beyond ideal formula. It is the stigma of complex earthiness and exile from convention. It is raised with anguish into the stars. The incompatibility of consumer callouses and bull’s blood holds out madness (if one is enmeshed in a religion of sensuality and mindless academic spirituality) or alternatively it holds out a genuine spiritual sensation that one needs to lose one’s ritual soul to find life, and that this means prayer of such depth it is directed to god, however masked by innumerable or magical relics; Antoinette’s madness is no less than a hidden surrender of life, a loss of soul to find soul, disrupted ritual callous, disrupted voice of convention in order to find (or begin to find) the voice in the foodbearing tree from the ‘spouse’ of otherness.

These considerations are never explicitly stated in Wide Sargasso Sea. Their authenticity lies, I find, in a measure of confused force and anguish that drives her to say to one of the nuns before she leaves the convent: ‘I dreamed I was in Hell.’ The nun replies: ‘That dream is evil. Put it from your mind—never think of it again’ (p. 51) [36].

But she was to dream and think of it again and again. And the nun’s incomprehension is woven into Bertha’s shroud and damnation. It was Jean Rhys’s passion to illumine by fire Antoinette’s essential humanity and precarious divinity.

SANDRA DRAKE

Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea

“A zombi is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead. A zombi can also be the spirit of a place . . . .” (WSS, 107) [64].

“...I have noticed that negroes as a rule refuse to discuss the black magic in which so many believe. Voodoo as it is called in Haiti— obeah in some of the islands, another name in South America.” (WSS, 107) [64].

"Is there a ghost, a zombi there?" I persisted.
"Don't know nothing about all that foolishness."
—Rochester queries the Black servant Baptiste, WSS, 106 [63].

† From “All That Foolishness / That All Foolishness: Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea,” Critica 2, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 97-112. Reprinted by permission. Page references to this Norton Critical Edition are given in brackets after Drake’s original citations.

Jean Rhys's highly acclaimed novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is recognized as a brilliant psychological portrayal. It is also a historical novel, whose central issue is textualized in the portrait of Antoinette Cosway. That issue is the abolition of European plantation slavery and the transition—failed transition—to some other set of social relations that would constitute a viable Caribbean identity. Since the Voyages of European conquest, European hegemony in the Americas has been practically structured and symbolically cast in terms of the European patriarchal family. Black human beings were bought and sold; women were legally at the economic mercy of their male relatives, and Native Americans (Amerindians)—when not exterminated—were violently subjugated. Indigenous American, Black slave, woman, colonial, and child were considered by the colonizer, to differing degrees, to be by nature dependent and inferior. The relationship of all these groups to the colonizer is at stake in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The novel stands on its own. It could have been written without the relationship of intertextual referentiality of *Jane Eyre*. But this level of literary intertextual referentiality is paralleled and is absorbed by the extratextual referentiality to Europe's historical narrative. In that narrative, the Caribbean since the Voyages of European Conquest is constricted, and thus constructed, in the terms of a dominant literary and historical discourse that takes Europe as origin and reference point. So too does *Wide Sargasso Sea* have a European origin-reference point: *Jane Eyre*. It is in this regard deliberately derivative, an imitation, a copy. Its very existence derives from the English classical literary canon. It is a novelistic colony. Rhys chose this fact as its starting point. Depending on whether that is also its conclusion, *Wide Sargasso Sea* narrates a pathetic personal defeat, or an ironic triumph—literally speaking, a triumph of cultural irony.

The satisfactory resolution of Antoinette Cosway's crisis of identity can come only with a satisfactory resolution of her relationship to the part of the Caribbean that is not derived from Europe—in this novel, especially the Black Caribbean. This relationship is embodied in her relation to three characters: Christophine, Tia, and Sandi Cosway. Antoinette, who is Caribbean, colonial, and female, is reduced in the course of the novel to economic and psychological helplessness by European colonialism and patriarchy. History and culture, inscribed as narrative, plot structure, and symbolism, make the story ultimately one of triumph, accomplished in the terms of the Afro-Caribbean belief system. Accomplished with the assistance sought, given, and fully accepted at last. Given by Christophine, former slave, obeah-worker, model of female independence, arisen from almost unbelievable oppression. Maternal protector and ancestor-figure in the profound African sense. This reading is sustained by the centrally Afro-Caribbean structure of the novel, by the quintessentially Afro-Caribbean figure of the zombi, and by the Africa-derived beliefs about the relations between the living and the dead that the concept of the zombi—the living-dead—incorporates. The Caribbean in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not exotic backdrop but the central character of the book, embodied in Antoinette Cosway, "the spirit of a place" (*WSS*, 107) [64]. Battled for in the dramatic heart of the novel, Part Two, where Christophine and Rochester wage their contest, and Sandi Cosway makes her final plea. Christophine on the ground of the emergent free Black Jamaican peasantry, Sandi Cosway on the ground of the emergent free Jamaican bourgeoisie—but still Black too: Sandi's father, Mr. Alexander.

"Very wealthy man. He own three rum shops and two dry goods stores... I hear one time that Miss Antoinette and his son Mr Sandi get married, but that all foolishness. Miss Antoinette a white girl with a lot of money, she won't marry with a coloured man even though he don't look like a coloured man." (*WSS*, 121) [73]

The struggle for Antoinette's survival—for the survival of the Caribbean—against European patriarchy and empire, the struggle for a voice to reinscribe a past history and construct a future out of genuine indigenous cultural materials—to become something other than a copy—is the struggle Christophine and Sandi fight and apparently lose to Rochester at the end of part Two. I argue in this article that it is fought and won, in flame, at the end of Part Three.

Only superficially chronological, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 's true organizational harmony occurs on the level of Antoinette's psyche. And its true action is not the dramatic series of chronologically related events, but the working out of the answer to two questions (and one dream, dreamed three times): "Qui est là?" and "You frightened?" In Part Three, dream and question converge, for the question "You frightened?" is asked and answered in the dream: the answer to "Qui est là?" gives the answer to "You frightened?" In the first occurrence of the dream, Antoinette is immobilized with fear. In the second occurrence, she submits to fate. In the third occurrence, she asks for, receives, and accepts assistance, takes action, and personal and cultural liberation is achieved.

The centerpiece of the section and of the book is this violently sexual affair. Buried deep within Part Two, however, counterpoised to it, is the affair of love and friendship between Antoinette and Sandi Cosway. Such a relationship is shameful, often taboo in the slave and post-slave
Americas, hardly spoken of. Some critics and commentators seem even to have missed it. “You ask Miss Antoinette, she tell you” (WSS, 121) [73]. Rochester never does ask; Antoinette never tells. “Your wife know Sandi since long time. Ask her and she tell you. But not everything I think” (WSS, 125) [75]. Rumor, from hostile witnesses. Confirmed—as distortion—by Antoinette when she is able to speak, at last, in Part Three. Sandi’s name is mentioned only once by Antoinette in Part Two, and not in the context of sex at all, but of friendship: as, at the end, she remembers it in the context of love. Counterpoised to her relationship with Rochester in every way. “I did not love her,” Rochester says. “I was thirsty for her, but that is not love” (WSS, 93) [55]. Egalitarian ship with Rochester in every way. “I did not love her,” Rochester says. “I was thirsty for her, but that is not love” (WSS, 93) [55]. Egalitarian and not hierarchical, the relationship with Sandi, remarkably undifferentiated by gender-prescribed behavior; playful, happy and assured.

Rochester narrates about Antoinette:

“...one afternoon when I was watching her, hardly able to believe she was the pale silent creature I had married...her blue chemise...hitched up far above her knees, she stopped laughing, called a warning and threw a large pebble [at a crab under water in a pool]. She threw like a boy, with a sure graceful movement...As we were walking home I asked her who had taught her to throw so well. "Oh, Sandi taught me, a boy you never met." (WSS, 88) [52]"

In the patriarchy, unencumbering garments and sure aim are attributes of boys. In Sandi’s company, though, Antoinette has been able to develop them. And certainly there is something between Antoinette and Sandi. Before her marriage, and apparently renewed during the time in Jamaica when she and Rochester, definitively estranged, await their sailing to England. But a relationship only acknowledged by Antoinette in her “narratorial consciousness” years later, in her imprisonment at Thornfield Hall, when she looks at her red dress, so closely connected with fire and with her own Caribbean identity, and recounts:

“...I was wearing a dress of that color when Sandi came to see me for the last time. "Will you come with me?" he said. "No," I said, "I cannot." "So this is good-bye?" "Yes, this is good-bye." "But I can’t leave you like this," he said, "you are so unhappy." We had often kissed before but not like that. That was the life and death kiss and you only know a long time afterwards what it is, the life and death kiss. The white ship whistled three times. ... (WSS, 185-86 [109-10]; emphasis mine.)

This declaration establishes Christophine as a model of female independence and self-reliance for Antoinette, who responds to her situation in the most basic terms of female subjugation in the patriarchy: “He is my husband after all” (WSS, 109) [66]. Christophine recognizes the economic basis of women’s independence in society; and having lived most of her life as a slave—under British law—she perhaps has an especially good vantage point for developing skepticism about that legal system. This remarkable passage asserts several things: a similarity of women’s oppression by men across color lines, the psychological mechanism being their dependence upon romantic acceptance by men, the practical mechanism being financial dependence upon them. Implicitly, it suggests the advantages of not being “a rich white girl” but a former slave woman for understanding the undesirability of dependence and submission and ties together the equation in the novel between the colonial state, the female state, and the state of the slave of either sex—in a conversation that also emphasizes the differences in the two women’s situation.

But Antoinette rejects Christophine’s shrewd psychological assess-
ment of Rochester and her sober advice on how to extricate herself. "I stared at her, thinking, 'but how can she know the best thing for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate old negro woman, who is not certain if there is such a place as England?'" (WSS, 112) [67]. What Antoinette wants is an obeah charm to make Rochester love her. Yet when Christophine yields to her distress and agrees, Antoinette shies from this step. Even while taking it, she tries to distance herself from it, with money. Christophine comments on her fear, with scorn and hurt at being paid:

"So already you frightened eh?" And when I saw her expression I took my purse . . . and threw it on the bed.
"You don't have to give me money. I do this foolishness because you beg me—not for money."
"Is it foolishness?" I said, whispering and she laughed again, but softly.
"If bébé say it foolishness, then it foolishness. Bébé clever like the devil. More clever than God. Ain't so?" (WSS, 117 [70–71]; emphasis mine in line one.)

Antoinette recalls her departure from Christophine after she has obtained the charm: "Nearby a cock crew and I thought, 'That is for the devil, but who is the traitor?' She did not want to do this" (WSS, 135) [71]. The deepest answer, in terms of the structure of the novel, is that Antoinette—here, as in the scene with Sandi—has betrayed herself.

Blacks may be afraid of obeah, and they may pay the obeah worker, but this fear and this payment, unlike Antoinette's, is not a denial that they belong to the culture. Worst, Antoinette wants to use the spell to complete her assimilation to England and to whiteness. She is afraid of Afro-Caribbean obeah, but she agrees to what she herself identifies as "obeah too"—Rochester stealing her name: "My name is not Bertha," she says to Rochester. "Why do you call me Bertha?" (WSS, 135) [81]. "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too" (WSS, 147) [88]. But on page 135 (81) she says, "It doesn't matter." Not until she is nearly ready to triumph does she say, "Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette and I saw Antoinette drifting out the window . . . ." (WSS, 180) [106–07]. Here, again, the situation of women under the patriarchy, and of Blacks, is compared. The slaves lost their African names, and often took surnames of their owners. Women, in the British patriarchy, take the surnames of their husbands. Rochester goes a step farther and seeks to remove Antoinette's given name too. If

2. Bébé is a word found in various forms throughout the Americas; it is used by Blacks to refer to Whites. Sometimes it is "Backra." In Toni Morrison's novel Song of Solomon (1977) we find a verse handed down in Virginia since slavery: "Solomon, don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me. . . ."

she had married Sandi Cosway, she would not have lost either of her names, for she and he carry the same family name.

Christophine says to Antoinette at the point that is perhaps the younger woman's emotional nadir, " 'Get up, girl, and dress yourself. Woman must have spunks to live in this wicked world' " (WSS, 101) [60]. She thus enjoins "dress" upon her as an activity that is like girding on armor—part of a fight for life in a world especially hostile to women. Years later, in her prison in Thornfield Hall, Antoinette acts on her words when she demands of her keeper Grace Poole:

"Have you hidden my red dress . . . ? If I'd been wearing that he'd have known me."
"Nobody's hidden your dress," she said. "It's hanging in the press." (WSS, 185) [109]

And a bit farther on:
"... I held the dress in my hand wondering if they had done the last and worst thing. If they had changed it when I wasn't looking, if they had changed it and it wasn't my dress at all—but how could they get the scent?" (WSS, 186) [110]

She has finally claimed the red dress of her Caribbean identity. And it is this dress that becomes not noun/object/passivity, but agent of liberating activity, in an Afro-Caribbean idiom:

I . . . looked from the fire to the dress (that is lying on the floor) and from the dress to the fire . . . . It was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do. I will remember I thought. I will remember quite soon now. (WSS, 186–87) [110–11]

What she must do, and will remember quite soon, is to put to the torch Thornfield Hall, the symbol, in the heart of empire, of that alliance she has made with Rochester, and symbol of her denial of the Caribbean. She does this in her symbolic capacity of zombi.

Like many Caribbean beliefs, the zombi is of African origin. A number of African societies thought that bokon—"sorcerers" who turned great powers to evil ends—could reduce persons to automatons and force them to do the bokor's will, including work for him. A number of Caribbean scholars have been intrigued with the question of why this belief should have attained much greater importance in the Caribbean than in Africa, coming to its fullest development in Saint Domingue, later Haiti. Laroche and Depestre suggest that it was because it was so well suited to represent the condition of plantation slavery in the Americas.

The zombi's state is symbolic of alienation on the social as well as the individual level.
The zombi is, in reality, the legendary, mythic symbol of . . . a spiritual as well as physical alienation; of the dispossession of the self through the reduction of the self to a mere source of labour. They [Haitian writers] see in [the zombi] the image of a fearful destiny which they must combat; a destiny which is at once collective and individual.

Rhys indicates explicitly the importance of the zombi figure in her novel, and makes an equation between "ghosts" and "zombis" that points up Antoinette in that role. "Is there a ghost, a zombi here?" Rochester asks Baptiste (WSS, 106) [63]. And, finally, there is the "ghost" reputed to haunt Thornfield Hall, a rumor about the imprisoned Antoinette—a "ghost" Antoinette thinks she sees when she catches sight of herself in a mirror. But Rhys does more than equate. The action of the novel and the interpretation of its ending require an understanding of the complex nature of the zombi, whose state is "a symbolic one . . . at the centre of a network of symbols concerned with life and death" (EGT, 56).

The zombi's state is understood as a kind of sleep. In Wide Sargasso Sea, England, personified in Rochester, is responsible for Antoinette Cosway's course from increasing reduction to the condition of zombi, to apparent death (insanity) shortly to be followed by real, self-inflicted death (the disposal of the no-longer useful colony) provided for by the ending of Jane Eyre—but, as I argue, really to the waking, revenge, and life which in Haitian belief signal the zombi's freeing itself from its master.

Antoinette's "real" death is not a demented suicide in the flames of Thornfield Hall. That projected death is really only the one "everyone knows about"—through reading Jane Eyre, the European colonizer's writing of history, and of Antoinette's history. Her "real" death is her subjugation by Rochester—by the colonizer—the long slow process of her reduction to the zombi state chronicled in the novel.

But there is more to the Afro-Caribbean belief in the zombi. Related to it is an attitude toward death that is African in origin and fundamentally at variance with European belief. The African attitude, characterize, is that the living and the dead may almost be said to form one community. The spirit-world of the ancestors continues to function as part of the living community. Throughout the Americas, including the United States, it was well known that many Africans captured as slaves were often willing to commit suicide or to take terrible risks in rebellions because they believed that after death their souls would re-


Significantly, this passage occurs immediately before Christophine and Antoinette, very close, go into the bedroom together and shut the door. Rochester feels them close off against him. He hears them speaking, and singing, in patois, and thinks: "But whatever they were singing or saying was dangerous. I must protect myself" (WSS, 150) [90].

Rochester fears that Christophine will intervene on Antoinette's behalf when Antoinette appeals to her for help. She does so in the honeymoon house and, much later, in the corridors and on the battlements of Thornfield Hall. After the scene in the honeymoon house, Rochester concludes that he must separate Antoinette from Christophine, from the Black Caribbean.

The concluding passage of the novel, narrated by Antoinette, reads as follows:

Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage. (WSS, 190) [112]

Never, since she threw a stone as Sandi taught her, has Antoinette spoken with such authority and assurance. More than Rochester: he thinks he knows; she knows. A moment before, like Rochester in the passage quoted above, Antoinette too—a béke—is uneasy and threatened by fire and heat. The quotation in which she calls on Christophine for help continues:
I called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped. There was a wall of fire protecting me but it was too hot, it scorched me and I went away from it.... (WSS, 189 [112]; emphasis mine.)

Antoinette has progressed from fearing the power of the Afro-Caribbean and moving away from its protection, to becoming not only mistress and user of the flame, but its protector: "I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage."

The reversal — stylistically inscribed — is a textualization of the theme of the zombie, a literary acting-out of a belief about its nature. For Laroche writes that the zombie is the incarnation of the only "truly hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage." mistress and user of the flame, but a similar to divine fire... (ET, 56; emphasis mine).

Antoinette calls on Christophine for protection: she uses the answering fire but backs away from its power. This behavior repeats her request for Christophine's help on the honeymoon island and her simultaneous using of it and distancing herself from it. But there are two significant differences between the episodes. The second time, she does not interpose the British "idol" ("Gold is the idol they worship" WSS, 188 [111]). And, the second time, she is asking for protection from Rochester, not for assistance in drawing closer to him.

And, as the novel's conclusion indicates, Antoinette becomes keeper, mistress, and protector of the divine flame that brings freedom — becomes a fit "daughter" of Christophine.

She is able to accomplish this by finally answering the two questions personal and social history have set her as her life work: "Qui est là?" and "You afraid?" They are asked, and answered, in the course of the third occurrence of her dream. It constitutes an awakening to the realities of colonization, cast in the terms of the zombie. As Depestre puts it: "The history of colonisation is the process of man's general zombification. It is also the quest for a revitalizing salt capable of restoring to man the use of his imagination and his culture" (ET, 56). If zombies taste salt, "... the fog enveloping their minds is immediately dispelled and they become suddenly aware of their enslavement" (ET, 51). This discovery arouses in them an immense anger and an uncontrollable desire for revenge. As Rochester reads in part Two, zombies "cry out in the wind that is their voice, they rage in the sea that is their anger" (WSS, 107) [64].

Again, the text transmutes cultural belief into individualized experience and thought with marvellous skill.

"Nobody's hidden your dress," she [Grace Poole] said. ... As soon as I turned the key [to the press] I saw it hanging, the colour of fire and sunset. The colour of flamboyant flowers. "If you are buried under a flamboyant tree," I said, 'your soul is lifted up when it flowers. Everyone wants that.'"

She shook her head but she did not move or touch me.

The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grew stronger. The smell of vetiver and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust and lime tress when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain. (WSS, 185 [109])

Frangipanni, vetiver, cinnamon and lemon are the Caribbean salts which awake the zombie from its slumber. The red dress which Antoinette fears "they" have taken from her — that act which she calls "the last and worst thing," to change its smell — steal the freeing salts which confirm her identity — she sees transmute itself, to flame; and she identifies it, in the comment quoted, with the flamboyant tree. Antoinette converts Thornfield Hall itself into a flamboyant (flaming) tree; her own soul rises up as it "blooms."

The zombie, awakened, takes revenge in flame. But in burning Antoinette-zombie, she also frees Antoinette for her real life — her reverse trip back across the wide Sargasso Sea — "the slow road to Guinea, Death will take you there." In Roumain's classic novel of Haitian peasant life, Masters of the Dew, one of the characters declares, to general community agreement: "Life is life, ... life is an eternal return. It is said that the dead come back to Guinea and that death itself is only another name for life" (quoted in ET, 56-57).

Antoinette's third and final dream is the locus of her awakening. She is able to accomplish this by finally answering the two questions set her by her personal and historical situation: "Qui est là?" and "You frightened?" It is accomplished, stylistically, by yet another repetition and reversal — mirror-imaging — of a scene from Part One: the burning of Coulibri.

Then, not so far off, I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass. (WSS, 45) [27]

This is a remarkable scene on several counts. Though a situation of genuine social tension, it has also been prepared for in an almost pa-
Brodic manner: Mason has commented that the drums have been beating. "The natives are restless." Yet, Antoinette bolts towards "the natives," not away from them. She correctly intuits that that is the direction not just of her past but of her future. Yet in one of the most painful scenes of the book, apparently of brutal rejection of white by black, it is made clear that the little girls are equally hurt. Physical, emotional: one bleeds, one weeps. And that apparent rejection has been prepared for, too, in the earlier fight at the pool, where Antoinette has rejected Tia before Tia rejects her, and in racial terms, by calling her a "nigger." Yet it could hardly be made clearer that Antoinette and Tia are — not simply in a relation of ego and alter-ego — but the same person. Even the names are variants of each other. "It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass." And the scene of resolution, in Part Three, is a mirror-reversal of this sharp division and separation by race, class, and wealth, and conflates the fight at the pool and the scene with the stone in a final scene of reconciliation.

In her dream, Antoinette stands on the battlements of Thornfield Hall:

I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, Qui est là? Qui est là? and the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha! The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones. But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man’s voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought, Why did I scream? I called 'Tia!' and jumped and woke. (WSS, 190) [112]

This is the penultimate paragraph of the book, followed by the passage already quoted where Antoinette declares that she knows what she must do, takes a candle, shields the flame, and slips out of her attic prison.

The two questions are here brought together in the dream. Antoinette asks them of Tia — that is of herself for it is her dream — and answers them in an action where she jumps into her deepest self and wakes — the term for a zombi coming out of a trance. She then possesses herself of the divine fire, of vengeance and self-reclamation.

Because, in Afro-Caribbean belief, the zombi state is transitory and reversible; because, in the words of Roumain, the Haitian novelist and poet, "life comes round again," because "death is only another name for life," Antoinette’s life and death, in the context of Afro-Caribbean belief, acquire a far different significance from that accorded them from a Western perspective only. And this is why she is not dead at the end of Wide Sargasso Sea. The novel’s end is not the "end" of "Bertha Mason" — Rochester’s creation — in Jane Eyre.

In achieving this clarity of decision and action, the novel reads as victory over death itself by changing the cultural and belief system from a European to an Afro-Caribbean one. Antoinette, in accepting Christophine’s wall of flame, Depeste’s “revitalizing salt” capable of restoring human imagination and culture, takes her place in an American tradition — and an Afro-American tradition, in the wider sense.

Haiti’s history and Afro-Caribbean culture hold unique symbolic value for the Caribbean as they did for Afro-American slaves in the U.S. Haiti was the only country in the Americas where slaves successfully revolted against their European masters. They burned the plantations, as Coulibri is burned, as Antoinette burns Thornfield Hall, organized and then sustained themselves through a revolution and a terrible war that lasted twelve years. They held the forces of Napoleon himself at bay, and established the second independent nation in the hemisphere. And throughout this long ordeal, they organized and sustained themselves in terms of an African idiom, reinterpreted according to the American condition:

We know that the Haitian War of Independence began with a voodoo ceremony: the oath of Bois-Caiman sworn by slaves who were determined to gain their freedom or die, and who pledged therefore to fight the colonisers to the death... (Depeste, in E&T, 54.)

As long as she herself rejects the root culture of her native America, which at its substratum — its “bottom line” — is so deeply African in origin — as long as she remains oriented to Europe — Antoinette Cos- way is at Europe’s mercy. In Rochester’s terms she is “Antoinette-marionette”; in the Afro-Caribbean idiom, she is a zombi. But when she accepts Christophine, and her protective, purging, and empowering gift of fire, and answers Tia’s “You afraid?” by merging with her, by acknowledging Tia as at the heart of her own identity, Antoinette gains the strength of that Afro-Caribbean idiom, as the Haitians drew strength from the Vaudoun oath at Bois-Caiman. Her finally victorious struggle against European-colonial imposition of the zombi state — her ultimate regaining of an identity stolen by cultural imperialism — becomes, in Laroche’s terms, an American myth in an African-derived idiom; her final realization and action become an American battle against a Euro- nomic.

The point is not whether zombis are “real” or not. Any more than the point is whether the Christian beliefs referred to in the novel are “true.” The point is that, ever since Europe colonized the Americas,
militarily defeated Africa, and heavily populated the Americas with African slaves, African beliefs have been derided as foolishness. And the idea of equal relations between people of Caucasian and of African descent has been derided as foolishness. Today, 150 years after Antoinette Cosway thought to embroider her name, the date and her American location—Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839—in "thread of fire," probably every society in the Americas is still afflicted by these crippling attitudes, and faces as a result profound social and cultural problems. And, today, U.S. society and "high culture" and the U.S. educational system at every level is so impoverished by this attitude towards African and Afro-American culture that it has deprived itself of the knowledge it needs to understand its own indigenous culture and history—and its own literature.

With that deft mirror-imaging, reversal and variation on word and phrase so characteristic of the novel's style, Rhys relates the attitudes of the European-dominated Americas to both persons and cultural beliefs of African origin:

"Is there a ghost, a zombi there?" I persisted.
"Don't know nothing about all that foolishness."
—Rochester queries the Black servant Baptiste, WSS, 106 [63].

"I hear one time that Miss Antoinette and his son Mr Sandi get married, but that all foolishness. Miss Antoinette a white girl . . . she won't marry with a coloured man . . . ."
—The Black servant Amélie to Rochester, WSS, 121 [73].

"Is it foolishness?" I said, whispering.
—Antoinette to Christophine, WSS, 117 [70].

Rhys’s novel also assures—and warns—us that we will never understand either her novel or the deeply African, American culture from which it springs, until we hear the fine irony in Christophine’s words of response to Antoinette’s question. Christophine, illiterate old Black obeah woman/conjure woman. Former slave:

"If béké say it foolishness, then it foolishness. Béké clever like the devil. More clever than God. Ain’t so?"