“The Edge of Writing and Speech”: Measuring Silence and Voice in the Works of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Erna Brodber

by

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I had never seen England, really seen it, I had only met a representative, seen a picture, read books, memorized its history. I had never set foot, my own foot, in it. The space between the idea of something and its reality is always wide and deep and dark.

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Introduction

The White Cliffs

There is an image of the white cliffs of Dover, sharp and imposing along the English coastline. Poems and hymns have been recited at the cliffs for decades. A quavering voice sings, “there'll be bluebirds over, the white cliffs of Dover, tomorrow, just you wait and see” (Lynn 1941). The cliffs stretch through the singer’s longing to see such pristine, natural whiteness. Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid writes of this same band of whiteness, which swells in the Caribbean imaginary of England. Referring to her youth in Antigua, she writes “I had sung hymns and recited poems that were about a longing to see the white cliffs of Dover again” (Kincaid, “On Seeing England” 40). Kincaid was made to let the voices of others intone her own. She says that no one in her life had ever seen the cliffs—she and her classmates pined to see something again that they had never seen in the first place. Later in life, when she finally sees the white cliffs, they are not as immaculate as she had always been told.

The cliffs are blemished by streaks of blackness. Kincaid writes:

The white cliffs of Dover, when finally I saw them, were cliffs, but they were not white; you would only call them that if the word ‘white’ meant something special to you; they were dirty and they were steep; they were so steep, the correct height from which all my views of England, starting with the map before me in my classroom and ending with the trip I had just taken, should jump and die and disappear forever (Kincaid, “On Seeing England” 40).

With this, Kincaid effortlessly critiques the encroaching eight-mile strip of whiteness that has so perniciously sought to encircle her. In reciting and singing about the white cliffs in her childhood, she had further erected a monument of whiteness—a steep throne from which the minds of young Caribbean girls like herself could be molded
through an English imaginary. Kincaid’s work exposes this construction of whiteness, throwing the hymns, poems, and maps of England down the striped cliffs.

The project of this thesis is to understand the ways that three Caribbean women writers—Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Erna Brodber—recover voice and orality from the powers of colonial recitation and mimicry and the printed word. Kincaid powerfully pitches any longing for whiteness from the sharp cliffs, speaking and writing back. An immeasurable vastness lies before her—waters that she so deftly migrates across in her writing. With the phrase, “jump and die and disappear forever,” a long silence befalls her defiant act. In each of these authors’ works, the ability to move or migrate is always bound to forms of oral and written expression. This thesis will thus consider how each author is positioned between silence and voice, and the written and the oral—on the sharp edge of these forms of expression.

Each of the texts this thesis explores narrates a movement toward England. Both Jean Rhys’s Wide Saragasso Sea and Jamaica Kincaid’s Annie John present narrators who migrate from the Caribbean to England. The female protagonist in Erna Brodber’s Myal dreams of going to England her whole life but eventually migrates to the US, only to return to Jamaica. In the cases of Rhys and Kincaid, the novel maps movements out from the Caribbean that reveal the false construction or imaginary of England (as we see with the white cliffs). With Brodber, however, I seek to understand how she narrates a return to Jamaica after confronting neo-colonialism in America. How does she reconcile the self and the local community after, as Kincaid does, throwing whiteness and the powers of colonialism from the “white” cliffs?
While he doesn’t explicitly write on any of the authors studied in this thesis, Martinique poet and literary critic Edouard Glissant illuminates the role of body and voice in answering this question with his work on “forced” and “natural” poetics. In *Caribbean Discourse* (1989), a natural poetics is any collective yearning for expression that is not opposed to itself. A forced or constrained poetics, then, is a collective desire for expression that, when expressed, “is negated at the same time because of the deficiency that stifles it, not at the level of desire, which never ceases, but at the level of expression, which is never realized” (Glissant 122). In this way, the English language and the printed word are deficient—unable to express the natural voice and speech patterns of the Caribbean collective. Caribbean forms of speech like Creole and patois, however, aren’t standardized and can’t be easily translated into a written form.\(^1\) Glissant characterizes Caribbean speech against silence as a strained, collective desire: “When the body is freed…it follows the explosive scream. Caribbean speech is always excited, it ignores silence, softness, sentiment. The body follows suit. It does not know pause, rest, smooth continuity. It is jerked along” (Glissant 123). Here, Glissant marks an intimate connection between body and voice—when the body is freed, a collective scream follows. Speech positions the self in a state of excitement, and “the body follows suit.” For Glissant, speech seems to inaugurate or constitute the body.

\(^1\) In this thesis, my conception of the Creole or ‘Creolization’ works from a definition provided in *Caribbean Creolization*. It states, “Creolization is thus defined as a syncretic process of transverse dynamics that endlessly reworks and transforms the cultural patterns of varied social and historical experiences and identities” (Balutanky and Sourieau 3). The Creole language, then, is a complex, syncretic, open, and multilingual form of Caribbean speech. Patois works within this category as a more localized, demotic form of speech.
While Glissant provides a framework for reading the constrained or forced voices of Rhys, Kincaid, and Brodber, post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak enables this thesis to “measure silences” in their works. Her famous pieces, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” have formatively shaped this thesis. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” traces how the subaltern woman is muted and rendered in shadow, always historically refracted from the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other. In response to Freud’s use of women as scapegoats and subjects of hysteria, Spivak writes, “Part of our ‘unlearning’ project is to articulate that ideological formation—by measuring silence, if necessary—into the object of investigation” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 296). Spivak comes up with a sentence that shows how women are silent, inactive: ’White men are saving brown women from brown men’” (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 296). Here, she measures the space or distance of silence as compressed and syntactically wedged between white men and brown men. Her project is not to return to the lost voicedness of the subaltern woman, but rather, to “measure silences” and to trace the shifting, “unfixed place of woman as a signifier” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 299).

Next, through the etymology of sati, Spivak argues that naming can arrest and silence the subaltern woman, fixing her through violent reifications and renamings. She argues that the counter narrative of women’s consciousness slips from being, to being good, to the good woman’s desire, and finally to woman’s desire—this slippage is shown in the way that sati is fractured from the masculine Sat, meaning True, Good, and Right, to the feminine sati, meaning “good wife” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 305). However, sati “as the proper name of the rite of widow self-
immolation commemorates a grammatical error on the part of the British” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 305). Here, Spivak presents a central question of this thesis: how can a subject who is misnamed—grounded in factual and grammatical errors—be selfed in a text? The repeated use of the name *sati* reifies this grammatical error, giving it new meaning and power over time. For example, ‘Sati’ is a fairly common (and ironic) proper name in India for female infants (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 306). Thus, the term *sati* has varied levels of meaning—it communicates the substitution of widow sacrifice, a movement from masculinity to femininity, and a reductive naming device for all young women—all the while based in grammatical errors and slippages in meaning.

Spivak’s famous study of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” can be read as an extension of her question, “Can the subaltern speak?” Can Christophine, the protagonist’s Black nurse, speak in Rhys’s novel? She says no, “Christophine is tangential to this narrative. She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native” (Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts” 253). She claims that Rhys still writes within a European tradition, transgresses with its feminist individualist agenda, but ultimately conforms when she “drives [Christophine] out” of the story (Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts” 253). The reader is offered no explanation for Christophine leaving, only her response to Rochester: “Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know” (Rhys, *WSS* 146). This thesis will work out from Christophine’s phrase—from the measured silence that befalls her refusal to conform to the written.
Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Erna Brodber are each positioned between Spivak’s measured silence and Glissant’s “explosive scream.” The native woman is continually refracted and driven out into silence, while the Caribbean body can’t inhabit this silence and remains restless, “jerked along”—a body following a voice. This thesis considers first measuring silence—how to write out of silence and the way in which the Caribbean woman’s silence is always inflected with levels of voice and orality. Next, it turns to the possibility of subaltern speech in Jamaica Kincaid’s work. It will also consider how Caribbean oral forms transform through a turn to the written—how Rhys couldn’t capture or express Christophine’s orality through a rewriting of the European novel, but how other Caribbean texts, like Kincaid’s and Brodber’s, “take shape at the edge of writing and speech” (Glissant 147). After establishing the intimate connection between voice and body in Caribbean women’s writing, the thesis will turn towards place and location—tracking a turn in Caribbean literary criticism from an emphasis on migratory subjectivities in the 90s to a more recent emphasis on those who have remained in the Caribbean. Lastly, I’ll consider the ways that voice, body, and place converge in Brodber’s *Mya*.

In chapter one, I analyze Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a novel that stages various forms of colonial mimicry and naming through the white Creole Antoinette. This chapter is interested in the novel itself and also in the criticism that attempts to shift emphasis away from this white Creole narrative and reveal the

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2 In this thesis, Carole Boyce Davies’s work on migration is representative of this time in scholarship, while Alison Donnell’s recent work on reterritorializing the Black Atlantic focuses on the importance of local spaces in the Caribbean.
defiant utterances of its Black Caribbean characters.\textsuperscript{3} Through Homi Bhabha’s writing on the ambivalence of mimicry, I argue that the novel produces ambivalent moments of “slippage” and “excess” between the colonizers and mimics in the novel (Bhabha 126). Christophine refuses to be immobilized by the written, and so occupies a space between the written and the oral—silenced because the novel can’t contain her orality.

Chapter Two takes up Kincaid’s early collection of short stories, \textit{At the Bottom of the River} (1983), and her early novel, \textit{Annie John} (1985), which both follow young female protagonists as they transition into womanhood. \textit{At the Bottom of the River} (\textit{ATBR}) presents a more mysterious, magical world of the Caribbean, with no explicitly named people or places. \textit{Annie John}, on the other hand, is a more realist narration of Annie’s early life in Antigua, seen as some as a code or doubled narrative to \textit{ATBR} (Boyce Davies 124). I look at more states of “between” in these books—specifically the space between being named and unnamed, and between places in migration narratives. I argue that the transition from girlhood to womanhood allows Kincaid’s young narrators to move in ways other characters can’t. \textit{ATBR}’s girl is poised on the edge of speech, about to say her name, while Annie John’s name is boldly declared by the novel’s title. Thus, between both the possibility and the moment of self-naming we see yet another form of migration or movement.

Finally, I turn to the complex, historically embedded fictional narratives of Jamaica in Erna Brodber’s \textit{Myal} (1988). This novel follows two teenage girls, whose

\textsuperscript{3} Spivak similarly argues that the major problems of the muted subaltern woman can’t be solved by an “essentialist” return to lost origins, and also can’t be “served by the call for more theory in Anglo-America” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 295). The Rhys criticism I consider wants to turn away from reading the novel through more “theory in Anglo-America.”
stories are doubled to reveal repeated cultural, spiritual, and sexual theft or penetration. Set in Grove Town, Jamaica, Ella O’Grady repeats Kincaid’s act of colonial recitation and eventually moves to the US, where her white husband directs a racist coon-show about her life in Grove Town. *Myal*’s other protagonist, Anita, is raped for an extended period of time by a man who practices the Obeah religion in Grove Town. The novel thematizes sexual violence on both the global and local scales, and also, more importantly, turns towards collective healing processes by the end of the novel. I use the language of Glissant’s transition from the oral to the written to argue that *Myal* draws our attention to the breaks between these two forms of expression, as well as between standard and Caribbean English. I also argue that *Myal*’s themes of sexual possession and rape are tied to poet M. NourbeSe Philip’s conception of “linguistic rape”—the rape of African and Caribbean languages by English (Philip 89). While conforming to written English through the novel form, Brodber always draws attention to the transition or movement between the written and the oral, as well as to a deeply “broken,” ripped, and fissured language.

All of these novels constitute attempts to voice the subaltern—responding to Spivak’s question “Can the subaltern speak?” and, acknowledging that this question cannot be definitively answered with a binary of silence and voice. I suggest first, that Rhys complicates this neat binary, and secondly, that Kincaid thematizes the possibility of speech. Lastly, I argue that Brodber reveals a transition from silence to voice, that corresponds to the written and the oral—and presents the site of rupturing in language as the simultaneous site of healing.
“Partial Presences” in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.

Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body.

— Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man”

*Wide Sargasso Sea (WSS)* opens and closes with a deep sense of displacement, silence, and what poet Wilson Harris calls “non-existences,” or the vanishing and reappearing people of the novel (Harris, “Jean Rhys’s ‘Tree of Life’” 153). The novel follows the white Creole character Antoinette through her childhood in post-Emancipation Jamaica, to her early marriage to the unnamed figure of Rochester from *Jane Eyre*. The first section is told from Antoinette’s perspective, though she goes unnamed for much of Part One. The second section opens with Rochester’s voice renaming Antoinette. “Bertha! Bertha!” rings throughout the novel, suggesting both the violence of a name and the way in which a name, meant to signify presence and being, instead marks nonexistence or nonbeing.

This chapter is as much interested in *WSS* as it is in the large body of criticism surrounding it. As we’ve seen, Spivak identifies an impossibility to voice the subaltern in the novel. There has been a marked turn in scholarship since the 80s to expand the ground of the novel’s two main black characters, Christophine and Tia, and articulate their contradictory presences in the novel. In recent criticism, *WSS* is no longer read as a text about the white Creole, the madwoman in the attic, but rather as a text about the “non-existences,” silent resistance, and “demonic ground” of the novel’s black
characters. Furthermore, much criticism wants to deflect attention away from WSS. In a famous debate between Kamau Brathwaite and Peter Hulme, Brathwaite argues that we must ask about the “Tias in Paule Marshall, in Merle Hodge, in Merle Collins… in Brodber… in Jamaica Kincaid…” (Brathwaite, “Helen of Our Wars” 78, my emphasis). This thesis attempts to answer Brathwaite’s call—to look not only at the closed realm of WSS, but also at the way in which Tia’s incomplete, ambivalent character opens a space for interpretation more fully explored in Kincaid’s and Brodber’s writing. Thus, this chapter explores the way in which Tia, the daughter of a Black servant, and Christophine, Antoinette’s Black nurse, are constructed in relation to Antoinette through a few motifs that represent colonial mimicry: naming, stones, and thin partitions. These motifs mark the ever-present division between what Homi Bhabha famously called, “white presence,” or the colonizer, and “black semblance,” or the mimic subject (Bhabha 131).

WSS falls into the risky, intermediary space of Bhabha’s famous phrase “almost the same, but not white” (Bhabha 130, my emphasis). This phrase opens the subject to a similar way of being, yet closes this possibility of sameness in the second clause. As a white Creole writer, Rhys can only know blackness in relation to whiteness. Thus, each portrayal of blackness is a projection or refraction, split along the syntactical fault-line of Bhabha’s phrase. In the novel, mimicry is both a determining and highly ambivalent force. Elaine Savory writes that readings of Rhys

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4 While I mention Wilson Harris’s “non-existences” briefly, these other two phrases are explored later in the chapter. Carine Mardorossian argues that silence becomes a form of speech and resistance in the novel. The phrase “demonic ground” refers to Sylvia Wynter’s argument for establishing a space or ground of scholarship beyond Western critical paradigms.
“must take into account the ways in which she was continually evolving textually in the direction of a never entire, infinitely complex but decidedly anti-hegemonic identity, whilst accepting her unique contradictions and her political failures” (Savory, Jean Rhys 223). Rhys moves towards an ever-complex ambivalence, in which Tia is neither halve nor double, but a searing representation of an epistemic crisis—the impossibility of knowing a racialized other.

In WSS, the parrot Coco and Tia enter the narrative as representations of colonial mimicry. Notably, parrots have the ability to mimic the spoken language of humans, and in an early scene, Coco mimics the human impulse to name. While Bhabha doesn’t write on WSS, his piece, “Of Mimicry and Man,” illuminates a persistent ambivalence in the novel. To define mimicry, he coins the phrase, “almost the same but not quite,” or as he alters it, “almost the same but not white” (Bhabha 127, 130). This slight ambivalence or rupture is incredibly violent and fixes the colonial subject “as a partial presence” (Bhabha 127). Mimicry is a very specific form of difference—it repeats rather than “re-presents” and its violence is more subtle, a hidden menace (Bhabha 128). Bhabha also identifies the space between colonizer and mimic—the “slippages,” “excess,” and “difference” that constitute this space (126). In this chapter, I’ll also consider the ways in which this slippery space is expanded into a reverse ground of resistance for the novel’s black characters.

Bhabha also argues that mimicry, or the partial making of an individual, substitutes the actual presence of a colonial subject. He calls this colonial mimicry’s “metonymy of presence” (Bhabha 130). Thus, the role of mimicry is intimately linked to names as forms of substitution—like a name, mimicry never articulates a whole
presence or colonial body. Bhabha refers later to the tension between “white presence and its black semblance,” a phrase that deftly summarizes the fraught relationship between Antoinette and her halved other, Tia (131). Finally, Bhabha writes that “Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body” (133). Here, mimicry splits black skin—a substitute or false name for the body’s presence. When black skin splits, though, whiteness also splits—it becomes a “part-object” (Bhabha 132). Thus, he argues, blackness mimes the white authority until it deauthorizes it (Bhabha 131-132). This idea can be applied to Tia and Antoinette’s relationship: in each instance that Tia is mere mime or partial presence, Antoinette is also split, fractured, by her mimicry.

By book-ending the novel with mentions of the parrot, Rhys highlights problems of naming and mimicry. Coco can’t “talk very well” but repeatedly asks, “Qui est la? Qui est la?” (Who is there? Who is there?), and answers himself, “Ché Coco, Ché Coco” (Coco, Coco) (Rhys, WSS 38). Here, the parrot only says his name, simply repeating what others have called him. Antoinette’s stepfather, Mr. Mason, clips the parrot’s wings for no apparent reason, causing him to dart and bite at everyone’s feet. Coco names himself only to be cut, snipped of any chance of freedom by one of the novel’s male characters. In this way, WSS acknowledges the violence of naming and renaming (most often inflicted by men), while also calling attention to the way in which names are paired or connected. For example, Tia is named with a nickname or shorthand for Antoinette, prompting a fraught history of criticism that conflates or doubles the two—what Kamau Brathwaite calls “the Tia = Antoinette
syndrome” (Brathwaite, “A Post Cautionary Tale” 73). This “syndrome” results, too, from how readers learn Tia’s name first, and don’t learn Antoinette’s until the two are separated, forty-seven pages into the novel. Similarly, Tia’s mother’s name is Maillotte—a name Rhys uses in the slave record of ’Maillotte Boyd’, in her earlier work *Voyage in the Dark* (Rhys, *Voyage* 53). Ultimately, names assist in this violent making of the individual, while always calling attention to the pairing, cutting, or mimicking of the self.

Later in Part One, Coco’s naming process becomes a grotesque and violent spectacle. Retaliating after years of slavery, former slaves set fire to Coulibri, and after everyone evacuates, Antoinette’s mother Annette goes back to rescue Coco. She is unsuccessful, though, and Coco falls from a railing to his death. It is precisely because Coco’s wings were clipped in the act of naming that he is unable to fly. Antoinette recalls, “I opened my eyes, everybody was looking up and pointing at Coco on the glacis railings with his feathers alight. He made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching. He was all on fire” (*WSS* 39). Here, Coco is made into a spectacle, “feathers alight.” He also fell “screeching”—a guttural, animal sound that wasn’t mimicking or repeating a simple human question. While this is a small moment in the narrative, Coco reappears in the novel’s final scene, just before Antoinette sets Thornfield on fire. The phrase “He was all on fire” seems to determine her final act. As a screeching animal, his reappearance emphasizes the “grotesque,” “bestial” spectacle of naming and mimicry (Bhabha 133).
Looking-glasses and river-water, as forms of reflection and refraction, establish a more visual mode of mimicry in Antoinette and Tia’s relationship. Antoinette’s whole family is driven out of the burning estate and she sees Tia in the distance: “We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her” (WSS 41). Here, Antoinette imagines an impossible future beyond the ambivalent difference of mimicry—they are instead equals, “side by side.” In this moment of doubling, though, Tia raises a jagged stone in her hand: “When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face” (WSS 41). Here, Tia enacts a violent breaking from her role as a mimic. But unlike Bhabha’s phrase, “Black skin splits under the racist gaze,” here, white skin splits with Tia’s defiant response. The passage continues, “We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass” (WSS 41). Still there is a sense of mimicry with the phrase, “blood on my face, tears on hers,” but these reactions are very different—one physical, bodily, and the other more emotional or expressive.

Further distance is created between Tia and Antoinette with the phrase, “It was as if I saw myself” (WSS 41, my emphasis). Just as Bhabha’s phrase works along the fault-line, “but,” this phrase derives its ambivalence from the words “as if.” Again, we don’t learn Antoinette’s name until after this incident. So although Tia is often described as a mirror or reflection of Antoinette, Tia is the only named, individualized character of the two. Like the parrot, then, Tia offers no simple or clear representation of colonial mimicry. Rhys gives her some amount of agency—the
ability to split Antoinette’s skin with the rock—while also removing her from the narrative and fixing her name to Antoinette’s. Rhys still suggests, though, that because Tia is named first, Antoinette perhaps mimics Tia.

Antoinette is finally separated from Tia when she enters the convent, where she boldly declares her name. She says, “Underneath, I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason, nee Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839” (WSS 48). The phrase “fire red,” is directly related to Coco’s fiery plumes, calling attention to the violence of naming. Furthermore, this scene attends to the presentation of the self. The nuns urge Antoinette to push her cuticles up (calling to mind the pain of Coco’s clipped wings) and to comb her hair into a tight “coiffure,” without a looking-glass.

Antoinette and Tia spent hours by the river and in their final moment, were both compressed and distanced by the mention, “as if I saw myself. In a looking-glass.” However, Antoinette isn’t allowed to use looking-glasses at the convent. Thus, at the moment Antoinette is broken from Tia and names herself, she no longer sees her reflection. Here, too, Antoinette is being socialized into a new, Christian way of being. She calls the convent her “refuge, a place of sunshine and of death” (WSS 51). Throughout the section she repeats the final line of the Hail Mary prayer, saying, “After the meal, now and at the hour of our death” (WSS 52). Just as the convent is a place of sunshine—implying the present moment or life—and death, so these Hail Mary’s conflate the present, life, with one’s impending death. Thus, the process of naming both introduces an individual to the present and fixes them to a future, now and at the hour of our death.
“Demonic Ground” and Modes of Resistance

Even in WSS criticism, Antoinette’s name is assigned a certain level of ambivalence and fragmentation. Brathwaite, for example, urges critics not to “figmentize Rhys – make her depart from what she is: a white xmatriate Creole (Miranda)” (Brathwaite, “Helen of our Wars” 74). He even renames Antoinette, “MIRANDA / Antoinette / Miss Ann,” meaning first the white daughter of Prospero, who enslaves the island native Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest.* The roles of Miranda and Caliban in *The Tempest* have been formative to Caribbean literary scholarship. For a volume of essays on Caribbean women’s literature, Sylvia Wynter wrote a famous afterword entitled, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/ silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s Woman” (355). Her work on *The Tempest* in this piece allows us to see how Antoinette’s voice and orality are always leveled against the silence of the ‘native’ woman, most often Christophine or Tia.

Wynter argues that in *The Tempest,* “Caliban’s physiognomically complimentary mate” is entirely missing. She suggests that the silencing of the ‘native’ woman allows the white Miranda to speak (Wynter 363). In the final turn of her argument, Wynter places Caliban’s woman on “demonic ground”—the space outside the Western canon and the master discourse (356). She writes, “This terrain, when fully occupied, will be that of a new science of human discourse, of human ‘life’ beyond the ‘master discourse’ of our governing ‘privileged text’, and its sub/versions. Beyond Miranda’s meanings” (Wynter 366). With the phrase “demonic ground,”

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6 The phrase ‘xmatriate’ playfully twists the word ‘ex-patriot’, through Brathwaite’s characteristically difficult and typographically innovative writing.
Wynter also links the possibilities of a new discourse to the specific terrain or geography of the Caribbean. This radical new production of meaning and knowledge will thus be intimately tied to a new spatial awareness.

With language much like Spivak’s, Wynter identifies the “doubly silenced ‘ground’ of Caliban’s ‘native’ woman” and reveals how the silence of one always resonates with the newly enfranchised voice of another—Miranda, or the “white xmatriate creole” Antoinette. So when Antoinette writes her name in *fire red*—a rare moment in which she declares herself—we must also remember how Tia has been cut from the narrative, silenced for the rest of the novel.

In this way, *WSS* complicates any neat binary between silence and voice. While much criticism has questioned the silence of the subaltern woman in the novel, all of the black characters are clearly invested in defiance, refusing colonial mastery, and raising a sharp-edged stone to Antoinette. In Part Two, Antoinette slaps the servant girl Amélie for referring to her as a “zombie” and Amélie responds, “I hit you back white cockroach, I hit you back’…And she did” (*WSS* 91). While most often called a “white cockroach,” Tia repeatedly calls her a “white nigger,” revealing how race is also constructed according to one’s economic status (Mardorossian 1073). In this way, Tia’s radical act of splitting also reverberates throughout the novel in the form of defiant slaps, threats, and taunts.

Rhys can’t ever fully access the experience of the black Caribbean women from her childhood, so she thematizes this silence and shapes it into a form of speech. Like Wynter’s “demonic ground,” critic Carine Mardorossian refers to the “black Creoles’ parodic ‘reverse’ discourse”—a discourse similarly beyond the privileged text and
bounds of Standard English. Mardorossian also writes of the reverse powers of silence in the novel, arguing that it “questions the Western assumption that the speaker is always the one in power. Silences in the novel become a ‘way of speaking’ insofar as they are examined in terms of their effects and not simply as effects of an oppressive power” (Mardorossian 1084). Here, Mardorossian seems to build on Spivak’s famous argument, recognizing the prolonged silences or falterings of the Caribbean women, while also adding tones and utterances to this silence.

Wynter, Mardorossian, and Brathwaite each construct radical counter-discourses that have the potential to expand readings of black Caribbean voice in WSS. To further bind the projects of these critics, Mardorossian quotes Kamau Brathwaite in his touchstone work Folk Culture: “It was in language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master, and it was in his (mis)use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled” (qtd. in Mardorossian 1085). Now the “demonic,” “reverse,” discourse this chapter considers is also an active turning of language through “(mis)use.” The term “(mis)use” implies a deliberate deception—the movement through a language intended to imprison and bind. In this way, characters like Christophine and Amélie deliberately (mis)use language, subverting it with their creolized English and patois.

Just as Rhys suggested the violence of a name in Part One, Part Two begins with the exaggerated irony of the name of their honeymoon village in Granbois, Dominica—Massacre. Rochester asks, “And who was massacred here? Slaves?” to which Antoinette responds: “Oh no.’ She sounded shocked. ‘Not slaves. Something must have happened a long time ago. Nobody remembers now” (WSS 60).
Antoinette erases any trace of violence and slavery despite the village’s overtly brutal name. Here, she speaks as if slavery never occurred, “Nobody remembers now,” ignoring the way in which she frequently identifies with black characters through her own “sexual slavery” (Emery 178). Brathwaite rightly comments that no matter how oppressed white Creole women were, we cannot equate their condition to that of slaves (Brathwaite, “Helen of Our Wars” 78). Rochester describes the honeymoon further, saying, “So this is Massacre. Not the end of the world, only the last stage of our interminable journey from Jamaica, the start of our sweet honeymoon. And it will look very different in the sunlight” (WSS 60). Each clause of his phrase qualifies, and nearly contradicts the last, “Not the end…only the last…the start” producing a collapsed temporal framework for the scene—again the kind of collapsing that the phrase now and at the hour of our death accomplishes. Beyond the initial dark humor of the name, ‘Massacre’ also foreshadows sexual violence in Rochester and Antoinette’s marriage. Finally, Rochester’s comment also parallels Antoinette’s earlier description of the convent: “This convent was my refuge, a place of sunshine and of death” (WSS 51). Massacre “will look very different in the sunlight,” marking the repeated refraction of place and light throughout the novel. Antoinette is violently displaced again—first from Coulibri, then from the convent, and now from Massacre—the refraction and movement of light with the futural phrase, “will look very different,” indicates her dislocation once again.

7 This racist theme in which Rhys’s protagonists feel as though they are sexual slaves, and thus closer to blackness or black slavery, recurs in Rhys’s other novels, Voyage in the Dark (a work that explicitly references the Middle Passage) and Good Morning, Midnight.
While Rochester questions the history of Massacre, a genocide most likely inflicted by the colonial powers he represents, Christophine counters this by questioning the very existence of England. In the middle of Part Two, Antoinette visits Christophine and expresses concern that Rochester no longer loves her. She explains that by English law all of her money now belongs to him. After Christophine urges Antoinette to leave Rochester, Antoinette suddenly digresses into a reverie about England. She reads from a geography book, “The Yorkshire and Lincolnshire wolds. Wolds? Does that mean hills? How high? Half the height of ours, or not even that?” (WSS 101). Here, Antoinette attempts to shape the landscape of England in her imagination, but even terms like “wolds” are inaccessible to her. She tries to imagine the English experience of snow, saying, “White feathers falling? Torn pieces of paper falling? They say frost makes flower patterns on the window panes” (Rhys, WSS 101). From found objects like feathers and paper, Antoinette attempts to construct this experience. She also references “sugar-cane fields,” revealing how she can only access snow in relation to her limited experience of a plantation. Antoinette is again the mimic subject, projecting only the white Creole’s fantasy of the Anglo world. In this scene, Antoinette gropes for meaning, attempting to construct an ideal that can only find form through slave labor on sugar-cane fields. Each attempt to construct England as a unified reality reminds of its utter dependence on pillaged wealth and labor.

After Antoinette’s dream, Christophine questions the very existence of the imperialist project that has subjected her: “‘England,’ said Christophine, who was watching me. ‘You think there is such a place?’ (WSS 101). Here, Christophine offers an effortless upheaval of British colonialism, stripping it of any authority with this
simple phrase. Antoinette immediately defends her dream, saying, “How can you ask that?” and Christophine responds, “I never see the damn place, how I know” (WSS 101). She goes on, “I know what I see with my eyes and I never see it. Besides I ask myself is this place like they tell us?...I hear it cold to freeze your bones and they thief your money, clever like the devil. You have money in your pocket, you look again and bam!” (WSS 101). While Christophine might be referring to petty street crimes, she also critiques the way in which English law gives Antoinette’s money to her husband.

England’s colonial project inflicted countless namings and misnamings. Carole Boyce Davies writes that even the names Caribbean writers use to identify themselves carry a history of mistakes: “The terms we use to name ourselves (Black, African, African-American…West Indian, Caribbean, Hispanic, People of Color, Women of Color, Afro-Caribbean, Third World and so on) carry their strings of echoes and inscriptions. Each represents an original misnaming and the simultaneous constant striving of the dispossessed for full representation” (Boyce Davies 5). In this way, the colonial project of naming infects each attempt to self-identify. Boyce Davies writes also that each “arrival” at a new name or definition marks only a “new departure, a new interrogation of meaning, new contradictions” (Boyce Davies 5). By questioning England’s very existence, Christophine also interrogates the impact and function of its name, and in turn, England’s ability to name. While this passage could be read as Christophine's ignorance—her understanding only extending so far as she can see—it also asserts the power of a different way of knowing, collapsing the western binary of mind separated from and privileged over body. Thus, Christophine occupies “demonic ground,” beyond the fantasy of England’s wolds. She gives new
power and meaning to sight, projecting an embodied way of knowing: “I know what I see with my eyes” (WSS 101).

In Part Two, Rochester begins his process of renaming Antoinette “Bertha.” Each of these moments is followed by Antoinette’s calls to Christophine: “Oh Pheena, Pheena, help me” (WSS 140). The world of the novel increasingly relies upon Christophine, almost constituting the world of Granbois through her voice. Ambreen Hai writes of Christophine’s constructive power: “Christophine clearly emerges in the novel as a significant protofeminist figure, adored by Antoinette, distrusted by Antoinette’s English husband, fiercely protective of the former, boldly confrontational with the latter, speaking truth to power” (493). Like Mardorassian, Hai places Christophine in a “protofeminist” project of resistance. As Antoinette’s narrative becomes more fractured, the novel moves out to Christophine, leaving Granbois estate and going to Christophine’s small, private house. While Spivak emphasizes the way Rhys pushes Christophine out, she fails to mention how, earlier in the novel, Christophine chooses to leave the honeymoon house and go home with her son. She leaves with ease, and Amélie signals her departure with the simple phrase, “Christophine is going” (WSS 91) As Antoinette’s voice becomes more fractured and unreliable, Christophine’s voice and sight become clearer and more pervasive.

With each new name fastened to Antoinette, space opens in the text for Christophine to speak. Antoinette also becomes bound to her mother’s name, Annette. Daniel Cosway, a possible half-brother of Antoinette, informs Rochester that Annette was mentally ill. So, the name Bertha also attempts to sever any ties to mental
illness in Antoinette’s family. This of course has the opposite effect, beginning a process that “breaks her up” (WSS 139). At the end of this scene, Christophine says, “Listen doudou che. Plenty people fasten bad words on you and on your mother. I know it” (WSS 103). Addressing Antoinette with endearment, Christophine recognizes the “fastening” of language. The name Bertha becomes fastened to Antoinette’s string of names, adding to this associative identity and further cleaving her character. While Christophine’s voice becomes more powerful, she is still bound by the Anglo-European novel form—still an imagined, constructed character—not the fully realized voice of the subaltern.

Later in the novel, the process of renaming Antoinette intensifies, with Rochester repeatedly calling her “Bertha, my dear Bertha.” (WSS 123). Antoinette (armed with the love/obeah potion from Christophine) calls Rochester into her bedroom saying, “Not Bertha tonight” (WSS 123). He replies, “Of course, on this of all nights, you must be Bertha” (WSS 123). After this, she concedes, “As you wish,” and Rochester reflects, “As I stepped into her room I noticed the white powder strewn on the floor. That was the first thing I asked her—about the powder. I asked what it was. She said it was to keep cockroaches away” (WSS 123). Here, Antoinette scatters a white powder highly reminiscent of the English snow. It also recalls how black servants repeatedly called Antoinette “white cockroach” in her childhood. By covering the floor in white powder—white on the white cockroaches—Antoinette covers and repels her Creole self and responds to Rochester’s attempts to blacken her, which we see more clearly in Jane Eyre. Because of Rochester’s renaming, Antoinette attempts to whiten herself, constructing a false English identity through the experience of
snow. She says, “Haven’t you noticed that there are no cockroaches in this house and no centipedes,” meaning on some level that Antoinette, the white cockroach, is gone. When Antoinette accepts her renaming, saying, “As you wish” to Rochester, she also concedes to an eradication of her self.

With both Antoinette’s so-called “double” Tia, and her later pairing with Amélie, Rhys draws attention to the “thin” lines between Antoinette and these two figures. Antoinette poisons Rochester with Christophine’s love potion. He wakes in the dark feeling suffocated, only able to retch painfully. Rochester briefly leaves the estate, and when he returns, he expects Amélie to find him, and they sleep together, just “behind the thin partition” dividing them from Antoinette’s bedroom (WSS 127). Earlier in the novel, Tia steals Antoinette’s dress, forcing Antoinette to wear her own. Tia “never wore any” underclothes though, so we know that this dress figures as a kind of flimsy veil between the two (WSS 22). These descriptions of some transparent screen between Antoinette and Tia and Amélie can be read with irony. The doublings or pairings are unsuccessful—Antoinette can’t access the experience of Tia or Amélie. After Amélie and Rochester have sex, Rochester pays her so that she can leave Massacre. While Rhys always draws attention to the sexual slavery of her white protagonists, even here the pairing with Amélie is unsuccessful. Antoinette’s family paid Rochester to marry her, whereas Rochester pays Amélie. The thinning, translucent partitions between Antoinette and other black women in the novel ultimately draw attention to the gaping space—the wide sea—between them.

While stones and veils are separate motifs, they operate similarly. As contracted, small objects, they expand in the text to create “boulders,” or large
partitions between the black characters and Antoinette. Brathwaite writes that if we try to post-colonize Rhys, then “there is no immanent boulder — or stone! between herself & Tia” (“Helen of Our Wars” 74). Thus, the stone, the small wedge held in Tia’s hand, must also be recognized as an “immanent boulder”—great and immovable.

“The Explosive Scream”: Christophine’s Forced Poetics

After this scene, Christophine subverts the novel’s form of colonial mimicry by turning Rochester into the mimic subject. As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis uses Edouard Glissant’s writing on “forced” and “natural” poetics to understand this subversion. Christophine’s body yearns towards expression or a defiant, “explosive scream” (Glissant 123). In a scene of confrontation between Christophine and Rochester, Christophine attains some level of voice. However, the written seeks to immobilize and silence her. Thus, drawing upon Spivak’s argument, Christophine must inevitably leave the narrative, positioned between the silence of the subaltern and the “explosive scream” of Caribbean speech.

Glissant’s writing on a forced poetics, or expression negated by a “deficient” language, is strikingly like the role of Christophine’s body and voice in her final scene. Her patois can’t be easily brought into the European novelistic tradition, although as Hai notes, modernist breaks offer some space for her demonic discourse.⁸ Although

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⁸ Hai suggests another way to read defiant silences in the novel, arguing that the unreliable narration of the modernist novel “self-consciously” enables “the subaltern to speak” (496). She writes that through modernist formal techniques, Rhys’s white narrators offer “paradoxical access to the agency and subjectivities of their black subaltern servants” (496). Thus, the breakdown of meaning in modernist texts opens up demonic spaces of meaning making for the black Caribbean woman.
Glissant was writing in 1989, the problem of how to bring oral forms into the written is still one of the most pervasive issues and goals in Caribbean writing (John, *Clear Word* 62). Christophine defiantly questions England and the power of its name, shaping the demonic terrain of the novel, yet her poetics is always forced or constrained. Her expression “is negated,” because as Spivak reminds: “[Christophine] cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text…in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native” (“Three Women’s Texts” 253).

Thus, Christophine attains some level of voice or expression in the following passage, but the written form negates her and immobilizes her—at the moment of speech.

Just as Coco, Tia, and Antoinette are bound by a complex system of colonial mimicry in Part One, Rochester becomes a mimic subject in Part Two and repeats after Christophine. First, Christophine confronts Rochester by suggesting he was sexually violent towards Antoinette: “I undress Antoinette so she can sleep cool and easy; it’s then I see you very rough with her eh?” (*WSS* 137). Christophine berates him further, with her condemning refrain: “And then you want to break her up…all you want is to break her up” (*WSS* 138). Rochester responds with some salvaged agency:

(Not the way you mean, I thought)
‘But she hold out eh? She hold out’.
(Yes, she held out. A pity)
‘So you pretend to believe all the lies that damn bastard tell you.’
(That damn bastard tell you)
Now every word she said was echoed, echoed loudly in my head.
‘So that you can leave her alone.’
(Leave her alone)
‘Not telling her why.’
(Why?) (*WSS* 138-139).
Rochester’s voice fades as he mimics Christophine, and soon, he responds with basic clippings of Christophine’s words. The parentheticals point to Rochester’s “partial presence;” as units of grammar neither spoken, nor entirely silent, they situate him between silence and voice (Bhabha 127). This scene subverts the dominant form of colonial mimicry, placing Rochester in the position of silent subject. Here, a thin partition emerges between Rochester and Christophine, marking a quick turn between subject and mimic, white presence and black semblance, that expands in the scene. With a mention of renaming, Rochester regains some agency from Christophine’s echoing voice and responds to her:

‘She tell me in the middle of all this you start calling her names. Marionette. Some word so.’
‘Yes, I remember, I did.’
*(Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta)*
‘That word mean doll, eh? Because she don’t speak. You want to force her to cry and to speak:
*(Force her to cry and to speak)*
‘But she won’t. So you think up something else. You bring that worthless girl to play with next door and you talk and laugh and love so that she hear everything. You meant her to hear.’
Yes, that didn’t just happen. I meant it.
*(I lay awake all night long after they were asleep, and as soon as it was light I got up and dressed and saddled Preston. And I came to you. Oh Christophine. O Pheena, Pheena, help me.)* (WSS 139-140).

Here, Rochester calls Antoinette, “*(Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta)*” adding to her ever-growing list of names, unfixing and untethering her from the narrative. Christophine carefully controls his speech and thought in this performative script. His voice returns at pointed moments, responding with clarity: “I meant it.”

The parenthetical immediately following this phrase is the most ambivalent and comprised. When one voice cries “Oh Christophine, O Pheena, Pheena, help me” this
reminds of Antoinette’s pleas from earlier in the novel. Thus this can be read as Antoinette speaking through Rochester—again as a mime—or it can be read as Rochester controlling and drawing Antoinette into speech. He plays both marionettist and marionette, colonizer and mimic here.

While Christophine is driven out of WSS because she can’t be contained by a rewriting of a canonical English text, it’s important to note that it’s precisely Christophine’s orality that can’t be contained. At the end of the scene, Rochester comments, “She began to mutter to herself. Not in patois. I knew the sound of patois now” (146). Here, Christophine seems to speak a language even further beyond the conventions of English than patois or Creole, making her orality beyond comprehension. Furthermore, Spivak draws attention to her final words: “Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know” (qtd. in “Three Women’s Texts” 146). Christophine refuses to be immobilized, controlled, or possessed by written expression. She “walked away without looking back”—her body, intimately tied to orality, refuses this silence or rest. This scene can be read as a further silencing or refracting of the subaltern, or a defiant insistence on Christophine’s orality, “echoing, echoing loudly” in Rochester’s head.

“On Seeing England”: A Return to the Cardboard House

Part Three of the novel returns to Antoinette’s utterly fractured, dissonant voice. From Massacre, Rochester takes Antoinette to the Thornfield Hall of Jane Eyre,

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9 The phrase “On Seeing England” is the title of an early essay by Jamaica Kincaid. I’ll begin Chapter Two by looking at this piece.
placing her under the care of a cruel nurse, Grace Poole. Antoinette thinks, “Her name oughtn’t to be Grace. Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass” (WSS 162). Like with Massacre, there is a certain dark humor in naming her emotionally abusive caretaker ‘Grace’. This scene is highly self-conscious, with Antoinette stating the importance of a name and recognizing that once she was renamed, “Antoinette [drifted] out of the window with her scents.” Here, she is fully aware of her partiality, her lack of presence. Furthermore, just as Christophine had questioned England’s existence, here, Antoinette refuses to believe that she has been brought to England. She thinks, “Then I open the door and walk into their world. It is, as I always knew, made of cardboard…They tell me I am in England but I don’t believe them. We lost our way to England” (WSS 162). Both her sense of place and of self are lost in this moment—she drifts out the window, out the door, and into this fictive cardboard world.

The novel returns to Coco’s spectacle of mimicry when Antoinette dreams of setting Thornfield on fire, and then wakes to enact this dream. Throwing the candle down the staircase, she dreams of Coco, Tia, and Rochester: “I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, Qui est la? Qui est la? And the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha! The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings…Tia was there…And I heard the man’s voice, Bertha! Bertha!!…I called “Tia!” and jumped and woke” (WSS 170-171). Here, the use of Qui est la? is different from in the opening scene—Coco no longer asks the question to respond to his own name, but rather to recognize a stranger. Even in Thornfield, Rochester goes unnamed—he
is merely “the man who hated me.” He cries out “Bertha! Bertha!” in response to the parrot’s question ‘Who is there?’, and almost to correct him or name herself, Antoinette cries out “Tia!” and jumps from the railing. Here, Antoinette repeats Coco’s screeching fall to his death. The wind caught her hair and “it streamed out like wings,” writing her name in fire-red: Tia. While this moment could be read as exhibiting an ultimate, spiritual connection between Tia and Antoinette (Wilson Harris, “Jean Rhys’s ‘Tree of Life’”), many critics have argued that in the end, there is still an “immanent boulder” between them (Kamau Brathwaite, “Helen of Our Wars”). With each name affixed to and cleaved from Antoinette, the grotesque spectacle of the name is heightened. As she reminds, “Names matter.” Antoinette, by both calling herself Tia and crying out for her, configures another moment of contradiction. Within the bound string of names—Annette, Antoinette, Tia—a statement of any one name echoes all of the others.

As we’ve seen, mimicry operates through the “slippages” and “excess” between blackness and whiteness, mimic and master, marionette and marionettist. The novel uses several motifs to express this ambivalent ‘between space’. Most often, names fracture and split both black and white bodies. As Bhabha says, “black skin splits under the racist gaze,” but this splitting always reminds that the white body is never entirely whole or unified. Thus, mimicry in Wide Sargasso Sea always expands and ruptures this space—it turns thin partitions and underclothes into gaping spaces, and small stones and rocks into “immanent boulders.” Names violently cleave out the novel, yet both Christophine and Tia traverse this ambivalent gap, establishing a “demonic ground” of voice and orality.
Migration and the Possibility of Speech in Jamaica Kincaid

England...You think there is such a place? — Christophine, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The space between the idea of something and its reality is always wide and deep and dark — Jamaica Kincaid, “On Seeing England for the First Time”

Chapter One considers how naming in *Wide Sargasso Sea* only signals non-existence—it becomes a device of colonial mimicry at the beginning of the novel, and by the end, each new arrival at a name intones a history of misnamings. I also explore the way in which Christophine refuses to be immobilized by the written form, as it repeatedly holds and negates her at the moment of her speech. Rhys presents a kind of failure to voice the subaltern woman—Christophine must leave the narrative. But before she does, Christophine gestures toward a “demonic” reverse discourse, one grounded in the “(mis)use” of standard English and the novel form. In this way, Chapter Two will move forward from Christophine’s radical question, “England...You think there is such a place?” She goes on to say, “I know what I see with my eyes and I never see it” (*WSS* 101). We see a similar negotiation of the “imaginary” and perceived “real” England in Jamaica Kincaid’s early essay, “On Seeing England for the First Time.”

This essay takes sensory encounters with England as its point of departure, repeatedly creating rifts between an imaginary and reality of England. For example, the essay begins with a young Kincaid in Antigua: “When I saw England for the first time, I was a child in school sitting at a desk,” and later builds upon the absurdity of this statement, “When my teacher had pinned this map up on the blackboard, she said ‘This is England’—and she said it with authority, seriousness, and adoration”
(Kincaid, “On Seeing England” 32). Much like moments in WSS, this attempt to name, pin, and access the reality of England is impossible—Kincaid is of course not “seeing” England when she looks at the carefully colored map, nor is her teacher able to fix any reality of England when she confidently says, “This is England.” In this way, Kincaid is also concerned with the power of names, but more significantly, she focuses on the “wide and deep and dark” space between being named and unnamed, between the idea of something and its reality (“On Seeing England” 37).

This chapter will thus consider two “betweens” that Kincaid presents, focusing on the state between being named and unnamed in At the Bottom of the River, and the role of migration in Annie John. Throughout her work, Kincaid asserts that both named and unnamed girls have the ability to travel and migrate across this “wide and deep and dark” space, while men often don’t. The final story of At the Bottom of the River, for example, begins with a third-person description of a man. He lies on a bed in a small room, unable to “conceive of flocks of birds in migratory flight,” and thus unable to migrate beyond confined spaces like the collection’s girl repeatedly does (Kincaid, A TRB 63). He also cannot conceive “the completeness of the above and the below and his own spirit resting in between” (ATBR 64). “Above and below” might refer to a kind of body/mind, earthly/divine split, and again, he can’t access the “between” of this—the reconciliation of these splits. In the following paragraphs he stands “forever, crossing and recrossing the threshold,” but before him, stretches a dreadful “silence,” a “vastness”—“its length and breadth and depth immeasurable” (ATBR 68). After this, he seems to leave the narrative, unable to cross this “length and breadth and depth,” or similarly, the “wide and deep and dark” space between an idea
and reality, England and Antigua. This distance is immeasurable for him, but in Kincaid’s writing, girls have the unique capacity to cross this space, to travel both physically and mentally. It is their very transition from girlhood to womanhood that allows for this capacity to migrate.

While much of Kincaid’s writing is concerned with her early life in Antigua, it also occupies a fraught space between the US and the Caribbean. Scholar Catherine John writes about Kincaid’s isolation, and in some ways self-alienation, from her original home and other Caribbean writers. One example of this separation is marked by Kincaid’s name change in 1973. John writes that she changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid to “avoid being ridiculed by her family for taking up writing,” or as Kincaid says in an interview, to “escape the thing [she] had been born into” (John, Clear Word 76). Kincaid boldly chooses a name that both separates herself from her family and her place of birth while simultaneously claiming or connecting herself to the space of the Caribbean, to Jamaica. John also writes of the “irony of the significance of the name ‘Jamaica’, given its status as one of the most recognized and familiar of the Caribbean islands to the American imaginary, cannot be overlooked” (Clear Word 77). Her name change constitutes a simultaneous effort to camouflage or hide the self and also to draw attention to an “American imaginary” of the Caribbean. In A Small Place (1988) Kincaid writes, “Antigua is a small place, a small island. It is nine miles wide by twelve miles long” (ASP 80). Her name change further displaces Antigua, drawing attention to one of the largest Caribbean islands over the “nine miles wide by twelve miles long” Antigua.
Catherine John argues that Kincaid largely ignores the history of Caribbean literature that she writes into. John writes that her explorations of migration and “what it means to come of age in the British West Indies” have been constant themes in Caribbean writing for decades (John, *Clear Word* 77). While Kincaid’s writing is very much embedded in a history of migratory and *bildungsroman* narratives, at the first international conference of Caribbean women writers, Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison stated, “It’s about time that our critics began to take us seriously,” to which Kincaid replied, “Are there many of us?” (*Clear Word* 79). This question draws attention to Kincaid’s lack of connection to other Caribbean women writers, many of whom write on the same topics of motherhood, naming, and migration.

Many of the writers this thesis considers, such as Erna Brodber and Sylvia Wynter, were at this conference. But again, Kincaid does not acknowledge the scope of this community. Kincaid also distances herself through formal techniques, such as never using creole words or Brathwaite’s “nation language” in her writing (John, *Clear Word* 95). Some have even suggested that she largely ignores racism in works like *Lucy*, which is her most autobiographical and softens, in some ways, her experience as an au pair in the US (Adisa 6). Thus, Kincaid occupies a difficult space in scholarship on Caribbean women’s writing. At the level of both theme and form, her writing privileges states of between or becoming through migration and the *bildungsroman* structure. She herself is wedged between categories of writers and identities, creating a contradiction in the moment of her personal renaming.

Finally, this chapter also functions as a movement between Jean Rhys and Erna Brodber, although these three authors present no direct progression or lineage.
in Caribbean writing and scholarship. Still, I’ll look at how *Wide Sargasso Sea* tracks the breakdown and fragmentation of its protagonist, while both Kincaid’s and Brodber’s works suggest modes of healing and reconciliation of the split between body and mind. Scholar Helen Tiffin similarly writes that Kincaid and Brodber explore “erasure/abuse and the potential for retrieval of the colonised Caribbean body” (Tiffin 912). She notes how both authors “trace the processes of female embodiment and the retrieval of Caribbean voice and body from its entrapment/erasure within European script” (Tiffin 912). *Annie John* is also the most thematically similar to Rhys’s *WSS* and Brodber’s *Myal*. In all three of these works, the narrator undergoes a psychological or physical illness set in relation to a migration. Antoinette becomes sick before her confinement in England, where her condition clearly worsens. Annie John becomes unexpectedly sick at the end of the novel, and her obeah–practicing grandmother, Ma Chess, brings her to health just before she leaves for England. And lastly, Brodber’s Ella moves to the US, where her husband exploits her and she becomes ill, establishing migration as a violent process. While little writing pairs Brodber and Kincaid, Tiffin’s quote reveals the way in which this thesis is moving *towards* a retrieved “Caribbean voice and body.”

Inauguration and Foreclosure in *At the Bottom of the River*

*At the Bottom of the River* presents ten stories, beginning with “Girl” and ending with the title story. All of the stories are narrated by unnamed girls or women, loosely following a progression towards womanhood and specifically, sexual maturity. The narrators differ in age throughout, but they maintain some unity of tone and
voice. While the text resists any consolidation of the narrator, for the sake of clarity in this section, I’ll refer to ‘the girl’ as she shifts and multiplies from the first story. This section explores her opening vulnerability—she is unnamed and thus threatened with the possibility of being named. The collection moves towards a moment in which the girl feels her name “filling up [her] mouth” (ATBR 82). However, her name is never spoken, nor heard. Through states of becoming, blurring boundaries of the home, and an inability to mark the moment of transition between girlhood and womanhood, Kincaid empowers the girl’s transitioning body with the ability to cross boundaries and migrate.

“Girl” moves through a series of instructions from an unnamed authority to her presumed daughter. These orders tell the addressee how best to be a girl on her way to womanhood. In this short, three-page story, Kincaid introduces the theme of “becoming,” through the refrain, “the slut you are bent on becoming,” and later, “the slut I know you are so bent on becoming” (ATBR 3-4). Thus, the story suggests that the girl is brought “into being,” and specifically sexual being, through language. Kincaid extends this verb, though, placing the girl in this constant state of process, alteration, and movement. The process of becoming is slightly altered by the word ‘bent’, which suggests a curved tendency towards a fixed state.

In “Girl,” Kincaid draws attention to the way in which the unnamed and unmarked body of the Caribbean girl becomes the site of gender construction. Her process of becoming involves both a normative, public script and a transgressive, private script (Bailey 108). After each mention of the girl becoming a slut, the speaker instructs her to clean something, either her body or the house, suggesting that her
embodied, sexual life will always be tied to her domestic life. In many ways, these instructions read as a kind of script or list of stage directions for the performance of womanhood (Bailey 108). Carol Bailey argues that “this landmark Kincaid story is in dialogue with Butler’s theorization of the centrality of stylized acts in the creating and crafting of gendered selves” (Bailey 106). Thus, each of these simple domestic tasks—how to set tables, how to iron, how to sweep the house—craft not a specific person, but an unnamed “gendered self” (ATBR 5). Bailey suggests, though, that embedded in this tight, condensed script is a “presentation of the transgressive potential of performance” (Bailey 109). She argues that the speaker stresses “public performance” with the phrase, “this is how you make medicine to throw away a child” (ATBR 5). An abortion suggests a possible transgression from the carefully scripted performance—it offers a way to elude the normative script of womanhood, the script that controls her body. Most importantly, Bailey concludes that Kincaid “foregrounds the body” as a means to both endorse and resist colonial models of femininity (Bailey 120).

Just as Bailey draws attention to Butler’s work on performative acts and gender construction, I’d like to consider the connections between At the Bottom of the River and Butler’s later work Excitable Speech. In this 1997 study, Judith Butler is concerned with how being called a name is one of the ways in which a subject is constituted in language. Most important to this study, she writes of how forms of address operate not only as threats, “but [also] there is a strong sense in which the body is alternately sustained and threatened through modes of address” (Butler 5). In the same way, “Girl” alternates between this sustainment and threat. It offers the girl a way to survive and also threatens to constitute her as a slut—a statement of an
apparently inevitable becoming. “Girl” mirrors Butler’s argument that language constitutes the subject through both inauguration and apparent foreclosure—the “you” is vulnerable and inaugurated by the possibility of being named, yet somewhat fixed by the term “slut.” Just as Spivak’s work is concerned with moments of misnaming and how this refracts and renders the subaltern woman silent, *At the Bottom of the River* is primarily concerned with what it means to be caught between being named and unnamed.

The mother in “Girl” presents a mode of survival through various speech acts, specifically for a girl in a postcolonial Caribbean context. Butler identifies J.L. Austin’s “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” speech acts: the former being a speech act that makes something happen in the act of saying it, and the latter being a speech act that produces certain consequences (Butler 3). Orders like “don’t pick people’s flowers—you might catch something,” or directions on how to make medicine for a cold, offer practical advice on how to sustain a self (*ATBR* 5). By contrast, saying the girl is bent on becoming a slut reads as more of a threat, proleptically constituting the girl as a “slut” through the speaker’s address. The girl is never directly called a slut, though—she is rather in the position of “becoming” one. She is thus both sustained by the older woman’s instructions about good housekeeping, but she is also repeatedly threatened by her advisor’s conviction that she will become a “slut,” which implies some as yet undeveloped proclivity in the girl that will determine her future conduct.

Yet “Girl” also suggests that there are moments of failure or fracturing in the constitution of the subject through illocutionary speech. Butler argues that speech is always to some extent out of the speaker’s control, and poses the rhetorical question,
“Even if hate speech works to constitute a subject through discursive means, is that constitution necessarily final and effective?” (Butler 15, 19). Such a faultline in “Girl” might be when the addressee speaks back, indicated by two brief counterarguments set off in italics. The final two sentences of the story read, “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” (ATBR 5). Here, the girl both questions and reinforces her social constitution. She asks a question—defying and fracturing the speaker’s rhetorical form. However, it’s clear that the “kind of woman” who can’t touch the bread is the “slut” the speaker has been warning her against becoming. The mother says, “you mean to say that after all…” suggesting the possible futility of these instructions.

However, Kincaid’s girl is never entirely set in her position—she might yet be named and fixed through speech. Later, Butler discusses how the one who names is presumed to already have a name (Butler 29). She also argues that the “vulnerability to being named constitutes a constant condition of the speaking subject” (Butler 30). Interestingly, neither the speaker nor the girl are given names. The girl certainly exists in a kind of constant vulnerability, waiting to be named—waiting for the name “to fix, to freeze, to delimit, to render substantial,” yet that moment never arrives (Butler 35). Kincaid thus leaves both the character of the girl and the narrative itself unresolved, since the very repetition of “slut,” creates in the interval of its saying an opening to refuse its interpellating power.
In this way, we can read the following stories in *At the Bottom of the River* as attempts to fix and render the girl substantial through language. However, the girl repeatedly resists attempts to freeze her—she remains in movement, “emptying and filling,” formless and blurring any defined shape of herself. This motif of emptying and filling the narrator’s voice is introduced in the third story, “At Last.” This story is again told from the perspective of an unnamed narrator, moving through rooms in a house, and then the space of a yard. Like Kincaid’s tight, condensed form, the movements in this story are concentrated in the closed space of the home. However, this space is extended beyond the confines of a realist narration. She says, “I’ve walked the length of this room so many times, by now I have traveled a desert” (*ATBR* 14). The repeated interval of her movement makes this expansion possible, transforming the room into a sprawling desert. Through such “surrealist” images of the home, Carole Boyce Davies argues that Kincaid is rewriting “the boundaries of what constitutes home” (Boyce Davies 129).

The home’s boundaries are ruptured further, with the phrase “nothing is measured here” (*ATBR* 18). The story ends, “The stillness comes and the stillness goes. The sun. The moon. Still the sounds of voices, muted and then clear, emptying and filling up” (*ATBR* 19). Even in ending with perceived stillness, Kincaid places this stillness in transition and movement—it “comes” and “goes.” The repeated use of the word ‘still’, with “still the sounds of voices,” further enforces this contradiction—any effort to fix or render the body still and silent, is resisted by a fluctuating movement and the sounds of voices “emptying and filling up.” This movement, of emptying and
filling, contracting and expanding, persists throughout the collection, suggesting the blurred boundaries of home, voice, and body.

The stories “Wingless” and “Blackness” also reveal attempts to render the girl’s identity frozen. “Wingless” begins, “The small children are reading from a book filled with simple words and sentences…The children have already learned to write their names in beautiful penmanship” (ATBR 20). Here, the children are constituted through language, and unlike “Girl,” are already foreclosed by names and the ability to write them. In this story, the girl is decidedly separate from the children and describes the “pupa stage of her life.” Thus we can assume she is going through puberty, on the edge of adulthood (ATBR 21). However, she seems aged beyond her teen years, exhausted. She says, “And yet I myself, at my age, have suffered so…My disappointments stand up and grow even taller. They will not be lost to me. There they are. Let me pin tags on them. Let me have them registered…” (ATBR 23). Here, she claims her disappointments and wants to pin, classify, and register them in some kind of epistemic attempt to know herself. This phrase “let me pin tags on them” is highly reminiscent of labelling insects, much like her “pupa” self. Thus, this also seems to be an attempt to pinpoint a moment of transition from girlhood to womanhood—she’s unable to do this, though, as she’s in a constant state of transition and becoming.

Later, she notes a series of creatures who are made still: “That mosquito…now a stain on the wall. That lizard, running up and down, up and down…now so still. That ant, bloated and sluggish, a purseful of eggs in its jaws…now so still” (ATBR 27). The list goes on in this way, with insects expanding through movement—“running up
and down,” “bloated”—and through repeated ellipses, until each is fixed. Similarly, the pubescent narrator describes her moving hands, until they are made still through sleep. She says, “My hands, brown on this side, pink on this side, now indiscriminately dangerous, now vagabond and prodigal…now folding an ice-cream cone, now reaching with longing, now clasped in prayer, now feeling for reassurance, now pleading my desires, now pleasing, and now, even now, so still in bed in sleep” (ATBR 27-28). While this final line could be read as the girl succumbing to stillness or a pinning through language, the repeated use of the word “now” disrupts any immobility. Her hands resist stillness through a variety of actions—folding, reaching, clasping, and feeling—and the “now” or present of these movements becomes conflated with the final moment of stillness. These movements also remind of masturbation—itself an act of transition and sexual vulnerability. Kincaid often writes of the first time her female protagonists touch themselves, describing in Autobiography of My Mother how Xuela always laced her fingers through her pubic hair (qtd. in Savory, “Connections” 30). In this scene of Annie’s pleading/pleasing desires, we cannot decipher what “now” she is referring to—“now, even now” indicates some epistemology of the present, some ability to know the self as it turns from girlhood to womanhood, but the narrator’s body is inevitably turning and folding away from the now. Even in sleep, she resists language’s efforts to freeze her.

While the girl’s race is introduced in “Wingless”—with her hands “brown on this side, pink on this side”—her race becomes most explicit in the story “Blackness.” This piece begins with as description of blackness as it “falls,” saying “It falls in silence and yet it is deafening, for no other sound except the blackness falling can be heard”
(ATBR 46). Just as Christophine’s silence in WSS always reverberates with the power of her voice, here, blackness’s silence is “deafening,” embodying a number of contradictions. The blackness is something both entirely present, loud, and selved, and something invisible, silent, and separate from the self. She goes on to say, “I can no longer point to myself and say ‘I’. In the blackness my voice is silent” (ATBR 47). The source of the violence seems to be the way in which the voice of the black body is perceived as silent always.

Soon, the girl more fully inhabits the “silent voice.” She says, “I hear the silent voice; it stands opposite the blackness and yet it does not oppose the blackness, for conflict is not a part of its nature…The silent voice enfolds me so completely that even in memory the blackness is erased. I live in silence. The silence is without boundaries” (ATBR 52). The silent voice is set apart from, but not necessarily in opposition to, the blackness. It pervades the narrative, enfolding her, and erasing the memory of blackness. Just as the blackness was formless, free-flowing, here too, silence has no boundaries. The final lines read, “I am no longer ‘I’. Living in the silent voice, I am at last at peace. Living in the silent voice, I am at last erased” (ATBR 52). Here, the narrator asserts her own erasure through a simple, first person phrase. “I am no longer ‘I’” consolidates the individual in the moment she also annihilates herself. Furthermore, just as she is erased in the final line, “blackness is erased” a few sentences earlier. Again, blackness seems repeatedly set apart from, but ultimately bound to, herself. The silent voice is described as “[falling] softly,” just as blackness, silent yet deafening, fell in the opening line. Thus the silent voice and blackness are
intimately bound, drawing the individual into being, while also erasing her into formlessness.

While “Blackness” is perhaps the most surreal, “formless,” story in the collection, “At the Bottom of the River” seems to slowly shift towards realism, with a focus on everyday objects and details. As noted earlier, this story, unlike any of the others, begins with a third-person description of a man. After he leaves the narrative, the first person narrator shifts—at times a child, at times a woman, and occasionally, a divine force. Now, we see all of the narrators in one story—the girl, the pupa, and even the formless narrator of “Blackness.” At the bottom of the river, the narrator describes seeing “a house of only one room, with an A-shaped roof” (ATBR 75). Boyce Davies calls this the narrator’s “house of writing,” perhaps arguing that the houses Kincaid constructs and deconstructs throughout the collection mirror the way in which Kincaid’s writing similarly alternates between construction and deconstruction, form and formlessness (Boyce Davies 126). In the final pages, the narrator describes standing “as if I were a prism, many-sided and transparent, refracting and reflecting light as it reached me, light that could never be destroyed” (ATBR 80). To build on Boyce Davies’s argument, the narrator seems to embody the “A-shaped” house of writing as a many-sided prism. In this way, she occupies a space between the narrative at its most realist—a house—and its most surreal—a prism of refracting and reflecting light.

After turns between the real and surreal, the narrator finally becomes nearly “fixed, frozen, rendered substantial,” to use Butler’s phrase (Butler 35). In the final paragraph, the narrator steps into yet another room and catalogues the objects around
her. She says, “In the light of the lamp, I see some books, I see a chair, I see a table, I see a pen” (ATBR 82). She constructs a more material reality—perhaps made possible by the prism’s light, now refracted through the lamp in this scene. The passage continues, “I see these things in the light of the lamp, all perishable and transient, how bound up I know I am in all that is human endeavor, to all that is past and to all that shall be, to all that shall be lost and leave no trace” (ATBR 82). Here, the human endeavor is that which perishes. So while this scene can be read as an assertion of the human, the material, it more importantly asserts the utter transience of a book, a chair, a table, a pen. Each of these objects, though, refer to language and the writing process. So once again, Kincaid deconstructs the house of her writing—the A-shaped roof or the narrator’s prism.

The story ends, “I claim these things then—mine—and now feel myself grow solid and complete, my name filling up my mouth” (ATBR 82). Here, she is “solid and complete,” possibly “fixed” or “frozen.” Rather than speaking back in rebellion, though, the rebellion seems to be the private name we don’t hear. Again, this name filling up her mouth is caught between inauguration and foreclosure—between the possibility of speech and the threat of being fixed by it. Just as Butler argues that language or a text often undoes its own assertions, here the narrator doesn’t provide an ultimate name, but rather must reiterate meaning, ever in search of some impossible, original name. This opens up the possibility that, unlike Antoinette, Kincaid’s narrators can avoid the violent pinning of names, no longer insects in a collection, as “Wingless”’s narrator is. The girl’s name fills up her mouth—solid and complete—and is wholly associated with her body. Her body seems drawn towards
the possibility of a name, or this edge of speech, but ultimately closed to the idea that an original or exact name could ever be spoken.

“Emptying and Filling”: The Migrating Body in *Annie John*

While the narrator(s) of *At the Bottom of the River* are not named, Kincaid’s first novel *Annie John*, is named after its narrator. The novel follows the young Annie John living in Antigua and tracks a number of splits between herself and the women and girls around her—first her mother, then her two young loves/friendships, Gwen and the Red Girl. At the end of the novel, Annie John leaves Antigua to become a nurse in England, and we finally learn that she and her mother share the same name (reminding of the bound names in *WSS*). Throughout, Annie John dreams of moving to Belgium, so, in many ways, the novel moves towards this departure for England.

Many have noted continuities among Kincaid’s works. Boyce Davies argues that “*Annie John*, as an autobiographical narrative, functions as a decoder of much that is unexplainable in the mysterious world of the first book, *At the Bottom of the River*” (Boyce Davies 124). And similarly, Kincaid’s next novel *Lucy* begins with teenage Lucy’s life as an au pair in the US, with a similar age, job, and migration narrative as that of Annie John. In this way, Kincaid’s works code and decode one another, disrupting the set bounds of a novel or short story.

Of all of these protagonists, Annie John most clearly represents migration and the liberating potential of Boyce Davies’s “migratory subjectivities.” Migration and the power of movement between Antigua and the US, Belgium, or England, pervade Kincaid’s writing. The final chapter of *Annie John* begins, “‘My name is Annie John.’
These were the first words that came into my mind as I woke up on the morning of the last day I spent in Antigua…” (Kincaid, *Annie John* 130). Thus, Annie John’s ability to state her name is bound to her ability to leave. Similar to how every name in *WSS* signals a new departure or contradiction, Annie John declares her name and physically departs in the following passages. While Chapter Three will consider how Brodber privileges a return to Jamaica, this chapter will explore how Kincaid privileges migration and spaces *between* a home and a destination.

In *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994), Boyce Davies establishes her theory of “migratory subjectivities.” She argues that Black female subjectivity must be configured “in terms of slipperiness, elsewhere ness” (Boyce Davies 36). The migratory subject thus pursues a space outside or “elsewhere” from dominant discourses (Boyce Davies 37). She elaborates, “Migratory subjects suggests that Black women/’s writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of discussion” (Boyce Davies 36). Here, she argues that Black female subjectivity, specifically Caribbean female subjectivity, are products of migration and so elude our normative terms of post-colonial, subaltern discussion. While Boyce Davies’s work was critically important in establishing diasporic subjectivity and agency, recent scholars have pointed to the problem of privileging “dislocation over location, rupture over continuity, and elsewhere ness over hereness” (Donnell 479). Alison Donnell, in particular, is concerned with how Erna Brodber considers the local or “hereness,” of the Caribbean over sites of metropolitan diaspora or migration. In this way, this chapter also explores a tension between migration and fixedness, or dislocation and location.
Throughout *Annie John*, the “elsewhere,” or as it occurs frequently in the text, the “somewhere,” is privileged. In Chapter Six, “Somewhere, Belgium,” Annie John turns fifteen and dreams of leaving Antigua. She says, “My most frequent daydream now involved scenes of me living alone in Belgium, a place I had picked when I read in one of my books that Charlotte Brontë, the author of my favorite novel, *Jane Eyre*, had spent a year or so there” (*Annie John* 92). Beyond the connection to *WSS*, this scene reveals how Annie John migrates and travels through books. She takes *Jane Eyre* as her vehicle to cross the Sargasso. She goes on, “I had also picked it up because I imagined that it would be a place my mother would find difficult to travel to and so would have to write me letters addressed in this way:

*To: Miss Annie Victoria John*

*Somewhere,*

*Belgium*” (*Annie John* 92).

Annie views her migration as importantly connected to leaving her mother. She wants to be unfixed, unlocatable—somewhere or, channeling Boyce Davies, *elsewhere*. In the same chapter, she says, “My dreams were not unreal representations of something real; my dreams were a part of, and the same as, my real life” (*Annie John* 89).

Although the novel purports a more realist style than *At the Bottom of the River*, it layers dream and reality, folding them into one another and making them one and the same. Thus, the migration narrative, the dream of being “somewhere” or between, is just as important as Annie’s reality.

Just as the novel privileges themes of migration, the writing softens the movement between English and patois. In one scene that “decodes” the first story from *At the Bottom of the River*, Annie speaks to four young boys. Her mother
observes this “spectacle” and later chastises her for behaving like a “slut.” One of these boys had been Annie’s childhood friend—they used to play together and in one game, he had her take off all of her clothes and sit in a red ants’ nest. When she encounters this boy again, he and his friends laugh at her, and she only realizes after that he must have told his friends of this incident. Annie describes her mother’s reaction to the boys’ laughter: “It had pained her to see me behave in the manner of a slut (only she used the French-patois word for it) in the street and that just to see me had caused her to feel shame” (Annie John 102). In this passage, why not use the French-patois word? Why draw attention to its absence with parentheticals? This question becomes more important in the following passage: “The word ‘slut’ (in patois) was repeated over and over, until suddenly it felt as if I were drowning in a well but instead of the well being filled with water it was filled with the word ‘slut,’ and it was pouring through my eyes, my ears, my nostrils, my mouth” (Annie John 102). Here, the quotation marks draw attention to the spoken word “slut,” even while it is not actually spoken. Annie drowns in a word we don’t read. This scene is both more accessible or accommodating for the English reader, and also more obscured or inaccessible. The parentheses draw attention to this rift, but smooth it over, not forcing the English ear to listen to the unfamiliar sound of another language. Furthermore, this scene actualizes the transgressive potential of “Girl.” After the unheard patois drowns Annie, she responds to her mother, “Well, like father like son, like mother like daughter,” shocking her mother into silence (Annie John 102). Those brief moments when “Girl”’s narrator spoke back become emboldened here, through Annie’s voice.
While the parentheticals, “(in patois)” and “(only she used the French-patois word for it)” open up the possibility of another language, one scene in *A Small Place* more pointedly criticizes the role of English. This work of creative non-fiction is Kincaid’s most radical, condemning neocolonial tourism in Antigua. She argues that because of England, she is without a motherland, a fatherland, and “most painful of all,” without a tongue (Kincaid, *ASP* 31). Again in parentheses, she writes, “(For isn’t it odd that the only language in which I have to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed this crime?...” (*ASP* 31). This parenthetical goes on for two more pages, embedding within it two more parentheticals, but never closing the phrase with a final parenthesis. She argues that the language of the criminal is always inflected with his past crimes. By refusing to close the parentheses, she recognizes that her attempt to condemn England is futile. It’s done in an English that is not her own, and so, these crimes bleed into the rest of her text. Her parentheticals in *A Small Place* suggest the violence of Annie’s mother’s phrase was not only the excitable threat, ‘slut’, but more importantly the lost “tongue”—the patois we can’t hear.

Lastly, this chapter looks at how scenes of Annie’s illness and healing precede her migration. In Brodber’s *Myal*, hurricanes and hissing electric storms participate in the healing processes of the novel’s protagonists. In *Annie John*, the storm, “The Long Rain,” as the chapter is called, is similarly bound to Annie’s illness and healing. She describes how there was a long drought before her sickness, but confined to her sickbed, the “rain started to come in heavy torrents” (*Annie John* 109). She says, “I could hear the rain as it came down on the galvanized roof. The sound the rain made
as it landed on the roof pressed me down in my bed, bolted me down…” (Annie John 109). In this way, the heavy rain traps and immobilizes her body—her illness is thus a forced stillness. As the scene continues, her bed becomes a kind of vessel in this storm. Her mother says, “So, Little Miss, huh? Hmmmm.” and Annie extends the phrase: “the ‘So’ was bigger than the ‘Little’, and the ‘Miss’ was bigger than the ‘huh’, and the ‘Hmmmm’ was bigger than all the other words rolled into one. Then all the sound rocked back and forth in my ears, and I had a picture of it; it looked like a large wave constantly dashing up against a wall in the sea” (Annie John 111). Here, she parses her mother’s question out into each word, revealing how her illness also marks a kind of breakdown of speech. The sound “Hmmmm” extends and envelops all other words, rolling them “into one” until the sound becomes something visual—the wave, tactile and moving. The rain continues to pin Annie down, and so she continues this tumultuous journey, waves rocking her ship.

After this moment, Annie dreams of the sea: “I dreamed then that I was walking through warm air filled with soot, heading toward the sea. When I got there, I started to drink in the sea in huge great gulps, because I was so thirsty. I drank and drank until all that was left was the dry seabed” (Annie John 112). Here, Annie takes the whole sea within herself, embodying the large, rocking waves. The sea is a reprieve—it quenches her thirst. The dream continues, “All the water from the sea filled me up, from my toes to my head, and I swelled up very big. But then little cracks began to appear in me and water started to leak out—first in just little seeps and trickles coming out of my seams, then with a loud roar I burst open” (Annie John 112). In this way, she can’t contain the vast sea—her body ruptures open, splitting at
its “seams.” Just as her mother’s words rolled into one rocking sound, here, the water rushes out with a single “loud roar.” This dream emphasizes the constant “emptying and filling” in *At the Bottom of the River*—and rather than the possibility of speech or the name filling up a mouth, this scene reveals the possibility of movement and migration, the rocking waves bloating her body to its fullest, until it breaks.

When Annie’s condition doesn’t improve, her obeah grandmother Ma Chess is called on to take care of her. With no specific remedy or medicine, Ma Chess settles in at the foot of Annie’s bed, eating and sleeping there. She lies with Annie, coaxing food into her mouth, “curled up like a bigger comma, into which [Annie] fit” (*Annie John* 126). In her illness, Annie notes the formal techniques in writing—before, she divided her mother’s phrase into its individual units, and here, she and Ma Chess become a unit of punctuation. After Ma Chess arrives, Annie is quickly healed, with no clear mention of Ma Chess’s powers or how she got better. Annie recovers and seems to almost immediately prepare for England. The final chapter begins with a bold declaration of her name. She says it just as she wakes, also noting, “My name was the last thing I saw the night before, just as I was falling asleep; it was written in big black letters all over my trunk, sometimes followed by my address in Antigua, sometimes followed by my address as it would be in England” (*Annie John* 130). Here, her name signals either her point of departure or her destination—it establishes the poles in her path of movement. The address also mirrors her earlier mention of “Somewhere, Belgium.” Her address “as it would be” marks a potential, unfixed future, as she doesn’t seem to know the exact somewhere of her future in England.
In the final chapter, her body is both the vessel with which she must migrate and the sea she must cross. After exchanging quick goodbyes with her parents, we catch a glimpse of Annie on the ship before the novel’s close: “I went back to my cabin and lay down on my berth. Everything trembled as if it had a spring at its very center. I could hear the small waves lap-lapping around the ship. They made an unexpected sound, as if a vessel filled with liquid had been placed on its side and now was slowly emptying out” (Annie John 148). This scene tightly mirrors Annie’s previous dream, of her body bloating with water until it bursts. While At the Bottom of the River repeats the motion of “emptying and filling,” ending on a moment of fullness with the girl’s name filling up her mouth, this novel ends with a moment of emptying—a flushing out of seawater from the self. The body again seems to fill with the sea, through this process of migration. But unlike Annie’s positive imaginings throughout the novel, this process now also poses a threat—it may slowly drain or empty her.

In both At the Bottom of the River and Annie John, Kincaid’s narrators exist somewhere between emptiness and fullness—in an ongoing process of shrinking and bloating, contracting and expanding. They migrate between such states, but unlike Boyce Davies’s argument, this constant state of flux or “elsewhereness” threatens to drain and ultimately empty the narrator’s body. The girl in ATBR is poised on the edge of speech—about to say her name—but here, Annie says her name, bursting and emptying as she does so. In both works, Kincaid points to lives in constant states of flux or rupture—lives buoyed and sustained by the “lap-lapping waves,” yet threatened by their power to overwhelm the individual.
The Penetrated Body/The Penetrated Text

My language attempts to take shape at the edge of writing and speech; to indicate this transition. — Edouard Glissant, 1989

It is in the _continuum of expression_ from standard to Caribbean English that the veracity of experience lies. — M. NourbeSe Philip, 1989

While Chapter Two explores the space between being named and unnamed in Kincaid’s migration narratives, Chapter Three considers how Erna Brodber’s writing occupies a fraught space between writing and speech, between standard and Caribbean English. For Kincaid, English both sustains and threatens the Caribbean body—it presents the possibility of speech, a name filling one’s mouth, and the threat of the ruptured body, drained of all expression. Annie John becomes both the vessel and the sea—the thing that keeps her afloat and that threatens to drown her. Brodber’s *Myal* includes a similar movement between sustainment and threat. Like in Kincaid’s works, *Myal*’s two female narrators are on the edge of adulthood and sexual maturity. While Chapter Two considers how the transition from girlhood to womanhood enables Kincaid’s girls to move and migrate, Chapter Three will claim that the transition between writing and speech enables Brodber’s young female protagonists to move. Just as Edouard Glissant “indicates this transition” from the oral to the written, I argue that Brodber’s writing attempts to show the transitioning fissures and rips between voiced and written speech. While the novel begins from a space of immobility, recitation, and “linguistic rape,” her text self-consciously marks a transition towards mobility, oral improvisation, and the healing of a profoundly penetrated body and voice.
This chapter first considers the role of doubled narratives in *Myal* in relation to those of *WSS*. With Rhys, perceived doubles or pairs only spliced the individual; however, the process of doubling in *Myal* is restorative and generates multiple ways of being. Next, I'll consider an early moment in the narrative when Ella is made to recite a Rudyard Kipling poem. Ella’s recitation performs a kind of nonspeech, rooted in printed English. Later, Brodber attempts to capture a form of Caribbean speech and expression that departs from this recitation or ventriloquism. Here, I’ll consider what Wilson Harris calls the “penetrated body of the text”—the complex pattern of fractures and fissures that result in moments of “broken English” or “bad English” (Harris “The Life of Myth” 88). While Harris did not necessarily mean to imply sexual penetration with this phrase, Poet M. NourbeSe Philip calls this “the linguistic rape” of African tongues (Philip 89). Brodber both thematizes sexual trauma through the rape of the young Anita, and formally constructs a “penetrated,” fractured text—revealing the violence of English. But again, *Myal* is a narrative of healing. It is marked by violent fissures between English and African, but also by generative moments of expression through themes of orality, body, and place. The last section of this chapter will consider how storms and hurricanes are involved in the novel’s healing processes. Through a reading of Brathwaite’s “History of the Voice,” I argue that hurricanes represent both a mode of healing and survival—the ability to express the Caribbean environment in writing—and a mode of catastrophe, threatening to destroy the natural world. Thus, *Myal*’s turns from the oral to the written become moments both of ‘broken’ English and mending of body and voice in the text.
Erna Brodber’s “Unaccommodating” Ground

*Myal* is a notoriously difficult work of Caribbean literature. Many have written about its complexity, referencing Brodber’s dense, fractured prose, and “modernist form-bending” (John, “Caribbean Organic Intellectual” 73). For this reason, I’d like to lay out a few of the novel’s plot-lines, as they move through complicated turns of voice, time, and place. *Myal* spans from 1913-20 and follows the stories of two young girls, Ella O’Grady and Anita, living in Grove Town, Jamaica. Both girls undergo specific traumas in the novel. Ella O’Grady is the daughter of an Irish police officer and his light-skinned house keeper Mary. ¹⁰ At thirteen, Ella is under the care of both her mother and Maydene Brassington, the wife of a Methodist minister (Walker-Johnson 51). With Maydene’s help, Ella goes to the US, where she passes for white, and marries a wealthy white man named Selwyn Langley, who knows she is mixed-raced. Selwyn stages an elaborate “coon show” called *Caribbean Nights and Days*, a violently racist show, based on her childhood in Grove Town. After the show, she undergoes a psychological breakdown, revealed through fractured and incomprehensible speech. She also becomes pregnant, with what’s described in many different and contradictory ways as a “grey mass,” a “stone bruise,” a “water belly,” and even “the baby Jesus” (Brodber, *Myal* 1-4). The novel begins with Mass Cyrus, the

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¹⁰ Here, Brodber is referencing a historical account from her research. She writes in an article called “Me and My Head–Hurting Fiction,” “How many people can know the story of the Irish policeman O’Grady who impregnated a native of St. Thomas, Jamaica, and was raked over the coals by the Colonial Office in the early twentieth century for stepping out of line?” (123). This reveals how obscure historical narratives are often embedded throughout Brodber’s text. Her writing is thus very much constructed through a located historical past.
Anita’s story parallels Ella’s, revealing the way in which “the narrative insists on the multiplicity and simultaneity of oppressions” (Puri, “An ‘Other’ Realism” 102). Anita is fifteen years old when someone throws stones on the roof of her house. She and her mother think it is a group of boys, but it turns out that “the aging Maas Levi is trying to regain his sexual potency by controlling the young girl’s spirit” (“An ‘Other’ Realism” 102). Miss Gatha is a spirit healer who later cures Anita and frees her from Levi’s control by killing him. Shalini Puri explains that Maas Levi is found dead with his pants down, clutching a doll made in Anita’s image, “that has been knifed in the crotch” (“An ‘Other’ Realism” 102). She writes of this especially complex scene: “We can now understand Anita’s nightly cries of ‘Let me go’ as cries against nightly rape/possession by Maas Levi. In this powerful instance, sexual possession and spirit possession—domination of body and domination of mind—become inseparable” (“An ‘Other’ Realism” 102). In this way, Brodber collapses the mind/body dualism, insisting that body and mind are bound in both Anita’s possession and subsequent healing. Like many Rhys protagonists, both Ella and Anita undergo some form of sexual possession or rape, which causes an intense breakdown of body, voice, and mind. Unlike Rhys, though, Brodber thematizes a specific form of “spirit possession,” which the novel defines: “People are separated from the parts of themselves that make them think and they are left as flesh only. Flesh that takes directions from someone” (Myal 108). This is also referred to as “zombification” throughout the novel. This
chapter will look at how spirit possession is enacted in multiple ways: through rape, neo-colonialist performances, the printed word, and migration.

Like Brodber’s entire body of work, *Myal* works towards establishing a written and literary history for formerly enslaved Africans in Jamaica, by incorporating sociological studies, oral histories, and historical archives into her text. Described as a “critically neglected Jamaican academic and postmodern novelist,” she hasn’t reached as wide an audience as the internationally celebrated Kincaid (Pinto 14). Her work emerged at a critical turn in Caribbean scholarship from Pan-Africanism, towards creolization, hybridity, and globalization (John, “Caribbean Organic Intellectual” 72).

Interviewer Catherine John notes how Brodber often states how her novels respond to theoretical problems from her research (“Caribbean Organic Intellectual” 73). In this way, her novels are always constructed in conversation with her sociological projects and attuned to her village community in Woodside, Saint Mary, Jamaica.

Brodber’s work has also been compared to Wilson Harris’s formally difficult poetry and prose (O’Callaghan 62). Harris comments on *Myal*, “I was struck immediately on reading by the penetrated body of the text, by the numinous fractures in the surface of the narrative,” and builds upon this idea later saying, “Brodber’s narrative style penetrates surfaces and raises unsuspected edges of light and dark” (Harris “The Life of Myth” 88,92). Just as Harris comments on the opacity and transparency of Rhys’s writing, Brodber’s writing can also be characterized by such sharp fractures of light and dark, broken along multivocal and multitemporal planes. As noted, *Myal* begins with Ella’s psychological breakdown and then traces her trauma backwards in time. Catherine John makes this connection between the
psyches of Brodber’s protagonists and her prose style, calling her writing a “dense, fragmented quagmire of disjointed cultural references, much like the psyches of the subjects she portrays” (John, “Caribbean Organic Intellectual” 73). Her writing is opaque with intertext, riddle structures, songs, and other oral traditions, creating an intricate game of “verbal hide-and-seek” (Walker-Johnson 54).

Not only does Brodber’s work ignore “the outsider on one level, naturalizing Jamaican ‘nation language’,” but it also presents “elaborate mazes” and “notorious complexity” to Jamaican critics as well (O’Callaghan 61). While this might seem like a problem in her work, I think that the scope of her project—to mend the broken pieces of local Jamaican histories—calls for such immense complexity. Similarly Wilson Harris has asked, “How can one begin to reconcile the broken parts of such an enormous heritage?” (O’Callaghan 62). Harris suggests that the Caribbean’s diasporic and racially hybrid communities demand that their narratives be told in broken, nonlinear forms (O’Callaghan 62). Many critics have noted, though, that Brodber has not yet been taken up as a theorist in the same way that male writers like Harris or Brathwaite have (O’Callaghan 67). Thus, this chapter considers the way that critics like Catherine John, Alison Donnell, Shalini Puri, and Evelyn O’Callaghan view Brodber’s fiction as a theoretical intervention—a deeply complex attempt to “reconcile the broken parts of such an enormous heritage.”

_The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature_ marks a critical connection between the difficulty of Brodber’s work and Sylvia Wynter’s opaque, demonic ground. In constructing the reader, editors Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh considered the role of “unaccommodating” and “accommodating” Caribbean women
writers. They call Kincaid’s *Annie John* a “more easily absorbed,” accommodating text (Donnell and Welsh 19). They write “Others have sought to evade accommodation, not only to the canon but also to comfortable, transparent or appropriative readings” (Wynter 1990, Brodber 1980, 1988)” (Donnell and Welsh 19). Both Wynter and Brodber radically push “all established critical paradigms,” with a demonic searching for modes of representation that can’t be comprehended through Anglo-European paradigms. While largely departing from Rhys and Kincaid, Brodber still builds upon Christophine’s demonic, unaccommodating ground.

As we have seen, a central goal of contemporary Caribbean literature is also to bring oral forms into the written. In Chapter One, I suggested that Edouard Glissant’s “forced poetics” draws striking similarities to the bound role of Christophine’s body and voice at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. With the final phrase, “Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know,” Christophine refuses to be immobilized by the written form. This moment is very similar to the way Glissant argues, “To move from the oral to the written is to immobilize the body, to take control (to possess it)…In this silent world, voice and body pursue desperately an impossible fulfillment” (Glissant 123). Thus, the act of writing requires stillness—a state that the Caribbean body actively resists. Even when complying in some ways to the written form, Brodber asserts the ever-present motion of voice in writing.

In expressing a transition between writing and speech, Glissant also wants to draw out a productive tension between the individual and the collective. He writes, “I am referring to a synthesis, synthesis of written syntax and spoken rhythms, of ‘acquired’ writing and oral ‘reflex’, of the solitude of writing and the solidarity of the
collective voice…” (Glissant 147). Here, Glissant maps connections between the written, the acquired, and the solitary, and then the spoken rhythm, the oral reflex, and the collective. Brodber’s writing also attempts this synthesis—it frequently uses “acquired writing” through intertext and embedded narratives, while always asserting the “oral reflex” through “broken English” and collective expression. Thus it oscillates from the written to the spoken word, and from solitude to solidarity.

Doubles in Myal and Wide Sargasso Sea

Brodber’s work shares a number of themes with Wide Sargasso Sea. Like Rhys, Brodber is invested in the role of secondary whites, with repeated mentions of white Irish Americans and Jamaicans. Her essay “Where are all the others?” explores the complicated placement of secondary whites: “I want to know what the Irish, the Scottish, the Welsh gave to the Creole mix as much as I want to know: ‘Is it Ibo, Fulani, what particular part of Africa is my heritage’” (Brodber, Caribbean Creolization 75). Here, Brodber suggests that scholars must also recover the histories of the Irish, Scottish, and Welsh, as they often were overseers in British territories, indentured laborers, and prisoners “banished” to the colonies (Caribbean Creolization 75). They thus lived in very close proximity to peasant-class African Jamaicans (Caribbean Creolization 75). Myal reflects this vision of creolization, with Ella being the daughter of an Irish officer and a light-skinned Jamaican woman. Her mother’s lighter skin also provides phenotypical evidence of a long tradition of white domination. Much of the novel is centered around Ella’s precarious position—her inability to fit into the Grove Town community due to her light, “alabaster” skin,
though she is unable to pass as fully white in America (Myal 7). While Ella and Antoinette are from entirely different raced positions, both draw attention to conceptions of the white creole and light-skinned creole as a minority.

Although Brodber explores the role of secondary whites, her overarching goal is to restore the history and archives of Black Jamaicans through fiction. Alison Donnell argues that “by drawing on both roots and routes, the African self and the European ‘other’, Brodber is not in any way flattening out the field of history on which these two groups have taken very different routes at very different inclines.” (“Erna Brodber’s Writing of the Local” 485). Here, Donnell borrows Paul Gilroy’s conceptions of ‘roots’ and ‘routes’ in Black Atlantic theory, to suggest that Brodber’s 

*Woodside* is both local (rooted) and scattered in a diaspora (routed). Donnell continues, “Brodber’s writings…allow us to see history as a form of agency and they also bestow agency and identity on those subjects for whom global mobility is not an option” (“Erna Brodber’s Writing of the Local” 485). Thus, Brodber’s main project is to recover Black history and agency, though always in relation to the “European other”—the obscured histories of secondary whites through Maydene Brassington or Ella’s Irish father.

I do not wish to suggest that Brodber’s work comes out of or is indebted to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Instead, I want to suggest that her work, in considering local, specific histories, presents a profoundly fuller history of classed, raced, and geographical positions in Jamaica than *WSS* does. Shalini Puri writes, “As a story of education and coming to consciousness, *Myal* draws on the traditions of the *bildungsroman*, the postcolonial novel of childhood, which ends with the
achievement of subjectivity, and the trope of the tragic mulatto” (*The Caribbean Postcolonial* 145). While Puri does not discuss Rhys’s work, each trope marks a connection to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with Antoinette similarly figuring into the *bildungsroman* of the tragic mulatto. Both works disrupt the basic *bildungsroman* of the young woman coming to consciousness or sexual awakening. Instead, Ella, Anita, and Antoinette each undergo psychological breakdowns tied to sexual traumas—they importantly differ, though, as *Myal* begins with Ella’s healing and retraces her trauma, whereas *WSS* moves more linearly through time and ends with Antoinette’s complete breakdown at Thornfield, with no suggestion of healing.

Puri also argues that *Myal* breaks these tropes by resisting a focus on individual subjectivity through numerous plot-lines. Brodber uses few quotation marks, moving abruptly through different characters (Puri, *The Caribbean Postcolonial* 148). In each chapter, she deindividuates and gestures instead toward a “collective community consciousness” (*The Caribbean Postcolonial* 148). Puri writes, “At the heart of *Myal*, then, is a critique of binaristic narratives. If indeed it is by “halving,” by suppressing heterogeneity or doubleness, that domination functions, then resistance to domination must involve the recovery of doubleness” (*The Caribbean Postcolonial* 146). Again, this concept of doubleness marks a turn from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which splits characters instead of doubling them. Brodber establishes a restorative politic or poetic through doubleness and crossing voices.
Thus, *Myal* becomes a narrative of healing through “doubleness”—a potential healing of the various wounds or cuts left open by names in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.\(^{11}\)

Unlike *WSS*, *Myal* begins and ends with scenes of healing. The work is titled after the African fusion faith myal, which mixes “indigenous spiritual knowledge with a Christian worldview” (John, “Caribbean Organic Intellectual” 75). Again, this marks a very hybridized or creolized practice. Post-slavery, myal was practiced to fight the negative forces of colonialism and obeah (“Caribbean Organic Intellectual” 73).\(^{12}\) Other historians have argued that myal drove slave revolts and resistance on plantations. Later, it became associated with unity between creole societies and African traditions (Walker-Johnson 52). Thus, myal works to resist colonialism, slavery, obeah, and later, the neocolonialist after-effects of these processes, like tourism or Selwyn Langley’s exploitative coon show. It offers a form of activism grounded in healing and the restoration of indigenous spiritual practices.

**Recitation and “Linguistic Rape” in *Myal***

*Myal* explores the systemic violence of colonial education and by extension, of the printed word. The final line states this theme most clearly, when Mass Cyrus says, “My people have been separated from themselves...by several means, one of them

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\(^{11}\) Puri argues that *Myal* also expands and reworks *The Tempest*. I suggest that Christophine occupies this ground in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and later, that Brodber comes to occupy this ground in her fiction. Puri makes this connection even tighter, saying that William Brassington stands in as Prospero and his wife Maydene is Miranda. The novel further disrupts *The Tempest* by splitting the role of Caliban, into the good Mass Cyrus and the evil Mass Levi, but more importantly, adds the voice of Ella—“the mulatto girl” who comes to critically rupture colonialist paradigms (*The Caribbean Postcolonial* 164).\(^{12}\) Scholar Carolyn Cooper calls obeah the “debilitating obverse of therapeutic myal” (Cooper 71). Obeah is associated with zombification and spirit possession, whereas myal is an “antidote” or form of healing (Cooper 71)
being the printed word and the ideas it carries” (Myal 109). While the text is unaccommodating at times, here it reveals its didactic project. It seeks to recover African Jamaicans from the possessive power of the printed word. The word “carries” implies that print can transcend national borders, just in the way colonial education was meant to extend the reach of colonialism beyond England’s borders. This section argues that recitation possesses and immobilizes Ella, while white characters like Maydene Brassington can move through English with ease. Next, it applies Philip’s theory of the “linguistic rape” of African languages, to the deep fractures between the oral and the written in Myal. Lastly, it suggests forms of continuous oral expression in Myal that push the boundaries of standard, written English.

Chapter Two begins with thirteen-year-old Ella reciting Rudyard Kipling’s poem “Big Steamers,” which was intended to teach children about the history of England and merchant ships. Ella also recites the more famous Kipling verse, “The White Man’s Burden,” which explicitly urges the US to assume colonial control of the Philippines. It ends with the phrase “Your new caught sullen peoples / Half devil and half child” (Myal 6). Her teacher, Reverend Simpson, looks to her after she recites and thinks, “And whose burden is this half black, half white child?” (Myal 6). This parallel phrasing marks her blackness as her “devil” half and her whiteness as her innocent, “child” half. Because Kipling’s phrase inaugurates her description, Brodber suggests that the printed word, spreading Kipling’s imperialist project, enacts this violent halving of Ella’s body. The novel begins with Ella’s voice, but it isn’t her own—recitation implies memorization or mimicry. The poem “Big Steamers,” suggests the dangerous reach of merchant ships and how the printed word can travel and be
recited from different locations. In this way, recitation is a form of zombification—it possesses or immobilizes Ella’s body through a form of nonspeech that isn’t her own.

Unlike Ella, white characters in *M yal* have a more comfortable relationship to English. Chapter Three begins with the voice of the “lily white, English” Maydene. Moving through language with ease, she searches for the right word to describe St. Thomas’s nightfall. After taking up a number of different words and rejecting them, she comes to her own “personal word,” suggesting her possession of English. As we’ve seen, naming becomes a way to own or colonize, and here, Maydene colonizes both language and the local space she describes. The scene begins, “This was the time of day that Maydene liked. The gloaming. No. Twilight. Not that. The dusk. No. Nightfall. Yes. The right word at last” (*M yal* 13). Here, Maydene confidently sifts through these words, trying to affix the best descriptor to her place. She continues, “If she were in the British Isles, the time of day that meant so much to her would have been called the ‘gloaming’ but she was in St. Thomas, Jamaica. Nightfall then. The right word. But there was something still missing. For it wasn’t just the fall of night that was hers. It was the ‘cusp’. Her personal word. She said it under her breath. ‘Cusp’” (*M yal* 13). Naming the setting becomes a way to possess it—“that was hers.” ‘Nightfall’ is a shared term. She must rename St. Thomas’s nightfall with her personal word, ‘cusp’. Maydene defines ‘cusp’ as “a point where two curves meet...That was

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13 Phrases in “Big Steamers” like “We are going to fetch you your bread and your butter / Your beef, pork, and mutton, apples and cheese” reveal England’s dependence on imported products and food. The line, “We can fetch it from Melbourne, Quebec and Vancouver / Address us at Hobart, Hong Kong and Bombay” also suggests the violent extension of the British Empire into major cities across the world (*M yal* 5).
what she liked most about the time called nightfall. The meeting of two disparate points” (Myal 13). The language of light and dark in this scene leads us to a racialized reading of her definition—the disparate points may be black/white, devil/innocent, or African/English. Here, Maydene synthesizes, merges meanings, in ways Ella can’t. Maydene’s confident choosing and rejection of words suggests the way that she defines, possesses, and colonizes language.

In *The Conquest of America*, Tzvetan Todorov argues that Columbus attempted to name the islands of ‘Mesoamerica’ through literal correspondence. He even renamed his own surname Colon, which translates to *repopulator* or colonizer (Todorov, *Conquest* 26). Todorov argues that it is impossible to assign a name in the exact image of a thing. Columbus, however, relished the process: “His pleasure seems to be such that on certain days he gives two successive names to the same place” (*Conquest* 28). Lastly Todorov argues, “The words of the language, are not simple associations—they do not directly link a sound to a thing, but pass through the intermediary of meaning” (*Conquest* 25). In this way, Maydene’s movement through language can be read as an attempt to pair a word with its image. Her language turns from the most literal word, ‘nightfall’, to the more abstract, ‘cusp’. She names and renames until she arrives at the one she takes the most “pleasure” in, revealing again the way that language passes through an “intermediary” of subjective meaning. Through Todorov, this scene suggests the impossibility of matching an English word to St. Thomas. Although Maydene owns the word “cusp”—it was “hers”—Todorov reminds that she can never fully capture a place through language. Maydene is “lily white” as the “black curtain” of night falls, and she can only name this shift with a
word that expresses precarity, movement, and extremity—cusp. It is a slow, pleasurable turning through language that allows her to establish the twilight or cusp poetics. It is precisely the transition between words, the points at which words meet and bump up against one another, that create meaning in her English. Maydene whispers the word ‘cusp’ “under her breath”—a form of expression between what’s said and unsaid. A cusp poetics, then, not only indicates a thematic meeting of “power” and “subjugation,” but also the edge or cusp of the spoken and unspoken—the “intermediary of meaning” through which words travel.

While Maydene takes delight in English, Ella’s speech reveals labored movements between the oral and the written. When Ella migrates to America to marry Selwyn Langley, this tension becomes most noticeable. Her stories of Jamaica provide the inspiration for Selwyn’s fetishizing coon show: “When she was telling her stories of back home. Ella always fell into broken English. It excited Selwyn” (Myal 54). This line suggests that because her stories are of Jamaica, she cannot tell them in ‘standard’ or ‘proper’ English. Instead she falls into a “broken English,” somewhere between the orality of dialect and printed English. The breaks in her English are exotic to Selwyn, like her half-black, half-white skin. As noted, almost all of Kincaid’s work

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14 Shalini Puri argues that this passage suggests a “cusp” or twilight poetics in Brodber’s work. Puri’s reading focuses more on the thematic significance of twilight, saying that it draws attention to “borders,” “points of crossover,” or the space between sleeping and waking (The Caribbean Postcolonial 150). She writes that “the central image of zombification embodies a twilight poetics that inhabits and interrogates the borders that divide the living from the dead, domination from resistance, dispossession from repossession, power from subjugation” (The Caribbean Postcolonial 151). Thus, she suggests that the two points meeting along a cusp mark different power structures coinciding or confronting each other. While Puri’s reading fits within general themes of hybridity, zombification, and the meeting of different classes, Brodber’s writing seems to intentionally point to the process by which Maydene chooses the word ‘cusp’.
lacks creole words, sayings, or Kamau Brathwaite’s ‘nation language’ (John, *Clear Word* 95). Brodber’s *Myal*, on the other hand, draws attention to Brathwaite’s nation language, or “the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean” (Brathwaite, *Roots* 266). Thus, nation language is rooted in Afro-Caribbean tradition. He insists that nation language is bound to sound and voice, even recording himself when he first presented this paper, “to get the sound of it, rather than the sight of it” (*Roots* 271). He concedes that Caribbean writers must work with English, “but often it is an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave...sometimes it is English and African at the same time” (*Roots* 266). While Brodber’s use of the phrase “broken English” suggests that it is “bad” or “inferior” (to use two other terms of Brathwaite’s) it also recognizes that it is English and African at the same time—it splits both forms of expression like a the rip of a howl, a shout, or a machine-gun. The meeting of African and English for Ella is no peaceable “cusp,” points meeting along a curve—instead, English “penetrates” the African.

Ella continues this scene in broken English, telling the story of Anita’s rape.

The narrator describes the stones falling on Anita’s house: “It wasn’t the sound of the zinc expanding on the roof. That was not usually half as sharp and it tended to move ‘Dup dup dup’...Ping. Sharper and stronger this time” (*Myal* 28). Later, Anita goes outside to confront ‘the boys’ and one stone hits her on the collar-bone with a sharp “thud.” Through various onomatopoeias, Brodber attempts to capture the sound and rhythm of the stones. When Ella retells Anita’s story to Selwyn, her language breaks, unable to match English to the “Dup dup dup” or sharp “pings” hitting Anita’s house.
She says, “Yes, I see the stones with my own eye. --And his eyes popped. Yes, yes, see them falling. Hear them and pick up some too. Small gravel. Some people say they even see rock stone fall on haunted house, but only gravel fall on this one. --She told him about the blood on the steps and his eyes popped wider” (Myal 54). Just as Ella falls into broken English, this scene emphasizes the “falling” motion of the stones. The word ‘pop’ distorts Selwyn’s face, making him a kind of grotesque “poltergeist” like Mass Levi, with bulging, protruding eyes. When Ella says, “Hear them and pick them up too,” she asserts both the sound and tactility of the stones. Ella can only tell the story of the falling stones by breaking down her own English—by matching her syllabic rhythms to those of the falling gravel.

Writing in English takes over the body and mind in much the same way that Anita’s rape steals her body and mind. Thus, Brodber’s writing draws attention to the “linguistic rape” of African by English. M. NourbeSe Philip is a Canadian poet, born in Trinidad and Tobago. In “The Absence of Writing—or How I Almost Became a Spy,” she argues, “The linguistic rape and subsequent forced marriage between African and English tongues has resulted in a language capable of great rhythms and musicality; one that is and is not English” (Philip 89). Here, Philip echoes some of Brathwaite’s argument—she presents an English that disavows itself, that “howls” or “shouts” in response to the linguistic rape of African tongues. It produces “great rhythms and musicality,” and “It is also like the blues,” to turn to Brathwaite’s blues influence (Brathwaite, Roots 266). Philip’s writing is also similar to Brodber’s. Both use words extended with hyphens, or that, like the title of Philip’s essay, omit spaces between
words. Philip’s piece begins from a point of anguish: “I have come upon an understanding of language—good-english-bad-english English, Queenglish and Kinglish—the anguish that is English in colonial societies” (77). Like Brodber and Brathwaite, Philip criticizes colonial education and the emphasis placed on Queenglish and Kinglish, or British literary forms of speech. Furthermore, the hyphenated phrase, “good-english-bad-english”—draws attention to the transitions between words on the page, and the “intermediary of meaning” between individual words. Even the words “anguish” and “English,” become bound by their similar sound and form. Brodber repeatedly comments on this anguish, binding words with hyphens like Philip, in an attempt to extend the expression of standard English.

Philip goes on to argue that the African was forced to use a foreign language (English) that only had the capacity to express an alien experience (Philip 82). She also writes that the African attempts to distort or subvert this foreign English through techniques rooted in African languages. She says, “Bad English. Broken English. Patois Dialect. These words are for the most part negative descriptions of the linguistic result of the African attempting to leave her impress on the language” (Philip 83). Thus when Ella speaks in broken English, and later, when her English breaks down to the point of incomprehension, Brodber acknowledges Ella’s attempt to “leave her impress on the language.” Lastly, Philip writes, “In a very real sense, it can be argued that for the African in the New World learning the English language was simultaneous with learning of her non-being, her lack of wholeness” (86). Ella’s migration to the New World mirrors this arc. Through English, she becomes a half-devil, and as Selwyn produces the coon show, she describes her body as being
“drained” (Myal 80). The narrator says, “With her hymen and a couple months of marriage gone, there was a clean, clear passage from Ella’s head through her middle and right down to outside” (Myal 80). The phrase, “clean, clear passage” draws attention to her “non-being, her lack of wholeness.” No longer a virgin, or with her “hymen” gone, it is again a sexual penetration that violently breaks the self, and then breaks her speech. While what’s described as consensual sex between Ella and Selwyn shouldn’t be conflated with Anita’s rape, penetration is repeatedly thematized to signal the fissured, “penetrated body” of Myal’s prose.

After Ella watches the ‘coon show’, words begin to blend together on the page, creating string-like units that span whole lines of text. Before the show, Selwyn tells Ella that she will be “so pleased to see what had been done with all that was left of her body” (Myal 82). He drains her body of all expression by speaking for her. He takes over the narration: “Not only was she the playwright/director’s wife, she was also the woman without-whom-none-of-this-would-have-been-possible” (Myal 82). The opening alliteration strings these words together. Selwyn is both/and, “playright/director,” while the repeated negation, “without-whom” and “none-of-this,” establishes Ella’s non-being.

On the following pages, though, Ella twists this formal hyphenation for her own use. She becomes silent after watching herself depicted as a white woman being chased by disembodied, “outstretched black hands,” but briefly utters, “It didn’t go so” (Myal 83). Here, she asserts that the events of her life didn’t unfold as Selwyn portrayed them. Although those were the last words Ella spoke aloud, “long conversations between her selves took place in her head” (Myal 84). As Ella’s body or
outer self is erased into non-being by Selwyn, her inner selves multiply and accuse one
another. One calls herself a “Mule. With Blinders on,” and another replies, “Mule?
Who you calling mule, you mulatto” (Myal 84). Here even, the words ‘mule’ and
‘mulatto’ blend together. They share an etymological root—mule is a hybrid crossed
between an ass and a stallion, and in the early 1500s, the Spanish started using the
word mulato to label a person of mixed race (“mule, n.1”). This moment also recalls
when Selwyn first taught Ella that she was “coloured, mulatto and what that meant,
taking her innocence with her hymen” (Myal 43). Thus, in the moment that she was
first sexualized, she was also racialized into a mulatto or mule—a dark animal, other.
After Ella inflicts these insults upon herself, she finally speaks to Selwyn, saying:

“—Mammy Mary’s mulatto mule must have maternity wear.—
She said it fast:
—MammyMary’smulattomulemusthavematernitywear—
She said it slow:
—Mammy Mary’s mulatto mule must have maternity wear.—
She sang it. She said it in paragraphs. She said it forever. Ella had tripped out
indeed. Selwyn was scared stiff” (Myal 84)

Ella uses alliteration and twists her speech into a riddle or verse. ‘Mammy Mary’ refers
to her mother, Mary Gordon, but in the US, this phrase also draws attention to the
derogatory mammy stereotype, adding another caricature onto this violent slur.15

Most importantly, this passage draws attention to the typography of printed English,
and the way in which Brodber attempts to visualize her orality on the page. “She said
it fast,” so the words form one long string, and “she said it slow,” so Brodber adds an

15 As names are layered in all of this thesis’s central texts, the name Mary also refers to the mother of
God. Again, Ella exists between whiteness—a Christian symbol of perfect motherhood—and
blackness—the dark, mule Other.
extra space between each word. Next, “She sang it,” asserting again a kind of voice that breaks from English, and then she “said it in paragraphs,” moving back to a standardized form or structure. Ella repeating this phrase “forever” defies standard English or any novelistic structure. She moves or “trips out” as she speaks indefinitely, leaving Selwyn immobilized, still, “scared stiff.”

With the title “The Absence of Writing or How I Almost—Became a Spy,” Philip suggests that there is a spectrum of English, which must be stretched to include Caribbean English expression: “To say that experience can only be expressed in standard English (if there is any such thing) or only in the Caribbean demotic (there is such a thing) is, in fact, to limit the experience for the African artist working in the Caribbean demotic. It is in the continuum of expression from standard to Caribbean English that the veracity of the experience lies” (Philip 84). In this way, Brodber works between standard English and the Caribbean demotic, a variant, vernacular form of English. This expands the scope of the African artist’s expression, allowing for a “veracity” of experience. Thus, Erna Brodber subverts the self-inflicted violence of, ‘Mammy Mary’s—mulattomulemusthavematernitywear’, by stretching it on the page, saying it forever, and thus extending the “continuum of expression.” While this is still a deeply violent phrase, it opens up the novel to a form of expression that spans beyond standard English—a voice that is sung, continuous, and bound to movement.

Hurricanes and the Force of Body and Voice

Both victims of “spirit thievery,” Anita stays in Jamaica—immobile through her rape—while Ella is made immobile through her illness, brought on by her very
movement and migration across the Black Atlantic. Brodber disrupts any simple binary of mobility and immobility—we can’t read the bodies of Anita and Ella through these two basic states. While the first section of this chapter looked at Ella’s labored movements through language and her attempts to impress the oral onto the written through continuous or transitioning expression, this section turns to Anita’s doubled narrative. Like Ella, Anita’s body becomes split from her mind through recitation. Through studying, she is left open to “infiltration” or penetration, and thus, this process allows her to be raped by Maas Levi. Anita, however, is saved from Levi’s sexual possession through Miss Gatha’s “private hurricane” ritual. Hurricanes occupy a difficult space in Caribbean writing. They signal, most obviously, the repeated destruction of the Caribbean’s natural environment. However, Kamau Brathwaite famously wrote about the Caribbean author’s inability to express the force of the hurricane in writing. He argues that English only allows for an expression of the alien experience of snow. Thus, Brodber’s use of the hurricane to save Anita from her rape is a critical intervention into Caribbean writing. Miss Gatha’s private hurricane becomes a form of voice that is still bound to the destruction of English, but it powerfully improvises, syncopates, and bends from it.

The novel introduces Anita as she practices a solfège scale: “Anita was studying. The kind that splits the mind from the body and both from the soul and leaves each open to infiltration” (Myal 28). Here, the text explicitly suggests that Anita’s act of studying creates this mind, body, soul split. The process of studying, memorizing, like Ella’s earlier reciting, leaves the body vulnerable to “infiltration.” Again, bodily and mental violence are inseparable—the word “infiltration” can be
defined as “the gradual penetration of one people into another” (“infiltration, n”). The word suggests both mental and cultural penetration, and the physical penetration of sexual violence. Themes of infiltration, penetration, and permeation abound in the text. At another moment, Ella describes the “osmosis” of learning, or “the process by which a thin substance pulls a thick substance through a thin cell wall” (Myal 11). Next Ella describes a map of England imaginatively rising from the paper allowing her to “walk on it, feel its snow…” (Myal 11). Thus, osmosis and infiltration in education force Europe into the Caribbean, invading both mental and physical spaces.

Anita’s passage continues, “She was solfa-ing. This took a lot of concentration. She had to read the notes — first note on the line is ‘e’ — and she had to remember the sounds. ‘Do re mi fa so la ti do’. So if that was ‘e’, it was really ‘mi’ and she sounded it. Now that next one is the first space so it has to be ‘f’ and if it is ‘f’ coming after ‘e’ then it must be ‘fa’ and she sounded that. Then she went back: ‘Do re mi fa’” (Myal 28). It’s important to note that the scale Anita practices is derived from English/French syllables ‘sol and fa’. The solfège (Anita calls it solfa-ing) is a process of assigning syllables to notes in Western music. Here, Anita methodically pairs each note to a syllable. Furthermore, this pairing seems to mimic the process of osmosis—it pulls one substance through another, affixing a sound to a letter and fusing the two.

The passage continues, “So what she really wanted was ‘mi, fa’ and she sounded those two. ‘Mi fa’. The other one was a little bit more difficult. It was all the way at the end: the last note on the line so it had to be ‘f’. Now to get at that sound” (Myal 28). Here, the repetition of “mi, fa” and “mi fa” draws attention to the closing of space between these sounds. The comma is removed and the sounds blur together,
adding to the solfège string. Phrases like “this took a lot of concentration” and “this other one was a little bit more difficult,” are made difficult by the dissonance between the voiced ‘do re mi fa’ and the printed notes. Each of Anita’s sounded syllables are flattened on the page, appearing like a string of arbitrary letters. She begins to add words to the solfège: “‘Thee I love’. She had got it. Now to press on a little further. Teacher had said it was easy. Other sounds joined hers. She heard a slight ‘ping’ but she continued to the fourth note” (Myal 28). Here, Mass Levi begins to throw stones on her roof, interrupting her scale. The ‘pings’ cross with the notes and syllables, further complicating the tight structure of this passage. Throughout the novel, Brodber presents Jamaican girls and women who have been “separated from themselves,” from their bodies. Once again, English, broken into its syllables and sounds show this separation. The scale “Do re mi fa so la ti do” marks a clear transition through language. Anita is made immobile, “left open to infiltration,” and can only gain mobility when her voice is restored.

Later, Anita is saved from this mind/body split through an indigenous Kumina healing ritual that takes the form of an embodied hurricane. Miss Gatha represents the Kumina religion (a form of Rastafari) in St. Thomas. She performs her ritual on a tabernacle, or open-air temple, to save Anita from her sexual possession. She begins by distorting and stretching the shape of her body: “With her body braced back 45 degrees from the ground, was how Miss Gatha walked that morning through Grove Town. Her ten little black toes, escaping from the long green and red dress, scratched the gravel of the road like a common fowl looking for worms” (Myal 70). Brodber describes this motion, body braced as close to the ground as possible while
walking, and toes fusing with the gravel as worms. Her dress references the Rastafari colors: red, green, and black. The passage continues, “That was the delicate side of her motion. And then there was the large: still with the back at an angle of 45 degrees to the ground, she took long steps, beginning and ending with her heel” (Myal 70). Just as Anita’s and Ella’s bodies are made small when they are expanding through puberty, Miss Gatha both contracts and expands her body, resisting the forced compression and immobility of zombification. Her body digs into the ground, rooted by her toes, and stretches through long steps, moving in extended “routes,” to use Gilroy’s phrase.

Miss Gatha becomes most embodied and mobile as a “private hurricane”:

“Miss Gatha had no audience. But Miss Gatha spoke and that was how her private hurricane became a public event” (Myal 70). Again we have the small of her motion compared to the large in the movement from private to public. Although the coon show didn’t explicitly depict Anita, this public healing performance could be viewed as a revision to or disruption of Selwyn’s racist performance. Miss Gatha’s voice comes to take over the narrative: “She recited; she sang; she intoned. In one register, in another; in one octave, then higher. Lyrically, with syncopation, with improvisation far, far out from her original composition…And then the wheeling, the turning, the bending, the scratching and the moving on the heels” (Myal 70-71). The phrase “she recited; she sang,” references Ella reciting Kipling and Anita singing the solfège scale. She begins to improvise beyond the limits of Ella’s or Anita’s simple composition. Miss Gatha’s voice is bounded by her body—the erratic wheeling, turning, bending movements mimic her newly improvised voice—constructing her private hurricane.
In *Myal* hurricanes and storms serve as important signifiers of the natural environment, and are forces of both great healing and destruction. In one of her historical essays on labor disturbances in Jamaica in 1938, Brodber writes that hurricanes held greater significance with people than any other historical event: “Hurricanes of 1903, 1915, 1916, 1933, and 1944 lived in their memory to a much greater extent than 1938 and its labor disturbances” (“Oral History and the Other Perspective” 28). In “History of the Voice,” Brathwaite writes about the Caribbean writer’s inability to capture the hurricane in writing. He argues that English cannot describe the Caribbean’s natural hurricanes and phenomena, but rather can only describe the alien experience of snow. He writes, “And in terms of what we write, our perceptual models, we are more conscious (in terms of sensibility) of the falling of snow for instance…than of the force of hurricanes that take place every year. In other words, we haven’t got the syllables…to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience; whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of snowfall” (Brathwaite, *Roots* 263). Just as Brodber often focuses on the broken syllables of English, here Brathwaite breaks down our “perceptual models” into smaller units, syllables, to emphasize an utter lack of voice and expression. As mentioned earlier, Ella sometimes mentions her ability to imagine or actually *feel* the English snowfall—to walk into the maps laid out before her in school. She says that Europe rose from maps, inviting her to “look deep down into its fjords and dykes.” Thus, the hurricane is again an attempt to move beyond the alien experience of Europe’s snow, fjords, and dykes. Through her “private hurricane,” Miss Gatha attempts to reclaim language for
Anita and Ella, to reinfuse it with the “wheeling, turning, and bending” of Caribbean movement and embodiment.

Miss Gatha takes the solfège scale or the Kipling poem and moves beyond it, “In one register, in another; in one octave, then higher.” The word ‘transition’ also has a number of musical definitions, including, “passing from one note to another by means of a passing-note,” and “passing from one key to another, modulation…also, modulation into a remote key” (“transition, n”). Thus, Miss Gatha’s shifts to higher registers and octaves designate again another form of transition. Her voice modulates to a “remote key,” and so “far, far out from her original composition.” In this way, Miss Gatha localizes a movement “far, far out” into her very embodied and rooted voice. Brathwaite also writes, “The hurricane does not roar in pentameter. And that’s the problem: how do you get a rhythm that approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience” (Brathwaite, Roots 265). Similarly, Miss Gatha moves towards a rhythm and intonation to “approximate” her natural environment. This suggests that Myal’s politic and poetic of healing is also an attempt to heal the rifts between voice, body, and the natural environment.

Ultimately, Myal works on a “continuum of expression,” a transition from the written to the oral, from standard to Caribbean English, mending the repeated separation of body and mind. It works through numerous rifts and fissures, rescuing the power of voice from the violence of print. Miss Gatha’s private hurricane becomes public—it actualizes Glissant’s movement from the solitary to the collective, from immobility to mobility, from written to speech. It is this very transition that allows for Anita and Ella to be freed from written possession and stillness.
In 2017, the entire region of the Caribbean was inundated with disastrous hurricanes. In the span of three weeks in September, three successive and devastating storms—Irma, Jose, and Maria—hit the region (Thorne 2017). Response to these storms saw a disproportionate amount of coverage and aid to US held Caribbean territories, ignoring spaces like Dominica, Anguilla, and Barbuda (the worst hit island). The narrator of Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother* is from Dominica and comments in the novel that Dominica’s capital Roseau, “had a fragile foundation, and from time to time was destroyed by forces of nature, a hurricane or water coming from the sky as if suddenly the sea were above and the heavens below” (*Autobiography* 61). As many have noted, these hurricanes are not acts of God, not sent from the “heavens.” These human-enhanced catastrophes violently reverse our conceptions of the environment—suddenly, the sea is above and the heavens are below. The challenge of Brodber’s writing suggests the enormity of the hurricane, even as she brings characters and readers alike through the storm. Her politic/poetics address a destructiveness that has long been a part of life in the islands of the Caribbean Sea. She turns the site of destruction into the site of healing and asks, how does the Caribbean woman recover from the simultaneity of trauma and destruction—from the ongoingness of colonialism? Her fiction can harness and modulate the force of the hurricane—to voice it—and recover the Caribbean from the brokenness of such disasters.

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16 Haitian author Edwidge Danticat drew my attention to this scene in her *New York Times* article “Dawn After the Tempests,” which responded to the recent catastrophes.
Works Cited


