Making a Statement with Form: Jamaica Kincaid’s Modernist Style and the Desire for Self-Definition in *At the Bottom of the River*

Mónica Fernández Jiménez

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Jamaica Kincaid’s rejection of labels and a-political position (“Jamaica Kincaid” 401; Plath 26; “Jamaica Kincaid with Gerhard Dilger” 82; “Interview” by Perry 495–99) align with contemporary theories on the exhaustion of the postcolonial such as David Scott’s, who instead advocates for the expression “after postcoloniality” (10). Although these theories are entrenched in the failure of the socialist projects of the Bandung Era (Penier 25), this position is indebted to Gayatri Spivak and the Subaltern Studies group, who problematise the existence of a postcolonial voice (Madsen 9). Particularly, Spivak focuses on what she calls “the sexed [subaltern] subject” (99), stating that women are always necessarily silenced because their particular subjective experiences are embedded in male-dominated narratives—whether those produced by an anti-colonial male elite or by the colonialists themselves (Spivak 103–04). Furthermore, she stresses the inability of the postcolonial Western critic to account for these issues, continuing to make the Western structure its subject (66, 89) while “constructing a homogeneous Other” (84). Similarly, Kincaid has rejected any connection to black or postcolonial identities—“I’m not African, I’m not anything . . . This is dead. I’m now” (“Jamaica Kincaid with Gerhard Dilger” 90)—while at the same time claiming that she is interested in the model of “the powerful and the powerless” (“Interview” by Vorda 12; “Jamaica Kincaid with Gerhard Dilger” 86). With a series of contradictory tropes—such as the mother being both victim and perpetrator—Kincaid also
warns, in a Spivakian fashion, against the homogenisation of individual, particular experiences.

Through the analysis of Kincaid’s first major publication, the short story collection *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), this essay aims to discuss Kincaid’s approach to subjectivity, with an emphasis on the intersections of genre and style present in the stories. Kincaid’s style and poetics reflect her ideological position with regards to the idea of postcolonial writing, denoting her liminal status as a Caribbean, trans-American, diasporic, female author. Discussing Kincaid’s approach to genre in this first publication, in particular the intersection between (auto)biography and the short story, makes it possible to expose the importance of literary experimentation for underrepresented subjects and groups. Thus, Kincaid breaks with the expectations traditionally associated with short stories and autobiographies to express a worldview different from the mainstream, hegemonic one. Because *At the Bottom of the River* is the publication that most clearly evokes narratological and formal characteristics pertaining to modernism, it will be useful to analyse the often discussed association of Kincaid’s works with modernism and postmodernism. The modernist features of the stories in this collection—autonomy, fragmentation and discontinuity, among others—have, as this contribution hopes to show, the purpose of achieving self-definition for the subaltern Caribbean female subject and of rejecting epistemological dispossession.

**Jamaica Kincaid and Genre(s)**

Kincaid’s interest in biographical and autobiographical genres is one of the most persistent features in her work, shedding light on her approach to genres in general, their definitions and boundaries, these being concepts which Kincaid destabilises, deconstructs and plays with. Recalling Edgar Doctorow’s famous postmodern *dictum* that “there is no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction; there’s only narrative” (163), Kincaid deconstructs the notion of autobiography: “When asked how much of her work is autobiographical, Jamaica Kincaid’s stock response is ‘All of it, even the punctuation’” (Donnell 123). Intersecting the concept of biographical truth with a metafictional idea such as the inclusion of punctuation as a part of one’s life, Kincaid destabilises the very notion of non-fictional genres. She thus seems to align with postmodernist ideas which highlight the fictional nature of all the written texts, no matter if they are historical, biographical or poetic. As Linda Hutcheon has explained, relying on Hayden White’s particular notion of historiography, this is because “they are [all] linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either
in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality” (105). Likewise, Kincaid aims at blurring the boundary between fiction and non-fiction and, by extension, between art and life.

As Jacques Derrida observes, literary genres have been often considered a natural category when they are precisely the opposite (60), since the notion of genre cannot escape a historicist concept of literature and theory (62). Genre theorists have noted (Braziel 4; Derrida 61) that the words “genre” and “genealogy” share the same linguistic root: the Greek genos which, apart from meaning “sort” or “kind,” also denotes a tribe or a race (Braziel 4). Etymology thus reinforces the idea that the understanding of genres is likely to vary across ethnic groups. Further on, it seems no coincidence that biographical genres are especially prone to being deconstructed in the exploration of feminist and post-colonial consciousnesses given that, as Liz Stanley puts it, “the notion of auto/biography involves the insistence that accounts of other lives influence how we see and understand our own” (i). Kincaid’s use of autobiography denotes a desire for understanding her particular situation as a woman writer from Antigua—where she locates most of her works. As such, Kincaid’s use of the genre does not adjust to conventional autobiography, the often lengthy genre canonised during the Western Enlightenment and associated with the idea of the “sovereign self” (Smith and Watson 3-4). In light of this, Braziel concludes that Jamaica Kincaid’s experimentation with genre has political implications, revealing “crises of the subject/subjective and the national/diasporic as sites of belonging” (9). Braziel uses the term alterbiography to define the deconstruction of autobiography for the sake of highlighting aspects of difference (8), thereby suggesting that what is understood as natural is in fact only hegemonic in terms of representation. All in all, she concludes that (auto)biography is a “gendered, sexuated, and above all racialized” genre (8), so that it is no coincidence if the writing of non-hegemonic lives entails formal experimentation.

Whereas the deployment of biographical genres has been consistent in Kincaid, she has combined it with the short story form only on two occasions: this first collection and the 1992 story “Biography of a Dress” which was published in the journal Grand Street. Considering definitions and theories of the short story, one might consider it an odd genre for articulating an autobiography which, in the traditional sense, would often require resorting to a time span adapted to its protagonists’ self-development. However, defining the short story is difficult, as many have affirmed relying on Brander Matthews’ claim that such a genre is much more than length (Sacido-Romero 2). Early definitions by important practitioners like Matthews himself, Edgar Allan Poe and Elizabeth Bowen mention other formal features as integral to the
short story, such as unity, organic structure and ellipsis or cutting, all leading to the “unity of effect” that Poe described (Sacido-Romero 2). Paul March-Russell and other contemporary critics understand the genre as non-definable and therefore suitable for experimentation (247). These definitions do not often match the purposes of life writing which tends to avoid cutting and condensation in order to transmit “how one has become who he or she is at a given moment in an ongoing process of reflection” (Smith and Watson 1). This idea of development and knowledge production does not tally with the claim that “the genuine short story severely restricts its scope for plot or action” and is more concerned with “reiteration through pattern” (Head 5).

Such experimentation with aspects as varied as genre, style and narrative technique has derived into a discussion of the place Kincaid’s work should occupy within the literary movements of modernism and postmodernism. Interestingly, Kincaid has also participated in this discussion—just as she fuelled the debate over biographical writing—causing confusion and disagreement among critics. The publishing dates (from 1983 to the present) of Kincaid’s oeuvre would chronologically correspond with postmodernism, but many disagree with traditional periodisation, alleging that this is the by-product of universalising the Anglo-American experience (Stanford Friedman 426-27). Therefore, as happens with regards to genre, when trying to categorise a writer like Kincaid into particular literary schools, one should also take into consideration the culturally-specific—white and Western—paradigms which most often such schools partake of.

**MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM IN JAMAICA KINCAID’S WORKS**

Despite the engagement with postmodern deconstruction analysed above, Kincaid’s explorations are exercised with an extremely fragmented and allegorical style which resembles that used in the experimental texts of literary modernism. This is well exemplified by the fourth story in the collection under scrutiny here, “Wingless.” Readers are witnesses to the narrator’s stream of consciousness, triggered by her sensorial environment. In the very first sentences, the narrator describes, in the present tense, what the children around her are doing to later change the topic and ask: “Must Dulcie really cry after thirteen of her play chums have sat on her?” (21). This question leads the trail of thought to concerns about sexual identity and expectations imposed on young women: “There, Dulcie, there. I myself have been kissed by many rude boys with small, damp lips, on their way to boys’ drill. I myself have humped girls under my mother’s house” (21).
Such narrative technique challenges the reader with many gaps to be filled. The elliptical information can be inferred from other narratives in the same collection as well as from other subsequent works by the author, as happens in the case of this obscure phrase from “Wingless”: “after I have made my great discovery I will be sent home in chains” (21). The character’s assertion intertextually engages with Kincaid’s Annie John, showcasing the narrator’s fascination with the story of “the usually quarrelsome Columbus” being sent back to Spain in chains after “a disagreement” with another colonial officer and the monarchy: “How I loved this picture—to see the usually triumphant Columbus, brought so low, seated at the bottom of a boat just watching things go by” (Annie John 77-78). With this technique, linear storytelling and chronological time are modernistically broken. A logical cause-and-effect relationship is replaced by intertextuality and by juxtapositions of reflections about the inward—“Am I horrid? And if so, will I always be that way?” (River 23)—and the outward—“The schoolhouse is yellow and stands among big green-leaved trees” (22).

In an interview with Selwyn Cudjoe, Kincaid affirms that “[she] was always being told [she] should be something, and then [her] whole upbringing was something [she] was not: it was English” (“Jamaica Kincaid” 400). The literary ruptures that emerge when the (auto)biographical self is a subject who has been for centuries described by others—that is, epistemologically dispossessed—are worth considering. Discontinuity in form matches the discontinuities created by colonialism, colonial education and the articulation of the colonial Other. The formal similarities with modernist texts can be associated with the fragmentation in consciousness that derives both from the crisis of Modernity and the (post)colonial experience.

In this same interview, Kincaid also acknowledges the influence of modernism in her writing (403), though that does not immediately turn her into a modernist author. Susan Stanford Friedman, and other critics like Simon Gikandi, have defended the right to a Caribbean modernism, in terms of “the expressive dimension of modernity” (Friedman 432), abandoning the consideration of aesthetic features, which are the ones with which Kincaid identifies. Other commentators immediately associate the writing of postcolonial authors with postmodernism because of the influence of poststructuralist philosophy in both of them (Bertens 6). Izabella Penier suggests that there has been an association of early anti-colonial male writers with modernism and linear narrative and of the later generation of women who took a more anti-essentialist perspective with postmodernism and fragmentation (29). Nevertheless, one should not forget that modernism never advocated for linear, chronological, cause-and-effect narratives (Helen Scott 982). Drawing on Penier’s claim that “contemporary Anglophone
Caribbean literature is not so much a bastion of modernism, as it is a site of an on-going debate about the values of European modernity” (32), it is also important to bear in mind that modernism was not the literary correspondent of modernity—which Stanford Friedman’s article seems to suggest at some points—but a harsh criticism of it, better defined as the crisis of modernity (Childs 17), and of the dialectic of the Enlightenment and its logical cause-and-effect rhetoric (Helen Scott 982).

Kincaid’s refusal to be targeted as a postcolonial writer and her acknowledged preference for modernism (Penier 31) find an explanation in the autonomy that the modernist technique grants (Sacido-Romero 4). Jorge Sacido-Romero explains autonomy in modernism as the quality which separates literature from the “socio-historical reality determined by capitalist expansion,” differing in this way from the politics of realism which reflect and align with such reality (4). This is not to say that such autonomy impedes criticism, but rather the opposite: it grants a distance which permits to assess possibilities other than those of the hegemonic system. In fact, Kincaid’s thought parallels David Scott’s criticism that postcolonialism “operated through a certain suspension or deferral of the question of the political, a deferral of the question of the renewal of a theory of politics” (14), thus making critique impossible. The “postcolonial” (in its non-hyphenated version), as many have argued, does not, or at least should not, function as an umbrella term for all the authors writing after coloniality. This idea of “the postcolonial” basically comes from postcolonial theory, a philosophical current with an already defined set of characteristics—mostly derived from poststructuralism—to which many may not subscribe. Some of its most controversial and criticised characteristics are “its inability to account for the history and process of decolonization” (Gikandi, “Poststructuralism” 97) and the fact that it “emerged within the larger institutions of European, especially French, theory after structuralism” (98).

Jamaica Kincaid’s formal relationship with modernism becomes a way to explore a collective yet subjective consciousness of the Caribbean female subject. She uses a modernist technique to engage with subjectivity and the inner self in order to show a non-Eurocentric perception of reality. It resembles modernism in its disdain for realism, engaging in the quest for self-definition and perspectiveness:

> the historical events I write about are also fractured and complicated and antagonistic and ambivalent and contrary. Modernism is more like life than the other kinds of fiction I had read. Ordering the world into a beginning, middle, and end in painting and in literature is what an artist does to stave off the fractured nature of life. But I wanted my writing to be real. (Kincaid, “Writing Culture” 4)
In fact, and according to Fredric Jameson, a particular set of aesthetic features alone may cause estrangement and fail to speak for the logic of a culture (213-214). One is not to forget the Caribbean’s specificity: as Simon Gikandi claims, “unlike their European counterparts, [modernist] Caribbean writers have no need to retreat from their social environment or cultural traditions” (Limbo 13); instead, they blend them in new ways. Furthermore, in what is one of the few lengthy studies on Caribbean modernism, Gikandi explains how contemporary women writers have gone a step beyond in the discussion of modernist Caribbean writers in their particular appropriation of modernity and cultural nationalism (Limbo 31). Gikandi further argues how the male modernist enterprise in the Caribbean, while trying to break with the discursive impositions of the colonial system, has only addressed what was a “crisis of male identity” (Limbo 31). And while Gikandi identifies modernist features in the—usually analysed as postmodern—literature of contemporary women like Michelle Cliff because of their use of deconstruction “as a prelude to unearthing the repressed Afro-Caribbean experience in the island” (Limbo 233), this cannot ever be found in Kincaid, in whose works no vestige of historiography remains. Thus, this leads to an assessment of Kincaid’s engagement with modernism as being exclusively aesthetic and formal, thereby constituting her choice for the development of “a discourse specific to those fractured and conflicting identities” (MacDonald-Smythe 41).

Kincaid’s Desire for Female Self-Definition

It is interesting that Kincaid herself rejects all labels including being a postcolonial writer—“When I sit at my typewriter, I’m not a woman, I’m not from the Caribbean, I’m not black. . . . So I think it’s sort of limited and stupid to call anyone by these names. . . . My life is not a quota or an action to affirm an idea of equality” (“Interview” by Vorda 9-10)—and claims that she better identifies with the modernist movement in that it “exposed the world as [she] saw it: fractured, scattered, and yet somehow whole” (Kincaid, “Writing Culture” 4). Kincaid seems to share with modernist writers their rejection of inherited (European) forms (Barbour 24) and she does so by borrowing the formal style of a literary movement normally associated with a periodisation not matching her own. Modernism’s emphasis on autonomy and discontinuity relates to her own purpose, which MacDonald-Smythe describes as the articulation of discontinuous consciousness (41).

Gayatri Spivak’s claim that “the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” (104) refers to the experience of subaltern females being silenced by Western intellectuals and colonialists on the one hand, and by native males on
the other, which would explain Kincaid’s rejection of the label “postcolonial.” The Antiguan author’s alleged preference for an “outdated” movement—if such a thing exists—is an attempt to deconstruct the Western articulation of the Other as predictable or knowable (Bhabha 295) with an emphasis on the female experience whose oppressive situation goes beyond colonialism. Kincaid’s purpose is to liberate her writing not only from chronological periodisation but also from the linear evolution of anti-colonial activism into postcolonial theory, as both have silenced the subaltern female experience. Harold Bloom links this purpose to the constant presence of children in her writing, claiming that the discontinuity produced in children’s literature—such as in Kincaid’s *Annie John*—corresponds to the child’s rejection to adjust to the parents’ rule (2) and can easily be read as a metaphor for any oppressive force. In fact, the trope of the mother has become something characteristic of the fiction written by Caribbean women. Maryse Condé—the much awarded novelist from Guadeloupe—claims that “the Antilles is [her] natural mother and it is with her that [she has] accounts to settle, like any daughter with her mother, before becoming completely an adult” (qtd. in Gikandi, *Limbo* 231). Olive Senior—a prose and poetry writer from Jamaica—has also commented on this trope, explaining that it breaks with a Caribbean literary tradition in its moving away from the anti-colonial male attempt to create a unified national identity, focusing instead on much more individual and, in her view, humane topics and thus “personalizing socio-political issues” (485).

Discontinuity is a major characteristic of Kincaid’s collection also in formal terms. Unlike *Annie John*, in which the rebellious child is the narrator, in the first story of the collection, “Girl,” the child’s voice only intrudes upon the mother’s long list of advice on a couple of occasions:

this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it’s fresh; *but what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread? (5)

As Diane Simmons has noted, the silences in this collection convey more meaning than what is explicitly stated (467). This inexplicit meaning is also carried in the intrusions that disrupt the rhythm of the descriptions pervading the collection. They carry the transcendental message which, in the following example from the next story, “In the Night,” designates violence towards women:

There is the sound of a radio in the distance—a fisherman listening to merengue music. There is the sound of a man groaning in his sleep; there is the sound of a woman disgusted at the man groaning. *There is the sound of the man stabbing the woman, the sound of her blood as it hits the floor, the sound of Mr. Straffee, the undertaker, taking her body away.* (7; emphasis added)
This story is a sensorial description of what happens during the night, what can be seen, heard and smelt. The descriptions are beautifully composed, with special care in the use of adjectives and rhythm—so much so that the reader becomes lost in the evocative images of the Caribbean night until s/he is surprised by violent images, such as the reference to a woman’s murder or to a “woman who has removed her skin” (6).

Modernist narratives’ “concern for fragmentation in detriment of unity” (Levenson 3) makes trying to reassemble bits of reality impossible and leaves them in this new, chaotic form. Drawing on Frantz Fanon’s notion of le noir and Luce Irigaray’s notion of the feminine, Braziel reclaims the space/state of nonbeing (30). Out of this lack of essence, one can be eternally constructed, for identity is seen as a process, as something mobile and subject to power struggle. In “Blackness,” the narrator describes blackness as a place for articulation: “The blackness cannot be separated from me but often I can stand outside it. The blackness is not the air, though I breathe it” (46). She never makes explicit that blackness is associated with race and leaves this word as an allegorical site for the articulation of identity. However, she offers at the same time an innocent, unadulterated image of a child who is “colorless,” alluding, perhaps, to the constructed nature of ethnicity markers. The story remains extremely fragmented, without making any totalising sense, transmitting the complexity of the identity formation of post-colonial, racialised females:

Her skin is without color, and when passing through a small beam of light, she is made transparent. . . . Oh, look at my child as she stands boldly now, one foot in the dark, the other in the light. Moving from pool to pool, she absorbs each special sensation for and of itself. . . . Though I have summoned her into a fleeting existence, one that is perilous and subject to the violence of chance, she embraces time as it passes in numbing sameness, bearing in its wake a multitude of great sadness. (49-51)

Both Braziel and Giovanna Covi have seen in the ambiguous writings of Kincaid a challenge to the concept of phallic identity, especially in “Blackness.” The latter explains, quoting Julia Kristeva, that the obscure technique that has gained the work much criticism is an attempt at preserving the polyphony which disrupts the established order (345). By being ambiguous, confusing and continuously contradictory, the impossibility of interpretation is not a failure on the part of the author but a conscious act of rebellion from pre-established definitions of Caribbean literature as following the expected path which the Western linear progression of history and politics imposes.

If in the first story in Kincaid’s collection the narrator is voiceless and, except for two sentences, we only hear the mother’s speech—“and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against
becoming” (4)—in subsequent stories this pattern is gradually changed. As the narrative voice acquires independence, the stories become more subjective and obscure to the point that the last ones include surrealistic elements of an allegorical nature such as the narrator’s mother developing lizard-like features. According to Simmons, it is in the last story, “At the Bottom of the River,” that the daughter takes control of language to break free (469). “At the Bottom of the River” begins with the description of a mountain—where only “the bravest, surest, most deeply arched of human feet will venture” (62)—and of the river which flows through it. This description occupies twenty-seven lines, exemplifying the recurrence of lists in the stories, where items and details do not seem to end. Then we get to know that a man “who lives in a world bereft of its very nature” (63), is there. The paragraph ends stating that all this nature lies “await[ing] the eye, the hand, the foot that shall then give all this a meaning” (63); and, significantly enough, the next paragraph begins with the following question: “What shall that be?” (63). According to the narrator, the character is unable to understand the world or other individualities around him, unable to conceive points of view other than his own, the sort of narrator—falsely objective—the modernist project wanted to get rid of. In the logocentric tradition, according to Covi, these meaning-makers have been the panoptic narrators of Western tradition (348). The stories are so difficult to understand and resist an imposition of meaning because the panoptic narrator, who does not offer a perspective but a totalising glance, has been revoked. Like Kincaid, the modernist movement debunked this false objectivity to advocate for perspective. In this sense, it is no coincidence that she chose a male character who “cannot conceive the union of opposites, or, for that matter, their very existence” (63), since this character stands for the silencing male gaze.

According to MacDonald-Smythe, this lonely man has not reached the level of awareness to the world which the narrator has (42)—she finally acquires a voice after being silenced in the first story by the patriarchal impositions uttered by her own mother. The next section narrates the daily life of this man who everyday crosses the threshold to leave his house and sees “before him himself” (65) and his life, which all mean nothing to him (68). There the section ends and in the next one the narrating voice reflects upon death and life; this first person “I” has become more common as the story progresses, paralleling the structure of the collection as a whole. This narrator is at the mouth of the aforementioned river, at the bottom of which there is a house and a garden that remain still despite the flow. We are led to believe this is the house mentioned at the beginning, where the man comes and goes, but now there is a woman in the house, a woman who shows the narrator “a world in which the sun and the moon shone at the same time” (77). Now the woman is the owner of the house and she is also in control of words. When the narrator
enters the sea of this world, she feels different: “I did not exist in pain or pleasure... I stood as if I were a prism, many-sided and transparent” (80). The image of the prism—the sun and the moon shining at the same time—defies the panopticon, standing instead for polyphony, since omniscience and objectivity are tyranny, only representing a majoritarian voice. The narrator, after being in this world, sees things more accurately, reaching a level which the man could not, for he was “not yet complete” (63); she sees the multiple realities logocentric tradition has denied.

The narrator, instead, “now feel[s] [her]self solid and complete, [her] name filling up [her] mouth” (82), and so the story and the collection end. According to MacDonald-Smythe, everything leads to the final purpose of self-invented authorisation (31-32), and the image the narrator sees at the bottom of the river stands for the rescued self (41). She explains that the ambivalence present in all the stories balances self-creation with the pressure of ancestry (41). According to Covi, the “dismantling of the metaphysical order” does not deny in Kincaid a “determination to enter history” (345). This rather adjusts to Kristeva’s re-categorisation of national identification mechanisms after the collapse of the pillars of the nation caused by World War II (13)—paralleling the post-colonial nation, economically unstable and linguistically plural. While writers like Kincaid do not follow the nationalist enterprise of anti-colonial male writers, this does not mean that they are not engaged with history, nor does it entail a wish to escape it as in the postmodern and postcolonial philosophies. Instead, Kincaid and others conform to a different history, one that Kristeva calls “women’s time,” as it has been modified by them and is determined by more subjective “symbolic denominators” (14-16).

It is not surprising that Kincaid does not adapt to genres which, according to Braziel, started to appear, within “the historical emergence of codifying systems of literary and artistic classifications,” as forms of asserting national—European—genius (4). Simmons defines both character and writer as “women caught between worlds” whose values are changing, as exemplified by the disagreements between mother and daughter (469)—the mother acting as the once-colonised who continues to enact the coloniser’s worldview and the daughter breaking free from these impositions. The literary technique of the stories accounts for the difficulty of self-representation in a world which insists on systematic categorising. Kincaid’s experimentation and playful narratives could be considered an instance of subaltern Caribbean literature resisting categorisation because, even within anti-colonial movements and postcolonial theory, women’s voices are often silenced. Some definitions of
the postcolonial experience account for this fact, like Homi K. Bhabha’s claim that the subject that emerged out of colonialism has been articulated both as “‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (295). Generally speaking, postcolonial theoretical practice aims at deconstructing such conflictive articulations inflicted by colonial powers. However, Kincaid goes a step further in her position of resistance to this definition by stressing the weaknesses of postcolonial studies and, at the same time, signalling the commodification of the idea of postcoloniality. In fact, Elleke Boehmer problematises the West’s promotion of and openness to postcolonial fictions as double-sided: “it is an openness which is withheld in other respects” (238). Kincaid’s first publication—At the Bottom of the River—is, in my opinion, the work that best represents this view on a formal level, deconstructing expectations with the use of an allegorical style. Kincaid’s particular understanding of the short story genre here connects with modernist artistic autonomy, partly achieved through the use of ellipsis, silence, stream of consciousness and symbolism, which in Kincaid’s stories matches the gradual emancipation of the text’s protagonist. Kincaid’s obscure style underscores an implication: that conventional realist narratives and omniscience, under their claim for objectivity, become oppressing mechanisms that impose the existence of an uncontested reality. Self-definition can only be achieved through experimentation with genre and style, and such a complex message is transmitted by the work’s resistance to interpretation, in turn achieved through its formal characteristics.

Mónica Fernández Jiménez
Universidad de Valladolid (Spain)

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Le premier recueil de Jamaica Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River*, remet en question une série de présupposés relatifs au genre et à la périodisation littéraire dans le but d’articuler une alternative pour les femmes écrivaines caribéennes contemporaines. S’inspirant d’un style moderniste qui ne correspond ni aux bornes temporelles du modernisme européen ni à celles de son pendant américain, *At the Bottom of the River* joue avec les conventions du genre biographique, en utilisant la forme de la nouvelle pour dénoncer l’homogénéisation de l’expérience des peuples colonisés, perpétuée dans une certaine mesure par la théorie postcoloniale. En utilisant les conventions de la fiction moderniste, notamment en raison de l’autonomie qu’elle permet et de l’accent mis sur la subjectivité, Kincaid s’éloigne des injonctions de la théorie postcoloniale pour articuler des récits subjectifs explorant la liminalité et dépeindre ainsi un monde qu’elle perçoit comme fragmenté, surtout à travers le regard féminin.