

“Though the Best Ones Fall and That Is
Another Song”:
A Reparative Reading of Jean Rhys’s
Wide Sargasso Sea

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“I do not know why, but [I am] so afraid. All the time. Help me” (Rhys 96), says Antoinette to Christophine, about halfway through Jean Rhys’s novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This conversation takes place after Antoinette overhears her husband Rochester making love to their maid Amélie, which in turn was his revenge for her poisoning him (or so he thinks). This vicious cycle of hurt—as Christophine succinctly puts it, “Because you hurt her she want to hurt you back, that’s why” (129)—is a repeating theme in Rhys’s novel, which is filled with this type of fearful, paranoid thinking that ends up creating even more paranoia and suffering for oneself and others. But Rhys is not alone in this tendency; as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in her essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” this “hermeneutics of suspicion” and “a concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia” (124-25) has become the overwhelmingly prevalent mode of interpretation and knowledge-making in our culture. But because paranoia can be limiting or self-defeating, Sedgwick then argues for the complementary practice of a more “reparative” reading approach, which is “not only important but

possible to find" (150) even in situations that only seem to invite—or even *require*—paranoia.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is also one of those texts that have generally been read with the 'paranoid' approach, since its overt positioning as the response to *Jane Eyre* invites critics to read it as a kind of "moral corrective" that reclaims the particularity of Antoinette's victimhood within the oppressive structures of both colonialism and patriarchy present in Charlotte Brontë's original novel (Davies and Womack, qtd. in Arizti 39-40). This kind of approach is "paranoid," in Sedgwick's sense, in that its main focus is the debunking of systemic oppression and illuminating "how the world works" (Sedgwick 126)—unfairly, oppressively, and unethically. However, as useful as such debunking may be, critics like Teresa Winterhalter or John S. Su also point out that those types of analyses could have the danger of "reinforcing [the] philosophical categories or biases" (Su 53) that created the systemic oppression in the first place. In Winterhalter's words, "[a] certain ... uniformity among people and perspective ... is implied if we assume that merely allowing cultural 'others' to speak will enable us to understand their stories" (215). That is simply privileging the "other side" of a certain binary system might have the unintended side effect of only emphasizing differences, and thereby reinforcing that binary.

So how do you read a story of an oppressed subject without unintentionally reinforcing its oppressive structure? While Winterhalter and Su choose to examine Rhys's narrative techniques in order to collapse those boundaries, my aim in this paper is to utilize Sedgwick's concept of "reparative reading" to propose an alternative way of reading Rhys's text. This will be done by first examining the reparative moments within the novel, analyzing the conditions that make them possible, then applying those same principles and strategies to the reading of the novel itself to "reformulate the ways in which [Antoinette's] experiences

are perceived” (Su 62)—in a way that does not simply replicate the dichotomous and paranoid way of seeing the world.

1. Paranoia as Zombification

The characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* constantly oscillate between the paranoid and the reparative mode of interpretation to perceive and engage with the world and others. Employing Melanie Klein’s concept of the schizoid/paranoid position and the depressive (reparative) position, Sedgwick sees these two modes of interpretation not as “fixed points” but as engaged in a “flexible to-and-fro process” (128) that an individual can choose or learn to adopt or disavow. Therefore, this essay will also attempt to locate *moments* of paranoia and reparation within the text—rather than attributing it consistently to one character or situation—in order to examine their respective mechanisms.

It may be argued that paranoia is the central organizing principle of the plot of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in the sense that this psychological tendency is what drives most of the conflicts in the novel. According to Sedgwick’s definition, paranoia is a cognitive process that is mainly focused on explaining and anticipating the harm suffered by an individual before it happens again. The directive to remain vigilant and allow no surprises, therefore, creates a “complex relation to temporality” that “requires that bad news be always already known” (130). In the novel, such anticipation of the (always already known) bad future manifests as interruptions in Antoinette’s narrative: “I must know more than I know already,” she says at one point, ‘remembering’ the future that has not happened yet, as well as foretelling the ending with the image of “that house where I will be cold and not belonging ... [where] I will dream the end of my dream” (Rhys 92). Also, her decision to burn Thornfield Hall at the end of the novel is—although still a future event

at that point—referred to as something she “will remember quite soon” to do (153).

In addition to this complex, paranoid perception of temporality, much of the interpersonal relationships in the novel are also defined by paranoia, in that they are driven by the preventive, defensive attitude of “*Anything you can do (to me) I can do first—to myself*” (Sedgwick 131). For example, accusing Rochester of making her “want to live,” Antoinette asks: “Why did you do that to me? ... if one day you didn’t wish it. What should I do then?” (Rhys 77). The solution to this paranoid fear (“Suppose you took this happiness away when I wasn’t looking”) is, of course, to try to “*do (to me) ... first*” by wishing to die “[n]ow, when I am happy.” The logic is that, if it is possible for her husband to destroy her in the future, she would rather do it to herself first before he—like other people in her life—inevitably hurts her again. Lastly, the repetition of Antoinette’s paranoid dreams (in which she is followed by an unseen but hateful presence [23], and resists any rescue attempt because “[t]his must happen” [50]) throughout the novel also lends strength to the argument that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a text that mainly operates within the paranoid mode.

However, Sedgwick’s essay also illuminates how paranoia can be an ineffective and self-defeating strategy. First demonstrating how paranoia is a “strong theory” of negative affect, Sedgwick then points out that it can only stay strong “exactly insofar as it fails” to alleviate the negative affects it attempts to describe (134). As Sedgwick puts it, paranoia thus “can’t help or can’t stop or can’t do anything other than prove the very same assumptions with which it began” (135). So, too, we see how the paranoid mentality that causes much of the hurt and violence in Rhys’s text, in turn, also creates even *more* paranoia for oneself and others. For example, Antoinette’s paranoid fear that Rochester might leave and take away her happiness leads—not only to

the desire to destroy herself preemptively—but also to her attempt to control Rochester’s feelings through a love potion which he mistakes as an attempt on his life. In a similar line, Anne B. Simpson also analyzes the “paranoid-schizoid awareness” (113) with which Antoinette and other Rhys heroines perceive the world, and how “the wounded child ... become[s] an assailant in reaction to repeated experiences of neglect and loss” (117) in a vicious cycle of paranoia. After all, one of the most destructive effects of paranoia is that it “grow[s] like a crystal in a hypersaturated solution, blocking out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding or things to understand” (Sedgwick 131).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the result of such paranoia—and, as discussed above, also the *cause* of further paranoia—can be likened to a process of ‘zombification.’ Defined in the text as a “dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead” (Rhys 88), being a “zombi” is being stuck between life and death, unable to truly connect or get in touch with the reality of life. In the novel, paranoia causes this state of ‘unreality’ in three different sites: the other, the self, and the world.

Distorting the reality of the unfamiliar other—‘othering’—is a commonly identified cause of conflict within any oppressive system (such as imperialism or patriarchy). Denying the humanity and reality of the racial other by calling them “white cockroach[es]” (Rhys 20) or simple-minded children (30), for example, are instances of such othering early on in the novel. This racial tension soon leads to a violent incident of a much larger size, in which young Antoinette comes to see the Jamaicans burning her house not as real individual human beings but as “all look[ing] the same, ... the same face repeated over and over, eyes gleaming, mouth half open to shout” (35). In Part 2, it is Rochester who is unable to see the reality of Antoinette, calling her a “stranger who did not think or feel as I did” (78). Faced with a cultural other outside

his interpretive framework, Rochester struggles to perceive Antoinette as she is and resorts to renaming her as “Bertha,” which Winterhalter sees as an attempt to “deny her a reality” and to “control[...] the excess of living by denying the otherness in Antoinette’s existence” (227).¹⁾ Similarly, Simpson interprets Rochester’s eventual confinement of Antoinette as the result of his “fear of being overwhelmed” (121) by the unfamiliar other, which he hopes to avoid by locking her away in the attic so he does not have to “encounter a genuine aspect of who she is” (119). Seized by the paranoid fear that the other would harm and deceive him (especially since, in his view, he has *already* been poisoned and lied to), Rochester tries to prevent further experience of pain by deliberately seeing the other variously as a “doll” (Rhys 123), a “child’s scribble” (134), wearing a “service mask” (88), or a blank face that seems to have “no expression at all” (137) and feel nothing. At one point, Amélie even taunts Antoinette that her husband looks at Antoinette like she is a “zombi” (83), which also happens to be the word that the bullying children use to taunt Antoinette and her mother with in Part 1 (“She have eyes like zombie and you have eyes like zombie too” [42]). As Simpson analyzes it, denying the “truth” of the other’s reality is what turns someone into a zombie (Simpson 122), and the fear that motivates it comes from a reductive paranoid/schizoid awareness (115).

An additional effect of this paranoid othering is that it causes those involved in this process—both the oppressed *and* the oppressor—to view themselves as unreal, as well. Again, this is both the consequence of paranoia and also the motivation to engage in further paranoid interpretations. Patricia Moran’s discussion of Silvan Tomkins’s shame affect theory is especially useful in this context, especially

1) Similarly, Rochester attempts to control his fear of Christophine and her obeh by intentionally obfuscating her name: “So much for you, Josephine or Christophine, I thought” (Rhys 118).

since Sedgwick also makes an explicit connection between paranoia and Tomkins's humiliation-fear theory in her essay (Sedgwick 133). Although Moran's analyses mostly center on Rhys's other fictions, the development of plot and relationships in *Wide Sargasso Sea* can also be interpreted as "constellat[ing] around the shame affect" (Moran 190), in the sense that the experience and the anticipation of shame are what motivate the most destructive, paranoid choices in this novel. As Antoinette explains to Rochester, "that day when ... [her mother] was ashamed of [her], it was after that day that everything changed" (Rhys 109).

According to Moran, shame can be characterized as a "doubled experience" of being painfully aware of the contemptuous gazes of the other and seeing oneself through their eyes, which then "becomes installed in the core of the subject" (192). Shame, then, is identity-forming; moreover, chronic and unacknowledged shame can also lead to self-eradication (190-91) and further paranoia. For example, discussing the process of chronic shaming turning into "humiliated rage," Moran analyzes how Julia in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* becomes "callous and immune to the suffering of others" (194-96). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, meanwhile, young Antoinette's awareness of other people's gazes and jeering laughter (Rhys 16, 17), as well as Rochester's awareness of the "delighted malice" in the servants' gazes (57, 86), create feelings of shame which then become entrenched in their respective subjectivities. As in Julia's humiliated rage, the reaction of the shamed subject ranges from simple irritation to more insidious, destructive choices. For example, reminded of the shame of having been "bought" by Antoinette, Rochester immediately lashes out defensively by complaining that "[h]er pleading expression annoy[ed]" him (59). Also, it is the shame about his own position in his family (in the letter to his father, Rochester calls himself "a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love" [59])

that drives Rochester to insist on marrying Antoinette against her (and even his own) wishes; and later, the letter from Daniel Cosway that emphasizes how he has been “shamefully deceived” (79, 82) is what first causes Rochester to keep a suspicious distance from Antoinette. Tellingly, when he receives Daniel’s letter, Rochester remarks that he “felt no surprise ... as if [he]’d expected it, been waiting for it” (82); in other words, he has “always already” known it.

Katy Cook also judges the shame affect as one of the main obstacles to expressing vulnerability (192-93), which she sees as crucially lacking in Rochester. And this inability to experience and express vulnerability, in Cook’s analysis, not only harms his wife but also eventually results in his estrangement from himself. Drawing on Brené Brown’s work on vulnerability, Cook contrasts the attitudes of Antoinette and Rochester in terms of their willingness to be open about the reality of their true selves, and argues that, in Rochester’s failure to do so and its destructive consequences, the novel “compellingly warns against the dangers of repression and emotional dishonesty” (183). Importantly, such emotional dishonesty out of paranoid fear (or, in Moran’s words, “an attempt to control and predict future shaming possibilities” [194]) is ultimately seen to be harming not only the other but also oneself, since it prevents a chance to “connect with a deeper and more authentic aspect” of the self (Cook 191). Therefore, if ‘othering’ is a process that turns other people into zombies, paranoia and shame affect is a process of ‘self-othering’ that turns oneself into a living undead. Rochester, for example, thinks of himself as having “sold [his] soul” (59), with “blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up” (64), “play[ing] the part I was expected to play” like a marionette doll—this, ironically, being one of the names that he later calls Antoinette (“*Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta*” [127]).

Finally, the zombification of the other and the self also extends to the

perception of the physical world and environment as unreal, so that they are experienced as disjointed collections of “hateful and envious part-objects” (Sedgwick 128) that one has to protect oneself from. As Sara Ahmed explains, the fear of vulnerability is also closely connected to the “fear of ‘the world,’” which comes to be seen as “the scene of a future injury” (qtd. in Cook 189). Accordingly, the paranoid subjects in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are often described as experiencing the environment *itself* as hostile and dangerous. For example, Antoinette explains how other people’s hateful gossip about obehah “changed” Christophine’s room, which suddenly appears frightful and strange: “I was certain that hidden in the room (behind the old black press?) there was a dead man’s dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly” (Rhys 26). In her repeated dreams of paranoia, as well, Antoinette’s fear manifests as the trees seeming “different,” unfamiliar and hostile, “sway[ing] and jerk[ing] as if it is trying to throw me off” (50). Rochester, meanwhile, outright calls the unfamiliar island “menacing” (58), “hostile” (86, 87, 123), and an “enemy” (87, 107) on many occasions, a place that makes him feel “so certain of danger” (87). Simpson, while discussing Klein’s paranoid/schizoid position, explains that relating to the world in this way “severely interfere[s] with an ability to perceive the ‘real,’ outer world, with its complexities and contradictions as well as richness” (120). Consequently, while in the paranoid positions of ‘othering,’ neither Antoinette nor Rochester has the ability to perceive each other’s world as “real”:

‘Is it true,’ she said, ‘that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends ... said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up.’

‘Well,’ I answered annoyed, ‘that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream.’

‘But how can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?’

‘And how can millions of people, their houses and their streets be unreal?’

‘More easily,’ she said, ‘much more easily. Yes a big city must be like a dream.’

‘No, this is unreal and like a dream,’ I thought. (Rhys 67)

Recalling this conversation later, Rochester tries to meet what he perceives as a “challenge” of “these mountains ... or Baptiste’s face, or Antoinette’s eyes” by dismissing them as “unreal,” as well (85). Interestingly, the definition of “zombi” that Rochester reads in the book *The Glittering Coronet of Isles* also makes a connection between “zombi” and hostility toward a certain “place,” stating that “[a] zombi can also be the spirit of a place, usually malignant” (88-89).

2. Moments of Reparation

Thus associating the paranoid mode with ‘zombification’ and ‘unreality’ allows us to find the reparative modes of interpretation at work in the moments that operate in the opposite way: that is, moments that engage with the full reality of the world, the self, and the other. But first, other than being contrary to the paranoid mode, what exactly characterizes the reparative mode? In Sedgwick’s essay, it is first of all connected to Klein’s depressive position, “an anxiety-mitigating achievement” of assembling antagonistic “part-objects” into a new whole object, which is sometimes also called “love” (128); in addition, a reparative approach is also linked to the “strategy of maximizing positive affect” instead of merely “anticipating negative affect” (Tomkins, qtd. in Sedgwick 136). In that context, the moments of peace (as the result of mitigated anxiety), love, and other such positive affects in the text can be said to exemplify the reparative mode at work. These are the moments of de-zombification, so to speak, that brings a subject closer to the fuller

reality of the world, oneself, and others.

First, relating to the physical environment in a reparative way is exemplified in those moments in which the characters experience full, sensory immersion in the world around them. Although the pursuit of conventional happiness in the novel (for example through marriage) does not necessarily lead to genuine happiness, "[t]here are more ways than one of being happy" (Rhys 31), as Antoinette says; and in the text, it is these moments of immersive engagement with the world that generate positive affects such as happiness, peace or freedom. For example, learning to pray in the convent where she briefly lives, Antoinette at first wonders: "what about happiness ... is there no happiness?" (47); "There must be," she continues, but then quickly dismisses it again by saying, "Oh happiness of course, happiness, well"—as if she does not want to dwell on it too long in case it gets corrupted by intellectualizing it. Instead, she begins to narrate her life in the convent in lively, sensuous details such as "the big stone bath where we splashed about wearing long grey cotton chemises ... Great splashes of sunlight as we ran up the wooden steps ... Hot coffee and rolls and melting butter ... the shifting shadows outside, more beautiful than any perpetual light can be ... the blazing colours of the flowers in the garden" (47-48). "I felt bolder, happier," she concludes, and also "more free."

In other parts of the novel as well, such lush, sensory engagement with the physical world is connected to a kind of expanded state of being, and associated with feelings of happiness, peace and freedom that allow one to experience the fullness of the world and oneself. Young Antoinette, for example, seeks refuge from other people by immersing herself in her environment to feel wider and bigger than her usually persecuted self: "Watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer" (24). Or, after the first of

her nightmares, she regains a sense of safety by turning her attention to “the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe” (23). Here, and in other instances, attending to the sensory details like “a smell of ferns and river water” is what makes her feel “safe again” (28). Later, when Antoinette is explaining to Rochester how she was “always happy in the morning,” her description of happiness is also full of specific, sensuous details of the physical world, consisting not only of nature but man-made objects too:

... and every day was a fresh day for me. I remember the taste of milk and bread and the sound of the grandfather clock ticking slowly ... All the flowers in the world were in our garden and sometimes when I was thirsty I licked raindrops from the Jasmine leaves after a shower. ... One of the best things was a curved flight of shallow steps that went down from the *glacis* to the mounting stone, the handrail was ornamented iron. ... and when I put my hand on it, the iron was warm and I was comforted. ... I was always happy in the morning, ... (108-109)

And while Antoinette’s history or temperament arguably make her more sensitive to her environment, this kind of engagement with the world benefits her English husband, as well. In Part 2 of the novel, which is mostly narrated from Rochester’s point of view, the moments in which he feels positive affects (such as peace, happiness and tenderness) correspond to his sensitivity to the things around him—in other words, when he feels the world to be real and alive. For instance, after “lay[ing] awake listening to cocks crowing all night,” Rochester gets up “very early and s[ees] the women with trays covered with white cloths ... [the] woman with the small hot loaves for sale, the woman with cakes, the woman with sweets ... [i]n the street another call[ing] *Bon sirop*, Bon

sirop” (58)—and simply watching this moment of life unfold, Rochester reflects that he “felt peaceful” for once, without needing to be afraid of the unfamiliar environment. In another scene, he stands on the veranda of their honeymoon house and breathes “the sweetness of the air” full of “[c]loves, cinnamon, roses and orange blossom,” feeling “an intoxicating freshness as if all this had never been breathed before” (61). Absorbed in this lush sensation of the freshness of life, Rochester responds to Antoinette’s toast “[t]o happiness” with a seemingly genuine toast of his own.

Finally, one other memorable moment in Rochester’s narrative is when he carefully rescues a large, stunned moth from a fire and lets it fly away without harming it. Referring to the moth as a “beautiful creature,” Rochester is mesmerized by “the soft brilliant colours, the intricate pattern on [its] wings” before gently letting it loose and hoping “that gay gentleman will be safe” (68). Notably, this—perhaps uncharacteristic—moment of tenderness is also framed by rich descriptions of nature such as “a very strong scent of flowers,” the “deafening” noise of the river, the light from “hundreds of fireflies,” and “the starlight . . . so bright that shadows of the veranda posts and the trees outside lay on the floor.” His attitude here draws a sharp contrast to another scene later on in the novel, where—gripped by paranoid fear and distrust—he decides that Christophine is “as mad as [Antoinette]” and refuses to engage with her and her world by “turn[ing] to the window” (132), seeing nothing but his hostile servants grouped under a tree. Rochester’s ‘turning away’ here gains further significance when compared with Aunt Cora’s “turn[ing] her face to the wall” (94) in another part of the novel, which is the gesture that symbolizes Aunt Cora’s final defeat into helplessness and paranoia; after trying and failing to stop the marriage between Antoinette and Rochester, Antoinette describes Aunt Cora’s tired surrender as her “turn[ing] away

from the window, the sky, the looking-glass, the pretty things on the dressing-table ... She turned her face to the wall. 'The Lord has forsaken us,' she said, and shut her eyes. She did not speak again" (95).

Importantly, however, this kind of engagement with the world can only truly happen when the world is perceived as something *other*, and therefore as something real. After all, how could one meaningfully engage with something that is seen only as a collection of hostile part-objects in one's mind? In other words, the embodied aspect of this sensual engagement with the world must presuppose a definite reality *outside* oneself that one can actively engage with. In this respect, the happiness and other positive affects here may be said to come from simply acknowledging and celebrating the 'otherness' of the world without trying to subsume (whether through actual physical possession or by trying to gain complete knowledge of it) or control it. Jessica Gildersleeve, discussing Rhys's representation of the Caribbean's tropical environment, argues that her refusal to "penetrate the unknowable wilderness, and instead perform a respect for the landscape" (34) by leaving its otherness intact is—despite this leading to the reinforcement of the author's "outsider status"—how she ethically engages with the environment (36). In this context, Rochester's "European coloniser" (Gildersleeve 33) attitude of wanting to penetrate the secret of "a beautiful place—wild, untouched" (Rhys 73) and to know "what it *hides*" is contrasted with Antoinette's refutation that "[this place] is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. ... it is something else ... as indifferent as this God you call on so often" (107). Accordingly, it is his pursuit of the 'secret knowledge' of the island that eventually shifts Rochester back into the paranoid mode, despite the occasional moments of reparative engagement—which, in turn, were only possible in the first place because he momentarily surrendered his obsessive desire to *know* (as Sedgwick puts it,

“epistemophilia” [130] is a crucial aspect of paranoia, as well).

By the end of the honeymoon, “exhausted” by his own paranoia, Rochester reflects:

I was tired of these people. I disliked their laughter and their tears, their flattery and envy, conceit and deceit. And I hated the place. I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it. (Rhys 141)

What this passage demonstrates is that the attitude of respecting the other’s otherness is a necessary condition not only for engaging with the world, but also for engaging with others in a reparative, non-paranoid way. Thus, Rochester has been criticized variously as controlling (Cook 193), aggressively pursuing knowledge (Gildersleeve 36), wanting to “possess the absolute otherness of this world” (Winterhalter 220), and resisting the “amorphous and unknown” out of fear (Simpson 127). And, though Antoinette’s attitude is generally less controlling and thus less problematized than Rochester’s,²⁾ she is not free from wanting to control her husband’s mind, either: thinking her husband is about to leave her, she resorts to *obeah*, described as magic that “can make people love or hate ... or die” (Rhys 93).

Despite the general paranoid tendency that eventually ruins their relationship, however, Antoinette and Rochester’s relationship is not

2) In “Internarrative Identity Revisited: The Narcissistic Impulse in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” however, Leah Strobel analyzes how Antoinette’s desire to maintain a coherent self-identity manifests in narcissistic tendency and ‘othering.’

always full of grief and violence, and neither is Rochester's attitude *always* that of a controlling imperialist bent on dominating the other. Rhys complicates such easy vilification by interspersing some moments of empathy, love and care throughout the trajectory of their relationship. According to Sedgwick, this reparative possibility, the "empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care," has to be accompanied by "the subject's movement toward what Foucault calls 'care of the self'" (137). That is, the reparative care for the other (the opposite of 'zombification') is closely connected to the reparative perception of the self—and in addition to respecting the other's otherness, the ability and willingness to see *oneself* as whole and real is also a crucial factor in reparative engagement. In that light, the moments of reparative reading of the other and the self will be discussed together in the following section.

To see oneself as real means recognizing the full reality of *all aspects of oneself*, including those psychological weaknesses, physical vulnerability, or 'bad' and uncomfortable emotions that one might want to hide or avoid. Cook, especially, makes an explicit connection between vulnerability, which is "awareness of our feelings" and the ability to "engag[e] with the full range of our experiences and emotions", and the ability to foster an authentic connection with others (184-85). She is also right to observe that Rochester generally displays "a lack of vulnerability" (187): for example, associating the "mournful expression" that Baptiste wears with vulnerability, Rochester reveals that from a very young age he has been trained to "hide what [he] felt" (Rhys 85): "It was necessary, I was told, and that view I have always accepted." Throughout the narrative, therefore, Rochester makes multiple attempts to conceal, or refuse to engage with, his and others' authentic emotions—especially when they are negative. "If this is a sad story, don't tell it to me tonight" (68), he tells Antoinette, and also to "[n]ever

be afraid. Or if you are tell no one” (77). When he himself feels fear, he “tr[ies] to forget it and push it away” (77). “Antoinette,” he says at one point, in the middle of their last long conversation together, “put the sad things away. Don’t think about them and nothing will be spoiled, I promise you” (110). However, as Cook points out, this is far from true; putting the “sad things away” and refusing to feel the fullness of one’s own emotional reality is not only damaging to oneself but to others as well, as evidenced by the eventual destruction of their relationship.

Sometimes, however, Rochester forgets to be on guard; sometimes he allows himself to feel sadness and fear, and it is in those moments that empathetic connections occur. Interestingly, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, these moments are also usually accompanied with sad and affective music—whether it is a song they sing together, with lyrics that remind one of loss (“The loving man was lonely, the girl was deserted, the children never came back” [Rhys 18]) and mortality (“shine bright Robin as you die” [70]), or the music of nature. For instance, the first time that Rochester feels “simple and natural” with Antoinette is after he hears a bird whistling “a long sad note ... a very lonely sound” (59). Rochester, for once, does not resist the sadness and loneliness that the song inspires in him, and the result is that he notices his wife “smil[ing] simply and naturally” for the first time. Also, instead of viewing her as an unfamiliar (and therefore fearful) stranger, he says that “[l]ooking up smiling, she might have been any pretty English girl” (60). In another case, singing a song about a dying Robin together, Antoinette and Rochester share one of the tenderest moments in the novel, in which he “put[s] [his] arms round her” and they drink “to [their] happiness, to [their] love and the day without end which would be tomorrow” (70). Then, woken by the strange “music” of the rain, Rochester looks at his wife in the candlelight and “wonder[s] why she seemed sad asleep”; “If I had forgotten caution, she has forgotten silence and coldness,” he

reflects, allowing himself to genuinely wish to “listen to the things she says, whispers, in darkness,” and to learn the sad songs of adieu which “haunted [him]” (75-76). In stark contrast to this, later in the book when Rochester is on high alert after being poisoned by Antoinette’s love potion, he reacts to the sound of “someone ... singing” quite differently: “whatever they were singing or saying was dangerous. I must protect myself” (123).

3. Choosing an Alternative Mode of Reading

By employing Melanie Klein’s concept of “positions,” what Sedgwick aims to do is to demonstrate that paranoia is not a fixed identity but one “mode” of reading and perceiving that is “always in the oscillatory context of a very different possible one” (Sedgwick 128). Likewise, the characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* also cannot be interpreted as fixed, paranoid subjects; instead, closer attention must be paid to the ways in which their attitudes oscillate between the two positions to recognize the paranoid and reparative modes at work. This is best exemplified by Rochester’s complicated psychological journey at the end of Part 2 when the two of them are departing from the island, a process that he himself describes as a “sickening swing” (Rhys 139) between paranoid hate and a more reparative desire for reconciliation. For instance, Rochester first claims that he “hate[s] music which [he] loved once” (135), while in the next breath begging his wife to “sing” (138) so he can “listen to the rain ... to the mountain bird ... high, sweet, lonely, magic”; he recoils against her “blank hating moonstruck face” (136), but also longs to say “I have made a terrible mistake. Forgive me” (139).

Two images in particular seem to symbolize this oscillatory relationship between the paranoid and reparative positions: the quoted line from *Macbeth*, and the weeping servant boy at the end of the section.

First, at the beginning of the final scene of Part 2, Rochester is seen ruminating on all the hurt he thinks he has suffered from Antoinette, thinking “of my revenge and hurricanes” (135). However, the unexpected feeling of “pity” also nags at him, giving him “no rest,” “[p]ity like a naked new-born babe striding the blast.” This line is adopted from Act 1 of *Macbeth*, specifically when Macbeth is thinking about his plan to murder the king and suddenly finds himself questioning the validity of the violence (until he is interrupted by Lady Macbeth, of course, who convinces him that he should carry on with their plan). Similarly, at the end of Part 2, there is a moment in which Rochester is similarly on the fence between two attitudes, feeling that he “do[esn’t] know what [he] would have said or done. In the balance—everything” (140). Just then, he is interrupted by a servant boy’s “[l]oud, heartbreaking sobs” (140), and interestingly, Rochester’s reaction to this display of sadness is that “[he] could have strangled him with pleasure.” The pleasure, presumably, is the possibility of engaging in a reparative mode of experiencing the world that accepts sadness, empathy, forgiveness and love. Eventually, though, the thought that a “half-savage boy” could love him proves too much to accept for Rochester, who turns away angrily and finally decides to go through with his revenge and turn Antoinette into a zombie-like figure with a “[w]hite face[...], dazed eyes, aimless gestures, high-pitched laughter ... only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie” (142). In the end, Rochester’s paranoid tendency to always know, to anticipate the hurt, and in the process to efface the reality of the other/the self/the world wins over his reparative desire. Although he is capable for a moment to imagine that “everything I had imagined to be truth was false” (138), he is ultimately unable to hold onto that position. And in Rhys’s writing, this retreat into paranoia is depicted not only as condemnable but also sad: as they are leaving, Rochester suddenly wonders if Baptiste “had

another name” (142), since he had never asked, and looks back one more time at the crying boy. “Who would have thought that any boy would cry like that,” he wonders, “[f]or nothing. Nothing ...”; his tone lamenting, perhaps, his own inability to cry, and a longing for reparative love which he cannot admit.

Read in this way—as the continuous negotiation between the paranoid and the reparative mode of viewing the self, the other and the world—it is possible to interpret *Wide Sargasso Sea* as not only engaged in the project of telling the “‘lost history’ of Bertha Mason,” but also concerned with “reformulat[ing] the ways in which her experiences are perceived” (Su 62). As Sedgwick points out, paranoia can be invaluable in that it illuminates “how the world works” (126), but Rhys’s novel also demonstrates that it can ultimately be a destructive force as well—as evinced by Antoinette’s final descent into a paranoia so potent that the world is as unreal as “cardboard” (Rhys 148), and she herself becomes an unrecognizable stranger: “He looked at me and spoke to me as though I were a stranger. What do you do when something happens to you like that? Why are you laughing at me?” (151) Even her treasured red dress, she suspects, has been “*changed* ... when I wasn’t looking” (152), so that she can no longer trust her physical senses anymore. As the boundary between dream and reality blurs and the image of herself in the mirror appears like a “ghost” that she vaguely knows (154), the only recourse left for Antoinette is self-destruction that is predetermined: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (155-56).

Despite its ending, however, *Wide Sargasso Sea* also shows us an alternative, more reparative way of engaging with the world, along with the interpretive attitudes necessary to shift ourselves into that position; in this way, the text can be said to function as Jonathan Flatley’s “affective map,” defined as a cognitive map of our emotional and affective responses to the “relevant social structures of the world” (Flatley 78).

According to Flatley, an affective map is crucial in navigating the various social formations that influence our lives, and the process of creating or changing such a map is also a process of “rearticulation and recontextualization” (79) that can resist oppressive social structures like patriarchy or capitalism. Certain aesthetic practices—such as modernist fiction—contribute to the creation of an affective map by presenting a specific aesthetic experience in a way that also works as a “representation of the affective life of the reader herself or himself” (80); this process, in turn, produces a kind of cognitive estrangement process that allows the readers to recognize and examine their own emotional responses to something. In other words, the oscillatory relationship between the paranoid/reparative mode at work, delineated within the textual world of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is also presented in such a way that helps the readers to recognize the same tendencies in themselves in reading a text such as this—sad, depressing and apparently hopeless.

“Pervaded by a strong feeling of doom and predestination” (Arizti 42),³⁾ the novel ends in an inescapable, irredeemable tragedy that is “melancholic” in Flatley’s term: “neither cathartic, compensatory, nor redemptive” (Flatley 5). One response to this melancholic text, as we have seen, is paranoia; this results in the type of analysis that dissects the workings of the oppressive systems in the text to show the specific ways in which the characters (for example, Antoinette, the servants, or the black population of Jamaica) have been wronged. However, as Sedgwick suggests, paranoia does not have to be the only response to the recognition of real persecution and oppression, as one might

3) Analyzing the novel’s “intertextual relationship with *Jane Eyre*” (42), Bárbara Arizti goes on to utilize Gary Saul Morson’s theory of time (specifically, *sideshadowing* as a strategy against *foreshadowing*) to look for possible ways in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* fights *Jane Eyre*’s fatalistic and deterministic time narrative (43).

instead “deduce that being paranoid is not an effective way to get rid of enemies” (127). In this context, one of the assumptions of paranoia that Sedgwick wants to problematize is that it “acts as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known. That a fully initiated listener could still remain indifferent or inimical, or might have no help to offer, is hardly treated as a possibility” (138). An alternative, then (and a more “effective way to get rid of enemies,” arguably) might be to utilize the “affective map” that the text gives us in order to engage the reparative mode of reading presented within the text, recognizing it as a mode that is difficult, tenuous, but ultimately crucial to forming meaningful relationships with the self, the other and the world.

What, then, does it look like to read *Wide Sargasso Sea* more reparatively? Returning to Flatley, his discussion of “melancholizing” as “something one does” and “a practice that might, in fact, produce its own kind of knowledge” (2) might be applicable as a strategy to read this ‘melancholic’ novel. Melancholizing—reading and encountering sad stories, and more importantly, allowing oneself to *feel* and *stay* sad—as a form of knowing is fundamentally different from paranoia, in that it is not so much concerned with the specific knowledge and systems of oppression (as Sedgwick emphasizes, however, an alternate form of knowing “does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression” [129] in any given situation), but with the ways in which engaging with these melancholic stories makes the world and the other more ‘real’ for us. Therefore, what we ‘know’ from reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* in this way is not so much the specific information about the victimization of various people within various social systems, but the *reality* of these victims—in the sense that they really exist, and need our attention and care—and also our own tendency or paradigm of thought to resort to paranoia in the face of suffering, which only creates more

paranoia. In this sense, melancholia can be a “mode of vital connection with the world” in that it changes one’s “mood,” as in Heidegger’s idea of *Stimmung*, or “one’s primary way of being in the world” (Flatley 4-5). Simply put, engaging with the sadness of *Wide Sargasso Sea* using the tactics for reparative reading outlined in the text (neither turning away from that “vulnerable” emotion, nor trying to subsume the otherness of the text by explaining and anticipating everything within the paranoid mode) could bring about the cognitive shift that restores “interest in other persons, one’s own actions, and often life itself” (Flatley 1). Sadness itself, when read right, can be a reparative process that makes others, oneself, and the world feel more real—the opposite of ‘zombification.’

After witnessing the killing of their family horse in Coulibri, Antoinette picks up a narrow wooden stick for self-protection, thinking that she “can fight with this, if the worst comes to the worst I can fight to the end though the best ones fall and that is another song” (Rhys 31). *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a story of the “best ones” falling, being victimized by the paranoia-inducing world and responding to that with even more paranoia, only to end up completely destroyed and destructive; the “wall of fire protecting me” that Antoinette hallucinates at the end of the novel, while being the only way she imagines she can be “helped,” is also “too hot” to be withstood (154). At the same time, though, the novel is also “another song”: a sad song, like all songs are in this text, but as Flatley theorizes and Rochester demonstrates, sometimes listening to a sad song can move us into a reparative position “from which it is possible ... to use one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole” (Sedgwick 128). In sum, by showing us why it is important for Rochester to listen to Antoinette’s sad songs and how to do it reparatively, *Wide Sargasso Sea* invites the readers to listen to the “sad song” of the novel in the same

way, a challenge to engage in the reparative reading mode that the characters themselves ultimately failed to do.

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ABSTRACT

“Though the Best Ones Fall and That Is
Another Song”:
A Reparative Reading of Jean Rhys’s
Wide Sargasso Sea

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Read primarily as the prequel of *Jane Eyre*, much of the criticism on Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* focuses on delineating the harmful effects of the colonial and patriarchal systems on its protagonist, Antoinette. While this line of interpretation is important and productive, it can also be—in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s words—a “paranoid” mode of reading. This paper employs Sedgwick’s concept of paranoid and reparative reading to interpret Rhys’s fiction on two levels: first, as a way to understand and examine the way in which, within the fictional world of the novel, the characters either take the paranoid or reparative mode to ‘read’ each other, creating moments of either harmful othering or reconciliatory empathy. Secondly, I suggest on another level that the whole project of reading the sadness in the novel is an exercise in the reparative mode of listening for the readers themselves, a challenge to find hope and empathy in a seemingly hopeless story of persecution and paranoia.

Key Words Jean Rhys, affect, paranoia, reparative reading