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“To Speak of My Own Situation”: Touring the “Mother Periphery” in Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother*

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If there is a lesson in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other [and] the last binarism of Self and Other—is the last of the shibboleths of the modernisers that we must learn to do without.

—Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House*

In her seminal work, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt seeks to “decolonize knowledge” by rethinking “how travel books by Europeans about non-European parts of the world” create the “domestic subject” of Euro-imperialism (6). Published in 1992, *Imperial Eyes* repeats similar chords struck by Jacques Derrida nearly twenty-five years earlier in “The Violence of the Letter,” first published in 1966 by *Cahiers pour l'analyse* as part of a special edition dedicated to the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In “The Violence of the Letter,” reprinted in *Of Grammatology* (1976), a seminal text of deconstruction—Derrida rereads Lévi-Strauss’s “The Writing Lesson.” The latter is an ethnographic reflection from *Tristes Tropiques* that describes Lévi-Strauss’s experiences with the Nambikwara, an Indian tribe from the Amazon rainforest—a society that Lévi-Strauss represents as “without writing;” an expression that Derrida reads as “dependent on ethnocentric oneirism, upon the vulgar, that is to say ethnocentric misconception of writing” (Derrida 109). He classifies Lévi-Strauss’s artful narrative composition as a travelogue: “In accordance with eighteenth-century tradition, the anecdote, the page of confessions, the fragment from a journal are knowledgeably put in place, calculated for the purposes of a philosophical demonstration of the relationships between nature and society, ideal society and real society, most often between the *other* society and our *society*” (Derrida 113). Derrida’s concern about European-engineered dichotomies, along with his assertion that as an anthropologist Lévi-Strauss “violates a virginal space” (Derrida 113), anticipates Pratt’s designation of “contact zones” where “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt 7).

Using Derrida’s as well as Pratt’s insights about writing/travel writing, autoethnography, and empire, in this paper I explore how Jamaica Kincaid, part of the Caribbean diaspora and a transnational travel writer herself, moves beyond the imperialist methods of a classic ethnographer like Lévi-Strauss, who typically attempts to explain “foreign” cultural systems to the cultural center which empowers that effort. Rather, Kincaid tells stories from the perspective of a tour guide whose sensitivity to the plurality of diasporic experience translates the polyphonic voices of decentered postcolonial subjects for a largely “foreign” audience. In this context, Kincaid becomes what Mustapha Marrouchi calls “the postcolonial writer as missionary in reverse” (6), retelling and often revising a colonial experience as she tours her homeland, “an imaginary land that lives and grows in her memory” (5), or to use Marrouchi’s trope, home as Mother Periphery: “Its assault of words, hopes, dreams, and anguish all come together in

portrayals of home (wherever that may be) as Mother Periphery: sometimes as nostalgia for color, at others as an indictment of the monstrous warts with which the periphery has been afflicted since independence” (5).

Kincaid writes in *A Small Place* that, “every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere . . . every native would like a tour” (18). This study builds on Gary E. Holcomb’s assertion in “Travels of a Transnational Slut: Sexual Migration in Kincaid’s *Lucy*,” that “no critic has so far explored how a postcolonial author may deploy the tropes of travel as a means of deconstructing the imperialist ideology written into the very genre of travel literature” (297). While Holcomb limits his critical exploration to “a thick reading of sexuality” in *Lucy* (297), his observation about the inverse values of the genre frames a valuable approach to Kincaid’s work.

I suggest that Kincaid, specifically in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, creates decentered postcolonial subjects/migrants with an eye toward doing away with the binary altogether. Kincaid’s narratives counter an appeal to essence and purity. Writing from her experience of diaspora, she displaces what Peter Childs and Patrick Williams call the “totalizing logic that is concomitant with the homeward-looking, centralizing perspective of imperialism” (210). Kincaid deconstructs the idea of homeland while celebrating heterogeneity and plurality, “instead of a regressive and resistant insistence for a lost homeland or a better past” (Childs and Williams 210). In short, Kincaid’s writing interrogates binary thinking, and her revisionary strategies align her with Derrida’s “The Violence of the Letter,” an essay that explores the cultural politics of the sign. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, whether consciously or not, Kincaid engages Derrida’s assertions that identity is not an essence but a positioning in discourse—a positioning that is itself conditioned by the position spoken from.

In “The Violence of the Letter,” Derrida interrogates the “filiation that binds Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau” (101), as well as Lévi-Strauss’s subsequent representations of difference and the writing of the Other. Derrida’s ensuing deconstruction engages the ethnocentrism of Lévi-Strauss’s representation of the Nambikwara, an Amazonian Indian group. For Derrida,

“The Writing Lesson” marks an episode of what may be called the anthropological war, the essential confrontation that opens communication between peoples and cultures, even when that communication is not practiced under the banner of colonial or missionary oppression. The entire “Writing Lesson” is recounted in the tones of violence repressed or deferred, a violence sometimes veiled, but always oppressive and heavy. (107)

In what Derrida terms a travelogue, Lévi-Strauss writes about “the little bands of nomads, who are among the most genuinely ‘primitive’ of the world’s peoples” (Derrida 107). Derrida observes that to Lévi-Strauss the fact that the Nambikwara could not write is a further sign of their innocence (Derrida 110). During Lévi-Strauss’s encounter with the Nambikwara, he

arranges a gift exchange with two subgroups, in which he presents a stack of paper and pencils to the tribe; when the people fill their pages with wavy lines, Lévi-Strauss interprets this as the first appearance of writing among a hitherto oral society (Derrida 124ff).

Targeting Lévi-Strauss's libertarian ideology of ethnocentric assimilation/exclusion, Derrida questions the contradictory nature of Lévi-Strauss's narrative:

One already suspects—and all Lévi-Strauss's writings would confirm it—that the critique of ethnocentrism, a theme so dear to the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, has most often the sole function of constituting the other as a model of original and natural goodness, of accusing and humiliating oneself, of exhibiting its being unacceptable in an anti-ethnocentric mirror. (114)

Derrida criticizes the model of "an ethnocentrism *thinking itself* as anti-ethnocentrism, an ethnocentrism in the consciousness of a liberating progressivism" (120), and concludes that these merely reverse the descriptions written by other anthropologists, the Jesuits, and the Protestant ministers who themselves had dealings with the Nambikwara (116). What this latter group perceives as the Nambikwara's violence, in contrast with their own attempts at good deeds, Lévi-Strauss records as the Nambikwara's innocence contrasted with the "wickedness" of his fellow correspondents (116). In Derrida's reckoning, any reversion of descriptions still functions to depict "us" versus the "Other;" he concludes that though the "two accounts are symmetrically opposed, they have the same dimensions, and arrange themselves around one and the same axis" (116). Peter Pericles Trefonis identifies Lévi-Strauss's work as "a type of unforgiving logocentrism carried on in the tradition of the teachings of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jean-Jacques Rousseau," and contends that within the interpretative impetus of deconstruction, "Jacques Derrida has addressed the question of ethics . . . through an elucidation of the problems of negotiating the affectivity of Western epistemology" (325).

Kincaid distances herself from this trajectory of Western epistemology. Alternatively, she employs a matrix of language designed to decenter meaning. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, she offers a way of viewing human identity as always moving, much like Derrida's theory of meaning that is defined by difference as meaning always deferred; Kincaid's narrative is a discourse of diaspora rather than a discourse of homelands and rootedness. Because the language in Kincaid's narratives moves back and forth between the language of the vanquished and the language of the victors, some have questioned her ability to write the decolonized subject.

Merle Hodge, also a Caribbean woman writer, identifies Kincaid's greatest achievement as "the beauty of the language that she herself has created" (50). Hodge explains the scarcity of Creole language in Kincaid's narratives by pointing to Kincaid's narrative style, which features the voice of the protagonist/narrator alone. "The main dialogue," Hodge writes, "is with her own searching self" (52); Hodge describes Kincaid as Caribbean writer who "has lived outside of the

Caribbean and out of earshot of Caribbean language for all of her adult life” (48). Kincaid’s American style of address often incites diametrical comments, like the following from Maria Helena Lima: “The longer Kincaid feels like an American, the harder it will become for her to continue to ‘express the voice of the decolonized subject . . . journeying back and forth between empires’” (861). While Lima wonders if Kincaid will be able to “do away with the binary altogether” (861), Louise Bernard is “drawn to the myriad ways in which she returns again and again to the raw material of the self in order to tease out the ways in which the postcolonial subject might be imagined anew” (116). The following excerpt from Lore Segal’s review of *The Autobiography of My Mother* is yet another example of the conflicting readings elicited by Kincaid’s work:

When the oppressed adopt their oppressor’s view of themselves—a view designed to defeat them—it incapacitates their affections. That is their defeat. The saddest and deadliest harvest of oppression is not the mutual hatred that is natural between those at the top and those at the bottom but the incestuous, unnatural hate within the family of the conquered. (Segal 23-24)

Segal’s criticism may well mistake Kincaid’s objective, and appears to be a direct result of rigid geographical and national identities forced on writers whose lives and narratives reflect multiple crossings. However, each of these critical topics—Kincaid’s use of language, her self-imposed distance from Antigua, her journeys back and forth between empires and the self—are stowed for Kincaid’s tour of the Mother Periphery in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. My reading credits Kincaid’s use of the autoethnographer’s voice with interrogating the false opposition of home and exile. Pratt uses the term “autoethnographer” to describe the travel writer who refashions traditions through cross-cultural contact. Autoethnography, according to Pratt, “refer[s] to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms” (7). Read as autoethnography, *The Autobiography of My Mother* redoes/undoes such binaries as self/Other, belonging/unbelonging, and home/exile. In this novel, Kincaid constructs a hybrid and decentered subject more compatible with the relocations and border crossings that are produced by diaspora and migration.

Kincaid begins the journey with an exploration of the ontological landscape of exile. Throughout her narrative the postcolonial protagonist is engaged in multiple migrations; constantly moving towards the “source” of identity, she dedicates herself to finding her mother/home, though the source proves to be elusive. The narrator begins the tour by positioning herself in an existential lacuna—an empty space between disorientation and belonging. She stands “on a precipice” with “a bleak, black wind” at her back, and “nothing, no one between me and the black room of this world” (3). Xuela reveals to us that she has been thrust into the world alone, and the narrative opens with Xuela’s lament for her mother: “My mother died at the moment I was born . . . And this realization of loss and gain made me look backward and forward” (3). Like Walter Benjamin’s Janus-faced angel of history, Xuela looks backward to the past and forward to the present (Benjamin 257-58).

The moment of birth is also a moment of death, as the daughter is born and the mother concurrently dies; both occur in the same space and time, which Xuela confirms as the space of her exile. As she unveils her story, Xuela seems to affirm Kincaid's tenet that, "At the moment African people came into this world, Africa died for them" (qtd. in Lee C10). Unwilling perhaps, more than unable to tend to Xuela's needs, her father delivers her to his washwoman as one of two nondescript and insignificant bundles, "one was his child" and "the other was his soiled clothes" (4). Thus delivered, Xuela lives "in a house that [is] far from other houses" (5). Her description of the landscape surrounding the house reads like the opening lines: "from it there was a broad view of the sea and the mountains" (5). The mountains hold the "precipice" and the sea is the world's black room. Her geographical site traces element for element the map of her ontological position. Within sight of the "unpitying" sea and mountains, Xuela "misse[s] the face" of the mother she has never seen (5). Kincaid writes Xuela into an orphaned subject position from which she must confront her ontological dilemma of how to find her place in the world. As Frantz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks* concerning the Black man, Xuela has similarly come "into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, [her] spirit filled with the desire to attain the source of the world, and then [she] found that [she] was an object in the midst of other objects" (109). In this foster home, in the care of the "same woman he paid to wash his clothes" (4), Xuela, the object, discovers that "brutality is the only real inheritance" for nothing more than a bundle (5). A bundle has no inherent rights to a past, a home, or even a language.

Displaced from birth, Xuela stands at an imaginary point with no real reference—a symbolic subject of Caribbean history. Initially, she cannot find the center since no one stands at the beginning, and eternity extends toward the bleak blackness. Xuela exists outside of stasis, and so outside of the tradition of Western philosophy and science since she has no centrality of presence. Born into exile, without a mother/home/language, she will search until she understands that the only presence she can legitimately claim is a decentered presence.

Throughout the narrative, Xuela's subject position drifts on the black sea of identity. Even so, as a child, she becomes self-aware. Though she does not yet know any linear "history of events," she is conscious of what makes up her difference:

There were seven boys and myself. The boys, too, were all of the African people. My teacher and these boys looked at me and looked at me . . . I was of the African people, but not exclusively. My mother was a Carib woman, and when they looked at me this is what they saw: The Carib people had been defeated and exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden; the African people had been defeated but survived. When they looked at me, they saw only the Carib people. They were wrong but I did not tell them so. (15-16)

Without a physical point of reference, Xuela learns to distinguish her own identity by seeing the reflection of what the seven boys see when they look at her. She sees herself in the gaze of these

others, though what stares back at her is nothing but the reflection of the Carib. The reflections stimulate Xuela's dreams of her mother, though her exile necessitates that the gaze go back beyond her own memories, to her homeland/ to her history/ to her mother—all which are virtually unrepresentable. In Xuela's dreams, then, her mother comes "down the ladder again and again, over and over, just her heels and the hem of her white dress [are] visible" (31). In the daughter's dreams, only exile itself can be visually represented as the image of feet moving down a ladder.

Though he unceremoniously dumps her with his laundry in a place of exile, Xuela's father sends money for her education. A quick and competent student, Xuela is emboldened by her vanity about her own learning faculties, and amuses herself by writing spurious letters to her father, which are stolen by Roman, one of her male classmates. Roman turns the stolen missives over to the unsympathetic teacher who forwards them to Xuela's father. As a result, her father rescinds her exile, ending her life as a foster child and bringing her home to live with him and his new wife. As Xuela's landscapes, both geographical and ontological, are mapped, she unconsciously discovers the power of writing to alter social realities: "I did not immediately recognize what had happened, what I had done: however unconsciously, however without direction, I had, through the use of some words, changed my situation: I had perhaps even saved my life. To speak of my own situation, to myself or to others, is something I would always do thereafter" (22). This experience—a kind of writing back to the center that her father represents—leads to Xuela's first "going from one place to another," about which she claims, "[t]his most simple of movements, the turning of your back, is among the most difficult to make, but once it has been made you cannot imagine it was at all hard to accomplish" (25). As she learns to amend her situation with language, she becomes skillful at manipulating her identity along the road map of writing. Later in the narrative, Xuela makes the bold claim that "[my] life began with a wide panorama of possibilities . . . I was new, the pages of my life had no writing on them, they were unsmudged, so clean, so smooth, so new. If I could have seen myself then, I could have imagined that my future would have filled volumes" (214-15). The story she knows at the end of her life is at once her story and the story of her mother; it is the expanded version of history for those who have lived in exile, and who might find themselves with more than one collective history.

By the narrative's end, Xuela (and through her, Kincaid) echoes the affirmative power of exile noted by another Anglophone writer, George Lamming: "The pleasure and paradox of my own exile is that I belong wherever I am" (50). The Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire also wrote a seminal work about return to the homeland; his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*) lays out his journey from "ex-isle" to reunion with his "native land." Kincaid abandons reunion with the land in lieu of self-evolution that may be claimed, as Carole Boyce Davies explains, as a rewriting of home: "home as a contradictory, contested space," in place of home as a longing for that single origin (113). In the end, Xuela's travels might be

construed as positive. "Displacement," Marrouchi argues, "can also give rise to an alternative vision . . . that sees both sides of the imperial divide" (19).

Though there is no actual dialogue in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid's narrative uses language and the position from which language is spoken to give utterance to the plural voice of the decolonized subject. In her essay, "'Mwen na rien, Msieu': Jamaica Kincaid and the Problem of Creole Gnosis," Rhonda Cobham argues that Kincaid "creat[es] for her narrator . . . a language that approximates [an] active refusal of all social allegiances" (876). Xuela transmits thoughts in terms that struggle against the binary of self and Other. Because identity is not an essence but a positioning in discourse, Xuela defers the use of any language until the age of four: "Until I was four I did not speak . . . I knew I could speak, but I did not want to" (6). When she finally decides to break her silence, her first sentence is in English, a language she has never heard anyone speak: "Where is my father?" Xuela asks (7). This act is more than mimicry; this act is the first example of Xuela's recurring manipulation of language, and it introduces the novel's ongoing critique not only of colonialism, but also of nation. Her pluralistic language speaks to dislocations of diaspora as Xuela maintains a monopoly on her voice, which she employs in the formation of her self. Xuela continues: "That the first words I said were in the language of a people I would never like or love is not now a mystery to me" (7).

Throughout the narrative, Xuela plays with language as she maintains what Bernard refers to as "a defiantly counter-hegemonic stance" (130). At school, she speaks proper English; but inside her thoughts and out loud to herself, she speaks French patois, "a language that was not considered proper at all, a language that a person from France could not speak" (16). She alternates between English and patois and starts to "speak quite openly then—to myself frequently": "I spoke to myself because I grew to like the sound of my own voice. It had a sweetness to me, it made my loneliness less, for I was lonely and wished to see people in whose faces I could recognize something of myself. Because who was I?" (16). Xuela needs to position herself in meaning and in language; her self-location depends on being able to discover her own voice and learning to "speak of [her] own situation" (22).

The language Xuela chooses to speak, if she speaks at all, depends on her mood; she maintains this language control over her life and the social contexts in which she finds herself. Xuela's self-identification is multi-voiced, and she ultimately negotiates the politics of her speech by practicing the act of naming as well as not naming herself. "The perfume of your own name and your own deeds in intoxicating," claims Xuela (59). The naming act, Pratt writes, "brings the reality of order into being" (33). Kincaid's words echo Derrida's, however, when Xuela observes the following: "And your own name, whatever it might be, eventually [is] not the gateway to who you really were" (79). Her words recall Derrida's claim that "proper names are already no longer proper names, because their production is their obliteration" (109). Xuela goes on to say, "For the name of any one person is at once her history recapitulated and abbreviated, and on declaring it, that person holds herself high or low, and the person hearing it holds the declarer high or low" (29). And Derrida, writing from another time and space has this to say: "it

is because the proper name has never been, as the unique appellation reserved for the presence of a unique being, anything but the originary myth of a transparent legibility” (109).

As a final point, Kincaid, on her autoethnographical journey, represents Xuela, the colonized subject, in terms “that engage with the colonizer’s own terms,” to use Pratt’s phrase. At one point in the narrative, Xuela identifies herself with the colonizer in a cultural encounter where she herself becomes the dominator. After discovering three land turtles, “crawling in and out of the small space under the house,” Xuela immediately decides to appropriate them: “I wanted to have them near me,” she explains (11). “I took all three turtles and placed them in an enclosed area where they could not come and go as they pleased and so were completely dependent on me for their existence” (11). As guardian, Xuela feeds them, provides water for them, and describes in vivid terms the turtles’ exotic shells with their dramatic colorations. Her care and concern, however, do not ameliorate the turtles’ “colonial” entrapment, and they offer resistance in the only way they might as Xuela reports: “they would withdraw into their shells when I did not want them to, and when I called them, they would not come out” (11-12). Annoyed by their lack of compliance, Xuela decides to teach them a lesson: “I took some mud from the riverbed and covered up the small hole from which each neck would emerge, and I allowed it to dry up . . . When they came into my mind again, I went to take a look at them in the place where I had left them. They were by then all dead” (12). In this cultural clash of wills, the turtles lose the anthropological war. In their confinement, they die under the oppressive and heavy weight of a muddy violence.

Later in life, Xuela again acts in ways that might be understood as that of the colonizing culture, when she chooses to marry Philip, an Englishman, one “of the victors” (217), a man whom she does not love. A friend of her father, a doctor, and a white man, Philip adores Xuela, but she refuses him customary deference and maintains matrimonial sovereignty: “He grew to live for the sound of my footsteps, so often I would walk without making a sound; he loved the sound of my voice, so for days I would not utter a word” (217-18). In this “reversed” role, Xuela dominates the “colonizer;” she moves him from the city into the mountains of her Carib ancestors exiling him in a world, “in which he could not speak the language. I mediated for him, I translated for him. I did not always tell him the truth, I did not always tell him everything. I blocked his entrance to the world in which he lived; eventually I blocked his entrance into all the worlds he had come to know” (224). As Xuela learns to negotiate the spaces of exile, she learns to maintain control of her subject position. She plans out her own destinations. She steadily withholds herself as wife, wanting something “beyond ordinary satisfaction” (176). Like Roland, her extramarital lover, she wants more than “one love and one room with walls made of mud and roof of cane leaves, beyond the small plot of land where the same trees bear the same fruit year following year” (176). In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid trades imaginings of homeland for the evolution of each succeeding self. She lays the groundwork for the new alignments described by Mustapha Marrouchi in *Signifying with a Vengeance*:

Instead we begin to sense that old authority cannot simply be replaced by the new authority, but that new alignments made across borders, types, individuals, nations and essences are emerging, and it is these new alignments that will provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of identity that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of domination. (13)

"If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see," commences Kincaid in the opening lines of *A Small Place* (1988), which is constructed as a travel narrative in which the author revisits her home after an absence of twenty years (3). "And since you are the tourist," Kincaid repeatedly advises, "you needn't let that slightly funny feeling you have from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into full-fledged unease . . . you could ruin your holiday" (10). In this passage Kincaid indelicately shifts the subject from tourism in the Caribbean, in particular Antigua, the nine-by-twelve-mile island in the British West Indies where she grew up, to an indictment of tourist complacency, imperialist oppression and government corruption. In the face of her polemics—replete with anticolonial censures—*A Small Place* "takes the form of a guided tour," argues Suzanne Gauch, "that focuses not only on the island of Antigua and its people, but also on perceptions of them held by the reader, by Antiguans, and by the narrator herself" (910).

More interestingly, Kincaid—the Caribbean writer in exile since the age of seventeen—situates herself as the tour guide in a narrative slot both problematic and full of possibility: she shifts herself as a subject moving from the first person "I" as the tour guide, to the "we" as in "we Antiguans, for I am one" (8), to stand specter-like with the "you" as the tourist. Kincaid's exploration of different subject positions in both *A Small Place* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* alludes to Homi Bhabha's many readings of colonial discourse in *The Location of Culture*. She articulates cultural differences by resituating the postcolonial identity to a Third space, which Bhabha identifies as necessary for the representation of cultural differences: "By exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (39). In eluding polarity, Kincaid's traveling songs recount hybridity, syncretism, and creolizations that are also in harmony with Paul Gilroy, who proposes diaspora as a way out of the essentialist/anti-essentialist binary in *The Black Atlantic*.

Throughout Kincaid's corpus, the author facilely moves through various stages of transformation; her touring subverts typical center-periphery relations. "Her oeuvre," writes Louise Bernard, "is self-consciously constructed as a fluid, intermeshed body of work that relates, back and forth . . . all of which are projected out of the site of her exile from, and continual physical/psychic return to, her native land" (118). Kincaid's various travels from Mother Periphery to the Center and back, however, allow her to explore the complexities and contradictions of homeland and identity for the migrant subject; and in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid deconstructs not only the idea of homeland but the European-engineered dichotomies that depict us versus Other as well.

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