A Tale of Aggression and Passivity:

Women in Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*

When delving into the critical conversation surrounding Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a re-write of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, many quarreling discussions arise regarding the essence of the protagonist Antoinette, focusing mainly on whether or not she has any power; whether or not she was destined to be colonized all along. Some critics interpret Antoinette as a woman with a fighting spirit, such as Laura Ciołkowska who points out that the protagonist must have some sort of power, represented in her stealing away the show and playing to readers’ ears as the narrating voice through various sections. In an interview with Jean Rhys, she revealed that the image of the mad wife being locked away from Charlotte Brontë’s novel always intrigued the author but that at the same time she was also “convinced that Charlotte Brontë must have had something against the West Indies, and [she] was angry about it. Otherwise, why did she take a West Indian for the horrible lunatic, for that really dreadful creature?” (Nunez-Harrell 287).

Though Rhys herself never thought about writing an entire book vindicating the mad Bertha, she was greatly encouraged by peers to do so (Nunez-Harrell 287). As Nunez-Harrell points out in her article “The Paradoxes of Belonging: The White West Indian Woman in Fiction,” “the very fury that propelled Third World writers to exonerate Shakespeare’s Caliban from the charge of lust, sloth, greed, lechery, ignorance, and attempted murder”—pointing out the underlying colonial themes and even allowing him to turn the tables against his colonizer in various re-writes—“spurred Rhys to set the record straight on the image of the white Caribbean woman”
(Nunez-Harrell 287). By juxtaposing Shakespeare’s Caliban and Rhys’s Antoinette, simultaneously analyzing their character development and actions through a post-colonial lens, critics have drawn many comparisons between the two. This portrait of Antoinette makes it easy to interpret her character as the stock figure of the aggressive slave. However, like our protagonist’s two mother figures, though Antoinette shows this potential to strive toward empowerment, she also shows underlying gradations of passivity.

Moving the focus entirely to the two mother figures in the novel for a moment, Annette and Christophine, it is clear that though they both are clearly colonized, they do not show all of the promise that Antoinette does to fit into the role of the aggressive slave. While they do show some potential, by the end of the novel Antoinette is the only woman who is given the chance to have a role in her own ending—an opportunity that Rhys does not present to Annette and Christophine, two characters who end up embodying the stock figure of the passive slave. However, the point of my analyses of their characters is to show that, like human beings, these characters do not fit purely into one category from the start of the novel. The job of labelling them does not come easily. Though each respective character ends up in one category or the other by the end of the novel, throughout the span of Rhys’s novel each woman shows gradations of both aggression and passivity. Where it is clear that most critics read Annette as a passive character throughout the entirety of the novel, she does in fact show glimpses of the aggressive slave. A woman with even more potential for “going against the man” is Christophine, a character who several critics, including Lucy Wilson and Shakti Jaising, find to be even more aggressive, strong, and independent than our protagonist Antoinette. In fact, they do not see Antoinette as the aggressive slave at all. For them, the notions of strength in the novel are represented by Christophine stepping up to the plate when her mistresses fail.
However, similar to how these aforementioned critics disregard Antoinette’s show of potential, other critics dismiss Christophine’s power, such as Carine Mardorossian who points out that she is indeed passive, found particularly in her being so easily written out of the novel. With all of this quarrelling, the waters of literary criticism surrounding these three characters are quite muddied, and for someone new entering into the conversation, it may feel more productive to sit back and attempt to assimilate the conclusions others are drawing, rather than interpreting the novel on their own. Though these opposing handfuls of critics do each have evidence under their belts for their respective analyses, there are a few facts that I have been able to tether myself to in order to get some stable footing: each of these three women have the potential to fall in the category of the aggressive slave, each of these women show gradations of passivity, and yet in the end only one woman is taken to England, face-to-face with her colonizer. By those last pages, Antoinette’s two mother figures have both become passive characters, no longer commented on in the novel, so they can no longer influence her in ways of apathy or empowerment. Antoinette’s last action in the novel is her choice of suicide and it is the very last moment that critics can interpret. Whether this act is one of defeat, representing a final slip into passivity, or the image of a woman finally taking control in the only situation she has left—the means of her own death—we see that Antoinette has a hand in becoming whichever stock figure she truly represents.

Delving into a deeper layer of my analysis, I believe that it is not a mere coincidence that Rhys chose to end the novel with a scene that extracts so many conflicting interpretations of Antoinette’s character. I’ve highlighted the gradations of passivity and aggressive potential exemplified within all three characters to bring light to the existing dualisms that Rhys has scattered throughout the novel—some of them being the aforementioned aggression and
passivity, but also freedom and imprisonment, love and hate, good and evil, and winning and losing. While these dualisms can help a reader to critically analyze the novel itself, they can also be used outwardly, facilitating Rhys’s movement toward feminism by analyzing the critics’ interpretations of Antoinette’s suicide through the dualism of winning and losing. In the end of the novel Annette and Christophine are absent and the magnification of Antoinette’s predicament helps to bring her solely to the forefront. For some critics, Antoinette’s choice of suicide makes her a martyr for feminism, but other critics interpret her suicide as a loss—an ultimate failing. However, no matter which side you are on, the important thing to note is that Rhys put you in this predicament on purpose. The struggle waged between critics who see Antoinette’s final action as either passive or aggressive exemplify the struggle in store for those striving toward equality, each critic becoming a tally on either side of the board. Rhys had the ability to write a happy ending for each of the three women, but instead she chose to cut two of them out, narrowing the focus solely onto Antoinette. In a way, both Annette and Christophine failed in their own respective battles against their colonization and it is all up to Antoinette to bring any shred of victory to the side equality, upping the stakes of her particular battle. Because so much is on the line—the entire game coming down to one player—it’s no wonder why the critics’ interpretation of whether or not Antoinette’s suicide was a success or a failure is vital. I imagined a metaphorical scoreboard in the novel that was set up to tally who was winning, the colonizing men or the women who were fighting for their own choices, and with Antoinette’s suicide, this scoreboard was lifted into our world, the critics now representing the players. With every day that passes more battles are fought, and the only way to move one step closer to equality is to join into the game ourselves. If we simply stand on the sidelines, we will lose our voices,
becoming passive, and we will not be able to help our teammates, we will not be able to show our potential.

“Antoinette and the Calibanesque Archetype”

It is easy to point out examples of colonialism in literature when the main plot features an empowered European man expressing through word and action that he has a right to a new land—especially since the natives cannot even speak a word of “true” language, follow the “correct” religion, or do anything productive for themselves—and a right to the native inhabitants, since he is “helping” them become the human beings they so long to be. It is not taxing for scholars in today’s academy to see that a white European man has no right to go to another human being’s home, take their land, their freedom, and their bodies and futures away from them for profit—either to become his servants or to sell them to one of his comrades back at home. However, is colonialism as obvious when it is not a clear portrayal of a white man—who, clearly, has no right—dominating an Afro-Caribbean man? Is colonialism even possible without that distinction? In Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* there are a few examples of colonial oppression and cultural denigration; however, the domination is not only happening to the various characters with black skin. In fact, the primary case of colonization examined in this essay is happening to our protagonist Antoinette, a woman who not only has white skin, but who is also a daughter in a line of slave-owners. This little addition to her backstory exemplifies the extent that these acts of colonization can reach, falling quite distantly from the tree of the stereotypical, dark-skinned, savage male such as *Robinson Crusoe*’s Friday or *The Tempest*’s Caliban. As Gayatri Spivak poses, “it should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British
literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” and that the role of this literature should not be ignored (Spivak 240). Picking up the lens of imperialism and focusing on our protagonist Antoinette, I argue that just because she does not share the same physical characteristics as the dominated native, Caliban, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, does not mean that she is not a victim of colonization. Analyzing the process by which Mr. Rochester colonized his blushing bride, it is easy to draw a parallel between her story and that of Shakespeare’s Caliban: Mr. Rochester wooed Antoinette, made her fall in love with him, and then deceived her, getting her to show him around her native land so that he could attempt to learn its secrets. Once he made it that far, he took everything she could possibly offer him, and he locked her away. However, while both Antoinette and Caliban fail to prevent colonization in the end, they each have a certain spark in their souls—both characters represent the “aggressive slave”. Just like Caliban, Antoinette plots against her colonizer, and is prepared to fight for her land and her integrity. They both fight the injustice in any way they can manage, and for as long as they can manage, before they are broken.

Describing the features of his new bride, Mr. Rochester makes the distinction that Antoinette had “long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either” (Rhys 39). Even though Antoinette is a white woman, and currently married to Mr. Rochester, she is also an outsider. She is the other. She is the unsuspecting native whose only destiny is to be dominated. As Liz Gunner argues in “‘Mothers, Daughters and Madness in Works by Four Women Writers: Bessie Head, Jean Rhys, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ama Ata Aidoo,’’ “the acute isolation of…Antoinette, daughter of an impoverished creole Jamaican family, formerly slave owners in the period immediately after
emancipation, gives a sense both of the Otherness of whiteness in the Caribbean and of the child's rich imaginative life” (Gunner 141). Antoinette is the other to those near her home, as well as in the eyes of Mr. Rochester. There is nowhere for her to belong. But that did not stop their relationship from blooming very quickly—“I was married a month after I arrived in Jamaica and for nearly three weeks of that time I was in bed with fever” (Rhys 39)—and though it is clear in the novel that she may be deceiving him (since she doesn’t mention her family’s history: “soon the madness that is in her, and in all these white Creoles, comes out” [57]), she also loves him whereas he plainly feels that “the woman is a stranger” and “her pleading expression annoys me” (Rhys 41). He is deceiving her in return, though on a much deeper, malignant level—he doesn’t just marry her and take her money, he makes her fall in love with him. He broke her by having sex with her, over and over, though he thought to himself, “I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love” (Rhys 55). They have very intimate moments together and he is trying to build a true relationship with her in any way he can in order to serve his own means: he is not just taking her money from her, to truly colonize her he is going to take everything. Though this novel takes place after the signing of the emancipation act, there are still clear themes slavery running rampant, and Rhys’s novel acts as a connecting point between this idea of colonization and the later feminist’s search for equality. In Rochester’s marriage to Antoinette, he is not looking for an equal, loving, caring relationship build on a foundation of things that they can share. Instead, if he manages to take everything from her in the ways that he expects, he would be more than just monetary possessions, he will be taking her freedom, her voice.

Mr. Rochester persuaded Antoinette to show him around her beloved land, parallel to how Caliban showed Prospero around in Shakespeare’s The Tempest, and how many colonizers
did throughout history, trying to learn the secret of the alien land. However, though “it was a beautiful place—wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness…it kept its secret” (Rhys 51-52). Though he was there, living and breathing in that native land, he did not belong to it. He studied the land but it would not speak to him as it did to Antoinette. Because he could not get at the mystery of the place, he studied Antoinette instead, learning that she liked “to be told ‘you are safe,’” so that he could play to her affections (Rhys 78). She fell in love with him, even though he “felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to [him], who did not think or feel as [he] did” (Rhys 55). To him, she was still the other, someone “lesser” who he could manipulate in any way possible in order to serve himself. As Gunner suggests, the unnamed Rochester is the “powerful husband figure who has the middle section of narrative, exhibiting all the ambiguities of the colonizer, attracted but yet repulsed by the land/woman he overpowers” (Gunner 143). Like Shakespeare’s Caliban, Antoinette is the native other who was tricked into a relationship with his European oppressor, before having her rightful power and title torn asunder. In Shakespeare’s The Tempest, readers learn in Caliban’s version of Prospero’s first days on the island, that “when [Prospero] cam’se first / [He] strok’se me and made much of me; wouldst give me / Water with berries in’; and teach me…and then I loved thee” (Shakespeare 18). Just like Caliban, Antoinette’s European oppressor came to her quickly, made much of their time together, gave her things she had never felt before (the physical pleasure) and made her fall in love with him.

Once Mr. Rochester has Antoinette in the palm of his hand, readers get to watch as he racks up his ultimate prize, similar to the actions Prospero takes in Shakespeare’s The Tempest, taking what is Caliban’s, making it his own, and doing with the native as he pleases. Writing a letter to his father, readers learn that “the thirty thousand pounds have been paid to [Mr.
Rochester] without question or condition” (Rhys 41). By the end of the novel, Antoinette cries to Christophine that “I am not rich now, I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him” (Rhys 66). Moving beyond all of Antoinette’s money and her home (which also “belongs to [Mr. Rochester] now” [Rhys 96]), her husband knowingly forces her from her place of refuge. Shattering her at a deeper level, he takes her from the only place she has ever felt safe: “she said she loved this place. This is the last she’ll see of it” (Rhys 99). Christophine asks Mr. Rochester toward the end of the novel “why…could [he] not return half of Antoinette’s dowry and leave the island—‘leave the West Indes if [he doesn’t] want her no more”, but that isn’t how colonialism works (Rhys 95). The Europeans don’t just come, divest the natives of their goods, and then sail away once more, perfectly quenched and praying for no hard feelings. The colonizers want to take everything they can manage with no thought to whose life it is harming. After all, the natives are the other, meaning it is absurd to see them as human beings. In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, as soon as Caliban let down his guard, everything was turned on end, the European reaping him of everything he had to offer, and then “here you sty me / In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me / The rest o’ the’ island” (Shakespeare 18-19). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Mr. Rochester took everything Antoinette had, and then like many natives in the slave trade, she was forcibly whisked away from her refuge, the land she loved, and taken wherever her oppressor felt like putting her—“He breaks her and takes her, zombified, to England” (Gunner 143). It is not difficult to see the similarity between her single room, fully equipped with a locked door, and the prison that is Caliban’s rock.

As previously mentioned, though both characters ended up colonized in the end, neither of them sat back and let their respective European do as he pleased. Though neither Antoinette nor Caliban were able to win the war, they were fighting the battle. In Shakespeare’s *The
Tempest Caliban took temporary refuge with Trinculo and Stephano, spilling out his woes upon their ears: “As I told thee before, I am subject to a tyrant, / A sorcerer, that by his cunning hath / Cheated me of the island…I say be sorcery he got this isle; / From me he got it” (Shakespeare 47). From there, it was not Trinculo and Stephano who came up with the plan, Caliban managed the plotting all on his own: Stephano asks “How now shall this be compassed? Canst thou / bring me to the party?” and Caliban quickly reveals the idea already thriving in his mind, “Yea, yea, my lord. I’ll yield him thee asleep, / Where thou mayst knock a nail into his head…Beat him enough. After a little time I’ll beat him too” (Shakespeare 47-48). After some jostling among the secondary characters, Caliban continues, showing just how much effort and thought he has already put into his plan:

“’tis a custom with him / I’ th’ afternoon to sleep. There thou mayst brain him, / Having first seized his books; or with a log / Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake, / Or cut his weasand with thy knife. Remember / First to possess his books; for without them / He’s but a sot, as I am, nor hath not / One spirit to command—they all do hate him / As rootedly as I. Burn his books” (Shakespeare 48).

Caliban has been watching his oppressor, Prospero, and he knows his weaknesses. Caliban is the aggressive slave, formulating a plot that, if raised to fruition in his planned manner, may have allowed him to triumph over his oppressor—especially if his character was not used as a comical aspect of Shakespeare’s play, the swan song needing to meet its quota. If Caliban were included into the plot as a true force to be reckoned with, say if The Tempest were one of Shakespeare’s tragedies instead, then he may have been able to triumph over his colonizer, who was originally the “good guy” in the play and who many critics saw representing Shakespeare himself. Either
way, Caliban did not sit in his cave and twiddle his thumbs, hoping that one day Prospero would have a change of heart. The only way he could win back his freedom was if he fought for it—however, while he had the right mentality to become the victor, he inevitably fell short in the end.

When fitting Antoinette from Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* into the Calibanesque archetype, it is clear that Antoinette is also a representation of the aggressive slave—instead of sitting around, twiddling her thumbs, she plotted against her husband, grasping desperately at the only chance of freedom she had left. As Laura Ciolkowski points out in *Navigating the Wide Sargasso Sea: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire*, “the competing narrative frames, authorial voices, and shifting points of view that characterize *Wide Sargasso Sea* reenact the struggles over meaning that are embedded within the fictions of colonial identity and English imperial control” (Ciolkowski 340). In the following scene, where Antoinette takes on a last ditch effort to win back Mr. Rochester’s favor, she takes refuge at Christophine’s house, spilling her woes upon her surrogate mother’s ears: “you must understand I am not rich now, I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him” (Rhys 66). Though the second section of the fiction is told from Mr. Rochester’s point-of-view, we switch back to Antoinette here to symbolize her temporary control. Her husband does not know her intentions of going out that afternoon, and if her plan played out as she had hoped (similar to Caliban’s case) than she may have finally triumphed over her husband in his attempt to colonize her.

Antoinette knew that Mr. Rochester was taking everything she had to offer, and that she had nothing left to her name. Though Christophine advised her to fix the problem by leaving him, Antoinette did not feel that the older woman was giving her good advice—or at least not the advice she truly wanted to hear—and she thought to herself, “how can she know the best thing
for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate old negro woman, who is not certain if there is such a place as England” (Rhys 67). Antoinette went to Christophine with a purpose—she already had her own plan to triumph over colonization, “I must say what I came to say”, and it was not as simple as picking up her skirt and leaving Mr. Rochester (Rhys 67). As represented in the change in point-of-view, it was Antoinette’s turn to take the offensive, even if it meant getting haughty with Christophine, a mother figure who she feared and respected. She stood her ground and made it clear what she was asking for, even if she knew Christophine would not like it: “‘You knew what I wanted as soon as you saw me, and you certainly know now. Well, don’t you?’ I heard my voice getting high and thin” (Rhys 67). It was already clear that Christophine did not want any part in Antoinette’s plan, and she sighed, “‘If the man don’t love you, I can’t make him love you.’” (Rhys 67). Before going there that morning, Antoinette already knew that this was her only fighting chance—she was not leaving without fulfilling her intention: “‘Yes you can, I know you can. That is what I wish and that is why I came here. You can make people love or hate. Or… or die” (Rhys 67). Antoinette knew about Christophine practicing obeah, and though the older woman first brushes it off as foolishness, later stating that she will not meddle in it for her, she eventually gives in and promises Antoinette “If you talk to him first I do what you ask me” (Rhys 69-70). As Antoinette travels back to her domain, she thinks to herself that Christophine “did not want to do this. I forced her with my ugly money”, and yet even though she feels bad for forcing her only friend to do something she was against, she was determined to carry out her plot, complete with her new possession: “it was wrapped in a leaf, what she had given me, and I felt it cool and smooth against my skin” (Rhys 71).

After her original plot against her husband’s colonization fell through, Antoinette continued her position on the offensive in a more immediate, present way. Antoinette no longer
plotted to herself in secret or among her close friends—she began to verbally and physically fight against Mr. Rochester, showing her position as the aggressive slave. After shouting at him that it was not his affair that pushed her into hating him, but rather the fact that he had made this place that she loved into a place that she hates, Antoinette fought against his demands, even more desperately than she had before. When he told her that she was not allowed to drink the very alcohol that was once hers, and he “managed to hold her wrist with one hand and the rum with the other”, she stopped holding her aggression back: “I felt her teeth in my arm” (Rhys 89). However, this motion failed to stop at self-defense, and moved completely into an offensive mode as “she cursed me comprehensively” and “she smashed another bottle against the wall and stood with the broken glass in her hand and murder in her eyes” (Rhys 89). Though Caliban had his fair share of shouting obscenities at his master, he never really got the chance to physically let his aggression smash his inhibitions, like the alcohol did for both spirited characters. Antoinette arguably made it one step further than Caliban in her battle against her colonizer, but even in the heat of the moment, when she had that weapon in hand, she never really had control. As previously mentioned, Laura Ciolkowski’s was quick to note in her analysis of Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea that the switching points-of-view between sections of the play highlight for the reader/audience when a particular character has the upper hand, as it the back-and-forth represents that fight for control (Ciolkowski 340). Even though Antoinette had the weapon and could have gotten revenge on Mr. Rochester for cheating on her, using her, stealing everything she had, and ultimately spoiling her land, the only place she’s ever felt safe, she was already broken. Readers get this battle from her husband’s point-of-view, meaning that she never really had a chance in winning back her identity and her freedom. It may seem like she progressed
further than Shakespeare’s Caliban, but both “aggressive slave” stock characters ended up succumbing to their respective colonizer in the end.

Gradations of Passivity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Though it can be made clear through Antoinette’s colonization that a white Creole woman can represent the stock figure of the aggressive slave, her character is not the only one in Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* who is a victim of colonization. Two secondary characters—each representing different nuances of the mother figure in the novel, Annette and Christophine—are also victims of colonization, and yet they fall into a different category of stock figure compared to our protagonist—these ladies represent the “passive slave”. While Annette’s backstory shares a striking resemblance to Antoinette’s, for she is also a white Creole and daughter in a line of slave-owners, when her time comes to be colonized, she does not have the same fighting spirit as her daughter. She becomes broken very easily and becomes a distant, uncaring mother to Antoinette, ultimately giving up entirely and putting her life in the hands of her enemies without a fight. When focusing on Antoinette’s other mother figure, the servant Christophine, while the older woman may show an intense fighting spirit at first, not unlike the glimpse shown from Annette, the black mother figure from Martinique is also passive in her failings. Annette’s passivity starts early on in Rhys’s novel, compared to the late blooming of Christophine’s passivity (which is not set in stone until she is written out entirely), but either way, both characters are clear examples of the “other”, and more importantly, the colonized passive slave. As Liz Gunner mentioned previously, “the early pages [of Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*] are marked by the sharp indifference of mother to daughter and by a degree of closeness to her
surrogate mother figure, the mysterious ‘blue-black’ Christophine, housekeeper and outsider, who comes from Martinique”, emphasizing the harsh break that Antoinette has with her mother, still in her childhood years, as Annette slips into the role of the passive slave (Gunner 142). Though Christophine also takes on this role, it is not until much later on, so she and Antoinette still have time to bond before that mother figure trickles into passivity.

Turning the focus primarily to Annette’s descent into passivity, there is no question that the rejection she receives from her peers is the starting point of her troubles. Though Annette’s real “psychotic break” does not happen solely in regard to this rejection, it is clear that the distress piles on until she is already fracturing beneath her skin. An early sign of this rejection from her peers is seen through the passing of her horse which “had been poisoned” by those who did not like the white cockroaches, a slang term used toward white Creole women (Rhys 10). However, it is also evident from the very beginning of the play that Annette favors her son Pierre over Antoinette, most likely because he was destined to become the family’s bread winner, and her passivity escalates tenfold when his deformities were becoming fully realized: “I didn’t know what the doctor told her or what she said to him but he never came again and after that she changed. Suddenly, not gradually. She grew thin and silent, and at last she refused to leave the house at all” (Rhys 10). It was no surprise that Annette became utterly broken when her dear son Pierre was killed, and though Antoinette hazily remembers her mother screaming “Don’t touch me. I’ll kill you if you touch me. Coward. Hypocrite. I’ll kill you,” her aggression toward the unfairness she should not have to accept is short-lived, for she is sent to the country to rest (Rhys 28). Annette has a couple short outbursts, which can perhaps be compared to Antoinette’s eruptions, but though readers can see a flicker of her potential to embody the aggressive slave stock figure, it remains dormant but in a few fleeting glimpses. Annette’s short-lived aggressive
bouts are specifically intended to get people to leave her alone—even if that person is her only living child, who is genuinely worried about her—not examples of her character truly fighting for change or fighting for control over the scarce decisions she should be able to make for herself.

Even before Annette goes to live in the country, her daughter Antoinette is used to her rejection. Early on in the play, Antoinette tries to show her mother affection on various occasions and is coldly shunned, one time in particular: “she pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her” (Rhys 17). With her mother in this fragile state after the death of Pierre, Antoinette tries to comfort her once more, but it is too late. Annette has already given up on having her own life and her own decisions—when Antoinette visits her in the country, Annette shouts “’No no no’ very loudly and flung me from her. I fell against the partition and hurt myself” (Rhys 29). This example of violence is not an example of Annette showing the characteristics of the aggressive slave because she is not fighting for her freedom—she has already surrendered and just wants to be left alone. Though Annette is regarded as mad, the “mother's madness is seen as passivity and silence” from that point on in the play (Gunner 143). Annette may seem crazy, but she is really just an image of the passive, colonized other who was whisked away and locked up. Even after Annette was positioned in the country home, she remained passive and uncaring when it came to what her oppressors were doing to her. In a secret visit, Antoinette recalled witnessing “a fat black man with a glass of rum in his hand”, who was most likely one of her mother’s caretakers, getting Annette drunk and taking advantage of her, even though a female caretaker was there as well, witnessing the abuse (Rhys 80-81). These caretakers did not care about Annette’s wellbeing; in fact, the woman caretaker thought it would be good to let their patient walk among broken glass,
barefooted, because “perhaps she keep quiet then” and Antoinette watched as the man lifted a babbling, or otherwise hallucinating, Annette “up out of the chair and kiss her. I saw his mouth fasten on hers and she went all soft and limp in his arms and he laughed. The woman laughed too” (Rhys 81). Annette is a stable representation of the passive slave, showing gradations of that weakness even before she is colonized and taken to the country home. If Antoinette were in this position, she would fight back against these caretakers, as she does in the end of the novel, doing whatever she can to break out of her imprisoners’ captivity. However, Annette does not seem to have that same fight in her—she went limp as they took her body and choices away from her, even as they laughed in her face.

Muddying the waters a bit, let us turn our attention to real, live human beings. In reality it is difficult for an individual to have such clear-cut edges, such as those being depicted thus far. An individual can have many conservative views, but then also be liberal when a certain situation arises. Even when it comes to fictional characters, things cannot always be strictly viewed in black and white, quartering off people and packing them into nice, tidy pens for what they solely represent. In the real world, and in the world of fiction, there are gradations. Taking a step back from the labels already plastered on our three characters, it is clear that though each of these women in Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea—our protagonist Antoinette and her two mother figures, Annette and Christophine—take a final resting place in either the category of the aggressive slave or the passive slave, as the story plays out readers see potential for each stock figure shining through when examining each individually. As Shakti Jaising reveals in her work titled "Who is Christophine?: The Good Black Servant and the Contradictions of (Racial) Liberalism" it is clear that Antoinette and Annette share likenesses, though one takes action in her colonized situation and the other does not. Christophine’s two white mistresses both have
respective aggressive bouts where they “puncture the liberal arrogance of their abolitionist husbands” (Jaising 818). When it comes to Antoinette, whose characteristics of the aggressive slave are more apparent and long lasting throughout the novel, we see her “engaged in struggles with her stepfather—whom she wishes she ‘could tell...that out here is not at all like English people think it is’ (476)—and with her English husband, who is generally suspicious of her and uncomprehending of her Caribbean upbringing” (819). Turning to her mother Annette and analyzing her similar position, readers witness a scene where “Annette lashes out at her husband, Mr. Mason, for being a ‘grinning hypocrite’ for condemning white Creole former slave owners and then profiting out of their misery (480)” (Jaising 818-819). Though Annette’s story ends in passivity where Antoinette’s arguably does not, her character cannot be strictly resigned to the passive slave category without question. There is a grey area, and Annette does dip her toes into the pool of aggression and action, not always meekly sitting back, one-hundred percent of the time.

Though Annette and Antoinette each harbor characteristics of the aggressive slave, at least to some extent, a different character seems to hold the most potential for the position. As Shakti Jaising goes on to show, “Christophine comes to the defense of both Cosway women” in various predicaments throughout the Wide Sargasso Sea and “at the same time that Christophine appears as a devoted and loyal servant to her white mistresses, she is also depicted as someone who stands up in defense of her own rights and freedoms” (821-822). From the very beginning it is clear to Rhys’s audience that Christophine is a strong character and that she does a lot for her mistresses. “Not only is she one of the few former slaves to stay on in the service of her mistresses postemancipation” (Jaising 821), as well as being the sole character they depend on for protection from their lazy, indecent, and rebellious servants (Jaising 822), “she is also the
only person to lament Annette Cosway’s deterioration into madness, to speak out against the injustices done her by her English husband as well as her caretakers, and to weep at her funeral” (Jaising 821). Christophine took care of these women in regard to how other servants treated them, she held them up when others sought to push them down, and though her eventual passivity was shown in her character being written out of the novel, she was the only one who pointed out what society was doing wrong, and what the men in her mistress’ lives were taking advantage of. Christophine was sensitive to her mistress’ predicaments and conscious of her own rights, enabling her to “imagine herself part of a female collectivity: ‘All women, all colors, nothing but fools,’ she proclaims. ‘Three children I have. One living in this world, each one a different father, but no husband, I thank my God. I keep my money. I don’t give it to no worthless man’ (524)” (Jaising 822). Christophine’s concerns transcended beyond her own situation, but though she could give her mistresses advice, really they had to rise to the challenge of putting the advice to action. She could not make their decisions and stand up to their husbands for them, though she may have tried. It was up to them to take action and secure their own freedom.

As previously mentioned, Christophine did try to help Antoinette in her predicament with Rochester: “Christophine functions as a stabilizing counterforce to Antoinette’s identity crisis and as reinforcement in the latter’s struggle against Rochester” (Jaising 820-821), and it is “Christophine alone whom Rhys allows to offer a hard analysis of Rochester’s actions” for she “is the only character who is a match for Rochester (34)” (Jaising 823). Unpacking this a bit, though Antoinette is seen as the aggressive slave more often than the passive slave, she does still show signs of each. In Antoinette’s passive phases, Christophine typically was there to help her stand on her feet because she “has no patience for Antoinette's passivity. When Antoinette is
immobilized by despair, Christophine admonishes her: ‘Get up, girl, and dress yourself. Woman must have spunks to live in this wicked world’ (84)” (Wilson 445). In fact, Christophine’s help does not stop here. Wilson continues on, pointing out Antoinette’s, and even her mother Annette’s, passivity in order to prove that “Christophine embodies the life force” in the novel, or the aggressive slave’s fighting spirit: “When Antoinette was a child, it was Christophine who kept her family alive—despite Annette Cosway's death wish: ‘I dare say we would have died if she'd turned against us and that would have been a better fate. To die and be forgotten and at peace. Not to know that one is abandoned, lied about, helpless’ (19)” (Wilson 445). If Christophine had not been there to support the women in their time of need, fighting off the natives who had it out for them, who knows what would have happened to them. Turning the attention back to Antoinette’s eventual struggle with Rochester, even though Christophine is simply written out of Wide Sargasso Sea, “obeah is largely responsible...for sending Rochester packing home to England...Rochester does not once mention his father's and brother's deaths as the reasons for his departure but instead obsessively rehashes his discomfort vis-à-vis the Caribbean landscape and people” (Mardorossian 1087). As analyzed in the previous section, Rochester was ultimately “unable to comprehend ‘the hidden place,’ he leaves behind ‘the secret he would never know’” and the reason he runs out of time in this mysterious land before he is able to reap all of its bounties is from the threat of Christophine’s magic (Rhys 172). Christophine may not have been able to save Antoinette, one of the women she helped stabilize throughout the majority of the novel, but even after she crystallized into the stock figure of the “passive slave”—caused by her forceful departure from the novel—her potential to embody the aggressive slave was a clear memory for Rochester, and her obeah was the only threat that really
sunk in to him, ultimately leaving him rattled. Though Christophine failed to save both of her mistresses in the end, she was the only character that seemed to stand a chance.

But with all of that said, did Christophine really ever have a chance at being the aggressive slave? Was she ever strong enough to stand eye-to-eye with Rochester? As mentioned previously, each of these women show nuances of both the passive and aggressive slave, and though Christophine clearly had potential for the aggressive slave stock figure, did she ever have a fighting chance before she was ultimately hushed by Rochester’s threats and Rhys’s pen? I

There are critics on each side of the argument, but I believe that though Christophine had a fighting chance for her own empowerment, Antoinette needed to take her life into her own hands and no longer have Christophine in her corner. Christophine’s advice got her to where she was, but it was time for Christophine to worry about herself, and she did not need to stay in the novel to carry that out—at the moment she is written out, it is all about Antoinette. To move back to what the critics say, in Lucy Wilson’s “Women Must Have Spunks: Jean Rhys’s West Indian Outcasts” she writes that “Christophine seem[s] to thrive on adversity and to draw strength from [her] opposition to the prevailing power structures”, possessing a “kind of resiliency” that Antoinette, her white Creole counterpart, lacks (Wilson 440). Opposing that analysis, Carine Mardorossian writes that she does not see “the defiant Christophine in the role of the self-determining agent Antoinette failed to become. Indeed, the moment Christophine best represents Western ideals of subjectivity and vehemently speaks up against injustice is also the moment she is made to leave the island and the narrative altogether” (1071-1072). It is clear that by being written out Christophine is no longer in the running for power, but to go further, some critics feel that she never had a clear shot at that power in the first place. To go back to Ciolkowski’s idea in the previous section about the narration and how it represents the struggle over power and
control, readers can analyze that Antoinette had the potential for power in a way that Christophine was never able to experience throughout the entire novel. Though Christophine was the only one to rattle Rochester, Antoinette clearly had the upper hand in her battle with her colonizer at various predicaments throughout the novel. As Mardorossian argues, “Wide Sargasso Sea’s double narrative structure...only gives us access to the black Creole voices and actions through the consciousnesses of the two major narrators” (1072), showing that though Christophine seemed to have power throughout the novel, really because she was never a narrator, she never has the same power that we often witnessed Antoinette and Rochester struggling over. Though Christophine showed an impressive fight, through the lack of her voice in the means of narration readers glimpse a foreshadowing of her later downfall into passivity, the moment many critics pick up on: when she is simply written out of Rhys’s novel. I can agree with this standpoint, however, going back to my own feelings on Christophine’s exclusion from the end of the novel, I feel that individuals can have mentor for a good portion of their lives, but at some point they need to stand on their own two feet. By Rhys writing Christophine out, she was not necessarily showing that she had no power, but that Antoinette was the one we were supposed to be focusing on, and in order for us to see if she can stand up to Rochester on her own, she needs to have her own strength, not constantly calling on Christophine for help.

Through the juxtaposition of Antoinette and Caliban, we can clearly see that Antoinette shares many characteristics of the colonized other and we can understand how well she fits beside him in the category of the aggressive slave. Though Antoinette’s two mother figures also show potential for fitting into this category, by the end of the novel both Annette and
Christophine are forced into submission and colonized by their oppressors. Even though the two women played significant roles in influencing Antoinette in the past, they have both become passive by the time Antoinette reached England. In the end, Antoinette must stand up for herself, and though her last action can be interpreted as either an act of defeat or one last show of power, it is clear that Antoinette has a hand in becoming whichever stock figure she truly represents. By Rhys allowing her protagonist Antoinette to make that last decision for herself, rather than letting her character’s story end in muted imprisonment, she was opening up the forum for feministic ideals of equality and empowerment, while maintaining her interest of the colonized slave. In her review titled “Rhys, Stead, Lessing, and the Politics of Empathy, and: The Unspeakable Mother: Forbidden Discourse in Jean Rhys and H. D., and: The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives,” Rachel Brownstein remarks that in Rhys’s decision of “moving Brontë's madwoman from the attic into the center of the narrative…and linking an exploited woman's rage to the fury of the colonized,” the author anticipates ideas of later feminists to come, including “their vision of rage as rebellion, their concern with the intersection of race and class with gender, [and] their focus on the problematic mother-daughter connection” (Brownstein 678). Though Antoinette did not have a purely happy ending, at least she was able to keep that little bit of power she had left, choosing her own fate. Antoinette’s final decision was not one made out of madness, it was rage—“‘it was when he said ‘legally’ that you flew at him’ (WSS, p. 150 [109]). In Rhys’s retelling, it is the dissimulation that Bertha discerns in the word ‘legally’—not an innate bestiality—that prompts her violent reaction” (Spivak 242). Antoinette may not have been able to save herself from colonization but she did use her last notch of power to write her own ending. In one light, Antoinette’s choice of suicide makes her a martyr for feminism, but even for the critics who do not agree, this choice is an important one.
The struggle waged between critics who see Antoinette’s final action as either passive or aggressive exemplify the struggle in store for those striving toward equality. There will be many battles along the way, and many stories to interpret.
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