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*Jean Rhys's Piecing of the Local and the Transnational
in Voyage in the Dark*

Writing about Jean Rhys in *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya*, Christopher GoGwilt makes the prescient general observation that her “narratives are premised on a problem of reading modernism.”¹ GoGwilt highlights Rhys’s writerly and readerly consciousness of her complicated locations as a modernist, locations marked by her white Creole Dominican heritage and upbringing, by her shifting class and expatriate status, by her gender, and by her routes to and through modernist sites and temporalities. The spatial or transnational turn in modernist studies has focused on her primarily as a Caribbean expatriate birthed as a writer under the pseudonym Jean Rhys in Left Bank Paris in the mid-1920s under the patronage of Ford Madox Ford, yet “whose relation to Creole modernism remains contested.”² Outlining “A Transnational Poetics,” Jahan Ramazani advocates an attention to the “*translocal*” rather than “culture-of-birth determinism,” writerly and readerly crossings of “boundaries of national and regional community, forging alliances of style and sensibility across vast distances of geography,

¹ Christopher GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 91.

² GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature*, 3. For other recent instances of the placement of Rhys as a transnational modernist, see Mary Lou Emery, “Taking the Detour, Finding the Rebels: Crossroads of Caribbean and Modernist Studies,” *Disciplining Modernism*, ed. Pamela L. Caughie (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 71-91; Jonathan Goldman, *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Mary Lou Emery, “Caribbean Modernism: Plantation to Planetary” and Peter Kalliney, “Jean Rhys: Left Bank Modernist as Postcolonial Intellectual,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. Mark Wollaeger and Eatough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 48-77 and 413-32 respectively; Mary Lou Emery, “The Poetics of Labor in Jean Rhys’s Caribbean Modernism,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 23.4 (2012): 421-44; Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Ankhi Mukherjee, “[Creole Modernism](#),” *Affirmations: of the modern* 2.1 (Winter 2014): 25-45.

history, and culture.”³ Crossing such boundaries engaged Rhys in the crucial process of piecing together, shaping her fiction: “a novel has to have a shape and life doesn’t have any,” she would insist.⁴ Rhys uses the figure of quilting to describe her artistic method—“a lot of cutting, joining up—all that patchwork.”⁵ In quilting the work of cutting and joining up is called piecing. It is a process that also involves “arrange[ment]” of the “colours and all the pieces [of narrative fabric] cut.”⁶ In this essay I address her piecing of the local and the transnational in *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), a piecing which pointedly engages with texts, movements, and sites identified as decadent or degenerate in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century moral panics: French naturalism epitomized by Zola’s *Nana*; the work of Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley (who is explicitly named in the novel); the “amateur” prostitute in Britain during the First World War and the 1920s; the tropics (othered through the discourse of tropicity as a site of miscegenation and degeneration); plantation slavery; the underdevelopment cited as a motive for New Imperialism imposed on fin-de-siècle Dominica; and the ragtime craze in England in the early 1910s (often stigmatized as American decadence). Falling is a crucial motif of the novel, which Rhys described as the “downward career of a girl”:⁷ from the opening statement that “It was as if a curtain had fallen,” through dreams of people going overboard, to the last sections of Part IV, where falling resonates as sexual fall (represented in delirium as falling from a horse), regaining of consciousness (“down to earth again”), and a lie about miscarriage to try to cover up an illegal abortion in seeking medical treatment (“you had a fall”).⁸

Rhys, born Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams, tells several versions of her early interest in writing. The narrative of her emergence as an adult writer begins with

³ Jahan Ramazani, “A Transnational Poetics,” *American Literary History* 18.2 (2006): 332-59 (343, 333).

⁴ Diana Athill, Foreword, in Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*, ed. Diana Athill (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 6.

⁵ Jean Rhys, letter to Selma Vaz Dias, 10 January 1959, in Jean Rhys, *Letters 1931-1966*, ed. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly (London: Andre Deutsch, 1984), 159.

⁶ Rhys, letter to Maryvonne Moerman, 4 May 1959, in *Letters*, 162.

⁷ Rhys, letter to Evelyn Scott, 18 February 1934, in *Letters*, 24.

⁸ Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 7, 158. Subsequent citations of *Voyage in the Dark* will be made parenthetically.

the depression she experienced after her lover Lancelot Hugh Smith abandoned her in 1912. On impulse one day she bought a number of brightly coloured “quill pens” to “cheer up” her “table,” black exercise books with red spines, “an ordinary penholder, a bottle of ink and a cheap inkstand,” and that evening headed one of the books,

This is my Diary. But it wasn't a diary. I remembered everything that had happened to me in the last year and a half. I remembered what he'd said, what I'd felt. [...] I filled three exercise books and half another, then I wrote: “Oh, God, I'm only twenty and I'll have to go on living and living and living.” I knew then that it was finished and there was no more to say.⁹

At the suggestion of journalist H. Pearl Adam, and with her assistance, Rhys would rework the diaries in the early 1920s as “Suzy Tells,” later retitled “Triple Sec,” the protagonist of which is Suzy Gray. “Triple Sec” brought Rhys to the attention of Ford Madox Ford, then editing the *transatlantic review* from Paris. Rhys returned to the exercise books (now lost) rather than “Triple Sec” to develop *Voyage in the Dark*, which covers about half of the narrative span of “Triple Sec.”¹⁰ The diaries provided some of the fabric of the novel, which was published in the year that marked the centenary of the abolition of slavery. Like other modernist writers, Rhys used “revision, an action that implies retrospection, [...] to *make it new*.” Rhys makes her use of material new not just by transforming “structure, perspective, and genre,”¹¹ but through stitching in allusive design and reach to engage with memory, time, and history.

Rhys's placing of *Voyage in the Dark* in relation to a translocal genealogy of representation of decadence is a crucial feature of its self-conscious modernist innovation. In 1934 Rhys wrote to her friend Evelyn Scott, explaining that her

⁹ Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 104, 129–30.

¹⁰ Both Esty and Goldman confuse these exercise books and *Voyage in the Dark*, placing the novel as written before 1914 (Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 166; Goldman, *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity*, 142).

¹¹ Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.

first title for *Voyage in the Dark*, “Two Tunes,” has “Something to do with time being an illusion I think. I mean that the past exists—side by side with the present, not behind it; that what was—is.”¹² The novel limns the “positionality of *beside*,” undercutting the “linear logics” of past and present and of now-here and then-there,¹³ and inscribing a relation of temporality and history that accords with Edouard Glissant’s later theorization of a temporal “poetics of accumulation” or Atlantic “sedimentation of the modern.” As for Glissant, for Rhys “the what-has-been *is*, and it is *lived*, and it is lived in the total environment linking together the ‘histories of peoples.’” Providing a succinct summary of Glissant’s view of the sedimentation of time, Ian Baucom writes: “time accumulates both variously and unevenly: in the body, in architecture, in the law, in language, in rituals, customs, and ceremonies and [...] in images.”¹⁴ For Rhys it also accumulates in moral panics around decadence and degeneracy. Stanley Cohen identifies as a moral panic the sensationalization of a “condition, episode, person or groups of persons” as

a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion in the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; [...] Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk-lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society perceives itself.¹⁵

Engaging with theories of moral panic, Simon Watney argues that the British and U.S. media “address [...] an imaginary national family unit which is both white and heterosexual. All apparent threats to this key object of individual identification will be subject to the kinds of treatment which Cohen and his followers describe as moral panics.” He identifies such panics as “primarily

¹² Rhys, letter to Evelyn Scott, 18 February 1934, in *Letters*, 24.

¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

¹⁴ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 319, 325, 319, 325.

¹⁵ Quoted in Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, Aids and the Media*, 3rd edn (London: Cassell, 1997), 39.

defensive,” repetitive, “fundamentally *serial*,” and exhibiting an “infinite variety of tone and posture.”¹⁶ Rhys also alludes to moral panics which address imaginary imperial family units in which hegemony is invested in respectable middle-class white English norms, and perceived crossings of racialized thresholds are denounced.

The Picture of Dorian Gray as *Point of Departure*

The opening sentence of *Voyage in the Dark* describes the affect of white Creole Anna Morgan’s move from Dominica to England: “It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known” (7). The sentence also alludes to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, signalling a contestation of Dorian’s and Lord Henry’s abjection of the past to sustain a decadent present and an interest in and engagement with the way women are positioned in subcultures represented as dissident, decadently other to bourgeois heterosexual norms of relationship and reproduction. Later in the first chapter Anna drops the “as if”: “A curtain fell and then I was here” (15). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a quintessential text of 1890s decadence about which Wilde was questioned during the libel trial which publicized allegations of homosexuality. Dorian Gray’s “hardly seventeen”-year-old fiancée, actress Sibyl Vane, dies, apparently by suicide by ingesting prussic acid or white lead, after he breaks off their engagement, having been “disappointed” by a performance she gave in the role of Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*. He insists to her that she has “killed” his “love.” “A fit of passionate sobbing choked her,” as he looks “down” on her prostrate form with “chiselled lips curled in exquisite disdain.” His mentor Lord Henry Wotton tries to persuade him that the suicide has been fortuitous, as abandoned female partners have an excruciating habit of “go[ing] in at once for reminiscences.” Abandoned women fail to recognize that “[t]he one charm of the past is that it is past,” for “women never know when the curtain has fallen. [...] They are charmingly artificial, but they have no sense of art.”¹⁷ Lord Henry redeems the suicide as a fortunate act of self-sacrifice in Dorian’s interest. In conversation with Basil, Dorian idealizes it as a theatrical triumph: “She passed again into the sphere of art. There is something of the martyr about her. Her

¹⁶ Watney, *Policing Desire*, 43.

¹⁷ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Peter Ackroyd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 75, 117, 115, 117, 131.

death has all the pathetic uselessness of martyrdom, all its wasted beauty.” “What is past is past” becomes the seductive rationale of Dorian’s amoral hedonism,¹⁸ though after Sibyl’s death the weight of the past, his corruption, does register in the portrait of him painted by Basil Hallward.

The first few pages of *Voyage in the Dark* offer a counterpoint to the opening of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in which Lord Henry luxuriates in the present moment looking from Basil Hallward’s studio to a beautiful garden. The counterpoint takes up the challenge of Gilbert’s comment in Wilde’s dialogue “The Critic as Artist” that the writer “who would stir us now by fiction must either give us an entirely new background, or reveal to us the soul of man in its innermost workings. [...] there is still much to be done in the sphere of introspection.”¹⁹ Jed Esty has nicely pointed to the ways in which Lord Henry’s hedonism is grounded in “cultural privilege that Raymond Williams has called metropolitan perception, that is, the ‘magnetic concentration of wealth and power in imperial capitals and the simultaneous cosmopolitan access to a wide variety of subordinate cultures.’” Esty argues that the “cluster[ing]” and “thicken[ing]” of “Orientalist tropes” in this opening sequence and elsewhere in Wilde’s text mark “points where” he “needs to break with the realist mode of presentation or the linear demands of traditional plotting.”²⁰ By contrast with Wilde’s novel, *Voyage in the Dark* immerses the reader in the first-person narrative perspective of its protagonist Anna Morgan.

Rhys’s contrapuntal scene of consumption explicitly evokes white Creole “difference” from the English (7), a difference represented in her sustaining primitivist corporeal memories of Dominica and impressionistic evocation of England as a grim, enclosing place marked by a culture of repetition and homogenizing grey sameness. Jonathan Cape, which had published *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927) and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), rejected *Voyage in the Dark*, complaining about “how grey” Rhys “was, without light or shade.”²¹ Dominica is never explicitly named in *Voyage in the Dark*. Rather,

¹⁸ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 139, 138.

¹⁹ Oscar Wilde, *Poems and Essays* (London: Dent, 1956), 336.

²⁰ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 106, 105.

²¹ Rhys, letter to Evelyn Scott, 10 June 1934, in *Letters*, 25.

Anna remembers the geographical coordinates of a small island on which she was born and grew up: “15⁰ 10’ and 15⁰ 40’ N. and 61⁰ 14’ and 61⁰ 30 W.” (15). Interested readers would be sent scurrying for an atlas. Rhys’s citing of the coordinates shows up readers’ epistemological distance from Anna and challenges them to reorient their perspectives. Anna’s comparative cultural privilege as a white Creole is registered in the memories as difference from labouring black people and as a capacity to reduce their humanity by casually remembering them as “niggers” (7), a word Rhys characteristically uses in the novel as a sign of the racism of Anna’s English stepmother Hester. Expatriate Anna, on tour as a lowly paid chorus girl, is staying in a boarding house in Southsea that looks onto a “walled-in garden. The tree by the back wall was lopped so that it looked like a man with stumps instead of arms and legs. The washing hung limp, without moving, in the grey-yellow light” (9). The prospect suggests enclosure, amputation, bleakness, and stasis. Walter Jeffries, whose kept mistress she will later become, first meets her while sexually cruising Southsea pier and buys her two pairs of stockings, “lisle thread with clocks up the side” (10). In the moral panics around amateur prostitution in the 1910s and 1920s the perceived lack of sexual and consumerist self-control of the sexually active, lower-class, single woman is pathologized as a moral or psychological rottenness which threatens racial health, a view Rhys challenges.²² The term *amateur* separated these women from prostitutes who were part of a fee-for-service sexual economy. Amateurs were more part of a gift culture, exchanging the prospect of sex for luxuries like the stockings, a “good time” (133).

The opening places Anna and her labour in relation to transatlantic circulation of capital and to the transatlantic as a site of “material and economic exchange,” of the “transmission of aesthetic and ideological forms,” and of migration and dispossession.²³ Her named lovers Walter Jeffries and Carl Redman make their wealth through transatlantic business. Londoner Walter works in the City and travels to New York; Carl is a married American businessman who travels to mainland Europe, England, and Buenos Aires. The picking up and display of

²² Sue Thomas, *The Worlding of Jean Rhys* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 67-70.

²³ Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor, “Introduction: What is Transatlantic Literary Studies,” in *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, ed. Manning and Taylor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 1-13 (5).

temporary or casual sexual partners in front of other men consolidates homosociality. Walter's cousin Vincent's partner Germaine says of Englishmen, "They can't make women happy because they don't really like them. I suppose it's the climate or something" (70). Laurie tells Anna that Carl is "a funny cuss. He only cares about gambling really" (100).

Rhys also counterpoints other motifs from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in *Voyage in the Dark*. Like Wilde, Rhys plays on the idea of the corrupting book. Though Anna is reading Emile Zola's *Nana*, a novel "about a tart" according to her acquaintance Maudie Beardon, it registers with her merely as "dark, blurred words going on endlessly" and with Maudie as "disgusting. I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another" (9). Anna's worldly acquaintance escort Laurie Gaynor takes her to meet d'Adhémar, who has promised to show her "a marvellous book of dirty pictures," which turn out to be a "book of drawings by Aubrey Beardsley," an icon of 1890s English decadence, which Laurie berates: "I don't call that hot stuff." Performing and posturing his self-fashioning as sexual dissident, d'Adhémar recites "Les Philistins" by French decadent poet Jean Richepin. Rhys also implicitly juxtaposes Dorian's opium addiction and Anna's developing alcoholism over the course of her relationships with Walter Jeffries, Carl Redman, and unnamed men. Offering Anna alcohol is a routine part of scenarios of seduction and sex in the novel.²⁴

Entertaining Places

Anna's movement further into London's demi-monde after Walter drops her is signalled in the resonant sedimented histories of two establishments to which Carl takes her: Kettner's and Oddendino's. "Rhys is always so particular about the names of streets, cafés, and restaurants," observes Andrew Thacker, in his study of the "spatial style of her fiction."²⁵ The reference to Kettner's places

²⁴ I analyse Rhys's engagement with these aspects of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* more fully in "Jean Rhys and Katherine Mansfield Writing the 'Sixth Act,'" in *Jean Rhys: Twenty-first Century Approaches*, ed. Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 21-39.

²⁵ Andrew Thacker, "The Idea of a Critical Literary Geography," *New Formations* 57 (Winter 2005-2006), 56-73 (69).

Anna's experiences with Carl beside the conduct of sexually dissident subcultures revealed in the courtroom appearances of Wilde, suggesting the sedimentation of practices within such homosexual or heterosexual subcultures over time. Wilde's practice of entertaining "young male prostitutes in private upper rooms" at Kettner's was a sensational courtroom revelation at the libel trial.²⁶ Oddendino's, where Carl, Joe, Laurie, and Anna dine in 1912-1913, listening to the named Melville Gideon singing and playing the piano, is a historical marker of the transatlantic commercialization of ragtime and its reach into white performance and dance cultures. Gideon, a ragtime performer who relocated from New York to London, struck a deal with the owner of Oddendino's that he would be paid 25 cents for the per capita increase in trade his performances brought to the restaurant.²⁷ He reportedly earned £7,000 in his first year of performing in England,²⁸ and Oddendino's became one of Soho's "magnets for demi-mondes and young bloods on the town."²⁹

Rhys's allusion to the history of Wilde's patronage of Kettner's draws out a fetishization of youth and economies of procurement in the sexually dissident subcultures she places alongside each other. Wilde's testimony under cross-examination revealed a penchant for the youth of his casual partners and suggested that the sexual coterie for which Alfred Taylor procured young men from lower social classes was organized around gifts—money, silver cigarette cases, books, for example—rather than set fee for service.³⁰ Edward Carson, the defence lawyer for the Marquis of Queensberry, made such a point of asking about the amount of alcohol available for the young men that Wilde eventually responded, "any one who dines at my table is not stinted in wine. If you mean,

²⁶ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 36.

²⁷ "Overdoing Ragtime in England May Be Its Death, Says Butt," *Variety*, 10 January 1913, 1.

²⁸ "£7,000 a Year as a Pianist," *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 31 December 1913, 3.

²⁹ Walkowitz, *Nights Out*, 96.

³⁰ Douglas O. Linder, ed., "Famous World Trials. The Trials of Oscar Wilde. 1895," School of Law, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2015, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/wilde.htm>.

did I ply him with wine, I say ‘No!’ It’s monstrous, and I won’t have it.”³¹ By the time Laurie Gaynor, who had worked with Anna as a chorus girl, meets Americans Carl Redman and Joe Adler, she is “getting about a bit” by “showing” men “round” “a bit,” and introducing them to potential fresh partners (98-9). “She went on about how lucky she had been and what a lot of men with money she knew and what a good time she was having.” Laurie prudently “bank[s] half of everything” her male friends give her (98). “I never pay for a meal for myself. [...] I get along with men. I can do what I like with them. Sometimes I’m surprised myself. I expect it’s because they feel I really like it and no kidding,” she boasts (99). The circumlocution “it” suggests the difficulty of fully acknowledging her amateur prostitution and procurement. In context here, too, Rhys is punning on kidding, meaning becoming pregnant and having babies. Laurie inveigles Anna into going out with Carl, Joe, and her, telling Anna, “I’m sure you’ll go well with Carl because you look awfully young and he likes girls that look young” (100). So, too, does Walter Jeffries. Vincent, his cousin, even greets Anna: “Well, how’s the child? How’s my infantile Anna?” (69). Laurie has also earlier brought another “kid,” Renée, along on a date with Carl and Joe, playing to Carl’s sexual taste (106). When Carl takes Anna to Kettner’s, she does “everything to the tune of *Camptown Racecourse*” (132). The first record of the slang word “camp” meaning “Ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to or characteristic of homosexuals” has been traced to James Redding Ware’s *Passing English of the Victorian Era* (1909); this meaning had greater currency by the early 1930s.³² In association with Kettner’s the puns in the title *Camptown Racecourse* are clearly intended. Anna’s sex with Carl is registered as “The room still and dark and the lights from cars passing across the ceiling in long rays, and saying, ‘Oh please, oh please, oh please ...’” (132). It is not clear whether the lights, Carl, or Anna is saying “Oh please”; if Anna is, she may be suggesting that—like Laurie—she really likes sex, or willing that she pleases Carl. Edward VII conducted his affair with actress Lillie Langtree at Kettner’s.

³¹ Linder, ed., “Famous World Trials. The Trials of Oscar Wilde.”

³² “camp, *adj.* and *n.*,” *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, 2014), definition A.

The ragtime craze in pre-First World War Britain is epitomized by the phenomenal success of the revue *Hullo, Ragtime!*, with score and lyrics by Louis Hirsch (1881-1924), which ran at the Hippodrome from 23 December 1912 to ca. 13 April 1914. “[I]n the decades before the first war, ‘revue’ was understood,” Veronica Kelly writes, “as the newest new thing, epitomising cosmopolitan and revolutionary modernity in both mode and content. [...] As ragtime internationalised [through revue], its composers could be black or white, American or not.”³³ Peter Bailey observes that during the run of *Hullo, Ragtime!* there were

130 American ragtime groups reported touring Britain’s music halls together with countless British imitators [...] In its immediate and extensive take-up as popular song and dance beyond the stage, American ragtime demonstrated the appeal of its greater expressive freedoms, somatically, sexually and colloquially, features happily appropriated to the more performative style of a lived popular modernism in big-city Britain, embodied in the pelvically driven modern couple.³⁴

Gideon and Oddendino’s capitalized on the popularity of ragtime in the commercial arrangement into which they entered. Ragtime and dancing to it were sensationalized by some in Britain as American decadence, in large part because of its emergence from African-American musical and dance cultures. In a scathing essay “Ragtime: The New Tarantism,” published in the *English Review*, Francis Toye, for instance, urged readers to “beg” their local parliamentarians “to persuade parliament to deport Messrs. Hirsch and Melville Gideon and their various satellites, both male and female, as highly undesirable aliens, before this unhappy country should be converted into an even larger lunatic asylum than it is at present.” He urged that syncopated rhythm with “accents falling in unexpected places” was “unhealthy,” that ragtime dances were “of a lascivious or merely ridiculous kind,” “a direct encouragement to

³³ Veronica Kelly, “Come Over Here! The Local Hybridisation of International ‘Ragtime Revues’ in Australia,” *Popular Entertainment Studies* 4.1 (2013): 24-49 (27, 39).

³⁴ Peter Bailey, “‘Hullo, Ragtime?’ West End Revue and the Americanisation of Popular Culture in Pre-1914 London,” in *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin, 1890-1939*, ed. Len Platt, Tobias Becker, and David Linton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 135-52 (144, 148).

hysteria,” and that “since the introduction of rag-time people are much more given to excitement and drink—and that not only when they are dancing.”³⁵

Both Toye’s construction of ragtime as monstrous and Bailey’s sexually libertarian characterization of it draw out what Ronald Radano has described as the constructed “animated properties of slave sound,” “qualities of racialized fleshliness.” In the ragtime craze “[r]acialized, animated, fleshly sound”³⁶ took on a commercial value, and the sound crossed over to non-African-American players in the international music industry and to white audiences. A resonant ragtime song “Waiting for the Robert E. Lee,” which was in the historical Gideon’s repertoire,³⁷ haunts Anna as an earworm, “musical memory.”³⁸ The lyrics were by L. Wolfe Gilbert (1886-1970), a Russian-born immigrant to the U.S., and the music by Lewis F. Muir (1884-1950). C. R. W. Nevinson’s painting *Waiting for the Robert E. Lee* shown at the 1913 Post-Impressionist and Futurist Exhibition in London—a representation of dancing to the song—was printed in black-and-white “upside down” in the *Daily Sketch*, labelled “ragtime art that perfectly expresses the feelings aroused by five barrel organs playing that inescapable tune under one’s windows.”³⁹ The Robert E. Lee is a ship “come to carry the cotton away” after harvest in “old Alabamy,”⁴⁰ implicated in the flow

³⁵ Frances Toye, “Ragtime: The New Tarantism,” *English Review*, March 1913, 654-8 (658, 656, 654).

³⁶ Ronald Radano, “Black Music Labor and the Animated Properties of Slave Sound,” *boundary 2* 43.1 (2016): 173-208 (195, 199, 206).

³⁷ Ross Laird, *Tantalizing Tingles: A Discography of Early Ragtime, Jazz, and Novelty Syncopated Piano Recordings, 1889-1934* (Westport: Greenwood, 1995), 71. The song later became part of Al Jolson’s blackface repertoire. This leads Mary Lou Emery to misread its provenance. She identifies it as one of the “minstrel songs” Anna remembers, reading them simply as evoking “plantation nostalgia” in the present time of the novel (Emery, “Caribbean Modernism,” 49, 57, 58).

³⁸ Oliver Sacks, *Musophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, Kindle Edition, location 3856.

³⁹ Bailey, ““Hullo, Ragtime?””, 146-7. The original painting is now lost. The vibrancy and carnivalesque of the original might be hinted at in a contemporaneous painting of his, *Dance Hall Scene* (ca. 1913-1914), heavily influenced by futurist Gino Severini’s *The Dance of the “Pan-Pan” at the Monico* (1909-1911).

⁴⁰ Heidelberg Quintette, “Waiting for the Robert E. Lee,” 1912, by Muir and Gilbert, Southbridge Old Time Radio Nostalgia Song, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1jbaSDB78>.

of capital production in the Atlantic region founded on a history of racialized plantation labour. The famed Robert E. Lee plied the Mississippi River, which does not flow through Alabama. Gilbert was disconcerted to find, contra the first line “Way down on the levee in old Alabamy” and several other references in the song, that Alabama did not have levees.⁴¹ Both errors and the recourse to racial stereotype in the invocation of the mammy figure—“Alabamy” rhymes with “mammy” and “Sammy”⁴²—are indications of the distance of the lyricist from the “formation of race *and* capitalism in the U.S. antebellum South.”⁴³

Dreaming about the Sea

Rhys's novel is punctuated by crucial shifts in modes of representation that associate and arrange scenes that instantiate in dream and delirium the accumulation of Atlantic and circum-Atlantic history, including aesthetic history, in the present. When Anna fears she may be pregnant by one of a number of nameless men with whom she has sex after Carl abandons her, she begins to dream about the sea, the Atlantic Ocean. Her acute anxiety about the prospect of pregnancy signals “the difficulties of filiation” with the foetus and the English.⁴⁴ She thinks of the “eternal grimace of disapproval” on the faces of the respectable at the conduct of young women like her. The voices she attributes to them are the segue to the dreams. The last voice is, “Why didn't you bloody well make a hole in the water?” (140)

This references a standard scenario of the seduced and abandoned woman: suicide by drowning.⁴⁵ L. J. Nicoletti notes that the scenario is “omnipresent in Victorian London's visual culture” often with a representation of a church in the

⁴¹ Michael Whorf, “L. Wolfe Gilbert 1886-1970 (As told by his widow, Rose Gilbert),” in *American Popular Song Lyricists: Oral Histories, 1920s-1960s* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 94-8 (95).

⁴² Heidelberg Quintette, “Waiting for the Robert E. Lee.”

⁴³ Radano, “Black Music Labor,” 177.

⁴⁴ Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 17.

⁴⁵ L. J. Nicoletti, “Downward Mobility: Victorian Women, Suicide, and London's ‘Bridge of Sighs,’” *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* 2.1 (March 2004), <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2004/nicoletti.html>.

background to register the woman's sinfulness. In representing seduced and abandoned women, "Victorian writers and artists transformed their subject's corrupt life and violent death into a peaceful martyrdom. They left the woman's body unscathed because Victorian art and literature constructed suicide as a redemptive act for unchaste women."⁴⁶ The representation of the death of Sibyl Vane, chaste but spurned after she has fallen from grace in Dorian's eyes, becoming merely a "third-rate actress with a pretty face," also draws on the aesthetic tradition of constructing female suicides as redemptive. In talking earlier to Lord Henry of his love for Sibyl, Dorian had described her in religious language as a "sacred" object of his devotion.⁴⁷ The pun on "bloody well" in *Voyage in the Dark*, by contrast, draws out the violent impact of suicide on the body. The allusions in Anna's dream suggest a pun on hole and the question of why Anna could not make a whole of herself through migration and maturation. In the dream Anna is "on a ship" and is unable to reach the shore of her home island, as "the deck of the ship expanded. Somebody had fallen overboard" (140). "[F]allen" and the syllable "board," with its pun on bawd, suggest the ways she will be positioned as a single pregnant woman in the eyes of society. The formulation "Somebody had fallen overboard" equivocates over agency, over whether the fall was a suicide, an accident, or an act of violence against the person who fell. Overboard has a range of meanings which resonate with Anna's sense of her predicament: "over the side of a ship [...]; out of, off, or from a ship into the water"; "to throw (also cast, fling, etc.) overboard: to cast aside, discard, reject, renounce"; "to go overboard: to behave immoderately; to go too far; to display excessive enthusiasm."⁴⁸

Anna's dream features a symbol of the church, a seeming boy bishop in a coffin, who metamorphoses into a figure of experience rather than innocence, a "little dwarf" supported physically like a puppet by a sailor (140). The bishop, identified by Cathleen Maslen as a "malicious, inhuman symbol of paternal law

⁴⁶ Nicoletti, "Downward Mobility."

⁴⁷ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 116, 77.

⁴⁸ "overboard, adv.," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, definition 1.a, definition 2.a., and definition 2.b.

and male privilege,”⁴⁹ has “large, light eyes in a narrow, cruel face” that “rolled like a doll’s as you lean it from one side to the other” (141). In the early modern period boy bishops were elected to preside over the feast of the Holy Innocents, the Christian festival that commemorated the Massacre of the Innocents, the mass infanticide of male children aged two and under ruthlessly ordered by the Biblical Herod, about which an angel warned Jesus’s father Joseph, urging him to flee to Egypt with his family to escape persecution. The massacre is related in Matthew 2, where it is represented as fulfilling Jeremiah’s prophecy that “a voice was heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not” (Matthew 2:18).

Rhys draws out Anna’s and her white Creole family’s sense of financial dispossession as a reason for Anna’s inability to make a whole of herself. After the death of her father, her English stepmother Hester sold the estate Morgan’s Rest, which her husband had bequeathed to her, though her Uncle Bo suggests he had intended that it should “eventually be his daughter’s property” (52). Hester invested the proceeds along with her own monies to help generate an income of “under three hundred a year” to keep herself as a lady, representing herself as generously supporting Anna through gifts: “passage to England”; outfitting her for school and paying her “expenses for a term,” though fully realizing that this was not a “sort of decent education”; and meeting a medical and a dental bill while Anna was on tour as a chorus girl (54). The imperial expansion and trade that fuelled the development of modernity from the sixteenth century onwards produced an emerging set of ideas about the tropics as a region, which geographer David Arnold has influentially characterised as “tropicality,”⁵⁰ a discourse which Felix Driver and Luciana Martins observe has been “compared with that of Orientalism, to the extent that both have conventionally been used to define and legitimize essential differences between

⁴⁹ Cathleen Maslen, *Ferocious Things: Jean Rhys and the Politics of Women’s Melancholia* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 178.

⁵⁰ David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). See also his “‘Illusory Riches’: Representations of the Tropical World, 1840-1950,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21.1 (2000): 6-18.

cultures and natures, both understood in strongly spatial terms.”⁵¹ “Whether represented positively (as in fantasies of the tropical sublime) or negatively (as a pathological space of degeneration), tropicity has frequently served as a foil to temperate nature, all that is modest, civilized, cultivated.” In selling up in Dominica Hester has determined to distance herself from what she sees as the contaminating proximity of black people and African Dominican culture and the degeneracy of Anna’s Creole family, views which accord with the discourse of tropicity. Associated with tropicity, Anna’s Creoleness places her in the eyes of other English characters as racially liminal, her sister chorus girls even nicknaming her “Hottentot” (12) and Walter pathologizing the tropics and her as being “altogether too lush” (46).⁵²

Arguing that by the end of the nineteenth century the West Indies comprised “undeveloped estates” suffering imperial neglect, Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain set in train in the fin-de-siècle a policy of New Imperialism: “restitution of a British planter class, preferably newly minted from the metropolis, assisted by modern experimentation in agriculture and by the establishment of a decent set of communications.”⁵³ Anna’s father had practiced scientific agriculture. In the first version of the ending of *Voyage in the Dark* Anna remembers Uncle Bo tracing the economic decay that prompted imperial intervention to West Indian slaveowners not actually receiving British monies awarded in the mid-1830s as compensation for freeing bondpeople: “it all stayed in the good old home coop and if you like to come and have a look at things I can prove that to you easily enough if you’d like to come and have a look.”⁵⁴ This white Creole view of colonial history keeps intact the “myth of

⁵¹ Felix Driver and Luciana Martins, “Introduction: Views and Visions of the Tropical World,” *Tropical Visions in the Age of Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 5.

⁵² Joseph Clarke reads the tropicity identified by Rhys in the English naming of Anna as Hottentot as Rhys’s use of a “representational grammar of blackness as pollution [...] to elicit [...] a racialized affective coherence in the reader.” See Joseph Clarke, “Caribbean Modernism and the Postcolonial Social Contract in *Voyage in the Dark*,” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 3.3 (Summer 2003): 1-16 (5).

⁵³ Peter Hulme, *Remnants of Conquest: The Island Caribs and their Visitors, 1877-1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 112-3.

⁵⁴ Jean Rhys, “*Voyage in the Dark*. Part IV (Original Version),” ed. Nancy Hemond Brown, in *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott

King Sugar”: sugar cultivation under plantation slavery not only as a “tropical capital-labor regime,” but “also, in the imaginary world that the plantocracy constructed, a sort of divine, mystical cult” around planter wealth and grandeur.⁵⁵ It resonates with West Indian planter ideology: that the economic viability of its class was shattered by outside interference around the abolition of slavery and questions around the payment of compensation monies by Britain to affected slaveowners.⁵⁶

With the condensation characteristic of dreams “Somebody had fallen overboard” resonates with the history of slaves being thrown overboard from slaving ships, most infamously from the *Zong* in 1781, when 132 enslaved people were killed or pressed to suicide so that the shipowners could claim their insurance value of £30 per slave. James Walvin notes, “The very name—the *Zong*—quickly entered the demonology of Atlantic slavery, and came to represent the depravity and heartless violence of the entire slave system.”⁵⁷ In *Voyage in the Dark* the condensation is haunted by and engages with the aesthetic sedimentation of its allusions to falling: a Victorian repertoire of sentimentality around the suffering of the seduced woman; and what Baucom characterizes as “the sentimental mind of a romantic liberalism” in which the “observer” of an aesthetic artefact is offered “the idea of *himself* or *herself* as

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 381-9 (386). Subsequent citations of the first version of the ending of *Voyage in the Dark* will be made parenthetically.

⁵⁵ Gordon K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought: The Historical Evolution of Caribbean Society in Its Ideological Aspects, 1492-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 191.

⁵⁶ The chief creditor of Rhys’s slaveowning great-grandfather James Potter Lockhart was awarded the compensation monies for the freeing of enslaved people owned by Lockhart. On the ways this history was encrypted in family memory see Sue Thomas, “Ghostly Presences: James Potter Lockhart and Jane Maxwell Lockhart in Jean Rhys’s Writing,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 57.4 (Winter 2015): 389-411. I draw there on the theorization of family secrets being preserved in crypts in language offer by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁵⁷ James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 2. Walvin traces a number of sources for Turner’s painting: James Thomson’s poem “Summer” (1726-1730), abolitionist Thomas Clarkson’s *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (1839), and contemporaneous accounts of deaths aboard slave ships (5-10).

historical spectator” and the “idea of the self as a historical spectator impressed by the idea of its own sympathy for the suffering.”⁵⁸ Baucom here is analysing the most iconic artistic representation of the *Zong* massacre, which had formatively galvanized anti-slavery agitation in the 1780s, J. M. W. Turner’s *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On* (1840), “painted to coincide with the opening of the first World Anti-Slavery Convention as his singular visual anecdote of the horrors of slavery.”⁵⁹ Turner’s painting depicts welling blood and body parts on the surface of the ocean.

With the question “‘What’s overboard?’” Rhys challenges her readers to look in the hold, over the side of the deck and under the water that at the opening of the dream is “transparent as glass” (140). Baucom suggests that Turner’s commemorative painting is “a representative image of what we do not see [...] beneath the banality of number, beneath the smear of paint, beneath the deck, beneath the water.”⁶⁰ In dream at this point Anna does not see the ship’s hold or welling blood or body parts in the water, but rather “confused figures” on deck:

I was still trying to walk up the deck and get ashore. I took huge, climbing, flying strides among confused figures. I was powerless and very tired, but I had to go on. And the dream rose into a climax of meaninglessness, fatigue and powerlessness, and the deck was heaving up and down, and when I woke up everything was still heaving up and down.

It was funny how, after that, I kept on dreaming about the sea. (141)

The word “figures” suggests commodification in flows of capital and, with reference to the *Zong* massacre and similar incidents, hints at calculation about what and who might be pressed or thrown “overboard,” cast aside. “[C]onfused figures” emphasize the history of racialized terror and violence of an Atlantic abyss which Glissant characterizes as “three times linked to the unknown”: the abyss of “deportation” of African people in the holds of slave ships; “the depths of the sea” for human “cargo” thrown “overboard”; and the wrenching of African people towards an unfamiliar material and spiritual diasporic futurity in

⁵⁸ Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 289, 293.

⁵⁹ Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 221.

⁶⁰ Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 275.

a “new land.”⁶¹ In the first version of the novel’s ending Uncle Bo suggests to Hester in Anna’s delirium that she is confused about the “figures” voted by the British parliament as compensation for the abolition of slavery: “Oh yes it may have been voted all right but we never got it” (386). Caught up among the “confused figures,” Anna in dream is unable to step home to a plantation culture in decay, a displacement which suggests the affective subconscious reach of Atlantic history—“that awful dropping of the heart,” “meaninglessness, fatigue and powerlessness,” a mourning seasickness that segues into morning sickness—in the production of her sense of transcendental homelessness. In Turner’s painting, futurity is signalled by the retributive force of the “typhoon coming on” implied by the heaving ocean and fiery sky. Anna’s subsequent recurring “dreaming about the sea” suggests that the futurity she is haunted by is the inescapable question “‘What’s overboard?’” The question resonates with the historical acknowledgements of the incommensurability of the black Atlantic abyss that lies outside her range of vision in the first dream.⁶² Joseph Clarke has drawn attention to a different moment in *Voyage in the Dark* in which in delirium Anna “seems to move toward some acknowledgment” of African Caribbean “bodies and [...] experiences” only to have the prospect of “Insight [...] withdrawn” as she thinks she is about to fall from the horse she has been riding.⁶³

“I’m going to fall nothing can save me now”

The words that haunt Anna’s delirium while suffering from post-abortion haemorrhage are “ought,” “stop,” “ought to be stopped,” and “fall,” and there are condensed associative links between the iterations.⁶⁴ The subject implied by the

⁶¹ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 5-7.

⁶² The historicity of the dream, including its referencing of aesthetic history, complicates more sanguine readings of this passage. Maslen, for instance, argues: “Dreaming of the sea alone, bereft of the comforting, quotidian or homely motifs of ships and islands discloses that in place of a comforting nostalgia of home, Anna has succumbed to a despairing desire for the ocean itself, as a sublime, featureless infinite—in other words, for the ocean as death” (Maslen, *Ferocious Things*, 178).

⁶³ Clarke, “Caribbean Modernism,” 11.

⁶⁴ Rhys, “Voyage in the Dark. Part IV (Original Version),” 388, 384-9; Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, 155-8.

repetition of the passive infinitive is the “huge machine of law, order and respectability,” an image of the feeding of moral panic that Rhys uses in the 1927 version of her short story “Vienne.”⁶⁵ Anna’s delirious memories of growing up in Dominica and her sexual experiences in England are intercut with the censorious voices of the landlady Mrs Polo and the doctor who eventually attends her, and the voice of the worldly Laurie, called to the scene by Mrs Polo. There are two extant versions of the final section of the novel: the version published in 1934 and the version submitted to Constable. Michael Sadleir at Constable asked Rhys to revise Part IV to provide a more optimistic ending by giving Anna a chance at a happier life by having her “recover and meet a rich man” or a “poor, good-natured man.”⁶⁶ In a letter to Evelyn Scott about Sadleir’s demand for cuts, Rhys writes: “I’m afraid it will make it meaningless. The worst is that it is precisely the last part which I am most certain of that will have to be mutilated.”⁶⁷ In the first version the ticking clock in the room as she lies bleeding on the bed leads Anna to remember clocks and clock time marking her sexual encounters. At “nearly four o’clock” partners say “perhaps you ought to be” (384), “perhaps you ought to be going” (387), a practice that allows her partners to maintain a semblance of respectability.

In three of the scenes or one scene remembered three times a man refuses to act on Anna’s withdrawal of consent to sex; the juxtaposition of censorious voices with the scene(s) of rape highlights the limits of what the respectable do and do not see and speak up about. The fullest of these memories is: “And I kept saying stop stop stop please stop will you stop and he said I thought you’d say that and he laughed and it sounded funny and his face was very white and his nostrils going in and out” (385). This may be a resurfacing of a memory of what happened with “the man at that supper-party at the Greyhound, Croydon” who “told” her, ““You don’t know how to kiss. I’ll show you how to kiss. This is what you do.”” An earlier memory of the incident when Walter started to kiss her with the intent of having sex with her for the first time made her feel “giddy” (20). In the 1934 published version of the ending of *Voyage in the Dark* there are

⁶⁵ Jean Rhys, “Vienne,” in *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927; Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 193-256 (241).

⁶⁶ Jean Rhys, *Smile Please*, 127.

⁶⁷ Rhys, letter to Evelyn Scott, 10 June 1934, in *Letters*, 33.

two memories of a man refusing to “stop” when Anna “tried to hang back” (156, 158). Anna tells Mrs Polo three times that she feels “giddy” (157). The voices of white onlookers to Dominican masquerade, some named, others not, indoors, uphold the “decent” and “respectable” in relation to the things they insist “ought to be stopped”: in the published version of Part IV, masquerade; and in the first version, masquerade, the near nakedness of male masqueraders, and “all these Roman Catholic priests and nuns in an English island.” (Dominica had been a French colony for large parts of the eighteenth century. Among African Dominican people, who in 1891 numbered 26,841 to 335 white settlers,⁶⁸ a French patois was the everyday language and Catholicism was by far the dominant faith.) Repressive Englishwoman Hester protests about the near nudity and Catholicism (56). Mrs Polo worries about bloodied sheets and scandal attaching itself to her boarding house. In the first version of the ending Anna thinks while riding a horse, an image which condenses her sexual experiences in England,

I’m going to fall nothing can save me now but still I clung desperately
with my knees feeling very sick and the waves of pain going through me
like the sea I always knew it was like waves and like the sea I
always knew it was like waves and like the sea. (388)

Conclusion

In *Voyage in the Dark* Rhys’s piecing together of the local and the transnational sets up intertextual resonances and counterpoints that chart the particularities and the political and aesthetic reach of her representation of Anna Morgan and of the cultures of sexual dissidence of which she becomes part. The novel has for this reason resisted assimilation into standard literary historiographies of modernism. Rhys is prepared to risk opacity to maintain the integrity of Creole difference and to challenge her readers to make meaning of her novel by attending to her poetics of the accumulation of history.

⁶⁸ There were also around 300 Carib Indians. Of the white population 235 were of French heritage and 100 of British heritage. See Basil Cracknell, *Dominica* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973), 85, 57.