Spaces of resistance and transformation: Caribbean islands between dystopia and creolotopia in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract: Jean Rhys's best-known novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, writing back to Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre*, is set in the exuberant natural world of the post-emancipation Caribbean. Despite its harsh depiction of cruelty, self-deception, and hypocrisy in the human world, the novel conveys a sympathetic impression of Caribbean society. The novel's utopian/dystopian tension is centered on its imagining of the Caribbean as a paradoxical site of coexisting dystopia and creolotopia. This article focuses on spaces lived in by individual characters, aiming to show that *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s Caribbean islands can be read as both dystopian spaces of resistance and creolotopian spaces of transformation. Counter to colonial utopian imaginary, the tropical islands in the novel are presented as an evil, ugly, and diseased world for both white colonizers and the colonized, yet they are simultaneously portrayed as a special Caribbean creolotopia formed through archipelagic thinking and the process of creolization, as embodied in the lived experiences of the black woman Christophine. By resisting the binarism of victim/victimizer and envisioning utopia and creolotopia in the same space, the novel subverts the binary thinking that dominates Western epistemology.

Keywords: archipelagic thinking, archipelagos, creolotopia, dystopia, islands, utopia, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Introduction

Wide Sargasso Sea, published in 1966, is the last and best-known novel of Jean Rhys, a major writer of the 20th century, who was born in Dominica in 1890 and immigrated to England at the age of 16. Since its publication, the novel has attracted continuous critical attention, partly because it writes back to and enriches the reader's understanding of Charlotte Brontë's (1847/2008) *Jane Eyre*, a canonical novel of British literature, by giving voice to Rochester's mad wife Bertha (Wickramagamage, 2000, p. 27). *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be viewed as a

prequel to *Jane Eyre*, countering the original novel's negative depiction of Bertha, which according to Rhys (Raiskin, 1999, p. 144), represents "only one side—the English side." In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys presents the story of Bertha, whose original name is Antoinette, using multiple voices: Antoinette's and Rochester's narratives, interspersed with a letter from Daniel Cosway, who claims to be Antoinette's illegitimate half-brother, and the narrative of Grace Poole, who is Antoinette's keeper at Thornfield Hall. The voice of Antoinette, challenging "an array of accepted truths from the glories of Empire and English culture to the celebrations of liberal feminism" (Raiskin, 1999, p. xi), offers a powerful counter-discourse that resists and dissolves colonial master narratives.

Wide Sargasso Sea helped draw critical attention to the portrayal of madwomen in classic Western literature. For example, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979, p. 360) read Charlotte Brontë's Bertha as "Jane's truest and darkest double" and "the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress." Extensive studies have been conducted regarding *Wide Sargasso Sea*, mainly from postcolonial, feminist, modernist and postmodernist angles, focusing on issues such as race, gender, female subjectivity, madness, mother-daughter relationships, patriarchal oppression, colonial domination, postcolonial counter-discourse, and narrative experiments (e.g. Hwang, 2021; Hai, 2015; Gilchrist, 2012; Jaising, 2010; Maurel, 2009; Mardorossian, 1999; Ciolkowski, 1997; Gunner, 1994; Olaussen, 1993; Fayad, 1988; Mezei, 1987; Spivak, 1985; Wilson, 1986), but few critics have approached the novel from the perspective of utopian studies or island studies. Although Louis James (1994, pp. 80–81) has discussed the "geographical, social and mental" islands in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, his study centers on the "interplay of place and self" without paying much attention to island spatiality and its connection with the novel's utopian/dystopian imagination.

This article, considering *Wide Sargasso Sea* through the lens of island space and spatiality, explores how the novel portrays Caribbean islands as dystopian and creolotopian spaces. Space—filled with power, ideology, and politics—is important for understanding the social and human conditions. Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 39) distinguishes between three types of spaces: the perceived space, which is real and physical; the conceived space, which is a conceptualized and mental construct; and the lived space, which is "directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users', but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who *describe* and aspire to do no more than describe." Lived space, situated between perceived and conceived space, is actively and directly experienced by individuals in daily life. It is where social relations are produced, maintained, and reproduced. Lefebvre (1991, p. 362) also highlights that "the space of the everyday activities of users is a concrete one, which is to say, subjective." The lived space is thus not only one of human experience but also one of pure subjectivity, leading to its non-static, dynamic, and ever-changing features. This article, focusing on spaces lived in by individual characters, reads the Caribbean islands in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as both dystopian spaces of resistance and creolotopian spaces of transformation.

Utopia, dystopia, creolotopia, and archipelagic thinking

The word *utopia* was created by Thomas More (1516/2014) in his seminal work *Utopia*. Although there have been frequent attempts to demarcate the boundaries of the utopian concept, its definitions, as Ruth Levitas (2013, p. 122) states, are "contested, or more

frequently simply presumed or neglected": Utopia manifests itself in diverse forms, such as "an alternative society in the future," "an idealized representation of the present," and "the ideal relationship, or the perfect selfbody" in a personal locus. Despite its various manifestations, its most important characteristic is "the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in," and its principal energy is hope (Vieira, 2010, pp. 6-7).

Since its creation, utopia has often been associated with islands and colonialism. More's island of Utopia, isolated and superior to the known world, was inspired by "the expansion of geographical horizons" and "the discovery of the *Other*" (Vieira, 2010, p. 4). The island has been frequently employed to "project political and social possibilities" (Savory, 2011, p. 37). In early colonial history, European colonists used Atlantic archipelagos such as the Canary Islands and Madeira, imagined as remote and isolated relative to industrialized Europe, as laboratories to experiment with "deforestation, colonization, enslavement, and plantation monoculture," ultimately concluding that remoteness and isolation, two synonyms for island space in the Western imperial grammar, were "vital to successful colonization" (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 8). As Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2011, 71) notes, "the construction of the tropical island as an isolated and ahistorical space separated from the world-making of the European metropole was a constitutive part of the British empire." A nesomania, "the desire for islands" that drove colonial explorers to 'discover' utopian islands around the world, became a trademark of European colonial expansion and maritime empire (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 6). It is the spatial features of islands that made them targets of colonization by all major colonial powers: their strategic positions in the global flow of raw materials, capital, and labor; the easy access for trade resulting from their long coastlines; and favorable conditions for control and defense on account of their clear boundaries and contained spaces (Grove, 1996, p. 63).

Colonists viewed islands "as discrete, conquerable, individual territories" (Brinklow, Ledwell, & Ledwell, 2000, p. 15) and as blank spaces on which to impose fantasies and utopian visions. This island imaginary was vital to European discourses of colonization, and the association of islands with utopia is reflected by the sweet names, such as 'Fortunate Isles' and 'Sugar islands', used to label "the spaces of the most brutal form of human subjugation, the slave islands" (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 13). The tropical islands of the Caribbean, with "the best conditions for sugar production" (Grove, 1996, p. 63) and its Amerindian population being almost wiped out of existence, were imagined as "a *tabula rasa* for colonialism" (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 13) and an ideal place for profiting from the sugar industry, using cheap labor. This vision of Caribbean islands as blank canvases on which "colonial imaginations could write their utopian dreams" (Savory, 2011, p. 39) has continued up to today, being transformed into a neocolonial discourse, exemplified by the military and tourist exploitation of tropical island spaces.

Literature, including colonial travelogues, has played a significant role in constructing the colonial discourse of island expansion. As DeLoughrey (2007, p. 13) notes, "since the colonial expansion of Europe, its literature has increasingly inscribed the island as a reflection of various political, sociological, and colonial practices." Among the best-known examples are More's *Utopia* (1516), William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), which "upheld imperial logic and must be recognized as ideological tools that helped make colonial expansion possible" (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 13). These writers, whose target audiences were white

readers at home and who "simply did not consider the inhabitants of the area to be colonized to be important" (Sargent, 2010, p. 204), often self-deceivingly covered the darkness and violence of the colonial process, for instance by describing slaves as happily contented and presenting the island colonies in a utopian manner, based on a selective vision (Ward & Watson, 2010). Identification of a utopian society is based upon a subjective conception of what is a good and desirable place.

Dystopia, a term derived from *utopia*, refers to "the idea of utopia gone wrong" (Vieira, 2010, p. 16). Its first recorded use dates back to a parliamentary speech made by John Stuart Mill in 1868, where it was adopted to name a perspective "opposite to that of utopia: if utopia was commonly seen as 'too good to be practicable', then dystopia was 'too bad to be practicable'" (Vieira, 2010, p. 16). Synonymous with terms such as *cacotopia*, *anti-utopia*, and *negative utopia*, dystopia is often used to refer to fictional societies "in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand, or as a satire of utopian aspirations which attempts to show up their fallacies, or which demonstrate, […] 'ways of life we must be sure to avoid'" (Claeys, 2010, p. 107). As reversed or failed utopias, dystopias warn people not to fall into the same old trap or follow similar paths, often even offering solutions, and can thus contribute meaningfully to the improvement of real, non-fictional places (Phillips, 2002). At the beginning of the 20th century, the optimistic view of utopian ideals ceased to dominate, as the dystopian discourse gained prominence, a trend that continued throughout a century "characterized by man's disappointment—and even incredulity—at the perception of his own nature" (Vieira, 2010, p. 18). Islands, important for utopian thinking in the Western imaginary, are also preferred spaces upon which to project dystopian dreams (Stephanides & Bassnett, 2008, p. 8; Brinklow, Ledwell, & Ledwell, 2000, p. 15) since "island locales have been prime sites for piracy, smuggling, slavery, and all manner of inhumane incarceration" (Lowenthal, 2007, p. 215).

In the context of European colonialism, the dystopian perception was already present in slave narratives, such as *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1770/2010) and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789/2021). With their descriptions of the brutality and dehumanization of slavery, often on the tropical islands of the Caribbean, these accounts serve as counter-discourses to colonial utopian visions. However, these texts have long been marginalized by a colonial literary canon and have had limited success in challenging imperial discourses. In the 19th and early-20th centuries, some literary works, such as gothic novels, written by white authors in Europe and the Caribbean, began presenting a utopian/dystopian tension in the tropical islands by portraying the Caribbean "as a tropical hellhole" of "brutality, bizarre sacrifices, cannibalism and sexual aberrations" and "a colonial 'dystopia of savagery and backwardness' replete with Obeah and Vodou practitioners" (Paravisini-Gebert, 2002, p. 234). These colonial texts serve as further justification for the oppression and exploitation of colonized peoples in the Caribbean. Postcolonial literary works like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with their more complex representations of utopian and dystopian thinking, respond to the images of the colonies depicted by colonial powers and powerfully interrogate colonial discourses and literatures.

The postcolonial writing produced in the Caribbean is characterized by a special utopian vision, *creolotopia* in Peter Poiana's (2008, p. 168) words, referring to "a peculiarly Caribbean utopia that, in its various narrative manifestations, transforms the colonial island

prison into a model of cultural dynamism and invention." This new utopia, "a Caribbean-inspired model of sociality," can be explained by the idea of *créolité* or creoleness, which not only captures the fluidity and complexity of present-day Caribbean societies but provides "a distinctively Caribbean solution to the problems that afflict peoples around the world as a result [...] of the indiscriminate application of Western liberal and social ideologies" by setting out "the principles of the future politics of a globalised world" (Poiana, 2008, pp. 169-170). Unlike the Western utopian tradition, which is based on "strict principles of exclusion," creolotopia is "essentially non-selective and non-limitative" (Poiana, 2008, p. 169).

The Caribbean creolotopian thinking is a product of the combination of the inalterable historical events of colonial exploitation and the archipelago topographies. The historical reality of slave and coolie trade as well as their unspeakable horror creates an ambivalent attitude towards the past and an effort to cast off its lingering effects in Caribbean societies, the result of which is that creolotopia tends to focus on a continuous present rather than a distant future. According to Poiana (2008, p. 170), this Caribbean utopia, describing "an exemplary process that all creators, including philosophers, set in train when they engage with the moving, changing world," "is a productive way of engaging with the present, such that it allows the present to give rise to new concepts, creations and practices, in a flurry of innovation that impacts immediately and directly upon reality" (Poiana, 2008, p. 170). Caribbean writers with a creolotopian vision have used their imagination and creativity to evoke the cruelty and humiliation endured by their people and to free them from the burden of memory, thus creating a temporal model that "defines the present as a succession of intensified moments" (Poiana, 2008, p. 174).

More importantly, creolotopia is shaped by the Caribbean's archipelagic geography, a geography that permits a display of "the abundant productions of *créolité*" (Poiana, 2008, p. 173). The spatial model prevalent in Caribbean narratives is one "that is figured as the breaking up of continental land masses into small islands scattered over the ocean" (Poiana, 2008, p. 174). This archipelagic spatial model—"consisting of a chain or cluster of islands" (Baldacchino, 2016, p. 35)—is a dynamic geographical form that "invites significant productive thinking about island relations" on the basis of "connection, assemblage, mobility, and multiplicity" (Stratford, 2013, p. 3). The Caribbean is a meta-archipelago that "has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center" (Benitez-Rojo, 1996, p. 4). Because Caribbean island populations are comprised of "ethnic groups that have migrated to the archipelago from elsewhere, either by force or of their own free will," the Caribbean is essentially "a place of arrival rather than origin" (Otto, 2005, p. 30). Like the Mediterranean, it can be considered as "an intricate site of encounters and currents, involving the movement of peoples, the intermingling of their histories and cultures, and exchanges of ideas and conversations" (Percopo, 2011, p. 94).

The utopian thinking of the Caribbean, according to Bill Ashcroft (2017, p. 145), is characterized by a transformative urge resulting from "an 'archipelagic consciousness,' a sense of the vibrant multiplicity of the region that embeds itself in every individual cultural production." Archipelagic thinking, a relational mode actively promoted by many island studies scholars (see e.g. Martínez-San Miguel & Stephens, 2020; Xie et al, 2020; Baldacchino, 2016; Pugh, 2013; Stratford, 2013; Stratford et al, 2011; Fletcher, 2011; DeLoughrey, 2007, 2004, 2001; Hau'ofa, 1994; Gilroy, 1993), foregrounds the fluidity, diversity, and dynamic state of the archipelago, thereby disrupting binarism, dichotomies, and the static form. It

stresses "a respect for otherness that stands in stark opposition to the conceptual tyranny of Western thought" (Poiana, 2008, p. 174) and implies "an awareness of the collectivity and interconnectivity of other islands in the archipelago (and hence other subjects in society), which become the nodes of constant movement and exchange, both geographically and culturally" (Ashcroft, 2017, p. 148).

Many Caribbean writers and artists exhibit an archipelagic consciousness in their work. Writers such as Antonio Benítez Rojo, Édouard Glissant, Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and Patrick Chamoiseau, enriching their literary imagination with archipelagic relations (Ashcroft, 2017; Stratford et al, 2011; Poiana, 2008), "have called for a cartography of archipelagos that maps the complex ebb and flow of immigration, arrival, and of island settlement" (DeLoughrey, 2001, p. 23). In Caribbean visual arts, an exemplary representation of archipelagic thinking is Trinidadian artist Kathryn Chan's installation piece *Archipelago* (Figure 1), which presents a new type of unity, accommodating diversity, multiplicity, fragmentation and in-between spaces and "allows room for closing gaps, for the inclusion of new shades or expressions; in other words, for the fluidity of culture itself with time" (Mohammed, 2018, p. 160). Chan's artwork foregrounds the flexibility, openness, interconnectivity, and dynamic construction of the archipelago.

Figure 1. Kathryn Chan, *Archipelago*, 2002, limestone plaster, pigments/fresco, dimension variable, courtesy of the artist.

Créolité is the energy that drives archipelagic thinking and its associated creolotopia. As Glissant asserts, "the most human, the densest and most intense form of metamorphosis is creolization. Its privileged environment is the Archipelago" (qtd. in Wiedorn, 2018, p. 7). *Créolité* is bound up with the archipelago, the dynamics of which produce a unity in diversity and facilitate, in creolized cultures, "a creative transfiguration of inheritances into something new" (Pugh, 2013, p. 20). The relational politics growing out of the creolization process challenges the insular thinking of traditional identity politics. A dynamic equilibrium can thus be reached within the archipelago to deliver fluid, transformative, and creolized values. In

this sense, the "scattered shards of the archipelago" as a whole offer "the possibility of a different creole future" (Ashcroft, 2017, p. 152).

Set in the 1840s, in the vibrant natural world of the Caribbean, the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents the island space not only as an evil, ugly, and diseased dystopia counter to colonial utopian imaginary but also as a dynamic creolotopia formed from "defamiliarising cultural encounters" (Poiana, 2008, p. 177). Despite the harsh vision of the cruelty, self-deception, and hypocrisy of the actual human world depicted in the novel, the author conveys an optimistic view of Caribbean society. The novel's dark and creolotopian visions coexist.

Spaces of resistance: Caribbean islands as dystopias

In the process of the reterritorrialization of imperial nations and the world market, "a colonial utopia, in which civilization, prosperity and amenity are established, a utopia regulated by the ordering power of a higher civilization, is absolutely fundamental to imperialism's discourse of self-justification" (Ashcroft, 2007, p. 413). As Lyman Tower Sargent (2010, p. 215) notes, "utopianism was an important part of the process of colonization." White colonizers projected their utopian imaginings and dreams onto the Caribbean islands that served as their stepping stones to better and more prosperous lives. This utopian envisioning "obscures [the island's] function as producer of commodities for capitalist consumption and underpins its lasting invention as 'tropical paradise'" within the Western island discourse (Ashcroft, 2017, p. 21). However, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the author portrays Caribbean islands as dystopian spaces for both black slaves and white colonizers.

The novel demonstrates that within the collective memory of the dispossessed majority in the Caribbean, the trauma of slavery, indentureship, and colonial exploitation as well as entrenched colonial influences have always covered the archipelago with a dystopian ambience. The story begins just after the passing of the Emancipation Act (1833), when former slaves were compelled to work temporarily under a new system of apprenticeship that granted them only limited freedom. Even after the end of apprenticeship system in British colonies in 1838, various land and employment measures were put forward to confine former slaves to agricultural wage labor because the West Indies' economic dependence on the export of sugar and other agricultural products required a substantial labor force, and ex-slaves were expected to meet those demands (Fergus, 2013, p. 183). In the new colonial order, blacks remained at the bottom both socially and economically, as revealed by the following comments by Christophine, Antoinette's black nurse:

> No more slavery! She had to laugh! 'These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people's feet. New ones worse than old ones – more cunning, that's all. (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 15)

The inhuman system of slavery, racist ideology, and unjust economic practices of the slave-driven plantation agriculture had made the Caribbean a dystopian space for blacks, which is evoked by "Massacre" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 45), the name of a fishing village on the couple's honeymoon island. Here Massacre refers not only geographically to a specific village on the leeward coast of the island Dominica, where a group of Caribs were killed in

the 1670s, but symbolically to "the ominous presence of forgotten historical disasters" (James, 1994, p. 78) on nearly all Caribbean islands, thereby intensifying the image of them as malevolent and oppressive dystopias. The exploitation, violence, and brutality suffered by the blacks at the hands of white slave owners led directly to their hostility against the whites. The wage plantation economy that replaced the old economic order based on slavery imposed equally severe punishments upon black laborers and continued inflicting grievous harm on them by maintaining their subjugation as low-paid and racially inferior workers, perpetuating the dystopian animosity between blacks and whites. After the abolition of slavery, white colonists introduced another harsh and unjust system—indentureship—into the plantation economy to retain the imperialist utopia, "importing Chinese and Indian workers, paying them meagre wages as indentured servants" (Grydehøj et al, 2021, p. 7), which is also mentioned in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "My stepfather talked about a plan to import labourers—coolies he called them—from the East Indies" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 19). The working and living conditions of indentured workers were as destructive and harsh as those of the slaves in the past. The continuing displacement, deprivation, and rejection endured by plantation laborers as well as their frequent rebellions and revolts in the post-Emancipation society where their racialized identities were severely stigmatized and marginalized further foreground the dystopian environment in the novel.

The dystopian dimension of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is also reflected in Antoinette's perception of the Caribbean. Representing white Creoles, who are excluded by both the black and white communities, Antoinette feels "marooned" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 4) on the island of Jamaica and perceives her family's Coulibri Estate as a post-lapsarian dystopia:

> Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible—the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. […] All Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush. (Rhys, 1966/2011, pp. 4-5)

The decaying estate indicates the poor economic status of the white Creole minority, including the Cosways, whose poverty has earned them nicknames such as "white cockroaches" and "white niggers" (Rhys, 1966/2011, pp. 8-9). With hatred, scorn, and constant threat from the newly freed black population, white Creoles, whose whiteness is believed to have been contaminated by the island climate, experience the Caribbean space as menacing, hostile, and alienating. The word 'marooned', used repeatedly in Antoinette's narrative, conjuring up the colonial imagination of islands as "fixed, clear-cut, precisely bound by surrounding water" (Lowenthal, 2007, p. 206), suggests that not only for African and Asian laborers, but also for white Creoles who are trapped in a conflicting and bordering position between the Europe and the Caribbean, the tropical islands are prisons from which it is hardly possible to escape.

In Antoinette's mind, it is the Emancipation that has ruined the Edenic space. However, the gossip spread in Spanish Town reveals that even before Emancipation, it was already a fallen place:

> Emancipation troubles killed old Cosway? Nonsense—the estate was going downhill for years before that. He drank himself to death. Many's the time when—

well! And all those women! She never did anything to stop him—she encouraged him. Presents and smiles for the bastards every Christmas. Old customs? Some old customs are better dead and buried. (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 13)

Antoinette's father, old Cosway, has innumerable mixed-race offspring. In colonial times, plantation owners often raped slave women and free non-white women, but the blame was usually put on the planters' wives, who were assigned the role as guardians of sexual morality (Erwin, 1989, p. 148). Old Cosway's alcoholism, used as a metonym for syphilis in the novel, makes manifest the syphilophobia of the late-19th century. Syphilis was often associated with blacks, especially black women, who were viewed "as the source of corruption and disease" (Gilman, 1985, p. 231). The madness Daniel identifies in "all these white Creoles" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 72) embodies the sexual indulgence and moral degeneration of the white slave-owning plantocracy as a whole: an unjust, degraded, and corrupt reality infested with dystopian elements.

The honeymoon island, where Antoinette spent her childhood at Granbois Estate, used to be "a Caribbean Eden, the world of childhood innocence" (James, 1994, p. 78). Yet Rochester's betrayal by sleeping with female servants, such as the "half-caste" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 45) maid Amélie, transforms the island from an Eden into a dystopia, leaving Antoinette completely homeless:

Do you know what you've done to me? It's not the girl, not the girl. But I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it. It's just somewhere else where I have been unhappy, and all the other things are nothing to what has happened here. I hate it now like I hate you and before I die I will show you how much I hate you. (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 115)

When Antoinette returns to Granbois with Rochester for their honeymoon, she expresses her sense of belonging to this place: "This is my place and everything is on our side" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 53). However, Rochester's disloyalty there makes her acutely aware of her precarity that she has lost this estate, her childhood home: "I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him. […] That is English law" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 83), which is a general plight of married white Creole women in the colonial context. The depiction of the tropical island's beauty as ominous and menacing at the start of Rochester's narrative foreshadows Antoinette's predicament. For her, the Caribbean is a paradise lost, in which she will always be an outsider.

For new settlers like Mr. Mason and Rochester, whose illusion of the tropical islands as utopian and idyllic places is broken by their experience of the harsh reality, the Caribbean space becomes a fallen Eden as well. Representing new colonial agents, these freshly arrived planters replace former slave owners to invest in the plantation economy: "He came to make money as they all do. Some of the big estates are going cheap, and one unfortunate's loss is always a clever man's gain" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 14). Rochester's investment is made indirectly by his marrying Mr. Mason's wealthy stepdaughter Antoinette. As haughty abolitionists, their hypocrisies are revealed by their stereotypical view of the black, mixed-race, and Asian people as impotent and lacking agency as well as by their introduction of the

equally exploitative indentured labor system into the Caribbean colonies (Mardorossian, 1999, p. 1075; James, 1994, p. 80).

Mr. Mason's disillusionment is made complete when the Coulibri Estate is burned by former slaves, who are prompted to action by Mr. Mason's plan to import Indian laborers, which would deprive the blacks of their livelihoods. The destruction of the estate, representing the blacks' resistance against continued oppression by the whites, subverts the expectations inscribed into the white settlers' mentality by colonial discourses. In Rochester's case, the West Indies is supposed to be a "utopia as compensation, as escapism, as fantasy" (Levitas, 2013, p. 122), where he is assured of a fortune through marriage. Yet from the time of his arrival to the Caribbean island, Rochester is challenged not just by his sense of abandonment as the second son who has been ignored in the family inheritance but also, and more importantly, by his realization of his limits and his admission of awe "in the face of something he cannot quite dominate" (Haliloglu, 2009, p. 92). His experience of the tropical space as a fallen world of depravity and corruption is reflected by his dissolute indulgence in sensual pleasures. Despite the textual repression and ellipses in Rochester's narrative, the reader can detect that he has not only sexually exploited black or mixed-race women who worked for him but also fathered with them children who he refuses to recognize, such as the "nameless" and "half-savage" (Rhys, 1966/2011, pp. 135-136) boy he has abandoned on the honeymoon island.

The Caribbean colonial spaces are often "held in utopic/dystopic tension" (Whitlock, 2000, p. 179) since tropical islands were often imagined as utopias by colonialists. However, for African slaves and indentured Asian laborers who suffered colonial oppression and racism, these were infernal spaces of suffering and injustice. Rhys's novel does not follow this formula of allocating the utopic to the colonizer and the dystopic to the colonized. She resists the easy binarism of victimizer/victim and challenges the binary thinking of Western epistemology. The novel, opposing the colonial utopian fantasies of the Caribbean through models of dystopia, presents the Caribbean as a world "fallen through the horrors of slavery, colonialism, class, and the materialist worship of money" (James, 1994, p. 78) and shows how this impacts the lives of not only black, mixed-race, and Asian people but also white colonists.

Spaces of transformation: Caribbean islands as creolotopias

Despite its intense dystopian vision, *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows that, as a place of arrival, the Caribbean archipelago has already become home to peoples of various ethnicities who "regard themselves as native to the region" (Otto, 2005, p. 30). It is a paradoxical site where trauma and humiliation have been inflicted upon the oppressed blacks and Asians, yet a special bond also exists between them and the place after generations of struggle for survival. The Caribbean's tropical archipelagic geography and its complex colonial history have generated an archipelagic consciousness and creolotopian thinking in its cultural productions, driven by the process of *créolité*. Indicating "motion, mutability, and openness to difference and change" (Wiedorn, 2018, p. 115), the archipelagic creolotopia breaks out of binary oppositions and "resists the hierarchy and subordination implicated in received notions of organic totality" (Scappettone, 2007, p. 115). A unique creole culture develops that is heterogeneous, hybrid, dynamic, and transformative. In Rhys's novel, this special Caribbean utopian thinking is embodied in the character of the black woman Christophine.

Since the publication of Gayatri Spivak's (1985, p. 253) 'Three women's texts and a critique of imperialism', in which she argues that *Wide Sargasso Sea*, written "within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native," provides us a glimpse of the black maid Christophine's perspective without containing her, literary criticism of the novel has shifted its focus from the white Creole woman Antoinette to Christophine. The question provoked by Spivak's article—whether the subaltern can ever be heard within the framework of postcolonial and imperial epistemologies—initiated a sequence of scholarly discussions regarding "the nature and limits of the black subaltern's voice and agency," as exemplified by Christophine (Jaising, 2010, p. 831). Scholars such as Lucy Wilson (1986) and Benita Parry (1987) suggest that Christophine is an empowered and resistant black subaltern who voices a "counter-discourse" to imperial accounts (Parry, 1987, p. 38). Most critics, however, tend to complicate the character. For instance, Veronica Marie Gregg (1995, p. 42) points out that although Christophine is a speaking black subject, she is "constructed according to the stereotypes of black promiscuity and the black mammy who privileges the white child over her own." Carine Melkom Mardorossian (1999, p. 1078) states that Christophine's voice is mediated by the unreliable narratives of Antoinette and Rochester, whose "formal disruptions and silences […] allow for the perspectives and resistances of the subaltern to be recognized." Keith A. Russell II (2007, p. 101) maintains that Christophine's "seamless merging of a wide variety of languages" enables her to be simultaneously "voiceless and voiced." Shakti Jaising (2010, p. 831), reading Christophine as the product of a longstanding liberal vision of black subjectivity, argues that the novel "sets limits to the agency of the black Creole woman in the very act of depicting her as autonomous and individualistic." Ambreen Hai (2015, p. 517) asserts that the novel, neither erasing the voices of the Other nor attempting to speak for them, allows "the Other/subaltern to speak between the lines of dominant discourses" through its use of modernist narrative techniques. These discussions reveal the complexity and exceptionality of the character Christophine, which, the present article argues, is derived fundamentally from her archipelagic consciousness. This mode of thinking gives Christophine an innate strength that marks her as exceptional in contrast to not only her white masters but also other black people. Moving beyond the previous debates about her condition as a black subaltern, it transforms her into the epitome of the Caribbean creolotopian future.

Christophine's archipelagic thinking is a result of her archipelagic way of life: she is from Martinique, a French island; she spends years with the Cosways in the British colonial island Jamaica; and she later lives in a small house Antoinette's mother gives her in Dominica, the honeymoon island that has switched between French and British colonial control. This experience of moving between islands occurs with other characters in the novel as well. Maillotte, Christophine's only friend in Jamaica, is "not a Jamaican" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 6), but from another island. Baptiste, the head of the black servants at Granbois, was born in Dominica but has spent many years on St. Kitts. Mr. Mason splits his time between his properties in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Antigua. Antoinette and her mother have also moved between different islands. Yet it is Christophine who has developed a clear archipelagic consciousness, characterized by flexibility, migration, and mobility. When Rochester asks about her plan after she tries to persuade him to leave Antoinette and return half her dowry, Christophine tells him that "they would go to Martinique. Then to other places. 'I like to see the world before I die.'" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 125). The utopian world imagined by

Christophine is one of perpetual change, flux, and free movement, "with no predefined direction, destination or intention" (Poiana, 2008, p. 175).

The transformative power of creolotopia is driven by the energy of *créolité* and the process of creolization. Linguistic creolization is a quintessential manifestation of *créolité*, just as Bill Ashcroft (2017, pp. 78-79) states that "the creolization of language in the Caribbean stands as both the origin and the metonymy of the postcolonial dynamic of hybridization." Despite having a firm command of the colonizers' languages, Christophine insists on using the dialect: "Though she could speak good English if she wanted to, and French as well as patois, she took care to talk as they talked" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 6). The Jamaican Creole, the native language of Jamaica, known locally as patios, has developed through a combination of elements from English and African languages. As George Lamming has pointed out, language is "a source of control" and "also a source of invention" (qtd. in Hall, 2015, p. 19). Through linguistic mixing, English is appropriated to the local idiom, which is a way to "challenge the hegemony of the language of the colonizer" (Hall, 2015, p. 20), "a kind of prison language" in the words of Kamau Brathwaite (1993, p. 270). Christophine uses the vernacular form of language, a powerful orality, not only to condemn, as shown in the previous section, the colonizers for exploiting black and Asian laborers on post-Emancipation plantations but also to defy patriarchal authority and refuse the role of a domesticated black female Other prescribed by discriminatory colonial discourses: "Three children I have. One living in this world, each one a different father, but no husband, I thank my God. I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 83). For Christophine, the Creole language—a site of power and resistance, a liberating form of expression, and a transformative counter-discourse to colonizers' languages—serves as an effective tool for challenging patriarchal, colonialist, and imperialist laws.

The process of creolization is also exemplified in the obeah practiced by Christophine. Obeah is based on a creolization of multiple and various religious elements, including African religions, Christian practices, and even Indigenous and East Indian religions. In this sense, it is "a set of hybrid or creolized beliefs […] rooted in Creole notions of spirituality which acknowledges the existence and power of the supernatural world and incorporates into its practices witchcraft, sorcery, magic, spells, and healing" (Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert, 2011, p. 155). According to Kamau Brathwaite (1981, p. 12), "in African/Caribbean folk practice, where religion had not been externalized and institutionalized as in Europe, the obeah-man was doctor, philosopher, and priest." For black people in the Caribbean, obeah functions as a weapon of resistance in face of oppression, a medical practice to heal illness, and a religious bond for building communities. As Silvia Cappello (2009, p. 53) notes, obeah "represents a huge living tradition, largely oral, in the West Indies: a great deal of African folk culture, myths, songs, folk tales, and superstitions." Carrying a rich tradition of local knowledge, obeah challenged "imperialism's official epistemology" (Parry, 1987, p. 38). Obeah practitioners, often leaders of local communities, were feared by colonists as potential inciters of rebellions. Therefore, the practice of obeah, viewed by colonial authorities as a threat to the stability of the plantation economy and imperial institutions, was criminalized (Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert, 2011, p. 156). Christophine, despite being a Catholic, practices obeah, which provides her a means of cultural disobedience, a measure of control, and a sense of autonomy and mastery. As an obeah woman, she has mastered a kind of secret knowledge that Rochester desires to know but is unable to comprehend: "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, 1966/2011, p. 64); "I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 136). Rochester feels his authority threatened by his inability to access local knowledge, while Christophine—the mistress of this knowledge—frightens him. The poison episode in Rochester's narrative demonstrates the potency and destructive potential of this magic or knowledge. When Christophine exits the text, her image speaks louder than her words, affecting Rochester profoundly: "When I looked at her there was a mask on her face and her eyes were undaunted. She was a fighter, I had to admit. […] She walked away without looking back" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 127). By practicing obeah, Christophine not only assumes a position of power within the black community but also earns the respect and reverence of white colonists who dread her power.

Créolité and archipelagic consciousness are crucial sources of Christophine's strength. Rochester's depiction of his three encounters with Christophine reveals that she is stronger and braver than he is. Upon their first encounter, Rochester feels weakened by Christophine's gaze: "She looked at me steadily, not with approval, I thought. We stared at each other for quite a minute. I looked away first and she smiled to herself" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 51). Their second encounter is even more intimidating for Rochester, who feels emasculated by the power of Christophine's words: "The same contempt as that devil's when she said, 'Taste my bull's blood.' Meaning that will make you a man" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 133). In their last encounter, Rochester must lean upon the power of the law to gain the upper hand, threatening to put Christophine into jail by claiming that she has given Antoinette a poisonous obeah potion to use against him. Although Christophine eventually leaves Antoinette due to Rochester's threat, she is undefeated: "'No police here,' she said. 'No chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is free country and I am free woman'" (Rhys, 1966/2011, p. 126). Before her departure, she impugns Rochester to his face for exploiting Antoinette economically and sexually.

Christophine's creolotopian thinking helps her develop a sense of confidence and freedom, dissolve the social hierarchies and authority of imperial discourses, and cherish a hope for the island and the archipelago even in the difficult colonial setting. As Carine Mardonrossian (1999, p. 1077) notes, "although the black Creoles are indeed, in Spivak's words, 'doubly silenced, doubly marginalized,' their complex interplay with colonial strategies actualizes a resistance that effectively unsettles the colonizer's worldview and actions." Through the practice of creolization and thinking with the archipelago, Christophine has transformed the Caribbean space into a creolotopia, a utopia located not in the future but in her present life, with a focus on relieving the generational trauma of colonial oppression and exploitation.

Conclusion

There has been a "deep colonial impulse" in *utopia* since the concept's creation (Ashcroft, 2017, p. 417). Islands' spatial features cause them to be often imagined as ideal places for projecting utopian visions, and they have thus been crucially important for the process of imperial expansion. As Elaine Savory (2011, p. 36) points out, "the island imaginary has been key to colonization discourse and literature." That is to say, literature has played a significant role in constructing an island utopian discourse for Western colonialism. However, utopian discourses, on account of their complicity in the colonial project, have always already

contained dystopian seeds within themselves. The tropical islands of the Caribbean, occupying a critical position in colonial context, were often envisioned as blank canvases upon which imperial imaginations could paint their utopian dreams, while the brutality, violence, and injustice involved in its colonial plantation history were usually viewed selectively. Caribbean authors have responded not only by challenging colonial utopian discourses but also by developing the concept of *creolotopia*, a unique Caribbean utopia, on the basis of the region's historical reality and archipelago geographies. Creolotopia, focusing on a continuous present instead of a remote future, is characterized by a relational mode of archipelagic thinking. Being fluid, dynamic, and open to multiple possibilities, the archipelagic consciousness disrupts dominant imperial ideologies, celebrates differences and otherness, and stresses interconnection and collectivity. The energy that drives creolotopian and archipelagic thinking is *créolité*, which has nourished the heterogeneous Caribbean culture and enhanced the cohesion of the archipelago's collectivity. This utopian/dystopian tension is present in Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which portrays the Caribbean as a paradoxical space of dystopia and creolotopia. Countering the colonial island utopian discourse, the novel envisions the tropical islands as a dystopian world for both white colonizers and the colonized, while simultaneously setting forth a special creolotopia for the archipelago, which is embodied by the lived experience of the black woman Christophine. By problematizing the binarism of victim/victimizer and envisioning dystopia and creolotopia in the same space, the novel subverts the binary thinking that dominates Western epistemology.

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