Family Matters in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*

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Article:

Amit S. Rai begins his essay, "'Thus Spake the Subaltern…': Postcolonial Criticism and the Scene of Desire," with the following question: "If we are sure today that the subaltern cannot speak, can we be as sure that her ghost does not, especially when postcolonial criticism seems to re-present the discourse of that ghost?" (91). In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, that ghost speaks in multiple voices which blur the lines between fiction, biography, autobiography, and criticism. I adopt Rai's figure of the ghost here not to detract from the powerful subjectivity of Kincaid's narrator, Xuela, whom Kincaid calls "more godlike" than her previous protagonists, but to emphasize her ability to transcend traditional literary and political realms.[1] Xuela tells of her life on postcolonial Dominica, and while her story is intensely private, avoiding mention of the island's political affairs in favor of her thoughts and relationships, it is imbrued with the history of colonialism and slavery. The story also draws on Kincaid's own life (as does all of her fiction) and that of her grandmother, such that, as Alison Donnell writes in "When Writing the Other is Being True to the Self," "we cannot be certain who the auto-biographer is [of] this text, or if there is more than one, for if this is Kincaid's mother's auto/biography, then Kincaid is still present as the 'ghost' writer/biographer" (127). The layered voices of the female narrator disrupt familiar patterns of subjectivity and nationhood as well as the autobiographical form.

In a passage from her essay, "In History," which could well be spoken by Xuela, Kincaid writes:

What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me?

Should I call it history?

If so, what should history mean to someone like me?

Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound and each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over, or is it a moment that began in 1492 and has come to no end yet? Is it a collection of facts, all true and precise details, and, if so, when I come across these true and precise details, what should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself? (1)

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid addresses these questions where they intersect: in the metaphor of the paternal family often invoked to conceptualize both subjectivity and national identity. Xuela asks repeatedly, "Who was I? My mother died at the moment I was born." But her turn for answers to the family tableau subverts rather than reinforces its power to subjugate her as a woman and as one of the Carib and African peoples (she is the daughter of a Carib mother and a Scot-African father). Xuela's story exemplifies self-production rather than negation, though both remain tied to the image of the family that structures her understanding of herself and her historical context.

By both invoking and critiquing the metaphor of the paternal family on multiple levels, Kincaid asks us to reconsider our own easy acceptance of its terms, even when they lead to sympathetic readings of postcolonial female voices. She heeds Sara Suleri's warning in "Woman Skin Deep" that the "coupling of *postcolonial* with *woman*…almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for the 'good'" (273). Xuela is socially denigrated and mentally strong, but not necessarily good; her story is not one of triumph over adversity or of unremitting oppression, but of building subjectivity out of lack and historical trauma. Kincaid thus effects the kind of "space-clearing" Kwame Anthony Appiah advocates between postmodernism and postcolonialism: the book's inconclusivity is not merely a stylistic gesture, but an opening up of the identifications made possible by an historically specific postcolonial condition.

Intersections of psychoanalysis and post colonialism

As the central image in narratives of the Freudian and Lacanian subject and of the modern nation, the family brings discourses of psychoanalysis and postcolonial studies together. The alliance begs justification. What can psychoanalysis, with its history of privileging gender over race and its focus on phallic power, say about a Carib-African-Scot woman of Dominica who identifies herself as one of the defeated, yet who demands to be heard? What can postcolonial studies, which often vacillates between nostalgia for a pre-colonial past and yearning for a postcolonial modernity, say about Xuela's refusal to countenance any time except her own painful present? For as Xuela states, "history was not only the past: it was the past and it was also the present…I did not see the future" (139). Together such theoretical discourses might silence even the ghost of the subaltern subject, particularly if she refuses to represent, in Susheila Nasta's words, "motherlands, mothercultures, mothertongues" (211). But Xuela does speak, using her father's language, appropriated from the colonizers, but against the full force of the symbolic order it conveys. Thus, I bring strands of these two discourses together because they are inextricably linked to one another, to Xuela's oppression, and to her determination to write her own story.

In *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock focuses on this intersection of postcolonialism and psychoanalysis, and, thus, public and private, in narratives of modernity. She describes how the metaphor of the nation-as-family incorporates a sense of the nation's timelessness and its modernity, which work together to naturalize the nation's conflicted history. The temporal disjunction is "typically resolved by figuring the contradiction in the representation of *time* as a natural division of *gender*. 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" (*DL* 92). Central to McClintock's analysis of the gendering of the nation-as-family is the way the metaphor contributes to imperialism and, in doing so, makes imperialism a defining attribute of Western modernity (*IL* 5). Not only did the image of the family tree of man, popularized with Darwinism, legitimate (naturalize) a notion of progress predicated on whiteness and masculinity, but this image, when applied to nation-building and imperialist expansion, "enabled what was often murderously violent change to be legitimized as the progressive unfolding of natural decree. The trope of the organic family became invaluable in its capacity to give state and imperial intervention the alibi of nature" (*IL* 45).

McClintock encourages us to see how the nation-as-family is itself a historical construct, a specific vision of domestic life arising out of 19th century European economic and philosophical developments, and how it operates through and subsumes metaphors of gender and race; at the same time, she insists that we remember the material effects — the non-metaphorical consequences — of the family as ideology. In what McClintock calls, "the paradox of the family," "the family as a *metaphor* offered a single genesis narrative for global history, while the family as *institution* became void of history" (*IL* 44). The paradox finds its most egregious form in past slave-holding colonies, such as the Antigua of Kincaid's birth and the Dominica of the novel. There the metaphor of the paternal family, translated into colonial authority, served to abrogate the familial ties of the slaves themselves. In the neo-colonial world of the novel, the mythic superiority of the white slaveholder survives through a contemporary hierarchy of skin color, race, language, religion, and class. The most lasting

division of all is that of gender: paternal power determines social standing, and that power legitimates itself in the slaveholding tradition of control over women's bodies.

Reading imperialism as integral to modernity and the nation-as-family as its primary metaphor runs the risk, as Katherine Pratt Ewing warns, of reducing postcolonials to exemplars of damaged subjectivity, caught between radical "Otherness" from a Western self and their own negated traditions (7). Female black characters are doubly-displaced by such readings. Nasta identifies two primary stereotypes male writers present of their Caribbean female characters: they appear "either as the rural folk matriarch figure, representing the doer, the repository for the oral tradition, the perpetuator of myths and stories, the communicator of fibres and feelings, or, alternatively, woman, as a sexy mulatto figure, a luscious fruit living on and off the edges of urban communities belonging to no settled culture or tradition" (214). Nasta suggests women's articulation of their experiences as mothers as an alternative to these stereotypes, one that reverses the gendered terms of social value by positing the figure of the mother as the antidote to paternal power. The value of this strategy is the power it ascribes to historically devalued subjects; the danger is the way it limits female sexuality and identity to procreation, thereby reinscribing the metaphor of the family.

Female Subjectivity and critical distance

Xuela rejects all three of these paths. Instead, Kincaid chooses the kind of subtle, shifting subject position contemporary postcolonial critics often search for in their own work. Xuela at once recognizes her place within the historical circumstances which have created a continuum of female experience in the Dominica of the novel and rejects the options it presents to her: she refuses sexual subjugation, motherhood, and the role of the liminal temptress, choosing instead to validate her own sexual pleasure within the gendered and racial oppressions which govern her life. Similarly, she yearns for identification with the missing mother, yet constructs herself through her father's language. In this way, she chooses absence and lack (both genealogically and linguistically) over stable, if devalued, identifications. As Xuela writes at the end of the novel,

> 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. In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from. In me are the voices that should have come out of me, the faces I never allowed to form, the eyes I never allowed to see me. This account is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become. (228)
>
> The choice of such radical instability suggests both the promises and limits of psychoanalysis in this context. Xuela initially appears to be an exemplary Lacanian subject, defined in Kaja Silverman's words "almost entirely…by lack" (*SS* 151). Yearning for that "oceanic" (Lacan) oneness with the maternal body, she desires compensation for the initial separation of birth that also took her mother's life. At the same time, as an infant and throughout her maturation, Xuela rejects attempting to satisfy her desire with either substitute or symbolic maternal objects. When her father gives the motherless infant to his laundress for nursing and care, Xuela refuses the woman's milk and with it an imaginary identification with her maternal role. Thus Xuela's mirror stage recognition of her ideal image takes place without the mediating and approving third term of the mother's gaze: "No one observed and beheld me, I observed and beheld myself; the invisible current went out and it came back to me" (56). '

The question remains of how a literary subject, her author and readers may achieve this kind of radical critical distance from the very terms which define their worlds. Even if we see critical self-consciousness as a faculty subjects may develop in time, we need to account for the way that faculty may challenge the subject's situated identifications rather than subjectivity itself. This problem is both political and methodological. If, on a political level, subjectivity only makes sense in the ideologically-coded terms of what Silverman calls the dominant fiction, then how can a subject transform or even reject that which renders her own consciousness possible? We must ask the same question of the psychoanalytic methods that define this problem, methods themselves embedded in the cultural contexts they critique. In understanding Xuela through psychoanalysis, we need to be

able to invoke psychoanalysis in a sense against itself, to examine the subversive potential of the very subjects the methodology itself produces. In different yet complementary ways, Kaja Silverman and Judith Butler's readings of Freud and Lacan help us to achieve the kind of critical distance from psychoanalysis that Xuela evinces of her own subjectivity.

Lacan specifies that although the mirror stage precedes entry into the symbolic order, it only makes sense retrospectively to the subject. This suggests that both the idealized image of the mirror stage and the subsequent identifications made possible by the symbolic order are culturally mediated. For Xuela, these conditions produce an unusual combination of self-mastery and idealization on the one hand and recognition of her cultural denigration as black, Carib, and female on the other. Without that validating parental gaze to affirm her infant view of herself, Xuela recognizes herself only as the self-same and not as other; adopting an outside perspective but only to see herself as herself, she notes that "there was never a moment that I can remember when I did not know myself completely" (225). Even as she insists on her autonomy, however, she recognizes her liminal social status. Of her father's decision to bring her along with his laundry to Eunice Paul, for example, Xuela notes: "He would have handled one more gently than the other, he would have given more careful instructions for the care of one over the other, he would have expected better care for one than the other, but which one I don't know, because he was a very vain man, his clothes were very important to him" (4).

Xuela's glance of self-recognition as well as her perception that for some she is little more than a bundle of laundry draw attention to her corporeality. In *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Silverman insists that we understand that glance, and the experience of the body accompanying it, as culturally informed. Since the mirror stage and entry into the symbolic order together produce the lack at the core of subjectivity (the recognition that the coherent image is identification "at a distance"), lack itself is culturally determined according to the laws of the symbolic order; lack describes what the child forever abandons at the constitutive moment of subjectivity within the symbolic order. This makes it clear that the subject's body and the experiences it perceives are "always already" (Althusser) social. It also creates a role for racial identifications as well as gendered ones in the foundation of subjectivity. By insisting that her own ideal image is not at a distance, however, Xuela rewrites the terms of lack. Rather than that socially-scripted lack being what forever relegates her to devalued subject positions, lack appears in the disjunction between the ideal image and her social context.

For Xuela, the ideal image she has of her own totality competes with one presented to her — through the absence of her mother, her father's rejection, the loveless care she receives from Eunice Paul (the laundress) — of her worthlessness. Out of this ambivalent social status comes her ability to claim instruments of power for herself. While her own social value versus the laundry remains a question, that of her father by comparison is clear. His red hair (inherited from his Scottish father), his skin "the color of corruption" (181), his ability to drop off and pick up his laundry, to come and go every two weeks from the house that limits her world, all signify his power. Without a maternal image to internalize, however, Xuela remains just outside the Oedipal identifications which "should" inculcate her subordinate role in this structure. Thus in staging her dramatic entry into the symbolic order, she takes advantage of the breakdown in genealogical destiny to claim the colonial language, appropriated by her father, as her own. At age four she utters her first words: "'Where is my father?' I said it in English — not French patois or English patois, but plain English — and that should have been the surprise: not that I spoke, but that I spoke English, a language I had never heard anyone speak" (7). Like her language, the question itself underscores her orientation toward sources of paternal power.

In order to understand how this is possible, it is helpful to turn to Silverman's analysis of how race, gender, and sexuality are all integral to subject formation within culture. In her reading of Lacan's *Seminar XI*, she notes that subjectivity denotes being recognizable as well as recognizing one's self in the images currently available. Using Lacan's terminology, those images are presented on the cultural screen (the range of possible identifications) and illuminated by the gaze, the figurative light that blinds us to its source while making possible our social vision and, therefore, existence. Silverman explains that "(i)n order to emerge within the field of vision, the subject must not only align him- or herself identificatorily with the screen, but must be

apprehended in that guise by the gaze" (18). Race, gender, and other corporeal markers may disrupt this three-way process of identification by presenting markers not of the ideal but of its negative. Thus, the coherent ideal subject has as its opposite, not a fragmentary image, but a negative one caught in the slippage between the visual and sensational egos (20). Moreover, since the subject always holds a multiplicity of identifications and discursive positions, such slippages occur regularly. They continually displace the subject from culture's idealizing terms, spawning the desire for restitution and recognition.

Even though ideology works by naturalizing its terms, the subject's repeated experiences of displacement simultaneously produce the condition of self-reflexivity or critical distance that Xuela manifests so completely. Critical distance entails, then, awareness of one's own position within the dominant fiction as well as one's ability to change its normative ideals. At the same time, the subject's subversive potential is limited: self-reflection must always stop short of comprehending lack itself, what Judith Butler terms, the "loss that cannot be thought, cannot be owned or grieved, which forms the condition of possibility for the subject" (24). Instead of attempting to satisfy lack, the subject may challenge its *effects* through self-reflexivity or critical distance.

Contesting the dominant fiction

Xuela's first words initiate her lifelong "questioning," as Alison Donnell writes in "Writing for Resistance: Nationalism and Narratives of Liberation," "of how ethical it is to position yourself as eternally, unalterably sinner or sinned upon, preserving the 'natural' hierarchy of colonial superior/inferior and consequently stabilising national boundaries around a model of historical conflict and exclusionary practices" (34). Instead Xuela challenges the validity of the model itself, using the very terms with which it would condemn her. That she knowingly assumes an active role in the symbolic order which structures her own subjugation is clear, even beyond her use of English. She is bombarded by lessons, drawn from Victorian morality, Christianity, and British history, of her own supposed worthlessness, and those lessons are presented by the black people around her (her father, her teacher, Eunice Paul). The first words she learns to read in school are "The British Empire," she is severely punished for breaking Eunice's prized plate which depicts Heaven as the English countryside, and she is taught in school that she should be ashamed of her race and her sexuality. Claiming English as her own is her way of assuming control of the very forces which would otherwise erase her: "I came to love myself in defiance, out of despair, because there was nothing else" (56-7). In an interview with Moira Ferguson, Kincaid explains how "claiming yourself" may signal at once insecurity and self-determination: "I do come from this tradition of possessing and claiming yourself, because if you don't possess and claim yourself, someone else will. You keep declaring that you are in full possession, which is to say you are on guard" (184).

Judith Butler, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, provides added insight into how the subject possesses and uses critical distance to challenge the cultural norms within which she exists. To do so, Butler takes us even deeper inside the psychic topography while still insisting on its ideological foundations. Her focus is on the way in which subjectivity entails both subjection (*assujetissement*) to power matrices in Foucaultian and Althusserian senses and becoming an instrument of power. One of Butler's great contributions to our understanding of the conditions of subjectivity comes from her own language: reading theorists ranging from Hegel to Freud to Nietzsche to Foucault, she draws on the materialist language of power and agency to describe psychoanalytic functions. This combination makes it impossible to presume any division between public and private or social and psychic conditions because the language she uses to describe any one of these is thoroughly implicated in the others.

Butler's explication of subject formation shares with Silverman's an emphasis on the way subjectivity is bounded by its ideological context yet initiates the potential to challenge that context. Whereas Silverman speaks of the lack occasioned by entry into the Symbolic Order and its effects on the subject's subsequent identifications, Butler focuses predominantly on the agency of psychic processes at work within subjectivity. Entry into the symbolic order, then, becomes in Butler's words subjection; lack becomes foreclosure; identity-at-a-distance becomes the condition of self-reflexivity of "one who can take oneself as an object" (22); and, the dominant fiction becomes the social regulatory power the self-reflexive subject may contest. Butler invokes

these terms, which resonate materially and psychically, to explain the duality of subordination and empowerment that Xuela so clearly manifests:

Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled. One might say that the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency. To the extent that the latter diverge from the former, agency is the assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically, that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs. This is, as it were, the ambivalent scene of agency, constrained by no teleological necessity. (15)

Xuela's agency, while it knows no predetermined limits, nevertheless remains grounded in the condition of subjection, what Butler calls the condition of "either/or": "To claim that the subject exceeds either/or is not to claim that it lives in some free zone of its own making. Exceeding is not escaping, and the subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound" (17). While Silverman explains how the subject constituted within a regulated discourse simultaneously finds subversive potential among the slippages of those regulations, Butler notes that, "(b)ound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent" (20).

In Xuela's case, mastery of English facilitates self-mastery as it allows her to contest the web of perjorations she finds at home and at school. Her teacher and schoolmates, who find their own African heritage a "source of humiliation and self-loathing," see in Xuela's features the Carib people: "The Carib people had been defeated and then 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). Instead of directing her discourse outward, she talks to herself, assuaging her loneliness and, in the process, taking pleasure in the sound of her voice. Soon she learns that by directing her discourse outward she can effect even greater change. After learning to write a proper form letter (a lesson which initially appears as an absurd remnant of colonial schooling), she writes secret letters to her father, begging to be taken into the home where he lives with his new wife. When a schoolmate finds the stash and the teacher in anger mails them, her father retrieves her and Xuela first senses the potential of her agency: "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 others, is something I would always do thereafter. It is in this way that I came to be so extremely conscious of myself, so interested in my own needs, so interested in fulfilling them, aware of my grievances, aware of my pleasures" (22).

Both Silverman and Butler locate the source of agency, and, ultimately, of conscience, in the subject's foundational loss. Silverman categorizes this loss as shared by all subjects, a topographical feature that refutes the possibility of coherent subjectivity as anything other than an ideological wish.[2] For Butler, loss similarly inaugurates subjectivity and remains inscrutable and irreplaceable. Following Freud, she describes how it generates melancholia that "rifts the subject, marking a limit to what it can accommodate. Because the subject does not, cannot, reflect on that loss, that loss marks the limit of reflexivity, that which exceeds (and conditions) its circuitry" (23). The lack Butler describes here remains inaccessible because it derives from foreclosure, rather than repression, and thus leaves only the illegible mark of absence through the desires it produces secondarily within the symbolic order; its desires are knowable only through the identifications and narratives deployed to satisfy them. By approaching the limits between conscious and unconscious (repressed) material, between what is presentable and prohibited, we may find ourselves at the edge of the abyss, able to reflect on its effects though never to assuage the loss or to see to its depths.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, this framing of the loss that cannot be thought or compensated takes place through a series of displacements which enhance Xuela's agency. While her mother is the most immediate sign of loss, she stands in for the historical wounds suffered by the Carib and African peoples as well as the island itself and for the colonial education both Xuela and Kincaid received. That education, devoted to the history and

exploits of the English, was its own form of oppression. As Kincaid writes in "On Seeing England for the First Time,"

I did not know then that the statement [which launched every school exam], ‘Draw a map of England’ was something far worse than a declaration of war, for in fact a flat-out declaration of war would have put me on alert, and again in fact, there was no need for war — I had long ago been conquered. I did not know then that this statement was part of a process that would result in my erasure, not my physical erasure, but my erasure all the same. (34)

The alternative, she continues, "was to fall back into the something from which I had been rescued, a hole filled with nothing, and that was the word for everything about me" (35). Xuela experiences the same education, as she and her classmates are taught not only of English superiority but also to mistrust one another. These holes, these wounds cannot be healed, as Kincaid argues stridently regarding Antigua in *A Small Place*: "Nothing can erase my rage — not an apology, not a large sum of money, not the death of the criminal — for this wrong can never be made right, and only the impossible can make me still: can a way be found to make what happened not have happened?" (32).

Although Xuela initially tries to recover her mother’s past as a key to Xuela’s own present, this, too, is impossible. Abandoned outside a nunnery as an infant, Xuela’s mother was raised and named by the nuns who "baptized her a Christian, and demanded that she be a quiet, long-suffering, unquestioning, modest, wishing-to-die-soon person." Xuela concludes, "She became such a person" (199), thereby signaling the reader that her own or an other’s attempt to define her through her mother will only result in misidentification. Religion is, of course, another form of conquest, and her mother’s Christianity silences the *obeah* traditions Xuela associates with women’s knowledge and the fierce independence of the Carib people. Xuela’s father, in contrast, has the social mobility accorded only to men, and religion is just one of the vehicles he uses to resolve the discrepancy between his Scottish father and the African mother, the former self-determining and the latter already defeated: "within my father the struggle between the hyphenated man and the horde had long since been resolved, the hyphenated man as before had triumphed" (188). Within the hyphenated man "there existed at once victor and vanquished, perpetrator and victim, [and] he chose, not at all surprisingly, the mantle of the former, always the former" (192).

For Xuela to make a comparable choice, she needs to rewrite the opposition between maternal defeat and paternal power into sequence of images, identifications, and agencies. As Butler describes, this process takes place on the fringes of the conscious and unconscious and through the secondary desires such mental activity produces. To escape the harsh environment of school and home, Xuela learns to take pleasure in her natural world which is feminized as "silent, soft, and vegetable-like in its vulnerability, subject to the powerful whims of others" (17). Sitting by the lagoon, watching the weather change and the ducks swim, she dreams her first of a recurring image of her mother: "I saw my mother come down a ladder. She wore a long white gown, the hem of it falling just above her heels, and that was all of her that was exposed, just her heels" (18). Even the fuzzy dream world fails to yield anything other than modesty and absence, yet Xuela refuses to become trapped in loss: "At first I longed to see more, and then I became satisfied just to see her heels coming down toward me." Upon waking she again, as she did when she began to speak, actively claims her paternal legacy and with it the power to define herself in her own terms. "I was not the same child I had been before I fell asleep," she notes. "I longed to see my father and to be in his presence constantly" (18). By substituting the insatiable desire for her mother’s image with the desire, which she meets through her letter writing, for her father’s presence, Xuela transforms yearning into satisfaction and defeat into agency.

These strategies do not produce a single, total, subjectivity modeled on the coherence often ascribed to the Western self. For example, detailing the specific histories of her parents, Xuela emphasizes the gaps. "I don’t know," "I don’t know," she often says to underscore how history ignores the personal stories of those it conquers. Rather than fill those gaps with a counter-history, she uses them to show the failure of the colonial past to determine completely its contemporary descendants and to underscore the inevitable failures of writing

history. As she matures, whenever she faces indeterminancy, negativity, and lack, Xuela turns to her own body as a source of power and pleasure. Already relishing the pleasure she can give herself, when her first employer, Monsieur LaBatte, extends a sexual "invitation," she retains a measure of control, as she says, "knowing what it was I wanted" (70). In this case, laying claim to her desires disrupts any simplistic reading of the power dynamics between them. It also demands our continued wariness regarding any claims to female solidarity. While Lise LaBatte initially served as a maternal figure to Xuela, Lise's joy from the liaison between her servant and husband and the pregnancy that results from it teaches Xuela that the only link the two women share under such circumstances is one of oppression. By insisting on her own sexual pleasure and by terminating the pregnancy, Xuela rejects both the one female companion she has had in favor of her own autonomy as well as the seemingly inevitable link between female sexuality and procreation.

Her rejection of any position of romantic subjugation grows stronger as the novel progresses. In narrating her first encounter with the white doctor, Philip, who would eventually become her husband, Xuela provides only questions — "Did he knock at the door? Did I say come in?" (149) — to undermine any such turn toward the romantic. She remains steadfastly focused instead on guaranteeing her own pleasure: "He was like most of the men I had known, obsessed with an activity he was not very good at, but he took directions very well and was not afraid of being told what to do, or ashamed that he did not know all the things there were to do" (143). Finally, she refuses the requests of Roland, her one genuine lover whom, like herself, she identifies with the islands, to bear his children as proof of her desire, and chooses instead to terminate their relationship. In all these ways she acknowledges, in Angela Carter's words, that "no bed, however unexpected, no matter how apparently gratuitous, is free from the de-universalising facts of real life" (9). "Real life," in this case, includes the colonial and slave-holding history of control over women's sexuality and children which finds its current expression in black and white men's power.

Sexual pleasure does not equal happiness nor transform Xuela into an adherent of the law of the father. It does provide, however, alongside her use of English, a measure of self-determination which translates into the auto/biography itself. It is in these strategic uses of language and sexuality that Kincaid most clearly obscures the distinctions between her roles as novelist, auto/biographer, and critic. Alison Donnell encourages us to see these slippages as "an opportunity to understand that there is a way of restor(y)ing agency through representing another. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, bell hook's condemnatory phrase 'Re-writing you, I write myself anew' can be translated into a statement of positive possession of selves previously denied ownership of their stories" ("When Writing the Other" 130). In the story of Xuela and her mother, and through its echoes of Kincaid's grandmother's life, the silence of the defeated is broken; at the same time, the critical distance maintained by both author and subject demand more than just willing readers. It demands a kind of conscience that like Xuela's is anything but simple and that, Butler specifies, is produced by the melancholia underpinning subjectivity (177).

Melancholia, history and conscience

The irony of Butler's analysis is that it shows us, once again, how psychoanalysis eventually comes up against its own limits. Butler's reading of melancholia leads to a psychic topography defined by the split between the ego and super-ego on the one hand and the power constituting the subject and that which the subject wields on the other. At the same time, the topography itself cannot represent its most fundamental feature: the loss at its center. We have instead a blueprint in invisible ink, whose dimension and intentions appear only in its effects, in the identifications it leads us to build. In reading those identifications, particularly those loaded with the greatest reservoirs of affective value such as Xuela's claims on English or her sexual freedom, we may begin to grasp a second irony of Butler's analysis of psychic topography: the melancholia that produces the schism between the ego and super-ego simultaneously produces the critical faculty to challenge the super-ego's dictates. Thus, melancholia persists despite Xuela's agency. Even in old age with her husband Philip, she cannot evade historical legacy. Philip chose her in an attempt to atone for the past and exist wholly in the present, and in doing so he accepts his own defeat: "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" (217-218). Despite her control, however, she asks, "Did so much sadness ever enclose two people?" (224), for the history

of colonization ultimately robbed them both of victory. The only position that remains for her is to negotiate the complicated path between power and victimhood, goodness, evil, and revenge.

Butler pushes Freud's model of the concurrently idealized and feared aspects of the super-ego to its logical limits. She argues that it is precisely the dual nature of the subject's relationship to the ideal image (the internalized yet distant image the subject loathes and loves) that creates a subject capable of critical distance from that image: "The 'price' of such an identification…is that the ego splits into the critical agency and the ego as object of criticism and judgment" (180). For Xuela, the idealized and antagonistic images of her parents produce her ability to champion herself without losing that critical distance. The melancholia or loss that enables her subjectivity and spurs her anger simultaneously turns inward, refusing self-identifications exclusively with the good. As Butler explains, the subject attempts to ease the melancholia of foreclosure when it "withdraws into the psyche a configuration of the social world…The ego thus becomes a 'polity' and conscience one of its 'major institutions,' precisely because psychic life withdraws a social world into itself in an effort to annul the losses that the world demands" (181). Rather than separate the loved and hated aspects of the ideal, in Xuela's case her mother and her father, into what has been forever lost and what regulates all possible compensation, respectively, we might find both within conscience.

For Xuela, that conscience is both personal and national, yet it seeks to undermine rather than embrace the workings of the nation-as-family metaphor. As opposed to Philip whose future is bounded by "a past he had inherited" (215), Xuela says of herself:

I am of the vanquished, I am of the defeated. The past is a fixed point, the future is open-ended; for me the future must remain capable of casting a light on the past such that in my defeat lies the seed of my great victory, in my defeat lies the beginning of my great revenge. My impulse is to the good, my good is to serve myself. I am not a people, I am not a nation. I only wish from time to time to make my actions be the actions of a people, to make my actions be the actions of a nation. (216)

By making this statement at the end of her life (when her father has died, she has refused to further the nation-as-family model by bearing her own children, and Philip is reduced to "bus[ying] himself with the dead" (224)), Xuela portrays the dominant metaphor heading for extinction. At the same time, she maintains her rights to speak on behalf of the nation and some of its constituents.

The search for new metaphors of subject and nation

In *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Edward Said suggests a way of conceptualizing Xuela's departure from the nation-as-family metaphor when he describes the social networks accompanying the rise in modern nations in terms of a transformation from the filiation of shared birth to an affiliation of shared consciousness. Affiliation (chosen association) takes place, Said suggests, when filiative networks fail to provide the connectedness necessary for communal and national identification. The biological underpinnings of filiative networks, not to mention their paternal slant, are inappropriate in past slave-holding colonies such as Dominica whose population and various languages (English, English patois, French patois) reflect a history of familial, cultural, and sexual violence. For Said, modernist aesthetics or shared discursive pleasure can establish the affiliative foundations of new "imagined communities" (Anderson). *The Autobiography of My Mother* approaches affiliation through a narrative that is at once lyrical and political. The novel does not abandon the shared history of Caribs and Africans it represents, but it does seek to establish a wider web of understanding among the novel's readers.

Not only do filiation and affiliation apply to social belief systems and to aesthetics, they also, according to Said, denote distinct critical perspectives: "My position…is that the contemporary critical consciousness stands between the temptations represented by two formidable and related powers engaging critical attention. One is the culture to which critics are bound filiatively (by birth, nationality, profession); the other is a method or system acquired affiliatively (by social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willed deliberation)" (25). Adopting an affiliative critical consciousness, then, means

recreating "the bonds between the texts and the world," a process built out of "genuine historical research" and taking deliberate responsibility for the effects of criticism (175).

Both Kincaid and Xuela articulate the subtleties of this approach, the difficulties in claiming both agency and defeat in a postcolonial context. In her interview with Moira Ferguson, conducted during the writing of *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid describes how her own history has enabled her to see from these two seemingly conflicted perspectives: "I am interested in the defeated and identify with the defeated even though I don't feel defeated myself…Actually, the great thing about being the victim is that you identify with the victim, and that may save you from victimizing. If you can keep in mind who suffers, it might prevent you from suffering" (171). Such a position is not an evasion of situated knowledge, but rather an acceptance of the shifting subject positions, and with them moral claims, we all hold. Xuela adopts the same dual perspective when she realizes "that many things which reminded me that [Philip], too, was human and frail caused a great feeling of anger to swell up in me; for if he, too, was human, then would not all whom he came from be human, too, and where would that leave me and all that I came from?" (220). She eventually accepts both her (justifiable) anger — "for the first step to claiming yourself is anger"[3] -- and the inability to "be a part of anything that is outside history…that can deny the wave of the human hand, the beat of the human heart, the gaze of the human eye, human desire itself" (218). We are caught in the web of desire in all of its intricacy. Rather than seek to escape those desires, whether beneficent or harmful, she suggests we must foster the critical consciousness to understand and use them.

In arguing for an affiliative critical consciousness, one that might have room for both personal and historical anger and the recognition of our common humanity, Said advocates the dismantling of barriers between scholarly disciplines (barriers which, he says, make individual disciplines into miniature filiative networks whose authority derives from the exclusion of "outsiders") and, thus, to make responsibility for critical positions an integral part of such consciousness.[4] The pervasiveness of the image of the nation-as-family, combined with the obvious need to break away from the language of fathers and sons, suggests we add another dimension to Said's concept of affiliative critical consciousness. Affiliation would not mean getting beyond or outside of filiation; rather affiliation ably captures the process of de-naturalizing filiation, of recognizing how, like Xuela, we are implicated in its circulation and how we may consciously work to subvert it. Said's concept of affiliation finds a counterpart in the other theoretical approaches invoked here. Silverman and Butler argue for a psychoanalytic approach that is similarly aware of the limits imposed by its own history and terms, yet also contains the possibility of critical distance.

The question remains of how national identity might emerge from the models of social belonging and subjectivity discussed above. Writing the nation requires, as does the auto/biographical subject, a precarious balance of idealization and practicality to avoid the pitfalls of foundational loss. For Homi Bhabha, the ideal image of the nation, like that of the subject, is one beyond the discursive order and its loss (for which narratives of the nation try to compensate). Nevertheless, Bhabha argues that through "another time of *writing*" (141) the nation we might learn to see the ambivalence of both our desires and the narratives they spawn. Bhabha's focus on the enunciation rather than the epistemology of the nation has as its goal the expression of cultural difference to provide an "adding *to* that does not add up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification" (162). I want to conclude with the argument that Kincaid's "autobiography" enacts just such another time, producing identities of subject and nation that are feminized but not *necessarily* maternal, representative but not totalizing.

Rewriting autobiogrpahy

In *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith argues that "[w]omen who do not challenge those gender ideologies and the boundaries they place around women's proper life script, textual inscription, and speaking voice do not write autobiography. Culturally silenced, they remain sentenced to death in the fictions of woman surrounding them" (44). For Smith, those fictions or false autobiographies take two main forms, both of which "derive from the erasure of female sexuality": a woman most often presents herself as either a "representative man" (requiring "the repression of the mother") or a de-eroticized and "good" "'representative'

woman" (55). Although Xuela chooses the identification with her father and his discourse, she does so in search of what Smith terms "a new sentence." As Kincaid insists in her interview with Ferguson, only those who will remain trapped by history "cling to their narrow definitions of themselves…What you ought to do is take back. Not just reclaim. Take — period. Take anything. Take Shakespeare…Just take it" (168). Such an author (or subject), Smith writes, "traces her origins to and through, rather than against the mother who has been repressed in order for the symbolic contract to emerge. Through the marginalized space inhabited by actual mothers and daughters, she pursues the source of patriarchy's reproduction of woman as a means to discovering some new truth about her sexuality" (57). In Xuela's case, the absence of her mother enables Xuela to claim her father's language as her own source of power. She takes a similar approach to her sexuality, insisting upon her right both to sexual control and pleasure. Both linguistically and sexually, she refuses to abide by the social rules which would disenfranchise her, instead seeking to rewrite them.

Ostensibly fiction, yet blurring the lines between genres, Kincaid's writing uses long lyrical sentences which transform logical oppositions into grammatical companions in order to insist as much on a shared history of black Caribbean women as it does on the speaker's right to define herself out of that history. Thus the text refuses any nostalgic return to coherent subjectivity, essential gender or racial identifications, or firm national identity, offering instead a voice at once assertive, self-critical, questioning, and angry whose "very composure…is so unsettling" to our fixed notions of subject and nation.[5]

NOTES

1. Moira Ferguson, "A Lot of Memory: An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid," *The Kenyon Review* 16:1 (1994), 187. Back
2. By emphasizing the centrality of loss or lack in subjectivity in general, Silverman also challenges the inevitability of the Western self/other, male/female dichotomy, insisting instead on the historical and material conditions of those relationships. Back
3. Donna Perry, ed., "Jamaica Kincaid," *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out: Interviews by Donna Perry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 127-141. Quoted in Diane Simmons, *Jamaica Kincaid* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 19. Back
4. In *Imperial Leather*, McClintock supports the overall goal of creating such a consciousness, yet she reads Said against himself to show how the family metaphor functions as a central organizing trope for Western culture across its various disciplines. Back
5. Alison Donnell, "When Writing the Other is Being True to the Self: Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*," in Pauline Polkey (ed.), *Women's Lives into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Auto/Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 131. Back

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