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Jamette Carnival and Afro-Caribbean Influences on the Work of Jean Rhys

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Most art critics would agree that since the Universal Exhibition of 1900 in Paris, African aesthetics have profoundly influenced twentieth century sculpture and painting. Literary critics have paid less attention to ways in which West African culture and rhetorical patterns have shaped twentieth century writing. A case in point is the Dominican writer Jean Rhys (1890-1979) who has been located within the discursive spaces of formalism and feminism and, in the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, postcolonialism. Aside from Caribbeanists who, as Kamau Brathwaite points out in “A Post-Cautionary Tale,” bat Rhys back and forth as “The Helen of Our Wars,” critical response to Rhys’ work usually privileges its European modernism and concern with form over its Caribbean cultural context. Even though Ford Madox Ford trumpets her Antillean origin in the introduction to her first book, *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927), critics of Rhys’ first four novels rarely mention her West Indian identity. Such an oversight is puzzling, considering that every text, European setting notwithstanding, includes such identifiable Afrocentric elements as parody, satire, masquerade, hybridity, heteroglossia, and the rhetorical technique of call-and-response. Critics who do acknowledge the culture of the Black Atlantic in all of Rhys’ work include Kenneth Ramchand and Elaine Savory. Ramchand contextualizes her style, “essentially image and rhythm,” as part of the *Negritude* movement of the 1930’s (Ramchand 134), while Savory contends that Rhys’ texts “conduct important conversations between gender, national, racial and class positions” (198). Janette Martin further asserts that Afrocentric spirituality provides all of Rhys’ protagonists with an “alternative epistemology” (5), “to transcend or, more important, to transgress conventional modes of knowing and behaving” (4). It is surprising that even after the publication of her specifically West Indian novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), A. Alvarez hailed her as “the best living *English* novelist,” and Carole Angier, her British biographer, never visited Dominica as part of her research. Annette Gilson, however, maintains that Rhys’ Afrocentric identity is always present in her European texts, albeit coded and manifested as presence-as-absence (654).

Like Picasso and Modigliani, to whose art she alluded in her novels, Jean Rhys drew on African sources, mediated in her case through the culture of her Dominican homeland. Just as visual artists learned, from West African masks and sacred artifacts, to streamline and stylize form, so Rhys borrowed cultural and oral tropes from the Yoruba and other West African peoples. These cultural markers had crossed the Atlantic with the slave ships and evolved into the trickster tales, ghost stories, obeah spells, talismans, satirical calypso songs and carnival street performances of Dominica and the other Caribbean islands. In privileging Afro-Caribbean orality, heteroglossia, hybridity, and satire, Rhys stands as a foremother to Anglophone writers such as Olive Senior, Michelle Cliff, Rambai Espinet, Jamaica Kincaid, Pauline Melville, Velma Pollard, Erna Brodber, and Opal Palmer Adisa. Like the Martinican novelist Mayotte Capecia (Lucette Combette), Rhys writes against the racist travelogues of “local colorists” like Lafcadio Hearn and subverts the stereotype of the *guiabliesse* (female demon) in both West Indian and European sites (Carter 446). Rhys’ protagonists, like Capecia’s, have been dismissed as apolitical and Eurocentric when in fact the reverse is true. Rhys’ interrogation of power relations

across racial, sexual and economic lines is subversive, and she approaches her subject in the indirect, elliptical style of Afrocentric social criticism.

This paper contextualizes Rhys within Afro-Dominican culture and argues that the texts set in Paris and London are deeply informed by the culture, specifically by the rhetorical device of call-and-response and by the persona of the female carnival street performer, or *jamette*. *Jamette* is Trinidadian Creole, from the French *diametre*, the name given to the working class women who took part in carnival (Liverpool 3). The term is used in a broader sense here to include the transgressive, parodic style of the Dominican female street performers of Rhys' childhood. I would argue that for Rhys, the *jamette* signifies an opposition to the legal and cultural "limitations ... that seek to close women and to enclose [them] 'safely'" (Fayad 451). Rhetorically, Rhys uses Afrocentric "forms of verbal artistry such as calypso that require economy and highly developed verbal play [and] permit a depth of signification without many words" (Savory 153). Rhys thus indirectly interrogates colonial and metropolitan power structures. In combining modernism and African aesthetics with the hybridity and heteroglossia of her own background, she shapes the satirical tone and parodic structure of her work.

It is not surprising that Jean Rhys was drawn to subversive Afrocentric orality. She was born on a predominately African island at the height of the British Empire; her father was a Welsh physician and her mother, a Lockhart, came from an old Creole family. Rhys, who began writing at an early age, was also musical; she played the piano and sang traditional West Indian melodies: folk songs like "Brown Girl in the Ring" and "Roseau Town;" French Creole ballads; and carnival songs like "Charlie Lulu" (Jean Rhys Collection [Series I, Box 5, Folder 13] Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa). Since there was constant musical exchange between Dominica and Trinidad, some of the tunes she learned as a child may well have been of Yoruba origin, brought to Trinidad by indentured Africans between 1841 and 1867 (Rohlehr 16). Fluent in Dominica's French patois, she translated carnival songs for her disapproving English relatives, and soon grasped the heteroglossic implications of nation language. The British administrators in Dominica, as in Trinidad, "nurtured a mistrust of the [Afro-]Franco-Catholic element ... [and] had settled on a policy of systematically anglicizing the island, both with respect to language and population" (Rohlehr 51). Rhys was aware of the politics of pronunciation and knew that accent denoted class: "Now that I've spoken you can hear that I'm an ... English gentlewoman. I have my doubts about you. Speak up and I'll place you at once" (Rhys, *Voyage* 35). Depreciated throughout her life for her West Indian accent, Rhys trained herself to speak in a whisper. However, her "acute memory of West Indian speech" served her well as she composed the "remarkable and convincing dialogue" in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and stories like "Let Them Call It Jazz" (Savory 166). In her seventies she recorded Afro-French lullabies and Houdini's (Edgar Leon Sinclair) 1926 calypso "Woman Sweeter Than Man" in a flawless Dominican accent (Jean Rhys Collection [Series I, Box 2, Folder 3] Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa).

In addition to her musical interests, Rhys was knowledgeable about Afrocentric folklore: witches, ghosts, shape-shifters, tricksters, souciantes, and zombies. She researched Voodoo and left copious notes on Baron Samedi and other Haitian deities (Jean Rhys Collection [Series I, Box 4, Folder 15] Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa). Rhys often mentioned obeah in her correspondence and claimed she could cast spells. She “enjoyed alluding to herself as a witch, especially when she thought others so imaged her;” in fact, her neighbors in the remote Devon village of Cheriton Fitzpaine accused her of witchcraft more than once (Savory 110; Rhys, *Letters* 248). In later years, Rhys used trickster skills to avoid intrusive fans and importunate interviewers. When a reporter in possession of a batch of Rhys’ book reviews appeared for an interview, Rhys appropriated the reviews before rushing her out, whispering “*Merde*, dearie, that’s what they say for good luck”(Litherland 1). Rhys’ “malicious grin” made the reporter think of “voodoo ... of little dolls with pins ... (of shades of Martinique)” (1). Rhys was aware of the Afrocentric power of names: “I have a thing about names ... they are very important indeed” (*Letters* 170). She often changed hers, either because she hoped a new “identity” would improve her luck, or for self-protection. In *Voyage*, Anna Morgan is teased about her West Indian heritage and retorts: “[m]y real name isn’t Morgan and I’ll never tell you my real name ... Everything that I tell you about myself is a lie” (78). Dissimulation, witchcraft and shape-shifting appear frequently in Rhys’ work: the black cat in “Kikimora,” either a familiar or a shape-shifting spirit, suddenly attacks a patronizing male guest (*Short Stories* 331-334). Rhys’ meek, passive protagonists are deeply angry women who fantasize about changing into animals: “one day the fierce wolf that walks by my side will spring on you and rip your abominable guts out” (*Good Morning Midnight* 375). Rhys’ interest in shape-shifting and tricksters may have been inspired by the Dominicans who transformed themselves through the elaborate masks and costumes of the road march and sang carnival songs of *picong* (provocation) and *mepris* (scorn). Satire, as an approach to musical expression, had survived the Middle Passage and blended with Catholic ritual to create a uniquely Dominican cultural synthesis. Rhys was aware, however, that calypso songs and carnival performances were not simply entertainment, but were modes of resistance to an unjust and exploitative system.

The only eyewitness accounts of African celebrations in the Caribbean are filtered through a voyeuristic European gaze although, as Jean D’Costa and Barbara Lalla point out, “even in ... travelogues written by white visitors survive echoes of the voices of those who, having neither quill nor printing press, left the mark of their exile upon the minds of white observers” (8). Jamaica, Trinidad, Dominica, St. Lucia, and the Virgin Islands all developed unique approaches to holiday performance, and although the Jamaican Set Girls and the Trinidadian *jamettes* represent different cultural phenomena, they shared a common parodic and subversive response to social and economic repression. In 1687, Sloane described holiday dances or “plays” in Jamaica that involved costumes, props, and “great activity and strength of body in keeping time” (Long 384). In all of the islands, the role of women is well documented. Even before the advent of the *jamettes*, entrepreneurial women had hosted public parties and fetes. One woman in pre-Emancipation Trinidad “gave dances and made a great deal of money by

them; she paid for everything—supper, liquor and music; and each negro paid half a dollar for admission” (Rohlehr 13). In the Virgin Islands, the Bamboula queen composed extemporaneous verses to which the other dancers sang a chorus in call-and-response style (Rohlehr 25). In Jamaica, during Christmas week, the Set Girls danced through the streets of Kingston. They wore elegant frocks trimmed with red or blue and sang satirical, topical songs (Lewis 56). Another witness of the Jamaican festivities reported that,

the creole negro girls of the towns ... dressed with much taste ... Their gowns are of the finest muslin with pink or blue satin spencers ... gold necklaces, ear-rings and other expensive trinkets shine to advantage on their jet black skins. (Stewart 273)

The Queen at the head of the procession “eclipse[s] all the rest in the splendor of her dress” (274). Similarly, the St. Lucian La Rose Society featured Queens “with bright coloured head dresses, sparkling with jewelry (who) sang in cadences (with) dangerous gracefulness” (Rohlehr 33).

There was always a subversive undercurrent to these performances, which sometimes masked slave uprisings. Between 1649 and 1833, one third of the seventy documented slave revolts in the Caribbean occurred at holiday time (Dirks 168). By the turn of the century, the harsh conditions of the urban poor had perforce altered the “stateliness, subtle eroticism and decorum” of the early nineteenth century street performances (Rohlehr 33). In fact, Rhys’ eyewitness account of Dominican carnival women is remarkably similar to newspaper descriptions of Trinidadian *Jamette Carnival* (Liverpool 3). By Rhys’ time, the colonial press had become sufficiently discomfited by the subversive nature of these masked female performers to complain that,

the obscenities, the bawdy language and gestures of the women in streets have been pushed to a degree of wantonness which ... cannot be tolerated. The young girls will become the curse of the country if these yearly *saturnalia* are allowed to continue.” (Rohlehr 31)

Undeterred, the Dominican carnival women, in “whiteface,” wearing “masks made of close meshed wire covering the whole face and tied at the back of the head—the handkerchief that went over the back of the head hid the strings and over the slits for the eyes mild blue eyes” and “little red heart-shaped mouths” (Rhys, *Voyage* 113), continued to parody and lampoon powerful colonial interests.

In Rhys’ Dominica in the early 1900’s, political and economic power was vested in the British civil servants who administered the country, in the Catholic Church, and in the privileged proprietor-class, which included both whites and people of color. The island had bounced between French and British control until 1782 when a decisive naval battle determined its status as a British possession. French patois remained the language of the folk and is still spoken by some older, rural Dominicans (Honeychurch 2005). The “mulatto” or colored elite of Dominica

had challenged white hegemony more successfully than on any other Caribbean island according to Lennox Honeychurch (Honeychurch 1984). People of color, predominantly Catholic and of Afro-French descent, controlled the outspoken local press, as Rhys shows in stories “Again the Antilles,” “Fishy Waters,” and “Pioneers, O Pioneers.” In the former story, Papa Dom, the editor of the fictional *Dominica Herald*, “was against the Government, against the English, against the Island’s being a Crown Colony” (Rhys, *Short Stories* 39). Rhys’ father was satirized by the editor of the real *Dominica Dial* for his “conviviality,” his constant bridge playing, and the suspicion that he had parlayed his assignment to a remote medical district into a more lucrative one in the capital (Savory 6). Although racial discrimination in Dominican politics had been illegal since 1831 (photographs of the House of Assembly in Rhys’ time show a representative number of delegates of color), tensions were evident between the Afro-French planters and the British administrators. Rhys interrogates Dominica’s complex hierarchy of race and class in “Pioneers, O Pioneers.” “The black women were barefooted, wore gaily striped turbans and highwaisted dresses” (Rhys, *Short Stories* 275), while Afro-French Madame Menzies maintained the dignity of her old-fashioned riding habit, and British Mr. Ramage lived out an imperialist fantasy in his “tropical kit, white suit, red cummerbund, solar topee” (276). These different perspectives are linked through the consciousness of the young protagonist who rejects the reductive, hegemonic vision of colonial society.

Between the uneasy alliance of Afro-French and British interests and the black working class, there stretched a wide divide. Slavery had been abolished officially since 1834 but the former bondsmen and women were only marginally better off in the 1900’s. A mercantilist economy discouraged local industry and tied the people to subsistence farming and domestic service. The poor possessed little mobility and had minimal recourse to the courts. Christophene, the obeah woman in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is clearly based on Anne Truitt, the Rhys family’s cook who was arrested and accused of practicing obeah by Governor Hesketh Bell. Truitt’s photograph is among Bell’s papers at Cambridge University; the Governor seems to have photographed many of his female prisoners (Honeychurch 2005). Truitt’s low opinion of British justice has undoubtedly come down to us in the words of her fictional counterpart: “No more slavery! She had to laugh! ‘These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang’” (Rhys, *Sargasso* 471). Through Christophene, Rhys interrogates a legal system that defines obeah and other aspects of African spirituality as evil and illegal.

In the absence of a just legal solution in Dominica, such as land reform, carnival and calypso provided a sanctioned outlet for resistance. Caribbean calypso, as Rohlehr points out, derives “from an older West African tradition of social commentary, in which praise, blame or derision were conveyed in song” (1). African music “often served the purpose of social control ... leaders of society recognized the value of such satirical songs in which the ordinary person was given the privilege of unburdening his mind ... in a controlled context” (2). Stylistically, the old Yoruba songs, “whether sacred or secular, indicate a source of that satire-cum-boast tradition

within the calypso” (Rohlehr 17). Rhys would have heard topical songs of “praise, blame, picong, ridicule, improvisation; and the themes of women and love-intrigue” (Rohlehr 2), all structured in call-and-response or litany form, “which consisted of a couplet in recitative form and a chorus” (Rohlehr 2). Although both Rhys and her cousin Emily Lockhart wrote calypsos in nation language, including one by Lockhart about “the gold Sargasso Sea” that provided the title of Rhys’ novel, actual participation in carnival was limited to the black working class (Jean Rhys Collection [Series II, Box 1, Folder 2], Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa). The proprietary class, people of color and whites, watched from behind louvered windows as masked and costumed revelers composed extemporaneous verses and chorused responses to percussion and string bands. Rhys recalls that:

In the afternoon, from four to six, the singing, dancing mobs thronged the streets. I used to hang out of an upstairs window and watch ... Dancing, swaying people, dressed in every colour of the rainbow ... the women-masks were powdered and scented. You could see the powder like bloom on the dark skin of their necks and arms ... (the dancers) passed under the window, singing, headed by three musicians—a man with a concertina, another with a triangle, and a third with a “shak-shak” ... I used to think, “Imagine being able to do that—to dance along the street in the sun ... dressed in red or yellow, to concertina music; and to sing and shout your defiance ...” (“Lost Island” 10).

While Dominicans may not have used the term *jamette* to describe carnival performers, Rhys would have been familiar with the word since it appeared in the Antillean newspapers to which her father subscribed, as well as in repressive legislation and in references to official documents such as R.G. C. Hamilton’s 1881 report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies on Trinidad’s Canboulay Riots (Liverpool 21). Because some of the African dances that survived the Middle Passage were fertility-oriented, the carnival performances that Rhys observed included movements that were routinely banned by European colonizers who “had brought to the New World, a horrendous history of anti-feminism” (Roehler 4), of witch-hunts and misogyny. The language used by the colonial press to describe the moves of the transgressive *jamettes* anticipates that expressed by characters in Rhys’ texts, who object to both black carnival dancers in Dominica and to solitary women of all races in European cities. In *Voyage*, an English aunt, watching the dancers, repeats angrily, “It ought to be stopped ... it’s not a decent and respectable way to go on” (113). Through the trope of masking, Rhys specifically connects her protagonists with the *jamettes*. In *Good Morning Midnight*, Sasha’s face is “a tormented mask” that she can “remove and hang on a nail” (370). Wandering through Paris, she wonders whether she should place over her face “a tall hat with a green feather, hang a veil over the lot, and walk about the dark streets merrily ... Singing defiantly ‘You don’t like me, but I don’t like you either’ ... Singing ‘one more river to cross, that’s Jordan, Jordan’” (370). Sasha’s defiance and her reference to an African-American spiritual reveal an Afrocentric epistemology. Writing in the persona of a *jamette*, Rhys rejects the hypocrisy and oppression of European belief systems:

They had their feet well on your necks; and they paid you barely enough to live on and then called you “lazy devil” ... for not doing more work; and imagined that you envied them, their pale faces and their pursed-up mouths, half-cruel, half-sanctimonious, and the stiffly-wooden gestures of their bodies. And, after all, they could only look on at you leaping in the sun and envy you (“Lost Island” 10).

Rhys’ Afrocentric belief system may be grounded in her own ambiguous ethnicity. “Who’s white?” the Rhysian father expostulates whenever the question of people’s “colored blood” on Dominica comes up, “damn few!” (Rhys, “The Day They Burned the Books,” *Short Stories* 156). While Rhys’ father may have warned his family that the racial identity of *all* West Indians was suspect, he may also have encouraged his daughter to embrace her mixed heritage. Gilson writes that in the metropolis “she was subject to disparagement reserved by the English for West Indian colonials whose racial identity was suspect and whose social position was questionable at best” (636). In 1959, Francis Wyndham reported on the BBC that Rhys was “Welsh and Scottish.” She immediately wrote: “I am not a Scot at all. My father was Welsh ... my mother’s family was Creole ... *As far as I know I am white* but I have no country really ...” (Rhys, *Letters* 172; my italics). Her great-grandfather Lockhart had married a “pretty Cuban countess ... with dark curls and an intelligent face,” who never fully assimilated the language and mores of the British plantocracy. Lockhart was “jealous and suspicious not only of other men but of her possible attempts to get in touch with Catholicism again” (Rhys, *Smile Please* 26). In “Elsa” the narrator suspects that she is of mixed race: “my grandfather and his beautiful Spanish wife. Spanish. I wonder ...” (Jean Rhys Collection [Series I, Box, 1, Folder 1a] McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa). While one must be careful of conflating excessively, as Angier does, Rhys’ fiction and her history, Aunt Hester’s insinuations to Anna in *Voyage* that her mother is racially mixed and that her father was pressured into the marriage may be grounded in Rees Williams’ family history. Rhys recalls that Aunt Clarice, the “real” Hester, made similar remarks. Clarice claimed that her brother was “continually brooding over his exile in a small Caribbean island ... ‘Poor Willy,’ she would say meaningfully, ‘poor, poor Willy’” (Rhys, *Smile Please* 55).

Although Rhys was considered white in Dominica, English people, including her biographer, routinely questioned her race. Adrian Allinson, a painter for whom Rhys once modeled and on whom she in turn based Marston in “Till September, Petronella,” criticized her “drawling” West Indian voice and suggested that she was of mixed race (Dorothy Miller Richardson Collection [Series II, Box 1, Folder 11] McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa). Ford Madox Ford and his common-law wife Stella Bowen both claimed that Rhys was passing for white (Angier 656), and described her as such in their books. Bowen justified her complicity in “l’affaire Ford” by othering Rhys as “savage” and “cannibal,” while asserting her own “superior” Anglo-Saxon values (Thomas 4). The sinister Lola Porter (read “Ella Lenglet,” Rhys’ name at the time) in Ford’s turgid potboiler *When the Wicked Man* (1931) is modeled on Rhys. Lola is a Creole from the West Indies and, like Rhys, is tall and thin. Lola has a “soft, stealthy

voice” and “gipsy blood” (Ford 157). She is “a seductive blackamoor” (249); her breath “pours in and out of her large nostrils”(Ford 183). Lola frequents Harlem nightclubs, is an expert on “Negro music,” and tells “fantastic and horrible details of obi and the voodoo practices of the coloured people of her childhood home” (Ford 175). The scenes in which Lola alternates between kissing the protagonist’s hands “continuously, as if she had been a slave” (162) and threatening him with death by obeah (259), are very similar to Rhys’ description of Marya’s behavior toward Heidler (Ford) in *Quartet*. A milder version of Rhys inspires another character in Ford’s novel. Henrietta Faulkner Felise is an American, of Spanish descent. Henrietta is from the “Deep South” (“Missouri or Tennessee” as Ford puts it) and has “a slightly dusky accent” (Ford 78). Like Rhys, Henrietta has an unusual intonation and the protagonist “experience(s) a singular revulsion ... at her voice” (78). Henrietta is ostensibly white but Ford makes a Carib/cannibal association with her necklace of pink coral, her sharp little white teeth, her “very full and pouted lips,” high cheek bones, and “extremely large-pupilled eyes” (78). Like Rhys, both Lola and Henrietta are expert horsewomen and “spent their childhood on horseback” (Ford 183). Lola, dressed in riding clothes, inspires lurid dominatrix fantasies in the hapless protagonist. Although Rhys and Ford both said their novels, *Quartet* and *When the Wicked Man*, were not autobiographical, there are remarkable similarities in the racial othering of the Lola/Marya/Henrietta characters.

Rhys makes the women in her texts functionally white but codes them as nonwhite, and gives them her own experiences. Anna’s classmates call her “the Hottentot” (*Voyage* 7) and her landlady objects to her “drawly voice” (18); in “Overture and Beginners Please,” the narrator’s schoolmates refer to her as “West Indies” and demand she translate the lyrics of “coon songs” (Rhys, *Short Stories* 316). Marya in *Quartet* has a “strange little Kalmuk face:” broad-cheekboned, with “wide nostrils” and “thick lips” (199). Julia’s Brazilian mother in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* is, like Rhys’ own mother, dark with high cheekbones and long black hair. The functionally white Heather in *Tigers are Better Looking*, betrays her Caribbean origin when she pronounces her name “Hedda” (Rhys, *Short Stories* 181). “Her language/enunciation defines her as Other;” a would-be suitor sees her as “disdainful, debonair and with a touch of the tarbrush too, or I’m much mistaken ... Why is it that she isn’t white?—Now why?” (Gregg 171; *Short Stories* 181). In “The Blue Bird” the callous narrator notes “a lovely creature” sitting alone in a café, “her face framed by a silver turban” from which “wisps of wooly hair” denote her race (*Short Stories* 60). In “Let Them Call it Jazz,” Selina, a “fair coloured woman” from the West Indies is provoked into assault and sent to Holloway Prison (*Short Stories* 158) just as Rhys was incarcerated for the same charge in 1949.

Through her writing Rhys reassembles the fragmented elements of her Afrocentric identity. She draws a parallel between the street performance of the transgressive *jamette* and the solitary urban woman, both of whom assert their right to move in public spaces. Heteroglossia and calypso infuse her texts: she grasps calypso’s coda of resistance; the interplay of multiple voices; the condensed and telescoped imagery; the rhetorical devices of satire and call-and-

response; and the themes of betrayal, exploitation, and oppression. Rhys understands calypso's technical structure and the strictly prescribed form belied by an apparent improvisational quality. In 1964, she sent a friend a calypso and implied that she had just dashed it off explaining, "a real calypso is done on the spot ... words and music. The audience judges who's best;" yet her papers contain several carefully worked out drafts of the same tune (*Letters* 281; Jean Rhys Collection [Series I, Box 3, Folder 8] Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa). She differentiates between the authentic voices of Emily Lockhart and respected calypsonians like Attila the Hun (Raymond Quevedo) and Houdini (Edgar Leon Sinclair) and the "ersatz," commercialized music promoted by "foreigners like Noel Coward and Katherine Dunham who always (get) it wrong" (Rhys, *Letters* 108). Like the calypso composer, she shapes her controversial material elliptically, creating dramatic tension through patterns of call and response.

According to Rohlehr, African call-and-response is an important element in the structure of calypso. "The tendency of the Yoruba to repeat the first lines of their songs ... is still evident in the stanza structure of calypsos today" (17). Proponents of calypso in the early twentieth century "viewed the Call-and-Response calypso as being of Yoruba origin and encouraged singers ... to retain the form" (18). Within this pattern, either the leader calls out a line and the group repeats it exactly, or the leader sings a couplet to which the group responds with a chorus, as demonstrated in Lord Caresser's (Rufus Callender) 1938 lyric about Trinidadians mining gold in Guyana:

Call: I left America to go down Demerara
 Response: No surrender
 Call: On the Mazaruni River I was a gold digger
 Response: No surrender
 Call: When I am in the jungle the lions tremble.
 Response: No surrender
 Call: An old-time flunkser and a sweetie vendor
 Call: No surrender (Rohlehr 146).

Rhys uses call-and response when she opposes the voice of a repressive, misogynistic society against the solitary urban women. Between the 1860's and World War I, Britain passed a number of laws related to the Contagious Diseases and Defence of the Realm Acts. Such legislation purported to control prostitution and venereal disease, but in fact discouraged the presence of single women in public; due to this sexualized stigma, "respectable" women married and accepted confinement in the home. According to William Harris, Assistant Commissioner of Police in late nineteenth century London, "any woman who goes to places of public resort, and is known to go with different men, although not a common streetwalker" *should be considered a prostitute* (Emery 96; my italics). This label was dispensed freely, as female promiscuity was assumed to be inherent: a London policeman in 1882 argued that "in every large town without exception, where a woman has a chance of this course and runs no danger of serious loss or

inconvenience ... she will embrace it" (Emery 96-97). As Rhys knew from her own work experience, these laws ignored the fact that women barely earned subsistence wages in legitimate occupations. In 1911 women constituted less than 28% of the labor force, and 66% worked in manufacturing or personal service (Emery 92). During World War I, when clerical jobs became available, Rhys was one of the women who earned one-third the salary paid to men in the same jobs (92). Her earlier jobs, as a chorus girl and artist's model, were not only poorly paid but were considered forms of prostitution. When the Rhysian woman rejects these options and still insists on the right to be out of doors in cafes, streets, taxis, and restaurants, she threatens social stability and inspires an angry chorus from former lovers, landladies, employers, and strangers. Anna mentions that she met her lover "at Southsea," and his friends chorus sly innuendo about loose women "on the pier at Southsea" (Rhys, *Voyage* 53). When she is abandoned, the pillars of society gloat over her plight. "What about what's-her-name? She got on, didn't she? Get on or get out, they say ... everybody says 'Get on' ... Everybody says the man's bound to get tired" (Rhys, *Voyage* 46). In *Quartet*, Marya imagines both parts of the call-and-response: "What's the matter with you? ... Why are you like this ... Pull yourself together! ... No self-control ... that's what's the matter with me ... No training" (190). Marya provokes a hostile response simply by her unprotected state: "As she walked she was certain that every woman she passed was mocking her gleefully and every man was mocking her contemptuously" (211). In *Good Morning Midnight*, Sasha continually intercepts comments by "them" on her sexualized solitude. Even inanimate objects join the ironic chorus, as when she returns to a Paris hotel where, as a much younger woman, she had lived with her lover: "'Quite like old times,' the room says. 'Yes? No?'" (347).

Not all call-and response is oppositional. Sometimes Rhys creates call-and-response when minor characters repeat the protagonists' concerns and reflect their values. Rhys thus avoids the reified or voyeuristic stance of the omniscient narrator, and maintains the moral relativism of her modernist universe. Since exile, isolation and marginalization are major themes in Rhys' work, the "respondents" in the European novels are often racially marginalized "others," specifically Jews and Arabs. Miss DeSolla in *Quartet* is triply marginalized as a Jewish, female artist. Although she considers Marya "pathetic," the pathos of DeSolla's situation as a struggling female painter, the butt of Anglo-Saxon humor, underscores Marya's vulnerability. In her bleak studio, DeSolla like Marya exhibits a "hunger for the softness and warmth of life" (*Quartet* 122). Similarly, in *Good Morning Midnight*, Sasha's marginalized status and iconoclastic philosophy are echoed first by Serge, the Russian Jewish painter from whom she purchases a Soutine-like canvas, and later, by Rene, the gigolo, may be an Arab. Serge, like Miss DeSolla, is poor but generous; he places an "African" mask (that he has carved himself) over his face and dances to a Martinican Beguine in order to distract Sasha from sadness: ("Pourquoi etes-vous si triste?") (*Midnight* 371); Serge's compassion, his ironic humor, his Afrocentric sensibility, and his authentic values respond to Sasha's "call" for connection. Rene's lack of nationality links him to Sasha whose own citizenship is suspect: "the patron tells me he wants to see my passport ... Nationality ... that's what has puzzled him" (*Midnight* 350).

Sasha cannot identify Rene's accent; he describes himself as a *mauvais garcon*, a roughneck; he claims to have escaped from the Foreign Legion in North Africa. Although he echoes Sasha's desire for a relationship of authenticity and acceptance, their call-and-response does not result in communication or connection.

The abortive relationship between Sasha and Rene is prefigured at the beginning of the novel when she overhears someone singing "Sombre Dimanche" (Gloomy Sunday), a popular song that establishes the year as 1937. Rhys achieves a variation on call-and-response when lines from popular songs comment on the action, much as calypsonians sample and reference each other's work. "Important textual reference to songs is a Rhys hallmark," according to Savory (168). Rhys both establishes the period and implicates the British upper classes in the impending First World War in "Till September, Petronella" through references to "La Reve Passe" and other songs associated with aristocratic English regiments (Rhys, *Short Stories* 125). Instead of describing Anna's exile from the Caribbean, Rhys contrasts a harsh, Cockney tune with West Indian folk-songs that express her loneliness: "Adieu, sweetheart, adieu" (*Voyage* 19) and "Connais-tu le pays ou fleurit l'oranger?" (Do you know the country where the orange trees flower?) (*Voyage* 100). In *Good Morning Midnight*, Rhys comments on the hypocritical double standard of morality, when Sasha finds herself "walking to the music of *L'Arlesienne*" (396). Daudet's naturalistic drama, for which Bizet composed the music, concerns an engagement broken up by the man's family because the young woman has "a past," a situation applicable to all Rhys protagonists. Rhys knows Paris geography and has carefully worked out Sasha's route so when she hears Bizet's music, she is close to the Odeon Theatre where *L'Arlesienne* had its premier in 1872 (396).

In addition to adopting the calypsonian rhetorical pattern of call and response, Rhys explored the genre's thematic concern with exile and power relationships. Ford attributes to her Dominican background, her "terrifying insight and a terrific—an almost lurid!—passion for stating the case of the underdog" (*Left Bank* 24). Like the calypsonian, Rhys chooses cryptic language and double-entendre because her texts challenge powerful interests. Both Rhys and C.L. R. James reference the 1933 calypso sung in duet by Attila the Hun and Roaring Lion, "Doggie Doggie Look a Bone," to critique the economic exploitation of women and the commodification of sex (Quevedo 46-47). Rhys uses it in the radio script of *Voyage in the Dark* and James associates it with the nurse in *Minty Alley* who is both exploited by men and abusive toward her child. Economic exile also begets abuse of power; just as Callender sings about Trinidadians forced to migrate to the gold mines of Guyana, so Rhys writes stories and calypsos about West Indian women working in London. The patois words of *Tired Song* describe an exhausted woman; another tune, also in patois, notes the lack of trees in the urban landscape and deplores the spiritual aridity of Western culture: "They don't hear no rivers running / They ain't got no ease" (Jean Rhys Collection [Series I, Box 3, Folder 9] McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa). Both songs prefigure the protagonist of "Let Them Call It Jazz" whose original calypso is commercialized and distorted on the radio.

Perhaps because her protagonists are so marginalized, Rhys' work has been described as morbid and depressing. Such critics miss her sly deflation of pomposity and her perfect comic timing. In fact, writes Elaine Savory: "Rhys' humour can be understood better if viewed through the lens of Caribbean humour which is so often political, full of word-play, skeptical of institutions and power, and essentially survivalist" (109). Her fragile women are resilient tricksters who mock and outsmart their oppressors. In "Till September, Petronella," a man boasts about his amorous skills: "I know what women like ... They like a bit of loving, that's what they like, isn't it? They like it dressed up sometimes--and sometimes not, it all depends. You have to know and I know. I just know" (Rhys, *Short Stories* 141). Petronella's ironic response—"You've nothing more to learn, have you?"—goes over his head (141). Like the Caribs in "Temps Perdi," Rhys' women speak a different language from men (Rhys, *Short Stories* 256). In *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Rhys employs two Afrocentric tropes, the trickster and the zombie. Loe maintains that Rhys knew all about zombification, and that her "allusions to zombies (are) an important narrative patterning" (35). Julia, Mr. Mackenzie's discarded lover, keeps appearing in the wet Paris streets. It is twilight, "the hour between dog and wolf" (*Mackenzie* 343), a time of shifting shapes and prowling spirits. Julia's face is pale with "black specks in the corners of her eyes" (240) ... and deep, bluish circles under (them) (343). She walks "slowly, aimlessly, her head down" (343). Approaching the man as a zombie, Julia plays on his guilt; then swiftly she shifts shape and manipulates the startled Mackenzie into lending her a lot of money (343). Like Anansy, the trickster spider of Jamaican folklore, Rhys' women must turn weakness to advantage in a predatory world. Given their marginalized status, they realize that "cunning, rather than overt male / female confrontation is the preferred strategy" for getting what they want (Cooper 48).

The abuse of power, the exploitation of the weak, and "disillusionment at the colonial, patriarchal lexicon of ideas that pass for universal truths" are central themes of Rhys' oeuvre (Thomas 100). The texts link two subversive and marginalized groups: the Afro-Caribbean *jamette* and her experience of misogyny, racialized motilities of the body, and legal restriction; and the single, urban woman of any race who encounters a similar hostility, sexualized stereotyping and legal deterrents to her mobility. In exposing relations of sexual commodification and economic oppression, Rhys challenges powerful social forces which, as she knew from her own experience, deal severely with those who destabilize the social order. As an artist wishing to interrogate controversial issues of gender, race, and class, Rhys calls upon her cultural heritage and utilizes Afrocentric rhetorical and stylistic strategies of parody, satire, and masquerade. Since "linear European narrative cannot register plausibly her own experiences and those of her characters" (Thomas 100), Rhys creates a multiplicity of voices and perspectives through heteroglossia and call-and-response. The Rhysian woman always rejects a "single compartmentalizing vision in favor of one that opens up the realms of possibility" (Fayad 451). Rhys, through her exiled and marginalized characters, through the psychological fragmentation of their personalities, and through their deconstructed narratives and minimalist milieu, creates the quintessentially modernist text. Her protagonists, though temporally and

geographically removed from carnival, are yet informed by an Afrocentric aesthetic of resistance, survival and celebration.

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