

Atlantic World Research Network

Graduate Student Prize – 2016-2017

First Prize

Marc Keith, PhD Student in English, Nominated by Professor Christian Moraru

Title: "Placing the Other: Space, Place, and Transatlantic Communities in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*"

This essay successfully demonstrates that an important work in the post-colonial literary canon—Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)—anticipates certain important concerns in contemporary ecocriticism. Keith shows that the novel's chief subject, Antoinette ("Bertha") Mason so infamous in Rhys's master-text, *Jane Eyre*, is so identified with the geographies of her home islands of Jamaica and Martinique that her removal to England by Mr. Rochester is as much responsible for her eventual derangement as her mixed Creole heritage. In exploring the persistence of space and place in what many critics wish to see as our "postnational" era, Keith's sophisticated, interdisciplinary analysis addresses transatlantic history and literature in a deeply theorized and persuasive argument that connects literary theory with physics, geography, history, philosophy, and environmental studies. Most strikingly, Keith shows how Rhys encourages us to regard this sense of place, this spatial "relationality," more broadly—to include the "non-human world"—and that her novel dramatizes the difficulties and benefits of this conceptual broadening. Thus, while colonialist Atlantic world social networks—like those imagined by Brontë in the Nineteenth Century and experienced and reimagined by Rhys in the Twentieth—may promise a universal transcendence of place, Keith reminds us that places, like the displaced persons whom they have formed, may reassert themselves with a vengeance.