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"Disposed To Be Communicative": Conversations about Literacy Among Four Texts

My earliest memory, a blurry mingling of hospital walls and baby-blue blankets, is the birth of my younger brother. My second-earliest memory is my mother guiding my hand along lines of text, identifying letters and phonemes. With that sort of a background, it isn’t surprising to learn that reading dominated my childhood, nor that I formed the resolution to be an English teacher sometime around the age of ten. (The discovery that one could get paid to talk about books all day was a revelation that felt like it should have been accompanied by angel’s song). Eternally on the look-out for interesting new books (and perhaps a bit inclined to read “classics” in the hopes of impressing the grown-ups), I took Jane Eyre home on the first day of the sixth grade, and while my peers were swooning over heartthrob-of-the-year Leonardo DiCaprio, I fell wholeheartedly in love with Edward Rochester. Not that Titanic wasn’t worth the price of admission all three times, but come on…Rochester!

A confirmed bookworm and 19th-century literature fan since “There was no possibility of taking a walk that day,” I now find myself committing what feels like a form of textual adultery. In love with literacy and literature almost since babyhood, in love with Edward Rochester and Hareton Earnshaw nearly as long, I would like to make the argument now that reading/writing is, at best, a two-edged sword, easily capable of rebounding on the user, particularly if that user forms part of the voiceless and marginalized of their society. That literacy, while indispensable in the modern world, may be a rather expensive commodity for many, as perhaps it has always
been. That minority languages, oral cultures, and the very identities of many students of literature may be endangered if we are not alert to the ways in which we teach.

More than anything else, I am making the argument that it may be time for teachers of literacy and literature to reconsider long-held beliefs that may have become, like many belief systems, an idol unto themselves. English lovers – teachers, professors, or simply the sort of annoying university students that squeal to their roommates about a newly published piece of Brontë juvenilia – may need to reevaluate our literature and our pedagogy, particularly those of us living in a Western context. Particularly those of us adhering to creeds that require an open hand, an open mind and an open heart.

Literature is necessarily a double-edged sword. It is classified as “frozen” language, unchangeable once it is has been written; this renders it vulnerable to chronic conservatism, reinforcing the old rather than exploring the new. It casts itself as more permanent and more trustworthy than flimsy oral accounts, which almost inevitably leads to a valuing of standardized and literary cultures over oral cultures, of languages with a body of literature over languages which may not even have seen the need to develop an alphabet. Literature in the classroom is often composed of texts written by majority authors and even taught by majority teachers; it is presented as absolute truth and the pinnacle of cultural production when it often may ignore or even insult the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of many students in the classroom. Particularly for students of minority cultures or even minority languages, English – learning it, reading it, speaking it, and writing it – can be an incredibly difficult and exhausting task. The classroom should be a place of equality and openness, yet many teachers of literature feel that sensitivity to their minority students requires that they ignore the canon and the requirements of literary study and focus purely on political correctness.
It is not the place of this paper to examine or question the various sections of the canon, though it is quite probable that, like most aspects of literary study, it could do with a tune-up. However, I would like to remind us that literary studies must be treated as an ongoing conversation, a conversation often composed of writers who intensely disagree with one another. Students have the opportunity to observe and take part in this conversation, and indeed it is a teacher’s job to help them do so. Teachers of literature owe their students the opportunity to examine and question the books on the syllabus, but this does not mean combing through a given work with a fine-tooth comb, checking for material offensive to a given group. Instead of such a narrow approach I would propose that we examine literature in the context of other literature, that for each textual act we seek out the rejoinder or the complement that has undoubtedly been written, even if unconsciously. Teachers who acknowledge the need for a conversation in the literature classroom can then seek out works that will foster this conversation and, more than merely fostering it, model it.

Students will rarely partake in a literary conversation – by which I mean the conversation already being held silently by different works of literature – if they are not encouraged to do so and are not educated in methods of engaging the text. I would argue that if students are not taught to engage and question the text, to seek out conversations being carried on among authors and participate in those conversations themselves, then literacy and literature education carries the potential to become an oppressive and overpowering form of education.

Such an argument, to be fair, calls for a discussion of the ways in which literacy and literature are positive, empowering forces. It also demands an examination of the underside of certain types of literacy, the potential pitfalls of our intense love affair with the fiction of dead white men (and women). It requires above all the means to make the argument and perhaps offer
a solution: a lens through which we can see the good, the bad, and the practical application. To find this prism, I’ve returned a little shamefacedly to one of my first loves: the works of Charlotte and Emily Brontë.

_Wuthering Heights_ and _Jane Eyre_: perennials on the reading list, on syllabi, and even in television miniseries scripts. Call it the appeal of the glowering Byronic heroes or the fiery genteel-poverty heroines, or simply the tragic stories of the authors themselves, but these most celebrated works to come out of the little Haworth parsonage have been popular targets for reimaginings in any form. Jane has flickered to life on both the large and small screen, and even found herself belting on Broadway a few years ago. Cathy has aimed her doomed passion at a long line of cinematic or dramatic Heathcliffs, including Laurence Olivier and Ralph Fiennes (a girl could do worse!). Yet the resculptings of either Charlotte’s or Emily’s novels have not been limited merely to the screen and the stage. A few inept sequels or retellings have crept out on the shelves: _Adèle: The Hidden Story of Jane Eyre_, for example, which among other implausibilities casts Jane’s French pupil as a renowned trapeze artist and the genial Mrs. Fairfax as a cold-blooded sociopath responsible for murdering Bertha Mason and drugging Adèle into paranoid delusions. Tantalized by hints that Emily Brontë may have drafted part of a second novel, multiple modern novelists have attempted sequels or companions to _Wuthering Heights_ (Miller 221). These often attempt to flesh out the vague past of the haunting Heathcliff, particularly his long and never-explained absence from Yorkshire. These novels are often not particularly well-written, nor do the authors seem to have paid particular attention to the original texts. Two responses to the Brontës, however, bring more to Bronte lovers than the further sensationalism and the obligatory sex scene that seems necessary in a 21st century novel. Maryse Condé’s 1995 _La Migration des Coeurs (Windward Heights, _in translation) and Jean Rhys’ 1966 _Wide
Sargasso Sea conduct re-visions of the old stories from a postcolonial perspective, reconsidering the characters we have only seen in rural England. Wide Sargasso Sea recounts the story of Antoinette Cosway, who becomes Bertha Mason, who becomes the wife of an Englishman we recognize as Edward Rochester, twenty years younger than when he meets Jane on the road at dusk. La Migration des Coeurs, instead of dwelling on a marginal character of Wuthering Heights, takes the core story of thwarted love and intergenerational revenge and transfers it to the Caribbean at the end of the 19th century.

In these four texts, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Wide Sargasso Sea and La Migration des Coeurs, questions of literacy and language are scattered on nearly every page. The double-sided nature of English and literacy is, of course, an established concept, as is the recognition of language’s potential not only for communication and education but also for oppression and psychological violence. Pierre Bourdieu speaks of the alienating nature of “artificial languages” used in academia, an alienation that is only heightened when even the native tongues of the student and the teacher are different. He points out that “the ability to manipulate academic language remains the principal factor in success at examinations” (21) and adds that that ability comes mainly from social status. According to Bourdieu, professors and students alike pretend that this “language gap” does not exist, complaining aloud about the lack of communication and clarity but ultimately relishing the linguistic and spatial distancing that protects them both.

Pedagogy, even in the rigid French universities, has altered greatly since Bourdieu wrote Academic Discourse in the 1960’s, yet the distance between pupil and teacher remains a fixture in many classrooms. Culturally and linguistically diverse students are especially vulnerable to this gap, lacking the specialized academic speech that we in the university treat as a mother tongue. Above and beyond the simple question of language proficiency, however, Bourdieu
explains the clear power of words in pedagogy, declaring that “there are few activities which consist so exclusively as teaching in the manipulation of words” (4). Language is always power, but in an educational context that power is magnified and expanded by the authority conferred upon the teacher by society and the captive native of the audience. Perhaps this power of the teacher and the teacher’s tongue is nowhere as pronounced as in literary studies. Teaching itself, and the student-teacher relationships, are endowed with what Paolo Freire calls a “fundamental narrative character.” Educating students in a language and a literature necessitates introducing them to a certain worldview; often this world view is not merely introduced but imposed.

Freire speaks to this imposition in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; he outlines the way in which education, particularly the education of students perceived as deviant or inferior, is treated and enacted as “an act of depositing” (58):

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. (58)

In contrast to this model of the benefactor-professor, Freire offers a model of “libertarian education” that begins “by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (59). In such a model, all students and teachers ultimately become “jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (67). The result is communication, the only act through which “human life [can] hold meaning” (63). It is this drive for communication that should undergird our educational theories of language and literature, and it
is a drive reflected in the search for communion that dominates the works of the Brontës, Jean Rhys, and Maryse Condé.

The very existence of Rhys’ and Condé’s responses to the Brontës, after all, reflects a curious kind of communal glossing, as Jean Rhys and Maryse Condé reach across oceans and centuries to connect literally with the retiring women from Yorkshire. Seen from a postcolonial perspective, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *La Migration des Coeurs* seem to become the embodiment of Homi Bhabha’s notion of hybridity. Themselves representatives of a complex Creole culture that is neither European, nor African, nor native Caribbean, Condé and Rhys are literally writing in the margins of the British female canon. Spivak has remarked on the power of the ways in which Rhys’ novel, in particular, enacts Bhabha’s notion of resistance as Rhys takes a fundamental European text and reimagines it, teasing out an entirely separate story without ever directly contradicting Charlotte Brontë or showing her anything but respect. Rhys discovers the inherent ambivalences in Brontë’s work and exploits them, creating something entirely new and yet quite derivative. “The colonial presence,” Habra explains, “is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (107).

Rhys is certainly involved in repetition and difference, nowhere more markedly than in her decisions on how to conclude her novel. Caroline Rody in particular remarks on the power and subversive tactics evident in Rhys’ refusal to recount Bertha/Antoinetta’s death. Wakened from a dream of fire and terror, the imprisoned Antoinette cries in the last pages, “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do,” but the story ends as she moves along the dark passage and before she has actually set fire to Thornfield Hall. Having read *Jane Eyre*, though, we know what the fate of the candle in her hand will be, that the flames she sees as
liberation will claim her life and Rochester’s hand and eyesight. This refusal of Rhys’ to actually narrate Bertha’s self-immolation places the responsibility of her conclusion – and her death – on the reader:

Resisting the force of Bertha’s original ending, instead giving the force of an ending to the moment before the burning, Rhys’s unclosed end leaves Bertha’s death to the moments after the reader closes her novel and muses in her intertextual memory. In this way, Rhys forces history – that is, Charlotte Brontë – to bear the responsibility of killing Bertha Mason, as Delourme puts it. When Jane Eyre “returns to the surface to write the end of the text born of it,” Brontë is, as it were, forced to consummate Rhys’s heroine’s desire for revenge [on Rochester] but also to reduce it to a functional subplot once again, and to reextinguish a life we have come to value. (221)

Rhys’ seemingly docile recreation of Brontë’s text carries a hidden subversion that complicated our own relationship to Brontë’s writing. Marie Shelton imagines this as one of the main tasks of an author like Rhys, explaining that “the intention of the postcolonial writer is to write an unknown history and escape the finality of the colonizer’s Word”(138). Nor is Rhys the only writer to write such an unknown history of the Brontës’ work.

Condé offers a similar sort of repetition with a difference, though the subversive potentialities of her conclusion choices come not from ending her retelling “prematurely” but from continuing it beyond where Emily Brontë stopped. The reconciling marriage of the second Cathy and the second Heathcliff (Hareton Earnshaw) is only a projected reality in Wuthering Heights, one that the narrator Nelly proclaims will be “the crown of all [her] wishes” (302). This marriage is actually realized in La Migration des Coeurs, but there we are forced to confront what Brontë seems to gloss over: a legacy of hatred and prejudices that spans generations and
cannot be wiped clean simply by one young man learning to read and falling in love. Cathy II and Razyé/Heathcliff II can only experience a brief, furtive happiness, continually haunted by the pasts of their parents and their nation. Condé thus implicitly questions Brontë’s happy ending, even ambiguous and unsettling as that happy ending was. She will not allow her characters, embodying as they do centuries of class and racial conflict, to enjoy any cheap grace but instead makes them the victims of consequences of disasters and bitternesses at once international and familial.

It would be a mistake, however, to equate *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* with novels of the oppressor, now justly replaced by the *real* stories that Rhys and Condé have to offer us. Indeed Condé and Rhys themselves would likely reject such an idea. It would be an equally egregious error to treat all four texts as outside space and time, to assume that the Brontës absorbed none of the racism in which their culture was steeped. It would be a mistake to assume that the plight of a poor white governess is somehow the equivalent of the situation of a white Creole, or that either could have any understanding of the difficulties attending the life of a Caribbean woman with African blood. I am proposing neither a resanctification nor a rewriting of the canon. I am, however, seeking to examine all four texts in the light of Spivak’s notion of ethical responsibility: the “ethical stance,” according to Benjamin Graves, “of making discursive room for the Other to exist.” I wish to use these four novels as a lens through which to examine the underside of the literature we so deeply admire and the lauded skill of reading and writing such literature. I wish to examine the ways in which four very different women imagine the stories they had to tell.

The stories narrated to us are markedly different and yet inextricably related. As we follow the lives of Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw Linton, Antoinette Cosway Mason and
Catherine Gangeur de Linsseuil, we are compelled to consider questions of oppression, femininity, colonialism and the power and poison inherent in human relationships. Any study of these four novels, or of any four novels on similar themes, would necessarily discuss the intertextual conversations taking place and serve as a model for the sort of comparative criticism I am proposing as particularly useful in the classroom. These four novels, however, serve as one of the best possible examples for two important reasons: firstly, that the intertextual conversation is self-conscious and unavoidable, with each work, though also readable as a stand-alone novel, necessarily informing our viewpoint of the other three. Secondly, and even more importantly, because these novels themselves use fiction to enter the debate about the power and burden of literature, the most fascinating element of this particular four-way conversation is the portrait it offers us of the many-sided nature of textual creation, of reading and writing, language and narrative. Literacy and the ability to manipulate language are at once both a blessing and a curse for all of our heroines and their families. We see it function as a tool for social advancement and, more importantly, a way to form deep and lasting relationships. Yet at the same time, literacy is not a panacea or even always a positive development. It frequently appears as tool in the hands of powerful figures seeking to impose on others an inimical worldview. It brings destruction and despair in the form of letters, journals and marriage certificates; it summons ghosts and lays them to rest again. It privileges given languages and dialects over others and creates an odd disjunction in the text as the authors make the choice to transcribe the unprivileged languages and to translate them (or not). It raises questions of narration, voice and ownership of this text or any text, and forces us to examine the ways in which putting pen to paper can both liberate and silence, depending on what society is willing to hear and the extent to which society is willing to admit female or native ownership of a text.
Textual ownership becomes crucial for the characters of these stories if they are to avoid the many pitfalls and dangers of literacy; such a theory explains, among other things, the relatively positive attitude towards literacy and textual narrative in *Jane Eyre*, a first-person story, as opposed to the other three. Allowing each character a voice and a narrative does not seem to be a sure answer to any problem, however; though Condé allows over a dozen first person narrators, though Rhys offers two perspectives on a failed marriage, and though Emily Brontë layers her narrative through two and sometimes three pairs of eyes, the negative potentialities of literacy as a dominating, colonizing force remain. What *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *La Migration des Coeurs* can teach us is how to recognize those negative potentialities and work with them. The first step in addressing a challenge is admitting that it does, in fact, exist.

There are more challenges inherent in the discussion of English literature than many people suspect. I find the most interesting and relevant aspect of the interplay between these four novels to be the potential implications for pedagogy and practice in English education, and the secondary level and beyond. Teachers now face predictions that in the next decade over forty percent of students will be English Language Learner classified, or students whose first language is not English (Herrera & Murray). Given such a rapidly changing student body, we must reexamine the canon as we teach it and the way in which we teach it. Bringing the conversation between Jean Rhys and Charlotte Brontë or that between Emily Brontë and Maryse Condé into the classroom allows for the examination of diverse languages, dialects, and questions of our own identities as readers, writers and human beings. Literacy in English can be both liberating and crippling; and as a future teacher and a person of faith I seek strategies to prevent it from
becoming a poison instead of a gift. The exchange among these four authors may well offer those strategies.

The conversation among all four texts is naturally fascinating; it is Caroline Rody who points out that “the intertextual pairing of Rhys’s revision and its canonical mother text has itself become canonical, has come to typify the late-century feminist relationship of legacy and resistance to traditions of women’s writing, as well as the postcolonial appropriation of canonical European texts” (133). Though of much more recent publication and only available in a translation designed more for commercial than academic success, *La Migration des Coeurs* has also attracted critical attention and invited comparison with its source text. The novels should each likewise be compared to their closest contemporaries; connections and cross-influences between *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are natural when we consider they were written nearly simultaneously and in the same home, but the relationship between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *La Migration des Coeurs* is also significant. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the story of immediately-post-emancipation Jamaica, written by and from the point of view of a white Creole. *La Migration des Coeurs* is written by a native African-Caribbean, set around the failed battle for not only individual but national independence that convulsed the west Indies in the early 20th century. By examining all four novels in relation to each other and in relation to times and places in which each was written, it is possible to gather a complex and nuanced portrait of the impact of language, literacy and storytelling on a wide range of peoples and places.

Charlotte Brontë’s most famous work is the story of an orphan turned governess; it begins with young Jane crouched over a book and ends with her writing at the dictation of her blind husband. Rife with books and letters, pen and ink, it is a novel where “the question of literacy – not just of reading and writing, but of who reads and writes, and what gets read and
written – is central” (Brantlinger115). *Wuthering Heights*, the only novel of Charlotte’s sister Emily, is just as preoccupied with questions of the written and spoken word. The main plotline is introduced when the narrator sees a name carved on a door and later examines a ledge “covered with writing scratched on the paint” (19) and then discovers a makeshift diary in a pile of old books, childish print “covering every morsel of blank the printer had left” (20). His literary discoveries summon forth the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw Linton, dead twenty years and still dominating the life of her childhood companion Heathcliff. The novel ends with a similarly textual image, when a reading lesson between Catherine’s daughter and nephew doubles as a courtship whose consummation will make amends for two generations of betrayal and revenge. Such is the place of literacy in two of the most well-known works of the English canon, but we find a significantly more ambiguous response in the two post-colonial revisions.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is a postcolonial companion to *Jane Eyre*, a prequel of sorts. Rhys, herself born in the Caribbean, responded to *Jane Eyre* and Bertha Mason with now-famous words of sympathy and interest: “She seemed like such a poor ghost. I thought I’d write her a life” (*Rhys Letters*). By telling us the story of “Antoinette”’s difficult childhood and youth as a white Creole accepted neither by the African-Caribbean nor by the “pureblood” Europeans, Rhys fundamentally alters our perception of not only Bertha but of Edward Rochester also. After a traumatic childhood and a quiet youth spent surrounded by education and religion (not unlike *Jane Eyre*), Antoinette finds herself married to an unnamed Englishman who takes control of the narrative to recount the couple’s brief happiness (a happiness never hinted at in Brontë) and detail the slow collapse of their relationship. Ultimately it is “the Englishman’s” atrocious conduct (particularly his adultery in the room next to his wife’s) that drives Antoinette/Bertha into insanity, not, as Brontë claimed, her own excesses and debaucheries. The third and shortest
part of the novel gives Antoinette her voice again and allows her as well a measure of triumph
and escape through her decision to burn her husband’s estate and leap to her own death. Though
Rhys goes to great lengths to avoid demonizing Rochester as Bertha was demonized in Jane
Eyre, Wide Sargasso Sea tells its story in a way that leaves Brontë readers uncomfortable and
dissatisfied with the prejudiced and self-exculpatory account Rochester offers to Jane. It is
impossible to view Jane’s “blind but beloved master” in quite the same light once we have
watched him be willfully blind to his frightened young wife’s fragility.

Rhys takes many liberties with her source text, deliberately challenging and exploding
Brontë’s portrait of Bertha Antoinetta Mason as a brutish Creole madwoman who was a model
of lust and depravity even when she was sane. Yet the story of Wide Sargasso Sea remains
recognizably based on Charlotte Brontë’s work, and Rhys will occasionally even lift entire
phrases or bits of dialogue from Jane Eyre. Wuthering Heights might seem a ripe candidate for a
similar “prequel.” Where does the brutal, racially ambiguous Heathcliff come from, after all?
How does he gain the fortune with which he returns to the Heights? Instead of trying to answer
these questions, Maryse Condé’s homage to Emily Brontë takes the core story of Wuthering
Heights and transplants it to Martinique, Cuba, and Guadeloupe at the turn of the twentieth
century, using the political upheaval of the transition from a slave society as the backdrop for the
emotional upheaval she describes.

La Migration des Coeurs (Windward Heights) is not a new look at Wuthering Heights so
much as it is an actual rewriting. It tells us the story of Cathy Gagneur and the orphan boy her
father brings home on a whim, the doomed love between these childhood friends, and how the
consequences of that soured passion shadow their children’s footsteps. Razyé (a Creole word
meaning “heath”) is as brutal and Cathy as capricious as their British predecessors, but the
setting provides Conde with surprising parallels to Bronte’s novel. The complex class divisions of mid-19th-century England are mirrored in the racial hierarchy of the Caribbean, every character identified instantly and definitively as African, European, white Creole (“béké”), Indian, or any varying mixture. Razyé, besides being poor and parentless, is also “a little black boy or Indian half-caste” (Conde 21), making his relationship with the light mulatto Cathy even more transgressive.

Cathy and her brother Hubert are of mixed race striving to rise above their dark blood; Aymeric de Linsseuil, the Linton figure, is a béké educated in Europe who marries Cathy in his role of benevolent, paternalistic uplifter of the African race. After Hubert also marries a béké and Razyé’s raw and violent sexuality seduces Aymeric’s sister Isabelle, the second-generation interplay between three mixed-race children becomes a complex and unsettling story of racial conflict, self-hatred and implied incest. In the novel’s most disturbing reincarnational image, Cathy’s daughter Cathy II looks nothing like her mother or her supposed father but is, instead, Razyé in female form, a phenomenon never truly explained.

While Brontë’s work ends on a note of dubious hope, with an impending marriage between Cathy II and her cousin Hareton, Conde’s story is far more unsettling. When Razye II and Cathy II marry, ghosts are not laid to rest; instead, both feel from the beginning that their love is somehow sinful, a sin that eventually crystallizes as a suspicion that they share the same father in Razyé. After Cathy II dies in childbirth, her little daughter’s future is left in doubt and Conde ends with a line that feels far more like wishful thinking than ringing reassurance: “Such a lovely child could not be cursed” (378). Conde makes concrete much that is only intimated in Wuthering Heights: racial prejudice, incestuous relationships, even the eerie possibility of communion with the dead, which seems if anything more at home when skillfully connected to
the voodoo of Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Cuba. Yet Condé’s story is still clearly her own; she weaves into the plot issues of race and politics unique to the Caribbean and does not hesitate to kill off or resurrect characters that Brontë handled differently.

The surface message in all four texts, and most especially in *Jane Eyre*, might appear to be as simple as a poster in a first-grade classroom: reading equals power. Indeed, more than power, reading equals connection, community – a value that equals survival to the woman expected to make her life through her men, whether in 1840’s England or 1890’s Guadeloupe. Jane Eyre finds her first true friend as a child, Helen Burns, because Helen is reading and that “occupation [touche] a chord of sympathy somewhere; for [Jane too likes] reading” (C. Brontë 41). When she loses her academic and spiritual community at Lowood School through Helen’s death and Miss Temple’s marriage, she uses her education to find a new community, one that becomes in effect her family. When this community collapses around her, she is drawn into a new community by her glimpses of two young women reading together (C. Brontë 283). It will be text, in the form of a name idly scrawled in the margins, which ultimately leads to the revelation of Jane’s newly discovered family. At the close of the novel, reunited with Rochester as “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh” (C. Brontë 384), Jane continues to use her literacy as a means of forming and enhancing community: her Edward sees not only landscapes but also “books through [her]” and it is as she is “writing a letter to his dictation” that Rochester makes the thrilling discovery that he is recovering sight in one eye, a development that Jane again casts in terms of his renewed ability to connect with the world, herself, and his family:

[T]he sky is no longer a blank to him – the earth no longer a void. . . . When his firstborn was put into his arms, he could see that the boy had inherited his own eyes, as they once were – large, brilliant, and black. (C. Brontë 384-5)
Even after his eyesight is restored, Jane remains indispensable to Rochester; she is still his "right hand" and amanuensis, the means by which he can communicate textually with others, and therefore the possessor of great power.

The strongest connections between literacy, community and power for Jane exist, of course, in the mere existence of her text. Called by Lisa Sternlieb the "first great female narrator of the Victorian novel," Jane recounts her own story over and against the attempts of Brocklehurst, St. John and others who claim to narrate her life for her. Sternlieb points out that Jane keeps the secret of her literary power even from the husband with whom she is so intimately joined, for he never reads the novel in which she recounts her life. Final proof of this textual inviolability comes when Jane shares with the reader the secret of the mysterious summons she receives at Moor House, but admits that she never tells Rochester of the miraculous occurrence. Her "I listened to Mr. Rochester's narrative; but made no disclosure in return...I kept these things, then, and pondered them in my heart" (C. Brontë 381) amounts to an "explicit confession that Rochester never has and never will read the novel to which the reader is afforded such intimate access" (Sternlieb 513).¹ From her silent communion with Bewick's birds as a child to her literary outreach and familiar address to thousands of unknown readers, Jane Eyre finds herself empowered by the written word, using it to forge the relationships and communities denied her as a child and vital to her emotional and physical survival.

A similar phenomenon takes place in Wuthering Heights, particularly in the closing chapter. From the start of the novel, reading and writing function as avenues for connection: Lockwood's spelling over of Catherine Earnshaw's name and her childhood diaries acts like an

¹ Jane's words are an explicit echo of the description of the Virgin Mary's actions after the birth of Christ (Luke 2:19), a choice particularly interesting if we consider Jane as the bearer of the word (or the Word) in her text.
incantation, summoning her ghost to the Heights. One of the first signs of the tragic telos of Heathcliff and Cathy’s relationship is Heathcliff’s abandonment of literary pursuits:

“Continual hard work...extinguished any curiosity he once possessed in pursuit of knowledge, and any love for books or learning .... He struggled long to keep up in equality with Cathy in her studies, and yielded with poignant though silent regret.” (E. Brontë 66)

Only a page after this admission of his faltering literacy, when Cathy spitefully informs him that “you might be dumb, or a baby, for all you say to amuse me!” Heathcliff is shocked and hurt. Later that same evening Cathy says the fatal words, “I could never marry Heathcliff,” that send him fleeing into the night, not to be seen for years.

After returning, Heathcliff retains sufficient literacy to write to a dying Cathy; however, he forces his way in, unannounced, rather than waiting for his text to gain him admittance. He destroys all of Cathy’s daughter's books when she comes to live at Wuthering Heights, denouncing it as “trash.” Young Hareton seems set at first to follow in Heathcliff’s footprints, scorning “book-larning”, denouncing an inscription as “some damnable writing,” and dismissing literacy altogether with, “Why, where the devil is the use on’t?” (E. Brontë 213). Even after he alters his views sufficiently to wish to learn to read, Cathy II mocks him for his efforts and accuses him of tainting any enjoyment she herself had had from literacy by his “debas[ing]” and “profane[ing]” of her few remaining books. In a scene that seems to destroy permanently all hope of friendship, Hareton burns the books he has borrowed from an unwitting Cathy and responds to her “saucy tongue” (E. Brontë 288) with physical violence. Yet ultimately a repentant Cathy “employ[s] herself in wrapping a handsome book neatly in white paper, and having tied it with a bit of ribbon and addressed it to ‘Mr. Hareton Earnshaw,’” she initiates a
reconciliation that ends with an idyllic scene between a refined, "respectably dressed" Hareton and a beautiful, newly joyous Cathy II, a reading lesson where the rewards are kisses and ultimately marriage (E. Brontë 293). Literacy here accomplishes more than simply elevating Hareton or cheering Catherine; the union of these two, each deliberately cast as a gentler double of the first Cathy and Heathcliff, puts an end to a cycle of abuse, betrayal, and physical and emotional sadism that began decades before.

The Hareton and Cathy equivalents in *La Migration des Coeurs*, Cathy II and Razyé II, also encounter each other as the result of literary yearnings, although here the stakes are even higher. Literacy – symbolized by the school diploma for which Razyé II seeks tutoring from Cathy II, the island schoolmistress – is his only opportunity to lift himself from the dead-end manual labor that he feels is slowly devouring his imagination. His cousin Justin-Marie treats education as the road to power and vengeance, fantasizing that "Yes, perhaps he would become a lawyer in order to avenge [the poor] and punish the well to do." Cathy the second becomes a schoolmistress and transmits literacy to her students to such an extent that "after only one year of teaching, ninety-five percent of Cathy's pupils received scholarships and six fishermen's children were admitted to the lycée Carnot in La Pointe" (Condé 232). Cathy II’s literacy, a legacy of her beloved father, has in fact rescued her from the sort of self-prostitution that seems to await her two elder brothers:

"[Aymeric] had guaranteed a pension for his workers. Bravo! But what about his sons, now that they didn’t have a cent to their name? They had no inclination to study for years and years to become civil servants. So what was left? Marry some richly endowed mulatto girl, prepared to do anything to whiten her blood? Many of the white Creoles
were now indulging in that little game, and the priests working as go-betweens had their surplices full of the right addresses.” (230)

Even in the torment of her marriage to Razye II and her painful pregnancy, Cathy relies on her journal, telling a friend: “if I didn’t have this, my diary, I think I’d be dead already. I write everything, everything in here” (327). The release she finds mirrors Brontë’s first Cathy, keeping her “regular diary, scrawled in an unformed, childish hand” in the margins of her books (E. Brontë 20). However, while Cathy de Linsseuil may find her journal a comfort, her husband Razye II/Aymeric views it as a ticking bomb. After Cathy’s death, he throws it away rather than face what it might say about the past. He dreads, among other things, that it contains confirmation of his own suspicions that he and Cathy share a father in Razye and have therefore been engaging in incest:

“He took the diary out of his pocket again and gazed at it. The truth was there. Written in these few pages. All he had to do was turn them and he would know . . . who knows if another Cathy would not emerge as he turned the pages? If he read her diary, all the memories he kept of her might be drastically changed . . . Without hesitating, he threw it overboard . . . Whatever Cathy’s secrets might have been, he would never know their monstrosities.” (Condé 334)

Razye II has recognized the danger of text, its potential to destroy flimsy human lives.

Even Rhys’ Antoinette had been slow to realize this, for at one point she sees literacy and writing as useful, though that faith proves misplaced. Antoinette manages, while imprisoned in Thornfield, to find pen and paper and uses it in a vain attempt to escape:
“Where, where is this letter? It was short because I remembered that Richard [Mason] does not like long letters. Dear Richard please take me away from this place where I am dying because it is so cold and dark.” (108)

Richard, of course, does not come to save her and does not even receive her letter; he has his own concerns and looks on his stepsister “as though [she] were a stranger” (109). He leaves her alone in the cold of Thornfield. This is the other side of writing and literacy in this intertextual conversation we are examining: oftentimes ink and paper are simply ink and paper, powerless and flimsy. And sometimes text emerges from the page not to liberate and aid, but to oppress and grind down.

Reading and writing often function to fundamentally recreate and reinforce the status quo. If we expect any form of text to resist the literary drift towards stasis and frigidity, surely we would turn to letters. Letters lack the impositionary status of actual narrative, and would seem to carry within them a greater potential for a communal, positive expression. However, the Brontës, Condé and Rhys do not offer a positive picture of textual communication. In fact, letters in these four novels often serve to either initiate disaster or whitewash a calamity.

It doesn’t pay to be sanguine about the arrival of the postman, at least not in these literary universes. When Daniel Cosway’s missive arrives at Granbois, Rhys’ Rochester believes the false history it describes for Antoinette.² He greets the letter as the textual (and therefore irrefutable) confirmation of what he has always been inclined to believe about his insufficiently-European bride: “It was as if I’d expected it, been waiting for it” (Rhys 59). With this letter and

² Most Wide Sargasso Sea scholarship does not believe Daniel Cosway is lying; it suggests that Antoinette and her mixed-race cousin, Sandi, engaged in a sexual love affair before her marriage. However, an examination of the text in light of Rhys’ letter of 14 April 1964 and her poem “Obeah Night” suggests that Antoinette and Sandi’s affair takes place “back in Spanish Town” (140) during a brief interlude between the Granbois section and Rochester’s final decision to “haul her to England, lock her up in a cold dark room, deprive her of all she’s used to – watch her growing mad” (140).
his belief of it, hope vanishes from the marriage; Cosway’s coarse insinuations of Antoinette’s madness and promiscuity dovetail so completely with Rochester’s European expectations of a white Creole that he is unable to accept Antoinette’s own fumbling attempt at explaining her past. The *Jane Eyre*-conscious reader is aware of the irony, of course, that Rochester’s second marriage will also be destroyed (before it properly begins) by a letter, this time with *true* revelations about his own past, written by Antoinette’s (step)-brother, Richard Mason. Although Jane, like Rochester himself with Antoinette, allows the accused a brief space to attempt to defend himself, his eloquent defense cannot change the simple textual facts Mason brings.

Letters that do not summon a fatal past may whitewash a disturbing present. The “very pretty, and very silly” love letters that pass between Cathy’s daughter and Heathcliff’s son two years later serve as the start of a “love” that leaves Cathy II an orphan and a widow, disposed of all that was her father’s and her mother’s, a despairing and blighted woman whose one pleasure seems to be cruelly mocking Hareton’s attempts at literacy. Rochester’s letters to his father in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are consistently stilted and false, with no mention of the true state of his feelings or his marriage, and Jane’s own letters written in search of Rochester later prove ineffective, even as her own uncle’s letters seeking her had been. Isabella Linton’s rambling account of her new marriage bodes no good, in Nelly’s eyes, for that marriage’s future, and Edgar Linton’s “refusal of even a few lines to console Isabella” (E. Brontë 144) condemns his sister to a life of solitude and abuse.

Razyé’s letters to his Irmine’s parents, seeking their permission to marry her, receives textual confirmation of the same abandonment expressed in *Wuthering Heights*: 
“Since I was under age, Razyé had to write to my parents to get their permission, and my mother answered in her withered, shaky hand: *For us, Irmine is already dead. Do what you will with her.*” (106)

Justin-Marie, partly a Haret on and partly a Linton figure, will later write to his adopted parents, Irmine and Razyé, who has been raising the boy, uncannily like Catherine, as his heir and protégé. When Justin-Marie is enticed away for a holiday with Aymeric/Edgar, he overstays his original intention and indeed remains in Aymeric’s care until his death from tuberculosis. He writes to his adopted father in a way imical to Razyé and all he stands for: his letter comes on “elegant and cream-colored” paper, the handwriting “already assured” (my emphasis) as if Justin-Marie, once the embryonic revolutionary, has already been thoroughly absorbed into the conceit and decadence of bébé society. Razyé treats this text as “his defeat . . . inscribed . . . in writing” and hopelessly he “read[s] the short letter over and over again” (148). Merely by writing in the stilted language and elegant script of the white power structure, Justin-Marie has turned his back on his (admittedly dysfunctional) family, and his textual betrayal prompts Razyé to formulate the question the novel poses numerous times: “Tell me! What have you [white people] got that we haven’t got? You’re no better looking, no stronger, no more intelligent, and yet you win every time” (147).

The sign of white triumph in this case comes textually, although “triumph” is an uncertain word. Like its mother text, *Windward Heights* is not a story of one family or one man triumphing over another, but a story of pain, loss and love inextricably linked among families and generations, creating a legacy of furious hatred and equally furious passion that will not leave even the dead quiet in their graves. Text, whether letters, journals, or the more weighted books, often functions to reinforce the socio-economic (and racial) power structure that so
problematizes what begins as a child’s love affair. White over black, man over woman, rich over poor are all values often asserted by the texts within these texts.

Yet even if letters are problematic, surely literature itself is worth the risk. We turn especially to Jane Eyre, the story, after all, of an educator, for support for literature. Literary-minded scholars, necessarily lovers of literature themselves, often empathize with Jane’s rainy afternoon “shrined in double retirement” with a book. Yet blinded by our own love of literature – and hardly anticipating anti-literature sentiments in a seminal British work – we often miss the caveat that when little Jane seeks a book, she “tak[es] care that it should be one stored with pictures” and except for a few poetic “introductory pages” she “car[es] little” for the text therein, far more interested in the illustrations. From benign indifference, Jane’s attitude to text moves rapidly to outright terror when repulsive John Reed quite literally throws the book at her, knocking her to the ground as “caught up in a vicious metafictional narrative, woman thus physically experiences the violence of words” (Talairmach-Vielmas 123). His cruelty promotes a series of literary-derived insults that seem to imply that Jane’s main understanding of literature has been as a history of tyrants:

“‘You are like a murderer – you are like a slave driver – you are like the Roman Emperors!’

I had read Goldsmith’s ‘History of Rome,’ and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula, etc.” (C. Brontë 8)

Only a few chapters later, Jane finds that books cannot lift her out of depression, even a favored volume appearing “eerie and dreary” (17), and then, of course, she meets the forbidding Mr. Brocklehurst, with his insistence that she should enjoy certain books of the Bible and his “gift” of an imposing tract (28). After her subsequent tirade against her aunt, Jane finds that reading is
now a hopeless and uninteresting task, as if the “dreariness of [her] hated and hating position” makes textual enjoyment impossible (31).

Despite these negative early experiences with literature, Jane finds herself a good student and a well-liked, if stifled, teacher at Lowood school; she grows to appreciate literacy’s power, but it never becomes a fully innocuous force. Jane’s life is bracketed by two stern and oppressive Johns; after escaping her childhood tormenter, her reprobate cousin John Reed, she finds herself confronted as an adult with her Puritanical cousin St. John Rivers, an adversary much more formidable because he merits (and receives) her gratitude, affection and respect in a way her odious maternal cousin never could.

St. John is very much a man of the word and of the Word; an indefatigable parson and a future missionary, he is also “an accomplished and profound scholar” possessed of the “unsocial custom to read at meals” (336). Jane is initially intrigued but undaunted by him; she upbraids him with straightforward familiarity and a little glee, quite aware that “he had not imagined that a woman would dare to speak so to a man” (319). Their relationship moves from one of equals to one of oppression when St. John seeks to impose a language upon her, choosing to teach “Hindostanee.” Jane rises to the challenge, but she does “not love [her] servitude” and quickly sinks into a sense of suffocating depression. When she refuses St. John’s cold proposal of a utilitarian marriage, he punishes her with the Word, reading the Bible at her in the psychological equivalent of John Reed’s spiteful physical attacks nine years ago:

“The succeeding words thrilled me strangely as he spoke them: especially as I felt, by the slight, indescribable alteration in sound, that in uttering them, his eye had turned on me.
‘He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But,’ was slowly, distinctly read, ‘the fearful, and unbelieving, etc. shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.’

Henceforward I knew what fate St. John feared for me.” (355)

Jane resists his literary attack and refuses him a final time, buoyed up by the mysterious voice she hears from her erstwhile master. Yet even St. John’s final attempts to dominate her come in the form of text. He slips a letter under her door the next morning, warning her how near she is to losing “the Christian’s cross and the angel’s crown” (358); in his distant but courteous correspondence after Jane’s marriage he avoids all reference to her husband and expresses only his faintly reproachful good wishes: “he hopes [she is] happy, and trusts [she is] not of those who live without God in the world, and only mind earthly things” (383). Jane has freed herself from his literary attempts to control her, a fact crystallized in her decision to write her story – although we are compelled to remark that is St. John’s words, quoting the Bible, which close the novel.

Given the oppressive Johns at each end of Jane’s life, it is tempting to perceive Rochester as a benign intermission, a place where Jane – present in his home because of her literary prowess as a teacher – is a paid dependent ironically free from the potential imposition of others’ wishes. Yet when Jane returns to Thornfield after a brief absence, she finds Rochester “sitting [on a stile], a book and a pencil in his hand: he is writing” (206). We will learn later that he is actually writing his own story at this moment, or, more properly put, his story and Jane’s, casting their love as a charming “conte de fée” (wherein, significantly, the fairy that represents Jane is mute). He has “literally written their romance” imposing his own interpretation upon it (Talaimach-Vielmas 124): an act that, to the reader of Wide Sargasso Sea, creates a disturbing parallel between Jane and Bertha Antoinetta. Rochester sought to put her story on paper once,
too, during the long night as he writes to his father and his lawyers, planning their future while "all the time [he is] writing this letter a cock crow[s] persistently outside" for treason.

Rochester’s initial plan is a house in Spanish town, a distant but not abusive marriage. However, his ideas then begin to take on a more sinister cast:

“I scowled too as I re-read the letter I had written to the lawyers. However much I paid Jamaican servants I would never buy discretion . . . Wherever I went I would be talked about. I drank some more rum and, drinking, I drew a house surrounded by trees. A large house. I divided the third floor into rooms and in one room I drew a standing woman – a child’s scribble, a dot for a head, a larger one for the body, a triangle for the skirt, slanting lines for arms and feet. But it was an English house.” (98)

Hurling a book at the obstinate cock that disrupts his concentration, Rhys’ Englishman has created an oppressive reality with pen and paper, one which the reader knows Antoinette will only escape through suicide. He is capable of manipulating language, twisting words to suit his own agenda, or the agendas of those more powerful than he, as when he consistently alters his own passionate epistles, “the letter [he] meant to write,” until they conform with the barbed respect he is expected to show his father (97). His manipulation of text – to overpower and to conceal – has been foreshadowed by Daniel Cosway’s vociferations against the textual memory of his father, a man who hurled an inkstand at his illegitimate son:

“My father old Cosway, with his white marble tablet in the English church at Spanish Town for all to see. It have a crest on it and motto in Latin and words in big black letters. I never know such lies . . . ‘Pious,’ they write up. ‘Beloved by all.’ Not a word about the people he buy and sell like cattle. ‘Merciful to the weak,’ they write up. Mercy! The man have a heart like stone.” (73)
Text belongs specifically to the men of power in Jamaica; we see Antoinette interact with text only once, and this is not literally, but merely her plans to inscribe her name on her embroidery sampler (31). Her attempts to keep her name will fail, as the reader knows: Antoinette’s maiden name, Cosway, does not even appear in Bronte’s work, as if Rhys wishes to emphasize the way in which Antoinette’s identity has been layered over with that of men, first her stepfather and then her husband. Rochester succeeds for fifteen years in his attempts to write his wife out of existence.

Cathy de Linssseul, unwittingly, makes her own attempt to write history out of existence. When she comes to Marie-Galante as a school teacher, she leads her class of “little negro boy sand girls” to the local carnival “dressed up... as marquises and princesses replete with cotton wigs and fans,” an amusement for which Razyé II mocks her viciously, accusing her of blinding herself to any understanding of the real nature of the island and her students:

“‘You can change grandsons of slaves into marquises,’ he said. ‘So you are capable of doing anything you want.’ . . .

‘That was for fun. The carnival is an amusement.’ . . .

‘You could have played at other things. Dressing them up as Mandingo ancestors or Maroons, for example . . . Do you know the history of this piece of land? . . . And of these people who seem so harmless to you?’

She did not say a word, but, despite herself, she felt tears rushing to her eyes. His voice became softer.

‘I’ll take you to the Punchbowl Pond or else Tartenson Heights, where a few years back the crowd stood up to the gendarmes. And then you’ll see who the people of Marie-Galante really are, the people you think are as tame as turtles’” (233)
Although acting with the best of intentions, Cathy has also forbidden her students to speak Creole at school, eliciting discontent from the parents: “Creole is our mother tongue, they grumbled. Any one who prevented its natural expression silenced a child for life” (238). Cathy limits the historic and linguistic expression of her students’ identity, imposing upon them her own béké concepts of proper language and literacy. She is doing no more than following in her father’s footsteps, for Aymeric was quick to offer English texts to the invalid Justin-Marie. Sanjita, an Indian servant, plans to introduce the dying young man to the oral stories of her own culture, but Aymeric moves more quickly:

“In order to amuse him, [Sanjita thinks], I wasn’t going to tell him the same old boring stories of silly Zamba and trickster Rabbit. Oh no! I would make him dream with the wonderful adventures of Rama and Sita. Sashi, my father, did not even know the letters of the alphabet and yet he told us these tales without changing a word as if he was reading from an invisible book open in front of him . . . . Monsieur Aymeric was sitting at the head of the bed in a rocking chair. In one hand he was holding a book [by Gustave Flaubert] from which he was reading out loud . . . . With the other he was caressing the hand of Justin-Marie who, with a bored look, floated on the huge bed as in a boat at sea.” (164-5)

Brontë’s young Cathy and Heathcliff suffer similarly from an imposing elder, though in their case it is the foul-tempered Joseph. Secure in his position and supported by the tyrannical Hindley, Joseph commends his young charges to turn themselves to the “good books enough if ye’ll read them” and when the children react by hurling their “dingy volume” into the dog kennel, they are vigorously punished. Throughout their lives they will both be incapable of effective communication through textual means: when Heathcliff writes Cathy a letter, she only
seems to comprehend the signature: “She had not gathered its import … she merely pointed to the name, and gazed at me with mournful and questioning eagerness” (155). Indeed, one scholar has theorized that Heathcliff may have so far abandoned his early education by this point in the story that his own name is all he can write (Hansen).

Heathcliff raises Hareton to live in the same literary black hole. Prior to his eventual literacy, Hareton suffers acutely from both Cathy’s and Linton’s vicious mockery, and his early attempts to educate himself only give them more tools with which to belittle him. Andrew C. Hansen points out this ongoing battle in fact represents “a clash of oral and literary cultures” (60) that traps Hareton between oral and chirographic cultures; he has been Heathcliff’s heir to orality, but ultimately abandons him for Cathy the second and her literate culture. Heathcliff’s “demise really begins when he loses Hareton to the chirographic world” (Hansen 78), an insight which also applies to the written notice that Razyé receives when his own heir abandons him for Aymeric de Linsseuil and his European books.

Of course we understand that the violent and antisocial misfits, Heathcliff and Razyé, should hardly be taken as models, but the fact remains that adherence to a literate world is taken as a betrayal of place and blood, and, significantly, both tombstones indicate the ways in which, as Hansen says of Heathcliff, their “essence[s] [escapes] the world of written words,” single names carved in granite.

Given such a negative portrait of literature and text as exists in all four novels, we are left to wonder if the few positive facets of literature and text already mentioned can possibly outweigh the objections. Am I in the unenviable position of conducting a literary analysis on literature that condemns reading and writing? Not at all. A closer look reveals the potential
marriage of two opposing concepts, and allows us to thereby determine a strategy for both reading and teaching literature.

Some characters seem to cope best with the troubling potentials of literature by eschewing it altogether. Christophine, Antoinette’s black friend and servant, acts as the voice of the illiterate and seemingly powerless in her interactions with Rochester. He fears Christophine’s oral power with exaggerated terror; after his adultery reduces his wife to a drunken wreck, he reacts as if Christophine is at fault and it is she who constitutes the real threat to his well-being and the marriage’s: “I listened. Christophine was talking. My wife was crying... But whatever they were saying or singing was dangerous. I must protect myself” (96). Rochester sends Christophine away, depriving Antoinette of her one ally, frightened as he is by this strange old woman who “mutter[s] to herself. Not in patois. I knew the sound of patois by now” (97). Her final words to him are both a contemptuous rejection of his textually bordered worldview and a not-so-subtle affirmation of her own alternative power: “Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know” (97).

Heathcliff echoes Christophine in his rejection of text; though literacy is initially taken from him against his will, he construes this deprivation into an active assertion of negative strength by fostering further illiteracy. He works his revenge on Hindley, who precipitated his own degradation, by raising Hindley’s son to “take a pride in his brutishness” (212). Heathcliff himself, while keeping Hareton virtually mute, is himself a surprisingly powerful orator, capable of overpowering Cathy’s daughter quite persuasively. Despite the warnings of her father and Nelly after Heathcliff holds conversation with her, Cathy “regard[s] what she had heard as every syllable true,” and Nelly, herself an accomplished enough speaker to hold the main narrative voice in the tale, lacks the “skill to counteract the effect his account [has] produced” (226).
Heathcliff's command of oral culture is impressive, particularly in a story that focuses so extensively on passions and emotions that defy reason or articulation.

Razyé, in contrast to his Brontëan counterpart, is nearly mute; although immensely involved in politics, he sits silently at political meetings, which in itself gains him power of a sort:

"While the room rollicked and roared, Razyé did not say a word. I was told that at political meetings he always behaved like that. He didn't speak, he didn't shake hands, he gave no embraces, contemptuously considering all this a waste of time. As a result, women pressed around him like flies around a honeypot" (198).

When Razyé does speak, however, he speaks in the language that, according to Condé, renders him a genuine and impressive individual: Creole. Despite the relative silence of her hero, Condé, "like the Yorkshire author, is at pains to represent an oral culture" (Lionnet 54). Throughout her novel Condé establishes a contrast between the Creole language, fundamentally oral and hybrid, and the "francais-francais" spoken by the upper classes. Creole, with its blended nature and its lack of text, is the language of the people. Justin-Marie rejects his white, French-speaking uncle as "not natural. He's not a true person. He's not ... he's not real" (189). His interlocutor, an Indian young girl named Etiennise, initially mocks him:

"Now it's my turn to shrug my shoulders and scoff: 'What do you mean by a 'true person'? What do you mean by 'real'? People who speak gutter Creole, swear, drink rum and are at odds with everyone? Come and spend some time with my papa.'" (169).

Yet a few pages later she finds herself echoing and agreeing with his assessment, even as it frightens her:
“What would [Justin-Marie] have thought of these people around me? Would he have said they were real because they drank rum and beat the gwoka? Because they sang and danced, uninhibitedly shaking their bondas? Is that what it is to be real? Did he mean the white man’s ways are an obstacle to being real?” (175)

Condé rarely chooses to translate the Creole phrases sprinkled throughout the book, her own silent protest against the “French-French” imposed by people like Cathy II, forbidding her students to speak Creole. Indeed, French-French is imagined as a dominating and self-motivating force, overpowering Cathy’s well-meant attempts to greet her new neighbors at Marie-Galante:

“She tried to speak Creole, but those present could hear it was not her mother tongue and that it was proper French that was used to coming out of her mouth and was desperately trying to gain the upper hand” (225).

Condé’s approach to Creole is particularly telling as she is herself a Creole, writing from her homeland of Guadeloupe and occasionally facing criticism for not writing solely in Creole. R. Howard Block, however, points out that her very choice embodies the sort of tension necessary in literary studies, the both/and approach often indispensable:

“Face à l’alternative ... d’écrire en Francais ou en créole, Maryse, à la fin, ne choisit ni l’un ni l’autre. Elle choisit plutôt d’exercer son talent dans un Francais créolisé qui a réussi à transformer et à encracher la langue officielle de la France. (Faced with the alternative of writing in either French or creole, Maryse, in the end, chooses neither. She chooses rather to exercise her talent in a creolized French that has succeeded in transforming and enriching the official language of France.)” (182)
Far from being an inferior language that lacks textuality, Maryse Condé makes Creole in her works into an oral language that is not rendered wholly into text because it is beyond the confines of words on a page. She is “rejecting a culture while ironically using its linguistic and cultural codes” (Hewitt 80). Her emphasis on and understanding of the immense importance of minority languages (and of conveying that importance to others) creates a powerful metaphor for relationship, in and out of the text.

The equation of minority languages with truth and relationship and colonizer languages with distance and cruelty is established from the start in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well; in contrast to Antoinette’s mother, who pushes her away “calmly, coldly, without a word” (my emphasis), Christophine sings “patois songs” to her small charge and even teaches this language of communal bonds to the little white girl.

Even the definitions of “oppressor language” can alter; French, the language of imposed education and tyranny in *Windward Heights*, becomes the language of female intimacy and solidarity against Rochester’s often aggressive Englishness in *Jane Eyre*. Not withstanding Jane’s Anglocentric references to Adèle’s “French defects,” she sometimes bonds with the child against Rochester. Their close relationship is characterized through the French language; although Adèle speaks to Jane in relatively fluent English when she first meets her, the child switches in and out of French throughout the novel, using it sometimes to play the coquette with Rochester and sometimes to connect with Jane in their mutual isolation. Natalie Hess points out that Adèle, an illegitimate and marginalized figure, acts as the “avatar” of Jane’s own blurry social and familial position:

In one sense, then, little French speaking and flighty Adèle becomes the French double of prim and proper Jane. Both Adèle and Jane are orphans. One is an illegitimate daughter
of Mr. Rochester; the other almost becomes his illegitimate wife. Both live at Thornfield as dependents of Mr. Rochester. Both display their personalities through dress – Adèle through exaggerated refinement and Jane through overstated plainness. Since both the role of the French woman and the place of the governess are positions of suspect morality within the Victorian domestic ideal, both Adèle and Jane hover in the anomalous state between bourgeois propriety and suspected amorality. (Hess 16)

Hess identifies French as the language of Adèle’s frivolity, but it is also the language of her relationship to Jane, a language into which they fall whenever they seek to avoid the power Rochester has over their lives. After hearing the story of Adèle’s birth and realizing her orphaned state, Jane gravitates to the child in a subtly poignant moment of physical and linguistic communion:

But I stayed out a few minutes longer with Adèle and Pilot – ran a race with her, and played a game of battledore and shuttlecock. When we went in, and I had removed her bonnet and coat, I took her on my knee; kept her there an hour, allowing her to prattle as she liked, not rebuking even some little freedoms and trivialities into which she was apt to stray when much noticed; and which betrayed in her a superficiality of character, inherited probably from her mother, hardly congenial to an English mind. Still she had her merits; and I was disposed to appreciate all that was good in her to the utmost. (124)

Later, when both Jane and Adèle are relegated to the outskirts of their home by Rochester’s wealthy guests, Adèle shifts into French again to dwell longingly on the enjoyments from which, in her liminal state, she is now excluded. Peering out at the guests and hoping for a summons to the majority world, she reverts briefly to English, yet almost immediately returns to French, exclaiming sadly what a “dommage” it would be if she received a summons after
changing out of her party clothes – a summons both Jane and the reader know the child should not expect. Perched at the top of the stairs, on the margin of the life of the house, she eventually falls asleep with her head on Jane’s shoulder and is carried to bed. Jane’s return after Aunt Reed’s death is marked by Rochester’s ironic observation that Adèle is “prête à croquer sa petite maman anglaise” (ready to eat her little English mamma), and after he and Jane are affianced, the first conflict in their new relationship centers around Adèle’s presence when Rochester wishes to be alone with his future bride. The two marginalized young women commune again the night before Jane’s marriage, in a scene of Jane’s foreboding and fear:

I did not indeed dream of sorrow, but as little did I dream of joy; for I never slept at all. With little Adèle in my arms, I watched the slumber of childhood – so tranquil, so passionless, so innocent – and waited for the coming day: ... as soon as the sun rose I rose too. I remember Adèle clung to me as I left her; I remember I kissed her as I loosened her little hands from my neck; and I cried over her with strange emotion, and quitted her because I feared my sobs would break her still sound repose. She seemed the emblem of my past life; and he, I was now to array myself to meet, the dread, but adored, type of my unknown future day. (244)

After the aborted marriage, Adèle is sent to school, but at the close of the novel, Jane retrieves her. Adèle abandons her “French defects” in her new home because the threat of English male colonization has been neutralized by the way in which Jane has become Rochester’s text and voice. It is important to note that Jane’s command of French is cast in oral terms: she has “made a point of conversing with Madame Pierrot as often as [she] could” and of “applying [herself] to take pains with her accent” (87). The language thus functions, like Creole or patois, as an oral language of community against the oppressive impostures of those in power.
Throughout all four novels, we see an oral minority subculture with surprising potential. The question that faces us is this: in light of the strengths and problems we have already identified in the study of literature and text, is it possible to strike a middle ground, reconciling the positive aspects of literacy and orality while neutralizing literacy’s negative potentials? The answer teases us from the very forms of the novels we examine, for the closest thing to reconciliation comes through narration.

*Wuthering Heights* is a combination of literary and oral techniques; Brontë carefully mimics the dialects of the area, most especially, of course, with Joseph’s near-incomprehensible accent. The multi-layered format of the story is itself a comment on the benefits of the oral tradition; although the story comes to us in written form, we trust Nelly Dean, the oral narrator of the story, far more than we trust the priggish Lockwood who commits her words to the paper. Nelly herself is an example of reconciliation between literary and oral cultures: she is an accomplished storyteller who has also “read more than you would fancy...you could not open a book in this library that [she has] not looked into and got something out of also” (61). Bessie, a similar kindly servant in *Jane Eyre*, manages a similar balance between writing and speaking, for the stories she tells young Jane are a composite of both cultures: “passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and older ballads; or (as at a later period I discovered) from the pages of ‘Pamela,’ and ‘Henry, Earl of Moreland’ (7). Jane draws upon this oral/literary heritage later in life, as she casts her romance with Rochester in terms of a folktale, rather than the literary moonshine of “conte de fees” or saccharine poems which he offers. Jane responds to such a sentimentalized and literary account of her story by relying instead on “certain of Bessie’s tales”
from their first meeting; if she must speak of fairies, they will be part of the oral folktakes, the “North-of-England spirit[s],” not mute, gossamer-clad pixies who fly away to the moon.  

Indeed, at the close of the novel, Jane’s story is ultimately that of the union of oral and literary cultures. In contrast to St. John’s domineering texts, the positive relationships she has formed by the end of the novel are based on oral communication. When Jane first sees her future family, Mary is reading aloud to Diana, declaring of the German phrases, “That is strong….I relish it” (283); Jane herself comes to relish her German lessons, trading it only reluctant for St. John’s “crabbed Oriental scrolls” (338). When nearly overcome by St. John, Jane is saved by the oral intervention of Rochester, his voice coming to her across the moors when her letters have proved useless. Jane then recounts these oral triumphs to us in literature, a written form.

This ease of communication is just what Antoinette cannot master, to her grief; she is a “pale, silent creature” unable to articulate her fears on the morning of her wedding and incapable of articulating herself to Rochester after his “disillusionment” about her relationship with Sandi. “We must talk about it,” she pleads, desperate to save her marriage, for “I might never be able to tell you in any other place or at any other time” (78). But though Rochester, numb and distant, hears her out, she is unable to reach him:

I have said all I want to say. I have tried to make you understand. But nothing has changed... I will tell you any thing you wish to know, but in a few words because words are no use, I know that now. (81)

Rhys writes her novel as a way to compensate for Antoinette’s lack of voice, a way to articulate what the character cannot articulate either here or in Jane Eyre, where she gibbers, moans and snarls but speaks only once, offstage, and that to issue vampiristic threats. Yet Rhys does not

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3 Indeed, with its recurring motifs of fire, the presence of the powerful and unnerving “other woman” with a prior claim, and the need for the loyal woman who holds fast to her lover despite changes in fortune and appearance, Jane Eyre recalls the Scottish ballad of Tam Lin, taken by the fairies, and his fair Janet.
succumb to the temptation to make *Wide Sargasso Sea* solely Antoinette’s story; she artfully maintains the conversational aspect of oral culture in her form. The novel contains the viewpoints of Antoinette, Rochester and (briefly) Grace Poole, and Rhys even allows Antoinette to interject into Rochester’s narrative at one point, interrupting his voice long enough to give her own perspective even during “his” section of the novel. The result is, ironically, an articulate and communicative novel about the lack of articulation and communication.

Maryse Condé takes this conversational structure of a novel one step further: *Windward Heights* relies on the voices of not one, not two, but fourteen separate and individual voices to recount her story, fifteen if we include the omniscient third person narrator who fills in the gaps between the first-person accounts. These voices dialogue with one another, offering conflicting character portraits and motivation. Often Condé gives the narrative voice to a marginal individual, a close friend or a neighbor rather than a main character; in homage to Brontë’s story narrated by a housekeeper, seven of the fourteen first-person narrators in Condé’s work are servants, and Aymeric de Linsseuil, as the symbol of white power, is never given a first person voice. None of the stories are written down, that we know of – except that of course they are, because we hold them in our hands.

We are left with a tension between oral and literary voices, a creative simultaneity of discourse: novels, not only as textual artifacts that showcase the oppressive potentials of a literary culture, but also as textual creations that celebrate the power of oral traditions. It is this co-incidental and contradictory portrait, this multiplicity of voices that allows us to seek a positive solution to our dilemma – or rather, to accept that no pat solutions may exist. Our one hope is to remain in the kind of tension that is demonstrated by the conversations in and among
these four texts, to acknowledge the power of both oral and literary traditions and seek to wed the two as equals.

If education is to consist, as Freire demands, of a community of simultaneous teacher-students, then such literary conversations are indispensable. Examining the works of Rhys, Condé and the Brontës not only offers us an example of the kind of intertextual conversation that needs to be examined in the classroom but also gives us persuasive reasons to do so by documenting the good, the bad and the ugly of literature and textual creation. The classroom, a safe dialogic space devoted to the study of text, is perhaps the ideal place in which to enact this interactive and conversational approach to literature, engaging students, authors, teachers and text in a multilogue that demands a recognition of literature's power and a determination to use the power wisely.

I'm still married to my first love of literature, and I'd walk down the figurative aisle again, encouraging others to do so too. But I've found that it's important to engage all aspects of this creature to whom I am so devoted, and that certain parts of it should, perhaps, be treated no longer as strengths but as forms of oppression. I am not arguing that we ever cease studying, reveling in, and falling in love with literature. But let's make sure we come out of the honeymoon phase now and again, to build a mature and complex conversation among the writers, the readers and not-yet-eithers.
Works Cited


<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/misc/graves.html>


