

EXOTIC MADNESS IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

FROM MARGINALIZATION TO EMPOWERMENT AND INDIGENIZATION

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Caribbean women migrants and exotic madness

In this essay, I focus on the connection between exoticism and madness in the context of the Caribbean diaspora, and examine the responses to this intriguing association that have been offered by selected writers from the Anglophone Caribbean.¹ It is a given that West Indian literature is replete with migrant figures -- usually women -- who are viewed by the host population when they go abroad as exotic but also, by virtue of this distinct difference, as suspect, or indeed, dysfunctional and possibly mad. The apparent otherness of their behaviour or life choices is constructed in their new homes in the West as evidence of some form of mental imbalance. Such fictional characters are victims of what Graham Huggan has called “a particular mode of aesthetic *perception*,”² and distinguish themselves by their difference, whether cultural or ethnic. To the relatively homogeneous communities into which they might be seen to intrude, they can inspire initial fascination, but also doubt as to their purpose and ability to fit in. Such suspicion often leads to instances of exploitative commodification that can be followed by radical rejection. The iconic literary example of this is to be found in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*,³ a novel in which the Dominican writer gives a voice and a story to the white creole from Jamaica who is famously locked up in the attic of Thornfield Hall in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.⁴ In Rhys’s prequel to the English classic, Antoinette, renamed Bertha by her English husband, is perceived by him as a “stranger who did not think or feel as [he] did”⁵ and by extension as an irrational being, “a mad girl,”⁶ a “lunatic.”⁷ Antoinette is as menacing to him as the mysterious exotic landscape of her native Caribbean, which justifies her incarceration in her husband’s eyes. But Rhys provides her readers with “the other side” of the story as well,⁸ giving Antoinette the possibility of regaining some of her dignity, as she dreams of setting fire to the English mansion where she is held prisoner. She is presumed to eventually do so before jumping to her death. Another similar story is that of mixed-race, Jamaican Ella O’Grady, in Erna Brodber’s *Myal*, whose assumed exotic background is exploited by her American husband Selwyn to put on the “biggest coon show ever,”⁹ a form of zombification or “spirit thievery” that partakes in Ella’s breakdown and mental disruption,¹⁰

1 I would like to thank both Evelyn O’Callaghan and Daria Tunca for commenting on draft versions of this essay.

2 Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 13. Italics in original.

3 Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 1966, London: Penguin, 2000.

4 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 1847, London: Penguin, 2006.

5 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 58.

6 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 110.

7 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 106.

8 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 82.

9 Erna Brodber, *Myal*, London: New Beacon, 1988, p. 80.

10 Brodber, *Myal*, p. 83.

but which she finally escapes thanks to the healing powers of a group of Myalists. Finally, a comparable narrative of exotic othering coupled with issues of mental health is Kei Miller's novel *The Last Warner Woman*, whose Jamaican protagonist, Adamine, is sectioned in England because of her strange behaviour as a warner, i.e. as a person who prophesies catastrophes. It is almost, the narrator tells us, as if "being of West Indian origin was sufficient cause for madness."¹¹

Challenging exoticization

After this brief, initial assessment of how complex and varied the configuration of "exotic madness" is in Caribbean literature, I wish to concentrate on specific texts that further demonstrate how the marginalization resulting from the exoticization of Caribbean migrants has been addressed and challenged by West Indian authors. The above mentioned texts by Rhys, Brodber and Miller can be said to have restored the humanity of their migrant protagonists mostly by giving readers a more intimate access to these characters' often traumatic back stories, which works to undermine the prejudices regarding their mental states. But there are additional, often concomitant, ways for writers of achieving such subversion, and I will address two of them here. Some have endowed their characters with an ability to take advantage of their exotic label in the narrative itself and so achieve some form of empowerment, however ambiguous or temporary this agency might turn out to be. Others have implemented a less visible, yet more subtle and therefore more radical, calling into question of the process of categorization presiding over the labelling of migrant others that goes through an indigenization of their assumed exotic madness. Even if there are possible overlaps between these two treatments of the allegedly mad migrant, I will concentrate in the former case on two short stories, Dionne Brand's "Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls,"¹² and Jean Rhys's "Let Them Call It Jazz"¹³ (1962), and in the latter on Caryl Phillips's novel *The Lost Child* (2015).¹⁴

Achieving empowerment in stories by Dionne Brand and Jean Rhys

Brand's story provides yet another version of the marginalization of the migrant others whose anger is, in the words Johanna X. K. Garvey, "perceived by observers in terms of 'madness.'" Yet there is a special twist this time as the protagonist's rage eventually turns into a concrete "form of resistance for a Black female subject rendered voiceless."¹⁵ The story focuses on Blossom, a Trinidadian migrant in Toronto, who is financially exploited by white Canadians as a domestic servant but also by her faithless Caribbean husband, whom she supports. When she vehemently and even violently reacts to her boss's attempt to touch her, by throwing the family's laundry in the swimming pool and trying to strangle the inconsiderate doctor for whom she works, she is unsurprisingly labelled as "crazy."¹⁶ She

¹¹ Kei Miller, *The Last Warner Woman*, London: Phoenix, 2010, p. 156.

¹² Dionne Brand, "Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls," in *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, Toronto: Women's Press, 1989, pp. 31-42.

¹³ Jean Rhys, "Let Them Call it Jazz," in her *Tales of the Wide Caribbean: A New Collection of Short Stories*, London: Heinemann, n.d., pp. 164-180.

¹⁴ Caryl Phillips, *The Lost Child*, London: Oneworld, 2015.

¹⁵ Johanna X. K. Garvey, "'The Place She Miss': Exile, Memory, and Resistance in Dionne Brand's Fiction," *Callaloo* 26.2, Spring 2003, pp. 486-503, p. 489.

¹⁶ Brand, "Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls," p. 33.

is, in other words, categorized as the black other incapable of anything else but rage, which is seen as the ultimate expression of a lack of intrinsic level-headedness that native Canadians are supposed to naturally possess. However, Blossom transcends this vicious circle of suffering when she starts speaking in tongues, and lets herself be possessed by the spirit of the Yoruba goddess-warrior Oya.

Through this transformation, she apparently performs the madness that she has been accused of but also acquires “the power to see and the power to fight; [...] the power to feel pain and the power to heal.”¹⁷ It is by choosing to embrace her supposed exotic alienness, as an “obeah woman”¹⁸ and by living up to some of the clichés that Canadians, but also her husband, entertain about her as an irrational being that Blossom manages to achieve the agency that her host society refused her when she was a good immigrant, when she was trying to comply with the Canadian way of life. This interpretation, which relies on the idea that the traumatized individuals can perform the mental deviance they are charged with, has been rightly questioned by some scholars, for it starts from the rational premise that the spirit possession undergone by Blossom is merely the individual acting of a part, and not an actual spiritual transformation with collective dimensions. Developing this argument, Marlene Goldman, for example, insists on viewing Blossom’s behaviour as an effective challenge to “Western norms of subjectivity.”¹⁹ It is therefore important, as Kathleen J. Renk asserts, to consider that “Blossom attains a visionary state where the imposed boundaries between species, time, and dualities dissolve,”²⁰ an alternative vision of the world which destabilizes the very concept of madness and which, as we will see later, is taken even further in Phillips’s *The Lost Child*.

Jean Rhys’s heroine Selina in “Let Them Call It Jazz” experiences a form of ostracization similar to Blossom’s when her loud voice and her singing make her appear deranged in the eyes of her self-righteous English neighbours and cause her first arrest for “drunk and disorderly” conduct.²¹ The couple next door watch her constantly, the husband staring at her “as if [she is a] wild animal let loose.”²² As a mixed-race Martinican, Selina stands out in the allegedly respectable London neighbourhood where, in the 1950s, she is lent a flat by the mysterious Mr Sims, who, the story implies, has a sexual interest in her. When she throws a stone at her prissy neighbours’ window after they accuse her of shameless behaviour, of “[making] dreadful noise at night and [using] abominable language, and [dancing] in obscene fashion,”²³ Selina is taken to court and then sent to Holloway prison, an ominous building that encapsulates the conceptual straightjacket that the so-called exotic subject is trapped in. There she learns a song, which a man later hears her sing at a party and finally sells, presumably to a recording label, after “jazzing [the tune] up,”²⁴ suggesting that music is more likely to be popular if it catches the attention of listeners who crave for exoticism, which is ironically fake in this case. Selina is only given £ 5 from the transaction, and is thus obviously exploited, yet she comes to terms with her feelings of dispossession because she now understands how English people function, and she is now better able to cope in a society where mendacity and greed prevail, as shown by the adaptation and sale of her song. As Lucy Wilson has argued, Selina is definitely a resilient

17 Brand, “Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls,” p. 40.

18 Brand, “Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls,” p. 41.

19 Marlene Goldman, “Spirit Possession and the Transformation of Space in the Fiction of Dionne Brand,” *Topia* 34, Fall 2015, pp. 141-156. <https://topia.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/topia/article/view/40307>

20 Kathleen J. Renk, “‘Her Words Are Like Fire’: The Storytelling Magic of Dionne Brand,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 27.4, October 1996, pp. 97-111.

21 Rhys, “Let Them Call it Jazz,” p. 171.

22 Rhys, “Let Them Call it Jazz,” p. 167.

23 Rhys, “Let Them Call it Jazz,” p. 174.

24 Rhys, “Let Them Call it Jazz,” p. 180.

character. Unlike Rhys's white protagonists, who tend to be passive hence powerless, she indeed seems to "thrive on adversity and to draw strength from [her] opposition to the prevailing power structures."²⁵

Both stories are told in a form of non-standard English that indexes Blossom's and Selina's cultural background but which also gives us a more direct access to their supposedly deranged minds. If Brand's text is nevertheless told in a more distant third person narrative, Rhys's is exclusively focalized through Selina, so much so that one critic has spoken of this story as an example of Rhys's paranoid narrative, where "we are witness to the interior monologue of an individual who tries desperately, and unsuccessfully, to control the way others perceive her."²⁶ So, if the variety of English that the two protagonists speak reinforces their otherness in their environment, it is also empowering in the sense that it contributes to asserting their human selves in the face of the prejudice they have to endure, which somehow turns their exotic status on its head. For by familiarizing themselves with their stories readers are indeed directed to view these women as human beings first, and not as enigmatic strangers. Blossom and Selina navigate between two different sets of norms, their own and that of the metropolis, which might be represented by the police forces that in each story intervene to put an end to the exotic's disturbing goings-on. Yet both women are forced to construct a new, diasporic and syncretic consciousness in order to survive. Do they compromise in doing so? Do they triumph? The stories are not conclusive in this regard. What is certain, however, is that, in spite of different locations and time periods, their narratives are still based on a form of dualistic opposition between the Caribbean migrant, perceived as strange and therefore mad, and the surrounding supposedly 'decent' world where they have settled, a separation exemplified in "Let Them Call It Jazz" by the hedge that divides Selina's yard from that of her virtuous English neighbours. While these two texts go some way towards dismantling the system whereby these women are regarded as outlandish and mysterious, and therefore mentally challenged, the narratives still rely for their effect on a cultural binary of sorts that presents the world of the newcomer and that of the host society as separate and almost mutually exclusive.

Indigenizing exotic madness

I now turn to Caryl Phillips's *The Lost Child* (2015), and consider how its combined representation of strangeness, difference and mental imbalance differs from the texts previously discussed. Like them, it suggests that the psychic problems of the migrant are to be regarded, as J. Michael Dash proposes, more as a "state of extreme consciousness" than "a form of pathological behaviour"²⁷ -- a view which promotes a compassionate understanding of the impact that displacement and the confrontation with another culture can have on individual psyches. Yet, I would like to argue that Phillips's characterization is likely to prove more subversive, even if it does not seem to confer direct agency to its characters as in the other texts mentioned so far. For, instead of relying on the exotic vs familiar binary, Phillips's novel profoundly destabilizes this duality and thereby generates a more complex reading of the mad exotic figure, one which overcomes the division between self and other, very much

²⁵ Lucy Wilson, "'Women Must Have Spunks': Jean Rhys's West Indian Outcasts," *Modern Fiction Studies* 32.3, Autumn 1986, pp. 439-448, p. 440.

²⁶ Lauren Elkin, "Getting the Story Across: Jean Rhys's Paranoid Narrative," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 46.1, Winter 2016, pp. 70-96, p. 76.

²⁷ J. Michael Dash, "The Madman at the Crossroads: Delirium and Dislocation in Caribbean Literature," *Profession*, MLA, 2002, pp. 37-43, p. 41.

like the two literary texts, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*,²⁸ and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with which Phillips's 2015 fiction openly dialogizes, as we will see in more detail later. In the meantime, it is interesting to note the relevance to Phillips's text of Carine Mardorossian's discussion of *Wuthering Heights* in terms of a "radical reconfiguration of difference."²⁹ As a novel "preoccupied with the disruption of normative social values,"³⁰ notably to the way it represents Heathcliff's and Catherine's unstable racial identities, this English classic indeed offers an "alternative model of identification" that "challenges not only the separation of identity-based interpretations but also the simplified binaries of black/white and self/other through which we traditionally conceptualize the category of racial difference."³¹ The "relational paradigm"³² conceptualized by Mardorossian, whereby man-made categories are "meaningful only in relation to one another,"³³ could also be made to apply to other identitarian taxonomies, such as the distinction between madness and sanity.

In view of this, it is intriguing to consider that Phillips's exploration of perceived and "real" mental states in *The Lost Child* not only deals with an obviously displaced and traumatized individual of Caribbean origin -- a woman who suffers from migrant alienation and from the trauma that she had to endure as a slave transported to the Americas then to England. The novel also zooms in on two women of English descent, who are "at home" in their native land and thus supposedly more rooted. Yet, their painful life trajectories bring them very close to the mental destabilization of the exotic outsider born in the tropics, in spite of very different backgrounds. Far from suggesting, as James Clifford did in the late 1980s, that "We are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagos,"³⁴ and thereby trivializing the suffering of the Caribbean slave figure, Phillips's subtle literary rapprochement between the two sets of mentally disturbed characters rather results for the reader in a more complex understanding of their respective situations. By showing the puzzling similarities between the mental disorders of so-called outsiders and so-called insiders -- what I would call "indigenizing the mad exotic" -- Phillips does not flatten out the differences resulting in the cultural appropriation of the exotic margin by the normative centre, but rather performs a kind of empathy-inducing cultural integration whereby so-called madness is no longer regarded as exclusively extraneous to England, as typical of the foreign other, but as something which is fully part of it, which is, one might say, indigenous to it. Given that the mad ideology behind the slave trade and colonial slavery was very much a product of England, one could even say here that madness has inevitably come home.

Phillips's previous fiction has often relied on juxtaposing radically different people and suggesting to the reader that they actually share much more than meets the eye, if only their common status as outsiders, literal in some cases and figurative in others. This is, for example, the case in *Higher Ground* and in *The Nature of Blood*,³⁵ where Phillips builds tentative bridges between characters of the Black and Jewish diasporas to denounce the pervasive and age-long ostracism suffered by the two diasporic groups.³⁶ In *The Lost Child* Phillips again intimately connects people

28 Emile Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 1847, London: Penguin, 2003.

29 Carine M. Mardorossian, "Racial Vagaries in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*" in her *Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Rewrite Postcolonialism*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008, pp. 91-113.

30 Mardorossian, "Racial Vagaries," p. 92.

31 Mardorossian, "Racial Vagaries," p. 93.

32 Mardorossian, "Racial Vagaries," p. 93.

33 Mardorossian, "Racial Vagaries," p. 93.

34 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 173. I owe this reference to Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 84.

35 Caryl Phillips, *Higher Ground*, London: Penguin, 1989, and *The Nature of Blood*, London: Bloomsbury, 1997.

36 It might be worthwhile to remember that this approach owed Phillips charges of misappropriating the suffering of the Jewish

who are apparently worlds apart: an eighteenth-century Caribbean female slave living in England on the one hand and, on the other, two women from the north of England, one living in the nineteenth and the other in the twentieth century, who all experience terrible losses and rejection, suffer mentally as a result and are perceived as deranged.

It is not the first time that Phillips has paired members of the African diaspora with English women from the north of England to suggest existential similarities between them, coming as they do from regions that are marginal in comparison to the colonial metropolis. In his 1991 novel *Cambridge*, he associated Cambridge, an educated African slave on a Caribbean plantation with Emily, the absentee planter's English daughter, both radically changed by their crossing of the Atlantic.³⁷ And in *A Distant Shore* Phillips brought together Solomon, an African asylum-seeker, and Dorothy, the psychologically distressed northern Englishwoman who, at the end of the novel, finds herself in a psychiatric hospital -- also an asylum, but mental this time.³⁸ What makes *The Lost Child* stand out, however, is that the web of connections that binds Phillips's characters (who are additionally not contemporaneous, unlike *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore*) is made denser than ever before, notably including numerous thematic, lexical and literary reverberations relating to "madness," as will be shown later. All these links intimate that northern England too has its own strange, mad, exotic denizens, who are as lost and distracted as their Caribbean or African counterparts, to the point of becoming in some circumstances almost interchangeable with them. Interestingly, the multiple resonances between the various characters of *The Lost Child* cannot but echo Catherine Earnshaw's passionate, almost schizophrenic statements "I am Heathcliff,"³⁹ and "he's more myself than I am,"⁴⁰ two of the most famous quotations from *Wuthering Heights*, a classic with which *The Lost Child* dialogizes, as already suggested.

Making the exotic familiar in Caryl Phillips's *The Lost Child*

The Lost Child is a rich, complex, fractured text which can be read from many different angles. In what follows, I will concentrate on how the trope of "madness" is used in the novel to bring to the fore compelling correspondences between the characters and, in that way, convey how intricately interconnected they are, which is Phillips's way of making the exotic familiar. The three women characters at the heart of this novel are, as mentioned, a nameless Caribbean woman, who was a slave in the West Indies and at the time of narration lives a destitute life in eighteenth-century Liverpool, where she had a child by an English gentleman who very much resembles Mr Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*. Called "Crazy Woman" by Liverpoolians at the end of her life,⁴¹ she dies in dire circumstances, an exotic in the streets of the English slave port where she, at some stage, prostitutes herself, then begs with her young son, whom we assume to be the future Heathcliff. The second woman is Emily Brontë herself, also depicted in the final days of her life. We see her on her death bed,

diaspora (see Hilary Mantel, "Black is not Jewish," *Literary Review*, 224, 1 February 1997, p. 39) while some critics, such as Stef Craps, argued that these accusations do not hold if one looks into the way Phillips resists easy empathy (see Stef Craps, "Linking Legacies of Loss: Traumatic Histories and Cross-Cultural Empathy in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*" in *Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life*, ed. by Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012, pp. 155-172).

³⁷ Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge*, London: Bloomsbury, 1991.

³⁸ Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore*, London: Secker and Warburg, 2003.

³⁹ Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 82. Italics in original.

⁴⁰ Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 81.

⁴¹ Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 3.

haunted by her dead brother Branwell, a failed artist who has ended up a drunkard and whom she confuses in her ravings with another outsider, the “boy who came from the moors,”⁴² the Heathcliff character from her own fiction.⁴³

The final part of that tryptic is Monica Johnson, a woman from Leeds who meets a Caribbean student in Oxford in the late 1950s, marries him, tries to raise her two mixed-race sons on her own and spirals into a fatal depression. Bound by their invisibility and powerlessness in a male-dominated world and by their ability to live “in two worlds”⁴⁴ -- harsh reality on the one hand and their own mental landscape on the other -- these three women see their lives forever marred by similar catastrophes that shape their ostracization, including enslavement and abuse at the hand of a slave trader for the first (the Caribbean woman), a dysfunctional family life for the second (Emily Brontë), acute loneliness and child loss for the third (Monica), with possibly a suspicion of incest for the last two, all circumstances which in themselves could very well be read as the source of their traumatized reflections.

If these three characters share comparable experiences in spite of their different origins and backgrounds, it is quite interesting to look more closely at the way that their mental states are conveyed and realize that the vocabulary or the images used to describe the two English women’s psychological predicaments in many cases suggest the type of alienation and segregation that one would more automatically associate with the mental problems of the rootless Caribbean one, whose death is evoked as “Another journey, another crossing.”⁴⁵ Emily Brontë’s hallucinations, for example, are depicted in terms of displacement, as her “[wandering] in her mind out onto the moors.”⁴⁶ This association between Emily’s mental drifting and physical movement might not be that surprising if one considers Emily’s Irish migrant background and the fact that, like her famous sister Charlotte, she might have “journeying in [her] blood,”⁴⁷ as suggested by the two sisters’ stay in Belgium for several months. Monica’s family, with a father who is a headmaster and a rather submissive mother, is more conventional and situated than Emily’s and cannot be easily described as displaced, even if she betrays some form of restlessness in her daily life, moving between Leeds, Oxford, a town on the south coast of England and London through her narrative. Her drifting into despair and her feeling of unbelonging and isolation are nevertheless also worded in terms that evoke the dislocation and the outsidership suffered by Caribbean migrants in England more than the mental crisis of a middle-class English girl. Like Emily, Monica displays an “often flighty state of mind”⁴⁸ and a “proclivity to wander in her head.”⁴⁹ When she leaves her husband in London to go back to her native north, she views her departure as “a fresh start,”⁵⁰ which somehow echoes the motivation of many post-war West Indian migrants to England. On her arrival at Leeds station, her children and herself are perceived by her judgmental father as “huddled together on the platform like evacuees, and all that was missing were their name tags,”⁵¹ a description which suggests yet another type of migration, that which occurred during the Second World War, but also Monica’s essential separateness from the local population and

42 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 105.

43 Note that this conflation between Branwell and Heathcliff, as two outsider figures, echoes the parallels between Monica and Heathcliff’s nameless mother.

44 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 112.

45 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 12.

46 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 105. Italics mine.

47 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 99.

48 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 27.

49 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, pp. 27-28.

50 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 51.

51 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 54.

her lack of secure identity, encapsulated here in the missing name tags. Later when she is on her own in London, trying “to keep [herself] to [herself],”⁵² and her mental state deteriorates, she complains that her younger co-workers start “telling [her] that [her] face didn’t fit and calling [her] all the names under the sun”⁵³ and remembers how her colleague back in Leeds “treated [her] like a leper.”⁵⁴ These examples of racial and social exclusion very much recall situations faced by many foreign newcomers to any Western metropolis, who are, like Monica, paradoxically victim of facial discrimination and of a simultaneous form of invisibility.⁵⁵

What do these clues suggest? Perhaps that through her marriage to a Caribbean man and the birth of her two mixed-race children -- that is by transgressing established social norms in terms of race and class -- Monica has vicariously become a member of the West Indian diaspora? In this, she very much recalls the English woman Joyce in Phillips’s novel *Crossing the River*, who, following her marriage to a black GI with whom she has had a son, finally becomes associated with the children of the African father who had sold his own children into slavery and is recognized by him as one of his offspring.⁵⁶ The familiarity of Monica’s plight for readers acquainted with novels of migration to England, and to Europe, for that matter, might also indicate that the experience of mentally ill patients has parallels with the alienation associated with the painful aspects of the exotic migrant condition in the so-called heart of the Empire. Phillips has already suggested such a convergence through other diasporic characters, for example the Jewish Pole Irina in *Higher Ground* and more recently the West Indian Earl in *In the Falling Snow*,⁵⁷ whose gruelling experience of twentieth-century England includes their being sectioned to a mental home. White, middle-class Monica, too, ends up in such a place in *The Lost Child* yet the novel intimates that, contrary to the title of the section of the novel depicting her lonely stay in London and her descent into psychological hell, she is not “Alone,”⁵⁸ but that she shares her fate with many racial and social others whose belonging to England has been denied to them because of their assumed apartness. As in *Wuthering Heights*, this destabilization of categories implies, to quote Mardorossian, that “Far from being sites of stable and essentialized difference, class, gender and race are thus revealed as inseparable complexes of social meanings that expose the symbolic nature of race and challenge the concept’s yoking to the body. Race, in other words, is revealed as a product of language rather than of ‘visible’ racial otherness.”⁵⁹

Taxonomic instability and the Jean Rhys connection

One could speak of the same taxonomic instability in relation to mental health in *The Lost Child* and a major source of illumination in this case, aside from the work of Emily Brontë, is that of Jean Rhys, for whose Caribbean heroines England, as explained earlier, is synonymous with rejection, ostracization and mental disorder, in the same way as it is for Monica and to some extent for Emily. It is impossible to fully develop here the intertextual parallels that exist between the writing of Rhys and that of Phillips, especially in matters of mental states, and explore their relevance to what I call

52 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 214.

53 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 214.

54 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 226.

55 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 215. “I could see the people, but they couldn’t see me”.

56 Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River*, London: Bloomsbury, 1993.

57 Caryl Phillips, *In the Falling Snow*, London: Harvill Secker, 2009.

58 Phillips, *The Lost Child*, “Alone,” pp. 211-237.

59 Mardorossian, “Racial Vagaries,” p. 108.

Phillips's indigenization of exotic madness in *The Lost Child*. Phillips's latest novel, *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, which retraces Rhys's own life, might offer compelling material in this regard.⁶⁰ Still, there are many other examples that can testify to the closeness between Rhys's (often avowedly autobiographical) displaced, presumably exotic heroines, and Phillips's native yet deranged women.

The first area of intertextuality that is worth exploring is the strong similitude between the eighth chapter of *The Lost Child*, entitled "Alone," which, as already mentioned, focuses on Monica's breakdown after the murder of one of her sons, and Rhys's "Let Them Call It Jazz." Not only do the two first-person narratives share the same paranoid tone, but they also contain several quite similar scenes. For example, exactly like Selina, Monica is at one stage accommodated in an empty flat by a man that she has met by chance, and her behaviour, in this case sunbathing in her underwear, annoys the sanctimonious neighbours who finally call the police and have her arrested for disturbance and sent to a psychiatric hospital. Both women drink heavily too, to drown their sorrow and loneliness, and they share the same body language when they speak at their court case: while Selina can "hear [herself] talking loud and [...] see [her] hands wave in the air,"⁶¹ Monica realizes that "[her] arms are flying about in front of [her] face and [she is] still talking."⁶² But the two women do not cope in the same way with their experience of confinement: if Selina is strengthened by it, Monica finally commits suicide. While these echoes of "Let Them Call It Jazz" in *The Lost Child* have been read as "a form of literary parenthood" that compensates for the novel's general sense of familial disruption,⁶³ it is also important to view them as part of Phillips's attempt to familiarize the mad exotic and to show the irrelevance of any systems of othering, whether they refer to race or to the mental vulnerability that is often attached to it.

If Monica reminds us of Selina, she is also strongly reminiscent of Antoinette in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a novel which goes some way towards indigenizing exotic madness too in the sense that it shows Rochester as being as susceptible as Antoinette to a form of psychological derangement. The links between Rhys's and Phillips's novels might be tenuous at first sight, yet they do surface, notably through references to the iconic mad woman in the attic, a figure that binds *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*, and who can also be found at several places in *The Lost Child*: Heathcliff's unnamed mother lives in a "bleak attic room,"⁶⁴ Monica's student room in Oxford is also located in the attic,⁶⁵ and in London she first lives in a rented "tiny attic room,"⁶⁶ then she moves to another flat with an upstairs neighbour who is described as a "crazy woman."⁶⁷ In addition to these clues, Monica also ends up confined in a mental hospital, where she is under the supervision of various Grace Poole figures. Interestingly, in this place she realizes that "There's no mirror,"⁶⁸ which makes her unable to

⁶⁰ Caryl Phillips, *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, London: Vintage, 2018. On intertextual connections between Rhys and Phillips, see Bénédicte Ledent, "'There is always the other side, always': Britain, the Caribbean and the Ghost of Jean Rhys in Caryl Phillips's Writing," *Wasafiri* 34, 2019, pp. 61-66.

⁶¹ Rhys, "Let Them Call it Jazz," p. 175.

⁶² Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 232.

⁶³ Bénédicte Ledent and Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Caryl Phillips' *The Lost Child*: A Story of Loss and Connection," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 48.3&4, July-October 2017, pp. 229-247, p. 229. On the links with "Let Them Call It Jazz," see also Giovanna Buonnano, "Exploring Literary Voices in *The Lost Child*," *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 40.1, Autumn 2017, pp. 95-104, p. 102.

⁶⁴ Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 7. It is described as a "foul-smelling attic room" in Mr. Earnshaw's narrative, p. 249.

⁶⁵ Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 16.

⁶⁶ Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 214.

⁶⁷ Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 221.

⁶⁸ Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 236.

fully recognize herself -- very much like Rhys's Caribbean madwoman in the English attic who similarly deplors that "There is no looking-glass here"⁶⁹

In those circumstances, it seems that it is the mirror of fiction, which makes insider and outsider reflect each other, which makes the self face the other, that offers perhaps the best way of familiarizing the mad exotic and promoting a form of understanding that overcomes racial, cultural, class, temporal and geographic differences. In this case, it is not so much the characters who are empowered, as is the case in the stories by Brand and Rhys discussed at the beginning of this piece, but the readers themselves, who understand better the limitations of what Mardorossian has called "narratives of alterity."⁷⁰ Phillips's integrative approach conveyed in what could be called "narratives of similarity" is perhaps what is most needed today, at a time when millions of people can remain indifferent to the predicament of their fellow human beings simply because they think they have nothing in common with them.

⁶⁹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 117.

⁷⁰ Mardorossian, "Racial Vagaries," p. 102.