

## Generic Discontinuities, National Allegory, and the Aesthetics of Postcolonial Fiction

The debate over the extent to which postcolonial literature can be said to ‘represent’ or ‘write’ the nation state has been a field-defining one in Postcolonial Literary Studies. Parallel to this debate stands the issue of the transformation of established literary genres and the question of how they are adapted in the postcolonial context. This article aims to reconsider both of these issues in relation to two texts that emanate from post-imperial cosmopolitan milieus. These are Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* and Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*. In so doing, I build upon recent scholarship that has rehabilitated the notion of ‘national allegory’ for postcolonial studies and provide an account of how the material world conditions the imaginary in the case of two texts. Following Arthur Koestler and conceiving of creativity as a combination or “bisociation” of previously disparate cultural paradigms,<sup>1</sup> the article argues that even in contexts that are removed from the struggle for independence from colonialism, the nation state continues to shape the creative choices of postcolonial writers.

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Arkana, 1989).

This article is, therefore, an attempt to bridge the gap between the political and the aesthetic. In doing so, it draws on the growing body of work dedicated to a materialist critique and “reconstruction” of postcolonial studies.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in describing the generic unevenness and internal heterogeneity of these two texts, I eschew de-historicised terms such as ‘hybridity’ which impose established theories of the postmodern upon the text. Instead, I will ‘start from the bottom up’ as it were, and read the texts as representational acts that are formed from and perform the national and cultural contexts from which they emanate.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1. See also Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004).

I have chosen to use Fredric Jameson’s concept of “generic discontinuities”<sup>3</sup> because of its power to unite complex ideological subtexts with the aesthetic properties of a text. At this point it will be helpful to explore the concept as it appears in Jameson’s writings. The general thrust of Jameson’s book *The Political Unconscious* is to advocate a Marxist literary criticism that is sensitive to the social and political currents that underlie the narrative act. In a chapter entitled “Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism”, an attempt to move away from prescriptive approaches to genre, Jameson suggests that we read a text “synchronically, as the coexistence, contradiction, structural hierarchy, or uneven development of a number of distinct narrative systems”.<sup>4</sup> Such a process, Jameson says, “allows us to grasp the text as a socially symbolic act, as the ideological – but formal and immanent – response to a historical dilemma”.<sup>5</sup> Moving his focus to the nineteenth century novel, Jameson notes that diverse generic paradigms make up Alessandro Manzoni’s *I Promessi Sposi*:

<sup>3</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1996), 144.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-9.

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On this reading, then, the ‘novel’ as an apparently unified form is subjected to a kind of x-ray technique designed to reveal the layered or marbled structure of the text according to what we will call *generic discontinuities*. The novel is then not so much an organic unity as a symbolic act that must reunite or harmonize heterogeneous narrative paradigms which have their own specific and contradictory ideological meaning.<sup>6</sup>

For Jameson, the generic discontinuities of Manzoni’s novel endow it with a “totalizing completeness”<sup>7</sup> and allow it to straddle the diverse cultural forces of a particular moment in bourgeois culture. It is the attention to the “layered or marbled structure” of the text’s generic makeup, that is to say, to the *manner* in which the text switches from one genre to another other, which allows us to locate it politically. Generic discontinuity is, therefore, a useful concept for exploring connections between questions of aesthetics, genre and politics.

Generic discontinuity can play a role in the signifying process that Jameson has elsewhere named “national allegory”, which is elucidated in the 1986 essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”.<sup>8</sup> Many readers will be familiar with the controversy surrounding this essay and with Aijaz Ahmad’s impassioned response to the effect that Jameson “others” literature of the third world.<sup>9</sup> I will not enter into the terms of that debate, other than to cite Neil Lazarus’s compelling and satisfactory defence of Jameson’s position.<sup>10</sup> Jameson’s essay argues that “Third-world texts ... necessarily project a libidinal dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of third-world culture and society”.<sup>11</sup>

This is not as controversial as it may sound, for it is quite reasonable to claim that literature emanating from countries with a burgeoning nationhood should have a major preoccupation with national consciousness. Indeed, similar arguments are readily deployed in relation to eighteenth and nineteenth century Western literature. However, for the notion of national allegory to be entirely useful and mobile, I think it important to understand it in terms of a basic preoccupation with solidarity, or as “appeals to collective identity”,<sup>12</sup> for which the nation state and national consciousness are the most obvious correlates. A key aspect of my argument is that the same process occurs in later postcolonial fiction: whereas Jameson illustrates the national allegory thesis in relation to postcolonial texts that were written before, during, or just after decolonisation, I want to show how the concept works in relation to migrant authors of a later generation and who write in an age when the idea of ‘the nation’ has lost much of its political credibility.

Importantly, Jameson does not over-simplify the point and his argument has interesting implications for an investigation of aesthetics, for he notes that, “the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the heterogeneous representation of the symbol”.<sup>13</sup> Such a conception of allegory has clear parallels with the form of a generically discontinuous text. Indeed, the compatibility of the two concepts is manifest when Jameson highlights the generic discontinuities of Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala* as contributing to a national allegory.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 144, emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 65-88.

<sup>9</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’”, *Social Text*, 17 (1987), 3-25.

<sup>10</sup> Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 89-113.

<sup>11</sup> Jameson, “Third-World Literature”, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>13</sup> Jameson, “Third-World Literature”, 73.

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In the first section of what follows, I unpack the generic complexity of Rushdie's *Shame* which has hitherto been under-examined. Understanding the significance of the realist pull in *Shame*'s otherwise magical realist narrative helps us to see its relation to the nation as an idea and to build upon a recent reassessment of Rushdie's place in the postcolonial canon. In the second section I argue that the internally heterogeneous nature of Kincaid's *A Small Place* is best understood in the context of Antigua's problematic nationhood. Delineating the relation between generic discontinuity and the nation state can, I argue, help us to better understand these two texts as creative acts that are shaped by their contexts.

## Genre and Containment in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

Numerous critics have examined the meta-narrational asides of Rushdie's migrant narrator in *Shame*.<sup>14</sup> However, it remains to be shown how these interruptions are actually of a different generic category from the main narrative, and therefore constitute an instance of generic discontinuity. Whereas the main narrative in *Shame* is magical realist in the manner of Rushdie's previous novel *Midnight's Children*, the narrator's interruptions frequently conform to an alternative narrative register; they are firmly grounded in the narrator's contemporary reality. Whereas the main narrative is obviously at pains to place the story at one remove from the real Pakistan, the narrator's meta-narrational comments employ the proper nouns for Pakistan and for real-life figures who are analogous to characters in the primary narrative.<sup>15</sup> In what follows I demonstrate that these generic discontinuities are, by virtue of their formal and structural manifestations in the novel, key to Rushdie's representation of the authoritarian nation state of Pakistan.

Brendon Nicholls summarises an important aspect of Rushdie's representation of Pakistan in *Shame*:

Central to Rushdie's project is the sense that a national narrative founded upon repression inevitably exhibits a crisis of plausibility. As such, any cultural claim staked upon the homogeneity of the nation already authorises the alternatives, detours and embellishments that antagonise its intention. To put it another way, since the authoritarian state actively suppresses possibilities within its own puritanical narratives, it at some level unconsciously imagines-into-being the very same cultural contestants that it seems unable to avow.<sup>16</sup>

My argument is that this "crisis of plausibility" of the authoritarian state is articulated by the generic discontinuities in *Shame*. The picture of oppressive religious nationalism that Rushdie paints in the primary magical realist narrative is not fully containable within the conventions of that genre. The leakage that Nicholls describes is manifested in the narrator's interruptions that conform to a more realist narrative paradigm. Before turning to specific instances of generic discontinuity, it is necessary to examine how Rushdie presents the state's oppression and its consequences in the primary magical realist narrative.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Ayelet Ben-Yishai, "The Dialectic of Shame: Representation in the Metanarrative of Salman Rushdie's *Shame*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 48.1 (2002), 194-215; Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992); Hima Raza, "Unravelling *Sharam*: Narrativisation as a Political Act in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*", *Wasafiri*, 39 (2003), 55-61.

<sup>15</sup> An important distinction here: on the one hand we have the generic discontinuity that I describe. Related to, though distinct from this, is the general slipperiness around the names and places and people. Although, this reinforces part of the shifts in genre, I also see it as part of Rushdie's unreliable narration.

<sup>16</sup> Brendon Nicholls, "Reading 'Pakistan' in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*", in Abdulrazak Gurnah, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 110.

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As Timothy Brennan and Aijaz Ahmad note, *Shame* focuses almost exclusively on the Pakistani ruling elites rather than on the masses.<sup>17</sup> The sense of claustrophobia in his portrait of the nation is, Ahmad notes, made particularly acute by the fact the two ruling families who populate the story are themselves related to one another. What I want to emphasise here is that the primary narrative, in its claustrophobic portrayal of Pakistan and the rise of religious nationalism, and with its sketching of the relationship between violence, shame and shamelessness, generates a sense of rising pressure, that is only released in *periodic* acts of violence.

From the very start of the novel, the narrator issues warnings that contribute to this sense of growing pressure: “Trouble in a marriage is like water accumulating on a flat roof”,<sup>18</sup> is one example. This is combined with, particularly from the beginning of Raza Hyder’s premiership, an increasingly forceful Islamic nationalism, expressed not only through the regime’s rhetoric, but also through the introduction of oppressive religious laws (247). Stephen Morton has demonstrated how “Rushdie uses the conventions of magical realism to articulate the excesses of state terror”.<sup>19</sup> This occurs most notably through the character of Sufiya Zinobia, whose “psychosomatic” (123) blushing and subsequent violent outbursts (all articulated in the magical realist tradition) are the result of her family’s and the nation’s shame (122). The magical realist narrative is used by Rushdie to show how the shame begotten by the excesses of the nationalist religious state results in violence.

I suggest that Sufiya Zinobia’s violent outbursts are analogous to the generic discontinuities in *Shame*. The totalising narrative of the state that seeks to assert its hegemony upon the nation “unconsciously imagines-into-being the very same cultural contestants that it seems unable to avow”.<sup>20</sup> The “cultural contestant” is shame that, produced within the Hyder family and to a greater extent by Raza Hyder as dictator, builds up in the figure of Sufiya Zinobia and is released in periodic acts of violence in the main narrative. Likewise, on a formal level, the conventions of magical realism are insufficient to fully represent the consequences of this totalising state narrative – the consequences of state violence might be said to be too *real*. The fallout from a totalising nationalist government pierces the narrator’s contemporary reality, hence the need for a realist narrative paradigm. Just as Sufiya Zinobia’s violent outbursts are periodic, so are the narrator’s interruptions; their structural manifestations suggest that they play a similar function as an outlet for the “cultural contestants” brought about by the regime.

This problem of containment within the magical realist narrative is compounded by the narrator’s own ambivalence about the nation state and, in particular, the foundation of Pakistan, as evidenced by his comments about the manufactured character of its name (87). This can be linked with a paradox inherent in Benedict Anderson’s influential study of the modern nation state:<sup>21</sup> if the nation state is an essentially arbitrary, *imagined* community, why does it remain a site of great emotional investment and a source of so much violence? This paradox is a real issue for the narrator in *Shame*, as we see in one of his realist interventions:

<sup>17</sup> See Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 121; and Ahmad, *In Theory*, 140.

<sup>18</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Picador, 1984), 93; hereafter in the text.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Morton, *Salman Rushdie: Fictions of Postcolonial Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 54.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholls, “Reading Pakistan”, 110.

<sup>21</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

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It is the true desire of every artist to impose his or her vision on the world; and Pakistan, the peeling, fragmenting palimpsest, increasingly at war with itself, may be described as a failure of the dreaming mind. Perhaps the pigments used were the wrong ones, impermanent, like Leonardo's; or perhaps the place was just *insufficiently imagined*, a picture full of irreconcilable elements, mid-riffbaring immigrant saris versus demure, indigenous Sindhi shalwar-kurtas, Urdu versus Punjabi, now versus then: a miracle that went wrong. (87; emphasis in the original)

This quotation reveals the difficulty of reconciling the violence that Pakistan begets with its seemingly arbitrary creation as detailed by the narrator in the paragraph previous to the one that I have quoted. If Pakistan is “a failure of the dreaming mind”, then this is illustrated in *Shame* by periodic lapses in the magical realist narrative that symbolise failures to conceive of Pakistan using that genre's conventions. This is consistent with Nicholls's comment that, “the unrepresentable or unreclaimable elements of traumatic national memory must emerge as disruptions or flaws in narrative design”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Nicholls, “Reading Pakistan”, 111.

That this is a genuine case of generic discontinuity is evidenced by the narrator's explicit flirtation with the realist genre in one of his asides (68-69). Here, he speculates on what he would have to include if it were a realistic novel. The irony is increased by the repetitive statements: “If this were a realist novel about Pakistan,” (68) and “But suppose this were a realist novel!” (69). By specifically plotting the points of correspondence between the magical realist narrative and a projected realistic narrative, Rushdie simultaneously denies and posits its correspondence with the real world. This not only implies that the magical realist narrative has direct correspondences with the outside world, but that the matter of genre is a conscious concern and preoccupation.

One should be wary, however, of interpreting this as a postnational/postmodern comment on the nation *per se* – as is the tendency in much criticism on Rushdie. In *Decentering Rushdie* Pranav Jani attempts to recover the diversity of post-independence Indian fiction that has been, to some extent, obscured by Rushdie's success. Whilst offering readings of lesser-known Indian novels that offer sophisticated nationalist *and* postnationalist attitudes towards India, Jani is able to revise the common postmodern/postnational reading of Rushdie. In a decisive reading of a short passage from Rushdie's essay “Imaginary Homelands” Jani notes that, “the passage problematizes efforts to interpret it strictly within the paradigms of postmodernist epistemology”:<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Pranav Jani, *Decentering Rushdie* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 4.

Despite Rushdie's overall project in the essay to establish migrancy as an Archimedean site from which to view the nation, the cited passage exudes a nostalgia for India that is distinctly modernist and mournful rather than postmodernist and celebratory.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

I think it important to bear this reading in mind when thinking about Rushdie's attitude towards the nation in *Shame*. Indeed, is not the *extent* of the nation's penetration into the novel's levels of narrative an indicator of the mournfulness that Jani detects in the “Imaginary Homelands” essay? Surely such a commitment



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suggests displeasure that the state of Pakistan has failed as a means of ensuring solidarity, rather than simply a postmodern dismissal as the concept as a whole.

I now turn to some further examples of generic discontinuity in the novel in order to illustrate my argument. One particularly pertinent instance is the narrator's intervention that tells the violent stories of Annahita (Anna) Muhammad, the girl attacked on the London Underground and of the boy found burned to death in a car park (115-117). These have occurred in his 'real life', outside of the story he is narrating. In each case, the narrator implies, the violence was caused by the dialectic of shame and shamelessness that is present in the primary narrative. These London victims are, says the narrator, "inside my Sufiya Zinobia" (117). The point being made is that the shame produced by the authoritarian nation state is not containable within the magical realist narrative; it breaks out into contemporary reality. Just as violence breaks out within the main narrative, the "crisis of plausibility"<sup>25</sup> of Pakistan's nationalist narrative creates acts of such violence that a realist narrative is required to show them.

In concluding this section I would like to respond to Aijaz Ahmad's well-known critique of *Shame* in his book *In Theory*. His argument may be summarised thus: the claustrophobic picture painted of Pakistani's political elite "is presented, in the rhetorical stance of the book, as the experience of a 'country'".<sup>26</sup> The result, for Ahmad, is a skewed representation of Pakistan that "does not include those who resist, or love, or act with any degree of integrity or courage".<sup>27</sup> This leads to a representation of women that "overvalorizes, when it comes to describing women, the zones of the erotic, the irrational, the demented and the demonic";<sup>28</sup> "none [of the women] may be understood in relation to those fundamental projects of survival and overcoming which are none other than the production of history itself".<sup>29</sup>

Ahmad, I believe, does not take the generic complexity of *Shame* into account and is too willing to read Rushdie in terms of the latter's postmodernism. The presence of the realist category both explicitly and implicitly introduces a correspondence with the world beyond the closed magical realist narrative. The generic discontinuities, and the various scenes they describe (the narrator's return to Pakistan, or the violence in London for example) show that there is inevitably something *outside of* the "closed circle"<sup>30</sup> of Pakistan. The point is that the "closed circle" brings such "cultural contestants"<sup>31</sup> into being. True, the novel does not narrate acts of resistance and is not written from the perspective of the masses, but Rushdie's decision to introduce a generic paradigm that is different from magical realism does allow for such a possibility. With regards to the question of women in *Shame*, I will quote one of the narrator's realist interventions: "I hope it goes without saying that not all women are crushed by any system, no matter how oppressive. It is commonly and, I believe, accurately said of Pakistan that her women are much more impressive than her men ... their chains, nevertheless are no fictions. They exist" (173).

<sup>25</sup> Nicholls, "Reading Pakistan", 110.

<sup>26</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 140.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholls, "Reading Pakistan", 110.

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The above passage (which Ahmad does not mention) demonstrates further that although there is no description or portrait of them in the novel, *Shame's* generic discontinuities do allow for acts of women's resistance. The novel's generic makeup, an expression of the inevitable by-products of a totalising regime, does not, when taken as a whole, imply that such a resistance on the part of women is impossible.

### Generic Instability in Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*

Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* defies easy categorisation. For, despite its brevity (only 81 pages), the text frequently shifts generic register. Indeed, critics have noted the difficulties in locating it within a particular genre. Giovanna Covi states that, "*A Small Place* is a political essay in content, but it reads like fiction".<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, Corinna McLeod sees it as having "a multiplicity of narrative elements" and states that, "it is difficult to find a place for the text in terms of genre".<sup>33</sup> For whilst it maintains a polemical imperative throughout, *A Small Place* uses the conventions of a range of genres. In what follows, I argue that the individual manifestations of these generic paradigms, their relation to the book's polemical passages, and the text's subsequent generic unevenness can be read as a kind of national allegory. A national allegory that, as we shall see, reflects the gap between Antigua and coherent nationhood.

<sup>32</sup> Giovanna Covi, *Jamaica Kincaid's Prismatic Subjects: Making Sense of Being in the World* (London: Mango Publishing, 2004), 31.

<sup>33</sup> Corinna McLeod, "Constructing a Nation: Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*", *Small Axe*, 25 (2008), 77-78.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

It is first necessary to examine how Antigua relates to the concept of the nation state, both in the economy of *A Small Place* and in reality. In her essay entitled "Constructing a Nation: Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*" McLeod focuses primarily on the text's engagement with the discourse of modern tourism. By deconstructing the network of discourses that superimpose the island, Kincaid's text, McLeod argues, "yields a pathway by which the narrator (and, vicariously, the reader) is able to conceive a nation".<sup>34</sup> Although McLeod's account of the text is persuasive, I think that it rests on the idea that Antigua and 'the nation' are commensurable – an idea that neither history *nor* the text itself support. *A Small Place* is undeniably a critique of tourist discourse and the latter's foundations in colonialism. But the idea that a coherent national community is in some way *recoverable* from behind the distorting effect of such discourse is at variance with the text. When Kincaid's text is read against the precise disjuncture between Antigua and the nation state, the operation of an unusual kind of national allegory becomes apparent and the strangeness of its generic makeup begins to make more sense.

For, Antigua is categorically *not* a nation. It is an island that makes up the greater part of the multi-island state of Antigua & Barbuda. This is something of which the narrator of *A Small Place* is acutely aware:

for reasons known only to the English person who did this, Redonda and the islands of Barbuda and Antigua are all lumped together as one country. When Antiguan talk

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about 'The Nation' (and they say 'The Nation' without irony), they are referring to the nine-by-twelve-mile-long, drought-ridden island of Antigua; they are referring to Barbuda, and island even smaller than Antigua ... ; and they are referring to a barren little rock where only booby birds live, Redonda.<sup>34</sup>

Antigua and "The Nation" are, therefore, not the same thing. Kincaid's repetition of the physical dimensions of the island throughout the text (9; 80), underscores Antigua's incommensurability with the discursive formation of "The Nation" by emphasising its physicality. In order to understand how the national allegory functions in the text and how this relates to the generic discontinuities, it is important to understand how solidarity and national consciousness are rendered problematic by Antigua's postcolonial circumstances.

Despite one hundred years or so of anti-colonial agitation in the British Caribbean, independence for Antigua was not a triumphant affair. Granted in 1981, Antigua & Barbuda's independence was late in arriving in comparison with the much of the rest of the West Indies.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps more importantly, it did not come as the climax of any great anti-colonial struggle. As Bonham C. Richardson notes of the region as a whole,

Political independence for the states of the former British Caribbean has not resulted directly from military struggles featuring full-blown battle campaigns with armies of downtrodden peasants eventually vanquishing European troops. Quite the opposite: independence ceremonies in the former British colonies usually have been marked by handshakes, band concerts, and celebrations.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the fact that "older residents of the Commonwealth Caribbean recall with pride the resistance to colonial policies exhibited by protest leaders in the 1930s and their uncompromising demands in the years thereafter",<sup>37</sup> Richardson's account suggests that independence was couched in the terms of the former colonisers and not those of the newly liberated. Such a genial handover of power, whilst remaining undeniably the result of Black agency, raises several conceptual and practical problems for a newly emancipated nation. Frantz Fanon's famous statement that "[v]iolence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them" is relevant here.<sup>38</sup> Although violence is certainly not the only path to successful postcolonial nationhood, Fanon does point towards the necessity of understanding the nature of colonialism. Without the disruption caused by anti-colonial violence, the reality of colonial power structures is less likely to be revealed to the people. Fanon's remark is especially pertinent to Kincaid's text since one of its recurring themes is the ignorance of Antiguan, past and present, to the forms of their oppression.

Antigua & Barbuda's independence should not be seen as the decisive break from colonialism that Fanon advocates. Indeed, the slow handover of power, which was not the result of a popular uprising, was especially likely to lead to the

<sup>34</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 51; hereafter in the text.

<sup>35</sup> As a point of reference, Jamaica gained independence in 1962, Barbados in 1966 and the Bahamas in 1973. Only two further states (Belize in also 1981 and St Kitts & Nevis in 1983) also gained independence in the 1980s.

<sup>36</sup> Bonham C. Richardson, *The Caribbean in the Wider World, 1492-1992* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 182.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 118.



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middle class taking power – a situation that Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth*. A potential danger of decolonization, Fanon argues, presents itself when the native middle class takes its influence from the colonisers, and effectively emulates the European bourgeoisie. Consequently, nationalist liberation ends in failure, since the proletariat remains as oppressed as it was before, only this time by a native bourgeoisie trying to maintain its power.<sup>39</sup> Again, the parallels with Antigua (and Kincaid’s description of it in *A Small Place*) are manifest: Vere Bird (Prime Minister of Antigua for more than a decade and a significant political figure long before independence) began his political career in the Antigua Trades and Labour Union but, as freedom from colonialism became ever more feasible, he gradually shifted to the right. The national consciousness which the labour movements of the 1930s helped to propagate was gradually ceded to the aims of the Bird family and their bourgeois cronies.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 119-165.

Thus from the Fanonist perspective, Antigua and Barbuda’s independence failed to bring about true liberation. National consciousness that was developed by protest movements from the 1930s onwards failed to create a coherent national community and dissipated when the middle class took power. Furthermore, the amalgamation of Antigua and Barbuda into a single nation state has caused problems. Following independence in 1981, a dispute developed between the Antiguan government and Barbudans over “whether Barbudan land is owned by Barbudans themselves or by the larger state whose capital is in Antigua”.<sup>40</sup> Richardson notes that the dispute is due in part to a difference in outlook between the Antiguan and the Barbudans: “Barbudans consider themselves a sober, family-oriented, and proper people, content in their isolation. Their view of most Antiguan, in contrast, is that of a free-spending, improvident lot who have sold themselves to international banking interests”.<sup>41</sup> The very borders of this nation state, drawn on a map by the British, do not effectively circumscribe solidarity and national consciousness.

<sup>40</sup> Richardson, *The Caribbean in the Wider World*, 187.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Antigua, therefore, stands in a complex relation to the nation state. Having unpacked the circumstances behind the narrator’s scepticism towards “The Nation”, the questions to ask are: what is the relation between the text’s generic makeup and the nation state as it has been elucidated? What does this tell us about us about Kincaid’s text as, in Jameson’s words, “a socially symbolic act, as the ideological – but formal and immanent – response to a historical dilemma”?<sup>42</sup> In what follows, I provide an alternative reading that takes account of the text’s generic complexity and focuses on the unconscious narrative act which underlies the critical imperative of *A Small Place*. In short, the aim is to show that the creative use of genre is linked to the vexed question of Antigua’s status as a nation state.

<sup>42</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 139.

The text comprises unnumbered four sections. The first section employs the generic conventions of the travel brochure. Tourism is Antigua’s primary industry and this has resulted in the subordination of the island’s needs to the dictates of international capital. Kincaid systematically undoes the Western reader’s expectations of such a narrative whilst she simultaneously “imitates the lofty, omniscient style of a tourist brochure” (14).<sup>43</sup> The luxuriant features of an exotic tourist destination

<sup>43</sup> McLeod, “Constructing a Nation”, 92

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are consistently undercut, revealing a much darker side to the tourist's experience. For example, the image of the sea, which is often made a centrepiece in travel brochures, is here subverted by the suggestion that human waste may end up in it: "the contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you wade carefree in the water" (14). As well as imitating the benign tone of a travel brochure, Kincaid appropriates its tendency to address the reader in the second person, a practice that allows the prospective holidaymaker to imagine him/herself on holiday. Thus, Kincaid constructs what John Urry has termed "the tourist gaze".<sup>44</sup> The reader's view is framed so that he/she sees Antigua with "an anticipation ... of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different pleasures from those customarily encountered".<sup>45</sup> But there are, in effect, two voices at work here. The first is the soothing one of the travel brochure, the second is that of Kincaid and this second voice undercuts the propositions of the first and is polemical in tone. Appearing frequently in parentheses, this second voice appears to be in tension with that of the travel brochure.

<sup>44</sup> See John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage Publications, 1990).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

A tourist brochure's descriptive narrative comes laden with assumptions about the specificity place and national culture. Urry notes that tourist commodities "are consumed because they supposedly generate pleasurable experiences *which are different from those typically encountered in everyday life*".<sup>46</sup> In trying to sell a 'once in a lifetime experience' the brochure must make the product seem unique. Behind such an attempt is a particular perspective on globalisation that is blind to the homogenising influence of global capital. In this perspective, the world is simply more connected, whilst individual locations retain their exoticised local wonders. Kincaid picks up on this tendency and subverts it. The tourist's encounter with a taxi driver is an important example:

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1; my emphasis.

You see a man, a taxi driver; you ask him to take you to your destination; he quotes you a price. You immediately think that the price is in the local currency, for you are a tourist and you are familiar with these things (rates of exchange) and you feel even more free, for things seem so cheap, but then your driver ends by saying, 'In U.S. currency'. (5)

The tourist mindset is hardwired to anticipate freedom from the grubby business of Western capitalism. But this tourist's specialist knowledge – presumably acquired from other trips abroad – is shown to be incompatible with the reality of global capital. The passage associates freedom with the use of local currency, but this is trashed when the tourist learns that exchange value is measured on the same scale as at home. The first section of *A Small Place* makes further attempts to undermine the myth of 'undiscovered territory'. The cliché of freshly prepared local food is trashed by the suggestion that it "came off a plane from Miami" (14). The commonplace of primitive arts and crafts is similarly undermined: "you look at things they can do with a piece of ordinary cloth, the things they fashion out of cheap, vulgarly colored (to you) twine" (16). The 'ordinariness' of the cloth hints that these are not truly primitive crafts, since the cloth is "ordinary" to the Western tourist.

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Towards the end of section 1 the travel brochure narrative dissipates. Kincaid continues to address the constructed Western ‘you’, but no longer in the anodyne tones of the tourist industry. The constructed tourist’s gaze disassembles as Kincaid attacks the Western tourist and shows the connection between self-realisation and holidaymaking to be facile (17). The voice that was mostly relegated to parentheses in the earlier part of this section now becomes dominant as the author excoriates the Western tourist. The repetition of ‘you’ reaches almost fever pitch: “(it is their custom to eat their food with their hands; you try eating their way, you look silly; you try eating the way you always eat, you look silly); they do not like the way you speak (you have an accent)” (17). This creates the sense of a kind of struggle of genres, in which the polemic is the victor. Whereas earlier in the section it was mostly relegated to the numerous parentheses, it now appears both inside and outside of them. I will return to the generic instability of this section later. For now, it is sufficient to note that Kincaid has employed a genre of writing (the travel brochure), which comes laden with assumptions about the specificity and uniqueness of tourist destinations. By setting it in tension with another narrative paradigm (the polemic), Kincaid undermines and exposes these presuppositions that ignore the reality of global capital.

The second section of *A Small Place* opens thus: “The Antigua that I knew, the Antigua in which I grew up, is not the Antigua you, a tourist, would see now” (23). After the caustic accusations of the end of section 1, the calmer, reminiscent tone acts to pacify the reader. Here, Kincaid adopts the conventions of autobiography in order to plot the oppressive power dynamics of the colonised Antigua of her childhood. It is appropriate to think about how this genre functions elsewhere in postcolonial and Caribbean contexts.

Bart Moore-Gilbert has investigated postcolonial transformations of autobiography. He notes that in many cases postcolonial autobiographical texts feature “generic undecidability”<sup>47</sup> – something he attributes to “the intrinsic hybridity of postcolonial subjectivity”.<sup>48</sup> However, in *A Small Place*, a text which takes Antigua as its subject, might not “generic undecidability” be attributable to the island’s vexed relation to national community? Meanwhile, Louise Hardwick has looked into the rise of the Caribbean *récit d’enfance* genre in the 1990s. Although not always strictly autobiographical, these texts use “the child’s gaze as the fundamental conceit”<sup>49</sup> to “explore the links between private destiny and the wider socio-political context”.<sup>50</sup> Autobiography, then, has frequently been ripe for adaptation by postcolonial authors.

In *A Small Place*, the coincidence of the beginning of the autobiographical generic paradigm with the beginning of the second section suggests an attempt at compliance with the dictates of formal chapter divisions and, consequently, with the stability of the speaking subject that the autobiographical form traditionally prescribed.<sup>51</sup> On the level of overt critique, this paradigm allows Kincaid to demonstrate how her personal development was mediated through Antigua’s colonisers and to elaborate the naivety of the people towards the means of their oppression. This naivety is a

<sup>47</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, “A Concern Peculiar to Western Man? Postcolonial Reconsiderations of Autobiography as Genre”, in Patrick Crowley, Jane Hiddleston, eds., *Postcolonial Poetics: Genre and Form* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 98.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>49</sup> Louise Hardwick, “The Rise of the *récit d’enfance* in the Francophone Caribbean”, in Patrick Crowley, Jane Hiddleston, eds., *Postcolonial Poetics: Genre and Form* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 176.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>51</sup> Moore-Gilbert’s essay describes the customary wholeness of the speaking subject in Western autobiography.

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key trope throughout the text. For example, the public holiday on May 24<sup>th</sup> is to celebrate Queen Victoria's official birthday (30), and the speaker states: "We didn't say to ourselves, Hasn't this extremely unappealing person been dead for years and years? Instead we were glad for a holiday" (30). Intertwined with these observations are the Antiguan's further misapprehensions concerning the discourse and rhetoric to which they are subject. They believe that the people at the Mill Reef Club are simply rude (27) and the speaker's mother naively believes that the foreign doctor is worried about germs when he insists that any black child that he sees must be clean (28). They doubt that the white people they see can be English because they have always been told that the English are polite (29-30).

Despite lamenting this ignorance, Kincaid remembers the old Antigua with apparent nostalgia. Features of colonial Antigua are recalled with an emphasis on their utility: "In that part of High Street, you could cash a cheque at the Treasury, read a book in the library, post a letter at the post office, appear before a magistrate court" (25). Although colonial domination is never forgotten (the mention of the magistrate court ensures this), there is a distinct fondness in Kincaid's description of "the Antigua that I knew" (24). Even if it is at variance with the situation she describes, her command to the reader to "let me show you the Antigua that I used to know" (24) registers pride.

But there is a key contradiction here. Why, particularly within the liberal Western narrative of a decolonized postcolonial world, should Kincaid remember the old Antigua so fondly? In the light of what she actually tells us about it, the nostalgia for the old Antigua becomes analogous to the ignorance of the Antiguan. There is a clear difference between the expectations of the genre (both those of the Western autobiography and the *récit d'enfance*) and the Antigua that Kincaid is capable of remembering. The non-fragmentary subject that Moore-Gilbert sees as a central feature of traditional Western male autobiography requires the narrative of an eventful childhood and coming of age. Such recollections are blocked for Kincaid. Towards the end of the section, Kincaid seems to become aware of this: "Have I given you the impression that the Antigua I grew up in revolved around England?" (33). The effect of this question is a jarring one; for having been self-reflexive for the entire section, Kincaid suddenly turns her focus back onto her constructed Western reader. From this point, the autobiographical impetus of the narrative dissipates into further censure of the descendants of colonisers. Any sense that the autobiographical genre is contained neatly within the section parameters is trashed. This implies that the autobiographical narrative, laden with nostalgia, is incompatible with the task of writing about Antigua.

The third section begins abruptly and, again, changes tack:

And so you can imagine how I felt when, one day, in Antigua, standing on Market Street, looking up one way and down the other, I asked myself: Is the Antigua I see before me, self-ruled, a worse place than what it was when it was dominated by the bad-minded English and all the bad-minded things they brought with them? (41)

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This casual sentence ushers in the theme of return. Return is a common theme in Caribbean writing – understandable, given the size of the region’s diaspora. Although the Caribbean return novel cannot be said to be a codified genre to the extent of, perhaps, the *récit d’enfance*, there are certain distinctive tendencies that we can discern. For example, several autofictional novels by the Haitian writer Dany Laferrière problematise the return from exile and explore the strange interplay between continuity and change that the homecomer experiences.<sup>52</sup> The complexities that surround the subject of the homecoming of members of the Caribbean diaspora have been investigated in other disciplines. In a fascinating study entitled *Narratives of Exile and Return*, social historian Mary Chamberlain studies oral accounts from Barbadians who left for the UK in the mid-twentieth century. She notes that although Barbados “emerged as a symbol of stability”<sup>53</sup> from her interlocutors’ narratives, various factors complicate the notion of ‘home’. Important among these factors is “the ideology of the mother country”<sup>54</sup> – the notion, inculcated by colonial education, that England was home. This contributes to what Chamberlain terms “an ‘instability’ in regard to national boundaries, and an implicit challenge to the idea of the nation-state (and the ‘British’ way of life) as the natural and only form of political and social organisation”.<sup>55</sup> Kincaid, herself a member of the Caribbean diaspora, is therefore entering into an established cultural narrative, the chief characteristic of which is ambiguity.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Dany Laferrière, *L’Enigme du retour* (Paris: Grasset, 2009), and *Pays sans chapeau* (Paris: Le Serpent à plumes, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Mary Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return* (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1997), 87.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

The return that Kincaid attempts in section 3 of *A Small Place* is, in some sense, a failure. Indeed, the first indication that the reader has of a return is the casual opening sentence quoted above which begins “And so”. This does not pave the way for a grand homecoming. In fact, the full return is effectively blocked. The narrator compares a “Teenage Pageant” that she sees on her return to the gatherings of her own youth. She notes that the teenagers struggle to speak in English and that, whereas in her day the young were obsessed with “the rubbish of England” (44) those of today prefer “the rubbish of North America” (44). For her, this suggests that the standard of schooling has deteriorated in her time away. It also implies that cultural imperialism persists, albeit from a different source of power. The corruption of successive governments is described in detail. Every attempt that the speaker makes to reconnect with an aspect of the nation is disrupted by the narrative that she must first unpick. Again, the inability of the Antiguan to understand the nature of their oppression is foregrounded: the hotel training school, ostensibly an academic institution is, for the narrator, tantamount to a preparatory college for modern slaves (55). The library, which evokes so many memories for the speaker, instead offers only an entry into the deceitful world of Antiguan politics (45-47). The description of the return rarely goes beyond the level of landmarks and memories associated with them. Kincaid cannot approach the subtle ambiguity that characterises Laferrière’s novels and the oral narratives examined by Chamberlain. Interestingly, there is no sense of tension with the polemical passages, as in the previous two sections.



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Rather, the return narrative that Kincaid adopts appears to be particularly commensurable with her angry critique. Perhaps the fact that the return genre is relatively uncodified means that less of a battle of authority ensues.

The fourth and final short section acts as a conclusion and argues mournfully that Antigua's beauty and small size are the sources of its many problems. What we are left with at the end of *A Small Place* is a book that feels unstable and incomplete. Jameson's reference to generically discontinuous texts as featuring the "uneven development of a number of different narrative systems"<sup>56</sup> is particularly pertinent here. For, Antigua is a victim of uneven development. Whilst the country's tourist and service facilities are developed to the highest standard, much of the general population lives in poverty. A text that attempts to represent these paradoxes cannot have a stable generic base. In terms of 'national allegory', the generic makeup of *A Small Place* is an instantiation of Antigua's *lack* of national community and solidarity. Various attempts are made to write Antigua in established registers, but these frequently dissipate into polemic and never achieve narrative closure. This impression of incompleteness pervades the short text. Kincaid's achievement is to have constructed a text that points to the gap between Antigua and nation, whilst diagnosing its cause. When the idea of the nation is as problematic as it is for Antigua, national allegory still functions; it simply generates a self-contradictory and unsatisfactory image, which in itself speaks volumes.

<sup>56</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 139.

## Conclusion

What is obvious, but nonetheless important to note, is that postcolonial creativity in literature extends well beyond 'writing back'. The decades after decolonisation made, and continue to make, political demands on writers that require the constant adaptation of forms – even of those which emerged in the years after decolonisation and in different cultural circumstances.

I have, I hope, shown that one of these political demands is the nation state. The idea of the nation continues to shape literary production despite the widespread dissatisfaction with the idea of nationalism from the mid-twentieth century onwards, even if many of its promises remained unfulfilled. Furthermore, I have tried to highlight the fact that attention to the *full complexity* of the use of genre in a text helps us to better appreciate it as an object of its time. So, for example, seeking an explanation for the generic discontinuities in Rushdie's *Shame* supports a more nuanced interpretation of the relation between his work and the nation. Likewise, setting the complexity of Antigua's national situation against the slipperiness of *A Small Place's* generic makeup allows us to see that the text engages with the problematic of national community.

In recent years a new focus has been given to the aesthetic dimensions of literature in postcolonial studies. Notable in this regard are *Postcolonial Poetics: Genre and Form* (essays from which I have cited above) and *Locating Postcolonial Narrative*

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<sup>57</sup> Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio, eds., *Locating Postcolonial Narrative Genres* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> Jameson, "Third-World Literature", 85.

*Genres*.<sup>57</sup> Both of these collections make considerable headway in understanding some of the myriad ways in which literary forms are oriented and moulded by material circumstances. Whether or not we wholly accept Jameson's statement that "third-world culture", denied the luxury of "placeless individuality", "must be situational and materialist despite itself",<sup>58</sup> this essay has tried to contribute to the argument for a materialist approach to postcolonial literary studies, an approach which can help us to better appreciate the aesthetic diversity of its ever-growing corpus.