

Narratives of Place in Literature, Film, and Folklore

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Mourning the Motherland: Nostalgia, Trauma, and Displacement in Marguerite Duras and Jean Rhys

When surveying the predominant themes and settings across the breadth of their works, one clear strand that ties Duras and Rhys together is the repeated return, whether directly or indirectly, to their childhood “native” geographies. The marginalized perspectives of the female protagonists in their most widely known novels, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Lover*, articulate the experience of exile and displacement alongside the nostalgic longing for return to one’s place of birth, which becomes conflated with an abject desire for the maternal body. Throughout both texts, the entangled and merging identities of mothers and daughters are presented as isolated and liminal subjects set against similar spaces of islands, rivers, and seas. These locations are scripted by ambivalent colonial desires; as sites of simultaneous belonging and subjugation, they represent fluid yet polluted barriers that mark the place where differences between self and other, colonizer and colonized, are discursively constructed and physically crossed. Both mothers and daughters in the texts are positioned as belonging and outcast, both white and “native,” stranded in the slippery yet static space of two conflicting racialized signifiers. Place and its various configurations in these texts are thus connected to oppressive conditions of colonial existence, and particularly the experiences of white colonial women who are privileged (racially) and circumscribed (economically and sexually) within the boundaries of colonialist and patriarchal discourses.

In correspondence from the time she was writing *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys indicates how her childhood memories clearly informed the representation of place in the novel. She confesses feeling nostalgia for her lost homeland, which she left when she was sixteen, while also signaling her intent to resist romanticizing “the magic of the place, which is not all lovely beaches or smiling people – it can be a very disturbing kind of beauty” (“Selected Letters” 139). The lush island beauty of Coulibri (in Jamaica) and Granbois (in Dominica) are presented as both seductive and sinister, and they are of course haunted by the unreal hostility of Thornfield Hall (in England). Thus, the narrative is set at three different houses on three different islands, all of which determine Antoinette’s fate and define her alienation.

Likewise, in *The Lover*, which is often categorized as autofiction, the (unnamed) girl is forced to navigate various spaces in which she is, according to Karen Ruddy, “discursively constituted as a racially and sexually hybrid, perverse, and degenerate female subject” (87). The girl is a younger version of the author, and Duras observes in *The Lover* that she has continuously returned to the story of her family and childhood in French Indochina (7). She confesses that in previous books there are things she had left out (8), but “can’t remember” what those things are: “I think I wrote about our love for our mother, but I don’t know if I wrote about how we hated her too, or about our love for one another ... in that common family history of ruin and death” (25). This history is directly rooted in the land of her colonial childhood, and Julia Kristeva suggests that “the strangeness of being uprooted” from her place of birth, when she was seventeen, was

formative to Duras' aesthetic of pain (144), which in the *The Lover* blends psychological displacement with an "account of colonial shabbiness and ... maternal failure and hatred" (141).

Wide Sargasso Sea and *The Lover* are strikingly similar in their representations of maternal abandonment and rejection. Antoinette's mother "calmly, coldly" pushes her away as if her daughter "was useless to her" (17). Duras repeatedly observes in *The Lover* how her mother "experienced this deep despondency about living" (14), which made her inaccessible and unpredictable. According to Kristeva, maternal abandonment in *The Lover* plays out the key theme of "the impossibility of a love limited to doubles," as particularly found in "mutual mother-daughter destruction" and repressed "incestuous desire" (150), which "involves a profoundly nostalgic quest for the same as other, for the other as same" (151). This ambivalent desire for a blurring of boundaries between self and other inevitably leads to a mourning for the lost object, often represented by the maternal body, alongside the experience of repulsion and abjection, which is the recognition of the impossibility of merging one's identity with the m/other. Duras admitted shortly before her death that she was still "drowning ... in her love for the mother" (Adler 56), and, as Victoria Burrows notes, Antoinette persistently "attempt[s] to retell her mother's traumatic history – always inseparable from her own" (44). The daughters' mourning for the lost mother is ultimately rooted in nostalgia for the lost origin or place of birth; yet this mourning for the idealized mother or home is imbued with a perpetual melancholy that reveals corruption and madness at the heart of the colonial "paradise" or enterprise.

For example, in Antoinette's retelling of the past, Coulibri is closely associated with her mother and represented as an Edenic space, and is thus directly related to her nostalgia for and exile from her childhood home. Accordingly, as John J. Su points out, her narrative is driven by a desire and longing for a "reclamation of place" ("Once I Would Have Gone Back" 167). However, Antoinette is aware that her childhood paradise was already poisoned by corruption and neglect, and though it is protected by the "barrier" of cliffs, high mountains, and sea (23), "feeling safe ... all belonged to the past" because Coulibri is "now a thing of the past" (15). After the Emancipation Act of 1833, the white Creole landowners and ex-slave owners no longer fully belong, a sentiment echoed in Tia's mocking song: "Go away white cockroach. ... Nobody want you. Go away" (20), and summed up in Annette's helpless claim: "Now we are marooned ... now what will become of us?" (10).

The term "marooned" directly refers to the history of slave resistance and rebellion within Caribbean contexts (Burrows 31; Wightman 48), yet, as Beth Wightman observes, in Rhys' alternative usage of the term, "marronage transforms the plantation itself into an island space, a site not of emancipatory rebellion but rather of isolation and loss" (49), and ultimately links the entangled identities of mother and daughter as exiled and liminal figures: "not 'at home' but rather lost at sea" (48). The Sargasso Sea is likewise presented as an abject space, as Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn reminds us that its name is derived from the "mass of seaweed that renders the water motionless," where ship-wrecks are fated to remain stranded, lost, and mired without possibility of rescue (qtd. in Kimmey 117). Deborah Kimmey notes how the Sargasso Sea remains on the periphery of the text itself – it is only mentioned twice and both references "refuse the sea its

proper name and present [it] as receding from access or awareness. ... [T]he sea is disappearing; it is almost not even there” (116). Thus, for mother and daughter, to be marooned in this particular sea, which functions as both a geographical and figurative space, indicates their own receding sense of cultural identity; which, according to Kimmey, emphasizes “the contradictory status of the Creole woman as both trapped and free. ... her existence jettisoned to the borders” (117).

Duras’ memories of her mother/land are also linked to liminal, watery spaces, such as the deltas and flood plains of the Mekong River (which translates to “mother of water”). The Mekong plays a significant symbolic and geographic role for Duras and her sense of identity as fluid, shifting, and merging with the “other.” The river is the site where she first meets the Chinese lover on the ferry crossing, which enacts for her a movement of boundary crossing that transgresses the rules of colonial society while also crossing over into a space that exiles but frees her from the insular, incestuous confines of the family: “Suddenly I see myself as another, as another would be seen ... available to all eyes, in circulation for cities, journeys, desire” (13). In *The Lover*, however, desire is marked by colonial ambivalence, and just as the girl feels repugnance for the body of the Chinese lover, the river is also presented as an abject space: “It carries everything along ... dead birds, dead dogs, drowned tigers and buffalos, drowned men ... islands of water hyacinths all stuck together” (21-22). The river and its deltas are repeatedly associated with the figure of the mad beggar woman, who haunts Duras, reappears in multiple texts, and is representative of the corruption, poverty, and disease resulting from colonial mismanagement. Like the Mekong, the beggar woman relentlessly journeys toward the sea, bordered by “forests of pestilence. ... [T]he stagnant din of mosquitos, dead children. ... The biggest deltas in the world. Made of black slime” (87). The beggar woman, and all the mad white women of Indochina, remind Duras of her own mother, all of them suffocating from the despair and isolation of their “peculiar colonial existence,” which often leads to a “hankering for death” (90) that reeks of the need to “escape from the frightful loneliness of serving in outposts upcountry, stranded amid checkered stretches of rice, fear, madness, fever, and oblivion” (91).

The seaboard along her mother’s Cambodian property is another important site for Duras, and is linked to her mother’s madness, which grew out of the betrayals and lies of colonial bureaucracy. Her mother was swindled into buying unprofitable farmland, which she soon discovered annually flooded so that it became useless for cultivation, and when she tried to recoup her investment from the local officials, Duras claims there was “nothing she could do against the vileness of that white colonial scum” (*NCL* 89). The officials reported back to the governor of Cambodia that she was crazy and even her children came to believe this since their mother continued investing money and hope into the land, which drained her of financial resources, dignity, and sanity (89). Duras makes clear that the mother’s “shame” is linked to the failed promises of colonial society that have “reduced her to despair” and abject poverty (*TL* 55). For the rest of her life, Duras confesses, she would remain furious “over the terrible injustice” done to her mother (*NCL* 91), similar to Antoinette, who insists her mother was destroyed by “lies” (*WSS* 108) and that for her, there was “no justice” (120-21). In both texts, the mother’s madness and abject shame is feared as a contagious force, a sickness that might be inherited by the daughter, and thus

threatening collapse of the daughter's autonomous identity, which is already precarious due to her marginalized positioning on the outskirts of colonial society.

According to Burrows, Antoinette "is entrapped in a melancholic state of impossible mourning" (20) brought on by her lack of belonging due to "the white creole position caught between two racially divergent cultures" (26). Like her mother, Antoinette knows she is "so without a doubt not English" (30), since in the eyes of the English, as will become clear through Rochester's perspective, she is too intimately associated with the place, which has too much of a "savage appearance" (61). Rochester distrusts the "alien, disturbing, secret loveliness" (73) of the place, and as a result, displaces his ambivalent desires and fears of becoming overwhelmed by the "otherness" of the colonized island onto the "exotic" beauty of his wife. At the same time, he remains frustrated in his desire to penetrate what he believes to be "the secret of this place" (77), to make it his own by possessing "what it *hides*" (73). He asserts his identity through ownership of colonized bodies and lands – he wonders how much "the place...would fetch" when he sells it (142), and purposefully (mis)names Antoinette in a symbolic act of reifying and taking possession of her identity, insisting on calling her Bertha (111), which of course transports both Antoinette and the text into the world of *Jane Eyre*. Forced to cross "a different [colder] sea" that severs her from any clear sense of time and place, Antoinette disassociates entirely from her own body and identity as she walks "along the passages" of the fictional "cardboard" Thornfield Hall (148). Antoinette cannot ever be at home when she is displaced to an England that does not exist for her, because it refuses to accept her own existence. Thus, her story, as Wightman argues, is "the narrative of the undead geographic Other eternally returned to an eternally disavowing 'home'" (60).

The longing to return to the lost home, in both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Lover*, is informed by the compulsion to repeat the traumatic experience or event in an attempt "to master what was never fully grasped in the first place" (Caruth, "Parting Words" 10). As Cathy Caruth goes on to explain: "The witness of survival itself – the awakening that constitutes life – lies not only in the incomprehensible repetition of the past ... but in the incomprehensibility of a future that is not yet owned" (11). Indeed, although presented as a dream, Antoinette's final act of burning down Thornfield is for her an act of awakening and returning to Coulibri, signified by her longing to rejoin her childhood friend Tia; yet she hesitates, knowing Coulibri had also gone up in flames and that Tia had rejected her. Trapped in this liminal space, between departure and return, Antoinette is eternally condemned to "wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (85). For Duras, she is compelled to focus on reframing the details of the "real" story until she gets it "right," since repeatedly retelling the story of her mother allows her to work through childhood trauma while confronting the "othering of violence" (Heathcote 211-12) inherent within the injustices of the colonial past. Duras also acknowledges her complicity within that system, since much of the girl's sense of agency is asserted through objectifying the racialized "other" in order to retain her self-possession and control (Staley 293), as she navigates her own ambiguous status within the white patriarchal society of colonial French Indochina. The text itself ends on a note of mourning for the Chinese lover, with whom love was

always an impossibility because of class and race barriers; thus, Duras resists the erasures of official history by showing what was lost or suppressed.

Svetlana Boym observes how the object of nostalgia often becomes eroticized as a young girl “buried somewhere in the native soil” (13). I would argue that Duras turns this object into herself, while Antoinette functions much the same, buried within *Jane Eyre* and then exhumed by Rhys in her rewriting of Brontë’s text. Boym also offers two types of nostalgia – restorative nostalgia, which “protects the absolute truth,” and reflective nostalgia, which “calls it into doubt” (xviii). I would argue that Duras and Rhys’ texts are engaged in a reflective nostalgia, rejecting the “actual return home” (55) in favor of “dwell[ing] in ... longing and loss [and] the imperfect process of remembrance” (41). Su agrees (building on Boym) that reflective nostalgia “facilitates an exploration of ethical ideals in the face of disappointing circumstances” (*Ethics and Nostalgia* 4) and can be employed to imagine “alternatives” (5) of “what could have been,” in the past and in our relationships to the other (12), through an ethical longing for difference as a form of telling history otherwise (13).

For example, Antoinette’s longing for unity with Tia is often read as an appropriation of the racialized other’s identity, but Antoinette is also presented as liminal, on the margins, and thus her desire for reunion with Tia might equally be interpreted as the desire for a communal belonging that was never possible because of the racial politics and history specific to the West Indies. This would then indicate mourning for an historical loss, since in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as Su argues, “history ... is defined by images of communities never formed, empathy never felt, suffering never shared – in other words, history is defined by what never occurred” (“Once” 165-66). Leslie Hill argues for reading a similar struggle in *The Lover*, which she views as exemplary of the repetition-compulsion throughout Duras’ work, and is expressed as a search for a way out of mourning, where “the point of the compulsion to repeat would be to transform the past into a radical absence of foundation” (601-602). In other words, the repeated return to the past is enacted as a disruption, or dis-placement, of one’s origins, and as a necessary movement of confronting loss and trauma.

Thus, when reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Lover* through the lens of reflective nostalgia, this helps resituate our understanding of how Rhys and Duras risk a perpetual and obsessive melancholy in the attempt to transform mourning into an ethical practice of narrating the past. Both authors utilize nostalgia not as an erasure of history but an attempt to recover suppressed narratives and identities rooted in specific yet always shifting relationships and locales. As Su argues, “place” has the “potential to take on multiple and even conflicting associations” and is “continually in the process of being rearticulated” (*Ethics and Nostalgia* 21-23). The central importance of place and setting in Duras and Rhys’s writing allows for an exploration of the ways in which colonial discourses and histories construct impasses and irreconcilable spaces between self and other. By mourning where and how these relationships might have been imagined or experienced differently, this achieves what Boym considers an ethical form “of reflective longing [that] recognizes the cultural memory of another person as well as his or her human singularity and vulnerability. The other is not merely a representative of another culture, but also a singular individual with a right to long for – but not necessarily belong to – [her] place of birth” (337).

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