

"Writing Gender, Re-Writing Nation:

***Wide Sargasso Sea, Annie John, Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home and Myal*"**

Rebecca Ashworth

The second half of the twentieth century saw a dramatically increased visibility of women's writing in the Caribbean literary project of self-definition, with certain voices emerging as a defining presence. In reaction to the colonial inscription of the white Creole woman in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) sought to re-inscribe an alternative subjectivity. Merle Hodge's pioneering novel *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970) was an early indicator of the approaching boom in African-Caribbean women's writing in the 1980s that emphasized gender as a valuable and necessary site of analysis in the region's project for decolonization. Pivotal texts at this time both recorded and contested the colonial presence in education and socialization, including Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985) and Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980) and *Myal* (1988).

Female 'madness' in these novels signifies a crisis of identity for both the female subject and, symbolically, the nation. The fissure between the female body and psyche is not only indicative of cultural alienation and loss, but also of the socio-historical determinants of women's sexuality and self-possession. Significantly, in these novels female 'madness' occurs at the point when the female characters find themselves most vulnerable and are forced into a direct collision with colonial values. Rejecting classical realism and revising and rewriting the English literary canon, these novels challenge the Western hegemonic epistemology in that they depict reality as it is experienced by 'othered' subjects and claim the right for self-determination and representation. As Mr Dan in *Myal* explains:

we have people who can and are willing to correct images from the inside, destroy what should be destroyed, replace it with what it should be replaced and put us back together, give us back ourselves with which to chart our course to go where we want to go.

(1988: 110)

These novels reclaim and recreate missing voices, histories and cultures in the cause of imagining a Caribbean cultural wholeness unavailable in both colonial and patriarchal accounts. *Myal* offers an alternative version of the theft of African culture and the historic failure to record Caribbean experience, and therefore approaches that 'half [that] has never

been told' (63). Similarly, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, set at the moment of African Jamaican emancipation, frames the crises of female Creole identity both past and present, declaring, 'There is always the other side, always' (1966: 106), and crafting a consciously provisional authority.

Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys's last novel, repositioned the Dominican-born Rhys as a Caribbean writer. As Evelyn O'Callaghan notes, other than Louise Bennett, Rhys was the only female writer mentioned in early surveys of Caribbean criticism (1993: 2). However, as Caribbean cultural criticism began to consolidate itself around agendas of folk belonging and the authentication of black experience, Rhys's position as a Caribbean writer came under threat. Kamau Brathwaite, in his much-quoted statement from *Contradictory Omens*, was influential in questioning Rhys's credentials as a Caribbean writer:

White Creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf, and have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or be identified, with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea.

(1974: 38)

O'Callaghan's seminal study of Caribbean women's writing, *Woman Version*, offered an alternative model through which to read Caribbean women's writing that 'announces a gendered perspective; adds individual styles of "talk over"; enhances or omits tracks depending on desired effect ... the dub remix in fact refuses to privilege any version over others' (1993: 11-12). This gendered model of interpretation, O'Callaghan argues, allows 'outsider' Creole voices, such as Rhys's, to be included within the canon.

In addition to *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s contested position within the canon, the presentation of black characters was also considered problematic. Indeed, Brathwaite's assertion of the historically impossible friendship between Antoinette and Tia continues to engage critics outside the Caribbean, including Gayatri Spivak. The ethical and political force of that relationship has also been explained by biographical analyses that draw on Rhys's letters (1984) and unfinished autobiography *Smile Please* (1979). This mode of criticism does not account for the novel's form or that the novel is more than just a rewriting of *Jane Eyre*. Its refusal to privilege any one viewpoint limits biographical interpretation, as does the fact that the novel owes more to literary Impressionism than it does to the realism of *Jane Eyre*. These techniques are employed not only to depict subjective experience, but also to destabilize the possibility of an objective reality. Veronica Gregg's 1995 comprehensive study, *Jean Rhys's*

Historical Imagination, questions and exposes the frequently neglected epistemological gaps in the novel. Gregg suggests that not only is Antoinette's narrative composed whilst in Thornfield's attic, but she also questions whether Antoinette survives 'her own death to speak her "truth," to tell her side of the story' (1995: 87). Antoinette's husband's narrative in the middle section of the novel includes, Gregg shows, 'counterdiscursive texts that he writes but cannot read'. Therefore,

to fully read Antoinette's life, we must read against the grain of his story. To read 'the other side' of the story is to read what the husband's text cannot know that it does not know. The aporias of the husband's narrative are the ground of possibility for the 'carnival' of voices, the multivocality, which helps to create the text of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

(1995: 108)

Gregg also proposes that the letters written to Antoinette's husband by the mixed race Daniel Cosway, the man who claims to be Antoinette's half brother, that are embedded in his narrative, 'cannot be disproved ... only denied or disbelieved'. This makes Daniel's narrative 'an important dimension of the narratives through which the subjective and sociolocal identities of the Creole woman are constructed in the slave and post-slavery societies of the Caribbean' (1995: 114).

The three narratives, therefore, present three conflicting views of the Creole woman, as well as contrasting worldviews. Whereas the narratives of Antoinette and her husband (apart from his letters) rely on memory, often the memories of impressions, Daniel's letters document an exact time. His desire to discredit Antoinette and gain money, however, makes his narrative unreliable. As the black characters are narrated through the memories and impressions of the white characters and only snatches of dialogue are recorded by the narrators, it is simplistic to critique Rhys for ventriloquizing their voices. Moreover, the 'friendship' between Antoinette and Tia that Brathwaite criticizes is only presented at the point at which this friendship terminates. There is nothing beyond her desire for Tia's approval and companionship to support Antoinette's claim that they were friends; therefore, it is moot whether Tia ever viewed their relationship as friendship or whether the girls' encounters were free from hostility and verbal abuse. This inability to read Tia is also applicable to Antoinette's maid Christophine, whom she values as a surrogate mother, but whose sense of self is not made available by the text. Ostensibly, the reader, unlike the husband, is able to fix a subject and meaning to Christophine's dialogue, but there is always

an element of uncertainty. This is particularly emphasized in Christophine's fluctuation of subject, between Antoinette and the black maid Amélie when talking to the husband, making it impossible to judge her opinion of the two women: 'Why you don't take that good-for-nothing girl somewhere else? But you love money — must be why you come together' (1966: 123). To stress the limitations for the characters' understanding of each other across gender, race, and cultural barriers, the novel frequently uses laughter to mark uncertainty, as laughter is a gesture that resists the interpretation of both other characters and the reader.

An inability to understand and read the other becomes the principal source of conflict between Antoinette and her husband. In contrast to her husband's ostensibly fixed nationality and race as an English white man, Antoinette's identity is unstable, leading her to constantly seek reinforcement through her image in a mirror. She is distrustful of anything that cannot be seen: 'I didn't say I don't believe, I say I don't know, I know what I see with my eyes' (92). Antoinette's liminal whiteness brings her husband's understanding of all identities under pressure. Unable to comprehend what he sees and fearful of what he perceives with his own eyes, he chooses to rely on preconceived ideas and stereotypes. He seeks to validate his identity and worldview through fixing Antoinette as a mad, highly-sexed Creole with tainted ancestry, possibly the product of miscegenation. The couple engages in a battle of wills to control the other that is also an attempt to hold on to their own sense of self. Obeah in the novel comes to symbolize this unseen force. Antoinette asks Christophine to use obeah to help her seduce her husband. The husband, believing himself to be impervious to external forces, chooses to view her successful seduction of him as his own choice. Antoinette, on the other hand, believing in a more permeable and malleable subjectivity, recognizes the power of language to shape reality and views her husband's renaming her Bertha and his attempt to make her into a marionette or doll as acts of obeah. Finally, unable to fully possess and control her, her husband takes her to Thornfield and imprisons her in the attic of the Great House. Antoinette perceives this house as being made of cardboard; this, as Gregg suggests, is symbolic of her entrapment 'between the pages of a book' (1995: 98). She dreams of escape through burning down the house and jumping to her death to unite with her double, Tia, thus emulating the forms of resistance of African-Jamaicans she witnessed in childhood. The novel, however, concludes before she realizes this dream. Indeed, Rhys's refusal to free her from this cardboard reality/Victorian novel can be read as an acknowledgement of the inability to articulate fully the reality of an historical Creole woman.

The female coming of age novel *Annie John* also explores the capricious quality of

knowledge and reality. Annie's early childhood is one of edenic bliss with her mother at the centre of her world and identity. Her 'fall' into adult knowledge, for Annie, is experienced as her betrayal by her mother. The structure of the novel, K.B. Byrne argues, means that the reader begins to distrust information when it is first presented. As Byrne discerns, this is achieved through a subversion of chronology and by events only gaining meaning later in the text. The reader is dependent on Annie for all meaning. This gives the text and reader, Byrne suggests, an 'obeah insight'; thus Kincaid uses her 'canonical training' to counter 'the authoritative, scientific claim on reality of that very canon' (2000: 77). Kincaid, in interview with Selwyn Cudjoe, explains the Antiguan concept of reality:

Reality was not to be trusted [;] the thing you saw before you was not really quite to be trusted because it might represent something else. And the thing you didn't see might be right there — I mean, there were so many stories about people who were followed home by a dead person, and the dead person eventually led them into a pond.

(1989: 230)

For Annie, the unseen and supernatural are in harmony with her mother's oral narratives, which provide meaning and affirmation to their lives and their identity. Frequently, her mother, with the aid of objects from Annie's infancy, makes Annie the subject of the narratives. It is from her mother's oral narratives that she learns the correlation between storytelling and identity formation/construction. The young Annie feels secure in her identity, believing that mimicry of her mother will ensure a painless passage from childhood to adulthood. Her mother's inability, however, to come to terms with female sexuality, both her own and her daughter's, means that Annie receives only a negative lesson: a lack of information, a silence evoking shame about the female body, and instructions to avoid boys. Anxiety over the unknown, this time adult sexuality, comes to replace Annie's previous anxiety over the supernatural; this time, however, there are no stories or explanations with which to understand it.

Furthermore, as Annie matures, her exposure to the colonial legacy increases, whilst her connection to the traditional folk element of culture decreases. Rebellious, she embraces everything and everyone that appear to defy social norms, such as the Red Girl who spurns acceptable female appearance and behaviour. When asked to write an autobiographical essay at school, Annie uses this exercise to author herself. Her essay, 'heartfelt, and, except for the very end, it was all too true' (1985: 41), is symbolic of the novel's structure. Emotional authenticity and complete control over the content are more important than facts. Annie

authorizes herself, both in the essay and in the novel, through making her gaze and viewpoint the determining access point to her narrative. Annie also usurps the colonial Caribbean history by defacing the picture of Columbus in her *A History of the West Indies* with her mother's phrase, 'The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go' (78). Annie, the transgressive author of the novel, also reverses the historical determinants of the colonial class/colour hierarchy. She describes Ruth, a white English girl in her class, as wearing a coronet-shaped dunce's cap made of 'shiny gold paper' that 'was all aglitter' and looking like a girl attending a birthday party in *The Schoolgirl's Own Annual* (74-5). Annie's gaze renders Ruth an object of absurdity and pity when she scornfully imagines Ruth's interiority: 'Perhaps she wanted to be in England, where no one would remind her constantly of the terrible things her ancestors had done' (76). To ensure that readers understand the psychological trauma that necessitates historical revision, Annie's revision of her personal history takes place during her unexplained sickness/breakdown. She erases aspects of family photographs to eliminate her parents' sexuality. Significantly, Merle Hodge identifies Kincaid's use of creole in the section of the novel when Annie is unwell. This, Hodge suggests, conveys 'certain intimate and unprocessed memories, preserved in such detail that the actual language used is indelibly recorded, resisting translation' (1998: 27), thus signifying the trauma of her mother's betrayal that has stemmed from an inability to aid Annie through puberty, which has necessitated this revision. It is Annie's Carib grandmother, an obeah practitioner, who helps to heal her. The ethereal character of obeah with its associations for Annie with her childhood, strong bonds between women, and self-affirmation, is necessary to fight this illness brought on by the intangible forces of the colonial legacy.

At the end of the novel Annie leaves for England. This decision reprises her mother's journey from Dominica to Antigua to defy her father, but with a significant difference. Annie's final, and ironic, act of resistance against her mother is in the hope of a freedom with which to construct her identity. The peculiar nature of this irony is that it is the result of her mother's own internalization of colonial values that caused the friction between them and has been experienced by Annie as a betrayal. Thus Annie rejects her mother and symbolically her own colonial and Caribbean cultural inheritance in favour of the Mother Country. Therefore, as Annie stages her resistance through authorizing and controlling her own text and self-construction, she also conversely exposes the limits of this resistance.

Gaining knowledge of one's colonial and cultural inheritance is the journey Nellie in Brodber's *Jane and Louisa* is forced to undergo when she experiences a breakdown. Brodber

originally wrote the novel as an aid for her sociology students to understand dissociative personality disorder in the Jamaican context. This dissociation for Nellie is from the Jamaican people, the folk aspect of her culture, her wider family including her ancestors, and from her own body. Acting out her preordained role set by her self-effacing paternal black great-grandmother, who in Anancy fashion made a kumbla out of her husband's white skin to ensure her progeny would ascend into the fair-skinned middle classes, Nellie becomes a doctor. Along with her friends who are part of a Jamaican intellectual and social elite, she isolates herself in an anti-sexual intellectual barren desert, severing her mind from her emotions, body, spirit and black ancestry. In addition, due to her gender, Nellie is assigned the role of minute-taker to the group's discussions. The immolation of her lover Robin (who June Roberts (2006) reads as an allegory of the Guyanese political activist Walter Rodney) serves as a crisis point, not only to her intellectual political endeavour, but also in terms of her community of friends who, confined to the intellectual and rational, cannot cope with her bereavement. The first section of the novel can be read as Nellie's memories of both her experiences and the voices in her life. The voices often appear in the form of a play script and are not always easily attributable to a particular person, thus emphasizing the collective nature of self-hood.

During Nellie's mental collapse her childhood friend, the Rastafarian Baba, comes into her life to help heal the division between her body and soul. Baba, through what Nellie views as obeah, presents her with a doll made of pear seeds: The baby crumbled in my lap ... a cracked up doll ... Baba's point was that we should stop hiding and talk about ourselves' (1980: 61). This, a revision of Antoinette's husband's actions in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, forces Nellie to understand that she is the one responsible for making a doll of herself who has lost all feeling and connection with both herself and others. It is Baba who helps Nellie after his actions lead to her breakdown/diabetic coma/ resurrection — the novel allowing all three interpretations simultaneously. Baba, however, is unable to complete Nellie's healing, as she needs to learn to value herself, reconnect with her heritage and understand her ancestral legacy that has caused this dislocation.

To aid her in her journey, her deceased aunt Alice comes to help her down the 'rabbit hole' into the womb of her past in order for her to reconnect with her ancestors and understand her history, viewing the past through a spiritual lens and moving camera. This gynaecological symbolism allows a reading that incorporates both the actual female body in terms of female sexuality and the body as the nation. Nellie learns that the legacy, the kumbla,

she has inherited is both preserving and sterilizing, stifling all forms of creativity. The greatest danger to women is perceived as 'Black sperms disintegrating black wombs' (142). Consequently, this elimination of black folk heritage, something to be 'thrown on a scrap heap', prevents creativity, especially as the female members are advised to 'Take an antidote. Silence it. Best pretend it doesn't exist' (143). The novel ends with Nellie finally understanding her connection with her ancestors and wider community; the creativity first used by her great-grandmother to imagine the protective kumbla needs to be re-channelled into creating a unified affirmative community and culture, symbolized by the fish inside her waiting to be birthed.

The innovative imagining of a potential self-in-community also informs Brodber's *Myal*. Shalini Puri terms Brodber's techniques in *Myal* a 'twilight poetics', which embraces doubleness (1993: 112). To overcome binarisms, she turns away from realism in search of, Puri argues, 'a realist epistemology' (1993: 99). Brodber's realist epistemology is established through her incorporation of her previous socio-historical research. Female socialization in *Myal* is explored through the colonial education system of the early twentieth century. The bodies of two young women, Anita and Ella, become a site on which power structures, both colonial and neo-colonial (American), symbolically fight for dominance and control, which the novel terms spirit theft. The young gifted black student Anita is violated by the black ex-constable Maas Levi, this role being symbolic of African collusion with the white slavers of the past. This violation is both sexual and spiritual and, like Jane and Louisa, re-employs the voodoo/obeah doll of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Ella, the child of a black woman and white man, is violated by Selwyn a white American dramatist, who, through his interrogation of her history in the guise of love, steals her culture in order to produce a 'coon show'. This theft is symbolic of both present American cultural imperialism and of previous colonial theft, suppression, and defamation of African and Caribbean culture. As Maas Levi's rape of Anita's womb is a re-enactment of the historical violation of black women and symbolically an act of violence against the creative will of a people, Ella's violation is also experienced as violence against her ability to create: Selwyn prevents her conceiving a child and does not involve her in his play. Ella, like Nellie, suffers a dissociative disorder when she becomes mute and her personality splits into two accusatory voices, one attacking her race, the other her gender.

The two girls are healed by a diverse selection of community leaders who literally embody spirits from the Middle Passage. Anita is helped through a Kumina ritual led by Miss

Gatha/Mother Hen who works with the help of spirits and music derived from African origins and Ella is healed by Maas Cyrus/Percy the chick, through myal, using the products and spirits of the natural environment. Brodber, in an unpublished interview with O'Callaghan in 1983, stresses that it is a creolized, rather than African, culture or 'spirit' that she is re-employing (cited in O'Callaghan 1990: 58), since both Myal and Kumina are syncretic Caribbean spiritual forms. Maureen Warner-Lewis's *The Nkuyu: Spirit Messengers of the Kumina* (1977) is usefully read alongside Brodber's novels, as it provides an introduction to the spiritual dimension of her work, and because Warner-Lewis, like Brodber, records and reaffirms 'the unwritten, sometimes the unspoken ... secrets of one's environment' (Warner Lewis cited in Gregg 2005: 414). The whole community is also healed during these rituals and is thus symbolically reconnected to both Caribbean cultural forms and the land. It is important that the teacher and his wife are active participants in helping Anita, just as it is significant that the Anglican minister and reformed spirit thief William Brassington, also a child of mixed parentage, takes part in healing Ella.

The novel culminates with both young women pursuing teaching careers. Ella, in her new job, begins to understand how education, specifically the story of Mr Joe's farm in the *Caribbean Reader*, enacts spirit theft through teaching children to become complicit in their own zombification. With the help of the Reverend Simpson/Mr Dan she learns how she can teach children to read against the grain and correct images from the inside of colonial texts. The novel also enacts this reversal of images through informing the reader at the end of the novel that the community leaders are the same characters in the *Reader*.

These novels bear witness to the plurality of Caribbean female experience. More than this, they revise previous presentations of gender, race and class by complicating each category through an understanding of their mutual influence and thereby delivering new understandings of the nation. Together the novels establish the female body, women's sexuality and the relationships between women as important themes in the region's decolonization project. They also reveal the colonial influence within the private realm of experience such as the home and politicize this space as another site of resistance. Each provides a distinctive epistemological challenge to the authority of colonial discourses and institutions. Moreover, their newness in terms of form and thematics provoked an important turning point for Caribbean criticism. The development of 'club version', 'obeah insight', and 'twilight poetics' marked important initiatives in a critical methodology adequately complex

to the region's literary production and one that captured the value of inbetween and multiple, as well as gendered, Caribbean subjectivities.

References

- Brathwaite, K. (1974) *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*, Kingston: University of the West Indies.
- Brodber, E. (1980) *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, London: New Beacon Books.
- (1988) *Myal*, London: New Beacon Books.
- Byrne, K.B.C. ([2000] 2008) 'Under English, Obeah English: Jamaica Kincaid's New Language', reprinted in H. Bloom (ed.), *Jamaica Kincaid* (Bloom's Modern Critical Views), London: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 63-78.
- Cudjoe, S.R. ([1989] 1990) 'Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview', reprinted in S.R. Cudjoe (ed.), *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays From the First International Conference*, Wellesley, MA: Calaloux, 215-32.
- Gregg, V.M. (1995) *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole*, Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- (2005) 'Maureen Warner-Lewis', in V.M. Gregg (ed.), *Caribbean Women: An Anthology of Non-Fiction Writing, 1890-1980*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press: 414.
- Hodge, M. (1970) *Crick Crack, Monkey*, London: André Deutsch.
- ([1998] 2008) 'Caribbean Writers and Caribbean Language: A Study of Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*', reprinted in H. Bloom (ed.), *Jamaica Kincaid* (Bloom's Modern Critical Views), London: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 23-30.
- Kincaid, J. (1985) *Annie John*, London: Picador.
- O'Callaghan, E. (1990) 'Book Reviews: *Myal* by Erna Brodber', *Journal of West Indian Literature* 4(1): 50-9.
- (1993) *Woman Version – Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Caribbean.
- Puri, S. (1993) 'An Other Realism: Ema Brodber's "Myal"', *Ariel* 24(3): 95-115.

Rebecca Ashworth, "Writing Gender, Re-Writing Nation: *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Annie John*, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* and *Myal*", in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Alison Donnell & Michael Bucknor (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 209-217.

Status: Postprint (Author's version)

Rhys, J. (1966) *Wide Sargasso Sea*, London: André Deutsch, republished in Penguin Classics, 2000.

— (1979) *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*, London: André Deutsch.

— (1984) *The Letters of Jean Rhys*, edited by F. Wyndham and D. Melly, New York: Viking.

Roberts, J.E. (2006) *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora Through Folk Culture and Religion*, Westport, CT and London: Praeger.

Warner-Lewis, M. (1977) 'The Nkuyu: Spirit Messengers of the Kumina', reprinted in V.M. Gregg (ed.), *Caribbean Women: An Anthology of Non-Fiction Writing, 1890-1980*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005: 415-46.