



Adaptation and Appropriation

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‘E’ach composing representation must be distorted, diverted and torn from its centre’ (Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Athlone Press, 1994), p.56). How helpful do you find this statement in exploring the relationship between Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*?

The work of Gilles Deleuze features significantly in the field of post-modern theory. Whilst the novelist Michel Tournier praised Deleuze for his “fierce newness”, the quotation in the essay’s title already has resounding echoes of modernist writers such as Ezra Pound coining the term “Make It New”, and modern art with its emphasis on “metamorphoses and permutations”. The concept of newness and its importance within literature is fundamental in examining the domain of adaptation and, within this essay the texts *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). With the latter novel based upon the plot of the former, yet differing most significantly in its exploration of a marginal character, we are invited to consider the importance of difference- an element that “must refer to other differences which never identify it but rather differentiate it”.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys writes an adaptive text that privileges the Caribbean over the English, transports ‘Rochester’ out of the Gothic Romance and moves away from linear recollection based on memory. Yet most striking in terms of difference is the way in which Rhys takes the principal narrative viewpoint of a previously enigmatic and marginalised character. Bertha, Rochester’s “monstrous” (JE, 309) lunatic wife in *Jane Eyre* is transposed and centralised in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as Antoinette, a Creole girl living in Jamaica.

If difference equates qualitatively to the new and unfamiliar, Linda Hutcheon sees the contrasting “recognition and remembrance” as detrimental to our experience of an adaptation, suggesting that *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a hyper-text must be torn from its centre (which we can view as the hypo-text, *Jane Eyre*). By reading the hyper-text in a stand-alone context, we avoid overt analysis, a constant search for similarities and a critical approach upon the discovery of unfaithfulness to the hypo-text. Genette presents a compromise to this “stand alone” context in his view that whilst it is possible to read “at least two [texts] together”, we must simply ensure that “elements of pleasure are neither lost nor underestimated” through a striving to compare and contrast. In the process of aligning myself with these viewpoints, I noted the circularity that exists between definitions of difference and sameness, similar to the way Mark Currie looks to each concept’s opposite in his effort to define them .

There is a danger of constructing an unequal power relationship by linking the *Wide Sargasso Sea* to the “centre” of *Jane Eyre*, a text that is categorised as a canonical British classic and serves to represent Imperialism and a firm sense of Englishness. Indeed, through my continual referral to *Jane Eyre* as an authoritative source text from which I would then derive the meaning of Rhys’s novel, I became aware of myself as a twentieth century Western reader denying *Wide Sargasso Sea* an important level of autonomy. Viewing the

value of Rhys's text merely through its association with a British classic highlights the negative consequences of "things seen for the first time as versions of a previously known thing"

However, if we are to take *Jane Eyre* as a metaphorical "centre", we can find numerous "composing representations"; in the form of characters, plot, structural buildings and identities, through which *Wide Sargasso Sea* distorts, diverts and tears itself away from Brontë's timeless classic. Further to this, a consistent lack of anchorage is prevalent within both texts when taken as separate entities, unraveling further exactly where and indeed if a centre exists. With numerous instances of displacement and de-centering present within and between both novels, it appears that the process of representations being "torn" from their centre may be working on several levels. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, displacement occurs internationally with 'Rochester' in Jamaica and Antoinette in England, emotionally- through Antoinette's loss of Christophine as a stabilising force and even on a grammatical level with the use of ellipsis and page breaks (*). In *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist is constantly portrayed making journeys- between Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield and Marsh End, or in relation to potential voyages to places such as Madeira (JE, 239), Ireland (JE, 252) and India (JE, 389). Other characters are displaced; Adela is a "little Parisienne" in rural England (JE, 171), Helen Burns is "abstracted from all round her" (JE, 55) and 'Rochester' struggles to locate himself in the Caribbean, both physically "I got lost" (WSS, 82) and mentally "I have had a fever, I am not myself" (WSS, 47)

Close analysis of characters and situations within both novels shows this lack of centre as almost entirely negative. Indeed, like Rhys's character Ann in another of her texts, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) who desperately desires "a place to be from", Jane Eyre describes a "craving" (JE, 387) for a home and fraternal or sisterly love. She expresses true sadness that: "not a tie links me to any living thing" (JE, 346). Characters in both novels demonstrate the importance of homes and the desire to establish a personal centre in a fixed location, yet they are denied this repeatedly for, "movement implies a plurality of centres".

Numerous instances in both texts show character's quest to establish their centre as continually obstructed. The "sea" in the title of Rhys's novel can be seen in the context of other Caribbean literature, in which it represents a subject's personal struggle to place themselves. Indeed, Antoinette and 'Rochester' have "diametrically opposed senses of home" – 'Rochester' even subverting Antoinette's desired centre, Granbois, by his presence there: "I used to love this place, and now you have made it into a place I hate" (WSS, 100). The fight to establish their individual centres as a mutual home serves to generate some of the novel's most dramatic episodes and define their identities: "I will be a different person when I live in England and different things will happen to me" (WSS, 84). Although Jane Eyre eventually returns to her centre, and ends the final chapter of the novel with the word "homeward" (JE, 448), Ilena Rodriguez comments that "substantial displacements severely affect coherent self definition". Both texts reflect this on a narrative level by character's continued questioning- Antoinette connects place with identity by asking, "What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (WSS, 125) whilst Jane Eyre's internal dialogue produces "What was I to do? Where to go? Where am I wondering and what am I saying?" (JE, 323).

At this point, it appears crucial to consider whether the presence of a centre should be viewed as a necessity within the two novels. Characters crave them, and as readers we appear to subconsciously search for one. Yet it is often the lack of centre and the events that this evokes which drives much of the action and shapes the characters. Perhaps then one can turn to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "rhizome", derived from the horticultural term, as a model offering an alternative to a deep rooted, fixed centre. Deleuze and Guattari describe "multiplicities as rhizomatic" suggesting the relevance within this essay and its recurring

focus on “metamorphoses and permutations”. Taking *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, we can employ Deleuze’s description of a rhizome as “a map and not a tracing” .

However, centres and stability are “craved” for by protagonists in both novels. Conflicting with the sense of agency reflected in the titular quotation of the essay, characters, particularly female, appear relatively passive subjects with isolation inflicted upon them. Antoinette is a social outcast within her own country, branded a “white cockroach” because of her hybrid Creole identity. *Jane Eyre* too appears defeated in her quest for a centre where she is accepted: the exclamation “Let me be torn away then!” (JE, 297) occurs only after years of “placelessness”, movements and ostracisation which start at the Reeds where she experienced a “marked line of separation” and was “dispensed from joining the group” (JE, 2).

While distortions, diversions and tearing from centres have thus far concentrated on physical places, characters in both novels consistently look to other characters to provide them with a centering stability. Christophine is described by Antoinette as “the only friend I have” (WSS, 86), the only person she truly feels safe with, making their separation all the more poignant. Whilst the role of the young black girl Tia has been repeatedly examined by critics, I agree with Barber Williams’s view that “Tia and Antoinette can be seen as two halves of a whole” . Although ultimately denied confirmation of her identity by Tia’s face being “crumpled”(WSS, 38) Antoinette, the protagonist says, “We stared at each other...it was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass” (WSS, 59). Carolyn Williams expresses a similar idea in her discussion of *Jane Eyre* by suggesting that “Jane marries another part of herself” – an echo of Jane’s words within the novel “wherever you are Mr Rochester is my home- my only home” (JE, 246). Yet Antoinette is torn from both Christophine (by ‘Rochester’) and from Tia (by circumstance), whilst Jane loses her first real friend Helen, and later Rochester albeit temporarily, suggesting again an instance in which representations, this time in the form of characters, are “distorted, diverted and torn from [their] centre”.

Drawing back from this specific concentration on displaced characters, we as the readers are also displaced and de-centred. The historicist approach of theorists such as Stephen Greenblatt presents the idea that “texts do not stay still” therefore it is vital to realize that centres, this time in the form of individual interpretations of our examined novels, will be inevitably distorted and diverted over time and across cultures. The texts themselves adopt new meanings as we the readers experience them differently to a readership a hundred years ago would have done.

There is a clear argument here for the reader’s decentralized experience as emergent from their individual social and historical context yet we can also focus on the subtle forces of literary linguistics engaged within the narrative of each novel. *Jane Eyre* in particular demonstrates the creation of an egotistical deictic centre with its singular narrative perspective, adopted as the reader’s centre and effective in evoking empathy and a close alignment with Jane. This is enhanced through Jane continually addressing “Reader”; hoping that “Gentle reader, may you never feel what I then felt” (JE, 322) directing them: “Let the reader add to this picture” (JE, 93) and continually confiding in them: “while he is preoccupied, I will tell you reader what I know” (JE, 125). However, Jane’s self-awareness of herself as “writer” in relationship with a reader is troubling. Continual descriptions of the actual process of writing; “this is not to be a regular autobiography” (JE, 83), “this is a gentle delineation” (JE, 345) and “I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence, a few lines only are necessary” (JE, 83) serve to de-centre the reader by highlighting the fact that they are reading a recorded story, perhaps interrupting full immersion within the text. Returning to the suggestion of an egotistical deictic centre, it is pertinent to question why *Jane Eyre* ends on an entirely different note to her main story, in the voice of St John- a technique that radically de-centres any reader of a previously exclusive first person novel.

The use of metafiction within *Jane Eyre* de-centres and disrupts the reader by the process of “pushing and popping” into and away from the deictic centre. There are stories within the story, events and memories recalled and dreams described, serving to destabilize the sense of a true core of the novel. This “core” is even less prevalent in *Wide Sargasso Sea* with its provisional narrative voice, changing in each of the novel’s three sections. It is within Rhys’s novel that similar settings are described in strikingly different ways, dependent upon the narrating consciousness. The vivid jewel colours that Antoinette loves are oppressive to ‘Rochester’ whose description of them as “too much blue, too much purple” (WSS, 67) causes us to question the stability and reliability of the deictic centre in the form of the narrator.

As the reader we begin to search for a centre ourselves, using and negotiating yet also questioning the information we gain from the narrative voice. Often the schism between appearance and reality is highlighted for us; in *Wide Sargasso Sea* ‘Rochester’ narrates an entire section which follows each line with an echo in parentheses- often paralleling the difference between outward speech and internal thought. Similarly, there is an almost stage direction like nature to Jane’s description of ‘(Aside) “Damn him!”- (To me.) “Did you like him, Jane?” (JE, 441). The reader must also assume the role of judging the reliability of the narrative voice it depends upon- Virginia Woolf describes the way that Charlotte Brontë’s protagonist “has us by the hand, forces us along her road, makes us see what she sees” . However, we are “torn” from the centre that we have created through the voice of the omniscient narrator when the reliability of Jane’s recollections appears doubtful. When Jane leaves the Reed’s house Bessie tells the porter that her journey will be fifty miles, yet Jane’s recollection is that “we appeared to travel over hundreds of miles of road” (JE, 41) and throughout the novel Jane explicitly admits that “I will condense now, I am sick of the subject” or that she will describe an event but “only as clearly as words can give it” (JE, 47) constantly concerning the reader that there is more to be known and that our “centre” may in fact be “distorted and diverted”.

As a reader I view this as increasingly problematic when examining the instance in which Jane first sees Bertha, her authority as a narrator challenged by her inability to capture the “lunatic” within her narrative” -thus we are left as a reader to “fill in the gaps” left open by the following description:

“In deep shade, at the far end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell. It was covered with clothing, a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, a wild mane hid its head and face” (JE, 46)

Jane’s inability to capture Bertha within her narrative can be linked to ‘Rochester’s’ failure to understand his wife’s culture, which he views explicitly as foreign or “other”. With yet another example here of corresponding themes in the novels of both Brontë and Rhys, we can return to the concept of the rhizome to negotiate the extent to which these novels interact with one another. Built upon the concept of lines that connect, a “rhizome may be shattered at a given spot, but will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” - in my opinion, this can be used to discuss the literary process of adaptation. Deleuze insists that “these lines always tie back to one another” directs us in negotiating the increasingly apparent contradiction between “dependence and liberation” in the relationship between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Although Hutcheon’s suggests that “recognition and remembrance” can be detrimental to our experience of an adaptation, she also writes that they can become “part of the pleasure” . Therefore we must begin to explore the ways in which adaptations appear to work on a system not only of deviance, but also of dependency.

Indeed, as Antoinette responds to ‘Rochester’ when he asks, “Is there another side?” there is “always another side, always” (WSS, 99). In the case of this essay, it is the contradictory impulse between dependence and liberation; the way in which key similarities

as well as differences between the texts make the experience of the adaptation enjoyable. “Torn” as a descriptive verb is therefore too absolute and I would instead suggest that centres are displaced and dismantled in stages and to varying degrees.

By highlighting the use of intertextuality in much modernist literature, Ezra Pound’s earlier term can be challenged, reflecting the idea that “any text is an intertext”. Jane Eyre contains lines from Shakespearean works: “the play is played out” (JE, 200) and “a plain unvarnished tale” (JE, 160) as well as the Bible with references to Samson (JE, 300) and Thornfield Hall as “this tent of Achan” (JE, 302). In the domain of adaptation, the process of interpolation maps associated texts onto one another, also working within the novels themselves. Seeing Antoinette as a representation of Bertha, the earlier cited description (p6) correlates almost exactly to Rhys’s “red eyed, wild haired stranger” (WSS, 116). Yet Jane too is linked to Bertha with critics viewing the lunatic as Jane’s dark other and John Reed describes her as “having flown at him like a mad cat” (JE, 27). Despite Antoinette telling Christophine “I shall lie in red curtains, I have slept there many times before, long ago” (WSS, 111) I find Johnson’s suggestion that “perhaps the mirrors of Thornfield are pre-inscribed with the image of a mad woman” problematic due to its emboldened certainty that the Thornfield in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the same physical structure that Jane Eyre lives in years earlier. To me, the interpolation works on a more abstract and conceptual level- more through identity and “representation” than fixed location.

Undeniably similar to those in Jane Eyre, representations throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea* evoke a sense of “recognition” in the reader. The laughter of Grace Poole echoes throughout Rhys’s work: “Hilda giggled more loudly” (WSS, 51) and Antoinette recalls “screams, then someone laughing very loudly” (WSS, 70) when her mother was taken away. Jane Eyre “resolved to resume an alias” (JE, 337) whilst Antoinette is denied her own name by ‘Rochester’: “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else” (WSS, 115). Thematic similarities include fire, dilapidation and a repeated fixation on playing out identities- Rochester dresses as a fortune-teller and asks Jane “What character did I act? My own?” (JE, 202) whilst Baptiste “put his service mask on the savage reproachful face” (WSS, 100). Specific events such as Bertha biting Mr Mason: “This wound was not done with a knife, there have been teeth here” (JE, 212) are honoured in Rhys’s adaptation: “I felt her teeth in my arm” (WSS, 116) whilst Bertha’s family history is almost directly mirrored by Christophine’s opening description of Bertha’s mother as “pretty like pretty self” (WSS, 3) relating to Rochester’s “Miss Mason as the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty” (JE, 305). Pierre too is an adaptation of Bertha’s “younger brother, a complete dumb idiot” (JE, 305). Similarly within Jane Eyre, St John talks to Jane, oblivious of her true identity about the “parallel points in her history and yours” (JE, 380) when telling her about Rochester’s quest to find his love.

I believe many critics overlook the way in which Rhys’s relationship with Brontë’s text is at times playful. Rochester’s words to Jane “I wish I were in a quiet island with only you” (JE, 203) seem ironic when we view the effect that small island life has on the relationship between Antoinette and ‘Rochester’. More explicitly, Rhys names Antoinette’s friend at the Convent school, Helené de Plana- subverting Brontë’s outcast character Helen Burns, by describing how “everyone had fallen under the spell of the de Plana sisters and holds them up as an example to the class” (WSS, 35). However this subtle subversive strain can only truly be appreciated if we view *Wide Sargasso Sea* in relation to Jane Eyre, indicating the way in which Rhys’s adaptation may be indirectly perpetuating the status of this canonical British classic.

The benefits of rewriting with the “echoes” mentioned above as opposed to a more “torn apart” approach can be seen through the ability of the hypertext to re-angle perspectives and change opinions. In Jane Eyre, the reader feels little sense of pity towards Bertha- she is

described in animalistic terms, is an obstacle to Rochester and Jane's happiness and we are never exposed to her thoughts or feelings. However Antoinette is given a history, an undesirable social context as a "white cockroach" (WSS, 76) and an identity that humanises her to the reader. I was affected by this new version of 'Bertha' and even began to actively reassess her madness within *Jane Eyre*. However as with Helené de Plana, my reaction was almost entirely dependent upon knowledge gained from the "central" hypotext, suggesting that the effectiveness of a new character (Antoinette) evolves through its development from the "centre" of an old character (Bertha).

Gradual deviance and evolution from the centre therefore appears a more fitting theory than a tendency "to tear" when discussing the ways in which characters, plots and places function in Rhys's adaptation. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), T S Eliot presents a similar notion; that we must readjust the old in order to accommodate the new and the way in which "inclusion of a new work alters the way in which the past is seen". I believe Eliot, with his prioritisation of repetition and reworking over originality, could be seen as an early advocate of adaptation; his idea that no poet or artist achieves complete meaning alone taken up by Barthes as a basis for the "intertext" theory. Yet Eliot's essay has caused controversy amongst critics more in favor of the ideas discussed earlier regarding diverting, distorting and Making It New. Harold Bloom and Adrienne Rich both support these more radical approaches of rebellion and transformation against tradition with Rich promoting the need to "take on the writing of the past in order to move beyond it" and to "break its hold over us" rather than maintain it as a foundation.

The day after meeting Mr Mason for the first time Antoinette awakes "knowing that nothing would be the same. It would change and go on changing" (WSS, 27). This helps to conclude our argument that adaptations, are not "torn from their centre" entirely, nor are they direct repetitions- they are instead expansions, possessing new centres certainly but ones that are created from their evolution from a centre or a periphery of something previous. Returning to the essay's titular quotation, the suffix of 're' in "representation" subordinates difference and focuses on the repetitive element to any foundation. Here then, I must take issue with Deleuze's use of the word "Each" when discussing representations being torn from their centre and instead suggest the word "some" as more appropriate and accurate to the evolution of *Wide Sargasso Sea* from *Jane Eyre*. Deleuze's statement has however been of paramount importance in our discussion of these two texts, not least through its role as a referential centre from which we have explored the relationship between them.

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