

“Persistence of (Colonial) Memory”:
Jean Rhys’s *Carib* Texts and
Imperial Historiography

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[Books] also are capable of hurting you, pushing you into the limbo of the forgotten. They can tell lies — and vulgar trivial lies.

JEAN RHYSS, “Temps Perdi”

IN THE CARIBBEAN context, the history-determining “encounter” is most often defined as that by Europeans, the Old World, in an event-creating meeting with the New World. This paradigm continues to wield influence, dominating historical and anthropological discourses, including contemporary ones. Major texts appearing during the Columbian quinqucentennial, such as Stephen Greenblatt’s *Marvellous Possessions* (1991), Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* (1992) and Peter Hulme and Neil Whitehead’s *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day* (1992), assume this eurocentric standpoint, even while they bring new and radical interpretations to the colonial historical archive.¹ Under-represented, it seems to me, is the important encounter, or “intersection” of histories, between the indigenous peoples and the subsequent settlers, namely the African, East Indian, and white creoles. This other “encounter” figures significantly in the literature of the region, including that by Wilson Harris, C. L. R. James, Derek Walcott, and a younger generation of writers such as Merle Collins and Jamaica Kincaid. In their works, the Carib and his warring aggressivity is a usable past for their emancipatory imagination. As “resistor” — Indian Warner and the Caribs of Morne des Sauteurs² — he is linked to heroic figures of cultural importance such as Toussaint L’Ouvverture, the maroons, and the contemporary intractable “Rasta” man.

Among Anglophone writers, Jean Rhys is arguably the forerunner of a Caribbean interventionist discourse on the Carib. Ahead of her time, she understood the collusion of textuality in the imperializing project; writing the Carib was a pre-eminent way by which she deconstructed historiography through problematizing her own ideological conditioning. This essay provides new insight into Rhys's important, though slim, body of work on the Carib, exploring her evolving political critique of (H)istory that also served to interrogate the meaning of her own encounter, as a colonized subject, with the marginalized Carib. I employ an intertextual strategy — interrogating texts within biographical and cultural matrices — that provides a wider web of relevant circumstances — a kind of “trans-generational formation” (Hulme 75) — from which to account for her transforming views.

In the use of the Carib subject, Rhys's intention is only partly recognized by most of her critics. Teresa O'Connor, for example, says that Rhys makes “scant reference to the Caribs” compared to her “near obsession with the blacks” (*Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels* 15); others leave in place the impression that Rhys's use of the Carib subject is principally as symbol of [her] exploitation and loss, and for her literary ends. (This view makes sense, of course, in light of the fact that Rhys was so often preoccupied with her own victimization and death wishes, and characteristically used marginalized figures, the Carib among these, to mirror her own state of alleged defeat.)³ Sylvie Maurel, in her comments on *Voyage in the Dark*, comes closest to arguing the perspective that, in Rhys, the Carib discourse served as a primary mode of interrogating British knowledge systems:

The Caribs, a metaphor for the near extinct virgin origin, are subjected to the same partitioning as the English landscape, Anna drawing an analogy between discursive and political imperialisms. This conflation of imperialisms is represented by the fact that here Anna is quoting from a book — her text can only refer to another text; the “real” Caribs are “practically exterminated” and have been colonized by discourse. (94)

What is not fully explored even in this study, however, is the full meaning of the Carib trope *within* the dialectical context of Rhys's several uses of the Carib.

Writing during the period of high modernism, when the Indian subject was apt to be “romanced” or exoticized — the tendency of modernism to “imaginatively plunder” the othered, as J. Michael Dash has commented (*The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* 37) — Rhys began to explore the significance of that haunting presence in the formation of Caribbean consciousness. *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) is Rhys’s first incorporation of the Carib text. In this work — begun as early as 1911-12 but published after her European novels *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr. McKenzie* — Rhys seems mainly to deploy the Carib as a metaphor of *her* alienation. The narrator of this semi-autobiographical fiction, Anna Morgan, is an insecure, vulnerable Caribbean immigrant who feels herself a victim of the British gender and class system, as well as its racial biases: she lacks financial means and social standing, is hardly a “real” Englishwoman, and as a colonial creole is racially suspect as having mixed blood. Arriving in England at the age of sixteen, Anna studies for two years at an acting school (as did Rhys at the Perse School, Cambridge, and the Academy of Dramatic Art). Later, she can find only limited employment opportunities, generally bit parts in music hall theatre. Meeting a man of the “better” class, Walter Jeffries, Anna forms a sexual liaison, graduating to the status of mistress, which encouraged dependency. When her keeper tires of the relationship and ends it (“and after all you must have always known that the thing could not go on for ever,” Jeffries’s cousin Vincent remarks caustically), Anna enters a period of depression. In this state she remembers parts of a song:

“Blow rings, rings
 Delicate rings in the air,
 And drift, drift
 — something — away from despair.” (105)

Correcting the “something” to “legions away from despair,” Anna by metonymic displacement and free-associating, replaces “legions” with “oceans,” the latter prompting the recall of an historical text of the Carib that Rhys then inscripts:

The Caribs indigenous to this island were a warlike tribe and their resistance to white domination, though spasmodic, was fierce. As lately as the beginning of the nineteenth century they raided one of the

neighbouring islands, under British rule, overpowered the garrison and kidnapped the governor, his wife, and three children. They are now practically exterminated. The few hundreds that are left do not intermarry with the negroes. Their reservation, at the northern end of the island, is known as the Carib Quarter. (105)

In the novel, Anna identifies with the Carib as a symbol of loss, defeat, and passivity; like her, a victim of European domination.

By introducing a marginal (hi)story into her work, Rhys disrupts the nationalistic space of the modernist novel, but one notes that Rhys's view of the Carib yields to a typifying stereotype — of the Carib as “lack,” passive and defeated — fixing it as conclusive or, as Pratt defined, rigidifying the tenuous into the “timeless essence” (95). Bypassing the multiple significations of the Carib represented in that description — as resisting “other,” as warrior, “warlike,” “fierce,” an *act-or* — she colludes with a complacent, culturally conditioned one. It would seem that, at the point at which *Voyage in the Dark* is written, Rhys has not entirely escaped the imperial perceptual landscape, nor has she sufficiently evolved to allow her to challenge the codified Western discourse of the Carib; she is more mirror than lens. Rhys ironically showed the influence of what she was writing against. As she comes to recognize more fully the complexities of historical narratives in Western imperialism, Rhys will attempt to challenge the received “knowledge” — the objectives of the later works “Tempt Perdi,” “The Day They Burned the Books,” and *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The Dominican space — the social, historical, and ideological matrix — is inadequately integrated into critical studies of Rhys. Yet it conditioned her initial impressions, and as a formative influence was of great consequence. Rhys's heritage of difference promotes her outsider's political consciousness. Rhys, for one, is unlike the colonizers of the metropole; she is a “colonial” produced by a history that includes the Carib presence. The Carib had continuously occupied reservations in Dominica since the seventeenth century. Rhys, thirteen years old, was still living in Dominica at the time of their uprising in 1903. Later, Rhys was very affected by the events of the 1930s, when Caribs in Dominica broke out in rebellion against the British who had attempted a raid on their quarters to search for smuggled goods. According to Honychurch's account,

[S]tones and bottles were hurled at the police, who retaliated by firing into the crowd and injured four Caribs, two of whom died later from their wounds. The police were forced to escape from the area and arrived at Marigot beaten and battered, with neither prisoners nor seizures. (126)

Unlike her European compatriots, for Rhys the Carib was not an unknown or imagined people, as she signifies by the ignorance of the Englishman/husband (*Wide Sargasso Sea*) who misidentifies the history of the Dominican village, "Massacre."⁴

But Rhys's familiar projection of her marginal status in British society obscures the fact that, until the age of sixteen, she belonged to the ruling class in Dominica. Belonging to a "white" creole family (Rhys Williams, Welsh father; Minna Lockhart, mother and descendant of a "white" slaveowning family), she enjoyed the racial privileging based on the three-tiered hierarchized structure of blacks, coloureds/browns, white (Douglas Hall, 1959; Gad Heuman, 1981; James Walvin, 1973) that placed her in a position of superiority. While Rhys was colonized, she was "superior" being "white"; liberal in persuasion, she benefitted from her inherited place in the colonial power structures. Rhys belonged in a network of important personages, and it is important to explore the nature of its belief systems and the possible effect on Rhys.

One of the colonial relationships that might serve, paradigmatically, to suggest the nature of Rhys's early influences is that of Hesketh Bell, the administrator for Dominica during the years 1899 to 1905. As Rhys has related, she was singularly affected by his political idealism. Along with the adolescent fancy she held for him, she was particularly impressed by his political liberality:

We had at that time a very energetic administrator called Mr. Hesketh. That was part of his name anyway. The governor of the Leeward Islands . . . lived in Antigua. So did the Chief Justice. So did the Anglican bishop. But Mr. Hesketh, our administrator, went his own active way and did what he liked. (73)

Bell was well known for his work with the Caribs, and Rhys would have been cognizant of his reforms in their favour. He had successfully fought for the expansion of the Carib reserve, from 232 acres to 3,700; gained recognition for the social organization of the Caribs; and insisted its "chief" be recognized and given a token

allowance (Honychurch 126). In most respects, Bell was a catalyst for change. His “active way” was also a series of bold initiatives: telephone service, paved roads, public buildings, street lighting, and treasury solvency. Not the least of his improvements was the building of a public library which Bell himself designed, and for which he had secured funds from the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie (Honychurch, *The Dominica Story: A History of the Island*). Bell also wrote an ethnohistorical study, *Obeah: Witchcraft in the West Indies* (1889), an accomplishment that would have added to his high standing in the colonial society. Two of the subjects in his work, obeah and the Carib, feature prominently in Rhys’s works of fiction.

Rhys presents herself as a voracious reader in her *Black Notebooks*, and her citing of texts, read during her youth, might well have included Bell’s ethnohistorical study, *Obeah*. In “Temps Perdi,” she tries to rediscover the histories that had promoted her impressions of, and some confusions about, the Carib; she is successful in locating one of these (discussed later in this paper). Using Bell’s work as one which she might have read, but most certainly had knowledge of, we can assess the nature of its possible influence. Its effects would have been complicated, since Bell’s viewing of the Carib is benign. But at its centre, it is ideologically biased. Take, for example, this description of the Carib in *Obeah*:

They have since dwindled away with great rapidity and, at present, I believe, there are not more than three or four pure Caribs in the island. Dominica still possesses a few individuals of this interesting race, but in a few years there will be nothing left to remind the world of this vanished people, save the stone hatchets and other implements found occasionally in the fields . . . (86)

Bell references the Carib’s conquest, dispersals, and dispossession, putting to use a familiar sentiment toward a “vanished” race. But the excerpt substitutes a rhetoric of civility for factuality, deliberately muting the history of imperial aggression by omission. Bell’s euphemisms — the Caribs have “dwindled” away with “great rapidity” — employ circumlocutions that fuzz over the historical events of conquest. Unwilling to acknowledge British culpability in ventures that practically wiped out the Carib, Bell demurs that “at present, I believe, there are not more than three or four pure

Caribs in the island." Likewise, he manipulates attitudes toward the Carib by insinuating their inauthenticity — "not more than three or four *pure* Caribs in the island" (emphasis added). He tries, thus, to use a scientific discourse of the nineteenth century, which helped to justify colonial expansion. Bell's narrative falls into the category of textual imperialism that Edward Said describes in *Culture and Imperialism*:

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps ever impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination . . . (9)

Bell also borders on the jingoistic when, in imagining the earlier state of the land under the Caribs — wild and virginal — he contrasts this with the development under British ingenuity:

fair scene before me, stretching away towards the blue ocean, with its bright green fields of waving cane, substantial sugar factories and broad white roads glistening in the sunlight, the regular posts of the telephone wires planted all long. Brightly painted villas peep out on every hill side . . . (83)

The dualistic divisionism valorizes Western territorial ambition and technological prowess. The descriptive language — "fair scene," "bright green fields," "white roads" — clearly organizes a construction of British superiority.

A progressive who strongly criticized the neo-imperialism of the historian James Anthony Froude (*The English in the West Indies*), his attitude to the Carib is markedly "othering," little changed from earlier times. The "othering" trope of the Carib has its source in Columbus's account to Luis de Santangel, the "first chapter to many histories" as Peter Hulme comments (*Colonial Encounters* 45); later centuries of European writing only "reinforce[d] the largely derogatory image that Columbus initiated and his successors perpetuated" (Doggett 19). In that letter, Columbus wrote:

Thus I have found no monsters, nor report of any, except of an island which is Carib, which is the second to the entrance into the Indies, which is inhabited by a people who are regarded in all the islands as very ferocious, [and] who eat human flesh [. . .]. They have many canoes with which they range through all the islands of India, rob and take whatever they can. They are no more malformed than the others,

except that they have the custom of wearing their hair long like women, and they use bows and arrows of the same cane stems . . . (83)

Authorizing himself by asserting objectivity and learnedness (that is, the cartographic details and his correcting of European myths), Columbus established a discourse of difference that obscured the provisional "truth" he proffered, gained second-hand and by hearsay — "inhabited by a people who are regarded in all the islands as very ferocious, [and] who eat human flesh."⁵

The conflicting rhetoric toward the Carib is also seen in the administrator's accounting of the Carib religious practices. Like the earliest colonizers who complemented "exploration and conquest with collection" (Doggett, *New World of Wonders* 12), Bell too sought to discover new objects of exotica. Finding a Zemi, a spiritual object of the Carib, Bell muses: "and what were the thought of the tawny savage as he cut and carved the stone which, when completed, was to be believed a divinity and destined to preside over the cruel sacrifices of his religion" (83). The Carib object is "elevated," but the Manichean dualism (civilized/savage) and linguistic condescension implicitly reinforce imperialistic ideology. Bell shows a "decolonizing" intent, of deconstruction, but in fact reinstates the imperial text of the Carib; like the art historian who elevates the "primitive" art object but controls through a "dynamics of colonialism" (Torgovnick 82).

But the colonial legacy was complicated and contradicted from another source, Rhys's family. Disposed to a creolized perceptual viewpoint, her family acted to subvert some aspects of the metropolitan hegemony, notably its racial one. A paradigmatic event is her family's choice of a Catholic school in which to enroll the youthful Rhys, as she accounts in *Smile Please*.

When I first knew I was to be sent to the convent as a day scholar I was very frightened. . . . There was a certain prejudice against Catholicism among the white people, and I'd heard many horror stories about the nuns. Also most of the girls at the convent were colored, that is of mixed blood, another reason for general surprise at my going there. (63)

British hierarchal church politics are rigorously duplicated in the Caribbean; authority is formally vested in the Anglican (High)

Church, the denomination of choice for the ruling class. Moreover, church history in the Caribbean is weighted with historical and cultural meanings. The “lesser” churches (especially the Baptists, Methodists, Moravians) were identified with political struggle; these helped to bring emancipation to the enslaved people. The family’s act thus contravened colonial ecologies of power via the religious institutions, and it also challenged the racial biases of the society, particularly difficult at a time when racial mixing — “hybridity” — was of overriding concern to the British (Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*). Socially eccentric, and racially liberal — a point about (white) creole consciousness that Rhys promotes in *Wide Sargasso Sea* — the family placed Rhys in an ontologically ambiguous position. The social and family influences of her colonial days reconfigured, it is apparent how they rendered conflicting ideologies — British hegemonic belief systems in contradiction with the those of the creolized-affirming family. Straddling the antithetical belief systems, Rhys brought to the metropole a divided sensibility. The cultural politics — imperialism’s “simultaneous processes of unification and differentiation” (Young, *Colonial Desires*); or its inherent ambivalence which Homi Bhabha defines as “the repertoire of conflictual positions that constitute the subject in colonial discourse” (*Location of Culture* 77) — is a history of embedded ideologies of difference that marks the burden Rhys carried to the metropole.

Rhys’s Reconceptualizing of the Carib Trope

By 1936 (two years after the publication of *Voyage in the Dark*), Rhys seemed determined to visit Dominica. She wrote to Evelyn Scott (December 1935): “I suppose going back to Dominica is foolhardy but I want so much — I can’t help risking it. You can imagine the wild and fantastic plans and hopes.” Rhys does not elaborate on what she feared as “foolhardy” or risky, but this would have included not only this Carib event, but other political agitation such as the 1930s labour riots and strikes occurring throughout the Caribbean. There was even the burning of Geneva Estate — “burned to a shell,” according to Honychurch — property that had belonged to the Lockhart family.⁶ Gone from Dominica for

twenty-nine years, Rhys might have been frightened of re-experiencing the ontological distress that she projects in *Voyage in the Dark*, and would repeat in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. But she succeeded in visiting Dominica in February 1936, staying through May. And though apparently her “wild and fantastic plans” seem not to have materialized, she did visit the Carib Reserve.⁷ Peter Hulme suggests that this visit “initiated, or at any rate intensified, the collection of West Indian material and memories which Rhys later refers to as ‘Creole’” (“The Locked Heart” 76). But this view excludes the importance of the visit to the reservation, an experience that enables certain of her historical revisions.

Rhys’s obsession with revising the Carib trope speaks to her need to replay the “learned” versions of the Carib that had conditioned her youth and promoted her conflicted consciousness. Her story, “Tems Perdi,” is the pre-eminent means by which she did this. Written sometime before 1945 but not published until 1968 (in the collection *Tigers Are Better Looking*), the tripartite narrative represents Rhys’s most direct confrontation with the biases of Carib historiography. How Rhys’s Carib discourse may have further evolved is lost to us, her longest work on the Carib never recovered.⁸ The title, “Tems Perdi,” perhaps signifies on the modernist work by Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, similarly based in memory but showing differences by its focus on a privileged bourgeois class rather than the displaced colonial subject of Rhys’s story. The narrative comprises three independent but thematically interlocking stories — “Rolvenden,” “The Sword Dance and the Love Dance,” and “Carib Quarter” — its structure “associative rather than temporal or causal,” as Kathy Mezei comments (“And It Kept Its Secret” 204).

The first story, “Rolvenden,” frames the three-part narrative as “recherche,” but places the “book” — “capable of hurting you, pushing you into the limbo of the forgotten. They can tell lies . . .” — as a dominant motif. Rhys’s first-person narrator is a middle-aged woman living the disruptions of wartime in a small English community. The army contributes to her dislocatedness, reminding her that their mode is “smash and grab,” and which the local citizenry seem to follow in stealing from her coal supply. But she also reveals feelings of vulnerability to racial and sexual societal

biasses, as the narrator indicates through this account of a conversation between two coal suppliers:

The clatter of coal on zinc. Then a man's voice said, "That's the bathroom."

"Well what about it? Why are you looking at it? Is there a woman in the ditch?" said a second voice.

"Why d'you think I'd look at her if there was?" . . .

"Why should you think I'd look at a blank, blank cow in a blank, blank, blank ditch?" (259)

The narrator regards the coalers as coarse and misogynistic. But Rhys's linguistic reticence — "blank, blank" — might suggest more than profanity, perhaps racist language which she is reluctant to acknowledge as a supposedly "white" person; the issue of her own "purity" is not an absent text in her fiction, letters, black notebooks, and autobiography. Later in the story, it is apparent that a racial discourse underscores the tensions and metonymic interfacings. For example, the narrator assails:

But it will certainly defeat me, for it has one great quality — it is very cunning. It knows how to hide its hate under a hypocrite's mask — again a beige mask, of course — for all here is beige that can be beige, paint, carpets, curtains, upholstery, bedspreads. Everything wears this neutral mask — the village, the people. (260)

The exasperation suggested by the multiplied details, the conflations, the personification produces the fearful presence of race, and dramatizes the disequilibrium racial hypocrisy inflicts. A typically linguistic reticence is shown as Rhys chooses the term "beige" over the more personally problematic one of "white."

Trying to escape the harsh realities of wartime Rolvenden, the narrator indulges in pleasant memories, especially of Vienna. While these initially serve to make her "grow calmer, and then quite calm" (260), their re-narration serves to refigure them as critique. Gone is the nostalgia of the autobiographical accounting of the 1927 version ("Funny how it slipped away, Vienna. Nothing left but a few snapshots"); now the anecdotes are re-deployed with a different authority. Transmuted into "The Sword Dance and the Love Dance," the story specularizes events of imperialism, parodically

repeating “with critical distance,” as Linda Hutcheon describes such interventions (26).

“The Sword Dance and the Love Dance” gives an ironic portrayal of the attempts by the Japanese and Allied nations to produce harmony through its peace commissions in Austria, a defeated country. The title emblemizes the paradoxes and incongruities of their union; all belong to a “world of Boots,” as the gender victimization of the Austrian women as “war material” shows. All sides display their own ethnocentric racisms, though the Japanese will experience their “othered” status among the Western partners. Yoshi, for example, soon encounters racial humiliation from the young French typist, Simone:

Yoshi was sprawled on the floor, the table and the bottle of wine were upset. He got up and brushed his clothes down . . .

[Later] Simone said, “I don’t know how it happened. He was practising kissing the hand and I’d had enough of it and tried to pull away. He held on and crashed into the table, and down he went. I expect he’d had too much to drink. Oh, his face when he fell! Aren’t they funny? And those dances with the umbrellas!” (263-64)

The “differentness” of the imperial Japanese places them in a status no different from the colonial’s or immigrant’s. This is the purport of Matsu’s experience in London: “Matsu had a fortnight in London and for a whole day of it he had been lost in the Inner Circle. ‘When I came out it was very dark and cold. I grew frightened and sad’” (262-63). Rhys uses the “Inner Circle” as a multivalent sign, referencing both the London underground and Matsu’s marginality outside British “inner circles” as an ethnic. Rhys immediately deploys this image to link versions of oppressions — Matsu’s to the Carib’s and her own: “Riding round and round the Inner Circle, but unlike Matsu I ride knowing that it will be dark and cold when I come out, that it will be November, and that I shall be a savage person — a real Carib” (267). Rhys is, typically, sensitive to her outsider status as a colonial and immigrant — to Peggy Kirkaldy she writes (on 6 December 1949): “You see me as a ridiculous human being — ridiculous and slightly (?) mad — also alien” (*Letters* 64). But by identifying herself *as* Carib, Rhys attempts to confound taxonomical systems; in the context of metropolitan ideological racism, she contravenes racial uniformity.

Rhys simultaneously signifies upon the term “real.” She brings into question the central question of Carib historiography — its powerful scripts that are of questionable veracity. Traditional imperialist history and ethnography presume knowledge of the “real” Caribs, and instilled a discourse of their savage and inferior nature. Rhys uses this presumption — that the “real” Carib has been the subject of western representation — to authorize her own version based on experiential knowledge, her visit to the Carib Quarters in 1936. The story makes ironic use of the androcentric, culturally valenced genres of travel and ethnography. Rhys parodically appropriates the “seeing man’s imperial authority” (Pratt), viewing and interpreting the world of the Carib by providing the obligatory observations on people and landscape. But Rhys’s ethnographic gaze focuses on details of cultural imperialism: “already the newspapers and coloured cards of Virgins, saints and angels, Star of the Sea, Refuge of the Distressed, Hope of the Afflicted, Star of the Sea again, Jesus, Mary and Joseph” (273). The walls decorated with newspapers and other cultural detritus point to a syncretism that has promoted cultural disintegration: imposed religion is fetishistically incorporated. The narrative also suggests a relationship between physical deterioration and the enravishment of imperialism; the young girl’s lameness is in many respects symbolic of the sexualizing and prostituting of the “other” that followed violent conquests. Her face is “a vanishing one,” in Wilson Harris’s symbolic mythicizing, “overpowered by the fantasy of a Catholic as well as a Protestant invasion” (*Palace of the Peacock* 61). For the translator/colonized subject, she is “a beautiful Carib girl. . . . Everybody goes to see her and photographs her. She and her mother will be vexed if you don’t go. Give her a little present, of course. She is very beautiful but she can’t walk. It’s a pity, that” (272). The spokesman, a policeman, mimics European reductionism in producing the Carib girl as spectacle, and calls attention to his cultural mis-education under colonialism, the slave of yore manipulated into ethnic betrayals.

While Rhys’s ethnographic critique calls attention to the materiality of the evidences of imperial injustice — the first Caribbeans now look out on “the big clearing where the police-station stood with five or six other houses, one of them a Catholic church”

(272) — it is the critique of discursive practices that is most notable in this story. Pursuing the motif of “Rolvenden” — the book “can tell lies” — she reviews those Carib texts that had confused the impressionable girl growing up in Dominica. The narrator reminisces: “All my life I had been curious about these people because of a book I once read, pictures I once saw” (268). Bothered by her memories, she perseveres in looking for the works of her childhood, and finds a newspaper — *L'Illustration*, 23 November 1935 — which exhibited the illustration “Homme caraïbe: Dessiné d'après nature par le Père Plumier” whose “gaudy illustrations” had remained central to her imagination. Commenting on the image she remarks:

Bow and arrows in his right hand, a club in his left, a huge, muscular body and a strange, small, womanish face. His long, black hair was carefully parted in the middle and hung smoothly to his shoulders. But his slanting eyes, starting from their sockets, looked wild and terrified. He was more the frightened than the frightening savage. (269)

The narrative voice emphasizes pictorial features that seem dubiously to present a “real” Carib: his face is “small, womanish,” his eyes made to look “wild and terrified.” Rhys thus makes an issue of the feminizing and demonizing of the Carib, and the assumptions of the imperial text; as she corrects, the Carib is “more the frightened than the frightening savage.”

The Plumier illustration, Figure 1, distorts the “homme”: he is specularized as an eroticized male–female composite. Towering over the landscape, the giant-size Carib is thick and muscular; mostly naked, attention is drawn to his suggestively darkened loin area. But to the contrary, his face, hands and feet are feminized. The small face appears cosmeticized — rouged round cheeks, coloured mouth, shaped eyebrows, trellised hair. The representation encodes abnormality, degeneracy, otherness. Of course, it can be argued that the illustrator was simply an amateur and had drawn badly. Indeed, Père R. P. Carolo Plumier, Religieux Minime, was principally a botanical artist, whose main works are of New World ferns and lichens — *Traité des Fougères de L'Amérique* and *Description des Plantes de L'Amérique*.⁹ But visual representations have, in general, feminized, sexualized, and pathologized the Amerindian. The work “America” by the Flemish artist Jan van der Straet (see Figure 2), the first plate in the series *New Discoveries*



FIGURE 1

(*Nova Reperta*), produces an iconography that will influence many later representations, including the naked native woman made available to the gaze of the (clothed) European, and Indian barbarity as the activities in the distant scene suggest. As contemporary studies have pointed out, Indian iconography also reveals the motive of greed that informed the “discoveries,” as Jacob Meurs’s engraving in *De Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld*, like many others shows



AMERICA.
Americus Americus retraxit, Cæcæ Semel vocatus inde semper excitam

To conclude, *Guiana* is a Country that hath yet her Maidenhead, neuer fact, turned, nor wrought, the face of the earth hath not bene torne, nor the vertue and fait of the soyl: pent by manurance, the graues haue not bene opened for golde, the mines not broken with sledges, nor their Images puid down out of their temples.

FIGURE 2

in its details of wealth.¹⁰ The encounter with the New World was, as Elleke Boehmer comments, a “global sprawl of hubris” (*Colonialism and Post-Colonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* 12).

Rhys makes reference to another of the illustrations that she viewed as a youth:

I shut my eyes and saw one of the illustrations about the Caribs, vivid, complete in ever [sic] detail. A brown girl, crowned with flowers, a parrot on her shoulder, welcoming the Spaniards, the long-prophesied gods. Behind her the rest of the population crowded, carrying presents of fruit and flowers, but some of them were scowling and suspicious — and how right they were! (271)

Rhys insists, as with “L’Homme,” in satirizing the conventional text. In this case, she is attentive to the less-noticed features of the illustration — the Caribs were not all guileless innocents, for some

appeared “scowling and suspicious” — and thus inscribes Carib subjectivity in its resistant modality.

Rhys's broad exposure, as a colonial, to textual versions of the Carib is rigorously critiqued in this later period. When a companion on the trip to the Carib Quarter asks about the Carib — “The original West Indian, is he?” (270) — Rhys corrects him by explaining that the “original West Indians” were different from the Caribs and were mostly killed off, but she also ridicules European mendacity, as in their deporting of the Caribs to Hispaniola: “The Spaniards told them they were going to Heaven. So they went. Weren't they suckers” (270). Identifying the source of this information as from that book “written by an Englishman in the 1880s,” she mocks his “truths,” remarking that “he had a lot of imagination, that man,” and calling into question his views that the Carib women had a secret language, the Caribs were Mongolian in origin, and had buried treasure in La Soufrière, St. Lucia (a volcanic site). It is disputable that Rhys means to refer to Hesketh Bell's work; her use of the dismissive “that man” does not match the respectful nature of her own references to him. Of course, such notions as that of a secret language among women were the staple of many historians and travel writers, including the well-regarded text by Labat (*A Sojourn on Dominica* 1722) and Bell's.

In this decentering narrative, Rhys derails eurocentric values by the perverse pleasure she takes in pointing to creole features of the Carib:

The girl appeared in the doorway of the dark little bedroom, posed for a moment dramatically, then dragged herself across the floor into the sun outside to be photographed, managing her useless legs with a desperate, courageous grace; she had white, lovely teeth. There she sat in the sun, brown eyes fixed on us the long brown eyes of the Creole, not the small, black, slanting eyes of the Carib. And her hair, which hung to her waist and went through every shade from dark brown to copper and back again, was not a Carib's hair, either. She sat there smiling, and an assortment of brightly-coloured Virgins and saints looked down at her from the walls, smiling too. (273)

Rhys shows no distress at the creolized identity of the Carib, celebrating the “long brown eyes of the Creole” and hair that had gone through “every shade from dark brown to copper and back again.” Rhys codes the Carib mother as racially creolized also: she looks

“like an old Chinese woman,” and “had lived in Martinique in service with a French family and then had been taken to Paris.” Are these, then, “real” Caribs? Rhys’s answer is a Caribbeanist one; she defends and legitimates what might, in discriminatory Western science, be construed as contamination and impurity.

Rhys re-examines the texts that have produced the “real” Carib and exposes their self-serving fictionality. She parodies ethnographic writing, postmodernistically placing and exposing herself within the scrutinized space of the narrative, the self-reflexivity challenging conventions of historiographic authority. The ethnographic voice renders little optimism regarding the course of imperialism, and concludes darkly:

It is night that you know old fears, old hopes. . . . But when you have drunk a good tot of rum nothing dismays you; you know the password and the Open Sesame. You drink a second; then you understand everything — the sun, the flamboyance, the girl crawling (because she could not walk) across the floor to be photographed. And the song about the white-cedar trees. “Ma belle ka di maman-li — ’ (A lot of their songs begin like that — My lovely girls said to her mother’) . . . I wish I could remember it all but it is useless trying to find out because nobody sings these old songs any more. (274)

At the time of the writing of “Temps Perdi” (1945), Rhys has found that articulating voice identified in Judith Raiskin as “the development of a theoretical vocabulary” (11), and one which gives the complex narrato-logic of the later work, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where she challenges hegemonic ideologies by rewriting the canonical text, *Jane Eyre*.

Rhys is accorded literary stature for her stylistic originality and the bold perspectives she brought to issues of alienation and exile, gender exploitation, and colonial identity and the creole (hybrid) subject. And her Caribbean texts — that excludes, therefore, such works as *Quartet* (1928), *After Leaving Mr. McKenzie* (1930), *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) — have been accorded literary and cultural distinction for their linguistic, cultural, and historical authenticities. But her “Carib text,” so important in the body of writing she has left, has received short attention, critics overlooking its powerful intervention in colonizing historical discourses. Rhys’s narration, however ironic and indeterminate, challenges the certainties of the powerful discourses of the Carib, marks a

distinct shift in perspective from that of *Voyage in the Dark*, and shows Rhys's more politically radicalized consciousness. It serves in the "erosion of transcendent authority" (Judith Raiskin 11), a project that becomes abundantly evident in the postcolonial writing that follows.

Rhys was a pioneering spirit, one not lost upon the succeeding Caribbean literary generations: Merle Collins in *The Colour of Forgetting*, several novels by Wilson Harris, Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother*. The Nobel poet laureate, Derek Walcott, would memorably write in *Another Life*:

The leaping Caribs whiten,
in one flash, the instant
the race leapt at Sauteurs,
a cataract! One scream of bounding lace.

I am pounding the faces of gods back into the red clay they leapt from
with the mattock of heel after heel as if heel after heel were my thumbs
that once gouged out as sacred vessels for women . . . (69)

His lines re-map the unique Caribbean-centred discourse of the Carib begun by Rhys, which takes on new epistemological meanings as the fictions of the past are opened to scrutiny.

NOTES

- 1 Widely critiqued in these new studies are the historical writings that demonized the Carib Indian — the Kalinago — establishing a Manichean dialectic that served to promote his conquest and dispossession. For a discussion of the "naming" and denominations of the Carib, see Hilary McD. Beckles, "Kalinago (Carib) Resistance to European Colonisation of the Caribbean."
- 2 The history of Indian Warner (1630-1674) is part of a valorized native past. The son of the English Governor of St. Kitts, Sir Thomas Warner, and a slave woman from Dominica, he was raised and educated by his father. Upon his father's death, Indian Warner was persecuted by his half-brother, Phillip Warner. Fleeing to Dominica, he lived among his mother's people, the Caribs, becoming their chief. At the appeal of the British, Indian Warner led several successful attacks against the French. Eventually he was killed (stabbed to death) by the ambitious Phillip who, after confinement for this crime in the Tower of London for 18 months, was acquitted in a trial in Barbados.

Morne des Sauteurs is the legendary site in Grenada from which Caribs jumped to their deaths in resistance to colonization, the site preserved in folk memory as "Leapers' Hill." It is alluded to in many texts by Caribbean writers; in Merle Collins' novel, *The Colour of Forgetting* (1995), it frames her historicized fiction.

Ironically, the Carib, denigrated for aggressive, ferocious behaviour, were often sought out to fight against enemies of British imperialism. Thus Thomas Atwood, for example, lamented in *The History of the Island of Dominica* (1791) as follows:

It is much to be regretted, that since this island has been in the possession of the English, so little pains have been taken to cultivate an union with these people, as they might be capable of essential service to its internal security, especially against the accumulation of runaway negroes in the time of peace; and in war they be induced to join in its defence, should it be invaded. (222-23)

- 3 For example, in her letter to Francis Wyndham she wrote: "Well I have the death wish myself and always have had, so can write about it." (Letters 281).
- 4 In that novel, the English husband indiscriminately identifies "Massacre" as a place where slaves had been killed. Rather, it is a site of Carib history: of Indian Warner and his tribe's massacre. See note 2, above.
- 5 This differentiating discourse provided justification for centuries of Western aggression; sentiments of colonial officials such as William Stapleton became commonplace:

I beg your Lordship pardon if I am tedious and do pray your Honours to represent to His Majesty the necessity of destroying those Caribbe Indians and that he would be graciously pleased to order the Governor of Barbados to destroy them heathens . . .

In Peter Hulme's words, savagery was "honed into the sharpest instrument of empire" (*Colonial Encounters* 3); by the eighteenth century the Carib was "practically exterminated" while, symptomatically, dispossessed of his homelands — a not insignificant portion of the West Indies that included Trinidad, Tobago, Grenadines, and Martinique, Dominica and St. Vincent.

- 6 Rhys's maternal line, the Lockharts, was a slave-holding family. Her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* uses this personal history, though she sets it in Jamaica.
- 7 Carole Angier writes in *Jean Rhys*: "People told her there were no roads to all the old remembered places, where she wanted to take Leslie" 59.
- 8 Rhys related to Francis Wyndham: "It was a sad affair, for a lot of stories disappeared too — an unfinished novel 'Wedding in the Carib Quarter' . . . as for 'Wedding in the Carib Quarter,' it disappeared completely. I found some notes on it the other day, and they made no sense at all any more" (*Jean Rhys: Letters*, 22 July 1962).
- 9 Rare Books Collection, Library of Congress.
- 10 *New World of Wonders: European Images of the Americas 1492-1700*, 172.

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