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Introduction: “When You Think of Me, Think of My Life”

In the eyes of her many interviewers, Jamaica Kincaid is an unusual and forceful individual: she is described as a woman with a “dramatic” look and as a “tall, striking, clear-eyed” woman who turns heads and “projects a natural authority that attracts attention” (Garis, Garner). Kincaid’s interviewers also often make note of the Antiguan-born writer’s “proper British accent” or comment that she sounds “like a genteel Englishwoman with a mysterious background that puts music in her speech” (Kreilkamp 54, Garis). “Even when she’s denouncing the world’s many evil-doers, her voice is gentle and engaging. The effect is not so much a softening of her anger but an intensification of it by contrast. She makes anger and outrage completely compatible with good humor,” writes one of her interviewers (Kreilkamp 55). To another, she is a “highly opinionated” woman who is “steadfast in her beliefs” and “fiercely determined” about those things she believes to be social injustices (Vorda 80).

A memory-haunted woman who continually remembers and tries to make sense of her Caribbean upbringing on the island of Antigua, Kincaid is a writer out of necessity. Speaking openly about her life and work in her many interviews, Kincaid emphasizes the autobiographical and psychological origins of her writing. “[F]or me, writing is like going to a psychiatrist. I just discover things about myself,” Kincaid has revealingly remarked (Perry, “Interview” 498). When she writes, she is not Caribbean, not black; instead, she is “just this sort of unhappy person struggling to make something, struggling to be free. Yet the freedom isn’t a political one or a public one: it’s a personal one. It’s a struggle I realize that will go on until the day that I die” (Vorda 82). Kincaid, who has always asserted that for her writing is a personal act, says that she is “trying to discover the secret” of herself in her writing (Kennedy).

“When you think of me, think of my life” (Vorda 83). In Kincaid’s works, whether it be her short story collection, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), her avowedly autobiographical fiction, *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990), her fictionalized *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), her factual account of her brother’s death from AIDS in *My Brother* (1997), or her fictional memoir of her biological father in *Mr. Potter* (2002), she insistently, if not obsessively, focuses on her relationship with her family, especially her powerful, and to Kincaid, tyrannical mother. And she similarly draws on her personal life in her angry attack on the tourist industry in Antigua in *A Small Place* (1988) and in her essays on gardening collected in *My Garden (Book)*: (1999). My aim is to investigate the ongoing construction of Kincaid’s autobiographical self and writer’s identity as I examine the aspect of her writings that many critics find so enigmatic—what has been called the “mother mystery”² that lies at the heart of her work.

“I hate tyranny,” Kincaid states. “It’s better to be dead than to have people forcing you to do things that are a violation” (Garner). Well-known for her fierce self-assertiveness and her frank expression of her feelings, Kincaid considers anger “a badge of honor,” and she also insists on the power of shamelessness—whatever causes shame “you should just wear brazenly,” she comments (Perry, “Interview” 497, Garner). Yet while Kincaid openly expresses her anger and defiant shamelessness in her writings, she deals with intensely painful, even frightening, experiences and feelings as she describes, through her daughter characters, her intensely ambivalent love-hate relationship with her mother, her episodic experiences of profound depression and subjective emptiness, her injured pride and intense rage, and her feelings of exposure and bodily shame. Behind the intense idealization of the daughter’s attachment to the perfectly attuned mother and the often accusatory depictions of the withdrawn and rejecting mother lie not only feelings of sadness and betrayal and injury but also a profound sense of shame and dread.

Providing an absorbing account of the often conflicting needs and fantasies that animate psychic life and family relationships, Kincaid conveys, through her hallmark style, the ambivalences and uncertainties that drive her work. The classic Kincaidian sentence, in Derek Walcott’s often quoted description, “heads toward its own contradiction” (Garis). Through her associative but also highly controlled narrative style, Kincaid makes her readers privy to a deeply conflicted consciousness, an inner voice in open conflict with others and in deep self-conflict. Focusing more on individual experience than on the Caribbean collective experience, Kincaid’s narrative style, as Caribbean writer Merle Hodge

has aptly remarked, is one in which “the main speaking voice is the voice of the protagonist/narrator, and the main dialogue is with her own, searching self” (52). Driven by the need for self-rescue and self-repair, Kincaid, through her self-searching style, writes not only to relieve the mental torment caused by her obsessive ruminations about the past but also to make a kind of literary sense of her life experiences and to construct a meaningful and livable autobiographical and writer’s identity. Describing her writing as “very autobiographical,” Kincaid insists that when she began to write, the act of writing “was really an act of saving” her life (Ferguson, “Interview” 176). For Kincaid, the writing process is “always full of pain,” but it also is “a way of being” (Snell). She writes because she does not know “how else to live,” and writing also allows her to live “in the deepest way” (Ferguson, “Interview” 169).

An author who has commented that she must “find the emotion somewhere inside” herself to write (Perry, “Interview” 495), Kincaid taps into what Nancy Chodorow calls “the power of feelings” in her writings. “A particular feeling condenses and expresses an unconscious fantasy about self, body, other, other’s body, or self and other,” writes Chodorow in her analysis of the psychoanalytic contribution to the study of feelings. “Through the power of feelings, unconscious fantasy recasts the subject—emotions and stories about different aspects of self in relation to one another and about the self and body in relation to an inner and outer object world” (*Power* 239–40).³ Countering contemporary cultural theorists who focus on how cultural forms give rise to a culturally determined psyche, Chodorow argues that cultural meanings are kept alive for the individual and culture because they are “emotionally charged and continually invested with fantasy, conflict, and shifting private meaning” (*Power* 201). Chodorow, who takes issue with the cultural determinism of antipsychological theorists,⁴ states that “the psychological is just as irreducible as the cultural and has as much force and power in shaping and constituting human life and society” (*Power* 217).

No more a seamless whole than culture is, psychological life, as Chodorow aptly comments, is a “multiplicity of unconscious fantasies and conflicts and the complex internal worlds that characterize psychic life for the individual” (*Power* 217). While individuals are products of their culture, they also “create cultural selves and emotions and animate cultural meanings and interpretations individually” (*Power* 225). In her both-and approach, Chodorow argues that meaning is at once cultural and personal: that is, it is an “inextricable mixture of the sociocultural and historically contextualized on the one hand and the personally psychodynamic and psychobiographically contextualized on the other” (*Power* 2). Moreover, “There is no simple internalization of culture, no

single way in which psyches hook onto culture” (*Power* 197). Thus, “people avail themselves of cultural meanings and images, but they experience them emotionally and through fantasy, as well as in particular interpersonal contexts. Emotional meaning, affective tone, and unconscious fantasies that arise from within and are not experienced linguistically interact with and give individual animation and nuance to cultural categories, stories, and language (that is, make them subjectively meaningful)” (*Power* 71–72). “That thoughts and feelings are entangled and that thoughts are thought in culturally specific languages—these ideas do not mean that there is no private feeling or that any particular thought has only a public cultural meaning” (*Power* 166). For Chodorow, “if cultural meanings matter, they matter personally. . . . Psychological force drives the experience of culturally recognized emotions just as cultures help to shape emotional life” (*Power* 170–71).

That cultural meanings are “emotionally charged and continually invested with fantasy, conflict, and shifting private meaning” is apparent in Kincaid’s representation of the private and cultural lives of her protagonists. Yet in the scholarly responses to Kincaid’s writings, critics, while they typically concur that mother-daughter and family relations are central to her work, also tend to shun the psychological and instead allegorize and politicize the personal and relational in her writings. Thus, as Kincaid critics have frequently argued, Kincaid’s troubled relationship with her mother is a metaphor for her troubled relation with her colonial Antiguan culture and the colonial motherland. “There is a clear correlation established throughout Kincaid’s work between motherhood and the colonial metropolis as motherland,” remarks one critic (Paravisini-Gebert 27). Although the relations between Kincaid’s female characters and their mothers “are crucially formative,” they are also “always mediated by intimations of life as colonized subjects” so that “[c]ultural location becomes paramount” in Kincaid’s art, writes another (Ferguson, *Jamaica Kincaid* 1). For yet another critic, in Kincaid’s novels “the alienation from the mother becomes a metaphor for the young woman’s alienation from an island culture that has been completely dominated by the imperialist power of England” (de Abruna 173).

Despite the argument that it is “narrow and prescriptive” to read postcolonial works featuring mothers and daughters as “uniformly allegorical of colonizer/colonized relationships” (Curry 100), one can find evidence of this tendency in studies of Kincaid’s works. Indeed, Kincaid herself, over time, has come to make a conscious connection between her fierce hatred of maternal domination and her colonial upbringing as she, in her own description, has developed a political consciousness.

But if the psychosocial development of Kincaid's characters can—and indeed should—be read in the context of the colonial situation, it is nevertheless reductive to read the mother/daughter relationship in Kincaid as “metonymic of the colonial condition” (Ledent 59) or to ignore or minimize the importance of the psychological and familial in Kincaid's art. In a similar way, the handful of psychological readings of Kincaid's writings by critics have focused largely on the regressive pre-oedipal dynamics of Kincaid's art⁵ to the exclusion of a broader understanding of the autobiographical origins and persistence of the mother-daughter conflict in her work. My aim is to draw on Kincaid's many remarks on the autobiographical sources of her writings as I read her works through the lens of contemporary shame and trauma theory. If there is a politics to Kincaid's psychology, there also is a psychology to Kincaid's politics, as I will show as I provide a sustained analysis of the psychological and affective dynamics of Kincaid's works, including her openly political writings.

From Elaine Potter Richardson to Jamaica Kincaid

Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson in 1949 and grew up in the West Indies on the island of Antigua in the shadow of her mother, Annie Drew, née Richardson. Characterizing her mother as an impressive and powerful woman but also as someone who should never have had children, Kincaid insists that the way she is “is solely owing” to her mother, and that, indeed, her mother is the “fertile soil” of her “creative life” (Cudjoe 219, 222). The same mother who “gave” her daughter words by teaching her how to read when she was three-and-one-half years old and giving her a *Concise Oxford Dictionary* when she was seven later became a source of intense pain, Kincaid recalls, yet because of her mother, she is “able to articulate the pain” (Mendelsohn). Although admired by her mother for her reading when she was young, later, when Kincaid read obsessively as an adolescent and consequently ignored her household duties at times, her mother became annoyed with her reading habits. When the fifteen-year-old Kincaid, who had been asked to babysit her two-year-old brother, Devon, became so absorbed in a book that she failed to notice that his diaper needed to be changed, Annie Drew, in a state of fury, gathered up all of her daughter's treasured books and burned them. As an adolescent, Kincaid came to identify with the bookish—and to her idealized—world of literature, a world, as she would later speculate, she tried to recreate in her writing as she attempted to bring back into her life all the books her mother had burned.

Kincaid was an only child until age nine, and from ages nine to thirteen her life was disrupted by the birth of her three brothers: Joseph, Dalma, and Devon. For Kincaid one of the great betrayals of her life was her family's interruption of her education after the birth of her brothers. "My brothers were going to be gentlemen of achievement, one was going to be Prime Minister, one a doctor, one a Minister, things like that. I never heard anybody say that I was going to be anything except maybe a nurse. There was no huge future for me, nothing planned. In fact my education was so casually interrupted, my life might very well have been destroyed by that casual act . . . if I hadn't intervened in my own life and pulled myself out of the water" (BBC). Kincaid was educated in British colonial schools in Antigua, which became self-governing in 1967 and an independent nation within the British Commonwealth in 1981. Although she was a bright student, her teachers considered her difficult. "I was always being accused of being rude, because I gave some back chat," Kincaid recalls (Garis). Not only did she refuse to stand at the refrain of "God Save Our King," but she also hated "Rule, Britannia" with its refrain, "'Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves, Britons never ever shall be slaves.' I thought that we weren't Britons and that we were slaves" (Cudjoe 217).

Kincaid, who had hoped to stay in school and then go on to the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, remembers with great bitterness how her mother removed her from high school in Antigua, claiming that she needed help caring for her three sons after her husband—Kincaid's stepfather, David Drew—became ill. Kincaid wanted to go to the university so she could become one of those "very respected women who come back from the university and just sort of push everyone around" (Vorda 91). Instead, in 1965 the sixteen-year-old Kincaid was sent to America to work as an au pair, so she could help support her family. "I dutifully sent my paychecks home, and then one day it dawned on me that I was being asked to support someone else's mistake," she recalls. "I was a brilliant young girl who should have gone on to a university. Nothing was dependent on the sacrifice of my life. . . . I stopped sending them money and stopped writing to them and began to send myself to school. I became the parents I didn't have for myself" ("Portraits: Jamaica Kincaid" 20).

After breaking off all contact with her family, Kincaid set about, as she tells her story, reinventing herself. In an act of self-creation that also served as a self-protective disguise, she changed her name to *Jamaica Kincaid* in 1973. "I was with friends and we were all calling ourselves different names and I thought of that name, and I said, 'That's my name'" (Wachtel 64). Kincaid, who is "part African, part Carib Indian"

and “a very small part . . . Scot” (Vorda 81), called herself “Jamaica” because of her Caribbean origins. When she decided to change her name, the Caribbean had become “very remote” to her. “It was a kind of invention: I wouldn’t go home to visit that part of the world, so I decided to recreate it. ‘Jamaica’ was symbolic of that place” (Cudjoe 220). Despite her explanation that she chose “Kincaid” simply because it “seemed to go with” the name “Jamaica” and she “liked the sound” (Cudjoe 220, J. Kaufman), the name “Kincaid,” as one commentator has observed, does, in fact, sound Scottish,⁶ so it, too, points to Kincaid’s origins (see J. King 885). In changing her name when she began to write, Kincaid was also attempting to disguise herself so that her family would not know she was writing, for she was afraid that she would fail, and they would laugh at her. Despite her fears of failure, Kincaid became an almost overnight success as a writer. After being befriended by *New Yorker* writer George Trow, who began to quote her in his “Talk of the Town” pieces, calling her “our sassy black friend” (Garis), she was hired as a staff writer for *The New Yorker* by the editor, William Shawn, who also published her stories in the magazine, and she later married his son. In 1983, with the publication of her first book of stories, *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid caught the attention of the critical establishment, and she has since become a widely acclaimed and often studied author, celebrated as an important voice in literature for both her fiction and nonfiction works.

In the composite portrait of Kincaid that emerges from her many interviews, she is identified, if not mythologized, as a classic American type: the self-created and successful individual. “She is an Elaine turned a Jamaica,” writes one commentator. “She is a former servant—as she describes herself—who is now one of the more remarkable voices in contemporary literature.” Moreover, “‘Jamaica herself may be Jamaica’s greatest work of art. She is totally self-created. . . . She came here and she picked and chose and built a life’” (Jacobs). To another commentator, Kincaid’s story “sounds a bit like a cross between Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, except in this version, the woman from the West Indies triumphs, working her way through governess jobs to become a renowned author” (Kreilkamp 54). If in describing the trajectory of Kincaid’s literary career and life in America, interviewers often invoke the discourse of the American success story and the self-made individual—and Kincaid’s story does indeed follow such a script, as she tells it—embedded in Kincaid’s literary success story is another story that she tells and retells in her interviews as she recounts her abiding struggle to make sense of her painful past and free herself from her obsessive love-hate relationship with her

mother and also to understand the external cultural forces that have helped make her what she is.

“I’ve come to see that I’ve worked through the relationship of the mother and the girl to a relationship between Europe and the place that I’m from, which is to say a relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The girl is powerless, and the mother is powerful” (Vorda 86). But even as Kincaid recognizes that she must have “consciously viewed” her relationship with her mother as “a sort of prototype” for the larger social relationship between Antiguans and the British, she also insists that for her writing is “an act of self-rescue, self-rehabilitation, self-curiosity: about my mind, about myself, what I think, what happened to me in the personal way, in the public way, what things mean. It’s so much a personal act that I have no real understanding of it” (Birbalsingh 144, 149). Stating that she has “never really written about anyone” except herself and her mother, Kincaid describes herself as “one of those pathetic people for whom writing is therapy” (Listfield). “It’s still a mystery to me, and it’s still an awe-inspiring thing to me, that I came to discover that I can write. . . . I could be dead or in jail. If you don’t know how to make sense of what’s happened to you, if you see things but can’t express them—it’s so painful” (Kennedy). Kincaid’s work, which has often been read as a political allegory, is political, but it is also highly personal.

Memory, Narrative, Identity

“[M]y mother wrote my life for me and told it to me,” Kincaid has said of her writing (O’Conner). Kincaid’s well-known remark on the origins of her autobiographical self-representation in the stories her mother, Annie Drew, told her about herself when she was a child recalls Paul Eakin’s account of the origins of the autobiographical impulse in the developmental process of “memory talk.” Beginning in early childhood when the child learns to share memories with others, “memory talk” leads to “the establishment of a store of memories that are shareable and ultimately reviewable by the individual, forming a personal history” (Nelson, cited by Eakin 109). As part of her “memory talk” training, “the child learns that she is expected to be able to display to others autobiographical memories arranged in narrative form” (111). Parents not only play an important role in the “continuous, lifelong trajectory of self-narration,” which starts in childhood as the child learns to narrativize her experiences, but “parental styles of engagement can exert an enormous influence, transmitting both models of self and

story” (Eakin 113, 115). Serving as “the ‘vicar of the culture,’” the family indoctrinates the child in “the received ‘genres of life-accounting,’” and, indeed, the child’s very sense of self emerges “within a crucible of family stories and cultural scripts” (Eakin 117). Explaining the connections among memory, narrative, and identity, Eakin comments that narrative is “not merely one form among many in which to express identity, but rather [is] an integral part of a primary mode of identity experience, that of the extended self, the self in time” (137). Moreover, “the writing of autobiography is properly understood as an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation in which acts of self-narration play a major part” (101).

Even as Kincaid finds the origins of her writing in her mother’s storytelling, she also, as we shall see in the course of this study, finds it necessary to talk and write back to the mother who incessantly shamed her daughter in the stories she told about her. Kincaid also insists on the importance of memory and truth-telling in her writing, recalling that as a young child she was praised for her memory but over time was chastised for remembering things her mother wanted to forget. Indeed, in her adult relationship with her mother described in *My Brother* and in her interviews, Kincaid complains that her mother plays with memory and with the “truth” about the past. Remarking that she “grew up in a place where the truth is in the shadows—which is to say there is none,” Kincaid recalls, “When I was a child, I was much praised for my memory because it was very precocious. I could remember everything I saw and heard, and I would complete people’s stories—everyone thought it was so charming. And then when I kept it up and told people things they didn’t want to remember, everyone grew annoyed with me. I have often overheard my mother describing some incident that I was directly involved in as a child, and it just enrages me, because her telling of it is always so different from how I remember it. . . . [S]he plays with memory” (Goldfarb 98). For Kincaid, “if something really happened, it *really happened*,” and while she does not “mind so much that it happened,” she does mind “not knowing the truth of it” (Goldfarb 98, Hansen). “What a memory you have!” Annie Drew says of the trait she so dislikes in her daughter (*My Brother* 6). “This is what my family, the people I grew up with, hate about me. I always say, Do you remember?” (*My Brother* 19).

For Kincaid, the memory process⁷ involves the recovery of events—and not necessarily buried or repressed events⁸—and also the continual mental processing of the past in light of later knowledge as she attempts to make sense of her relationship with her mother. “I go over my life all the time—events in my life—and suddenly I remember

that I was with my mother somewhere,” as Kincaid describes this process. “Over and over again, I remember my mother and I went somewhere and only now it has dawned on me what was happening” (Ferguson, “Interview” 183). As Kincaid continually reviews events from her past, she gains expanded awareness of “what was happening,” allowing her to elaborate on or even revise her ongoing self-narration. In *My Brother*, Kincaid remarks on the process of memory and self-narration: “[A]t this moment that I am sitting and contemplating (though I am not sure that I am capable of contemplation), I am remembering the life of my brother, I am remembering my own life, or at least a part of my own life, for my own life is still ongoing, I hope, and each moment of its present shapes its past and each moment of its present will shape its future and even so influence the way I see its future” (167).

In Kincaid’s work, memory is central to the process of self-narration and thus the making of what Eakin calls the “storied self” (see 99–141). But Kincaid also insists that she writes fiction and not pure autobiography because she manipulates facts to bring out the connections between events, arranging “things in a way” so that she can “understand them.” Yet in everything she says “there is the truth” (Perry, “Interview” 507). Even though Kincaid has remarked that “it is fair” for her mother to say, “This is not me,” of the mother characters in novels such as *Annie John* and *Lucy*, insisting that “[i]t is only the mother as the person I used to be perceived her,” she also says of her mother, “I don’t think anyone could destroy us [Kincaid and her brothers] as powerfully as she did” (Ferguson, “Interview” 176, Mehren). “I want to say, this is not a mother like your mother. This is a mother like you have never known” (Mehren). Responding to her mother’s frequent remark, “Oh, you remember all those old times stories,” Kincaid insists, “[W]hat I remember is not an old times story: it’s the truth” (Birbalsingh 146). Kincaid emphasizes the importance of memory—memory of what “really happened”—in her writing yet she also insists on the constructed nature of her autobiographical-fictional narratives of the past as she, the powerful “Jamaica Kincaid,” identifies with her discarded yet remembered self, the powerless and vulnerable and deeply shamed “Elaine Potter Richardson.”

“I am someone who had to make sense out of my past,” Kincaid insists. “I had to write or I would have died” (Ferguson, “Interview” 176). For Kincaid writing about herself in *At the Bottom of the River*, *Annie John*, and *Lucy*, and writing about her family as a way to gain expanded insight into her own identity in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *My Brother*, and *Mr. Potter*, are not only acts of self-narration

and the creation of a storied identity but also acts of self-preservation and survival. Yet for all her need to “tell the truth” Kincaid, as we shall see, is a reluctant witness to the “real story” of what happened to her.

The Mother-Daughter Relationship

Focusing attention on the mother-daughter dyadic relationship, Kincaid evokes a well-known relational pattern in describing how characters such as Annie John and Lucy have problems with attachment and autonomy in their intense bond with the mother. In Nancy Chodorow's well-known description in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, the infant daughter's preoedipal attachment to her mother leads, in the developing girl and the adult woman, to a relational mode of identification characterized by a fluidity of self-other boundaries. The recurrent division of the mother into loved and hated parts in Kincaid's fiction is also illuminated by relational theorists in their description of “splitting,” an important “developmental and defensive process” that arises from the daughter's conflicting perceptions of and feelings about the mother (St. Clair 190). In the “complex” relationship with the mother “where feelings of love and hate, frustration and gratification coexist,” splitting functions to keep dangerous feelings separate from gratifying ones (St. Clair 40). Through splitting, the developing girl “protects the ideal, good relationship with the mother from contamination with the frustrating and bad”; splitting also protects “the good mother image” from the child's “destructive anger” (St. Clair 132–33; Mahler 99). Relational theorists also show how enmeshment with the mother complicates the daughter's differentiation from the mother in adolescence, a time of “prolonged and painful severance from the mother” when the mother may wish both to keep her daughter close and to push her into adulthood and when the daughter may use various strategies to separate from her mother: she may become hypercritical of her mother or try to solve her “ambivalent dependence” through splitting, seeing her mother and homelife as bad and the world outside the home as good; or she may try to be as unlike her mother as possible, defining herself in opposition to her mother; or she may idealize friends or fictional characters, contrasting her mother unfavorably to these idealized figures (Chodorow, *Reproduction* 135, 137). Kincaid's characters experience difficulties in negotiating connection and separation in their girlhood and adolescent relationships with the mother and also feel intense ambivalence toward the mother, splitting her into the all-giving and beneficent “good” mother or the totally withholding and persecutory “bad” mother. And

during adolescence, they defy and denigrate the mother while forming intense attachments to girls who are initially idealized but eventually denigrated like the mother. Kincaid's characters also exhibit what Adrienne Rich calls "matrophobia"—the fear "of *becoming one's mother*." "[W]here a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia, there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely," as Rich explains this phenomenon (235).

Yet while relational theory provides useful insights into Kincaid's representation of the mother-daughter relationship in her work, it does not tell the whole story, leaving what many critics see as a kind of enigma at the heart of Kincaid's work. Remarking on the "pattern of returning to the autobiographical scene" in Kincaid's writings, Leigh Gilmore describes Kincaid's "performance of autobiography as a discourse with an, as yet, limitless capacity for repetition or reengagement" (96, 99). Yet Gilmore also asserts that the "central theme of mother-daughter conflict" in Kincaid's works is presented as "a locus of enigmatic trauma" (104). Questioning the place of the mother in *Annie John*, Gilmore remarks that while the mother character is central, "her actions seem less like the cause of Annie's unhappiness than something more like the psychic force of individuation, the incomprehensibility of some forms of emotion, and deep emotion as itself a kind of trauma" (111). Like Gilmore, critic-readers commonly find the mother-daughter conflict and the daughter's intense love/hate feelings for her mother enigmatic,⁹ revealing Kincaid's early reluctance to describe in her fiction the very real hurts inflicted on her in her girlhood by her mother. The fact that Kincaid, over the years, comes to forcefully describe her abiding, even obsessive, hatred for and anger toward her mother points to a hidden drama in her early stories and novels.

Kincaid, who frequently remarks on the brutality and humiliation inflicted on children in Antigua, is generalizing from her own experiences growing up. "I don't want to use the word 'abused,' but there was a great deal of cruelty directed at me when I was a child," Kincaid states, only reluctantly admitting that she was, in fact, beaten by her mother (Cryer). Kincaid also comes to admit, but again reluctantly, that she "suffered greatly from shame" as a child, including shame about various parts of her heritage, in particular the fact that she was illegitimate, leading her to realize the necessity of saying the things she was ashamed of so that others could not have "power over" her (Wachtel 65, 64). In Kincaid's repudiation of her powerless identity as Elaine Potter Richardson and her creation of her writing identity as the powerful daughter-writer, "Jamaica Kincaid," she attempts not only to reclaim but also to

take power and authority over her past as she talks and writes back to the contemptuous internalized mother,¹⁰ the mother who wrote her life and the mother with whom she carries on incessant conversations in her head in her adult life. But the internalized voice of the mother is also part of Kincaid's writing voice and is heard in the angry, contemptuous voice of the daughter-writer who publicly exposes shameful family secrets, a process I examine in detail in the following chapters.

Writing Memory, Writing to Survive

Individuals are “motivated or driven, in order to gain a sense of a meaningful life and manage threatening conscious and unconscious affects and beliefs, to create or interpret external experiences in ways that resonate with internal experiences, preoccupations, fantasies, and senses of self-other relationships,” as Chodorow observes (*Power* 14). A central organizing theme in Kincaid's writings, as she herself has often remarked, is the relationship between the powerful mother and the powerless daughter. Even though Kincaid eventually comes to attach a political meaning to this type of power-imbalanced relationship, seeing it as analogous to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, she remains haunted—indeed, tormented—by her memories of her powerful and, to Kincaid, powerfully destructive mother. In part I, “In the Shadow of the Mother,” I analyze the mother-daughter relationship in *At the Bottom of the River*, *Annie John*, and *Lucy*, using shame and trauma theory to help explain the “enigmatic trauma” at the heart of the daughter's conflicted relationship with the mother in these works.

If in *At the Bottom of the River* Kincaid uses a densely allusive style to partially obscure her meaning as she evokes the “bookish” idealized world of literature she came to love while growing up in Antigua, in *Annie John* she recounts, in a simple way, the story of her girlhood in Antigua under the control of her mother, Annie Drew. Although Kincaid omits scenes of physical beatings in *Annie John*, the secret of Kincaid's abuse does find veiled expression in the narrative, which reveals the devastating impact of trauma and shame on Kincaid's fictional projection, as I show in my discussion of *Annie John*. Like the abused child described by trauma specialists, Annie sees her mother as a powerful woman who uses her power in an arbitrary way, and she feels deeply vulnerable and helpless in her relationship with her mother, whom she rigidly and persistently splits into loving and punishing identities; she becomes obsessed with death and indeed associates her mother with death; she has an intense need for protection and care coupled with a

fear of abandonment and exploitation; she reenacts with others dramas of intense and fierce idealization followed by denigration; and she engages in revealing rituals of intimacy with others in which she acts out a classic pattern of abuse, one that combines loving and punishing behaviors. And like the deeply and chronically shamed child who is subjected repeatedly to maternal contempt, the shame-vulnerable Annie succumbs to the disorganizing experiences of shame-rage and shame-depression, and she attempts to protect herself from her mother's annihilating contempt both through avoidant behaviors and through expressions of anger, shamelessness, and the active humiliation of her mother-humiliator in an attack-other shame script.

In *Annie John* and in the continuation of Annie's story in *Lucy*, Kincaid reveals that there is a "relationship between social formations and structures of feeling" (Fox 14) as she shows that the feeling of shame and the experience of being shamed are crucial to the development not only of a colonized black identity but also a female sexual identity. If Annie, when accused by her mother of behaving like a "slut," returns maternal contempt with daughterly countercontempt, she also subsequently succumbs to feelings of profound shame-depression. In a similar way Lucy, even as she employs a classic defense against shame—shamelessness—as she flaunts her "bad" identity as a "slut" and as Lucy/Lucifer, remains a prisoner of her crippling past, existing like Annie in the shadow of her powerful, and powerfully injuring, mother even though she is physically removed from her. Behind Lucy's defiant anger and bitterness lies a deep sense of woundedness. Attempting to forge a new identity as a writer, Lucy finds the act of writing a painful process of recovering the past and confronting her abiding feelings of vulnerability and shame.

The angry, contemptuous voice that pervades *Lucy*—a voice that Kincaid identifies as her mother's voice—is also the voice Kincaid adopts to great effect in her openly political writings, as I show in part II, "A Very Personal Politics." In my discussion of *A Small Place* and "On Seeing England for the First Time," I show how Kincaid uses a classic shame-reversing attack-other script as she denounces not only the British and American tourists in Antigua but also the English people she encounters during a trip to England. Even though Kincaid claims that she identifies with the powerless Antiguans in *A Small Place*, she clearly speaks from the position of authorial power as she shames the corrupt black-ruled government in Antigua and the small-minded Antiguans. That Kincaid not only has an intense love/hate relationship with England but also is overcome with feelings of loss, betrayal, resentment, profound shame, and anger when she returns to Antigua—feelings

attached to the mother-daughter relationship in her work—call attention to the highly personal nature of her politics.

Just as there is something highly personal about Kincaid's politics, so her "Family Portraits," as I show in part III, are not only self-revealing, but they are also, in part, self-portraits. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, which derives from Kincaid's observation that her mother should not have had children, Kincaid examines her matrilineal roots even as she talks and writes back to her mother. In her fictional memoir of her mother, which includes family stories passed down by her mother, Kincaid retells the story of her own girlhood and adult relationship with her angry and contemptuous mother, and she also examines aspects of her own identity in the figure of the mother character. Just as Kincaid writes about herself in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, so in *My Brother*, her memoir of her youngest brother, Devon, who died of AIDS in Antigua, she also tells the story of the failed life she might have led had she remained in Antigua under the influence of a mother hated not only by her daughter but also, as we learn in *My Brother*, by her three sons. And in her fictional memoir of her biological father, *Mr. Potter*, Kincaid, as she imagines and writes about the life of her absentee father, also deals with the missing and yet everpresent part of her repudiated identity, "Elaine Cynthia Potter," the daughter-narrator in *Mr. Potter*. As she tells the shameful story of her illegitimacy—like her biological father, she has a "line drawn through" her—she settles old scores against her biological father. But she also uses her writing not only to give narrative—indeed novelistic—dimension to her absent father who is authored, and authorized, by the daughter-writer but also to give a kind of artistic legitimacy to Elaine Cynthia Potter, the shamed girl with the line drawn through her.

Despite the sense of open emotional revelation in Kincaid's works, there also is a sense of narrative withholding and omission as readers are forced to make emotional sense out of the pervasive depression, anger, and shame of Kincaid's characters. An author whose work shows a remarkable psychological complexity even as it describes the cultural forces that impinge on the self, Kincaid deliberately unsettles readers as she demonstrates the "power of feelings" in her writings. As she dwells on painful family relations, Kincaid sheds light on the complex ways that fantasies about the family—and especially the mother—permeate the construction of her autobiographical self and writer's identity. In the course of showing how Kincaid provides literary renderings of the complex process of creating personal and cultural meaning, my aim is also to investigate the reparative function of Kincaid's writings as I trace her search for a livable—and literary—life and her transformation

of inherited feelings of shame into pride as she wins the praise of an admiring critical establishment and an evergrowing reading public. While Kincaid does not claim that she can ever forget the past or heal her shame, she does, in her domestic and gardener's life, which to her are part of her writer's life, find moments of solace, as I show in the conclusion. "I am writing for solace," Kincaid states, explaining that she writes "to make sense of" what has happened to her (Holmstrom). Even though she remains haunted by the past, she does find solace in her writing, and as the self-authored and authoritative Jamaica Kincaid, she is able to fashion for herself a literary life and writer's identity that she finds livable.