2020

Burying Bertha: Race and the Ungraveable Body in *Jane Eyre*

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CHAPTER 2

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Where is Bertha buried? Bertha Antoinette Mason Rochester falls to her death in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), hurtling fatally into the agstones of a burning Thorn eld Hall, where, according to an eyewit- ness, she "lay smashed on the pavement."[1] But where is she buried? Do her remains lie inside the local church in "the vault of the Rochesters," or among what are called the "green gravemounds" outside it (285)? Or is she mouldering where she fell on Thorn eld's grounds, another decaying object on that site of broken masonry, of ruination past redemption?

We cannot tell because Jane Eyre does not tell us, although hers is a narrative in which burial marking is a vital commitment of the narrator. Determining less the location of Bertha's interment than the scope and signi cance of its absence necessitates a review of other burials, themselves in some sense buried throughout the text—and yet generally, with the exception of the grave of Helen Burns, unremarked in the vast critical lit- erature regarding this novel. But graves throughout are generally clearly marked, making the absence of a grave for Bertha itself remarkable,

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 27 J. Pizzo, E. Houghton (eds.), *Charlotte Brontë, Embodiment and the Material World*, Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34855-7_2

particularly in conjunction with the consistent use of "grave" as an adjec- tive to describe Jane and other exemplary female characters, and Jane and Rochester's use of the word to signify their intimacy. The grave denied Bertha de nes Jane and her relationship with Rochester. For him and each of his wives, the grave is foundational, whether as a matter of location or locution.

The novel's sense of duty to the dead and buried, and more precisely to the dead *as* buried, has both literal and metaphoric signi cance. Elizabeth Gaskell wrote to George Smith that in composing her biography of Charlotte Brontë she was agreeing to "perform this grave duty laid upon me well and fully."[2] While certainly she intends to convey her

sense, with the word “grave,” of the seriousness of her task, with this word Gaskell also allies her affective, intellectual, and discursive duties with tending to the literal grave of her friend. And in this, she no doubt consciously fol- lows Brontë herself, who tended both literally and metaphorically to her sisters’ graves, justifying her 1850 Biographical Notice concerning her sis- ters Anne and Emily (prefacing *Wuthering Heights*): “I felt it a sacred duty to wipe the dust off their gravestones.”[3]

Brontë’s sense of duty to the dead understands mourning as both affect and task. In maintaining the legibility of the lettered stone by wiping away the dust potentially produced by the very body it marks, the mourner maintains the visibility of the deceased among the living, thus preventing a kind of social oblivion for the dead. This accords with Jane Eyre’s prac- tice, given that character’s scrupulous return, fteen years after Helen Burns’s death, to her burial place. Jane reports, “Her grave is in Brocklebridge churchyard: for fteen years after her death it was only cov- ered by a grassy mound; but now a gray marble tablet marks the spot, inscribed with her name, and the word ‘Resurgam’” (91). While we are in Brocklebridge churchyard we might note that when the Reverend Brocklehurst rst meets Jane, in threatening her with her own mortality he emphasizes his burial duties with something like relish, announcing, “I buried a little child of ve years old only a day or two since” (42). Later, when so many Lowood students fall ill, even the lowliest among them merits a report of burial: “some died at the school, and were buried qui- etly and quickly; the nature of the malady forbidding delay” (85).

But we hear of no such quiet or quick burial for Bertha, nor of any return on Jane’s or anyone’s part to mark or maintain her grave. I want to stress how unusual this is in this narrative. Even for absent characters, mortuarial information—if not the site, then at least the fact of burial—is

conveyed. Jane’s parents, for example: characters never met yet still accorded a respectable grave. St. John Rivers goes so far as to investigate, telling Jane the romantic tale in which her father, “a poor curate,” marries “a rich man’s daughter”: “Before two years passed, the rash pair were both dead, and laid quietly side by side under one slab” (371). Although they lie “side by side” quietly, their inseparability constitutes an on- going de - ance of her family’s judgement. Their grave, like Helen’s, is visited long years after their deaths. Rivers goes on to inform their daughter, paren- thetically, “(I have seen their grave; it formed part of the pavement of a huge churchyard surrounding the grim, soot-black old cathedral of an overgrown manufacturing town in—shire)” (371). Jane’s retrospective narration presents his description as an aside, but its evidentiary assertion grants her parents’ corpses a de nitive location and even something like a set of directions should she wish someday to visit them and pay her respects. And they are gone but not forgotten: Jane’s eventual nancial legacy from her father’s brother John Eyre of Madeira constitutes just such a remembrance, whereas her mother’s brother, John Reed of

Gateshead, deeply mourns his sister. His wife Mrs. Reed, when on her own deathbed, informs Jane of her uncle's grief regarding her mother's death: "he opposed the family's disowning her when she made her low marriage; and when news came of her death, he wept like a simple- ton" (232).

Even those whom it feels impossible to grieve are accorded clarity and visibility regarding the disposal of their dead bodies. Mrs. Reed, perpetra- tor of active harm to Jane in person and in her withholding of crucial information about the wealthy Eyre uncle whose heir she is, provides just such an example. Although Jane has hurried to Gateshead from Thorn eld to attend Mrs. Reed's deathbed, she regrets that "I was not present to close her eyes; nor were either of her daughters." Once Mrs. Reed is "laid out," however, Jane sits with the deceased. She later recalls: "A strange and solemn object was that corpse to me. I gazed on it with gloom and pain: nothing soft, nothing sweet, nothing pitying, or hopeful, or subdu- ing, did it inspire; only a grating anguish for *her* woes—not *my* loss—and a sombre tearless dismay at the fearfulness of death in such a form" (240). Although Mrs. Reed's family does not mourn her (Jane reports that as she and her cousin Eliza took leave of the corpse, "Neither of us dropt a tear" [240]), Jane accords her aunt's body sustained re ection. All participate in the "funeral," including Mrs. Reed's brother Mr. Gibson, who "had come down to direct his sister's interment" (240). One may locate her woeful

"form" as easily as those that "inspire," deposited as it is alongside Mr. Reed in the "vault under the chancel of Gateshead church" (28), visions of which had terri ed the young Jane in the Red Room when imprisoned there by Mrs. Reed ("here he lay in state, hence his cof n was born by the undertaker's men" [26]).

Although at Lowood Jane "recoiled at the dread of seeing a corpse" (89), in the company of Mrs. Reed Jane's mind returns to the inspiration of Helen Burns, whose corpse she had in sleep embraced. At what Jane calls Helen's "placid deathbed" (237), perhaps the only one in the novel, her friend had counselled: "when you hear that I am dead you must be sure and not grieve: there is nothing to grieve about" (89). In this valedic- tion forbidding mourning, Helen in some sense anticipates Judith Butler's articulation of the "nefarious distinction that gets set up between griev- able and ungrievable lives."[4] In *Precarious Life* (2004) Butler asks, "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, nally, what *makes for a grievable life*?"[5] Butler takes up similar questions in *Frames of War* (2009), addressing the "differential distribution of grievability." Here she posits, "Forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently griev- able, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable."[6] As Helen's submission to, indeed insistence upon, her own ungrievability shows, it is not race only that makes for this socially prescribed condition. One might without dif culty trace as well the differences that gender, age, sexuality,

disability, and class also—and in intersectional ways—make to memorialization or its lack. But the insistent racialization of Bertha's Creole and representationally outsized body while living does seem to me to help begin to account for its entire disappearance in death. Butler posits that, "we cannot think the ontology of the body without the body being somewhere, without some 'thereness,'" suggesting that we "consider the modes of materialization through which a body exists and by means of which that existence can be sustained and/or jeopardized."[7] Bertha's 'thereness' is at once concealed and made manifest in the novel, but nally, the absence of material remains after her death calls into question the material form in which those around her are so heavily invested while she is alive, suggesting, I hope to show, that on some level, for them, she may not exist at all.

The OED has at this writing no entry for Butler's word "ungrievable"; given the term's apparently recent coinage perhaps it would be permissible for me to suggest another, related term: *grave-able*. A grievable life would

also constitute, in my formulation, a graveable life. We might thus ask, who counts as buriable, as worthy of being graved? What makes for a gra- veable life? In *Jane Eyre*, these are related but separable categories, as the examples I have just reviewed demonstrate: all characters may or may not be *grievable* after their deaths—Helen Burns is while Mrs. Reed is not— but all who die in the novel are *graveable* except for Bertha Antoinette Mason Rochester. After Mrs. Reed's death, Jane re ects on "her last moments: I saw her dis gured and discoloured face, and heard her strangely altered voice. I mused on the funeral day, the cof n, the hearse, the black train of tenants and servants—few was the number of relatives— the gaping vault, the silent church, the solemn service" (242). Jane also describes Bertha as possessing a distorted and "discoloured" face, and her voice as what might be considered an estranging one: guttural and inhu- man. But the novel affords Mrs. Reed a full-scale funeral. For all her cru- elty to Jane, and even in the absence of affective ties or actual mourning ("few was the number of relatives," Jane notes with strained neutrality) she is commemorated with cof n, hearse, and procession, before inter- ment in the Gateshead vault with "solemn service." Why not Bertha?

Butler suggests, considering our contemporary context, that race is the primary determinant in the relegation of a person to the condition of being ungrievable and I would argue that this distinction may hold in this Victorian context for the category of graveability. But what is Bertha's race? In a major formulation of this question, Gayatri Spivak calls Bertha "a gure produced by the axiomatics of imperialism," and identi es her as "white Jamaican Creole."[8] In another foundational essay on the racial gurations of Bertha, Susan L. Meyer notes that, as the "sister of the yellow-skinned yet socially white Mr. Mason" and as acceptable spouse of "the younger son of an aristocratic British family," Bertha is "clearly imag- ined as white—or as passing as white—in the novel's retrospective narra- tive." Meyer argues though, that when Bertha "actually emerges in the course of the action, the narrative associates her with blacks. In the form in which she

becomes visible in the novel, Bertha has *become* black, as she is constructed by the narrative." She cites Jane's description of Bertha's "'fearful blackened in ation of the lineaments'" as an example of this racial construction.[9] Patricia McKee remarks, however, that although the characteristics assigned to Bertha are "attached, within Victorian racial discourse, to biological darkness," nevertheless, none of them "quite assigns Bertha a biological blackness."[10]

"Critics have long disagreed over whether Bertha Mason is white or black," A. H. Murdoch observes.[11] And in being Creole, Bertha is, in a sense, both and neither—as attentive readers of her race have remarked. Meyer notes that the "word 'creole' was used in the nineteenth century to refer to both blacks and whites born in the West Indies, a usage which caused some confusion."[12] More recent scholars have sought to af rm rather than allay this confusion. Murdoch in an essay on "Creole indeter- minacy" calls Creole identi cation "an inherently unstable category." In Brontë's day, he argues, "contemporary discourses ... understood the Creole to be marked and overdetermined as different."[13] For my purposes here, it is precisely this overdetermination of the "necessary indetermi- nacy" of the Caribbean Creole that I would argue is determinative for Bertha's ungraveability.[14] This indeterminacy in her takes many forms, lit- erally, as critics have often observed. Regarding the scene in the novel in which a " gure ran backwards and forwards," a gure about which Jane muses, "whether beast or human being, one could not ... tell," Spivak argues, "Through Bertha Mason, the white Jamaican Creole, Brontë ren- ders the human/animal frontier as acceptably indeterminate."[15] Here again, Butler's questions are relevant: "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, nally, what *makes for a grievable life*?"

This indeterminacy as to whether Bertha counts as human extends to what kind of human, if she is one, she counts *as*: though at some times hypermobile, she is at all times incapacitated, that is, dis-abled as either cause or consequence of her carceral situation. Representations of Bertha disturb any notion of a binary between able-bodiedness and disability, just as they do distinctions between masculinity and femininity. Her sex is indeterminate, a result, her husband hints, of her having been oversexed, even as her privilege as the daughter of one wealthy man has led to her debasement as the wife of another one. Bertha's de nitional contours shift precipitously and constantly, not only, but most evidently, in her racial identity. Thus one might posit that Spivak and Meyer, although one calls Bertha "white" and the other calls her "black," might agree that, whatever the features of Bertha's indeterminacy, the novel gures it as dehumaniz- ing. Meyer calls her "the Jamaican Bertha-become-black."[16] The descrip- tor "black" is in this context a complex and contentious identi cation, as is the descriptor "become." "Becoming" is itself a necessarily indetermi- nate status; by its nature it is transitional and unstable. For my purposes here, what is valuable about an emphasis on "becoming" is a concomitant, if not commensurate, suggestion of the unbecoming that is the material

state of the dead body in its decay and dissolution. Because if we cannot quite determine Bertha's racial location, still less can we determine her corporeal one: that is, the location quite speci cally of her corpse. This disembodiment is striking for someone whose body, in its reportedly dra- matic beauty in Spanish Town and still more dramatic reported mon- strousness at Thorn eld, has posed so many problems for Rochester: as an object of desire and disgust, of disgusted desire. Bertha remains a problem in death, indeed, as remains that have somehow not remained.

To search for Bertha's grave is to search for a vacancy that will make visible the ways in which Brontë's novel gures her as not merely dead but as also non-existent. And when her dead body does attain visibility, I argue, that too is racialized. In what follows, I track the implications of Bertha's non-narratized burial, studying her death and the refusal to mourn or mark it, a gap we should understand in the context of the novel as a shocking dereliction of grave duty. I brie y—sometimes very brie y— posit nine options for the whereabouts of Bertha's corpse, bearing in mind throughout the centrality of race, gender, and disability to the complexi- ties of an ungraveable body. Some options are likelier than others; a few are in the nature of thought experiments. In the absence of actual infor- mation, these can of course proliferate, like conspiracy theories.

Spivak quotes Jean Rhys's comment in an interview about Bertha: "I thought I'd try to write her a life."[17] In writing her "a life," part of what Rhys articulates for the character is greater agency, and this should also inform any graveability project: it is not in Rochester's power alone either to marry Bertha or to bury her. Grievability and graveability, as terms and practices, place greater emphasis on the mourner, whether as a matter of affect or act: each risks prioritizing the living as possessing, as a kind of privilege or power, the capacity to withhold or bestow grief or a grave. I want therefore to suggest Bertha's contingent agency in what can seem a contradictory role, that of both casualty and engineer of her own ungrave- ability, a state in stark contrast to the graveable future ends gured for Rochester and Jane.

OptiOn One: ChurChyard

In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1850), when Catherine Earnshaw Linton is dying, she insists that she is not to be buried with the Lintons in Gimmerton Kirk but outside in the churchyard, where eventually Edgar Linton and Heathcliff each join her on either side, like two bookends.

Theirs are among the few outdoor graves, a rarity that apparently also characterizes the churchyard beyond Thorn eld's gates, where the head- stones are "few," though potentially of interest to the traveller. Recollecting what was to have been her wedding

day, Jane writes, “And now I can recall the picture of the gray old house of God rising calm before me.” “I remember something, too, of the green gravemounds,” she adds, “and I have not forgotten, either, two gures of strangers, straying amongst the low hillocks, and reading the mementoes graven on the few mossy head- stones” (285). Jane’s stress on the functioning of her own memory (“I can recall,” “I remember,” and “I have not forgotten”) corresponds to the memorializing function of the cemetery and indeed, the activity of the two men reading the “mementoes.” The gravemounds are green as must be the “mossy” headstones themselves; Jane’s vivid retrospection, writing this autobiography at Ferndean a decade after her marriage to Rochester nally does come to fruition, anticipates the greening of the grave that she will nd there.

The two “strangers”—whom we come to learn are Bertha’s brother Richard Mason and his solicitor—could be taken for the kinds of grave- yard tourists that already frequented the cemetery at Haworth, just out- side the parsonage where Patrick Brontë was incumbent, and which Gaskell describes as “terribly full of upright tombstones.”[18] Jane has previ- ously travelled, at least in her imagination, into what she describes as the “death-white realms” of Bewick’s landscapes. She comments on one of the scenes she describes: “I cannot tell what sentiment haunted the quite solitary churchyard, with its inscribed headstone” (21). Haunted less by spectres than by her own “sentiment,” the child Jane projects her own sense of isolation onto the churchyard, because, though in Bewick’s scene it may be unpeopled, I would argue that it can never be “quite solitary.” Any headstone must counter the “solitary” feel of a graveyard, because its inscription, whatever the particulars, indicates sociality. The inscribed headstone marks the deceased as part of a community that makes demands upon memory, necessarily announcing relationality, grievability, and graveability.

If Bertha is buried under one of the “green gravemounds” this would constitute the only occasion, other than that of her death, when we hear of her outside the con nes of Thorn eld Hall since her arrival there a decade previous to Jane’s own. Her burial in this verdant spot would con- stitute an accomplished escape as well as a public positioning in this local landscape. It would also grant her the positive association the novel

attaches consistently to “grave,” as both adjective and affect. Jane is g- ured repeatedly as “grave,” notably in the moment of her of cial intro- duction to Bertha by the husband they were to share. Rochester demands that Mason and his solicitor “look at the difference” between Bertha, who “sprang and grappled his throat viciously” and Jane, who, he says, “stands so grave and quiet” (290).

The quality of being grave is one Rochester observes and praises in Jane, as in their rst meeting when, he recalls to her, “you gravely offered me help” (308). He remarks in their conversations, “something singular about you ... quaint, quiet, grave and simple” (137), your “grave, quiet manner” (144). Though apparently so legible, there is something

unread- able to him in this affect: when unmasked as the gypsy fortune-teller, he asks Jane, "What does that grave smile signify?" (204); when unmasked as an attempted bigamist, he challenges, "You are looking grave" (308). Jane has been schooled in this solemn and serious demeanour at Lowood, by those whom she most admires. Her rst observation of Miss Temple is that "her countenance was grave, her bearing erect" (53); when a meal is deemed particularly inedible, she surveys her charges "silently and gravely" and then supplies them with bread and cheese (57). Jane also recounts how Helen Burns, when unjustly punished, "to my surprise ... neither wept nor blushed: composed, though grave, she stood" (62), and when Jane asks her about Miss Temple, "a soft smile itted over her grave face" (66). This sorority of gravity extends to Diana and Mary Rivers. Watching them through the window of Moor House, after days of hunger and nights sleeping rough, Jane observes they are "pale and grave" (326). "[A]ll delicacy and cultivation" (326), Diana and Mary join Miss Temple, Helen Burns, and their protégée Jane in enacting a form of expressive self- suppression. Their affect suggests overt submission to, and potential sub- version of, the patriarchal rule of Rivers, Brocklehurst, and Rochester, respectively. It is a sorority from which Bertha is excluded, or which she eschews; Jane affectively internalizes the space that Bertha will not enter.

Option two: rochester Vault

Somehow not wholly absorbed in the event of her own wedding, occur- ring at just this moment, Jane in the front of the church keeps an eye on the "two strangers," observing that

> they now stood by the vault of the Rochesters, their backs towards us, view- ing through the rails the old time-stained marble tomb, where a kneeling angel guarded the remains of Damer de Rochester, slain at Marston Moor in the time of the civil wars; and of Elizabeth, his wife (285)

The "old time-stained marble tomb" memorializes the dead but, more, their marriage; Damer de Rochester is named and so too, almost more rel- evantly, is "Elizabeth, his wife." This marital allusion is of course tting, in that Rochester, planning to take a new wife while the other still lives, seeks a kind of tacit burial of his legal wife, as if she were already dead. Perhaps this is why Bertha's brother Richard Mason, lurking at the Rochester vault with his attorney, as Meyer puts it, "oddly and apparently unnecessarily" declares her "parental lineage 'of Jonas Mason, merchant, and of Antoinetta Mason, his wife, a Creole.'" Meyer suggests that this attestation emphasizes that the "ambiguity of Bertha's race is marked by this designation of her mother as a 'Creole,'" which is surely right.[19] Mason's wording, however, seems less "odd" and "unnecessary" when one realizes that he is claiming for his sister precisely the kind of formal recognition graven into the Rochester vault around which he has lurked: its wording ("Elizabeth, his wife") inspires his own ("Antoinetta Mason, his wife"). After Bertha's demise, her burial in the

Rochester vault would constitute a public acknowl- edgement not only of her death but also of her life, a recognition that Bertha existed as his wife, and that the union conferred kinship and a kind of belonging in the country to which she had immigrated. Although at the cost of her death, it would constitute recognition that she had existed at all.

Jane does not report interment of the remains of Bertha in what would be her rightful place in the Rochester vault (as "Bertha, his wife"), but this ancestral grave is the rst place Jane thinks of when she returns to a ruined Thorn eld. Looking at "the drenched piles of rubbish," she wonders what brought the great hall down and notes, "My eye involuntarily wandered to the gray church tower near the gates, and I asked, 'Is he with Damer de Rochester, sharing the shelter of his narrow marble house?'" (414). Jane's association of Rochester with the grave is "involuntarily" and, like his regarding her, consistent. During all of her "changes of place and for- tune," she recalls, his "was a name graven on a tablet, fated to last as long as the marble it inscribed" (389). The lack of response to her previous attempts to learn of him by letter had suggested his possible placement in this sepulchre, a site clearly on her mind in her absence: "as well dispatch epistles to a vault in a church-aisle" (414). Like the gravemounds outside,

the vault inside is a place of active social de nition, indeed social reclama- tion, as Jane expects Rochester, whatever his wrongdoings, to merit inter- ment there. The Rochester vault welcomes and perhaps redeems its rightful inhabitants, unregenerate though they may be. Mrs. Fairfax, when giving Jane a tour of the third story of Thorn eld Hall (Bertha's habita- tion, we later learn), re ects, "it is said the Rochesters have been rather a violent than a quiet race in their time: perhaps, though, that is the reason they rest tranquilly in their graves now." Jane in answer offers a kind of benediction, drawn from *Macbeth*: "Yes—'after life's tful fever they sleep well,' I muttered" (113). We hear of no such blessing offered to Bertha after her own life's tful fever. Bertha's inhumation among the "violent ... race" of Rochesters would mark a grievability vouchsafed by English lit- erature no less than English history, precisely the reason that we may nd it unlikely that Bertha, condemned herself for a violence insistently racial- ized by her husband, shares this narrow marble shelter, or would want to.

Option three: exposure to the elements

When Jane rst sees Thorn eld again after her return from Moor House, she needs no one to tell her what has happened, as she attests that "the grim blackness of the stones told by what fate the Hall had fallen" (414). Do the stones also tell the fate of the woman who fell among them? The stones fall silent, so to speak, on this question, but we do have an account, from the proprietor of the Rochester Arms, an impeccable eyewitness. He recalls of Bertha: "she was standing, waving her arms, above the battle- ments, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off: I saw her and heard her with my own eyes. She was a big woman, and had long black hair: we could see it streaming against the ames as she

stood." He also saw Rochester emerge onto the roof, and his account represents not only the events there but also the event of witness itself: "I witnessed, and sev- eral more witnessed, Mr. Rochester ascend through the skylight on to the roof: we heard him call 'Bertha!'" Here, Bertha asserts her audibility and visibility. Having been long silenced, she can now be heard "a mile off"; having long been hidden, she now is "standing," an upright posture Jane's informant stresses twice in his description: "she stood" (417).

Impossible to say how long she might thus have stood in public. The publican notes how swift the shift once Rochester appears on the roof: "We saw him approach her; and then, ma'am, she yelled, and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement." Jane asks a

one-word question: "Dead?" Her informant echoes her: "Dead? Ay, 'dead' as the stones on which her brains and blood were scattered" (417). In describing Bertha as dead as the stones against which she has hurtled, the innkeeper makes vivid precisely what could not in fact be kept in: "her brains and blood." Splattered across the stones, this raw matter may not be suf ciently divisible from them to be reconstituted. Bertha's bloody scattering suggests the impossibility of collectable remains and thus the impossibility of any reintegration of her body.

Less a body without organs, she is a body only organs—brains and burst veins, not corpse but corpuscle. Bertha's exposure on the roof culminates in an exposure still more radically entire. I want to pause over how extraordinary this sight is: so graphic, so violent, and so uncompromising in its refusal of remains. I largely focus in this essay on what it is not given us to see—Bertha's grave—but it is what we *are* given to see that may well disturb more: the mutilated fragments of Bertha's "smashed" and wholly dis gured form. First unbowed (standing upright on the roof) and now bloodied, Bertha pays the price of her visibility in the open space Jane had experienced exultantly in her own earlier rooftop escape as "that arch of blue air" with an excess of visibility on the ground. Bertha is at once outside and inside out (114).

What are the ethics of this level of exposure in death? Bertha's corpse is denied not only a burial but also bodily integrity. We might look for at least the beginning of an explanation for this anomaly in the novel not to Victorian Britain but to contemporary America, because this vantage point can help make clear the centrality of Bertha's race to the ontology of her remains, and indeed to the lack of a corpse that might be integrated into the novel's mortuarial system. In her essay "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning" (2015), Claudia Rankine writes of the United States, "Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against."[20] Rankine contrasts two mourning mothers of slain black sons who articu- late different responses to the exposure of their sons' corpses. Mamie Till Mobley, mother of Emmett Till, who was murdered in 1955, insisted on an open

casket to allow viewing of her son's "mutilated and bloated body," thereby "placing both herself and her son's corpse in positions of refusal relative to the etiquette of grief." In so doing, Mobley turned "the tradi- tion of the lynched gure left out in public view as a warning to the black community ... against itself." In 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, Michael Brown's corpse was left unmoved and uncovered for hours where it fell, a "bullet-riddled body bleeding on the asphalt." His mother, Lesley

McSpadden, did not want "to expose her son's corpse to the media" but instead "wanted him covered and removed from sight." Rankine illumi- nates the ways this exposure of a mutilated body can constitute a highly racialized spectacle, one connected, as she puts it, to "the devaluation of the black body" and "the associations of blackness with inarticulate, bes- tial criminality." Rankine's essay comes to focus on the Black Lives Matter movement, which, she writes, "aligns with the dead, continues the mourn- ing and refuses the forgetting in front of all of us."[21] The case of the 'devalued' body of a ctional Creole woman in Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel sustains a connection to far more pressing current issues in this regard: namely, that Bertha's body bears the burden of both invisibility and over-exposure, and both conditions are marked by an absence of mourning that is the result of a relentless devaluation of her human being.

Bertha's burial by exposure to the elements, assuming her organs have been left where they "smashed," is not as fantastical an option as it may initially seem. Jane both dreads and desires it for herself. After the revela- tion of Rochester's attempted bigamy, Jane ees Thorn eld, rst on foot and then by coach, alighting randomly at a place called Whitcross, there to nd herself destitute and starving. Lying in a hidden glade, she imagines herself dying among the mossy stones, neither buried nor mourned. "Hopeless of the future," she recounts, "I wished but this—that my Maker had that night thought good to require my soul of me while I slept; and that this weary frame, absolved by death from further con ict with fate, had now but to decay quietly, and mingle in peace with the soil of this wilderness" (320). Jane seeks absolution by dissolution, desiring not only death but, more speci cally, to "decay quietly" and "mingle ... with the soil." Returning to the heath on her third night "by cross-ways and by- paths," she calls on her Maker to unmake her. Despite her exposure to the elements, however, these environs vouchsafe for her corpse a kind of pri- vacy. Looking out to the moorland, she calculates, "Well, I would rather die yonder than in a street, or on a frequented road ... And far better that crows and ravens ... should pick my esh from my bones, than that they should be prisoned in a workhouse cof n and moulder in a pauper's grave" (324–5). Jane has from childhood rejected the company of the poor. As she tells the "good apothecary" Mr. Lloyd after her terror in the Red Room, "I should not like to belong to poor people" (36). This night on the moorland, Jane re ects, "Not a tie holds me to human society at this moment" (318). This extreme social isolation renders her, she thinks, radically ungrievable and ungraveable. In such a condition, having one's

carrion pecked clean by crows seems the preferable, indeed, the purest option. But then Jane follows the lights to the Rivers household, variably called Moor House or Marsh End. There she nds both family and for- tune, thus escaping the unburied fate she had imagined and that Bertha, neither grieved nor graved, will endure—or engineer.

Option Four: Burial at Crossroads

Jane's desire for inhumation via exposure, "to decay quietly and mingle with the soil," is of course a consequence of her passing desire for what she will later, contemplating her fate were she to go to India, call "premature death." Jane conceives of that journey, for herself and for St. John Rivers, as a direct trajectory of "leaving England for India, and India for the grave" (395). Had an earlier early death been her fate, her arrival at Whitcross, which Jane describes as "but a stone pillar set up where four roads meet," would have been appropriate, given that crossroads were the traditional burial site for suicides (317). The novel is of course peppered with "premature" deaths, indeed suicides, although the line between willed and unwilled deaths can be a ne one, as is the line between censure and admiration for them. "They say he killed himself" (222) is the pronouncement on John Reed's death, and of course the innkeeper reports that Bertha "gave a spring" from the roof, an act and a moment, I think, of extraordinary complexity. Did Bertha fall or was she pushed? Neither, quite, and yet she is evidently compelled, if not directly propelled, to spring from the roof by the arrival of her husband. In the reported sequence of events, he approaches Bertha and as a consequence she springs; she springs and as a consequence she falls. "Mine is not a tendency to indirect assassination," Rochester tells Jane after she meets Bertha, explaining why he did not sequester his wife at his Ferndean property (297). But indirect assassination is perhaps what he commits when he bears down upon his wife on the roof, with the purpose, it may have seemed to her, less of rescue than of recapture.

The novel implicitly associates the self-slaughters of John Reed and Bertha Mason with moral censure, in keeping with its judgement on their roles as tormentors of Jane and Rochester (according to each of their accounts). This of course differs from the explicit admiration, mounting towards sancti cation, that Brontë's narrator accords the deaths of Helen Burns and St. John Rivers, each of whom is drawn knowingly and eagerly to death: their ends are explicably their ends, or aims. Acknowledging

Bertha's agency in her own end affords her some power, not only over her death but also over her disposal. Her refusal to return to Rochester under any circumstance or condition constitutes a refusal to remain with him, even as remains.

Option Five: inCineratiOn

As the re set by Bertha engulfs Thorn eld and all of its contents, answer- ing to Rochester's allusion to the Biblical gure of Achan (Joshua 7:25), who is "stoned with stones and burned with re," her "brains and blood" may have been similarly consumed by the ames in a form of auto- cremation. Given the novel's consistent judgement upon her of ungriev- ability and ungraveability, perhaps implicit in accounts of her death (and the absence of accounts regarding her burial) is the possibility she is burn- ing still. This too would constitute a fate she undergoes that is rst sug- gested for Jane. While still a child at Gateshead, Jane had been asked about hell re by Brocklehurst, "should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?" (43). Bertha, who as far as we know receives nei- ther memorial service nor interment, in her end combines both falling and burning, simultaneously and potentially "for ever." The spectacle of her smashed and soon to burn body, suffering—or scripting—a kind of narra- tive overkill, is the last we see or hear of her. Better to marry than to burn, Paul counsels in 1 Corinthians, although for Bertha the reverse may hold: better burning than this marriage; better incineration than incarceration.

Option Six: return hOme

This may be the most outlandish of my thought experiments, the most far-fetched, literally: namely, that Bertha's remains are shipped back to Spanish Town, Jamaica. Richard Mason has fairly recently made the jour- ney—why shouldn't she, in reverse? Following the example of Admiral Horatio Nelson, her remains could be preserved in alcohol (we recall that Jane's fortune derives from Madeira, where her uncle is a "wine-merchant"[100]). In Nelson's case, or cask, the alcohol was reportedly brandy, a controversial solution; many argued that rum would have served as a better preservative. If Bertha were returned home, this could consti- tute a kind of reverse of the Atlantic trade triangle that enables and sup- ports Jane's position and place in the world even as it destroys Bertha's, whether alive or dead.

Option SeVen: undead

In this seventh option, we might imagine that Bertha though dead sleep- eth not, but is one of the undead. This too might seem wildly far-fetched, but for the repeated naming of Bertha as a vampire. As Richard Mason, her own esh and blood, declares, regarding her attack on him: "She sucked the blood: she said she'd drain my heart" (214).

Option eight: Burial aliVe

The innkeeper of the Rochester Arms tells Jane regarding Bertha, as they regard the ruins of Thorn eld: "She was kept in very close con nement, ma'am; people even for some years were not absolutely certain of her exis- tence" (415). A con nement so "close" has

compromised existence itself, rendering it essentially uncertain (296). Bertha's restrictive space is sepul- chral, as Jane suggests when she recalls how the "attic seemed black as a vault" upon her return from the bright air atop the roof (114). The third- story passageway, which we later learn leads to Bertha's hold, is similarly "narrow, low, and dim" (114). Entering "the low black door" (289) into what Rochester calls a "secret inner cabinet" (305) on the day of what was to have been her wedding, Jane sees both "a room without a window" (290) and the inhabitant who has been shut up there, according to Rochester, "now for ten years" (305). "In the deep shade, at the further end of the room," Jane reports, "a gure ran backwards and forwards" (289). Rochester extends these sepulchral con nes to all of Thorn eld Hall, which he describes as "this insolent vault, offering the ghastliness of living death ... this narrow stone hell, with its one real end" (296). He rightly refers to "living death," though less of his own than of his spouse, enduring an aerial burial in her third-story grave, suffering something like social death, in the sense of not being recognized or accepted as human. She is gured instead as a " end," a " gure," an "it covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane" (290).

All that is discernible of the gure is the darkness of its hair and its compulsive motion, signifying, *it lives*. And yet Bertha's gurations also suggest a bloated corpse. Mrs. Reed tells Jane of her son, "I dream some- times that I see him laid out with a great wound in his throat, or with a swollen and blackened face" (232), and Jane herself recalls "Mrs. Reed in her last moments: I saw her dis gured and discoloured face" (242). These terms recall Jane's description of Bertha's "discoloured face," with "fear- ful blackened in ation of the lineaments" and lips "swelled and dark"

(281). Rochester forwards a similar association, declaring: "For a wife I have but the maniac upstairs: as well might you refer me to some corpse in yonder churchyard" (312). That his wife's situation is bound inextricably to these representations of her colouration is evidenced by the dis guring, blackening, and swelling of her features, like the deceased Mrs. Reed and her son, whose dark skin is highlighted in Jane's accounts of their cruelty. But the Gateshead Reeds differ, of course, from the Spanish Town Masons—a distinction Rochester implicitly draws. He tells Jane, "My bride's mother I had never seen: I understood she was dead" (301) before recounting his later realization that Bertha's Creole mother, Antoinetta Mason, had instead been "shut up in a lunatic asylum" (302). Rochester thus links a "shut up" state that is indeed a kind of social death to racial indeterminacy, suggesting that his wife's geographical and racial formation dehumanize and indeed delegitimate her.[22]

One " ery West–Indian night," as Rochester tells it, resisting breath itself because "something of her breath (faugh!) mixed with the air I breathed" (the more general air "was like sulphur-steams" [303]), he is literally inspired by what he rst calls a "wind fresh from Europe" and then a "sweet wind from Europe." This European inspiration

leads to a very speci c insight that night about his Jamaican Creole wife: “That woman ... is not your wife, nor are you her husband” (304). The only problem with this insight is that it is not true, as he is reminded by Mr. Briggs, London solicitor for Richard Mason, in the church where Rochester is attempting to marry Jane Eyre: “I would remind you of your lady’s existence. Sir, which the law recognises, if you do not” (287). Rochester counters that the marriage document “does not prove that the woman mentioned therein as my wife is still living” (287). Confused, the clergyman asks Bertha’s brother, “are you aware, sir, whether or not this gentleman’s wife is still living?” (288), to which Mason asserts, “she is now living at Thorn eld” (289). Even after all have encountered Bertha in her enclo- sure, Rochester later that evening twice asserts to Jane, “I am not mar- ried.” Jane’s response is de nitive: “your wife is living ... to say otherwise is sophistical—is false” (300).

Jane makes a crucial point, but so does Rochester. As the multiple rep- etitions of the phrase “still living” highlight, the nature of Mrs. Rochester’s mortality is indeed in question. This state of being at once still living and not living aligns with the condition of being ungrievable, as Butler argues: “Without grievability there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life.” Indeterminate in other kinds of categorization, Bertha is also inde nable in her mortal state, unlike the woman Rochester

calls, at their reunion, “my living Jane” (422). As for Bertha, we cannot tell whether she is alive or dead. In Butler’s terms, she is “sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost.”[23] Butler’s consideration of the “politics of immigration” are not irrelevant for Bertha, who is with- out question—if perhaps also without consent—an immigrant. “Certain lives are perceived as lives,” Butler argues, “while others, though appar- ently living, fail to assume perceptual form as such.”[24]

Other characters voluntarily (a crucial distinction) choose burial alive or living graves. Mrs. Reed’s daughter Eliza, for example, chooses after her mother’s death, as Jane relays, to be “walled up alive in a French convent” (241), eventually as its Abbess. And Jane is to bury herself in Rochester’s other property, Ferndean Manor, a site so “insalubrious” that Jane asks, as she advances towards it in search of Rochester, “can there be life here?” (420). She describes the edi ce as “deep buried in a wood,” almost indistin- guishable “from the trees; so dank and green were its decaying walls” (419). Mr. Rochester uses similar language, telling her, “Ferndean is buried as you see, in a heavy wood, where sound falls dull, and dies unreverberating” (436). Sound may die, given that the environs are “still as a church on a week-day” (419), but for all the gurations of burial, little else here does. Indeed, it is a place of extreme fecundity: “all was interwoven stem, colum- nar trunk, dense, summer foliage—no opening anywhere” (419).

On what grounds are these grounds so generative and regenerative? Jane is to bear children there, and Rochester to be restored to eyesight. And yet he had forborne to house

Bertha at Ferndean, though it would "soon have eased me of her charge" (297). As he tells Jane on the night of their aborted wedding, "I could have lodged her safely enough, had not a scruple about the unhealthiness of the situation, in the heart of a wood, made my conscience recoil from the arrangement" (297). This appears a paradox only until we recognize the positive valences attached in *Jane Eyre* to the grave, as place and personality type, as location of sociality and inti- macy from which Bertha, ungrievable and ungraveable, is barred. And from which she may recoil; in ensuring for herself a bodily exit so entire, Bertha may have nally eluded con nement on or in English soil.

In what is perhaps the most heightened and consequential of their dra- matic exchanges, at Thorn eld on the night they declare their love for each other, Jane insists to Rochester: "I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal esh;—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,—as we are!" (252). Critics have rightly made much of her crucial claims of equality, but I would note that

Jane imagines having both "passed through the grave" as their necessary conduit, establishing the grave itself as fundamental to their union. Rochester echoes this at Ferndean, when he declares, "our honeymoon will shine our life long: its beams will only fade over your grave or mine," echoing the traditional marriage vow, "till death do us part," but drawing still more from the gurations of the grave that have animated and united them. Jane had observed a greening of graves on her wedding day, and later yearned for burial in the verdant moor near Whitcross. She attains the grave more consummately in the still more orid growths of Ferndean, called by the Rochester Arms innkeeper "a desolate spot" (418). Their grave's a ne and private place, and they indeed do there embrace.

OptiOn nine: nOnexistenCe

On the roof of Thorn eld Hall, Bertha is nally visible beyond her mortal and mortifying con nes, but she returns to invisibility with her non-burial. Springing from the roof, Bertha's body in some sense vanishes in thin air, and indeed in *Jane Eyre*: that is, vanishes from the narrative itself, unlike other remains that are marked not only by memorial but also by narrative inscription. While falling through the air she drops out of sight and speech, silenced by Jane's journey from the loquacious innkeeper of the Rochester Arms to the embrace of Rochester's arms. For all of the narrative's empha- sis on Bertha's ostensibly indeterminate and inhuman physicality, her non- existent grave suggests a condition less of being dead than of never having existed at all, which must constitute the gravest and most fatal of Bertha's many forms of death, answering to Butler's distinction that a "life that is not supposed to be grieved is also a life that is not supposed to have existed at all."

During the period of their betrothal, Rochester repeatedly calls Jane "Mrs. Rochester," a name that makes her as uncomfortable as the other kinds of nery he attempts to heap upon her. Jane, marvelling, thinks, "Mrs. Rochester! She did not exist" (273). Her assertion is at once unin- formed, given her eventual introduction on her wedding day to "Mrs. Rochester at Thorn eld Hall" and more accurate than she can know (288). Mrs. Rochester's nonexistence is precisely what Rochester resolved to establish the night he decided to leave Jamaica with Bertha, command- ing himself, "Let her identity, her connection with yourself, be buried in oblivion: you are bound to impart them to no living being" (305). "Buried in oblivion" in life, what but oblivion could characterize any other grave? Bertha's brother Richard Mason wishes he could forget what he has seen

after she attacks him, and Rochester assures him: "You will when you are out of the country: when you get back to Spanish Town, you may think of her as dead and buried—or rather, you need not think of her at all" (214). Rochester urges Bertha's complete erasure from thought or memory— one "need not think of her at all"—as an option that improves even upon the thought "of her as dead and buried." The latter condition, as we have seen, confers social recognition and placement not only to the dead but also to the living Jane and Rochester, buried together at Ferndean, quietly side by side like Jane's parents under their cathedral gravestone.

What Rochester's incarceration of Bertha cannot accomplish—her effective nonexistence—Jane's narrative can: the madwoman had her attic; the dead woman is nowhere to be found. Rochester does not wish Bertha were dead, or even disappeared; he wants her never to have existed at all. It is this condition of nonexistence that most characterizes the ungriev- able, Butler argues: "An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that it is, it has never counted as a life at all."[25] How then to remember and account for Bertha, to make her life and death matter? I'd suggest, by committing *to* her matter, its condition, its whereabouts. Near death on the doorstep of the Rivers household, Jane despairs of "this isolation—this banishment from my kind!" (330). Bertha Antoinette Mason Rochester, more isolated than ever Jane was, is ban- ished even as a corpse; her spring to the stones is a burial in oblivion. That she may choose to escape their reach does not exclude Edward Rochester and Jane Eyre from their own ethical obligations to her corpse: where is Bertha's Antigone? That her death may be as self-willed as those of Helen Burns and St. John Rivers suggests its similar profundity and its deserving of the kind of respect, even reverence, accorded to theirs. While its mate- rial oblivion may constitute an act on her part of agency and escape, rec- ognizing Bertha's death as grievable and her remains as graveable surely remains an ethical imperative, a performance of our own grave duty.

nOtes

1. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 417. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and are referenced

by page number in the text.

2. Elizabeth Gaskell to George Smith, 18 June 18 [1855], in Gaskell, *Letters*, 349.

3. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 21.

4. Judith Butler, "A Carefully Crafted F**k You." Butler comments: "A life that is in some sense socially dead or already 'lost' cannot be grieved when it is actually destroyed."

5. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20 (emphasis original).

6. Butler, *Frames of War*, 24.

7. Butler, *Frames of War*, 53 n11.

8. Gayatri Spivak,"Three Women's Texts," 247.

9. Susan Meyer, "Colonialism," 252 (emphasis original).

10. Patricia McKee, "Racial Strategies in *Jane Eyre*," 70.

11. H. Adlai Murdoch, "Ghosts in the Mirror," 6. Murdoch observes, the term "Creole" is itself a "product of the colonial encounter," and as such "a Creole subject can be white, black, or the product of both ethnic groups" (3).

12. Meyer, "Colonialism," 253.

13. Murdoch, "The Discourses of Jean Rhys," 147.

14. Murdoch, "Ghosts," 5.

15. Spivak, "Three Women's Texts," 247.

16. Meyer, "Colonialism," 254.

17. In "Jean Rhys, The Art of Fiction No. 64," (quoted in Spivak, "Three Women's Texts" 249).

18. Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 13.

19. Meyer, "Colonialism," 253.

20. Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life."

21. The controversy over the exposure of the body of Emmett Till continues, as for example in response to the exhibition in the 2017 Whitney Biennial of Dana Schutz's painting "Open Casket."

22. For an extended consideration of the attribution of madness to Creole "intemperance," see Carolyn Vellenga Berman's chapter "Colonial Madness in *Jane Eyre*."

23. Butler, *Frames*, 15.

24. Butler, *Frames*, 24.

25. Butler, *Frames*, 38. For clari cation of the racialized foundation of Bertha's situation, we might turn to another contemporary American author, Toni Morrison, and the eponymous character in *Beloved* (1988), an elusive and aggressive gure for slavery, among much else. We learn early in the novel that Beloved's name derives from a single word inscribed on a tombstone. Her utter disappearance, as if she had never existed, is what ends the novel: "Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her ... Although she has claim, she is not claimed" (274).

Justine Pizzo • Eleanor Houghton Editors

Charlotte Brontë, Embodiment and the Material World

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Editors

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Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture ISBN 978-3-030-34854-0 ISBN 978-3-030-34855-7 (eBook) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34855-7

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG. The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland