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Herndon: Returns to Native Lands, Reclaiming the Other's Language

Returns to Native Lands, Reclaiming the Other's Language: Kincaid and Danticat¹

By Gerise Herndon

When asked, "Who do you belong to?" Amabelle Désir, narrator of Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, points to her chest and says, "Myself." Likewise, the speaker in Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* says she understands why someone "would want to feel as if he or she belongs to nothing, comes from no one, just fell out of the sky, whole" (12-13).

The feeling of belonging to nothing or no one but oneself is not unusual in diaspora writing. Literature of migration often includes not just the departure from home, but Aimé Césaire's mythic evocation of the subsequent return to what once was home. The "native" (and I use the word in the context of the English translation of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natale* or *Return to My Native Land*) does not think of herself as raced, as Other, until in exile in the metropolis. Once abroad, race is forced upon her; she is now a stranger, a foreigner, or a black. On returning home, the native undergoes a re-migration, not home, but to a state of liminality. She is now in fact homeless, in between, neither here nor there, for you can't go home again. The speaker in Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* moves into this liminal state after having acquired the relative wealth, privilege and comfort of the adopted homeland. The speaker in Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* finds herself in a liminal state because those who made up her home, her people of the Dominican Republic, no longer exist. The authors Kincaid and Danticat exist on national and literary borders, but how comfortably? Danticat contends that "a border is a veil not many people can wear" (*The Farming of Bones* 1998: 264). This in-between state is a reality of life for many women around the globe. As boundaries between nations and ethnic groups blur, and as movement across borders increases, more women, especially poor women of color, find themselves not quite at home. How do Kincaid and Danticat express and cope with this sense of dislocation and rootlessness?

Though not at home in the country of migration, the country of origin is no longer the site of memory, nostalgia, or homesickness. Those who stayed home notice the difference in speech and may even ridicule the way the returned migrant now talks. In the case of Kincaid and Danticat's writing, the migrant either does not want to return to the poverty and lack of resources now visible in the former homeland or cannot be at home without those she has chosen to love. Of course, many Caribbean migrants want to return, but cannot without the economic means; thus home becomes a remembered and then an imagined community. Other migrants regularly depart and return home, then depart again for the mainland in order to perform seasonal labor. Memory thus becomes more fixed, as each return either confirms or alters what was remembered—or each return is shaped to conform to memory.

Return involves a recasting of identity, a double exile: the immigrant becomes either the prodigal daughter who brings foreign knowledge or values into the native land or "an imagination out of mind" (Clark 45) who lives only in memory and cannot belong to the present moment. Kincaid and Danticat interrogate migration, identity, exile, language, as well as the complications of writing about home from afar and writing about trauma of others. Trauma may be the invisible AIDS virus attacking the body or a dictator's soldiers attacking the bodies. The displaced body is under attack from powerful forces and is no match for either, in Kincaid's case,

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multinational capital combined with the devaluing of black bodies that controls the price of AIDS drugs worldwide or, in Danticat's case, the repressive state apparatus of Trujillo's military. Both *My Brother* and *The Farming of Bones* are narratives of homecoming that also function as narratives of trauma and discipline of the body. Home no longer exists, nor does family or community. The immigrant, coming from no one, belonging to no one but herself, appears forever displaced once departed. Language and misery have left their imprints on the body of the migrant, but the optimism of the will of which Antonio Gramsci speaks can be found in memory and the need to testify; thus vibrant works of literature are born, as personal and political history become translated into art.

Self, Location and Landscape

Stuart Hall alludes to the multiplicities of locations and identities of diaspora artists by asserting that "There's no place to speak from except from somewhere. But at the same time as somebody has to speak from somewhere, they will not be confined to that person or that place" (cited in Ferguson 1). One's native land is no longer necessarily home once the writer has left. Salman Rushdie has argued that literature has little or nothing to do with the writer's home address or, one might argue, even one's current address.

The editors of *The Whistling Bird*, *Women Writers of the Caribbean* have selected only writers born in the Caribbean, yet one can also see other anthology editors wanting to claim, perhaps colonize, writers like Kincaid and Danticat for U.S. literature or African American literature. So where is the writer's home within the canon? And are they more at home in one category than other-- any more or less than in one country or another? Elaine Campbell and Pierrette Fricky have highlighted Caribbean women writers' ambivalence about "home"--while greater objectivity may be achieved in exile, the editors argue that exile leads to the disquieting realization about the necessity to return in order to demonstrate a commitment to one's people (Campbell and Fricky 6). Such an assertion is debatable, especially given Kincaid's and Danticat's liminality both as citizens, as residents and as voices that emerge in their fiction and memoir. Kincaid says that home is "the home I have now made for myself, the home of my adult life" (1997: 98).

Kincaid's memoir tells of her brother Devon Drew who died of AIDS in 1996 at the age of 33. While writing the story of his life and death, she also rewrites the story of her ambivalent relationship with her mother and her former island home as well as her chosen home and family in New England. Concurrently she alludes to the unavailability of AIDS drugs in Antigua and the necessity of having connections with a doctor in the privileged north in order to treat this disease.² Also dealing with trauma and transnational inequality, though in a very different context, Danticat's novel retells the story of the massacre of hundreds of Haitians in 1937 by Dominican Republic president Rafael Trujillo. In order to distinguish Haitians from Dominicans, those whose nationality is in question must say parsley or "perejil." The identifying sound is the trilling of the "r" and the pronunciation of the "j." Trujillo attempted to control the population of Haitian workers, sounding not unlike the nativists in the U.S. today who respond similarly to immigrants arriving in this country to do the labor that current citizens refuse:

² (One might note John Le Carré's comment that the pharmaceutical corporations are multi-billion dollar companies that "view the exploitation of the world's sick and dying as a sacred duty to their shareholders" [13]. We can see by their behavior in South Africa that recent lawsuits forced "big pharma" to relinquish profits, if not for people, then for international image.)

Walk too far in either direction and people speak a different language . . . does anyone like to have their house flooded with visitors, to the point that the visitors replace their children? How can a country be ours if we are in smaller numbers than the outsiders? Those of us who love our country are taking measures to keep it our own . . . We Dominicans must have our separate traditions and our own ways of living. If not, in less than three generations, we will all be Haitians. In three generations, our children and grandchildren will have their blood completely tainted, unless we defend ourselves now, you understand? (Danticat 1998: 260-1)

Nativism is one of many obstacles faced by migrants. Indeed, literary returns to native lands are now complicated by the recognition of the hybridity or creolization in the native place. What's more, third nations or imagined communities are reinvented in the place of migration. Despite expressions like that attributed to Trujillo, the immigrant stranger "refuses to participate in the state's construction of an imagined community, its efforts to eliminate strangers and redefine them as friends through nationalistic assimilation policies" (Featherstone 9). While the new homeland would like to appropriate the migrant for its own nationalistic purposes, the writer in exile resists such re-colonization. The state of exile, according to Edward Said, is that of "unhealable rift, a discontinuous state of being [. . .] with very little to possess, you hold on to what you have with aggressive defensiveness. What you achieve in exile is precisely what you have no wish to share, and it is in the drawing of lines around you [. . .] that the least attractive elements of being an exile emerge" (Said 51). Such reflections may lend insight into the narrator of *My Brother*, who expresses astonishment when advised to care for her brother at home in the U.S. She balks at "taking this strange, careless person into the hard-earned order of my life" because she, while fabulously wealthy compared to her brother, in her own context is not rich (Kincaid 1997: 48-9).

Kincaid retains her Antiguan citizenship. Yet while making their homes in the U.S., Kincaid and Danticat continue to recreate their native lands in literary visions. Danticat tells an interviewer: "When I first came [to America] . . . I felt like I was in limbo, between languages, between countries" (*Time* 72). George Lamming asserts that "This may be the dilemma of the West Indian writer abroad: that he hungers for nourishment from a soil which he (as an ordinary citizen) could not at present endure. [. . .] there is always an acre of ground in the New World which keeps growing echoes in my head" (Lamming 17). One's native land, however, is not merely geography or latitude. One's home is also the language in which he thinks and interacts with the world. The editors of *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* remind us that "place and displacement are crucial feature of post-colonial discourse. By place we do not mean landscape. Indeed the idea of 'landscape' is predicated upon a particular philosophic tradition in which the objective world is separated from the viewing subject. Rather 'place' in postcolonial societies is a complex intersection of language, history and environment. . . . in constant flux, a discourse in process" (Ashcroft et al 391).

Liminality

This flux is now redefining national and ethnic boundaries in ways that cartography can't contain. According to Arjun Appadurai, global landscapes are becoming "imagined worlds" made up of ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes, an ethnoscape

being “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers” (297). Borders between insiders and outsiders break down or criss-cross and intertwine. Before the publication of *My Brother*, in 1994, Moira Ferguson argued that Kincaid’s “own departure from Antigua and her role as external observer who is simultaneously an insider are never problematized” (99). Now, however, we can safely say that Kincaid has foregrounded her doubleness in *My Brother*. Writing about a passion fruit tree that her mother inadvertently destroyed while trying to rid it of a colony of parasitic insects (using insecticides imported from North America yet too toxic to be sold in North America), Kincaid writes, I would argue, about herself, about her dying brother, and about neocolonialism in Antigua when she says: “the stunted passion fruit [. . .] was that, stunted, unable to go on, unable to go back, it could not yet die” (127). Throughout the memoir, parasitic insects are compared to the AIDS virus. When the narrator was a young girl babysitting her brother, a colony of ants covered his infant body while his sister was busy reading a book. Those ants, trying to kill him from the outside, remind her of the virus now trying to kill him from the inside. Kincaid’s observation of her brother’s illness reminds her of the passion fruit tree. Debilitated by AIDS, he is not yet dead but not fully alive either.

Likewise, Kincaid is not cleanly separated from her childhood home, yet not quite at home in the US either. She’s painfully aware of how her relatively newfound privilege puts her at odds with her family and former home, but is not willing to give up her comfort. She can’t go back to Antigua to live, but can’t feel that she is fully part of her chosen home in Vermont. She too resides on the border between the “prosperous north” and the once beautiful island “made vulgar and ugly by the incredibly stupid people who had become attracted to it” (101). Trinh T Minh-ha too investigates this would-be dichotomy of the writer in exile:

The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa) She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Like the outsider, she steps back and records what never occurs to her the insider as being worth or in need of recording. But unlike the outsider, she also resorts to non-explicative, nontotalizing strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure. [. . .] She refuses to reduce herself to an Other and her reflections to a mere outsider’s objective reasoning or an insider’s subjective feeling [. . .] she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. (218)

The indeterminacy of the anticolonial woman writer in exile is further analyzed by Vève A. Clark. Clark’s use of the idea of Marasa consciousness builds upon W. E. B. DuBois’s notion of double consciousness. Clark, however, grounds the dual identity of the African diaspora of the Americas squarely in the midst of the history of the Caribbean region. “Marasa consciousness,” Clark argues, is necessary to developing diaspora literacy. The self-reflexivity that Kincaid demonstrates and that Danticat illustrates in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* can be understood as Marasa, the ritual twins in Haitian vodoun ceremonies of initiation. The Marasa consciousness holds out new possibilities beyond the either-or of Northern binary oppositions. The writer in exile goes beyond being either an insider or an outsider. The writer performs like the doubling Haitian twins. When in one reality or geographical context, the writer can, through the exercise of memory and language, gain access to another reality, and thus another consciousness and another identity. Flexibility with language allows the writer to transgress boundaries, but the inability to code-switch may leave the native trapped. Writing about home in the Other’s language puts the

exiled writer beyond national boundaries and thus enables the reader to understand the statelessness of the diaspora.

In opposition to this state of flux, many Caribbean societies, Clark argues, have manifested stability by repressive means: "domination by a minority (whether old planters, békés, or military dictators)" (45). Language, Clark elaborates, is also part of this double consciousness: textual displacement can be represented by the violence done by hurricanes, coups d'état, or less violent disruptions such as departures from home:

[. . .] Seasonal labor, exile an emigration or double consciousness due to color, class and educational differences experienced by one individual. Degrees of bilingual or diglossic dissonance in the Caribbean are at the very root of the problem requiring transformation. In neo-colonial societies, the standard of literacy and the official language of its articulation is Other--French, English, Spanish rather than Creole or a native language. Literacy is therefore reckoned on an evolutionary chain from rural to urban or urban to hexagonal metropole. The toll on the individual's double consciousness at the level of language is deeply unsettling because out of place, signifying upon return to the regional landscape (if return does occur) an imagination out of mind (45).

Consider Marasa consciousness while reading of Trujillo's military torturing and executing Haitians who cannot say parsley other than in Creole or with a Haitian accent: "In most of our mouths [the word *perejil*] would be tinged with or even translated into *Kréyol*" (183). Creole thus becomes a not only an identifying liability, but a death sentence. Less drastic are the consequences of the difference between Kincaid's English and her brother's: "I no longer spoke the kind of English he spoke, and when I said anything to him, he would look at me and sometimes laugh at me outright. You talk funny . . . [my mother, on the other hand,] makes an effort to speak to me in the kind of English that I now immediately understand" (8-9). Kincaid's brother ridicules her way of speaking, yet he too can code-switch into the colonizer's language when necessary. When saying goodbye, her brother speaks what she calls "conventional English, not in the English that instantly reveals the humiliation of history, the humiliations of the past not remade into art" (108). In *A Small Place*, she alludes to Caliban with her lament that she has no tongue: "Isn't it odd," she asks, "that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?" (31).

Neither language nor translation nor transcription can be trusted. As Amabelle is warned in *The Farming of Bones*, those taking your testimony will distort and erase your history: "You tell the story, and then it's retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs, and not yours" (246). Historiography and the language of the colonizer seem to erase or forgive the crimes of slavery and imperialism--or at least make them appealing. Kincaid's brother enjoyed reading the history of the West Indies, but he thought, Kincaid writes, "that this history of ours was primarily an account of theft and murder . . . but presented in such a way as to make the account seem inevitable an even fun . . . he liked the people who won, even though he was among the things that had been won" (95). Thus, Kincaid writes in *A Small Place*, people like me are shy about being capitalists because we were once capital "like bales of cotton and sacks of sugar" (37).

Language: Discipline and Play

Economics, historiography and linguistics clearly favor the conquerors. Apropos, Peter Hulme argues that “the discourse of English colonialism arises fundamentally on the career of two key terms-- ‘hurricanes’ and ‘Caribbees’--that mark relatively new lexemes in the English language. ‘Not found before the middle of the 16th century,’ these terms do not settle into ‘their present forms before the latter half of the 17th’ Both originate in Native American languages and ‘both were quickly adopted into all the major European languages’.” Roberto Retamar delineates the history of related terms “Caribbean/Caribbees/Caliban”: “Retamar tracks ‘Caribbean’ from its eponymous Carib community of Native Americans, who we are told, valiantly resisted European incursion in the sixteenth century, to its philosophical and terministic transformation, by way of ‘Caliban,’” (cited in Spillers 34). Amerindien languages were thus twisted and “carib” became associated with “cannibal.”

As becomes increasingly evident, “The English Language is a tool of power, domination and elitist identity, and of communication across continents” (Kachru 291). While this is less true of French and Spanish, context is all, and in *The Farming of Bones*, Spanish pronounced as the powerful pronounce it serves the same function. But both Kincaid and Danticat have shown that this tool of the dominant and the elite can be used as witness, testimony, and subversion, telling the story of hidden history in Danticat’s rendering of Trujillo’s massacre of the Haitians and Kincaid’s allusion to international pharmaceutical companies’ exploitation of AIDS patients. While dominant languages have been used to control the powerless, Kincaid uses English to expose domination and begin to dismantle it. Kincaid’s memoir, for example, informs readers that AZT is not available in Antigua, while Danticat’s novel gives witness to the nearly 20,000 Haitians who may were killed by Trujillo’s violence. Kincaid and Danticat have, in extremely different fashion, resisted the discipline of the colonized body by their testament to those who had no opportunity to write their own histories. Caribbean literature is subversive in its power, argues Michael Dash:

Caribbean writing exploits precisely this [postmodern] terrain of the unspeakable. In the radical questioning of the need to totalise, systematise and control, the Caribbean writer is a natural deconstructionist who praises latency, formlessness and plurality. In order to survive, the Caribbean sensibility must spontaneously decipher and interpret the sign systems of those who wish to dominate and control. [. . .] It is not simply a matter of deploying Caliban’s militant idiom against Prospero’s signifying authority. It is, perhaps, a matter of demonstrating the opacity and inexhaustibility of a world that resists systematic construction or transcendent meaning. (335)

Inscribing trauma and uncertainty, Kincaid’s style refuses aesthetic or institutional regulation. Both she and Danticat use the first person narrative to resist any sort of normative closure or nationalistic generalizations.

The Body as Map

While writing before the movement known as postmodernism, Aimé Césaire demonstrates such plurality in his *Cahier d’un retour au pays natale* (*Return to My Native Land*). He refers to his own body and blood as his intimate world map, his “original geography, also, the world map made for my personal use, not tinted by the arbitrary colors of savants, but by the

geography of my spreading blood, I accept" (55-6).³ Danticat evokes such a map when the narrator Amabelle in to her flesh as *The Farming of Bones* refers no longer a tempting spectacle, but "a map of scars and bruises, a marred testament" (226-7). But the testimony of flesh alone is easily lost. Flesh, asserts a Haitian who had been left for dead in a pit of cadavers, "is no different, the flesh, than fruit or anything that rots. It's not magic, not holy. It can shrink, burn, and like amber it can melt in fire. It is nothing. We are nothing" (213). How does this human being linguistically reduce himself to nothingness? His body has already been disciplined by the dictator's soldiers. Foucault defines the disciplines as the methods that "made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility" (137). Foucault charts the ascension in the 17th century of the factories, schools, hospitals and military barracks; such institutions brought the human body into a new machinery of power. The Dominican military machine has attempted to subdue all Haitians, but Gramsci's optimism of the will prevails.

While Kincaid demonstrates Gramsci's pessimism of the intellect, the fact that her memoir exists gives hope to the voiceless. Kincaid's brother cannot bring himself to say the word "AIDS." Though he calls the virus that is killing him "the chupidness," Kincaid needs to say out loud, to make it real to herself, "My brother is sick and dying of AIDS." Kincaid writes in order to dispel the social stigma of the disease. She then compares the illness to colonialism. AIDS becomes personified in the same way as the English colonizers, as parasitic insects killing a passionfruit tree, like the tiny red ants killing her brother not from the outside, but from the inside. She then uses the simile of AIDS as deer eating her evergreens. AIDS becomes like a hungry animal, eating her brother's flesh, his skin missing, "eaten away, not from a large bite taken at once but nibbled, as if by an animal in a state of high enjoyment" (37). Then once the flesh begins rotting, Kincaid compares the body to a roof beam, a piece of wood, "as if the substance of the wood was being slowly drawn out of it" (113), and then a carving, her brother's face now like a mask. His liminal state exudes the smell of rotten flesh. AIDS has written its horror story on the body of Devon just as the English wrote their history of theft and murder on the island of Antigua. Antigua's substance is being leached away by neocolonialism and tourism.

Memory and Mourning

And how do Kincaid and Danticat interpret the pain of the colonized island/body? By keeping alive communal and personal histories of trauma, by testifying to their readers of the body eaten away by machete blows or by the AIDS virus. The past, Danticat writes, is "more like flesh than air" (281); it is material and solid, and memory returns even when unbidden. "The dead haunt the living. The past; it 're-bites' [*il remord*] (it is a secret and repeated biting). History is 'cannibalistic,' and memory becomes the closed arena of conflict between two contradictory operations: forgetting, which is not something passive, a loss, but an action directed against the past; and the mnemonic trace, the return of what was forgotten" (Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies; The Discourse of the Other*, cited in Spillers 62). Writers like Kincaid and Danticat work against the historical amnesia so common in the U.S., the active forgetting of a shameful past. Memory, which Kincaid's mother loathes because it indicts her actions, is the fuel for Kincaid's art. While Kincaid remembers with bitterness her mother burning her books

³ "mon originale géographie aussi; la carte du monde faite à mon usage, non pas teinte aux arbitraires couleurs des savants, mais à la géométrie de mon sang répandu, j'accepte" (55-6). All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

with the oil that lit the lamp she read by as a girl, she knows that she has to keep writing until she recreates those lost books, and to keep writing them for the perfect reader, her brother Devon, even though he is no longer alive.

Writing of Devon and for Devon is Kincaid's way of attempting to understand his death. Memory is like flesh, and Jacques Derrida argues that mourning is inseparable from the physical body:

Upon the death of the other we are given to memory, and thus to interiorization . . . since Freud this is how the 'normal' 'work of mourning' is often described. It entails a movement in which an interiorizing idealization takes in itself or upon itself the body and voice of the other, the other's visage and person, ideally and quasi-literally devouring them. This mimetic interiorization is not fictive; it is the origin of fiction, of apocryphal figuration. It takes place in a body. (Derrida 62)

Derrida would unravel the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, as Kincaid and Danticat both do in their work, insisting that memories are held in the flesh. Memories live in the dreams of Danticat's narrators, and though painful, Amabelle asserts that remembering can make you strong (1994: 73). At the end of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie Caco tells us she comes "from a place from which you carry the past like the hair on your head" (1998: 234). Memory and trauma live in the physical self, inseparable from the present moment. Remembering in writing, however, fulfills the desire for testimony, so that trauma doesn't isolate the individual self.

For Kincaid, the condition of exile is a necessary pre-condition to the creation of art, and possibly the invention of the self. Of her brother and herself, she writes: "His homosexuality is one thing, and my becoming a writer is another altogether, but this truth is not lost on me: I could not have become a writer while living among the people I knew best, I could not have become myself while living among the people I knew best" (162). What's more, art is a pre-condition of survival: "I started to write about my own life and I came to see that this act saved my life. When I heard about my brother's illness and his dying, I knew instinctively, that to understand it, or to make an attempt at understanding his dying, and not to die with him, I would write about it" (196). Memories are imprinted onto the flesh when trauma such as AIDS and war write their versions of power on the body. The author then must rewrite the master narrative, reassigning power to her version, and revising the scarred body into a map of powerful experience. Writing is a way to salvage meaning from confusion, as Danticat tells an interviewer: "That was the only way I knew to try to better understand what was happening in my life--by reading and writing" (Time78). Survival is contingent upon narrative. What is written and spoken testifies to those who did not survive; telling their stories nourishes the writer and imparts meaning. The narrator of *The Farming of Bones* says, "The slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on" (266). And hence the return to the native land is an opportunity to testify and resist, to create powerful works of art and reclaim the master's language as one's own. Thus Kincaid and Danticat have found their homes in the canon of Caribbean literature.

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