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**"GET ON OR GET OUT":
FAILURE AND NEGATIVE
FEMININITY IN JEAN RHYS'S
VOYAGE IN THE DARK**

Anne Cunningham

I must write. If I stop writing my life will have been an abject failure. It is that already to other people. But it could be an abject failure to myself. I will not have earned death.

—Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*

Failure permeated Jean Rhys's life, and she wove it into her textual world. The epigraph to this essay taken from her posthumously published autobiography points to how failure (or the threat of failing) served as a creative spur. Indeed, in *Smile Please*, failure is central to her consciousness and serves as an impetus to write; she must write, at the very least, to avoid being an "abject failure" to herself (163). Rhys was not an abject failure as a writer. She published four novels and a book of short stories between the wars that met with modest critical acclaim. Yet her writing is steeped in a rhetoric of failure: the majority of her protagonists are unwilling or unable to abide by the socially prescribed codes of feminine respectability, and are therefore marginalized or even excluded from the various communities they inhabit. Rhys's protagonists often fail to "get on" in their lives (74). They founder, but in doing so, they reveal a critique of patriarchal

femininity. In this essay, I suggest that these failures represent a form of nondirect activism. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai theorizes:

noncathartic feelings . . . could be said to give rise to a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended "action") . . . does so as a kind of politics. Such a politics is of a Bartlebyan sort—very different, say, from the direct activism supposedly incited . . . by Harriet Beecher Stowe's poetics of sympathy and the genre of sentimental literature as a whole. (9)

Drawing on a similar paradigm, I endeavor to theorize a modernist feminine aesthetic of failure. I suggest that a kind of Bartlebyan politics is present in Rhys's work. Her protagonists, much like Melville's Bartleby, "would prefer not to."¹ Bartleby's refusal to perform his duties as a law office clerk sends the office into a state of disarray. His refutation is an example of how passivity functions as resistance, and Rhys's heroine's refusal to behave according to British notions of white feminine respectability in work and social situations operates similarly. I argue that failure is a feminist response in Rhys's novels because it jettisons patriarchal femininity, albeit through negation. In other words, I examine how negation points toward the problematic construction of this mode of femininity, and show how Rhys employs a negative feminism that serves to question less resistant, positivist feminist accounts.

Failure serves a specific function within hegemonic structures. As Scott Sandage writes, "With few exceptions, the only identity deemed legitimate . . . is a capitalist identity; in every walk of life, investment and acquisition are the keys to moving forward and avoiding stagnation. . . . The misfits of capitalism are the people we label born losers" (5). Revealing "the hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism" (9), he revives this shadow history by telling the forgotten and buried stories of "bankrupts, deadbeats, broken men . . . forgotten men" (6). By making explicit the hidden experiences leading to pessimism in a free labor market economy and culture, Sandage exposes the processes of history making; "deadbeats tell no tales" (9), but rather the stories of success and the histories that affirm capitalist ideology loom large in Western cultural and historical consciousness.

Yet behind every success story lurks the shadow history of failure. By bringing this hidden history of pessimism into the light, we can theorize alternatives to dominant hegemonic ideologies. If those who are unable to thrive in a capitalist system are deemed failures, how might failure be formulated as a form of productive resistance?

In her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam discusses how failure functions as a set of oppositional tools that James C. Scott calls "weapons of the weak":

The concept of "weapons of the weak" can be used to re-categorize what looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance in terms of the practice of stalling the business of the dominant. We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. Failure, as a practice, recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities. (122)

Just as Melville's *Bartleby's* curious utterance "I would prefer not to" stalls the business of prevailing forces, Rhys's literary project constructs white female protagonists who have a tenuous relationship to the dominant order. These women struggle due to their failure to achieve material success. But this failure to achieve is, at the same time, a rejection of that normalized mode of success, and effectively calls into question the terrorizing logic of capitalist and patriarchal ideology. I offer a reading of Rhys's novel *Voyage in the Dark* and a brief discussion of her second novel *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* that locates failure as a productive form of critique, linked to a feminist and anticolonialist project. Such a reading is particularly useful for reconsidering Rhys's female protagonists, who have long confounded critics.²

Rhys's Modernism: Failure as Form and "Shadow Feminism"

Voyage in the Dark was Rhys's third novel, published in 1934; however, it was the first novel she wrote, originally drafted in 1911 in diary form in a series of black exercise notebooks. The narrative vacillates between the young protagonist's memories of her former island home and her present exilic home in England. *Voyage in the Dark* begins with Anna Morgan, a white Creole, born in the West Indies, claiming that being in London was "almost like being born again" (7). From the outset, the narrative introduces a trope of circularity. Anna feels she is being born again; the novel fails to progress in a linear manner. The feeling of senseless repetition is pervasive: in Anna's England, "the towns . . . always looked so exactly alike. You were perpetually moving to another place which was perpetually the

same" (8). The novel's ominous closing sentence provides no resolution, but states instead a vague beginning: "And about starting all over again, all over again" (188). This lack of positive development renders *Voyage in the Dark* a failed bildungsroman. Rhys's representation of a protagonist unable to successfully inhabit this literary form foregrounds a distinctive feminine modernist aesthetic during the transformations of European culture between the wars.³

Typically, the bildungsroman is a story of an education that assumes experience can lead to insight, that with knowledge, power is gained, and that within society, a place exists for the educated figure. In other words, the reward for the maturation experience is earning one's deserved place in the world (Dearlove 25). Rhys's fiction destabilizes these assumptions because of the marginalized spaces her protagonists inhabit. Anna's Creole subjectivity, for example, makes her an outsider in both the West Indies and in England. Rhys employs elements of modernist form such as narrative fragmentation and dream sequences that effectively challenge Victorian values and assumptions, both in her content and subject matter as well as in form and style.

Unlike the usually male protagonists in the bildungsroman, Rhys's figures are not rewarded with self-knowledge after their coming of age experience, but rather find that "instead of learning how to survive in the world, they are destroyed by it" (Dearlove 24). I argue, however, that Rhys's protagonists are not merely destroyed by their world; their seemingly inevitable downward spirals ultimately point to a need for an alternative to the narrow definitions of white female respectability. I suggest that there is a purposeful self-destruction at play in Rhys's work: the Rhysian protagonist demonstrates that a feminine subjectivity based on negation and failure is preferable to the prescribed choices available to women—even, and perhaps especially, to those women who have a privileged relationship to a largely white patriarchal system.

Although she doesn't discuss Rhys, Halberstam's concept of "shadow feminism" (4) is particularly useful in teasing out the function of feminized failure in Rhys's work. Halberstam defines "shadow feminism" as an anti-Oedipal project. She writes:

This feminism, a feminism grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, silence, offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and forgetting as part of an alternative feminist project, a shadow feminism which has nestled within more positivist accounts and unraveled their logics from within. This shadow feminism speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, an anti-social femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter

that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so, reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power. (124)

The concept of "shadow feminism" helps reframe negative traits such as passivity and failure as active processes of critique. This feminism, grounded in "failing and forgetting," is particularly useful in the ongoing effort to situate Rhys's female protagonists within a feminist project. The prevalence of reductive readings that conflate Rhys's biography with her fiction elides her significance to modernist, feminist, and postcolonial studies.⁴

Rhys repeatedly constructs her white female protagonists as both inside and outside of dominant culture. Anna is not quite white—or certainly not properly British; rather, she is doubly excluded as a woman who appears white but is socially and economically disinherited from British colonial wealth when in the mother country. Because she is also unable and unwilling to transgress racial codes, she cannot belong to the formerly enslaved black population in the West Indies. Anna's sense of unbelonging and her various subsequent failures in London stand as an implicit critique of white British imperialist culture.

The Africanist Presence in *Voyage in the Dark*: A Critique of Whiteness and Models of Caribbean Subjectivity

The narrative voice at the opening of the novel establishes at once that Anna is from somewhere exotic, sunny, and—compared to cold, dead England—alive. Her memory of the West Indies is animated by recollections of the vibrant black population. She exoticizes the West Indies and uses blackness to convey a sense of vitality. The descriptions of the Caribbean further contrast with the stuffy white Englishness of England. The opening paragraph offers a description of the memory of her former island home: "the narrow street smelt of niggers and wood-smoke and salt fishcakes fried in lard" (7). The passage goes on to paint a portrait of sunshine, singing black women, strands of frangipanni, and sweets made of ginger and syrup. Anna pines for the warmth of the island and identifies with its exotic, uncontainable beauty. She does not identify as white or of the British planter class because in England everything is grey and boring. Consider the passage where Anna compares the two regions: "Sometimes the earth trembles; sometimes you can feel it breathe. The colours are red, purple, blue, gold, all shades of green. The colours here are black, brown, grey, dim-green, pale blue, the white of people's faces—like woodlice" (54). Once in England while working as

a chorus girl, Anna's difference is first marked by the "clamminess" noticed by Mr. Jones and Walter Jeffries, her soon-to-be lover. Maudie, a fellow chorus girl, states of Anna's clamminess, "She's always cold. . . . She can't help it. She was born in a hot place. She was born in the West Indies or somewhere. . . . The girls call her the Hottentot" (13). Although Anna appears white, her being "born in a hot place" is enough to mark her as (somewhat) other once in England.

Her disdain for British whiteness and propriety is often conveyed by her personal desire to align with the formerly enslaved black population. Anna constructs her critique of whiteness through her impossible and parasitic desire to be black. Alone in her English boarding room, Anna recalls Francine coming to her aid when she was young:

Then Francine came in and she saw it and got a shoe and killed [the cockroach]. She changed the bandage round my head and it was ice-cold and she started fanning me with a palm-leaf fan. . . . I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black. I was happy because Francine was there, and I watched her hand waving the fan backwards and forwards and the beads of sweat that rolled from underneath her handkerchief. Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad. (31)

The use of the West Indies, particularly Anna's recollections of her black nursemaid Francine, expresses an Africanist presence that Toni Morrison identifies in *Playing in the Dark*. "Africanism" (7), far from having any root in concrete black reality, is instead born from the white literary imaginary, and is a product of the various anxieties, assumptions, and desires essential to white subjectivity. The term is used to signify "the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people."

The Africanist presence of Francine dramatizes how gendered Creole whiteness on the colonial island is defined as English. Anna's desire to be black is premised on a disavowal of being white, on a desire to not be "cold and sad." It is not premised on a political urge to transgress or transform racial boundaries.⁵ The representation of Francine points to how the "construction of a history and a context for whites [is created] by positing the history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks" (Morrison 53). As Anna recollects her past, she repeatedly claims the only time she was happy was when she was with Francine. Francine is described as "small and plump and blacker than most of the people out there, and she had a pretty face . . . she never wore shoes and the soles of her feet were as hard as leather.

She could carry anything on her head. . . . I don't know how old she was and she didn't know either. Sometimes they don't" (68). The use of the pronoun "they" in this passage is telling; Anna is not interested in the particularities of Francine, or of being black.⁶ Rather, Francine functions to provide a history and context for Anna, She is a signifier of freedom from the confines of detestable white models of respectability.

The juxtaposition of Francine with Anna's English stepmother Hester conveys competing racial legacies and ideologies. Anna disdains Hester, who brought her to England, and was the first person to introduce her to the restrictive norms that constitute white female respectability when Anna was growing up. Hester says to Anna:

I always did my best for you and I never got any thanks for it. I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger and of course I couldn't do it. Impossible to get you away from the servants. That awful sing-song voice you had! Exactly like a nigger you talked—and still do. Exactly like that dreadful girl Francine. When you were jabbering away together in the pantry I never could tell which of you was speaking. But I did think when I brought you to England that I was giving you a real chance. (65)

For Hester, giving Anna a "real chance" in England is providing an opportunity to marry, and this is contingent on learning and abiding by the codes of white feminine respectability. Behaving like a lady, according to Hester in this passage, is conflated with acting and talking white (whiteness here is coded as speaking with an English accent) and is only defined in relation to not behaving and talking like the black servant Francine. Hester's racism reflects how the institution of slavery brought into sharp relief both class and gendered categories for white women and white men. Rhys writes in her fragmented autobiography *Smile Please*, "In those days, a girl was supposed to marry, it was your mission in life, you were a failure if you didn't. . . . Black girls on the contrary seemed to be perfectly free . . . marriage didn't seem a duty as it was with us" (51).

Rhys's curious perception of black women's freedom from the duty of marriage reflects how black women were historically denied a position of subjectivity. *Voyage in the Dark* demonstrates how race complicates gender. Anna's wish to be black is born from a fear and disdain of the symbolic white patriarchal order. Although Anna dreads joining the ranks of white gendered femaleness, her whiteness circumscribes her options for resistance within this order. Thus, enacting a failed or negative white femininity serves as an alterna-

tive to accepting the colonial narrative. As Hortense Spillers argues in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," gender itself was raced through slavery; only white women and men had a gender because the slave trade enforced a space of undifferentiated identity for the captive:

Those African persons in "Middle Passage" were literally suspended in the oceanic . . . these captives, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. Because, on any given day, we might imagine the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the culturally "unmade," thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that exposed their destinies to an unknown course. . . . Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as *quantities*. (215)

Spillers's analysis explains how under slavery, the "culturally 'unmade'" captives become a contested cultural site once in the domestic sphere, and describes the processes in which dominant culture gained nominal power over African women. She also theorizes that there is a radical misunderstanding committed by dominant culture in assigning a matriarchist value when we speak of the enslaved. This misnaming is false on two accounts, according to Spillers, because the female could not claim her child and because motherhood is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance. Therefore, "reproduction of mothering" carried few of the benefits of a *patriarchalized* female gender, "which from one point of view, is the only female gender there is" (216). Crucially, Spillers contends "this problematizing of gender places [black women] . . . out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject" (229).

I treat Spillers at length because she gives a context for understanding that gender cannot be viewed as common among all women and that race constructs female subjectivity. Under gender norms then, to be a white female is to base an identity on privileges that one has no expectation of achieving for one's self. A particularly compelling aspect of *Voyage in the Dark* is Anna's desire to break free from the traditional symbolics of female gender, yet her inability to do so is demarcated by racial codes and a racialized subjectivity. Anna's story is in part a refutation of white gender norms. Yet she is unable to gain insurgent ground as a female social subject because she cannot (despite her attempts) claim racial alterity, nor can she

claim class alterity as a woman (not a lady) who can support herself. Anna's desire to be black evinces a wish to be placed outside of the symbolics of patriarchal femininity. Thus, while Anna conflates blackness with a freedom from white English codes of feminine respectability, she does not account for the history of violence perpetrated against black women. After consuming a few whiskies and some champagne during a date with Walter, she exclaims, "When I was a kid I wanted to be black. . . . I'm the fifth generation born out there, on my mother's side. . . . I saw an old slave-list at Constance once. . . . Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant. . . . All those names written down. . . . It's funny, I've never forgotten it" (52). Anna reiterates to Walter, "I'm a real West Indian. . . . I'm the fifth generation on my mother's side" (55).⁷ That Anna should, at the moment before consummating her relationship with Walter, verbalize her desired Creole status suggests an anxiety about being interpolated into a patriarchal ideological system. It also suggests anxiety about losing the Caribbean identity she is trying to claim that is disavowed in England.

Yet Anna's dream of affiliation with Francine is disrupted and never regained. She recalls this moment when she is in England, shortly after a visit with Hester, who announces that she is no longer able to support Anna financially. After Anna departs from Hester, she recounts how once she began to menstruate she was told she would be sent to England at Hester's insistence. Anna remembers seeking out Francine in the kitchen at Morgan's Rest:

. . . the kitchen was horrible. There was no chimney and it was always full of charcoal-smoke. Francine was there, washing up. Her eyes were red with the smoke and watering. Her face was quite wet. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and looked sideways at me. Then she said something in patois and went on washing up. But I knew that of course she disliked me too because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white. Being white and getting like Hester, and all the things you get—old and sad and everything. I kept thinking, "No . . . No . . . No . . ." And I knew that day that I'd started to grow old and nothing could stop it. (72)

Anna recognizes her entry to womanhood by way of menstruation as marked under the symbolics of a white patriarchal femininity.⁸ After she begins to menstruate, Anna views herself as "being white," like Hester—doomed to be "old and sad." Her illusion of identification with Francine shatters; she can no longer identify with Francine, who is now viewed as a laborer in the kitchen—a subject position outside

of the white gender symbolic system. Instead, Anna must now learn to become a proper lady, because gendered Creole whiteness is defined in the space of the colonial island in terms of one's ability to become English.

Rhys's writing occupies a unique place that cannot be ascribed to one cultural or national sphere. This aspect makes *Voyage in the Dark* a particularly compelling examination of gendered identity, race, place, and colonialism. The tropes of fragmentation, the split-self, and the problems that Anna encounters due to gendered and race-based hierarchies launch a critique not only of patriarchal femininity, but also conventional notions of liberal feminism. The narrative does not describe a cohesive, self-knowing liberal subject capable of direct action (or activism). Rather, Anna reacts to her conditions by failing and foundering. She is unable to make sense of her identity in the wake of rigorously imposed, socially prescribed, and highly problematic identity categories.

Certainly the moment in the kitchen with Francine marks Anna's realization that racially inscribed social structures overdetermine the material of her subjectivity and her counterparts. Further, it marks an awareness that these categories cannot easily be transgressed. If we view Rhys's novel in the context of a modernist project that subverts the bildungsroman, this moment in the kitchen with Francine is key to Anna's development—or more aptly, her disintegration—because it also sets into motion her failure to negotiate forms of patriarchal femininity when in England. In other words, by dramatizing Anna's inability or unwillingness to transgress racial boundaries and subsequently reject her place in a gendered and raced hierarchy on the island, *Voyage in the Dark* provides a narrative for the ideological workings of interpolation into the white gendered symbolic order. Mary Hanna argues that "Anna Morgan's personal 'racial sin' is committed at this moment of *her* choice to become a master/wife. . . . in her West Indian context/place and to refuse all other alternatives, as embodied in Francine" (149). Yet I contend the alternative Francine embodies is no longer available to Anna once she is interpolated into the white symbolic order. Anna recognizes Francine as thereafter unavailable to her: "I knew that of course she disliked me too because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white" (Rhys 72). In my reading of Rhys's novel, what is expressed through negation is crucial. Anna's choice and her disavowal of making that choice provide a critique specific to white patriarchal femininity. Anna's feeling that she would never be able to explain how she hated being white demonstrates her entrance into the white gendered symbolic order and her inability to conceive of any other identity outside of that order. Rhys's depiction illustrates

Charles W. Mill's point in *The Racial Contract* that "white racial identity has generally triumphed over all others; it is race that (transgender, transclass) has generally determined the social world and loyalties, the lifeworld, of whites—whether as citizens of the colonizing mother country, settlers, nonslaves, or beneficiaries of the 'color bar' and the 'color line'" (138). Yet Anna's status as a negative feminine subject in the context of both the colonial island place and in England illuminates how a failing and refusing rather than striving to enact modes of white femininity is an alternative to joining the ranks of "gendered femaleness."

Refutation of Patriarchal Femininity through Refusal of the Mother–Daughter Bond

Rhys narrativizes the negative feminist trajectory of a shadow feminism that rests on the refusal of the mother–daughter bond, a bond that Halberstam claims is essential to ensure "that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power" (124). I make a brief detour to Rhys's second novel, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, because it emphasizes the importance of "losing the mother" as a "way out of the reproduction of woman as the other to man from one generation to the next" (Halberstam 125). Rhys depicts the refusal of the mother–daughter bond as a means to avoid the confinement that results from acquiescing to the expectations of patriarchal femininity. The commitment to dissentience, despite the negative consequences incurred socially and economically, is preferable to blindly subscribing to what is coded as socially acceptable, decent behavior.

Published in 1930, four years before *Voyage in the Dark*, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* is narrated from the perspective of an older female protagonist named Julia, who, fresh after yet another love affair ending badly, returns to London from Paris. Julia reflects on her grim present situation while recollecting her mildly depressing past. Because she is almost destitute, she visits her sister Norah in London in hope of receiving some financial assistance. Norah, taking care of their dying mother, serves as a counterpoint to Julia in that she is a woman who does not disavow her mother. Norah has garnered approval within the social structure by acting as her dying mother's nursemaid, yet Rhys depicts the dismal drawbacks of maintaining this bond. Norah thinks:

Everybody always said to her: "You're wonderful, Norah, you're wonderful. I don't know how you do it." It was a sort of drug, that universal, that unvarying admiration—the feel-

ing that one was doing what one ought to do, the approval of God and man. It made you feel very protected and safe, as if something very powerful were fighting on your side. . . . She could bear disgusting sights and sounds and smells. And so she had slaved. And she had gradually given up going out because she was too tired to try to amuse herself. . . . Three years ago her mother had had a second stroke, and since then her life had been slavery. (104)

Norah's sense of protection within the British patriarchal order, which is afforded by her bond with her mother, is accompanied by the rueful knowledge that she has become deprived of autonomy and agency. Rhys demonstrates through Norah that garnering "approval from God and man" comes at a deep cost to the self. Julia, by contrast, has neither approval nor protection, but at the very least dissents from the prescribed role of patriarchal femininity, coded through her rejection of the mother–daughter bond. Her Uncle Griffiths's admonishes her dissent: "You always insisted on going your own way. Nobody interfered with you or expressed any opinion on what you did. You deserted your family. And now you can't expect to walk back and be received with open arms" (84).

Uncle Griffiths and Norah shun Julia, and they refuse to help her financially. Yet Rhys suggests that poverty and rejection are preferable to maintaining familial ties that ensure that the daughter inherits the legacy of the mother and reproduces her relationship to patriarchy. This explains Julia's reaction to her mother's death. During the funeral, Julia has a feeling that "She was a defiant flame shooting upwards not to plead but to threaten" (131), and she experiences a sense of relief and liberation after the funeral: "it was all over. Life was sweet and truly a pleasant thing" (132). Julia tells her sister Norah that she felt not sorrow but rage at her mother's death: "Don't you know the difference between sorrow and rage?" (134). She scathingly criticizes Norah's position in respectable society via the mother, and places herself in opposition to respectability by calling attention to the destructive aspects of banal conventionality: "People are such beasts. . . . And do you think I'm going to cringe to a lot of mean, stupid animals? If all good, respectable people had one face, I'd spit in it. I wish they all had one face so that I could spit in it," to which Norah responds "you mean all that for me, I suppose" (135). Julia's disavowal of the mother refutes the model of femininity transferred from mother to daughter, and it also enables her to critique Norah and the societal order of "good, respectable people" who uphold the tenets of patriarchal femininity.⁹

In *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys makes the process of disavowing the mother more straightforward by giving Hester the status of

stepmother. That Hester is a stepmother further underscores Anna's disavowal not only of patriarchal femininity, but also of British identity and colonialism. Hester's overtly marked Britishness and her insistence that Anna act like a British lady certainly mirrors to some degree the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Anna refuses her role as a colonized subject by refusing to take on the affectations of a lady both in the Caribbean and in England, and she thereby offers a critique of the process of cultural colonialism. In this context, the disavowal of the stepmother disrupts the relationship that positions the daughter as the inheritor of the mother's relationship to explicitly British forms of patriarchy. Halberstam writes how texts that "refuse to think back through the mother . . . produce a theoretical and imaginative space that is 'not woman' or that can only be occupied by unbecoming women" (125). This point is critical to understand how a writer like Rhys lays bare the expectations of patriarchal femininity while also disavowing conventional feminist praxis. With the realization that she cannot stop "being white and getting like Hester" under the white gender symbolic order into which she is cast, Anna embarks on a project of unbecoming, achieved by a failure to adhere to codes of white feminine respectability that were first introduced to her by her stepmother before reaching England.

On arriving in England with Hester, Anna's initial impressions convey dismay and a sense of displacement:

This is England Hester said and I watched it through the train window. . . . I had read about England ever since I could read—smaller meaner everything is . . . hundreds of thousands of white people white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike . . . oh I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place—you'll get used to it Hester kept saying I expect you feel like a fish out of water but you'll soon get used to it. (17)

Anna again conflates whiteness, England, and Hester's presence and insistence on one dreaded value system. In England, Anna seeks to passively "lose the mother" through her refutation of the codes of white feminine respectability. Once she is working as a chorus girl, her friend Maudie comments "There's one thing about you . . . you always look ladylike," to which Anna retorts, "oh god . . . who wants to look ladylike" (10). In England after visiting Hester, Anna narrates "I wrote once to Hester but she only sent me a postcard in reply, and after that I didn't write again. And she didn't either" (74). Like Julia in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Anna refuses patriarchal femininity through her disavowal of the mother, which marks a project of "unbe-

coming" in Halberstam's terms, and serves as a radical form of passivity that is capable of disrupting systems built around the dialectic between colonizer and colonized, and woman as other to man (131). Anna's radical passivity, premised on rejection of prescribed codes of feminine respectability, and her disavowal of her stepmother is a form of radical passivity; this radical passivity, is further enacted in her dealing with men such as Walter.

Although repeatedly referred to and treated by men in the novel as infantile, naïve, and child-like, Anna evinces an acute understanding of English middle-class codes of feminine respectability. The narrative is propelled by her rejection of these prescribed codes within the white, gendered, British symbolic order. During a visit to Walter's house, her awareness of her remove from the status of a lady is conveyed through an imagined judgment made by the house itself: "the rest of the house dark and quiet and not friendly to me. Sneering faintly, sneering discreetly, as a servant would. Who's this? Where on earth did he pick her up?" (49). After Walter abandons her, she moves in with Ethel, a xenophobic masseuse who insists she is "really a lady," Anna thinks, "A lady—some words have a long, thin neck that you'd like to strangle" (141). Anna's vehement rejection here of the word "lady" as signifier of femininity conveys a sense of outrage and a desire to do away with the modes of white femininity that are perpetuated from one generation to the next. Rather than participate in the maintenance of this mode of femininity, she chooses to opt out of it; she is neither a successful protagonist who gains social ground as an insurgent female subject capable of supporting herself financially, nor is she successful in enacting prescribed roles that would allow her even a modicum of financial stability and a place within the British social structure. Anna's rejection and refutation of the roles of lady, chorus girl, mistress, and prostitute offer a critique of the narrow and often harrowing positions available to women during Rhys's historical moment. She enacts a mode of femininity that self-destructs; in this context, the disintegration of a feminine subjectivity premised on patriarchal subordination is a feminist response, albeit one that differs greatly from conventional liberal feminism.

Failed Femininity: Negation of the Patriarchal Feminine Subject

Critics who attribute Anna's downfall to her passivity, lack of self-knowledge, and acceptance of white gendered attitudes of entitlement do not account for the ways in which these very characteristics contribute to an indirect critique of British colonialism, patriarchy, and Victorian notions of character.¹⁰ Moreover, this line of thinking denies

the possibility of a feminism that voices resistance through negativity, failure, and stasis rather than victory, triumph, and progress. Rhys's novels portray a disintegration of the feminine subject, an essential element in the aesthetics of failure.

Much of Rhys's fiction is preoccupied with the theme of women who fail to make enough money to thrive within the systems of economic opportunity available to them. Her novels mark a transitional moment for women in modernity who experienced the predicament of having few opportunities to procure financial independence while inhabiting the position of social independence. Although Anna refuses (and is excluded from) occupying the status of lady and is critical of white codes of British feminine respectability, she nevertheless is financially dependent on men more powerful than she. Anna is painfully aware that within this shifting gendered system, women are put in the unfair position of having to perform and appear in ordinary public urban spaces, and that, furthermore, they will be judged and evaluated by these appearances:

About clothes, it's awful. Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell. People laugh at girls who are badly dressed. Jaw, jaw, jaw. . . . "Beautifully dressed woman . . ." As if it isn't enough that you want to be beautiful, that you want to have pretty clothes, that you want it like hell. As if that isn't enough. But no, it's jaw, jaw and sneer, sneer all the time. And the shop-windows sneering and smiling in your face. And then you look at the skirt of your costume, all crumpled at the back. And your hideous underclothes. You look at your hideous underclothes and you think, "All right, I'll do anything for good clothes. Anything—anything for clothes." (25)

Following this observation, Anna says to herself, part quiet consolation and part resolution, not to resort to desperate measures: "Yes, that's all right. I'm poor and my clothes are cheap and perhaps it will always be like this. And that's all right too" (26). *Voyage in the Dark* provides a prescient look at the conditions that allow for the male gaze to operate and garner power, and simultaneously addresses the detriment incurred to women who internalize the male gaze. Yet Anna's temporary failure to be fashionably dressed enacts a form of refusal within a social system that positions women's appearance as life determining. If she cannot reverse the power structure that allows for the male gaze to function, she can opt out of it by refusing to be an object of male desire.

This is a fleeting resolution, however, and Anna's anxiety that she will be forced to join the ranks of "The ones without any money,

the ones with beastly lives" returns (26). She receives a letter from Walter with money in it telling her to "buy . . . some stockings. . . . And don't look so anxious when you are buying them" (26). After receiving the money, Anna thinks "I was accustomed to it already. It was as if I had always had it. Money ought to be everybody's" (27). When speaking to her landlady, Anna notices that her own "voice sounded round and full instead of small and thin. 'That's because of the money,' I thought" (27). Following this, she quickly spends all of her money on clothing: "All the time I was dressing I was thinking what clothes I would buy. I didn't think of anything else at all. . . . *A dress and a hat and shoes and underclothes*" (27). The passage suggests that under gender norms, to be a white female is to base an identity on privileges that one has no expectation of earning for oneself. Anna clearly has no expectation of earning a living for herself; fearing abject poverty, she feels compelled to model herself as an object of desire for Walter. Consider Anna's description of meeting Walter on a holiday: "I was wondering if I looked all right, because I hadn't had time to dry my hair properly. I was so nervous about how I looked that three-quarters of me was in a prison, wandering round and round in a circle. If he had said that I looked all right or that I was pretty, it would have set me free. But he just looked me up and down and smiled" (76). This passage points to how women who violated the domestic/public distinction were subjected to the male gaze by merely appearing as single women in public spaces.

Furthermore, Rhys depicts how the women in Anna's class position were socialized to make a living by way of commodifying their sexuality. Maudie breaks down how "commodity exchange reduces the value of the object to its exchange value" (Emery 101) when she tells Anna "'My dear, I had to laugh. . . . D' you know what a man said to me the other day? It's funny, he said, have you ever thought that a girl's clothes cost more than the girl inside them?'" (45). It is telling that Anna retorts, "What a swine of a man!" She is advised by Maudie that "'The thing with men is to get everything you can out of them and not care a damn. You ask any girl in London—or any girl in the wide world if it comes to that . . . and she'll tell you the same thing,'" to which Anna replies, "'I've heard all that a million times. . . . I'm sick of hearing it'" (44). Anna is unable, as Maudie puts it, to "swank a bit" (45), that is, to demand expensive gifts or a nicer flat from Walter in exchange for a sexual relationship. Anna fails to benefit materially or emotionally from sexual commodification. Walter abandons her, and it is clear that she detests the options available to her under this bartering system.

Anna ultimately refuses to negotiate all forms of patriarchal femininity that are available to her. Once she comes to realize that

the familiar modes of feminine artifice only create false hope, she essentially offers a critique of a socioeconomic system that places women's appearances as life-determining:

The clothes of most of the women who passed were like caricatures of the clothes in the shop-windows, but when they stopped to look you saw that their eyes were fixed on the future. "If I buy this, then of course I'd be quite different." Keep hope alive and you can do anything, and that's the way the world goes round, that's the way they keep the world rolling. So much hope for each person. And damned cleverly done too. But what happens if you don't hope any more, if your back's broken? What happens then? (130)

Anna realizes that under the dominant social order she has but two options: "to get on or get out" (74). She continues, "Everybody says, 'Get on.' Of course, some people do get on. Yes, but how many? What about what's-her-name? She got on, didn't she? 'Chorus-Girl Marries Peer's Son.' Well, *what* about her? Get on or get out, they say. Get on or get out" (74). And yet her failure to "hope" as described in the above passage signifies a resistance and a refusal to participate in the either/or logic that, in Anna's words, "keep[s] the world rolling." Anna neither gets on, nor does she get out; rather she finds an alternative in the act of unbecoming.

Anna repeatedly violates prescribed codes of feminine behavior as a strategy for resistance. For example, she refuses the advances of Joe, an acquaintance of her friend Laurie. In a drunken fit, she tells them to go to "go to hell," then ends up passing out in the next room. The next morning Laurie admonishes Anna: "I think you're a bit of a fool, that's all. And I think you'll never get on, because you don't know how to take people. After all, to say you'll come out with somebody and then to get tight and start a row about nothing at all isn't a way to behave. And besides, you always look half-asleep and people don't like that. But it's not my business" (129). It is in fact Laurie's business to accommodate men in return for financial favors. That both Laurie, who is described as a "tart" (127) and Hester, a "lady," both criticize Anna's behavior suggests that her dissent from these dichotomized roles is disruptive. While the two women worry that she will not "get on," Anna represents a subversive impulse in her refusal to do so, if even it appears to be at a cost to the self. After this incident, Anna continues to refuse the prescribed roles available to her. On accepting a room in Ethel's house, she is expected to give manicures and act as a prostitute. In a conversation with Laurie about the arrangement, she says: "'I've had four or five . . . to manicure . . . One of them asked me to take him upstairs, but when I said No

he went off like a shot. He was a bit frightened, all the time, you could tell that. Laurie laughed. She said, 'I bet the old girl wasn't pleased. Bet you that wasn't her idea at all'" (142). During her stay at Ethel's, Anna comes to exemplify inaction: "There were never any scenes. There was nothing to make scenes about. But I stopped going out; I stopped wanting to go out. . . . And then you go to sleep. You sleep very quickly when you are like that and you don't dream either. It's as if you were dead" (141). Anna's refusal to prostitute herself and subsequent act of unbecoming demonstrates a Bartlebyan politics of inaction. Rhys's novel articulates how inaction and passivity can be used as tools of opposition. Moreover, it emphasizes how negative feminism exists as a shadow archive of resistance, one that, as I have argued in Rhys's case, points to the limitations of a liberal feminism that argues for a self-knowing, cohesive feminine subject that flourishes within a patriarchal order.¹¹

In a 1934 letter to Evelyn Scott, Rhys wrote of *Voyage in the Dark* that she was trying to write "the present dreamlike (downward career of girl)—starting of course piano and ending fortissimo. Perhaps I was simply trying to describe a girl going potty" (24). Certainly, toward the end of the narrative, Anna becomes rapidly undone; she is perceived by Carl, the man who impregnates her, as being high on ether, and Ethel, the woman who tries unsuccessfully to employ Anna as a manicurist and prostitute, tells her in frustration that "'The thing about you . . . is that you're half potty. You're not all there; that's what's the matter with you. Anybody's only got to look at you to see that" (145). The novel ends with Anna hemorrhaging from a botched illegal abortion; there is no resolution, only the thought "about starting all over again, all over again" (188). Anna's "downward career" urges the reader to consider how, given the options to "either get on or get out" under the white, gendered symbolic order, a failed patriarchal femininity functions as a form of resistance. Rhys's description of the unbecoming of woman represents a disruption of the feminine relationship to patriarchal forms of power, a disruption that is especially evident in Anna's refusal and inability to inhabit the space(s) defined for her within the colonial social structure on the island and while in England. Rhys narrativizes negative feminism in her depiction of Anna, a subject who refuses to cohere, who chooses to disintegrate, rather than to activate, the self under the models of femininity available to her.

Rhys's often-ambiguous endings and refusal to write female protagonists who fail to "get on" has long posed a problem for feminist readers. As Mary Lou Emery writes, "the problem becomes especially acute since we wish to draw well-deserved attention to Jean Rhys as a woman writer and perhaps feel that to do so we must somehow

redeem her seemingly 'failed' female characters. If we are unable to view them as victorious, we become trapped in victimology" (64). Yet *Voyage in the Dark* is neither a triumphant tale nor a novel that wholly celebrates femininity. Nor is the concept of redemption a fruitful point of inquiry for Rhys's writing. Normative victory for a character like Anna would work against the logic of a critique grounded in negation. Working to redeem these failed characters as "victorious" under conventional liberal feminist frameworks elides the possibilities Rhys's fiction provides—that is, a context for examining and articulating a feminist framework that recognizes a politics grounded in purposeful failure and refusal. By the end of the narrative, Anna has rather thoroughly failed to enact the problematic roles available to her under a patriarchal order. Rhys's depiction of Anna is a deft example of negative feminism; by writing the disintegration of the feminine subject rather than its formation, she offers a critique of patriarchal femininity. Considering Rhys's writing through the lens of negative feminism illuminates a feminine aesthetic of failure that newly articulates how race and gender inform women's modernist narratives.

Notes

1. Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" published in 1853 is narrated by a Manhattan lawyer who employs Bartleby to copy legal documents. Bartleby disturbs business as usual by repeatedly uttering the phrase "I would prefer not to" when asked to perform his job duties. By the end of the story, the narrator finds Bartleby imprisoned and learns he has starved to death by refusing to eat. Bartleby's utterance, in the words of Deleuze, posits "not a will to nothingness, but the growth of a nothingness of the will. Bartleby has won the right to survive, that is to remain immobile and upright before a blind wall. Pure patient passivity. . . . He can survive only by whirling in a suspense that keeps everyone at a distance" (78). Bartleby serves as a literary representation of the exploration of failure and passivity as a form of resistance in the context of capitalist enterprise.
2. Mary Lou Emery points out that Anna's "passivity irritates critics such as Peter Wolfe, who contends that if Anna had "more fiber" she might have kept her "honor" (91). Urmila Seshagiri lists five book length studies that take as their point of departure the assumption that Jean Rhys's protagonists are all the same unhappy woman in different guises. She quotes Joseph Wiesnfarth's 2005 book, *Ford Madox Ford and the Regiment of Women*, where he attributes all of Jean Rhys's fiction to her "need to portray herself as a helpless victim of a scheming man with a pimping wife" and dismisses her as "nothing more than a drunken, nymphomaniacal liar" (qtd. in Seshagiri 502).

3. Jed Esty discusses Rhys and other Anglophone women modernists, noting their "fiction rewrites Goethean models of male destiny, exposing as uncertain and uneven the promises of progress that were knitted into the narrative code of the (male) bildungsroman" (161).
4. Sean Latham provides a notable exception, as he argues that by deploying the conventions of the roman à clef, Jean Rhys was able to "avoid the devastation of her own heroines by profitably seeking revenge on her own patron and supporter, Ford Madox Ford" (126).
5. The relationship between Anna and Francine brings to mind Charles W. Mill's excellent point, made in a footnote in *The Racial Contract*: "Women, subordinate classes, and nonwhites may be oppressed in common, but it is not a common oppression: the structuring is so different that it has not led to any common front between them. Neither white women nor white workers have a *as a group* (as against principled individuals) historically made common cause with nonwhites against colonialism, white settlement, slavery, imperialism, jim crow, apartheid" (138).
6. Lilian Pizzichini's 2009 Jean Rhys biography *The Blue Hour* reinscribes rather than problematizes this point when writing about young Rhys's impression of black people on the island: "She saw them (and for her they were always the 'other' as for any white Creole) as being strong and at ease with themselves. She heard them every night as they danced to drums in the jump-ups in Roseau. They were more alive than whites, she felt, more alive than her" (30).
7. H. Adlai Murdoch notes that the OED standard definition of the term creole "inscribes the creole in terms of instability and alterity, since it figures a European or an African subject linked to displacements of place rather than race" (67).
8. Francine's initial explanation of menstruation to Anna works in opposition to Hester's and illuminates the terror associated with white codes of femininity: "when I was unwell for the first time it was she who explained it to me, so that it seemed quite all right and I thought it was all in the day's work like eating or drinking. But then she went off and told Hester, and Hester came and jawed away at me. . . . I began to feel awfully miserable, as if everything were shutting up around me and I couldn't breathe. I wanted to die" (68).
9. Halberstam theorizes the disavowal of the mother as a form of radical passivity in a discussion of Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother*. She writes, "radical forms of passivity and masochism step out of the easy model of a transfer of femininity from mother to daughter and actually seek to destroy the mother daughter bond altogether" (131).
10. For example, Mary Hanna writes, "Anna's choice of . . . *accepting gendered white West Indian Creole attitudes of entitlement*, along with its concomitant hypocrisy and refusal of self-knowledge (her denial of having in fact made this choice), leaves her few options

when she is an impoverished exile, and no desire at all to achieve maturity and independence—*except*, like Antoinette Cosway in *WSS* through the traditional, unstated, and problematic route of marriage to an elite white man . . ." (149).

11. Halberstam's call to think about a shadow archive of resistance clarifies this concept: she proposes that "feminists refuse the choices as offered—freedom in liberal terms or death—in order to think about a shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing. This could be called an "anti-social feminism," a form of feminism preoccupied with negativity and negation" (129).

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