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Prisms of Perception - Speech, Silence, and Racial Identity in "Wide Sargasso Sea"

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to answer two questions. Firstly, whether *Wide Sargasso Sea's* portrayal of black Creoles, which contextualizes them through white characters with imperialist assumptions, allows them to exhibit strength within the narrative. And secondly, whether such a portrayal can be considered an authentic expression of the Caribbean by postcolonial standards. I argue that Christophine, as well as other black Creoles in the narrative, exhibit strength in their use of speech and silence. The basis of this argument is found in exploration of the text through the concepts put forth by Keith A. Russell II and Carine M. Mardorossian's articles on the novel, demonstrating the power in speech, and silence, respectively. The paradoxical commonality of their concepts builds a solid argument for the novel's empowerment, which when exposed to other concepts such as Bakhtin's "Heteroglossia," Russell's "Refractive spaces," and economic racialization, have led me to the conclusion that the historic value attainable from such works should be determined, not by the author's race or class, but by whether they are capable of perceiving the people they chronicle as *selves*, and not *others*.

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Lingual Dexterity, Refractive Spaces, and Heteroglossia

Keith A. Russell II argues in his analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that despite her seemingly peripheral role to the story, Christophine's language indicates her rising authority within the narrative told by Rochester. He details this stance in his article, "'Now Every Word She Said Was Echoed, Echoed Loudly in My Head': Christophine's Language and Refractive Space in Jean Rhys's 'Wide Sargasso Sea,'" which explores her adroit use of language and how she uses it to rebel against Rochester's narrative reign. The article offers a supplementary breakdown of her lingual characteristics, but more importantly, it shows how she uses this language to abrade the narrative bounds which constrict her. Russell argues she does this through use of the titular "Refractive Spaces," which are essentially instances in which otherwise obscured expression from non-narrators manages to surface within Rochester's narrative. Russell also argues that such instances, when effectuated by Christophine, serve to express refracted representations of Rhys's own opinions, which he justifies by his interpretation and application of Bakhtin's theory of "Heteroglossia."

Russell argues for the existence of Christophine's power within the narrative through these refractive spaces. An explicit definition is not provided as to what constitutes a refractive space, however, with the examples provided one may conclude that it is an event in which a non-narrator disrupts or distorts the narrative in a way, either by causing the true perspectives of otherwise voiceless characters surface within Rochester's (Or Antoinette's) narrative or causing him to make alterations to his own narrative. According to Russell, it is through this refraction that Christophine's agency and expression manifests, and this concept is how he argues that despite *Wide Sargasso Sea's* narration from Rochester and Antoinette's imperialist perspectives, the black Creole has a powerful voice in its story.

However, their placement in the periphery of the novel, is the basis on which much criticism has been levied against it, notably by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal article on the

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topic, which Russell acknowledges. While she claims the novel focalizes Jamaica and its natives through the lens of the white Creole/Englishman, which consequently displaces of black voices,¹ other critics such as Benita Parry contend that Christophine, who within this discourse is often seen as representative of the black Creoles, has a “vital and *retrievable* voice” (Emphasis Added.)² She believes that the voices of the black Creoles which have been “lost” can be recovered through a “recuperative reading,” which in essence is a literary approach that seeks out fragments of buried black voices embedded in the narrative in an effort to salvage it within postcolonial standards. This point especially is where critics divide, as they disagree on whether such an approach is beneficial (Parry), or harmful (Spivak). Spivak believes that to even attempt such a recovery is to reopen the “epistemic fracture” of imperialism,³ as any English records of Jamaica will have been written with imperialist mindsets as their foundation. Russell’s stance is somewhere in between, though it definitely sways in favor of Parry, as he, much like Parry, sees Christophine as an emblem of strength. He details his stance in an exposition of the two articles, where he reiterates Carine M. Mardorossian’s claim that “[Contrary to Spivak’s position] the novel is not composed in the interest of the white creole” and affirms it as “a valid concern that clouds Spivak’s idea of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.”⁴ Yet, as stated, he does not fully identify with Parry’s stance either, as he again echoes Mardorossian, whose opinion was that “the idea Christophine is only a powerful, black obeah woman. . . is perilously close to reinscribing stereotypical colonial roles.”⁵

Despite these apprehensions, Russell argues that while Rochester is the one telling the

¹ Gayatri Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 253.

² Keith A. Russell II, “‘Now Every Word She Said Was Echoed, Echoed Loudly in My Head’: Christophine’s Language and Refractive Space in Jean Rhys’s ‘Wide Sargasso Sea,’” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 88

³ Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts,” 259.

⁴ Russell, “Christophine’s Language and Refractive Space,” 88.

⁵ Russell, “Christophine’s Language and Refractive Space,” 88.

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narrative, Christophine's influence on him and his narrative, through these refractive spaces, indicates the strength of her character. This is apparent in the most significant refractive space, labeled a "key" refractive space by the Russell.⁶ This space contains Christophine's confrontation of Rochester, which he claims has significant effects on the remaining parts of the narrative, as he writes that "this passage is crucial to the narrative disruption of the novel."⁷ Russell claims that the effects of this particular space manifest both orthographically and narratively. He provides an example of such orthographic change, as he writes "Before this pivotal passage, the narrator represents Christophine's pronunciation of husband as 'husband;,' after this passage, she [Christophine] adopts a more ethnically flavored pronunciation when she says 'husban'."⁸ Essentially, his point is that Rochester changes the way her dialogue is represented within his narrative, reflecting it more similarly to how she actually speaks, instead of anglicizing it. On these changes, he also adds, "Orthographic changes emphasize the dramatic effect the refractive space has on the narrative . . . Christophine's expressions and the representation of her words are altered and displaced."⁹ Russell's argument is that subtle orthographic changes alert the reader to the influence Christophine has on Rochester, and by cause of effect, his narrative. His assertion that Christophine "adopts a more *ethnically flavored* pronunciation" (Emphasis added.) implies that heretofore, Rochester's narrative has been suppressing the true expression of the black Creoles, Christophine included. Specifically, the words "ethnically flavored" tacitly extend the suppression to cuisine, which, much like language, is symbolically representative of culture. This may imply that Russell sees the strife between these two characters as an allegory of that between their cultures, and as we may infer from the quotations, Rochester,

⁶ Russell, "Christophine's Language and Refractive Space," 97.

⁷ Russell, "Christophine's Language and Refractive Space," 97.

⁸ Russell, "Christophine's Language and Refractive Space," 100.

⁹ Russell, "Christophine's Language and Refractive Space," 100.

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the representative of imperialism, is losing. As this loss of narrative control progresses, he begins to authentically narrate Christophine's expression where he would previously congenialize it. His description of her dialogue to the reader, and its characteristic change from anglicized to Caribbean, indicates how he is subconsciously relinquishing control of his narrative to Christophine, just as the imperialism he represents ceded its authority over the Caribbean after the abolition of the slave trade. Russell's claim that Christophine's expression was "altered and displaced" is ironic, as he clearly elaborates that what we perceive as change in narration, is in this case a reversion to authenticity; the absence of change masquerading as it. The transition from "husband" to "husban'" is not actually a change, as "husband" is the altered version of her dialogue.

The culinary metaphor used by Russell may also be an allusion to Russell's presentation of "Heteroglossic double-voicedness," which is used to explore certain refractive spaces. This is a concept originally birthed by Mikhail Bakhtin, but Russell has an innovative application of the theory, which he bases on a quote from Bakhtin's explanation of it: "Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel . . . is another 's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way."¹⁰ Russell argues Rhys's language is prevalent in Christophine's speech, as he points to "slippages," sporadic verbal anomalies where she uses phrases such as "galloping at the dead of night,"¹¹ which he claims are uncharacteristic to her lingual identity. Therefore, he argues these may be explained as Rhys's refracted lyricism surfacing through her character in a heteroglossic fashion, effectively making them refractive spaces. The quote's specific mention of "authorial intent," lays the foundation for how Russell furthers this theory to interpret the novel, as he uses the manifestation of Rhys's speech in the character of Christophine to justify his assignment of her as the author's textual envoy.

This view of the theory intrigues, as it bolsters Russell's assertion that, contrary to Spivak's

¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.

¹¹ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin Classics, 2019), 115.

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claim, *Wide Sargasso Sea* was *not* written in the sole interest of white creoles. I say this, as it establishes Christophine, the black obeah woman, as the one with which the author identifies. Had she sought to write the novel in the interest of white creoles, one would imagine Rhys's language would manifest in Antoinette's character, being a white Creole woman like Rhys. Russell provides multiple examples of what could be the author's opinions, such as that "Her comment on English Tea, 'Not horse piss like the English madams drink' could be a refracted version of the narrator's take on English libations."¹² In essence, he views this passage as Rhys' criticism of English customs and cuisine, which connects to the concept of Rochester's suppression of the "ethnic flavor" in Christophine's language.

Russell analyzes a passage which indicates the presence of double-voicedness, even between the characters themselves. After the "key" refractive space which transforms the narrative, Rochester paraphrases his earlier conversation with Esau "Daniel" Cosway, narrating it internally in the first person. Though he abruptly stops paraphrasing Esau's speech, to reply to the contents of it. Russell claims this is "a heteroglossic remark from the husband himself," pointing to the disjuncture from its preceding clause as evidence of this being his own voice interjecting into what should be a narration of Esau's dialogue. Rochester narrates: "(Give my sister your wife a kiss for me. Love her as I did – How can I promise that?)"¹³ The very last clause in the quotation is Rochester's interruption of his own narration. The passage, however, is consistent in terms of language, so it appears his designation of it as heteroglossic refers to origin, and not orthography. Unlike Christophine's double-voicedness, which while duplicitous in origin is both coherent and narratively congruous, Rochester's exhibition of the concept is jarring. Its meaning confuses the reader, as the textual lack of clarity leaves one uncertain as to whose thought we are now reading. If we, like Russell suggests, apply heteroglossia in this way, the difference in how the two characters exhibit it may be an

¹² Russell, "Christophine's Language and Refractive Space," 95.

¹³ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 120.

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indication of their place within the novel. Rochester's discordant exhibition of the concept, juxtaposed with Christophine's seamless integration of it, epitomizes their compatibility with the narrative. Despite narrating it, his example is incoherent and barely functions within its framework, whereas hers has clarity, and according to Russell, even expresses the author's intent. This means that despite Rochester's attempt to restrain Christophine and others by use of narrative authority, ironically, it is his character that is trapped between the covers of the novel. Whereas Christophine, through her connection to the author's expression, transcends the confines of the narrative he sought to control her with. The contrast in what application of double-voicedness effects in our understanding of these characters, serves to mirror their trajectories within the narrative; she gradually comes into harmony with it, whereas he grows unstable and afraid.

Silence, Epistemology, and the Race/Class-dynamic

Russell's analysis of Christophine's language, and how she utilizes it to exercise authority in refractive spaces provides a firm foundation for an argument of her strength, and his presentation of heteroglossic double-voicedness evolves the interpretations reached to extend beyond the characters themselves. As revisitation of passages in the novel with this view of double-voicedness in mind facilitates many interesting analyses, the theory is also suited for combination with concepts by other critics. Mardorossian's analysis of the novel, which also argues for the presence of strength in the black Creoles, does so through concepts which I argue exhibit compatibility with Russell's use of heteroglossic theory. The concepts in question are "Silence" as a tool of rebellion against colonialism, employed by the Subaltern, which takes advantage of Rochester's imperialist epistemology and its inadequacy to realize Jamaica, and the deconstruction of perceptions of race as comprised of various factors beyond skin tone.

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Mardorossian claims that the power found in the black creoles of *Wide Sargasso Sea* comes from their subversive use of silence. In her article, “Shutting up the Subaltern: Silences, Stereotypes, and Double-Entendre in Jean Rhys’s ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’” she argues that the “Subaltern,” i.e., the black Creoles, weaponize silence to strengthen Rochester’s feeling of isolation, as his only way to assuage the sense of alienation he feels would be to learn the knowledge of Jamaica possessed only by the black natives. The power of this silence, according to Mardorossian, may be attributed to Rochester’s state of ambivalence. He vacillates between seeing the black Creoles as unintelligent boors, and cunning conspirators. The latter designation is responsible for his paranoia, as the ambivalence with which he perceives the subaltern, combined with their ominous reticence, turns his ignorance to fear. Rochester’s view of the world is filtered through the axioms of imperialism, rendering him unequipped to comprehend the land and people of Jamaica. It is to this failing which Mardorossian ascribes his gradual mental decline, and consequent paranoia, which she argues the seemingly (To Rochester) furtive silence of the black Creoles exacerbates. This failure to comprehend his surroundings is symptomatic of his colonialist assumptions, which Mardorossian explains, as she remarks: “This ambiguity persists throughout the narrative and reflects the two narrators inability to grasp a Caribbean experience whose opaqueness cannot be reconciled with their interpretive frameworks.”¹⁴ In other words, “Opaqueness” and “ambiguity” both elucidate how he and his narrative’s attempt to assimilate Jamaica within his incompatible worldview fails, which in large part causes the distress that ails him. Mardorossian argues that, paradoxically, it is not “Obeah,” i.e., black magic, which torments him, but rather the colonialist definition of Obeah, which he reads in an English text. This definition elicits fear in Rochester, and as the subaltern remain silent, dismissive, and eschew discussion of the subject, he has no means to confirm nor deny the power, or even existence,

¹⁴ Carine M. Mardorossian, “Shutting up the Subaltern: Silences, Stereotypes, and Double-Entendre in Jean Rhys’s ‘Wide Sargasso Sea,’” *Callaloo* 22, no. 4 (Autumn 1999): 1080.

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of it. Mardorossian writes, “It is not what Obeah *is* that overwhelms the British; it is the account of Obeah he reads in an English text”¹⁵ adding that, “As long as he is incapable of fixing obeah as an object of knowledge, he cannot control or appropriate it”¹⁶ The English text in question is an account of Jamaica and all it encompasses, though just like Rochester’s own narrative, it is filtered through the epistemology of imperialism, and therefore falls short of aiding him in his attempt to comprehend his environment. The opacity of obeah, not only to Rochester, but to the reader also, is deliberate, as he cannot narrate what he cannot understand. Yet it is apparent that whether or not it has the power his narrative imbues it with does not ultimately make a difference to his fate. The two quotations emphasize this, as the combination of the power *he* vests in obeah after reading its English definition, combined with the impossibility of assessing its true power, create two paths for Rochester whose end points are the same. Either it has the power to control him, and he is defeated, or it does not, and his xenophobia-induced paranoia caused by the text and ambiguity brings about the same result.

Much like his view of obeah, Rochester’s view of race is also deeply rooted in his epistemology. This is apparent not only in his view of racial hierarchy as having those with white skin at its peak, but also how its definitions depend on matters other than skin color. Specifically, his perceptions of culture, class, and other factors of social standing affect his view of who is black, white, and colored. Mardorossian explores this as she touches on how Rhys’s novel deconstructs the concept of race. She argues that it problematizes the constitution on which perceptions of race are formed and exposes their underlying contingency on positions of class. This idea of economic racialization is that the credentials from which people are assigned racial epithets depend more on their societal standing than the actual color of their skin. There is considerable connectivity between this concept and

¹⁵ Mardorossian, “Shutting up the Subaltern,” 1080.

¹⁶ Mardorossian, “Shutting up the Subaltern,” 1081.

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Rochester's paranoia, as this socioeconomic mode of stratification contributes directly to his feeling of isolation. Mardorossian argues that Rochester even comes to perceive his wife Antoinette as colored, despite the novel's emphasis on the whiteness of her skin, which illustrates the contradictory tenets through which he processes what he sees. She presents this idea when discussing Rochester's alienation: "They [Subaltern] are thus largely responsible for maintaining his belief in a fundamental secret that the place and its inhabitants would be harboring and which he tries to attain through a wife he now clearly identifies as colored[.]"¹⁷ Here Mardorossian is discussing Rochester's feeling of isolation, as he believes everyone but him is "in the know," and keeping it from him. She identifies a connection between his perception of the demonstrably "other," as both those who keep the secret from him, and those who are colored. As I have discussed these two groups are generally indistinct, however this all changes near the end of his narrative, as he is quoted saying: "Very soon she'll [Antoinette] join all the others who know the secret but will not tell it."¹⁸ It is because of this quote that Mardorossian claims Rochester comes to see Antoinette as "colored." This is not the only example, as allusions to how he dislikes her appropriation of "black" characteristics pervade the novel, but this example in particular perfectly exemplifies the oxymoronic thought process responsible for his instability.

Mardorossian bolsters the theory further by analyzing the concept of the "white nigger." This phrase is initially used by Tia, Antoinette's childhood playmate, in her retort to Antoinette's racist outburst.¹⁹ When the two disagree on who won a bet they made, Antoinette turns to racially stereotype her friend, invoking a sense of white supremacy in an attempt to guard her ego, which causes Tia to utter this seemingly paradoxical phrase. However, this phrase may be interpreted as an exposition of the classist skeleton on which the body of racism is built. As

¹⁷ Mardorossian, "Shutting up the Subaltern," 1084.

¹⁸ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 132.

¹⁹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 9.

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emancipation has diminished the Cosways's wealth, their only claim to superiority is through racism, as they have now become equals in terms of class. Mardorossian writes: "Tia's tirade reveals that race is historically and discursively constituted identity whose meaning varies according to one's economic status."²⁰ In terms of hierarchy, the Cosways now firmly place on the lower rungs of society, their family has had a fall from grace, but they cling to the illusion of racial superiority in an attempt to avoid placement at the very bottom. In terms of class, they *are* at the bottom, but through embracement of white supremacy, they delude themselves into being prideful. In her retort Tia says: "Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger." This coheres with Mardorossian's idea, as there is practically little difference between a girl like Tia, and a girl like Antoinette, once they are equated in class. In fact, Antoinette even likens looking at Tia to looking at a mirror later in the novel. The only tangible difference is that Antoinette and her family are hated due to grievances caused by their implication in slavery and the colonialist project, meaning Tia's analysis rings true, which seemingly even Antoinette knows at a subconscious level, as she unwittingly adopts Tia's lingual patterns when narrating this passage.

Though both articles perceive strength in the black Creoles of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is clear that they source this strength from different facets. One author ascribes strength to silence, the other to speech, which at first glance seems a complete contradiction. However, I argue that these theories absolutely can coexist, and even coalesce, as Russell's concept of refraction through language, does not eliminate the possibility of Christophine using it to withhold information, just as Mardorossian's concept of silence does not refer to saying literally nothing, but rather deliberate obscurement of information. The silence gains its power, not from the absence of sound, but of comprehension, and there is thus no character better suited

²⁰ Mardorossian, "Shutting up the Subaltern," 1073.

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to alienate Rochester than the polyphonic Christophine and her arsenal of languages. An indication of this presents itself in the passage narrated by Rochester, in which he tells: “She [Christophine] kissed Antoinette on the cheek. Then she looked at me, shook her head, and muttered something in patois before she went out.”²¹ Prior to the key refractive space, Rochester suppresses Christophine’s true expression. His authority is established in how he controls the narration of how the events in Jamaica transpired, which of course is filtered through his comprehension, and its dependence on the epistemology of imperialist England. In the quoted passage, Christophine intentionally uses language which Rochester does not understand, but Antoinette does. Not only does this sow a protective division in the espoused, but it also protects her speech from his comprehension, and consequently, narrative control which would be used to suppress her identity. In this way, her lingual agility explored by Russell serves a similar function to Mardorossian’s silence, due to the silence’s power, as stated, originating from avoidance of Rochester’s comprehension, rather than his aural perception.

The novel’s use of laughter also substantiates the alignment between the two concepts. Laughter plays a key role in solidifying Rochester’s feeling of everyone but him being “in the know.” It is not quite speech *or* silence, but rather something in between. It carries meaning, but that meaning is lost to those who do not understand why someone is laughing. Throughout the novel the subaltern often laugh when in the presence of Rochester, and I argue this affects him in a similar way to Mardorossian’s silence, as his paranoia is evident in the passages which this occurs. Amélie’s interactions with him exemplify this tendency. Rochester narrates, “. . . she put her hand over her mouth as though she could not stop herself from laughing and walked away. Then turned and said in a very low voice, ‘I am sorry for you.’”²² Prior to this passage, she had explained how there was a rumor of Antoinette having married

²¹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 74

²² Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 90

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the colored Sandi before he met her, which she then immediately dismissed as “foolishness,” since “a white girl with a lot of money” would never marry a colored man.²³ Such a statement in isolation is enough to arouse suspicion in Rochester, but when followed by stifled laughter and an exclamation of pity, it causes him paranoia similar in effect to the subaltern silence. I argue this may be seen as a refractive space, as her suggestion of Antoinette having a secret history of relationships, with a colored man no less, causes Rochester to view his wife as promiscuous, which Mardorossian claims he associates with the “latent” madness in the Cosway women.²⁴ This change in perception significantly contributes to the alienation he feels from her, and when allusions at the potential “affair” with Sandi are reiterated by Esau Cosway,²⁵ it all but solidifies Antoinette as mad and unchaste in Rochester’s eyes.

Laughter also functions to alienate Rochester from the other characters. By the half-way point of his narrative it is clear laughter alone discomforts Rochester, as he in a passage narrates, “Still leaning against the post she [Amélie] smiled at me, and I felt that at any moment her smile would become loud laughter. It was to stop this that I went on[.]”²⁶ He has come to dread even the thought of their laughter, so much that he preemptively tries to inhibit it. No one is willing to tell him why they are laughing, which is why the laughter holds so much power. He can’t shake the feeling that everyone else is in on it, that they’re all talking behind his back. As Mardorossian stated he comes to perceive Antoinette as colored, and as someone who, unlike himself, “knows the secret but will not tell it.” This perception reveals itself near the end of his narrative, but even in its beginning we may find allusions to it, precisely in the shape of laughter. When Rochester says he “wouldn’t hug and kiss them [Christophine/Black servants]”²⁷ he narrates her reaction as, “At this she’d laugh for a long time and never tell me

²³ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 90.

²⁴ Mardorossian, “Shutting up the Subaltern,” 1076.

²⁵ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 93.

²⁶ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 89.

²⁷ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 65.

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why she laughed.”²⁸ While his mentality at this point is relatively intact, this passage shows the irreconcilable schism that already separates them. They both engender imperialist views, yet Antoinette has a genuine love for the black Creoles she has grown up with. They are not foreign to her like they are to Rochester, and the supremacist doctrine imposed on her by Mr. Mason in her youth, has gradually been eroded by her own life experiences. Christophine’s actions support this, as while she departs from Rochester’s narrative after confronting him, she reappears in the following section narrated by Antoinette as a supportive voice.²⁹ I believe this disparity is caused by their respective acceptance and rejection of supremacist beliefs, and that this may be Rhys’s way of showing that the way to overcome these harmful views, is through love and familiarity.

While this passage conveys how Christophine’s voice is staunchly antagonistic of white supremacy, the character of Esau “Daniel” Cosway demonstrates that this antagonism is not a given among the black Creoles. He appears much more accepting of colonialist structures, and finds pride within this ideology, by drawing a distinction between what constitutes a “nigger” and someone who is “colored.” I argue this further reinforces the argument for the novel’s deconstruction of race. It is clear that Esau perceives a distinction between the two labels, as he acknowledges himself as colored, but rejects the idea of being a “nigger.” He views people with mixed race as colored, but also, unlike many who internalize white supremacy, as an approximate to both white and black, its own middle rung on the racial hierarchy, carrying with it the possibility of attaining whiteness. Tia told Rochester he is “a very superior man, always reading the Bible and that he live like white people,”³⁰ which indicates this attainment is something he strives for. This view is strongly influenced by economic racialization, as when he tells Rochester how he would ask his father, old Cosway, for money, he says “. . .

²⁸ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 65.

²⁹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 146.

³⁰ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 89.

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sometimes I ask help to buy a pair of shoes and such. Not to go barefoot like a nigger. Which I am not.”³¹ Yet, in his letter to Rochester earlier in the novel he states “They are white, I am colored. They are rich, I am poor.”³² I argue the latter quote is indicative of the intersection of race and class I have discussed. However, when juxtaposed with the former, Esau’s ambiguous view of how the designation of “colored” is given imbues the discussion with another layer of nuance. He justifies the rejection of the label “nigger,” by reframing it as a matter of apparel, rather than skin color. It isn’t clear whether the preference for shoes indicates his view of the matter as being rich versus poor, those who can afford shoes, and those who cannot, or, as a matter of culture, denoting the difference in customs between England and Jamaica, but one can find support for either argument. What *is* clear, however, is that Esau views the hue of one’s skin as secondary, or even tertiary, when assigning someone their place on the racial hierarchy. His description of his half-brother, Alexander, and nephew, Sandi, reiterates this belief, as he says, “. . . and in the end he [Alexander] marry a very fair-coloured girl, very respectable family.” And “His son Sandi is like a white man, but more handsome than any white man, and received by many white people they say.”³³ This emphasizes the potential he accredits those he classifies as “colored” have to move within the social hierarchy. Alexander and Sandi are for him examples of this mobility, but there is an argument he views their ascent in class from a point of envy rather than admiration. He describes Alexander as “coloured like me but not unlucky like me”³⁴ in his explanation of how his brother found favor in old Cosway, where he found only neglect and reproach. Their disparate level of success supports the idea of social mobility, though his resentful disposition reveals the contempt with which he views those who have managed to approximate whiteness. He says that “Because he [Alexander] prosper he is two-faced, he won’t speak

³¹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 91.

³² Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 70.

³³ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 93.

³⁴ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 92.

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against white people.”³⁵ Which carries the implication that in their social climb, Alexander and Sandi have abandoned their class, and if viewed through the concept of economic racialization, their race. He attributes this view of them as class/race-traitors to a sense of pride, indicating their affluence has come at the cost of subservience. Yet, the anger he exhibits throughout the dialogue suggests jealousy could just as easily be his actual reason, and his attempt to extort money from Rochester is much more indicative of ignobility than the duty-sworn Christianity he purports his devotion to.

Esau’s failure to both reconcile with Rochester and win favor within the narrative results from adherence to the systems which oppress him. He appeals to Rochester on basis of their shared Christianity,³⁶ the essential component of imperialist ideology most accessible to him as a colored man, but this demonstration of piety brings him no closer to acceptance than he was before. Unlike Christophine, whose speech is utilized to dissent from imperialism, Esau plays within its rules in an attempt to approximate himself to Rochester. His use of speech yields no favorable results when contrasted with Christophine, who exhibits brilliance in use of both speech and silence and uses these to evade Rochester’s narrative oppression. Russell’s analysis of the passage in which Christophine uses language Rochester can’t understand was that she aimed to drive a wedge between husband and wife.³⁷ I agree with this, however, I believe its purpose exceeds that, as it is also a tool with which she rebels against the confines of his narrative. Despite not having reached her zenith of authority, she manages to find minor ways of disrupting or evading the tyranny of his narration through her multitude of languages. I would therefore consider the passage an example of a refractive space, as well as a utilization the “silence,” or rather aversion, which alienates Rochester. I believe the conjunction of these concepts provides a strong argument for the presence of power in the

³⁵ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 92.

³⁶ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 70

³⁷ Russell, “Christophine’s Language and Refractive Space,” 93.

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novel's characterization of the black Creoles, despite the initial appearance as peripheral, weak, and voiceless. Mardorossian claims that "No matter what Christophine or Antoinette say, their utterances are filtered through and consolidate a colonialist discourse . . ." ³⁸ I contend that this statement neglects Christophine's clever evasion of Rochester's comprehension through verbal excellence, and how it frees her dialogue from his narrative filter. As quoted earlier, Rochester's inability to "fix obeah as an object of knowledge" leaves him unable to "control or appropriate it." Though this applies not only to obeah, but also language, and anything else beyond his realm of comprehension, as I reiterate, freedom from his understanding, is freedom from his narrative authority, which is freedom from being contextualized as a peripheral other by imperialist structures.

Christophine's evasive use of "patois" with Rochester may also indicate Rhys's opinion on the concept of "recuperative reading." While the conjunction of the concepts speech and silence facilitates interesting analysis of the passage, I argue that if we apply Russell's use of heteroglossia on top of that, we may develop further meaning. Russell's application of the theory posits Christophine as the "mouthpiece" of Rhys. ³⁹ If we embrace that stance and review the passage in which she avoids Rochester's comprehension again, then we may not only interpret it as her rejecting his narrative appropriation of her, but also Rhys's stance on colonialist appropriation of their subjects. Christophine deliberately avoids inclusion in Rochester's narrative, and her prompt departure from it consolidates the idea that for her, escape from his narration means freedom. Essentially, Christophine is showing, through her actions, that absence from the narrative of her oppressor is preferable to an appropriated inclusion. If viewed through the lens of heteroglossic double-voicedness, or at least Russell's application of it, we may conclude that this is reflective of Rhys's opinion on the matter.

³⁸ Mardorossian, "Shutting up the Subaltern," 1081.

³⁹ Russell, "Christophine's Language and Refractive Space," 95.

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Consequent to that conclusion, one would imagine Rhys's answer to whether a recuperative reading should be attempted, would be *no*, as the true freedom for those oppressively chronicled through the imperialist project, would be absent from their narratives entirely. However, this inference does hinge a very specific set of interpretive theories. So, while it may be interesting to conjecture as to her thoughts on the issue, the idea that her thought process was to such an extent coherent with contemporary discourse is unlikely to withstand scrutiny.

Conclusion - The Other and the Self

Both Russell and Mardorossian have argued black Creoles have power within Wide Sargasso Sea. The former through speech, refractive spaces, and otherwise disruptive means of gleaming through the bounds of Rochester's narrative filter, and the latter through a weaponized silence and ambiguity which causes his inadequate epistemology to drive him mad with alienation and paranoia. I agree with these characterizations of strength, and how they influence Rochester and his narrative. However, Russell's application of heteroglossia leads us to an interpretation of Christophine that may argue against their belief in a recuperative reading. While this interpretation is highly hypothetical, it indicates she saw exclusion from imperialist narratives as preferable to an inclusion which contextualized the Caribbean as "other." Yet, crucially, she drew a distinction between the narrative of Antoinette, and of Rochester, despite both being white and raised aside the doctrine of white supremacy. This distinction manifested in what role Christophine played in their narratives. Her support in the conclusion of Antoinette's narrative juxtaposed with her rebuke of Rochester, leads me to believe that, similarly to Esau Cosway, Rhys did not see the central issue as difference in skin color, but rather what you believe and do. She distinguished those who accept imperialism, from those who do not. Therefore, I believe her opinion on recuperative readings would be that one should not determine the authenticity of such

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narratives by the color of the author's skin, but by whether they see those they portray as *others*, or *selves*. Antoinette's conclusion was no happy ending, but she left the story with purpose, and the support of her beloved *Da*, whereas Rochester concluded his story bitter, mad, and defeated. As he sailed home, what had brought him ruin was not the color of his skin, but the system of beliefs he revered, his staunch reliance on the axioms of white supremacy isolated him, until he had nothing left but plundered wealth, and a "mad" wife.

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