

Reaching for the 'Other' across the Wide Sargasso Sea

Sheikh F. Shams

Faculty and Academic
Coordinator Center for Languages
BRAC University

Abstract

This paper investigates the representative characteristics of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in an attempt to explore the problems of its representation of the marginal class, its exploitation of this class, and hence its misrepresentation. The purpose of this essay is to reclaim an alternative understanding of the marginal class or the cultural "other" from the heavy-handed clutch of Orientalism. In other words, it will engage itself in reclaiming an understanding of these less powerful groups of people, in order to reconstruct their identity constructed by Orientalism. For this purpose, it will use Franz Boas' anthropological analytical tools to understand the "other" from their local contexts rather than from outside.

The question of the representation of the marginal class is a much-debated issue in postcolonial criticism. This debate surrounding representation stems from its politics. Representation is often politically motivated and stereotypical and can unfairly reduce its subjects. Edward Said in *Orientalism*, labeling such representation as "Orientalism," argues that this aspect of literary and other representations creates and constructs the identity of their subjects, the marginal classes of people, which not only erroneously misrepresents, but also contains them permanently. Among other issues, what makes all marginal classes relevant to Said's theory of Orientalism is first, their disadvantaged position in the power dynamic; second, their experience of domination, oppression and subjugation; and third, their apparent voicelessness or inability to speak.

Said's theory of "Orientalism," which is premised upon the binaries of West/East or colonizer/colonized, puts particular emphasis on power relations. In fact, this binary is structured upon power relations: the powerful position of the colonizer, and the powerless position of the colonized (880). Expanding on this structure of colonizer/colonized, Said observes in "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors":

[F]ar from being a category that signified supplication and self-pity, "the colonized" has since expanded considerably to include women, subjugated and oppressed classes, national minorities, and even marginalized or incorporated academic subspecialties . . . the status of colonized people has been fixed in zones of dependency and peripherality, stigmatized in the designation of underdeveloped, less-developed . . . ruled by a superior, developed, or metropolitan colonizer who was theoretically posited as a categorically antithetical overlord. In other words, the world was still divided into betters and lessers, and if the category of lesser beings had widened to include a lot of new people as well as a new era, then so much the worse for them. Thus to be one of the colonized is potentially to be a great many different, but inferior, things, in many different places, at many different times. (207)

In this neocolonial setting, the all-encompassing trait of the signifier "colonized" incorporates less powerful groups of people into its realm of marginality.

The purpose of this essay is to reclaim an alternative understanding of the marginal class or the cultural "other" from the heavy-handed clutch of Orientalism through a reading of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In other words, it will attempt to reclaim a less powerful group of people from misrepresentation in order to reconstruct their identities. For this purpose, it will also use Franz Boas' anthropological analytical tools to understand the "other" in their local context. Although at first glance, Boas and Said might seem antithetical, the two thinkers will be brought together for my purpose.

Since Boas' methodology is centered on a local context, rather than outside, the result characteristically challenges Orientalism, which is "premiered upon exteriority" (875). Said's formulation is indicative: "all of Orientalism stands forth and away from the Orient: that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient" (876). What makes Boas crucial for this project of reclamation is his recognition of the importance of "critical self-reflection" in the process of interpreting the "other." Boas realizes that his method is not devoid of complexity, and recognizes that in the process of attaining an understanding relative

to a particular context, there is a possibility that the observer's own standard of judgment could involve him in critical judgment that he has learned to appreciate through socialization and cultural orientation. Boas further cautions that no culture should be thought of as superior or of absolute value, and that the choice of any standard of judgments is arbitrary, being based upon the observer's own socialization and cultural orientation. While such critical self-reflectiveness better equips us to approach the "other," it also informs us about related complexities.

For this project, I am particularly interested in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The distinctive Caribbean cultural contexts of this text will not only be useful in exploring the cultural codes represented by the author, it will also test the applicability of Boas' method outside the domain of anthropology. Because of Rhys' representation of the distinctive cultural codes manifested by natives, they inescapably fall prey to Orientalism's "othering." This is because anything that is an aberration of the normative standard of Western civilization is an Oriental "other." So the choice of this text is determined by the distinctive cultural codes of a marginal class of people and the way their distinctiveness ties them to the politics of Orientalism.

Wide Sargasso Sea is a prequel based on the character of Rochester's Creole Jamaican wife, Bertha, in Charlotte Bronte's classic novel *Jane Eyre*. It is widely known that in her fascinating text, Rhys makes an attempt to give voice to this almost mute female character of Bronte's novel. However, critics, like Carl Plasa, have alleged that, in the process of giving voice to Rochester's enigmatic wife in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys, in return, silences the native black characters (84). But it is to be doubted if Rhys intentionally or driven by political motive has undermined the natives' voice. Rather, it could be that it was the problem and complexity of understanding and representing the cultural "other" that made Rhys fail to give voice to the black characters. Antoinette, the protagonist, represents Rhys' dream and struggle to unite with the culture "other": "I dreamed that I was walking in the forest. Not alone. Someone who hated me was with me, out of sight" (26). But because of cultural differences and the history and experiences of slavery, this dream is a dream almost impossible to fulfill. It could be said that Antoinette also resembles the vexed position of Franz Boas' anthropological field worker subjected by her own ideological disposition and cultural contexts. Although she aspires to attain an understanding of the "other," because of her critical position, that understanding is difficult to attain:

The field worker must try to set aside all a priori assumptions, try to adapt herself as much as possible to the way of thinking and feeling of

the people she was studying, try to divest herself of the opinions and feelings determined by her own culture. This could never be accomplished fully, as one cannot speak from any position other than one's own. However, that position is revisable, so long as one attends carefully to the lives and speech of the other and opens a space in which the other can tell her own story in her own way. (Hutchinson, 72).

Nonetheless, one of the major problems in this text is that there is very little space in which the "other" can speak. Or as Boas has it there is little space for her to "tell her own story in her own way." Rather than reading this as acknowledging the inevitable silencing of black voices it should be read as Rhys' struggle to reclaim the "other" because of her socio-cultural and political relationship with the slaves. In fact, *Wide Sargasso Sea* reflects Rhys' partial knowledge and understanding of blacks and the Creole that plays a part in making the novel a neo-colonial text. No wonder that this text, in its representation of the character of Antoinette, resonates with the complexity and the consequent frustration that are emanated from the inability to be associated with the "other."

By positing Antoinette in juxtaposition to Rochester in their treatment of the cultural "other," this text underscores the differences between a colonialist outsider and an outsider who resides among cultural "others," embodying a desire to assimilate, and share certain similar cultural codes, yet struggling to reach the "other." Criticizing the effect of slavery, or any other form of colonization, *Wide Sargasso Sea* points out the difficulties of reconciliation, in the post-emancipation period. Or to put it differently, colonization or any history of domination and oppression is a Wide Sargasso Sea which is difficult to bridge.

Boas theorizes that it is only through shared and similar experience that one can attain a sense of the "other" (Hutchinson). Through the character of Antoinette, one can argue, Rhys attempts to fulfill her desire to reach for the "other." In this difficult task, the portrait of Antoinette reminds us of Boas' methodology, and at the same time represents the troubled position of an outsider subjected by a colonial disposition.

Wide Sargasso Sea is equipped with multiple narrative voices. The narratives shift between Antoinette, the Creole white female protagonist, and Rochester, her European white counterpart. However, the black characters suffer from limited access to the instrument of narration, and thereby, are deprived of the chance to represent themselves or their "others." They are spoken of, or represented from the point of view of Antoinette and Rochester.

This text is full of racial tension. There are three racial groups: the white European Rochester, the Creole Antoinette and the black ex-slaves. Much of the tension, alienation and consequent problem of stereotypical representation emanate from their lack of knowledge or understanding of each other. Rochester comments about his wife Antoinette, "she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did" (93). He also comments later: "I don't understand you. I know nothing about you, and I cannot speak for you" (171). Yet Rochester recklessly continues to speak for the "others."

That the unknown "other" is also an object of fear and suspicion to the outside observer Rochester is suggested in Antoinette's remark: "[Coulibiri] is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it because it is something else" (130). This fear is evident in Rochester's own narration:

it seemed to me that everything round me was hostile. The telescope drew away and said don't touch me. The trees were threatening and the shadows of the trees moving slowly over the floor menaced me. I had felt it ever since I saw this place. There was nothing I knew, nothing to comfort me (149).

The black obeah woman, Christophine, is particularly an object of fear to both Antoinette and Rochester. At the outset of the text, in many respects, Antoinette resembles Rochester's colonialist disposition in her treatment toward the "other," because at this state, she is unable to completely discard her colonial ideological subjectivity. Her celebration of the image of "The Miller's Daughter" is one of many evidences of this claim. In this sense, the narrators of *Wide Sargasso Sea* represent the problem of understanding and representing the cultural "other," that Boas himself acknowledges as a problematic process: "[setting aside all a priori assumptions, which is the precondition for understanding the cultural "other"] can never be accomplished fully, as one cannot speak from any position other than one's own" (Hutchinson, 71-2). They embody Boas' awareness of the vexed position of any outsider who seeks to represent the cultural "other."

Although Antoinette treats Christophine as her surrogate mother and expresses a desire to be like her, she is unable to overcome the fear of the unknown. This is grotesquely exposed in this narration when Antoinette objectifies her as a practicing obeah:

Yet one day when I was waiting [at Christophine's room] I was suddenly very much afraid. The door was open to the sunlight, someone was

whistling near the stables, but I was afraid. I was certain that hidden in the room . . . there was a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly . . . No one had ever spoken to me about obeah—but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. Then Christophine came in smiling and was pleased to see me. Nothing alarming ever happened and I forgot, or told myself I had forgotten (31).

Rochester, for his part, describes Christophine as an "evil old woman." She is often compared to a "shadow" (73) by him, suggesting his incomprehension of her, and at the same time, the fear associated with such a lack of understanding. In order to overcome their fear, the narrators of *Wide Sargasso Sea* attribute the unfamiliar "others" with stereotypical renderings that reflect and reinforce the colonial agenda.

Both Antoinette and Rochester try to overcome their fear by racializing each other's group using familiar and stereotypical languages. While the use of familiar and stereotypical language is employed to attain a cognitive sense of the "other," ironically it perpetuates the gap between the speaker and the subject. These languages are embedded with value judgments that serve the purpose of the speaker, while misrepresenting and containing its subjects. In his attempt to understand the "unfamiliar" Antoinette, Rochester addresses her using the familiar name, "Bertha;" she is also his "mad girl on the attic" from *Jane Eyre's* enigmatic character (166). While this process of naming reflects Rochester's attempt to render the unknown with lingo familiar from popular western novels, such a process is also used to transport her from an unfamiliar "other" to a familiar territory. This is only the beginning of his containment process, which ends in the attic of Thornfield Hall in England, where he literally imprisons her later in the novel.

Antoinette, similarly, relies on stereotyped discourse of popular English novels to attain an understanding of Rochester and his English heritage. The following narration is relevant in this context:

[Antoinette] often questioned me about England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made the difference. Her mind was already made up. In some romantic novels, a stray remark never forgotten, a sketch, a picture, a song, a waltz, some note of music, and ideas were fixed. About England and about Europe. I could not change them and probably nothing would. Reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality. It would be only a mistake, a misfortune, a wrong path taken, her fixed ideas would never change. (94).

Not only does this evidence reveal the limitations of preconceived knowledge, it also shows the effect of stereotypical renderings in popular discourses. Because of his experience in Coulibiri, Rochester becomes disconcerted and bewildered when he observes the reality in a foreign place that does not conform to his preconceived ideas about that place. However, the fact is that the permanence of ideology constructed over the years through popular discourse determines how one perceives an unknown "reality." In such case, "reality" is no longer "Real" or even reflectively so; it is predetermined.

This notion is more notoriously evident in relation to the black characters, as the most stereotypical representation is imparted in relation to them. To Rochester, the servant Hilda who laughs all the time, is "stupid," Baptiste is "a half savage boy," and Christophine's language is "horrible." Such rendering is perniciously oppressive to the natives' identity, since they do not have the weapon of resistance, and the narrative voice with which to counterattack or even defend. The only audible voices available are Daniel's ambiguous and controversial letter, and Christophine's verbal confrontation with Rochester. While Daniel's letter remains an object of suspicion to the reader, Christophine's fiery dialogue has been overpowered and abruptly curtailed by the mechanics of narration by the colonial narrator, Rochester: "[S]he walked away without looking back" (161). As Carine Mardorossian's observes in "Shutting up the Subaltern":

That Rochester echoes Christophine's words during their talk does not signify that he is absorbing them or being invaded by her culture. Considering his expeditious dismissal of her, he rather seems to act as an obstructing surface from which Christophine's words bounce back unheeded. In fact, it is precisely when Christophine's free will and resiliency explode in Rochester's face that her powers are the most limited: he "no longer felt dazed, tired, half hypnotized, but alert and wary, ready to defend [him]self" (158) and appeals to the "Letter of Law" to subdue the black nurse he can at last identify as an opponent. (1079)

Benita Parry notes about the silencing of Christophine that: "when the novel transfers to England, Christophine must leave the narrative, for there her craft is outlawed, which is why after making her statement, she walks away, without looking back" (250). The cultural difference between Rochester and Christophine is underscored here, as he "act[s] as an obstructing surface from which Christophine's words bounce back unheeded" (Mardorossian 1079). Driven by the anxiety associated with the lack of comprehension and familiarity, Rochester's only escape is to subdue her using familiar language.

These readings recall Edward Said's discussion in *Orientalism* about the permanence of the constructed identity, through the Orientalist discourse of containment and the violence related to it. It is at this juncture that Franz Boas' anthropological analytical tool becomes necessary to reclaim an alternative understanding of the cultural "other." According to Boas, a culture should be understood on its own terms, as having developed within particular circumstances, with its own specific histories and standards of judgments (Hutchinson 66). The "particular circumstances" and "specific histories" that Boas emphasizes, if considered in the context of this text, refer to the experience of slavery of natives. The division, alienation, and lack of understanding among them emanate from this experience. In other words, the reason natives' characteristics and behaviours are foreign and alien to others — specially to Rochester and Antoinette — is because they are "different," for each of them has his or her own experience of slavery and its history. The natives' 'anomalous' characteristics and behaviours are foreign and unfamiliar to the narrators, because they are "different" people with specific experiences.

It seems reasonable at this point to recount some of the distinctive behaviours and characteristics of the black characters, in an attempt to unveil the cultural codes that emanate such distinctness. The porter Emile, who is a native of the island, doesn't know how old he is. This is strange to the outsider, Rochester, and the porter Young Bull. Based on this characteristic, outsider Young Bull tries to show that the people of Massacre are not civilized. He says, "[Emile] don't know how old he is, he don't think about it. I tell you sir these people are not civilized" (68). Noticeably, "civilization" is a universal category based on which these people are being judged, measured and labeled. If any individual or group does not meet the categories and cultural codes of "civilization," automatically a negative connotation is inscribed. Such disposition is implied specifically perniciously in relation to the black characters. This is exemplified when after colliding with Rochester, the servant Bertrand doesn't say "a word of apology" (72). Hilda is characterized as rude and stupid, because she giggles very loudly all the time (90). Amelie, who fights back against Antoinette's physical assault, is frightened and pacified by Christophine's threat of bellyache from which it is inferred that she is superstitious. Christophine doesn't believe in husbands. She gives birth to three children, "each one from a different father" (110). She believes that it is "bad to sleep in the moonlight when the moon is full" (83). Furthermore, these people are not regulated by common law. From such representation, it is assumed that they are unruly, promiscuous and superstitious.

But these distinctive behaviours and characteristics are specific to these people, their history, experience and cultural codes. Hence, these people need to be understood on their own terms, rather than seen from universal categories. If seen through such a Boasian lens, Hilda's giggle can be interpreted differently. As Antoinette argues in her conversation with Rochester:

Sometimes she'd smile a sweet childish smile, sometimes she'd giggle very loudly and rudely, bang the tray down and run away.

'Stupid little girl,' I'd say.

'No, no. She is shy. The girls here are very shy.' (90)

Similarly, Christophine's threat of bellyache, Amelie's belief in 'supernatural power' and their apparent 'superstitious' behaviours can be read as processes of maintaining order and discipline on their own terms. The example of Christophine's threat of bellyache, in response to Amelie's 'seductive' smile towards Rochester, can serve as evidence of restoring order on their own terms:

Amelie looked at me sideways and smiled.

Christophine said in a soft voice, "Amelie. Smile like that once more, just once more, and I mash your face like I mash plantain. You hear me? Answer me, girl.'

'Yes, Christophine,' Amelie said. She looked frightened.

'And too besides I give you bellyache like you never see bellyache.

'Perhaps you lie a long time with the bellyache I give you. Perhaps you don't get up again with the bellyache I give you. So keep yourself quiet and decent. You hear me?'

'Yes, Christophine,' Amelie said and crept out of the room. (102)

Boas' formulation, stated above, supports the claim that in modern society "actions opposed to the ethical code are checked by society, which holds every single person responsible for his actions." But in many distant societies "there is no such power. The behavior of an individual may be censured, but there is no strict accountability, although the fear of supernatural punishment may serve as substitute" (Boas-227). This is what might be taking place when Christophine's "supernatural" power performs the function of authority to maintain order in the community. If the history and experience of slavery are considered, then Amelie's sexually 'immoral' act can also be read differently than what it appears to be ostensibly, for it is well-known how female slaves were often used as sexual objects by their white masters. In many cases, young female slaves would perform the role of sexual objects. Similarly, the obeah woman Christophine can be understood from the point of view enunciated by Kamau Brathwaite: "obeah was

associated in the [white] Jamaican/European mind with superstition, witchcraft, and poison . . . [whereas] in African/Caribbean folk practice, where religion had not been externalized and institutionalized as in Europe, the obeah-man [sic] was doctor, philosopher, and priest" (qtd. in Mardorossian 1079).

Even though Antoinette lives surrounded by native black characters, she does not have a complete understanding of these people. In fact, she only has partial understanding about the community. The following narration supports this claim:

The girls from the bayside who sometimes helped with the washing and cleaning were terrified of [Christophine]. That, I discovered, was why they came at all — for she never paid them. Yet they brought presents of fruit and vegetables and after dark I often heard low voices from the kitchen. (21)

Just because Christophine does not pay the girls, Antoinette, our narrator, assumes that they are terrified of her. She is only partially correct in believing that the girls are terrified, but this is not everything. The act of bringing flowers and vegetables can also refer to their sacrifices and offerings to the supernaturally powerful Christophine. This assumption is validated later in the text through the chapter "Obeah" in Rochester's book, *The Glittering Coronet of Isles* (107). Christophine is portrayed as if she is an outcast who does not show any solidarity with the rest of the black community. But her aloofness from the black community can also indicate the community's reverence toward a priest-figure.

Although Antoinette has partial understanding or half-knowledge of the black characters, she definitely has better knowledge or understanding of them than Rochester. What separates Antoinette from Rochester in relation to the black community is her willingness to be part of it. In fact, *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates Antoinette's struggle to attain a complete understanding of the "other." She aspires to be part of them, as is exemplified through her strong bond with Christophine, and as is further illustrated by her strong urge to become friends with Tia. She laments to Rochester that:

It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you and I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. (102)

Because of the history and experience of slavery, Antoinette is either denied access to the black community or she is not trusted. Again, slavery is the issue that functions as an obstacle to assimilation. But ironically, because of the history of slavery, she also becomes victimized by the experience of racial "othering" from the ex-slaves' community. This experience enables her to relate to the black community more intimately than Rochester. This notion conforms to the Boasian emphasis on "similar and shared experience." On the other hand, Rochester as a white European figure who has never experienced oppression or subjugation represents the ideology of the colonizer, arrogantly engaged in the mission to defeat and contain the unfamiliar "other."

The differences between Rochester and Antoinette are further illustrated in the following scene, where his ignorance, coupled with his tendency to superimpose his ideology, is exposed grotesquely:

Her coffee is delicious but her language is horrible and she might hold her dress up. It must get very dirty, yards of it trailing on the floor.

'When they don't hold their dress up it's for respect,' said Antoinette. 'Or for feast days or going to Mass.'

'And is this a feast day?'

'She wanted it to be a feast day.'

'Whatever the reason it is not a clean habit.'

'It is you who don't understand at all. They don't care about getting a dress dirty because it shows it isn't the only dress they have. Don't you like Christophine?'

'She is a very worthy person no doubt. I can't say I like her language.'

'It doesn't mean anything,' said Antoinette.

'And she looks so lazy. She dawdles about.'

'Again you are mistaken. She seems slow, but every move she makes is right so it's quick in the end.' (85-6)

Antoinette's embodiment of Boas' approach is evident in this conversation where she demonstrates his point of view: "The field worker must try to set aside all a priori assumptions, try to adapt herself as much as possible to the way of thinking and feeling of the people she was studying" (Hutchinson, 72). In the process, she tries to compensate for Rochester's misunderstanding by performing as a mediator between him and the black characters.

A number of "experiences" gradually enables Antoinette to merge with the black characters. Her childhood experience of racial "othering" from the ex-slave community is one such experience. Rochester's stealing her name is also reminiscent of the workings of slave owning. As Sandra Drake observes; "The slaves lost their African names, and often took the surname of their owners . . . Rochester goes a step farther, and seeks to remove Antoinette's given name too (198). Her marriage with Rochester is an instance of colonization under a new disguise, for it is evident that he marries her for property. With the aid of the institution of marriage, he tries to contain, subdue, and finally transport and translate her into the *Mad Woman in the Attic*¹. It is only after she experiences similar oppressions by Rochester that Antoinette acquires a better understanding of the "other."

Antoinette reacts to such domination exactly the way she has learned to from the black characters: she sets fire to the house. The term "house" is a trope for containment and capturing. The colonized — both the black characters at Coulibiri and later, Antoinette in England — respond to such domination by burning the house down. In other words, Antoinette is finally capable of grasping the form of subversion the ex-slaves had taught her when they burnt the "house" of Coulibiri. The experience of containment and subjugation at firsthand has given her a moment of enlightenment. It is only then that it is possible for her to leap toward the image of her native childhood friend Tia for complete unity.

Antoinette's physical death should not be read as her defeat or failure; rather, it is a triumph for her to be able to reach across the *wide Sargasso Sea*. Sargasso Sea symbolically refers to the cultural differences, and related distances between natives and our male and female protagonists. Drake's telling articulation regarding overcoming these differences only reinforces the claim: "the novel reads as victory over death itself by changing the cultural belief system from a European to an Afro-Caribbean one" (205). In this spiritual and intellectual journey Antoinette resonates with echoes of Jean Rhys' unfulfilled dream to reach for the "other": "I was curious about black people. They stimulated me and I felt akin to them. It added to my sadness that I couldn't help but realize they didn't really like or trust white people — white cockroaches they called us" (qtd. in Plasa 82). As Judie Newman has also noted, this is a "dream to take flight into the heaven of a different culture" (25). In this intellectual and spiritual journey of enlightenment Franz Boas shows Antoinette ways to reach home. In other words, Antoinette deploys the Boasian method to attain an understanding of the "other."

Antoinette's life-long struggle, and then finally her figurative leap toward the image of the "other," indicates that understanding and consequent alliance is an arduous process, which requires "similar and shared experience." Unless and until the outside observer suffers similar experience and life-style, this understanding can only be attained in an allegorical dream.

Antoinette embodies the vexed position of any outsider who seeks to represent the cultural "other". Rochester, on the other hand, similar to Said's Orientalist outside observer, arrogantly represents the cultural "other," without any substantial understanding. He translates them into his own language, superimposing his own ideological map upon their lives. In the process of understanding, interpreting and representing the unfamiliar "other," he translates their cultural codes into his own familiar language; language that is meaningful to and for his "civilized" group. Said's construction in *Orientalism* is suggestive:

All of Orientalism stands forth and away from the Orient: that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible "there" in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient. (876)

According to *Orientalism*, the understanding of the cultural "other" is based upon the cultural codes of the Orientalist observer, rather than the Orient. In such a case, reality is constructed through the rhetoric of representation from "outside." But for Boas, culture should be understood from *within*, a perspective that is unlike that of Said's Orientalist outside observer.

In conclusion, it seems important here to emphasize on Boas' connections with Said's postcolonial debate on representation. Boas is relevant here in a number of ways. His emphasis on "history" clearly directs us to the history of colonialism, which has been underscored in this paper through the division between Antoinette and the native black characters and how it has been difficult for her to bridge the gap that emanates from such a historical backdrop.

Boas' relation with postcolonial debate on the problem of representation is marked by his emphasis on history, problems of classification, and his idea of an inauthentic and incoherent cultural "self." A brief discussion of these premises will explain the connection between Boas' and Said's thoughts.

Although the history of colonialism is a significant cause for the distinctive characteristics of the natives, it is in no way limited to colonialism. History goes back to phenomena preceding colonialism. And this history is plural, consisting of distinctive, dissimilar factors. It would be a mistake, if one attempts to make holistic sense of the cultural "other" based solely on their history. George Stocking summarizes Boas' stance on history in *The Shaping of American Anthropology 1883-1911* thus:

Since the "physiological and psychological state of an organism at a certain moment is a function of its whole history," appearances were frequently deceptive: "The outward appearance of two phenomena may be identical, yet their immanent qualities may be altogether different." Indeed, "the historical intricacy of the acting causes" was so complex in the realm of ethnology that "the development of similar ethnological phenomena from unlike causes" was "far more probable" than its alternative.

Historical processes, furthermore, did not move in lockstep: different aspects of human life were affected in different ways by different historical and developmental processes. (4)

History in the Boasian sense is not only plural, but also constituted by borrowed elements, elements that have affected human life during migration. One remark from Stocking drives the point home: "like effects do not necessarily have like causes" (2).

While a Boasian view explains why it is difficult for an outsider like Rhys to understand the cultural "other," it also contributes to the debate on "representation." It challenges Orientalists' constructed identity of containment and permanence, and warns us about the shifting nature of any cultural identity. Boas gives us a method of interpretation, but he also points out the complexity associated with that methodology. Having said all this, it can be argued that whatever is not represented in *Wide Sargasso Sea* should be considered as a ramification of the complexities of understanding the "other," which emanates from complex historical processes. If *Wide Sargasso Sea* is unable to give voice to the black characters, this is because it is unable to reclaim the "other" from its realm of complexities. Although a Boasian approach prepares us to understand the "other" in order to represent them more effectively than the Orientalist outsider Rochester, because of the nature of historical complexities — histories of colonialism, slavery, migration and so on — it will always be difficult to reclaim anything pure or authentic.

Notes

- 1 *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a prequel to Bronte's famous novel *Jane Eyre*. The *Mad Woman in the Attic* refers to *Jane Eyre's* enigmatic character Bertha who was locked up in the attic in England by Mr. Rochester. It is also the title of the widely acclaimed feminist work *Mad Woman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar.

Works Cited

- Boas, Franz. *Anthropology and Modern Life*. New York: Norton, 1932.
- Drake, Sandra. "Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*." *Wide Sargasso Sea*. ed. Judith L. Raiskin. New York: Norton, 1999. 193-206.
- Ferguson, Moira. "Sending the Younger Son Across the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: The New Colonizer Arrives." *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*. Ed. Gregory Castle. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.
- Frickey, Pierrette. ed. *Critical Perspectives on Jean Rhys*. Washington D. C.: Three Continent Press, 1990.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory. A Reader*. Ed. Williams and Chrisman. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. p. 392-403.
- Hutchinson, George. "Americanization of Race and Culture." *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Mardorossian, Carine. "Shutting Up the Subaltern." *Callaloo*. 22.4 (1999): 1071-1090.
- Newman, Judith. *The Ballistic Bard*. London: Arnold 1995.
- Parry, Benita. "Two Native Voices in *Wide Sargasso Sea*." *Wide Sargasso Sea*. ed. Judith L. Raiskin. New York: Norton, 1999. 247-250.
- Plasa, Carl. *Textual Politics from Slavery to Postcolonialism*. UK: Macmillan, 2000

Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: Norton, 1982.

Said, Edward. "Orientalism." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryan. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998.

---. "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors." *Critical Inquiry*. 15 (1989): 205-225.

Stocking, George W., Ed. *The Shaping of American Anthropology 1883-1911*. New York: Basic Books, 1974.