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The Empire of Affect: Reading Rhys after Postcolonial Studies

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The Empire of Affect: Reading Rhys after Postcolonial Theory

John J. Su

The canonical status *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) acquired within postcolonial literary studies has shaped readings of not only the novel but also the entire corpus of Jean Rhys's work. In giving voice to the mad Creole Bertha Mason of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wide Sargasso Sea* emblematises social and political concerns that became central to postcolonial theory in the 1980s. Rhys's critical rewriting of Brontë's novel provided a key example of how the 'Empire writes back' to the imperial centres of Europe, to use Salman Rushdie's phrase: challenging Eurocentric histories of progress and civilisation by presenting images of the dehumanising effects of European colonialism. An enormous body of scholarship on *Wide Sargasso Sea* has emerged along these lines, eclipsing the scholarly output on Rhys's four earlier novels and short stories.

Transformations in postcolonial studies over the past decade offer the opportunity to rethink *Wide Sargasso Sea* and its relationship to Rhys's other work. The shift away from the centre-periphery model of postcolonial theory toward more multilateral, multinational analyses of globalisation among theorists of postcolonialism opens up possibilities for more nuanced readings of a writer who never fit terribly well within the categories of modernist, feminist, or postcolonial authorship. From her earliest writings, Rhys explored the victimisation of women within a patriarchal and capitalist system, one that placed racialised Others in situations of particular vulnerability. Yet her writings also demonstrate a fascination with the various currents of existentialism that were circulating in Paris while she was living there. She experimented with modernist literary forms, but her deep interest in the relationships among patriarchy, capitalism, racialisation and existentialism separated her from many of the more canonical modernist authors. I am hoping to contribute to this volume's project of developing twenty-first-century approaches to Jean Rhys, then, by troubling easy binaries between the

postcolonial Rhys of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (and, to a lesser degree, *Voyage in the Dark*) and the modernist Rhys of everything else.¹

In particular, I am interested in pursuing Rhys's representations of the affective experiences produced by a form of European modernity whose emergence was inseparable from imperialist forms of capitalism that developed in Great Britain. I will argue that shifting away from the preoccupations of earlier postcolonial scholarship on Rhys – which focused heavily on thematic representations of voice and subjectivity – can provide a productive mode of connecting Rhys's experiments with literary form to her efforts to describe the particular experiences of disorientation of her characters. Rather than seeing the novel structured around the opposing narrative voices of Antoinette and her unnamed husband, I will argue that the novel is attempting to reproduce through its formal features (which include shifting narrative voice) an experience of disorientation that is symptomatic of the particular conjunction of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy that emerged in the late nineteenth century.

Voice and the Unvoiced

Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the field of postcolonial studies has been preoccupied with exploring the history of European imperialisms in terms of their discursive effects. For Said, political, cultural, scientific, religious and other discourses were essential to the successful expansion of European empires across the globe. In identifying the central role played by colonialist discourses in the creation and maintenance of modern European empires, Said implicitly defined what would come to be seen as the central project of postcolonial scholarship: to give voice to colonised peoples and their descendents by recovering or reconstructing alternative histories and memories. These concerns resonated with the works of postcolonial scholars throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial 'mimicry' or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question 'can the subaltern speak?' represent perhaps the two most well-known examples of scholarship focusing on the processes of reclaiming, rewriting, or otherwise redefining histories associated with colonialism and its aftermath. These shared concerns rapidly became institutionalised in the fields of postcolonial studies through overviews written by Bill Ashcroft, Ania Loomba, Leela Gandhi and others, as well as prominent critiques of the field by scholars such as Aijaz Ahmad, Arif Dirlik and E. San Juan, Jr. Indeed, critics of the field were often some of the most acute observers of the intimate connection between voice and subjectivity in postcolonial theory.²

The connection between voice and subjectivity in scholarship on *Wide Sargasso Sea* – particularly a subjectivity that provides a critical lens through which to view imperialism – is logical, and can be inferred from Rhys’s own correspondence. In one of the most cited passages of Rhys’s letters, she writes of Bertha Mason: ‘She’s necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry – *off stage*. For me (and for you I hope) she must be right *on stage*.’³ Placing Bertha Mason ‘on stage’ serves to provide her a meaningful voice – not a series of inhuman noises or the ravings of the quintessential madwoman in the attic, but the articulations of a woman providing a rationale for her violent acts, which would otherwise seem to be indications of madness. Seminal scholarship on Rhys re-emphasises this point: *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides what Molly Hite calls ‘the other side of the story’, suggesting that subjectivity is fundamentally produced from language, particularly voiced speech.⁴ In granting Antoinette Cosway a voice, Rhys creates a coherent and rational subject.

By ascribing a privileged status to voice as the basis of subjectivity, the novel registers the capacity of those marked outside the colonial centre to narrate their own stories without being determined by the prescriptions of colonial history. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason’s past is related entirely through Rochester. At no point in Brontë’s novel is Bertha Mason allowed to speak, to give her version of events. The persistent tendency of Jane to describe Bertha Mason using animal metaphors ensures that Jane’s own trajectory from orphan to Mrs Edward Rochester is seen to be entirely appropriate in the context of Victorian sensibilities. Jane can marvel at the creature that ‘grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal’, but her feelings of compassion and pity for the ‘clothed hyena’ reaffirm her rightful role as the true wife of Rochester.⁵ As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others have noted, *Jane Eyre* diminishes the boundaries between the human and the animal in its representations of Bertha Mason in order to rationalise Rochester’s imprisonment of her in the attic of Thornfield Hall and his subsequent marriage to Jane.⁶

Reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* as giving voice to a colonised Other, however, highlights the contradictions in the novel, particularly around Rhys’s own potentially racist representations of Afro-Caribbeans. Veronica Marie Gregg, for example, argues that the novel reproduces the historical silencing of Afro-Caribbean populations. Gregg writes: ‘The racialist usurpation of the voices, acts, and identities of “black people”, so central to Rhys’s writing as a whole, is the psychological cement in the architecture of this novel.’⁷ For Gregg, Rhys collapses a diverse range of voices of colonised Others into her single creole

protagonist in an effort to ‘reclaim hegemony’ over representations of the Afro-Caribbean populations of the West Indies. Antoinette’s narrative voice in *Wide Sargasso Sea* reproduces the same silencing of Afro-Caribbean voices that Bertha Mason experiences in *Jane Eyre*. Spivak takes a somewhat different tack from Gregg, suggesting that the silencing that *Wide Sargasso Sea* reproduces is not specific to Rhys; rather, it points to a more fundamental challenge in the very project of envisioning subjectivities who could be genuinely critical of imperialism. For Spivak, the novel can succeed only to the extent that it points to its own limits – specifically, its *inability* to give voice to black characters. Spivak argues: ‘No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperial self.’⁸

The debate between Spivak and Benita Parry over the extent to which *Wide Sargasso Sea* can effectively articulate a counterdiscourse to British representations of the West Indies has been significant not only to readings of Rhys but also to debates over postcolonial studies more generally, because it highlights a tension over the capacity of literature to express resistance to imperialism.⁹ For Spivak, imperialism functions as the dominant world system, incorporating expressions of resistance within its own terms; as such, postcolonial literary texts are celebrated for their capacity to identify the limits of representation. For Parry, in contrast, the historical contingency of imperialism suggests that literary texts can represent voices who actively disrupt colonial representations. The difference between Spivak and Parry is most recognisable in their conflicting readings of the family servant Christophine. Christophine stands out in the novel in every respect – she is described as physically different (taller and darker), she possesses a strong voice from the first paragraph of the novel (she, not Antoinette, is the first named speaker), is an obeah practitioner treated with respect and fear, and is seemingly unafraid of white authority. Both Spivak and Parry place significant emphasis on an exchange between Christophine and Rochester late in the novel, particularly her enigmatic final words in the text. After confronting Rochester over his abusive treatment of Antoinette, Christophine refuses to entertain his vague concessions. When Rochester offers her the opportunity to write to Antoinette after they leave the island, Christophine states: “‘Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know’”.¹⁰ For Spivak, this line stages what she sees as the most significant strength of Rhys’s novel: its refusal to contain Christophine within its own narrative framework, thereby allowing her to mark the limits of the novel’s discourse. Spivak writes: ‘Taxonomically, she belongs to the category of the good

servant rather than that of the pure native. But within these borders, Rhys creates a powerfully suggestive figure.¹¹ Christophine cannot represent a subject genuinely capable of challenging colonial discourses because she is defined vis-à-vis an established colonial type, 'the good servant'.¹² As such, Rhys may employ her to suggest that colonial forms of knowledge are not all-encompassing, but cannot directly articulate those alternatives. Parry, in contrast, argues that Christophine is asserting the basis of an alternative epistemology, which challenges the authority of Rochester as a character and the colonial discourse with which he is associated. Indeed, for Parry, Spivak's analysis ambiguously blends historicist analysis of the rise of British imperialism with an idealist philosophical paradigm that finds the power of colonial representations to be a consequence of language itself.¹³

Despite their significant differences, Spivak and Parry share a more basic sense that resistance to historical representations of colonial history can be read through literary characters, particularly Christophine. Resistance is measured in terms of her ability either to speak or to remain silent: to disrupt the discourses of English colonialism or to identify the limits of such discourses. Another approach might begin from the basic recognition that Christophine, like any character, is inseparable from the text in which she appears – that is, 'Christophine' has no necessary ontological reality outside of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As a consequence of her being inseparable from the novel, she is inseparable from the points of view of other characters as well as other textual descriptions. That is to say, Christophine may or may not function as an allegory of a subjectivity, but she does serve as a narrative device for representing a specific point of view. More precisely, she represents one point of view whose particular characteristics emerge in relation to the points of view of the other characters in the text, particularly the narrators of the text, Antoinette and Rochester.

Both Spivak's and Parry's arguments can accommodate the shift in focus proposed in this essay: Christophine's enigmatic final words (161) and Rochester's inability to respond to them signal a break in the narrative. Such a break could be read as highlighting either the epistemic limits of colonial discourses described by Spivak or the critical response to colonialism described by Parry. The formal techniques employed by the novel signal that the exchange between Christophine and Rochester is significant for what is not voiced. The issue is less whether a critical response *cannot* be voiced than what the *effects* of that silence are on interpretations of the novel. By attributing to Christophine a set of words that have no response from Rochester, either aloud or internally voiced, *Wide Sargasso Sea* invites readers to explore what the text itself

cannot or will not directly represent. The non-represented becomes, in other words, the primary subject rather than the actual exchange between the characters.

Focusing on the formal techniques used by the novel reverses the privileging of voice in readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, emphasising instead the pattern in Rhys's writing of highlighting moments of silence – or, more precisely, thoughts that are only partially formed or left unsaid. Some of the most dramatic articulations by Rhys's characters are never voiced. In *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), for example, the narrator Sasha Jansen finds herself publicly castigated by a visiting English boss. The absurdity of the situation is accentuated by the fact Sasha's 'mistakes' are actually the result of the boss's incomprehensible French (Sasha, in contrast, is fluent). Waiting mutely as her boss is preparing to fire her, Sasha thinks:

Well, let's argue this out, Mr Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That's my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow in the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there's no denying it. So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word [. . .] Let's say you have this mystical right to cut my legs off. But the right to ridicule me afterwards because I am a cripple – no, that I think you haven't got. And that's the right you hold most dearly, isn't it? You must be able to despise the people you exploit. But I wish you a lot of trouble, Mr Blank, and just to start off with, your damned shop's going bust. Alleluia! Did I say all this? Of course I didn't. I didn't even think it.¹⁴

The novel does not imply that Sasha is silenced – rather, she is unable to articulate the particular perspective that the novel provides readers through her focalised narrative. 'I didn't even think it', she acknowledges. Her frustration and humiliation are experienced affectively – she blushes.¹⁵ At least in the moment in which she feels shame, however, she lacks the ability to put her feelings into words. The text marks the gendering of labour exploitation by marking the inability of Sasha – as a victim of it – to voice her experience directly. Indeed, this becomes a primary mode of signalling to readers how exploitation is experienced as an affective phenomenon: felt but unexpressed, referenced but not articulated.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette lacks Sasha's acuity, but her narrative nonetheless draws attention to moments in which she has similar experiences: the inability to match words to her feelings. She desperately desires not to leave the island, abandoning her family in the midst of a riot to join her sometime Afro-Caribbean friend Tia. Antoinette is

unable to diagnose her situation in ways that Sasha was able – she can articulate why she feels connected to Tia, but she cannot recognise that Tia might not share her feelings. As was the case in *Good Morning, Midnight*, the discontinuity between what the novel uses a character to signal and what that character herself can discern become central to the reading experience. The poignancy of this discontinuity becomes acute when Tia responds to Antoinette by throwing a rock at her. Antoinette cannot register the act of violence immediately, noting: ‘I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass’ (45). Gregg’s intervention is important to recall here: Tia functions in this scene not as a human being able to articulate her own needs or motivations but as a means to certify the genuineness of Antoinette’s feelings. But Antoinette’s feelings signal her limited perspective, against which readers are invited to interpret the text: the narrative focalises attention through the perspective of a girl who understands neither the rage felt by post-Emancipation Afro-Caribbeans nor even the abandonment felt by other Creoles.¹⁶

This helps to explain the function of Rochester assuming the narrative voice in Part Two. Like Antoinette, Rochester’s narrative voice repeatedly draws attention to moments in which he cannot find the words to voice his feelings. On three separate occasions, he begins to compose letters to his father to describe his feelings of betrayal and frustration. Rochester is portrayed in the novel as a second son, victim of primogeniture, sent to the British West Indies by his father to acquire economic security through marriage to a Creole. On each of these occasions, the letter is left unfinished or filed away; on at least one occasion, the letter is simply dictated in his mind and is never written (70). When Rochester finally posts a letter to his father (162), he finishes it only after imagining an alternative version in which he articulates his frustration and anger at being manipulated. The imagined letter openly expresses his feelings: ‘You had no love at all for me. Nor had my brother. Your plan succeeded.’ The actual letter posted by Rochester, however, is descriptive but devoid of feeling even as he acknowledges his own role in exploiting Antoinette for her family’s wealth (162). The moment Rochester claims his voice is not cast as a triumph: it occurs as he finally commits himself to forcefully removing his wife from the West Indies, beginning the process that will culminate with her imprisonment in the attic of Thornfield Hall.

The argument I am developing here can be seen as an extension of Carine Mardorossian’s suggestion that the ‘novel deconstructs the opposition between silence and voice and, in so doing, questions the

Western assumption that the speaker is always the one in power'.¹⁷ For Mardorossian, the novel encourages readers to read against the grain of Antoinette's narrative, revealing thereby Antoinette's reproduction of racist attitudes and assumptions. The elegance of Mardorossian's argument lies in its ability to account for the apparent racial biases of the text without dismissing its capacity to critique colonial representations of West Indians. The argument I am presenting suggests that sections in which Rochester functions as narrator are fundamental to this critique. That is, Rochester does not function as an oppositional figure to Antoinette, at least not solely. The continuities between Antoinette's and Rochester's narratives suggest that they function together to produce a particular form of disorientation for readers.

Disorientation

The formal features of *Wide Sargasso Sea* make reading a disorienting experience. From the first paragraph, readers are faced with questions of identification that cannot be answered on the basis of the information provided: 'They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks. The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, "because she pretty like pretty self" Christophine said' (17). The pronouns 'they' and 'we' have unclear antecedents, and the clarifications destabilise the racial categories invoked. What constitutes 'white people', such that the narrator is excluded? What is the basis of the connection between the narrator's mother and Christophine – readers are later told that Christophine is much blacker than the other Afro-Caribbeans on the island. So is the implication that the narrator's mother is black? While this possibility is rapidly dispelled, questions about the racial identity of Antoinette's mother and subsequently Antoinette herself keep recurring in the text. Unmoored from the obvious categories of racial identification, which are evoked but destabilised, readers have a difficult time identifying the narrator's position within the social and racial hierarchies of the novel. She is called a 'white cockroach' and a 'white nigger' (23, 24); Rochester will also be puzzled. Noting her 'sad, dark alien eyes', Rochester can define her only in terms of identity categories from which she is excluded: 'Creole of pure English descent she may be, but [her eyes] are not English or European either' (67). In an environment in which social relations are defined primarily by racial identifications, the absence of clear identity categories for Antoinette disorients readers.

The shifts in narrative voice further complicate efforts to identify reli-

able standpoints from which to interpret the statements and attitudes of characters. *Wide Sargasso Sea* abruptly shifts narrative voice from Antoinette to Rochester in Part Two of the novel, without directly informing the reader. The pronoun 'we' is reinvoiced in the third sentence, but the narrator subsequently references 'my wife Antoinette' (65). Indeed, readers never know with complete certainty whether the second narrator is in fact Rochester. He remains unnamed in the novel, though it is a common scholarly convention to identify him as such. The traditional function of the narrative voice, to orient readers' interpretation, is shifted: the narrative voice functions as a formal technique for disorienting the reader. The narrative voice will shift several more times: abruptly back to Antoinette (107–18), again with no warning or explicit signal; briefly to Grace Poole at the beginning of Part Three (177–8); and finally back to Antoinette for the remainder of Part Three, though the narrative voice is more fragmented, more uncertain of itself, leaving readers with greater doubts about its reliability. Not only does the narrator insist that she is in a 'cardboard house' which is not England (181), she shifts backwards and forwards in time, and demonstrates anxieties about whether her favourite red dress has perhaps been replaced by a look-alike.

The time shifts can be read in terms of the formal experiments of literary modernists to produce the perception of a stream of consciousness. But they have a consistent pattern in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which is also apparent in earlier works including *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight*. Rather than functioning to represent the non-linearity of cognitive processes, the time shifts in Rhys's narratives mystify readers by referencing specific events that are never explicitly described. In a crucial passage in *Wide Sargasso Sea* that culminates in Antoinette writing her name for the first time in the novel, the paragraph establishes an ominous but unknown threat through its timeshift: a section break is immediately followed by Antoinette's interjection '[q] uickly, while I can, I must remember the hot classroom' (53). Readers are given no information on Antoinette's current location (except that it's not a hot classroom) or when in the chronology of her life story she is currently speaking (is she perhaps in Thornfield Hall remembering?); readers have no information on the nature of the threat (why '[q] uickly'?). All readers know is that some event is looming, one so profoundly disorienting to Antoinette that she would not be able thereafter to identify her name, location and time – precisely the orientation points she provides at the end of the same paragraph: 'I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish town, Jamaica, 1839' (53).

Rhys reinforces the reader's awareness of the disorienting elements of her narrative by casting disorientation as a defining experience for her characters. As with the time shifts, experiences of spatial disorientation felt by characters occur at moments in which they feel unable to make clear judgements for themselves. The connection is more explicitly stated in *Voyage in the Dark*: feeling bereft and utterly abandoned after an ex-lover pays her to get an abortion, Anna loses all spatial orientation, noting 'Everything was so exactly alike – that was what I could never get used to. And the cold; and the houses all exactly alike, and the streets going north, south, east, west, all exactly alike'.¹⁸ Implicit in her self-reflections are a set of questions that she cannot yet bring herself to articulate: did she make the right decision, what will she do next and where will she go? She experiences these half-formed questions bodily, in her physical inability to distinguish among the cardinal directions. Rochester, too, experiences spatial disorientation accompanied by a sense of being unable to make clear judgements of his own: suddenly realising that his father knowingly sent him to marry a purported madwoman, Rochester walks off into a forest and gets lost. He wonders as he wanders: 'How can one discover the truth I thought and that thought led me nowhere. No one would tell me the truth. Not my father nor Richard Mason, certainly not the girl I had married [. . .] I was lost and afraid among these enemy trees, so certain of danger that when I heard footsteps and a shout I did not answer' (104, 105). The inability to judge his circumstances is cast in terms of a spatial metaphor, a thought that leads Rochester 'nowhere'.

The connection between a sense of spatial orientation and an ethical or moral compass has a long philosophical history, according to Edward S. Casey. In *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (1993), Casey argues: 'To lack a primal place is to be "homeless" indeed, not only in the literal sense of having no permanently sheltering structure but also as being without any effective means of orientation in a complex and confusing world.'¹⁹ Extending Casey's argument, then, the experience of losing a sense of connection to a childhood home renders more difficult and confusing the decisions faced by Rhys's protagonists.

The key consequence of disorientation appears to be passivity, though not in the reductive terms associated with the 'Rhys woman' familiar to earlier lines of scholarship. *Wide Sargasso Sea* suggests that Antoinette learns at a very young age to read feelings of disorientation and helplessness in her mother's body language: 'My mother walked over to the window. ("Marooned," said her straight narrow back, her carefully coiled hair. "Marooned".)' (26). Whether or not her mother actually

feels marooned, the young child Antoinette is cast in the novel as unable to look to others for emotional support. For Patricia Moran, this provides the basis for the psychological trauma that will later lead her to develop a masochistic sensibility in her relationship with Rochester.²⁰ It is part of a pattern in Antoinette's narrative in which a sense of disorientation produces feelings of helplessness. As mentioned above, her defining experience in the novel is exclusion from the familiar categories of racial identification, which orient individuals and their relationships. She will remain uncertain about her own racial status throughout the novel, referring to her stepfather as 'white pappy' (33). Some of the clearest indications of the alignment between physical disorientation and helplessness occur in a series of dreams that she experiences. In these dreams, Antoinette foreshadows her adulthood experience of being forcibly taken from the West Indies and incarcerated in the attic of Thornfield Hall by her husband. In the second dream, Antoinette finds herself being led from her home into a forest, and from the forest to an unidentified and unfamiliar garden, and up a set of steps that she cannot even see in the darkness. Yet she does not run away from this alien environment or the man who is leading her onward: 'I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself; if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse. This must happen' (59–60).

The notion that disoriented individuals are rendered passive is articulated more explicitly in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Sasha notes: 'When you've been made very cold and very sane you've also been made very passive' (12). In order to accommodate herself to abandonment by her lover, Sasha is expected to relinquish her right to complain. She is expected to mute her negative affects, which she manages through alcohol abuse and scheduling her days to conform to a monotonous routine that skirts places, people and memories that could trigger anger. The word Sasha uses to describe herself is 'automaton', an entity without feeling (10). The language of dehumanisation resonates with the experiences of Bertha Mason that troubled Rhys so profoundly – that the maturation and happy reincorporation of *Jane Eyre* into bourgeois England depends on the dehumanisation of Rochester's first wife. What is striking in *Good Morning, Midnight* is how the familiar pattern of abandonment of a female protagonist, which appears in all of Rhys's novels, is cast in terms different from her earlier works. Rather than a personal romantic tragedy, abandonment in *Good Morning, Midnight* is symptomatic of an economic and social system that places women in positions of dependence. Whereas the protagonist of *Quartet* will lament the cruelty of the world when she is abandoned, Sasha recognises that her personal experiences are not distinctive to her, but replay the world around her:

Venus is dead; Apollo is dead; even Jesus is dead.

All that is left in the world is an enormous machine, made of white steel. It has innumerable flexible arms, made of steel. Long, thin arms. At the end of each arm is an eye, the eyelashes stiff with mascara. When I look more closely I see that only some of the arms have these eyes – others have lights. The arms that carry the eyes and the arms that carry the lights are all extraordinarily flexible and very beautiful. But the grey sky, which is the background, terrifies me [. . .] And the arms wave to an accompaniment of music and of song. Like this: ‘Hotcha – hotcha – hotcha . . .’ And I know the music; I can sing the song

...

I have another drink. Damned voice in my head. I’ll stop you talking . . .
(187)

The arms are beautiful and flexible, to Sasha’s mind, but they all sway to the music, a song that Sasha must drown out with more alcohol. Her experiences are not even distinctive to her, nor is she an autonomous being: she is simply one more arm hoping not to recognise the music to which she is swaying.

The representation of what Sasha calls a ‘whole social system’ that describes modern capitalism as the basis of individual experiences of exploitation suggests an evolution in Rhys’s thinking (38). The experience of women being rendered non-human – automata, dolls, mannequins – is apparent from Rhys’s earliest writings. In *Quartet*, Marya experiences the acute frustration of being financially dependent on Hugh and Lois Heidler. Pressured by the Heidlers to cheat on her husband while he is in prison, Marya is expected to have sex with the husband and conform to the social rules imposed on her by the wife. Her self-description marks her dehumanised state: ‘She had felt like a marionette, as though something outside her were jerking strings that forced her to scream and strike. Heidler, weeping, was a marionette, too.’²¹ The precise force or person manipulating the strings is never clearly articulated. Lois is the last person with whom she speaks, and someone who expects Marya to continue her affair with Heidler and bear repeated shaming in front of Lois’s friends – but the novel never explicitly identifies her as the puppeteer. Marya identifies the manipulating force as ‘something’ rather than ‘someone’, suggesting that her suffering is more of an existential condition than the result of exploitative social and economic relationships. This notion is reinforced by extending the dehumanisation to Heidler, who appears to be equally manipulated. The novel, in other words, neither identifies the nature of Marya’s exploitation nor distinguishes it from that felt by Heidler, who nonetheless enjoys the economic security and social standing that Marya conspicuously lacks.²²

The term marionette appears again in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but the dif-

ference is striking. In a series of unvoiced recriminations against his wife, Rochester declares that he will make her into a marionette in order to '(Force her to cry and to speak)' (154). The usage of the term, in other words, clearly identifies the source of manipulation, and the ways in which manipulation is unevenly experienced by men and women. The colonial system may have exploited both Rochester and Antoinette, but not to the same degree and not in ways that exonerate Rochester's behaviour toward her. Much as is the case in *Good Morning, Midnight*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* characterises the personal affective experiences of helplessness or passivity as a logical consequence of an economic and social system that deprives individuals of the opportunity to make constructive choices for themselves. The difference is that the latter novel casts the social system less in terms of global capitalism than in terms of British imperialism. The racialisation that underlies the hierarchical system of exploitation in the novel is not governed purely by efforts to distribute wealth unevenly. In Rhys's portrait, exploitation functions in part to sustain British attitudes about the superiority of their civilisation – the denial of alternative epistemologies functions as much to deny the possibility that racialised Others have access to culture and knowledge separate from what is imported from Britain. Hence, Rochester's need to assert contra Antoinette that the West Indies, not England, are a 'dream' (80–1).²³

The shift in emphasis away from industrial capitalism to British imperialism as the basis of the disorientation that characters experience clarifies the nature of colonial violence in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rochester's increasing obsession with what he feels is a 'secret' protected by the island, its residents and even his wife points to the consequences of his obsession with rendering the world within his epistemological limits (172). Because he believes that all features of the world can be made sensible through a kind of Eurocentric positivism associated with the rotting books in his library, Rochester feels fundamentally threatened by events or experiences suggesting that other forms of knowledge exist outside of his ability to understand them. Christophine's final words to him thus could speak to the crucial insights of both Spivak and Parry: to the extent that representations of Christophine point to the limits of knowledge in the novel, such representations are themselves a form of resistance. This is a significant shift away from the relatively unmotivated, existential violence experienced by Rhys's protagonists in her early work. When Marya is struck and perhaps killed by her own husband in the final pages of *Quartet*, it is a moment signifying the cruelty of existence, not specifically an act of violence that can be directly traced to the social and economic circumstances of the characters. In the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in contrast, violence is the direct

result of the colonial system that places Rochester in a position in which he ultimately views his own wife as a representative of a threat that must be contained.

The Affects of Empire?

Disorientation is not among the classic affects defined by psychologist Silvan Tomkins. Tomkins is often viewed as the seminal figure in current formulations of affect theory, and he posited (depending at which point in his career) nine basic sets of biological responses that underlie the vast array of experiences that are called emotions: enjoyment, interest, surprise, anger, disgust, dissmell, distress, fear, shame. Disorientation might be seen as a form of distress, which is defined as the result of too high a level of neural firing in the body. However, disorientation is characterised by a basic sense of being unable to recognise one's place in the world; it is an experience of the body in relation to physical or social or ethical contexts that makes it so keenly felt. And this dimension of the body in relation to its surroundings is not captured in Tomkins's formulations.

Disorientation might more readily be viewed as a defining affect of the transnational literary modernisms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is apparent in the startling final words of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, the brilliant hypnotic voice that whispers 'The horror! The horror!' Disorientation figures centrally in the shellshocked veteran Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, wandering the streets of London terrified and exhilarated by flashbacks of his dead comrade Evans. The formal features of literary modernism make disorientation not only a central thematic concern but also a central feature of reading – the superabundance of allusions to popular culture, literary texts and religious traditions apparent in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

The centrality of disorientation to literary modernisms emphasises a crucial point for intersections of literary studies, affect theories and postcolonial theories. Within the novel, affect is a representation of a phenomenon that, at least for many prominent theorists of affect, is putatively prelinguistic and precognitive. For Brian Massumi, affect is defined in terms of intensity. According to Massumi, emotion constitutes an affect captured within language:

An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion

is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized.²⁴

The rigid distinction Massumi draws between emotion and affect is controversial, and compelling critiques have been articulated by Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, Ruth Leys and others.²⁵ Massumi is useful nonetheless in reminding scholars of why Rhys's experiments with modernist literary forms were motivated by the specific historical conditions of the experiences she sought to describe. The mismatch between words and noncognitive bodily responses are, according to the argument I have been tracing in this essay, a central symptom of the ideological formations necessary for imperialist forms of capitalism to have flourished. Those moments when Rhys's characters cannot voice what they are feeling indicate that bodily responses function to some degree outside of the values and norms that characters have been socialised to accept. The narrative disruptions and techniques designed to disorient reader interpretation in Rhys's novels, then, draw attention to precisely those moments in which characters resist the process of 'fixing' their bodily responses into recognisable and socially sanctioned emotions. Massumi argues that non-ideological neural processes are a constant feature of every person's life, and such processes could well be in tension with the feelings that individuals ascribe to themselves after rationally reflecting on them. The feelings of disorientation characteristic of Rhys's fiction, to extend Massumi's argument, could be characteristic of a body whose cognitive and non-cognitive neural processes are in misalignment with each other. Representations of such misalignments signal to readers the effects of ideology on the characters' perceptions, attitudes and actions.

The broader implications of the argument I am drawing are that constellations of various social, political and economic systems are likely to produce particular kinds of affects among the people who live within them. Rhys's works suggest that a set of negative affects associated with disorientation are not idiosyncratic experiences of a few literary characters, but rather a more general byproduct of the emergence of British imperialism and the discourses of civilisation on which it depended.

A particular bodily response that is repeatedly referenced among the characters in the writings of Jean Rhys, whether it is an affect or emotion or something else, would be cold. Characters from the beginning to the end of Rhys's literary career experience cold – whether cold is a measure of internal body temperature or a response to a lack of intimacy or something else, it occurs frequently and predictably. At moments in which characters sense their alienation from their immediate circumstances

and the people around them, they shiver. This is apparent in Rhys's first novel: Marya's hands turn damp and cold when she hears that her husband has been arrested (*Quartet*, 25). The pattern continues through Rhys's final novel: in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, even Grace Poole cannot help but notice Antoinette shivering in the attic of Thornfield Hall (186). The experiences of shivering accompany cognitive recognitions of which the characters themselves are only partially aware: Antoinette is experiencing the lurking fear that even her beloved red dress has been taken from her and replaced by a duplicate; Marya shivers in the moment that she finally yields to Heidler's incessant wooing, but she incorrectly interprets her own body signals. She tells herself that Heidler will bring her warmth: 'All my life before I knew him was like being lost on a cold, dark night' (*Quartet*, 83). This declaration not only contradicts her own earlier descriptions of her life but also radically misunderstands the nature of her liaison with Heidler, which will rapidly bring her misery. The connection between experiences of cold and misjudgements is also apparent in *Voyage in the Dark*: the same sentence indicating Anna Morgan's sense of disorientation in an England whose North, South, East and West are indistinguishable also indicates that England is a country whose cold is something to which she could never have grown accustomed (179).

Whatever else cold may be taken to signify, as an affective or emotional response it points to the role that colonialism plays in existential conceptions of alienation. Cold marks the distance that Rhys's West Indian expatriates feel from the lands of their birth. It marks their inability to navigate confidently their position within English social circles. Ultimately, in the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea* it can be seen as a somatic marker that provides characters a means of overcoming their disorientation. As Rhys notes in her letters, the fire set by Bertha Mason in Thornfield Hall comes to define her, to function as the signal indication in *Jane Eyre* of her madness. Rhys is concerned to articulate the rationale for such a decision, to redefine the act of madness as an act of reclaiming her subjecthood. And as Rhys indicates, it is Antoinette's feelings of cold that ultimately lead her to do so. Rhys writes:

[Bertha Mason] must be at least plausible with a past, the *reason* why Mr Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, the *reason* why he thinks she is mad and of course why she goes mad, even the *reason* why she tries to set everything on fire, and eventually succeeds. (Personally, I think *that* one is simple. She is cold – and fire is the only warmth she knows in England.)²⁶

Cold as an affective experience is important because it enables the novel to register with readers a set of experiences that characters themselves

cannot recognise on a rational level. The cold they feel has interpretive consequences for readers more so than for the characters themselves, who struggle to respond to the physical sensation.

Rhys's experiments with representing affect through modernist literary forms offer some suggestive possibilities for future research in post-colonial literary studies. The bifurcation of the field into what Laura Chrisman calls textualist/culturalist and historicist/materialist scholars has had the unfortunate tendency to suggest that close textual analyses are separated from concerns about the material conditions of majority populations across the formerly colonised world. Affective experiences in Rhys's writings, however, concern the most basic material conditions of life. Her protagonists are not the comprador intellectuals or cosmopolitan expatriates that often figure in critiques of postcolonial scholarship; rather, her protagonists are concerned with very basic needs: food, stable shelter, health care. Crucially, such basic material concerns are best conveyed through a set of narrative techniques – stream of consciousness, shifting narrators, time shifts, intertextuality, among them – that are frequently associated with a rarefied 'high modernism'. This essay has tried to contribute to the idea that these formalist techniques emerge out of and respond to particular political, social and cultural concerns. Rhys, in other words, found herself experimenting with literary forms not to evade such concerns but rather to engage with them.

Notes

1. The schizophrenic approach to Rhys can be found even in recent scholarship. The editors of *Rhys Matters* (2013), for example, note that their volume represents the first volume on Rhys's work in more than twenty years; however, they consider the significant scholarly output on *Wide Sargasso Sea* to be grounds for excluding essays focusing on it.
2. Dirlik famously argued that the preoccupation with recovering voices and subjectivities from the margins indicated that postcolonial criticism was an ideological effect of late capitalism in ways that its scholars have been unwilling to acknowledge. For Dirlik, 'Since postcolonial criticism has focused on the postcolonial subject to the exclusion of an account of the world outside of the subject, the global condition implied by postcoloniality appears at best as a projection onto the world of postcolonial subjectivity and epistemology' ('The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', *Critical Inquiry*, 20 [1994]: 336).
3. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly (eds), *Jean Rhys: Letters 1931–1966* (New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 156.
4. Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 3.

5. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 321.
6. Spivak argues that Brontë 'renders the human/animal frontier as acceptably indeterminate, so that a good greater than the letter of the Law can be broached' (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999], p. 121).
7. Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 114.
8. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 253.
9. The debate between Spivak and Parry has been explored in a number of sources including Chrisman, Jaising (2010) and Mardorossian (2005). Jaising's analysis is helpful, though skewed heavily toward Spivak's position. Jaising argues that Rhys's novel 'invokes and perpetuates a typology that simultaneously recognizes and constrains black personhood and that is therefore crucial to maintaining colonial control over black labor' (817). Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *The Oxford Literary Review*, 9.1-2 (1987): 27-58.
10. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 161. All other references are to this volume.
11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Discourse*, 12.1 (1985): 252.
12. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak responds to Parry, reframing their debate. Instead of the question whether a counterdiscourse articulated through Christophine is possible, Spivak casts the debate so that Parry's argument is 'to give voice to the native' and Spivak's is 'to give warning of the attendant problem' (191).
13. Laura Chrisman argues that Spivak's 'gestures towards historical particularity ambiguously affirm both a contingent materialism and an absolute idealism' (57). For Chrisman, this leads to a situation in which Spivak cannot conceptualise any notion of progressive mediation, granting to imperialism a hegemonic status that seems all-encompassing.
14. Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (New York: Norton, 1986), p. 29.
15. For a more comprehensive exploration of shame, see the introduction to Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran's edited volume *The Female Face of Shame* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
16. On the first page of the novel, a neighbour commits suicide by swimming out to sea, after growing frustrated with waiting for post-Emancipation compensation that never comes. But Antoinette cannot quite register even her own potential feelings of regret or sorrow because she cannot fathom the logic of her neighbour's desperate act.
17. Carine Mardorossian, 'Shutting Up the Subaltern: Silences, Stereotypes, and Double-Entendre in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *Callaloo*, 22.4 (1999): 1082.
18. Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (New York: Norton, 1982), p. 179.
19. Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. xv.
20. Patricia Moran, *Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Trauma* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), p. 7.

21. Jean Rhys, *Quartet* (New York: Perennial Library, 1981), p. 105.
22. In terms of the trajectory I am tracing in Rhys's work, *After Leaving Mr McKenzie* represents a very interesting transition in Rhys's thinking. In this novel, the Rhys protagonist, Julia, inspires in a wealthy businessman an awareness of his own dissatisfaction with the status quo. In another instance of a character thinking what he cannot articulate, Mr Horsfield imagines a conversation he would have with Julia. Struck by the cold and hostile look she gave him when they met last, Mr Horsfield declares to himself: 'I'm just as fed up as you are [. . .] I'm ready to chuck up everything and clear out. Lots of us are like that. Just the touch is wanted – something to set us off' (Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* [New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1990], p. 167. Because the novel portrays these thoughts in Mr Horsfield's head rather than in the female protagonist's (as was the case in *Quartet*), the reliability of the statement is more subject to suspicion. Indeed, after working himself up to seeing Julia 'not as a representative of the insulted and injured, but as a solid human being', Horsfield ultimately rationalises doing nothing for her (168). At the same time, Horsfield's awareness of their unequal status in the social hierarchy and his recognition that his own misery is a direct result of his business suggests that *After Leaving Mr McKenzie* is shifting away from the notion that human misery is a general existential condition of modern life toward a more specific awareness of the ways in which economic conditions place Julia on the borders of destitution and Horsfield in a position of dissatisfied leisure.
23. For a more extended analysis of the alternative epistemologies in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, see my chapter 'Nostalgia and Narrative Ethics in Caribbean Literature', in *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 53–88.
24. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 28.
25. Critics of Massumi have focused particularly on how his distinction between affect and emotion emerges from a series of lab experiments. For Ahmed, the artificial environment in which researchers were isolating affect does not accurately represent everyday experience, in which affect and emotion are continuous. See Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 1, and Ruth Leys, 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique', *Critical Inquiry*, 37.3 (2001): 456, 460.