Rhys’ Texts and the Modernist Connection with Césaire

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In this essay, I shall investigate the gendered nature of Négritude through an examination of Rhys’ texts to Aimé Césaire’s Notebook of a Return to My Native Land (Le Cahier d’un retour au pays natal) in a contrapuntal reading which recognises that Césaire’s and Rhys’s works are all written within a modernist framework. However, while Césaire was contributing to the establishment of Caribbean nationalism, Rhys was contributing towards Caribbean women’s writing, which was largely neglected by Caribbean nationalist writers of a movement exclusively privileged racial difference.

In the following, I shall read Jean Rhys’ texts against Aimé Césaire’s Notebook of a Return to My Native Land and in particular their interpretations of gender. Each author, in his or her own way, interpreted modernism from a Caribbean perspective. Specifically, I consider Négritude to be a form of Caribbean modernism, and European writers and their ideas played a significant role in forming Césaire’s notion of Négritude. During the inter-war period 1919 to 1928, Jean Rhys lived in Europe, mainly in Paris, and published The Left Bank and Other Stories (1927), Voyage in the Dark, Quartet (1928) and After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (1930). She also depicted her experience in Paris in her later novel Good Morning, Midnight (1939). Alone in making this particular connection, Caribbean critic, Kenneth Ramchand, referred to Voyage in the Dark as ‘our first Négritude novel’(1) in his introduction to Tales of the Wide Caribbean as well as in the preface to Sam Selvon’s The Lonely Londoners. Ramchand claims that the attitudes of the protagonists of Voyage in the Dark problematise and situate Rhys against whiteness. If, however, the Négritude movement can be understood as the reversal of the Manichaean logic, or as ‘a displacement of positive/negative value from one term to another in binary structures’,(2) I would argue that Rhys’ position in Négritude is not a simple displacement of a positive to a negative but rather an attempt to question or to dismantle such structures. Therefore, linking Rhys and Césaire through their relation to European modernism not only reveals one aspect of Caribbean modernism but also the difference in their engagement.
Like Rhys, Césaire lived in and knew Paris before the Second World War. Césaire first elaborated his idea of Négritude in ‘L’étudiant noir’, published in 1934. Césaire asked Leopold Senghor, Birago Diop, Ousmane Socé and Gontran Damas to join him, and they altered the name of the Martinican Student Journal to L’étudiant noir. For Césaire, the journal was his declaration against the assimilative stance of Caribbean surrealists. He believed that Caribbean self-affirmation can only be attained by the rediscovery of the 'search for their sources', or in other words, the 'patrimony of African civilizations'.

In the summer of 1936, Césaire returned to Martinique for the first time after living in France and his return revealed to him the reality of Martinique. In an interview with Kesteloot, Césaire attested that the writing of the Notebook of a Return to My Native Land was a demonstration of his determination to free himself from the acquired forms of a French education at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. The poem, the first version of which was completed in 1938 and published in Volonté in 1939, is supposed to be an affirmation of African heritage and a rejection of the assimilationist position of Caribbean surrealists, and yet it reveals an intricate relationship between Césaire’s Négritude and European modernism.

In Modernism and Négritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire, James Arnold claims that Césaire’s contribution would be to reveal the dialectical relationship between the two currents of modernism and Négritude. Along with the influence that Césaire took from the writings of the Harlem Renaissance, Arnold examines the presence of Frobenius and Maurice Delafose’s ideas in Césaire’s poetry: the idea, for example, that ‘irrationalism’ is an inherent force in black experience which distinguishes the African from European rationalism and formalism. Another instance of this dialogue with modernism is Césaire’s notion of Négritude as compared to D.H Lawrence’s idea of cosmo. According to Arnold ‘in Césaire, as in Lawrence, access to a cosmic unity is frequently expressed in terms of a communion of blood, a phallic marriage’. Indeed, their understanding of cosmology is strikingly similar. For Lawrence the universe is divided into the sun-principle and the moon-principle and, as Arnold shows, Lawrence considers that ‘Woman is really polarized downwards toward the centre of the earth. Her deep positivity is in the downward flow, the moon-pull. And man is polarized upwards, toward the sun and the
day’s activity’. (7) This understanding of cosmology is present in Césaire’s representation of woman in his *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* and it could be said that this form of representation is the result of his dialogue with those European modernist writings which had a certain framework of representation and symbolism regarding women. This is not to say that Césaire’s concept of Négritude has shortcomings because of the way women are portrayed, but to question, as follows, why the rebellion in *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* comes close to being depicted as an empowerment of male sexual agency, while women are cast into passive roles.

**Négritude and Césaire’s Representation of Women**

Having pointed out the impact of European modernism and the historical factors concerning the Caribbean immigrants that may have influenced both Césaire’s and Rhys’ texts, following Kenneth Ramchand’s attempt, I shall qualify Rhys’ novels as Négritude texts, or, rather, Négritude woman’s texts. To start with, I propose to demonstrate that Césaire’s Négritude is based upon the emasculation of black masculinity.

The Négritude movement, as usually understood, ‘is based on a “reaction to bourgeois rationalism”’…’ (8) and, as Wole Soyinka argues in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, was not free from the ‘manichean logic of the racial stereotype’, (9) nor was it a “simple reversal”, a displacement of positive/negative value from one term to another within binary structures’. (10) Critics point to the shortcomings and limitations of the movement as it failed to dismantle such binary structures which, I will consider, impacted on male-dominated Caribbean literary nationalism. While Césaire’s Négritude might be considered as an attempt to question binary structures and to replace or diffuse them, his representation of the mother as an ideal image of womanhood is a product of the imposition of colonial education and the European family model. Imperialist ideology, defined by ‘the worlds of opposites’, influenced the ideal image of women so as to ensure ‘the white male mind is at the centre of the universe; the “black”, the “female” and the “body” are defined in relation to and below him’. (11) This imposition of colonial values forced Caribbeans to live in ambiguity and contradiction: their lives demanded an equality of the sexes while Western ‘natural’ gender identities were forced upon them. Thus, ‘Black
women, in particular, live the contradictions of a Euro-derived ideology of female subordination and the African woman-centred tradition.\(^{(12)}\) The tension and alienation created by colonial ideology is detected in the representation of gender in Césaire’s poem and in the limits it has on his representation of women. In *Dialogue with Négritude* Jean Baptiste Popeau argues that Césaire’s struggle against Manichaeanism can be compared to Julia Kristeva’s refusal to play the identity game which casts woman and black people as the Other, yet I argue Césaire’s poem posits women, especially white women against the black man’s quest for self-affirmation.\(^{(13)}\)

In *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, the awakening of revolutionary spirit is ‘the male thirst and the stubborn desire’ \(^{(14)}\) and the narrator’s quest for the rebellion and the awakening of consciousness of Négritude seem to parallel his growing into manhood. The narrator also identifies himself with others who are oppressed but the list does not include women:

To leave
As there are hyena-men and panther-men, I shall be a Jew-man
a kaffir-man
a Hindu-from-Calcutta-man
a man-from-Harlem-who-does-not-vote \(^{(15)}\)

His oath to return to the island can be interpreted as his desire to unify himself with the island and its people:

I do not dodge. Make of my head a prow-head
and of myself, my heart, do not make a father nor a brother,
nor a son, but the father, but the brother, but the son,
nor a husband, but the lover of this unique people.\(^{(16)}\)

In attempting to reverse the colonial hierarchy and Western concepts of black and white, the poem, in fact, challenges representations of Martinique and of the women of the island. The European image of Martinique as the flower of the Caribbean, or Paris in the Caribbean, and as an exotic place of beautiful women was especially abundant in the literature of *doudouism* in the nineteenth century.
The main project of the poem is to subvert that imagery. The narrator expresses his outrage concerning the exoticism of the island: ‘There are still madras cloths around women’s loins rings in their ears smiles on their faces babies at their breasts and I will spare you the rest: ENOUGH OF THIS OUTRAGE!’ (17)

Instead of images of beautiful women in the exotic island he juxtaposes the suffering of the slave: ‘So much blood in my memory! In my memory are lagoons. They are covered with death’s heads. They are not covered with water lilies. In my memory are lagoons. On their banks no women’s loin-cloths are spread out.’ (18)

In his refusal to commit to exoticism, he introduces the real figure of a working woman, his mother:

I never knew which one, lulled to nostalgic tenderness or exalted to the high flames of anger by some unpredictable witchcraft; and my mother whose legs, for our tireless hunger, pedal, pedal, both by day and by night, and I am even awakened at night by these tireless legs pedalling the night and by the Singer, bitterly biting into the soft flesh of the night as my mother pedals, pedals for our hunger every day, every night. (19)

This depiction of the mother pedalling a Singer sewing machine through the night is echoed by later generations of Caribbean writers but it could be said to be the first representative image of woman which separates the poem from the tradition of doudouism. Nevertheless, despite the powerful evocation of the mother in the poem, alternative images of women are absent. In abstract language, the poet places women in opposition to man, as with the sun against the moon or the tree against the soil. The narrator’s Négritude is described thus:

My Négritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral
It reaches deep into the blazing flesh of the sky
It pierces opaque prostration with its straight patience. (20)

Although Négritude is not ‘a tower nor cathedral’ the representation of Négritude as standing is repeated throughout the poem:
Rhys’ Texts and the Modernist Connection with Césaire

Negridom is standing
sitting-down negridom
unforeseeably standing
standing in the hold
standing in the cabins
standing on deck
standing in the wind
standing under the sun
standing in the blood

This horizontal movement is repeated to underline revolt and uprising and the return of the poet, setting off ‘at the brink of the dawn’ to his native land, is achieved under the Sun. Manliness is linked to the Sun, femininity to the moon and resonating with the notion of D.H. Lawrence’s modernist cosmology, the poem reveals the Western dichotomy of man and woman:

Blood! Blood! All our blood moved by the male heart of the sun
those who know the femininity of oil-bodied moon the reconciled
rapture of the antelope and the star
those whose survival moves in the germination of grass!
Eia perfect circle of the world and closed concordance!

According to Mireille Rosello, ‘Césaire’s attachment to a stereotypically manly ideal is sometimes contradicted by his declarations about natural and essential alliance between Femininity and Poetry’. She quotes from Césaire’s speech delivered at the 1945 graduation ceremony at the ‘Pensionnat Colonial’ (a colonial boarding-house for women):

The truth is that woman (the memory of the species) has retained the memory of the marvellous wonders experienced by humankind at its origin, when the sun was round and when the earth was soft, and that after all, what is called woman’s ‘unrealism’ is but the will to let our thinking recover its demented strength, an aberrant strength, granted, but also a strength of population, creation and renewal.
In this speech, woman is seen as closer to the origin of humankind, thus retaining archaic memory and she is the source of inspiration for creation. Rosello rightly argues that ‘his speech sounds closer to the Surrealists’ ambitious celebration of the Woman as Muse, gifted child and supernatural being’. Rosello, however, considers Césaire’s linking of femininity with the source of creation and memory, as being a contradiction of his phallic idea of Négritude. I would argue, however, that it is one of the instances in which Césaire reveals ways in which his concept of gender is heavily influenced by modernist and surrealist writers’ concept of women and womanhood.

In order to examine Rhys’ and Césaire’s representation of gender, I shall draw upon observations made by the critic, Hedy Kalikoff. According to Kalikoff, Césaire critiques colonial discourse by manipulating gendered imagery thereby rendering the division of masculine and feminine as ambiguous and ambivalent. She argues that the first half of Notebook of a Return to My Native Land sets the figural structure that places the sun and vertical axis as the masculine, and the moon and horizontal axis as the feminine. Here the sun exposes the agony and bleak reality of the island: ‘At the brink of dawn budding with frail creeks, the hungry West Indies, the West Indies pock-pitted with smallpox, the West Indies up by alcohol, stranded in the mud of this bay, in the dust of this town sordidly stranded’.

The sun as the symbol of vertical power over the passive and horizontal earth, is refigured as ‘land great organ rising towards the sun’ and the vertical and horizontal axes are unstable, as is the gendered imagery. However, the vertical and authoritative position of the sun is resumed when the sun is personified as ‘a black man’ with curly hair: ‘Sun, Angel Sun, curly Angel of the Sun, for a leap beyond sweet greenish swimming of the waters of abjection!’ Additionally, Kalikoff stresses that it is ‘the pinnacle of the sun as symbol’ that is significant, ‘the moment when it is personified and, most importantly, made into a black angel to help the subject ascend skyward, out of the depth of his colonized state’.

Kalikoff further highlights unstable gendered imagery by focussing on two passages from the poem. Firstly, since Négritude is feminine in the French language, the masculine movement of penetrating the earth is signalled by the pronoun ‘elle’. Secondly, in the final process that affirms the rebirth of the
narrator the imagery is again reversed: ‘Come wolves grazing in the savage orifices of the body at the hour when at the ecliptic inn my moon meets your sun’. In this passage, the poet identifies with the moon, not with the sun. The reversed masculine and feminine axes are restored to their original position when the poet refers to ‘the male heart of the sun,’ ‘the femininity of oil-bodied moon’. Kalikoff claims:

When one examines the way that the poem’s complex imagery is gendered, one arrives at a point of reversal of terms, where what was once masculine (the sun) becomes feminine (the moon) and vice versa. This reversal is eventually overturned, yet a fundamental ambiguity remains and is never fully resolved. The poem’s ending is both an attempt to rewrite the binary oppositions of masculine and feminine, vertical and horizontal, sun and moon, and a call to transcend a debilitating collective history. By upsetting this symbolic structure - what amounts to a ‘colonial Imaginary,’ in Althusserian terms - the poem unsettles the ideology which strove to justify the wrenching history of the African diaspora.

In the above argument, Kalikoff refutes the conventional idea of ‘Négritude as phallus’ and attempts to re-examine the interpretations of the poem as the ‘arousal of ethnic consciousness’. For Kalikoff, the poem does not conclude with the narrator’s discovery of a new voice but rather ends ambiguously and is difficult to grasp in terms of its true meaning. She claims that it is for this reason that the narrator seeks another way, the wind, to carry him at the end of the poem, imagery which does not fit into ‘colonial imagery’ and thus enhances the potential to free the author. Thus Kalikoff reads ‘the poem as an attempt to subvert colonial discourse through retaining the colonial Imaginary’, revealing that masculinity is constructed and not a natural process, and thus upsetting the binary order. Kalikoff’s reading of the poem is useful too for a reading of Rhys’ texts which also use European symbolism and ‘colonial imagery’ to reveal their inadequacy for the representation of her world. Yet, crucial insight into the kind of gender binaries typical of Césaire’s poem can be found in Rhys’ fiction, discussed further, below.

In comparison, Césaire’s notion of Négritude is similar to a reaction against the emasculation of the black body under the gaze of the white woman’s eyes:
A nigger shrouded in a old/threadbare coat. A comical and ugly nigger, with some women
behind me sneering at him.
He was COMICAL AND UGLY, COMICAL AND UGLY for sure.37

The poet recognises an abject gendered black male body being sneered at by a white woman and yet only by its recognition can the poet declare his Négritude. Césaire’s Négritude in the Notebook was, then, the reclamation of masculinity, emphasizing its basis in ‘the blood’.38 In this sense, Clarisse Zimra’s question of whether there is a ‘Négritude in the feminine mode’39 is a challenging one; for while there was a strong presence of the Caribbean woman’s voice, for example in the work of Marson, women writers were largely forgotten in the French context of the Négritude movement. I would argue that Césaire’s poem attests to this tendency for, although his Notebook undermines a colonial imaginary, it can be read as the empowerment of black masculinity. In the discussion that follows I intend to explore the larger question of ‘Négritude in the feminine mode’ in relation to Rhys’ novels.

Rhys and the First Négritude Novel: Reaction against Bourgeois Rationalism

Rhys’ life in the 1930s was spent mostly in England where there was no equivalent literary movement to Négritude during the interwar period. Yet, as modernism impacted on both Césaire and Rhys, similar circumstances surrounded West Indian immigrants in England and the growing awareness of Pan-Africanism may have influenced Rhys’ writing. The life of black London is rarely expressed in the literature of the 1930s. However, Sandhu considers that the London inhabited by black immigrants is expressed in the writings of Jean Rhys where the city is portrayed in terms of its light and dark sides.40 Female characters in Rhys’ early novels such as Sasha Jansen in Good Morning, Midnight, Julia Martin in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie and Anna Morgan in Voyage in the Dark, all live in narrow and shabby rooms, without a sense of security due to their reduced circumstances. Her female protagonists’ disappointment with London and her sense of alienation is shared by other immigrants from the colonies. According to Sandhu, Rhys’ representation of women who ‘have merely delivered themselves into another form of servitude’
certainly parallels the experience of black women immigrants.\(^{(41)}\)

To consider Rhys’ novel as an expression of Négritude is not totally
unprecedented; as we have seen, Ramchand considers Rhys’ *Voyage in the
Dark* as the ‘first Négritude novel’.\(^{(42)}\) In the following section I shall draw
out possible meanings of the ‘feminine mode of Négritude’ as expressed in
Rhys’ fictions which link to those French Caribbean women writers who
were her contemporaries. As Césaire’s poem challenges binary imagery and
unsettles its distinctions, Rhys’ contemporary novels have a similar objective
of disempowering the function of binary opposites and diffusing them into
numerous axes.

*Voyage in the Dark* (1934), narrated by a nineteen-year-old chorus girl from
the West Indies, reveals the alienation of a colonial subject, a young woman
without great means in England. The novel powerfully demonstrates how
women are commodified and how they commodify themselves. Anna and
Maudie, her chorus girlfriends are living in a society where ‘people are much
cheaper than things’, ‘some dogs are more expensive than people’ and women
are not respected unless they are with men:

Maudie said, ‘Insulting us just because we haven’t got a man with us. I know
these people, they’re careful who they’re rude to. They’re damned careful who
they try to convert. Have you ever noticed? He wouldn’t have said a word if we’d
had a man with us’.\(^{(43)}\)

Apprehensive about the male gaze, by which she might be rescued from
the anxiety of life, Anna dresses and wears makeup to please, and engages in
a game in which she is not allowed to say certain things. Hester personifies a
ruthless, cold respectability and English bourgeois values. Hester forbids Anna
to speak like ‘a nigger’ and to say things which would upset people in England:

‘I hate dogs,’ I said.
‘Well, really!’ she said.
‘Well, I do,’ I said.
‘I don’t know what’ll become of you to go on like that,’ Hester said. ‘Let me tell
you that you’ll have a very unhappy life if you go on like that. People won’t like
you. People in England will dislike you very much if you say things like that.

‘I don’t care,’ I said. But I began to repeat the multiplication table because I was afraid I was going to cry.\(^{(44)}\)

Anna cannot accept the values that Hester imposes upon her and she slowly discovers that other people around her, such as Walter and Ethel, try to manipulate her in the same way. Women are rendered powerless unless they have protection from men and this is the reason why Ethel projects her anxiety about old age and loneliness onto Anna and consequently augments the hatred between them. The social position of Anna, both chorus girl and West Indian in a seemingly ‘respectable’ society, does not allow her to be suitable marriage material for Walter, an English gentleman. Rhys links Anna’s relationship with him to the servitude of the slaves, hence connecting gender oppressions to racial oppressions.\(^{(45)}\) Anna’s self identification as a slave resonates in the title of *Voyage in the Dark* which evokes the Middle Passage, especially depicted in the last dream scene in which Anna finds herself on the ship.

In *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931) Rhys also portrays the commodified status of women who appear to be ashamed of getting old as they will be left without value:

Vague-looking people hesitated for a moment, and then drifted in, to sit in the dark and see Hot Stuff from Paris. The girls were perky and pretty, but it was strange how many of the older women looked drab and hopeless, with timid, hunted expressions. They looked ashamed of themselves, as if they were begging the world in general not to notice that they were women or to hold it against them.\(^{(46)}\)

The figures of old women are a projection of the sentiments of the thirty-five year old Julia, the protagonist of *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*. Rhys signifies how a woman’s value deteriorates with age and that women are determined by systems that turn them not into subjects but objects to be gazed at. The narrator also parallels her taking care of her mother and making self-sacrifice to the lives of slaves in Malaya. Thus, Julia’s sister Norah picks up the book on her bedside table and quotes the following passage:
The slave had no hope, and knew of no change. She knew of no other sky, no other water, no other forest, no other world, no other life. She had no wish, no hope, no love.... The absence of pain and hunger was her happiness, and when she felt unhappy she was tired, more than usual, after the day’s labor.\(^{47}\)

By quoting this passage from Joseph Conrad’s *Almayer’s Folly*, a portrayal of the life of a colonial in Malay, Rhys makes an analogy to the family structure, the smallest unit of patriarchal society that replicates the nation.\(^{48}\)

In *Good Morning, Midnight* Rhys also gives voice to Sasha to accuse capitalist bourgeois society of being based upon the sacrifice of the weak. In an unspoken monologue Sasha speaks against the authoritative figure, Mr. Blank:

Well, let’s argue this out, Mr. Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That’s my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow in the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there’s no denying it. So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word. We can’t all be happy, we can’t all be rich, we can’t all be lucky - and it would be so much less fun if we were. Isn’t it so, Mr. Blank? There must be the dark background to show up the bright colours. Some must cry so that the others may be able to laugh the more heartily. Sacrifices are necessary[...].\(^{49}\)

Moreover, Sasha, who is disempowered in a society where she is castigated in terms of gender, race and power, gives birth to a baby who reminds her of being ‘an instrument’, ‘something to be made use of’.\(^{50}\)

In these novels Rhys reveals the issue of gender in terms of the processes by which women are torn apart and disconnected from each other within a socio-historical context that has them constantly imprisoned by the male gaze. Veronica Gregg argues that Rhys has ‘a dual relation to Europe and Eurocentric discourses’ and her self-fashioning is constructed through ‘the recruitment of the silenced or degraded “natives” as parts of her identity’. Hence Rhys articulates a marginalised position with regards to the metropolitan subject even as she reveals a structure of power that uses race to construct a myth
of otherness.\(^{52}\) I would like to argue, further, that Rhys’ position is more ambivalent than this, one which can be compared to the double consciousness and alienation articulated by other Caribbean intellectuals at the time. In short, despite her whiteness, a creolised consciousness is inscribed. Thus she is fated to live with perpetual contradictions and in ambiguity, in which a colonial ideology is built upon artificially manufactured values.

**Reversal of Values and the Diffusion of Binary Opposition**

In comparison to Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, Rhys not only questions binary oppositions but connects gender oppression to racial oppression. In *Voyage in the Dark*, the binary oppositions of dream and reality and of England and the West Indies are undercut, as Anna considers her dream in the West Indies as more real than her actual life in London. It reveals the ‘interconnectedness and the inseparability of both’\(^{53}\) as well as how the tension between the two worlds maps the political, economic and discursive power relation of colonialism.

In *Voyage in the Dark*, the contrast between solar cycle and lunar cycle is seen in Anna’s confrontation with her English stepmother, Hester. Anna misses the night of her island with ‘the moon and the darkness and the sound of the trees, and not far away the forest where nobody had ever been – virgin forest’, while she remembers that Hester would say that the place gives her the creeps at night.\(^{54}\) As Sylvia Maurel comments, islanders like Anna are ‘wary of the sun and shy away from it’ and ‘cut themselves off’ from solar time, giving themselves up instead to the influence of the moon, to the eternal recurrence of its cycles that secure eternal renewal’.\(^{55}\) On the other hand, the figure of Hester represents solar and linear time. Hester’s view of the world incarnates the masculine and more dominant concept of time whereas time in the West Indies is more ‘cyclical and eternal’ – a ‘woman’s time’, as suggested by Julia Kristeva.\(^{56}\)

After Anna has an abortion, she dreams of the carnival in the West Indies then of the way back to her home, Constance Estate and of the barren limbo-like landscape full of stone and without a soul:

....and then that turning where the shadow is always the same shape - shadows are
ghosts you look at them and you don’t see them - you look at everything and you
don’t see it only sometimes you see it like now I see - a cold moon looking down
on a place where nobody is a place full of stones where nobody is.\(^{(57)}\)

According to Sylvia Maurel the moon presiding over the wasteland is
an ‘ambivalent symbol’ that is ‘emblematic of a text that has its roots in
carnivalesque ambivalence’ that ‘knits together images of life and death,
lushness and aridity, fecundity and sterility’.\(^{(58)}\) Yet, under ‘a cold moon’, Anna,
the white Creole, is alone in the arid landscape.

In \textit{Good Morning, Midnight} Rhys also questions binary oppositions in
a similar way to that of Césaire through a re-examination of oppositional
imagery of day and night. Rhys starts her own story by quoting from an Emily
Dickinson poem:

\begin{quote}

Good morning, Midnight!
I’m coming home,
Day got tired of me –
How could I of him?

Sunshine was a sweet place,
I liked to stay –
But Morn didn’t want me – now –
So good night, Day!\(^{(59)}\)
\end{quote}

In Dickinson’s poem, the apparently female narrator desires to remain with
the male ‘Day’ who has rejected her. The narrator is ‘coming home’ because
she is stranded and the home occupies the oppositional position to the man.
Yet, placing the poem as an epigraph for the novel raises the question of a
woman’s home, especially when many of Rhys’ women protagonists do not
have a permanent home. According to Judith Kegan Gardiner, woman’s space
is conflated with the woman herself: her choices are apparent oppositions, but
in a field that does not separate ground from figure and so renders oppositions
meaningless and questions the meaning of choice within such a space.\(^{(60)}\)

The poem foretells the fate of Sasha as does the episode of the Martinican
woman who only goes out at night. She is not unhappy as long as her husband lives and thinks she would kill herself if he were to die, even if he were to bring other women to their room. Aging is the main source of Sasha’s agony and money is regarded as the only consolation and protection against the coming of the night:

Now, money, for the night is coming. Money for my hair, money for my teeth, money for shoes that won’t deform my feet (It’s not so easy now to walk around in cheap shoes with very high heels), money for good clothes, money, money. The night is coming.\(^{(61)}\)

Night in this passage denotes a double meaning referring both to a night out with the gigolo, René, and also to the ‘night’ for women. Sasha is constrained by respectability and cannot express her desire nor believe in his affection when approached by a younger man. Sasha’s refusal to sleep with René is her refusal to exchange her love and body for money. Yet, she is doomed to have sexual intercourse with the *commis* whom she detests. Her acceptance of the *commis* suggests a profound despair and a strong criticism of a world where women have to commodify themselves to survive.

Rhys challenges the reversal of binary oppositions, especially that of men against women just as Césaire sought to deconstruct the polarities between white men and black men. Yet, unlike Césaire, Rhys’ texts fail to achieve the binary oppositions and her protagonists accept death and darkness. Hence, Rhys instead explores the difficulty of overthrowing complex discursive binary oppositions in which women are entrapped.

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(2) See Thomas, p. 101.


(4) Kasteloot’s interview with Césaire, in March 1959. See Kesteloot, p. 159.

(5) Kasteloot, p. 63.


(11) Christine Barrow, *Caribbean Portraits* (Kingston, Jamaica: I. Randle, in association with the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies,
Rhys’ Texts and the Modernist Connection with Césaire

(12) Barrow, p. xxxi.
(22) Césaire, *Notebook*, p. 115.
(25) Rosello, p. 38.
(27) Césaire, *Notebook*, p. 73.
(30) Kalikoff, p. 497.
(31) Kalikoff, p. 498.
(34) Kalikoff, p. 498.
(36) Arnold, p. 168.
(38) Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Modernism in a Transnational Landscape: Spatial Poetics, Postcolonialism, and Gender in Césaire’s Cahier/Notebook and Cha’s Dictée’, Paideuma: Studies in American and British Modernist Poetry, 32.1/2/3 (Spring, Fall, Winter, 2003), 14-39 (p. 29).


(41) Sandhu, p. 134.


(44) Rhys, Voyage, p. 71.

(45) Rhys, Voyage, p. 56.


(47) Rhys, After Leaving, p. 103.


(50) Rhys, Good Morning, Midnight, p. 58.

(51) Veronica Marie Gregg, Jean Rhys’s Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), p. 43.

(52) Gregg, p. 43.

(53) Gregg, p. 132.

(54) Rhys, Voyage, p. 83.


(56) Julia Kristeva, ’Women’s Time’ in The Kristeva Reader, ed. by Toril Moi (London:
Rhys’ Texts and the Modernist Connection with Césaire


(57) Rhys, Voyage, p. 186.

(58) Maurel, p. 100.

(59) The poem is quoted in the preface of Good Morning, Midnight. The original poem continues: ’I can look – can’t I – when the East is Red? The Hills have a way –then –, That puts the heart abroad, You – are not so fair – Midnight, I chose – Day –, But please take a little Girl, He turned away!’ From Emily Dickinson, The Poems of Emily Dickinson (London, Hayes Barton, 1958), p. 477.


(61) Rhys, Good Morning, Midnight, p. 144.