Jean Rhys’s novels are characterized by final and internal ambiguity, an ambiguity created not only by open endings but also by punctuating the text throughout with chronological and thematic gaps between paragraphs, and with ellipses and other forms of syntactic interruption. This ambiguous mode of presentation defies the critical tendency to cast the stories in terms of dichotomy or dialectic, with the possibility of resolution. Rhys’s strategies of ambiguity seem designed to protect each central figure from attempts at producing a single definitive meaning from her life, especially those attempts which would determine her behavior and circumstances after the narrative ends. This narrative ambivalence suggests not only consciousness of modernism’s disruption of nineteenth-century narrative structure, but also the defensive, subversive façade of a woman from the colonies writing in the context of the dominant culture. Syntactic gaps often seem gendered to benefit the men who therein conceal their selfishness, and who interrupt and silence women; on the other hand, after the central figure recognizes the futility of her words, she ultimately finds refuge in the silence of the unstated. Engaged in ironic colonial mimicry of the European novel, Rhys uses lacunae to subvert stereotypical expectations of the stranger, and to encapsulate the “unhomely moment” of alienation. Several critics have seen ambiguity in the conclusion of an individual novel; but it has not been recognized that the open ending, the inconclusive conclusion, marks all Rhys’s novels. Moreover, the internal gaps have been mentioned in the cases of only two of the five novels: *Wide Sargasso Sea,* and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie.*

Rhys’s deliberate ambiguity accords well with the “forced merging of cultures” from which her fiction derives much of its power (Adjarian 208). It has become commonplace to describe *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as a critique of British imperialism, and both M.M. Adjarian and Lee Erwin connect Rhys’s strategic avoidance of closure with such a critique: Antoinette wandering the corridor with her candle, after her dream, represents all “who inhabit the space of in-between, no closure; such as that provided by definitions and conclusive endings” (Adjarian 208; cf. Erwin 155). Antoinette is a descendent of the colonizers and the slaveholders, but her contact with English people and eventually with England convinces her that she is rejected by the Empire, seen as one of the colonized (Spivak 250). She belongs nowhere. Graham Huggan points out that to be Creole is to have an unstable personal and social identity, to be “neither black (Afro-Caribbean) nor white (European)” (Spivak 250; cf. Raiskin 109). Like Homi Bhabha’s “mimic man,” Antoinette is “almost the same (as Self) but note quite,” “almost the same but not white” (89).

Yet Antoinette’s ambiguous status undermines the simple binary opposition of colonizer/colonized; she is more that what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms “a self-immolating colonial subject,” as the novel is more than “an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism” (251). A white descendent of the
colonizers, Antoinette identifies not with the colonized (the Caribs, who are completely absent from the novel) but with Christophine and other former slaves not native to the islands. On the other hand, Antoinette is the daughter of slaveholders; Benita Parry asserts that “while themselves not English, and indeed outcasts, the Creoles are Masters to the blacks” (36; cf. Ciolkowski 340), while Bhabha argues that the dynamics of the master/slave opposition differ from those of colonizer/colonized (89). Antoinette’s status as not-quite white, not-quite native is further complicated by gender. Mary Lou Emery points out that feminist critics too often conflate those women who are “actually colonized” with “those of European ancestry oppressed and exploited through domestic patriarchal and capitalist systems of dominance and subjugation,” but still finds value in the comparison (“Refiguring” 266; cf. Rody 306).

Economically and emotionally dependent on Rochester, Antoinette is doomed through her ultimate failure to conform to his expectations, to become English Bertha rather than Creole Antoinette. Like the West Indies in general, Antoinette’s “exotic” qualities simultaneously draw and terrify Rochester.

In Antoinette’s Otherness she resembles Rhys herself, who was also a woman descended from white colonizers, and as Lucy Wilson comments, one who “felt exiled even before she moved to England because she was cut off from the black community in Dominica” (58; cf. Naipaul 54). While in Dominica, Rhys longed to be black, although not fully understanding what “blackness” meant; “Dear God, let me be black,” she reports praying (Smile Please 42). Veronica Marie Gregg prints a previously unpublished essay entitled “The Bible is Modern,” in which Rhys opposes “the average Englishman” and “us black people” (45). Rhys’s “appropriation of the term ‘black people,’” comments Gregg, “polemically embraces (...) ‘blackness’ as a site of creativity and resistance” (46; cf. Olausson 67). “Blackness” also signified community, in opposition to the rejection Rhys experienced from English people: No one was ever kind to me,” she wrote of her life in England (Letters 140).

Rhys’s feelings as a West Indian in England were complicated by her feelings of being victimized as a woman. In his introduction to her collected letters, Francis Wyndham suggests that Rhys’s “feeling of belonging nowhere, of being ill at ease and out of place, in her surroundings wherever these happened to be, a stranger in an indifferent, even hostile world” arose from her first lover’s ending in of their affair — that is, from her treatment as a woman rather than her treatment as a colonial subject (11). Not only does this assertion reflect a simplistic dichotomy, but Wyndham continues by minimizing the situation (“All that happened was that a kind, rather fatherly businessman [...]”) without reference to Rhys’s youth, loneliness, economic vulnerability, and colonial background, all legitimate reasons for a “kind, rather fatherly businessman” not to take advantage of her sexually. In many ways, Rhys was privileged, but it is nevertheless clear that throughout her life in Europe she felt, and had reason to feel, oppressed and alienated on the bases of white Creole background and of gender. Luce Irigaray writes that if a woman “wishes to have some face” in the male world, she must mimic male traditions, “borrow(ing) forms that are never her own” and that “denature her.” In Wide Sargasso Sea she consciously and subversively mimics Jane Eyre (Huggan 652, 654). This ironic mimicry reveals her perception of England as inhospitable to female strangers; her work captures what Bhabha terms “the
unhomely moment,” the moment of estrangement experienced by (post)colonial subjects and by women (9-10).

Like her life and Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys’s earlier novels can be read as commentaries on imperialism and sexism, and as other examples of a colonial-feminist resistance. Each central character is the Other, a female and a foreigner, her actions governed largely by financial need. As Judith L. Raiskin argues, “(e)ven when the exiled woman is not West Indian, she is of foreign nationality, and her alienation is cultural, linguistic, and economic” (164). Her identity may be obscure: married to Stephan Zelli, Marya’s non-English surname partially conceals her national origin in Quartet (1929), while in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (1931) Julia’s “career of ups and downs had rubbed most of the hallmarks off her, so that it was not easy to guess at her age, her nationality, or the social background to which she properly belonged” (14). As Emery remarks, Julia is “of vaguely Brazilian and English background” (“Refiguring” 264). Each woman — Marya, Julia, Anna in Voyage in the Dark (1934), and Sasha in Good Morning, Midnight (1939) — is the foreigner as described by Julia Kristeva: a mask-wearer, aloof, lacking in self-confidence, melancholy, torn between belief and skepticism, solitary, hatred and hating. The speech of the stranger is not quite right, so she speaks rarely; when she does speak, her low status insures that her speech “will be of no consequence, will have no effect” (Strangers 1-14, 20). Each mark of the stranger can also be read in terms of gender. Julia Lesage’s description of “women’s mental colonization” resembles the traits of the foreigner, and describes Rhys’s female heroes well: “our internalized sense of powerlessness, our articulation into masochistic structures of desire, and our playing out of personae that on the surface seem ‘passive,’ ‘self-defeating,’ ‘irrational,’ ‘hesitant,’ ‘receptively feminine,’ or even ‘crazy’” (426). Each central character disturbs those around her by her passivity and irrationality. The other characters label her as “Other” to minimize the threat, even when they are themselves strangers (as in the case of Rochester in the West Indies). The labeling may be phrased in terms of parentage and cultural identity, class and economics, or sexual desirability and behavior: Antoinette is Annette’s daughter and a “white cockroach,” an attractive yet unfaithful wife, while other characters are critiqued in terms of purchase price and ability to maintain desirability.

Although none of the people around her acknowledge her as a threat, in each novel the female stranger engages in what James C. Scott (in a study of peasant resistance) describes as “the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth” (29). The lacunae allow her to escape scrutiny, often through false compliance and feigned ignorance, and enter the safety of silence. She makes her final escape, through the open ending of the novel, without conforming and without a definite punishment for her nonconformity as a woman and as an outsider. Yet her escape into the realm of the silent and the hidden can never be wholly successful, as a small part of her life remains visible. The characters and Rhys herself reach out to show that dichotomies of white/black, male/female, native/alien, pure/fallen. “To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction (...) is also to
affirm a profound desire for social solidarity," writes Bhabha (18). If all are strangers, and acknowledge the strangeness, all are home. Rey Chow points out, however, that in the post-modern world "home" is problematic. Where was Rhys when she was "home": Great Britain, the home of her ancestors, and her own home for the second half of her life; Dominica, the place of her birth, to which she returned only once after leaving for England; or continental Europe, especially Paris, where she claimed to be most comfortable, but in "whose language she never wrote? Perhaps Rhys, like Chow, would answer, using "migranthood" neither negatively nor nostalgically, "home is here, in my migranthood" (142). Home is where boundaries, whether of national identity or of gender, are crossed. If the opportunity for "social solidarity" is located in ambiguity, then in Rhys’s fiction, home is situated in the gaps: the open endings and the internal lacunae.

On one level, as Bianca Tarozzi argues concerning Good Morning, Midnight, the Rhys ending is a product of the writer’s imitation of those French realists who, according to Ford Madox Ford, opposed the conception of the novel as “a tale in which the central character with an attendant female should be followed through a certain space of time until the book comes to a happy end on a note of matrimony or to an unhappy end – represented by a death. That latter […] is again imbecile, but again designed to satisfy a very natural human desire for finality” (quoted in Tarozzi 9): This type of nonclosure – the withholding of

both the comic (matrimonial) and the tragic (fatal) ending – may be seen in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, at the end of which Julia and Mr. Mackenzie disappear from the text: "The street was cool and full of grey shadows. Lights were beginning to come out in the cafes. It was the house between dog and wolf, as they say" (191). There is no certainty that either leaves the café, although Mr. Mackenzie has announced his departure: "I’m afraid I must be getting along now. Will you have another drink before I go?" In general; however, Rhys is not satisfied with merely denying the novel its traditional end: Quartet, Voyage in the Dark, and Good Morning, Midnight frustrate that “very natural human desire for finality” by simultaneously granting and withholding the comic and tragic endings. The central characters – Marya, Anna, and Sasha, respectively – may die, or they may survive to love again, perhaps and more fortunately. Even Wide Sargasso Sea stops short of portraying the death of Antoinette. The repeated ghost references in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie and Wide Sargasso Sea, and the descriptions of Julia and Antoinette as ghosts, prefigure Rhys’s denial of closure: a ghost is that which lives on after death, the ultimate survivor.

The central characters whose futures are guarded by the open endings are all women, in contrast to Ford’s narration of the male protagonist and “attendant female.” As Rachel Blau DuPlessis comments, “Once upon a time, the end, the rightful end, of women in novels was social – successful courtship, marriage – or judgmental of her sexual and social failure – death”
Rhys offers the traditional endings, a heterosexual relationship or death; her novelty lies in offering both options at once. Although her female heroes are in a sense fated to repeat their lives as portrayed in the novels, since neither they nor society have changed, the open ending gives an opportunity to hope for a break in the cycle, or to hope for an end to the woman’s misery — a choice which Rhys refuses to make. The same year that Rhys wrote Quartet (1929), Virginia Woolf complained in “Phases of Fiction” that “the story has to be finished: the intrigue discovered, the guilty punished, the lovers married in the end. [...] Better would it be, we feel, to leave a blank” — unlike Anthony Trollope, who “manfully” filled in the blanks despite “find[ing] himself out of facts or flagging in his invention” (101-2). Rhys left blanks. Her narrative style subverts her own authority: it refuses to dictate a way of reading the endings and expose the myth of polarized choice: for Rhys, the equation of life with happiness and death with punishment is simplistic.

The only novel generally agreed to have a plural ending is Voyage in the Dark, and then only because Rhys actually wrote two endings for it. The original final paragraph read: “And the concertina music stopped and it was so still so still and lovely just like before you go to sleep and it stopped and there was the ray of light along the floor like the last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out and blackness comes...” (Howells 88). Although Rhys complained that she had been forced to change the ending, and claimed to prefer this original version, according to Carole Angier she “had the chance to restore her original ending, twice, and neither time did she take it” (295). Moreover, as Teresa F. O’Connor notes, “this unpublished ending, even though Rhys may have intended that the young Anna be dead or dying, does not eliminate the ambiguity which is also present in the published version” (129). In fact the words of the published version that appear to offer hope for a new start are not narrative certainty but the thoughts of a character, and are preceded by the light of the original ending, the light which suggests death without promising it: “When their voices stopped the ray of light came in again under the door like the last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out. I lay and watched it and thought about starting all over again. And about being new and fresh. And about mornings, and misty days, when anything might happen. And about starting all over again, all over again...” (Voyage in the Dark 187-88, emphasis added). These thoughts, like the ray of light, might
represent Anna's "last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out" by her death. Or the image, as filtered through her consciousness, could be unreliable, and she might indeed live to start "all over again, all over again." If the latter, all arguments concerning the success of her new start are extrapolations based on her past, and also unreliable. When writing Wide Sargasso Sea decades later, Rhys remembered the ambiguity of this first novel as intentional, designed to achieve the same results as the final dream of the later novel: "time and place abolished, past and present the same" (Letters 233). Perhaps the last words of Voyage in the Dark are part of Anna's dream, as Rhys suggested in another letter: "Her dream must be so vivid that you are left in doubt as to which is dream and which reality. (And who knows?) In the end her dream takes her entirely so, perhaps that is the reality" (241). Offering past and present, dream and reality, the ending possesses an ambiguity captured visually in the ellipsis following "all over again, all over again."

In her autobiography, Smile Please, Rhys recorded her version of the impetus behind changing the ending of Voyage in the Dark: a request from Michael Sadleir at Constable.

I said, "But can't you see that a girl like that would be utterly bewildered from start to finish? She's dying and there's no more time for her as we think of time. That's how she feels, I'm certain."

"Oh, give the girl a chance."

So I spent several gloomy weeks trying to think of two or three paragraphs that wouldn't spoil the book, trying to give the girl a chance. (Smile Please 127)

This "explanation" of the revised ending as an attempt "to give the girl a chance" does not eliminate the ambiguity of the ending, however. First, that Anna was "dying" in the original ending is asserted not as an objective fact but as the character's perception, "how she feels." Second, it is uncertain whether giving Anna "a chance" means life or death, since as Angier points out, death may be "the ultimate solution" for Rhys's heroines, their "ultimate punishment," or both (250). Third, Rhys's words ironically echo Sadleir's, suggesting that she may be convinced that her interpretation of "give the girl a chance" differs from his. As Mervyn Morris comments, Rhys chose in her autobiography to portray herself "as a woman misunderstood and victimized, like one of her own heroines, and in so doing revenged herself upon Sadleir: the writer who is neither English nor male—facing her oppressor. Morris argues that in the revision Rhys merely pretended to conform to Sadleir's wishes, "only seeming to 'give the girl a chance'" (3–7). Nor does Rhys claim in her autobiography that she accomplished this goal, instead changing the subject immediately after the phrase "trying to give the girl a chance." As in her fiction, I will argue, the omission conceals much; at the same time, further explanation would have taken the passage's focus from Sadleir's apparent bullying. Finally, Rhys's stated preference for the original ending in effect adds to the plurality, calling our attention to the first (now subversive) version without erasing the published (and therefore official/oppressive) version.

Rhys's endings for her other novels closely resemble her ending(s) for Voyage in the Dark: in each, she does voluntarily what she claimed was forced upon her: for Voyage in the Dark: she ends by giving the girl a chance—whatever that means. Her first novel, Quartet, ends just as ambiguously; the text deliberately leaves open both the possibility that Marya has been killed by her husband Stephan, and the possibility that she is merely unconscious: "He caught her by the shoulders and swung her sideways with all his force. As she fell, she struck her forehead against the edge of the table, crumpled up and lay still." (185). Marya's consciousness is absent from the remaining few paragraphs of the novel; the point of view is now that of Stephan, who leaves the building...
without ascertaining her condition. After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie is, similarly inconclusive; as Arnold E. Davidson points out, the novel is structured like a spiral, like the painting Julia examines of "a male figure encircled by what appeared to be a huge mauve corkscrew" (90), with the caption, "la vie est un spiral, flottant dans l'espace, que les hommes grimpent et redescendent très, très sérieusement" — life is a spiral, floating in space, which men climb and descend very, very, very seriously (After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie 17). In many ways the ending of the novel echoes the beginning, but the details fall short of lining up exactly, in circular fashion (Davidson 90). Unlike the circle, the spiral is ambiguous: it "spins both ways"; as the painting’s words indicate, Julia and the other characters may be ascending or descending. While Betsy Berry sees Julia’s life as "decidedly on its downward spiral" (553), Davidson’s contention that in some ways Julia is more successful toward the conclusion of the novel is supported by Mr. Mackenzie’s perception that Julia was "afraid of life. Had to screw herself up to it all the time" (After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie 25). Screwing oneself upward on the spiral may require more effort, but Julia does it "all the time." In Good Morning, Midnight, Sasha’s sexual invitation to the commis, after rejecting the overtures of the gigolo René, simultaneously suggests her rebirth and her welcoming of death: "I look straight into his eyes and despise another poor devil of a human being for the last time. For the last time... Then I put my arms round him and pull him down on to the bed, saying 'Yes - yes - yes..."’ (190). Although Tarozzi acknowledges that a "reader afflicted by a 'very natural human desire for finality' might want to decide whether Sasha’s death will be metaphorical or real, sordid or blind or fully aware," she concludes that "the ambiguity [...] remains" (9; cf. Emery, "Paradox" 149-50).

Similarly, the end of Wide Sargasso Sea is not really the end. On the one hand, Rhys appears to give Brontë the final say, relinquishing to her the killing of Antoinette/Bertha: "the heroine dies [...] in Charlotte’s book, killed by Charlotte" (Angier 533). Moreover, Rhys depends on our knowledge of Jane Eyre to transfer the death, so that we become Brontë’s accomplices. In this sense, the ending of Rhys’s novel is pre-determined by the existence of Brontë’s novel; Nancy R. Harrison argues that Antoinette “must seek out the end of the dream that Brontë had foreordained for her” (147). On the other hand, Rhys’s subversion of the earlier text can be seen in its ending as well. For instance, the awakening in the final sentence of the dream - "I called ‘Tia!’ and jumped and woke" - reminds us that dreams are not reality (Wide Sargasso Sea 112). Also, the allusions of the culminating dream send us to Jane Eyre, where the story continues with the inevitable union of Jane and Mr. Rochester, and simultaneously to part 1 of Wide Sargasso Sea; which contains the first installment or iteration of what Antoinette asserts is the same dream (Harrison 182). In sending us back to part 1, the novel returns us to another traditional yet ultimately subverted ending: Erwin points out that while part 3 enacts the "other endings" that Rachel Blau DuPlessis has argued close nineteenth-century narratives about women, that is madness and/or death, part 3 is only possible because the ‘ending’ of part 2, namely marriage, didn’t work out” (153). Furthermore, the final part of Rhys’s novel undermines Jane Eyre by an ironic verbal allusion, when Antoinette recalls Rochester’s words, “intemperate and unchaste,” “[i]ninfamous daughter of an infamous mother” (110). In Brontë’s novel Rochester describes Bertha thus to Jane, but placing the words in a different context “emphasizes that they cannot be read the same way,” as Nicola Nixon asserts: “What appears to be stable or fixed in Brontë’s text becomes uncertain and fluctuating in Rhys’s” (280). Thus the ending of Wide Sargasso Sea simultaneously bears Rhys’s meaning and Brontë’s, giving “Rhys’s heroine-narrator [...] another chance, as she gives Charlotte Brontë’s anti-heroine another chance” (Harrison 108).

Besides leaving a gap in place of a traditional ending, Rhys systematically punctuates her text with literal and chronological ellipses. Like Woolf’s
fictitious modern novelist Mary Carmichael, Rhys has "broke[n] the sentence" and "broken the sequence." For Woolf, the writer "has every right to do both these things if she does them not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating" (41). Rhys's syntactic and structural omissions seem purposefully creative, designed to arouse but ultimately frustrate the reader's curiosity about Antoinette, as well as to give the sense of a life made up of "disconnected episodes" (After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie 179). For instance, the intervals between parts 1 and 2, and parts 2 and 3, contain events crucial to the plot: the wedding, the journey to Jamaica, the affair (or not) with Sandi, the journey to England, Antoinette's imprisonment. Although Rhys may have "seen" these events clearly (for instance, Antoinette's promiscuity); she deliberately omitted them from the novel (Letter 263). Furthermore, nearly every page of the novel is punctuated by white spaces designating briefer intervals, textual silences. For example, the first dream is followed by a white space concealing Antoinette's awakening, a white space followed by "Now Sister Marie Augustine is leading me out of the dormitory, asking if I am ill" (36). These lacunae guard Antoinette's privacy by preventing a "definitive" reading. Rochester believes he has discovered "the secret," the key to holding Antoinette, but in fact he never understands her (101). For him, Antoinette is an exotic stranger and a sex object who becomes a disdained fallen woman; renamed "Bertha," she is his "mad girl" and his possession (99). These are all ways of seeing her as Other, and the Other is necessarily inscrutable.

On the level of the "broken" sentence, ellipses and other discontinuities interrupt nearly every page. For instance, Daniel's sentences trail off, thus avoiding the necessity of support for his insinuations: "I see her when she ... You going eh?" (75); "It's not I fool you, it's I wish to open your eyes...." (75); "you are not the first to kiss her pretty face. Pretty face, soft skin, pretty colour - not yellow like me. But my sister all the same...." (76). When he faces his growing conviction that Antoinette is unfaithful, promiscuous, and mad, Rochester initially sounds like Daniel: "She thirsts for anyone --not for me ..." (99). However, this ellipsis marks only a momentary hesitation, from which Rochester quickly recovers into certainty: "She'll not care who she's loving [...]. She'll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would - or could" (99). He has filled in the gaps of Daniel's discourse, and with exactly the ideas Daniel wished. In fact, Daniel's lacunae operate quite differently from those of other Rhys characters; while others attempt to conceal information, and promote ambiguity, Daniel's silences point to the inevitable and unambiguous accusation of female promiscuity.

Appropriately, other instances of ellipsis mark communicative failures of both Rochester and Antoinette, and the disruption of Rochester's identity by the Other. Antoinette's attempts to reveal her past to Rochester are often self-censored, as in "'That was after ...' She stopped and put her hand up to her head" (48). So are her fears for the future: "Suppose you took this happiness away when I wasn't looking ..." (55). Rochester comments on the lacunae of their conversations, recognizing that Antoinette initially was "trying to protect herself with silence and a blank face," but that these are "poor weapons" which have not "served her well or lasted long" (54). He hates and fears "the girl with her blank smiling face," and finds her silence "disturbing, absolute" (62). When she attempts to explain to him, he repeatedly cuts her off: "We won't talk about it now [...] Not tonight. [...] Some other time. [...] But why not tell me tomorrow, in the daylight?" (77-78). She insists that he listen ("You have no right to ask questions [...] and then refuse to listen to my answer"), but in the end perceives her words as futile: "I have said all I want to say. I have tried to make you understand. But nothing has changed" (78, 81).

Rochester is the victim of his past and his inability to reject heredity, his desire to see himself as a true son of the father(land) despite his lack of.
both property and name. He easily substitutes nation for parent: "I thought about the letter which should have been written to England a week ago. Dear Father ..." (39). His planned letters to his father are full of such false starts, as he conceals his feelings of entrapment and his doubts about the marriage: "I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet ..." (41). His final unwritten letter, "the letter [he] meant to write," is most explicit in its accusations that his father has manipulated him for material gain without regard to his happiness. Yet he stops himself at "You were able to do this to me ..." and instead writes advising his father not to speak of the marriage (97). Spivak comments on the juxtaposition of undelivered letters with Rochester's complaint, "There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up" (Wide Sargasso Sea 45): "It is as if the text presses us to note the analogy between letter and mind" (Spivak 252). Rochester's psychic void is exacerbated by his perception of himself as a stranger. Mr. Mason's rotting study represents for Rochester the effect of the West Indies on English life, especially the book whose binding reads only "Life and Letters of ..." The rest of the title, Rochester sees, "was eaten away" (44). Significantly, Rochester is never named in this novel. Spivak describes the image of the rotting book as one "of the loss of the patronymic": just as the West Indies are destroying this tribute to a (probably male) individual life, they are depriving Rochester of his sense of identity (252; cf. Gregg 101). Hilda van Neck-Yoder sees his blank spaces, silences, and ellipses as "his attempt to undo, 'not-telling,' the loss of his prestige - his race - within the colonial hierarchy," but the attempt is unsuccessful (198). Rochester is a victim of his own silences as well as an oppressor.

Ellipsis punctuates the earlier novels as well, sometimes for similar reasons. For instance, in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, Julia's discourse with Mr. Horsfield is broken by ellipsis, signaling her inability to express herself to him: "She began: 'After all ...' and then stopped. She had the look in her eyes of someone who is longing to explain herself, to say: 'This is how I am. This is how I feel'" (48). "In a voice that was pathetically like a boast she added: 'He's a very rich man. He is ...' And then stopped" (55). Ellipsis thus marks her failure to communicate - "I wish I could tell you how much I liked it," she says to Mr. Horsfield (51) - but also her instinct toward reserve, toward protecting her inmost thoughts and feelings. Her impulse toward secrecy is partly dictated by her distrust of others' willingness to listen and empathize, and her lack of faith in their ability to help, even if they could comprehend her plight: "She stared at him [Mr. Horsfield], thinking: 'What's the use of trying to explain? It's all gone on too long'" (50). She learned this lesson from trying to explain things to the sculptor Ruth: "I wanted her to understand. I felt that it was awfully important that some human being should know what I had done and why I had done it. I told everything....She said: 'You seem to have had a hectic time.' But I knew when she spoke that she didn't believe a word....I might have known she would be like that" (52-53). Another unsuccessful attempt to connect with someone occurs later, when the wealthy Mr. James cuts off her explanation of her request for assistance: "She said, rather stubbornly: 'But I always meant, when I saw you, to explain....' Mr. James said: 'My dear, don't harrow me. I don't want to hear. Let's talk about something else'" (113). Based on such experiences, Julia has reason to believe Mr. Horsfield and everyone else will be "like that." Gregg comments that Julia "attempts to explain herself to almost everyone" and "[i]n each case she is 'refused or silenced'" (149).

Other instances of ellipsis represent an emotion that goes beyond words and coherent thought: "Then even that thought left her. She floated ....floated.... And shut her eyes" (After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie 137). In 1957, Rhys acknowledged this use of ellipsis, complaining that Quartet had "too many dots, too much emotion" (Letters 150). In contrast, Mr. Horsfield's lacunae are self-
serving, aiding the suppression of his feelings and the denial of Julia's; when he finally sees "with great clarity" that Julia is "not a representative of the insulted and injured, but [...] a solid human being," he rationalizes his selfish refusal to help, concealing his self-justification with a "broken" sentence: "Undertaking a fresh responsibility was not the way to escape when you came to think of it.... He suddenly remembered that, after all, he was not in love with Julia" (After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie 168-69). Within the gap, presumably, lies his questionable logic: a man only undertakes responsibility for a woman with whom he is in love.

Ellipses are plentiful in the other novels as well, and often significant. For example, Marya's final words in Quartet, "I didn't mean," are followed by ellipsis, suggesting that her meaning is obscured by Stephan's violence which interrupts it, possibly forever (185). The first section of Good Morning, Midnight, considering only Sasha's narrative and not any reported dialogue, contains thirty instances of literal ellipsis, an average of more than three per page. Sasha's recognition that René is a gigolo is marked by ellipsis: "But the nervousness, the slightly affected laugh.... Of course. I've got it" (72). The sentences that follow, Davidson notes, contain another meaningful ellipsis: "'Oh Lord, is that what I look like? Do I really look like a wealthy dame trotting round Montparnasse in the hope of -?' The dash says it all. She has hitherto been deemed sexually available by most of the men whom she has encountered, a judgment convenient for them and demeaning to her. Now she is to be worse than available; desperately so, eager to pay" (103). At the end, when the commiss enters the room, ellipsis and white space separate death from knowledge, "I lie very still, with my arm over my eyes. As still as if I were dead" from "I don't need to look. I know" (Good Morning, Midnight 190). The gaps on the syntactic and structural levels, like the open endings, ask the reader to supply what is missing, and here as elsewhere multiple "right answers" can be supplied. What does Sasha know, and how is this knowledge connected with lying "as if I were dead"? What has occurred between lying "[a]s still as if I were dead" and "I don't need to look. I know" to give Sasha a certainty which requires no visual evidence? In a letter regarding a radio version, Rhys suggests an answer to this last question: "when the man is close to her she would touch his sleeve or shoulder and feel the silk instead of the coat or overcoat René would be wearing. So the end must be, would be: 'I don't need to look I know. I can feel (or I am touching - feel better) the silk of the dressing gown - the white dressing gown" (Letters 139). Again, it is a notable characteristic of Rhys's fiction that Good Morning, Midnight omits this explication.

Rhys consistently avoids closure on every level, breaking the sentence as she breaks the larger structure of the novel, following the example of "Mary Carmichael" rather than the "manly" example of Trollope. Rhys dramatizes what Kristeva later theorizes, that grammatical suppression is threatening, since it enables meanings to proliferate and burst from the syntactic unit: "ellipsis or syntactic noncompletion can be interpreted as [...] a division within a signifying homogeneity. [...] For the Other has become heterogeneous and will not remain fixed in place: it negativizes all terms, all posited elements, and thus syntax, threatening them with possible dissolution" (Revolution 56). In its promotion of ambiguity, Rhys's elliptical writing violates the logic of binary thinking. Her texts seem to conform to tradition, presenting the heroines with the conventional choices between heterosexual love and destruction, community and alienation; but the pervasive silences subvert traditional meaning-making and create a proliferation of meanings.

Notes
My thanks to Ellen Friedman for her perceptive comments and for her suggestion that I write a paper on Rhys.
Regarding the earlier novels, see Davidson, Emery ("Paradox"), O'Connor, and Tarozzi. Regarding Wide Sargasso Sea, see Adjarian, DuPlessis, Harrison, Huggan, and Rody.

By Neck-Yoder and Davidson, respectively.

That is, it was "that time of neither daylight nor darkness, where end and beginning are indistinguishable," according to Thomas Staley (68).

Staley notes the ghost references in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (69).

Cf. Davidson: "Rhys simply takes a female character destined to play a minor part in such a masculine drama [...] and gives the woman the starring role" (64).

Nor is this gap atypical of Rhys's self-presentation, as many have noted. E.g., Davidson writes of "the lacunae at the heart of her own account of her various setbacks" (3). Regarding Voyage in the Dark, Rhys wrote to Evelyn Scott in language suggestive of physical violence: "I suppose I shall have to give in and cut the book and I'm afraid it will make it meaningless. The worst is that it is precisely the last part which I am most certain of that will have to be mutilated" (Letters 25).

See Ellen Friedman's claim that Rhys "ruptures the nineteenth-century text, making holes and blank spaces through which a reader is compelled to look with a self-consciously twentieth-century vision that will necessarily transform what it sees" (119).

Cf. Brontë: "the true daughter of an infamous mother [...] a wife at once intemperate and unchaste" (269-70).

Cf. Caroline Rody: "Resisting the moment of Bertha's original ending, instead of giving the force of an ending to the moment before the burning, Rhys' unclosed end leaves Bertha's death to the moments after the reader closes her novel and muses in her intertextual memory" (312-13).

Works Cited


