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Wide Sargasso Sea
at 50

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Editors

Elaine Savory
Department of Literary Studies and
Environmental Studies
The New School
New York, NY, USA

Erica L. Johnson
Department of English
Pace University
New York, NY, USA

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To
DIANA ATHILL
December 21, 1917–January 23, 2019

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We thank the entire Palgrave Macmillan team for shepherding this project through.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Katy Cook who presented at the London symposium, has a PhD in Psychology from University College London (UCL), as well as a master's degree in Modern Culture Studies and a master's in Psychology. She is the founder of the Centre for Technology Awareness and co-founder of No Data Day and has given talks on a number of topics, ranging from psychological captivity to the future of education. Katy spent many years working in research, focusing on eating disorders and medically unexplained symptoms. She has taught at UCL and currently runs the technology training for Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children.

Mary Lou Emery who presented at the London symposium, is Professor Emerita in the Department of English at the University of Iowa. Her publications include articles on British modernist and Anglophone Caribbean writers and on Caribbean Modernism. She has edited a special issue of the *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* (2003) on Jean Rhys and authored two books, *Jean Rhys at "World's End": Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile* (1990) and *Modernism, the Visual, and Caribbean Literature* (2007).

Erica L. Johnson who presented at both the London and New York symposia, is Professor of English at Pace University in New York. She is the author of *Cultural Memory, Memorials, and Reparative Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018), the co-editor with Patricia Moran of *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches* (2015) and *The Female Face of Shame* (2013), and the co-editor with Éloïse Brezault of *Memory as*

Colonial Capital (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). She is also the author of *Caribbean Ghostwriting* (2009) and *Home, Maison, Casa: The Politics of Location in Works by Jean Rhys, Marguerite Duras, and Erminia Dell'Oro* (2003). She has authored articles on modernist and postcolonial writers in such journals as *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, *Meridians*, *Biography*, *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory*, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, and the *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*.

Chrisila Maida is a Brooklyn-based designer, illustrator, and writer with a love of storytelling and odd characters. She is an assistant designer at HarperCollins Children's Books, where she gets to work on the books she fell in love with as a child. She graduated from Parsons School for Design in 2016 with a dual BFA in Illustration and BA in Writing.

Carine Mardorossian is Professor of English at University of Buffalo, SUNY. She is the author of *Framing the Victim: Rape, Agency, and Structural Masculinity in the Contemporary United States* (2014) and *Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Rewrite Postcolonialism* (2005). She has written articles on Caribbean writers in such premier journals as *Callaloo*, *Research in African Literatures*, and *Small Axe*. She is the Executive Director of the Northeast Modern Language Association.

Kylie Mirmohamadi is a research associate at La Trobe University in Melbourne. Her works have been published widely in Australian and British historical, cultural, and literary studies. Her most recent book is *The Digital Afterlives of Jane Austen: Janeites at the Keyboard* (Palgrave Pivot, 2014). She has co-authored and co-edited a number of books including, with Susan K. Martin, *Sensational Melbourne* (2011) and *Colonial Dickens* (2012).

Patricia Moran who presented at the London symposium, is a reader at City, University of London. Her books include *Antonia White and Manic-Depressive Illness* (2017), *The Aesthetics of Trauma in Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and *Word of Mouth: Body/Language in Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf* (1996). She is the editor, with Tamar Heller, of *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in 19th- and 20th-Century Women's Writing* (2003) and with Erica L. Johnson of *The Female Face of Shame* (2013) and *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches* (2015). She has written articles on modernist women writers for such journals as *Modernism/modernity*, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, *Women's Studies*, and *Woolf Studies Annual*.

Sophie Oliver has just finished her PhD on modernist women and fashion, from clothes to literary vogues. Her article “Fashion in Jean Rhys/ Jean Rhys in Fashion” was published in *Modernist Cultures* in 2016. That year, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she conceived and curated an exhibition at the British Library in London, “Jean Rhys and the Making of an Author.”

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert who presented at the New York symposium, is Professor of Caribbean culture and literature in the Department of Hispanic Studies at Vassar College. She is the author of a number of books, among them *Phyllis Shand Allfrey: A Caribbean Life* (1996), *Jamaica Kincaid: A Critical Companion* (1999), *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* (2003, with Margarite Fernández Olmos), and *Literatures of the Caribbean* (2008). She is at work on *Glimpses of Hell*, a study of the aftermath of the 1902 eruption of the Mont Pelée volcano of Martinique, on *José Martí: A Life*, a biography of the Cuban patriot, and *Endangered Species: The Environment and the Discourse of the Caribbean Nation*. She has also co-edited a number of collections of essays, most notably *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (1997) and *Displacements and Transformations in Caribbean Cultures* (2008). Her critical editions of texts by Caribbean women writers include Phyllis Allfrey’s *The Orchid House* (1997) and *It Falls into Place: The Short Stories of Phyllis Shand Allfrey* (2004). Her articles and literary translations have appeared in *Callaloo*, the *Journal of West Indian Literature*, the *Jean Rhys Review*, the *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, *Obsidian*, and the *Revista Mexicana del Caribe*, among others.

Caryl Phillips who presented at the New York symposium, is a novelist, essayist, screenwriter, playwright, and Professor of English at Yale University. His novels include *The Lost Child* (2015), *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), *A Distant Shore* (2003), *Crossing the River* (1993), *Cambridge* (1991), and *The Final Passage* (1985). His work in non-fiction includes *Colour Me English* (2011), *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), and *The European Tribe* (1985). He has won numerous awards and prizes including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and his work has been shortlisted for the Booker. His latest novel *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018) is about the life of Jean Rhys.

Diana Quick who presented at the London symposium, is a BAFTA and Emmy-nominated British actress with extensive film, television, and stage credits to her name. She is well known for her role in the British television series *Brideshead Revisited* and her more recent role as Queen Elizabeth II in *The Queen*. In 2003, she played Jean Rhys in Polly Teale's play, *After Mrs. Rochester*. She is the author of a memoir, *A Tug on the Thread: From the British Raj to the British Stage*.

Alexa Roccanova who presented at the New York symposium, is a New York City-based writer working in the fashion industry. She has a BA in Literary Studies and a BFA in Fashion Design from The New School. In 2016 she completed her senior capstone piece, a series of humor essays focusing on the unvarnished reality she has come to know from studying and working in fashion. The following year she presented her thesis, a womenswear collection inspired by Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Her work largely explores the ways in which fashion and literature intersect.

Elaine Savory who organized and presented at both the London and New York symposia, has written widely on African and Caribbean literatures, especially women's writing, theater and drama, poetry, and most recently, ecocriticism. She has authored two books on Jean Rhys (1998 and 2009) and she edited *The Jean Rhys Review* for several years (which will soon be web-accessible). She has recently written a new essay for the first Paris conference on Rhys (2018), and has a book in progress on Caribbean literature and ecology. She contributed an article to the collection *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches*, edited by Erica Johnson and Patricia Moran. She is also a poet who has been inspired by Rhys, and she is presently working on a new collection which includes dramatic poems in the voice of Annette, Antoinette's mother, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well as a memoir. She teaches at The New School, where she is Associate Professor of Literary Studies. Her work focuses on ecocriticism and environmental studies.

Ania Spyra is Associate Professor of English at Butler University (USA) and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University (UK). She teaches Transnational and Postcolonial Literature, Translation and Creative Writing. She has lectured and written widely on nodal cities, feminist contestations of cosmopolitanism, multilingualism, and

transnationalism, most recently in *Studies in the Novel, Comparative Literature* and *Contemporary Literature*.

James Thackara is a distinguished American novelist who recently returned to New York City after half a century in the UK. He knew Jean Rhys in her last years, when he was starting out as a novelist. His remarkable novels include *America's Children* (1984, 2001); *Abab's Daughter* (1988) and *The Book of Kings* (1999). Born in California and educated in Buenos Aires, Provence, California, Rome, Switzerland, and New England, Thackara is, like Rhys, a transnational.

Sue Thomas who presented at the London symposium, is Emeritus Professor of English at La Trobe University, Melbourne. She is the author of *Telling West Indian Lives: Life Narrative and the Reform of Plantation Slavery Cultures 1804–1834* (2014), *Imperialism, Reform and the Making of Englishness in 'Jane Eyre'* (2008), and *The Worlding of Jean Rhys* (1999), a co-author with Ann Blake and Leela Gandhi of *England through Colonial Eyes in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (2001), and a co-editor with Anne Collett and Russell McDougall of *Tracking the Literature of Tropical Weather: Typhoons, Hurricanes, and Cyclones* (2017), among other books. She has written very extensively on nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers, decolonizing literatures, and nineteenth-century periodicals. A Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, she is a member of the editorial board of *Postcolonial Studies* and of the National Advisory Board of the Australasian Modernist Studies Network. Her recent scholarship on Rhys has been funded by the Australian Research Council DP140103817.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea at 50*

Elaine Savory and Erica L. Johnson

The year 2016 was the 50th anniversary of the publication of Jean Rhys's last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It used to be said that 50 years was the right length for copyright to persist, and that reputations of artists and their work were unstable for at least half a century, before assessment found its balance. This collection implicitly argues that 50 years after publication is a good moment to pause and reconsider a work still vibrantly alive for a new generation of readers.

We began this project after presentations given at two symposia in 2016 to celebrate the novel's special birthday. From the response of Rhys scholars, established and new, as well as fiction writers and visual artists, it was clear that there is more to say about this now canonical, highly influential text. This collection explores how a diverse group of readers interpreted it in this moment, almost two decades into another new century, and found highly significant new ways to think about it.

E. Savory (✉)

Department of Literary Studies and Environmental Studies, The New School,
New York, NY, USA

e-mail: savorye@newschool.edu

E. L. Johnson

Department of English, Pace University, New York, NY, USA

e-mail: ejohnson@pace.edu

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The two symposia took place in March and October 2016. The first was hosted by Goldsmiths, University of London, organized by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Peter Hulme, both eminent names in postcolonial/Caribbean literature circles. Paravisini-Gebert's biography of Rhys's contemporary, Phyllis Shand Allfrey, and Peter Hulme's work on Amerindian cultural presence in Dominica, Rhys's homeland, are of great importance in understanding Rhys's work. The two-day symposium presented reconsiderations of the novel in times very different from 1966, marking not only the evolution of approaches by established critics, but the first steps of new Rhys scholars engaged in doctoral work. Known Rhys scholars such as Judith Raiskin (who edited the critical edition of the Norton *Wide Sargasso Sea*), Denise Decaires-Narain, and Helen Carr were not able to contribute to this collection, but made important interventions in London.

The second symposium was hosted by the New School University, New York, in October 2016, organized by Elaine Savory. This was a one-day event, with presentations by academic critics, creative writers, and a visual artist, proof that *Wide Sargasso Sea* inspires people in a range of disciplines, not only literary critics and theorists. The only presenter not included here is the novelist Robert Antoni: his conversation with Caryl Phillips about their respect for Rhys's work was a powerful conclusion to that day.

A third event should be mentioned because it marks the distance Rhys has come from being regarded as only a British writer to being included in the canon of Anglophone Caribbean literature. The BIMFEST (the biannual literary festival held in Barbados and named after the famous journal *Bim*) included Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in a retrospective reevaluation of roughly half a century of now-canonical Anglophone Caribbean literature. This affirmed that Rhys cannot be responsibly considered without the Caribbean context which shaped her so profoundly for the first 16 years of her life. We can trace this approach back through the work of the founding editor of *Wasafiri*, Shusheila Nasta, who attended the London symposium and who published two important clusters of sociopolitical responses to the novel (1995, 1998). These included Kamau Brathwaite's naming of Rhys as the "Helen of Our Wars," a term that evokes just how significantly she figured into the conversation about Caribbean literature, wherever critics came down on the issue.

Reception of the novel in and since 1966 has often been said to reflect three main approaches. In no intended order, these are feminist/gender,

postcolonial/Caribbean, and modernist. *Wide Sargasso Sea* appeared in a moment of cultural ferment, in which race, gender, and class issues were at the forefront, and the formal ending of British colonialism in the Caribbean was underway. This novel, representing the story of a white creole woman in the immediate aftermath of slavery, revisioning *Jane Eyre*, was bound to provoke political discussion, not just in the 1960s, but since. This may be the case in part because she was herself often thinking along with theoretical trends in her fiction; as Helen Carr so eloquently put it, in historicizing the reception of *Wide Sargasso Sea* at a conference on Rhys in Paris in 2018, “Rhys’s ideas quickened to more theoretical debates.”¹ Carr showed how, for example, Rhys was thinking through power in a mode and moment that resonated with Foucault’s theoretical work on the same topic. Looking back on the reception history of *Wide Sargasso Sea* makes it possible to see cultural and literary trends as they shaped particular approaches just as the readings in this volume shed light on such current issues as the #MeToo movement and its recognition of a global culture of sexual exploitation, the twenty-first-century concept of rape culture, climate change and environmental destruction, and even contemporary trends in fashion and design aesthetics. The novel speaks to all of these issues and more.

There have been a wide variety of insightful readings of the text over its 50-year history. Chronologically, the first phase of response to Rhys’s work focused on her modernist beginnings as a writer in Paris in the mid-1920s. Ford Madox Ford, her mentor, almost complained, because she ignored his advice, about the lack of contextual detail (topography) in her first collection of stories except for the Caribbean. He could be a very prolix writer himself and he found her concision to be extreme. Clearly Rhys’s instinct gave her a unique voice, just as Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, and H.D. have particularly individual voices within what we call modernist literature. We also know now that modernism is not one movement, and it is not only European. For example, many point to the role of violence in modernist formations and tend to focus on the world wars as forces that changed consciousness, but while these European-centered wars were intensely murderous and cruel, we have to acknowledge that the transatlantic slave trade was the beginning of a brutal modernity and displacement for millions over centuries. Because Rhys’s work and *Wide Sargasso Sea* in particular are grounded in the Caribbean, this history haunts her poetics. As our perception of modernisms has evolved, so have readings of Rhys’s work.

Although Rhys began writing *Wide Sargasso Sea* during the period of high modernism, by the time of its publication in 1966 two important political movements were underway: European and U.S.-centered feminisms and demands for the end of formal colonialism in the Caribbean. The novel was not written for or to the 1960s, nor even in terms of evolution, in the 1960s, but it speaks to that moment of hope and determination for cultural and social change. There was a wide spectrum of feminist readings of it by critics of different ethnic backgrounds on both sides of the Atlantic and also from the Caribbean. It took a little longer to establish that Rhys is definitively a Caribbean writer because that had to be argued from deep knowledge of the region and she was claimed by Britain in mid-career. This is understandable in that Rhys was white creole and left the Caribbean as a teenager to live in Britain, then France and Britain again, only ever returning for a few weeks to Dominica in her middle 40s. In fact all her work displays either evidently or subtly, her Caribbean identity and affiliation, but it was *Wide Sargasso Sea*, even more than her somewhat autobiographical first novel *Voyage in the Dark*, which made facing this unavoidable. Thus, the novel has been a litmus paper for shifts in cultural consciousness in readers, and it is valuable to look at the reception history of *Wide Sargasso Sea* from this point of view. It is canonical because it is so well written that it can inspire diverse interpretations. In shaping this collection, we have found that critics and theorists who may have thought they were done with the text have found, in our moment now, 50 years on from the novel's beginning in print, they have much more to say.

This might be so partly because *Wide Sargasso Sea* is such a highly determined, very precisely written, short text. Rhys worked on it for a number of decades, and clearly earlier texts, such as her lost draft novel, "The Revenant," are ghost presences within the finished work. Novels which are baggy monsters, full of digressions and detail, are actually much harder to read from divergent perspectives than lean ones, in which many words carry metonymic significance. In fact, it is always most productive to read Rhys's prose employing an awareness of the economies and layering of poetry. She had a lifelong deep attachment to poetry, especially in French, though she rarely wrote it herself, and when she did, she did not choose to work at it seriously: instead, she found some formal poetic strategies useful. The very concision of her prose invites the reader in to explore and speculate, because it excludes definitive, detailed representations.

She also is expert at indicating large historical events or moments via a small occurrence. For example, Mr. Mason has the idea of bringing in

Indian labor to the plantation. In this moment, he represents the white male plantocracy, which did just that in reality in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. Aunt Cora, in her opposition to this idea, represents the canny insider who knows better. Moreover, Cora's role in trying to help Antoinette illuminates the powerlessness of the white creole woman given into marriage with a foreign, colonialist stranger because her money attracts him. But then Rhys complicates these characters in ways which provide many alternative readings. Mason is a kindly stepfather to Antoinette, despite all of his troubles with her mother; Cora is in the end not just an affectionate and protective aunt but a scion of a past with slavery, which benefited her. It is easy (and true) to say this plurality of perspectives is quintessentially Caribbean, but it is also a key part of highly accomplished literary storytelling.

A word needs to be said about the wide range of inspiration which the novel has provided to many kinds of writers and artists, some of whom are included in this collection. Although, like much sensitive and well-written fiction, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has not translated well into film; two attempts have been made to do this (1993, directed by John Duigan for an Australian film company, and 2006, directed by Brendan Maher for the BBC). These films were not successful visions of the novel despite Rhys's biographer Carole Angier providing screenplay input for the first film, and established writer Stephen Greenhorn screenwriting for the second. Making Rhys's subtle visual representations literal almost inevitably condemns them to becoming lurid and falling into cultural clichés of race, sexuality, and gender, even to the extent of Caribbean foliage and topography (the tourist promotion of the region for jaded northerners looking for escape from reality does not help). Far more successfully, more than one play has sought to represent Rhys herself dramatically, for example in Barbados in the early 1980s, directed by Earl Warner, and in London in 2003 (the actor who played Rhys in London, Diana Quick, has contributed a chapter to this collection). For those pursuing careers in design—in our collection, a book cover designer and a fashion designer serve as examples—the novel appears to speak volumes in terms of suggesting ways of speaking important insights by means of line and color. Also poets and fiction writers, in/from the Caribbean, have been inspired by Rhys as a kind of literary godmother, someone who demonstrates how to tackle the difficult history and complex Caribbean present reality through careful and accomplished prose. Rhys also demonstrated a sensitivity to the

natural world which is entirely the product of her childhood on Dominica, still a stunningly wild place.

Seeking to discover new apprehensions of Rhys's last work of full-length fiction has been a very rewarding task. We begin with a set of interviews and chapters that document the influence *Wide Sargasso Sea* has had on these contemporary artists and writers. The "Influences and Inspirations" section includes three interviews that Elaine Savory conducted with the writers Caryl Phillips and James Thackara, and with the artist Chrisila Maida. Phillips's discussion is timely indeed, given that he has just recently published a novel inspired by Rhys's life, entitled *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018). Phillips and Savory engage in a wide-ranging conversation about Caribbean literature and culture, and artistic choices made by both Rhys and Phillips. Their discussion of Rhys as a writer and as a character goes into how her most Caribbean novel shaped Phillips's strategy of framing his novel with the bookends of her childhood in Dominica and her one, melancholy return trip there as an adult. The American novelist James Thackara has spent most of his adult life in England and knew Rhys personally in the last years of her life. His memories of her and impressions of her work bring to light new details about her relationship to modernist circles. The artist Chrisila Maida, quite coincidentally sent us a cover she had designed for *Wide Sargasso Sea* while we were assembling this volume and we wanted to include her beautiful artwork along with a brief discussion of it. In her interview, Maida explains that she painted the cover not on commission but out of pure inspiration and personal fascination with the world Rhys creates in her novel; the brilliance of her image, which now graces the cover of this book, reflects this.

Similarly inspired, the fashion designer Alexa Rocanova offers a chapter in "Influences and Inspirations" about a stunning line of clothing that she created on the basis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rocanova explains how she mapped out the novel's palettes and themes and how she worked from Rhys's text to the delicate gowns and red-accented tunics of her "capsule collection." This unique expression of the novel reveals Rhys's imagination as intensely visual, and the designs speak to the novel's richness and many layers—to which we allude throughout this introduction. Sophie Oliver, too, speaks to the topic of fashion by drawing out Rhys's own fashion sense and how it directs her reading of the novel. Oliver came into possession of one of Rhys's dresses, and she explores how the dress figures as a transtemporal, female, and feminist connection between herself, Rhys, and the text at hand. Filling out this section on artistic responses to *Wide*

Sargasso Sea is a chapter by the eminent actress Diana Quick, who played Rhys in Polly Teale's 2003 play about her, *After Mrs. Rochester*. Quick presented and discussed excerpts of the play at the London symposium to great effect. Her research into Rhys's life and affective understanding of it enabled her to embody Rhys; moreover, the play dwells on the period in her life when Rhys was writing *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and this is conveyed by the omnipresence on stage of a Bertha/Antoinette figure, whose comments and movements underscore the dialogue that ensues between a younger version of Rhys and the older version that Quick played.

The next section of this collection, "Framing the Text," provides key critical frameworks through which *Wide Sargasso Sea* is read in the twenty-first century. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert presents an ecocritical reading of the novel that is terrifyingly relevant after the devastation of the 2017 hurricane season in the Caribbean, from which Dominica is still recovering. Her piece attends to Rhys's precise and detailed account of the vulnerability of the natural world and considers the fate of this world in a stage of climate change that Rhys could never have foreseen but to which she speaks nonetheless. The next chapter, by Sue Thomas, also returns to Dominica to frame the novel with Rhys's childhood memories of her aunt's songs and quilts. Through archival research, Thomas traces these small and essential details from Rhys's memories to her novel, thereby offering new insights into the affective underpinnings of the work. Finally, Mary Lou Emery builds on her considerable body of work on Caribbean modernism in her analysis of how Wilson Harris's notion of "broken parts" plays out in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and how this theme informs a modernist aesthetic of the 1960s that the novel exemplifies. Caribbean poetics and theory draw heavily on ideas of breakage—and assembly—and Emery's discussion of this theme thus updates this important theoretical conversation for a contemporary reading of the novel.

One of the most provocative dimensions of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is Rhys's depiction of sex, and so the section on "Sex and Gender" shows how her insights anticipate and speak to our current #MeToo moment. Long before "rape culture" was even a term, Rhys makes it clear that plantation society could be described as exactly that. Antoinette's father, for one, evidently has sex with several Black women who are then erased from the narrative, which is to say they are dehumanized by these sexual encounters. The unnamed husband's treatment of Amélie as nothing more than a sexual object to be used in his humiliation of Antoinette makes their encounter a crude and aggressive power play on his part. Carine

Mardorossian reevaluates the novel in light of the #MeToo Movement, which she characterizes as both a watershed for women's rights and as a movement whose power has been undermined by racial differences. Tarana Burke, the African American founder of the movement, was initially erased by white women's appropriation of her term, although she has since resurfaced as its face and voice thanks to outrage on social media. Mardorossian uses contemporary politics as a lens on the fraught relations between Antoinette and Amélie, and looks at the role of solidarity in gaining leverage on the husband's sexual aggressions. Elaine Savory also looks at sexual relations in the novel from the perspective of male sexual and emotional abuse of women. She engages with journals written by two white male planters during slavery which reveal the rape culture of the plantation. In one of the most frank addresses to the novel's sexual relations, Savory historicizes the husband's corrupt sexuality in relation to these historical men and to Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. The last chapter in this section focuses more on gender than sexuality as Katy Cook takes a key concept of contemporary critical theory, vulnerability, and shows how Rhys understood its nuances and explored its affective "wisdom" through the character of Antoinette. Rhys's critics have to work continuously, generation to generation, against the characterization of her protagonists as victims, and Cook's argument effectively dismisses that approach by showing how Antoinette does not seek relief from her vulnerability but rather opens herself to others, to suffering, and to her fate in such a way that she comes into possession of truth about herself and the world she inhabits.

The last section focuses on dialogues between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and other works ranging from Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* to fan fiction and reader-critic commentators on websites. An inherently dialogic text, Rhys's novel has been read together with scores of other works, and critics have carefully traced her influences through close readings of her work. Rhys liked to insist that her own reading practices were lowbrow but close readers can see that they included everything from pulp fiction to Shakespeare, Freud, Baudelaire, and scores of other canonical writers in French as well as in English.² Her reading is not widely documented in the existing Rhys archives so critics have had to do much of the work of unearthing her influences from within her stories and novels, as though her writing holds their secrets.³

The chapters in this section draw out contemporary dialogues or offer new theories of Rhys's unique mode of literary influence. Kylie Mirmohamadi's contribution shows just how much *Wide Sargasso Sea* has

influenced readings of *Jane Eyre* through a growing constellation of Brontë fan fiction. She demonstrates that readers of these recent spin-offs almost inevitably read them through the lens of *Wide Sargasso Sea*—whether they have read Rhys or not. So prominent is Rhys’s novel as a forebear of *Jane Eyre* spin-offs (although it transcends that genre in itself), it finds new critical life in online reviews and social media discussions of current fan fiction. Patricia Moran and Erica Johnson look to more classical predecessors of Rhys’s novel, like Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* and Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, as influences on *Wide Sargasso Sea*—with an emphasis on the *mode* of influence. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories of how material can be “encrypted” in the unconscious, Moran and Johnson apply this idea to Rhys’s mode of literary influence, arguing that hers was a unique, feminist one through which she preserved the secrets of gendered violence from other women’s texts in her tale of the same. Finally, Ania Spyra brings *Wide Sargasso Sea* back to its twenty-first century resonances as they play out in Marlon James’s 2009 novel, *The Book of Night Women*. Spyra draws clear lines between James’s neo-slave narrative and Rhys’s novel and shows how and why a contemporary Jamaican writer is compelled by this 50-plus-year old novel as it continues to haunt and articulate our present reality.

NOTES

1. This was the “Jean Rhys: Lines of Transmission/Lignes de transmission” conference at the Sorbonne in June of 2018.
2. See Juliette Taylor-Batty, “‘Le Revenant’: Baudelaire’s Afterlife in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (*Modernism/modernity* 27.4 [November 2020]).
3. This could change given that, at the conference in Paris, “Jean Rhys: Lines of Transmission/Lignes de transmission,” Ellen Moerman, the executor of Rhys’s estate, revealed the existence of a library containing some 1000 books and 300 recordings that Rhys left behind. Were this library to become available to Rhys scholars, it would shed brilliant light on investigations into her influences.

PART I

Inspirations and Influences