



## Em/bodying Resistance in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*

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### ABSTRACT

The article aims at rethinking the relationship between the female body and resistance in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother*. The book develops a number of tropes and themes that are peculiar to Caribbean experience, such as race, gender and class problematic. The theme of exile and the history of physical abuse are also present. Through repositioning the subaltern as a privileged cultural subject and the borderland as a creative site, the book succeeds to build up a discourse of opposition and couterknowledge. It creates powerful images with a highly metaphorical language, fluid temporality and hybridized genre. It establishes the very links between self-possession and nationalism. In retrospect, the female protagonist unfolds her successive losses and gains. The book's aesthetically disjunctive and thematically complicated novel can be examined from postcolonial, psychoanalytical and postmodern perspectives. First, I refer to Cathy Caruth's expansion of the study of trauma from psychoanalysis to the fields of history, sociology, and fiction, and to many other postcolonial theorists' views about the subaltern's position such as Homi Bhabha, Abdul Jan Mohamed, and Spivak. Second, I analyse the narrator's psyche and her relation to the body through the lenses of Freud, Lacan and feminist writers such as Kristeva and Cixous. Third, I give emphasis to the book's experimentation with form and recourse to postmodern strategies, chief among them are fragmentation, the stream of consciousness technique and open-endedness.

**Keywords:** female body, resistance, gender, repositioning, fluid, hybridized, self-possession

### Introduction

"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." With these words, Kincaid begins her 1996 novel *The Autobiography of My Mother*. One can read this introductory scene as a different perspective from which the mother-daughter knot is articulated. From the incipit of the novel, then, the reader is stricken with the temporal, historical and physical correlation between two polarities, those of life and death, thereby an invitation to investigate the few moments separating both incidents. These moments of birthing can be interpreted as the very manifestations of the settlement of the enterprise of colonialism, leading to the breeding of colonial and exilic subjects and the death of the natives, whether this death is physical or psychological: "For Africans, Africa died the minute they were born in the new world' and for Kincaid '[t]hat loss is not recoverable'" (Bouson 118).

The passage above is, in fact, a retrospective recounting of the story of a seventy-year-old half Carib, half African woman, whose life was that of a whole race who "had been defeated and then exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden" (*The Autobiography* 16) in the name of territorial expansion and a civilizing mission. The past for her is a black screen where the knowledge of the self is blurred and the present is an open wound where vulnerability is her birthmark. Obviously, the loss of her mother makes her live at the edge of the world with sadness, shame and self-pity imprisoning her.

In this philosophically-oriented novel, Kincaid reinscribes female characters' subsumed stories and repressed voices. Though the protagonist's troubled itinerary of loss and absence weighs against her identity construction, it concretizes her spirit of resistance. For trauma proves to be not only a debilitating feeling, but also a source of empowerment and possible recovery. In Cathy Caruth's view, the traumatized people are "the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (*Explorations in Memory* 5). In the light of Caruth's revisualization of trauma and Cixous' notion of the "écriture féminine," then, textualizing resistance through the language of the flesh, memorializing the past, and re-writing and re-righting canonical texts are the bases upon which the Caribbean female idiosyncratic project is built. To heal the wounds of the past, speaking the unspeakable and making visible the formerly invisible subjects are of paramount importance. Caribbean female writers initiate a female voice capable enough of embodying a room for enunciation and a passage from subalternity to sub-alternation and from seclusion to inclusion.

The protagonist, Xuela Claudette Richardson, is a liminal character (Carib, African and Scottish). Her hybrid position enables her to gain awareness of her status as a subaltern who yearns for sub-alternation: "[T]hat the subaltern as such cannot be heard by the privilege of either the First or Third worlds. If the subaltern were able to make herself heard...her status as a subaltern would be changed utterly; she would cease to be a subaltern" (Landry and MacLean 8). She struggles to find her way through her traumatic losses. Her passage to maturity is accompanied by her first abortion; and from then on, her denial of motherhood becomes her trait. She falls in love with Roland, a black man, but marries Philip, a white man, whom she never loved. Furthermore, in order to alleviate her anxiety of the dependence on a phallogocentric system, Xuela strives to liberate her body through self-eroticism.

In unfolding her story and other characters' accounts of loss and abandonment, the protagonist frowns upon the enterprises of colonialism, slavery and racism. She is an icon of resistance *par excellence* who in many cases abrogates the colonial strategies of making her "mother's people": the Caribs, an object of humiliation and oblivion. Through this female resistive character, then, Kincaid runs riot against silence, invisibilization and disempowerment. She exposes the life of her exiled protagonist and those of her people as a microcosm of the wider environment where colonial ideas and masculine orthodoxies are of haunting effects. This process of invalidation and rejection is meant to strengthen the importance of home, national culture and history.

## 1- Writing the Body

### 1.1. The Female Body: A Site of Resistance

"When I write it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart..." Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

"To write-the act that will 'realize' the uncensored relationship of woman to her sexuality ... that will return her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her vast bodily territories kept under seal ... Write yourself, your body must make itself heard." Hélène Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays."

How to represent the suppressed past and make heard the silenced voices is at the hub of the Caribbean female ideology, which is framed by subversive aesthetics and resistive thematic concerns. Kincaid dispenses with the very elements characterizing the male canonical and nationalist texts both at the level of form and content. Homi Bhabha, in this respect, claims that "subversion is negotiation, transgression is negotiation" ("The Third Space" 216). To negotiate a powerful female voice and to rearrange the subaltern's shattered memory and selfhood, Kincaid thematizes female sexuality and corporeality and adopts an "erotic aestheticisation" (Curti 114). Accordingly, the language and theme of the body appear to be the enabling tool for taking by storm the rigid confines of patriarchy and colonialism.

Aesthetic transgressions in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, for instance, can be seen at the level of the narrative structure and language. While the former is based on fragmentation, temporal distortion and open-endedness, the latter is characterized by fluidity, metaphorization and indeterminacy. Thematic resistance, on the other hand, lies mainly in re-centring the female body and sexuality. What is of interest, also, is that aesthetic and thematic resistive strategies go hand in hand with revamping the female Caribbean self-image.

Obviously, the linguistic fluidity is a leitmotiv in the novel. In Curti's words "the juxtaposition of the female body with writing is often rendered through images of fluidity..." (116). Kincaid, in this light, stresses water imagery and "woman's blood and menstruation" (Trinh 38). The fluidity of language, the fact that each sentence can be interpreted in different ways, becomes an icon of female fluid corporeality.

Through the language of the flesh, Kincaid invents her distinctive narrative style. Her *At the Bottom of the River* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, for instance, are characterized by an emphasis on the metaphor of the river:

[I] walked to the mouth of the river and I saw a world in which the sun and the moon shone at the same time. They appeared in a way I had never seen before: the sun was The sun, a creation of Benevolence and Purpose and not a star among many stars, with a predictable cycle and a predictable end; the moon, too, was The moon, and it was the creation of Beauty and Purpose and not a body subject to a theory of planetary evolution. The sun and the moon shone uniformly onto everything. *To-gether*, they made up the light, and *the light fell on everything*, and everything seemed transparent, as if the light was through each thing, so that *nothing could be hidden*. The light shone and shone and fell and fell, but *there were no shadows*. In this world, on this terrain, there was no day and there was no night. (*At the Bottom* 77 emphasis mine)

Diving into the bottom of the river, the protagonist sees the possibility of union between the opposites. While the moon has feminine connotations, the sun denotes masculinity. Their bringing “to-gether” condenses binary oppositions and suggests the possible cohabitation between the opposites as a source of illuminating the dark areas of history and revealing “hidden” truths. Moreover, Kincaid uses water imagery as a sign of rejuvenation and rebirth in *The Autobiography of My Mother*:

One day when the river was very high and we were crossing naked, we saw a woman in the part of the river where the mouth met the sea. It was deep there and we could not tell if she was sitting or standing, but we knew she was naked. She was a beautiful woman, more beautiful than any woman we had ever seen, beautiful in a way that made sense to us, not a European way: she was dark brown in skin, her hair was black and shiny and twisted into small coils all around her head. Her face was like a moon, a soft, brown, glistening moon. (35)

Accordingly, the river unearths the black female beauty and retrieves women’s lost bodies. It also offers the protagonist some kind of spiritual solace. The river triggers the vision of the naked woman who stands as the memory of the African dead spiritual ancestry.

The simultaneous flow of rain and blood is another metaphor that indicates that the body writes itself through a fluid style that echoes women’s fluid corporeality. Xuela’s loss of virginity was accompanied by “a rain that was beyond torrential ... [that] in the morning it did not stop, in the evening after the morning it did not stop; the rain did not stop for many, many days” (72). The rain, then, signals pivotal moments and accompanies phases of change and development: “I was in a state of upheaval. I would not remain the same...” (73). This idea has a resonance in Cixous’ “Sorties” where she corroborates the imbrications between the female body and the water in its changeability and fluidity:

Unleashed and raging, *she belongs to the race of waves*. She arises, she approaches, she lifts up, she reaches, covers over, washes a shore, flows embracing the cliff’s least undulation, already she is another, *arising again*, throwing the fringed vastness of her body up high ... She has never ‘held still’; explosion, diffusion, effervescence, abundance, she takes pleasure in being *boundless*, outside same... (90 emphasis added)

The female body as “boundless” harks back to the open-endedness of Kincaid’s text which follows a circular movement in its beginning and ending in death symbolism:

A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there is no closure, it doesn’t stop, and it’s this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read. For we’ve learned to read books that basically pose the word ‘end.’ But this one doesn’t finish, a feminine text goes on and on and at a certain moment the volume comes to an end but the writing continues and for the reader this means being thrust into the void. These are the texts that work on the beginning but not on the origin. (Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 53)

A metaphorical language, then, generates opacity of meaning and creates an utter display of indeterminacy. They invite a plurality of interpretations. The structuralist notion of the one-to-one relationship between the signifier and the signified as a characteristic of male nationalist texts is transgressed.

At the level of structure, fragmentation, time inconsistencies and open-endedness create a break in “the phallographic order of writing” (Curti 109). Unlike male nationalist texts which are based on teleological causality, well-regimented narrative, and closure, Caribbean female writings are structured around a fragmented style and temporal distortion. The sudden shift in both topic and time is evident in the fact that there is no clear transition from one idea to another and no clear boundaries between past, present and future. These are elements of the stream of consciousness technique. The latter is a postmodern strategy in which the narrator expresses her emotions and all that comes into her mind without abiding by the rules of time and linearity. The accumulation of disordered memories translates the restlessness of the mind and psyche:

My sister did not notice. Her father’s wealth did not seem unusual to her. He should be rich, she should be his daughter. She bought a comb—I did not know from where—that when heated and run through her

own tightly curled hair made it lie flat against her head. It gleamed in the sunlight, piles and piles of it, like a kind of wealth. Her father was a thin man. He never ate food in a way to suggest he enjoyed it. Her waist grew wide... (*The Autobiography* 118)

This idea clarifies the impossibility for an artist to use a coherent style within a restless environment. Formal brokenness, in this way, reflects psychological brokenness and the fragmentary outside world.

### 1.2. "Sexual Liberation is a Demand": Thematizing the Female Body

The patriarchal discourse has long aimed at invisibilizing and silencing women. For the female voice to break free from silence and pierce invisibilization, it has to deconstruct the very bases that constitute patriarchy. The male control of the female body, for instance, fostered the supremacy of men over women. Premised on theories of sadomasochism and phallogentrism, the unbalanced gender and sex relations imprisoned women in a position of inferiority and dependence. While man was seen as the emblem of authority and reason, woman was represented as an inert icon and a mere repository of this authority. Unable to move beyond the dictates of sexual dogma, women were entombed in an abyss of impotence.

Richard Von Krafft-Ebing's reading of sadomasochism serves as an exemplum of the means through which the patriarchal discourse imposed its ideologies of exclusion and oppression. He separates sadism from masochism, basing his argument on "the intercourse of sexes [where] the active or aggressive *rôle* belongs to man, [while] woman remains passive" (56). Interpreting gender relations on the ground of biological and sexual drives, Krafft-Ebing defines masochism as "the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force" (56). The masochist, accordingly, "in physical feeling and thought, is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subjected to the will of a person of the opposite sex, of being treated by this person as by a master, humiliated and abused" (56). The sadist, however, satisfies his sexual desire through exercising power over his masochist partner and revels in his power of control. Therefore, sexual subjugation echoes social and political inertia. This female powerlessness resonates with Virginia Woolf's view that "women have served all those centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (Woolf 35).

The female body becomes a sign of inaction and a mere projection of male superiority. *The Autobiography of My Mother* appropriates this idea in order to abrogate it and thereby to undo hierarchy. In portraying the sadomasochist LaBatte couple, Kincaid illustrates the way phallogentrism weakens female selfhood and works against her agency: "[Jacques] turned on [Lise] with the strength of that weapon he carried between his legs, and he wore her out" (65). Madame LaBatte is a masochist character. She embodies the image of the obedient wife who subjects herself to the will of her husband. Therefore, defeated by the patriarchal system, this female character becomes the prototype of those women Xuela refuses to resemble:

I was young then; I was young, I did not know; when I looked at her and felt sympathy, I also felt revulsion. I thought, this must never happen to me, and I meant that *I would not allow* the passage of time or *the full weight of desire to make a pawn of me*. I was young, so young, and felt my convictions powerfully; I felt strong and I felt new and I felt I would always be so, too. And at the moment the clothes I was wearing became too small, my bosoms grew out and pressed against my blouse, my hair touched my shoulders in a caress that caused me to shiver inside, my legs were hot and between them was a moisture, a sweet smelly stickiness. I was alive; I could tell that standing before me a woman who was not. *It was almost as if I sensed a danger and quickly made myself defense; in seeing the thing I might be, I too early became an opposite.* (66 emphasis added)

Clearly, Xuela alienates herself from the community of women who seek pleasure through men. Madame LaBatte is not the only character who is victimized by her love for a man but the step-sister also shares the same fate. In an ironic description of her step-sister's physical collapse, Xuela questions the legacy of patriarchy:

When she looked at me, she saw me replicated ten times, each partially imposed upon another, and no version of me fully revealed. This sight of me made her feel uncertain; she turned away from me in anger. I should have loved her then, enough to quell the curiosity that aroused in me when I saw her lying there: what was he like, he who could bring her to this, a semi-invalid whose vision would forever be blurred? (123)

The focus on the blurred vision is strategic. Metaphorically speaking, Elizabeth represents the shadowy woman who is denied a clear vision of herself and who accepts her dependence on an Other as natural. To respond to this moral decadence, Xuela engages herself in a peculiar relation with her body. Through possessing her body, she possesses herself: "My own face was a comfort to me, my own body was a comfort to me, and no matter how swept away I would become by anyone or anything, in the end I allowed nothing to replace my own being in my own mind" (100). This idea is advocated by Jehlen who thinks that "the autonomous individuality of a woman's story ... is framed by engagement, the engagement of its denial of dependence" (582).

<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) 119.



In an erotic description of the love affair between Elizabeth and Pacquet, Xuela destabilizes male power through suggesting self-eroticism as offering a parallel sensation: “The way he pleased her when he was inside her, his body just that part between his waist and his knees, moving away from her as if forever and inside her as if forever, was so glorious to my sister that she thought this sensation was unique to her being with him; she did not know *she could have this sensation with anyone else, including her own self*” (*The Autobiography* 120 emphasis added). This idea is recurrent in the novel. There are many scenes where Xuela satisfies her sexual desire through caressing the intimate parts of her body:

I had been sitting on the floor caressing in an absentminded way various parts of my body. I was wearing a nightgown made from a piece of nankeen my father had given me, and when Philip came in, one hand was underneath it and my fingers were trapped in the hair between my legs. When he came in I did not remove my hand hurriedly. He said my name, I wanted to respond in a normal way...., but I could not do this, my voice felt as if it were trapped in my hand, the hand that was trapped in the hair between my legs. (151)

Obviously, Xuela embarks on a journey of self-eroticism as “an act of sexual defiance” (Meese 117). In her book *Crossing the Double Cross*, Meese aims at showing the way “women foster disruption, dissension, disturbance and general anarchy within the closed system of sexual ideology” (129). Having as an objective the forging of a new female self-image, Kincaid revisits sexual politics and re-centers the formerly de-centred female bodies. She makes the body a central thematic concern of her narrative. Hence, she elevates the female body from its denigrating position under the male gaze. Her protagonist, Xuela, observes and acknowledges the beauty of her body: “[I]t was seeing my own face that comforted me. I began to worship myself” (*The Autobiography* 100). The body becomes, in this way, a source of pride rather than a cause of shame. Women can experience sexual pleasure without subjecting themselves to man’s power as symbolized by “the hardening flesh between his legs” (71). The deconstruction of phallogocentric dogma is, on this basis, the *sine qua non* condition for women to regain their position in the world. It is plausible, then, to assume that “[w]oman and writing are both political constructions; that feminist writing is a movement toward re-membered or re-bodied writing that materializes woman’s specificity” (Meese 131).

More so, Kincaid “writes what cannot be written” (Jacobus 15). She exposes woman’s relationship to her body as a way to “traverse the limitations erected by phallogocentric discourse” (Meese 119): “I did not wear undergarments anymore, I found them uncomfortable, and as I sat there I touched various parts of my body, sometimes absentmindedly, sometimes with a purpose in mind. I was running the fingers of my left hand through the small thick patch of hair between my legs and thinking of my life as I had lived it so far, fifteen years of it now... (*The Autobiography* 69-70). This passage illustrates the fact that the “knowledge of one’s body...comes only through the free use of it” (Olsen 254). Therefore, the book’s recourse to self-discovery through the body is a challenge to the dogmatic assumption that the female body denotes powerlessness, for one of the bases of phallogocentrism is that “ideologically men have the free use of their sexual organ, and practically women do not have the use of themselves—they are directly objects, women do not have sex, they are sex” (Guillaumin 83).

In the same vein, one can draw upon the fact that the destabilization of sexual codes can be seen also in Xuela’s commanding the process of having sex with men: “I made him stand behind me, I made him lie on top of me, my face beneath his; I made him lie on top of me, my back beneath his chest; I made him lie in back of me and place his hand in my mouth and I bit his hand...I made him kiss my entire body, starting with my feet and ending with the top of my head” (*The Autobiography* 155). Female sexuality, then, is characterized through a yearning for a control rather than a submission to authority:

And still without his exhibiting any excitement, the words would pour out of him, one on top of the other, like water rushing to a precipice, and I would grow tired of it, and it would cause me offense, and I would put a stop to it by removing my clothes and stand before him and stretch my arms all the way to the ceiling and order him to his knees to eat and there make him stay until I was completely satisfied. (145)

Another fact that shows the book’s engagement in re-writing the female body can be seen in employing it as a testimonial site. The step-sister’s scarred body, for instance, can be read as a metaphor for the colonial land and the violence that patriarchy, colonialism and slavery had inflicted on the natives: “[H]er entire body was so marked by scars that it looked like a map on which the lines had been drawn and redrawn, the result of battles whose outcomes were never final” (126). In the same vein, Shemak argues, “[w]hereas the survivors’ oral testimonies are vulnerable to misinterpretation, the bodies of the survivors appear to offer more enduring testimonies to the massacre” (103). “Signing or marking the body [then] signifies its passage into writing, its becoming a literary body, and generally also a narrative body” (Brooks 3 emphasis added). Kristeva’s notion of “the abject” is also crucial for coming to terms with Xuela’s relation to her body:

Two seemingly contradictory causes bring about the narcissistic crisis that provides, along with its truth, a view of the abject. *Too much strictness on the part of the Other*, confused with the One and the Law. *The lapse of the other*, which shows through the breakdown of objects of desire. In both instances, the abject appears in order to uphold ‘I’ within the Other. The abject is the violence of mourning for an ‘object’ that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of representation and its judgments. It takes the

ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, a new significance. (15 Kristeva's emphasis)

Xuela's attraction to the smells of her body, in this respect, "takes [her] ego back to its source on the abominable limits." Xuela remarks that "the smell of [her] underarms and between [her] legs changed, and [that] change pleased [her]...in private, then...[her] hands almost never left [these] places, and when [she] was in public, these same hands were always not far from [her] nose, [she] so enjoyed the way [she] smelled..." (*The Autobiography* 58-59 emphasis added). She strives to return to the pre-colonial phase symbolized by her dead mother. And here lies "the violence of mourning" which straddles between the belief in the loss of this "object" of mourning and the longing for her resurrection.

It is through a deconstructionist Caribbean female literature that "the occasion for speaking" is provided for the repressed voices. In this sense, Meeze sees that "telling the truth about one's body [is] a necessary, freeing subject for the woman writer..." (255 emphasis added). Freeing the female body from male control is a mandatory step for re-constructing an independent social and political identity. It is plausible, then, to conclude that Xuela gains her body through not only self-eroticism but also self-appropriation: "I was not a prisoner of the most primitive and most essential of emotions, that thing silently and secretly called sex, my mind turned to another source of pleasure" (163).

## 2- Beyond Trauma: Memory and Mourning

### 2.1. "But Who Can Really Forget the Past?": Against Silence and Oblivion

"To some extent, one has to rewrite the past in order to understand it." Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: a Life in a New Language*

Kincaid revisits the past of genocide, colonialism and slavery in order to explicate the power structures that governed it. She re-inscribes the oppressed groups of people within a political agenda based on the legacy of loss and oppression. In an attempt to go beyond psychological and historical traumas, Kincaid's heroine refuses to become one of the powerless through recourse to memory as "a productive site for the recovery of meaning and identity" (Harte 4).

*The Autobiography of My Mother* is transmitted from a postcolonial orphan's point of view. Xuela's retrospective journeying in time is a tool of releasing the pain and illuminating "a past that refuses to be suppressed" (Rushdie, *Shame* 92). At the age of seventy-two, Xuela unfolds her autobiographical account starting from the moment of her birth. Remembering traumatic events is, in Freud's psychoanalytical perspective, not only "the most convenient way out and the one most agreeable to the pleasure principle," but also "the most harmless and socially tolerable solution" ("Beyond" 474). The performance of remembrance, then, "would be the space where black women could name their pain and find ways of healing" (Wade-Gayles 13). Xuela's art of memorialization and witnessing crosses the boundaries of silence and combats historical erasure. Xuela, in Morrison's terms, endeavors to "unforget" and to "rememory" the past in order to forge herself as a speaking subject and a bearer of her people's memory:

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. (*The Autobiography* 215-16 emphasis added)

Xuela highlights the importance of revising the past in order to pave the way for the future. She is the instigator of change. In the same vein, Sam Durrant draws upon the fact that "the possibility of a different future, a future that would not simply be a repetition of the past, is dependent on a never-ending labor of remembrance" (8). "[C]ast[ing] light on the past" is then a source of recovery. For historical revision brings order to chaos through probing questions of injustices and exclusion. Through the work of memory, "many wrongs that nothing can ever make right" (*The Autobiography* 209) are brought under scrutiny: "[M]emory is not a literal reproduction of the past but instead depends on constructive processes that are sometimes prone to errors, distortions and illusions" (Schacter, Norman, and Koutstall 289).

In the same context, one can refer to Lang-Peralta's criticism of Kincaid's historical revisioning in *Jamaica Kincaid and Caribbean Double Crossings*:

There is no way to right the wrongs, but she can write about the wrongs. The multiple perspectives that she has gained from this history, along with the irritation that it generates in her, inspires her productivity, leading her repeatedly to construct selves in writing, expressing the ambivalence located at the source of her art. (43)

Writing, as imbricated in memorialization, becomes Kincaid's medium of re-animating the past and "quilting together strands of fragmented history" (Harte 5).

Caribbean literature attends issues of history and memory in relation to identity. The traumatic history compels identity construction. Yet it is these traumatic memories that keep the oppressed in touch with her/his past and community. Therefore, revisualizing trauma and retextualizing the past are the tools for regaining a group consciousness:

[O]ne can speak of traumatized communities as something distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons. Sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body, [...] but even when that does not happen, *traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos — a group culture*, almost — that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up. (Erikson 185 emphasis added)

This literature prepares the axiomatic floor for the oppressed to define himself or herself not as an amnesiac object but as a resistive subject through memory. Caribbean female writers force the reader to “read the wound” (Hartman 537). The “wound that,” Caruth writes, “cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us the reality or truth that is not always available” (*Unclaimed 4*).

Therefore, uncovering trauma becomes a means of recovering truth and identity. Xuela asserts, in this respect, that “truth is always full of uncertainty” (*The Autobiography 71*). She gains knowledge through her traumatic experience in the postcolonial world. It is in defying historical erasure and testifying to the oppressor’s atrocious deeds that Xuela exposes hidden truths about genocide, colonialism and slavery.

Kincaid’s narrative, accordingly, is a testimonial account that manages “to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate” (Morrison, *Beloved 115*). It textualizes the horrors of the past, the unwritten lies, and untold truths. Her protagonist is a questioning subject who serves as a reminder of the lost people, places and traditions: “Who are the Carib people? Or, more accurately, Who were the Carib people? For they were no more, they were extinct, a few hundred of them still living ...” (*The Autobiography 198*). Moreover, in witnessing her father’s denying the nails to Lazarus, Xuela proves the colonizer’s ways of manipulating truth:

[H]e believed he was being himself one day when a man named Lazarus, a gravedigger, came to ask him for some nails to help rebuild the roof of his house...; my father was the highest government official in Mahaut then, he was given by colonial government various things to give for free to people in the most need whenever there was disaster.... My father did dispose of some of the things in the proper way, giving them to people in need, but just enough not to cause a scandal; the rest he sold, and *the more a person was unable to pay*, the more he charged them.... And so when Lazarus asked my father for the nails to complete the roof in his house, within my father the struggle between the hyphenated man and the horde had long since been resolved, *the hyphenated man as before had triumphed*, and my father told Lazarus that he did not have any nails left. (187 emphasis added)

Both the father’s insistence on not having any nails, though Xuela mentions to him their place, and his punishing her for revealing the truth echo the colonizer’s ideology of power. The father is the embodiment of evil in the novel. His transgressions adumbrate the enterprise of colonialism. Through this scene, Kincaid fictionalizes history. She makes her novel a political arena where power relations are reproduced and allegorized.

In an attempt to deconstruct Black Nationalists’ and Western writers’ notion of single and unified identity, Kincaid emphasizes a hybrid and fragmented one. She probes questions of racism and homelessness. Indeed, her narrative displays “mixed-breeds of white and other races” (Young 50). The protagonist, for instance, is of a Carib, African and Scottish descent. Her liminal character can be interpreted as both a source of “a hybrid consciousness” and a translation of history into a written account. Her hybrid genealogy echoes the history of genocide, slavery and colonialism.

Hence, Kincaid pays homage to the Caribbean ancestors who died victims of genocide, and also condemns the institution of slavery through “rooting out illegalities” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish 101*). She pictures out the enslaved Africans with her powerful metaphorical language: “[They] came off the boat as part of a horde, already demonized, mind blank to everything but human suffering, each face the same as the one next to it” (*The Autobiography 181*). Moreover, an exploration of the dark areas of colonialism is attained through writing back to the contemptuous father. The latter, as well, is a hybrid character: “His mother would have been born into slavery, but her parents most certainly would have been enslaved people; and so; too, his father then could not have been an owner of slaves but his parents might have been” (182). However, he chooses to forget about his African inheritance: “His mother remained to him without clear features, though she must have mended his clothes, cooked his food, tended his schoolboy wounds, encouraged his ambitions, soothed his wounded brow...” (183).

Undeniably, Xuela’s memory of her father shatters the colonizer’s ideals of superiority. Her accusation of his deeds is nothing but an indirect message to the colonizer who had brought decay and ruin to the colonized’s minds, traditions and homelands.

Hybridity not only deconstructs the singularity of identity, but also questions racism. *The Autobiography of My Mother* is a female outcry for racial pride. This narrative reverses hierarchy in order to set blackness as beautiful and whiteness as ugly and asexual. Xuela’s assertion of her blackness as a source of beauty is a primordial step towards



empowerment. More so, her description of her black lover, Roland, further illustrates her elevation of blackness to a higher status than whiteness:

His mouth really did look like an island, lying in a twig-brown sea, stretching out from east to west, widest near the center, with tiny, sharp creases, its color a shade lighter than that of the twig-brown sea in which it lay, the place where the two lips met disappearing into the pinkest of pinks, and even though I must have held his mouth in mine a thousand of times, it was always new to me. (164)

She adds, "he did not have a history; he was a small event in somebody else's history, but he was a man" (167). On the other hand, Xuela's depiction of Philip, her white husband, is full of disgust:

His hair was thin and yellow like an animal's that I was not familiar with; his skin was thin and pink and transparent, as if it were on its way to being skin but had not yet reached the state that real skin is; it was not the skin of anyone I have loved yet and not the skin I dreamed of; the veins showed through it here and there like threads sewn by a clumsy seamstress; his nose was narrow and thin like the small part of a funnel, and tilted up in the air as if on the alert for something, not like a nose I was used to being fond of. (152)

Equally important is the focus on the notion of home. The latter foregrounds the importance of origin and motherland which are the prerequisites for identity construction: "[T]he meeting of place and people, you and the place you are from are not a chance encounter; it is something beyond destiny, it is something so meant to be that it is beyond words" (191). Xuela, in an act of defiance to her literal "unhomineness," goes on a spiritual voyage based on remembrance and imagination: "And that is how I claimed my birthright, East and West, Above and Below, Water and Land: In a dream. I walked through my inheritance, an island of villages and rivers and mountains and people who began and ended with murder and theft and not very much love. I claimed it in a dream" (*The Autobiography* 88-89). Therefore, dream becomes the orphaned child's domain of enunciating her demand for rootedness. In the same context, Salman Rushdie claims that "it may be that writers [...] are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back [...] But if we look back, we must do so in the knowledge that we will not be capable of claiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we, in short, create fictions [...] imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (*Imaginary Homelands* 428).

It is plausible to assume that *The Autobiography of my Mother* transgresses geographical boundaries through claiming metaphorical homes to repair the trauma of non-belonging. Hence, it is through fiction and language that the Caribbean writers "find their mental home, their definitional relationship to the external world (Prah 2). Those writers try to create new ways of meaning in order to survive their harsh history, which left its imprints on their present and future.

In short, the novel is a retelling of the past but from the point of view of the subaltern, with her language and perception. It re-forms an independent voice that resuscitates an almost dead memory and revamps an occluded self-image. She connects Xuela to her mother's story. Seen from this angle, Xuela's autobiography is imbricated in her mother's. And so, the mother-daughter knot is tightened in such a way that the daughter gives voice to her mother and grants her continuity.

## 2.2 Wording the Mother's Wordless Songs

"I say I am in love with her, what does that mean?

It means I review my future and my past in the light of this feeling. It is as though I wrote in a foreign language that I am suddenly unable to read. Wordlessly she explains me to myself; like a genius she is ignorant of what she does.

I go on writing so that I will always have something to read." Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*

"'Father' is hypothesis but 'mother' is fact" Angela Carter, *Wise Children*

*The Autobiography of My Mother* breaks the ancestors' silence and offsets their invisibility. The constant remembrance of the dead mother to the extent that "my mother died at the moment of my birth" becomes the novel's refrain. With her poetic language and Caribbean rhythm, Kincaid recreates the mother's silenced songs which bespeak the anxiety of the whole Caribbean cosmos. In other words, the domain of dreaming and mourning exposes the pain in order to find ways of recovery.

Death "is not something that can be imagined once and for all, but an idea that has to be constantly reimagined across cultures and through time" (Neill 2). In questioning the death of the mother, Xuela questions the legacy of genocide. For the death of the mother at the moment of her daughter's birth reminisces of the colonial encounter which brought about the insufferable death of many Caribs. Mourning the death of the mother parallels mourning the lost Carib people.

Xuela retreats into the inner world of imagination and dreams. The virtual world allows her to escape her real world of limitations. Her account of her mother gives shape to her shapeless story. The mother is named Xuela Claudette Desvarieux. Though Xuela never sees her mother, the latter is given a precise physical and moral



description. Xuela imagines her faceless mother's beauty. Accordingly, dream is Xuela's domain of communion with her ancestors. The latter are also represented by the figure of the sugar woman:

I dream of the sugar woman, Again ...

The sugar woman grabs her skirt and skips back and forth around my room. She seems to be dancing a kalanda in a very fast spin, locks arms with the air, pretends to kiss someone much taller than herself. As she swings and shuffles, the chains on her ankles cymbal a rattled melody. She hops to the sound of the jungle of the chains, which with her twists grows louder and louder ...

'Why are you here?' I ask her.

'Told you before,' she says. 'I am the sugar woman. *You, my eternity.*'(132-33)

These female characters represent in Freud's terms the "return of the repressed" in the form of what Derrida labeled "specters," when the other arrives as a ghost or a spirit that always comes back. In Derridean sense, one should "learn to live with ghosts" (25). In mourning the dead, absence can turn into presence, silence into speech and margin into centre: "The work of mourning begins a responsibility owed to the dead" (Harte 4). The ghost, in Caribbean literature, is a shield against total absence. It is a victim yearning for revenge through the power of words: "No amount of revenge can satiate or erase the perpetration of a great injustice" (*The Autobiography* 192).

### **3-Genre, Style, and Language: Black Caribbean Female Writers' Domain of Idiocracy**

Caribbean female writers incline towards a strategy of reversal. The latter hinges upon a departure from canonical texts so as to radically distort them. Those writers set up a counter-discursive method of writing from within the English language and culture. They try to forge a new "Black female self in Black terms from a Black perspective" (Blackburn 147). Reworking the canon, then, implies enacting a paradigm shift at the level of genre, style and language. Kincaid, for instance, being fully aware of the efficacy of aesthetic transgressions, seeks to invent a peculiar generic, stylistic and linguistic form.

The present chapter, hence, focuses on Kincaid's literary ramifications which fashion the Caribbean female aesthetic subversive project. She strategically employs a hybrid genre which acknowledges the reproduction of multiple selves facing the different historical, psychological and cultural forces. She also institutes an alternative opaque style and metaphorical language which concretize an ethos of survival and defiance.

### 3.1 The Hybridization of Autobiography: "The Multiple Imbrications between Self, M/Other and Writing"<sup>2</sup>

By explicating the interrelationship between self, m/other and writing, this section examines Kincaid's transmutation of autobiography into a hybrid genre. Singularity of genre is, then, another realist standard this Caribbean writer violates while spinning her counter-discursive strategy. She opts for a transgeneric model which countervails the linear objectivity of the white canon. Her narrative subsumes a blend of genres: autobiography, biography and fiction.

First, one can read *The Autobiography of My Mother* as an autobiographical account of a seventy-two year old woman. The use of the first person narrator offers Xuela an authorial control over her narrative. She is the dominant voice who allows the reader to trace her itinerary towards self-identification. Her different phases of transition from childhood to adulthood are brought into light. This strategy aims at dredging up the eclipsed dimensions of female experience. Therefore, Xuela's occupying a large narratological space sustains her authority over her personal and political life. This is because in the male Nationalist texts, women were either left out or unacknowledged. Accordingly, Kincaid's subduing autobiography, which is essentially male, as a platform of enunciation breaks the shackling chain of invisibility. She makes this genre both serviceable to her specific socio-cultural context and answerable to her specific goals: "[A]s genre autobiography can be likened to a restless and unmade bed; a site on which discursive, intellectual and political practices can be remade; a ruffled surface on which the traces of previous occupants can be uncovered and/or smoothed over; a place for secrets to be whispered and to be buried; a place for fun, desire and deep worry" (Donnell 124).

Second, the book further transgresses generic boundaries. It resists generic labelling. Clearly, the female autobiographer blurs the lines and boundaries between self and other and asserts that the individual cannot exist outside community and history. It exceeds the limited scope of the self to reach the fabric of the community and to interweave a communal narrative voice. More importantly, autobiography is entangled with genealogy in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. This "alterbiographic"<sup>3</sup> form resonates with Xuela's hybrid character. Autobiography is enmeshed with biography and fiction, paralleling Xuela's Carib, African and Scottish ancestry:

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid locates her writing within a genre with a strong tradition of women's writing and feminist criticism, as well as one which consciously brings to the fore questions concerning her own identity as a writer, a woman and an American-Antiguan subject. However, at the same time she forces an immediate dislocation from this generic positioning, signaling that this work is not seeking to define itself unproblematically as a piece of life-writing which takes either herself or her mother as its subject, but as a piece which addresses the multiple imbrications of self, m/other and writing. (Donnell 124)

An analysis of this idea can be the view that for Xuela to come to terms with herself, she needs to know her parental roots. She provides accounts of both her Caribbean mother and African-Scottish father. Yet, overburdened by maternal absence from the moment of her birth, Xuela seeks to reinscribe her mother's story through the recourse to imagination and dreams. And in here lies the fictional quality of the narrative. Drawing upon this idea in an interview with Allan Vorda, Kincaid remarks: "[T]he process of fiction, for me, is using reality and then reinventing reality, which is the most successful way to do what I do" (92).

In a related vein, Jana Evans Braziel suggests a connection between autobiography and the metaphor of the broken plate in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. She reads Xuela's breaking Ma Eunice's "plate of bone china," symbolizing "the English countryside idealized," as an act of creating order out of disorder and chaos.

### 3.2 "A Speaking and a Listening from the Site of Trauma"<sup>4</sup>: Coded Narrative and Engaged Reader

<sup>2</sup> Alison Donnell, "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 Auto/Biography*. Ed. Pauline Polkey (London: Macmillan, 1999) 124.

<sup>3</sup>The term "alterbiographic" is coined by Jana Evans Braziel in her *Caribbean Genesis: Jamaica Kincaid and the Writing of New Words*. She elaborates on this idea by interrelation between autobiography, biography and genealogy:

In Kincaid's alterbiographic texts, she challenges the presumed insularity and discreteness of the autobiographical form, opening it to representations of alterity: through alterbiography, Kincaid powerfully writes other into self, biography into autobiography, annihilation into creation, and death into life. She thus forces us to rethink the presumed boundaries of these terrains; she does so through her transmutations of genealogy and genre. (3)

<sup>4</sup>Cathy Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995) 11.

The reader of Caribbean literature is freed from authorial intentions. Kincaid's traumatic narrative blurs the line between text, author and reader. It calls for an active reader who is critically involved in the events of the text and the characters' deeds in order to understand the writer's ideology. The fact that nothing is fully provided in the text, due to its fragmented style, temporal distortion and elusive language, necessitates the reader's embarking on a journey of meaning-making, starting from investigating the socio-cultural context of the text.

The empathetic reader needs to witness the characters' dilemmas in order to help them find a sense of recovery. The mission of witnessing is, then, given to the listener and reader, who imagine, question and share the narrator's contradictory feelings and thoughts.

*The Autobiography of My Mother* is highly symbolic. The proliferation of figures of speech, chief among them are metaphor, metonymy and paradox, is symptomatic of Kincaid's choice of systematic delinearization as a resistive strategy. The reader, in this way, is invited to de-symbolize the symbols and decode the messages in order to decipher meanings. This participatory reader completes what the author left incomplete through filling in the gaps of silences, indeterminacies and rhetorical questions: "[writing about invisibility and silence] requires attention to what is not seen, but is nonetheless powerfully real; requires attention to what appears dead, but is nonetheless powerfully alive; requires attention to what appears to be in the past, but is nonetheless powerfully present; requires attention to just who the subject of analysis is" (Gordon 42 emphasis added).

However, for the subaltern to achieve subjectivity and pin down her experience, she does not have to abide by the rules of the master's language. Interestingly, then, are Caliban's words in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "You taught me language and my profit on't is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language!" (21). Here, then, lies the power of deconstructing language in order to reconstruct identity.

Kincaid's coded narrative, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, is laden with metaphors. The metaphor of braiding hair for instance, is recurrent: "[S]he washed my hair and rinsed it with a tea she had made from nettles; she combed it lovely, admiring its thickness, ... she plaited it into two braids...." (*The Autobiography* 75). The narrative also contains many elements of nature. Each bears a symbolic meaning. Nature becomes the mediator between the subject, the past and the nation. It stresses the imbrications between past, present and future. The sea, for instance, is remarkably present in the novel. It registers a painful history. It becomes the foundation of memory and nostalgia: "[T]he Black Dominica sea, a sea that was a tomb, and [the father's] history which was made up of man and people was locked up in it" (*The Autobiography* 185).

The repetition of sounds has a cohesive potential. With a poetic language, a Caribbean rhythm and "[m]y mother died at the moment I was born" its refrain, this narrative "demonstrate[s] that agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive, to show that victims are not mutually exclusive, to show that victims are also agents who can change their lives and affect other lives in radical ways" (Nnaemeka 3 emphasis added).

Graphical presentation is also present in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. The book is made of seven chapters. Each divided from the other by the picture of a black woman whose physical features appear gradually till the last chapter, where her shape is complete. This strategy is symptomatic of the process of constructing selves through writing. It alludes to the way the narrative pieces together the female subject's fragmented experience in a hostile environment where the only support she can find is the power of her word.

### 3.3 Writing as Catharsis<sup>5</sup> and "the Hunger to Tell"<sup>6</sup>

"These testimonials are instructive and cathartic, for a nation that due to a series of continuous struggles never really had time to pause and grieve any single tragedy for long."  
Beverly Bell, *Walking on Fire*

Narrative is the channel for "working through" trauma. It has the power of healing the wounds of history. Writing as catharsis is celebrated in Caribbean literature. Xuela asserts in this context:

I had, through the use of some words, changed my situation; I had perhaps saved my life. To speak of my situation to myself or to others, is something I would always do thereafter. It is in this way that I came to be so conscious of myself, so interested in my own needs, so interested in fulfilling them, aware of my grievances, aware of my pleasures. From this unfocused, childish expression of pain, my life was changed and I took note of it. (*The Autobiography* 22)

<sup>5</sup> Catharsis is "the release of ideas, thoughts, and repressed material from the unconscious, accompanied by an emotional response and relief." <http://dictionary.sensagent.com/catharsis/en-en/>

<sup>6</sup> Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (New York: Soho Press, 1998) 209.

Writing and telling about her own anxieties are, in this respect, the narrator's means of survival. Kincaid's Xuela has been victimized and disabled by a society governed by racism, sexism and class differentiation. Yet, she protects herself from an abyss of oblivion through the use of "words." It is plausible, then, to deduce that the recourse to language as a potential cure proves enabling. Caribbean women writers, for instance, seek out the translation of their experience into words that, in Walcott's terms, restore "[their] shattered histories, [their] shards of vocabulary, [their] archipelago" (*The Antilles* 374). Kincaid, whose writings surmount the diseased history, audaciously speaks out for herself and for the triple oppressed community (Black, Caribbean, and female). Narrative, then, heals individual and collective traumas. It provides a sense of recovery from literal paralysis and prevents psychic death: "A language, any language, is a map, a cartography, a representation of reality and an evolutionary device which has made the cultural identity of peoples possible with the best of its artistic and social expressions" (Muñoz-Calvo, Buesa-Gómez, Ruiz-Moneva 1).

Writing becomes a psychological act that assures an emotional discharge, for it sets up "a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 2-3). Caruth writes about the "wound that cries out", that resists "liv[ing] forever locked up in an iron cage made of [its] own silence" (*The Autobiography* 60). *The Autobiography of My Mother* can read as a condemnation of the mental colonization that exists long after decolonization. Cultural imperialism, a form of economic, linguistic and spiritual dependence, imprisons the colonizer in her standstill.

In an attempt to focus on the notion of language as catharsis, one can allude to the subject's relation to both English language and creole. Throughout her *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid examines the position of language with particular emphasis on the binary opposition between the two languages. This binarism inferiorizes patois while valorizing the English language. Patois is relegated to a low position because of its broken and incomplete form. This Western view is used as a pretext for cultural domination and linguistic mutilation: "We spoke English in school-proper English, not patois-and among ourselves we spoke French patois, a language that was not considered proper at all, a language that a person from France could not speak and could only with difficulty understand it" (16).

Escaping cultural and personal annihilation, the black writer whose language could not reach the ears of his potential addressee, uses the means available to her but in an idiosyncratic way. The employment of English, indeed, has various undertones. It is not a passive consumption of the colonizer's language but rather strategic. Kincaid, in this case, reconsiders the English language. She utilizes it as a revolutionary and revisionary tool. The English language, then, is not to praise the Western ideology but to debilitate its rigidity and stand against its exclusionary endeavors.

### Conclusion

*The Autobiography of My Mother* is the most enigmatic and allegorical of Kincaid's works. The mother's death at the moment of her daughter's birth constitutes the core of the novel. This event goes beyond both the personal and social spheres to construct a larger political metaphor. It suggests the downfall of the motherland at the moment of colonial encounter. The mother's early death symbolizes the loss of a people whose history has been erased. Yet, the daughter's story is a strife for self-invention out of this loss. Through the constant mourning, imagining and remembering of her mother and her lost people, Xuela proves able to revisit the past and remake her identity. She does not accept to wear her father's mask nor to be a colonial object. Rather, she clings to memory as a sword against the devastating effects of oblivion. It is memory that "revises, reorders, refigures, resignifies: it includes, it omits, embellishes or represses, decorates or drops, according to imperatives of its own. Far from being a trustworthy transcriber of 'reality,' it is a shaper and shape shifter that takes liberties with the past as artful and lying as any taken by the creative writer" (Greene 294). Memory, as manifested in the form of dreams and the work of remembrance, "is activation in the face of stasis, a restoration of fluidity, translucence, and movement" (Holloway 68). It has a recuperative and a transformative potential.

What is important also is the power of writing as a strategy of survival and a means of escape. Like many Caribbean women writers, Kincaid has recourse to literature in order to translate her thoughts into words. Her overarching aim is to make a change from a situation where women were silenced and invisibilized to a state of voicing and rehabilitation. It is plausible, then, to refer to Kincaid's assertion: "I suspect that if I wasn't writing, being the person I am who has become, politically conscious, then I would be throwing bombs if I didn't have the pen, I would certainly be someone who would take up the sword" (Vorda 26).

The book's fragmented style, which reproduces the African-rooted Caribbean tradition and defies Western notions of logic, proposes a more flexible way of interpreting reality. She inscribes the mother's story in history in a very unconventional way. The death of the mother punctuates *The Autobiography of My Mother*. It is emotionally charged and imbued with strong feelings and opinions.

*The Autobiography of My Mother*, indeed, stands as a testament for the victims of genocide who faced the atrocities of the colonial regime. The novel starts with Xuela's personal story to look at the political, diasporic and historical issues of the whole community. The personal and the communal imbricate in the protagonist's quest for



identity and power. There is a reference to her “private, secret, insidious traumas” (Brown 102). These traumas are aggravated with the legacy of genocide, slavery and colonialism.

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