

# Countermemory and Return: Reclamation of the (Postmodern) Self in Jamaica Kincaid's The Autobiography of My Mother and My Brother.

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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# Counteremory and Return: Reclamation of the (Postmodern) Self in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *My Brother*

Louise Bernard

I am not in nature. I do not find the world furnished like a room with cushioned seats and rich-colored rugs. To me, the world is cracked, unwhole, not pure, accidental; and the idea of moments of joy for no reason is very strange.

--Jamaica Kincaid, "To Name is to Possess"

Jamaica Kincaid, in the opening section of *My Garden (Book)*: (1990), a collection of personal essays about gardening, comments upon the lawn and the "peculiar ungardenlike shapes" (7) she has crafted around her home in Vermont. The garden, as a site of creativity, is connected to the sensory implications of aesthetics, taste, and pleasure, yet the garden for Kincaid is also tied to the power of the written word and to the ostensibly simple presence of dahlias and zinnias and the larger, far more complicated history that is reflected in both the (re)naming and the very **[End Page 113]** presence of flowers as symbols of possession and dislocation (6). Kincaid writes in one of her essays, "To Name is to Possess," about the early conquistadors and their desire to lay claim to the natural beauty and resources of the lands they invaded. It was under these circumstances that specimens such as cocoxochitl, a plant valued by the Aztecs for its medicinal properties, were (forcibly) removed from Mexico and later introduced to Europe in hybridized form as the dahlia, named for the Swedish botanist Andreas Dahl (118-119). Kincaid, who grew up under British colonialism in her native Antigua, considers such a display of entitlement to be symptomatic of the erasure and revision that informs the grand scheme of imperialism. In the same way, as she notes in her essay "In History," Carl Linnaeus's eighteenth-century system of classifying all the plants on earth--a means of placing order over chaos in an attempt to make sense of new and strange lands--cannot be read outside the context of aggressive European expansion (160-166). Indeed, in the discipline of natural history, "the naming, the presenting, and the claiming are all one; the naming brings the reality of order into being" (Pratt 33).

Mary Louise Pratt, in her study of travel writing and natural history's relationship to the imperial mission, makes clear that "[t]he systematization of nature coincides with the height of the slave trade, the plantation system, colonial genocide in North America and South Africa, slave rebellions in the Andes, the Caribbean, North America, and elsewhere" (36). Further, descriptive language was a central component in these classificatory schemas and natural history, as scientific discourse, became a field heavily invested in the enterprise of writing, publishing, and disseminating knowledge in collections and books for public consumption (Pratt 29). Kincaid explains that her own garden was born as a place of intense, globalized knowledge after she read historian William H. Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico* and came to realize that the politics of botany and horticulture are far from innocent pastimes (*My Garden* 6; 117). For Kincaid as writer/gardener, "the garden [. . .] is so bound up with words about the garden, with words themselves, that any set idea of the garden, any set picture, is a provocation to me" (7). The garden, then, is not merely the thing in and of itself but representative of its individual creator's artistic vision as well as the long trajectory of gardens, gardeners, and other displaced objects and peoples that came before **[End Page 114]** it. It is literally (*up*)rooted in history--a potent symbol of the cross-fertilizations and ruptures that are inextricably

...tied to the plundering impulses of early global exploration.

Kincaid's understanding of the space she has created is projected as a gradual realization over time, one akin to the regenerative process by which the garden is literally able to bloom...

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