Jamaica's Difficult Subjects
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"NO, MY GIRL, TRY BERTHA"

RACE, GENDER, NATION, AND CRITICISM IN WIDE SARGASSO SEA AND LIONHEART GAL

We stared at each other; blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass.

—Wide Sargasso Sea

The tales and the process of making them suggest the possibility of a unity between the aesthetic imagination and the social and political process.

—‘Introduction,’ Lionheart Gal

Introduction

Early in Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea, a child hits her playmate in the face with a “jagged stone” (41). This depiction of acrimony between two girls of different races—one black, the other white or creole—in the immediate post-emancipation context of the novel is understandable. Already high tensions between the ruling white planter class and ex-slave black working class during this period were further exacerbated by the impending importation of Indian and Chinese indentured laborers to augment the existing but increasingly unreliable ex-slave work force. The responses of both girls in this moment of

3. For more in-depth information on the nineteenth-century importation of Chinese and East Indian indentured laborers into the West Indies, see Walton Look Lai, Indentured Labor,
violence suggest conflicts that go beyond racial hostility, however. When Tia hurls the stone at Antoinette, the latter is running towards her playmate, with whom she “had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river” (41). Disgruntled ex-slaves razed Antoinette’s home and her family is forced to flee the burning Coulibri estate out of fear for their lives. When Antoinette sees Tia in the crowd of angry ex-slaves, she runs to her, because for Antoinette, Tia represents home, friendship, stability, and freedom. Antoinette says,

I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been . . . As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not 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. (41, my emphasis)

In the moments of this crisis, Antoinette sees Tia as a safe space of freedom and refuge, away from the turmoil of being creole in this postemancipation society. She even desires to be “like” Tia. This is an odd sentiment because by virtue of race and wealth, it is Antoinette who at first seems to be in a desirable position. Nonetheless, the act of violence between playmates, and Tia’s subsequent tears, suggest that a friendship between these two girls of different race and class statuses, while briefly possible, is not uncomplicated. Antoinette continues, “We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass” (41).

Antoinette seeing a reflection of herself in her black playmate’s face, and her desire to be like Tia, raise questions about the troubled alliance between them. What do Tia’s tears mean? What does it mean for Antoinette to see herself in a black child’s face? The only variance between the two girls that Antoinette notes in this reflection is the blood on her face and the tears on Tia’s. The near-mirror image and difference between blood and tears allow us to think about both the elements that separate these girls and the ones that link them. The interracial camaraderie implied here is disrupted by Tia’s place among the mob of ex-slaves who raze Antoinette’s home and force her family to flee their estate in fear for their lives.

In this chapter, I take this distorted “looking glass” image of two girls, different in race and social status but similar in gender and country of birth, as a narrative point of entry to reflect on how our practices of reading and writing have engaged with interracial relationships between Caribbean women and what such relationships reveal about the nuanced complexities of representing sovereign Caribbean female subjectivity. Though separated by race and class, Tia and Antoinette are playmates, and the moments of friction and violence between them are symbolic of racial tensions in the novel’s larger postemancipation context. They are also more specifically symbolic of the tensions within representations of Caribbean female subjectivity. This is not to say that the friendship between these girls is unproblematic. There is an additional moment of friction between the two when Tia cheats Antoinette out of her pennies and steals her dress, and the two exchange derogatory racial epithets (22). This fight notwithstanding, Rhys portrays not only a context in which the two girls existed together and played together but also one in which Antoinette could imagine Tia’s existence as one that is far less constrained and restrictive than her own. The blood on Antoinette’s face is indicative of the vulnerability of a racially empowered subject. Tia’s tears reflects her own confusion about the violence that surrounds her, her place as an agent in it, and the placement of a playmate in the position of enemy. Nonetheless, both are native to this colonial space and Tia’s tears bear out this confusion of enemy and ally. This conflicted moment of mirroring and violence that we see through Antoinette’s eyes also reflects the difficulties we continue to face as Caribbean literary critics in reading and writing about the relationship between women of different races and classes. This is a sustained difficulty that continues to affect our ability to imagine sovereignty in postcolonial contexts.

I characterize these sustained difficulties by discussing, alongside Wide Sargasso Sea, the work of the Sistren Theatre Collective—the two testimonies by mixed-race middle-class women in its collection of written testimonies, Lionheart Gal, in particular. I do this to highlight a literary and critical continuum that helps demonstrate the outer limits of the possibilities for critically assessing relationships among diverse Caribbean women. Evelyn O’Callaghan, Alison Donnell, Tracy Robinson, and Michelle A. Rowley are among the revisionist feminist critics whose work remains central to my thinking about some of the persistent limits in theorizing nonblack female subjectivity across the history of Caribbean writing.  

4. I cite these scholars specifically here because their work on race, class, and gender is of immediate relevance in discussing the tensions between working-class black women and mixed-race middle-class women in Rhys’s and Sistren’s texts. Work on broader ethnic plural-
late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century white creole woman “problematises” West Indian literature’s perennial concern with identity (O’Callaghan 17). O’Callaghan’s exploration of “outsiders’ voices” via readings of Rhys, Bliss, and Shand advocates for “attending to the dynamics of interrelating sources of influences,” which in turn lends more complexity to West Indian literature’s identity quests (O’Callaghan 13). For O’Callaghan, white female writers’ portrayals of “interrelating sources of influence,” which are produced by the mutual (but not necessarily equal) dependency of black and white women within domestic spaces, for example, offer possibilities for reading “these early narratives as partially deconstructing the concept of the black woman as powerless and inferior” (O’Callaghan 26). Portrayals of “acts of resistance, of subversion, as innocuous as a deliberate refusal to invest energy (‘laziness’) or as desperate as infanticide necessarily mitigate against the depiction of black women as powerless and passive.” Moreover, “in these early narratives, ‘silenced’ black and mulatto women are a formidable presence” (O’Callaghan 27). Thus, “the strategies of white women writers for inserting themselves into the history of colonization in the region, and thus into ‘the popular imagination,’ are therefore all the more important to any study of the ‘emergence’ of West Indian literature by women” (O’Callaghan 22).

O’Callaghan shifts attention to writing by white women, however, in part to mark the formidable though “silenced” presence of black or mulatto women in this writing, long before their appearance in standard histories of Caribbean literature. O’Callaghan’s recovery of white female writers is premised on what they reveal about these “silenced” black presences. This sense of interrelationality among women of different races is instrumental for what it reveals about black and mulatto subjects, but it nonetheless seems to be a critical gesture that consigns the visibility of black female subjectivity to white women and also subordinates white women in their own narratives. Inclusion here seems to be premised on what texts written by others can illuminate about the lives of black West Indian women.

My examination of Rhys’s and Sistren’s treatment of nonblack Caribbean female subjectivity will show that this peculiar subordination creates critical paradoxes that continue to inform spaces of difficulty in addressing nonblack subjectivity in West Indian discourses. As Donnell suggests, these paradoxes occur because of the contingencies upon which Caribbeanness rests:

ity in Caribbean discourse has gained momentum in the last decade, as is exemplified by studies like Brinda Mehta’s Diasporic Dis(locations): Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2004) and Puri’s The Caribbean Postcolonial.
At certain critical moments the “nationalist,” the “resistant,” the “oppressed” and the “displaced” have been constructed as bona fide figures of Caribbeansness and [. . .] in these moments, only they have been allowed to occupy the place of ethical or the redemptive subject (Donnell 6).

My goal is not to identify or recover a nonblack female subjectivity that can occupy a position among these “ethical or redemptive subject[s],” but instead, to highlight how the reification of “bona-fide figures of Caribbeansness” occurs via the subordination of other subjectivities. As Michelle A. Rowley suggests, contemporary Caribbean feminism “requires that we question those rhetorical and political strategies that render a black female subaltern subjectivity as an a priori feminist constituency” (Rowley 13). Indeed, for Rowley, “gender’s viability in Caribbean feminist theorizing operates primarily through the invocation of a very specific, often unstated woman thing: the black, female, heteronormative maternal subaltern imaginary in whose name gender is both constituted and deployed” (Rowley 14). Alongside Donnell, Rowley provides a potential site of resistance to unitary, rational, heteronormative, and always-agentive lenses for Caribbean subjectivity, one that functions through a brand of relationality that can access Scott’s notion of “different ways of being in common.” Thus, as Rowley suggests,

Rather than grant primacy to race, gender, or nationality as prediscursive—or, more popularly designated “contradictory”—phenomena, we are better served by observing what becomes salient through the field of play in which power reveals itself. This is an approach that foregrounds the con/text in which identities are discursively produced as what matters (be it for the naming of oppression or its corollary, justice). In this way, it is not that gender or race as examples no longer matter. It is that the field of play allows for gender or any other identity marker to matter differently and specifically, based on the various discourses at work in the question of what constitutes justice at any given historical marker. (Rowley 15)

As the work of Rhys and the Sistren Collective attest, an a priori granting of primacy to specific constituencies based on race, gender, and/or class is complicit with the development of an empowered black female subjectivity through willful denials of other subjectivities. Read comparatively, both texts allow us to see how across the development of the West Indian literary tradition in the twentieth century, an empowered subjectivity for the black subject often occludes or perhaps overlays similar possibilities for the creole or white
My focus on interrelationality among West Indian women, within the terms of O’Callaghan’s usage, is not so much aimed at understanding racial subject formation as at examining the limitations of thinking about relations among women only in terms of racial identity.

Rhys’s novel encapsulates the various difficult and often insufficiently articulated relations surrounding race, gender, and perceptions of self that are central to this discussion. It provides an opportunity to consider the priorities of first-wave Caribbean writing and the ways they are mediated by specific raced, classed, and gendered subjectivities. *Wide Sargasso Sea* also debunks the third-wave notion of the voiceless and absent ancestor on whom the genesis of Caribbean feminist discourse depended, and ultimately it provides a context for historicizing the treatment of interracial and interclass relationships among women in West Indian discourses. Where O’Callaghan and Donnell follow archival and revisionist impulses, I add to this conversation a more developed sense of the contemporary consequences of eliding certain periods, authors, texts, and subjects in the service of tradition making. I suggest in this chapter that we focus not on Tia and Antoinette’s subjectivities but on their relationship as a different kind of difficult subject—one that points the way towards addressing the problems of gender, race, class, language, and power that Honor Ford Smith identifies in the work of the Sistren Collective, and that are central to the two understudied testimonies in *Lionheart Gal* by non-black sistren.

### The Absence of Language and the Crisis of Work

In “Ring Ding in a Tight Corner: Sistren, Collective Democracy, and the Organization of Cultural Production,” Honor Ford-Smith, the longtime artistic director of the Sistren Theater Collective, discusses in detail the problems faced by the collective both internally and externally. She details these problems in order to confront the things “in [her]self and the organization that infected [her] with an overwhelming sense of failure, powerlessness, rage, or guilt” (Ford-Smith 216). This examination of her relationship to this collective leads her to identify the “absence of a language to get across the complexity of lived crises and often unspoken causes behind the conflicts” as a problem that

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5. One could argue that nonblack subjects do not face the same circumstances of oppression that black subjects do and are not in need of liberation. What this suggests, though, is a dangerously monolithic sense of oppression that facilitates the continued elision of other terms of oppression that remain in circulation in postcolonial contexts and a consequent ignorance of other possibilities for liberation.
plagued the work of the collective in the 1970s and 1980s (Ford-Smith 216). The absence of this kind of language meant the inability to convey the unspoken complexities that underlay the conflicts within the collective—conflicts that undermined the members’ ability to work cooperatively. In sharing these experiences of conflict within the collective—the members’ failure to articulate specific interracial and interclass conflicts in particular—Ford-Smith advocates for the development of such a language as a solution to underlying conflicts often rooted in issues of race and class. I suggest that developing a language that can convey the complexities that Ford-Smith identifies as compromising the work of the collective begins with an awareness of how particular trends in decolonization projects (trends replicated in West Indian literary and cultural discourses) prioritize/naturalize specific subjectivities at specific historical junctures and in turn limit our ability to talk about interracial and interclass conflicts.

Sistren is a grassroots theater collective that is typically described as a successful offshoot of Michael Manley’s 1970s democratic socialist government.6 A decade beyond independence, the 1970s marked a period when the work of decolonization was equated with indigenous cultural development. The disappointment with the gains (or lack thereof) produced by independence resulted in a reconfiguring of politics in the 1970s that saw culture—black culture more specifically—come to play a dominant role in Jamaica’s social, cultural, and political landscape.7 Manley’s goal in his culture-based policy was to displace Eurocentrism’s centrality in constructions of Jamaican national identity through the legitimization and promotion of the selected cultural practices of Afro-Jamaicans.

Social transformation was key for the Manley government, which envisioned such transformation occurring through a shift in focus from Jamaica’s British colonial legacy to its African heritage. The former had created for the new nation an identity built on a multifaceted sense of dependence from which the latter offered the promise of release. In keeping with trends throughout the developing world, Manley saw the arts and cultural expression as playing a major role in this process of postcolonial self-transforma-

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7. For a more in-depth description of how indigenous cultural development is positioned in state-sponsored decolonization efforts, see Rex Nettleford’s Caribbean Cultural Identity and Mirror Mirror. See also chapter two or Deborah Thomas’s “The Political Economies of Culture” in Modern Blackness, 58–91.
One of the notable recommendations of his Exploratory Committee on Arts and Culture “was to place Jamaica’s cultural policy within the context of human resource development” (Thomas 77). This policy in turn linked “cultural development with social and economic development through education policy, adult education, and youth community programs, as well as through direct assistance to national cultural bodies and groups” (Thomas 77). The Sistren Theater Collective thus emerges as a product of such cultural policies in 1977, as a part of the response to a desire for wide-scale social transformation in the Jamaican national landscape, which could be enacted by privileging and fostering select Afro-Caribbean cultural practices. The group consisted mainly of working-class black women who were beneficiaries of Emergency Employment programs under Manley’s government in the late 1970s into the early 1980s, and their cultural work revolved around dramatic projects that incorporated elements of a retained African cultural heritage.

The group’s founding goals were “to analyze and comment on the role of women in Jamaican society through theater, to organize [them]selves into a self-reliant co-operative enterprise, to take drama to working-class communities” (Sistren 10). The formation and composition of the group necessarily informed its demographic focus. But their stated goal of “comment[ing] on the role of women” and the involvement of mixed-race middle-class women (albeit in mostly administrative or supervisory capacities) begs closer scrutiny of these goals. Despite this commitment to “comment on the role of women,” there seems to be an unsaid and universalizing dictum that “women,” here, refers specifically to black working-class women. These goals don’t necessarily exclude nonblack woman but rather subordinate them.

This became an obstacle in their cooperative work, because the nonblack middle-class women in the group actively downplayed their differences in the service of its specifically raced and classed agenda. As Ford-Smith suggests,

> By not problematizing our own situation, we middle class women were being “good girls” inadvertently playing into the old colonial image of middle class femininity. By “facilitating” working class women’s expression of their own oppression and not our own, we were engineering only a partial picture concerning Jamaican women. (Ford-Smith 248)

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8. For further reading on the role of cultural work—more specifically, the global development of the grassroots theater movement—in decolonization processes, see Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1979).

Providing such a partial picture, while engaged in empowering cooperative work, constituted a missed opportunity for the group to reflect more deeply on the reality of its diversity and the diversity of the nation as a whole. This is not a fault of the collective, however, but symptomatic of larger lapses in the ideological formation of Caribbean nations. According to Rex Nettleford in *Caribbean Cultural Identity*, “in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean, cultural nationalism has indeed been an ‘ideological façade’ to cover up the social injustices of induced poverty among the black masses and the continuance of the entrenched privileges of a Eurocentric few” (Nettleford 5). Moreover, “national mottoes such as Jamaica’s ‘Out of Many, One People’ are said to be too ambiguous to be useful since it can mean anything to anyone and therefore nothing or little to a nation in search of unity” (Nettleford 5). As the benign, façadal, and ultimately monolithic mottoes like “Out of Many, One People” suggest, the racial and ethnic diversity of Caribbean societies has yet to meaningfully factor into reflections on postcolonial sovereignty. The “oneness” that seeks to homogenize diverse populations around a single national identity can neither give full breadth to the nation’s plurality nor dismantle persistent colonially rooted inequality.

According to Ford-Smith, middle-class women’s silencing of themselves equated to a denial of their own differences and complexities. This denial undermined the collective’s decolonizing goals, because the silence also ironically allowed long-standing class-based hegemonies to remain undetected and uncritiqued. Thus,

> We avoided naming our own experience, which might have created a real basis for transforming old class-based dynamics. By keeping our mouths shut, we allowed the construction of the “good woman” to remain intact. We missed an opportunity to envision and formulate new images of women’s identity and interclass relations. (Ford-Smith 248)

It is this missed opportunity—as characterized by the middle-class women’s self-effacing stance in the service of analyzing and commenting on the role of women—that I seize on here to formulate new understandings of Caribbean women organized around their relationships rather than identities. As we see throughout the historiographies of Caribbean women’s writing, black working-class women were the targets for social, political, and economic empowerment. An inadvertent consequence of this targeting was the sustained ignorance of the ways nonblack or non-working-class women were also oppressed, repressed, manipulated, and subordinated in colonial and postcolonial ordering, and also of the hierarchies that structured relation-
ships among women of various backgrounds. This ignorance held real consequences for Sistren’s collective work of analyzing and commenting on the position of women in Jamaican society.

Ford-Smith thus attributes the group’s failure neither to its declining relevance in local contexts during the 1980s because of the pressures of international touring schedules nor to the time-consuming efforts put into securing external funding, but rather to its inability to satisfy its individual members’ needs. In part, this failure stemmed from the inability to address the internal contradictions in the collective’s structure. Arguably, what Ford-Smith experienced as a crisis of the work of Sistren has its parallel in the work of critics of Caribbean literature and culture. Like Ford-Smith’s, my focus on interrelationality in women’s writing and criticism works to “deepen [our] understanding of the problems and potential of working across differences as well as [our] understanding of how power work[s] among us and outside of us” (Ford-Smith 215).

Sistren’s collection of oral testimonies, Lionheart Gal, is central to this task of “deepen[ing] [our] understanding of the problems and potential of working across differences.” The collection arises from the group’s attempt to document its performance work over the years. Lionheart Gal has been praised as an example of a new wave of postcolonial literature that opens questions of sexually and gendered citizenship, of literature’s relationship to the politics of the public and private in the formerly colonized world, and of how feminism might offer a counternarrative to the official versions of history that extend the boundaries of anticolonial nationalism. Other critics have been more speculative than celebratory, raising questions about what they see as the collection’s uncritical attempt to universalize the plight of Jamaican women; its elision of class distinctions; the unspoken inequities of the collaborative relationship between the mainly black working-class sistren and the white middle-class amanuensis, Ford-Smith; and the inevitable conflicts produced by forcing oral testimonies into the confines of a predetermined scribal narrative. These critiques of Lionheart Gal more often than not hone in on what Carolyn Cooper calls Ford-Smith’s “mediating consciousnesses” and question


how the text and, by extension, the work of the collective is complicated or even compromised by such interventions (Cooper, *Noises* 87). For Cooper, Ford-Smith’s “mediating consciousness” is characterized by her gender, race, class, and educational status, all of which combine to exert problematic influence on the formation and functioning of the collection. The various critical complexities surrounding *Lionheart Gal* allow us a medium through which we can explore additional “mediating consciousnesses” inherited, perpetuated, and refined by West Indian discourse. I am curious, for instance, about the relationship between Cooper’s sense of “mediating consciousnesses,” the naturalization of specific “bona fide figures of Caribbeanness” (Donnell 6), and what Ford-Smith identifies as the absence of a language to talk about the complex relationship between diverse women working together on cooperative ventures. How does the prioritizing of race, gender, and class in the cultural work of decolonization affect our ability to discuss interclass and inter-raced cooperative efforts? As Ford-Smith suggests, it renders some conflicts inexplicable and ultimately undermines those efforts.

I argue in this chapter that identitarian imperatives in our critical practices obstruct possibilities for exploring nonblack female subjectivity, a condition that persists from the early decades of Caribbean literature and literary criticism that Rhys’s work emblematizes into the postcolonial decades that characterize Sistren’s work. What becomes clear, especially through the critical neglect of the two testimonies by nonblack sistren in *Lionheart Gal*, is that we have yet to attain the critical capacity for accommodating the looking-glass image of two Caribbean girls: one crying, the other bleeding. This lack of accommodation also affects our ability to recognize acts of sovereign subjectivity that do not fit the predetermined raced cultural nationalist mold. A practical example of such problems is the sustained illegibility of interclass and inter-raced relationships between women and how such relationships contribute to the work of fostering specific kinds of sovereign subjectivity.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lionheart Gal* together represent a complex nexus of what is at stake in this chapter’s discussion of the politics of race, class, and gender in criticism. My critique of these texts continues to resist homogenizing impulses and respects the antagonism that prevents settling into any easy categories. My discussion shows how the successful and unsuccessful interactions between Antoinette and Tia, as well as among the working-class and middle-class women in Sistren, work together to provide a useful context for imagining sovereignty within the terms of dissensus. To reiterate, my work here should not be taken solely as an attempt to identify who is not accommodated and write them into the canons of political and literary legibility, but rather to illustrate that those imagined as excluded have never actually been
absent, have in fact always been inextricable parts of the process. Our existing modes of criticism have simply not provided sufficient avenues for reading and talking about them. The act of talking about them here begins the work of developing a language for interrelationality, whose absence Ford-Smith laments. Though identity politics inevitably play a role here, I suggest that an examination of the relationship between groups—cooperative or otherwise—may prove more useful to imagining “stability as a state of creative conflict” than does continuing to function in an inclusion/exclusion paradigm.

“That is not for Béké”.12
Race and West Indian Subjectivity

Early twentieth-century West Indian writing carried a twofold political ethos: to offer correctives to the marginal and stereotypical representations of West Indian subjectivity in English literature, and to do so through the invention of more authentic versions of West Indian subjectivity. The intertextual relationship between Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre* demonstrates not only the racial tensions inherent in representing Caribbean subjectivity but also the concerns of early to mid-twentieth-century writers who undertook the task of representing the Caribbean through English literary forms like the novel, with its Victorian heritage in the Commonwealth context.13 The phrase “West Indian” itself symbolizes one of the most significant challenges to this kind of corrective work. Christopher Columbus stumbled on the region in the fifteenth century as he sailed west to find a new trade route to Asia, or the East Indies. What he found was not supposed to be there and as such, was named in recognition of its position west of the Indies. The phrase “West Indies” resonates with a fifteenth-century maritime mistake, and the endowment of this space with a misnomer not only marks it with an imprint of this mistake but also announces its filiation to colonial endeavors. Belinda Edmondson in *Making Men* suggests that “the place did not concretely exist—indeed, could not exist—on its own terms: literally as well as figuratively” (Edmondson 20). Hence, early twentieth-century Caribbean writing seeks to counter these effects of filiation and immaterial existence by identifying and articulating an authentic West Indian

13. See Kathleen Renk, *Caribbean Shadows & Victorian Ghosts: Women’s Writing and Decolonization* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999) for a discussion of the ways Caribbean women writers subvert Victorian literary conventions. Of specific relevance to this discussion is her chapter titled “Emerging from the Shadow of Victorian Madness.”
subjectivity, one defined in relation to others but on (what it imagines) its own terms (to be).\textsuperscript{14}

**WEST INDIAN LITERATURE AND AUTHENTICATING SUBJECTIVITY**

Rhys’s work appears in the period generally acknowledged as the boom in Caribbean writing. This is loosely historicized around the post–World War II period, when labor shortages in England created attractive migration incentives for British passport holders in the colonies. In the late 1940s, many of the writers whose work we now laud as canonical in the West Indian literary tradition were among those who made their way to England either on government scholarships as students or to work at the BBC’s Empires Service.\textsuperscript{15} Historiographies of West Indian writing mark this mid-century period as the beginning of a distinctly Caribbean literary aesthetic that concerned itself with defining an authentic West Indian subject through the relationship of the writer in exile to home and the colonizer. More than the beginnings of regional literary tradition, this period also marked the beginning of regional collective cultural identification. George Lamming says of the West Indians in his generation,

> No Barbadian, no Trinidadian, no St Lucian, no islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in a foreign country . . . The category West Indian, formerly understood as a geographical term, now assumes cultural significance. (Lamming, *Pleasures* 214)

Finding themselves together in London, away from home, provided fertile ground for the development of a cultural consciousness identified with a term previously understood only in terms of geographical significance. It seems no coincidence that the reclusive Jean Rhys makes a literary comeback with *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the later stages of this period of cultural development through the literary arts.

\textsuperscript{14} Along with Edmondson’s *Making Men*, historiographies of West Indian literature such as Ramchand’s *The West Indian Novel* outline the ways Caribbean literature worked within English literary paradigms to identify and explore notions of authentic West Indian subjectivity.

\textsuperscript{15} See Lamming, *Pleasures* for an exploration of the relationship between exile, colonization, and decolonization. Bill Schwartz, *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) is an edited connection that also explores the ways West Indian intellectuals interacted with British imperial codes while in England.
Nonetheless, though West Indian herself, Rhys’s gender and race posed problems for her easy accommodation into the community of boom writers. As Belinda Edmondson suggests,

Writing as a woman places Rhys into a more uncertain tradition of letters. There can be no invocation of the Victorian *gentleman* of letters to make her case as a West Indian; unlike the male writers, at the time of writing she was not presumed to be engaged in the project of writing the Caribbean into existence, “simply” writing as she did about women. Hence she cannot draw on the cultural power of exile status. (Edmondson, *Making Men* 154)

Among the first wave of West Indian writers were men and women in England who were preoccupied with finding and articulating an authentic West Indian consciousness to negotiate the colonials’ relationship to their island homes and their place as colonial subjects in England. Though their racial politics were oppositional, they more often than not appropriated the forms and conventions of the Victorian novel as the ideal vehicle for conveying this collective consciousness that could eventually comprise independent Caribbean national identities. Furthermore, many of these mid-century novels are nationalist coming-of-age stories, in which a boy’s struggles from childhood to manhood parallel a colony’s struggles towards independent nationhood. Iconic narratives like Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* and the final story in Naipaul’s collection *Miguel Street* end with the now-of-age protagonist embarking on a journey to the motherland to seek his fortune. These works cast the journey away from the island colony as pivotal for the development of a specifically West Indian consciousness.

In *The Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming’s observation of the West Indian peasant’s elevation from labor source to English literary subject reflects this desire for indigenous literary origins (38–39). But in spaces on the verge of political independence, opponents of the influences of the English literary canon saw the necessity for an indigenous subject around which an indigenous tradition could develop. This reconceptualization of the West Indian peasant from source of cheap labor to literary subject also saw the reification of the select African-based customs of peasant populations as the authentic culture of West Indians. Decolonization eventually came to mean being anti-Europe, and being anti-Europe came to mean being black. Much of what has become canonical West Indian literature is for this reason preoccupied with the representation of an authentic collective consciousness, which is prefigured as a return to the “real” Caribbean to be found in the African-based culture of the often rural folk of peasant societies in the region.
Given these racial political priorities and, moreover, their representation in specifically masculinist terms, it is easy to see how Rhys’s narrative of a white heroine does not fit easily into the first-wave paradigm. While *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as Benita Parry discusses, does convey strong representations of an African-descended folk subjectivity through characters like Christophe, the narrative undeniably centers on the female creole protagonist. As Carine Mardorossian suggests, this focus on the creole protagonist is instrumental to Rhys’s “insight into the workings of the ideological systems and its categories of representation (black/white, male/female, etc.)” (Mardorossian 88). Relationality is also central to Mardorossian’s analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s binary constructions, which are made all the more explicit through its creole protagonist’s eyes, once the reader recognizes how Rhys distances herself from her character, encouraging us to read against the grain of the latter’s fragmented and often confused perspective. Mardorossian suggests, “The rigid and seemingly overlapping sets of binaries [oppressor/oppressed, colonizer/colonized, male/female, rational/emotional, etc.] that the novel flaunts so ostentatiously dissolve because the novel compels us to take into account the interrelation of axes of power (gender, race, class) that constitute and contextualize cultural identities” (Mardorossian 88).

Mardorossian’s reading of the “interrelation of axes of power” in the novel, I would argue, are made possible by contemporary contexts that no longer carry decolonization as an urgent political imperative. Decolonization, as a political imperative of the mid-century, required a literary paradigm that reflected the “real” Caribbean. In this context Rhys’s novel is rejected by some of her contemporaries because its interplay of raced and gendered binaries does not easily comply with prescribed racial and gendered priorities. Kamau Brathwaite, in *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (1974), for example, challenges the veracity of Rhys’s representations of an interracial relationship and of a nonblack West Indian subjectivity. He says,

> White creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or be identified with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea. (38, emphasis in original)

Without hesitation, Brathwaite dismisses the possibilities of West Indian subjectivity for Antoinette (and Rhys, by extension); furthermore, he also dismisses the possibility of white creoles to even identify with the West Indies.
Of course, Rhys’s work is not completely jettisoned from West Indian literary discourses. Kenneth Ramchand is among those who famously defends Rhys’s place in the West Indian literary tradition in an essay that asks, “What makes a novel a West Indian novel?” Ramchand’s reading praises the narratives’ “lyric intensity,” while at the same time chiding Walton Look Lai for his reading that privileges the narrative’s sociocultural themes (Ramchand, *An Introduction* 100). Regardless of the echoes of the debates between “acquiescent” and “challenging” critics (see chapter one), however, the fact that Ramchand even has to defend Rhys illustrates her precarious position in the West Indian literary tradition.  

“THE FIRST MRS. ROCHESTER”

While Rhys’s novel is not easily read into the anticolonial and black-nationalist paradigms of mid-twentieth-century Caribbean literature, *Wide Sargasso Sea* does address broader and very relevant concerns about empire generally and the West Indies specifically. In particular, it remains significant that *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s point of departure is one of the most enduring images of West Indian-ness in English literature—*Jane Eyre*’s Spanish Town heiress, Bertha Rochester. Rhys addresses the relationship between her novel and Brontë’s in a 1958 letter to Frances Wyndham: “This is to tell you something about the novel I am trying to write—provisional title ‘The First Mrs. Rochester.’ I mean, of course the mad woman in ‘Jane Eyre’” (Rhys, *Letters* 153). She continues, “It is that particular mad Creole I want to write about, not any other mad Creoles. There are quite a number it seems, and large dowries did not help them” (Rhys, *Letters* 153–154). In another letter to Wyndham in 1946, Rhys further notes,

I’ve brooded for years over “Jane Eyre.”

The Brontë sisters have of course a touch of genius (or much more) especially Emily. So reading “Jane Eyre” one’s swept along regardless. But *I*, reading it later, and often, was vexed at their portrait of the “paper tiger” lunatic, the all wrong Creole scenes, and above all by the cruelty of Mr. Rochester. (Rhys, *Letters* 262)

While Rhys acknowledges the genius of *Jane Eyre* and her pleasure in reading it multiple times, she also expresses vexation with the inaccuracies and even

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one-dimensional treatment of the creole mad woman, as well as her husband’s role in her demise.

In her letters, Rhys demonstrates a preoccupation with Brontë’s creole character, in particular, as a poor representative for other West Indian women whose race and wealth offered no more protection from opportunistic husbands than it did from their unsavory portrayal in English literature. Rhys positions her novel as a corrective of sorts to what she sees as Brontë’s depiction of “the ‘paper tiger’ lunatic,” one designed to supplement Brontë’s inadequate depictions of West Indian creole life and of West Indian women—including both those whose economically prosperous positions produced confinement rather than prosperity and those without the protection of either status or wealth. The juxtaposition between Amelie and Antoinette allows us to see the ways in which money does not necessarily mean mobility or autonomy for West Indian women. Amelie’s blackness puts her outside of the British patriarchal laws of primogeniture that govern gender and wealth control. Furthermore, she can take the money Antoinette’s husband gives her and move to Rio de Janeiro (Rhys, _Wide Sargasso Sea_ 127–28). Because of the patriarchal laws governing property, from which Amelie is excluded, Antoinette’s person is as subject to her husband’s discretion as is her wealth.

In a letter to Selma Vaz Dias in 1958, Rhys says, “The Creole in Charlotte Brontë’s novel is a lay figure—repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive which does” (Letters 156). What seems to bother Rhys is not so much Bertha’s loathsome madness in _Jane Eyre_, but rather how this portrayal seems devoid of life. This lifelessness is perhaps related to Rhys’s critique in the earlier letter of “the all wrong Creole scenes” (Letters 262). Bertha, as Brontë portrays her, does not ring true, even in her repugnant madness. Less important than Brontë’s portrayal of Bertha as a repulsive and undesired subject is her portrayal of Bertha as a repulsive, undesirable subject who is one-dimensional. Thus, despite being necessary to _Jane Eyre_’s plot, “always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry—off stage” (Letters 156). _Jane Eyre_, moreover, gestures towards Bertha’s West Indian background as the source of her madness, which in turn serves as a justification for Rochester’s treatment of her in Brontë’s novel. Yet for such an instrumental character, Bertha’s presence in _Jane Eyre_ seems far more spectral than it is material. Rhys notes further to Mrs. Dias,

For me (and for you I hope) she must be right on stage. She must be at least plausible with a past, the reason why Mr. Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, the reason why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad, even the reason why she tries to set every thing on fire, and eventually succeeds. (Letters 156)
Though one response to such a portrayal might be to sanitize the madness and present as a corrective a comfortably sane West Indian subject, Rhys does not try to remove Bertha or the West Indies from the context of madness that characterizes its presence in Victorian literature. Rather, she is concerned with giving reasons for both Bertha’s and her husband’s actions by explaining Bertha’s geographical and cultural origins, thus making her central role in *Jane Eyre* all the more real and, more importantly, fully human. *Wide Sargasso Sea* outlines historical and cultural circumstances that make the possibility of exploitation and madness for this particular kind of creole an inevitability.

Even more subversively, Rhys seeks to render madness as a victory of sorts for the creole West Indian subject and Caribbean literature by extension. Rhys frames *Wide Sargasso Sea* “as a story, a romance, but keeping the dream feeling and working up to the madness” (*Letters* 233). Her notion of the possibilities of triumph for Bertha lies in the perceived madness that leads Bertha to her fiery and destructive death in *Jane Eyre*. If Brontë’s novel painted the destruction of Thornfield Hall and Bertha’s role in it as menacing and tragic, Rhys emphasizes Bertha’s madness to portray more triumph even in her demise: “she burns the house and kills herself (bravo!) . . .” (*Letters* 297). In its critique of the Victorian tradition, Rhys’s version of “that particular mad Creole” allows the reader to see how the self-actualization of the English heroine, Jane, is contingent on the animalistic lunacy of her foil, the West Indian villain Antoinette/Bertha.

As Gayatri Spivak suggests, in Bronte’s England, Bertha “must play out her role, act out the transformation of her ‘self’ into the fictive Other, *set fire to the house and kill herself*, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction” (Spivak 251). I’d suggest further that *Wide Sargasso Sea* subverts this violence by giving life and dimension to the “self-immolating colonial subject” and having her visualize her role in the destruction of the symbol of the colonizer: the English house built by West Indian plantation-generated wealth (Spivak 251). Though framed as an act of madness, burning down her husband’s house symbolizes an attack on patriarchy and the destruction of the literary conventions that bolster its subordinating power. In Brontë’s novel the symbolic marriage between patriarchy and feminism that is exemplified by Rochester and Jane is a joint venture that complicates the representational possibilities for colonized subjectivity—gendered, raced, and in general.

Ironically, West Indian literary discourses also seem complicit in Bertha’s spectral relegation to the margins in order to bolster a specific kind of critical power at varying historical junctures. Returning once more to Rhys’s

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17. My emphasis.
metaphor of the looking glass, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the parallel mirroring of Antoinette and Tia illustrates the complexity of perceiving self and Other among West Indian female subjects. Tia’s racial subjectivity engenders that of the Other, and in seeing herself as Tia, Antoinette begins to see herself as Other. Susan Myer argues that in Jane Eyre’s narrative, Bertha “become[s] black” through descriptions like “dark swelled lips,” for example (Meyer 252–53). As Spivak suggests, in seeing herself in Tia’s face, “Rhys makes Antoinette see her self as her Other, Bronte’s Bertha” (Spivak 250). Likewise, towards the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette does not recognize herself as the ghost that haunts Thornfield Hall, but does register that the visage in the frame is familiar to her: “I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her—the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her” (169). Tia’s appearance at the very end of the third and final recurrence of Antoinette’s dream completes the cycle of mirrored images in which Antoinette sees her own visage as something other than herself. The novel’s final scenes convey how the creole woman’s sense of herself and her freedom is inextricably tied to her stone-throwing black playmate.

In the third and most elaborate instance of the dream that recurs throughout the novel, Antoinette finds herself in another scene of inferno after she “dropped the candle [she] was carrying and it caught the end of the table cloth and [she] saw flames shoot up” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 169–70). Her dreamed experience of fiery escape is confused with the memories of her life as a girl in Coulibri, and she sees events from her life emblazoned in the sky: “I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it” (170). The memories of her home in the Caribbean also include Tia, whom she sees in the dream: “Tia was there. She beckoned me and when I hesitated she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? . . . I called “Tia’ and jumped and woke” (170). Calling out to Tia is the final image of this recurring dream that illuminates for Antoinette how she might escape from her English prison. This is the first time Tia appears in the dream, and with her beckoning Antoinette back to her life in Coulibri, Antoinette realizes, “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (170). She returns to the hallway that she sees in her dream with the candle in her hand, and the novel ends with the suggestion that she will burn down “the man’s” house, destroy her prison, and return to her Caribbean home. Antoinette’s dream vision of home and escape not only includes a memory of Tia but also offers a vision of purpose and clarity as to why Antoinette is brought to England and, consequently, what she must do.
The dream presents a blueprint of sorts for destroying and escaping the literal and figurative prison of English patriarchal authority. The destruction of her husband and captor’s house is key, but Tia’s role in revealing the “how” is also significant. In the same way that the folk culture of the Afro-Caribbean peasantry becomes central to the West Indian writer’s construction of an indigenous and authentic Caribbean subject in the first wave, Rhys’s novel (unsurprisingly) positions black women as integral to the liberation of a repressed and differently subjugated nonblack subject.

Bertha’s razing of Thornfield Hall can thus be read as an assertion of sovereignty, one that liberates her from her attic prison while destroying the material and symbolic trappings of her captivity in the process. Rhys’s rewriting of this scene is imbued with the possibility of triumph. Antoinette’s vision of Tia in her dream, along with vestiges from her life in Jamaica amidst flames, conveys to the reader Antoinette’s sense of home and freedom. Recognizing that fire is the element of destruction for both Coulibri and Thornfield Hall is integral to the legibility of the triumphant dimension inherent in burning her husband’s house. Emancipated yet nonetheless disgruntled ex-slaves set fire to Coulibri. The declining fortunes of some estate owners in the wake of Emancipation, as well as the deep-seated hostility between the enslaved and the planter class, create a tense context with a tone of impending danger for families like Antoinette’s. A casual reference by Antoinette’s new stepfather to replacing the existing ex-slave workforce with laborers imported from East India provides accelerant to smoldering fires. The ex-slaves raze Coulibri as a retaliatory measure, one that highlights their status as members of a freed yet still subordinate colonized population. The relativity of freedom becomes more obvious when we consider these actions, and even more so when we trace the similarities between the actions of these ex-slaves and those of a creole woman.

That both the ex-slaves and Antoinette rely on fire in their responses to subjugation and the threat of being replaced—the ex-slaves by indentured laborers, Antoinette by a new wife—makes the similarities clearer. Antoinette imagines/dreams retaliatory resistance similar to that which was formerly deployed against her family as plantation owners. In asserting this parallel, the novel situates Antoinette in a context of resistance that is characteristically Afro-Caribbean. The inability to recognize the continuities between two houses that West Indian plantation labor built, however, muddles our ability to recognize Antoinette’s actions as a response to subjugating Otherness and an expression of liberation, and by extension, to see the possibilities her portrayal offers for understanding West Indian expressions of sovereignty overall.
In another sense, it also conveys limitations and restrictions in our ability to imagine and/or interpret subaltern resistance.

“No, my girl, try Bertha”: 
*Wide Sargasso Sea* and Caribbean Feminism

Prescriptives surrounding black-nationalist concerns built on Afro-Caribbean folk culture stymie the development of more nuanced critiques of plural subjectivity in regional discourses of sovereignty offered by narratives like Rhys’s. While it may be true that Antoinette and Tia are separated by the white supremacist inequities of colonialist discourse, as Brathwaite suggests in the 1970s, Rhys offers a depiction of their vexed relationship that complicates conceiving the solution to the problems imposed by colonial white supremacy as the prioritization of black subjectivity. This is important because, though voluminous analysis of Rhys’s work has been conducted over the decades, I would argue that our modes of criticism still carry vestiges of Brathwaite’s exclusionary dismissal of nonblack West Indian subjectivity, complicating our ability to read the relationships between black and nonblack subjects. Caribbean feminist discourses also seem complicit in the requirement of “self-immolating” nonblack subjects for the development of its own oppositional discourses of subjectivity. Rhys’s intervention into Brontë’s narrative razes the master’s house in an attempt to build a new one that liberates Antoinette from confinement. In Sistren’s *Lionheart Gal*, though the middle-class mixed-race sistren don’t actually set themselves on fire, they do self-censor their own concerns for the empowerment of black working-class women. As I hope to show in my discussion of the testimonies of the middle-class sistren, the ghost of the creole mad woman is not a ghost at all, but very much still alive, though imprisoned in a critical attic of sorts.

Thus, despite the presence of Rhys’s work, with few notable exceptions (O’Callaghan, Donnell, and Francis, for example), historiographies of Caribbean women’s writing consistently suggest that Caribbean women writers need to look elsewhere, beyond the Caribbean, for a model for representing an empowered female subject, because of the inaccessibility of both the Victorian tradition that much of the first wave of (male) Caribbean writing subscribed to and the existing (white) feminist tradition. Carole Boyce Davies’s *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994) offers one of the most explicit discussions of the mobilization of African diasporic criticism in the

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service of consolidating a Caribbean feminist tradition. Davies, along with Elaine Savory-Fido, incorporates this epistemological consolidation into the organization of one of the first edited anthologies of Caribbean feminist criticism, Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature (1990). This trend of shifting epistemological remembering of Caribbean female subjectivity away from the specific geographical context of the Caribbean towards African diasporic critical interventions is reflected throughout the 1990s boom of Caribbean feminist writing and criticism. Early historiographies of Caribbean women’s writing pose the absence of a literary ancestor as the reason female-authored texts and authors must rely on Black Atlantic narratives and criticism in its pursuit of an empowered subjectivity for Caribbean women. Despite her elision in favor of an African diasporic framework, Donette Francis is an additional exception of note that locates Rhys’s and Sylvia Wynter’s novels within the first wave of Caribbean feminist writing.

Nonetheless, one point on which there is critical consensus is that the implicit quest of Caribbean literature and criticism by women is to make imaginative possibilities available for the Caribbean woman to (re)cast herself as an emancipated and empowered subject. As with Rhys, unraveling Caribbean female subjectivity often began with disappointing encounters with Bertha in Jane Eyre. More often than not, these narrative encounters with Brontë’s novel begin with an identification with Jane, but end up with an unsettling feeling of disappointment and/or betrayal once Bertha is introduced into the narrative. The title of this chapter is taken from Michelle Cliff’s No Telephone to Heaven, when the protagonist Clare Savage encounters herself in Jane Eyre. Claire says,

The fiction had tricked her. Drawn her in so that she became Jane. Yes. The parallels were there. Was she not heroic Jane? . . . No, my girl, try Bertha. Wild-maned Bertha . . . Yes, Bertha was closer to the mark . . . All Bertha. All Clare. (Cliff 116)

While Clare identifies with Jane’s solitude, motherlessness, and loneliness, she believes that the visions of the wild-haired woman bear a closer resemblance to her own not-quite-whiteness and not-quite-Englishness. A similar notion of being “tricked” by Jane Eyre is also recounted in Lionheart Gal’s “Grandma’s Estate.”

19. See also Renu Juneja, Caribbean Transactions: West Indian Culture in West Indian Literature (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Educational, 1996) and Chancy, Searching for Safe Spaces.

20. See Francis, “Uncovered Stories.”
We liked the bits about school and then we came upon the mad heiress from Spanish Town locked up in the attic. At first we giggled knowing that it was Jane we were supposed to identify with and her quest for independence and dignity. (Sistren 205)

The mention of “Spanish Town” signals to these young readers that *Jane Eyre*’s “mad heiress” hails from their country. The description of Bertha Mason as “inferior, blue skinned . . . etc.” (read out loud) leads the whispers to crescendo into “an open revolt of loud choruses of ‘It’s not fair Miss!’” (Sistren 205). The students identify immediately with the character whose “quest for independence and dignity” is most visible, but the fact of Bertha’s West Indian-ness forces the recognition of themselves in her representation (Sistren 205). When the narrator goes home from school, she goes searching “anxiously looking for a chapter, a paragraph, or a sentence that might redeem the insane animal inferiority of the Caribbean” (Sistren 205). According to the narrator Ella, “It was a woman’s novel and I had liked so much the earlier part, but I couldn’t stomach the way I had been relegated to the attic. I felt betrayed” (Sistren 205). The “unfairness” that the students protest and the betrayal Ella describes are two-pronged: the representation of the Caribbean self as an insane animalistic aberration and the fact that this representation is proffered by an initially trusted woman writer.

I would suggest, however, that there is an additional layer of trickery and unfairness at play in these representations of women, by women. A critical practice that swaps local and regional specificity for diasporically defined subjectivity not only elides some in favor of others, as Donnell argues, but also replicates a similar sense of confusion surrounding the symbolic point of identification. We see this in Antoinette seeing herself in Tia’s face. She experiences her Otherness in England as a white yet creole woman through the terms of Otherness she had learned in the West Indies, blackness. Likewise, West Indian readers, for whom the desired point of identification was once Jane, uncomfortably recognize themselves in the undesirable Bertha, but can find recovery and empowerment in the black female subject, symbolized by Tia, or Christophine, or even Amelie. Nonetheless, in oppositional discourses (feminist and Afro-Caribbean feminist), it is only Jane’s or Tia’s liberation and dignity that are sought.

Rhys, however, provides something that is missed in these responses for which Bertha exists only in relation to Jane or Tia and liminal in the attic. Where Clare Savage in *No Telephone to Heaven* feels betrayed to discover that she is not the heroic Jane but the mad Bertha, Rhys works in her novel to
make Bertha triumphant, even in the moments of her fiery demise. The illegibility of Bertha's triumph is comparable to the absence of a language to talk about how racial politics affect the Sistren collective. The missed opportunity to explore varying images of Caribbean women on the basis of their relationships is an additional pitfall of specifically raced oppositional approaches. The sustained inability to read Bertha's place in relation to Tia also characterizes the tensions that haunt Sistren's work and continue to compromise fuller understandings of postcolonial sovereignty.

Rhys's work nonetheless sits as uneasily in the West Indian literary canon as it does in the West Indian women writer's tradition. Like the former, the latter is inaugurated around racial concerns that preclude the untroubled inclusion of Rhys's work. The Caribbean woman writer's task in locating a tradition for articulating Caribbean female subjectivity includes revising her inherited tradition's foundation on interpolated meanings of manhood and cultural authority. According to Edmondson, “The traditional writing structure in anglophone Caribbean narrative, predicated as it is on the authorial construction of the gentleman scholar, presents special problems for female authored narratives. Female subjectivity lies outside this paradigm” (Edmondson, *Making Men* 83). I question whether female subjectivity as such lies outside of the paradigm of the gentleman scholar, or if it is a specific and desired female subjectivity that does so. What do we do as critics with female writers and texts that do not fit neatly into the desired paradigm? Is gendered subjectivity always the purchase of Caribbean women's writing? Or, asked another, more specific way, if we are not looking exclusively for representations of an authentic black peasant/working-class female subjectivity, what else becomes apparent?

Edmondson's observation that African American feminist theory is “the only theoretical framework for the engenderment of the black and female subject” is useful in understanding African diasporic female subjectivity (Edmondson, *Making Men* 143), but for Donnell, “the splicing of African American history and theory into the narratives of Caribbean women's writing has seemingly licensed the denial of a literary past and the invocation of the resonant trope of the invisible, voiceless ancestor” (Donnell 137). What is the critical purchase of the “invisible voiceless ancestor”? What kinds of sub-

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21. Recent and fairly recent studies have worked assiduously to offer less generalized and more nuanced understandings of the diverse West Indian subjectivities, contextualizing them in their specific geographical and regional contexts. Among them are Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*; Puri, *The Caribbean Postcolonial*; and Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*. 
jectivity does this enable or disable? What it has meant is a gap in the feminist historiography of Caribbean women's writing between slavery and the 1970s, when Merle Hodge published *Crick Crack Monkey*. I concur with Donnell's assessment that the trope of the invisible voicelessness that undergirds the Caribbean women's literary tradition allows for the easy overlay of African American feminist theory as the only framework that can engender black female subjectivity, and that the prioritizing of this specific raced subjectivity hinders our ability to read and talk about nonblack female subjectivity. Thus, writing that challenges this assumption-turned-orthodoxy seems necessarily excluded from the project of bolstering the raced literary tradition that is dependent on this construction. The lack of critical focus on the “Grandma's Estate” and “Red Ibo” chapters of *Lionheart Gal* reflects an inability to process the relationships between women and the impact of their collective work. Their neglect is especially pointed because they appear alongside the testimonies of women whose experiences do conform to this model.

In fairness, Carolyn Cooper does provide some engagement with these testimonies, but it occurs under the veil of suspicion and seems more concerned with the making of these testimonies than with what they tell. This raises interesting questions about class, language, and parity within the work of the collective in general. Such questions are relevant to the ability to render more legibly interracial relationships between women. Cooper questions, for example, the very deliberate and guided values that shape the testimonies’ formulations. Accordingly, “the search for what Honor calls a ‘through line for each story’ (p. xxviii) superimposes on these misbehaving, idiosyncratic, oral accounts a decidedly scribal narrative necessity,” which in turn presents a text that “somewhat ironically affirms the authority of the written word” (Cooper, *Noises* 89). According to Cooper, this superimposition troubles the line between the oral and scribal—a line that is hotly contested as a site of inequitable power relations between English- and African-descended cultures in West Indian discourse and also between the working and middle classes. Cooper's protestations about linguistic choices in *Lionheart Gal* are perhaps most explicitly exemplified by her own linguistic choices in her chapter “Writing Oral History.” In explaining her decision to write her essay in patois, Cooper says the following: “I wish to engage in an experimental Jamaican subversion of the authority of English as our exclusive voice of scholarship” (Cooper, *Noises* 91). This particular exercise in subversion is an obvious critique of Ford-Smith's personal and editorial choices to render the testimonies in “Grandma's Estate” and “Red Ibo” in Standard English rather than in patois—the language used in all the other testimonies in the collection.
“PARSN KRISN DEM PIKNI FOS”22

Where the majority of testimonies were composed through Ford-Smith’s transcriptions of oral interviews with the participants,

With the two middle strata members of the group, the oral interviews did not work well. Accustomed to Standard English and the conventions of academic expression, their stories sounded stilted when spoken full of jargon, and hollow. Both “Red Ibo” and “Grandma’s Estate” were written as responses to the interview questions. (Ford-Smith 16)

Cooper sees in this an opportunity to critique the politics of language in our critical discourses, particularly the ways it reflects class distinctions, and subverts Ford-Smith’s language and formal choices by rendering her entire close reading of Lionheart Gal in Jamaican patois. She questions, “Supozn dem did gi wi a chaans fi hier wat dem did se?” She also suggests that “miebi notn neva rang wid it” (Cooper, Noises 94). Like Cooper, I would be curious to hear the interviews with the middle-class women, and I am equally intrigued by what Ford-Smith saw as wrong and in turn described as “stilted” and “hollow” when these women spoke. What informs this desire to hear their speech via the page, and furthermore, what accounts for their speech sounding “stilted” and “hollow” in comparison to the other women’s speech? What does the written account take away from/add to the testimonies? Despite this curiosity, and even though I would like to see/hear all the interviews as transcribed from the oral, Cooper’s proverbial explanation that “parsn krisn dem pikni fos” is dissatisfying. She here implies that Ford-Smith and the middle-class mixed-race sistren reserve the more sophisticated storytelling method for themselves. This explanation is dissatisfying because of an assumption or perhaps presumption of sameness within such collective efforts and a refusal or perhaps inability to interrogate the race and class differences among the sistren. Indeed, the project of Sistren is specifically structured for disenfranchised working-class women, but the interactions between women of different classes within the collective nonetheless offers a compelling context for parsing female subjectivity in more nuanced ways.

The cultural politics of language in West Indian discourses is a fruitful place to begin to think through Cooper’s and Ford-Smith’s respective stances on the language used to represent the testimonies of middle-class sistren. As

22. Cooper, Noises 91.
23. I leave Cooper’s quotes untranslated to maintain the integrity of the subversion of languages that her critique enacts.
Edmondson tells us, “English . . . was used as a moral force in the colonization of the English middle (and lower) classes,” and this force is what Cooper identifies in these two testimonies and seeks to critically subvert with her use of patois in her chapter on Lionheart Gal (Making Men 43). Ford-Smith’s assessment of the power dynamics between the women of Sistren, in a section of “Ring Ding in a Tight Corner” aptly titled “Race, Middle-Class Women, and the Denial of Power Needs,” provides some insight into her linguistic choices:

When we spoke of middle class women and their actions, it was with such stringent and judgmental criticism that a visitor from another planet might never have suspected that we came from that class. The implied self-hatred was never interrogated. We painted ourselves out of the picture in theory, while we remained at the center of the organization’s work struggling to shape things in practice. (Ford-Smith 244)

The mediating consciousnesses that undergird default class-based privileging in our modes of criticism leave us with no critical apparatus for talking about these women—and thus leaves these women with no critical apparatus to talk about themselves. The implicit privileging of orality over the scribal within these testimonies—regardless of the specific and class-based experiences of each of the collective’s members—that Cooper seems to advocate and Ford-Smith feels compelled to explain are manifestations of this dilemma.

Cooper is nonetheless one of two critics (Olive Senior is the other) who challenge an otherwise wholesale purchase of Caribbean female subjectivity through the paradigm of Black Atlantic criticism (Donnell 125). Cooper’s work, though attentive to local nuances in the ways that others have ignored, also falls into patterns of exclusivity where Caribbean female subjectivity is concerned. It is here that issues of authenticity come into play—as was the case with the writers who inaugurated black working-class culture as the authentic culture of the Caribbean and prescribed this constituency as the “authentic” subject of Caribbean writing. The middle-class women of Sistren whose testimonies are also included in Lionheart Gal are excluded (or exclude themselves) from this language-based authenticity. This exclusion is made obvious in their speech that is “stilted” and “hollow” when compared to that of the working-class sistren and is the basis of criticism that takes them to task for offering their narratives in a manner that is markedly different from the rest of the group. What is authentic in Lionheart Gal are the testimonies that retain their orality.
SAMENESS AS EQUALITY

What we have today as *Lionheart Gal* was not originally conceived as a literary project, but rather as an attempt to document the work of the theater collective. The testimonies of the women in the collective were to be used as illustrations of predetermined themes. But as Ford-Smith tells us,

> Soon it was clear that the testimonies would not sit neatly into an introductory section. They refused to become supporting evidence for predetermined factors. They threatened to take over the entire project and they did not behave. (Sistren 15)

Even though Ford-Smith acknowledges their misbehaving refusal to become “supporting evidence for predetermined factors,” *Lionheart Gal* is ironically conceptualized in rigid ways; even her editorial guidance on how to read the collection in its introduction seems limited in its focus on resistance. In particular, she consistently prescribes what kinds of representations of which women’s daily lives fit into the work’s paradigms. The overriding goal is recovering the voiceless and invisible woman and representing how she articulated her way towards an empowered subjectivity despite the constraints of dispossession and powerlessness.

In this respect, Sistren constrains its own project of giving misbehaving testimonies a literary platform of their own. The testimonies are all guided by the following questions: “How did you first become aware of the fact that you were oppressed as a woman? How did that experience affect your life? How have you tried to change it?” (Sistren 15). As such, all the narratives begin with oppression, they continue with a reflection about this oppression’s quotidian effects, and they end with a standardized revolutionary statement about how recognizing this oppression changed the speaker’s daily life. Furthermore, the introduction tells us that “the stories chart the terms of resistance in women’s daily lives and illustrate ways in which women can move from the apparent powerlessness of exploitation to the creative power of rebel consciousness” (Sistren 1).

As introductions do, this one offers a preview of what we will (or should) see when we read these stories. First, they are about resistance in the daily lives of women who have a severely limited scope for resistance. The introduction designates “the creative power of rebel consciousness” as the terminus of the shift from “the apparent powerlessness of exploitation.” What we will (or should) see when we read the testimonies are narratives of resistance to pow-
erlessness and the achievement of empowerment inherent in an oppositional rebel consciousness. This is not to say that this frame did in fact produce cookie-cutter stories that we are forced to read only in one way. But although the women’s narratives are each distinct in their own ways, they all follow the same narrative impulse guided by oppression, resistance, and empowerment. Of course, this impulse is in keeping with the group’s organizational ethos, as well as the demands of a specific tradition of Caribbean women’s writing.

What Ford-Smith urges us to see in these narratives are the acts of resistance to powerlessness to which we are typically blind, so that we can

[come] to terms with ways in which ordinary women have determined their own struggles for themselves and the ways in which they have assessed their own victories and defeats. In doing so, we may be able to identify the circumstances and consciousnesses which we need to draw on to build a basis from which we can win a greater share of power over our lives as women. (Sistren 2–3)

A few things are key here, beyond the implicit assumption that Lionheart Gal’s readers are women. First is what Ford-Smith describes as “the need to read-just one’s sense of the rules of resistance and the limits of power.” Ford-Smith asserts that the typical frame for understanding the rules of resistance and the limits of power do not work effectively for deciphering Caribbean women’s resistance, and she offers the folkloric figure of Ni/Nanny as an alternative model. The collection is offered as an artifact of sorts that will help us to come to terms with the ways “ordinary women” negotiate their struggles and find empowerment in contexts where their dispossession and disenfranchisement is a daily struggle. As most Caribbean feminist historiographies suggest, and I agree, black women in the Caribbean were doubly colonized by gender and race, and as such, processes of decolonization necessarily involve cognizance and negotiation of this particular double bind. The ability to see this, in Ford-Smith’s estimation, allows women to garner greater power in their own daily lives. But who are Sistren’s “ordinary women”? At the time of the collection’s publication, the group was majority working-class with two mixed-race middle-class women.

Though in the minority, the inclusion of testimonies by non-working-class sistren in the collection suggests that the stakes of the group’s work extend beyond the working-class women. Indeed, the impulse that equality means sameness seems to underlie the resistance to exploring how these women’s experiences of oppression, resistance, and empowerment differed from those of their working-class counterparts. Notions of freedom and liberation are
central in such juxtapositional portrayals of West Indian women—a convention that is obvious across the literary landscape and can be seen in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng*, Elizabeth Nunez’s *Bruised Hibiscus*, and in the testimonies of the middle-class sistren. Writers invested in this convention are also engaged in carving out a space in the West Indian literary landscape for representations of nonblack women and an increased understanding of the nuanced ways this space has been denied (or grudgingly surrendered) not only in the literary landscape but in the actual Caribbean landscape. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, black women are able to exercise far more freedom than Antoinette is: Tia never wore any underwear (22); Christophine has her own house, a garden, and a son to help her; and Amelie not only seduces Antoinette’s husband but is able to take the money she gets from him and run away to Rio (127)—an escape of sorts that Antoinette cannot enact for herself, regardless of her wealth and race.

The freedom of movement and sexuality along with the independence of black women in comparison to nonblack women is also explored in *Lionheart Gal*’s “Grandma’s Estate.” The narrator Ella notes that only the household helper Carmen was allowed to walk up and down the hill to their home when the violence in Kingston escalated to alarming levels in the 1960s. Ella recounts that as teenagers, “our [hers and her cousin’s] limited freedom of movement was even more tightly curtailed now, in an effort to prevent us from facing the scourge of rape or teenage pregnancy” (*Sistren* 207). Carmen’s freedom to go on dates and express her sexuality is enviable: “She would tell me about her Saturday dates. She was fat and on Saturdays she always wore a wig and miniskirt and high heels to meet him . . . I envied her what I thought was her sexual freedom” (*Sistren* 108, my emphasis). What “Grandma’s Estate” allows us to do is to conceptualize and critique what this sistren sees as freedom for working-class and middle-class women. Rightly, this narrator recognizes and acknowledges the complexities of wholesale attribution of comparative freedoms between women in each class: “her apparent freedom was undercut by her position as a domestic helper and her total responsibility for her children” (*Sistren* 188). The surrounding narratives more than attest to these complexities of agency among working-class women but should not constitute contexts for disregarding any experiences of freedom, regardless of its limits or the presence of privilege. What is at stake is the ability to hold all these things together and to resist the impulse to prioritize or universalize. As Rowley says, “We are better served by observing what becomes salient through the field of play in which power reveals itself” (15).

*Lionheart Gal* does portray the way in which members’ cross-class relationships affect their cooperative efforts, but the criticism of the collection
and even Sistren’s operations does not seem to take this into account as a central part of the group’s work. This recognition of yet failure to negotiate these contexts of difference bears consequences for the collective’s overall functioning. According to Ford-Smith,

The middle-class women were members and workers in the organization too, but we made little effort to analyze our specific situations as women.

We imposed on ourselves a virtual silence about our own experiences of class and becoming raced and sexed. (Ford-Smith 244)

This failure is compounded once changes in the local political climate mean the loss of government financial support.

When the government changed hands in 1982, the conservative platform of the ruling political party no longer supported democratic socialist initiatives like Sistren. Once the group no longer received government funding, it was forced to seek external international funding in order to continue its work. For Ford-Smith, it was the dictates of external funding agencies that brought the internal problems of Sistren to the fore. These were problems that circulated around the interpersonal relationships among the women and their individual abilities to do both the work the collective wished to do and the work it was forced to do because of the demands of external funders. Thus,

the dictates of international funding agencies exacerbated internal contradictions in the collective’s structure around race and class, specifically on issues having to do with service and product delivery, education, decision-making, leadership, power, and authority. (Ford-Smith 214)

The need for external funding led to the group’s restructuring in the decade between the late 1970s and late 1980s. NGOs required that the groups they funded generate income for themselves by producing something. This “something” for Sistren was a screen-printing textiles project. Despite capitulating to the pressure of funding agencies, however, Sistren’s textile project never generated enough income for the collective to be able to support itself as an enterprise. Furthermore, the time and attention needed to run this project overextended an already stressed group: they “produced theater; were self-managed; documented [their] work; publicized [their] work; produced educational workshops for women in the local communities; did [their] internal education work; and now printed and marketed textiles” (Ford-Smith 231). As Ford-Smith continues, “Our structure, which had been overburdened from
the start, creaked, groaned, and expanded again, before it was ready to do so” (Ford-Smith 231).

An additional requirement for external funding was copious amounts of documentation and record keeping. Many of the group’s early external funders funded their projects only in the short-term, so the collective had to continuously document short-term projects that promised to deliver a specific product or outcome. Accountability to short-term funders hindered the group’s long-term planning by deferring attention from internal organizational problems to meeting the criteria of lending agencies: “creative workshops for personal development, group recreational activities, and sensitive forms of conflict resolution were luxuries we could hardly consider in the rush to establish one small project after another” (Ford-Smith 233).

Some sistren, particularly those with a variety of skills and the ability to switch quickly from one task to the next, were given more power over the administration of the group. Because these skills generally came with formal education, the women given more power were in large part the middle-class women. Internally, this meant a shift in the valuation of skills within the group. Working-class women’s lived reality of local popular cultural knowledge, which had been rendered invisible and inferior by centuries of colonization, was central to the group’s work in theater workshops and community outreach. Nonetheless, as funding demands grew more pressing, the more quantifiable and externally recognized educational qualifications of the middle-class women, who oversaw the group’s administrative processes, proved far more useful in meeting the demands of funders. The problems within the group were even further exacerbated by the egalitarian structure of the group itself, which problematically conflated equality with sameness.

In reality, the skills of the resource people were marketable and valued beyond the confines of the group, and the same could not be said of the working-class sistren—the skills they gained working within the collective were not accorded with the same kind of practical privilege outside of Sistren. Furthermore, the group did not clearly define any job descriptions, and as such, no one was clear about her specific area of work. Self-reliance—as pushed by external funders—was interpreted by the group as “everybody could and should do everything” (Ford-Smith 242). Thus, “this way of working assumed not only that [they] were equal but that equality meant sameness. The fact that [they] were not equal and that each person had a different talent or ability became incompatible with the ideal of the system” (Ford-Smith 242). The work of combating the legacies of colonial history seems to require this kind of attention to equality within the group, but conflating equality with same-
ness as the sole productive way to function within the group served only to intensify its internal contradictions and to limit the discussion of different experiences from which all members might have profited.

What would happen if, rather than insisting on sameness within such collective endeavors, we explored differences? What *Lionheart Gal* shows us is that though they were involved in the same grassroots organization and their lives are chronicled in the same collection, the experiences and backgrounds of these women were hardly the same. This presupposition of equality as sameness obscures the possibilities of understanding the complexities of how such differences played out in real encounters. The middle-class members subordinated their experiences to the supposedly more authentic ones of their working-class colleagues, in ways that later obscured the privileging of their backgrounds (with deleterious consequences for the group) by outside agencies. Furthermore, by sublimating difference with sameness, we as critics miss a crucial opportunity to develop a much-needed language that can address the contradictions in the emancipatory goals of postcolonial grassroots groups and communities. If the testimonies of the working-class sistren reveal the ways dysfunctional communication between young women and their maternal figures results in poor decision making, the testimonies by the middle-class women make the absence of a language to talk about the differences between female peers even more apparent. In “Grandma’s Estate,” the narrator seems sensitive to the differences between women, but her narrative’s evaluation of how she has tried to change the oppression women face interestingly does not take these differences into account. While this lapse exemplifies Ford-Smith’s identification of the absence of a language to talk about these issues, it is also symptomatic of the strategic structuring of the narratives in the collection around specific questions about the awareness of gendered oppression, its effects, and efforts at transforming these effects. These questions at the outset assume a foundational sense of sameness. Interestingly, though, the differences between women and the ways these differences are perpetuated within the same systems of oppression they seek to dismantle does not factor prominently in the narrator’s conclusions.

“GRANDMA’S ESTATE” AND “RED IBO”

This is ironic because the central focus of “Grandma’s Estate” is Ella’s reflection on her maternal heritage and the ways race and class come to bear on the matriarchs’ perceptions of themselves and their progeny. The word “estate” evokes a context of bequeathing and inheritance, and in this narrative, the
inheritance bequeathed to Ella by her grandmother is one of gendered, raced, and classed contradictions. In this narrative as in others throughout the collection, we see the importance of social ascendancy via the attainment of middle-class status, as well as the characteristics women need to assume to literally embody this status. The ways middle-class female identity is constructed across colonial history is crucial here. As many feminist historians have pointed out, the ideal image of woman in nineteenth-century European societies was that of a maternal, asexual housewife and charitable patroness, endowed with the responsibility of transmitting moral values and social virtues to her children and her society. She neither possessed nor expressed any needs beyond her role as mother, wife, and social patroness, and expressions of anger were antithetical to this ideal image. White middle-class women traditionally embodied this ideal image of womanhood. Within the context of twentieth-century nation building, the woman's ideal role as maternal caretaker extended into social work. In the postemancipation and eventual postcolonial contexts of the Caribbean, embodying this ideal image became the basis for social uplift among women and a significant facet of Afro-Caribbean nation building. The longevity of this ideal image of womanhood also meant its sustained oppositional relation with the unruly, recidivist, atavistic, and vulgar image of black womanhood far into the twentieth century. In the decades beyond the nineteenth-century origins of this ideal, Caribbean womanhood and indeed nationhood remain subject to the imperative to embody or perform this ideal image. Thus, women are encouraged to cultivate this ideal, regardless of their complexion or economic position, and are lauded for their efforts as part of the project of building a civilized nation.

It is within this context of civility and nation building that we can begin to parse Ella's grandmother's complicated relation to her own mother, Mammee. Ella’s grandmother keeps a picture of her mother, Mammee, in her Bible, and when it falls out, the reader begins to see the complex relation towards race, gender, and class that has confined generations of women in Ella’s family, including her great-grandmother, her grandmother, and her mother. While she ends the narrative by focusing on this confinement as one of the vagaries of patriarchal oppression, she barely brushes the surface of analyzing the role of women in perpetuating the inequity and subjugation of other women. Interspersed with the narrative of Ella’s coming of age and her development of political awareness is the story of how Mammee brings shame on her family by having a child with her employer—a white planter—after her husband.

For a more detailed analysis of the tensions between these two visions of women and their role in projects of nation building within early twentieth-century Caribbean society, see chapter four of Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*. 
abandons her and their children. This illegitimate child is Ella’s grandmother, who attributes her suffering to her mother’s sexual impropriety. Thus, once her paternity is discovered by the headmaster, she is publicly humiliated and is subsequently too ashamed to return to school or even take her external exams and finish her schooling. She tells Ella,

“The headmaster was my father’s nephew, but I didn’t know. A was filling out the exam form . . . a put my father’s name [. . .] in front of the whole class . . . he said, ‘This can’t be your father!’ And I said ‘Yes it is.’ And he said ‘Are you saying that you’re a bastard? We don’t have bastards in this school.’” (Sistren 215)

This humiliation brought about by what she perceives as her mother’s indiscretion makes Ella’s grandmother obsessed with patrician respectability. This in turn makes her all the more concerned when Ella’s growing political and social awareness brings greater involvement in activities that traverse rigid class boundaries, like forms of social outreach that had this middle-class young woman “wandering through the country side with the peasantry and the working class” (Sistren 213). Indeed, the middle class as brokers of working-class social and political uplift existed in a schizophrenic position that decried the hierarchical structures that perpetuated social and political inequality while still maintaining (and sometimes experiencing guilt over) their own positions of privilege in that hierarchy.

Ella’s involvement in politics worries her excessively class-conscious grandmother, who even dreams that Ella married a “Bongo man” (or Rastafarian). Rastafarians during this period epitomized, for the middle and upper classes, cultural dereliction and incivility, which helps to convey her grandmother’s deep concern. She laments,

[A]h try my best to be a respectable person. A lady. Ah had ambition. A look up. Yuh doan know what I go through to reach where I am today . . . so nobody can’t say a not a respectable person. And now you come and yu just want to throw it away. I tell yuh I could hardly sleep last night when ah see the people yuh come in with. (Sistren 213)

Amidst her worry about the company her granddaughter keeps, however, Ella’s grandmother feels lingering humiliation that her mother’s sexual indiscretions caused her. “Ah never did a thing to make anybody say ah wasn’t a respectable woman,” she says. “But now yu come and yuh want to go right back . . . Ah doan know how Mammee could have done a thing like
that. Ah doan know . . .” (Sistren 215–16). She experiences the shame of her mother’s indiscretion and sees her granddaughter’s activism among the working class as regressive and similarly threatening to her middle-class respectability. Ella, meanwhile, is uncomfortably moved by her grandmother’s self-loathing. She sees the ways her grandmother “had spent her life struggling for the approval of her father and that of his class” and is incensed by the ways she had allowed “an incident which had taken place over sixty years ago . . . to wither her.” She curses her “grandmother’s inability to question the assumptions on which the actions of her mother and father were based” (Sistren 216). Ella’s own ability to question these things is as much symptomatic of the historical progression of decolonization as of her burgeoning awareness of the injustices and inequities that prevail in her society. Her grandmother’s story also makes her “feel more keenly than a thousand books the vital role that the control of women played in the maintenance of power” (Sistren 216). Ella exhibits in this story the capacity to do the same kinds of questioning of societal order that she wishes her grandmother had, but she does not focus on women’s complicity in the maintenance of power that controlling women secures. She never questions, for example, what it means for her grandmother to be an instrument in the maintenance of her own subordination.

The limitations of Ella’s awareness become apparent in her relationship with their domestic helper Carmen. Though Ella envies what she thinks is Carmen’s sexual freedom and can recognize that “her apparent sexual freedom was undercut by her position as a domestic helper and her total responsibility to her children,” she engages in no similar analysis of her grandmother “inevitably” interrupting their conversations or questioning of Carmen’s grumbled “she no believe we should a get no time at all” (Sistren 208). Ella recognizes that Carmen and her grandmother “quarreled plenty” and acknowledges that she is “on Carmen’s side on this issue,” but there is no closer examination of the interclass conflict surrounding the working conditions of domestic laborers in Carmen’s “Don’t hale at me Maa! Doctor say I supposed to get some time before dinner” retort (208). Ella’s analysis of the inequities she notices is filtered instead through the traditional feminist lens of resistance to patriarchy and ignores the instrumentality of intragendered subordination along class lines to the functioning of patriarchy. Indeed, patriarchy is the larger institution that should be opposed in this context, but not considering the conflicts between women means missing an opportunity to grasp more fully what hinders not only the complete emancipation of women but also social and political equality among women. After hearing the story of her grandmother’s life, Ella promises herself that she would “challenge every social convention in which her [grandmother’s] world had tried to imprison [her]”
The narrative couches this awareness as an encounter with nationalism, a teenaged political awakening to inequities in the society in general. But Ella’s response focuses exclusively on tackling the inequities and conflicts between men and women, rather than also taking into account more concretely the immediate inequities among women.

Similarly, while the narrator in “Red Ibo” recognizes class as a condition separating Jamaican women, she also seems to retreat to the familiar gender-domination script without tackling more aggressively the very obvious conflicts between women. One could argue that guilt and even self-hatred play a role in this avoidance. Joan French, a middle-class member of the collective, notes, “Because we were guilt-ridden about our class power, we made ourselves into nonpersons in theory, but we remained individuals in reality” (Ford-Smith 248). The first part of French’s sentiment is evident in “Red Ibo’s” narrator noting with some derision the distinction between middle-class and working-class women who work together in cooperative efforts:

I remember how the middle class women who considered themselves highly conscious and versed in theory used to have these education sessions where they brought prepared documents that read like pages out of a Social Science textbook. They had to stop after every line to explain the terms. The women would fall asleep or just suffer in silence. They came alive when Dorothy, a working class sister, proposed a campaign around condensed milk which they couldn’t get at the time. It was Dorothy who saw the link between the condensed milk factory and imperialism, but the middle class sisters were terribly concerned that she might not call it by the right name. I can laugh about it now but it was a very alienating experience. (Sistren 248)

There is some distancing of self here, with the narrator distancing herself from the sisters in the anecdote who are also middle class—particularly surrounding their ability to be relevant and offer practical solutions to the women who appear to be more “real,” like Dorothy. Her response focuses not on better understanding the relationships among members of the group, but upon achieving the authentic identity embodied by some of them. The narrator’s distancing from and even underlying ridicule of other middle-class women meets the latter half of French’s observation that though middle-class women in theory tried to efface themselves when working cooperatively with other women, they were not actually able to accomplish this in practice. The problem, we might say, lies in the very notion of effacement rather than of self and mutual understanding.
The narrator in “Red Ibo” comes the closest to grappling with these contradictions between women who work together in social and political activism, but this grappling doesn’t seem directed more internally and productively into the actual functioning of the union organizations that she works in. Thus, she acknowledges that the Voluntary Organization of Women was “still the most egalitarian structure [she] had ever worked with. Everyone had a right to say what they felt and to have their opinions respected.” However, she also points out that “sometimes the ways things operated people didn’t feel like exercising the right. The working class sisters felt they didn’t know as much as the middle class ones and I felt that if I said what I felt I would be dismissed as being anti-revolutionary” (Sistren 248–49). More problematically, she emphasizes and lauds the intervention of “two brothers” in a conflict between herself and a working-class sister as a point of focus, rather than addressing the ways the conflicts between women affect the functioning of the group overall.

What interests me in this particular anecdote is not the “understanding [the two brothers] showed towards women” but the lack of understanding between the two women themselves. She notes: “I remember once a working class sister in the organization accused me of being middle-class and fair-skinned and therefore suspect in my relations with the working class and black people” (249). She defended her work with working-class and black people by invoking her black husband, black child, actually being black in England, and generations of black relatives all the way back to slavery. Not satisfied with this, her accuser, Noreen, said she “could have married her husband out of pretense” (249). The two women do not tackle this conflict by directly addressing the raced and classed contradictions that belie the suspicion, or even by interrogating the defensive necessity of invoking close-knit ties to blackness—to the extent that one would marry a black man to procure them. Moreover, what is addressed in the resolution of this conflict is not the suspicion of the efforts of middle-class women, but rather the advice the women solicited from one of the brothers, T. Focusing on the relationship between men and women elides an opportunity for closer analysis of the internal functioning between women.

T advises the working-class sister to provide evidence of her accusations against the middle-class narrator, to “say what actions of [hers] constituted evidence” (249). Failure to do this would result in the withdrawal of the charges and the reprimand of the working-class sister. The latter is unable to produce any evidence to support her charges, but one can’t help but wonder if the effort wasn’t better spent investigating what other issues underlie the suspicion working-class women had of middle-class women and the attendant tensions between them. T’s conclusion that “just being working class doesn’t
mean you are right and just being middle class isn’t a crime” is poignant, but it hardly gets at the center of the “rightness” of the working class and the suspicion of the middle class (249). The narrator avoids the conflict between the women in favor of exemplifying “true working class brotherhood” and in turn exemplifies one of the many missed opportunities for exploring more meaningfully the nature of the conflicts between women who try to work together on cooperative projects. The seemingly unconscious reinscription of masculine authority is also strange because it seems to contradict the feminist ethos of Lionheart Gal and the work of the Sistren Collective more generally.

Conclusion

The change of focus in this passage from working through the relationships between women to the development of equitable working relationships between men and women more generally is aimed towards a larger goal of nation building. Lionheart Gal, though produced through the collaborative efforts of a group of women, prioritizes the development of black feminism and cultural nationalism more than it does coming to terms with the internal race and class conflicts within the group. Yet these conflicts effectively undermine the group’s ability to function successfully as a collective, especially in its ability to meet the unique needs of its members. Parsing these relationships between women provides the opportunity for becoming aware of and perhaps dismantling pernicious class-based conflicts that persist in and plague emancipatory processes—opportunities that are hindered by distinctive and predetermined raced and gendered priorities.

By focusing on the fraught yet cooperative relationships between women of different races and classes in Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea and Sistren’s Lionheart Gal, I have tried to further trouble the raced and classed priorities in the establishment of both Caribbean nationalisms and the Caribbean literary traditions. I have done this to identify the limitations such prioritizations impose on our understanding of postcolonial citizenship and subjectivity. More than an argument for including the voices of nonblack middle-class women in literary and critical discourses, my discussion here works to show how the dual imperatives of black cultural nationalism and Afro-Caribbean feminism in postcolonial contexts leave few critical tools to talk about the ubiquitous yet unarticulated spaces of interaction among people of different races and classes that appear within the Caribbean literary tradition. Over the course of this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate how the failure to probe more deeply the relationships between women of different races and classes in
Jamaican literature results in a missed opportunity to develop a more nuanced account of the challenges to identitarian nationalisms that are represented in these works, sometimes in opposition to their own goals.

Tia’s tears after she hits Antoinette in the face with a jagged stone reflect the limitations of unitary versions of subjectivity and the merits of a relational strategy that is uninterested in the celebration of a specific (underrepresented or disenfranchised) subjectivity. Her tears can also be read as symbolic of a sense of frustration and confusion embedded in the inability of discourses of Caribbean subjectivity to fully account for the space in between her and her frenemy, Antoinette. Michelle Rowley’s claim that racial and gendered lenses are not enough in the achievement of twenty-first-century social justice projects in the Anglophone Caribbean is also one that encourages us to “question those rhetorical and political strategies that render a black female subaltern subjectivity as an a priori feminist constituency” (13). Moreover, with an overdetermined working-class subaltern trope at work, “how has the oppression of these categories been named as normative and necessary over time? How might gender or humanism be implicated in these processes? And how can we, as Caribbean feminist academics and activists, advocate in ways that render the abject desirable?” (15). In discourses where the default mode is for the middle class to chide itself for being middle class and get to speak for the working class as well, the celebrated working-class black subject seemingly also has no outlet for expressing the complex dynamics of her own relationship with her self-effacing middle-class counterpart who has long assumed the mantle of speaking for her. Understanding the relationships between these subjects unmask the unitary prescriptions that continue to stifle our understandings of Caribbean subjectivity.