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The Anxiety of Racialized Sexuality in Jean Rhys

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The West Indian roots of Dominican-born Jean Rhys are often referenced solely in terms of her engagement with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (vis-à-vis *Wide Sargasso Sea*). Rhys's rise to fame because of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) has veritably eclipsed her other artistic contributions to transnational Anglophone Caribbean literature. Rhys's heroines make for an unappealing read; their stories are rife with selfishness, prostitution, abortion, poverty, addiction, and self-loathing. The protagonists in her fiction do not care for traditional ideals of morality or "womanhood." Instead, they go on with their lives, violating multiple societal codes, and Rhys offers readers no resolution. As Lesley McDowell commented when reviewing the latest biography on Rhys, Lilian Pizzichini's *The Blue Hour* (2009), Rhys's own life is similarly the "kind of narrative we don't really want to read in a post-feminist age." Indeed, Rhys's work does not inspire a sense of liberation, and while her own biography is complicated, trying to map such an agenda and modernist aesthetic onto Rhys is to misread her strategic anxiety-producing stories about "foreign" females trying to "make it" in London and Paris.

As modernism and postcolonialism shore up against one another, Rhys's writings are an expression of the sociopolitical challenges facing a racialized, sexualized "foreign" subject suspended in space between shifting national tides. Rhys writes at a time when, as Urmila Seshagiri suggests, "the exhausted limits of modernist form revealed the lineaments of postcolonial fiction" (487). In *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), the realm of the visual, as opposed to the purely textual, is a powerful site for the mapping of resistance against the traditional bildungsroman. While Sasha's embodiment of flânerie departs from its traditional modalities, the visual regime of the novel becomes increasingly important as a politically subversive statement against institutionalized narratives of successful subject formation.

Good Morning, Midnight's 1939 publication marked a time when, as Jed Esty has so eloquently argued in both *Unseasonable Youth* (2011) and *A Shrinking Island* (2003), Britain was "shrinking." Esty unpacks the intersections between modernist aesthetics and imperial designs and illuminates how national "contraction" leads to modernist rejuvenation and creativity (Introduction, *A Shrinking Island*). Esty acknowledges that this injection of energy registers differently for Caribbean subjects than it does for British ones.¹ Simon Gikandi similarly contends that for Anglophone Caribbean subjects, "only by subverting colonial modernism could these writers become modernists" (*Writing in Limbo*, 256). Gikandi highlights the challenge of Caribbean authors writing themselves out of colonial modalities of modernism using "a European language already loaded

¹ Two other noteworthy books that explore the clashes and parallels between modernist ideology and empire are *Colonial Odysseys: Empire and Epic in the Modernist Novel* by David Adams and *Sapphic Primitivism: Productions of Race, Class, and Sexuality in Key Works of Modern Fiction* by Robin Hackett.

with Eurocentric figures” (15). Esty and Gikandi both make the point that it is reductive to assume that a writer like Rhys is simply not capable of authoring a fuller narrative with a traditional and more pleasing aesthetic.

Rhys categorically refuses the impulse to write growth and maturation into the stories of her protagonists. Even in our age of new media and literary experimentation, the bildungsroman novel in particular is, in the words of Tobias Boes, “at once one of the most vexing, but also one of the most fruitful contributions that German letters have made” (“Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*,” 230). Boes’s historical survey of the bildungsroman tradition reveals that it has been an especially empowering form for social misfits, including women and, in the 80s and 90s in particular, the fields of “post-colonial and minority” studies (231). In broad terms the bildungsroman is a novel of formation and growth in which the protagonist traverses the period between youth and maturity and is socialized into a heteronormative structure of nationally inflected subjectivity.² The process of subject formation is a blueprint for the modernist *bildung*. But what happens when Sasha Jensen, constantly hovering closer to death than to birth, unravels this blueprint? Instead, readers must imagine why stunted emotional growth and self-destructive behavior might be normalized for women like Sasha Jensen.³ Reflections, glass, colors (both in nature and in terms of race), and appearance are undeniably central to *Good Morning, Midnight*.⁴ Rhys’s narrative tactic is one that challenges readers to look anew at institutionalized forms of colonialism, racism, and sexism. Rhys’s women undergo processes of *de*-formation (somatically and psychically) that demonstrate how the bildungsroman becomes unhinged when it interdigitates with peripheral and expendable lives.

Sasha Jensen, the protagonist of *Good Morning, Midnight*, wanders the streets of Paris and operates under a haze of general malaise: “I’ve had enough of these streets that sweat a cold, yellow slime, of hostile people...I’ve had enough of thinking, enough of remembering” (43). Rhys’s modernist, fragmented text

² The protagonist usually undergoes some form of loss that is related to his departure from the home. He begins a long maturation process that is marked by clashes with the hegemonic social structure, and lastly, he emerges at the end with a space carved out for himself in society. In his sociohistorical study of the novelistic tradition in nineteenth-century Europe, Franco Moretti posits that the process of maturation is a bolstering of the Ego wherein the “*Bildungsroman* attempts to *build* the Ego” by privileging youth as the “most meaningful part of life” (11, 3). Beginning with Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, which marks the birth of the bildungsroman tradition, youth is the most highly prized trait in this genre of the European novel (3-4).

³ I would like to thank Jed Esty who first introduced me to Jean Rhys’s earlier work and taught a memorable seminar on the bildungsroman in which we read her writing in conversation with George Lukács and Franco Moretti (among others).

⁴ Elaine Savory’s chapter on Rhys’s use of color in *Voyage in the Dark* is central to any discussion of color in Rhys’s fiction. Savory writes about the color politics of Rhys’s heroines and their choice of hues (why they pick out certain colors, what they mean, and how it marks them as connected to the Caribbean).

(marked by ellipses, italics, parenthetical digressions, and stream-of-consciousness narratives) operate to “silence” Sasha. Although these “gaps” in the writing are certainly an opportunity for readers to engage in meaning making, they are also quite literally an omission of words. While at times we may be frustrated by Sasha’s “failure” to verbalize her rich interior dialogue, her silence reveals the problem inherent in expecting an alienated subject to “speak.” Continuing her review of the latest Rhysian biography, *The Blue Hour*, Lesley McDowell states that we like to view female modernist writers as empowered: “It’s been a feminist project, quite rightly, to see them as autonomous subjects who forged their own paths through a male dominated world.” Sasha Jensen is not empowered, and like most of Rhys’s protagonists she lives under a condition of anachronism wherein the things she desires that could sustain her are not yet accessible to her.

In a 1972 piece on Jean Rhys in the *New York Review of Books*, V.S. Naipaul understood the fact that she herself “might have been a riddle to others” but “she never sought to make her experience more accessible by making it what it was not.” Rather than become “a novelist of manners,” writes Naipaul, “she avoided geographical explicitness.” While earlier waves of modernists adhered to the “novel of manners” and the bildungsroman tradition, Esty notes that writers like Rhys express “a resistance to the twin teleologies of the classic bildungsroman: adulthood...and nationhood” (*Unseasonable Youth* 3). This resistance to normalized discourse of Empire and standard plotlines comes at the price of tone-deaf critics easily dismissing Rhys as simply “writing what she knows.” Part of what is so difficult about Rhys’s fiction is what comes off as the absolute self-absorption of her “heroines.” They seem to care for nothing and do nothing and, as Naipaul elsewhere notes, they are “from nowhere.” If adulthood and nationhood are part of a “contractual” agreement of entering into the bildungsroman process, then it is all the more fascinating that Sasha seems perpetually listless and stateless. Rhys’s Sasha Jensen appears a disinterested subject: put simply, she does not hold any emotional investment in others or in society at large.

RHYS’S WOMEN

Jean Rhys, herself an exilic subject, was renamed “Jean Rhys” from Ella Gwendolen Rees by none other than Ford Madox Ford. Rhys was ambivalently floating from abortion to affair to prostitution at a time when ideals of femininity precluded sexuality.⁵ Rhys’s Creole heritage, her tension-filled relationship to her

⁵ The infamous affair between Ford Madox Ford and Rhys was often considered to be the sole reason for her success and the source of her novelistic inspirations. See for example, Joseph Wiesenfarth’s *Ford Madox Ford and the Regiment of Women: Violet Hunt, Jean Rhys, Stella Bowen, Janice Biala*. Wiesenfarth’s unforgiving portrait of Rhys as a “drunken, nymphomaniacal

family and roots, and her battle with alcoholism undoubtedly make it onto the pages of her works but certainly do not equal the sum total of her talents. Leah Rosenberg points out that Rhys's biography appears to destabilize her identity as a Caribbean subject: a white woman from a privileged Dominican family who would go on to be a celebrated modernist writer hardly reads like the "down-on-your-luck" stories of her destitute protagonists (219). And yet Rosenberg also makes it clear that Jean Rhys and Claude McKay (both Caribbean writers) were intent on "exposing the racialized and sexual politics of modernized aesthetics." The issue of reading the reticence and silence of Rhys's protagonists is a complicated undertaking.

Rhys's fiction features disjointed, hybrid, and fractured female characters who seem to lack any type of agency but are champions of survival. *Good Morning, Midnight* is the last of four books Rhys completed before her 27-year absence from publishing (Frickey 3). This is also the last book in a series of four that Rhys published in the eleven years after World War I: *Quartet* (1928), *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). The four books are set in Europe, all the female protagonists are loosely based on Rhys's own life, and they appear to be linked to one another as if they could be simulacra of the same woman. As Mary Cantwell shares of her interview with Rhys, Rhys blurs the lines between fiction and autobiography: "Whenever I asked about one of them – Jean Rhys's women they've been called – she replied with 'I'" (23).

The purposeful silence of Rhys's women has disturbed readers and critics alike; Carol Anne Howells wonders in what manner Rhys's "fiction [is] so multiple, so secretive, that it constitutes a kind of blankness onto which critics can project their own ideological interests?" (5). Rhys's terse style mirrors the manner in which she allows Sasha to express herself; all of Rhys's women, like Rhys herself, engage in a refusal to implicate themselves in ideological structures that they are arguably not simply trying to escape, but to clearly expose and clumsily upend.

The compulsion in Rhysian criticism is to name *one* social construction that Rhys is resisting. In earlier work, gender was most commonly pointed to as the reason for failure and pain in Rhys's oeuvre. More recent criticism has broadened the possibilities. Judith E. Dearlove reconsiders her earlier assessment of Rhys and finds it limiting: "I have realized that Rhys's significance extends beyond gender boundaries" (24). Dearlove goes on to offer economics as the main reason why Rhys's heroines fail (29). This, however, does not do justice to Rhys's multifarious characters and their difficult circumstances (where economics are only partly to blame). Helen Carr, writing a year before Dearlove, warns of the danger of

liar" is a surprisingly recent commentary on a dated historical thread of relegating Rhys to a pseudo-autobiographer with a talent for bedding men, not writing fiction (89). Earlier studies of Rhys are guilty of the same dismissal of Rhys as simply writing herself and only herself and her own stories on the pages of novels. See, for example, Thomas Staley's *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study* (1979) and Paula Le Gallez's *The Jean Rhys Woman* (1990).

ascribing all problems to the echelon of the monetary and stresses the need to pay attention to Rhys's critique of various forms of subjugation: "If there is any one form of oppression privileged over others in Rhys's work, it is the power of money, but even that is never seen in isolation" (12).

Rhys avoided making direct statements both *about* her novels and *in* her novels; she resisted reductive readings that categorized her characters and writing as following a singular agenda. When Cantwell asked Rhys about a "British television production of one of her novels [that] was so distorted as to make the [Feminist] Movement the message," Rhys expressed that she was upset about the misrepresentation: "[I was] so depressed, I swore I'd never write again. I just wanted to say about life, not about propaganda" (Cantwell 25). Alexis Lykiard, a close friend and author of a memoir about his time with Rhys, seems to have his finger on the pulse of her spirit when he says of her, "She always, from her earliest days in Dominica, identified with the oppressed, the underdog and the black, and the rest of her long life in Europe never caused her to change her views on that score" (111). Lykiard instinctively knew that Rhys would not, as Dearlove and Carr at times propose, focus solely on gender as the source of the "scorn and loathing of the female" (Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, 81).

GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT

Good Morning, Midnight's Sasha Jensen refracts the uniquely Caribbean experience of dislocation and homelessness. Sasha is in her early forties and as such she is the oldest of the four women in Rhys's post-WWI series. She is of obscure origins, not clearly British, but probably at least has British citizenship. Sasha is an addict who spends most of her time in altered states that parallel her waking world; she is often dreaming, drinking, taking barbiturates, or fantasizing. From her autodiegetic narrative we learn that she used to live in Paris and both lost a baby and attempted suicide there, and that she has traveled around Europe and was once married. She is living in England and comes to Paris for a short vacation, where she meets characters that are equally peripheral: there is Serge Rubin, the Russian Jewish artist, René, the gigolo, and the "*commis voyageur*," who is aggressive and uncannily threatening (32). Sasha believes that her deteriorating beauty is the only thing that has allowed her access to material wealth. Much of the novel is devoted to Sasha's wanderings around the streets of Paris, her stints in bars, and her seedy hotel room.

Sasha's obscure origins and descriptions of England configure it as a xenophobic and masculinized country, and Sasha's encounters with the expatriate community in Paris only further solidify her feelings of alienation. Sasha reads much like Rhys's other dislocated West Indian women: "I have no pride – no pride,

no name, no face, no country. I don't belong anywhere. Too sad, too sad..." (44). She has no clear home, she does not express nostalgia for Britain, and there are many instances where she is associated with the Caribbean.⁶ Sasha is troubled when she has to declare her nationality in the paperwork at the hotel: "Name So-and-so, nationality So-and-so... Nationality — that's what has puzzled him. I ought to have put nationality by marriage" (14).

While analyzing Sasha's cagey relationship to names and nationality, Veronica M. Gregg proposes that in this vein, "Sasha constructs herself as constitutive Otherness" (154). Sasha's "Otherness," her foreignness, is never clearly stated, as in the scene at a hotel where Sasha longs for a room. While Sasha waits, she listens to the heedless banter of two employees as they discuss how "foreigners" are troublesome and suspicious of the French: "'My God,' says the receptionist, 'foreigners, foreigners, my God...'" (37). After overhearing them, Sasha thinks that she understands the clerk, that she knows "all about him," presumably because he was the one to rigidly apply the template of identity politics to an economic exchange, and to specifically denounce non-French (possibly West Indian) customers.

The recurring mention of and connection to Martinique also paints Sasha's character with the brushstroke of the Caribbean. First, Serge Rubin (the Russian Jew) plays "some bégúine music, Martinique music," which launches Sasha into a fantasy of "lying in a hammock" by the sea (92).⁷ Serge then asks her to dance with him but she refuses, instead letting him dance alone in a West African mask that he made, "straight from the Congo" (*GMM* 91). Leah Rosenberg lays bare the double alienation of the African mask: "modernism tended to homogenize Africa" and "by showing a Russian Jew making African masks, Rhys emphasizes the constructed nature of the primitive in modern art" (232). Sasha, always aware of construct and how to reconstruct oneself by performing constructs, is undoubtedly conscious of the layers of irony. Somehow Serge creates a space of twinned alienation for them both, not that it settles Sasha, but it at least leaves space for critique of the masks that are "made" by him but "straight from the heart" of Africa.

The numerous and strong associations between Sasha and the Caribbean continue as she spends time with Serge. After they talk and drink, he tells her of the "Martiniquaise," the mulatto woman who lived by him in London. Serge describes how he once found her drunk and crying, and Sasha thinks he is mocking *her*:

⁶ For an extended and well-argued discussion of Sasha's Creole identity see Erica L. Johnson's chapter on flânerie in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Johnson sees Sasha as a failed *flâneuse*, in part because of her failure to construct or claim a private place (50). She suggests that Sasha, as a postcolonial subject, is inhibited by the dominant gaze, which leaves her without a geographic and/or psychic sense of privacy.

⁷ See Jess Isacharoff for a fuller treatment of Serge and Sasha's interplay and the identity politics at stake, "'No Pride, No Name, No Face, No Country': Jewishness and National Identity in *Good Morning, Midnight*."

“‘Exactly like me,’ I say. ‘I cried, and I asked for a drink.’...Is he getting at me?” (95). Although Serge assures Sasha that he is not talking about her, the association remains strong, especially as he goes on to describe how cruel the people in the house were to the Martiniquaise: “She said that every time they looked at her she could see how they hated her, and the people on the streets looked at her in the same way...She told me she hadn’t been out, except after dark, for two years” (96). Sasha’s nocturnal lifestyle and wanderings closely mirror those of the Martiniquaise, as does her paranoid certainty that people are staring and sneering at her. A further instance of Sasha’s Othering is when she is propositioned by a man in London and asked: “Can you resist it?” (136). “It,” meaning the temptation to have relations with this man – or so we are led to believe. Sasha replies that she can easily withstand him: “...very coldly. I can resist it, just plain and Nordic like that, I certainly can” (136). Implicit in her adoption of a “Nordic” coldness is that it is not native to her. The racialized stereotypes continually confronting Sasha suggest that she inhabits and performs them or projects them onto herself.

Sasha’s internal dialogue ruptures the fabric of the text, interrupting her own story and exposing her troubled relationship to language; it allows readers access to her manner of thought. When a man picks her up, misreading her cheap coat as one that signals wealth, they have a “mad conversation” and she “feel[s] like a goddess” after half a glass of Pernod (87). As they talk and drink more, the man starts complaining about receiving a letter from a girl asking for three hundred francs; he invites Sasha up to his flat and she agrees, but he is perturbed that she is drunk and even more so because she claims to have “‘had nothing to eat for three weeks.’ (Exaggerating, as usual)” (90).

Sasha is a talented and astute manipulator of social codes and languages. She knows that the man will flee once she gestures towards her poverty or starts “giggling more loudly” (i.e., she is no longer charmingly tipsy, but acts like a drunk).⁸ Lest we think that Sasha does this mistakenly, she indicates to the contrary: “And did I mind? Not at all, not at all. If you think I minded, then you’ve never lived like that before, plunged in a dream, when all the faces are masks and only the trees are alive and you can almost see the strings that are pulling the puppets” (90). Sasha, sensing that he has inevitably misunderstood her, takes the “strings” and acts as puppeteer, willfully sending him packing. But Sasha rarely verbalizes her subversive thoughts. Words fail her, language fails her in that it is not only ultimately the vehicle for her own marginalization, but her command of it – her verbal command – is inhibited by her fear and altered states. Unlike Serge, who

⁸ In her chapter on signifying modes and linguistic codes in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sylvie Maurel posits that Sasha’s manipulation of social and linguistic codes is intricately linked to her Creole identity. Maurel understands Sasha’s “parodic expertise” as a type of subversive mimicry linked to her Caribbean roots (108-115).

seems content in his “speechifying,” Sasha finds verbal communication a problematic medium.

SILENCE AND EXPRESSION

Sasha’s episode with “Mr. Blank” demonstrates both her multifaceted issues with language and her reliance on the medium of visuality. When Mr. Blank, Sasha’s English employer in Paris, asks her to take a letter to “the kise,” Sasha is too embarrassed to ask him to clarify: “Kise – kise...It doesn’t mean a thing to me” (25). Sasha frantically wanders around the building, all because the British Mr. Blank mispronounces the French for “*La caisse*” (the cashier) and she does not want to “seem rude” by correcting him (27). Sasha composes a cutting answer to Mr. Blank’s accusations that she is “half-witted” and “hopeless,” but she does not end up verbalizing it: “Did I say all this? Of course I didn’t. I didn’t even think of it” (29). Sasha’s command of French is better than Blank’s. By correcting him in a language that is foreign to both of them, he would be doubly embarrassed. In Sasha’s imaginary retort to Mr. Blank, she acknowledges that there must be people like her, “slightly damaged in the fray,” so that there can be powerful people like him: “Isn’t it so, Mr. Blank? There must be the dark background to show up the bright colors” (29). Sasha configures and dissolves herself into the “dark background,” symbolically linking herself to blackness. She demarcates a space for herself in darkness because she knows that Mr. Blank relegates her to the periphery of society. Most interesting is that she uses a racialized visual metaphor to schematize identity politics as she understands them. The play on words is inescapably ironic: she is the “dark” periphery while Blank is the “light” at the center.

Her jaded relationship to language leads to her frequent verbal impasses, but through her description of her dreams and waking visions, the reader is privy to Sasha’s complex world of silent participation in – and contemporaneous critique of – society’s judgments of her.⁹ More than Rhys’s other protagonists Sasha is maddeningly silent, but Rhys pens an even fuller interior dialogue that complicates Sasha’s reticence. As Anne B. Simpson suggests in her psychoanalytic reading of *Good Morning, Midnight*, “Unlike Rhys’s previous heroines, Sasha has an apparent haplessness and weakness that are belied by the narrating strategy Rhys accords her” (88).

⁹ Rachel Bowlby argues that Rhys’s novel should be understood as an ironic exercise of the impasse: “structured like a rhetorical impasse too As an impasse, and as the story of an impasse, the novel does not pretend to go very far. But as a woman’s story written by a woman, it claims with ironic precision to be unconvincing” (57).

The modernist tradition of the *flâneur* (which Walter Benjamin defines as a kind of social critic), necessarily occludes Sasha from its borders; nevertheless, Sasha's urban wanderings – where her visibility becomes paramount – flag her as a type of *flâneur*. Benjamin writes about the figure of the inherently male *flâneur* as one who dissolves into the crowd, a man of leisure who takes in images; he is the “priest of the *genius loci*” (264). Benjamin proposes that Parisians made Paris into a city of *flâneurs*, of wandering men taking in the city as their own personal landscape (263). Sasha cannot successfully operate within this elitist and hypermasculine model of *flânerie*. When she wanders the streets of Paris, her consciousness informs the reader that she feels as if people and buildings are staring at her: “Then they step forward, the waiting houses, to frown and crush. . . Frowning and leering and sneering, the houses, one after the other” (32). This is not the young Baudelaire that Benjamin admires as he slips into crowds, collapsing women and objects into the same category for his scopical and bodily pleasure. Rather, this is a woman who roams the streets in a state of heightened fear and paranoia, certain that she will be swallowed up by her surroundings.

Yet one could think of Sasha as at least enacting some facets of the classic *flâneur* for she *is* a type of social critic; given her gender and marginality, her form of *flânerie* would have to be an alternate one. Anke Gleber focuses on the turn of the century and uses 1920's Berlin to talk about women and female *flânerie*. She proposes that female *flânerie* is absent in the early representations of the *flâneur* because women were largely denied access to the public sphere (71). Single women strolling the streets were suspect and seen as tainted: “The female *flâneur* still runs into a degree of scrutiny. . . and forms of surveillance, suspicion, and harassment that her male predecessors and contemporaries do not expect to encounter” (74). Pegging Sasha as a *flâneuse* – or a failed *flâneur* for that matter – is problematic because it ignores the social inequities that plague her.

Gleber searches for agency in the figure of the *flâneuse* and ends by proposing the cinema as the space where the unfettered female gaze can partake in visual pleasure and “socially sanctioned scopophilia.” Scopial desire is satisfied by the hyperrealism of film: “the mediated gaze through the eye of the camera . . . grants the female spectator a relatively uncontrollable gaze. . .” (83). I depart from Gleber and am uncomfortable with the idea of female spectatorship in the cinema as a “synonym” for female *flânerie*. How can a mediated, machinated, and – certainly in the early years of cinema – male representation in the cinematic realm serve as a substitute for walking the streets? Gleber rightfully gestures to her evolved definition of what the cinema can mean for women when she writes that the “female *flâneur* can become a prototype for gendered spectatorship in the cinema” (84). For Sasha, the cinema is not a substitute for reality and her experience in it is fraught with misidentification. Enjoyable as it may be, female agency does

not seem to prosper within the walls of the theater – at least not in the same way that the possibilities of female *flânerie* suggest.

Sasha frequently thinks about people's eyes and is fixated on seeing and being seen. For example, she notices that the hotelier has "a glassy and unbelieving eye," while at Théodore's restaurant, she is sure that "everybody in the room is staring" (14). Nevertheless, as much as Sasha feels subjected to the looks of others, she herself frequently stares. She is aware of the dangers of voyeuristically gazing at others and one instance in particular articulates her sense of vulnerability. She watches a woman applying make-up through the window and when the woman notices her staring, "she averts her eyes, her expression hardens. I realize that if I watch her making-up she will retaliate by staring at me" (34).¹⁰ Sasha prefers to look out but not to be looked at, and in fact, she is paralyzed by fear when she knows people are watching her.

"MY FILM-MIND"

Sasha's barbiturate-induced dream of the London Exhibition further demonstrates her fear of objectification and the terror she experiences when she thinks she might literally turn *into* an object. The placards further estrange Sasha from a sense of belonging and subjecthood: "This Way to the Exhibition, This Way to the Exhibition. But I don't want the way to the exhibition – I want the way out. There are passages to the right and passages to the left, but no exit sign...I walk along with my head bent, very ashamed, thinking: 'Just like me – always wanting to be different from other people'" (13). Signs in the tube should point to an exit, but they instead mock Sasha and solidify her feelings of alienation.¹¹ Not only can she not physically escape from the London Exhibition but there is no respite from her physicality, which racializes and sexualizes her in a unilateral push to keep her relegated to the realm of the object. Her dream ends in violence when a "little man" tells her that he is her father: "'Remember that I am your father.' But blood is streaming from a wound in his forehead. 'Murder,' he shouts, 'murder, murder.' Helplessly I watch the blood streaming. At last my voice tears itself loose from my chest. I too shout: 'Murder, murder, help, help'" (13). Unlike in her waking moments when Sasha wants to see (and in fact sees) the Exhibition in Paris by night,

¹⁰ In Lacan's formulation of the voyeur and the gaze, when the voyeur (Sasha) is met with an oppositional look (the woman) – surprised by it, in fact – she realizes that she is a "subject sustaining [her]self in a function of desire" (85).

¹¹ In Anne B. Simpson's psychoanalytic interpretation of Sasha's dream sequence, she reads the gushing wound as an allusion to Sasha's own genitals and proposes that Sasha may be implicating herself in this imaginary murder of her father (95); Simpson suggests that Sasha may have been abused as a child (we might remember here that there have been whispers of abuse in Jean Rhys's own childhood), and thus she is directing her rage onto her father (96).

in her dream she tries at all costs to escape the violence of the London Exhibition (where people see exhibits, where she will be exhibited and *become* the exhibit). Her terror propels her to demonstrate to her father, to fictional future onlookers, and to herself that she sees this as “murder.” Her disembodied voice signifies that it belongs to a body and to a disenfranchised subjectivity; nonetheless, Sasha refuses to be exhibited and completely objectified, and it is in this way that she thinks she chooses “to be different from other people.”

Digressions such as those of the London Exhibition buttress the filmic quality of the text. There are many ways in which Rhys’s text can be spoken of as a filmic experience and nothing points to this more clearly than Sasha’s own disambiguation of her visual experiences: “My film-mind... (‘For God’s sake watch out for your film-mind.’)” (176). She is aware of her ability to manipulate social signifiers and perform them, thus coding herself as she wishes. Also revealed more plainly than earlier in the novel is how Sasha’s visual experiences bleed into one another – she understands the way she looks by imagining how she looks to others. Right before she chastises her “film-mind” she imagines a sequence that is akin to an excerpt from a screenplay: “I am in a little whitewashed room. The sun is hot outside. A man is standing with his back to me...I am wearing a black dress, very short, and heel-less slippers...Now he ill-treats me, now he betrays me” (176). Sasha envisions herself in a movie where she is the protagonist, and she describes her imagined scenario much like she relates the plot of the movie she watched earlier.

The cinema encourages Sasha’s misidentification with the characters and with the audience, and it solidifies her tendency to view herself as if looking through a camera lens. Sasha’s first two short references to the cinema reveal little about the films: “At four o’clock next afternoon I am in a cinema on the Champs Elysées, according to the programme. Laughing heartily in the right places” (16). The film allows her to laugh with others, instead of getting laughed at by others – it produces an opportunity for Sasha to gain a sense of sociopolitical assimilation. Whether or not she picks up on the cultural cues of the film, her choice to laugh “in the right places” is significant. Sasha is a master manipulator and identifier of the hegemonic code of conduct. Even while she may not find something funny, Sasha’s laughter is a choice to collude. Next, Sasha uses the cinema as a way to legitimize her habit at a bar: “I ask him to tell me the way to the nearest cinema. This, of course, arises from a cringing desire to explain my presence in the place” (106). She again attempts to veil herself under the cloak of cinema in order to fit in. The longest interaction with film comes at the Cinéma Danton, where Sasha watches the majority of it but leaves because it “shows no signs of stopping” (108). Again we see Sasha laughing heartily “till the tears come into [her] eyes” because she identifies with “the good young man” in it. She says she “really [is] O.K.” after the cinema because she – misguidedly – identifies with both the audience and the actor.

Rhys may be using film *in* her text to operate *like* her text. Sasha identifies with the protagonist of the film at Cinéma Danton (a young man) when actually they are polar opposites. In the exchange with Mr. Blank, Sasha demonstrates that she would rather be fired than assert herself to her employer and she also ultimately fails to complete her task (to deliver the letter correctly). In the film, the young man does both: “He interrupts intimate conversations, knocking loudly, bringing in letters and parcels, etcetera, etcetera...the good young man is triumphant. He has permission to propose to his employer’s daughter” (108). The film may be imbued with traces of the comic, but Sasha is not able to distinguish between the comic and the tragicomic – or even the plain tragic – when reflecting on her own life. She proves incapable of mobilizing the agential possibilities that film holds. Yet the way that she misidentifies with the film might be the same way that Rhys is coaxing some of us to creatively misidentify with Sasha.

CODE SWITCHING

The linguistic and physical code switching of Rhys’s heroines has led to a palpable anxiety among critics. While it seems that Sasha wants to “fit in,” it is not altogether clear that she wants to fit in with a particular kind of people. At times she wants to be at ease in the company of chic Parisians, at others she wants nothing more than to have Serge accept her. As I noted earlier, critics have long read Rhys’s heroines as wounded and disenfranchised women and they have expressed frustration in the way in which Rhys seems to avoid direct statements about, and engagement with, ideological structures. Colette Lindroth asserts that “Rhys’s fiction is a haunted world” that Rhys achieves through “the hazy ambiguity, the ‘not-quite-there’ quality of her description” (85). Lindroth asks us to think about how, both biographically and fictionally, Rhys’s reticence and evasive prose points us to the strong sense of survival and identity these victimized women possess: “In the maelstrom of their lives, one constant remains: themselves. This sense of identity, of a self which can be relied on when nothing else can be...” (89). But why can’t we think of Sasha’s sense of self, ego, and subjectivity as possessing the same hazy and “‘not-quite-there’ quality” that we readily acknowledge in Rhys’s prose? While critics hesitate to leave Rhys’s protagonists identity-less, this seems to be their *modus operandi*. The agency inherent in such a move has been dismissed.

Sasha’s internal dialogue at the end of the novel demonstrates her own sense of fractured identity. She imagines herself cinematically and is the picture of a woman getting woefully objectified by her own internal gaze. Sasha cries as she feels abandoned by René, and her schizophrenic internal voice mocks her:

I cry in the way that hurts right down, that hurts your heart and your stomach. Who is this crying? The same one who laughed on the landing, kissed him and was happy. This is me, this is myself, who is crying. The other – how do I know who the other is? She isn't me? Her voice in my head: "Well, well, well, just think of that now. What an amusing ten days! Positively packed with thrills. The last performance of What's-her-name And Her Boys or It Was All Due To An Old Fur Coat. Positively the last performance" (184-85)

"The other," as Sasha terms it, is her internal gaze given voice. Sasha's thoughts that she is performing herself, that this is the "last performance" of Sasha as we know her, implies that Sasha is conscious of her capabilities. Just as the right coat, hat, laugh, or dress will change her destiny (and perpetually fail to do so), so will the right alliance with an identity category bring her relief from her anxiety-riddled life (likewise, she realizes that this is a dangerously false hope). The sadistic nature of her internal voice/gaze, her "other," illuminates the self-hatred in which Sasha engages and the theatricality with which she combats it.

Sasha's fixation with changing herself outwardly is a metaphor for what she envisions for herself inwardly: "I must go and buy a hat this afternoon, I think, and tomorrow a dress. I must get on with the transformation act" (63). Her transformation act is always forward-looking, she uses the language of futurity to express what she desires: "I want to have a bath. I want another dress. I want clean underclothes," because, as Sasha admits, "there is always tomorrow" (63, 145). But before her hair, like her identity, can be good, it must be cleansed, its native qualities bleached in order to attain the perfect hue: "First it must be bleached, that is to say, its own colour must be taken out of it – and then it must be dyed, that is to say, another colour must be imposed on it. (Educated hair ... And then, what?)" (52). Sasha makes legible her dexterity in dealing with the imbricated layers of race and gender, she understands the power of "bleaching" herself to mute her Creole identity but she stops short of feeling a sense of agency. Once her hair is bleached and dyed and is "educated hair," it still does not grant her access to the power she desires. Racial passing in this case is complicated by its intersectionality with gender. Sasha cannot untether constructs of race from gender and is perplexed to then also confront class, or "education," as an exclusionary tactic. While the trope of her hair can certainly be read as a metaphor for what she must do with her Otherness (her "Caribbeanness") in order to "pass" as a desirable woman, it can also be read as a diatribe of the frivolous rules defining women's lives and their sense of autonomy.

Rhys refused to identify herself or her heroines as engaging in a particular political agenda. In an interview with Mary Cantwell, Cantwell asked Rhys about the palpable bitterness towards men in her novels:

Cantwell: “Yet there’s a lot of rage, mostly aimed at men, in your novels.” [Cantwell quotes from *Quartet*] (“Sob stuff, sex stuff. That’s the way men talk. And they look at you with hard greedy eyes. I [Marya] hate them with their greedy eyes.”)

Rhys: “However much you cut, or how careful you are, your own feeling will come through. But on the whole I’m rather sorry for everybody...I’ve reached that stage.” (25)

While Rhys readily acknowledges that her anger towards men is a part of her novels, she appears, at this late stage of her life (at 80 years old, five years before her death) to have reconsidered the “early Rhys,” and is now “rather sorry” for all types of people. Although published thirty-five years before her discussion with Cantwell, Rhys’s ending in *Good Morning, Midnight* gestures to the same sentiment that she shares in her interview. Sasha waits in bed and expects René to come back to her room and make love to her; instead, it is the *commis*: “...his mean eyes flickering...I look straight into his eyes and despise another poor devil of a human being for the last time. For the last time ... Then I put my arms around him and pull him down on the bed, saying ‘Yes – yes – yes.’” (190). Sasha’s parting thoughts, that she will despise somebody one “last time,” leave the reader in the land of ambiguity where the possibilities ominously loom: there could be another suicide attempt by Sasha or an act of lethal violence against her by the *commis*.¹² These are the murky waters of Rhys’s heroines, where nothing is certain, not even death.

We find Sasha in the aftermath and throes of the trauma of death, impoverished dislocation, and addiction, where she desires all that is other and seems intent on expiring. I propose that this is not Sasha’s telos. Instead, her sojourn in Paris exacerbates a state of pain that drives her towards transformation. While she is in the depths of despair, it might be thought of – vis-à-vis Sasha’s survivalist instincts – as a place of no return, but in the sense that she cannot return to the same state in which arrived to Paris.

THE POSTCOLONIAL BILDUNGSROMAN

Rhys’s female protagonists in general participate in a pointed refusal to comply with networks of power outside of their control. Their movement signals an implicit critique of unjust hegemonic structures (patriarchal and colonial) and foreshadows

¹² Savory, like a number of critics, rightfully draws a parallel between Sasha and Molly Bloom in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Savory claims that Sasha “is moving entirely beyond a place where she can understand feeling at all,” a zombie-like state (131).

recent developments in postcolonial feminist studies. Sasha Jensen does not *reverse* the bildungsroman process, but Rhys forcibly deconstructs and questions hegemonic forms of selfhood. Sasha (much like the other three female protagonists in the series of four post-WWI novels) is in many ways reduced to a shadow of her former self and the very statelessness she feels potentially allows a new discourse on what it means to be a racialized and sexualized subject circa 1939 in England.

Good Morning, Midnight reveals a simultaneous decline of “Englishness” and a desperate desire for it. But it also (and more importantly) betrays a deep anxiety about how racialized sexuality diverges from traditional narratives of stability and growth. While most critics emphasize gender and sexuality in Rhys, Naipaul instead focuses on the intricacies of her writing and the way that she resists hegemony rather than avoids it even in her refusal to create a fixed location and background for her stories: “She never ‘set’ her scene, English, European, or West Indian...She was outside that tradition of imperial-expatriate...She was an expatriate, but her journey had been the other way round, from a background of nothing to an organized world with which her heroines could never come to terms.” My reading of Rhys’s oeuvre points to the institutionalized and asynchronous denial of political legitimacy to her characters – one that she undoubtedly felt herself.

In Gikandi’s “Provincializing English” he notes that in his own childhood, English was “both pure and dangerous” and “seen as an embodiment of the civilizational mission of colonialism” (8). Gikandi questions the civilizational pull of English and Englishness and wonders about the possibilities of postcolonial writers producing literature that creates “autonomy” and selfhood: “Caught between the need to imagine sovereignty and the use of a language that represented its negation, postcolonial writers wrote under the torsion of linguistic anxiety” (9). While seemingly quiet, Sasha Jensen is full of anxiety-inducing thoughts about belonging, language, foreignness, and sexuality. The broader sense of unease that haunts *Good Morning, Midnight* dismantles the possibility of passive absorption into the narrative of Sasha’s life. Certainly linguistic anxiety in part justifies the frequent “silence” of Sasha; but that silence is also a mechanism that Rhys employs to critique the unfeasibility of autonomy in a moment of colonial decay and systemic gendered and racial oppression.

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