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# Historicizing Madness in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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## ABSTRACT

Antoinette Cosway Mason in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), whom her English husband later calls Bertha—the name of a mad white Creole woman in *Jane Eyre*—has been a focus of discussion of Rhys's novel, particularly regarding her madness and its implications of feminism and (post)colonialism. However, although largely neglected, depicting the post-emancipation British West Indies around the 1830s, Rhys represents various forms of physical and mental symptoms of madness, expressed not just by the white Creole woman but also by two important groups—white male colonizers and African Caribbeans. By focusing on the under-examined symptoms of madness, I will analyze how they reveal changing socioeconomic systems and the continuity of exploitation after emancipation. This reading also suggests how Rhys's novel about the 1830s West Indies reflects her own madness/anger about her contemporary *post*-colonial world of the mid-twentieth century.

## KEYWORDS

Rhys; The West Indies; 1830s; *Wide Sargasso Sea*; madness; 1960s

In a letter to Selma Vaz Dias, Jean Rhys said her motives to write *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966): dissatisfied with Charlotte Brontë's representation of Bertha Mason, a mad white Creole woman in *Jane Eyre*, she was “fighting mad to write *her* story” (*Letters* 157). Rhys provides a plausible past to Bertha through her novel and explains “the *reason* why Mr. Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, the *reason* why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad, even the *reason* why she tries to set everything on fire, and eventually succeeds” (156). Created by the author's specific intention, Antoinette Cosway Mason—whom her English husband later calls Bertha—has been a focus of discussion of Rhys's rewriting, particularly regarding her madness and its implications of feminism and (post)colonialism. For instance, Evelyn O'Callaghan argues that “the image of ‘mad’ woman, the ultimate victim, serves as a social metaphor for the damaged West Indian psyche” (104) fragmented in colonial/post-colonial societies. In contrast to this viewpoint depicting the colonized as a passive victim, Kathleen J. Renk contends that Rhys's representation of Antoinette reinvests “madness as an alternate mode of vision and power” (91) by arguing that Antoinette's setting fire to *Thornfield Hall* challenges patriarchy and “destroys the emblem of the colonial system” (115). Many others, like Kelly Baker Josephs, have read complicated social, racial, and class structures of the British West Indies through Antoinette and her mother, Annette's madness, which they argue, results from the white Creoles' “cultural inbetweenity” (80) and their lack of sense of belonging to either the British or African-Caribbean societies. However, focusing on Antoinette and her victimization, the current readings have overlooked other physical and mental symptoms represented in Rhys's novel.

As suggested by Rhys's words—“I'm fighting mad to write [*a mad white Creole Bertha's*] story”—“madness” has multiple meanings: mental illness, insanity, and extreme anger, as well as “a frenzied mental or physical state” (Oxford dictionary). Setting her novel in the British West Indian colonies around the 1834 emancipation, Rhys portrays these various forms of madness, expressed not just by the white Creole woman but also by the majority of her characters,

regardless of their gender, class, and race/ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the novel represents the madness of two important groups—white male colonizers and African Caribbeans—through which Rhys reveals the colonial/post-colonial conflicts and realities of the post-emancipation West Indies that the white Creole woman can represent partially but not fully.

Slavery was abolished in the British West Indies in 1834, but the emancipation neither guaranteed full and immediate freedom to slaves nor terminated the dominance of white planters. Full emancipation was delayed, and “all registered slaves over the age of six years were initially to become ‘apprenticed labourers’ who would be compelled to work without pay for forty-five hours each week for the same masters as they had prior to abolition” (Bolland 108). The apprentices could “buy their freedom at a fair valuation of the unexpired term of their apprenticeship, but planters commonly impeded this procedure by rendering exorbitant appraisements upon their servants” (Green 133). The apprenticeship system eventually ended in 1838 and all slaves were freed, but full emancipation was not the antithesis of slavery either.

After emancipation, “[s]lavery, in which the *labourer* himself is the commodity” changed to the wage system in which “*labour power* is the commodity” (Bolland 120). The wage/rent system transformed slave owners into employers and landlords, and slaves into employees and tenants. However, the wage rate was not fairly determined based on the supply and demand for labor in the market. Measures and regulations were set up to systematically depress the legally freed people into “various kinds of dependency and unfreedom” (Bolland 120) and circumscribe “the ex-slaves’ impulse to leave the plantations” (Trouillot 82).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, blaming the post-slavery labor problem on the laziness of African Caribbeans, the employers imported indentured laborers called “coolies” from other colonies, primarily the East Indies, on the pretext of saving the British West Indies from eventual ruin.<sup>3</sup> The global exchange of the colonized as a cheap labor force prevented former slaves from selling their labor at a fair price. This all shows that although emancipation largely changed the British West Indian societies, the post-emancipation era was merely “a period of transition from one system of domination to another, each involving different forms of labour control” (Bolland 120). Despite the former slaves’ resistance and struggle, the preexisting social, political, racial, and economic order, and the dominance of small groups of white colonizers over large groups of African Caribbeans persisted.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the white planters were not invincible. The British West Indian colonies were established to generate profits for the overseas empire, and the white West Indian planters were inevitably subject to the mainland and its policies.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in 1815, toward the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain acquired new sugar colonies, and “[b]etween 1830 and 1834, 46% of the colonial sugar entering the United Kingdom was being produced in recently annexed dependencies” (Green 35). Consequently, “[t]he British West Indian sugar industry had been in recession for several years prior to the Emancipation Act of 1834” (Lobdell 319), and the “value of [the West Indian] estates had plummeted in anticipation of abolition” (Green 132). Many plantations were substantially indebted to the proprietors in the mainland, such as investors, bankers, merchants, or absentee planters who owned “[m]ost British West Indian properties” (59). Even most of the 20 million pounds that the planters received as compensation for the loss of their slaves went to insistent creditors and merchants in London.

The labor shortages and increased cost of sugar production after emancipation more adversely affected the profitability of the West Indian sugar plantations, and “some planters could not even raise the cash to pay their labourers” (Parry and Sherlock 198). The impact became visible. The “acquisition of essential stock and horses offers a fairly reliable index of the purchasing power of the planters in this period” (Green 44). During those fraught times, they inevitably “cut back on maintenance costs. Buildings and equipment deteriorated and the quantity of stock declined” (44). Due to the economic hardships, several West Indian sugar estates were abandoned and “planter suicides were not uncommon” (Ferguson 96). It was obvious that pre-emancipation planters were going bankrupt and vanishing. However, they became absentee planters or were immediately replaced by other whites. White dominance and the plantation system thus persisted by the new replacements under the established

hierarchal and exploitative colonial order, and the profits made in the colonies continued to flow to the empire.

Locating Bronte's Bertha as Antoinette deliberately and anachronistically in the post-emancipation British West Indies around the 1830s, Rhys describes all these historical transitions by portraying physical and mental symptoms of African Caribbeans and three white male colonizers appearing in different temporal and geographical settings—Antoinette's deceased father, Alexander Cosway, a pre-emancipation slave owner of Coulibri estate, Jamaica; her stepfather, Mr. Mason, a post-emancipation planter at Coulibri during apprenticeship; and Mr. Rochester, who temporarily stays in Granbois, Dominica, after full emancipation and later becomes an absentee proprietor living in Thornfield Hall, England.<sup>6</sup> Although largely neglected, the white male colonizers, especially Mr. Rochester, and the African Caribbeans display the symptoms of madness as a response to the socioeconomic changes in this specific period. These symptoms are not personal but collective and symbolic. Historicizing the under-examined symptoms of madness, I will analyze how they reveal the changing socioeconomic systems and the continuity of exploitation after the 1834 emancipation. This reading also suggests how Rhys's novel about the 1830s West Indies reflects her own madness/anger about the *post*-colonial world of the twentieth century she lived within.

Rhys opens *Wide Sargasso Sea* by depicting the end of slavery through various mental and physical symptoms of pre-emancipation planters and their deaths. Mr. Cosway has already died. The people's words, "Emancipation troubles killed old Cosway? Nonsense – the estate was going downhill for years before that" (W 26), allude to the economic decline of slavocracy that began prior to the abolition due to Britain's acquisition of new sugar colonies. This also suggests the reasons for Mr. Cosway's symptoms of madness —why he became "raving" (87) and alcoholic and "drank himself to death" (26). It is not his personal issue: "Many's the time when" (26). Heavily affected by the temporal circumstances, another plantation owner, Mr. Luttrell, Antoinette's neighbor and the only white planter visiting her house, grows tired of waiting for compensation, shoots his dog, and commits suicide. Pierre, the legitimate male successor of Coulibri and Antoinette's younger brother, is physically and mentally disabled. He cannot "speak distinctly" (17), nor can he give orders to his servants, and he soon dies when the local black people set the house on fire. The fall of slavocracy is evident. Reflecting the planters' reduction of maintenance costs during this period, Coulibri and its supposedly Edenic garden are "gone wild" and "gone to bush" (17). As Antoinette remarks that "My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed – all belonged to the past" (15), her family becomes disconnected from the white people after losing their European father. One remaining horse, an index of wealth, soon dies after being poisoned. As critics have examined, the remaining female members of the Cosway family, Antoinette and Annette, are alienated from both white and black communities and display mental symptoms.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, the former slaves express their own symptoms of madness. According to Antoinette, they are extremely lethargic: they "won't work" and "don't want to work" (32) and ruin the beautiful estate and garden. Critics, such as [Moira Ferguson](#), read the negative representation as Rhys's inability to understand and represent the voices and experiences of African Caribbeans because "the text favors Jean Rhys's class—the former white planter class to which Antoinette belongs" (115).<sup>8</sup> However, Rhys's negative representation can be historically accurate. Although Antoinette blames black servants for their laziness, her mention of "[n]o more slavery – why should *anybody* work?" (W 17) and "the old sugar works and the water wheel that had not turned for years" (25) suggests that Coulibri estate is one of many abandoned West Indian plantations that suffered from a lack of capital, preventing its proper functioning after emancipation.

Historical records also suggest that the former slaves were deliberately indolent. According to William A. Green, industrious apprentices were "penalized" because

[v]alue was determined by a labourer's age, strength, skills, and general worth. Strong, accomplished, reliable apprentices, the people most likely to seek appraisalment were valued much more highly than their idle or unproductive counterparts, and the inflated valuations which planters placed on them bore no relation to the wages offered for the extra work they performed. (133-34)

Apprentices were not rewarded for their diligence. Instead, their hard labor increased sugar production and profit for the planters. Highly appraised slaves had to pay larger amounts of money for their freedom, thereby benefiting the planters. Contextualized within the historical context, the extreme lethargy and laziness of servants at Coulibri can be read as a form of resistance to being a means of profit generation for the white planters. This might explain why Godfrey not only “[d]oesn’t do a thing” but also “[p]retends he’s deaf” (W 20) so that he does not have to obey the Cosway family. It may also explain the madness/anger of the African Caribbeans who kill Annette’s horse—the remaining symbol of the planter’s wealth.

However, strangely, these disobedient former slaves, who Antoinette describes as parasites, do not leave Coulibri after abolition. The temporal setting—the period of apprenticeship—suggests a plausible answer. They might be apprentices who were bound to their former master’s estate. Even Christophine, Antoinette’s black nurse and an obeah woman, who Annette argues, stays “because she want[s] to stay” (19), is probably one of the apprentices restricted by the law and unable to leave Coulibri. (Christophine later lives in a separate house after full emancipation.) Antoinette’s negative descriptions of these black servants further indicate the reason for their inability to leave. According to her, *lazy* Godfrey stays because he wants “somewhere to sleep and something to eat” (19) and “new (white) ones aren’t too kind to old people and he knows it” (20). On the contrary, Sass is described as a betrayer who leaves the estate but returns, when Mr. Mason, a new white planter, arrives with money: he “can *smell* money” (28). This indicates that the wealth of the former ruling class was passed on to new white colonizers after abolition; former slaves still lived in abject poverty; and slavery continued in a seemingly different but similarly exploitative form of the wage system wherein the former slaves were graded by the commodity value of their labor power for white employers.

Under the *new* system, the two former slaves appear to have different options. Old Godfrey cannot leave his former master’s estate because he cannot sell his labor and hardly has an alternative job, while Sass, “a big strong boy” (19–20), could leave. However, Sass’s return to Coulibri—where he once worked as a slave—implies that his departure might not have been for the sake of his independence. Regardless of leaving or staying at Coulibri, the former slaves’ livelihoods continued to depend on their servitude to the white people whom the novel describes as the only source through which they “can smell money.” In this way, *Wide Sargasso Sea* reflects historical reality: despite their wish to leave the plantations, many former slaves remained in residence, “those who left did not entirely withdraw their labour” from the estates (Hall 58), and some had “returned” by their own choice “to their old locality” (59) due to socioeconomic restrictions and limited alternatives.

Leaving only a dying heir, Pierre, and female members of the Cosway family, the novel also reflects a popular practice of the economic transition among white men during apprenticeship. After abolition, Mr. Cosway’s properties were transferred to the Englishman, Mr. Mason, *legally* and *peacefully* through marriage in the form of a “bargain” (W 64). According to Ferguson, “[t]his updated form of Caribbean predation had become common in the years following the passage of the Emancipation Bill in 1834” (92). As a result, although many in the pre-emancipation slavocracy were destroyed, the post-emancipation West Indies still served as a place for the empire and new white replacements to make money: “Some of the big estates are going cheap, and one unfortunate’s loss is always a clever man’s gain” (W 27). The clever man was never an African-Caribbean but a white European like Mr. Mason, who possesses not just Coulibri but other properties in Trinidad and Antigua.

The novel reflects another popular practice in the post-emancipation period through the new replacement: how white planters continued to control the black labor force. Blaming that African Caribbeans are “too damn lazy” (29), Mr. Mason plans to import coolies from the East Indies to save the ruined Coulibri estate. As [Veronica Gregg](#) points out, by “belittling the workers as lazy children,” he “naturalizes the planter’s desire for economic prosperity based on their labor” (92). However, Christophine reveals the coercion and violence underlying the planter’s justification.

No more slavery! She had to laugh! 'These new ones have Letters of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people's feet. New ones worse than old ones—more cunning, that's all.' (W 24)

Christophine's words affirm that slavery persisted through more cunning ways, and apprenticeship was just "an interval intended to facilitate the creation of social and economic machinery that would perpetuate the established order" (Green 130) through various legal methods to punish and discipline former slaves.

During apprenticeship, the physical and mental symptoms of the former slavocracy and African Caribbeans become exacerbated. After marrying a rich Englishman, Annette's fear and anxiety of the local black people grows. She pleads with Mr. Mason to leave Coulibri, warning him that the former slaves, who are mad/angry because they are aware that his wealth comes from plantations in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Antigua, might harm her family. However, he rebukes the request by calling her unreasonable and hysterical. He differentiates himself from the immoral and irrational former ruling class and justifies his control over the *hysterical* white Creole woman and *lazy, naive* African Caribbeans. His failure to see or accept his complicity in maintaining the old system aggravates the local black people's madness/anger that erupts in the form of arson at Coulibri.

Antoinette most negatively describes African Caribbeans at the scene of the arson: "They all looked the same, it was the same face repeated over and over, eyes gleaming, mouth half open to shout" (W 38). She represents the black arsonists as undistinguished howling animals and the arson as an expression of their irrational hatred and madness-like violence against a poor white Creole family.<sup>9</sup> However, Rhys suggests an alternative implication. Although the local black people mock the former planters, isolate them, or poison their horse, they do not harm Antoinette's family when they are at their most vulnerable immediately after Mr. Cosway's death. Ironically, their madness/anger appears in its most violent form through the arson when Antoinette's family becomes powerful and protected under the leadership of Mr. Mason, a rich white English colonizer.

The novel hints at the cause of the seemingly belated event. Prior to the arson, Rhys inserts the conversation between Mr. Mason and Aunt Cora in the presence of Myra, a black servant, about the importation of coolies; Mr. Mason's perception of African Caribbeans as naive children who "wouldn't hurt a fly"; and Aunt Cora's warning, "Unhappy children do hurt flies" (32). Then, mentioning Myra standing with the arsonists, Rhys suggests that the seemingly sudden, irrational arson can be considered an expression of African Caribbeans' madness/anger and their resistance to the "commodification of human beings" through the importation of laborers from other colonies "which to the ex-slaves would necessarily conjure up slavery was to be resumed" (Mardorossian 1078). The arson also reveals the African Caribbeans' unhappiness in the post-emancipation period which betrays their expectations. They remain poor servants, apprentices, or cheap workers who must now compete with imported, cheap laborers and the foreign colonized. The arson is not an isolated local event restricted to Coulibri: "There must have been many of the bay people" (W 38) among the arsonists. It is not a single event either. Mr. Rochester's remarks—"Certainly, many of the old estate houses were burned. You saw ruins all over the place" (120)—suggest that arsons occur throughout the West Indies. Echoing the history that "Burnt estates became familiar signifiers of historical resistance and revenge" (Ferguson 98) in the post-emancipation West Indies, the arson at Coulibri and the burned houses seen by Mr. Rochester reveal the collective madness/anger of African Caribbeans toward the former and new white ruling class.

Moreover, *Wide Sargasso Sea* implies that African Caribbeans' madness/anger has a much longer history by using a distinctive figure—the zombie. According to Melanie Otto, the notion of the zombie is deeply related to "an experience of exile and displacement" (151), since the concept originating in African and West Indian beliefs and stories was disseminated into Europe through the expansion of empire and people's movement. She particularly emphasizes how slavery and colonialism transformed West Indians into zombies—the living dead—as a result of "their enslavement by a white master who controls them and their subsequent loss of any human characteristics, such as



personal agency and identity” (153). Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* reflects such a notion of zombification. Mr. Rochester looks up the meaning of “obeah” in the English book, *The Glittering Coronet of Isles*, which alludes to the dissemination of the concept of zombification through the empire’s geography. The book’s definition of zombie—“a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead” (W 97)—features the status of African Caribbeans. They were slaves who had been zombified and “dead,” deprived of their agency and will. They were officially freed and supposed to be “living” people after the 1834 emancipation but remained “dead,” bound to their white masters.

The English book’s definition of zombies—who “cry out in the wind that is their voice, they rage in the sea that is their anger” (97)—further refers to the origin of African Caribbeans’ madness/anger by evoking the Middle Passage and the pain they experienced. In her study of the African diaspora in the West Indies and “the history of resistance of Africans,” Erna Brodber examines how the “[b]lack anger and frustration (have) translated themselves into sporadic outbursts of violence” (58). In Rhys’s novel, the “sporadic outbursts of violence” are represented in the form of violent arson. The arsons at Coulibri and throughout the West Indies are the very sites where the black madness/anger and frustration, which continue to linger in the Wide Sargasso Sea since the Middle Passage ultimately erupt, and where their cries and pain can be heard. In a larger context, the acts of arson are linked to Frantz Fanon’s concept of madness, which, according to him, is immanent in a colony where the colonized resist the brutal violence and injustice of colonialism forcing them to “thoroughly fit into a social environment of the colonial type” (182). Similarly, the African Caribbeans refuse and subvert the colonizers’ attempts to produce them as docile and passive “children (who) wouldn’t hurt a fly” (W 32), who require the colonizers’ guidance and control. They also resist the social environment of the post-emancipation West Indies that continuously enslaves and exploits them.

The African Caribbeans’ collective madness/anger has a devastating impact on the ruling class. The arson drives the former ruling class away from Coulibri. Losing her son due to the arson, Annette loses herself, criticizes and attacks her English husband, and is confined in a remote house and abused by black servants.<sup>10</sup> Upon leaving Coulibri, Antoinette is sent to a convent, then to Granbois, and finally to England. She never feels at home and lacks a sense of belonging until she sees Coulibri and her black childhood friend Tia in her dream just before setting Thornfield Hall on fire. Yet Antoinette’s imaginary return home, by jumping to Tia, would not come true, given Tia’s violent rejection of her during the arson at Coulibri by throwing a stone at Antoinette and making her bleed.<sup>11</sup> The arson also reveals that Mr. Mason’s vision of African Caribbeans and his self-declared innocence and differentiation from the slavocracy are all false. He withdraws himself from Coulibri. However, like the real world where white dominance and colonialism persisted despite former slaves’ violent resistance; in the novel, Mr. Mason becomes an absentee planter. Despite his invisibility in Jamaica, his exploitation and control continue. He eventually dies and disappears from the novel. Then, a new white replacement, Mr. Rochester, appears in a specific historical time.

Antoinette’s own inscription that she embroiders on a canvas at a convent—“Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839” (W 48)—visualizes the colonial history of the West Indies. Antoinette is a French name, which traces back her relation to the French colony Martinique, where her mother comes from; Mason is a given name by her stepfather, an English planter during apprenticeship; Cosway is from her father, a pre-emancipation slave owner; Mount Calvary Convent and Spanish Town are residual marks of the earliest colonizer, the Spanish, and their religion, Catholicism. Putting the year 1839, the novel’s present, at the end of her list, next to the reminder of Jamaica’s oldest colonizer, Spanish Town, Antoinette’s list suggests the continuity of colonialism. In particular, 1839 marks when Antoinette meets the third colonizer, Mr. Rochester, and more importantly, when he arrives in the West Indies—after the 1838 full emancipation. Like “his economic forefather of sorts, the heiress’s stepfather Mr. Mason” (Ferguson 93), Mr. Rochester criticizes the slavocracy, but marries a rich, white Creole heiress by following the colonial custom, possesses the money accumulated from slavery, and is unaware of his complicity in the old system. However, arriving in the West Indies after full emancipation, he shows specific aspects that are dissimilar to those of his predecessors.

Unlike Mr. Cosway, who was authoritative, but became a raving alcoholic when slavery comes to an end, and Mr. Mason, who was once confident and authoritative before being challenged by the arsonists; Mr. Rochester expresses his physical and pathological symptoms almost immediately upon his arrival in the West Indies. He marries within one month of arriving in Jamaica and “for nearly three weeks of that time [he] was in bed with fever” (W 61). He feels “drowsy” (72) and “giddy” (75). He also experiences anxiety, restlessness, bewilderment, uneasiness, delusion, and endless doubts. He has “blanks in [his] mind that cannot be filled up” (69). Even raindrops add to his “feeling of discomfort and melancholy” (61). Looking at a wild and untouched beautiful bathing pool, he suspects that it keeps its secret: “What I see is nothing – I want what it *hides* – that is not nothing” (79). It is Mr. Rochester, not Antoinette, who seems already hysterical and mad. [Arnold E. Davidson](#) argues that Mr. Rochester narrates his own symptoms as an “excuse to himself” (31) to position himself as a victim of the marriage that occurred when he was not himself and defend his behavior in the West Indies by concealing his intention to exploit Antoinette and her wealth. However, considering the time of his arrival in the British West Indies—after the fall of the slavocracy, after the violent arson by African Caribbeans, and after full emancipation—his uncertainty and doubt seem natural.

For Mr. Rochester, Coulibri estate, Jamaica, is no longer available: it is omitted from Antoinette’s list due to her withdrawal following the arson. The second chapter of the novel begins with the newlywed couple’s journey to Granbois, an estate in Dominica, which Antoinette has inherited. The black servants are no longer slaves or apprentices: they are free and hired. The relationship between Antoinette and Christophine also changes. Christophine no longer stays with Antoinette in the same house as a servant. She moves out to live in a house that Annette bought for her. Antoinette, the employer, also offers money to the employee, Christophine, when she asks her to perform the practice of obeah to make her husband love her again. Changing the novel’s geographical setting to Granbois, Rhys shifts the narrator from Antoinette to Mr. Rochester, and he describes how the black servants are defiant and disrespectful toward their white male employer. For instance, when Antoinette introduces her English husband to the servants, Hilda “[begins] to giggle” (W 65). Another servant, Baptiste, “seldom smiled and never spoke except to answer a question” (129): he despises this Englishman. The servants also judge and react to the white colonizer’s behavior. Following Mr. Rochester’s affair with a servant, Amelie, a black cook subsequently leaves the estate without notice, and the other servants become more hostile toward him. Christophine is the most disobedient and confronts him to his face. The servants’ disrespect may be read as a reflection of Mr. Rochester’s own anxiety and initial lack of authority as a poor second son who comes to the West Indies following his father’s orders. Nevertheless, the time of his arrival in the West Indies may also suggest a possible reason for the changed relationship between the white employers and the black employees.

Considering the time of its publication in the 1960s, many critics read Rhys’s portrayal of Brontë’s Edward Rochester—as an unnamed, disturbed, and doubtful man—and the challenging attitude of servants toward him as Rhys’s reflection of an era of decolonization and the closing of an empire.<sup>12</sup> Critics like Ferguson additionally read Mr. Rochester’s withdrawal from the West Indies in this regard. According to her, reflecting the historical data showing that the number of plantation owners “diminished to virtual invisibility” (97) in the post-emancipation West Indies, Rhys’s text “covertly intimates that the African-Caribbean communities drove out the English and the white creoles” (91). Mr. Rochester’s departure to England thus symbolizes that “[h]is authority has vaporized” (110) and “[t]he days of richly laden vessels exporting sugar and coffee to England are gone, and their replacement pitifully reflects the colonial loss of power” (112). However, Rhys’s representation of African Caribbeans and Mr. Rochester instead challenges any facile celebration of the *post*-emancipation era by revealing its conflicting realities.

The 1830s West Indian societies in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are divided by race and class. In descending order of hierarchy, they comprise the white male colonizers, the white Creoles, the black Creoles, and the African Caribbeans. Money and power are circulated and transferred only among white men. Although white Creole women could legally inherit a fortune, their wealth is ultimately transferred to white men. White Creole men appear in the novel but, unlike the white male characters, they are



powerless. Pierre is ill and disabled, and Sandi, one of Antoinette's "coloured relatives" (W 46) with a fair complexion, has money, but he is disempowered and located outside of the story. The self-proclaimed black Creole, Daniel, has a higher economic status than the African Caribbeans, but he is located much lower in the hierarchy than his white counterparts. As emphasized through Daniel's words—"they are white, I am coloured. They are rich, I am poor" (88)—race is closely linked to class.

Under this established racial and class structure, the African Caribbeans are invariably placed in a low socioeconomic position. Accordingly, most identifiable black characters appear as servants, and servitude to the white ruling class is represented as their only source of income in the novel. The former slaves at Coulibri remain servants at a ruined former master's house after the 1834 emancipation. The economic structure is replicated in Granbois after full emancipation in a form of a wage system. Unlike apprentices and servants at Coulibri, the black employees at Granbois are disobedient and challenge their white employer. Nonetheless, they remain servants whose livelihoods are dependent on the white ruling class. Within this context, the small boy—who constantly weeps and follows Mr. Rochester because he is told earlier that he could leave for England with Mr. Rochester but now has to stay—is not "a stand-in for Rochester himself" who leaves the West Indies disposed and disconsolate (Davidson 37) and does not cry for "nothing" (W 156), as Mr. Rochester assumes in the novel. Rather, the boy might be crying for the loss of his only chance to escape from poverty and make money—a chance to serve a white master which the novel describes as the only economic activity of the African Caribbeans.

Rhys foretells the persistent white dominance from her novel's opening sentence: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did" (15). White male colonizers successively arrive in the West Indies after the virtual invisibility of a prior planter, and each appears with a respective mode of exploitation, corresponding to a new socioeconomic form. Mr. Rochester's appearance after full emancipation is particularly significant in this regard. According to Christer Petley, slavery was abolished not on humanitarian grounds but mainly for economic reasons. Responding to "a new form of capitalism" emerging at the end of the eighteenth century that was committed to "the principle of free trade" ("Rethinking" 6), the empire needed and attempted to "legitimize and control a rapidly expanding, and apparently unbridled, British global commerce and imperialism" (8) in order to create "a more stable and manageable empire" (8). It reformed the "monopolistic privileges" (6) of the slavocracy regarded as "particularly savage and corrupt in their pursuit of wealth and power" (8) and subsequently abolished slavery itself. The abolition and fall of the slavocracy thus did not mean that the empire's influence over the West Indian colonies diminished. Rather, they were deliberate decisions to ensure "the best future for British commercial interests" (8). Moreover, "[p]lanters may have lost the debate over slavery, but they continued to exercise political influence and often maintained healthy incomes" (9–10). Many of them became "a truly transatlantic group" (2) who "lived in the British Isles, far from the sources of their wealth, keeping in touch with affairs on their West Indian properties via correspondence with local managers" (2).<sup>13</sup> The historical contexts can shed a new light on Rhys's Mr. Rochester, the third colonizer.

Mr. Rochester is not a Caribbean-based planter: he grew up in England and has internalized its social norms and values. He is sent from the metropolitan center by his father, in accordance with the Law of the Father, to the West Indies. The letters that Mr. Rochester writes in his mind to his father reveal that he is fully aware of his father's and the empire's motives—to acquire money, property, and human beings from the colonies. Reflecting the uncertainty related to the social upheaval around full emancipation, Mr. Rochester initially appears as a disturbed and doubtful man and is challenged by disobedient and rebellious black servants who are no longer slaves or apprentices. However, while describing his mental and physical symptoms in the second chapter, Rhys simultaneously depicts how he becomes aware of his power. He first capitalizes on his status as a white Englishman by marrying a white Creole heiress. Soon after the marriage, he experiences his privilege in the Caribbean, where a little girl who accidentally encounters him in the forest is scared and cries, which signifies the power of whiteness, the legacy of brutal slavery, and the colonial order. Then, the novel depicts how, despite his anxiety and unease, he gains power and exerts it.

Unlike Mr. Cosway and Mr. Mason whose authority is derived from owning slaves or running plantations and controlling the black labor force, Mr. Rochester establishes his authority based on the Western epistemology. The exotic climate, environment, and culture initially overwhelm him but he repossesses them through Western knowledge and discourse. As Gregg puts it, his “‘perception’ of the West Indian people, their Otherness, the landscape, derives not from his interaction but from prior ‘knowledge,’ which invents the West Indies as uncivilized and wild, a place to make money, where the blacks are inhuman and the Creole whites are contaminated and strange” (102). The seemingly nonviolent and civilized Western discourse and the third colonizer have more power over the colonized. Whereas Mr. Mason confines Annette to a *rest* home after she loses her son and shows signs of temporal mental symptoms, Mr. Rochester diagnoses white Creole Antoinette’s madness based on existing Western knowledge, without her showing any symptoms: she is a cultural and racial Other and “a stranger who did not think or feel as [he] did” (W 85).<sup>14</sup> This is why he “felt no surprise.” Instead, he thinks “it was as if [he]’d expected it, been waiting for it” (90) when he receives letters from Daniel, who claims to be Antoinette’s illegitimate half-brother and informs him of the madness running in her family—the alcoholic father, mad mother, and “*idiot*” younger brother (89). Daniel’s assertion—“*soon the madness that is in [Antoinette], and in all these white Creoles, come out*” (88)—only re-affirms Mr. Rochester’s assumption that Antoinette already has the seed of madness inside.

The African Caribbeans’ resistance against the third colonizer thus takes a different form—through a counter-narrative. Christophine and her obeah are often read as a source of resistance and a counter-discourse. Benita Parry, for instance, argues that “as obeah woman, Christophine is mistress of another knowledge dangerous to imperialism’s official epistemology and the means of native cultural disobedience” (38). However, Rhys weakens Christophine’s representative position in the novel. Christophine, described as “much blacker” than others (W 18), is not a native Jamaican but a foreigner who came from Martinique as Annette’s wedding gift. She is a stranger, isolated and distant from other local people, and some African Caribbeans do not believe in obeah.<sup>15</sup> Rhys’s description of the foreign obeah woman has a specific function. Locating obeah as a distinct feature of native culture and counter-knowledge against a colonialist discourse can reproduce the stereotyped perceptions of native culture as *mysterious*, *exotic*, or an *uncivilized* superstition in opposition to the *modern* and *civilized* culture of the colonialists. Yet the novel’s description of Christophine serves to avoid the binary and shows that African Caribbeans and their cultures are not uniform but multiple and diverse.

More importantly, although Rhys describes the moments when Christophine challenges Mr. Rochester and Western discourse he symbolizes, she simultaneously represents them as the moments when Christophine and her obeah are ineffective and fail. For instance, Parry argues that Christophine’s departure after a confrontation with Mr. Rochester and “her challenging of imperialism’s authorized system of knowledge” (39) is “logical” and voluntary. However, an inserted scene within the conversation between Mr. Rochester and Christophine raises doubts about such a positive reading. Mentioning that Christophine is a fugitive who performs an illegal practice, obeah, he threatens to report her to the local police if she does not leave immediately. This makes it possible to read Christophine’s departure as the moment when she is “simply driven out of the story” (Spivak 253), defeated by the Western discourse and law that designate her as a criminal and her obeah as illegal.<sup>16</sup> Christophine’s remark—“[obeah] is not for *béké*,” the whites (W 102)—already implies the power of epistemic violence that deflates and incapacitates any possible counter-discourse.

Mr. Rochester’s return to England with Antoinette indeed highlights the power of epistemic violence. Set in Thornfield Hall, the third chapter, which is the last chapter of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, begins with Antoinette’s guard, Grace Poole’s short narration, before shifting to Antoinette’s voice. Regarding the novel’s narrative structure, J. Dillon Brown points out,

[c]ritics have noted how this technique works to engage the sympathy of the reader not only for Antoinette, but also for Rochester and Grace Poole, who are shown to have their own troubles, doubts, and fears and are suggestively paralleled with Antoinette by Rhys. In effect, the technique formally manifests Antoinette's ethical caveat to Rochester that "there is always the other side, always" (as she says in the novel), and demands a fluid interpretive attentiveness to the structuring historical and experiential foundations of any individual discourse. (576)

However, in analyzing the novel's various narratives, Brown neglects the excluded voices of the African Caribbeans and the sequence of each narrator, and consequently overlooks the important implications of the novel's narrative structure.

Rhys employs only *white* narrators, and the African Caribbeans' troubles, doubts, and fears and their side of the story are excluded or indirectly suggested, mediated and distorted through the white narrators. In this way, she emphasizes the marginalization of the African Caribbeans. She also deliberately and carefully arranges the narrators for the same purpose. In the first chapter, Antoinette unknowingly suggests former slaves' resistance after the 1834 emancipation by describing their extreme lethargy. Yet a new colonizer arrives. They resist more violently against Mr. Mason by expressing their madness/anger through acts of arson and drive away the old and new ruling class from Coulibri. Upon arriving in the colonies, Mr. Rochester witnesses many burned estates all over the West Indies, the remnants of this violent resistance. However, his arrival itself already signifies their defeat and the persistence of white domination.

In the second chapter, white male narrator, Mr. Rochester, describes the physical and mental symptoms that he suffers as *the white man's burden*, contemplating how he deals with his white Creole wife and the disobedient black servants after full emancipation. His narration reveals how he gets to *know* the colonized by otherizing them, based on Western discourse, and how much he longs to possess Antoinette: "She's mad but *mine, mine*. [...] If she smiles or weeps or both. *For me*" (150). Antoinette and Christophine challenge him by revealing their side of the story and their knowledge, but he diagnoses Antoinette's madness and forces Christophine to leave. The second chapter ends with his narration, which epitomizes the epistemic violence to suppress and silence even the first narrator, white Creole Antoinette: "[v]ery soon she'll join the others who know the secret and will not tell it. Or cannot. [...] I too can wait – for the day when she is only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie ... ." (156). This is when he leaves for England—after violently silencing the counter-narrative and the Other.

The third chapter depicts the consequences. It begins with a white English narrator Grace Poole and reveals Antoinette's status: she is placed lower than any white English people, including a working-class Englishwoman. Antoinette "*hasn't lost her spirit*" (160) but becomes "*that girl*" without a name. She is *legally* absorbed in the economic circulation between the employer, Mr. Rochester, and the employee, Grace Poole, who is paid to monitor the white Creole patient. Antoinette, the only remaining trace of the West Indies, is locked away and confined in the attic. A voice is given to Antoinette following Grace Poole's narration, but it is considered a mad white Creole woman's unfathomable howling. In this last chapter, Mr. Rochester does not appear and is not given a voice, but his absent voice symbolizes his invisible overarching power, sanctioned by colonialism, patriarchy, and Western discourse. Although unseen, he exerts authority as the master of Thornfield Hall and the owner of everything Antoinette has and even Antoinette herself.

This reading can answer two important questions about Rhys's rewriting of Brontë's novel: (1) the reason why Rhys deliberately changed the temporal setting of *Jane Eyre*, whose last chapter is set in 1819, to the 1830s, and (2) the reason why although she was mad at the "unfortunate death of [the] Creole" and "fighting mad to write *her* story" (Rhys, *Letters* 157), she does not change Antoinette's fate as prefigured in Brontë's novel. Depicting three colonizers appearing in different socioeconomic stages after emancipation, Rhys presents the last one as an unnamed English man. Due to the unchanged ending, Rhys's unnamed man—who realizes the power of his white male status in the West Indies, returns to England, and takes his Father's position—is easily identified as Brontë's Edward Rochester and consequently, *Jane Eyre* is easily read as a sequel of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In this way, Rhys's novel provides a plausible past to Brontë's rational, authoritative Edward Rochester: he is a "transatlantic"

colonizer whose existence and modest income result from and, at the same time, reveal the long history of slavery and exploitation and their continuing effects.

Reading Brontë's novel as a sequel can also reveal how the money—made in the West Indian colonies and exchanged between Mr. Rochester and Grace Poole at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*—is circulated in England. In the beautiful rural area where Thornfield Hall is situated, the source of its wealth—the remote colonies and brutal exploitation of the colonized that support his civilized, lavish, and peaceful life—is out of sight and becomes invisible by being transformed into cash. Moving to Britain, Mr. Rochester no longer shares his money with his white Creole wife or the black servants in the West Indies. He no longer interacts with the colonized and there is little chance that he would face their resistance. The money will later be shared with his British wife, Jane, and pass on to their children and its source will become more invisible. This reading can unmask the overlooked realities implied in Brontë's novel: how enormously the seemingly civilized nineteenth-century British society was related to slavery; how slavery was made invisible in the empire, absorbed into the social system of marriage and inheritance; and how, as Jane and Grace Poole's responses to Antoinette suggest, British people were unaware of the historical realities.

Rhys's madness/anger is not limited to the nineteenth century. As many critics have argued, she reflects the 1960s in *Wide Sargasso Sea*; however, her demystification of the 1830s, the so-called *post-emancipation* period, points to her madness/anger at the mid-twentieth century, the so-called era of *post-colonialism*. She indeed depicts the realities that counterpoint the idealized myth. In the West Indies of the 1960s, as in that of the 1830s, the racial prejudices that afforded privileges to white people and devalued those darker were pervasive, and "color distinctions correlate[d] with class differences and govern[ed] most personal associations" (Lowenthal 581). The West Indian societies were where "the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich" (Fanon 5). Along with the racialized social structure, the global economic system shaped by slavery persisted. The West Indies were once a part of the Triangle Trade as a route of the Middle Passage and produced cash crops through the plantation economy which is "characterized by monocrop production, limited intersectoral linkages, low value, export and import orientation, external market dependency, and foreign control" (Andreatta 416). The region continued to function as a source of supply for agricultural produce as well as other plantation by-products to export for the overseas market at the expense of its own people who worked for meager salaries.

Moreover, as in the 1830s, in the 1960s, responding to growing transnational relations and globalization, metropolitan centers reinforced their commercial interests through an economic transition to a more cunning form of imperialism, global capitalism, under a new empire, America.<sup>17</sup> An emerging industry—tourism—epitomizes the historical transition. Since the 1960s, tourism has "replaced sugar production, (and) it has out-paced all agricultural activities as the lead economic sector" (Andreatta 420) in the West Indies. Yet the seemingly new industry replicates the preexisting exploitative plantation system. As Louise Pérez points out, "[i]n converting former agricultural monoculture economies to travel monoculture, tourism renews and reinforces the historical process of underdevelopment" ("*Aspects of Underdevelopment*" 480) by positioning the African Caribbeans at the bottom of the socioeconomic order. They were employed as "waiters, maids, bartenders, dishwashers, chauffeurs, and porters, receiving low wages" to meet the "need of vacationing white foreigners" (476) and many valuable lands were owned by "small national elites and foreigners" (477).<sup>18</sup> While these foreigners functioned as modern-day absentee planters, most of the money made in the West Indies flowed to metropolitan centers.<sup>19</sup>

Contextualized within this historical reality, Antoinette and Mr. Rochester's trip to Granbois might not be a fictional invention of the 1830s, but Rhys's reflection of the 1960s. Rhys locates Massacre, the village in Dominica—which is named after a massacre of the indigenous people in 1674—on the way to the newlywed couple's honeymoon destination. The past is unknown to the couple; however, Rhys hints at its continuing effects through the hierarchy between the white visitors and black servants and

suggests how even seemingly apolitical and purely joyful activities, like traveling to the beautiful Caribbean islands, are deeply intertwined with the brutal history of slavery and colonialism.

The shadow of slavery and colonialism depicted in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not only confined to the nineteenth century (the West Indies in the novel) or the 1960s (Rhys's time), but also taints the present day. In the so-called era of globalization, metropolitan centers continue to shape the order of world economy and politics, and labor breaks down along historically established global order between developed countries, many of them are former empires, and poor countries, many of them former colonies, including the West Indies, where the *natives* function as cheap labor or workers. Mr. Rochester in England, who remains an unnamed man to the end, might feature many unnamed and absentee beneficiaries in the metropolitan centers whose interests and demands enormously affect the poor countries and the local people; whose comfortable lives are deeply entangled in the long history of colonialism, with its pain and exploitation; and whose involvements are obscured, distanced from the origins of production and labor, and neutralized under the Western law, such as the free market system and global capitalism that glosses over the inequality, the hierarchal international relations, and exploitation within it.

*Wide Sargasso Sea*'s depiction of Mr. Rochester further unmasks one of the most persistent and rooted methods of perpetuating white dominance and colonial order—the Western epistemology which has been so deeply embedded and naturalized in the knowledge of human beings and the world. Throughout her oeuvre, Rhys expresses her madness/anger and desperately challenges invisible but powerful Western discourse and knowledge systems that marginalize the racial and cultural Other and the under-privileged and justifies the hierarchal order. In a larger context, Rhys's madness/anger is closely linked to ongoing interdisciplinary efforts, involving posthumanism, postcolonialism, ecocriticism, or feminism, which challenge Western discourse and knowledge systems in which “Europe as universal consciousness posits the power of reason as its distinctive characteristic and humanistic universalism” (Braidotti 23) against “the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized ‘Others’ whose social and symbolic existence is disposable and unprotected” (24). Analyzing the mental and physical symptoms of the African Caribbeans and the white colonizers, particularly that of Mr. Rochester, can provide insights to readers about the pervasive and persistent reality of colonialism and its inherent epistemic violence. It can also equally expose pervasive and persistent struggles against the “lethal exclusions and fatal disqualifications” of “these ‘Others’ who raise crucial issues of power, domination, and exclusion” (24). Most of all, it can make us aware that we still have to be fighting mad to write the story of the Other and to challenge the legacy of colonialism, white privilege, and Western-centrism that have been fiercely challenged but willfully perpetuated.

## Notes

1. The Slavery Abolition Act was passed in 1833; however, in this essay, the year of the emancipation is referred to as 1834 when it officially took effect.
2. For instance, slaves previously had access to provision grounds and their homes on their masters' estates, but this access was restricted once they were freed. The employers started to impose rent on the houses and provision grounds, lowered their employee's wages in compensation for rent, or threatened their laborers with conditional eviction if they did not fulfill work or contractual agreements. For more on how provision grounds and houses on the estates served to hinder former slaves from withdrawing from plantations, see Bolland; Wilmot; and Hall.
3. For more on the trope of the “lazy black,” see Gregg 10–12. For the justification of immigration or importation of new labor forces from other colonies, see Gregg 22; and Parry and Sherlock 201–202.
4. For how, after the termination of the apprenticeship system, former slaves “determinedly protected” their rights against “various planter strategies to maintain a command over labour” (48), see Wilmot. For more on the natives' acts of arson on former planters' houses and estates after emancipation, see Ferguson (97–98). For more on former slaves' “techniques of withdrawal from and resistance to the coercive system,” see Bolland 120.
5. For how the British West Indian economy was systematically structured for the interests of the empire, see Green 35–64.



6. For more on the anachronistic temporal setting of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, see [Gregg](#) 83. Rhys does not name Brontë's Edward Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and he is referred to as a "man" or "husband" throughout the novel. However, he is referred to as Mr. Rochester in this essay.
7. For on the white Creole women's madness, see [Abel](#); [Josephs](#); [Mezei](#); [O'Callaghan](#); and [Renk](#).
8. [Kamau Brathwaite](#) similarly contends that Rhys's problematic representation results from her "socio-cultural background and orientation" (35) as the white Creole. [Gayatri Spivak](#) also argues that the voice of the native cannot be contained in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as Rhys "rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native" (253).
9. For more on metropolitan critics' negative readings of the arsonists, see [Gregg](#) 94.
10. Emphasizing the binary link between the white male colonizer and the colonized white Creole woman can overlook the internal social fragmentation and conflicts in the West Indies, wherein the local people affect Antoinette and Annette's madness through the acts of arson and how they physically and sexually abuse Annette confined in a *rest house*.
11. Critics are divided about how to interpret this scene. According to [Mary Lou Emery](#), it is the moment when Antoinette "identifies with those who are racially and culturally oppressed" (61) and suggests the possibility of African-Caribbean and Creole women's solidarity. Similarly, [Ferguson](#) reads it as a "black-white union and positive connection" (102). However, the positive reading does not include a critical question—whether Tia and the African Caribbeans accepts her return. The earlier scene—in which Antoinette perceives Tia as "a looking-glass" (W 41), and Tia throws a stone at her—suggests that Tia refuses to be the "mirror image" or "the black Other" of the white Creole ([Gregg](#) 96). By pointing out that "Tia was historically separated from [Antoinette]" (36), Brathwaite also argues that a union between the two is impossible. This type of solidarity can become problematic as it erases "the social and economic differences (of the two) created by a racial hierarchy several centuries in the making" ([Brown](#) 582).
12. Jamaica became independent in 1962 before the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. For more on the decolonization of the West Indies from the early 1930s to the mid-twentieth century, see [Mardorossian](#) (1085–86). For discussions about the Anglophone Caribbean writers during this period, see [Gregg](#) (25–48). For more on the decolonization of the Caribbean in the mid-twentieth century, see [Josephs](#) (1–5).
13. For more on how "substantial nineteenth-century British family fortunes had their foundations in Caribbean slavery but also that many more modest British incomes were drawn from ownership of enslaved people in the Caribbean" (861), see Petley ("New Perspectives on Slavery and Emancipation in the British Caribbean").
14. For "the nineteenth-century discourse that positioned the madwoman and the colonies as loci of uncontrollable sexuality" (89), see [Renk](#). See [Mardorossian](#) for the imperialist and patriarchal discourse that considered the colonized susceptible to madness, due to their "sexual indulgence and racial 'degeneration'" (1082) and their contamination by inferior cultures, such as obeah.
15. For more on how the novel represents obeah as an ineffective counter-discourse, see [Mardorossian](#) 1078–1081.
16. For more on Christophine's exit from the novel, see [Mardorossian](#) 1079.
17. For how tourism reinforces the hierarchal relationship between America and the West Indies, particularly Barbados, see [Gmelch](#). For the growing imperial influence of America on the tourism industry of the West Indies, see Pérez (*Underdevelopment and Dependency: Tourism in the West Indies*).
18. This is the reality [Jamaica Kincaid](#) describes in *A Small Place* (1988). Antigua is where hotel training schools teach "Antiguans how to be good servants, how to be a good nobody, which is what a servant is" (55); where white people are tourists/customers in resorts in which most local people can enter only as servants/service workers; and where streets, buildings, and cities were built by colonizers and named after them. The legacy of colonialism can be found everywhere in this small place just like any other Caribbean islands.
19. According to Pérez, most "tourist expenditures" are "repatriated to metropolitan centers. For every dollar spent in the Commonwealth Caribbean, 77 cents return in some form to the metropolis" ("Aspects of Underdevelopment" 480).

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