

June 2006

Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*: Allegory and Self-Writing as Counter Discourse

Michelene Adams

anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

Recommended Citation

Adams, Michelene (2006) "Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*: Allegory and Self-Writing as Counter Discourse," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol4/iss1/1>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

Among Caribbean women writers, Jamaica Kincaid is noted for her counter-discursive strategies; she consistently produces essays, stories and novels, even children's fiction, that challenge accepted power structures. *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), her fourth lengthy work of fiction, is set in Dominica in the early 20th century and purports to be the life story of the writer's mother told from her own perspective. The basic premise of the novel presents two opportunities for further interrogating colonial and patriarchal power. Since the narrator's mother has died, her father is central in her life. This use of the trope of the father adds a new dimension to the familiar allegories in Kincaid's earlier works that feature the mother. Also, although *At the Bottom of the River* (1978), *Annie John* (1983) and *Lucy* (1990) are all first person narratives, the conscious focus on autobiography in this text calls attention to the subversiveness of the act of self-writing.

Despite Kincaid's avowed initial ignorance of the tradition of letters among Caribbean women¹, she immediately fell in line with the regional tradition of women's writing in that the mother figure and mother-daughter relations have been among her work's most distinguishable features. According to Marianne Hirsch, the norm in black women's writing is for the mother to be "prominently featured in complex and multiple ways" (415). This tendency to focus on the mother and to render her in multifarious ways is partly explained by the fact that this writing is, as Hirsch observes, "just in the process of defining itself in relation to a maternal, largely oral past" (415). Although Hirsch is speaking with reference to African-American literature, her insight is also applicable to Caribbean writing. In the vast majority of Caribbean women's texts, the blood or surrogate mother has always been a prominent figure and a major influence—positive or negative—particularly on female characters. Hirsch continues:

Unlike so many contemporary white women, writers who define their artistic identity as separate from or in opposition to their mothers, black writers have recently been insisting on what Mary Helen Washington identifies as the "connection between the black woman writer's sense of herself as part of a link in generations of women, and her decision to write." (416)

Hirsch also argues that black female writers, more than their white counterparts, tend to "think back through their mothers" in order to assume what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have called the 'authority of authorship' and to define themselves identifiably in their own voices as subjects" (416).

Kincaid's portraits do manifest identifiably Caribbean views on mothering, but she also invests the figure of the mother and the mother-daughter dyad with allegorical significance. Stephen Slemon has produced two enlightening articles in which he argued that allegory played a role in shaping the course of colonization. He explained that in allegory "signs are interpreted as modalities of preceding signs which are already deeply embedded in a specific cultural thematics" ("Monuments" 7). Thus, the meaning of the new group of signs depends upon the original group. Slemon demonstrated how in applying allegory Europeans read the Other through

their own experience and culture so that the identity of those who were not European was determined by the Empire. One example he gave of the use of this mode of interpretation was Columbus's nomenclature for the Caribbean. The explorer named the alien lands in honor of his monarchs and his religion. He read the unknown territory through the signs of his own culture and thus was able to claim it and, by extension, its inhabitants.² Europe identified the unfamiliar through its own cultural signs and so "the 'new' world is made contingent upon the old" ("Post-Colonial" 161).

Abdul JanMohamed identified the Manicheanism at the heart of colonization as operating within an allegorical frame. In other words, the paradigm of European versus Other could be extrapolated upon through allegory. The original antithetical paradigm is the ground for a set of oppositions that allegory supports. Hence, the antithesis that began in racial difference is entrenched by the "moral and even metaphysical" differences that are suggested in the Manichean allegory (JanMohamed 61). Clearly then, allegory has served as a key instrument in underpinning the imperialist project.

However, Slemon pointed out that in a characteristically subversive approach postcolonial writers appropriated allegory and regularly use it to interrogate history. He argued that allegory became a:

site upon which post-colonial cultures seek to contest and subvert colonialist appropriation through the production of a literary and specifically anti-imperialist, figurative opposition or textual *counter-discourse*. ("Monuments" 11)

He explained that:

since the allegorical sign refers always to a previous or anterior sign ... an awareness of the passage of time is at the heart of allegory, and because of this, all allegorical writing is thought to be inherently involved with questions of history and tradition. ("Post-Colonial" 158)

Thus, for postcolonial writers, whose history has been misrepresented or erased, allegory becomes a powerful instrument, for through it they are able to question the received notion of history itself and propose alternative ways of conceiving of the past and, consequently, the present. There is no stronger illustration of how allegory might serve the postcolonial writer than Lamming's potent re-presentation of Prospero and Caliban. His subversion of the Renaissance depiction of colonizer and colonized ensures an endless interrogation of the concept of power. Lamming has constructed allegories elsewhere as well. *Natives of My Person* (1972) reconfigures the standard scenario of imperial conquest, and in *Water With Berries* (1971) Prospero and Caliban are relocated in London in the shape of an elderly British woman and three immigrant West Indian males.

Kincaid's allegories do resemble these in their fundamental intent, but her concern with gender contributes another dimension to the counter-discourse. The femaleness of the central characters in Kincaid's fiction is key to comprehending the principal issues in the texts. She also represents the colonial. In most of Kincaid's fiction, the Caribbean mother interacts with her daughter in the manner that the mother country historically interacts with the colonial Caribbean. However, slippage occurs between the mother as mother country or England, and mother as motherland³—the ancestral homeland of black West Indians. Kincaid established these “crossover conjunctures” in *At the Bottom of the River* and in *Annie John* (Ferguson, *Where 1*), where the pre-pubescent child is cocooned with her mother in a bucolic landscape that suggests pre-colonial innocence; the colonial imagines a bond with her ancestral mother, Africa, that provides her with a sense of security and rootedness unavailable in the colonial environment.

As writers such as V.S. Naipaul have shown, the politics of power in the Caribbean tend to be predicated upon inequity and abuse because the region's history is characterized by the experiences of conquest, decimation, slavery, and colonialism. According to Kincaid, in an interview with Eleanor Watchel, “[t]he legacy [of conquest] is in the cruelty between ordinary people” (58). She adds that, “The truth is that the legacy of colonialism everywhere is cruelty and brutality and theft. What the colonizers did in a mild way we now do to each other in an exaggerated, grotesque way” (Wachtel 58). In the paradigm of mother and daughter featured in *At the Bottom of the River*, *Annie John*, and *Lucy* we can read Kincaid's views on how Caribbean history has shaped power relations in the region.

It should be noted, too, that the very terms “motherland” and “mother country” are vexing. Critic Caroline Rooney considers that the fact that “motherland” is defined as “native country” makes “mother” serve “as a substitute for ‘native’ and a trope for ‘of origin’” (99). She indicates that “fatherland” differs in that it is “marked by ownership,” whereas the motherland belongs to no one. She explains that these definitions become more problematic when factors such as colonialism and Empire are considered:

‘Motherland’ can also be placed next to ‘mothercountry,’ defined as ‘country in relation to its colonies’. ‘-land’ therefore pertains to the native, while ‘-country’ to the colonial relation, which suggests that motherland/native country is only country in terms of terrain, whereas mothercountry, as country-country and not country-land, is a proper country, a territory.

In terms of the above, the motherland can be situated in relation to colonial history, where it would signify (a) country belonging to no one, so open to adoption by the colonizing country as its other land. (99)

For black West Indians the import of these complex semantics is intensified by a few factors. Africans were transported away from their native land to territories in the Caribbean. As a result, the motherland was automatically distant. Secondly, slaves invoked West Africa as mother, but even for the first generation born in the West Indies the motherland was indirectly experienced,

and when it was made “open to adoption” by the empire, the pre-colonial haven that they envisioned was so transformed in many cases that it was a near-mythical construct. If motherland becomes myth, actualized neither as territory nor as terrain, what is to confer the sense of rootedness that it should furnish for its children?

The impression of rootlessness is prevalent in *Autobiography*. Set in Dominica in the early twentieth century, *Autobiography* is told from the point of view of Xuela, whose mother has died in childbirth. The text opens with this declaration: “My mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind” (3). Xuela goes on: “I came to feel that for my whole life I had been standing on a precipice, that my loss had made me vulnerable, hard, and helpless” (3-4). The shift in Kincaid’s depiction of West Indian history is extreme. *Autobiography* is marked by a feeling of loss and futility. The figure of the father casts a shadow over this text, for in the West Indies that Kincaid presents here, the mother is physically absent and patriarchy is left untempered by her tenderness. What Kincaid depicts through allegory in this novel is the society that grows out of the climate that colonization created. Unlike the first three texts, in which the pre-pubescent child’s relationship with her mother mirrors the idealized bond between individual and motherland, in *Autobiography* the mother/land is un-experienced; it can only be imagined. Thus, all that the trope implies—nurture, tradition, grounding, security—is absent. Instead, the nation is conceived as the territory of the father.

Significantly, the mother whom Xuela has lost is not of African heritage but is Amerindian. This emblem is weighted with significance. The portrait of the colonial West Indies that Kincaid offers in this novel is predicated upon the ultimate victim in the region’s history:

[T]hey were the last survivors. They were like living fossils, they belonged in a museum, on a shelf, enclosed in a glass case. That these people, my mother’s people, were balanced precariously on the ledge of eternity, waiting to be swallowed up in the great yawn of nothingness, was without doubt, but the most bitter part was that it was through no fault of their own that that they had lost, and lost in the most extreme way; they had lost not just the right to be themselves, they had lost themselves. (*Autobiography* 197-98)

It could be argued that the notion of the irrecoverable mother/land is as organically linked to the idea of the Amerindian as the African. For the descendants of Africans in the West Indies, the motherland in its purest sense is irretrievable. It should be noted, however, that the earliest mother in the Caribbean is, essentially, the Amerindian mother. With the decimation of the first peoples, the Caribbean mother/land, too, was lost. Initially, the West Indies, the new home for so many various peoples, is not a motherland because they arrived there from other shores. However, even later generations who had known only those territories would not have had the sense of an original mother/land, and, one might argue, remained without one. This impression of a people utterly unclaimed and unloved pervades the text.

Although Xuela's father does not abandon her, he is not, by any means, a substitute for the nurturing mother that she imagines she has lost. Upon his wife's death, he arranges to leave the infant with the woman who regularly launders his clothes. Xuela dispassionately informs the reader that she is unsure whether her father would have urged the laundress to take more care of the bundled child or the bundle of clothing "because he was a very vain man" (4). He is a consistently dutiful parent, but there is no indication that he has any real affection for Xuela. As a policeman, he is an agent of Empire, and it is clear that he has adopted its policy of placing economic gain first. More accurately, material gain is all that is of consequence to Alfred Richardson. Xuela conveys the extent of his materialistic nature in this chilling description: "My father's skin was the colour of corruption: copper, gold, ore" (181). Moreover, he is inhumane towards others; his cruelty to those under his jurisdiction grows exponentially to match their level of poverty and helplessness. Xuela describes him as a "part of a whole way of life on the island which perpetuated pain" (39). Alfred Richardson is the colonial who has adopted the master's values and ideologies, even the Manichean ideology that leads him, despite his own African heritage, "to despise all who behaved like the African people: ... all who were defeated, doomed, conquered, poor, diseased, head bowed down, mind numbed from cruelty" (187). Alfred Richardson seems to illustrate Fanon's theory that the "native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor" (*Wretched* 53).

Xuela describes her father on one occasion in a manner that clarifies his kinship with Empire:

his face was like a map of the world. ... His cheeks were two continents separated by two seas which joined an ocean (his nose); his gray eyes were bottomless and sleeping volcanoes; between his nose and his mouth lay the equator; his ears were the horizons, to go beyond which was to fall into the thick blackness of nothing. (91)

The analogy here equates him with the conquistadors who claimed the alien territories they reached and the imperialists who viewed foreign lands as property and divided the globe according to their own design. Xuela describes his face as "filling up the whole room from one end to the other" (91), and she senses that to go beyond the horizons of her father's face is to fall prey to nothingness. Here, again, Manichean allegory is apparent, for reflected in this image is the notion of Self versus Other. The space beyond the territory that the imperialist has named and claimed is so insignificant that it is un-conceived; it is nothing. Anne McClintock's discussion of the semiotic significance of cartography and of the map itself adds another layer of meaning:

Map-making became the servant of colonial plunder, for the knowledge constituted by the map both preceded and legitimized the conquest of territory. The map is a technology of knowledge that professes to capture the truth about a place in pure scientific form, operating under the guise of scientific exactitude and promising to retrieve and reproduce nature exactly as it is. As such, it is also a

technology of possession, promising that those with the capacity to make such perfect representations must also have the right of territorial control. (*Imperial* 27-28)

To be capable of mapping territory ensured one the right to claim and even to plunder it. The equation of Alfred Richardson with the image of the map cements his kinship with the colonizer. We are reminded that Kincaid has provocatively proposed that Europe's legacy in its territories is "cruelty and brutality and theft" (Wachtel 58). Although the colonial has suffered at the hands of the imperialist, the tendency of the colonial is not to simply imitate him, but to extrapolate upon his behavior.

The modern concept of the Fatherland is largely associated with Western states such as France, Holland, and Germany. The growth of cultural nationalism in the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the new popularity of the idea of the state belonging to its people encouraged discourse on the notion of the Fatherland. For example, Voltaire defined "patrie" as a space where citizens could feel economically secure and protected by the law and ultimately believe that they were part of the community ("Patrie"). Africans and West Indians, however, are more comfortable with the association of mother and land. Elleke Boehmer lists a number of writers from these regions who speak of their countries of origin as mother, including Kamau Brathwaite, Buchi Emecheta, and Wole Soyinka. There are also several female Caribbean women writers other than Kincaid who make a similar identification, such as Michelle Cliff, Lorna Goodison, and Paule Marshall.

West Indian discourse has not fully explored the concept of the Fatherland.⁴ In fact, in an article on *In the Castle of My Skin*, Mary E. Donnelly states that she is "consciously refocusing traditional debate about colonialism" by positing the idea of the colony as *Father* Country:

Although it is more typical to refer to the dominating culture, Great Britain in this case, as the Mother Country, I would like to rethink that usage, for if we consider the colonial child as torn between the mother and the father, we can see the mother only as Barbados, Barbadian culture, and the real Barbadian women who mother these (exclusively) male children. Like the father in Sigmund Freud's narrative of the nuclear family, British culture intervenes in the mother-child dyad, asserting its own laws and offering an opportunity for independence at the price of the maternal connection. Therefore, I refer to Barbados, as the mother culture or Mother Country and to Britain as the father culture or Father Country. (8)

The figure of the patriarch is a common one in postcolonial letters since Europe's male-centered ideologies defined the thrust of imperialism, but although he is in the sub-text of any discussion of mother country, the coupling of mother with land has always been seen as organic. However, Kincaid subverts the familiar equation, replacing the mother with her counterpart and

characterizing the Fatherland by its oppressive patriarchal law. Despite the unfamiliarity of the new Caribbean allegory, its logic holds, for although England is conceived as the mother country, the reality is that it was patriarchy and the law of the Father that directed colonialism's course. The depiction of the mother country as surrogate parent is thus exposed as a ruse.

Hegel's definition here helps to explain the traditional Western role of patriarchy in maintaining the state:

The *patriarchal* condition is regarded—either in reference to the entire race of man, or to some branches of it—as exclusively that condition of things, in which the legal element is combined with a due recognition of the moral and emotional parts of our nature; and in which justice as united with these, truly and really influences the intercourse of the social units. The basis of the patriarchal condition is the family relation; which develops the *primary* form of conscious morality, succeeded by that of the State as its *second* phase. The patriarchal condition is one of transition, in which the family has already advanced to the position of a race or people; where the union, therefore, has already ceased to be simply a bond of love and confidence, and has become one of plighted service. (41-42)

In other words, the traditional family unit, with patriarch as absolute head, served as the model for the hierarchy of the Western state as a whole. Much as the father kept order within the family, the male head of State kept order for his subjects, whose service was “plighted” to him.

Naturally, Europe's ideas on patriarchy, such as those that Hegel delineates here, were applied in the colonies. It was the Western conception of the role of men and the proper structure of family and nation, with male as head that were viewed as the ideal paradigms. McClintock explains that during the nineteenth century:

the social function of the great service families was displaced onto the national bureaucracies, while the image of the family was projected onto these nationalisms as their shadowy, naturalized form. Because the subordination of woman to man and child to adult was deemed a natural fact, hierarchies within the nation could be depicted in familial terms to guarantee social difference as a category of nature. The metaphoric depiction of social hierarchy as natural and familial—the “national family,” the global “family of nations,” the colony as a “family of black children ruled over by a white father”—depended in this way on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children within the domestic sphere. (“No Longer” 91)

Thus, women were expected to play a subordinate role or no role at all in the affairs of the nation or in nation building. This holds for the Caribbean, where “there was considerable collusion of Caribbean men with the colonial authorities to produce colonial hierarchies” (Lewis 274). The

Caribbean female cannot realistically have a place in any consideration of land, country, or even nation, since all three have been configured by the colonizer and/or his apprentices—the Alfred Richardsons—who learned from their masters how to control.

If we consider McClintock's description of gender roles within the frame of the "national family of man" we see that Xuela's parents display the dichotomy that the author outlines:

Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent, and historic) embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary, principle of discontinuity. ("No Longer" 92)

Xuela imagines her mother frozen in time. As an Amerindian, she is a member of a practically vanished people in parts of the Caribbean; this parent does not contribute to shaping her future. Her father, however, moves with the times. He has adopted the colonizer's tastes, his language, his religion, and his values. The nation appears to be modeled according to his desire: his solipsism, his materialism, and his lack of compassion mark the society. This is the Father's land where only the mother's bare heels and the hem of her dress are ever glimpsed as she climbs down toward, but never reaches, the child she left behind.

In a segment of *Autobiography* reminiscent of the short story "At the Bottom of the River," Kincaid defines the masculine principle. She describes the acquisitive nature of the European male, his desire to lay claim to much of what he can spy from his privileged position atop a plateau. She speaks of the question that he asks himself when he has acquired all he sees: "What makes the world turn?" (132). She concludes that one morning "he will have an answer and it will take up volumes and there are many answers, each of them different, and there are many men, each of them the same" (132). The course of the past is reflected in this parable, for it tells of Europe's acquisition of a large portion of the globe and the reason that Europeans felt entitled to propose that their perception of the world was ultimate knowledge. They linked the power to acquire and to control with the right to historicize other peoples and to define them existentially. Interestingly, although the men she describes find many different answers, all of the men themselves are the same. It is clear, too, that even non-European males such as Alfred Richardson, whom Xuela describes as "an incredible mimic" (139), can become replicas of their masters when they pattern themselves after them. Thus, the work of the colonizer is carried on by the colonial patriarch, and it is done so well that a modern woman such as Xuela can admit that as a female she "own[s] nothing" and is not entitled to ask any question (132). The course of the nation is undoubtedly charted and directed by males.

Elleke Boehmer discusses why the female plays no overt role in shaping modern nations that were once colonized. She argues that "the history of intersecting patriarchies that was part of

colonialism” has persisted in former colonies, ensuring that post-colonial societies are marked by “gender bias” (7). Sociologist Lynden Lewis’s discussion of gender and nation building in the Caribbean corroborates Boehmer’s views:

in the case of the nationalist movement in the Caribbean, whatever notions of femaleness may have existed about the nation, women were not really given any opportunity to participate in its construction, to delineate its parameters or to mediate its apparatuses of power. These determinations remained the prerogatives of indigenous men who had been schooled in the “best” tradition of colonial patriarchy and its deployment of power. (277)

Kincaid’s representation of gender and the nation exhibits the extent to which the adoption of Western epistemology and Western values served to entrench the same inequitable and damaging social structures and even the same relationships that existed in the West.

The trope of the mother is reconfigured further in this novel because Xuela refuses to accept the traditional maternal role. Schultheis reminds us that although woman as mother is preferable to a number of other female stereotypes, it is dangerous in that it “limits female sexuality and identity to procreation” (para. 7). The narrator realizes in time that while her employer Monsieur LaBatte is sleeping with her, his infertile wife is anticipating the child that she will bear for them. She says that Madame LaBatte’s vision of the baby she would have “hung in the air like a ghost,” but the young woman refuses to acknowledge or accept it: “I turned my back to it; my ears grew deaf to it; my heart would not beat” (77). Upon discovering that she is, in fact, pregnant, she thinks, “if there was a child in me, I could expel it through the sheer force of my will” (81), so, not surprisingly, she actually aborts it, severing the “seemingly inevitable link between female sexuality and procreation” (Schultheis para. 24).

After her own abortion, Xuela feels the need to depart from those who know her. While she resides alone, she practices strengthening her resolve. Her vision of her future underscores the impression of the motherland as no more than a groundless hope:

I had never had a mother, I had just recently refused to become one, and I knew then that this refusal would be complete. ... I would bear children, but I would never be a mother to them. I would bear them in abundance; they would emerge from my head, from my armpits, from between my legs. ... I would throw them from a great height; every bone in their body would be broken and the bones would never be properly set, healing in the way they were broken, healing never at all. I would decorate them when they were only corpses and set each corpse in a polished wooden box, and place the polished wooden box in the earth and forget the part of the earth where I had buried the box. It is in this way that I did not become a mother; it is in this way that I bore my children. (96-98)

In this enigmatic passage Kincaid creates an alternative allegorical representation of the mother: instead of loving caregiver, she is portrayed as baby-making monster.⁵ Trying to understand the motives of the patriarch, Xuela determines that his response to the question “What makes the world turn?” is three commands: “Connive, deceive, murder” (134). In the Fatherland, the mother would never be present as nurturer; in keeping with the climate that colonization has fostered, the nurturing mother is absent and none of the women in the text—not Xuela, her sister Elizabeth, her stepmother, Ma Eunice, and not even Madame LaBatte—is truly maternal.

Reworking her Caribbean allegory in *Autobiography*, Kincaid moves beyond the personal sphere to address social and political concerns from a feminist perspective. Issues such as social progress and nationhood are evoked, and although the figure of the mother is entrenched in their collective psyche, Caribbean readers are faced with the disturbing vision of a motherless society propelled by the values of the Father.

One means Kincaid uses to confront what Veronica Gregg describes as the “open wound” of Caribbean history (926) is the idea of writing the self. Both feminist and post-colonial thinkers see autobiography as a means of empowerment. They have “sought to reconstruct the subject in an assertion of identity-based politics and theories of agency,” and they have “been attentive to the idea of the self as a collaborative project in which both others and language play an active role” (Donnell 125-26). Narrative allows the anthropologist/historian/raconteur to shape the subject’s life, his or her history; but autobiography is a means of evading this capture—writing one’s own life is a way of trying to understand it and to claim it back. Autobiography is also a means of recuperating history itself. Many schools of feminists see the form as a way of “making visible women’s interpretations of their own historically grounded lives,” and they recognize that “to do so is to expand and to change a male privileged understanding of history, even a male privileged understanding of women’s lived experiences” (Sosnoski 30-31). Autobiography plays a similar role for postcolonial writers who are chronicling their own experience instead of accepting the histories written by others. “Post-colonial refusals of the interpellated subject position take place, appropriately, through that original avenue of interpellation—textuality” (Tiffin, “Rites” 29).

The title *The Autobiography of My Mother* draws deliberate attention to the form. The writer’s mother is presented as the “I” of the novel, supposedly recounting her own life. Of course, the work is fiction, so the fact that this life must be fictionalized to be narrated is a reminder of the silencing of so many Caribbean women’s histories. Firstly, as Alison Donnell argues, Kincaid is proposing that writing the life of another can, in fact, “become a form of decolonisation and dehegemonisation,” empowering both writer and subject (135). Although it is not truly autobiography, in writing Xuela’s narrative, Kincaid legitimises those who had no place in official histories. Secondly, though it is not technically the autobiography of her mother, because of its strongly autobiographical elements, writing the text presumably does help Kincaid make sense of her past, as she believes autobiography ought to do (Ferguson, “A Lot” n.p.).

Writing specifically about Caribbean autobiography, Sandra Pouchet Paquet contends that self-writing helps to map the impact of ongoing “interculturative processes” on the Caribbean individual’s sense of racial, ethnic and gender identity (4). The question of identity is vexing in a region where for hundreds of years a multiplicity of cultures has interacted and redefined Caribbean culture as a whole. Paquet argues that self-writing “illuminates the regenerative lineaments of the multilingual, multiethnic, many-ancestored communities” (5). As a result, “autobiography constructs multiple spaces where the private and the personal collapse into projections of a public self, where the individual is represented within the context of mutuality and commonality” (Paquet 4-5):

Autobiography is a form that allows the individual to tease out his or her genealogical complexity and as a result to better understand him or herself. Race and ethnicity are always a point of focus in coming to terms with the notion of identity, and in this region where people’s racial and ethnic makeup is typically multi-layered, they become especially crucial.

Xuela does find that race and ethnicity are major considerations in constructing the lives of each parent in narrative: she understands that she must pay attention to her father’s bi-racial background and to her mother’s Amerindian heritage to have a deeper sense of them as individuals and a deeper sense of herself. She discovers that although Alfred Richardson has both Scottish and African blood, historical and social circumstances have prompted him to submerge one and to embrace the other. Power relations have also determined that Xuela’s mother should be erased because she is Amerindian. In Kincaid’s texts, examining one’s racial and ethnic heritage is not “regenerative” as Paquet argues it is, nor is Xuela reconciled with her community by examining her genealogy. In fact, the implication is that there is no community to which she might be reconciled.

All the same, it is clear that Xuela does write the self in order to gain power. In simply articulating one’s own life, one declares that it is worth recording. In addition, Xuela takes deliberate control of the narrative: there is no dialogue, only her first person accounts, rendered in a measured and generally dispassionate tone. When she speaks for the first time at age four, her first words are a complete grammatical question in Standard English: “Where is my father?” (7). Considering that she has lived in the home of a laundress whose family converses in French patois, this is odd; however, it is a sign of Xuela’s will to resist. Her seizing on language as a route to subjectivity is another case of Caliban using Prospero’s tongue to his advantage. Xuela makes clear that those Dominicans who speak only French patois and/or Dominica’s English dialect are outside the dominant culture, but the master must be challenged on his own ground. By insisting on chronicling her life in Standard English, she is rejecting patois and the dialect, not because they are socially inferior but because they offer no political leverage.

Further, Kincaid looks to the inception of West Indian history and draws the Aboriginal out of that crippling moment in the region’s past and into the life story of a modern woman.

Granted, the Amerindian female is a ghost who never speaks, but this daughter's autobiography incorporates the Aboriginal mother's story, and so, through self-writing the ghost re-enters history:

That uncanny yet material mother cannot be inscribed, but the writing is made to mark her presence as a haunted and haunting absence. The foot of the living dead native woman leaves its imprint on the lives that come after; the imprimatur of her maligned spirit seals itself within the written text: A text written in the language and traditions which claim to have excised the Native Caribbean woman or reduced her to an inchoate wound. (Gregg 928)

In all of her texts, autobiography serves as a space to articulate her subjectivity as a woman and also as a West Indian. Kincaid herself has said:

[t]here is no reason for me to be a writer without autobiography. ... For me [writing] was really an act of saving my life, so it had to be autobiographical. I am someone who had to make sense out of my past. (Ferguson, "A Lot" 176)

Clearly then for Kincaid autobiography is a means of deciphering identity and coming to terms with history.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid moves away from the dichotomous motherland/mother country trope that she has explored in several texts. Instead, she presents another facet of what colonization in its various forms has made of the West Indies—the comfort that the notion of mother/land provides has been wrested from the people, and the Father has founded his territory upon “cruelty and brutality and theft” (Wachtel 58). Xuela ends her tale with a paradoxical declaration: “This account of my life has been an account of my mother’s life as much as it has been an account of mine, and even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have, as it is their account of me” (227). Donnell contends that, “this parting metanarrative functions as an explanatory narrative for the text as a whole” (134). Of course, if Xuela’s story is essentially the same one that her mother and her children would tell, the West Indies is figured as a space devoid of human connection. Kincaid does not place temporal limits on the inhumanity; the allegory of the Fatherland is meant to reflect West Indian history since landfall. The absence of the Aboriginal mother is a reminder of the brutality that emerged in Columbian time. Thus, she indicates how deeply imperialist impulses have scarred the region, and she acknowledges the reality of the female’s marginalization within the society. Nevertheless, her work is always “indelibly marked by opposition to the hegemonic project” (Ferguson, *Kincaid* 6), and allegory and autobiography are forms that facilitate that opposition.

Notes

¹See Cudjoe's interview "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project" (220-221).

²For example, in popular myth, the Arawak- and Carib-speaking tribes including the Nepoya, Suppoya and Yao who occupied Trinidad, had named the island *Ierie*, which is usually translated as "Land of the Hummingbird," but when that landmass came into view, Columbus saw three mountain ranges that made him think of the Catholic icon the Holy Trinity, and so he called it Trinidad.

³Ann Morris and Margaret Dunn have suggested that "[f]or the Caribbean woman, the notion of motherland is especially complex, encompassing in its connotations her island home and its unique culture as well as the body of tropes, talismans and female bonding that is a woman's heritage through her own and other mothers. The land and one's mother then are co-joined" (219).

⁴Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic Modernity and Double Consciousness* briefly discusses Martin Delany's references to an African fatherland:

... even when [Delany] referred to Africa with the female pronoun, [he] persisted in calling the continent the fatherland. I want to suggest that this obstinacy expresses something profound and characteristic about Delany's sense of the necessary relationship between nationality, citizenship, and masculinity. He was probably the first black thinker to make the argument that the integrity of the race is primarily the integrity of its male heads of household and secondarily the integrity of the families over which they preside. (25)

Thus, Delany imagined a Western-style patriarchy for black states whose male-dominated households mirrored the male-dominated nation.

⁵This portrait of the mother is reminiscent of the monstrous female in "Blackness," a story in *At the Bottom of the River* (46-52). She appears to be the issue of colonialism.

Works Cited

- Boehmer, Elleke. "Stories of Women and Mothers: Gender and Nationalism in the Early Fiction of Flora Nwapa." *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. Ed. Susheila Nasta. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992. 3-23.
- Cudjoe, Selwyn R. "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview." *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*. Ed. Selwyn Cudjoe. Wellesley: Calaloux, 1990. 215-32.
- Donnell, Allison. "When Writing the Other is Being True to the Self: Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*." *Women's Lives Into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Autobiography*. New York: St Martin's, 1999. 123-36.
- Donnelly, Mary. "Mother Country, Father Country: *In the Castle of My Skin* and Oedipal Structures of Colonialism." *ARIEL* 26.4 (October 1995): 7-20.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 1963.
- Ferguson, Moira. "A Lot of Memory: An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid." *The Kenyon Review* 16.1 (1994): 163-188.
- . *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land meets the Body*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1994.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Gregg, Veronica Marie. "How Jamaica Kincaid Writes the Autobiography of her Mother." *Callaloo* 25.3 (Summer 2002): 920-37.
- Halsall, Paul. "Voltaire: *Patrie*, in *The Philosophical Dictionary*, 1752." *Modern History Sourcebook*. July 1999. 14 July 2002
<<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1752voltaire.html>>.
- Hegel, George Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover, 1956.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Maternal Narratives: Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990. 415-30.
- JanMohamed, Abdul R. "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature." *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1985): 59-87.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *Annie John*. 1983. New York: Plume, 1986.

- . *At the Bottom of the River*. 1978. New York: Plume, 1992.
- . *The Autobiography of My Mother*. 1996. New York: Plume, 1997.
- . *Lucy*. 1990. New York: Plume, 1991.
- Lewis, Linden. "Nationalism and Caribbean Masculinity." *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*. Ed. Tamar Mayer. London: Routledge, 2000. 261-81.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- . "'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Gender, Race, and Nationalism." *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspective*. Eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. 89-112.
- Morris, Ann and Margaret Dunn. "The Bloodstream of Our Inheritance: Female Identity and the Caribbean Mothers'-Land." *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. Ed. Susheila Nasta. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992. 219-37.
- Paquet, Sandra Pouchet. *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2002.
- Rooney, Caroline. "'Dangerous Knowledge' and the Poetics of Survival: A Reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* and *A Question of Power*." Nasta 99-126.
- Schultheis, Alexandra. "Family Matters in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*." *Jouvert* 5.2 (Winter 2001) 16 Feb. 2002
<<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v5i2/kincai.htm>>.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Monuments of Empire: Allegory/ Counter-Discourse/ Post-Colonial Writing." *Kunapipi* 9.3 (1987): 1-16.
- . "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23.1 (1988): 157-68.
- Sosnoski, Karen. "Autobiography." *Encyclopaedia of Feminist Literary Theory*. Ed. Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace. New York: Garland, 1997. 30-31.
- Tiffin, Helen. "Rites of Resistance: Counter-Discourse and West Indian Biography." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 3.1 (Jan 1989): 28-46.
- Wachtel, Eleanor. "Eleanor Wachtel with Jamaica Kincaid." *The Malahat Review* 116 (Fall 1996): 55-71.