

RE-CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RACE AND AGENCY IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER*

Izabella Penier

The Academy of Humanities and Economics (AHE), Łódź

Abstract: Jamaica Kincaid, arguably the most popular Caribbean woman writer living in the USA, has produced many of her bestsellers by dissecting her personal and familial history. Yet in spite of her inclination to anchor the life of her creative inventions in her personal and intimate experience, Kincaid, known for her radicalism and militancy, can be a fiercely political writer. The aim of this essay is to explore how Kincaid handles the trope of race in her novel *The Autobiography of My Mother*, how she uses racial imagery to unearth the covert mechanisms that account for the intricacies of identity formation and how she dismantles ideological foundations that paved the way for racial exploitation. I will in particular focus on how Kincaid challenges, undermines and recasts the (post)colonial concept of race by showing that racial identity is a shifting category conceived through interaction with other categories of identification such as class and gender.

Keywords: relational identity, race, gender, class, sexuality.

Perhaps due to her international status, Kincaid has managed to escape the identitarian categories through which postcolonial, African American and femi-

nist studies have framed their discussions of agency. But even though she eschews the politics of feminism and race, Kincaid is incessantly preoccupied with the issue of power, which she links with the concept of race. For her race no longer boils down to somatic differences: "My husband is white, my children are half white," says Kincaid about her marriage to Allen Shawn (the couple are now divorced), "I can really no longer speak of race because I no longer understand what it means. I can speak with more clarity about power." (Jones 1990:75) For Kincaid race is not an essence in itself but a shorthand for something broader, an imbalance of power (Mantle 1997). Kincaid claims that "[she] can't imagine that she would invent an identity based on the color of [her] skin" because for her "[there] are so many things that make up identity and one of them is not identity" (Cryer 1996). Kincaid argues against treating "race" as a separate category of analysis just as she refuses to recognize her sex as a major coordinate in the process of her identity formation. In her interview with Selwyn Cudjoe she recapitulates: "It's just too slight to cling to your skin color or your sex, when you think of the great awe that you exist at all" (Cudjoe 1989:401). Kincaid asserts that "one's identity should proceed from an internal structure, from one's internal truth" (Hayden 1997) and that truth cannot be reduced to racial categories that are ultimately only relations of power. (Mantle 1997)

Kincaid's views tap into the recent debates about racial politics, racial discourse and agency triggered by contemporary critics who write under the aegis of various schools of literary practice such as Postcolonialism, Afro-American criticism, and the Black Atlantic model. The project to revise and rewrite the racial discourse has brought together different black thinkers such as Edouard Glissant, Henry Louis Gates and Paul Gilroy, who even though they do not share one agenda, theorize about race and power in a similar fashion and expose conventional cultural constructions through which racial otherness is represented. In this way those theoreticians have outlined a new analytical territory that transcends the critical boundaries with which postcolonial, Afro American and transatlantic studies have been traditionally separated.

I want to offer a model of reading Kincaid's novel which takes its clue from theoretical interpellations of these post-essentialist critics — Glissant, Gilroy and Gates — and which, in the words of Gates (1986:6), aims at "deconstruct[ing] the ideas of difference inscribed in the trope of race [and] explicat[ing] the discourse itself in order to reveal the hidden relations of power." Therefore I will begin with an overview of their discourses on race to provide grounding for my examination of racial, sexual and class configurations in Kincaid's fiction.

Edouard Glissant, one of the first Caribbean critics to take issue with the phenomena of globalization and hybridity, can be credited with creating the model of relational identity — an identity that comes into being as a result of the

continuous process of racial, cultural, religious and linguistic mixing — called Creolisation. Creolisation leads to endless proliferation of identities which do not fall into preconceived and fixed categories that classify groups of people into predictable and rigid categories. Glissant and some other Caribbean thinkers (Brathwaite, for example) incited the turn of the century polemics on multiculturalism and cultural syncretism that marked out a new field of analysis of the nature of cultural identity that at our present historical juncture seems to be unstable, mutable and never completely finished. His writings helped to bring to the fore the themes of nationality, migrancy, and cultural affiliation that have done a lot to discredit West Indian cultural nationalism that proposed to understand race, ethnicity and nationhood as invariable and hermetic categories.

Glissant was also one of the first critics who warned the black writing elites against falling into the pitfalls of anti-colonial nationalism which used the concept of identity, grounded in roots, folklore and racial authenticity as the major weapon against imperialism. Black essentialism was conceived as a unifying discourse whose primary function was to resist colonialism and defy and reverse racist stereotypes and hierarchies. And although as Glissant is quick to point out, it did a lot to “revalorize” denigrated indigenous cultures, still he condemns race-based politics as counter-productive. Glissant proposes to replace Négritude’s model of racial identity with his model of rhizome identity, which he defined as “multiple spreading of filaments of simultaneous being” (James 1999:112) and which, in his opinion, better accounts for the cultural and geopolitical intricacies of the Caribbean region.

Gilroy, who created an emergent school of cultural criticism which he called the Black Atlantic, goes one step further to evolve the concept of the fluidity of identities. Gilroy offers a powerful redress to the claims of nationalism by challenging black nationalist thinkers to investigate how they frame their own discussions about race and culture and how their thinking is configured by their imbeddedness in the Enlightenment philosophy and Romantic ideas about what constitutes “race,” “nation” and “people.” According to Gilroy despite their ostentatious attempts at disaffiliation, those thinkers theorize about race and agency with concepts and terms borrowed from the Euro-American age of revolutions and Romantic nationalism. These critics often emphasize ancestry and roots as the foundation of identity, rather than think of it as an ongoing quest: “modern black political discourse has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than seeing identity as a process of movement that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes” (Gilroy 1993:19). Gilroy associates black intellectuals’ desire for “acquisition of roots” with the post-emancipation period when rootedness began to be seen as a prerequisite of national identity and with the post-independence period when postcolo-

nial peoples were engaged in the project of building nation-states. In general, looking for roots — for stable and presumably authentic forms of subjectivity and identification — and for normative configurations of racial/national difference was what motivated the vast majority of black intellectuals in the 20th century.

Gilroy repeatedly stresses the futility of the pursuit of black essentialism and sensitizes blacks to the significance of plurality that exists underneath African unity. Black particularity, in Gilroy's opinion is complex and internally divided, not only by class and gender but also by age and relocation. In his 1993 study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy focuses chiefly on relocation, on the "restless recombinant qualities of the Black Atlantic affirmative cultures" (1993:31). In his later book *Against Race* Gilroy offers another profound corrective revision of the black discourse on race and launches one more attack against "the lazy essentialism that modern sages inform us we cannot escape" (2000:53). Again he rebuts the idea that blackness in a monolithic and unitary construct, and he refuses to recognize it as a common cultural condition based on shared interests and political solidarity of the whole race. He reminds his readers that race is an illusive category of identity whose origins can be traced back to the scientific racism of the previous centuries (eugenics, craniometry and phrenology) and whose major objective was to prove the inferiority of the black man and provide a rationale for his further exploitation. Whereas the 20th century science abolished the claims of biological determinism, race as a social construct continues to exert influence on political culture and bears upon the dynamics of identity formation with the effect that raced-based politics of identity is "pious ritual in which we always agree that 'race' is invented but are required to defer to its embeddedness in the world and to accept that the demand for justice requires us nevertheless to enter political arenas it helps to mark out" (2000: 52)

H. L. Gates, whom Gilroy calls a "cultural interventionist," was one of the first African American theoreticians who grappled with the issues of globalism and cultural hybridity and in consequence gave black criticism a new dynamic direction. For Gates race is "a dangerous trope" (1986:5). In a vein similar to Gilroy, Gates argues that race is a metaphor: "[r]ace as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of the 'white race' or 'the black race' 'the Jewish race' or 'the Aryan race,' we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, metaphors" (1986:4). Race is a social construct and, though it has been freed from the constraints of biological determinism, it is still enmeshed in the false assumptions of social determinism which continues to define our "color-coded" civilization, to use Gilroy's phrase (1993:125). The inscription of the racially bound identity is automatic because race is seen as a pre-existing, fixed and finite category. Bodies equipped with racial markers are still perceived as loci of alterity. They are a repository of

pre-established norms of behavior, psychological traits and moral attributes typical of a given race. According to Gates "the term 'race' has both described and inscribed differences in language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, fidelity and so forth" (1986:5).

Racially marked bodies are also sites of the subaltern as racial difference is more often than not read hierarchically. "Race has become a trope of ultimate difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific beliefs systems which — more often than not — also have fundamentally opposed economic interests", claims Gates (1986:5). Those clashing economic interests are the real reason why people so tenaciously cling to the idea of difference grounded in race. Therefore, in Gates's view, "current language use [of the term 'race'] signifies the difference between cultures and their possessions of power, spelling out the distance between subordinate and superordinate, between bondsman and lord in terms of their 'race'" (1986:6).

In literature, too, the dynamics of racial subordination often converge with the dynamics of racial representation. Gates holds that literacy is "the emblem" that connects "racial alienation" with "economic and political alienation" (1986:9). Literary discourse, as well as critical discourse are, to his mind, a battleground for the racial dimensions of power. Like Gilroy, who pointed out that race as a cultural and literary category was created by those in power to solidify the social hierarchy and to uphold the relations of power, Gates asserts that the great white Western tradition is not "universal, color-blind, apolitical, or neutral," (1986:15) as we, readers, were led to believe. Conversely, both literature and critical practice contain an ideological subtext that strives to prevent any democratic change in power relations and to preserve the status quo. Ever since the Enlightenment, contends Gates, writing has been valorized as the supreme expression of human reason because, as Hume claimed, it was the ultimate sign of difference between animal and human. Consequently, the human status was ascribed only to those who could master "'the arts and sciences' the 18th century formula for writing" (1986: 8). Therefore "if blacks could write and publish imaginative literature," argues Gates, "then they could, in effect, take 'a few giant steps' up the chain of being [...]" (1986:8). According to Gates, black people did accept the challenge by trying to "recreate the image of race in European discourse" (1986:11), but time did not bear out the effectiveness of this strategy because black people were not liberated from racism with their writings — they "did not obliterate the difference of race, rather the inscription of the black voice in the Western literatures has preserved those very cultural differences" (1986:12). Thus Gates, like Glissant and Gilroy, takes a stand against back essentialism which in his opinion fell into the trap of uncritically accepting the precepts

of Western political thought. "When we tend to appropriate, by inversion, 'race' as a term for essence — as did *négritude* movement," concludes Gates, "we yield too much: the basis of shared humanity" (1986:13). To get out of this unproductive situation, Gates advises all non-canonical and/or Third World critics to "analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes toward racial differences generate and structure literary texts by [black people] and about [black people]" (1986:15).

My reading of Kincaid's text was inspired by Gates's and Gilroy's observations about the correlation between race, literacy and power. It also adheres to Glissant's model of relational identity which has superseded the model of rooted identity, a concept I extend to include not only the collusion of races, cultures and languages but also criss-crossing of several other rubrics of identification such as class, gender and sexuality within a single nation or "race." In other words, I explore intra-racial divisions within black singularity when these mutually affective categories interact to either empower or dis-empower a black subject.

The Autobiography of My Mother, Kincaid's 1996 novel, focuses on the character of Xuela Claudette Richardson — a Dominican woman of mixed ethnic origin (Scottish-African on her father's side and Carib on her mother's side). Xuela muses on her life from the vantage point of her old ripe age and examines her relations with the colonial culture fleshed out in the person of her opportunist father — Alfred Richardson — an ex-policeman and magistrate who amassed a sizeable fortune by humiliating and robbing others. He is the embodiment of the colonial presence — a ruthless capitalist whose "skin was the color of corruption: copper, gold, ore" (Kincaid 1996: 182). Since Xuela lost her mother when she was born, and was abandoned by her father (who disposed of her by committing her to the care of a woman who washed his dirty laundry), the orphaned and disinherited Xuela is left exposed and vulnerable to the habitual brutality of colonial life which leads to her self-destructiveness and moral deformity — she refuses to love anyone but herself and aborts every child she conceives. She eventually marries a white doctor Philip, having poisoned his first wife Moira, but doggedly refuses to reciprocate his love and treats their relationship as an occasion to settle the score with the white colonizer's race.

The Autobiography of My Mother presents a whole range of perspectives on the problem of identity formation by dramatizing the cultural construction of Xuela's and her father's subjectivity. Both of them are Creoles with hyphenated identities — Scottish-African in his case, Scottish-African-Carib in hers. Both of them are aware of the fact that identity is not a given, that it is a matter of choice and a political stance — not physical phenotypes but behavior, loyalties and values are what makes a person either black or white.

Alfred, named by his Scottish father after Alfred the Great, gives preference to his paternal lineage and disowns his maternal African heritage. He fails to appreciate his mother Mary, who "remained to him without clear features though she must have mended his clothes, cooked his food, tended his schoolboy's wounds, encouraged his ambitions [...]" (Kincaid 1996:183). Her surname is unknown — she is one of the African people, and "the distinction between man and people remain[ed] important to Alfred, who [was] aware that the African people came off the boat as a part of the horde, already demonized, mind blank to everything but suffering," while the white man "came off the boat of his own volition, seeking to fulfil a destiny, a vision of himself in his mind's eye" (Kincaid 1996:181). In "the struggle between the hyphenated man and the horde," that takes place in Xuela's father, the hyphenated man "triumphs" (Kincaid 1996:188) with the effect that the father comes to "despise all who behaved like the African people; not all who looked liked them but all who behaved like them, all who were defeated, doomed, conquered, poor, diseased, head bowed down, mind numbed from cruelty" (Kincaid 1996:187). The father thus represents a shift from biological to social determinism — for him race is a matter of social status, demeanor and worldview. Blackness is not anchored in bodily characteristics but is determined by subaltern social position, non-rational worldview and pagan beliefs. As he relentlessly toils to raise his social standing through the multiplication of earthly possessions, he suppresses Obeah beliefs and practices and takes great pride in becoming a very religious person because, to his mind, social advance obliges to moral elevation. According to his daughter's contrary opinion, "the more he robbed, the more money he had, the more he went to church, it is not unheard of liking. And the richer he became the more fixed the mask on his face grew" (Kincaid 1996:40-1).

The metaphor of the mask was presumably borrowed by Kincaid from Frantz Fanon's seminal study *Black Skin, White Masks*, which, according to some critics, must have given Kincaid an incentive to write the novel. It describes the phenomenon that Fanon called 'Negrophobia' — the collective Caribbean unconscious that equals black with ugliness, sin and immorality. In Fanon's view, black people in West Indies "internalized" or "epidermalized" the racist views of themselves, believing that "one is Negro to the degree one is wicked, sloppy, malicious, instinctual" (1967:192). Therefore, Fanon contends provocatively, all the black man dreams about is to rid himself of his black identity of an inferior.

The way into the white world runs along the class axis: "One is white, as one is rich, as one is beautiful, as one is intelligent" (1967:51-52). Therefore the acquisition of wealth grants a black man entry into the genteel world. Alfred's rise to middle class status results in his "lactification," to use Frantz Fanon's term again, and even though he becomes an alienated mimic man, totally unable to see

through his sham identity, he succeeds in deploying the bourgeois culture “as a means of stripping himself of his race” (1967:225). Though his appearance — his red hair, grey eyes, pale skin and elegant white clothes — underscores his elevated social status, the novel makes it abundantly clear that it is his upward class mobility that defines his racial affiliation. Alfred’s social trajectory from “black” village policeman to “white” landowner and magistrate illustrates that race is a variable category contingent on other identificatory categories such as class.

While the father allies himself with the myths of white civilization, education and refinement, Xuela does not subscribe to this enlightened philosophical frame. She gives preference to the forces that oppose the expansion and triumph of these myths. She chooses “savagery” and asserts: “whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most. I loved the smell of the thin dirt behind my ears, the smell of my unwashed mouth, the smell that came from between my legs, the smell in the pit of my arm, the smell of my unwashed feet. Whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing I loved with the fervor of the devoted” (Kincaid 1996:32-33). Xuela believes that what white culture deems “bad” must, by definition, be “good.” In this spirit she passes judgements on what constitutes physical beauty: “My nose, half flat, half not, as if painstakingly made that way, I found so beautiful that I saw in it a standard which the noses of the people I did not like failed to meet” (Kincaid 1996:100). The world in which Xuela lives, ruled by the Manichean oppositions, requires that a black person, like Xuela or her father, should make political and ideological choices — they must either uproot or brandish their nativism; adapt either conformist or reactionary stand.

When Xuela chooses “the native” it is obvious that she feels affinity with the exterminated Caribs rather than with the ex-African people, who survived but lost their bearing in the modern world. They are pictured as zombies, half dead, half alive, “walking in a trance, no longer in their own minds” (Kincaid 1996:133). Having lost their native cosmology they have been severed from their own inner imaginative life — they no longer trust what they intuitively know. Unlike them, Xuela fends herself against losing access to “the inner life of her own inventions” and ardently believes in the redoubtable influence of Obeah on everyday life. While her father considers Obeah to be “the belief of the illegitimate, the poor, the low” (Kincaid 1996:18) for Xuela it is an alternative epistemological frame, through which she makes sense of the world. When on the way to school, she sees one of her classmates lured to death in the river by a *jabalesse* (she-devil in Caribbean folklore) she never relinquishes her faith in the realness of the event she witnessed in spite of the fact that to admit having seen such an apparition “was to say that [the black children] lived in a darkness from which [they could not be redeemed” (Kincaid 1996:9). Xuela chooses that darkness and learns to

"[separate] the real from unreal" (Kincaid 1996:42). At night she can hear the screeches of bats or "someone who had taken the shape of the bat," the sound of wings of a bird or "someone who had taken the shape of a bird" (42); "the long sigh of someone on the way to eternity" (Kincaid 1996:43). In light of the loss of collective memory and careful erasing of the past, which Glissant described in *The Caribbean Discourse*, Obeah provides Xuela with a means for the imaginative repossession of the past. As she lies in her bed at night concentrating on the sounds coming from outside she finds herself in the "dark room of history" (Kincaid 1996: 61-2):

I could hear the sound of those who crawled on their bellies, the ones who carried the poisonous lances; and those who carried the poison in their saliva; I could hear the ones who were hunting, the ones who were hunted, the pitiful cry of the small ones who were about to be devoured, followed by the temporary satisfaction of the ones doing the devouring [...] (Kincaid 1996:43)

Xuela's steady belief in the power of Obeah — an epistemic perspective that undermines the colonizer's ontology — is a sign of her resistance, her stubborn refusal to be confined within the Western grids of knowledge.

Xuela's father "whitens" himself climbing the social ladder; by contrast Xuela inverts her father's trajectory and "blackens" herself transgressing gender roles. Even though she marries way above her own class and race she does not do it with a view to becoming a mother and a lady. She not only refuses to be a bearer of children but also uses her sexuality to subvert traditional colonial scripting of femininity. Her uninhibited eroticism taps into the stereotype of sexual wantonness of the black female body that was bequeathed by slavery, perpetuated by colonial plantocracies and enhanced by the repressive Victorian sexual mores. It contrasted the alleged black female promiscuity with the idealization of the white female body. Xuela is aware how this dynamics of differentiation operates and what purposes it serves: "a lady," according to her definition, "is combination of elaborate fabrications, a collection of externals, facial arrangements, and body parts, distortions, lies and empty effort" (Kincaid 1996:159). That definition is at variance with the way Xuela perceives herself: "I was a woman and as that I had a brief definition: two breasts, a small opening between my legs, one womb, it never varies and they are always in the same place" (Kincaid 1996:159).

Xuela uses her sexuality to draw a line between herself and Moira, a white English lady who is the best proof that emancipation did not erase the analogous divisions between men and people, ladies and women, on which the concept of Englishness depended: "she was a lady, I was a woman and this distinction was for her important, it allowed her to believe that I could not associate the ordinary

— a bowel movement, a cry of ecstasy — with her, and a small act of cruelty was elevated to a rite of civilization” (Kincaid 1996:158-9). Moira is presented as an asexual woman who does not share a bedroom with her husband and who looks like a man — her hair is “cropped close to her head like a man’s,” (Kincaid 1996:156) and her femininity boils down to two little breasts likened to “two old stones” and “a broken womb” (Kincaid 1996:147). She is proud of the color of her skin — the most visible marker of racial differentiation, but Kincaid’s narrative points to the futility of clinging to skin color as a major determinant of identity. Moira undergoes posthumous epidermal permutation — her skin turns black as a result of poisoning, and eventually, as it turns out, with both Xuela and Moira being black and childless, what differentiates these two female protagonists is their contradictory attitude to sexuality. It is the exhibition of her uninhibited sexual agency that makes Xuela “black,” just as Moira’s impaired sexuality makes her “white.”

Though Xuela’s characterization fits into the racist stereotype of the oversexualized black woman, Kincaid deftly changes the dynamics of colonial sexual representation because in the case of Xuela the sexual encounter with the white man does not trigger her sexual exploitation. On the contrary, in her relationship with Philip, Xuela uses her sexuality to subjugate and exploit him. Although at first she assumes the role of a slave, binding his belt around her wrists, still she controls their sexual act, giving Philip directions which he obediently follows. In this way the representation of the colonial encounter with the sexual other is subverted — Philip is not the dominant subject who projects his sexual fantasies on the racial other but a sexual slave enacting Xuela’s wild fantasies. According to Gary E. Holcomb and Kimberly S. Holcomb, Xuela simulates the reversal of colonial power and dominates Philip to shift agency from the master’s to the slave’s body and blur the distinction between the two.

Through the renunciation of maternity and her narcissistic and predatory sexuality, Xuela defies the colonial power that wants to reduce her to subaltern position. Kincaid allows Xuela to hold on to the Manichean economy of colonialist discourse and the racist and sexist stereotype of black female sexuality to show that historical contexts are also constitutive of identity. In this way Kincaid not only exposes the mechanism of colonial ideological system, its logic of interracial encounters and its categories of representation, but first and foremost, she reveals that there is a concealed power dimension that determines the workings of racial instability. Race enhances meaning through adherence to or violation of gender and sexual roles that can respectively subject or liberate an individual from colonial and patriarchal domination. Consequently it becomes impossible for the reader to treat race, gender and sexuality as “discrete categories of analysis” (2005: 109). As Judith Butler claims:

[though] there are good historical reasons for keeping 'race' and 'sexuality' and 'sexual difference' as separate analytic spheres, there are also quite pressing historical reasons for asking how and where we might not only read their convergence, but the sites at which the one can not be constituted without the other. (1993: 169)

Similarly Xuela's father understanding of race as entwined with social position undermines the colonial and early postcolonial concept of racial identity determined by lineage, dissent or blood. His conceptualization of race as white/black binary also reinforces the Manichean system of white bias, but at the same time it puts emphasis on the fluctuating meaning of race which is irrevocably connected with power. Race and class become tropic configurations or inter-related axes of power and the protagonists are "whitened/empowered" or, by inference, "blackened/disempowered" as they travel up or down the social scale.

"The complicated divisions of class-race-color stratification," which in Hall's opinion replaced "the legal castes of slavery," (1985:281) are compounded by the protagonists' lingual affiliations. Language is a key factor forming the Caribbean social reality. Although Kincaid's novel is written in elegant Anglo-American English, her careful designation of the code of her protagonists' *parole* is very informative of Caribbean social choices. In the Caribbean, standard English or French are used in official situations — they connote respect and respectability. English Creole or French patois or pidgin are scorned as the languages of the illiterate and dispossessed. When a middle class person uses Creole vernacular it is usually to speak to a social inferior, for example a servant. In literature, however, this code-switching, from English/French — the language of the colonizer to Creole/patois, the language of the colonized dark masses is more discordant as it reflects social insecurity and anxiety produced by color-coded social stratification.

This linguistic continuum frames the social panorama of Kincaid's novel. The father who wants to rise socially and, in the words of Fanon, "be elevated above his jungle status" (1967:18), uses standard English to make himself socially acceptable. He speaks English with strangers as a way of manifesting his cultural affiliation and exercising his supreme colonialist authority. Whenever he addresses his countrymen in English, he not only renounces his blackness but also reasserts his right to dominate and abuse them because "a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (Fanon 1967:18).

Xuela's stepmother abides by the same logic. When Xuela arrives at her house, the stepmother speaks to her in patois to emphasize the class distinction between them, to discredit her and "make her illegitimate" by associating her with "the made-up language of people regarded as not real, the shadow people,

the forever humiliated, the forever low" (Kincaid 1996: 30-1). Using pidgin is, to misquote Fanon, "a manner of classifying [her], de-civilizing [her]: (Fanon 1967:32). It is meant to be a calculated insult whose aim is to draw attention to the fact that they — Xuela and her stepmother — do not belong to the same social caste and will never be equals.

Therefore, as Kincaid's narrative makes clear code-switching is a continuous practice, an ongoing interaction that tips the balance in interracial and interpersonal relations and reveals the two-dimensionality of hybridized population. The father shifts his idiom and speaks Creole when he is with his family. For Xuela these moments offer brief glimpses of the remnants of his genuine selfhood: "I associated him speaking patois with expressions of his real self" (Kincaid 1996:190), she claims. Xuela speaks patois to her white husband, while he addresses her in Standard English: "He spoke to me, I spoke to him, he spoke to me in English, I spoke to him in patois. We understood each other much better that way, speaking to each other in the language of our thoughts" (Kincaid 1996:219). At the same time, Xuela gives preference to English as the language of her social discourse. The first words she speaks are in English, "the language of a people [she] would never like or love" (Kincaid 1996:7), but feels nevertheless compelled to deploy it to meet her father on equal terms. Like him, she considers patois a language of cultural and social inferiority as well as cultural impurity brought about by creolisation. Reverting to speaking English — the language of the privileged — is a means of severing her from the network of relationships that bound her with the zombie-like native population.

Kincaid, who grew up in Antigua, must have heard very frequently Antiguan Creole as well as her Dominican mother's French patois but she has never mastered these dialects and consequently she does not use them often in her novels. The fact has led another Caribbean writer Merle Hodge to contend that:

[the] novels of Jamaica Kincaid actually sit on a cusp between fiction and essay [...] Dialogue in Creole would have set up such a contrast of codes as to create a focus which is not a part of authors theme. Code-shifting invites attention to issues such as class and cultural difference, issues which are not central to [Kincaid's] novels. (quoted in Réjouis 2003:214)

While Merle Hodge praises Kincaid's choice of excluding vernacular inscriptions from her prose as an appropriate creative strategy to avoid dealing with the problem of cultural syncretism and class conflict, in my opinion the absence of such inscriptions does not rule out Kincaid's interest in those issues. It is my contention that Kincaid's "descriptive" code-shifting — her insistence of

informing the reader which languages/dialects the protagonists apply in different social contexts and personal circumstances — makes 'class and cultural difference' the central theme of this novel.

Kincaid establishes an interesting dialogue with her predecessors and coteremporaries by supplying a female perspective on the theories of creolisation and by complementing their discourses with her own observations about the tropic representations of race, gender and class that overlap and collude in the process of identity formation. Like Glissant, Gates and Gilroy she is dismissive of the claims of black nationalism which instead of exploding imperialism, helped to entrench and solidify the unjust social structure that was the legacy of colonialism. Xuela repeatedly emphasizes her disavowal of essentialism: "I refused to belong to a race. I refuse to accept a nation" (Kincaid 1996:225-6), and she pours scorn on the "natives" who "bogged down in issues of justice and injustice, and they had become attached to claims of ancestral heritage, and the indignities by which they had come to these islands, as if they mattered as if they really mattered" (Kincaid 1996:117). By overlooking and ignoring experiential rifts caused by class division and gender, nationalism and its discourse perpetuated patriarchal and social stratification forced on the colonized people by the imperial rule, which Kincaid's narrative strives to subvert. The post-essentialist discourse was, likewise, a predominately male affair, very frequently aware of its own deficiencies and shortcomings. In *Against Race*, Gilroy admits that the interrelatedness discourses on race, gender and sexuality is "something that is further than ever from being settled and that defines a new and urgent need for future work" (2000:45). *The Autobiography of My Mother* is an important book that addresses these issues and contributes to the delineation of sociopolitical and discursive texture of the Caribbean, enlarging the study of racial and social relations with a new female perspective that highlights the representational interdependence of race, class, gender and sexuality.

Even though Kincaid's characters are still bound by the Manichean allegory (Abdul R. Jan Mohamed's term), their race is no longer literal — it is metaphorical and relational. Racial markers do not create in her novel a picture of the historically objectified Caribbean subject that is defined by certain presuppositions about the commonalities of his or her character, making it impossible for the reader to approach protagonists with a set of pre-established racial meanings and stereotypes. In the words of Carine M. Mardorossian, the writing of contemporary Caribbean women, such as Kincaid, forces readers to adopt new reading strategies which emphasize not whether but when characters are "black" or "white," and it bears witness to the fact that, to quote from Maryse Condé, "[there] are no races only cultures" (1987: 30).

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