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## Contextualizing Subjectivity: Speaking (Back to) Colonialism in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *A Small Place*

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Contextualizing Subjectivity: Speaking (Back to) Colonialism in Jamaica

Kincaid's *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *A Small Place*

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## ABSTRACT

The narrators of Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *A Small Place* all struggle to form a coherent sense of self while living within the colonial ideology that objectifies them and denies them identities as speaking subjects. In this thesis, Julia Kristeva's theories of language and subject formation are used to explain why and how the narrators' subjectivity is limited by colonial discourse. Particular attention is given to the way in which the narrators' relationships with their mothers both threaten and necessitate their emergence into Kristeva's symbolic order of language, and therefore into the colonial discourse community. The thesis also explores the role of literacy in the narrators' identity formation and the way in which their literacy environments both provide them with opportunities to speak back to colonial discourse and rob them of the ability to do so. It is argued that the narrators, despite their attempts to forge identities as speaking subjects, are ultimately restricted to the role of objects of colonial discourse. Kincaid does, however, write ambiguous endings to suggest that even from their positions as objects, the narrators are able to open up spaces from which they could speak by moving outside the master-slave dichotomy.

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## I. Introduction

Various theorists have posited that language is the source of identity. For Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and others, the process through which the individual becomes a speaking subject is related, in varying degrees, to the process through which the individual acquires language. For Kristeva and Lacan, the subject is continually constructed and reconstructed by the signifying process, a concept Foucault uses to elaborate on the potential for reciprocal relationships between a subject and a discourse community. Although all three theorists argue that every individual's subjectivity is necessarily produced by and within a tangled web of meaning, the process of acquiring subjectivity is especially complicated for the narrators of Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *A Small Place* because of their positions as members of a subaltern population. All three autobiographical narrators grew up on an island still very much dominated by the English colonial presence. Their stories demonstrate the complexity of forging an identity as a speaking subject in the face of a colonial power that sets them up to be anything but.

Kincaid's three narrators speak, read, write, and are educated in the English language, which leaves them no other option than to subject themselves to definition by a colonial culture that cannot see them as anything other than objects. In his article "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community," James Porter explains that all writers "are constrained insofar as [they] must inevitably borrow the traces, codes, and signs which [they] inherit and which [their] discourse community imposes" (41). The same is true of anyone who uses language in any form, including Kincaid's narrators. Their ability to speak back is limited by the inevitability of intertextuality and the inevitability of

speaking in a language that is both inherited and imposed. Inheritance and imposition are not, however, unique to the narrators' language, but also characterize their relationships with their mothers. There are as many different ideas about how an individual becomes a speaking subject as there are theorists who study subjectivity, and many of them differ only slightly—but still significantly—from the others. The connection between the narrators' use of language and their relationships with their mothers is best articulated, however, by Kristeva's theory of subjectivity, one in which the speaking subject's identity is an ever-evolving product of language. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall explains that the construction of the subject's identity "is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (110). If identity is a process that occurs through linguistic representation, then the colonial ideology that influences representation can be equated with the mother as a threat to each narrator's subjectivity. Although all three narrators attempt to speak back to colonialism from within colonial ideology, they struggle to sustain their own, independent voices. The three narrators' stories illustrate the great paradox of speaking in a (post)colonial environment: it is impossible to speak back to colonial ideology without speaking from and through it. They cannot speak outside the colonial culture, and the colonial culture denies them their identities as speaking subjects. Only by moving into spaces outside the dichotomy between colonizer and colonized can they begin to carve out those identities.

## II. Becoming a Speaking Subject: Progress and Tension

For Bulgarian-born French literary theorist and philosopher Julia Kristeva, the process through which one becomes a speaking subject is one that is never really finished, and the subject is, therefore, always “in process.” Her theory builds upon that of Jacques Lacan, whose formation of the speaking subject begins with the mirror stage, when the subject will look toward “images of others with whom he will identify” in order to form a coherent sense of self (Lemaire 73).<sup>1</sup> By looking toward those mirrors, be they literal or symbolic, the child develops a (false) sense of a whole self and comes to realize that she is separate from her mother, both important milestones for language acquisition. As Lois Tyson explains in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, the child would not need to use language to name things if it still believed those things were an inseparable part of itself (29). The mirror stage gives the child the impetus to become a speaking subject. Kristeva too believes that psychological separation from the mother is critical to the development of a speaking subject, but for her that separation occurs somewhat differently.

Kristeva’s understanding of subjectivity relies on the distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic is composed of all the extralinguistic aspects of language that infuse it with meaning and, by sometimes interrupting and undermining common understandings, pave the way for new and multiple meanings to emerge, even ones that contradict the symbolic meaning of the signs in play. The semiotic finds its origins in the child’s relationship with the mother. The symbolic, on the other hand, is

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this concept, see Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*.

composed of the denotative or referential signs that speakers recognize as carrying meaning in the world. Kristeva associates the symbolic with the father, the presence that gives order to an otherwise uncontrolled semiotic. According to Kristeva, before the infant develops the understanding that she is a being separate from her mother, she occupies the semiotic chora, a space in which “semiotic functions and energy discharges...connect and orient the body to the mother” (Kristeva *Revolution in Poetic Language* 95). All the infant’s communication with the mother, every one of the infant’s “energy discharges,” is pre-symbolic; the child has not yet become aware of a word’s ability to refer to a specific object or idea, or of the syntactical structures within which words must function in order to express coherent meaning in the world. The infant is expelled from the chora, however, when she first passes through the mirror stage and comes to identify herself as someone entirely separate from her mother, a process Kristeva believes begins when the child is still far from acquiring symbolic language. She is thus gradually forced into the realm of the symbolic, where language must be used to refer to things outside herself. The two aspects of language depend upon each other to express meaning, and the speaking subject must, therefore, have access to both. The semiotic must never be allowed to dominate over the symbolic, however, because allowing it to do so would destroy the subject’s ability to communicate with others. This delicate balance between the semiotic and the symbolic is maintained through abjection, the process of expelling, either physically or psychologically, that which threatens the orderly boundaries of the self.

Kristeva places a great deal of emphasis on the abject mother. In her explanation of Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Noëlle McAfee explains that by forcing out whatever is



not part of its body, the infant begins to define itself as a separate being from its mother long before it begins to use language (49). Nevertheless, even after the child's emergence into the symbolic, the object mother remains on the outskirts of a child's awareness, always tempting the child with the possibility of a return to the perfect union of the chora. That return, although it may sound positive, is actually quite dangerous. A return to the pre-symbolic state where signification is unnecessary would inevitably result in a loss of subjectivity for the child. In Kristeva's model, as in Lacan's, the child develops a concept of self largely through recognizing differences between herself and another. She knows that she is a separate being because she knows she is not one with her mother.

*Annie John*, Kincaid's first novel, is not autobiography, but like much of Kincaid's work, it is at least somewhat autobiographical. The book focuses on a theme common in Kincaid's writing: the relationship between a mother and daughter. At the outset of the novel, the narrator, Annie, is caught up in the struggle between her desire to maintain the once-harmonious union with her beloved mother and the necessity of severing that complete union in order to become and remain a speaking subject, a necessity she does not always recognize. Annie identifies with her mother so strongly early in the novel that she fails to understand what is happening when, for the first time, her mother decides their new dresses should not be made from the same cloth. Her mother tells her, "You just cannot go around the rest of your life looking like a little me," a comment that sends Annie reeling. She feels that "the earth [has] swept away from [her]," not only because of her mother's words, but also because of the manner in which those words are spoken (26). The fact that Annie expects their clothing to match is

indicative of the type of relationship she and her mother have had in the past. Like the image the infant wrongly identifies as herself in Lacan's mirror stage, Annie's mother has served as her false mirror image, an image of who she has been that was never really her at all.

Later in the novel, Annie is surprised that her mother's image of her does not align with her image of herself. She explains that, upon discovering that her daughter played marbles, an expressly forbidden activity, her mother unleashed her anger, telling Annie's father "about the marbles, [and] adding a list of things that seemed as long as two chapters from the Old Testament." Annie says, "I could hardly recognize myself from this list," an indication that she is growing more aware of the difference between the image she sees of herself in the form of her mother and the way she perceives herself in her mind (67). Nevertheless, the fact that Annie has continued to recognize her mother as her image well into her childhood supports Kristeva's belief that the subject always, out of necessity, exists in the intersection of the semiotic and symbolic. Annie's identification with her mother is the source of the semiotic. But because it serves a mirror function, it is also, in this case, one of many self-images that "arise from the identifications and investments the subject makes with others" (McAfee 39-40). Those images, although inaccurate, still allow Annie to understand herself as separate from everyone else and create the need for her to enter into the symbolic.

Her relationship with her "mirror" fading, Annie finds a new, more literal mirror. As she walks home one day, she catches a glimpse of her own reflection in one of the storefront windows along Market Street. She does not immediately recognize her own image, but soon begins to realize what she sees:

I didn't know that it was I, for I had got so strange. My whole head was so big, and my eyes, which were big, too, sat in my big head wide open, as if I had just had a sudden fright. My skin was black in a way I had not noticed before...on my forehead, on my cheeks were little bumps, each with a perfect, round white point. My plaits stuck out in every direction from under my hat; my long, thin neck stuck out from the blouse of my uniform. Altogether, I looked old and miserable. (94)

In some ways, the window-mirror acts as an agent of identity formation for Annie. Like her mother, it provides her with an image of herself that allows her to form an identity that is separate from everyone else. In order to see her image as whole in the mirror, the child must see it as distinct from herself, which is a type of fragmentation. That fragmentation, however, is a necessary precursor to “the positing of the object,” which makes signification possible (Kristeva *Revolution in Poetic Language* 100). In *Seeing Through Clothes*, Anne Hollander argues that “the mirror gazer is engaged in creating a posed studio portrait of himself,” and that looking in a mirror “presupposes some will to create an image, to fill the frame deliberately.” She also states that “the mirror gazer cannot escape putting...poses into the frame, which are perhaps quite uncharacteristic, rather than attempting to spy on his natural behavior” (392-3). Like the image the child sees in the mirror stage, the image Hollander’s “mirror gazer” sees is not really an accurate depiction of the self, but is nevertheless recognized as such. On the surface, Annie does seem to create a false portrait of herself as she looks into the window. Like the loss of her union with her mother, however, that portrait comes upon her somewhat unexpectedly, as she explains that she did not really understand what she was doing until

after the image had already been created (94). It is not part of her plan, and only with great effort can she identify it as herself. What's more, the image she sees appears in the midst of "bolts of cloth...Sunday hats and shoes...men's and women's undergarments...pots and pans," and a whole host of other material goods being sold along the street, implying that her identity too is a commodity and up for sale (94). Any certainty she had about who she was disappeared as a result of the unwelcome change in the relationship with her mother.

Although abjection of the mother is critical to the preservation of a speaking subject, equally critical is the need to expel anything else that threatens the subject's existence. For Kristeva, death is a prime example. She posits that a dead body is an indication that "the very border between life and death has been broken...and we who are faced with a corpse experience the fragility of our own life." Furthermore, death "violates [a subject's] borders," acting as "something rejected from which one does not part" (McAfee 47). Despite Annie's distress over her growing distance from her mother, she is quite clear about her disgust when she realizes that her mother and death are closely connected. She begins the novel by explaining that "for a short while during the year [she] was ten, [she] thought only people [she] did not know died" (3). She quickly learns, however, that the dead "sometimes...would show up standing under a tree just as you were passing by. Then they might follow you wherever you went; in that case, they would never give up until you joined them" (4). Immediately after revealing her new understanding of death as an active agent with the ability to pursue the very people who wish to expel it from their lives, Annie explains, "My mother knew of many people who had died in such a way" (4). Given her mother's firsthand knowledge of death, Annie

begins to feel that she must expel her mother from her life in order to expel death. That feeling is magnified after her mother holds a friend's dying daughter until she passes.

Annie Sr. then prepares the girl for interment (5-6):

I began to look at my mother's hands differently. They had stroked the dead girl's forehead; they had bathed and dressed her and laid her in the coffin my father had made. My mother would come back from the dead girl's house smelling of bay rum—a scent that for a long time afterward would make me feel ill. For a while, though not for very long, I could not bear to have my mother caress me or touch my food or help me with my bath. I especially couldn't bear the sight of her hands lying still in her lap.

(6)

Annie can no longer stomach the idea that her mother's hands, hands she now associates with death, could be used to nurture her, particularly to come into contact with her body or the food she will put into her body. She avoids them in the same way she must avoid death, effectively expelling both death and her mother, both threats to her identity as a speaking subject, at the same time. It is notable that despite Annie's father's close association with death—not only does he construct the coffin in the passage above, but he also built the coffin in which his grandmother was buried after her sudden death when he was eighteen—Annie's aversion to death does not extend to him.

For Kristeva, the father is associated with the symbolic, the process that maintains the logical order of language. The difference between Annie's attitude toward her mother's relationship with death and her attitude toward her father's relationship with death exists because of the difference in the contents of those two relationships. Annie's

mother confronts death with affectionate gestures, baths, and herbs that are associated with Obeah. Throughout the novel, the folk religion competes in both direct and indirect ways with science. Annie's mother and grandmother, in particular, believe Obeah is connected to all varieties of bodily ailments. Horace I. Goddard points out that when Annie falls gravely ill, the local Obeah woman, Ma Jolie, even places her Obeah-related remedies on the same shelf as the ones prescribed by the medical doctor (63). When her mother decides to call Ma Jolie for help treating Annie's illness, Annie reports that her father says to "have her come when I am not here" (110). Unlike the feminine practice of Obeah, which is mystical and inextricably intertwined with nature, death, and illness, Annie's father involves himself in death only long enough to build a box to contain it. His work hides the corpse and enables it to be buried, hidden away where it does not have to be confronted ever again. In doing so, it serves the same function as Kristeva's symbolic, protecting the subject by imposing order upon that which would threaten its subjectivity. Annie's nonexistent reaction to her father's role in the girl's burial is an indication of her privileging of the symbolic over the semiotic, a necessary step in developing and maintaining her identity as a speaking subject.

If the semiotic must interact with the symbolic in order for the subject to speak, it makes sense that the abject, including death, "remains on the periphery of consciousness, a looming presence" that is "not gone once and for all," and that "the subject finds...both repellant and seductive" (McAfee 48-9). The abject mother is the source of the semiotic, and so she cannot be completely abjected. Annie's behavior reflects that "seductive" power of the abject, because despite her determination to avoid death, she finds herself drawn toward it. She chooses to secretly attend the funerals of various community

members, gradually working up the courage to actually enter the building instead of just waiting outside (9). She cannot entirely avoid the abject, nor does she wish to. She is fascinated by and wishes to understand death, just as she is fascinated by and wishes to identify with her mother, who is herself linked to death. She cannot, however, get too close to either of them without losing her subjectivity.

The danger of succumbing to the semiotic is illustrated by Annie's extended illness near the end of the novel. After a particularly bitter fight with her mother in which each accuses the other of being a "slut," Annie falls into what seems to be a semi-conscious state (102, 108). In that state, she lacks control of her thoughts, actions, and body. The scene that makes most apparent the dominance of the semiotic at this particular juncture in her life happens soon after she falls ill, as her parents stand at the end of her bed, talking to each other. Their words, however, are inaccessible to Annie: "I couldn't hear what it was that they said, but I could see the words leave their mouths. The words traveled through the air toward me, but just as they reached my ears they would fall to the floor, suddenly dead" (109). In his study of the same passage, Adlai H. Murdoch points out that "if the parental word signifies the Law of the Father, the ultimate sign of authority and power," to which a child must succumb in order to enter into the symbolic, "then Annie has effectively removed herself as subject to this law: not only does the word not reach her, it dies of its own accord" (338). The symbolic, as manifested by her parents' speech, cannot reach her to structure her experience. Later, when her father carries her back from a trip to the local doctor's office, Annie says that although she is aware of her father "say[ing] something," she "couldn't make out what that might be" (111). The symbolic still remains inaccessible. The first parental speech she *is* able to

understand after the string of misunderstandings, her father's, "So, Little Miss, huh?" does not reflect the symbolic, instead carrying its meaning through intonation, an aspect of the semiotic, and through reference to Annie's mother. The name "Little Miss" is a reflection of the fact that Annie and her mother share the same name, a reminder of the perfect unity of the semiotic chora, which Annie has to escape in order to forge her own identity as a speaking subject. It is appropriate, then, that Annie experiences her father's speech through imagery: "...all the sound [of his words] 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..." (111). The meaning the words carry to Annie is not the rule-governed, commonly understood meaning of the symbolic, but rather the rhythmic, image-based meaning of the semiotic. When Annie is finally able to emerge from her weakened state, she is ready to leave Antigua and her mother behind, once and for all. She does so by planning a very literal escape from everything and everyone she has ever known.

*Lucy*, Kincaid's second novel, has much in common with *Annie John*. *Lucy* is also somewhat autobiographical without being autobiography, and it also focuses heavily on the relationship between mother and daughter, albeit in a very different context. In *Lucy*, as in *Annie John*, the title character's mother—and later surrogate mother—forms the basis for her sense of identity, or rather for the struggle she undergoes to form one. In "Jamaica Kincaid's Prismatic Self and the Decolonisation of Language and Thought," Covi explains that *Lucy*, like *Annie*, frames "her identity in relational terms...[Her] question is never, 'Who am I?', but 'Who am I in relation to an Other?'" (52). *Lucy*, however, is at a much different place than *Annie*, who at the end of her novel has just made the decision to leave Antigua behind. *Lucy* has already left her birthplace and



family, and is in fact living a life similar to the one Annie hopes for—or at least Lucy appears to be doing so on the surface. Although separated from her mother by both emotional and physical distance from the very outset of the novel, Lucy still spends a great deal of time reflecting on the state of that relationship: “...I had come to see her love as a burden and...I had come to feel that my mother’s love for me was designed solely to make me into an echo of her” (36). Their relationship, similar to the one between Annie and her mother, is one that overwhelms and absorbs Lucy. Her mother’s connection to the semiotic is made clear later in the novel, when Lucy explains that instead of speaking to her in English or French patois, both languages reflective of the rule-governed symbolic, her mother communicates with her “in language anyone female could understand” (90). Lucy recognizes her mother’s power to overwhelm Lucy’s own subjectivity. Becoming an echo, a vestige of someone else’s ability to speak, is a death for the speaking subject. An echo has no life of its own. What an echo does have, though, is a source. Like the speaking subject, it must have a place from which it comes. If Lucy exists solely as a product and reflection of her mother, she cannot wish that mother gone. She cannot help remembering that her “thirteen-year-old heart couldn’t bear to see her [mother’s] face when [she] had caused her pain,” while at the same time making deliberate efforts to excise her mother from her life in order to become more than an echo (22). Like Annie, she is caught up in the necessary tension between needing her mother and needing to rid herself of her mother. Lucy is careful not to allow her mother’s presence to infiltrate her life entirely, however. She explains early in the novel, when she is still reading correspondence from home, that the things her mother communicates are no longer of interest to her:

I did not care about that any longer. The object of my life now was to put as much distance between myself and the events mentioned in her letter as I could manage. For I felt that if I could put enough miles between me and the place from which that letter came, and if I could put enough events between me and the events mentioned in the letter, would I not be free to take everything just as it came and not see hundreds of years in every gesture, every word spoken, every face? (31)

Given her struggle to separate from her mother and all the personal history she associates with her mother and her past, it seems troublesome that Lucy would finally say, “I was not like my mother—I was my mother” (90). That statement comes perilously close to erasing Lucy’s identity as a speaking subject. Her mother’s voice traps her in the life she wishes to leave behind, continually reminding her that the past is present and that she, in the present, is the product of her past. Diachronic time becomes synchronic time, eliminating her ability to forge a new life in the United States, and the only way Lucy can protect her sense of self is by not acknowledging the past at all. For that reason, Lucy later decides not to read any more of the letters her mother has sent her, thereby keeping her mother’s voice at a safe distance (91). She cannot, however, maintain the same physical distance from the second mother figure in her life.

Not surprisingly, the tension in Lucy’s relationship with her mother carries over into Lucy’s relationship with her employer and surrogate mother, Mariah, about whom she says, “The times I loved Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother. The times that I did not love Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother” (58). Although Lucy expresses affection toward Mariah and her children, she cannot help but

hurt Mariah on occasions when the white, American woman fails to recognize the implications of their very different life experiences for the ways they each perceive the world and the things and people in it. At the beginning of the trip to the family's summer house on the lakeshore, Lucy explains that Mariah wants her "to enjoy the house, all its nooks and crannies, all its sweet smells, all its charms, just the way she had done as a child," but Lucy has no interest in sharing Mariah's memories or perspective (36). Later, after Lucy fails to understand Mariah's attitude toward her partially Native American ancestry, she poses the question, "How do you get to be that way?," a question for which Mariah is unprepared and which she is unable to answer (41). Like her mother's visible expressions of sadness, Mariah's despair over Lucy's comment is said to "almost break [Lucy's] heart," "almost" being the operative word. Lucy says, "It was hollow, my triumph...but I held on to it just the same" (41). Because Mariah has taken on the mother role in Lucy's life, Lucy feels the need to put distance between them in order to protect herself. Although there is little physical distance between the two, the emotional distance serves the same function.

Abjection of the mother allows Annie John and Lucy to maintain their identities as speaking subjects, because the mother is the source of the semiotic. What is really abjected, then, is the semiotic itself. For the narrators of *Annie John* and *Lucy*—and, Kristeva would argue, everyone else—an identity as a speaking subject is necessarily a product of the language acquired when the child enters into the symbolic. What Kristeva's theory does not address, however, is the idea that the narrators' positions as colonial subjects add an extra layer of complexity to their language and, by extension, their identities. The language in which Kincaid's narrators learn to speak is English, a

colonial language that, by virtue of being the only language in which they can speak, places them back into a position they have just escaped. Rather than allowing them to build their own identities, it forces them to identify with the mother country and live within the identities the imperial culture allows them.

### III. Reading Identities: Books as Mirrors in *Annie John*

One significant way in which Annie interacts with the English language every day is through the books she reads. Scenes of reading are abundant in *Annie John*, and an understanding of what those scenes mean for the narrator is essential to understanding the role of literacy in forming her identity. The scenes all demonstrate, albeit in slightly different ways, that Annie is Kristeva's subject "in process," her identity constantly being negotiated through her interactions with the various texts she encounters.

The "mirrors" discussed thus far have all been visual, reflecting images of actual, tangible people. But in the many scenes of reading in *Annie John*, the mirrors Annie encounters come in the form of words and texts, a reality that complicates the role of the mirror and the role of the language in creating her identity. Virgil C. Aldrich explains that like pictures, but unlike the images in mirrors, "what is represented [by words] need not exist" in the real world (48). No mirror image is an accurate replica of the individual it reflects, but visual mirrors project images that are at least visually similar to the original. Textual mirrors, on the other hand, project whatever image the author and reader assign to them. The textual mirror's gaze is directed outward toward the reader. In their book *Decolonising Fictions*, Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin explain that "colonial textual interpellation" occurs when a colonial subject is directed by colonial texts to see herself as "deviant from the European norm" (106). Annie, then, is a victim of "colonial textual interpellation." She has no role in determining which words are used to create her, the text's object.

For colonial subjects, books that reflect the imperial culture are agents, helping to determine how they will perceive and judge themselves. As Brydon and Tiffin explain,

“[t]he colonial does not read the text, the text reads/constructs her,” and “[t]he *book*, then, for the colonized, is supreme being, creator and arbiter” (106). Annie admits as much when she says that she and her classmates, surrounded by English teachers and textbooks filled with a decidedly English version of history, are not always certain how they fit into the narrative of Antigua’s colonial past:

Of course, sometimes, what with our teachers and our books, it was hard for us to tell on which side we really now belonged—with the masters or the slaves—for it was all history, it was all in the past, and everybody behaved differently now; all of us celebrate Queen Victoria’s birthday, even though she has been dead a long time. But we, the descendants of the slaves, knew quite well what had really happened, and I was sure that if the tables had been turned we would have acted differently... (76)

Annie describes a blurred line between the colonizers and the colonized and points out the things that both have in common. Those things are, of course, superficial and imposed, making them the opposite of unifying. The passage demonstrates the multi-layered use of language enabled by the narrator’s status as a colonial subject, especially when the text is autobiographical. In “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” Kristeva explains Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea that “history and society...are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which [s]he inserts [her]self by rewriting them” (36). On one level, Kincaid, as the author of *Annie John*, rewrites history; by virtue of its inclusion in the lines above, she brings it into the present, creating a character who questions the seemingly clear line between master and slave that, at least according to law, no longer exists. In doing so, she also brings the history that gives her the identity as part of the

“we” or “us” into the present. The trouble is that by bringing the historical text upon which her identity is based forward she rewrites it, and therefore rewrites her identity too. Although in the end the narrator maintains her group identity, something is lost in the process. The line between what she perceives as her group and its oppressors is blurred.

Annie’s reflection illustrates several elements of Lacan’s theory of the formation of the self through the mirror stage. Donald Hall explains that for Lacan, “. . . human desire for self-sufficiency and agency . . . is always dialectically bound with, and undercut by, feelings of powerlessness and fragmentation.” The image the child sees in the mirror appears whole, but the child’s experience of the self reflected in that image is “fragmented,” so that there is always a mismatch between what is perceived and what is felt (80). The tension of that mismatch can be seen in the two different meanings Annie assigns to the words “us” and “we.” Her first uses of “us” and “we” in the passage refer to the colonized Antiguan people who, she believes have a determination to make about who they are and with whom they should identify. Her second use of “us,” however, refers to all the people who celebrate an English monarch’s birthday, a group that most certainly includes the English people living in Antigua. She then shifts to using “we” to refer to black Antiguan once again. The books Annie mentions in the passage, the mirrors in which she is required to study both history and herself, lead her toward one sense of identity that unites her with the colonizers. Her own experience, though, leads her to determine that the image she perceives is not entirely accurate. Her experience, she believes, is the most accurate, and that experience clearly separates her from the English. Being able to identify with them and call herself one of them would make Annie a member of a privileged group. Like the infant who sees itself in the mirror, Annie would

be able to picture a whole identity for herself. Since colonialism is only a threat to subjectivity for colonial subjects, not for colonialists themselves, her identity would be that of a speaking subject. But because the image projected from the books does not match her experience, she cannot fully identify with it. Instead, she is in a “double relation...with [her]self,” in which the image she sees of herself and the life she leads do not align (Lacan 166). Whereas the child passing through the actual mirror stage is still without language and does not yet have to grapple with an identity that language has shaped, Annie brings language and the socio-historical texts it carries with her to her encounters with her own reflection in the colonial books she reads. Her identity is already formed within language, and the texts with which she interacts in that language prevent a full identification with the colonizers.

Annie questions the line between master and slave by examining her relationship to books that have authors of their own. Those authors, undoubtedly English, also brought the past into the present when they wrote their books. And that past, told from an English colonial point of view, is what leads Annie to question her own identity. It can only do so, however, because Annie too brings with her a version of history that does not align with the version in her textbooks. Although the reader is limited by the demands of language—no reader will read the signifier “tree” and envision an automobile, for example—every reader does bring a unique background to each text, and that background influences how each text is read. If history is a text, then there are two historical texts present at Annie’s readings of her textbooks, one brought by the authors and one she brings herself. It is in opposition to the authors’ texts that Annie distinguishes herself from “the masters.” Although she has a role in shaping the meaning



of her textbooks, that role exists only in response to the text's role in creating her identity. What's more, even her own history, the text she brings with her to the reading, must necessarily be reflective of colonial ideology, because Annie's experiences have been those of a colonial subject.

Annie is Brydon and Tiffin's colonial reader, one whose identity is constructed by the books she encounters. Books serve as mirrors for her, reflecting back a person that, like the images the infant encounters in the mirror stage, is not really her. Although she initially says the books make it difficult for her and her classmates to determine whether they should identify with the masters or the slaves in Antigua's past, her later claim that her ancestors would have treated the masters differently had their roles been reversed indicates that she does not truly identify with those masters.

The mirror stage provides the emerging speaking subject with a starting point for the acquisition of language and accompanying entrance into the symbolic. Annie is, of course, well past that stage, but the misidentification that characterizes it, the separation between what is and what is understood, is similar to the slippage that occurs between signified and signifier when Annie reads her schoolbooks. Kristeva explains that narrative is "a dialogue between the *subject* of narration...and the *addressee*..." and that "the addressee...[is] signified in the relation between the subject of narration and himself" ("Word, Dialogue and Novel" 45). Appropriately, she also states that the addressee is caught up in an unavoidable relationship with both the writer and the other texts "in relation to which the writer has written his own text," finally arguing that the reader "is included within a book's discursive universe only as discourse itself," rather than as a source of or participant in that discourse ("Word, Dialogue and Novel" 37).

Annie, the addressee of the books, is the signified for the authors' work. She is the concept their work is written to call forth, the colonial subject their words instruct their readers to think into existence while reading. The problem for Annie is that if she were to live out the identity she reads, she would be erased. In the mirror stage, the image becomes an object, an other, the signified that does not really match the referent but does introduce the child to the necessity of language use. Annie too becomes the image, the signified attached to the signifier (book) that acts as an agent. Finding a mirror in texts written from an English perspective places her into what amounts to a reverse mirror stage. Instead of Annie creating the image in the mirror, the mirror text creates an image of Annie. The problem is that, unlike the images the infant encounters in the mirror stage, Annie cannot and does not mistake the book's image for her true self.

The presence of books as mirrors in *Annie John* is not limited to Annie's general statement about her textbooks. Her school as a whole is clearly a product of the colonial presence on the island. In *Jamaica Kincaid: A Critical Companion*, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert points out that Annie's teachers, all of whom are English, have names like Nelson, an English general, and Newgate, a well-known prison (91). Miss Nelson's importance, as well as the importance of the literature the students read, is reinforced early in the novel, when Annie imagines the way in which her teacher might be comparing her to the characters she has read about in books. Although being a black Antiguan girl means she can never be like those characters, she already compares herself to them and wonders how she lives up to their standards. Upon hearing that the first school morning of the new term will be spent "in contemplation and reflection and writing...an 'autobiographical essay,'" she reflects that "in most books all the good

people were always contemplating and reflecting before they did anything. Perhaps in her mind's eye she could see our futures and, against all prediction, we turned out to be good people" (38-9). Because her teacher has asked her to do something the characters do, she imagines that she must be like the characters. Later, she tells her friend, Gwen, that she would prefer to have "been named Enid, after Enid Blyton, the author of the first books [she] had discovered on [her] own and liked" (51). Blyton is, of course, English. She is also known for the racism, sexism, and classism she writes into her children's books. In 2006, in fact, Blyton made headlines, decades after her death, when publishers decided to revise portions of her books to make them more "politically correct" ("The 'sanitisation' of Enid Blyton!"). Annie's favorite book is *Jane Eyre*, a novel that objectifies a mad, uncivilized other while celebrating white Englishness to such a degree that Jean Rhys penned the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* to tell the story of how the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* became mad as a product of growing up in the oppressive shadow of a looming imperial culture. The culture in which Annie reads, however, has no concern about the discriminatory attitudes in Blyton's work or the othering in *Jane Eyre*, and as a result, neither does she. Annie knows herself—or rather believes she knows herself—through the books. She identifies with Blyton and *Jane Eyre*, even though both cast her as an object. Yet although the novel provides many examples of how, as Brydon and Tiffin describe, colonial discourse writes Annie, it also shows how Annie herself writes within and in response to that discourse.

In "Word, Dialogue and Novel," Kristeva outlines the aspects of Bakhtin's theory that give rise to her own theory of intertextuality. For Bakhtin, she explains, no text is original. Instead, all texts are an amalgamation of texts that have come before, so that

“poetic language is read as at least *double*” (37). Porter explains that intertextuality imposes limits upon the writer, because she “must inevitably borrow the traces, codes, and signs” she inherits from her discourse community (41). Annie, then, is also required to borrow from her discourse community in order to write. Although it can be argued that she belongs to at least two different discourse communities, the native Antiguan discourse community of her mother and Obeah and the colonized and colonizing discourse community of her father and school, the only one in which she has models of writing is the discourse community of the education system. That community’s discourse has been taught to her explicitly at school, and also implicitly in the literature she has read on her own. When Annie does get the chance to write and fulfill the role of speaking subject, she has no other option than to borrow from her background. On the first day of school, Annie writes an autobiographical essay that is markedly different than those of her classmates. The fictionalized version of the story captures the attention of Annie’s teacher and classmates, because although neither they nor Annie are consciously aware of it, the story reveals her internalization of colonial ideology.

Although it is Annie’s teacher who, as an English woman, most clearly embodies the imperial culture, her classmates’ choices of topic for their narratives indicate that they too have internalized that culture. Annie explains that, in their essays, “one girl told of a much revered and loved aunt who now lived in England” and who she hoped to join one day, “one girl told of her brother studying medicine in Canada,” and “one girl told of how her oldest sister’s best friend’s cousin’s best friend...met someone who millions of years ago had taken tea with Lady Baden-Powell,” the British woman who was a central figure in the Girl Guides organization (40). All of those are stories connect quite clearly to

Western imperialism. But although Annie's narrative does not appear, at first glance, to be a product of the colonial culture, one need not look far beneath the surface to see the relationship between the two.

In the part of the story that Annie claims is true, she casts her mother as an explorer who claims previously unconquered parts of a mostly unvisited island. Her mother, like the English colonizers, is an agent, able to navigate the sometimes dangerous surf with ease. Annie, on the other hand, cannot swim, and so is easily overwhelmed by the environment. And despite her mother's "coaxing" and attempts to teach her to swim by "just throwing [her] without a word into the water," she does not learn to swim independently (42). She is the helpless colonial subject, only able to move through the water with the assistance of her imperial mother, who can deposit her on the shore and end her progress at will. Later, after Annie loses sight of her mother and begins to panic over being abandoned, she spots her mother perched on a rock, well out of reach and completely unaware of her child's distress (43). Annie says, "I started to cry, for it dawned on me that, with all that water between us and I being unable to swim... the only way I would be able to wrap my arms around her again was if it pleased her or if I took a boat" (44). The similarities between Annie's mother and the mother country become all too apparent, both separated from her by an ocean and both distressingly out of reach. If the narrative ended there, Annie's teacher and classmates would likely have a very different reaction than they do to what would amount to a scathing critique of colonialism. But Annie offers redemption to the colonial powers when she writes redemption for her mother: "When I told her what had happened, she hugged me so close that it was hard to breathe, and she told me that nothing could be farther from the truth—

that she would never leave me.” Annie also writes that later, when she begins to have a recurring dream about both of her parents abandoning her for a place on the rock, her mother comforts her in just the same way (44). Her story thus becomes compatible with the colonial narratives they have internalized. Their awed reactions indicate their approval of what they do not consciously realize is an oppressive ideology. In real life, however, Annie’s mother’s reaction to her daughter’s fear is harsh and dismissive. When Annie reveals her recurring nightmare, she is offered no consolation. Instead, her mother offers her “a turned back” and issues a simple “warning against eating certain kinds of fruit in an unripe state just before going to bed” (45). The problem, then, is that the celebrated ending to Annie’s narrative—and the warm, supportive mother-child relationship portrayed in that ending—is a lie.

Annie claims that her decision to change the ending is an effort to comply with the demands of her own psyche. She says she just “couldn’t bear to have anyone see how deep in disfavor [she] was with [her] mother” (45). That makes sense given the importance of identification with the mother, even if it is false identification, early in the process of identity formation and as the origin of the semiotic. Murdoch applies Lacanian ideas to Kincaid’s novel, arguing that, for Annie, identification with her mother is a step toward the formation of a whole identity. That attempt is undermined, however, by her mother’s repeated dismissals and rejections, which remind Annie of the “falseness” of her belief that she and her mother are one and the same (325). At the time of the essay-writing day at school, Annie is still struggling to come to terms with the new emotional and psychological distance that separates her from her mother. She is also, however, struggling with the emotional and psychological conflict that characterizes her

relationship to the mother country. Her refusal to write the truth in her essay serves as a method of hiding that distance and conflict from others. It allows her to present a whole self, a self that, in reality, no longer exists. In fact, that identification needs to end in order for Annie to maintain a secure identity as a speaking subject.

Paravisini-Gebert proposes another reason for Annie's revision of her story's ending. She argues that the revised ending is evidence of Annie's awareness of audience. Annie "manipulates" the truth in order to meet outside expectations (92). Those expectations are, of course, that her own lived experience will reflect and conform to colonial values, and that she should relish the connection to the colonialism that threatens her subjectivity. Miss Nelson reinforces the colonial narrative Annie has created in her essay when she decides to add it to the classroom library, where "it would be available to any girl who wanted to read it" (41). The essay now occupies the same position, ideologically as well as physically, as the other colonial literature Annie and her classmates read on a daily basis. By placing it there, Miss Nelson validates the falsified story and places it in conversation with the other books in the classroom library, books that are part of its intertextual context. Annie has now become the author of a textual mirror that will have the opportunity to construct other readers. What is celebrated is not Annie's own experience, but rather her experience as viewed through the lens of colonialism. Annie, though, remains as yet consciously unaware of the similarities between her relationship with her mother and her relationship with English culture. That lack of awareness allows her story to become the signifier and she the signified. She writes herself through colonized discourse.

The way Annie interacts with colonial discourse later in the novel is a marked change from the way she writes her essay. When she encounters a picture entitled “Columbus in Chains” in her textbook, she is amused. She believes the chains are “just deserts” for a man who wrought such havoc upon her home and the people in it. More significant than her thoughts, however, are her actions. Annie edits the textbook page, adding the caption “The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go” (78). In her textbook, the image is clearly meant to portray a tragedy that has befallen a hero, an unjust defeat of the imperialism her education has encouraged her to internalize and celebrate. Annie’s caption could be interpreted as a lamentation of the fact that such a “great man” is now bound and unable to act, but the source of the caption makes it clear that her writing is not, in fact, borne of sadness over what has happened to the explorer in the picture. On the contrary, it is an indication of the resentment she feels toward a man she knows opened the door to a great deal of suffering for her ancestors and others like them. Importantly, the words she uses are not her own, but rather words she has borrowed from her mother, who originally used them to describe her own father, Pa Chess:

My mother read the letter in quite a state, her voice rising to a higher pitch with each sentence. After she read the part about Pa Chess’s stiff limbs, she turned to my father and laughed as she said, “So the great man can no longer just get up and go. How I would love to see his face now!” (78)

Both Annie Sr.’s description of her father and the image of Columbus in the textbook are historical texts, but both move into the present when they are made new by Annie Jr.’s decision to fuse them. And the joy Annie Sr. feels upon hearing of her father’s disabled state, in addition to hinting at parent-child discord, reveals a great deal about Annie Jr.’s



feelings toward the man she sees depicted in her textbook. For her, Columbus, too, is a father figure, but that relationship is a product of colonialism, not genetics, so it is not surprising that her feelings toward him would be negative. She appropriates her mother's words to alter the meaning of the image in her textbook, making it tell the story of what he has done to, not for, Antigua. The political becomes personal, and through her use of language, the semiotic interrupts the symbolic. It is the semiotic content of her words, the emotion behind them, that makes clear how they should be understood. That semiotic content assigns them a meaning that contradicts their symbolic meaning. Murdoch describes Annie's decision to add the caption as her "imposing her own (written) will upon" the text. He relates Annie's relationship to Columbus to her relationship to her mother, arguing that by undermining the former's power and authority, she foreshadows that she will also undermine and act out against the power and authority of her mother (337). But although Murdoch does acknowledge that the words are her mother's and her use of them is "a further instance of the repetition-compulsion" that is evident throughout the novel, he fails to acknowledge that the challenge to authority her actions represent is itself undermined by the fact that she has to use her mother's words to create it. It might appear that Annie, by re-authoring one section of her textbook, has found a way to speak back to the colonial discourse that has shaped her identity. Her words, though, are not her own. Annie is, to be sure, speaking back, but she still cannot speak in her own voice.

Annie's ongoing quest for independence eventually leads her, at the age of seventeen to leave home once and for all. As she walks through the town to the jetty where a ship will be waiting to carry her away, Lucy says that she is "passing through most of the years of [her] life" (138). She describes passing the home of a seamstress to

whom she was once apprenticed, but who treated her as a servant and demanded that she follow a strict set of rules, a demand she was never able to successfully meet in the woman's eyes, even when she knew herself to have met it (138). She describes the rest of her route, saying, "We were soon on the road that I had taken to school, to church, to Sunday school, to choir practice, to Brownie meetings, to Girl Guide meetings..." (139). She explains that she took the same road to a "chemist's shop" at age five and successfully purchased various oils for her mother, an accomplishment that garners high praise from her mother (139-40). They pass the bank, the doctor's office, and, finally, the library (140-2). The story she tells of following her (very literal) path to freedom is necessarily wrapped up in the story of her past. Each and every landmark Annie mentions is tied—and ties her—to either the controlling presence of her mother or the domineering presence of the colonial culture. Her narrative subverts a diachronic understanding of time, especially as Annie describes her experience of walking through them: "As I passed by all these places, it was as if I were in a dream...I didn't feel my feet touch ground, I didn't even feel my own body—I just saw these places as if they were hanging in the air, not having top or bottom, and as if I had gone in and out of them in all the same moment" (143). The dreamlike nature of the physical space through which she must pass on her way to the dock, then, mimics the maternal space of the chora, which "precedes...temporality" (Kristeva *Revolution in Poetic Language* 95) and in which the child's subjectivity is nonexistent.

Like leaving the chora, Annie believes that leaving the space of her childhood is necessary for obtaining an independent identity as a speaking subject. Long before her final walk to the jetty, she imagines a life for herself in Belgium, because it was once the

home of her favorite author, Charlotte Brontë. While imagining her life there, she says, “I was walking down a street... carrying a bag filled with books that at last I could understand...” (92). The words “at last” imply an ongoing, unsuccessful attempt to understand those books in the past, an unsuccessful attempt to understand and live out the colonial ideology they contain. Annie believes that a change of place will separate her from whatever is preventing her from doing so. Her destination, however, is the very source of the colonial ideology that has prevented her from becoming a speaking subject. It seems unlikely, then, that she will be able to obtain subjectivity in the space to which she will travel.

#### IV. Reading and Writing Away From Home: The Fall of Stories in *Lucy*

The narrator of *Lucy* is, at the outset of the novel, in the place where Annie's story leaves off. Although Annie was bound for England and Lucy is in the northern United States, the treatment of Europe and North America in Kincaid's *A Small Place* makes it clear that both countries play a significant role in the colonial exploitation of the narrators' home island, Antigua. In Lucy's comments about the role of books in her childhood, it is difficult to ignore the striking similarities to Annie's experiences. In one particularly significant passage, she tells of being forced to memorize and recite a poem about daffodils, a celebration of a flower that, in Lucy's world, does not even exist. When Mariah introduces her to the flowers for the first time, her feelings are clear. She asks, quite pointedly, "Mariah, do you realize that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen?" (30). As Diane Simmons explains, for Lucy, "the beautiful and innocent form of the daffodil...no longer masks the fact that by glorifying the daffodil in poetry and by ignoring Caribbean flora, colonial education has used the daffodil as a tool to 'erase' everything that is native to the colonial child" (33). Of course, Lucy immediately expresses regret at hurting Mariah by "cast[ing] her beloved daffodils in a scene she had never considered...of conquered and conquests...of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes" (30). Lucy recognizes that the poem's meaning is not contained within the poem, but rather wrapped up in the text of Antigua's colonial history, where it is part of a larger system of alienation and objectification. She brings with her an intertext that Mariah, coming from a very different discourse community, cannot access or understand. Mariah has thus far lived unaware of her role within the colonial system, but Lucy's presence

affords her the opportunity to confront that role for the first time. Even so, Mariah remains in the position of power, and for that reason, she has the option of foregoing that opportunity.

Soon after their bitter conversation about the daffodils, while Mariah and Lucy are cooking fish for dinner, Lucy relates a story of the first time she heard the Bible story in which Jesus feeds thousands with only seven loaves of bread and two fish. Upon having the story read to her by her mother, Lucy focuses in on one small detail: she wants to know how the fish is prepared (37). She goes on to explain the importance of the various ways in which fish can be prepared and the different associations she has with each method (38). Of course, the Bible story does not specify the manner in which the fish is cooked. That might seem like a minor oversight, but Lucy states that to her, it “would have meant a lot” (39). Mariah reacts negatively to Lucy’s comment, making a face to indicate that she believes Lucy has missed the point of the story altogether, and that Lucy’s misunderstanding causes her anguish. Like in their conversation about the daffodils, Mariah dismisses Lucy’s concerns rather than learning from them. In doing so, she denies Lucy’s ability to speak.

The omission of food preparation methods from the Bible story and the emphasis Lucy places upon it demonstrate the inability of Western texts to describe or explain both Antiguan culture as a whole and the culture of Lucy’s family in particular. But as she watches Mariah’s pained reaction to what she has said, Lucy reflects that she would have found Mariah’s eyes “beautiful even if [she] hadn’t read millions of books in which blue eyes were always accompanied by the word ‘beautiful’” (39). Although Lucy recognizes that literature does not always reflect her reality, she knows that it does, nevertheless,

shape her thought process. It is unsurprising, then, that when considering a new name for herself, Lucy, like Annie, “eventually settled on the name Enid, after the authoress Enid Blyton” (149-50). Like Annie, Lucy understands and identifies herself through the lens of the English print culture and the ideology that comes with it. Their experiences, though, are not identical.

Books surround Lucy in her new home. One of those books is a photo album that belongs to Mariah. The album chronicles her life with her husband, Lewis, from the time they met in Europe to the present, “of them getting married against their parents’ wishes, behind their parents’ backs, and of their children just born in hospitals, and birthday parties and trips to canyons and deserts and mountains...” (80). The photo album should reflect the reality of their lives, but Lucy knows that it does no such thing. It is Mariah who believes her life to be the one reflected back to her in the book. When Lucy catches Lewis “licking [the] neck” of Mariah’s friend, Dinah, she reflects that the image “was a picture that no one would ever take—a picture that would not end up in one of those books, but a significant picture all the same” (79-80). Her statement reflects an understanding of the fact that books can fool people, and that the images—in this case literal images—that the books project cannot be trusted.

Her comments about the photo album are not the only instance when Lucy questions the authority of books. Later, when Mariah tells her about a painter who had been eager to leave his home and travel the world, Lucy says, “Of course his life could be found in the pages of a book; I had just begun to notice that the lives of men always are” (95). She sees that books tell a story, but that it is not *the* story. She further develops that idea later, when Mariah attempts to comfort her with a book:

Mariah...came back with a large book and opened it to the first chapter.

She gave it to me. I read the first sentence. “Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female— this word is sufficient to define her.” I had to stop [reading]. (132)

Lucy is unable to tolerate the reduction of her situation to a manifestation of what Mariah believes is their common plight as women. She quickly rejects the book’s representation of her life. She knows it cannot explain her, and so she does not give it a chance to construct her identity. Lucy does not, however, dismiss the importance of books completely. She explains that owning a large quantity of books has always “been a dream,” one she has finally been able to realize while living with Mariah and Lewis (143), and soon after reveals that her connection to the written word runs much deeper than it has seemed thus far.

Lucy reveals that her construction by colonial print culture began with the most basic aspect of her identity, her name. When Lucy is still younger and living at home, her mother tells her, “I named you after Satan himself. Lucy, short for Lucifer” (152). While Annie is named after her subjectivity-consuming mother, Lucy is named after a character from one of the central texts of Western culture, itself with the power to cast her as an object and eliminate her subjectivity. Lucy, who has grown up learning *Paradise Lost* and various Bible stories, immediately understands the implications of being named after the devil. Although she is very familiar with “the stories of the fallen,” she says she “had not known that [her] own situation could even distantly be related to them” until her mother’s statement (152-3). Her choice to escape from Antigua to North America means the United States is the hell where she has ended up. But as Julia De Foor Jay explains,

for Lucy, “isolated independence” in the United States is better than “subservience under the mother/colonialism” at home (119). Books, like mothers, are mirrors that hold up false images to both Lucy and Annie, images that force them to create false identities for themselves. Interestingly, the Biblical connection makes Lucy fonder than ever of her name, especially because in her mind it creates separation from her mother. To her, her mother has always seemed like a god, and so she believes it makes sense that she would be a god’s fallen child (153). Although there is no indication that Lucy’s mother really did name her after Lucifer, and in fact, given the tense emotions of the moment in which she tells that story, it seems unlikely that she would say so if she and her daughter were getting along, Lucy latches onto that story, not only allowing her identity to be determined by a text, but celebrating it. Lucy ends that particular anecdote by saying, “[W]henever I saw my name I always reached out to give it a strong embrace” (153).

Like Annie, Lucy does eventually get a chance to write her own story. The blank notebook Mariah gives her is literally the “book of blank pages” to which she compared her life when she moved out on her own (163). The blank book should be Lucy’s chance to write an identity for herself that creates more distance between her and her home, her mother, and all the other past she left behind. In order to see things as they come instead of seeing them in relation to the past, however, Lucy would need to escape intertextuality. If Lucy is, as Kristeva suggests, a product of language, and if language is what structures the subject’s understanding and experience of the texts of history and society, then Lucy cannot hope to maintain an identity as a speaking subject while losing her connection to those two texts. It is appropriate, then, that the first words she manages to write in her new book are her three names, all of which tie her in some way to either



her mother or the colonial culture. Those names are promptly washed away by her tears, the emotion of the semiotic overwhelming and erasing the identity provided for her by the symbolic (163-4). Lucy's attempt at (self) authorship ends as quickly as it started. Interestingly, it takes part of her connection to imperial culture with it.

## V. The Special Case of *A Small Place*

Although written right in between *Annie John* and *Lucy*, *A Small Place* represents a stylistic break in Kincaid's work. It is most often labeled as nonfiction—although whether it is autobiography, travel memoir, essay, or something else is up for debate—and its narrator has a very different voice than the narrators of the two novels. Much of the difficulty in classifying the book can be explained, in fact, by the tone with which the narrator directly addresses the audience, the information the narrator shares, and the autobiographical voice with which the narrator speaks. Unlike the other two narrators, whose subjectivity is threatened by both their mothers and the imperial culture to which they struggle to speak back, this narrator directly addresses the perpetrators of Antigua's oppression. In doing so, she illustrates the process through which a colonial subject can write a way out of colonial ideology and into subjectivity by appropriating colonial discourse. She also illustrates, however, that appropriating discourse effectively to escape oppressive ideology requires the presence and complicity of those who are traditionally cast as powerful within that discourse.

In *A Small Place*, the narrator's mother appears only three times, but the way in which she appears is significant. First, the narrator relates a story of going to the doctor, who happened to be a dentist from Czechoslovakia, and who has his wife evaluate the cleanliness of each of his patients before seeing them himself. Her mother, the narrator explains, "examined [her] carefully to see that [she] had no bad smells or dirt" on her body before she would even set out for the "doctor's" office. But what makes the story most notable is the narrator's observation that "in her innocence [her mother] thought that she and the doctor shared the same crazy obsession—germs" (28-9). The mother, by

failing to recognize the racism inherent in the doctor's superfluous concern with his patients' cleanliness, becomes its unwitting perpetrator, with her daughter as the victim. She, like the other narrators' mothers, becomes an agent of colonial oppression.

The narrator goes on to point out several other lapses in understanding that have played a role in shaping Antigua's history and also her own personal history. She identifies a girls' school to which illegitimate children were once not admitted as a means of denying admittance to black students. The Northern Irish school administrator reportedly tells the students repeatedly "to stop behaving as if they were monkeys just out of trees." Nevertheless, she says, "No one ever dreamed that the word for this was racism" (29). Like the unaware mother who excuses the doctor's bad behavior, the black Antiguans understand other racist practices as poor character traits on the part of the white Europeans on the island. The narrator explains that to them, "[t]he English were ill-mannered, not racists; the school headmistress was especially ill-mannered, not a racist; the doctor was crazy...he also was not a racist; the people at the Mill Reef Club were puzzling...not racists" (34). By naming the behaviors as something other than racism, they change the way those behaviors are perceived. Unlike the other Antiguan people to whom she so often refers, however, the narrator clearly can and does perceive the behaviors as racist. That difference in perception allows the narrator not only to speak back to colonial discourse, but also to highlight the ways in which the Antiguan people have become complicit in its project.

Discourse is a favorite topic for Michel Foucault, who uses it to think about subjectivity and subject formation. In "The Discourse on Language," Foucault states that "the production of discourse is at once controlled...and redistributed" (qtd. in D. Hall

91). Therefore, Donald Hall explains, “[p]ower circulates, is appropriated and deployed” in a complex network of relationships, not in “a top-down fashion” (93). For that reason, it can serve as a means of not only reinforcing the ideologies inherent in the dominant discourse, but also as a means of undermining them. As Hall puts it, for Foucault, “[p]ower is always circumscribed within historically specific terms and limits, but it is also always available for appropriation” (93). The discourse of colonization includes the idea that subaltern populations are ill-mannered, crazy, and puzzling, and therefore in need of civilization through colonization. The narrator, in pointing out the mislabeling that occurred so frequently throughout her childhood, employs the tactic Foucault advocates: she appropriates discourse typically used to define her as an oppressed minority and uses it to define someone else, thereby exposing the flaws in the dominant ideology. She turns that discourse around, using it to label the colonizers just as the colonized have been labeled.

In a later anecdote, the narrator describes a tense encounter between her mother and the Minister of Culture when her mother is affixing political posters to a streetlight outside the latter’s house. When the minister asks, in an accusatory fashion, “What is *she* doing here?” the response he gets from the narrator’s mother is telling: “I may be a she, but I am a good she. Not someone who steals stamps from Redonda” (50). The narrator explains that she is unaware of the meaning of her mother’s sarcastic response, but that it instantly silences the minister. The short exchange is bursting with semiotic content, from the minister’s loaded use of the word “she” to the unspoken power behind her mother’s utterance. On the surface, the meaning of the words is not clear, but what is clear is that the meaning depends upon some shared history between the two, some type of scandal

that both understand but neither is willing to address directly. The passage ties the semiotic and its connection to motherhood with Antigua's colonial exploitation, connecting language to history, a connection the narrator analyzes and laments throughout the text. It is also, however, another instance of a member of an oppressed population—in this case women—taking the discourse used to label her as the lesser side of the gender dichotomy and turning it back on someone who uses it. While being “she” in the minister's speech is clearly negative, being “she” in the narrator's mother's speech is “good.” The male person who usually holds the power to label being female as something else becomes the lesser in the relationship between the two.

If the narrator is to gain and maintain the speaking subjectivity that eluded Annie and Lucy, she must first find a way to appropriate colonial discourse not only as it manifests itself in interactions in her everyday life, but also in the print culture that figures so prevalently in her text. The narrator of *A Small Place* has been deeply affected by the English language and colonial print culture, and the significant role of reading in the narrator's life is reflected by the heavy emphasis Kincaid places on the Antigua Public Library. The library is a source of anger and anguish for the narrator, who treasured it as a child. It is an indicator of the island's deterioration over time and also a reminder of the reality of growing up in a nation still very much controlled by an imperial culture that does not value the education of the native population. As Joacim Hansson explains in *Libraries and Identity: The role of institutional self-image and identity in the emergence of new types of library*, libraries are always created in “response to something—a change in governance, in technology, in patterns of communication, in education policy,” etc. (36). They are designed “to uphold and defend a defined political

system that needs a certain structure to maintain its legitimacy” (36). In the case of the Antigua Public Library, one need not look far to uncover the need to which the library is a response or the political, social, and economic system to which it lends legitimacy. The library was founded by the Antigua Library Society, whose members saw no problem with importing and stuffing their library shelves with the literature of Britain, when they could afford it (Frohnsdorff 10). When they could no longer afford it, it is perhaps not surprising that they turned their sights toward North America, where they could take advantage of soon-to-be-loosened reprinting laws to import copies of British books that were “reproduced at one twentieth of the publishing price in England” (Frohnsdorff 11). The library is Antiguan in name only, but that name is powerful. Because it is said to be Antiguan, there is no reason for the Antiguan people to question the legitimacy of the colonial discourse in its books and the way that discourse objectifies Antiguan people.

Because its books reflect colonial ideology, the library helps to protect English dominance on the island. It tells the native Antiguan, over and over, that their identities are defined by their colonizers and not themselves. Its books, full of characters and plots that reflect colonial ideology, served as mirrors for the narrator as a child, showing her who she was expected to be and become. Like the books Annie and Lucy read, the texts in the library turn the narrator into an object. The library even seems to have the power to turn some black Antiguan into a kind of neocolonialists. The narrator describes the woman who was head librarian during her childhood as “imperious,” a significant word choice given its context in *A Small Place* (44). The librarian, an Antiguan woman, does become a (perhaps) unwitting accomplice to the colonial indoctrination the library’s patrons experience as they read the colonial ideology imbedded in its books. She

becomes a part of the colonial system. Beyond just being “imperious,” she is also described as “stuck-up” and “suspicious of [the library patrons]...always sure that we meant to do some bad” (45). Her attitude echoes that of the white people on the island. Pervasive colonialism has turned her into a tool that disseminates colonial ideology from the inside of the subaltern population. In a discussion of the way marginality has been figured in postcolonial studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains that “neocolonialism...fabricat[es] its allies by proposing a share of the centre in a seemingly new way” (201). As an Antiguan woman placed in the position of curator and protector of the library—and, by extension, English cultural dominance—the librarian seems to have been offered a share of the center, and she takes that role seriously. Of course, she can never really be of the center. Her position on the margin is reinforced by the ideology she is helping to protect. She is its victim, and she is now complicit in the victimization of others.

In one particularly striking passage, the narrator explores the way in which the library and its books harm the Antiguan people. She reminisces about the beauty of the old library, all while indirectly indicting it—and also the reader—for the psychological damage that the library wrought upon her as a child:

But if you saw the old library...the beauty of us sitting there like communicants at an altar, taking in, again and again, the fairy tale of how we met you, your right to do the things you did, how beautiful you were, are, and always will be; if you could see all of that in just one glimpse, you would see why my heart would break at the dung heap that now passes for a library in Antigua...most of the books, instead of being on their nice

shelves, resting comfortable, waiting to acquaint me with you in all your greatness, are in cardboard boxes in a room, gathering mildew, or dust, or ruin. (42-3)

The narrator clearly recognizes, at least in retrospect, that the library made her into an object of colonial discourse and played a role in determining her identity. She refers to the recorded version of colonial history as a “fairy tale,” but with a tone that is derogatory rather than celebratory. Even the words “beauty” and “beautiful,” used to describe her childhood experiences at the library, take on new, seemingly contradictory meanings because of their location within the context of Kincaid’s larger work. And underneath the longing for the library that once was is a thinly veiled sarcasm to let the reader know that, to the narrator, “all [the reader’s] greatness” is not so great after all. The tone of the passage seems to call into question the stability of the colonial discourse and the impact it has had upon the narrator. She clearly recognizes the damage that has been done to her, and that awareness should make it easier for her to overcome it. One notable passage seems to suggest the opposite, however. In it, she grieves the fact that English is the only language in which she can have a voice:

For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal’s deed. The language of the criminal can explain and express the deed only from the criminal’s point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me. (32)

The narrator’s claim is troublesome in the context of *A Small Place*, because the book speaks directly to tourists who are assumed to be European or North American and native



English speakers. Without the English language, the narrator could not communicate to her audience the “injustice of the deed” they have committed. Even a language of her own, one that could accurately contain and express what has happened to the Antiguan people, could not express that information to the intended readers.

Although the narrator argues that she is at a disadvantage because of her linguistic dependence upon the language of Antigua’s colonizers, in some ways it seems as though her role as the speaking subject in the book allows her to write her way out of the corner in which the English language has her trapped. After all, the entire book reads like a prosecution of “the criminal,” and certainly does not seem, at least on the surface, to be told “from the criminal’s point of view” (32). The narrator’s use of the English language, however, places her in an untenable position. It forces her to internalize a power structure in which she has no place. She can only speak in a language that forces her to understand herself as an object. Inherent in her description of the criminal is the idea that she understands herself as the victim of the crime, one who does not act, but is rather acted upon. The passage in which she describes the beauty of the library indicates that when this particular criminal looks out from his point of view, she is what he sees. She is the object of the criminal’s gaze. She *is* the criminal’s point of view, and it is true, then, that even as she writes back, she has to write from the colonial point of view. Even while writing the identity of her colonial oppressors, the narrator writes herself out of speaking subjectivity.

The inevitability of self-objectification in the narrator’s use of the English language arises because that language forces her to reflect upon herself. Although the narrators of *Annie John* and *Lucy* are certainly reflective in their comments about their

identities, the narrator of *A Small Place* engages in an even more elaborate form of reflection. In *Subjectivity and Self: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*, Dan Zahavi explains Natorp's theory of reflection, subjectivity, and selfhood, one that sheds light on the narrator's experience. For Natorp, he explains, the subject is the one who experiences and the object is the one experienced. Furthermore, in order for "the subject...to experience itself, it has to take itself as an object." That means that reflection is useless as a means of gaining insight into the self, because "the subject [who] experiences an object...does not experience itself" (74). Throughout the text, the narrator uses the signifiers "we" and "us" to refer to black Antiguans, a group with which she identifies to a large degree. Her use of the first person "us" implies the presence of not only one subject, but many, all of whom share a common identity. It presupposes that those subjects can be grouped based on some type of shared experience as subaltern residents of a place where colonial ideology still holds the power. To make that assumption, however, requires a significant amount of reflection. It requires the narrator to have studied her experience and the perceived or real experiences of those around her. According to Natorp's theory, then, she necessarily objectifies herself and an entire population in order to write about it.

The narrator's objectification of the Antiguan population is, of course, necessary if she is to write about it at all, a fact that would be true for any narrator of any nonfiction book by any author. Is it fair, then, to argue that the process of objectification through reflective writing about a group to which she belongs negates the narrator's ability to speak and eliminates her position as subject? To answer that question, it is necessary to study the narrator's treatment of tourists who, although they are assumed to be real, are

still hypothetical people, ones who may or may not conform to the narrator's definition of them in reality. Using the second person, she is able to objectify the tourists, taking away their role as privileged subjects. Because she controls the voice of the text, they cannot write back. Language is no longer theirs to use, but instead belongs to her. Rhonda D. Frederick points out that Kincaid's very intentional use of the second person to portray the tourist reader as "an ugly human being" is successful in that it allows her "to destabilize readers' established ways of knowing themselves" (14; 6). In writing them as objects, she uses the English language very differently than those same tourists ever would or could. If "good behavior is the proper posture of the weak, of children," then it makes sense that her writing style would violate the traditions of the English language narrative (Kincaid 30). Kincaid is aware that "being mannerly, peaceful, and orderly has been prescribed for, demanded and expected from people like her," and that "her style, therefore, must necessarily tell a radically different story—and tell it differently" (Frederick 12). Her writing breaks the rules of convention, and she breaks free from the submissive "posture" she so abhors. It could be argued, then, that rather than "express[ing] the deed only from the criminal's point of view," writing the tourist reader as other allows the narrator to undermine the colonial point of view she wishes to escape. It does not, however, allow her to complete that escape.

The narrator has no more access to the actual, lived experience of being a colonialist than the English residents and tourists on the island have to the lived experience of being subject to colonial rule. While her characterization of those populations seems accurate, she has no choice other than to extrapolate from her own experiences in order to make generalizations about who those people must be. Of course,

it is difficult to blame her for doing so after experiencing a lifetime of colonial interpellation herself. Covi explores the relationship between the narrator and readers in detail. She argues that "...the I-Thou mode of narrative...rhetorically multiplies the possibilities of meaning by inviting the reader to participate" in the text (52). Yet while it may be true that the use of the second person invites the reader into the text, that reader is unable to speak back to the narrator, unable to declare herself to be anything other than what the narrator characterizes her to be, unable to escape from her definition. She is a type, a representative member of a group, but not an individual.

Leslie Larkin refers to the narrator's treatment of the reader as "a *deconstructive performative*, an enunciation that seeks to destroy the subject of its utterance" (203). The roles of subject and object have been reversed, and the reader is now the other; she is trapped by the narrator's gaze in the same way the narrator was trapped by the colonial gaze in the literature she used to encounter in the books she borrowed—or stole—from the library. But inherent in the concept of the "you," the tourist reader, is the concept of a "not you," a group that is whatever the tourist reader is not and vice versa. In *A Small Place*, that other group is the Antiguan population to which the narrator belongs. It is the "you" that allows for the "we" and "us." In "Symbol to Sign," Kristeva explains that meaning is a process, because all signs are "correlative," and their "meaning is the result of an interaction with other signs" (72). If the signs "we" and "us" are composed of two signifiers that point to the same signified, that signified exists only because the sign "you" consists of a signifier associated with an opposing signified. Their meanings are differential, and one does not exist without the other. The narrator's identity exists only in opposition to the group and ideology she speaks back to in her book, making that group

and ideology into actors, even as they are acted upon. Even as she corners the reader, she is still dependent upon the colonialism that reader represents to give her an identity.

The narrator's dilemma of trying to speak oneself out of colonial ideology while speaking in a colonial language is illustrated by the Antiguan teenagers she observes at a pageant. She cannot believe "how unable they were to answer in a straightforward way, and in their native tongue of English, simple questions about themselves" (44). She speculates that their lack of ability may be due to the poor quality of the education they have received in post-colonial Antiguan schools, schools that, if she is to be believed, are producing students who are "almost illiterate" (43). Of course, their near illiteracy means that they would not be able to access the contents of the Antigua Public Library, even if the books weren't packed away into boxes. They simply would not be able to read and understand them, at least not well. Although their poor linguistic abilities might protect them from being objectified by the library books, and although that might be seen as progress toward the development of identities as speaking subjects independent of the colonial culture, it also illuminates the fact that, if the only language available in which to speak is English, and if Antiguan young people are losing their command of that language, then their ability to speak will be lost as well.

Given the narrator's vocal explanation of her distaste for both the books in the library and the language in which they are written, it seems contradictory that she would be upset about "the dung heap" that she feels the library has become. In fact, the location of the old library, the location to which the narrator would like the library to return, has become a symbol of the island's economic exploitation, a key theme throughout the text. The location is currently being held hostage by the development of the tourist industry

and those who stand to benefit from it. When the narrator questions a member of the Mill Reef Club, an organization on the island that she believes might be willing to help in the cause of restoring the building to its former splendor, about the possibility that the club will do so, the response she receives is not the one she would like:

This woman and her friends at the Mill Reef Club wanted to restore the old library, but she said she didn't know if they would be able to do so, because that part of St. John's was going to be developed, turned into little shops—boutiques—so that when tourists turned up they could buy all those awful things that tourists always buy... (48).

The man behind the development is not only not Antiguan, but also not trustworthy; he has a history of cheating another government out of oil profits (48). While the intended use of the library's space is unfortunate, it is not without historical precedents. The Antiguan people, as Michael K. Haywood points out, have historically been "treated as an expendable and poorly valued form of capital" by the English colonizers (654). The Mill Reef Club's refusal to help restore the library, an institution that should contribute to the education and general intellectual development of the Antiguan population, is very much in keeping with the members' old attitudes toward the people they have colonized. Turning it into a tourist locale legitimizes the tourist industry's exploitation of the island and its people. The building's surrounding area, home to the Treasury, post office, and courthouse, makes it an appropriate location to serve as a base for that exploitation.

Unfortunately, at least according to the narrator, the new library's location is no better than the old location has become. The Antigua Public Library has ended up atop a dry goods store in the city's commercial district, tying it once again to the economic

abuse of the island. The relationship between language, economics, and identity is not limited to the library's location, however. Capitalist ideology is heavily dependent upon language, a fact that is quite clear to the narrator. Speaking to the tourist reader, she explains, "you had always felt that people like me cannot run things, people like me will never grasp the idea of Gross National Product...people like me will never understand the notion of rule by law..." (36). She then goes on to tell the reader, "You will forget your part in the whole setup, that bureaucracy is one of your inventions, and all the laws that you know mysteriously favor you" (36). The narrator goes on to point out the ways in which an economic system influences identity by determining the places that an individual is allowed to occupy:

Do you know why people like me are shy about being capitalists? Well, it's because we, for as long as we have known you, *were* capital, like bales of cotton and sacks of sugar, and you were the commanding, cruel capitalists, and the memory of this is so strong, the experience so recent, that we can't quite bring ourselves to embrace this idea that you think so much of. (36-7)

The colonial ideology that allowed Antigua's colonizers to see the Antiguan people as capital in the way the narrator describes exists within and is carried out by language. The narrator's comment reveals that like the colonial ideology present in the library books, the capitalist ideology that came along with colonialism also imposed an identity upon the Antiguan people. They became objects, commodities for others' use, while the colonizers were the subjects who could control the commodities. In that way, the library's colonial ideology and capitalist ideology are similar. Both allow for and

encourage objectification of the Antiguan population, and both have, therefore, played a negative role in the narrator's identity formation and the identity formation of the Antiguan people who came before her. By pointing out that the tourist reader is a member of the group responsible for the objectification of the Antiguan people and then refusing to "embrace" the ideology that allowed for that objectification, the narrator seems to speak back to capitalist discourse. Yet while her statement clearly undermines its validity, she is still left with a problem of self-definition. She only identifies herself by what she is not. She is not a capitalist, or at least not a willing or enthusiastic one. That said, telling what she is not is different than telling what she is. In the passage above, she is only what the reader is not. Her identity is still defined in opposition to her oppressors.

The final chapter of the book best illustrates the conflict between the narrator's desire to write the reader and the limits imposed upon her by the language in which she composes. In *Social Identity*, his book about the sociological aspects of identity formation and expression, Richard Jenkins explains that "the notion of identity involves two criteria of comparison between persons or things: *similarity* and *difference*" (17). If the book has thus far worked to establish the differences between the narrator and the assumed reader, the last chapter does the opposite. In a marked departure from the rest of the book, the narrator assumes a perspective that comes perilously close to the tourist perspective she has mocked. She describes, at great length, all the things on the island that seem "too beautiful" to be real, starting with the sunset, ocean, and sky; moving on to the flora and fauna; and eventually reaching the people themselves (77-9). Her statement that "they [the Antiguan people] have nothing to compare this incredible constant [beauty] with, no big historical moment to compare the way they are now to the way they used to



be....Nothing, then, natural or unnatural, to leave a mark on their character” seems to undermine the argument she has made throughout the book, that Antigua’s painful past of slavery, colonization, and political and economic exploitation has paved the way for a painful present in which Western culture continues to exploit the island without giving a thought to the damage it inflicts upon the Antiguan people (79-80). By objectifying the Antiguan people, she differentiates herself from them and assumes a stance similar to that of the assumed tourist reader.

The narrator’s process of differentiating herself from other Antiguan and identifying with the reader continues in the last few lines of the book. The final passage describes the process through which the masters and slaves—the tourist readers and the black Antiguan—can shed their differences and come to be defined by their similarities: “Of course, ...once you cease to be a master, once you throw off your master’s yoke, you are no longer human rubbish, you are just a human being, and all the things that adds up to. So, too, with the slaves, once they are free, they are no longer noble and exalted; they are just human beings” (81). She inverts the usual descriptions, making the masters the ones harnessed like animals and the slaves the ones who are celebrated. Her statement is typical of colonial discourse in that it absolves the colonists, or in this case the readers, of any guilt that should be associated with their actions. It is also atypical of colonial discourse, however, in that it portrays colonialism as a burden to the colonialists and describes losing the power that comes with being a colonialist as a relief. The narrator’s ability to manipulate colonial discourse seems to indicate that she has gained power over it. Her statement that the two groups, masters and slaves, can become one does two things, however: first, it gives the reader a way out of her gaze. The identity she has

written for the reader throughout the text becomes optional rather than the only, unavoidable possibility. Second, and most importantly, it erases her as an object of colonial discourse. Her identity, if she is to have one, must be as something else.

## VI. Conclusion

*Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *A Small Place* all end with a sense of ambiguity. The three texts are certainly not a set or series, a fact demonstrated not only by the differences in the narrators' names and inconsistencies in their stories, but also by the very distinct narrative voice and perspective in *A Small Place*. For that reason, it would be inappropriate to understand any of them as a direct continuation of the others. That said, what each text can do is provide a context for the others. In doing so, they can also help provide a way of understanding the implications of the ambiguous endings for the narrators' identities as speaking subjects.

Kristeva's theory speaks to the ways in which the narrators' seeming failures might actually serve as indicators of burgeoning subjectivity. If the semiotic finds its roots in the relationship with the mother, and if a subject must maintain both her distance from and her connection to the semiotic in order to speak, then it makes sense that the narrators would have decidedly mixed feelings about their mothers. Particularly in the cases of *Annie John* and *Lucy*, the narrators' relationships with their mothers reflect the ambivalence that is necessary for the acquisition of language and the development of a speaking subject. Neither the semiotic nor the symbolic is sufficient to grant subjectivity on its own, and a person who employs both is, therefore, very different than a person who is trapped in one or the other. The middle space, the combination of the two, is where an individual acquires subjectivity. Because the mother country plays a role like that of the mother, it makes sense that the narrators, in the end, feel ambivalent toward their colonizers and the imperial culture. It also makes sense that the person who inhabits the middle space between colonizer and colonized native is entirely different than the person

who inhabits one of those spaces or the other. It is in that middle space that the narrators find themselves at the ends of their stories, and it is their presence in that middle space that offers them the possibility of subjectivity.

The books Annie reads throughout *Annie John* construct her in a way that amounts to erasure, so that any agency she might have is stolen by the colonial ideology that limits how she is able to use it. Her identity is caught up in Derrida's chain of signifiers. In his explanation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Russell Daylight summarizes Derrida's understanding of Aristotle:

[T]he spoken or written signifier is 'derivative' in regard to sense... the relationship between the thing and its mental image is established *prior* to the introduction of language. In this way, the signifier can be regarded as secondary or derivative in that it *follows* an original coupling, and hence also that it has no bearing or influence on that original coupling. The signifier is useful only for transporting the signified... (241).

Although the age of the actual texts Annie encounters at school is not clear, the colonial ideology in them certainly precedes her. According to Aristotle's concept of the sign, then, the English, those with the power to speak, can write her even before she has the power to understand their ideology. Her role in creating her identity is gone before it can be realized. The books, the signifiers, are simply "transporting the signified," as Daylight describes. Their destructive power comes from the fact that they require Annie to engage in the process of her own construction as an object of colonial discourse. By reading them, she becomes complicit in their project. She understands herself as she is reflected

back by the texts she encounters. She can never become Larkin's "new reading subject," because the agency necessary to participate in dialogue is not hers.

At the end of *Annie John*, Annie's future lies unknown before her, but what is known is that she is moving away from the colonized space of her childhood and toward a space that is home to the colonizers. She will always be from a former colony, but she is moving toward a psychological middle ground. The intertextual relationships between *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *A Small Place* give reason to believe that the middle ground may afford her the identity as a speaking subject that she has thus far been denied by oppressive colonial ideology.

Lucy cannot be read as a substitute for Annie, but she is in a situation that shares characteristics with the one awaiting Annie at the end of *Annie John*, and her story can, therefore, suggest what might be possible for Annie. It is notable that Lucy's story ends with a failed act of authorship. She is left with nothing but a tear-stained page where her name and a single phrase used to be (163-4). It might seem that despite her great effort to put distance between herself and the place she associates with her oppression, she is ultimately unable to speak, even when she is quite literally handed a blank page to fill. The name she erased, however, is one that was given to her by, and therefore ties her to, her mother. Her writing begins with it, in much the same way that a child begins life in the maternal space of the chora. Erasing her name could, therefore, serve the same purpose as the necessarily incomplete abjection of and ambivalence toward the mother. The fact that she wrote it connects her to where she has come from; the fact that she erased it allows her to move out of that space and into a new one. She is left in a middle

ground between colonizer and colonized, with a newly blank page before her. The novel does not show her filling it, but it does leave her with the potential to do so.

Just as *Lucy* seems to suggest what might be possible in Annie's future, *A Small Place*, despite being written earlier, seems to suggest what might be possible in Lucy's. If Lucy is who Annie John might become soon after leaving Antigua, the narrator of *A Small Place* is who Lucy might become after years of living in North America. At the end of the text, the narrator complicates the master-slave dichotomy she has cultivated so carefully throughout, erasing the otherwise clear line she has drawn between the presumed reader's white, North American and European tourist group and her own group, black Antiguan. Doing so means breaking down her own identity.

In order to speak and be heard, the narrator of *A Small Place* needs an addressee. Throughout much of *A Small Place*, she has one. Now, that addressee erased, it might seem that her need to speak is erased too. A successful attempt at putting her readers in the uncomfortable object position previously reserved for colonial subjects has not, in the end, overcome the barriers to invalidating imperial discourse. It has instead reopened a space for neocolonial ideology by telling the reader she does not have to be an object after all. It is also possible, however, that upsetting the master-slave dichotomy offers the narrator a way of escaping colonial ideology and the identity it has constructed for her. If the reader does not have to be the master, the narrator does not have to be the slave. All are free to inhabit subject positions outside the dichotomy posited by colonial ideology.

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin describe the concept of "the first interpreter," the person who first facilitates communication between a colonizer and the native community. They explain that the

person who assumes that role necessarily “emerges from the dominated discourse” and then “acquire[s] the power of the new language and culture in order to preserve the old, even whilst it assists the invaders in their overwhelming of that culture” (79). Although Kincaid’s narrators all speak English and do not, therefore, have a language barrier with their colonizers, they are like the interpreters Ashcroft, Griffins, and Tiffin describe, because they have emerged from the dominated culture and moved into the space of the imperial culture. In doing so, they, like the “first interpreter,” have placed themselves at an “intersection” that is “both exhilarating and disturbing...caught in the conflict between destruction and creativity” (79). It is important to note that, in this context, both destruction and creativity require agency. Although the narrators’ futures are unknown, the middle grounds they have come to inhabit offer them the possibility of claiming that agency and cultivating new spaces from which they can form identities as speaking subjects.

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