

## DECOLONIZING TERRORIZING ZOMBIES: PATHOLOGIZING GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RACE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

AMANDA SPOTO

The normative, binary society we live in—one in which everything is categorized into two opposing, disconnected factions—has set several boundaries, labels, and fixed definitions to notions such as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Living outside of these boundaries often results in being an outcast, or *abnormal* since—as Carla Kaplan explains in her book on the *Erotics of Talk*, which explores the connection between feminist criticism and theories of communication—in “failing to provide [society’s] necessary conditions, social values also tend to blame the victim [...] by accusing [them], in effect, of failing to engage with others, a failure that becomes proof of [their] inadmissibility to the public sphere” (Kaplan, 14). These individuals are placed within a void: a dark, Other, in-between space that does not necessarily have an assigned label, nor are they necessarily *alive*. They are the living dead—grotesque zombies—terrorizing the neatly paved, civilized streets of society’s single-tracked consciousness. The medical and/or political authorities tend to negatively diagnose such beings—namely women, individuals of darker races, and transsexuals—which, in turn, tends to confine them within a void: a partition-like

looking-glass through which to see themselves transposed against the “normalcy” of society as the abject, infected terrorists who are viewed as a threatening *nothing*. In Judith Butler’s “Undiagnosing Gender” and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, both the transsexual body and the Creole female body are diagnosed and perceived as abject zombies whose “abnormal” identity—stuck in an “in-between” limbo—is perceived as a threat to the colonial, normative borders of society.

The purpose of Rhys’s novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), is to serve as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), or a story that precedes the storyline in Brontë’s novel in order to better exemplify a more nuanced psychological perspective of Bertha: the madwoman in Rochester’s attic. One of the complications in Brontë’s novel is that Rochester cannot legally marry Jane since he is already married to Bertha, who is kept a secret, or is at least considered nonexistent: incarcerated by society’s standards of what is acceptable due to her “other” race infecting England, which then, in turn, brands her body as an “insane” terrorist. Rhys constructs a pre-history of Rochester and Bertha’s relationship in order to provide a narrative history for Bertha (Antoinette Cosway in Rhys’s novel) whose bodily presence is ultimately absent, or imprisoned, throughout most of *Jane Eyre*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys essentially provides a voice to Antoinette Cosway who is formerly void of speech in Brontë’s novel set solely in England.

Through both Antoinette’s voice and history in the West Indies in

Rhys's novel, many complexities of gender and race are raised, especially since being Creole—half white (or a descendant from England) and half black—sets her apart from both the black inhabitants of the West Indies and the white European colonizers. White Creole homes are described by the black characters as “unlucky”: “Mr. Luttrell’s house was left empty, shutters banging in the wind. Soon the black people said it was haunted, they wouldn’t go near it. *And no one came near us*” (Rhys, 16, emphasis mine). She can neither identify as white or black: she is “in-between,” a “white cockroach” with no financial stability. She is a terrorist Other in her own homeland, and is eventually quarantined in England by Rochester as such. She is unalive, or an inactive member of society: she is not a black slave, nor is she a slave-owner due to the Emancipation Act of 1833, and as a woman during that time, she also has no control over the arranged marriage to Rochester. Pathologizing Antoinette’s identity has confiscated her autonomy along with her existence as a *presence* in society.

Since Antoinette’s body is identified—in a way—as a terrorist, the blacks constantly remind her of her difference, and they make it clear that her body is not welcome in their homeland: “They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. [...] One day a little girl followed me singing, ‘Go away white cockroach, go away, go away.’ I walked fast, but she walked faster. ‘White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you. Go away’” (Rhys, 20). Essentially, Antoinette is labeled as an unwanted pest, one who walks too slow for the “living”: in other words, she wanders

in limbo, unsure of where she fits in society. She is meant to suffer the fate of her own mother, who “[had] eyes like [a] zombie and [Antoinette has] eyes like [a] zombie too” (Rhys, 45). Even Rochester is perplexed by her “mad” appearance since she lies “in-between”: “She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark, alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either” (Rhys, 61).

Antoinette is diagnosed as a “stranger,” just as the landscape in the West Indies seems foreign, threatening, and Other to Rochester: “Not only wild but menacing. Those hills [and Antoinette] would close in on you” (Rhys, 63). Although she does attempt to identify herself with Tia—a black servant’s daughter—as a child, Antoinette’s reflective mirror is inevitably shattered. Her identity is juxtapositional but not fluid, which is present in the following scene between Tia and Antoinette after the blacks set fire to the Coulibri Estate:

Then, not so far off, I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand, but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. *It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass.* (Rhys, 41, emphasis mine)

Through Tia’s gaze, Antoinette is abject: a grotesque being transcending borders that are known, causing Tia to be frightened and cry in response to

the person who was once so familiar, yet simultaneously alien. Using Julia Kristeva's theory on abjection in *Powers of Horror*—which defines abjection as the repressive, repulsive forces that linger in one's psyche—Antoinette can be understood as an abject being: she threatens life and must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self.

In his *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nation of the Boundary*, Stephen Clingman analyzes the scene between Antoinette and Tia as one that subverts links between peoples and identities, forming partitions (or boundaries): “The connective element divides, because connection is precisely what cannot be tolerated in a grammar of identity founded on demarcation and repression” (Clingman, 150). Related to the notion of delimitation, Rhys draws a sharp contrast of “female” performance between Antoinette and a nun she admires: “They sit so poised and imperturbable while [they] point out the excellence of Miss Helene's coiffure, *achieved without a looking-glass*” (Rhys, 49, emphasis mine). In opposition, Antoinette is constantly diagnosed as a “forfeited existence” (Kristeva, 9), one that is impure and has “slept too long in the moonlight” (Rhys, 75) after viewing herself analogous to rats through the looking-glass: “But I was not frightened. That was the strange thing. I stared at them and they did not move. I could see myself in the looking-glass on the other side of the room, in my white chemise with a frill round the neck, staring at those

rats and the rats quite still, staring at me” (Rhys, 75). Her sleeping in the moonlight signifies the “walking dead,” or zombie-like individual who uses the magic of Obeah—a kind of sorcery practiced in the Caribbean—in order to sustain her ghost-like, haunted presence (or inherent absence). Adjoining her “madness” with death, darkness, or zombies further labels her as a will-less, speechless, threatening being: a dehumanizing diagnosis.<sup>1</sup>

Even Christophine—Antoinette’s servant—warns Rochester that “she is not *béké*<sup>2</sup> like [him], but she is *béké*, and not like [Christophine’s people] either” (Rhys, 140). Clingman claims that Antoinette “is in the non-place of identity, between but not connective, contiguous but not transitive” (Clingman, 138-139). As a white Creole woman, she is incapable of claiming a living identity for herself. Rochester further alienates her identity by bestowing on her a new name, an Adamic, patriarchal act that possesses the power of assigning one’s identity: “Of course, on this of all nights, you must be Bertha” (Rhys, 123). All of the labeling and the narrowed borders placed upon Antoinette by her society restricts the fluidity of her identity, further regulating her creativity, her behavior, and her presence. She falls within the void of binary systems, wandering through limbo of race just as transsexual individuals are trapped in-between norma-

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<sup>1</sup> The cover illustration on Jean Rhys’s novel portrays Antoinette laying among phallic-like flowers/plants as if to portray the Creole version of the white, Shakespearean Ophelia from *Hamlet*. Antoinette’s eyes stare at the reader/audience with eyes wide shut: blankly staring, further burying herself alive amidst the dirt and flowers, creating a gaping space between herself and her burning home in the background as she lies there inactive and speechless. This is a visual portrayal of her displacement.

<sup>2</sup> *Béké* is a Creole term used to describe a descendant of Europeans; white.

tive definitions and conceptions of gender, corporality, and sexuality. The restrictions Antoinette faces are also experienced by transsexual individuals by the diagnosis of medical practitioners who construct their presence in society as somewhat void.

Similar to Antoinette's "in-between" identity, transsexuals also live in a culture that ignores, pathologizes, and degrades their bodies. Arlene Istar Lev, author of *Transgender Emergence: Therapeutic Guidelines for Working with Gender-Variant People and Their Families*, claims that "transgendered people have been labeled as narcissistic, histrionic, antisocial, depressed, phobic, obsessive, and of course, sexually deranged" (Lev, 3). They are often treated by medical "professionals" who use debatable procedures, and use—as stated in Butler's "Undiagnosing Gender"—derogatory language in clinically assessing such individuals. In her essay, Butler describes how diagnosing a transgendered person with gender identity disorder (GID) labels that person as "ill, sick, wrong, out of order, abnormal, and to suffer a certain stigmatization as a consequence of the diagnosis being given at all. [...] It assumes that there is a delusion or dysphoria in such people" (Butler 76-77).

Transgendered individuals do not associate themselves with heterosexism, nor are they exactly labeled as homosexuals: they are present in some sort of "deranged" void (or "in-between") that is not understood by the "ordinary" guidelines or conventional standards of society. Butler addresses this issue by stating that "it would be a huge mistake to assume that

gender identity causes sexual orientation or that sexuality references in some necessary way to a prior gender identity” (Butler 79). She goes on to describe the “heterosexual matrix”: the belief that, even after a sex change, the individual is attracted to the opposite gender (i.e. a male that changes to female must be attracted to males *only*, because that is what seems logical through “normal” convention); however, according to Butler, this is not the case: “the matrix would misrepresent some of the queer crossings in heterosexuality. [...] Indeed, sometimes it is the very disjunction between gender identity and sexual orientation [...] that constitutes for some people what is most erotic and exciting” (Butler 80). Despite this overstepping of borders that already make some health professionals cringe, most individuals who seek a sex change are assumed to possess some sort of mental health issue; therefore, they are trademarked as an “abnormal,” dead figure since they are symbolically—and almost literally—legally changing their name and their gender. They essentially rebirth themselves in a culture whose diagnoses of them “assumes that gender norms are relatively fixed, and that the problem is making sure that you find the right one, the one that will allow you to feel appropriate where you are” (Butler 95).

As pathologized, transsexual individuals are diagnosed, they—similar to Antoinette—are deemed to be speechless, dead beings since their individual autonomy requires a subscription to one’s own abnormalcy opposed to an otherwise purported relationality between body and gender. Our culture denies the transsexuals of their right to exercise autonomy,

and the insurance companies—through their demeaning medical practices, language, and assumptions—seize the notions of liberty and autonomy from the individual. Transsexuals, therefore, are seen as abject figures placed outside of society’s borders, as if their choice to change their genitalia is a monstrous form of sexual taxidermy: “stuffing” a lifeless, “psychotic” being with alien genitalia that was not permitted to them at birth. They are the walking Frankensteins viewed through the gaze of normative society, a gaze that believes in the “notion of ‘assigned sex’—sex ‘assigned’ at birth” (Butler, 97). They are the zombies whose silent screams for love and acceptance are not heard, whose diagnosis calls for the need for a physical, conscious, and unconscious seclusion. They are the terrorizing cyborgs—mechanized, non-humans stripped of their human rights. Meanwhile, Antoinette’s miscegenated body, too, is not exactly viewed as being alive since she is neither the white colonizer, nor is she the dark colonized; rather, she is a form of darkness not associated with skin color, but as a blackened, alien “nothing” through which few can see or understand without fear. Antoinette and transsexuals are both subject to society’s diagnosis, and both represent a nonnormative identity that society fears.

In her article “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Helene Cixious encapsulates the dark, dead space—the void of the “in-between”—society fears, and the limbo space through which transsexuals and Antoinette occupy and wander through:

*They have wandered around in circles, confined to the narrow room in*

*which they've been given a deadly brainwashing. You can incarcerate them, slow them down, get away with the old Apartheid routine, but for a time only. As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark.* (Cixous 878, all emphasis mine)

In society, there is no single looking-glass that can serve as an accurate model for an individual to live by or compare themselves to. The world simply isn't black and white. There are so many different combinations of races, ethnicities, genders, and spectrums of sexuality that society cannot simply restrict the potential for fluidity in all of these categories. In relation to Gloria Anzaldúa's argument "(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces," bridges are definitely needed, especially in the case for mixed raced people (i.e. Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*), transsexuals (especially those outside of the "heterosexual matrix"), and for different genders. Anzaldúa calls the "in-between" space "liminal space": "Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries, [and is] in a constant state of *displacement*—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling" (Anzaldúa, 243, emphasis mine).

Bridges, therefore, are indeed necessary in order to link the consciousness of the dominant, normative society that possesses power and the subservient, abnormal, "untraditional" bodies. This, in turn, will possibly loosen borders that were so tightly drawn, and can create some

sort of peace between the “terrorizing Other” and society as a whole, while *also* not excluding the bridges connecting various types of “Others” who are not white, or who do not abide by the beliefs of heterosexism. A new looking-glass is necessary in order to decolonize the bodies buried—half alive—underneath civilized borders and boundaries, one where “beauty will no longer be forbidden” (Cixous 876): “Frankensteins” brought to life, allowed a presence, a voice, and a *human* right to classify *themselves* without any constraints.

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