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The Feminine Aesthetic of Failure: Negative Female Subjectivity in the Modern Novel

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Dissertation Abstract

"The Feminine Aesthetic of Failure: Negative Female Subjectivity in the Modern Novel" examines how the failure to adhere to restrictive codes of normative femininity functions as a form of feminist critique in novels by women modernists published during the interwar period.[1] In these novels, issues of gender identity and the development of literary modernism intersect with a distinct feminine aesthetic and rhetoric of failure. In arguing for this feminine aesthetic of failure, I consider five works by four authors: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Jean Rhys's *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930) and *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936). While these novelists engage with frustrations and despair more generally associated with modernist literature, they do not offer heroic or positive solutions. Instead these writers invoke a struggle with (and often a surrender to) the anxieties associated with modernity and marginalization, and they foreground the problematic social hierarchies in which they and their characters are caught. In many instances, their novels demonstrate a repeated disintegration of the feminine subject. These women writers made negativity central to their work, inviting a critique of the conditions of exploitation with which their characters live. Critics have argued that the novels' protagonists suffer needlessly, but I argue their failures challenge the ethics of conventional models of success, and offer a

[1] The term "aesthetic of failure" references Charles Blaine Sumner's dissertation, where he draws from Adorno's commitment to negation in *Aesthetic Theory* and "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" to discuss failure in the of the work of T.S. Eliot, Hemingway, Wyndham Lewis, and Virginia Woolf. Heather Love also uses the phrase in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007) to discuss Walter Pater's queer aesthetic. The term "aesthetic of failure" is not to be confused with a failure in aesthetic praxis.

compelling critique of socially prescribed norms that also applies to the ways in which we as scholars determine canonical relevance and aesthetic merit.

There has been little scholarship that theorizes failure as it functions specifically in the work of women modernist writers.[2] My project questions the scholarship on feminism and modernism that would canonize neglected women writers on the same terms as their male counterparts by arguing for non-success as a valid mode of literary practice and feminist refusal. Yet failure as a strategy of resistance breaks down along class and race lines. Far from functioning in a monolithic way for all women, failure is specific to each character and author. While they share a common historical moment and similarly gendered protagonists, the various geographical locales and racial identities allow for analysis of how constructions of black and white female subjectivity are disparately informed by racialized hierarchies. These writers developed a modernist aesthetic that recognized the politically ambiguous work of negative emotions by focusing on minor feelings such as anxiety and irritation rather than the grander, cathartic feelings of fear and rage. J. Halberstam's concept of "shadow feminism" has been especially useful in mapping this aesthetic. While Halberstam does not discuss women modernist writers, she describes a feminism grounded in negation, failing and forgetting. Shadow feminism functions as an alternative feminist project that questions more liberal positivist feminist accounts and elucidates the alternative feminism that these modernist protagonists perform. My dissertation also contributes to recent affect theory that focuses on negative emotions and widens the horizons of feminist inquiry, namely Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2007) and Sarah Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2012). The modernist protagonists I examine remind us that feminine failure is not to be dismissed or buried away. Rather, their failures reveal alternatives to the narrow definitions of success often premised on unachievable narratives of happiness. My project helps us rethink feminism, women, and processes of marginalization. Thus, the feminine aesthetic of failure serves as a valuable analytic for reevaluating the contribution of women writers to Modernism.

[2] Published books about failure in literary and historical contexts include: Martha Banta's *Failure and Success in America: A Literary Debate*, 1978, Rurel Suresh's *The Art of Failure: Conrad's Fiction*, 1986, Jonathan Auerbach's *The Romance of Failure: First-person Fictions of Poe, Hawthorne, and James*, 1989, Ewa Polonowska Ziarek's *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism,* 1996, Scott Sandage's *Born Losers: A History of Failure In America*, 2005, Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson's *Courting Failure : Women and the Law In Twentieth-century Literature,* 2007, Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* 2007; *Failure!: Experiments In Aesthetic and Social Practices* Ed. by Colin Dickey et. al 2008, and Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* 2011.

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Introduction: Failure as Resistance

This project proceeds by putting aside unexamined assumptions about failure: instead, it asserts that failure is tied up in a host of both generative and disruptive activity. By recognizing the potential of this kind of activity, we can also begin to see a politics of resistance based on failure. Although written in the 19th century by a male author, Herman Melville's 1853 short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is an early representation of the disruptive power of failure and anticipates women modernist writers. Narrated by a Manhattan lawyer who employs Bartleby to copy legal documents, the tale recounts how Bartleby interrupts the business of prevailing forces by repeatedly uttering the phrase "I would prefer not to" when asked to perform his job duties. Flummoxing his employer and irritating his coworkers to no end, he throws the entire office into disarray when they are unable to respond to his constant refutation. By the end of the story, the narrator finds Bartleby imprisoned and later learns he has starved to death by refusing to eat. Bartleby's incessant utterance posits, in the words of Deleuze, "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). Because capitalism valorizes assertiveness to obtain success, Bartleby becomes a proto-modernist representation of a passive will to failure as a form of resistance within capitalist enterprise.

Likewise, Scott Sandage's *Born Losers* presents a cultural history of failure in 19th century America, revealing the "hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism" by giving voice to the misfits of capitalism, reminding us that "failure stories are everywhere, if we can bear to hear them" (9). Sandage's archive is in part constructed from the experiences of men

who failed, culled from the dead letters, memoirs, private diaries, suicide notes, and charity requests of the losers in history (9).[3] Sandage's hidden history of the United States complicates the success/failure binary. By looking at how discourses of ambition helped shaped capitalist ideology during the 19th century, he shows how failure exposes the processes of history making. Rather than consent to the nostrum, "deadbeats tell no tales," Sandage problematizes the stories of success that supposedly support capitalist ideology. Though his study focuses primarily on 19th century America, failure, just as capitalism, remains ever present in the 21st century. In wake of the 2008 economic collapse, it is particularly pertinent to bring hidden histories of pessimism into the light so we can theorize alternatives.[4] If those who are unable to thrive in a capitalist system are deemed failures, how might failure be formulated as a form of opposition?

James C. Scott's concept of "weapons of the weak" shows how Malaysian peasant laborers enacted subtle forms of resistance in the field--such as feigned compliance, pilfering, foot-dragging--as opposed to a grand-scale worker's revolt against the non-native landowning class. His example sheds light on how failure can be an effective tool of resistance. As Halberstam writes, Scott's concept is useful 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)

[3] For more on Sandage's archive, see his dissertation "Deadbeats, Drunkards, and Dreamers: A Cultural History of Failure in the United States, 1819-1893" (Rutgers University, 1995).

[4] The Occupy movement's rhetoric is a good example of reclaiming failure as a means of opposition. Their political slogan "we are the 99%" refers to the concentration of wealth among the top 1% of income earners, calling attention to how capitalism benefits the few at the expense of the majority. Their rhetoric reminds us that it is the majority rather than the minority of Americans today who are the misfits of capitalism.

These examples support the idea that failure is a form of resistance toward capitalist ideology. I extend this to rethinking feminine passivity and refusal as modes of resistance to hegemonic gender and race constructs. By taking up gender and race explicitly in relation to ideas of failure, I explore a politics of failure as the basis for a valid aesthetic rather than as a simple historical fact, theme, or character trait in a narrative. My use of "aesthetic" is not meant to connote the formal discourse of aesthetic theory, or literature's place in this scheme. Rather, I use the term aesthetic of failure to denote how failure affects the elements that comprise a literary work: style, characterization, story, plot, and form. I trace this aesthetic through novels by women modernists that focus on exclusion, withdrawal, loss, bitterness, melancholia, awkwardness, despair, irritability, shame and disappointment; their novels are linked as an archive not only in relation to their generic specificity but also in relation to the theme of failure itself. Moreover, this aesthetic of failure extends to a commitment to negativity that is evident in each writer's biography and authorial persona.

Negative feelings in women's literature provide a valuable diagnostic for affect's usefulness in the analysis of individual subjects and their relation to processes of marginalization. Raymond William's term "structures of feeling"[5] is pertinent here. Williams proposes that the term has special relevance to literature because literature accounts for "experience at the juncture of the psychic and the social" and is useful for analyzing the ways uncodified subjective experience is saturated by ideology (Love, 12). Patriarchy, for example, inflects everyday life for women in ways that are sometimes difficult to name, but feminine

[5] In *Marxism and Literature* Williams defines a structure of feeling as: "characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a "structure": as a set, with specific and internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis…has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific heirarchies (132).

negative feelings in literature offer an understanding of the way ideology impacts subjective experience. Like success, failure is culturally determined, and women modernists use failure to explicate the many problems women experience when they refuse to adhere to--or are kept altogether outside of--prescriptive gendered norms. These writers foreground failure as a feminist response to restrictive forms of patriarchally defined femininity.

Because modernism makes failure central to its own self-conception, cultural beliefs and values are newly illuminated when we read them through women's texts that have 'failed' or have been relegated to a minor status within the modernist canon. The modern subject is normatively historicized and read as alienated; yet this subject is often constructed as implicitly male. Given the history of female exclusion, the female modern subject is doubly alienated as both modern subject and woman; thus, the alienated female subject in the modern novel evokes larger questions associated with ethics and community. As Colin Dickey writes in his forward to *Failure: Experiments in Aesthetic and Social Practices*,[6] " Just as any human enterprise is defined by what it excludes, it is a culture's failures—quickly forgotten, repressed, buried away—which have the most to say about that culture's beliefs and values" (12). It is in this spirit that I approach failure in the women's modernist novel.

[6] Dickey edited a collection of essays, interviews and artworks that describes a "minor history of failure." This collection traces the idea of failure through contemporary art, late 20th century activism, and current philosophy. My project differs greatly as I examine women modernist writers and the modern novel specifically, focusing on how failure operates thematically as a gendered form of resistance as well as formally in their work.

Benjamin and Failure in Modernism

As a movement, modernism evokes the risk of aesthetic failure. While there are many paradigmatic literary modernist examples of this—the work of Eliot, Joyce, Pound, and Beckett all come to mind—Walter Benjamin's formulation of failure and modern writing is especially useful. I introduce Benjamin for two reasons: first, Benjamin illuminates failure's link to modern art; second, his neglect of women writers further emphasizes the need to study feminine failure in modernism. While the examination of gender in modernism has been ongoing in scholarly inquiry since the 1980s,[7] my study offers a renewed consideration of the contribution of feminine failure to the modernist aesthetic. Before I offer an analysis of this modernist feminine aesthetic of failure, I specifically address Benjamin's notions of failure in modern art. While he does not discuss women writers overtly, his thoughts on failure and writing provide a point of departure for theorizing failure and modernism in gendered terms.

In his essay "Franz Kafka," Benjamin figures failure as inextricable from Kafka's writing. Discussing the letter Kafka wrote that ordered the destruction of his work after his death, Benjamin relates how Kafka regarded his writing efforts as failures--that he "counted himself among those who were bound to fail. He did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into doctrine, to turn it into a parable and restore to it that stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him to be the only appropriate thing for it" (129). Kafka's failure, in Benjamin's estimation, engendered his art—his writing remains poetic and

[7] Studies in the 1980s engaged in remapping literary modernism and creating a separate female modernist canon: Susan Squier *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism* U of Tennessee P, 1984, Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank*: *1900-1914* Austin: U of Texas P, 1986.

indeterminate because it failed as doctrine. Elsewhere in "Some Reflections on Kafka" Benjamin writes "to do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure. The circumstances of this failure are manifold…There is nothing more memorable than the fervor with which Kafka emphasized his failure" (145). Kafka is now recognized as a canonical literary figure, ironically because he risked aesthetic failure. His writing "failures" provide the model for an entirely different literary mode, theorized in Deleuze and Guatattari's study *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, which I discuss at length throughout this study. On the one hand, Benjamin's reflections on Kafka are insightful because he reveals the creative potential embedded in failure, connecting it to the innovations in form we now associate as definitive elements of modernism**.** On the Other hand, Deleuze and Guattari refuse to see failure as a useful category, arguing that to say Kafka failed would be to presuppose a logical priority of content over form in literature (xvii). I argue they miss the creative and generative potential in failure.

Kafka's opposition between doctrine and literature bears emphasizing here, as the tension between art and polemic is one that energizes many modernist works. The women writers I discuss did not employ direct polemical forms like the manifesto. Yet their writing suggests a purpose beyond an aesthetic one--even if their work is not overtly instructional or moralistic. Modernism's use of covert didacticism is helpful for teasing out the implications of art that "fails" as doctrine, but is nonetheless ethically instructive in some manner.[8] In Rhys and Larsen's novels, and to a lesser extent Barnes, representations of the dominant culture's moral evaluation as hypocritical and punitive encourages an alignment with the protagonist—their failures direct readers to envision possible solutions for the societal problems illuminated by her

[8] See Celia Marshik's *British Modernism and Censorship* that maps a covert didacticism that operates through satire and irony in modernist literature (7).

protagonists' struggle. These novels suggest that modernism is didactic in ways that depart from traditional understandings of modernism as principally an aesthetic movement.

Additionally useful for theorizing failure and modernism is Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller." According to Benjamin, the advent of World War I marked a significant shift in the possibility of direct communication, but he also argues that history does not necessarily bring immediate changes in subjectivity. Benjamin intimates that the failure of the oral tradition to survive "modernity" nevertheless allows us to "see a new beauty in what is vanishing" (87). Turning to the novel, Benjamin describes it as the preserve of the solitary individual, removed from community and placed in isolation. The novelist is "himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others" (87). Thus, the communication of experience in the form of the novel follows a failure of oral communication that arose during a specific historical moment and represents the loss of community.

Benjamin's thought resonates with Lukács's suggestion that art is proof that we are unsuccessful people living in an unsuccessful world--art no longer adheres to the platonic world of forms, and is no longer a practice in harmony with existence.[9] While this perception of the crisis of representation may represent what Derrida has called "guilty nostalgia," its rhetoric is useful because it conveys how modernist artistic praxis stages the search for meaning and holds out the possibility of redemption even as it is linked to failure.[10] In the wake of destruction and disillusionment, and with the perception that "reality no longer constitutes a favourable soil for

[9] "The problems of the novel form are here the mirror-image of a world gone out of joint. This is why the 'prose' of life is here only a symptom, among many others, of the fact that reality no longer constitutes a favourable soil for art; that is why the central problem of the novel is the fact that art has to write off the closed and total forms which stem from a rounded totality of being—that art has nothing more to do with any world of forms that is immanently complete in itself. And this is not for artistic but for historico-philosophical reasons…" (17). Lukács writes this in his1962 preface of *The Theory of the Novel*, after reflecting on his work (written between 1914 and 1915, and first published in 1920). His immediate motive for writing was the "outbreak of the First World War…when the question arose "who was to save us from Western Civilization?" (11).

[10] Derrida accuses Rousseau of "guilty nostalgia" in *Writing and Difference* (292).

art" (17), failure is a particularly appropriate lens for examining modernist art. Benjamin suggests the modern novel is an incommensurable form and must be mired in failure to deliver representations of human life.[11] What then, are the limitations and potentialities of writing? Modernist women writers present a set of concerns mostly different from those of Benjamin and Lukacs, but they can nonetheless be linked to the condition of the (male) novelist described by Benjamin. In his discussion of the Russian writer Nikolai Leskóv, Benjamin argues that material and historical forces have alienated the story-teller from the social collective and the social collective from the story: the modern novel reflects this alienation. Benjamin does not consider what the transformation of gender roles entails for the modern novel, yet the changing roles of women during the period was undoubtedly a major material and historical force. The women novelists I discuss reflect this alienation by invoking gender as a structuring principle of their narratives. Their feminine aesthetic of failure differs from the modernism of their male counterparts not only in their representations of a distinctly modern female experience but also in their subversive feminist practices based on feminine forms of failure.

The Modernist Feminine Aesthetic of Failure

From Pound's injunction to "make it new," to the program put forth by the founders of high modernism, modernism has largely been understood as making particular demands on both the reader and the author. The literary writer in the high modernist context is weighted with the requirement of cultural renewal (Schiach 6). The makers of high modernism, the "men of 1914" (Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound), put forth a modernist program that

[11] "To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life…the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living" (Benjamin, 87).

was set against Romantic and Victorian modes of writing. Yet, as Mao and Walkowitz point out in their introduction to *Bad Modernisms*, "the old story in which heroic modernist outsiders assault a complacent bourgeoisie has also been complicated by the observation that there were numerous ways of being outside in the early twentieth century---many of which invited a marginalization far more enduring than that briefly experienced by Picasso or Eliot" (8). Indeed, Modernism has been shaped by numerous exclusions, particularly those pertaining to gender. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's theory of cultural centers to argue that the modernist program of high art was partially defined by marginalizing female writers, Monica Faltesjskova argues that the men of 1914 did not see women as makers of the new, and sought to distance themselves from the perceived feminization of fiction. Despite their occasional attention to women writers (Pound and H. D., Eliot and Barnes, for example) they often suppressed what was most distinctive about female writing and enforced their own principles of writing on female literary practice (1).

The exclusion of women writers' work from the modernist canon was reflected in academia during the 1950s and 1960s. The canon was not revised until feminist literary theory emerged as discipline in the 1980s and feminists and historians rediscovered women modernists. Numerous studies appeared that engaged particulalry in remapping literary modernism; texts such as Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank*: *1900-1914* and Bonnie Kime Scott's anthology *The Gender of Modernism* contextualized and reassessed work by women that had been previously excluded. While these anthologies provided invaluable revisionary work by advocating the inclusion of undervalued or forgotten women writers and worked to establish a parallel female canon, it was not until the 1990s that feminist scholars began to rethink the unexamined assumptions shaping the formation of the modernist canon.

The women modernist writers I examine do not embrace the heroic mode of modernism constructed by their male counterparts. Their aesthetic of failure emphasizes minor feelings, negativity, and incoherent subjectivities. Their narratives do not end in redemption, and their protagonists reject futurity. Importantly, these "minor" writers also differ from canonical women modernists such as Virginia Woolf who, like her male modernist counterparts, often staged the search for meaning and placed art as the site of transcendence, elevating the figure of the artist to instrument of cultural renewal. In the novels I discuss, the protagonists do not directly participate in any form of cultural production. But in these novels, negative affect works not entirely nihilistically, and often strategically. Sianne Ngai distinguishes noncathartic "minor and generally unprestigious feelings" such as shame, envy, and melancholia from the grander feelings of rage or fear by describing how these intentionally weak "ugly feelings" block, distract, or thwart action, as opposed to the grander passions that motivate people to action. For Ngai, minor feelings are politically ambiguous, as they are not likely to incite revolution or mass resistance. Yet these modernist writers used aesthetics—in this case, the form of the novel—in ways that foreground the potential political work of negative, minor emotions. When we consider that negative affect is a feminist response connected to forms of refusal and the failure to meet patriarchally prescribed norms, we can recognize a feminine politics of failure in these novels. I want to emphasize that the representations of feminine failure in these novels are not entirely recuperable, and that failure need not be entirely recuperable. To make such a case would reinscribe the problematic logic of success.

Jean Rhys, perhaps more than any other female modernist writer included in this study, made failure integral to her literary oeuvre. Throughout her novels and short stories, Rhys repeatedly wrote protagonists who founder and fail—providing a literary representation of what

Halberstam refers to as a shadow or anti-socialist feminism. This feminism is anti-Oedipal and rooted in a negation of the mother-daughter bond, which normatively ensures the daughter inhabit the legacy of the mother and her relationship to patriarchal forms of power (124). Halberstam does not take up Rhys or any women modernist writers for that matter, but I position Rhys's work as representative of a form of feminine resistance. Rhys's protagonists often invoke what Sarah Ahmed describes as the feminist killjoy--by exhibiting negative emotions, often publicly, they point toward how "feminism by refusing to go along with public displays of happiness can participate in the widening of horizons in which it is possible to find things" (Ahmed 69). Rather than represent empowered female subjects engaged in an onward progressive march toward inclusion and equality, such as those stereotypically aligned with feminism, Rhys's negative subjects refuse to cohere and, more often than not, unravel. Her novels render a feminism grounded in passivity and refusal. Many critics have neglected to see any feminist potential in Rhys's work, often because her novels lack conventional, triumphant heroines. Yet this not only neglects the poignant ways her writing documented the material and historical shifts that women experienced during the modern era, but also how the Rhysian woman performs an alternative feminist praxis. Rhys's interwar novels describe a common predicament many women faced: gaining social independence while lacking the means to procure financial independence. Her protagonists fail, but as I argue, the fault lines in patriarchal and capitalist values are highlighted by her protagonists' failures.

My first chapter, "Failure and Refutation of Patriarchal Femininity in Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*" argues the protagonists' status as negative female subjects (in the context of both the colonial island and in England) functions as a simultaneous rejection and critique of white British patriarchal values. I discuss the ways Rhys's

modernism incorporates failures in form to produce formal experimentation—*Voyage in the Dark* toys with the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*: the lack of positive development, the disintegration rather than maturation of the protagonist, and the failure of her experience to be rewarded at the end of the narrative render the novel a feminized version of a failed coming of age novel. Furthermore, I argue that the representation of a protagonist unable to successfully inhabit a traditional literary form foregrounds a distinctive feminine modernist aesthetic during the transformations of European culture between the wars.

Born in Dominica and raised under the legacy of the British Plantocracy, Rhys, like her protagonist Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark*, moved from the Caribbean to England at age 16. Rhys's place as a Caribbean or English writer has been contested among critics. Her two published novels that deal explicitly with the Caribbean, *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, both have complex representations of race and British colonialism. I devote a section of my chapter to analyzing race in *Voyage in the Dark,* arguing that the presence of Anna Morgan's black kitchen servant Francine dramatizes how gendered Creole whiteness on the colonial island is defined as English. A particularly compelling aspect of Rhys's novel is that it lays bare Anna's recognition and critique of the racist, class-driven, gendered hierarchies she encounters. But her disdain for British codes of whiteness and female propriety is often conveyed by her parasitic and impossible desire to be black. I draw on Toni Morrison's concept of "Africanism," a term used to describe the presence of black characters in literature born from the white imaginary who, far from having any semblance to black peoples' reality, instead reflect the desires, assumptions and anxieties essential to white subjectivity. This concept illuminates how Anna Morgan constructs her critique of whiteness through a privileging of blackness, while

simultaneously ignoring the ways in which racialized fantasies inform her privileging of blackness.

I delineate how Anna's desires for and perceptions of black women's freedom from white patriarchal gender symbolics rests on slavery, where only white women had a gender, and black women have been historically denied a position of subjectivity. Yet Anna's failures function as a refutation of patriarchal femininity, even if she cannot get outside her whiteness or acknowledge her own racism. I argue that Anna's status as a negative feminine subject (in the context of both the colonial island place and in England) represents how failing and refusing, rather than striving to enact modes of white femininity, is an alternative to joining what Hortense Spillers refers to as "the ranks of gendered femaleness" (229). In a brief discussion of *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie,* I discuss how the protagonist refuses to inherit the mother's legacy of subordination to patriarchal forms of power. The protagonist fails to be a good daughter and patriarchal feminine subject, but she carves out a modicum of autonomy despite her marginalization as a result. In both novels, Rhys's negative feminism shows how failure and refusal are options to white modes of femininity that flourish by conceding to problematic gender and race constructs. Seen in this light, a failed white feminine subjectivity operates subversively through its refusal of patriarchal prescribed notions of femininity.

My second chapter, " 'She, Helga Crane, who had no home:' Failure and Queer Negativity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*" shows how the interracial protagonist Helga Crane questions conventional models of success, and argues her failures point to the limits of prescribed racial and gender norms. Larsen was long considered the "mystery woman" of the Harlem Renaissance. She had critical successes with her first two short novels published during the interwar period, was a well known and important figure in the Harlem Renaissance who

received patronage and support from Carl Van Vechten, and was the first black woman to receive a Guggenheim grant. Yet after a series of personal and professional disappointments, Larsen cut all literary ties and never published again. She refused to disclose her letters and manuscripts to research institutions, and she seemingly had no interest in leaving a legacy.[12] She worked the rest of her life as a nurse in New York City, and her writing fell into complete obscurity until first generation black feminist scholars like Mary Helen Washington and Alice Walker revived interest in her in the 1980s. As her biographer Hutchinson points out, Larsen undoubtedly felt like a shadow through much of her life, as she did not inhabit the sort of place in which she could feel at home (1). Larsen was an interracial writer in Jim Crow America, and she uses the figure of the interracial woman in her novels to illuminate problems linked to race and gender categories prescribed by both black and white communities. Her work deploys negation and a feminine aesthetic of failure to critique racialized definitions of femininity.

Like Rhys, Larsen does not construct an unambiguously empowered female subject. With few exceptions, readers and critics alike were puzzled by the bleak ending of the novel during its time of publication. Yet representation of the negation of the feminine subject encourages the reader to envision an alternative to dominant raced and gendered categories. In this way, *Quicksand* employs a form of covert didacticism and uses failure to instruct readers. Larsen's refusal to offer a positive resolution to her protagonist's struggle is a key element in this covert modernist polemic--failure directs readers to consider her protagonist's plight. Alienated from her sex, race(s), and class, Helga is positioned as a shadow figure—she is both inside and outside of the normative social configurations of her historical moment. Helga's mixed race status makes her a particularly suitable figure for negative feminism. The novel conveys how

[12] Larsen refused to donate her correspondence with other writers and figures of the Harlem Renaissance to Yale library when Van Vechten asked, and most of her letters and manuscripts were lost in a fire after her death.

black female identity is fetishized and overdetermined. Helga's presumed death and negation of self at the end of the narrative is a forceful critique, evinced in the dismantling of the racialized feminine self as defined by the dominant and communal standards Helga encounters in the all-black college of Naxos, the white society in Copenhagen, the black bourgeoisie in Harlem, and the rural black community in Alabama. I read the shadow figure of Helga as disturbing what Lee Edelman describes as "congealments of identity." For Edelman, queerness can never "define an identity, it can only disturb one;" in this context, I show how Helga Crane's negativity enacts a feminist critique of heteronormative institutions that shape identity categories, arguing this representation has a strong affinity with Edelman's theorizing of queer negativity. I also read her mixed race status as a trope that disturbs or queers identity categories.

My third chapter, "A Failure of a New Kind: Djuna Barnes's Negative Aesthetic and *Nightwood*" reads both Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* and her authorial persona through the lens of failure. As an author, Barnes rejected success. She was infamously difficult to work with, insulted the reading public, refused to cooperate with most critics interested in her, and lived alone and rather reclusively the latter portion of her life. Not surprisingly, her writing espouses a poetics of failure. Barnes began her writing career as an amply employed journalist but soon decided to turn to fiction. Much like Rhys and Larsen, she received modest critical success with her published novels. Yet after her last novel *Nightwood*, she did not publish again until her 1958 play *The Antiphon*. Failure is multivalent in *Nightwood*. Barnes's editor and friend Emily Colman wrote to T. S. Eliot, and in an appeal for him to edit and find a publisher for the novel, she not only reported how many rejections it received from other publishers, but emphasized that the book was a "complete artistic failure" (qtd Plumb xx). Yet failure for

Barnes also functioned as a critique: her aesthetic form and authorial persona challenge the normative canonical premises on which literature rests.

My analysis of Barnes and her work moves away from the dominant critical impulses to either redeem Barnes as a self-empowered feminist writer or critique her as a writer who acquiesced to patriarchal power and avoided feminist and queer politics.[13] Instead, I consider the complex effects of Barnes's use of failure in terms of the aesthetic form and content of *Nightwood* and in her self-conception of a writer. Barnes's authorial persona contests normative assumptions made about the Author and text: her negative aesthetic refuses the modernist conception of the literary text as a transformative cultural project. *Nightwood*'s narrative failure(s) produces attentiveness to ambiguity, a resistance to reading for mastery and circumscribed meaning, and remains other and unknowable. In this way it refuses to work hierarchically. The narrative failure of *Nightwood* is integral to its distinct aesthetic and constructed by its representations of negative subjects, none of whom are rendered as coherent. Barnes renders her central character Robin Vote without interiority, further discouraging readerly identification and privileging opacity. The chapter intervenes in prevailing scholarship on *Nightwood* because I argue that by employing elements of failure, Barnes created a literature of alterity that demands alternative interpretive strategies from the reader. While *Nightwood* does not offer an overt, specific ideological critique, the equivocal position the novel places the reader in works against the concept of reading for mastery, and instead encourages an attentiveness to difference.

My fourth chapter, "Negative Feminism and Anti-Development in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*" argues Virginia Woolf complicates the genre of the *Bildüngsroman* in her first

[13] Mary-Lynn Broe's introduction to *Silence and Power* reads Barnes's acts of self-silencing as empowered refusal of male editors, while Monical Faltejeskova's book refutes this by claiming that Barnes acquiesced to many cuts because she wanted to be published and situated in the modernist canon.

novel through a formal and thematic use of failure: the young Rachel Vinrace is unable to inhabit the (usually male) space of maturation and reward of earning one's place in the world. The novel raises questions of women's education (or lack thereof), artistic development, and societal position. My chapter identifies where Virgina Woolf's novel of anti-development overlaps with the modernist aesthetic of failure created by her less canonical modernist counterparts, but my critique shows how unlike the other women writers in this dissertation, Woolf forecloses productive forms of failure as a viable resistance. Thus, I argue Woolf's novel highlights class and racial privilege endemic to the dominant notions of feminism that obscure the subtle forms shadow feminism.

Minor Literature, Feminine Negativity, and a Refusal of Futurity

This project questions a tendency of feminist literary theory that perceives success and participation in the literary mainstream as the mark of mature women's literature in order to raise a central concern regarding women's writing and literary history: how can the woman writer, whose relationship with the dominant mainstream is questionable or contentious, be theorized? It is vital to theorize spaces outside of mainstream understandings of literary success and canonization, particularly if we are to see the radical potential in women's writing. Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature is useful in this regard. While they problematically do not include any women writers, they consider the implications of writing against literary predecessors from a space of linguistic heterogeneity to create something other. This they term a minor literature, and describe a different set of writing and reading praxis and possibilities. By using Rhys, Larsen, Barnes, and Woolf to extend a theory of minor literature, I accentuate the

aesthetic and implicit political work in depictions of negative experiences like failure and suffering. Rather than view marginalized writers as victimized or excluded by dominant culture, minor literature allows for the reconsideration of such works by emphasizing the ways they depart from and write against the major tradition.

Lee Edelman's *No Future* is also instrumental to my theoretical framework. Numerous aspects of each writer's authorial persona, biography, and literary representations refuse futurity and circumscribed meaning, much in the way that Edelman theorizes the mission of the queer author in *No Future*. Regardless of the sexual orientation of the protagonists in these women's novels, each enact a negative feminism that queers conventional femininity. Moreover, to varying degrees, each protagonist rejects the Child as vision of futurity—Rhys's novel ends with an abortion, Larsen's protagonist Helga dies after seemingly having too many children too quickly, and Barnes's Robin Vote rejects her son and abandons him and her husband completely. This refusal to identify both of and with the Child refutes the ideological heteronormative function that Edelmen describes as the "Cult of the Child." Edelman insists that any delineation of queer politics must consider the consequences of political vision as a vision of futurity. While these women's novels do not present a redemptive future or a new form of social organization that counters the heteronormative and patriarchal order they critique, their protagonists' negativity is positioned as disruptive. These novels demonstrate the importance of negativity to feminist oppositional politics, and these writers emphasize how losing the mother and rejecting the Child thwart heterosexual and patriarchal orders that generally disenfranchise and disempower women. Finally, rather than argue these novels provide a direct explicit political critique, I instead aim to show how the affective reorientation and ethical sensibility they provide

help us to ask better, questions of the political, and help us to recognize alternative forms of feminist responses.

Chapter One

" 'Get on or Get Out:' " Failure and the Refutation of Patriarchal Femininity in Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*

" 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, from *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*

Failure permeated Jean Rhys's life, and she wove it into her textual world. The epigraph 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. 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.[14] 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. They founder, but in doing so, reveal a critique of patriarchal femininity. In this essay, I suggest 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

[14] First pressing publication dates and titles: *The Left Bank: sketches and studies of present-day Bohemian Paris*, Cape, London, 1927; *Postures,* Chatto & Windus, London, 1928; *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie,* Cape, London, 1930; *Voyage in the Dark,* Constable, London, 1934; *Good Morning, Midnight,* Constable, London, 1939.

> "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 am interested in theorizing a modernist feminine aesthetic of failure. I suggest a kind of "Bartlebyan" politics is present in Rhys's work; her protagonists, much like Melville's Bartleby, "would prefer not to." I argue that failure and refusal functions as a feminist response because Rhys's narratives utilize failure to reject patriarchal femininity, albeit through negation; I examine how negation points toward the problematic construction of this mode of femininity. Moreover, Rhys employs a negative feminism that serves to question alternative positivist feminist accounts. Just as Melville's Bartleby's curious utterance " I would prefer not to" stalls the business of prevailing forces, Jean Rhys's literary project constructs white female protagonists with a tenuous relationship to the dominant order. These women struggle due to their failure to achieve, or their rejection of, material success, and effectively call into question the terrorizing logic of dominant 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 anti-colonialist project; such a reading is particularly useful for reconsidering Rhys's female protagonists, who have long confounded critics.[15]

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

[15] 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 Sehsagiri 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 (502). 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" (502).

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. Rhys experiments with spatial and temporal shifts in the novel with the white Creole Anna Morgan as her young protagonist in *Voyage in the Dark*. The narrative is structured by vacillations between past memories of her island home and the present exile's "home" of England. *Voyage in the Dark* begins with Morgan, a chorus girl 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, yet the novel fails to progress in a teleological 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; moreover, the 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.[16]

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—the pay off of the maturation experience is earning one's deserved place in the world (Dearlove 25). Rhys's fiction destabilizes these assumptions because of the marginalized

[16] Jed Esty's *Unseasonable Youth*: *Modernism, Colonialism and the Fiction of Development* 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) bildungsoman" (161).

spaces her protagonists inhabit; Anna Morgan'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" 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)

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.[17]

Jean Rhys repeatedly constructs her white female protagonists as both inside and outside of dominant culture. Anna Morgan is not quite "white"—or certainly not properly British; 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 form 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 Morgan 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. Anna exoticizes the West Indies and uses blackness to convey a sense of vitality. The descriptions of the Caribbean are used to further contrast with the stuffy white "Englishness" of England. The opening

[17] Sean Latham's *The Art of Scandal* 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).

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 colors here are black, brown, grey, dim-green, pale blue, the white of people's faces—like woodlice" (54). Once in England, 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.

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 (brackets mine 31).

The use of the West Indies, and Anna's recollections of her black nursemaid Francine in particular, expresses an "Africanist" presence that Toni Morrison identifies in *Playing in the Dark*. "Africanism," 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" (7).

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.[18] 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 brackets mine). As Anna recollects her past, she repeatedly claims the only time she was happy was when she was with Francine. Francine herself 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

[18] The relationship between Anna and Francine brings to mind Charles W. Mill's excellent point, made in a footnote in his study *The Racial Contract*, "[w]omen, 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).

interested in the particularities of Francine, or of being black.[19] Rather, Francine functions in the narrative to provide a history and context for Anna Morgan; 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/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 "unfinished" autobiography *Smile*

[19] 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: "[s]he 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).

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 female subjects were historically denied a position of subjectivity. *Voyage in the Dark* demonstrates how race complicates gender. Anna Morgan's wish to be black is born from a fear and disdain of the symbolic white patriarchal order; however, 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 alternative 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 is a misnaming and false on two accounts 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 (228). Therefore, "reproduction of mothering" carried few of the benefits of a *patriarchilized* 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" (brackets mine 229 italics original).

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 patriarchal femininity, yet her inability to do so is demarcated by racial codes and a racialized subjectivity. Anna Morgan'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; blackness for Anna is conflated with a freedom from white English codes of feminine respectability, but it does not account for the history of violence perpetrated on 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).[20] That Anna should, at the moment before consummating her relationship with Walter, verbalize her imagined/desired Creole status suggests an anxiety about being interpolated into a patriarchal ideological system; it also suggests anxiety about losing the Caribbean, a place and identity she is trying to claim, that is disavowed in England.

Yet Anna's dream of affiliation with Francine is disrupted and never regained; Anna 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:

> [T]he 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).

[20] Murdoch notes in "Rhys's Pieces: Unhomeliness as Arbiter of Caribbean Creolization" 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).

This passage is telling; Anna recognizes her entry to womanhood by way of menstruation as marked under the symbolics of a white patriarchal femininity.[21] 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 and is 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 colonial island place as becoming English.

Rhys's writing occupies a unique place that cannot be ascribed to one cultural or national sphere; it is perhaps this aspect that 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 Morgan 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; it also marks an awareness that these categories cannot easily be transgressed. If we view her 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

[21] 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).

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 the choices she refuses to make) 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. While 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 Italics original), I argue the alternative embodied by Francine is no longer available to Anna once she is interpolated into the white symbolic order; Anna recognizes Francine as thereafter unavailable to her—she thinks, "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 Morgan's "choice" and her disavowal of making that choice provides 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 italics original). However, Anna's status as a negative feminine subject in the context of both the colonial island place and in England serves to illuminate 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 feminist trajectory of a shadow feminism that rests on the refusal of the mother-daughter bond, which ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and reproduces her relationship to patriarchy (Halberstam 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 terrible 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 feeling 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 is a dissentient from the prescribed role of patriarchal femininity, coded through her rejection of the mother-daughter bond. This is apparent by her Uncle Griffith's admonishment of her: "'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 "[s]he 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 says, "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.[22]

In *Voyage in the Dark,* Rhys makes the process of disavowing the mother more straightforward by giving Hester the status of *step*mother. That Hester is a stepmother further underscores Anna's disavowal as a refusal 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

[22] 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).

relationship that positions the daughter as the inheritor of the mother's relationship to explicitly British forms of patriarchy. Halberstam writes 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 key to understanding how a writer like Rhys lays bare the expectations of patriarchal femininity while also disavowing conventional feminist praxis. With the realization/fear 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.

Upon 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 "unbecoming" 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 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 Anna's dealing with men such as Walter.

Anna, though repeatedly referred to and treated by men in the novel as infantile, naïve, and child-like, 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 she is abandoned by Walter and 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 resources 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. Anna 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 consist in an indirect critique of British colonialism, patriarchy, and Victorian notions of character.[23] Moreover, this line of thinking obfuscates the implications of what Halberstam calls the "unbecoming" of woman—in other words, it 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 that 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

[23] 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, emphasis original).

"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 are 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 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 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 "[t]he ones without any money, the ones with beastly lives" (26) returns. 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). Upon 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." When speaking to her landlady she notices her "voice sounded round and full instead of small and thin. 'That's because of the money,' I thought" (27). Following this, Anna 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, italics original). 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 "[m]y 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!" (45). She is advised by Maudie that "[t]he 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 says "I've heard all that a million times…I'm sick of hearing it" (44). Anna is unable to (as Maudie puts it) "swank" and develop a lucrative relationship based on sexual bartering with Walter. Not only does he abandon her, but she also grows to detest the options available to her under this bartering system.

Anna ultimately both refuses and fails 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 socio-economic 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;" she continues, "[e]verybody 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 as when, 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" and 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" and Hester, a "lady," criticize Anna's behavior suggests that her dissention from these dichotomized roles disrupts the business of the dominant. 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. Upon 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: "[t]here 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 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 within a patriarchal order.[24]

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 "[t]he 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 Morgan'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

[24] Halberstam's call to think about a shadow archive of resistance clarifies this concept: she proposes "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).

negative feminism in her depiction of Anna Morgan, a subject who refuses to cohere by choosing disintegration rather than an activation of 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 celebrates femininity, and the concept of redemption is not 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. I suggest that 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 Morgan is a deft example of negative feminism; by narrativizing 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 modernist narratives.

Chapter Two

"She, Helga Crane, who had no home:" Failure and Queer Negativity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

In his biography of Nella Larsen, George Hutchinson discusses how his work differs from most biographies because it is "the kind of biography one writes about a person who has been 'invisible'—the so-called mystery woman of the Harlem Renaissance—and about *why* she has been invisible" (1). During the Interwar period Nella Larsen published two short novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), and three short stories, one entitled "Sanctuary" (1930), for which she was accused of plagiarism.[25] Larsen was an active professional writer during the period of the Harlem Renaissance and the first black female recipient of a Guggenheim in 1930; yet she drifted into obscurity until the early 1970s when "previously "lost" work by women writers began to be recovered and reprinted" (McDowell ix). Nella Larsen is now recognized alongside Zora Neale Hurston and Jessie Fauset as one of the leading women writers of the Harlem Renaissance movement, yet she was neglected in historical treatments of the Renaissance until historians and feminist critics began to turn their attention to her. As Mary Helen Washington wrote in 1980, five decades after her novels had been published Larsen "was for the most part unknown, unread, and dismissed—both by black critics and their white counterparts" (44). Larsen's fiction represents the gendered and racial complexities of her

[25] Larsen lifted heavily from British writer Sheila Kaye-Smith's short story "Mrs. Adis" published first in January 1922 in *The Century*. Shortly after *Forum* published Larsen's short story in 1930, a plagiary scandal ensued as readers noted the similarities, and in response the *Forum* editors printed in full Larsen's defense "The Author's Explanation" where she denied the accusations. Nevertheless, Larsen's reputation as a writer plummeted as a result.

historical moment; her position as an interracial author yokes her—as subject of a literary and cultural biography—to the site of the maintenance and production of the color line in America. It is not surprising that Hutchinson would regard his biography as an effort to delineate the myriad of ways "…in which distinctions between black and white identities are reproduced and important aspects of American experience repressed" (1).

That Larsen was largely unknown and unread by both black critics and their white counterparts for such an extended time speaks to the perceived liminality of her subject position. Larsen uses the representation of an interracial woman in both of her novels to illuminate problems linked to race and gender categories prescribed by both black and white communities. My aim is not to suggest that Larsen failed personally nor aesthetically, but instead to argue that her work makes use of negation and a feminine aesthetic of failure to critique racialized, patriarchical definitions of femininity.

Although Nella Larsen's position as an interracial author often placed her at the margins of both black and white communities, it also gave her access to both. Cheryl Wall writes, "for Larsen, the tragic mulatto was the only formulation historically available to portray educated middle-class black women in fiction," but her novels subvert the convention consistently—Helga is neither "noble nor long-suffering;" her plight is "not used to symbolize the oppression of blacks, the irrationality of prejudice, or the absurdity of concepts of race generally" (98). While Wall states the tragedy of Larsen's protagonists is ultimately the "impossibility of self-definition," I would add that Larsen's deviation from the trope of tragic mulatto shows not only a more nuanced take on this subject position, but also presciently reaches beyond identity politics. Although Helga desires and seeks to construct a self that is free from overdetermined, restrictive gender and race categories, she fails—her failures expose systemic racist and sexist constructions

rather than an individual problem. Exploring an interracial subject position in narrative form, *Quicksand* uses failure to instruct readers. Larsen's form of didacticism, however, differs from overtly instructive texts. Her covert form of didacticism is conveyed through literary representation and negation, rather than through direct lessons associated with avant-garde and modernist forms such as the manifesto.

Larsen's refusal to offer a positive resolution to her protagonist's struggle is a key element in this covert modernist didacticism--failure directs readers to envision possible solutions for the societal problems illuminated by her protagonists' struggle. Indeed, a wider aim of this dissertation is to show that when we examine failure in women modernist's text, "it becomes apparent that high modernism is polemical and didactic in ways that seem at odds with traditional understandings of modernism as primarily an aesthetic movement" (Marshik 7). Larsen's protagonist Helga Crane questions conventional models of success and her failures point to the limits of socially prescribed norms. *Quicksand* does not construct a modern, empowered female subject, but the shadow figure of Helga disturbs what Lee Edelman describes as "congealments of identity" (17). The novel sets up Helga to fail and suffer, but it also exposes the raced and gendered social categories that are gathering points for problematic "congealments of identity." Because Helga unsettles these identity constructions, she enacts a version of Edelman's queer negativity, regardless of her sexual orientation. Moreover, while *Quicksand* does not advocate nihilism, Helga's failures and negativity illuminate productive ways to think through identity categories and social relationships. Thus, by deploying failure and negation in this context, *Quicksand* takes on the "form that modernism's didacticism takes: texts instruct covertly, where and when readers least expect education" (Marshik 7).

When *Quicksand* was published, both black and white critics were confounded by the bleak ending, as well as by the implications of the protagonist's mixed race subjectivity. Yet Alain Locke wrote in his essay "1928: A Retrospective Review," that Larsen's novel's "study of the cultural conflict of mixed ancestry is truly a social document of importance…a living, moving picture of a type not often in the foreground of Negro fiction, and here treated perhaps for the first time with adequacy" (3). *Quicksand* is an invaluable social and historical document, and in this regard Locke was prescient in perceiving the novel's unique and innovative qualities. Yet given the complexity of the novel's themes and structure, and Larsen's own minor melancholic life, it is no wonder that it would dwell in obscurity for decades. Larsen's novel renders a shadow account of a woman of a mixed race heritage thus revealing the confluences of racism, gender, and class and its effects on the community and individuals. Larsen's novels differ from more conventional narratives of literary modernism because they provide an account of black female subjectivity and sexuality. As Hutchinson writes:

> Larsen herself no doubt felt like a shadow through much of her life. She did not long inhabit the sort of place in which she could feel at home. For me, the greatest interest of this tale lies precisely in such difficulties. Nella Larsen did not write a string of significant novels, or found an institution, or lead a movement. She is not the peer of someone like Thomas Mann—as a novelist, that is. She seems to have had little interest in leaving a legacy. She lived a life that should never have been, one that many seem to think *could not* have been. Briefly, she wrote about that life, and revealed part of what she perceived about the world and people of her time (Italics original 1).

Hutchinson's interest in the difficulties, or shadow-like presence, that Larsen both experienced and rendered in literary form is significant. That Larsen was not interested nor able to leave a legacy within the tradition of major literature (like Thomas Mann) raises questions about how gender and race inform literary production and audience reception**.** In order to examine these questions, I discuss *Quicksand* as a representative work of minor literature. Deleuze and Guattari developed this concept, and it is particularly useful in considering how Larsen's novel attends to different set of reading and writing praxis than works belonging to dominant or major literary traditions. Before I elaborate on this point, a brief exploration of an area of feminist literary theory is necessary. What follows is a theorizing of Larsen's work as minor literature that exposes problematic "congealments of identity."

Theorizing Marginalization: Feminism, Race, and Minor Literature

Second wave feminist scholars addressed the elision of woman writers in literary study. While they accounted for questions of gender they often neglected race--and racism--altogether. In her seminal study of English women novelists, *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter defines women's writing "as the product of a subculture, evolving with relation to a dominant mainstream" (xiii). Taking her point of departure (and title of her study) from a sentence from John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women,*[26] Showalter set out to trace the development of English women's writing as a product of a subculture that evolved in relation to normative constructs within dominant culture. She maps a tripartite structure she terms the feminine, the feminist, and the female, and argues that "a mature women's literature ceases to be part of a

[26] "If women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would have a literature of their own" (Mills qtd. Showalter 3).

subculture, and can move into a seamless participation in the literary mainstream" (xiii). Showalter's categorization of women's writing as a subculture serves to underscore how English women novelists developed a female literary tradition from "imitation, literary convention, the marketplace, and critical reception, not from biology or psychology" (xiii). Her work served a vital role in the reclamation of devalued woman writers in the important effort toward canon reformation. Because Showalter restricted her work to English women novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, black American women novelists fell outside the parameters of her study. Yet her privileging of a "seamless participation in the literary mainstream" as the mark of a mature women's literature elides the history of enforced nonparticipation of women writers of color. I bring up Showalter's work because it raises the question of how can the woman writer, whose relationship with the literary mainstream is tenuous or altogether excluded, be theorized?

Showalter insists that the same critical and aesthetic standards applied to the canonization of literary works be applied to the reclamation of devalued women writers in the effort to broaden the literary canon. She writes, "I continue to believe that women's writing needs no apologies or special treatment, and can sustain the most rigorous tests of aesthetic judgment and literary quality" (xxvii). I agree that women's writing need not be treated as exceptional nor requires concession in terms of aesthetic judgment. Such a belief implies that women accomplish noteworthy works *despite* being women, and reinforces dominant binary models of sex and gender that construct woman in terms of lack. I am suggesting that reading women's writing in terms of its *contention* with and *difference* from mainstream thought, rather than its ability to mature and slip seamlessly into the mainstream, opens up new avenues of literary inquiry.

Examining how concepts of failure are deployed in the form and content in modernist women's writing produces new readings of familiar works. Works by female modernists Larsen and Rhys depict representations of feminine failure; by refusing the trope of the heroic female character who triumphs over her conditions, they problematize conventional notions of success and provide an alternative account that differs radically from narratives that move "seamlessly into mainstream."

While Deleuze and Guattari do not explicitly address gender in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, their study offers an appealing framework to consider how gender and race shape literary production and reception. Their work provides a means to "theorize all sorts of differential practices of writing and to suggest how placing any minority writer within a major language can turn into a battle of the most far-reaching sort" (xxvi). Deleuze and Guattari attempt to wrench Kafka's work from the category of "Literature," and use his writing to sketch the contours of a new form of writing they term minor literature. They insist that critical interpretations of his writing are severely limited by the dominance of psychoanalytic and theological-metaphysical readings. The concept of minor literature is meant to provide the reader with a means to understand Kafka's work without being burdened by "old" categories of literary genres and theory, which give the reader the ultimate task to "interpret" writing. In the forward to *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Réda Bensmaïa writes, "The concept of minor literature permits a reversal: instead of Kafka's work being related to some preexistent category or literary genre, it will henceforth serve as a *rallying point* or *model* for certain texts and 'bi-lingual' writing practices that, until now, had to pass through a long purgatory before even being read, much less recognized" (xiv italics original). Deleuze and Guattari's minor literature does not seek to belong to the major literary tradition. Kafka, for example:

> does not read and admire Goethe and Flaubert to imitate them, much less to move beyond (*aufheben*) them according to some teleological schema like that of Hegel, but to determine and appreciate the incommensurable distance that separates him from their ideal of depth or perfection. Writing against the current and from a linguistic space that is radically heterogeneous with respect to his great predecessors, Kafka appears as the initiator of a new literary continent. (xiv)

The distinction of creating a new literary continent rather than seeking to imitate or surpass one's literary predecessors is applicable to women's literature and black women's writing in particular**.** While Elaine Showalter treats white women's writing as a subculture that can move seamlessly into the mainstream once it is "mature," Deleuze and Guattari consider the implications of writing against literary predecessors from a space of linguistic heterogeneity to create something Other to describe a different set of literary possibilities. By implication, they challenge a long history of studying literary influence. One need only think of Harold Bloom's 1973 *Anxiety of Influence*, where young poets strive to overcome the old masters. Bloom's theory, influenced by Freud and Nietzsche, basically argued that originality is achieved once a poet is able to articulate his own voice through a series of misreadings (an act he terms "creative misprision") of the canonical poets, thereby transcending the old master works, and earning "immortal/"original--rather than derivative--status. The study of the struggle for dominance/greatness within a tradition thus became a primary mode of understanding literary influence; however, the theory of minor literature challenges this history with a different set of characteristics pertinent to minor literature. Deleuze and Guattari's theorize a mode of literature that works non-hierarchically and

does not place the struggle for dominance at the heart of an author's impetus for creating literary works.

Deleuze and Guattari identify three characteristics of minor literature. The first is a deterritorialization of language. Kafka's writing as Jew in Prague marks an impasse for Jewish writers in Prague because it points to "the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise" (16). A minor literature is not born from a minor language; rather it is constructed by a minority within a major language (16). The second characteristic is that for minor literatures, in contrast to major literatures, "everything in them is political" (17). This is achieved because of the "cramped space" of minor literature, where the individual concern links to the family triangle and this is linked to the triangles that determine its values—"commercial, economic, bureaucratic, juridical" (17). The third characteristic is that everything in minor literature takes on a collective value. This characteristic identifies possibilities for solidarity and social critique for both author and reader, particularly when expressed in literature by marginalized writers:

> It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility...The literary machine thus becomes the relay for a revolutionary machine—to—come, not at all for ideological reasons but because the literary machine alone is determined to fill the conditions of a collective enunciation that is lacking elsewhere in this milieu: *literature is the people's concern*. (18 italics original)

Unlike Kafka, a giant of literary modernism (albeit posthumously), Nella Larsen probably never sought (nor, due to race and gender oppression, would have been able) to create a new "literary continent." Shortly after she failed to finish her third novel, she experienced a painful divorce and soon after cut all her ties to the literary community. She ceased writing (or publishing) and returned to working as a nurse until she died. Yet she is a minor writer who created two masterful, short novels both concerned with interracial female subjectivity. Her characters are often at the margins of their "fragile community." Larsen attends to the dire need for another possible community, and she utilizes negation to express this, a point I will return to shortly.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature offers far reaching implications for the ways writing gives vision to possibility, solidarity, and thus can even be revolutionary. However, their theory raises questions concerning both race and gender—Deleuze and Guattari write that Kafka's "Prague German is a deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses. (This can be compared in another context to what blacks in America today are able to do with the English language)" (17). Canonical modernists such as Beckett and Joyce are also placed in this category of minor literature. Becket's use of French and English as an Irishman and "[t]he utilization of English and every language in Joyce" (19) are but two examples of how "[t[here is nothing major or revolutionary except the minor. To hate all languages of masters" (26). To sweepingly compare "blacks in America" as a group with individual canonical white (Irish) modernist writers is a curt and problematic mention of an entire people. Moreover, it is not merely the comparison to Irish writers that troubles, but the neglect to mention *any* African-American writers who were contemporary with Joyce and Beckett-- as if they did not exist. Larsen's work expands the concept of minor literature, because she foregrounds interracial female subjectivity in the modernist novel it is a strong and fitting example of minor literature.

Barbara Smith's 1977 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" addresses one problem with Deleuze and Guattari's use of major male canonical writers like Kafka, Becket and Joyce to theorize a concept of minor literature without accounting for the ways in which gender and race inform literary production and critical reception. Smith was one of the first women to insist that examining race and gender is an integral part of feminist and literary studies. She begins her essay by situating her inquiry in outraged bewilderment, of not knowing "where to begin," since "writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers from any perspective at all" has not yet been done (157). Smith delineates her frustration with white critics' neglect of race, and effectively discusses how politics of race and gender have a direct impact on literary criticism. She writes, "[t]he role that criticism plays in making a body of literature recognizable and real hardly needs to be explained here…For books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about. For books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered. Because of racism Black literature has usually been viewed as a discrete subcategory of American literature, and there have been Black critics of Black literature who did much to keep it alive long before it caught the attention of whites" (159). She concludes her essay by demonstrating how a black feminist critical perspective can overturn previous assumptions about literary works as well as reveal overlooked dimensions in the text.

Smith's argument bridges a large gap in Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature as well as in Showalter's theory of English women novelists. The acknowledgement and examination of how race, gender, and sexuality inform a writer's basic intentions as well as a reader's understanding of those intentions are significant aspects of literary inquiry. Placing Larsen in the context of minor literature situates her work in contestation with the major tradition

rather than merely excluded from it. This reversal illuminates the radical potential in her work. The category of minor literature allows us to see how literature can work in opposition to master narratives. Minor literature repositions previously neglected or undervalued women writers not solely as victims or a subculture of dominant ideology; instead, it places them in opposition to that ideology.

The work of Showalter, Deleuze and Guattari, and Smith provides a theoretical background for thinking through categories of "difference" connected to race, gender, sexuality and writing. Stepping into the twenty-first century, I employ Judith Halberstam's work *The Queer Art of Failure* to introduce the concept of shadow feminism to theorize a feminist politics that "…issues not from a doing but an undoing, not from a being or becoming women but from a refusal to be or to become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy" (162). Although Halberstam's archive ranges from avant-garde performance art and children's films to late twentieth century novels, her concept of shadow feminism provides a useful lens for looking at the interwar work of women modernist authors. Larsen's novel *Quicksand* lays bare the expectations for racialized and gendered forms of femininity. Yet Larsen's narrative does not emerge with a conventional liberal model of an autonomous or empowered feminine subject—rather, her novel describes a dismantling of the feminine self as defined by gendered and raced heteronormative constructs. *Quicksand* articulates an alternative form of feminism through representations of feminine failure. Moreover, reading Larsen's novel through the lens of queer negativity unearths previously unexamined dimensions in the novel. Lee Edelman's work *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* develops the concept of queer negativity as a means to challenge values defined as positive by heterosexual institutions. He argues that queerness cannot define an identity; it can only disturb one (17). By using queer

theory in conjunction with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature, I discuss how Larsen's novel disturbs identity, literary, and social categories.

Alienation and Queer Negativity in *Quicksand*

If, as biographer George Hutchinson writes, Nella Larsen "did not long inhabit the sort of place in which she could feel at home," she made this feeling central to the construction of her first novel's protagonist, Helga Crane. *Quicksand* is structured by Helga's ostensible quest for happiness and desire to rid herself of the feelings of loneliness and apprehension that seem to follow her wherever she goes. The novel charts her various periods of fleeting contentment and subsequent anxieties that prompt her to flee from Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, and finally to Alabama. Written in third person omniscient narrative, the novel opens with Helga examining her qualms with her job as a teacher at Naxos, a black school in the south.[27] Feeling disillusioned and annoyed by the school's doctrine of racial uplift, she decides to leave her post of two years. Helga thinks "[t]his great community…was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency" (5). The narrative describes Naxos as inhospitable "…for a pretty, solitary girl with no family connections" and Helga "faced with

[27] Naxos is believed to be a combination and critique of the racial uplift doctrine practiced at Fisk University where Larsen attended college and was expelled, and Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute.

determination that other truth…the fact that she was utterly unfitted for teaching, even for mere existence, in Naxos. She was a failure here. She had, she conceded now, been silly, obstinate, to persist for so long. A failure" (5).

The opening pages introduce the trope of alienation as particular to a woman of mixed racial heritage. This trope is woven throughout the novel, and many critics have long argued it is the source of her psychic dualism.[28] For me, the mixed-race figure of Helga is a particularly amenable vehicle for negative feminism. The representation of a woman who is alienated from her race, her sex, and class is dependent on Helga's positionality as a shadow figure—she is both inside and outside the normative social configurations of her historical moment. This positionality, rather than create a divided psyche, enables a critical perspective on the dominant and communal standards that shape gendered and racialized norms. As I illustrated in my previous chapter, Jean Rhys also utilizes the alienated heroine to critique codes of white femininity; her protagonists are all marginalized figures to some degree, yet Rhys's protagonists cannot claim alterity since they pass for white and identify as such. Her protagonists are unable to access both black and white communities. In novels like *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea,* Rhys constructs black figures as the Other—to be both feared and desired—because they are outside of the white Symbolic order.[29] While both Rhys and Larsen construct protagonists who evade simple models of identity, Larsen explicitly brings race to the forefront by discussing her protagonist's sense of self in relation to prescribed raced and gendered categories in various communities.

[28] Nathan Huggin's 1971 *Harlem Renaissance*, a pioneering text that launched the subfield of Harlem Renaissance studies, writes of Larsen "Her characters seemed always to be pulled between the poles of refined civility and passion…Helga Crane is overwhelmed by the ethnic war within her mulatto psyche" (157).
[29] Jacques Lacan's term for a universal structure involving the function of speech and language, precisely the signifier.

Quicksand utilizes the alienated heroine and her failures to critique both black and white prescribed identity categories. Due to her historical moment and interracial subjectivity, a protagonist like Helga is positioned by Larsen as doomed to develop an alienated subjectivity, despite her evinced desires to find a community where she can thrive, or (to put it in Helga's words) find "happiness." Helga is unable to forge another consciousness (despite her numerous attempts to do so) by shifting her geographical location. Because the novel provides a rich and varied look at how black female identity is aestheticized and overdetermined, Helga's presumed death and negation of self is telling. Reading *Quicksand* through the lens of queer negativity and failure reveals a gendered critique of racism *and* black racial ideology. This critique is enacted by the dismantling of the racialized feminine self as defined by the various dominant and communal standards Helga encounters in the narrative: the all black college of Naxos, white society in Copenhagen, the black bourgeoisie in Harlem, and the rural black community in Alabama. I am especially impressed by how the fictive representation of Helga enacts a queer negativity despite being heterosexually oriented. But her negative feminism and her mixed-race status has the ability to disturb, which resonates with Lee Edelman's theorizing in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman writes "the embrace of queer negativity…can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself' (6). This embracement of queer negativity has different implications for narrative form. Helga's negation in the novel serves to challenge the reader's assumptions about gender and racial identity categories. The interracial figure of Helga "queers" these categories; her suffering is a critique of heterosexual models of marriage and reproduction. As Edelman writes, "To *figure* the undoing of civil society, the death drive of the dominant

order, is neither to be nor to become that drive; such being is not to the point…As the death drive dissolves these congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive as ourselves, so the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such—on disturbing, therefore, and on queering *ourselves* and our investment in such organization" (italics original 17). Helga does not emerge determined and able to direct her life out from under the restrictions of marriage and child rearing; rather, at the close of the novel she is vitiated and exhausted from having too many children too soon, and suffers from an oppressive marriage to an obnoxious man. But her negative experiences function for the reader as a critique of heternormative futurity under patriarchal structures.

Helga often views her alienation as a "state of mind" or a feeling from which she needs to flee or alter by finding another state of consciousness. Yet as Hazel Carby notes, Larsen depicts Helga's alienation as tied to relational sets of social problems, and it is against this definition of alienation as a state of mind or feeling of "unhappiness" present in the text where:

> Larsen place[s] an alternative reading of Helga's progress, that her alienation was not just in her head but was produced by existing forms of social relations and therefore subject to elimination only by a change in those social relations. That Larsen incorporated this alternative definition of alienation in her text has political significance, for the representation of alienation as a state of mind reduces history to an act of thought and leads to a political conservatism. If people cannot change their conditions, only how they feel about them, they can only legitimize and approve the status quo, and social criticism becomes irrelevant. (170)

Carby is quite right to identify how alienation as a representation merely of a state of mind reduces history to thought (or feeling) and elides the social, economic and material conditions that create dynamics of power and oppression. This process casts social criticism to the realm of "irrelevant." That Larsen artfully connects Helga's feelings to a set of relational social problems inserts political significance into the novel. Helga is not merely dissatisfied or unhappy for abstract, vague or personal reasons. Building on Carby's argument, I read Helga's unhappiness as preceding moments of epiphany intended for the reader; this negativity, linked to alienation, is connected to *how* failure mobilizes a specific critique of race and gender categorizations, acting as a form of didacticism. Unlike Carby, I see Helga Crane's queer negativity as a critique of heteronormative institutions such as marriage and child rearing; I also see her mixed race status as a trope that disturbs or queers identity categories.

Helga connects her unhappiness to social and philosophical misgivings regarding the policy of racial uplift at Naxos and the ideology of black bourgeoisie intellectual leadership. Helga places her mixed race heritage at the fore of her inability to find acceptance at Naxos:

> No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. It even accounted for her engagement to James. Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated but you didn't "belong." You could be queer, or even attractive, or bad, or brilliant or even love beauty and such nonsense of you were a Rankin, or a Leslie, or a Scoville; in other words, if you had a family. But if you were just plain Helga

> Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard, it was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable. (8)

Helga's critique of the rigidness of Negro Society at Naxos points to the congealment of identity premised on family hierarchies and class stratifications; those who are in a privileged position maintain that position by marginalizing individuals who are not despite their apparent unification under "Negro Society." Hazel Carby writes that within the rigid order of Naxos, "Helga was an expression of powerlessness, the alienated individual who could not change her social condition and felt only a sense of individual failure" (170); however, Helga's failure to be "inconspicuous and conformable" and her refusal to stay within the ranks of her prescribed race and class position impels her to leave Naxos for Chicago—here, failure is a mobilizing factor. With this decision, she also enacts a refutation of patriarchal femininity by way of ending her engagement with James Vayle: "to relinquish James Vayle would most certainly be social suicide, for the Vayles were people of consequence. The fact that they were a "first family" had been one of James's attractions for the obscure Helga. She had wanted a social background, but—she had not imagined that it could be so stuffy" (8). Helga's failure at Naxos differentiates her from being merely "conformable," or "plain." In other words, failure to enact the prescribed roles accorded to her at Naxos provides her with a sense of agency to leave her station and her engagement, both of which are boring and stifling even though they seem to afford her social and material security. Failure for Helga is preferable to bourgeois contentment. Her failure at Naxos dissolves this congealment of identity and makes legible a critique of the policy of racial uplift and black middle class cultural elitism; this critique would not be evident if she had successfully accepted her position and married James Vayle or if she had been less explicit in her explanation

of her decision. Her willingness to fail also functions as a differential marker that is tied to her interracial subjectivity.

This racial *and* class liminality is evinced in her conversation with the principal of Naxos, Dr. Anderson whom she meets with to announce her leave. Helga—not Dr. Anderson—proclaims she has "failed in my job here" (19) and has made up her mind to leave. She briefly considers staying when he implores her to because Naxos needs "people with a sense of values, and proportion, an appreciation of the rarer things of life" (21). However, Dr. Anderson invokes the class logic that Helga reacts vehemently against when he states, "You're a lady. You have dignity and breeding" and "at these words turmoil rose again in Helga Crane" (21). Helga retorts, "the joke is on you, Dr. Anderson. My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married. As I said at first, I don't belong here. I shall be leaving at once" (21). Here, Helga invokes her interracial heritage to denaturalize and destabilize a congealment of identity—her revealed birth and racial status disturbs the assumed category of a "lady" (i.e. someone who has come from a home of dignity and breeding) and enacts a form of queer negativity to challenge the value of the category of "lady" and Dr. Anderson's assumptions. Helga was momentarily assuaged to stay because Dr. Anderson first appealed to what was not "conformable," or "plain," but indeed "unique" about Helga, but she decided to leave when he ended by reiterating the cultural elitist ideology of which she is intensely critical. Helga's perceived failure in this context stems from a refutation of patriarchal femininity and middle class morality, engendered by her status as an interracial figure.

While Helga's interracial status effectively queers notions of black familial structures, it also queers the white family. Arriving in Chicago, friendless and in need of money, Helga

chooses to call on her Uncle Peter, her mother's brother. She meets his wife, Mrs. Nilssen, who maintains that because Helga's mother was not married, Peter is not her Uncle. She refuses to aid Helga or to acknowledge her as a legitimate relative. This confrontation reminds Helga (and the reader) of the inherent racism that defines legitimate subjects in the eyes of the law. At this moment, Helga's interracial status functions as a vehicle for negative feminism. She cannot claim family ties as an interracial woman and understands that she represents what must be hidden away in order not to preserve the (white) Symbolic order: "She saw herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden. She understood, even while she resented. It would have been easier if she had not" (29). Here the idea of family as structured by white patriarchal law is critiqued by Helga's racial status. She is only an "obscene sore" in relation to the white family structure from which she is excluded; it figures Helga through naturalized ideas of health and sickness.

Yet she also realizes, momentarily, that it was economic necessity that drove her to seek help from her white relatives, and "dismissed its importance. She would find work of some kind. Perhaps the library…She knew books and loved them" (30). Although she has been rejected by her aunt, she feels a momentary sense of libration in the anonymity of the city and is prompted to strike out as an independent woman: she was "drawn by an uncontrollable desire to mingle with the crowd…as she stepped out into the moving multi-colored crowd, there came to her a queer feeling of enthusiasm…And, oddly enough, she felt, too, that she had come home. She, Helga Crane, who had no home" (30). This section is key to understanding how Helga's interracial status queers "congealments of identity" premised on the family; it also underscores how negativity formulates a critique. Helga's alienation stems from her interracial status, but this exclusion and sense of homelessness among both black and white communities encourages the

reader to question social configurations based on racial identity; it is no wonder she feels "home" among a "multi-colored crowd." By laying bare the problems with the black community at Naxos and the refusal of her white relatives to help her in Chicago, Larsen depicts the need to "express another possible community" and to "forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (Deleuze and Guattari, 18) in the wake of the rigid norms that define the social self within neat categories of race and class. Examining Larsen's work in the context of minor literature includes the reader in this effort to construct another possible community; as I have argued, Helga's failures instruct the reader to imagine other possibilities and to further question raced and gendered categories that undergird normative definitions of success. Failure in *Quicksand* opens up possibilities by refusing to redeem conventional models of femininity and heterosexuality. Moreover, it points to the need for another possible community through its embrace of queer negativity.

The "multi-colored crowd" represents a preference and desire for the heterogeneity of American urban spaces in contrast to the closed systems of the provincial all black school of Naxos or the white racist patriarchal familial order; however, crowds do not constitute a community. Helga's travels to metropolitan areas initially satiate her immediate want for acceptance and anonymity, but she is repeatedly unable to forge lasting ties within these communities. Once she becomes familiar with them, she feels stifled and flees. Leaving Chicago, Helga finds herself in Harlem, living with Anne Grey, a black woman and "native New Yorker…a person of distinction, financially independent, well connected and much sought after" (45). In Harlem, Helga finds secretarial work at an insurance company and establishes a pleasing routine where "books, the theater, parties, used up the nights. Gradually in the charm of this new and delightful pattern of her life she lost that tantalizing oppression of loneliness and

isolation which always, it seemed, had been a part of her existence" (45). But her contentment with black life in Harlem does not last. Helga becomes increasingly annoyed with the black elite in Harlem and the ceaseless discussions of uplift ideology unnerve her. She experiences the familiar feeling of being trapped and the process of self-alienation begins once more:

> Helga Crane began to draw away from those contacts which had so delighted her. More and more she made lonely excursions to places outside of Harlem. A sensation of estrangement and isolation encompassed her…Not only did the crowds of nameless folk on the street annoy her, she began also to actually dislike her friends. (48)

The Harlem crowds now annoy Helga, rather than provide her with a sense of belonging or "queer enthusiasm" as they did when she first arrived in Chicago. That she began to also dislike her friends who were (in her view wrong headedly) immersed in the plight of racial uplift points to Helga's awareness of slight possibilities of a social self within this order. The Harlem that Helga has come to know is suffocating in its homogeneity. Unable to transform her material and social conditions in Harlem, she disavows the constructs that give characters such as Anne Grey a sense of community and purpose. Helga thinks, "Even the gentle Anne distressed her. Perhaps because Anne was obsessed by the race problem and fed her obsession she frequented all the meetings of protest, subscribed to all the complaining magazines, and read all the lurid newspapers spewed out…And, though she would not, even to herself, have admitted it, she reveled in this orgy of protest" (48). Helga particularly objects to Anne Grey's elitism and rejection of folk/popular forms of black cultural expression. She thinks of how Anne "hated white people with a deep and burning hatred…but she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she

yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race" (48-49). Helga finds Anne's (and others like her) hypocrisy in this regard "irked her with a great irksomeness and she wanted to be free of this constant prattling of the incongruities, the injustices, the stupidities, the viciousness of white people" (49). Helga is not able to find solace in the nameless crowds in Harlem, nor within the ranks of the black cultural elite who, like Anne Grey, are problematically dismissive of black popular forms of cultural expression.

To Helga, these congealments of identity are so unappealing that to fail is better than to succeed within these prescribed spaces. She disavows Harlem and its people, feeling that "she didn't, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn't merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin" (55). Helga's inability to find something "broader, deeper" in Harlem leaves her feeling trapped, and "life became for her a hateful place where one lived in intimacy with people one would not have chosen had one been given choice" (53). This passage suggests Helga's valorization of cosmopolitanism lifestyle, as its openness to difference evades simple models of identity. Her failure to achieve that in Harlem prompts her to search for something outside American overdetermined categories of blackness, and Helga leaves for Copenhagen to visit her white relatives.

In Copenhagen, Helga is inundated by "things. Things. Things…This, then, was where she belonged. This was her proper setting. She felt consoled at last for the spiritual wounds of the past" (67). Momentarily feeling liberated from the race conscious confines experienced in America, Helga initially feels at home among beautiful objects and enjoys being pampered by her Danish relatives. The Denmark section of the novel traces Helga's transformation into an exoticized object, and subsequent refutation of this process. She is reduced to mere spectacle,

adorned with bracelets and colorful garments bought by her Aunt. Helga realizes that she is "a decoration. A curio. A peacock" (73) and "after a little while she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired" (74). Helga observes that in Copenhagan, "true, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count" (70). Here Larsen renders in fictional form what Hortense Spillers theorizes in her essay *Mama's Baby, Papas Maybe*. Her marked status as a black woman places her outside the gendered white patriarchal gender symbolic system, and she is therefore treated as Other. That Helga would feel at home among objects and (momentarily) embraces her status as a "decoration" points to how dominant and communal prescribed norms in America were detestable and restrictive; that an exoticized identity in Copenhagen might be more appealing than the gendered racialized models she experienced in America speaks to how deeply problematic these congealments of identity are.

Yet her feeling of happiness comes to a screeching halt after attending a minstrel performance given by a group of traveling minstrels comprised of black American men:

> Helga Crane was not amused. Instead she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage. She felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people…had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget. And she was shocked at the avidity at which Olsen beside her drank it in…The incident left her profoundly disquieted. Her old unhappy questioning mood came again upon her, insidiously stealing away more of the contentment from her transformed existence. (83)

The spectacle of the black performers brings the realization for Helga that her status as a "peacock" or "curio" is deeply racialized in Denmark. That she transfers her feelings of hatred

onto the black performers rather than the racist conditions that create these categories signifies at once an identification with and a disavowal of white constructions of black identity. The outside/exotic "Other" status assigned to her loses its appeal for Helga once she realizes her Aunt and Uncle intend to marry her off in hopes of gaining social and class mobility, further objectifying Helga. She refuses the proposal of the painter, Axel Olsen, by stating "I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned. Even by you" (87). Helga can no longer tolerate what once abetted her anxious mind; her objectified status that she found refuge in is now revealed to be akin to slavery—she refuses Axel Olsen's proposal and decides to return to Harlem. Helga's impetus to leave is certainly prompted by the impossibility of a cosmopolitan lifestyle in Copenhagen. After the minstrel show she realizes that there is little room for black figures outside of an objectified/exoticized status. Helga's valorization of but failure to achieve cosmopolitanism in the racially homogeneous communities in both Harlem and Copenhagen figures failure as signifying the need for another possible community.

In her essay *The Quicksands of Representation*, Hazel Carby situates her reading of Larsen's novel within the crisis of representation, which she attributes to the period following World War I. Before World War I, the vast majority of the black population resided in the south and black intellectuals in the north assumed that their relation to this majority was unmediated and unproblematic (164). However, "after World War I, the large-scale movement of black people to the cities of the North meant that intellectual leadership and its constituencies fragmented. No longer was it possible to mobilize an undifferentiated address to "the black people" once an urban black working class was established" (164). Carby writes that both Larsen and Fauset "wrote more directly out of this urban confrontation" than Hurston, who "represented "the people" through a reconstruction of "the folk" and avoided the class

confrontation of the Northern cities" (166). Larsen wrote in contrast to her contemporary Fauset, who often reinforced the prevailing notion that "women ultimately had to be saved from the consequences of their independence and become wives" (168). Carby writes that Larsen "refused the resolutions offered by this developing code of black middle-class morality at the same time as she launched a severe critique against the earlier but still influential ideology of racial uplift" (168). I would add that, by refusing the resolutions of middle class morality, Larsen provides a form of queer negativity and utilizes negation as an effective form of critique. This use of alienation and negation, mobilized by Helga's interracial status, performs a critique of racist formulations in white communities as well as the problematic racialized identity codes evident in the doctrines of racial uplift.

This critique of the ideology of racial uplift through queer negativity is evident in the novel when Helga meets her old suitor James Vayle at a cocktail party. James asks her if she ever intends to marry, and she replies: "Some day, perhaps. I don't know. Marriage—that means children, to me. And why add more suffering to the world? Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? Why *do* Negroes have children?" (103). James was "aghast" and exclaimed:

> But Helga...Don't you see that if we—I mean people like us—don't have children, the others will still have. That's one of the things that's the matter with us. The race is sterile at the top. Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children, and each generation has to wrestle again with the obstacles of the preceding ones, lack of money, education, and background. I feel

> very strongly about this. We're the ones who must have the children if the race is to get anywhere. (103)

Helga retorts to James, "Well, I for one don't intend to contribute any to the cause" (103). Helga's exchange with James Vayle implies a queer negativity. Although he doesn't write about Larsen (or indeed about any black women writers), Edelman's theory speaks to Larsen's work. He writes that "conservatism of the ego compels the subject whether liberal or conservative politically, to endorse as the meaning of politics itself the reproductive futurism that perpetuates as reality a fantasy frame intended to secure the survival of the social in the Imaginary form of the Child" (14). The figure of the Child, in both the social and Symbolic order, "seems to shimmer with the iridescent promise of Noah's rainbow, serving like the rainbow as the pledge of a covenant that shields us against the persistent threat of apocalypse now—or later" (18). Edelman argues that because the figure of the Child is used to consolidate and govern the reproduction of the terrorizing ideology of heteronormativity and exclusion within the realm of the Symbolic and social order, queerness and its relation to the death drive can engender a radical politics of negativity. Queer negativity in this context "[does] not intend a new politics, a better society, a brighter tomorrow, since all of these fantasies reproduce the past, through displacement, in the form of the future. We choose, instead, *not* to choose the Child, as disciplinary image of the Imaginary past or as a site of a projective identification with an always impossible future" (31). In her exchange with Vayle, Helga refuses to accept that the figure of the Child represents a redemptive possibility for the future, based on her experience that the dominant social orders are premised on racism, classism, sexism, and repression. She feels that the racial uplift ideology of the black elite is premised on problematic class categories. The black middle class codes of morality necessitate that marriage means reproducing children, and

by doing so, also means, in the realm of the Symbolic, reproducing the ideological constructs that Helga finds destructive. In contrast to James Vayle who sees reproduction as a duty to the race for those at the "top," Helga refutes heteronormativity and the idea of futurity as linked to a teleological reproduction by refusing to "contribute" to the cause by marrying and reproducing with a member of the "top," James Vayle, a member of the black elite, or with Axel Olsen, a white man.

Despite this clear rejection of reproduction, the novel plots Helga to marry and have children, but the representation of marriage and reproduction at the close of the novel destroys the fabric of the romance form. Larsen renders queer negativity in narrative form ironically through Helga's harrowing experience with marriage and childbirth. Rather than reinforcing what Edelman refers to as the cult of the Child, in which the problems of the present are constantly deferred onto the redemptive project of the Child, Helga's reproduction and mothering results in intense suffering and an implied death. The ending of the novel clearly depicts Edelman's assertion that "the Child as futurity's emblem must die…the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past" (31). After wandering into a church in Harlem and experiencing a frenzied "moment [of feeling] lost—or saved" (113) she meets the Reverend Pleasant Green. Helga is momentarily relieved of her anxiety as she loses herself in the crowd of religious fervor, and feels "a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she has known" (114). Helga consummates her relationship with the Reverend Pleasant Green, and after, "in the confusion of seductive repentance [she] was married to the grandiloquent…rattish yellow man" (118). Helga then moves with him to a rural town in Alabama "where, as the wife of the preacher, she was a person of relative importance. Only relative." (118). But rather than

position religion, marriage, and childbirth as vehicles of faith, hope, and redemption, by the end of the novel Larsen connects them to doubt, suffering, and death.

In Alabama, Helga deteriorates completely. This representation of the disintegration of the gendered and raced self exposes two congealments of identity premised on religion and marriage. Despite her earlier conversion to Christianity, Helga comes to view religion as a ridiculous illusion, a means of deferring the present material and societal problems caused by racism to a reward after death: "this, Helga decided, was what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man's God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in "kingdom come" (133). Here, Helga's critique of religion as promoting the belief in compensation for earthly suffering rewarded in the after life is linked to a refusal of problematically inscribed concepts of futurity—just as the child as a positive emblem of futurity is dismissed, the idea of a deferred reward after death is viewed as lethal to the plight of those subjected to systematic racism. She scathingly critiques marriage, "the thought of her husband roused in her a deep and contemptuous hatred…Marriage. This sacred thing of which parsons and other Christian folk ranted so sanctimoniously, how immoral—according to their own standards—it could be!" (134). Helga critiques the institution of marriage on the grounds that her marriage has not only robbed her of her independence, but it has also, and immorally so, relegated her and the other married women in her rural community to the circumscribed space of domestic laborer. Her existence under the lawful/religiously sanctioned institution of marriage was reduced to reproduction, cleaning and cooking, while her husband the Reverend Green existed in the public sphere as a preacher, and was free to have extra marital sexual relationships. Helga's marriage and four pregnancies vitiate her, and at the close of novel "hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain…when she began to have her fifth child"

(135), her demise is implied. Helga's failure and refusal to accept religion, marriage, and childbirth as positive pillars of society and the self illustrates how negation disturbs the congealments of identity that are premised on institutions that have historically oppressed women. The close of the novel in particular exhibits modernism's covert didactic form: Helga's representation disturbs these categories, though she herself does not by speaking her mind or by leaving (as she previously does throughout the narrative). Here, failure urges readers to take an interpretive stand against the values and opinions that are inflicted upon her protagonist; in this way, Larsen's feminist aesthetic of failure performs modernism's didacticism, it exhibits "a reverse pedagogy that work[s] as an effective ethical tool" (Marshik 7).

Larsen's representation of marriage and reproduction at the close of the novel challenges and critiques the very form of the romance, and this has further implications for the reader. As Carby writes, "Larsen stressed the contradictory nature of the search for a female self by refusing the romance and structuring the relation of the individual to the social formation through the interconnection of sexual, racial, and class identity. The conclusion of the text offered no imaginary resolutions to the contradictions Larsen raised. As readers, we are left meditating on the problematic nature of alternative possibilities of a social self" (173). I depart from Carby's argument in that for me, the conclusion demonstrates how Larsen's narrative form participates effectively in utilizing failure and, as I have argued, queer negativity; it is this queer negativity that impresses readers with a sense of the problematic nature of the prescribed normative categories that shape the possibilities (and mark the limitations) of a gendered and raced social self. Although Helga fails in all respects, her failure is necessary and preferable given the realm of possibilities available to her within the communities the novel charts. In lieu of rigid class and racial categories, failure is dramatized as an alternative possibility for the feminized social self

on the level of representation. Moreover, the ending exposes the violence of a gendered racialization for the female subject in the effort to make such racialization ethically insupportable, thus performing a didactic function for readers. Larsen undoubtedly hoped the book would not fail to reach an audience. The novel, by depicting the processes of alienation and negation of a gendered and raced self in narrative form, demonstrates how fiction can depict the need for ethical change. It is in this capacity where the novel can serve as "the relay for a revolutionary machine—to—come, not at all for ideological reasons but because the literary machine alone is determined to fill the conditions of a collective enunciation that is lacking elsewhere in this milieu: *literature is the people's concern* (Deleuze and Guattari 18 italics original).

Situating Larsen's writing within minor literature indicates the political work her novel sought to achieve. Though the novel has autobiographical elements, *Quicksand* departs from a plot based on Larsen's own experience in order to explore "how racial order depends on a policing of boundaries and sexuality while mandating the disappearance of the person who cannot assimilate to one side or the other of the color line" (Hutchinson 238). Larsen, unlike Helga Crane, did manage to carve out a cosmopolitan social existence for much of her life that often defied the class and racial constraints in which Helga was caught. The bleak ending, as I have argued, demonstrates how failure at the level of fictionalized representation serves a didactic purpose, one that was intended for a heterogeneous audience. In this way Larsen makes literature the "people's concern" by encouraging readers to question their assumptions about race and gender prescribed categories. Yet many reviews at the time of publication failed to pick up on the importance of the novel's negative conclusion—the ending has long frustrated readers and critics. The majority of reviews (by both black and white critics) at the time of the novel's

publication reduced Helga's conflict to a war between her racial heritages. A critic from the *Baltimore Afro-American* wrote that Helga's "white blood will not let her be satisfied amid the military discipline of a southern school…nor yet in Harlem, where jim crow is absent…In Copenhagen, Denmark,…it's the colored blood which rebels and causes her to refuse marriage offers of aristocratic Danes." One notable exception was Du Bois's review in *The Crisis*, who noted "there is no 'happy ending' and yet the theme is not defeatist…Helga Crane sinks at last still master of whimsical, unsatisfied soul. In the end she will be beaten down even to death but she will never utterly surrender to hypocrisy and convention." Du Bois's review is one of the few that recognized the significance and the inventiveness of Larsen's conclusion; as biographer George Hutchinson writes, "*Quicksand* suffered the fate of many books ahead of their time: people tried to fit it into patterns to which they were accustomed and, not always satisfied with the fit, found the novel wanting" (283). Given the dearth of perceptive critical writing about *Quicksand*, Larsen likely felt dismayed about the novel's reception during her lifetime. Yet scholars and critics did catch up with the book. As I have noted, it was taken up for critical and scholarly reappraisal in the 1970s and 80s, but little has been written in terms of how her novel documents a shadow history of gendered interracial subjectivity and uses negative subjectivity for critique. Employing Deleuze and Guattari's framework of minor literature to Larsen's work attends to the different set of concerns a novel like *Quicksand* engages with; concerns that diverge greatly from works associated with of the major tradition. The form and content of *Quicksand*, as well as the history of its dissemination, call attention to the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality shape both artistic production and the politics that are always at work, implicitly or explicitly, in practices of literary production and reception.

Chapter Three

A Failure of a New Kind: Djuna Barnes's Literature of Alterity and *Nightwood*

This chapter reads Djuna Barnes through the lens of failure, in an effort to see, as Benjamin writes in his essay "The Storyteller," "a new beauty in what is vanishing" (87). Barnes embodies Benjamin's notion of the modern, uncounseled novelist, incapable (or, in Barnes's case, unwilling) of counseling others. Failure is a prominent theme in Barnes's fiction and in her self-conception as an author, and this theme challenges the high modernist notion of the artist as creator of heroic works capable of social transformation and cultural renewal. Barnes's authorial persona entails a purposeful rejection of success. Not surprisingly, her novel *Nightwood* espouses an aesthetic of failure, reflected both in its formal experimentation and in its representations of negative subjectivity. Multiple forms of failure(s) in Barnes's work and authorial persona disrupt normative assumptions associated with the Author and the novel. In her work, readers can find a politics of failure that encourages nonparticipation, disintegration, and opacity in place of inclusion, cohesion, and clarity. The negative aesthetic in *Nightwood* foregrounds the Other in a way that has political implications, primarily in its refusal to offer a totalizing narrative perspective, but also in its rejection and exposure of some of the canonical premises on which literature is based. My theoretical framework here draws again from J. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, Lee Edelman's *No Future* and Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,* as these texts point to the multivalent ways failure(s) can both disrupt and locate alternatives to dominant logics of power.

Barnes's recruited a "new" aesthetic by refusing to adhere to literary conventional form: the formal novelistic displacements push the narrative potential in an unconventional direction, and a clear, legible social critique is forestalled by the novel's opacity. Moreover, Barnes refused to make a virtue of her central protagonist Robin Vote, and her use of noncathartic feelings creates a critical distance for readers. By denying the interiority to her central characters, she calls attention to the limits of representation. Barnes's refusal to give her characters a coherent subjectivity creates what I am terming a literature of alterity, that is, a literature of difference that privileges opacity rather than identification. The notion of alterity aesthetics carries forward the theme of representations that fail or that expose their own limits. *Nightwood* does not provide a straightforward, comprehensible narrative where meaning can congeal, thus discouraging a reader's easy identification with the story and characters.

It is this alterity that points toward the novel's political potential. My sense of the political derives from Deleuze and Guattari's description of the category of minor literature, wherein the individual concern is linked to various triangles that determine its value rather than other individual concerns. As they put it, due to the cramped space of minor literature, each individual intrigue is connected to a politics that is revolutionary and necessarily connected to a social collective (17). While *Nightwood* does not offer an overt, specific ideological critique, its representational and formal experimentation demand alternative interpretive strategies from the reader that requires an attention to difference. *Nightwood* is exemplary of the distinct kind of effects an undermining of traditional form can have on the reader. By refusing to consolidate the social norms embedded in a literary tradition that delivers conventional novelistic pleasures, *Nightwood* resists totalizing readings, leaving the reader with uncertainty. This equivocal position works against the concept of reading for mastery, against the primacy placed on writing

master narratives, and instead encourages attentiveness to representations that challenge conventional narrative logic. Because Barnes's authorial persona is interconnected with her literary aesthetic, my account of Barnes's authorial persona and aesthetic of failure must precede my analysis of the novel.

According to biographer Phillip Herring, Djuna Barnes's favorite aphorism was "the wish to be good is the wish to be destroyed" (295). This sentiment lends insight into Barnes's negative aesthetic. If the wish to be "good" is figured as a self-destructive impulse, then the normative assumptions regarding what constitutes good fiction--legibility, clarity and narrative cohesion--are construed as a liability, or at least qualities to be avoided in formulating a new, modern aesthetic. Barnes's self-conception as an author and the manifold failures of *Nightwood* refuse futurity and circumscribed meaning, much in the way that Edelman theorizes the mission of the queer author in *No Future*. Moreover, the novel presciently illustrates the disruptive power of queer anti-normativity. Ultimately, Barnes's aphorism extends to the project of literary modernism and connects to Pound's injunction for modernist artists to "make it new," for such an aphorism implies (at the very least) a subversion of conventional understanding. Distinctly modernist in both form and content, *Nightwood*'s lack of linear coherence and its narrative structure break down traditional definitions of the novel.

Author as advocate of failure

"No book has ever been written like this before, its kind of failure is a new kind, which I don't [entirely] understand—I want to understand it." –Emily Coleman

Djuna Barnes was an accomplished journalist and illustrator before beginning her career as a fiction writer in 1923 with the publication of *A Book* that included stories, poems, and sketches. Her first novel *Ryder* made the best-seller list in 1928. Yet it was *Nightwood*, published in England in 1936 and America in 1937 that established her literary reputation. Barnes experienced numerous rejections from publishers, and it was not until T. S. Eliot took on the editing of the novel that it was published. Despite subsequent critical approval, Barnes returned to America in 1941 and did not publish again until her 1958 play the *The Antiphon*. Because she often refused to give interviews or permission to critics to quote from her work, critical interest soon declined. It was not until after her death in 1982 that Barnes was taken up again by critics devoted to reclaiming undervalued women writers.

Much of the critical discussion reevaluating Barnes attempts to characterize her self-suppression as either empowering or disempowering. More interesting than the question of Barnes's relative empowerment is how these acts disrupt normative ways of thinking about the connections between author and text. In the first collection of essays devoted to reevaluating Barnes's work, *Silence and Power* (1991), editor Mary Lynn Broe writes "through belabored revisions…excisions, threats to friends, and the burning of letters, Barnes developed a ritual of self-silencing, suggesting her refusal to privilege a single 'authentic' voice and her uneasiness with canonical forms." Alluding to T. S. Eliot's editorial cuts, she adds that Barnes's self-silencing is "is also a textual response perhaps, to the father's attempt to violate his daughter, then barter her in ritual exchange" (Broe 8). Unlike Broe, I am reluctant to assume that Barnes's acts of self-suppression were enacted consciously as a form of self-empowerment. More pertinent is how they construct a distinct modernist feminine aesthetic of failure that functions disruptively in both her novels and in her self-presentation. Barnes's self-silencing suggests a

refusal to acknowledge *author*ity and is subversive in so far as it refuses clear authorial claims expected to be made by the author of a text; this works in opposition to canonical conceptions of the (most often male) writer as creative genius, producing singular authentic works of art. Barnes's use of failure (whether by fault or design) can be read as a strategy to refuse this (masculine) heroic mode of author and obviates such limitations by refusing to adhere to fixed concepts concerning author/text, thereby opening up new potentialities.

In contrast to Broe, Monika Faltejskova considers Barnes's textual and personal silence as acquiescence rather than self-empowerment (170). She also argues that while Eliot made substantial cuts that undoubtedly reflected gendered assumptions about writing, he nevertheless improved the "literary merit" of the text and prevented it from "falling foul" of the censors (173). She questions if Broe's "attempt to promote Barnes's personal and textual silence is a constructive way of promoting a marginalized writer" (12). For Faltejskova, Broe's edited essay collection provides an analysis of the sexual, ideological and textual dimensions that had yet to be astutely addressed, but it fails to place Barnes "within the modernist tradition she belongs to, nor does it explore the implications that Barnes's struggle to gain a place as one of the modernists has for the formation of high modernism" (173). My concern is not to trace the formation of high modernism or its origins, but rather to point out that critical discussions of Barnes's dis/empowerment do not recognize that her failure(s) fall outside of a normative feminist trope. I aim to avoid the discourse of dis/empowerment altogether, although I understand feminist frameworks inevitably fall toward that binary**.**

Instead, my analysis here draws from Halberstam's concept of shadow feminism, described as an anti-social feminism that does not speak in the language of action or momentum but is articulated in evacuation and "unbeing" (129). The feminist implications in Barnes's acts

of failure and refusal become clearer when we consider how negation functions as an alternative to the reductive dis/empowerment binary that simplify her complex refusals. While Barnes uses formal and stylistic elements that are distinctly particular to what has come to be recognized as high literary modernism, viewing her through the lenses of failure and negative feminism opens up new avenues of feminist and literary inquiry.

I bring up the disparity between the two critical readings of Barnes's personal and textual silence--silence as power or acquiescence--to illustrate how Barnes's constriction of her authorial persona complicates normative assumptions about literary canonization and the Author. These debates about empowerment also rely on viewing the individual as a coherent agent in a master narrative. My analysis turns away from the heroic narrative of the woman author empowering herself through writing. Rather than read these acts of "self-silencing" as either acquiescence to patriarchy or empowerment, it is more illuminating to consider how Barnes's use of failure, both as a rhetorical tool in writing as well as in her self-conception as a writer, trouble conceptions of the modernist (male) artist as creator of heroic projects, capable of transformation and cultural renewal. As Daniella Caselli writes, Barnes's "inopportune modernism has never been fully absorbed within the literary history of the twentieth century because of its inherent skepticism towards genealogy and timeliness and of its staged illegitimate and belated self-conception: 'her work will not fall into oblivion—it was predestined for it from the outset' " (2). Barnes approvingly noted that her work was "predestined for oblivion" in a letter to Christina Campo. A predestination for oblivion is by no means a conventional understanding of literary success—such an understanding is in opposition to creating a work that resonates with an audience, that survives throughout the ages. In this light, Barnes's writing questions the fixity of the literary canon. Djuna Barnes's celebration of herself as "the most famous unknown in the world" calls

attention to the author function and modernist canonization. As Foucault notes, the conception of the author "…does not develop spontaneously as the attribution of a discourse to an individual. It is rather a complex operation which constructs a certain rational being that we call "author" " (110). Foucault points to the refusal of a proper subject behind the text; it is not a coherent or dis/empowered individual but the Author that is produced by discourse. Barnes's status of "the most famous unknown" refuses the processes that construct the author in Foucault's understanding; in other words, her negative aesthetic contests the modernist conception of the literary text as a transformative cultural project. This is not to say that Djuna Barnes had no interest in publishing her novel. She undoubtedly wanted *Nightwood* to be published, and for years lived with the fear that it would not be. Rather, I argue Barnes's formal and thematic use of failure performed a subversion of literary tradition, and that subversion worked oddly in her favor to ensure eventual publication with help from T.S. Eliot.

Narrative Failure and the Reader

In his introduction to *Nightwood* Eliot writes, "a prose that is altogether alive demands something of the reader that the ordinary novel-reader is not prepared to give" (xii). Here Eliot points to the demands that high modernist works place on the reader, distinguishing modernist novels from their popular generic counterparts. Barnes's prose style is described by Eliot as "a great achievement" where the reader will find "the beauty of phrasing, the brilliance of wit and characterisation, and a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy" (xvi). Despite Eliot's praise, even for readers familiar with modernism *Nightwood* remains a difficult work to categorize and to read. So much so that Tyrus Miller writes, "at the

heart of…*Nightwood*...Barnes self-consciously explores problems of interpretation, desire, and identification in reading and listening to stories, which cannot help but represent a comment on how her own readers should approach the book before them" (146). Indeed, how should the reader approach the book? The novel doesn't follow a conventional plot, the language, often described as "baroque," is both ornate and meandering, and the characters are misfits—their queerness has long contributed to the novel's subversive positioning. Yet there is a discernable story: the novel traces the formation and subsequent disintegration of relationships between the "Baron" Felix and Robin, who have a child named Guido, and Robin and Nora, who get together and torment each other, and finally between Robin and the detestable Jenny Petherbridge. These characters and their interactions are observed and abundantly commented upon by Matthew O'Connor, a cross-dressing doctor who serves as the point of connection between them all.

Many critics engage *Nightwood* by pointing to the "bewildering" and complicated nature of Barnes's prose style. "Difficulty" has long been a defining characteristic for high modernist literary works. Caselli implies there is a difference between Barnes's difficulty and the kind of difficulty employed by (male) high modernists such as Eliot or Pound. She writes "the obscurity, unintelligibility, difficulty and impenetrability of Barnes's corpus make it exclusive, but such an exclusivity is not predicated on an inherent nobility of feelings or on an acquired learnedness able to open the most elitist of circles; rather her difficulty figures the unending complexity and the lack of comprehensibility which in her work exempts no text and no one" (3). Some of the difficulties in *Nightwood* are the lack of cause and effect relationships, a refusal to describe coherent subjectivities, a lack of character development, and a denial of narrative closure. If Barnes's work is unintelligible and impenetrable because "meaning" is precluded by the unending complexity and "lack of comprehensibility," the novel performs a type of narrative

failure in which meaning is obscured and, according to many critics, even indecipherable once the reader's interpretive ground has been severely undermined. Theresa de Lauretis writes that this narrative failure threatens the reader, but I argue, this aspect of Barnes's work speaks to a politics of failure. De Lauretis writes that she was so disturbed by *Nightwood* that she could not finish reading the novel despite numerous attempts, and it was not until she read Roland Barthes that she understood why. According to Barthes, society develops various techniques to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to "counter the terror of uncertain signs" "whose polysemy would otherwise produce a traumatic suspension of meaning;" this anchoring function is provided by narrative in literary fiction (qtd de Lauretis 1). *Nightwood* disorients this anchoring function and "threatens the reader as would an incomplete sentence or an illogical statement" (1). In order to get through the novel one must sustain the "traumatic process of misreading—not looking for…narrative or referential meaning, but going instead with the figural movement of the text and acquiescing to the otherness in it" (de Lauretis 1). Here, de Lauretis describes an important effect on the reader—it demands misreading(s). By doing away with conventional forms of literary representation, Barnes refuses readers their familiar practices of interpretation--a practice often premised on finding coherent narrative threads—and instead encourages alternative interpretive strategies aligned with the alterity of the novel.

For de Lauretis *Nightwood* presents a threat or challenge that the reader must overcome, but she does not see this as a peculiar strength of the novel. I argue that *because* it forces the reader to "acquiesce to the otherness in it," the novel's failure(s) both disrupt dominant logic and generate an alternative praxis of interpretation. Moreover, de Lauretis's psychoanalytic reading of *Nightwood* relies on a subject with a developmental narrative, yet Barnes refuses that kind of subjectivity in the novel. De Lauretis's analysis thus misses the creative force of failure. It

serves Barnes's work well to recall what Susan Sontag wrote some years ago, "the function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means" (14). *Nightwood*'s narrative failure(s) produces attentiveness to ambiguity, a resistance to reading for mastery and circumscribed meaning, and refuses to work hierarchically. Furthermore, the narrative failure of *Nightwood* is integral to its distinct aesthetic, which is reflected in the novel's formal experimentation and constructed by its representations of negative subjects.

Nightwood, Failure as Opposition, and Minor Literature

Discussions of Barnes's place in the canon are often underwritten by the assumption that canon inclusion is necessary for a text to "function as a critique." For example, Jane Marcus writes that *Nightwood*'s status as a "strangely canonized and unread" book prohibits its "function as a critique of fascism" (87). Marcus's reading is framed as an attempt to revise modernist scholarship by inserting race, class, and gender in the discussion (87). While her aim is laudable, Marcus's theoretical approach elides the possibility of critique coexisting with marginality. Barnes's personal resistance to success reflects unease with the notion that a work must gain a large audience to be recognized as good art. This works against a feminist tradition that sees inclusion within the canon as a measure of progress or success; Barnes thus becomes a difficult figure of identification for feminism, much like her characters are for her readers. Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature is useful here because it challenges the category major literature. Using Kafka as their model, they theorize a minor literature that works non-hierarchically, relies on a deterritorialization of language, and does not place the struggle for

artistic transcendence over literary predecessors at the heart of an author's impetus for creating literary works. In addition, Walter Benajmin's Kafka is an analogous figure for my study of failure and Barnes. As Benjamin writes, "to do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure" (145). Deleuze and Guattari disagree with Benjamin's argument because it "necessarily implies the full-fledged return of literary and philosophical categories that presuppose a logical, even ontological, priority of content over form" (xvii). I disagree. Their claim misses Benjamin's point, and more importantly, it misses the potential in failure to function both as a disruptive and creative force—*because* Kafka failed to write accordingly, faithfully, to literary convention, to subscribe to mimesis or realism, he engendered a method of writing that produced a modern art, the very art that Deleuze and Guattari claim no longer proposes to " "express" (a meaning), to "represent" (a thing, a being), or to "imitate" (a nature). It is rather a method (of writing)" (Bensmaïa xvii). Barnes also created modernist art and a method of writing by failing to prioritize content over form.

Barnes's editor and friend Emily Coleman wrote a letter enumerating the ways in which both Barnes and her book were failures—an odd move considering it was meant as an appeal to T.S. Eliot to help publish *Nightwood*. Coleman informed Eliot that the book "would probably not have 'a wide sale'; there seems no 'organic' structure; that though the author has 'unconscious' intelligence, she lacks a kind of intellect; that the author cannot create character…has no sense of dramatic action, and can only describe people; the theme is homosexuality. It will thus be apparent…*that the book is an artistic failure*…perhaps you will conclude that the book is worthless—as a novel…but I think you will agree…that it contains as extraordinary writing as has been done in our time…it [is] a document which absolutely must be

published" (qtd Plumb xx brackets italics mine). Due to the extraordinary nature of *Nightwood,* Coleman relied on the novel's failure to convince Eliot how innovative a work it was. I cite Benjamin on Kafka and Coleman's appeal to Eliot because they illuminate how failure functions as an experimental force in aesthetic work that is capable of *opposing* rather than *reinforcing* literary and philosophical categories that prioritize content over form. I find Deleuze and Guattari's positioning of failure in their theory of a minor literature troubling because they neither allow for nor recognize this potential embedded in certain failure(s). This is surprising as it is integral not only to Kafka's specific aesthetic project but to the concept and goals of modernist art in general.

Nevertheless, parts of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature are relevant for a writer like Djuna Barnes, who achieved some critical success with *Nightwood*, but was not as successful (nor as interested in success) as her male modernist counterparts. Barnes was extremely guarded about her writing and publications. She often placed herself outside literary communities and displayed a general distaste for the reading public that exceeded even the fashionable disregard displayed by other modernists. Her response to Margaret Anderson's *Little Review* questionnaire in 1929 is but one example. For the last issue of the publication, a questionnaire of "ten simple but essential questions" was sent out to all of the contributors. Djuna Barnes's reply was "I am sorry but the list of questions does not interest me to answer. Nor have I that respect for the public" (Broe 66). For Deleuze and Guattari, the marginalized writer who is outside of their "fragile community" has all the more possibility to express alternative communities, to forge another consciousness and sensibility (18). Though they do not address the question of gender in their study, by assigning aesthetic and political value to works and authors who have been excluded from the category of major literature, they challenge

a history of criticism that has long placed canon inclusion as a prerequisite for cultural importance. Moreover, their theory of minor literature privileges the marginalized figure because they view a position of exclusion as a site from which a critique of normative ideology and the "possibility of another consciousness" is most forcefully expressed. By placing Barnes within a theory of minor literature, I emphasize the aesthetic and implicit political work performed by rendering negative experiences such as failure and suffering. Rather than view marginalized writers as victimized or excluded by dominant culture, minor literature allows for the reconsideration of such works by emphasizing the ways they depart from and write against the major tradition.

Literature of Alterity and the Rejection of Transcendence

Barnes uses the marginalized figure as an aesthetic point of departure: all of the characters in *Nightwood* are outcasts to varying degrees. As Alfred Kazin points out in a 1937 review, "sooner or later the thought must occur to any reader of this novel that its characters are freaks. In fact, it even occurred to Mr. Eliot, who swiftly goes on to explain however, that to believe that is to miss the point of the novel. But what is the point?" Kazin finds the achievement, if not the point, of the novel lies in Barnes's "full-blooded characterization" of a "romantically tragic attitude to life: it is the theme of a poetic tradition" (*New York Times* 7 July 1937). Barnes's characters' "freak" status engenders stylistic and formal experimentation that departs from the novelistic tradition. Returning to Emily Coleman, its failure is of a "new kind:" *Nightwood*'s stylistic innovation, use of poetic themes, and language experimentation create a literature of alterity through its characterization of unhappy inhabitants. The failure of the

characters in *Nightwood* to find happiness or pleasure, to transcend their alienation, or to achieve anything approaching self-liberation is representative of the modernist "crisis of representation" where the inability of language to capture transcendental essence is consciously articulated.

Yet even though high modernists acknowledged this impossibility, they still staged the search for meaning in their work. As Gillian Beer writes in her study of popular fiction and the romance mode, "all fiction contains two primary impulses: the impulse to imitate daily life, and the impulse to transcend it" (10). Barnes on the other hand, developed a modernist feminine aesthetic of failure in part by working directly against the impulse toward transcendence found in fiction. *Nightwood* differs from high modernist works because it does not stage the "search for meaning" through rhetorical effects or the valorization of art, which is often held up as the sole remaining site of transcendence. By foregrounding her characters' failure to achieve transcendence, Barnes gestures toward the cultural, historical and ideological underpinnings that complicate the notion of self-liberation. Moreover, Barnes figures the marginalized as much more compelling in their failures than those who succeed by normative standards—in this way, she illuminates the value of and assigns integrity to the Other.

Barnes further troubles the measuring stick by which a reader would recognize transcendence by denying the reader access to her protagonist's thoughts. Barnes doesn't offer clarity for the reader—all of the characters in *Nightwood* are outside dominant power structures and inhabit marginalized positions, yet their failures never connote a form of agency. We are seldom given access to Robin Vote's thoughts or feelings, and the other characters deflect attention from their desires through excess verbiage. For example, when Nora meets Robin for the first time at the circus, the reader has no idea why Robin would be there, nor how she got there, only that in the previous section of the novel she left her newly born son and husband who

were in Europe. Following a bizarre description of a string of circus animals, including a lioness that apparently grew agitated at the sight of Robin, Robin and Nora both leave together for the lobby: "Nora said, 'my name is Nora Flood,' and she waited. After a pause the girl said, 'I'm Robin Vote.' She looked about her distractedly. 'I don't want to be here.' But it was all she said; she did not explain where she wished to be. She stayed with Nora until the mid-winter" (55). By refusing the reader narrative continuity through chronological gaps and dialogue omissions, *Nightwood* resists familiar interpretive strategies. I will return to Robin's lack of interiority in a discussion of queer refusal of futurity, but now I want to turn to the figure of Felix and his mixed Jewish ancestry as representative of Barnes's method of foregrounding non-normative characters as a means of creating a literature of alterity. This alterity serves an aesthetic function in that it engenders the modernist "new;" additionally, while it serves an indirect political function, I argue it doesn't offer a direct ideological critique as some critics claim.

The novel begins with the 1880 birth of Felix, the son of a Viennese woman Hedvig, and an Italian Jewish man who masquerades as a German aristocrat named Guido. Felix, "who had come to call himself Baron Volkbein as his father had done before him" (8) is given little by way of background. Barnes writes, "what formed Felix from the date of his birth to his coming to thirty was unknown to the world, for the step of the wandering Jew is in every son. No matter where and when you meet him you feel that he has come from some place—no matter from what place he has come—some country that he has devoured rather than resided in, some secret land that he has been nourished on but cannot inherit, for the Jew seems to be everywhere from nowhere" (7). Felix is described further as "the accumulated and single—the embarrassed" (8) due to "the mingled passions that made up his past, out of a diversity of bloods, from the crux of

a thousand impossible situations" (8). Barnes contextualizes Felix within signifiers that allude to the Jewish diaspora; his mixed Jewish ancestry has made him simultaneously both "the accumulated and single" in Western Europe. Thus early in life, due to his racial status, he "had insinuated himself into the pageantry of the circus and the theater. In some way they linked his emotions to the higher and unattainable pageantry of kings and queens…here he had to neither to be capable nor alien" (11). Felix's fascination with the circus and the theater emerges from a desire to transcend his ugly feelings, which the narrative connects to his Jewish ancestry. Yet the circus does not provide a haven or an alternative community for Felix—in *Nightwood*, there is little solace found for any of the characters. Rather, the circus produced in Felix a "longing and disquiet. The circus was a loved thing that he could never touch, therefore never know. That he haunted them as persistently as he did was evidence of something in his nature that was turning Christian" (12). Although Bombaci terms Felix a "self-hating half-jew" sycophant who has internalized Western anti-Semitism (68), for me, Barnes suggests here the impossibility of community for the racialized and alienated Other in a western Europe dominated by an ideology of whiteness. This is especially poignant given that the novel was written and published during the rise of fascism.

While some critics have maintained that *Nightwood* is not political and even has anti-Semitic passages, many critics like Jane Marcus argue that the "political unconscious" of the novel lies in its first chapter and that *Nightwood* is antifascist when "it triumphs over its own anti-Semitism, when we realize that its characters—Jews, homosexuals, lesbians, transvestites, Gypsies, blacks, and circus performers—were all to perish in the Holocaust" (95). Marcus's reading emphasizes how, regardless of authorial intent, representation can never be divorced from its historical moment; however, Barnes's novel mentions neither the Holocaust nor Nazis

directly. *Nightwood*'s opacity forestalls the *direct* critique of fascism Marcus attributes to the novel. Because *Nightwood* does not examine social context, but rather only describes (often in grotesque and fantastic terms) places, events and people, one has to *bring* that context to the novel to follow Marcus. For a novel that Marcus reads as antifascist, the reader would expect some direct reference to the issue of fascism, a reference that is altogether lacking. I argue the novel's political implications are found in its experimental aesthetic and minor literature status: both reject the canonical premises on which literature is based. Because they lack interiority, cause or effect, and often refuse meaning altogether, these characters contribute to the novel's opacity. While this aesthetic foregrounds the Other and excludes a dominant, normative subject, it does not, as Marcus and others claim, offer a plausible critique of fascism. *Nightwood* does not implore the reader to consider the "ills of society" through a sympathetic depiction of a protagonist. The novel denies the reader an opportunity to anchor their interpretation through a normative prism of a dominant or non-marginalized perspective. *Nightwood* implicitly critiques normative concepts through their negation—representations of normativity are glaringly absent from the narrative. Rather than taking a didactic approach to what Marcus terms the "reversible world" of *Nightwood*, Barnes's aesthetic of failure delineates the politically ambiguous nature of negative emotions, but is open to readings that suggest the importance of a mode of subversion and resistance to normative hegemonic structures.

A Queer Failure: Refusal of Futurity

In this light, failure in *Nightwood* serves more than an aesthetic function and points toward an ideological and ethical critique; yet how are we to measure failure in a book that so

strongly diverges from representations of normativity from which definitions of failure are constructed? *Nightwood* challenges heteronormativity through the queerness of Robin Vote and O'Connor. Shortly before meeting Robin, Felix tells the doctor he "wished a son who would feel as he felt about the "great past," and he would choose to have a son with an "American" because "with an American anything can be done" (39). Felix maintains that to have a son is "to pay homage to our past [and] is the only gesture that also includes the future" (39). Felix's desire to procreate in order to preserve the past and a patriarchal lineage enacts what Lee Edelman describes as the heteronormative ideological tendency to position the Child as a signifier of futurity and redemption. This process, Edelman argues, obscures social and political responsibility and accountability in the present. As he writes in *No Future*:

> The Child, whose mere possibility is enough to spirit away the naked truth of heterosexual sex—impregnating heterosexuality, as it were, with the future of signification by conferring upon it the cultural burden of signifying futurity—figures our identification with an always about-to-be-realized identity. It thus denies the constant threat to the social order of meaning inherent in the structure of Symbolic desire that commits us to pursuing fulfillment by way of a meaning unable, *as* meaning, either to fulfill us or, in turn be fulfilled because unable to close the gap in identity, the division incised by the signifier that "meaning," despite itself, means. The consequences of such an identification both of and with the Child as the preeminent emblem of the motivating end, though one endlessly postponed, of every political vision *as a vision of futurity* must weigh on any delineation of a queer oppositional politics (13)

The "Baron" Felix's desire for a child is problematized by Robin Vote's queerness and her explicit rejection of the Child. Felix meets Robin Vote in Paris, over the course of a strange

evening with the doctor, and subsequently spends hours in museums courting Robin, where he was surprised that her taste "turning from an appreciation of the excellent, would also include the cheaper and debased, with an emotion as real" (42). Robin's queerness is signified by her dressing in clothes from a period "that he could not quite place…She wore feathers of the kind his mother had worn…heavy silks that made her seem newly ancient" (42). Felix soon marries Robin, and they have a child. Yet it becomes clear that Robin has no intention of taking care of the child or of remaining in her marriage. She instead becomes prone to drinking and wandering all evening—and strikes Felix across the face after proclaiming she didn't want the child. She leaves her husband and son, and reappears months later in the quarter with Nora Flood: "she did not explain where she had been: she was unable or unwilling to give an account of herself" (49). Robin's abrupt departure and refusal to account for it, along with her disconcerting reaction to motherhood—at one point she is described as "holding the child high in her hand as if she were about to dash it down, but she brought it down gently" (48)—points to a refusal of the Child as futurity as designed by the patriarchal symbolic order.

Yet Robin's explicit rejection of the Child is odd, even for female modernism. Because Robin has next to no interiority and invites no sympathy from the reader, O'Connor describes her as "outside the 'human type,' a wild thing caught in a woman's skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain" (146). Rather than make a virtue of Robin's failures by explicitly connecting her protagonists' suffering to patriarchy and generating sympathy, Barnes's *Nightwood* renders virtue inoperable. The novel doesn't substitute an admirable desire, such as pursuing a career or avocation, for Robin's apparently unadmirable feelings. In this way, *Nightwood* is more radical than Edelman's characterization of queer negativity, as Robin not only rejects the futurity of the child, she also rejects political and personal accountability in the present, namely through

drunkenness and refusing to communicate. *Nightwood* participates in the modernist mode of innovating form by breaking from generic models commonly associated with women's writing, such as the romance or sentimental fiction: here the virtuous/victorious heroine is absent from the narrative. By denying the reader access to what motivates Robin personally, her inexplicable actions read as queer opposition writ large: Robin is characterized often as an anomaly, and outside the 'human type.' Barnes constructs her opposition in unheroic terms—yet this opposition, figured as negative female subjectivity, carries disruptive power, even if it is entirely unheroic.

This opposition is also evident in her refusal to share Felix's identification with and projection of the always about-to-be-realized identity consolidated onto the figure of the Child. The enigmatic and incomplete figure of Robin enacts an oppositional queerness through refusal and passive inaction. By not participating in marriage and motherhood according to a heteronormative notion of futurity, she is representative of Edelman's concept of the oppositional potential in queer sexualities: "the only queerness that queer sexualities could ever hope to signify would spring from their determined opposition…to the governing fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social subject" (14). *Nightwood* doesn't construct Robin as a realized social subject, and her refutation of the Child and futurity radicalizes both femininity and queerness for a fleeting moment in the text when we consider that Robin leaves her marriage and takes up with Nora Flood, a woman who runs the "strangest "salon" in America, the "paupers" salon for poets, radicals beggars, artists, and people in love; for Catholics, Protestants, Brahmins, dabblers in black magic and medicine" (50). Although Nora's alignment and affinity with other marginalized figures represents a sharp contrast to Felix's fascination with aristocracy and the

cult of the Child, *Nightwood* is *not* about a lesbian who gave up the social privileges of heternormativity in order to be her true self, à la Radclyffe Hall. Robin's desire for Nora, if such it is, is never presented as her reason for leaving her husband and son.

Barnes also thwarts Felix's fascination with aristocracy and the cult of the Child with Felix and Robin's son Guido, a highly ineffective form of futurity. Like the other characters in *Nightwood*, Guido's characterization is peculiar. Instead of employing the tropes typically associated with the Child--vitality, hope and redemption--Barnes figures Guido as representative of weakness, atrophy and disappointment. Felix's desire to "pay homage to the great past" and gesture to the future by having a child seems perverse after Guido's birth: "as time passed it became increasingly evident that his child, if born to anything, had been born to holy decay. Mentally deficient and emotionally excessive, an addict to death; at ten, barely as tall as a child of six, wearing spectacles, stumbling when he tried to run, with cold hands and anxious face…"(107). In Barnes's novelistic realm the Child is not a symbol of redemption. Guido lingers seemingly as a sole reminder of Felix's unhappy past and unfulfilled desire: "in accepting his son the Baron saw that he must accept a demolition of his own life" (108). Yet if we follow the logic of Barnes's reversible world, Guido (like O'Connor and the other characters in *Nightwood*) signifies a disruptive value in anti-normative states—the doctor exclaims "with Guido, you are in the presence of the 'maladjusted.' Wait! I am not using that word in the derogatory sense at all; in fact my great virtue is that I never use the derogatory in the usual sense" (117). Here the doctor not only reinforces the "failure" of Guido as a project of futurity, but also gestures towards Barnes's refusal to make normative notions of virtue or physical and psychological health honorable. *Nightwood* aestheticizes failure in its representations of subjects

who illuminate the facade of normative ideology through queer opposition and self-fashioning, but it does not envision a sustainable alternative.

Rather, Robin Vote embodies disruptive rather than redemptive queerness through a negation that Edelman theorizes as crucial: "we do not intend a new politics, a better society, a brighter tomorrow, since all of these fantasies reproduce the past, through displacement, in the form of the future. We choose instead, *not* to choose the Child, as disciplinary image in the Imaginary past or as site of a projective identification with an always impossible future" (italics original 31). Robin is not constructed through her queerness as a realized social subject—her relationship with Nora ends, and she does not transcend the consciousness that leads her to restless wandering. The ending of the novel finds Nora drawn to a church where she finds Robin crouched on all fours facing her dog: "she began to bark also, crawling after him—barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching" (170). Rather than reading Robin's violent reaction to motherhood and refusal of her husband as a kind of reversion to "prepatriarchal" primitivism (Marcus, 96), the ending suggests a more sophisticated refusal of circumscribed ideology that figures the Child and redemption as futurity. Robin's refusals point to how "the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past" (Edelman 31**).** Robin and Nora do not represent a redemptive future or a new form of social organization, but their queerness is disruptive. Without the moral rectitude of alternatives, *Nightwood* instead emphasizes incoherent subjectivities and aestheticizes the gravity and power of negativity. Throughout its length, *Nightwood* enacts Edelman's queer negativity in its denial of meaning. Aggressively discouraging interpretation, the novel's ending refuses to give the reader narrative closure.

Chapter Four

Negative Feminism and Anti-Development in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*

Like other modernist women writers, Virginia Woolf complicates the genre of the *Bildungsroman* in her first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915) through formal and thematic uses of failure. The young Rachel Vinrace is unable to inhabit the (usually male) space of maturation and earn her place in the world.[30] Unlike the genre's typical male protagonists, Rachel does not achieve significant moral or psychological development through the course of her experience, nor does she go on to live a life of purpose after putting her disappointments and mistakes behind her.

Woolf's novel of "frozen development" raises questions of women's education (or lack thereof), artistic development, and societal position. The story begins as the widowed Willoughby Vinrace ships off his socially awkward daughter Rachel to South America with her Uncle Ridley and Aunt Helen. At the hotel in South America, Rachel meets suitor Terence Hewitt, becomes engaged to him after a brief courtship, and then dies. The novel draws into sharp relief the traditionally masculine narrative form of the *Bildungsroman* by centering it on Rachel, a woman. As Celia Marshik notes, the novel "might be called the anti-grand tour…The outlines of this plot seem familiar (young woman goes abroad, acquires cultural knowledge, and gets married) until the reader considers Rachel's destination. Instead of visiting museums or spas

[30] In *Unseasonable Youth*, Jed Esty argues that modernist literature disrupts-the form of the *Bildungsroman* with the figure of the stunted adolescent. Esty discusses Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929) and Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) as a critique of the masculine *Bildungsroman* because they portray the stasis rather than development of female protagonists.

on the Continent, Rachel is set off the boat on the shores of South America" (856). The unusual location of South America and Rachel's failure to acquire cultural knowledge on her trip reflect English colonial and imperialist attitudes. With their national triumphalism and social indifference, the characters assume there is little cultural knowledge to acquire in this South American locale. That Rachel takes ill and dies after journeying down river to a native village instead of completing her coming of age tale also reflects imperialist attitudes regarding racial Otherness—the novel suggests that mere exposure to the racialized Other infects Rachel, preventing her from becoming a disciplined, civilized, British female subject.

Woolf's first novel lacks the formal experimentation and innovation representative of her middle and late period work, yet *The Voyage Out* is more radical than one might think. Beyond formal innovation, the content of *The Voyage Out* raises the question of whether a woman can be "a self-determining individual within the conventions and institutions of patriarchal society and, through Rachel Vinrace's failure, seems to answer with a resounding 'no' " (Pease 100). Rachel's death is undoubtedly a "no;" however, in this chapter, I depart from Allison Pease's analysis by examining Rachel's characterization within the context of fictional women who, through their resistance to or exclusion from the middle and upper classes, managed to enact an alternative form of femininity in a patriarchal society that did not result in death. In the preceding chapters of this dissertation, I focused on how women modernist writers penned protagonists who reject patriarchal femininity from marginalized subject positions. In failing to meet restrictive codes of conventional femininity, these women are alienated or excluded from their social spheres, but they simultaneously enact an alternative model of feminine subjectivity.

Woolf's first novel renders the British upper-middle-class position as more restrictive than the lower class and/or bohemian subject positions that her less canonical modernist

counterparts constructed in their narratives of failure. There are no viable alternative models of femininity in Woolf's novel, and Rachel does not survive long enough to effectively transgress her class position. Thus the novel suggests that women born into the upper middle class cannot transcend their place, even if they want to. Surprisingly, in *The Voyage Out* the characters who enjoy the most privilege and therefore the most agency are ironically the most vulnerable to unproductive forms of failure. This differs from the other novels in this dissertation, in which women from marginalized positions do not have economic security; yet, despite their marginalized positions, they transgress conventional femininity by enacting subversive forms of failure, even if they suffer a greater social and material cost by doing so.

Woolf does not construct a viable alternative femininity premised on a marginalized subject position in this novel, but as I later show, the main protagonist begins to develop a shadow feminist subjectivity before her untimely death. Rachel's death has long been read as a feminist critique, but I argue here that such a reading overlooks subtler forms of shadow feminism prevalent in modernist women's writing, a form of feminism that Woolf begins to develop in her first novel. Because feminist readings of Woolf's corpus in general neglect shadow feminism, I read *The Voyage Out* here in its own right, without making references to Woolf's later fiction. Such a reading I hope will both illuminate the aspects of shadow feminism in this early novel and highlight how critics tend to read her work through a dominant positivist liberal feminist lens that obscures the aspects of shadow feminism in Woolf's writing.

Woolf herself addressed the difficulty in finding alternative representations of "everyday" women in fiction during her historical moment. She acknowledges in *A Room of One's Own* that women in fiction remain "unsolved problems." In a discussion of the writer Mary Carmichael (whom Woolf made-up), she criticizes the naturalist writer as one who refuses to be limited "to

the respectable houses of the upper middle classes" but who also includes the rooms "where sit the courtesan, the harlot, and the lady with the pug dog" (88). Yet the "majority of women are neither harlots nor ladies" (88). So Woolf asks, what *does* the everyday experience of a woman look like? She imagines asking a woman around age eighty a detail of her life from the past, whereupon a vague look would appear across the woman's face, and she would be able to "remember nothing" (89). Apparently, this is because the woman's life was comprised of a list of domestic duties, now drawn to an end: "all the dinners are cooked: the plates and cups washed; the children set to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished," and so, the novels "without meaning to, inevitably lie" because the "infinitely obscure lives" of everyday women have yet to be recorded (89). Woolf intimates the difficulty for "most" women—"most" is understood to be solidly middle-upper class, neither the "harlots" nor aristocratic "ladies"—to get out from the confines of patriarchy: marriage, child-rearing, and domestic labor. Woolf points out that "most" women don't have a recorded history, a biography, an existence beyond their domestic sphere. An early death for the young Rachel Vinrace, *because* it thwarts her entrance into adult life via marriage, might very well be preferable considering the enforced drudgery of the (non)life of female domesticity that awaits her.[31]

Woolf's first novel refuses to imagine a life for women outside of domestic Victorian middle-class social convention. Rachel's death functions both to critique these values and to advance the form of the novel. This critique and innovation utilizes failure themeatically and formally--as Stanford Freidman notes, the novel "simultaneously narrates a failed *Bildung* for its

[31] As Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes in *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Rachel's death represents Woolf's attempt to "write beyond the ending" of the typical marriage plot, her death "becomes Rachel's protest against marriage as her sole aim" (47-53). Susan Stanford Friedman builds on this argument, claiming the novel triumphs by killing off the traditional life story of upper middle-class British women, thus simultaneously triumphing over "the tyranny of conventional plot." Yet, as she notes "this story of liberation is fundamentally at odds with the sad tale of a young life ended before it had hardly begun" (109).

protagonist and inscribes a successful *Bildung* for its author" (109). Woolf, like many of her modernist counterparts put failure to use for aesthetic purposes, but in *The Voyage Out*, failure serves an ethical purpose for her as well. Failure and a rejection of futurity function in the novels in this study as both a materialist critique of the choices available to women during their historical moment and a critique of a patriarchal heteronormative investment in futurity--particularly a rejection of what Edelman refers to as "the cult of the child"--a concept I discuss in the previous chapters.[32] Rachel's death occurs after she accepts marriage as her fate. Many female protagonists in modernism have a painful and at times ugly relationship to marriage and children. Such protagonists are found in the pages of other modernist writers in this study: Jean Rhys, Nella Larsen, and Djuna Barnes write protagonists who protest hetero-normative institutions through various forms of failure. Although all of these writers have trouble imagining agency for their characters, I argue that failure serves as a channel through which their protagonists more productively reject patriarchal femininity and survive, as opposed to the absolute negation of death.[33] This dissertation examines protagonists who enact forms of shadow feminism—a concept I use throughout this study created by J. Halberstam to describe an "anti-social or negative feminism" that counters liberal positivist feminism (4). While the narratives of Jean Rhys, Nella Larsen, and Djuna Barnes are far from affirmative, and the protagonists far from heroic, they do present alternatives to existing within the confines of prescribed patriarchal femininity. Their failure to adhere to these prescribed forms of femininity simultaneously offers a larger critique.

[32] Edelman uses this concept in *No Future* to delineate how heteronormative ideology centers the figure of the child to give shape to a rhetoric and politics of reproductive futurity—for Edelman, the figure of the queer is constructed as its radical negation.

[33] Nella Larsen's protagonist Helga Crane also, though somewhat ambiguously, dies; however, her death only occurs after she has married a horrible man and is exhausted after giving birth to many children at the end of the novel. Her death is neither redemptive nor heroic, but a harrowing critique of patriarchal institution of marriage and child rearing.

Woolf, unlike the other writers in this dissertation, is canonized as a normative feminist model of success, based on liberal notions of female equality and inclusion. Not surprisingly, critics have yet to recognize aspects of shadow feminism in her work. The aims for this chapter are thus twofold: first, to identify where Woolf's work overlaps with shadow feminism and the modernist feminine aesthetic of failure. Second, to show how *The Voyage Out* forecloses subversive failure as a viable form of resistance to patriarchy because the novel does not imagine a life for women outside the confines of bourgeois whiteness; in doing so, the novel also highlights the class and racial privilege endemic to dominant forms of liberal feminism.

Woolf's Canonicity, Shadow Feminism and Minor Writing

Woolf famously wrote in *A Room of One's Own,* "a woman writing thinks back through her mothers" (97). Yet in her modernist polemic "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" Woolf's roster of "Edwardian" precursors and her canon of "Georgian" writers is entirely male: "Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy I will call the Edwardians; Mr. Foster, Mr. Strachey, Mr. Joyce and Mr. Eliot I will call the Georgians" (319). Although some critics view this list as ironic or strategic, most consider Woolf to have meant that the Edwardian model for a writer is male. Recent scholars of the *fin de siècle* have shown us that a critically acclaimed and widely read group of women--often feminist--authors existed in the generation preceding Woolf, and that Woolf read and in some cases reviewed them (Hite 525). Woolf was ambivalent at best about these works, yet Molly Hite argues that "by refusing to mention these female writers in her canon forming polemics, Woolf helped make them forgotten by much of twentieth-century literary history, or at best, regarded as minor (524). Hite's aim is to show Woolf in connection to

the work of Elizabeth Robins, who was a representative writer of the feminist polemical novel and an Edwardian antecedent for Woolf's modernism. Although Hite's use of Woolf is itself polemical, it overlooks the possibility I raise here: that Woolf may have been in search of a feminism she could not find in these turn-of-the-century feminist writers. Perhaps she could have found a subtler form of feminism in the work of her contemporaries.

Given her exclusion of women writers in her canon-forming polemics, Woolf's injunction that women writers "think back through their mothers" (76) comes across as odd. The idea–carries a different valence for different women. As Halberstam points out, the Oedipal frame stifles other models for thinking about the evolution of feminist politics and also inhibits the creation of new knowledge formations. Moreover, "the model of 'passing down' knowledge from mother to daughter is quite clearly invested in white, gendered…heteronormativity; indeed the system inevitably stalls in the face of…[sexualized and] racialized…scenes of difference" (124). Halberstam invokes postcolonial theorist Saidya Hartman's injunction to "lose your mother" in order to explore a feminist politics that arises from a refusal and a dismantling of the way woman has been defined by—or in the case of black women, excluded altogether from—western philosophy (124). Thus "shadow feminism" is consciously anti-Oedipal. Through processes of negation and refusal to enact a conventional femininity, the daughter is prohibited from inheriting the mother's relationship to perpetuating and securing patriarchal power.[34] Rhys's novel *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, discussed in Chapter 1, demonstrates how "losing the mother" functions in just this way. Julia, the main protagonist, refuses to serve as her dying mother's nursemaid—although she is shunned both by her relatives and polite society when she

[34] Halberstam writes "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).

returns to London from Paris, she has led a life of her own outside the home and domesticity. Although Julia refuses to be a good daughter and sister, and is not afforded approval or financial protection like her sister Nora, her character suggests that poverty and rejection are preferable to living a life confined by the problematic roles that ensure the daughter's inheritance of the mother's relationship to patriarchal power.

Shadow feminism re-frames failure as essential to processes of critique. As I have argued, negativity and failure function as feminist responses to patriarchally defined modes of femininity in less canonical works. Shadow feminisms sit alongside of, and often counter, positivist liberal feminisms. As my previous chapters show, Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature allows us to see how writing *against* tradition contributed to the formation of a new aesthetic, or as they argue of Kafka, an entirely new literature. By using the term "minor literature," I do not mean that literature is minor in the sense that it failed aesthetically or that these writers created lesser, poorer works that were neither critically nor commercially successful. Rather, I use to term to emphasize that these lesser-known women writers were not merely excluded from dominant knowledge and cultural canons, but that they were often uninterested or unwilling to participate in their formation.

Yet Woolf does not comfortably inhabit either side of the binary I am laying out here—while she is not exemplary of the same current of feminist minor literature I locate in this project, I argue that her use of negation in *The Voyage Out* nevertheless evinces a form of shadow feminism. My reading here focuses on aspects of Woolf's negative modernist turn in her first novel. Woolf's more normative feminism appears less conventional through this lense. Nevertheless, the novel has limitations, particularly when juxtaposed with the less ambiguous constructions of a negative feminism and aesthetic of failure located in the work of Rhys, Larsen,

and Barnes. Although Woolf's larger career isn't representative of minor literature, we needn't read her corpus as a unified statement. There are significant differences between her early and later novels, and *The Voyage Out* is not only her first published novel; it is also among her least canonical. My methodological choice to read the novel in its own light without attempting to explain away its problems or oddities by referring to her more "developed" fiction with representations of robust, triumphant feminist characters more clearly positions the novel in relationship to less canonical authors and shadow feminism.

Woolf's critical heroism: failure and the ethics of ambiguity

Woolf's formal experimentation in her first novel offers a critique parallel to the feminine aesthetic of failure enacted by Rhys, Larsen, and Barnes. Notably, Woolf's ambiguity leaves readers uncertain as how to evaluate the characters. These evasive textual elements are endemic to Woolf's modernism and serve an ethical as well as aesthetic function. Woolf, like the other writers in this study, employed a covert didacticism that encourages reading in a way that is attuned to ambiguity rather than mastery. Rebecca Walkowitz's contention that modernism often proposes that "one must risk being bad—uncertain, inconsistent, and unsuccessful—in order to keep being good" is pertinent here (121). Borrowing Edward Said's term "critical heroism," Walkowitz argues that Woolf's modernism was purposefully bad in the sense that she did not replace "euphemisms of British patriotism with explicitness, transparency, or heroic action" and that Woolf expresses her commitment to critical thinking by developing "narrative strategies that are evasive more than *descriptive* or *Utopian"* (123 emphasis original).[35]

[35] Edward Said uses the phrase in *Culture and Imperialism* to describe Woolf and other modernists whose form and content refused clarity and certainty and therefore refused to consolidate hegemonic normative ideology.

Since conventional understanding of what constitutes "good" literature broadly includes narrative clarity, direct representation, and some recognizable form of ethical or moral judgment, the lack of these qualities in Woolf's fiction is, on the surface, perplexing. As E. M. Forrester wrote of Woolf's early short story "Kew Gardens," there is "no moral, no philosophy, nor has it what is usually understood as Form. It aims deliberately at aimlessness, at long loose sentences that sway and meander" (69). This "bad" modernism is ethical as well as aesthetic because it resists literal and deliberate or unequivocal positions. This ethical evasiveness, then, works against totality and reading for mastery, resisting hegemonic knowledge formations. Moreover, Woolf's evasive modernism "entails a heroic unwillingness to rest in the consolidation of previously existing attitudes" (Walkowitz 121). In this sense, Woolf, much like the minor modernist women writers in this study, also risked being "bad" in order to be "good."

Failure as a means of undermining traditional form was necessary to engender a "new" modernist aesthetic, yet these writers also demonstrate a commitment to failure as an ethical practice. Although failure functions differently according to author and text, there are common elements that construct a distinct feminine aesthetic of failure. One characteristic or defining technique is that their narratives privilege opacity over clarity, leading the reader to challenge the concept of reading for mastery and to become attentive to ambiguity. Woolf employs opacity textually and formally in her first novel. Ellipses and dashes, incomplete and unclear thoughts and shifts in perspectives of the characters abound. The novel's formal experimentation undermines narrative tradition where meaning is more easily deciphered, and for this reason the book is disruptive. Many modernist writers emphasize the disruptive power a book can have on a reader by undermining literary tradition. Indeed, undergirding modernism as an aesthetic movement was the effort by artists to meet Pound's injunction "to make it new." Women

modernist writers, much like their modernist male counterparts, used thematic and formal failure to both subvert and innovate literary tradition. The ethical function of the feminine aesthetic of failure is often implemented through the use of covert didacticism, a concept that pertains to how modernist literature "fails" as doctrine but is nevertheless morally instructive.[36] By innovatively undermining traditional literary form, Woolf presents us with a covert didacticism and not simply with formal "failure." This undermining of form serves an ethical as well as aesthetic function because it exemplifies how modernist women writers refused to consolidate social norms embedded in traditional literary form. It is the feminine aesthetic of failure at work in these novels that make them more than feminist protest novels—at the same time, they also challenge the tension between art and polemic that energized so many modernist works.

As I have argued in previous chapters, another characteristic of the feminine aesthetic of failure is that it entails narratives of disintegration rather than development, redemption or progress: Jean Rhys's *The Voyage in The Dark* shows the downward spiral of Anna Morgan; Nella Larsen's Helga Crane makes one poor decision after another, -finally ending up on death's door after giving birth to numerous children and marrying a repulsive preacher; Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* ends with Robin Vote abjectly positioned on all fours, barking at a dog in a secluded woodland church. Woolf's *The Voyage Out* does not precisely fit this mold. Rachel Vinrace doesn't disintegrate, or slowly become undone. Instead, she is unformed from the outset: she is "silent, vague, and more of an absence than a presence"; she "knows nothing; she thinks and feels, but she is an outsider to a system that produces knowing individuals" (Pease 102). Similarly, Jed Esty argues that Rachel assumes a "stubborn social passivity," underscoring how

[36] Celia Marshik uses this term in *British Modernism and Censorship* to describe how high modernist writers were polemical and didactic through their use of irony and satire in ways that counter conventional readings of modernism as primarily an aesthetic movement. Similarly, I argue that these novels serve an ethical function through their formal and thematic use of failure.

she serves a null function—she is a fictional device that "disrupt[s] the coming of age plot" (129). Rather than portray a subjectivity that disintegrates or unravels, Woolf figures Rachel as stunted from the beginning of the novel. She is 24, yet acts like a teenager. Woolf denies her emotional maturity by writing her early demise. As Helen thinks, after Rachel's death "It seemed strange—so unbelievable. Why, only three weeks ago—only a fortnight ago, she had seen Rachel; when she shut her eyes she could almost see her now, the quiet, shy girl who was going to be married. She thought of all that she would have missed had she died at Rachel's age, the children, the married life, the unimaginable depths and miracles that seemed to her, as she looked back, to have lain about her, day after day, and year after year" (360). Woolf tells us again that an early death prevented Rachel not only from maturing but from entering a process of maturity that is only possible after a life of marriage, children, and domesticity.

Woolf disrupts the coming of age plot most prominently by placing Rachel's death so soon after she accepts her first engagement proposal. Her death thwarts an otherwise inevitable life of confinement to female domesticity expected from women of Rachel's class and racial status. That Woolf kills off Rachel after presenting her as an unformed absence rather than a person capable of desire and self-knowledge bleakly suggests that there are no alternatives to marriage for upper-middle class women. Moreover, Woolf has Rachel die of a fever—it isn't that Rachel chooses death, but that death chooses her, highlighting an utter lack of autonomy. Rachel's death is depicted as lacking in impact in a way that illustrates her ineffectual and formless characterization—though the various characters are saddened, the novel has two subsequent chapters describing life after Rachel, and neither the characters nor their actions are dramatically affected by her death. Pease writes, "importantly and notably the novel begins and ends in others' stories, as if to remind the reader that no one person is so remarkable as to inform

what is knowable and significant" (101); however, it seems to me that both Rachel's formlessness and the novel's form highlight the lack of ability for women like Rachel to do much of *anything* remarkable, or to have experiences outside of domesticity and marriage.

Throughout the novel, Rachel repeatedly expresses a desire for alternatives, but she clearly lacks knowledge of what those alternatives might be. For example, early in the novel she says, "No, I shall never marry" (62) to Mrs. Dalloway; she later says men and women in general "should live separate; we cannot understand each other; we only bring out what's worst" (174). Additionally, after Rachel and Terence decide to marry, Terence says to Rachel "[s]ometimes I think you're not in love with me and never will be…You don't want me as I want you—you're always wanting something else" (352). Rachel thinks "[i]t seemed to her now that what he was saying was perfectly true, and that she wanted many more things than the love of one human being—the sea, the sky….[S]he could not possibly want only one human being" (352). After this thought, she replies to Terence, "let's break it off then"; however, the "words did more to unite them than any amount of argument….They knew that they could not separate; painful and terrible it might be, but they were joined forever" (353). Curiously, and almost absurdly, Rachel is certain she does not want to accept marriage and romantic love as her sole aim in life, but at the same time that she has no idea of what else to do, and will accept being "painfully and terribly" joined to him "forever." Moreover, the things Rachel wants—the sea, the sky—cannot be concretely possessed. Death then, accidental or not, seems the only alternative.

Critics tend to read Rachel's death as a liberal feminist critique. For example, Christine Froula argues that Rachel's death signifies "not only the power of female initiation structures to overwhelm female desire when it ventures to imagine a different future" but also the difficulties Woolf confronted in trying to imagine an alternative to the female initiation plot (63). Froula

goes on to claim, however, that Woolf's "more powerful representations of female artists in her later female *Künstlerromane*" enables us to interpret "her representation of female initiation and authority in *The Voyage Out* not as an ultimate failure but as a challenging and transforming critique, and further as an allegorical measure of the very great odds that Woolf herself conquered in forging her own powerful artistic authority" (63). Froula's focus on later "powerful" representations of female artists who manage to triumph, as Woolf did herself (artistically, at least), underscores how feminism is bound up with notions of progress and positivity, and highlights the success/failure dichotomy so prevalent in conventional feminisms. These representations are also destabilized through a close reading of *The Voyage Out*. By not turning to Woolf's later representations of successful female artists in an effort to redeem Rachel, we more clearly understand how the liberal success/failure feminist dichotomy is constructed and normalized. We might also recognize how the critical tendency to privilege a liberal normative feminism obscures shadow feminism. Incidentally, this binary gets reiterated by the fact the Woolf's subsequent novels are considered more successful as works of literature as well. Moreover, although understandable, the success/failure binary neglects how negativity and failure were--and undoubtedly remain--fundamental aspects of feminine experience. As I have argued in the chapters in this dissertation, negativity and failure are crucial to the formulation of an alternative feminist response that is neither totalizing in its negation of the protagonist, nor mired in a redemptive plot complete with a triumphant protagonist. The narratives of disintegration penned by "minor" women modernists employ a shadow feminism that few critics have recognized. Woolf is far from occupying a marginal or "minor" status—she is acknowledged alongside James Joyce as one of the most canonical modernist novelists—but it is striking how much her first novel of anti-development shares with minor

writers. Woolf's novel formally disrupts the masculine *bildungsroman*; however, her protagonist's negation functions differently, and less subversively than the other minor writer's characters who enact feminine negativity as an alternative to patriarchal femininity.

Shadow Feminism and the Limitations of Class

Unlike the other protagonists in this dissertation, Rachel Vinrace's negative affect is limited in its subversiveness. While most critics of *The Voyage Out* (rightly) read Rachel's death as a symbolic representation of how the British social structure destroys the female artist who desires to stray from the path of female domesticity, I consider here how Rachel's inability to transgress or transcend these boundaries *except in illness and death* illuminates a more complex critique of her class privilege and racial status. Allison Pease examines how boredom in the novel functions as a critique of the individual and the project of enlightenment, but I am interested in showing here how boredom is also linked to a gendered, upper-middle class status, a class position Rachel is unable to transgress. The denizens of Rhys's, Larsen's, and Barnes's demimondes despite (or because of) their lower class status participated in forms of cosmopolitanism that were not sought by the upper-middle class women in Woolf's novel. Although these minor writer's protagonists fail and are marginalized, they have a degree of self-determination and reject authority even if it means they will be further marginalized. By contrast, Rachel does not reject patriarchal or class-based modes of femininity by refusing to embody her prescribed upper-middle class gendered position; rather, she accedes to it and then dies. My project suggests that failure might be conceived as a more effective means of

subversion and resistance for a larger range of women. In other words, while failure is a possible outcome for all, many lack the leisure time required for boredom.

This is not to say Woolf's novel does not function as a feminist critique; though implicit, it critiques a patriarchal class-based society that constructs women as "unknowing" subjects. The narrative goes to great lengths to point out Rachel's sheltered existence and naivety. Here is but one of many examples from the novel: "As for Rachel, she had scarcely walked through a poor street, and always under the escort of father, maid, or aunts" (62). Woolf's characterization of Rachel as a naïve, unknowing subject raises a larger point—Rachel's resistance isn't taken seriously by the other characters in the novels, and by critics of the novel, because it doesn't seem intentional. But shadow feminism doesn't require intent—by recognizing and reading for the implications of feminist acts that are divorced from identity based politics and neoliberal notions of progress, we are then able to acknowledge modes of resistance that, because they depart from conventional feminism, might not otherwise be apparent. Rachel begins to develop shadow feminist subjectivity before she dies, but the novel suggests her class position hinders an embrace of failure as a means of subversive means of resistance to patriarchy.

From the outset, Rachel is viewed by the society Woolf describes as less than a full human subject, not surprising given that patriarchal society sees women as daughters to be given away by the father to a husband. At the beginning of the novel, Rachel's father introduces the people aboard the ship and neglects entirely to mention her, highlighting her absence; in Pease's words, "if she is present to him, it is as a possession, like the goats he transports to South America" (Pease 108). Rachel's frozen adolescent quality functions as an inadvertent resistance to heteronormativity. Critics recognize this, as Jed Esty writes, she "naively resists patriarchal authority by questioning its outcomes and opting out of its sexual arrangements" (129). Rachel's

questioning of gender convention is perceived by other characters as symptomatic of immaturity, of stunted development, not as a developed form of resistance. That she can and does opt out of gendered conventions is not seen as disruptive by those around her, but rather a signifier that she is uninitiated into the prescribed gender roles expected from women of her class. An early encounter with Rachel and her aunt Helen illustrates this point. Woolf describes Helen leaving the dinner table due to boredom: "At the door she glanced back instinctively at Rachel, expecting that as two of the same sex they would leave the room together. Rachel rose, looked vaguely into Helen's face and remarked with her slight stammer, 'I'm going out to t-t-triumph in the wind' " (19). Although here she refutes gender convention by remaining at the table after her Aunt departs, Rachel hardly "triumphs in the wind." Her refusal reads as more of a goof than a subversive act. Rachel's resistance isn't taken seriously because it doesn't seem intentional, but, as this study shows, shadow feminism doesn't necessarily require intent. Although Rachel doesn't identify as a feminist, her actions signify a form of resistance to a reader attuned to shadow feminism. Representations in literature remind us that the political can be less about the subject's identification and more about the implications of the subject's actions or thought. Shadow feminism is thus a valuable analytic for revaluating women in literature and neglected women writers, because it encourages attunement to the spaces and gaps that may be misunderstood as passivity or naivety, and reframes them by reading those attributes as resistance rather than weaknesses.

Additionally, Rachel's nascent shadow feminism functions to highlight Helen and the other characters' conventionality and problematic qualities. Although Rachel's resistance is interpreted as naivety by the other characters in the novel, intent does not diminish her status as a shadow feminist figure for the reader. Her character's illegibility highlights the difficulty of

transgressing middle/upper class normative roles. The lower class protagonist's enactment of feminine failure in the minor modernist novels are more or less legible to both the readers of and other characters in the novel. Rachel's class status inhibits her from being as potent as other shadow feminist working class/bohemian protagonists.

Her Aunt Helen refers to her as "an unlicked girl, no doubt prolific of confidences" (19). These confidences are viewed as blunders by polite society because Rachel has had little to no social experience, nor has she been properly socialized. Helen, "woman of action" (19) who consistently aligns agency with men, views Rachel's inexperience with great distaste, and blames Rachel's father for her poor education. After the older, married Mr. Dalloway kisses Rachel, she relays the story in a disturbed way to Helen. Helen can "hardly restrain herself from saying out loud what she thought of a man [Rachel's father] who brought up his daughter so at the age of twenty-four she scarcely knew that men desired women and was terrified by a kiss. She had good reason to fear that Rachel had made herself incredibly ridiculous" (86). Rachel inadvertently thwarts convention because in Helen's view, she hasn't been disciplined to behave according to gendered conventions. Contrary to her purported independence and intellectual interests, Helen still adheres to the disciplining of women. She reinforces patriarchy, and despite all her bohemian and romantic airs, she behaves conventionally when doting on her husband. As Terence Hewitt, Rachel's fiancé in the novel, observes of Helen, "she who was all truth to others was not true to her husband, was not true to her friends if they came in conflict with her husband" (242). Woolf constructs Rachel as obliviously operating in a mode of negative femininity, which is viewed disapprovingly by Helen—Helen disapproves because Rachel is not acting accordingly to prescriptive femininity. Rachel's class status precludes her shadow feminism from becoming developed and legible by characters within the narrative—yet this is,

ultimately I argue, part of Woolf's larger critique. Early on the voyage, "Helen…wondered sometimes what Rachel *did* do with herself? She had meant vaguely to go and see" (italics original 30). Following Helen's thought, Woolf writes:

> At that moment Rachel was sitting in her room doing absolutely nothing…Rachel considered it her room, and there she would sit for hours playing very difficult music, reading a little German, or a little English when the mood took her, and doing—as at this moment—absolutely nothing. The way she had been educated, joined to a fine natural indolence, was of course partly the reason of it, for she had been educated as the majority of the well-to-do girls in the last part of the nineteenth century were educated…But there was no subject in the world which she knew accurately. Her mind was in the state of an intelligent mans in the beginning of the reign of Queen Elizabeth; she would believe practically anything she was told, invent reasons for anything she said. The shape of the earth, the history of the world, how trains worked, or money was invested, what laws were in force, which people wanted what, and why the wanted it, the most elementary idea of a system in modern life—none of this had been imparted to her by any of her professors or mistresses. (31)

Woolf critiques the education of "well-to-do" girls, implying that this system inhibits women from becoming not only intellectually astute but remotely competent in "modern life." Rachel's doing "absolutely nothing" is shown here to be class-based, and because such behavior was expected--even cultivated--among women of her class, her "doing nothing" does not function subversively as does the passivity enacted by Rhys's Anna or Larsen's Helga, working class

protagonists whom, as I have shown in previous chapters, enact failure as an alternative feminist subjectivity.

Those novels depicted women who rejected or failed at the work made available to them. As I have argued, those protagonists signify a Bartleybian politics of resistance based on failure and refusal to perform their prescribed roles.[37] Rachel's class-position, rather than introducing the problem of work, makes evident a classed aspect of femininity—her upper middle class boredom. This class-based distinction marks a key difference between boredom and failure: failure (though not categorically) may take the form of a subversive doing-nothingness, while boredom is symptomatic of doing-nothing. Pease's work on *The Voyage Out* doesn't take up failure as a possible form of resistance, nor does it critique how boredom is tied to class privilege, a position I argue that Rachel occupies and one that denies how working-class position allows for alternative forms of patriarchal refusal and femininity. Negativity and failure have a greater capacity to subvert these gendered norms than boredom.

This is not to say that Rachel's boredom does not function as a critique of the British patriarchal system that enforced idleness on women of the privileged classes. As Pease notes, enforced idleness was a "generational plague, observed and rebelled against by Woolf and her contemporaries" (103). Rachel is not idle but she is often bored. She is described as a talented self-taught pianist, an unintended benefit of an otherwise bleak educational system: "this system of education had one great advantage. It did not teach anything, but it put no obstacle in the way of any real talent that the pupil might chance to have. Rachel, being musical, was allowed to learn nothing but music" (32) but her passion for music cannot possibly amount to anything

[37] As I discuss in previous chapters, Larsen's Helga Crane quits her job as an instructor at the all black college because of ideological disagreements with the administration, thus coding her refusal as political. Rhys's heroines are constantly quitting jobs or getting fired from them—yet in this way Rhys exposes both how capitalism exploits women and valorizes the integrity of those women who are victimized (but also reject) it.

professionally, as women were not concert pianists, and Woolf frames Rachel's musicality as the development of a natural talent resulting from having the leisure time to indulge in practice. Rachel is helpless in every other regard, thus her artistic ability is meaningless to everyone but her.

The novel only delineates two subject positions that avoid death and derision: the white male position with varying degrees of agency based on class and social position, and the disciplined, married or soon to be/engaged white female position. That Woolf would only later represent a third, alternative feminine subjectivity represented as the successful woman artist who triumphs and doesn't die in her novels, is telling of how dominant feminist aims are framed in liberal terms as freedom and equality or death. The tendency in dominant feminism to affirm a success/failure dichotomy that is not necessarily achievable also ignores the neoliberal logic of the dichotomy. Furthermore, it elides the position of a historical (and in many ways, ongoing) negative feminine subjectivity that was, for some women, the *only* available position outside of a white patriarchal defined femininity.

Unexamined Norms and Invisible Others

In *The Voyage Out*, characters that are neither white men nor disciplined white women are marginalized from the narrow British world in the hotel and villas of the fictive town of Santa Marina. Those most conspicuously outside the two subject positions that matter are the nameless town locals in the fictive locale of Santa Marina—which was previously colonized by Spain and Portugal—and the (also) nameless "Indian" natives encountered in the remote village. Both the locals and natives are primitivized and seen as exotic specimens by the characters in the

novel to such a degree it is unclear to the reader how Woolf viewed the ethical problems of imperialism.[38] To make the matter murkier, neither the village natives nor the local population are given interiority. When trying to convince Helen to go on the five-day river expedition to the village (where Rachel catches the fever that causes her death), Mr. Flushing explains "the place—a native village—was certainly well worth seeing before [returning] to England" (brackets mine 260). When the group approaches the native village, they spot a herd of wild deer, and Hirst exclaims "I've never in my life seen anything bigger than a hare!...What an ass I was not to bring my Kodak!" (279). The British tourists view the jungle and village as if it were constructed for the sole purpose of their amusement: " 'It almost reminds one of an English Park,' said Flushing" (280); or a mere tourist spectacle, a "sight that aroused childlike excitement in them, dissipating their gloom" (279).

As is typical in much imperialist era literature (most famously *Heart of Darkness*), the primitive jungle unsettles the civilized, rational, English mind. Although Helen doesn't pull a Kurtz and descend into full-blown madness, once in the rural village she "stand[s] by herself in a sunny space among the native women, [and is] exposed to presentiments of disaster" (brackets mine 285). Wandering in the jungle, Terence and Rachel have what can only be described as a psychedelic experience, shifting out of temporal awareness and consciousness, and somehow emerge engaged to be married. Woolf describes Rachel walking through the jungle feeling "the overpowering sense of unreality. This body of his was unreal; the whole world was unreal" (282) next, there is blank space and Terence says, " 'what's happened?'…Why did I ask you to marry me? How did it happen?' " Rachel replies: " 'Did you ask me to marry you?' she

[38] For more on Woolf and imperialism, read her essay *Three Guineas* her most complete attempt to theorize the relationship between class, sex, capital, and empire. Also see Christine Froula's *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilization, Modernity*. Froula examines most of Woolf's oeuvre in the context of Bloomsbury's engagement with aesthetics, politics and the continuing project of Enlightenment. Froula makes a convincing case that Bloomsbury modernism was committed to human rights and focuses on the social significance of Woolf's work.

wondered. They faded far away from each other, and neither of them could remember what had been said" (282). The unfamiliar space of the native's village induces a dream/drug-like state for them.

Shortly after, they encounter a group of native women, whose racial difference serves as impetus to draw Terence and Rachel back together and back to reality:

> Stepping cautiously, they observed the women, who were squatting on the ground in triangular shapes, moving their hands, either plaiting straw or kneading something in bowls…The women took no notice of the strangers, except that their hands paused for a moment and their long narrow eyes slid round and fixed upon them with the motionless inexpressive gaze of those removed from each other far, far beyond the plunge of speech. Their hands moved again but the stare continued…in the dusk the solemn eyes of babies regarded them, and old women stared out too. As they sauntered about, the stare followed them…As she drew apart her shawl and uncovered her breast to the lips of her baby, the eyes of a woman never left their faces, although they moved uneasily under her stare, and finally turned away rather than stand there any longer….But soon the life of the village took no notice of them; they had become absorbed in it. The women's hands became busy again with the straw…if they spoke, it was to cry some harsh unintelligible cry. Voices rose when a child was beaten, and fell again…Seeking each other, Terence and Rachel drew together under a tree…They turned away and began to walk through the trees, leaning, without fear of discovery, upon each other's arms. They had not gone far before they began to assure each other once more that they were in love…(284-285).

In this passage, the native's gaze is described as animal like. They seemingly communicate by emitting "harsh cries" rather than a systematic language, and they are "far beyond the plunge of speech." Yet the natives described here are mothers with children, engaging in a form of domestic labor. The village offers a primitivized version of what waits for Rachel in marriage—for it is not *any* racial Other but a specifically domestic, feminine racialized Other. Yet Rachel doesn't identify with these women; rather, under their peculiar scrutiny Terence and Rachel seek one another. This construction of the feminized racial Other consolidates their shared national British and white identity, while the remote village simultaneously provides an exotic locale where they are able to shed convention long enough to express their romantic love, only to be brought back to "reality" where they reach an agreement that their union will be legitimized in marriage, which in turn serves to consolidate the British state. For Rachel and Terence, "this is Happiness" (284). It is through the Otherness of the racialized women that the two Brits are brought together by a hazy commitment. While Woolf does not use the figure of the racialized Other to construct a narrative of a healthy western heteroromance here, the racial Other nevertheless serves as a device to unite the two British subjects. Many critics have pointed to Woolf's characteristic obliqueness as indication of an implied condemnation of imperialism.[39] While this novel reflects what has come to be widely regarded as Woolf's general avoidance of direct polemic in her fiction, I have argued that her indirect writing technique constructs a covert didacticism aimed at forwarding feminism and a critique of patriarchy. Moreover, as I discussed earlier, part of what constitutes Woolf's ethical modernism is her formal and textual ambiguity. Yet in this instance, the ambiguity the novel shows toward imperialism and her construction of non-Western figures remain problematic. Although Woolf was undoubtedly a committed social

[39] Kathy Phillip's book *Virginia Woolf Against Empire* is an example, as she points to Woolf's oblique and indirect fiction as implicitly anti-imperialist, but its analysis is ultimately too simple do justice to either Woolf's work or to the subject of imperialism.

critic, there has yet to be a convincing argument that shows *The Voyage Out* to be explicitly anti-imperialist.

In comparison, In the tourist town of Santa Marina, the South American staff at the hotel mostly seem to rip heads off of chickens: "they kill hens down there…they cut their heads off with a knife—disgusting" (251). Rachel, curious about the hotel's staff, "looked down at the kitchen premises, the wrong side of hotel life" where she sees an old woman chase a chicken, her "face…expressive of furious rage, as she ran she swore in Spanish." The woman, having caught the chicken, "cut its head off with an expression of vindictive energy and triumph combined" (252). Rachel is fascinated by the "blood and ugly wriggling" but is shaken out of her trance by a British woman who comments "I daresay its more humane than our method" (125). The woman's observation points again to how the racialized Other consolidates a shared Britishness and establishes racial/ethnic difference between the local worker and herself and Rachel. Moreover, the passage exposes layers of colonization here—the locals speak Spanish, as they were colonized first by Spain and then Britain. Rhys's novels similarly construct black women on the Caribbean colonial island as outside of the traditional symbolics of white patriarchal order—due to slavery, only white women and men had a gender, as slaves were property.[40] But Rhys's protagonists despise their whiteness and envy the outside-ness of black women. Even if Rhys's protagonists cannot account for their own racism, they explicitly desire (however problematically) a space outside of white patriarchal femininity. Woolf's Rachel, on the other hand, rarely acknowledges racial difference except to marvel at the village native women and children, or at the kitchen staff when they murder chickens. She never critiques, acknowledges or examines her whiteness, even when she finds other white British people deplorable. This

[40] See Hortense Spiller's essay "Mammas Baby, Papa's Maybe" for more on how slavery defined gender for white men and women.

unexamined privilege of whiteness and the character's blindness toward racial inequality and colonial power makes *The Voyage Out* a far less sophisticated treatment of race and imperialism than the novels of Woolf's minor modernist counterparts, who featured race as a structuring principle in their narratives.

Woolf does not give the Santa Marina town workers or the village natives names, individualization, interiority or agency. Predictably, neither the remote native society nor the town locals are desired by or accessible to Rachel, thus negating the possibility for a non-white model of female subjectivity. Moreover, within the English microcosm that is the hotel, the white privileged women who refuse normative forms of patriarchal femininity do not serve as viable models of alternative female subjectivity either. Evelyn, who was born to a couple who lived out of wedlock, and who also refuses at the end of the novel to be married, is depicted as a loud-mouthed, obnoxious woman who has naive ideas about social and moral reform. She babbles to Rachel:

> 'I belong to a club in London. It meets every Saturday, so it's called the Saturday club. We're supposed to talk about art…what I'm going to tell them is that…we'd better talk about life for a change. Questions that really matter to people's lives, the White Slave Traffic, Woman's Suffrage, the Insurance Bill…I'm certain that if people like ourselves were to take things in hand instead of leaving it to police and magistrates, we could put a stop to—prostitution'—she lowered her voice at the ugly word 'in six months.' (248).

Evelyn is clearly not to be taken seriously as a viable example of a feminist radical who chooses to work on behalf of the oppressed or an agent of social justice. She has no grasp of material reality for women sex workers, just that they are doing "beastly things" and they should stop

(249). Since Evelyn doesn't value art, she also doesn't share Woolf's belief that art can be empowering for a woman. She functions as a straw man for Woolf's later claims that the female artist enacts a positive and liberating form of femininity. The dearth of empowered or admirable female characters makes Rachel's alienation obvious to the reader. Woolf's novel effectively renders the suffocating sense of being trapped in a world where the only two operative subjectivities are the white male with agency or the white disciplined/married female, making death seem a preferable if not unfortunate outcome.

The Voyage Out suggests that women cannot transgress their race and classed based position—this differs greatly from Rhys, Larsen, and Barnes who acknowledge the constraints of these two subject positions in their narratives but also embrace a third position, an alternative found in a failed patriarchal feminine subjectivity. While this negative or failed female subjectivity is not stable or necessarily desirable, it functions as both a critique and alternative to normative modes of femininity. Failure may not be comfortable or glamorous, but it beats bourgeois conformity or death. Yet Woolf's novel makes a point to foreclose failure with survival as possible. Rachel begins to develop in a way that enacts a negative female subjectivity, but she takes ill and dies. Thus while her death is, as critics have noted, a critique of patriarchal society, it also obscures alternative positions available to those who occupy negative feminist positions.

Intimations of Negative Femininity Thwarted

While Rachel does not enact a subversive failure, she begins to criticize and refute societal convention toward the end of the novel, a development of negative feminism that is

halted by her death. Rachel, although naïve and far from self-determined, never fails to voice her desire, even if in a passive or confusing way. For example, Rachel's fiancé Terence goes on a diatribe against the unfair treatment and neglect of women's lives that in some ways prefigures Woolf's argument *A Room of One's Own*: "the lives of women of forty, of unmarried women, of working women…one knows nothing whatever about them…it's the man's view that's represented you see…Doesn't it make your blood boil? If I were a woman I'd blow someone's brains out" (245). Rachel's response is to go "over and over the course of her twenty-four years" in a laboriously long and uneventful paragraph which details the daily domestic chores and dull childhood she led with her two spinster Aunts. Rachel concludes with saying "A girl is more lonely than a boy. No one cares in the least what she does. Nothing's expected her. Unless one's very pretty people don't listen to what you say…And that is what I like" (248). Though seemingly a passive response, Rachel here expresses a self-determined desire to carry on how she pleases, with music for example, without interference or the pressure from expectations that one would—or could—actually contribute to society. She expresses a preference for neither freedom in liberal terms nor death, but rather to do as she likes, liberated from the surveillance and expectations that would follow her if she were conventionally desirable or 'pretty.'

Rachel's nascent negative feminism is evident after she had a particularly frustrating day that included an offensive sermon in the chapel, being held captive to Evelyn's inane rants, and a cornering by Miss Allan, a batty elderly woman who has carried with her for over twenty six years a jar of Crème de Menthe that she insists is a gentleman named Oliver. Evelyn presses Rachel, asking her, "Do you *believe* in anything?" (249). Rachel "her mind forcing her to say the things that one usually does not say" replies, "But I don't believe in God, I don't believe in Mr. Bax" and, she adds, pointing to a picture of Evelyn's dead mother "I don't much believe in

her" (250). Here Rachel rejects God, religious convention, the figure of Mr. Bax the Anglican minister, and Evelyn's dead mother. These refutations intimate a negative feminism, particularly since she rejects the dead mother—although she doesn't literally lose her mother here, she makes a similar effort by rejecting these normative cultural authorities.

Rachel rejects cultural inheritance, and religion, also a powerful source of sexism and gendered expectations. After this incident, Rachel makes a break for her room, but she is further delayed by a crippled, deaf Mrs. Paley who blocks her exit. At that moment, Rachel understandably felt "repressed now by…the imposition of ponderous stupidity, the weight of the entire world. Thus tormented, she would twist her hands together, for all things were wrong, all people stupid" (301). Rachel is then subject to an interminable tea party with this dreadful company, after which she lashes out at her Aunt Helen, "Thank God, Helen, I'm not like you! I sometimes think you don't think or feel or care or do anything but exist!...You see that things are bad, and you pride yourself on saying so. It's what you call being honest; as a matter of fact it's being lazy, being dull, being nothing. You don't help! You put an end to things.' " (305). Although Rachel is in part merely upset with Helen because she initially refused her permission to go on the river trip to the native village with Terence and others, her critique is still scathing. Helen and Rachel go on the trip, where Rachel accepts Terence's marriage proposal.

Thus, just as Rachel's negative feminism emerges, she begins to lose it. Another example of Rachel's negative feminism occurs when Rachel and Terence return from the trip as an official couple, and Rachel receives congratulatory notes on their engagement. Rachel exclaims to Terence, " 'I never fell in love, if falling in love is what people say it is, and it's the world that tells the lies and I tell the truth. Oh what lies—what lies! (294). Objecting to the homogenous, seemingly standardized language used to congratulate her in their notes, Rachel

feels that by accepting marriage, she has acquiesced to the role of wife in polite patriarchal bourgeois society. Rachel describes feeling revolted: "[t]hat any one of these people had felt what she felt…or had even the right to pretend for a single second that they were capable of feeling it, appalled her almost as much as the church service had done…and if they didn't feel a thing why did they pretend to?" (294). Here, Rachel's perturbation at something as superficially innocuous as a social nicety functions as an indication of a deeper rejection of normative values, a rejection that overlaps with negative feminism. When Terence tries to comfort her, extolling the virtues of one of the letter writers, a Mrs. Thornsbury who has had many children, likening her to " 'an old tree murmuring in the moonlight or an old river going on and on' "(294). Rachel repudiates him and Mrs. Thornsbury, saying, " 'I won't have eleven children…I won't have the eyes of an old woman. She looks at one up and down, as if one were a horse' " (294). Although Rachel's worry is quickly ameliorated—the two begin to discuss their future as a married couple and Rachel resumes writing replies to the offensive letters—the chapter ends with her realization and acknowledgement that Terence's love will never be enough, that "she could not possibly want only one human being" (302). The rejection of children, futurity and her questioning of marriage as a woman's sole means of fulfillment suggests a negative feminism is developing, but Rachel takes ill and dies before this subjectivity matures.

Woolf experiments with women's blocked agency in *The Voyage Out.* By showing Rachel's self-determination begin to emerge only to have her fall ill and die, she refuses to write the dominant feminist corrective to the normative script with a heroine that triumphs. In this sense, the novel has much in common with the narratives of her less canonical women writers who created an aesthetic of failure, an aesthetic intrinsic to their modernist turn. Woolf's first novel is also steeped in failure—the experimentation in form, prose, and the young protagonist's

death engage concepts of failure to launch a feminist critique of patriarchal and enlightenment ideas about women's place in the world as educated citizens, as artists. While the majority of Woolf's oeuvre represents a positivist liberal feminism, her first novel is more exemplary of shadow feminism. It is important to remember that these two forms of feminism don't exist in an either/or binary, but are often intertwined. As the term suggests, it is easy to let shadow feminism go undetected. Most interpretations of the novel reinforce this neglect, as does the critical tendency to explain away this first novel's "problems" by reading it in the context of Woolf's later fiction to highlight her conventional feminism. I've aimed to show here the benefit of reading Woolf's first novel in its own right, and to illuminate the importance of shadow feminism.

Conclusion

Toward a Genealogy of a Feminine Aesthetic of Failure: Negativity and re-conceptions of Feminism

This project has theorized a modernist feminine aesthetic of failure to elucidate alternative feminisms found in the writing of Jean Rhys, Nella Larsen, Djuna Barnes and Virginia Woolf. By constructing an archive of novels that register the affective responses of melancholia, disappointment, desperation, alienation, and passivity, I sought to illuminate how these negative states work to resist capitalist, racist, and patriarchal forms of power and discipline. Although these novels were published during the interwar period, the structures of feeling they evoke indicate the emergence of an aesthetic that, while certainly specific to that time, has elasticity and continues to inform women's art and thought. These novels undoubtedly reflect their historical moment, yet they depict minor or ugly feelings as an everyday phenomenon. This structure of feeling continues to be part and parcel of everyday existence for many, as long as the hierarchies of patriarchy and capitalism are dominant structures that limit people's lives.

These modernist novels presciently meet Lauren Berlant's millennial call for "a realism that embeds trauma and suffering in the ordinary rather than in a space of exception, given that the crises of exhaustion and knowing how to live are problems saturating ordinary life" (Berlant, *ROROTOKO*). Studying negative affect in literature can be a useful analytic because it registers psychic and emotional trauma caused by social exclusion, but it also functions to illuminate "the affective condition of an everyday life in which the ways people seek to flourish turn out to be

bad**"** (Cvetkovich 166). For these reasons, negative affective states also point toward social and political critique. For example, Jean Rhys's melancholic Anna Morgan finds fault with capitalist exclusion and patriarchal oppression; Nella Larsen's alienated Helga Crane constantly critiques the racially coded and gender prescribed behaviors she encounters from Harlem to the Netherlands; the alcohol-infused rejections of Djuna Barnes's Robin Vote enact a queer refusal of heternormative visions of futurity, and finally Virginia Woolf's young Rachel Vinrace's anger at social nicety reflects an unhappiness with marital convention specifically and middle-upper class convention broadly.

One of the primary goals of this project has been to depathologize feminine negativity so that it can be seen as an impulse that not only shaped aesthetics, but also, implicitly, provided a model for political action. In this sense I have contributed to and built on both the antisocial thesis in queer studies and the affective turn in feminist and cultural theory by examining how negative affect and negative subjectivities can function in particular as feminist and disruptive responses to unjust power relationships.[41] I have argued that the feminine aesthetic of failure has an ethical component as well. This ethical component is evident in Rhys's privileging of the marginalized underdog; in Larsen's harrowing critique of marriage; in Djuna Barnes's literature

[41] Important books on affect, feeling, emotion, and the queer anti-social thesis include Abu-Lughod and Lutz,*Language and the Politics of Emotion*; Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, *Queer Phenomenology, The Promise of Happiness*; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*; Brennan *The Transmission of Affect*; Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power, Precarious Life, and Frames of War*; Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*; Dolan,*Utopia in Performance*; Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*; Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*; Flately, *An Affective Mapping* ; Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*; *Halberstam,The Queer Art of Failure*; Holland, *Raising the Dead*; Koestenbaum, *Humiliation*; Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions*; Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; Moten, *In the Break*; Ngai *Ugly Feelings*; Probyn, *Blush* ; Salecl, *On Anxiety*; Seremetakis,*The Senses Still* ; Snediker, *Queer Optimism*; Taussig,*The Nervous System*; Terada,

Feeling in Theory and Looking Awry; Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. Important books on queer theory and the antisocial thesis include Bersani's *Homos*; Edelman's *No Future;* Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*. Other foundational works include Benjamin, *Illuminations, Reflections*, *The Arcades Project*, and *Selected Writings*; Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*; and Williams, *Structures of Feeling*.

of alterity that privileges opacity and distance rather than clarity and identification; in Virginia Woolf's tonal ambiguity that undermines traditional literary form and values; and in the covert didacticism found in all of the novels in this study. The novels' refusal to use direct didacticism makes them more subtle and nuanced than the feminist protest novels written by their *fin de siècle* precursors. This aesthetic of failure evokes Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature, which clarifies how these novels challenge the major literature penned by their more canonical male and female counterparts.

The forms of shadow feminism I theorized also challenge the success/failure binary. I have demonstrated that in these novels feminine passivity, what is often considered "doing nothing," is indeed doing something. Their Bartlebian refusal reveals, as did Bartleby himself, that passive refusal is a highly effective form of resistance to capitalist endeavors, demonstrating a power of the weak, an antithesis to the "culture of professionalism" ever present in America.[42] As I made evident, these subversive forms of non-normative resistance via failure are not only applicable to class or anti-capitalist struggle, but also to patriarchal and racist forms of oppression. These protagonists' failures to adhere to prescriptive gendered, classed, and raced roles illuminate the problematic conditions women were subjected to, particularly by contextualizing their failures as not neccessarily individual problems but systemic ones. They also simultaneously provide a model for an alternative negative subjectivity in response, and it is in this way that their feminine failures *do* something. My task has been not to re-describe failure in this context as success but to think through forms of feminine failure as involving a different kind of activity, with different implications than those conventionally accounted for in the success/failure binary. Both the writers and their protagonists in this study demand failure and

[42] Burton J. Bledstein develops this term in his book *The Culture of Professionalism* (New York: Norton, 1976)

refuse to accept the liberal terms of social inclusion, which were never theirs to begin with. These writers re-frame failure and suggest the need and possibility for doing something other. While these novels provide a feminist critique of dominant ideology through negation, I do not want to transvalue failure or reduce negativity—I was not interested in re-describing these traits as ultimately positive, somehow perversely successful, or redemptive. I instead have shown how negative affect, rejection, passivity, and refusal effectively critique hegemonic ideology, and also offer an alternative subjectivity to patriarchally prescribed notions of white femininity. The affective reorientation and ethical sensibility these novels offer may not provide a direct roadmap for politics, but they do provide a means to think through how we can better ask questions of and represent the political.

Although none of these modernist women writers imagined a better world or utopian future, their rejection of futurity and their characters' alienation in the various communities they inhabit critique hegemonic systems, particularly because the normative understanding of those dominant systems tend to be almost exclusively affirmative. The negativity of these authors and their characters prevents their novels from being co-opted as heroic narratives that privilege individuality and exonerate these systems. My mode of critique here resonates with Berlant's injunction to "move our analyses of the historical present into the exploratory mode that crisis, regardless, forces us to occupy. This is not a time for assurance but for experiment—to have patience with failure" (Berlant, *ROROTOKO*). The writers in this study certainly recognized the value of refusing to provide the reader with assurance, and they instead experimented with various forms of failure in their writing and representation. While the recent scholarship of Berlant and others calls our attention to negative affect and minor or ugly feelings to analyze our current historical moment, I conclude here by addressing here how the feminine aesthetic of

failure spans temporal and generic categories of female artistic expression. From interwar poetry to second wave feminist performance art and theory, failure-based aesthetics share the one consistency of a commitment to negativity that extends to a feminist practice. I do not wish to position negative feminism as functioning in a teleological way, nor in terms of a developmental narrative but merely want to show the ongoing significance of this form of critique. In this conclusion, I briefly examine how the modernist feminine aesthetic of failure opens up outside the novel, using Stevie Smith's poetry as brief case study. I then turn to the late 1960s performance art of Lee Lozano to demonstrate the continued relevance of my theorizing to later forms of feminist creation/negation.

Stevie Smith (1902-1971), writer and poet, had much in common with the writers in this study. Like these novelists (except to some degree Woolf), she experienced numerous rejections from publishers, experimented with failure in both life and art, was misread, and achieved critical success late in life, only to become again undervalued. Also like the novels in this study--particularly Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*--Smith's critical neglect is all too often attributed to her poetry being "unclassifiable." Yet as Jane Dowson points out, "the unclassifiability of the poetry is…its achievement: it deliberately disarms ready-made responses in order to question the ready-made responses themselves" (139). While I am not interested in re-describing failure as achievement, the second half of Dowson's quote illuminates that what is deemed as "unclassifiable," could be seen as a viable and important critical component to art, rather than grounds for critical dismissal. Smith's life has been better chronicled than her writing. The subject of several biographies,[43] she has been "too often famed as the rather idiosyncratic

[43] S*tevie Smith, a Critical Biography,* by Frances Spalding, Faber in 1988, *Stevie, a Biography of Stevie Smith* by Jack Barbera and William McBrien, published by William Heinmann Ltd in 1985, *Me Again, Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, published by Virago Press in 1981 and also out of print and *In Search of Stevie Smith* edited by Stanford Sternlicht and published in 1991 by Syracuse University Press, New York.

spinster who nursed her aunt 'Lion' and who engaged wholly with life, but who preferred death" (Dowson 138). Both Stevie Smith's poet-persona and poetry incorporated failure for aesthetic purposes, and importantly, as social critique. Her feminism, like her socialism, is apparent in her use of negativity—namely in her portraits of women and children who lack power and who suffer under patriarchal and capitalist structures. Smith's poetry does not lack humor or wit—far from somber or morose, her tone is often playful. Although Philip Larkin dismissed her poems as "facetious bosch,"[44] in many ways Smith was ahead of her time.

Yet Smith's criticisms of social injustice, derision of a world that treats its artists poorly, and championing of those who are socially and economically marginalized, place her firmly within the conventional boundaries of Thirties poets. Smith figured the artist and the underdog as necessary to counter a conformist, homogeneous, dull and destructive culture. In her poem "Sterilization," she positions academia as intolerant, pompous, and seeking to repress those who experience creative, physical, sexual, or political differences. The success of such "sterilization" efforts, in Smith's view, will lead to a society comprised of moronic, insensitive dolts:

> Carve delinquency away,
> Said the great Professor Clay.
>
> A surgical operation is just the thing
> To make everybody as happy as a king.
>
> But the great Dostoievsky the Epileptic
> Turned on his side and looked rather sceptic.
>
> And the homosexual Mr. Wilde
> Sat in the sunshine and smiled and smiled
>
> And a similarly inclined older ghost in a ruff
> Stopped reading his sonnets aloud and said "stuff"

[44] Philip Larkin. 'Stevie Goodbye.' *Observer,* 23 January 1973, p. 28

And the certainly eccentric Swift, Crashawe and Donne
Silently shook hands and thanked God they had gone

But the egregious Professor Clay
Called on Theopompous and won the day.

And soon all our minds will be flat as a pancake,
With no room for genius, exaltation or heartache.

And our children and theirs will preen, smirk and chatter,
With not even the sense to ask what is the matter.

On one hand, Smith resembles the canonical modernists who believed in a heroic art—an art capable of transforming society for the better—but Smith invokes Wilde's queerness, Dostoyevsky's epilepsy, and the general eccentricity of canonical writers and thinkers from the past as part and parcel of their artistic and philosophical merit. She figures their "weaknesses" as part of their genius. She also implies that the general public's failure to recognize and preserve this genius, as well as the legitimized, institutional effort to suppress those who embody difference, is caused by and will only perpetuate a culture of total imbecility. Smith's poem imagines ultimately a society that prohibits the creation and appreciation of intelligent literary works, thus leading to the extinction of such works and their creators.

In "Marriage, I Think" Smith uses negativity to critique marriage. Written from the perspective of an abandoned wife who is punished for having thoughts and articulating them, the poem begins by describing Maria, a woman who first thought marriage the best opiate, as "It kills the thoughts that think about the thoughts." Maria succumbs to marriage because "too long in solitude she'd dwelt." But this solitude, Smith implies, allowed Maria to become accustomed to not having to shape herself accordingly under the male gaze. Thus, under patriarchy, even solitude for women fails to be liberatory—if women have their thoughts in solitude for too long,

they will fail to understand how to meet prescriptive norms in a culture that values women for their reproductive capacity, not for their intellect. Smith writes of Maria that for "too long her thoughts had felt/ Their strength. So when the man drew near, Out popped her thoughts and covered him with fear." Smith sarcastically insinuates women can't win in a patriarchal society that doesn't value women's intellect, "Poor Maria! Better that she had kept her thoughts on a chain/ For now she's alone again and all in pain." This brief look at Smith's poetry shows how the feminine aesthetic of failure extends beyond the genre of the novel. Although Smith continued to publish well into the 1960s, the poems I discussed were published in 1937. By examining Smith and her interwar poetry, I aim to build on scholarship that challenges traditional readings of interwar modernist poetry as a male-dominant period and genre. Teasing out how negativity and failure function in gender specific ways across genres shows the benefits of a new modernist studies approach, one that illuminates the work of non-canonical women writers, and also considers how minor emotions and negative affect shape aesthetics.

The negative feminisms these modernist women writers developed counter more liberal positivist, conventional forms of feminism. I want to now turn to the work of Lozano (1930-1999), a painter and conceptual artist who also utilized rejection, refusal, and negation as part of her feminist critique. My analysis of her work concludes by advancing a feminist position that builds on the queer antisocial thesis.[45] Because Lozano's relationship to second wave feminism and the women's movement is complicated at best, she fits in well with this study's aim to explicate alternative feminisms found in undervalued and neglected women's work—in shadow feminist terms, Lozano is an important figure, yet she is never written about in this context.

[45] Leo Bersani's definition of sex as anti-communitarian, anti-relational, and anti-identitarian in *Homos* is generally credited with largely influencing queer theory focused on developing a queer politics of negativity.

After gaining prominence in the late 1960s in New York City, Lozano dropped out of the NYC art world. Known primarily for her paintings, Lozano also kept a notebook filled with what she considered "word pieces," which were notes for conceptual and often self-instructional experiments like "grass piece," where she attempted (and very nearly succeeded) to stay solidly stoned for an entire month—"smoke it up as fast as you can. Stay high all day everyday, see what happens" (fig 1). Lozano considered these pieces "drawings," and eliminated any distinction between them and her more traditional studio practice (Molesworth, 66). Just as her career was gaining real prominence—she was frequently mentioned in *The Village Voice*, *Art Forum*, *Art in America,* and *ARTnews*, and she had a solo exhibition of her Wave Series paintings at the Whitney museum in 1970 that was met with praise by both critics and fellow artists—she followed her urge to drop out.

In 1969, Lozano began her "general strike piece" aiming, as she writes in her notebook, to "gradually but determinedly avoid being present at official or public 'uptown' functions or galleries related to the 'art world' to pursue investigation of <u>total personal & public revolution</u>. Exhibit in public only <u>pieces</u> which further sharing of ideas and information related to total <u>personal & public revolution</u>" (underline original fig. 2). By 1971, Lozano had withdrawn completely from the spaces of NYC art and commerce. She also had embarked on a conceptual "boycott of women" (fig. 3). While her "boycott of women" conceptual piece was first begun by ignoring a letter from the prominent and influential feminist art critic and curator Lucy Lippard, it initially seemed Lozano intended to stop communication with women only temporarily, writing after that "communication will be better than ever" (Fig. 3). Yet her "boycott" piece evolved into a categorical refusal to speak or communicate to any woman the rest of her life. Her "boycott" was extreme; for example if she encountered a female clerk she would insist on

being helped by a man (Molesworth 70). Lozano's refusal to speak to women, her "boycott" of them on the surface is hard to read as a legible critique of patriarchy, particularly given the emphasis put on collective struggle and community in feminist action. By 1972 she had disappeared from New York. There are many unverifiable rumors and myths about her nomadically wandering around for ten years before moving to Dallas, Texas, where she died. Lozano's extreme refusal evokes the authorial persona of Djuna Barnes. Like Barnes, Lozano's rejection of the art world and identity of artist, as well as her "boycott" of women, refute powerful, prescriptive parameters of identity, and speak to a critique of capitalism and patriarchy that emerges from rejection and enacts negation.

Lozano's example of refusal of the art world and removal of herself from it, as well as her rejection of women in general, offers an opportunity to think through critique structured principally by negation. Helen Molesworth writes, "Lozano's rejection of the subject position Artist, dependent as such a position is upon the bolstering paraphernalia and institutional legitimation of the art world, certainly evokes Marcel Duchamp's famous refusal to make art for much of his career" (70). Yet Lozano simultaneously rejected women, marking her refusals as gender specific. Of course, Lozano's refusal to participate conventionally in the art world left her without support or recognition, and she fell into obscurity until after her death. Yet during her lifetime, she used her art as embodied critique, conflating her lived existence with artistic practice. She carried on her boycott of women until she died; in this way, Lozano not only refused to commodify her artistic labor and production, but she also refused the reified category of artist and woman.

Curiously, Lozano took rejection, refusal, and negation to extremes, in the hope of achieving revolution. While she did not write manifestos or paint utopian visions, her word

pieces like “strike piece” make evident she was pursuing “total personal and public revolution” through rejection (fig. 2). In a 1969 statement given at an Art Worker’s Coalition meeting, she writes, “For me there can be no art revolution that is separate from a science revolution, a political revolution, an education revolution, a drug revolution, a sex revolution, or a personal revolution. I cannot consider a program of museum reforms without equal attention to gallery reforms and art magazine reforms which would aim to eliminate stables of artists and writers. I will not call myself an art worker but an art dreamer and I will participate only in a total revolution simultaneously personal and public” (fig. 4). Lozano’s refusal to separate the category of art from the personal, or political, or as distinct in anyway from other activities demonstrates not only a propensity for critique: it simultaneously exposes the limits of this kind of refusal to be transformative under patriarchy and late capitalism. Refusing to participate in anything less than total personal and public revolution evidently meant not participating at all, except through negation. Indeed, it was by way of exploring her disappearance and practice of negation in which Lee Lozano began to be recuperated and discussed after her death by art historians and journalists.

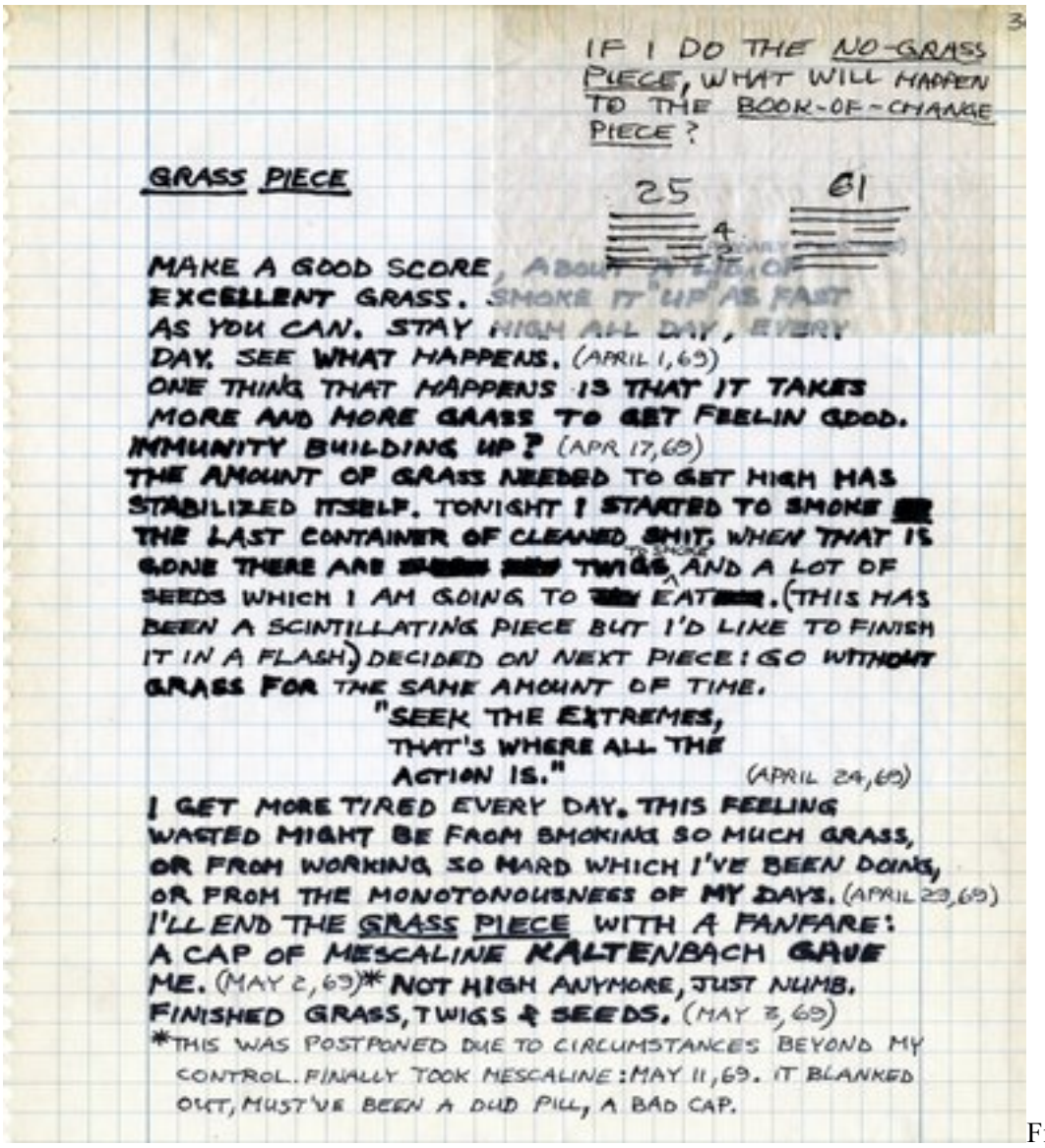
Lozano’s refusal to speak to women shows an understanding of patriarchy that is akin to her rejection of the art world—both are systems, with rules and logics that are public with personal affects. Lozano intimates that, as Molesworth writes, “you can’t reform the art world by focusing only on museums, nor can you alter patriarchy by bonding only with women” (71). I would add that given that Lozano sought nothing less than total private and public revolution, she exposed the impossibility of either kind of revolution—personal or public—under patriarchy and capitalism—so as an alternative, she rejected both, and by doing so lived an embodied critique. By refusing to speak to women as an ongoing conceptual art work she exposed the

systematic division of society into gendered categories, and she also rejected the demand of capitalism for the constant production of private property. Through these performative refusals, Lozano elided the fetishized art object and women, as both share a similar fate. (Molesworth 71). Lozano's lived experience of refusing the logic of patriarchy and capitalism in pursuit of personal and public revolution is both extreme and idealistic. Although she did not remotely achieve revolution, Lozano identified the interconnected systems of patriarchy and capitalism and rejected wholly their self-imposed terms of engagement (Molesworth 71).

Lozano, as well as Rhys, Larsen, Barnes, and to varying degrees Woolf and Smith, demonstrate the efficacy of negative feminism, of critique grounded in rejection and negation. The modernist tendency to avoid revolutionary or teleological projects actually places them ahead of later figures such as Lozano, when read through recent queer theorizing on anti-futurity. While Lozano utilized rejection as a self-conscious strategy to pursue revolution, her fall into oblivion after enacting rejection reflects a depressing totality of capitalism and patriarchal systems. But, the fact that her life and work was resurrected again by art historians and journalists despite this period of oblivion suggests just how enduring negativity as critique can be. These negative feminist figures highlight the power of impasse, rejection, and passivity, especially for others. While scant few would wish to have the life of these women, they created works that feature failure as a representational strategy, and provide readers a way to think through negativity as critique.

It is in this sense I have advocated for negative feminism, and for furthering scholarship that takes into account the antisocial thesis established in queer theory and its potential for feminist theory as well. These women and their work critique the hetero-normative patriarchal vision of futurity by attesting to a feminist negative refusal of positive identity and triumphant

narratives. They also urge the reader to consider women as negative subjects and agents of subversion. If the locus of negativity is to, as Edelman says, take us to "the limit point of knowledge" (822) these figures accomplish this goal. Their stories attest to the power of negativity and refuse to evacuate failure of its force by offering up positive, heroic resolutions. In their rejection of an unacceptable present and an unwillingness to imagine a better world in place of that critique, these women open up a feminist aesthetic and politics of failure that is needed now as much as ever.



IF I DO THE NO-GRASS PIECE, WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE BOOK-OF-CHANGE PIECE?

25 61

GRASS PIECE

MAKE A GOOD SCORE, ABOUT A LID OF EXCELLENT GRASS. SMOKE IT UP AS FAST AS YOU CAN. STAY HIGH ALL DAY, EVERY DAY. SEE WHAT HAPPENS. (APRIL 1,69)
ONE THING THAT HAPPENS IS THAT IT TAKES MORE AND MORE GRASS TO GET FEELIN GOOD. IMMUNITY BUILDING UP? (APR 17,69)
THE AMOUNT OF GRASS NEEDED TO GET HIGH HAS STABILIZED ITSELF. TONIGHT I STARTED TO SMOKE THE LAST CONTAINER OF CLEANED SHIT. WHEN THAT IS GONE THERE ARE TWIGS TO SMOKE AND A LOT OF SEEDS WHICH I AM GOING TO EAT. (THIS HAS BEEN A SCINTILLATING PIECE BUT I'D LIKE TO FINISH IT IN A FLASH.) DECIDED ON NEXT PIECE: GO WITHOUT GRASS FOR THE SAME AMOUNT OF TIME.

"SEEK THE EXTREMES,
THAT'S WHERE ALL THE
ACTION IS." (APRIL 24,69)

I GET MORE TIRED EVERY DAY. THIS FEELING WASTED MIGHT BE FROM SMOKING SO MUCH GRASS, OR FROM WORKING SO HARD WHICH I'VE BEEN DOING, OR FROM THE MONOTONOUSNESS OF MY DAYS. (APRIL 29,69)
I'LL END THE GRASS PIECE WITH A FANFARE: A CAP OF MESCALINE KALTENBACH GAVE ME. (MAY 2,69)* NOT HIGH ANYMORE, JUST NUMB. FINISHED GRASS, TWIGS & SEEDS. (MAY 3,69)
*THIS WAS POSTPONED DUE TO CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND MY CONTROL. FINALLY TOOK MESCALINE: MAY 11,69. IT BLANKED OUT, MUST'VE BEEN A DUD PILL, A BAD CAP.

Fig.1

("QUOTE"): SOUND OF "DAISY" FADING IN BACKGROUND FOLLOWED BY SOUND OF "ALSO SPRACH ZAARATHUSTRA" (R. STRAUSS) FOLLOWED BY SOUND OF "THE BLUE DANUBE" (J. STRAUSS) – SOUNDTRACK, 2001 (S. KUBRICK)

GENERAL STRIKE PIECE (STARTED FEB. 8, '69)*

GRADUALLY BUT DETERMINEDLY AVOID BEING PRESENT AT OFFICIAL OR PUBLIC "UPTOWN" FUNCTIONS OR GATHERINGS† RELATED TO THE "ART WORLD" IN ORDER TO PURSUE INVESTIGATION OF TOTAL PERSONAL & PUBLIC REVOLUTION.° EXHIBIT IN PUBLIC ONLY PIECES WHICH FURTHER SHARING OF IDEAS & INFORMATION RELATED TO TOTAL PERSONAL & PUBLIC REVOLUTION.ϟ

IN PROCESS AT LEAST THROUGH SUMMER, '69.

* WITHDRAWAL FROM 3-MAN SHOW COMPILED BY RICHARD BELLAMY, GOLDOWSKY GALLERY, 1078 MADISON AVE.

† DATE OF LAST VISIT TO UPTOWN GALLERIES FOR PERUSAL OF ART – FEB. 13 OR 14, 69
" " " " " A MUSEUM – MARCH 24, 69
" " " " " UPTOWN GALLERY OPENING – MARCH 15, 69
" " " " " A BAR – APRIL 5, 69
" " " ATTENDANCE AT A CONCERT – APRIL 18, 69
" " " " " " FILM SHOWING – APRIL 4, 69
" " " " " AN "EVENT" – APRIL 18, 69
" " " " " A BIG PARTY – MARCH 15, 69

° TERMS OF TOTAL PERSONAL & PUBLIC REVOLUTION SET FORTH IN BRIEF STATEMENT READ AT OPEN PUBLIC HEARING, ART WORKERS COALITION, SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS, APRIL 10, 69. FURTHER PARTICIPATION IN ART WORKERS COALITION OR ANY OTHER GROUP DECLINED AS PART OF GENERAL STRIKE PIECE. THIS INCLUDES ARTISTS AGAINST THE EXPRESSWAY GROUP & OTHERS.

ϟ FIRST PIECE EXHIBITED AT ART/PEACE EVENT, N.Y. SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL, PUBLIC THEATER, MARCH 5, 69. GRASS PIECE & NO-GRASS PIECE EXHIBITED IN NUMBER 7 SHOW COMPILED BY LUCY LIPPARD, PAULA COOPER, MAY 18, 69. INVESTMENT PIECE & CASH PIECE EXHIBITED IN LANGUAGE III SHOW, DWAN GALLERY, MAY 24, 69.

LEE LOZANO, JUNE 12, 69.

Fig 2

1ST WK AUGUST, 71

DECIDE TO BOYCOTT WOMEN.

THROW LUCY LIPPARD'S [redacted] 2ND LETTER ON DEFUNCT PILE, UNANSWERED.
DO NOT GREET ROCHELLE BASS IN STORE.

2ND WK AUGUST, 71

PAULA[redacted] TAVINS CALLS AUG 11. TELL HER I AM BOYCOTTING WOMEN AS AN EXPERIMENT THRU ABT SEPT[redacted] & THAT AFTER THAT "COMMUNICATION WILL BE BETTER THAN EVER!"

PEYOTE TRIP AUG 10 71 : PURIFICATION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS*; I BEAT THE SAND WITH JAKE'S PUSSYWILLOW WHIP.
I STOP HOLDING ON TO WALTER DE MARIA.

*DEEPBRAIN

AUG 12 71
IM FUCKIN UP BAD, MAKIN MISTAKES. ONE HOUR LATE TO MEET BELLAMY HERE, I MISSED HIM (HE LEAVES NOTE.) IT'S MY DEEPBRAIN RESISTANCE TO ... WHAT? BELLAMY? KELSEY? DO I WANT TO LOSE MY LOFT FOR ACTION? UTTER CLAUSTROPHOBIA IN TIME/SPACE OF PRESENT. i MISSED HIM ALL LAST WEEK TOO.
ALSO FUCKED UP WITH BUSINESS COMPATIBILITY BOOK.

EXPERIMENT: WRITE TO PEOPLE IN ATTEMPT TO COMMUNICATE AFTER MERCURY GOES RETROGRADE AUG 13.
TRY SOME LOCAL VISITS.

GOING [redacted] TO ROOF LOOKING UP AT MARS & (STRAIGHT) QUARTER MOON, STARS & DOWN ON NEIGHBOORHOOD CALMS [redacted] ME.

FROM WEEK IN HALIFAX: THE MAGIC WORD TO CANCEL SPELLS IF ANYONE TRIES TO LAY A SPELL ON YOU, OR, TO COUNTERACT A WITCH'S POWER; YELL: ORTHOGRAPHY!

Fig. 3

LOZANO 38

APRIL 10, 1969

STATEMENT FOR OPEN PUBLIC HEARING,
ART WORKERS COALITION.

FOR ME THERE CAN BE NO ART REVOLUTION
THAT IS SEPARATE FROM A SCIENCE
REVOLUTION, A POLITICAL REVOLUTION,
AN EDUCATION REVOLUTION, A DRUG
REVOLUTION, A SEX REVOLUTION OR A
PERSONAL REVOLUTION. I CANNOT CONSIDER
A PROGRAM OF MUSEUM REFORMS WITHOUT
EQUAL ATTENTION TO GALLERY REFORMS
AND ART MAGAZINE REFORMS WHICH WOULD
AIM TO ELIMINATE STABLES OF ARTISTS
AND WRITERS. I WILL NOT CALL MYSELF
AN ART WORKER BUT RATHER AN ART
DREAMER AND I WILL PARTICIPATE ONLY
IN A TOTAL REVOLUTION SIMULTANEOUSLY
PERSONAL AND PUBLIC.

LEE LOZANO
60 GRAND ST., N.Y.C.

Fig. 4

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