

ESSAY

## Jean Rhys's 'Temps Perdi': Space, Disability, and the Second World War

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Correspondences between key settings in Jean Rhys's "Temps Perdi," as suggested by analytics proffered by postmodern theories of space, suggest the Benjaminian notion of history as a perpetual state of emergency. Introduced in the three discrete sections of the story, these key settings are a house on the east coast of England during WWII, Vienna in the aftermath of WWI, and an unnamed Caribbean island (which the narrator visits between the wars). Further, the story's key disabled characters, the narrator and a young Carib woman, point to Walter Benjamin's notion of a revolutionary, "messianic" break with time, as suggested by analytics proffered by disability studies.

**Keywords:** Jean Rhys; 'Temps Perdi'; heterotopia; disability; Second World War; Caribbean

Few British authors wrote novels about the Second World War as the conflict was actually occurring; most wrote only short stories. Jean Rhys, too, wrote a series of WWII stories, living, once again, through a world war in Britain, while moving mostly around the eastern part of England, as her husband took on various RAF postings.<sup>1</sup> Yet, these war stories have not been recognized in her oeuvre nor read as part of any British or postcolonial war fiction canon. Considering Rhys's prominence, this constitutes an area of neglect in the criticism, if an understandable one, given the stories' belated publication. As is well known, Rhys did not publish any work after *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) until *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). However, she did try to get the stories published as part of a short story collection that no publisher would take on in the mid-forties. This failure was perhaps owing to "postwar Cold War conformity," as Helen Carr has said, which made the stories' attacks "on the established order, on snobbishness, on conventional English sexual mores, [and] on racism" too great a liability to accept (98). Interestingly, Rhys's two most frequently anthologized stories to date, "The Day They Burned the Books" and "Let Them Call It Jazz," both postcolonial pieces, were a part of this collection. "Temps Perdi," the subject here, is also a postcolonial piece—the one of the collection's war stories set in both Britain and the Caribbean, which partly grew out of Rhys's first and only return to Dominica in 1936, her place of birth which she had left in 1907.<sup>2</sup> The story's invisibility as a war story is especially interesting given Phyllis Lassner's recent claim that although "WWII was launched by Axis powers as an imperial conquest based on racialist ideology and precipitated the end of all European empires, little attempt has been made to integrate this cataclysmic event into the racially defined and ever expanding and complicating postcolonial narrative" (5).<sup>3</sup> "Temps Perdi" weaves WWII into colonial history in a number of compelling ways, in part, as I argue here, through its spatial and disability aesthetics that establish links between wartime and colonial genocides.

<sup>1</sup> Rhys and her second husband, Leslie Tilden Smith, were in London with Rhys's daughter when war broke out. They were back in London in 1944, during buzz bomb period.

<sup>2</sup> "Temps Perdi" first appeared in *Art and Literature* in 1967 and after this in *The Collected Short Stories* (1987) edited by Diana Athill (WW Norton).

<sup>3</sup> Although "Temps Perdi" has not been read as a war story, I have benefited from readings of the story by Elaine Savory in *Jean Rhys, Mary Lou Emery* in "The Poetics of Labor in Jean Rhys's Global Modernism," and Evelyn Hawthorne in "'Persistence of (Colonial) Memory': Jean Rhys's Carib Texts and Imperial Historiography."

## The Story

"Temps Perdi" is unusual in structure. After a first (unnumbered, untitled) part, there are two additional parts headed as follows: 2. *The Sword Dance and Love Dance* and 3. *Carib Quarter* (italics in the original). The first part of the story opens with the unnamed narrator-protagonist describing the house in which she is temporarily residing, which is one of three houses in a cluster on the outskirts of a village on the east coast of England. Her house is the only one of the three with a name, or the only one whose name we learn—Rolvenden.<sup>4</sup> The other two houses have been requisitioned by the army. The village is under threat of bombardment and invasion and the narrator too is vulnerable, a semi-invalid who is somehow (ambiguously) sequestered in Rolvenden. Most days, after having taken care to block off the many persistent drafts of the house, she reports that she spends her time propped up with cushions on the floor before a fire, reading.<sup>5</sup> The bulk of this section involves the narrator's descriptions of her environs, memories of the Caribbean where she clearly once lived, and her interactions with two men who deliver her coal, whom she resents but with whom she identifies (for various reasons which will become clear, below).

Part 2 is mostly comprised of the narrator's memories of an evening of revel at one of Vienna's smart hotels in the period immediately following the First World War when she was attached to a "Japanese Commission" involved in the disarmament of the Austro-Hungarian empire (261). She is socializing with French attachés, and with the Japanese military officers who, had this part been set in the story's present, would not be allies but instead personnel in a new imperial army. Of note in part 2 is its evocation of empires past and future, the narrator's lengthy description of her wardrobe of gorgeous dresses, a young woman's foiling of a married officer's advances, and the studied characterization of the cities' postwar nationalities to bring out both positive and negative qualities (as perhaps) suggested by the section's title. British misogyny and (especially Japanese) ethno-supremacist attitudes are emphasized on the debit side of the accounting.

Section 3 describes the narrator's trip to the unnamed Caribbean island she had grown up on; the trip seems to have taken place between the two wars. This corresponds to Rhys's trip to Dominica in 1936; further, the fictive island's topography recalls Dominican features. With respect to the story as a whole, the third part in some way justifies the various introjected Caribbean memories of the first section. It also explains the narrative's title, since during her and her party's visit to the island's Carib Quarter (the main event of the section), the narrator travels through an estate known as Temps Perdi, seemingly because the words are cut into a tree and have been there, it is said, for three hundred years.<sup>6</sup> On their way to the quarter, notions about the reservation's dwellers are imparted: The Spaniards are said to have wiped out or else deported most of the original islanders and the remaining few are said to have been finished off by Caribs from the mainland, who were themselves then rendered nearly extinct by Europeans.<sup>7</sup> The narrator explains how she used to be disturbed by depictions of Amerindians, and the party considers the legend that Carib women had a language of their own which Carib men could not understand. Further, notably, while Temps Perdi is still producing, the old estate house is crumbling amidst overgrown gardens, a fact which, along with the estate's name that "does not mean, poetically, lost or forgotten time, but, matter-of-factly, wasted time" (267), occasions the narrator's thought that "You are getting along fine and then a hurricane comes, or a disease of the crops that nobody can cure, and there you are, more West Indian ruins and labour lost" (267–268). This history of cycling natural disasters aside, the area they pass through is achingly lovely in its profusion of fragrant blossoms and magnificent trees, and, eventually, they arrive to the Carib Quarter.

<sup>4</sup> In the midst of her and her husband's moves during the war, Rhys suffered a breakdown and spent time recuperating on the east coast of England in a house like Rolvenden. Throughout the story, the narrator's memories are no doubt Rhys's or close to them. This points to Rhys's characteristic compositional method: her own experience is used liberally as material in the process of constructing incisive statements about her time. That she was drawing especially heavily from her life in this story is suggested from a jotting in one of her notebooks: "Combination of [?] and Diary" (qtd in Angier 415). Besides confirming the way in which Rhys composed, this note draws our attention to the degree to which the story's narrator reports facts about Dominica (or about the island of the story), i.e., to the story's sequences of reportage. It is as if Rhys (who was a news junkie) felt compelled to gesture toward that which the newspapers were overlooking in their war journalism: despite the admirable detail on the war to be found in *The Times* and the like, the point of view of the colonized is largely absent.

<sup>5</sup> For an exploration of the narrator's reading, see Evelyn Hawthorne, pp. 91–112.

<sup>6</sup> The Carib Reserve, Carib Territory, or Kalinago Territory is today a 3,700-acre zone that was allotted to the island's original (Kalinago) inhabitants (initially, less land was granted). The Kalinago word for Dominica is Waitukubuli.

<sup>7</sup> Recent archeological, genetic, and linguistic evidence undermine the long-held belief that Dominica's original inhabitants were finished off by an invading mainland native culture after suffering at the hands of the Spanish. See for example Corinne L. Hofman et.al., "Island networks: Transformations of inter-community social relationships in the Lesser Antilles at the advent of European colonialism"; J. Benn Torres et.al., "Genetic Diversity in the Lesser Antilles and Its Implications for the Settlement of the Caribbean Basin"; and Dave D. Davis et.al., "Island Carib Origins: Evidence and Nonevidence."

There, they find a “police-station” whose construction had caused violent protests and was partially burned down, for the Caribs had requested that a hospital be built (272). The policeman who provides this information urges the group to photograph a beautiful young Carib woman in the vicinity. They do so, the woman is indeed exquisite, and it is noted that she is of mixed ethnicity. She is also disabled and must drag herself into the sunlight to be seen and photographed. This she does willingly and somehow gracefully, expecting payment from those who photograph her: “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” (273). Part 3 ends with this connection between the narrator in her invalid, semi-reclining state, and this earthbound, disabled young woman, and with the narrator’s thoughts back in the present. “Before I leave ‘Rolvenden’ I’ll write them up [the words Temps Perdi] – on a looking glass, perhaps” (274), she thinks.

## Space

The linking of the story’s first and last parts, as through the two disabled characters, is most prominently a spatial dynamic, as Mary Lou Emery has pointed out in an essay on figurations of female labor in Rhys’s fiction. “This mirroring of the two estates, Rolvenden and Temps Perdi, embeds the Caribbean—in all of its complex and conflicted history and with its many peoples and languages—in the midst of twentieth-century England and Europe’s imperial wars,” Emery writes (180). By the end of the story’s first part, we understand that the space of Rolvenden and its environs represent both the idealized British nation inevitably foregrounded during the war and the classist, sexist nation that Rhys contrarily insists it is. By the end of the story as a whole, through a linking of Rolvenden/the demystified nation and the spaces of Temps Perdi/the Carib Quarter, we understand further that Britain is to be aligned with the imperial Third Reich on the basis of the states’ related histories of conquest and exterminatory white supremacy.

The story’s attention to space is suggested by its opening focus on the houses in and around which the narrator is living. They are described in the story’s first two paragraphs:

Rolvenden’ is a square, red-brick house, and it stands with two others on the farthest outskirts of a good-sized village on the east coast. It belongs to one of the masters of a small public school which has moved to Gloucestershire for safety’s sake. There is nothing in the house that you can say is ugly; on the other hand, there is nothing that you can say is beautiful, impulsive, impetuous or generous. All is sparse, subdued, quiet and negative, or so you would think – a lawn, a large vegetable garden, an empty garage and, when I first came, a few last sad flowers. Outside the front door a gravel path, once bordered with lavender, leads to a green gate.

The two other houses have been taken over by the Army. The one opposite has large grounds and I never hear a sound from it. But from the other one on the side there is often the clatter of men washing up ill-temperedly. How they chuck things about! This is the time of smash and grab. Some poor devil – [...] – had tried hard with that house. There are four bathrooms – pink, black, green and blue. But there is venom in the way those men wash up, and there won’t be much left of the pink, black, green and blue bathrooms when the military have got out. (256)

Its drearier qualities aside for the moment, Rolvenden emerges as a heterotopic space of compensation in the first section of “Temps Perdi”; that is, a space whose purpose is to dim the contradictions of other spaces, most often the space of the nation itself (Foucault).<sup>8</sup> Over the course of part one, the dwelling’s English village authenticity comes to evoke centuries of native tradition, partly thanks to its oft-repeated ancient Saxon name, the resonating first word of the story, which itself evokes a deep, dim English past.<sup>9</sup> At one point, for example, a sequence of the narrator’s vivid memories ends with an image of a dreamy yet enduring Rolvenden: “Everything [remembered] is sharp, bright, clear-cut – a little smaller than life, perhaps, and the voices coming from some way off, but very clear. It is ‘Rolvenden’ that is behind me in the mist” (260–261). Or, as in this related detail, the narrator ponders enchanting names for the island nation: “The White Island is occasionally also called Brea, or Britannia. Does this perhaps refer to White Albion, to the chalky cliffs of the English coast?” (257). The first section’s evocation of an idealized England is, however, consistently

<sup>8</sup> The most frequently cited source for Foucault’s thinking on heterotopias is “Of Other Spaces” (*Des espaces autres*), a transcription of a 1967 lecture.

<sup>9</sup> Emery points out that Rolvenden is “an ancient Saxon name” in “The Poetics of Labor in Jean Rhys’s Global Modernism” (180).

undercut, as in the opening passage's descriptions of Rolvenden's bland furnishings (not an unfailingly gracious isle) and prosaic garden (nor a uniformly verdant one). With its drafts and vulnerability to attack, certainly, the house-as-nation must be seen to gesture toward the idea of an island always open to conquests (predating even the Saxon, of course), hardly a culture and island unto itself.

Ultimately, Rolvenden and the third house in the cluster end up most convincingly evoking heterotopias of crisis and deviation, at least as they correspond to the narrator and the recruits, who come to represent, respectively, Britain's women and working classes. Michel Foucault has written as follows on these types of spaces:

[crisis heterotopias] are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc. In our society, these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing, though a few remnants can still be found. For example, the boarding school, in its nineteenth-century form, or military service for young men... [They] are being replaced, I believe, by what we might call heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed.... (25)

The working-class recruits are indeed "young men" in "crisis," but instead of being enveloped in a sacred aura befitting their immanent martyrdom, they exude venom in their bad tempered "smash and grab," energies suggestive of a bitter resistance to their (in fact inescapable) future as cannon fodder. For her part, the narrator's weakness taken together with her aging femininity and status as unwelcome village outsider put her and Rolvenden under the sign of deviance. The narrator is misogynistically reviled by the local working men who deliver her much needed coal, which villagers then routinely pilfer if not locked up; and since the men refuse to carry the coal to the secure garage, she is forced to lug the fuel herself, a labor that exhausts her. Overall in her interactions with the working men, the narrator struggles to reconcile her privilege and the sympathy this induces for the men's harsh life—"They went off and I started after them. They must be frozen. Shall I call to them and ask them in to have some coffee essence?" (259)—with the deep sense of aversion that has been occasioned by their misogyny and dismissal of her as a village outsider:

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?" the first voice said, very offended.  
 "Why should you think I'd look at a blank, blank cow in a blank, blank, blank, blank ditch?" (259)

While the narrator's class privilege and the men's persecution of her distinguishes her from them, her sympathetic yearning for connection and stint as a kind of exhausted collier ties her to them and the other working-class characters in the story, the recruits.<sup>10</sup> The idealizations and compensatory effects evoked by Rolvenden and related elements in the story's first section are then canceled, as Britain's women and working classes emerge as aggrieved groupings, if they are so for differing reasons and with differing effects.

A second postmodern understanding of space, the notion that key spaces within cultures (such as estates) reproduce broader social relations (Lefebvre), provides a means to approach the relation Rhys establishes between Britain and the Caribbean island-colony in section three of the story.<sup>11</sup> As Regina Martin has written with respect to the estate in Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), for example, plantations "naturalize, universalize, and de-historicize the social relations of the feudal estate system" by reproducing within their boundaries the "proper place for each individual within the colonial social system" (138–139). *Voyage's* plantation, however, Martin contends, "does not institute horizons; it opens up horizons and thereby raises the specter of social struggle intrinsic to empire" (139). In "Temps Perdi," the agricultural expanse of the eponymous estate must be grasped as a lingering feudal space coextensive with the island itself, no matter that the ruins of the old estate house encode the "social struggle" intrinsic to such spaces and empire more generally.

<sup>10</sup> Emery cites an unpublished manuscript by Rhys, titled "St. Lucia," which ends with the following passage: "The memory from St. Lucia of a long line of women carrying coals to the ship. Some of them looked very strained up and tired carrying those huge baskets. I didn't like to think of them, but I hadn't asked any questions. I knew someone would say, 'They're very well paid,' and another, 'Yes, but women are cheaper'. ("Poetics" 180). Rhys's 1936 visit to Dominica included time in St. Lucia and coincided with a period of intense labor unrest in the region.

<sup>11</sup> See Lefebvre, p. 202.

The island's continuing status as a colony supports this, as does the story's foregrounding of the space of the reservation, which conveys a sense of the exceptionality and hence fixity of status endured by island's colonized. Part one and three of the story are thus connected on the basis of their attention to subordinated populations, in a global view of the British empire.

Rhys's highlighting of aggrieved populations in "Temps Perdi" is not simply a spatial dynamic rooted in the present, however. The coal-hauling men of the story's first section evoke the British working-classes dating from the industrial age, just as Temps Perdi evokes the generations of the estate enslaved from the deeper imperial past. This temporal dimension allows for the story's explicit linking of the British empire and the Third Reich, as it occurs in relation to the reservation, in the form of a suggestion that the space must be classed with, even if it is distinct from, a concentration camp, as a type of space intrinsic to episodes of racial human oppression. This point is communicated in the story through the travelers' discussion of whether any members of the purported original, pre-Carib peoples will be found in the Carib Quarter:<sup>12</sup> "But that book [...] said that some of the [Arawak] women...survived both the Spaniards and Caribs – people were not so thorough then as they are now" (270). The idea of thoroughness in the here and now is a grim reference to the Nazi exterminations, clearly. In a story taking place during Britain's struggle against the encroaching Third Reich, in sum, Rhys's poetics of space point to histories of British national oppression and to a genocidal, imperial Britain that followed the Spanish lead to itself leave tragedy, terror, and decimation in its wake.

The cataclysmic present of the war no doubt led Rhys to her bleak vision of history repeating itself, a vision that recalls Walter Benjamin's contemporaneous anti-progressivist notion of history as an ongoing "state of emergency" when viewed from the vantage of the oppressed (257). The story's refracting empires from the Saxon to the British, the Austro-Hungarian to the Japanese, and so on, cannot be missed, and the same idea is reflected in the story's title, which refers to the Caribbean setting in its capacity as a locale of cycling natural disasters.<sup>13</sup> That said, Rhys's world is one in which dissent, too, is ongoing—the young woman's foiling of the Japanese officer's advances, the Arawak women's secret language, the recruits' anger, the nearly burned down police-station—but then again, this resistance is so often ineffectual. The police-station still stands, and no hospital was built, and so on. In what follows, the idea that the story's disability aesthetics point to a yearning for a (Benjaminian) "messianic" break in time to propel humankind out of its repressive cycles is explored (263).

## Disability

In *Disability Aesthetics*, Tobin Siebers opens his book with an affective claim, "[a]esthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies," and he goes on to ask the following: "[w]hy do we see representations of disability as having greater material existence than other aesthetic representations?" (1–2).<sup>14</sup> Siebers endorses artists' purposeful representations of disability and of things and actions that typically disgust, arguing that they grapple with the problem of how "aesthetic feelings of...disgust are difficult to separate from political feelings of...rejection" (2). In other words, Siebers believes that disability aesthetics work against the forces of social exclusionism and their accompanying depredations. He reminds us of Hitler's condemnation of the artists of the Degenerate Art exhibit for glorifying "'defective' people"—a condemnation that involved the mandate for idealized representations of the human body—arguing that disability must be seen as a radical form of human difference and that disability art serves to normalize the fact of diversity (29): "Disability does not express defect, degeneration, or deviancy in modern art. Rather, disability enlarges our vision of human variation and difference" (3). Relevant here also is Siebers's discussion of "trauma art," where the disabled or wounded body stands a record of social or historical violence (102).

The disabled figures of "Temps Perdi" speak volumes in this light, in ways that complement and complicate the story's spatial aesthetics. As has already been suggested, the ill and reviled narrator evokes the processes by which persons are deemed socially "defective," in her case on bases inclusive of gender.<sup>15</sup> For her

<sup>12</sup> See f.n. 7 and, although the narrator cites her reading here, it should be noted that Rhys makes much of the fact that the narrator is not simply a reader, but one who has learned to read against the grain: "I am almost as wary of books as I am of people" (257). See also f.n. 5.

<sup>13</sup> The refracting repetitions of the story are thematized in the story's heterotopic mirror: "Before I leave 'Rolvenden' I'll write [the words Temps Perdi] – on a looking glass."

<sup>14</sup> Siebers attributes the idea of an affective aesthetics to Alexander Baumgarten.

<sup>15</sup> Disability theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes that, akin to the disabled, women are often "cast as deviant and inferior": "both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a form that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority" (19).

part, the Carib woman's body encodes the history of colonial cruelty (trauma art), strongly suggesting, in its supine state, not only the gendered sexual violence of empire, but also a kind of perpetual exhaustion that we might associate with excessive, enforced labor.<sup>16</sup> Related to this is her habitat's suggestion of homogenizing cultural violence in its "wall covered with pictures cut from 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).<sup>17</sup> Essentially, she is being drawn into a tourist economy as a consumable spectacle.

That these figures are more than representations of distress, however, is signaled through their association with that which is most beautiful in the realm of the human and human-made.<sup>18</sup> For example, although the narrator is abject(ed), she is the same character who presents precise descriptions of the various gorgeous dresses of her Viennese wardrobe, one of which she still wears in her beleaguered, dislocated present: "Yes, I can remember all my dresses, except the one on the chair beside me, the one I wore when I was walking on the cliffs yesterday. Yesterday – when was yesterday?" (266). Likewise, while Rhys works to develop the idea of the Carib character's disability, she also works in a contrary vein. At first, however, the woman's disability is emphasized. Her physical disablement is noted and her mixed ethnicity is presented as a kind of aesthetic impurity: "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" (273).<sup>19</sup> This accords with the aesthetics of the illustration the narrator recalls from her youth, one of which she finds in a periodical on her travels and about which she wishes to argue with her fellow travelers:

I produced the special number of *L'Illustration*, 23 November 1935, for the *Tricentenaire des Antilles Françaises* and exhibited the '*Homme Caribe Dessiné d'après natur par le Père Plumier*'. Early eighteenth century, probably. Bow and arrows in his right hand, a club in his left, a huge, muscular body and 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.

"We had a print very like this – perhaps it was the same one – in the dining-room at home."

"He isn't very attractive."

"Everybody used to say that." (269)<sup>20</sup>

To the European eyes for whom these images were produced, the mixing of registers (man or women? murderous or childlike?) amounted to a monstrosity that produced both feelings of disgust and a comfortable sense of superiority. Yet, in keeping with the narrator's questioning of the ideological work of the illustration, the Carib woman's beauty is finally her most important feature of all, vying with the sun: "She sat there smiling, and an assortment of brightly-coloured Virgins and saints looked down at her from the walls, smiling too.... She had aquiline features, proud features. Her skin in the sun was a lovely colour" (273). She is both spectacle *and* a kind of deity, her habitat both a colonized space and shrine to which pilgrims

<sup>16</sup> In "Bodies in Conflict: Policing Sexual Liaisons in Jamaica during World War II," Delia Bean notes that the sexual exploitation of vulnerable Caribbean women was heightened during the war as soldiers were trained and garrisoned in the region.

<sup>17</sup> In doubling the "Star of the Sea" image, which, amongst all of the various European virgins, found a particular foothold in the Caribbean, Rhys perhaps also hints at the more complex process of transculturation (Pratt).

<sup>18</sup> Fitting this pattern also is the pairing of the restless recruits—abjectly sacrificial figures—with the fanciful dwelling of multi-colored bathrooms. Or, the narrator can be grouped with the recruits as a resisting figure, to the extent that her physical disqualification can be read as a bleakly comic subversion of the British high imperial-era/wartime womanly ideal. The disabled person, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has said, is no "more troubling...than in relation to the concept of work" (46), and while British womanhood had her duties in all eras, the need for productive bodies is never more intense than in times of national duress such as war. In this light, the story's disability aesthetics can be usefully considered alongside Anne Cunningham's argument about Rhys's modernist period, Bartleby-like aesthetics of feminine "failure":

Bartleby's refusal to perform his duties as a law office clerk sends the office into a state of disarray. His refutation is an example of how passivity functions as resistance, and Rhys's heroine's refusal to behave according to British notions of white feminine respectability in work and social situations operates similarly. I argue that failure is a feminist response in Rhys's novels because it jettisons patriarchal femininity, albeit through negation. In other words, I examine how negation points toward the problematic construction of this mode of femininity, and show how Rhys employs a negative feminism that serves to question less resistant, positivist accounts. (374)

<sup>19</sup> Addressing Rhys's descriptions of the Carib girl and her mother, Hawthorne writes: "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" (108).

<sup>20</sup> The Plumier illustration is reproduced in Hawthorne (105).

journey.<sup>21</sup> In both recalling and countering the responses typically evoked by the crass illustrations of the narrator's youth, in sum, Rhys's character yokes together that which is disabled and putatively monstrous to that which is most beautiful and possessed of its own form of (saintly) purity. Or, to put this another way, Rhys's disability aesthetics gesture toward a transformed relationship to human difference and to a utopian vision of human unity.

By way of conclusion to this exploration of "Temps Perdi," a brief consideration of the third house in the story's cluster, as yet unaddressed, seems apt: "The two other houses have been taken over by the Army. The one opposite has large grounds and I never hear a sound from it." The third key space in the story's first section straightforwardly points to those workings of the state, especially the state at war, to which citizens are not privy. Yet, given that the story speaks through an aesthetics of space about silences and invisibility—the empire's historical evasion in failing to acknowledge itself in its enemy—the third house's blank expanse and reclusive mystery undoubtedly point to weightier meanings. The most likely meaning, considering the story as a whole, is found in Hannah Arendt's argument that European imperialism was one of totalitarianism's origins by virtue of accustoming nation-states not simply to grotesque human rights abuses, but also to habitual secrecy in their operations in their splitting into democratic bodies at home and authoritarian regimes abroad.<sup>22</sup> That Rhys's insights and attitudes in this story might correspond to some of those of Arendt and Benjamin is not surprising. The thinking of all three at the midcentury was informed by the war, and searing critique was one of Rhys's *métiers* as a writer.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>21</sup> Related to this is the only approving description of art in the story, the narrator's reportage on Carib craft: They make baskets, beautifully plaited, light and waterproof, dyed red and brown or black and white. The largest is the island's substitute for a trunk, the smallest would just hold a baby's shoe" (269). Relevant here also is that even as the young woman is being drawn into a tourist economy, she is living in a territory that to this day maintains an economic system based on communal land tenure. Thus, when the story's travelers arrive to the Carib quarter, they discover that the people recognize their own regent, a King. For a wealth of information related to these points, see Trista Patterson and Luis Rodriguez, "The Political Economy of Tourism in the Commonwealth of Dominica" and Brigitte Kossek's "Land Rights, Cultural Identity and Gender Conflicts in the Carib Territory or Dominica."

<sup>22</sup> This is one of Arendt's arguments in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published in 1951.

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