"I want what it *hides*": The Role of Imperialist Imagination in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys

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In "Part Two" of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the narrative style shifts to capture the point-of-view of the Man, Antoinette's new, British husband. This new perspective reveals that the imperialist imagination is a tool of control in reinstating social order. The Man, already distrusting of the new Jamaican environment he finds himself in, uses imperial knowledge and ways of knowing as a basis to support his demand for "Truth", his mistreatment of Antoinette, and his distrust of other ways of knowing. In analyzing the colonial book that the Man turns to for answers, *The Glittering Coronet of Isles*, and comparing how his actions align with said book, it becomes clear that imperialist imaginations work to "right" power relations and confirm the superiority of, specifically in this case, white Europeans. Notably, although the superiority of imperial knowledge is the viewpoint of the Man in this text, Rhys does not share the same beliefs and, instead, critiques the imperialist system and its belief of a singular "Truth". It is these critiques that solidify *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a post-modernist, anti-colonial text.

Highly suspicious of his new surroundings and of being the visible minority, the Man is immediately out of place and uncomfortable. This discomfort manifests as a deep desire to uncover all the secrets he believes Jamacia is hiding from him. He states that the country is "a beautiful place—wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, 'What I see is nothing—I want what it *hides*—that is not nothing'" (Rhys 52). The Man's discussion of Jamaica gives the country agency while simultaneously positioning it as subject. The country can have secrets

and, what is more, protect and keep those secrets, which gives the country power over the Man. However, the Man also deems the country as "alien," "wild," and "untouched". This is classic colonial language that positions the land as ripe with resources that are under-utilized and available for the taking by incoming colonial forces. John Locke, a philosopher, was crucial in situating this idea in the public's minds. For him, the "settlement in a foreign country… is justified by him for the reason of making use of the 'waste' and 'honest industry'" (Miura 61). Just like Locke, the Man *wants* something from the land, and it refuses to give it up. Thus, the Man is situated as both a powerful, frightful imperialist agent who has the agency to stake a claim on Jamaica's resource of "secrets," and as the unwanted outsider who will forever be considered "Other." It is this othered status that will never allow him to be permitted the "secrets" he desires. This is not acceptable to him. If imperial forces are not used to being positioned as "Other" then imperial imaginings must limit the validity of colonized people's knowledge by crafting their own.

The situation that drives the Man to turn to *The Glittering Coronet of Isles* highlights this concept of devaluing colonized people's knowing by crafting imperialist ways of knowing. During a particularly overwhelming sensation of unfamiliarity, the Man sets out on a walk through a forest that gets him stranded by the remains of what he deems an old "*pavé* road" (65) that leads to "the ruins of a stone house" (64). After realizing he is lost and being saved by Baptiste, the overseer, the Man begins pestering him with questions about what he had seen in the forest. The Man asks about the remains of the road and where it might have led to, to which Baptiste responds, "No road". When pressed again, claiming that he saw a road, Baptiste just repeats his two-word response (65). Further, when he pressures Baptiste about the possible presence of a ghost or zombi living in the ruins,

Baptiste insists that he "don't know nothing about all that foolishness" (65). These non-answers frustrate the Man. His knowledge is being questioned, and the truth is being obscured. Unsatisfied, it is here that the Man turns to imperial ways of knowing when he searches for answers in *The Glittering Coronet of Isles*, where he finds validation. The unnamed author of the book writes that they "have noticed that n****** as a rule refuse to discuss the black magic in which so many believe. …They confuse matters by telling lies if pressed" (66). The Man's turn to imperial knowledge is not merely out of a desire for the familiar, but it is a return to the role of "Us". Both the Man and the author of the book struggled to extract the "Truth" from the locals of their respective locations, and the Man finds solidarity in this. Additionally, the Man can find the answers he was looking for about the zombie that were previously refused. Of course, this knowledge does not come from the source but from an imperial figure. Neither the Man nor the unnamed author show any respect for the secrecy surrounding the knowledge they wish to possess. In fact, they deem it their right to be allowed access, which leaves them feeling irritated and defied when they are not obeyed.

This imperial knowledge that the Man finds in *The Glittering Coronet of Isles* is also used to situate Antionette into the position of the objectified, female "Other" when the Man finds her too threatening. Fortin-Tournès argues that Antoinette's power comes from her beauty but also "through her capacity to gaze at her husband, which he interprets as an intolerable demonstration of her power over him" (42). The Man is "disconcert[ed]" by Antoinette's eyes that "never seem to blink at all" and are "too large" for her face (Rhys 37). As Fortin-Tournès rightly points out, the female ability to gaze is explored as her ultimate downfall in Mulvey's theory on the subject of "the male gaze," but has also been taken up by

other scholars, such as Williams' "When the Woman Looks", which states that "the woman's gaze is punished…by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy" (19). However, as Fortin-Tournès discusses, the Man does not see Antoinette's gaze as a threat to *her* but as a threat to *him*. This change in power relations terrifies him and further situates him as "Other" and out of place in this "backwards" country.

To comfort himself and to return the power relations to their "proper" positions, the Man consults *The Glittering Coronet of Isles* for ways to construct a new identity for Antoinette that is safer for him. This new identity is foreshadowed through dramatic irony and a double entendre. When Antoinette attempts to confide in the Man about her fears of losing her newfound happiness at the Man's own hands, she asks, "If I could die. Now, when I'm happy. Would you do that? You wouldn't have to kill me. …say die and watch me die" (55). To this, the Man complies, "in [his] way, not in hers," commanding "[d]ie then! Die!" (55). This conversation provides numerous insights. First, dramatic irony is available to those who have read Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and know *Wide Sargasso Sea* to be a retelling of Bertha Mason's former life and thus also know the final fate of the character. She will die, and this conversation is a moment of prolepsis. Secondly, Antoinette situates herself as a subject by stating that, with just one word from the Man, she would comply; he would not even have to kill her. Finally, given this opportunity, the Man takes advantage of Antoinette in the way he wants, applying a sexual connotation to the word "die". This morbid language, even used as a double entendre, foreshadows the Man's eventual murder of Antoinette's personhood. After this moment, Antoinette does become dead to the Man. *The Glittering Coronet of Isles* states that "[a] zombi is a dead person who seems to be alive

or a living person who is dead" (66), and the Man has just "watched her die many times" (55). From this realization on, the language the Man uses to refer to Antoinette strips her of her identity, and situates her as an object, because, as Fortin-Tournès theorizes, the Man is threatened by her. To remove her supposed power over him, the Man constructs Antoinette as a Marionette puppet, a doll that he can "force…to cry and to speak" in ways that please him, as Christophine points out (100). His construction is complete by the end of "Part Two" when he states that "the doll [Antoinette] had a doll's voice, a breathless but curiously indifferent voice" (112). Here, Antoinette is not named, not even given her hated nickname "Bertha"; she is simply "the doll." And a doll that is unbreathing, like a dead thing. Like the ghost that the Man finally compares her too. A literal ghost and a ghost of her formal self:

> I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness. *Say die and I will die. Say die and watch me die.* (111)

It is in this final dead form that Antoinette is no longer a threat to the Man. Her eyes are no longer "disconcerting" (37), no longer able to hold power over him with their gaze. They are simply dead. With her death, the "proper" social order of imperial knowledge is returned, and the Man is "sane" (112).

With his views now supported and solidified by *The Glittering Coronet of Isles*, the Man's quest for knowledge becomes even more shrouded in distrust as his imperial knowledge clashes with local knowledge. Instead of adapting, the Man instead becomes distrustful, believing everyone is lying to him; only what he believes is truth, everything else is lies. This further positions imperial knowledge as being above "Other" ways of knowing. As a person used to holding power, the Man finds his imperial knowledge clashing

the most with Christophine's local knowledge and authority. The Man is distrustful of Christophine from the beginning (42), which parallels Christophine's position as a figure of authority who does not subscribe to the imperial ways of knowing that the Man covets. Even in her earlier talks with Antoinette, she is not quick to trust in the place called England. She tells Antoinette, "I never see the damn place, how I know…I don't say I don't *believe*, I say I don't *know*, I know what I see with my eyes, and I never see thing" (69). Unlike the Man who trusts in England and its imperial values, Christophine rejects the imperial concept of "Truth" through this questioning of its very existence. It is after the Man has exerted his power over Antoinette that Christophine attempts to interfere on her behalf, providing the Man with at least some of the "secrets" he desires. She speaks of *béké*, the history of Antoinette's mother, and pleads with the Man to let Antoinette go (99-104). The truth has finally been revealed, and the Man absorbs it all, "hypnotized, to her dark voice coming from the darkness" (101). The language the Man uses here to describe Christophine's voice is the same sort of language he used to describe "the wild. . . alien. . . secret loveliness" of Jamaica itself, showing that his colonial attitudes have not changed and are easily transferred from place to persons deemed to be "Other" (52).

Regardless of how Christophine speaks or what she says, her knowledge and authority are not good enough for the Man as it contradicts his imperial ways of knowing. Returning to *The Glittering Coronet of Isles*, as previously mentioned, the fictional author writes that the people he interviewed not only "refused to discuss [Obeah]" but chose to lie about it "if pressed" (66). Additionally, this fictional author states that white people who "pretend to pass the whole thing as nonsense" are "credulous" for doing so (66). The Man refuses to be credulous and relinquish his fidelity to imperial knowledge. Instead, after

listening to everything Christophine tells him, he refuses to believe her and further blames her and her knowledge of Obeah as the cause of everything (103). In the end, it does not matter what the "Truth" was, just that the Man *chose* what counts as "Truth." The reality is that his ways of knowing have been challenged since he arrived in Jamaica. When he comments on Christophine's "unclean" habit of letting her dress drag on the floor, Antoinette tells him that he "[doesn't] understand at all. They don't care about getting a dress dirty because it shows it isn't the only dress they have" (50). When he states that Christophine "dawdles about," Antoinette, again, tells him he is wrong (50), that "every move she makes is right so it's quick in the end" (51). Not only do Antoinette's corrections create within the Man a hatred for Christophine, they also showcase how backwards this society and its rules seem to him. Thus, during the final confrontation with Christophine, where he clings on to imperial knowledge as the source of his power, he threatens her with police force, to which Christophine responds, "No police here…no chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is a free country and I am a free woman" (104). While the Man's other displays of imperial power have worked to "rebalance" the social order, Christophine remains undefeated. While Antoinette's story might not have a happy ending, Christophine's victory solidifies Rhy's novel as an anti-imperialist text.

By the end of "Part Two" of Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the Man uses imperial knowledge as a tool of control and reinstating the social order. The Man uses *The Glittering Coronet of Isles* in a way that supports his demand for the "Truth," his erasure of Antoinette's personhood, and his distrust of "Other" knowledge. As this is an anti-colonial text, the Man is left unsatisfied, stating that, "all [his] life would be thirst and longing for what [he] lost before [he] had found it" (112). His use of imperial imaginings did nothing

but bring pain and suffering to himself and those around him. It is with this conclusion that Rhys critiques the Man's actions.

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