Generic Instability and Identity in the Contemporary Novel

Generic Instability and Identity in the Contemporary Novel

Edited by

Madelena Gonzalez
and Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon

Generic Instability and Identity in the Contemporary Novel,
Edited by Madelena Gonzalez and Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2010 by Madelena Gonzalez and Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon
and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-1732-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-1732-5

Table of Contents

Introduction
Madelena Gonzalez vii

Chapter One
Generic Instability and the Limits of Postcolonial Identity

Crossing Borders and Transforming Genres: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Edward Saïd, and Jamaica Kincaid
Linda Lang-Peralta 2

Reading Nara's Diary or the Deluding Strategies of the Implied Author in *The Rift*
Marie-Anne Visoi 11

Contaminated Copies: J.M.Coetzee's *Foe*
Linda Carter 26

The Praise of Monstrosity: The Limits of Rushdie's Limitless Cult of Hybridity in *The Satanic Verses*
Christian Gutleben 34

Chapter Two
Genre Bending: Pushing out the Boundaries of the Novel

An Utterly Contemporary Work of Fiction? J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*
Grzegorz Maziarczyk 46

Melusinian Intertextuality in A.S. Byatt's Metaphorical Metamorphosing Tales
Gillian M. E. Alban 63

The Metaphor of Genre and Text: Embedded Relevance and Inherent Instability in the Represented Genres of A.S. Byatt's Novel *Possession: A Romance*
Victoria Reeve 80

Chapter Three
Individual Identity and Genre: Fashioning the Self

Variations on the Theme of Fiction in *Stranger on a Train* by Jenny Diski
Nicole Terrien.. 100

Tall, Tall Stories: Identity and Generic Instability in Muriel Spark's *Aiding and Abetting*
Graham Ranger.. 117

Financial, Pictorial, and Generic Speculation(s) in Deborah Moggach's *Tulip Fever*
Laurence Petit.. 130

Unruly Novels, Unruly Selves
Julie Scanlon.. 139

Chapter Four
The Ideology of Generic Instability: Postmodern Gaming

Not For Sale, or, the Postmodernist Ideology
Fanny Delnieppe.. 162

Thatcher's Postmodernists
Richard Bradford.. 171

Defining Identity and the Impact of Science on Fiction
Fiona Dunscombe.. 206

Fiction after 9/11 : A Journey through the Desert of the Real
Julien Bringuier and Madelena Gonzalez... 220

Contributors... 238

Index.. 242

INTRODUCTION

THE IDENTITY OF THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL: GENERIC HYBRIDITY

Contemporary aesthetics is characterized by generic mixing on the level of both form and content. The barriers between different medias and different genres have been broken down in all literary art forms, whether it be theatre, poetry, or the novel. While the publishing industry is increasingly keen to label novels according to genre or sub-genre ("Chick Lit", "Lad Lit", "Gay fiction", "Scottish fiction", "New Historical Fiction", "Crime fiction", "Post-9/11 Fiction"), the novel itself (and novelists) persist in resisting generic categorizations as well as inviting them. Is this a move towards a new artistic liberty or does it simply testify to a confusion of identity? The "aesthetic supermarket" evoked by Lodge in 1992 ("The Novelist Today: Still at the Crossroads?"), does indeed seem to sum up the variety of choices open to writers of fiction today and a literary landscape characterized by crossover and hybridization. The familiar dialectic of realism versus experimentation has segued into a middle ground of consensus which is neither radical not populist, but both at the same time. The techniques of postmodernism have become selling points for novels and the Postmodern Condition itself seems little more than a narrative posture marketed for an increasingly wide audience. Whether they have recourse to a "repertoire of imposture" (Amis, Self, Winterson), as Richard Bradford would have it (*The Novel Now*, 2007), in other words "the abandonment of any obligation to explain or justify their excursions from credulity and mimesis" (65-66), or, like the New Puritans, make use of narrative minimalism in order to foreground their own peculiarities, contemporary novelists consistently draw attention to the fundamental instability of narrative process and genre.

The much-feared apocalypse of the novel has failed to take place with the arrival of the new millennium, but generic game-playing and flickering, narrative hesitation and uncertainty continue to pose the question of what constitutes a novel today and to challenge its identity in a world

where all culture is increasingly public, increasingly contested and increasingly multifarious. Thanks to theoretical approaches as well as analyses of specific works, this volume aims to examine the concepts of generic instability and cross-fertilization, of narrative postures and impostures, and their constant redefinition of identity, which contaminates the very concept of genre.

The postcolonial novel is the obvious starting point for a discussion of genre in the novel, for playing with genre is a way of both mimicking and resisting the language of the colonizer. Linda Lang-Peralta illustrates how Jamaica Kincaid experiments with the traditional boundaries of genre in order to write back to the dominant literary tradition, by both espousing and subverting it, and is thus able to invent more personalized, hybrid forms of identity. Similarly, V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Rift* attempts to engage with the dilemma of postcolonial intellectuals re-using the discourse of colonial history and identity in order to write postcolonialism into existence. In her discussion of the novel, Marie-Anne Visoi focuses on an example of what happens when the reader is confronted with unfamiliar cultural norms. The presence of the implied author in the preface, the fragmentary character of the narrative which takes the form of a diary, the literary allusions, quotes and notes are all part of the deluding strategies used to upset the reader's expectations of genre, but also to critique the postcolonial archive and question the role of contemporary intellectuals in relation to it.

J.M.Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) also engages with this archive by self-consciously tampering with one of the foundation stones of the canon and providing a postcolonial and feminist rewriting of Defoe's classic. Diametrically opposed to the unproblematized literary realism of what some consider the first novel in the English language, Coetzee's narrative casts doubt on the tenets of unity, coherence and truth and undermines the new version of the story in the very recounting of it. Linda Carter illustrates how the novel is a hybrid copy which recalls, but yet is different to, the original model to which it ostentatiously refers. Ungrounded in any stable reality or fixed identity, the copies multiply and duplicate into infinity, throwing into relief postmodern concerns with the ontology of the text. The monstrous as a metaphor for such ontological questioning is the starting point for Christian Gutleben's discussion of Rushdie's "limitless cult of hybridity" in *The Satanic Verses* and its challenging of the constraints imposed on us. In his attempt to go beyond such boundaries, Rushdie crossbreeds linguistic and syntactic codes and intermingles generic borrowings in a systematic playfulness which blurs ontological and fictional categories. However, his yoking together of incompatible

worlds and his all-encompassing ludism does raise the question of aesthetic and ideological coherence and indeed that of the very limits and possibilities of postcolonial identity.

The role generic playfulness can have in pushing out the boundaries of the novel is the subject of Grzegorz Maziarczyk's discussion of Coetzee's latest novel. What makes Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* "utterly contemporary" is its problematization of the notion of "a work of fiction" by means of typically contemporary techniques. By blurring the borderline between fiction and reality, incorporating non-fictional fragments into his text and turning the page layout into an iconic signifying structure, Coetzee illustrates the multifarious nature of his text. The question posed by Maziarczyk is whether he construes these experiments as signs of exhaustion or of replenishment, to use John Barth's famous terms.

The techniques of excess and overbreeding are not specific to Rushdie or Coetzee, however, but also inform the work of A.S Byatt. Gillian Alban explains how the author's use of intertextuality sheds light on the whole oeuvre. Tales, fables poetry, letters, journals, lectures, lists and transcripts of trials are woven together in order to achieve an intertextual "verbal flickering", both within, and between, different works, and to expand the definition of novel and story to the utmost degree. Victoria Reeve pursues this reflection on the mutability of genres in the work of A.S. Byatt and the incessant shifting of boundaries therein. She proposes an insight into the process of reconstitution effected by the author through detail and repetition, thanks to the establishment of connections between different fragments of poetry, letters, journals and scholarly articles. The juxtaposition of genres gives rise to a fertile traffic and interpenetration between them, enabling the author to go beyond mere thematic resemblances and illustrate the chameleon-like quality of genre which is shown to be both unique and endlessly modifiable at the same time.

Perhaps, indeed, any distinction between genres may be a mere illusion, as Nicole Terrien's discussion of Jenny Diski's *Stranger on a Train* suggests. The novel is derived from two films, Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* and *Misery*, both of which are already adaptations of novels. The narrator's perception of herself is determined by her reading of classic novels so that fiction becomes a form of lived experience. Generic intertextuality develops into a quest for identity as Diski's schizoid characters find it increasingly impossible to distinguish fiction from reality. The theme of schizophrenia and multiple identities is pursued by Graham Ranger in his analysis of Muriel Spark's penultimate novel, *Aiding and Abetting* (2000) where the mysterious Lord Lucan and his

manservant-cum-*doppelgänger* become involved with the equally enigmatic Hildegard Wolf, a Parisian psychiatrist who is also a fake stigmatic. This ostentatiously artificial and convoluted situation is used to pose a number of important questions concerning the nature of individual identity and its links to the social, the spatio-temporal and the institutional. The novel plays games with its own generic identity, hovering uncertainly between detective fiction, docufiction, romance and familiar Sparkian metaphysical farce, while also attempting a feminist rereading of Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*.

Identity swapping is at the heart of Deborah Moggach's *Tulip Fever*, set in seventeenth-century Amsterdam where the speculation on tulip bulbs is rife. In a city of masks and reflections, dominated by the craze for portrait painting, the protagonists become involved in dangerous games of intense financial, emotional, and existential gambling as they seek to transcend their condition. Laurence Petit shows how the competition between words and images staged by the text raises speculation as to its generic nature. By using the motifs and techniques of the pictorial genre through sixteen Dutch paintings, the "Vanitas" or still lifes reproduced in the text, the novel is able to step out of the frame, transcend its own boundaries and form a veritable iconotext at the same time as it furnishes us with a reflection on the dangers of human vanity.

Engaging with the self as narrative is the subject of Julie Scanlon's contribution. The disruptive narrative styles and the disturbing subjects of alcoholism and anorexia found in A.L. Kennedy's *Paradise* and Jenefer Shute's *Life-Size* illustrate how the blurring of generic boundaries between autobiography, biography and fiction can offer a reflection on contemporary identity and narrative practices. These novels privilege individual narratives in conflict with the grand authoritative narratives, but only thanks to a poetics and a process of self-harm. Disorderly self-fashioning gives rise to disorderly narratives of recovery which fail to conform to the conventions of biographies and autobiographies, traditionally offering the solution of a secure self. This means that the reader is left with an uncomfortable portrait of identity formation as well as a strong sense of instability, both generic and ontological.

Fanny Delnieppe shows how Jeanette Winterson and Ali Smith use such generic instability to resist categorization and consumption within the framework of the postmodern. Narrative impostures are deployed as strategies aimed at conveying an ideology which brings together postmodernist literature, sciences and architecture. Her suggestion is that the narrative techniques and genres employed by these authors help to redefine the rules of the game of fiction and the identity of the novel

genre, saving it from the common accusations of nihilism and apoliticism. It is precisely these aspects of the contemporary novel with which Richard Bradford seeks to engage, by arguing that a market-orientated brand of postmodernism has become its predominant feature, encouraging the development of genre fiction and the popular refashioning of subgenres such as crime writing and gender fiction. In his view, the agenda of serious fiction has been replaced by a more streamlined product, repackaged, dumbed down and sold to the consumer: in short, market-fuelled pragmatism triumphs over the aesthetic demands of poststructuralist poetics.

Fiona Dunscombe gives a practical writer's response to the questions of generic instability and identity, bearing in mind that the writer comes from life to fiction, whilst an academic works in the opposite direction. Taking examples from her own fiction, she illustrates how the contemporary novel can attempt to open itself up to an original exploration of identity thanks to recent revolutionary ideas in science, which may suggest a new paradigm for the novel. This new paradigm is the subject of the final article in the volume which examines the novel faced with the unprecedented event of 9/11. The difficulty of dealing satisfactorily with such an event in fictional form has thrown the novel into a paroxysm of self-questioning as it struggles to invent a new genre in which to express this incredible reality. Whether it be Jay McInerney's social satire, *The Good Life*, Safran Foer's postmodern excursion into defamiliarization in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the experimental impressionism of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* or Cormac McCarthy's dystopian displacement of the tragedy in *The Road*, all are concerned with how to frame a suitable response to a paradigm shift in our perception of reality in terms of both form and content. Far from signalling the redundancy of the novel form or its death, this new challenge would seem to indicate that generic experimentation is at the heart of its renewal. Indeed this collection of essays demonstrates the diversity of generic practices in the novel today and furnishes us with undeniable evidence of how generic instability is fundamentally constitutive of the contemporary novel's identity.

—Madelena Gonzalez

CHAPTER ONE

GENERIC INSTABILITY AND THE LIMITS OF POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY

CROSSING BORDERS AND TRANSFORMING GENRES: ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET, EDWARD SAÏD, AND JAMAICA KINCAID

LINDA LANG-PERALTA

Considering the history of the novel, one might say that the genre has been unstable since its inception. As Wai Chee Dimock notes in *PMLA*, "The history of genre has never been without its lapses, a fact worth keeping in mind—as a cautionary warning and as a heuristic spur" (2007, 1377). He goes on to argue that "literary studies needs to be more fluid in its taxonomies, putting less emphasis on the division of knowledge and more on its kinships, past, present, and future" (2007, 1384). Cervantes, Sterne, Flaubert, Proust, Kafka all created new versions of the genre, according to their creative visions. In the 1950s Robbe-Grillet developed the "new novel" in France, acknowledging a historical influence on his work, saying,

> Perhaps I came to writing because of the disaster of the war [...]. Ruins, for me, give off incredible energy. And it's not by chance that, after Old Europe was destroyed, with bits scattered everywhere, this incredible creativity was born. There was a real creative euphoria. It was as if we had to believe that the world could always be new. (" 'The Immortal' Alain Robbe-Grillet" 2004)

Giving new form to the novel was one expression of this urge.

Later, writers from colonized and post-colonial countries searched for new ways to write back to their colonizers, often using the languages and genres they had learned during their colonial education, but adding their own creative strategies to account for their recent histories, which many of them saw as, using Robbe-Grillet's terms, "disasters", which left their cultures in "ruins."

As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has so vividly described, the effects of colonization are not unlike the devastation of war. Ngũgĩ describes the imperialist project in general as a "cultural bomb", the effect of which is

> to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance with other peoples' languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. (1986, 3)

Whereas Robbe-Grillet sees destruction as giving birth to the creative urge, Ngugi, who was raised under the British colonial regime in Kenya, sees in the assimilation into another culture the cessation of life. Yet, he has created new works of literature using the language and genres of cultures other than his own. Perhaps this view, however, had a part in his decision ultimately to write only in his native language, knowing that it would have to be translated to reach a global audience. He explores his creativity within the linguistic territory of his own culture.

Jamaica Kincaid also grew up under a British colonial system. Raised in Antigua, she now lives in Vermont in the US and writes fiction and non-fiction. She explains how she learned to break literary conventions from writers such as Robbe-Grillet:

> "it was some of his short stories. I cannot describe them except that they broke every rule. When I read them, the top of my head came off and I thought, 'This is really living!' And I knew that whatever I did, I would not be interested in realism. Whatever I became, I would not be influenced only by the things I read when I was growing up. [...] It was a total act of liberation." (Cudjoe 1989, 403)

Finding new creative freedom from Robbe-Grillet's approach to genre allowed Kincaid to express her anger over the effects of colonialism in new ways.

This article will argue that Jamaica Kincaid's subject position, being educated under the British system, being raised in a colonial society, and then leaving her home to live in voluntary exile from her culture can demonstrate not only the disorienting effects and emotional anguish of exile but also its liberating effects on creativity, such as the freedom to transform genres. From the beginning of her career, Kincaid has played with the concept of genre, seeming to ignore traditional boundaries. Her first book, *At the Bottom of the River*, is usually considered a collection of short stories. However, if one considers the form of a text such as "Girl", one can clearly see how it differs from other more traditional texts in that genre, perhaps appropriate for a text that has transformation, influenced by

the Obeah belief system, as a major theme. “Girl” is a string of clauses joined not by periods, but by semi-colons, covering a mere page and a half of printed text. It reads as a dialogue between a mother and a daughter, but it is really more of a monologue, since the daughter has only a couple of interjections, indicated only by italics, in a relentless string of instructions from the mother about how to be a proper young lady and not a “slut”. Kincaid has said of writing the story,

> One [. . .] afternoon I [. . .] wrote “Girl” and it was just my mother’s voice. [...] I just knew that was what I would write. Suddenly, I knew how to say what I wanted to say. It hadn’t always been so. (quoted in Gregg 2002, 924)

Critics also identify other influences on Kincaid’s approach to genre. According to Kenneth Ramchand,

> The dissolution of genre boundaries, and the attempts to abolish the significance of distinctions between literary and non-literary language hailed as avant-garde in Europe and America, are very old in Latin America and the Caribbean where they derived not from cynicism and hubris but from healthy positive concerns. (1998, 98)

Similarly, Veronica Marie Gregg has noted,

> Notwithstanding Kincaid’s apparent disavowal, elements of the African Caribbean oral tradition and vernacular cultures animate much of her writing: they powerfully shape the narrative forms and modes, the structure and language of her work. These include a concern with spirit possession, dreams, visions, voices, obeah, *jablesse/diablesse*, the use of biblical allusions, fiery tracings and “truth-telling.” (923)

Apparently, there have been several influences on Kincaid’s use of genre. After Kincaid’s mother sent her away from Antigua to North America to make money as an *au pair* to support the family, she was in a position literally, geographically, between the Caribbean and Robbe-Grillet’s Europe and, creatively, between her Antiguan culture and the source of her British education, to synthesize these influences in order to create her vision as a writer. This liminal position of an exile, although causing pain from separation, liberates her from the dominance of any one major influence.

Exile is a major theme in world literature today, whether used in its strict denotative sense of being forced to leave one’s home and live elsewhere or in the broader sense of choosing to leave one’s home because of various pressures and starting a new life in a different place. Of course,

one can also be in internal exile without ever leaving a homeland, as was the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. On the other hand, a colonial situation can cause one to feel like an exile from one's own culture, as Ngũgĩ describes. Those who are displaced might be categorized as cosmopolitan or diasporic and also may be called migrants, immigrants, foreigners, expatriates, émigrés, or political refugees, depending on their individual circumstances. The term exile is used in contemporary discourse to cover many of these types of experiences and is linked to creativity in intriguing ways.

Focusing on the emotional aspect of exile, Edward Saïd states,

> its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (2003, 173)

Yet he acknowledges that exile has also become an "enriching" cultural theme. In *Culture and Imperialism,* he writes,

> I have been an outsider in the United States [. . .]. Yet when I say "exile" I do not mean something sad or deprived. On the contrary belonging, as it were, to both sides of the imperial divide enables you to understand them more easily. (1994, xxvii)

Saïd notes that many exiles are "novelists, chess players, political activists, and intellectuals" because they are "compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule" (2003, 181). According to Saïd,

> Exile, far from being the fate of nearly forgotten unfortunates who are dispossessed and expatriated, becomes something closer to a norm, an experience of crossing boundaries and charting new territories in defiance of the classic canonic enclosures, however much its loss and sadness should be acknowledged and registered. Newly changed models and types jostle against the older ones. The reader and writer of literature—which itself loses its perdurable forms and accepts the testimonials, revisions, notations of the post-colonial experience, including underground life, slave narratives, women's literature, and prison—no longer need to be tied to an image of the poet or scholar in isolation, secure, stable, national in identity, class gender, or profession, but can think and experience with Genet in Palestine or Algeria, with Tayeb Salih as a Black man in London, with Jamaica Kincaid in the white world, with Rushdie in India and Britain, and so on. (1994, 317)

"Crossing boundaries and charting new territories" seems to have motivated Kincaid to find creative ways to write about her past, her family, her homeland. She has repudiated direct representation, stating,

> The idea of a story—or anything—being realistic, the idea of representing something as it is, [is] absurd. [...] I don't like realistic fiction, I almost never read it. (quoted in Gregg, 2002, 924)

Yet she has also stated that everything she writes about happened in her life, but she changes the setting and characters when she writes about it.

An example of Kincaid's experimentation with the novel is *Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). The title itself immediately signals a confusion of genres: is it biography? autobiography? fiction? As Gregg aptly explains it,

> The novel inscribes the autobiography of someone who is not the "I" of writing. The extralinguistic presence of the mother, a dead aboriginal Caribbean woman (a Carib), cannot be located in the situation that is written; but she is the condition of possibility for the narrator and the narrative. [...] The narrator writes the autobiography of another life, someone she does not, and cannot, know. She speaks a life she has not lived and about which she knows nothing. A person who died when she was born, the mother is always already unavailable. (2002, 927-28)

Kincaid has stated that she conceived the novel over several years, considering

> the facts of history and what sort of life it produces for an individual and how to put them in her way of looking at life and in a way consistent with her development (Jackson qtd. in Gregg 2002, 928).

Gregg notes that "the deepest irony of all, and that from which the novel's title derives its most salient meanings, is this: the one who describes becomes the one who is described" (2002, 935).

The narrator of *Autobiography* calls identity into question when describing the effects of her education:

> it only filled me with anger. I could not like what it would lead to: a humiliation so permanent that it would replace your own skin. And your own name, whatever it might be, eventually was not the gateway to who you really were, and you could not ever say to yourself, "My name is Xuela Claudette Desvarieux." This was my mother's name, but I cannot say it was her real name, for in a life like hers, as in mine, what is a real name? My own name is her name, Xuela Claudette, and in the place of the Desvarieux is Richardson, which is my father's name; but who are these

> people Claudette, Desvarieux, and Richardson? To look into it, to look at it, could only fill you with despair; the humiliation could only make you intoxicated with self-hatred. For the name of any one person is at once her history recapitulated and abbreviated, and on declaring it, that person holds herself high or low, and the person hearing it holds the declarer high or low. (1996, 79)

This theme of the intertwining of history, conquest, and identity runs throughout Kincaid's texts, whether fiction or non-fiction. The sharing of names with her mother causes more generic confusion as mother and daughter blend into a shared identity, the boundaries of which are unclear. Furthermore, Kincaid's actual name is Elaine Potter Richardson, which blurs the distinction not only between biography and autobiography, but between fiction and non-fiction, as the author gives her name to one of her fictional characters. The result of this convergence of identities makes a powerful statement about the history of the Caribbean and the legacy of conquest and colonialism.

As the narrator explains, her mother was left in front of a convent when she was an infant with the name "Xuela" written on some cloth. The nun who found her gave her her own name: Claudette Desvarieux in addition to the name Xuela. The narrator was, in turn, given her mother's first names when she died shortly after childbirth. The historical significance of this transfer of names is made evident in the narrator's comment on the nun, "who was on her way to wreak more havoc in the lives of the remnants of a vanishing people" (1996, 80). The narrator later explains the history of the Carib people:

> Who *were* the Carib people? For they were no more, they were extinct, a few hundred of them still living, my mother had been one of them, they were the last survivors. (1996*,* 197)

In these ways, Kincaid uses narrative voice along with genre in creative ways to illustrate and emphasize the damage that has been done on individual and collective levels through conquest.

Comparing her life to writing a book, the narrator reflects,

> My life began with a wide panorama of possibilities: my birth itself was much like other births; I was new, the pages of my life had no writing on them, they were unsmudged, so clean, so smooth, so new. If I could have seen myself then, I could have imagined that my future would have filled volumes. (1996, 215)

The genre of these imagined volumes is not specified, but the unlimited possibilities suggest fiction rather than non-fiction, such as biography or

autobiography suggested by the title, and fiction is how *The Autobiography of My Mother* is categorized. This novel takes on the complexity of identity by using genre as a method of analysis.

Writing gives Kincaid power over her experiences; as an author she has the authority to shape the narrative as she chooses, create the genre she deems appropriate. In “Girl” she creates a mother as the speaker, giving instructions to a daughter who barely has a voice at all in the text that is a poem/short story/sentence. In *The Autobiography of My Mother* Kincaid creates a mother figure who refuses to be a mother, who should not be a mother, as speaker in the text that is biography/autobiography/fiction. As J. Brooks Bouson so aptly puts it, in this book, Kincaid is not only “intent on examining her matrilineal roots as she includes family stories and looks back to her mother’s Carib Indian origins”, but

> she also is driven by the daughterly imperative to assert herself and assume power by talking back—or more accurately, writing back—to her powerful and powerfully destructive mother. (2005, 116)

She exercises this “daughterly imperative” in many of her texts. Her writing is self-referential, creating connections among her own texts of various genres. As Louise Bernard points out, Kincaid’s method is to “mine and cross-reference her own texts”, and it is in this

> taxonomic ordering of this self inventory and the connections that emerge between her fictional and nonfictional voices that Kincaid pushes against the boundaries of autobiography and memoir. (quoted in Bouson 2005, 141)

Jamaica Kincaid has created her authorial subject position from her unique circumstances, speaking and writing explicitly of this process of reinventing herself from changing her name, to changing her costumes, to crossing over to the other side of the cultural divide between her home and the metropolis. She crossed borders to move to the US, and she crosses traditional boundaries of genres to describe her experiences: autobiography blends into fiction, but she acknowledges that all her fiction is based on reality, yet changed. She rejects realism and opts for experimental literature that expresses her unique perspective. As a writer in exile from her native Antiguan culture, from her family, she remains free to continue to re-create new identities. Just as Saïd saw the benefit in “belonging, as it were, to both sides of the imperial divide” as “enabl[ing] you to understand them more easily” (2003, xxvii), Kincaid describes many examples in her writing of “crossing over,” as I and others have analysed elsewhere (see Lang-Peralta 2006). And while it is generally recognized

that first generation migrants write non-fiction: diaries and journals, and second-generation writers produce novels, Kincaid's oeuvre is comprised of many genres. Her early writing for the *New Yorker* chronicled her life experiences in Antigua and her perspective as an exile, while later writings are a mix of fiction and non-fiction, and some that are difficult to categorize.

Kincaid's perspective is important in literary studies at this moment as the field changes so dramatically. Homi Bhabha makes the theme of exile paramount as he derives his view of the future of transcultural studies from Goethe's "Note on World Literature" (1830). Expanding Goethe's vision, Bhabha writes,

> The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of "otherness." Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature. (1994, 12)

Bhabha emphasizes the importance of this type of project:

> The Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative *internal to its national identity*. (1994, 6)

Edward Saïd agrees with Bhabha's view of inclusive identity, writing that it is "*the* essential idea for the revolutionary realities today", asserting that

> We can no longer afford conceptions of history that stress linear development or Hegelian transcendence, any more than we can accept geographical or territorial assumptions that assign centrality to the Atlantic world and congenital and even delinquent peripherality to non-Western regions. (1994, 317)

Just as Ngũgĩ rejects the language of the colonizers, Kincaid often rejects the traditional genres of the colonizers, while explicitly recognizing that she uses their language. Thus, she is part of a trend described by Søren Frank:

> The old European "center" is thus being revalued and renegotiated as it is plugged into the network of a literary world system in which the former "peripheries" are conquering territory and gaining access to the megaphones. (2008, 14)

As borders are crossed, genres will change to reflect the unique experiences and identities of the world's writers.

Bibliography

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture.* New York: Routledge.

Bouson, J. Brooks. 2005. *Jamaica Kincaid: Writing Memory, Writing Back to the Mother.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Cudjoe, Selwyn R. 1989. "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview." *Callaloo* 39: 396-411.

Dimock, Wai Chee. 2007. "Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge." *PMLA* 122/5: 1377-88.

Frank, Søren. 2008. *Migration and Literature: Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjaerstad*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gregg, Veronica Marie. 2002. "How Jamaica Kincaid Writes the Autobiography of Her Mother." *Callaloo* 25/3: 920-937.

Kincaid, Jamaica. 1983. *At the Bottom of the River*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

—. 1996. *The Autobiography of My Mother*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Lang-Peralta, Linda, ed. 2006. *Jamaica Kincaid and Caribbean Double Crossings*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.

Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Ramchand, Kenneth. 1988. "West Indian Literary History: Literariness, Orality and Periodization." *Callaloo* 34: 95-110.

Saïd, Edward. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage.

—. 2003. "Reflections on Exile." In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Edward Saïd. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 173-87.

" 'The Immortal' Alain Robbe-Grillet." 2004. *WWD* 23. *General OneFile*. Gale. Auraria Library. http://0-find.galegroup.com.skyline.cudenver.edu:80/ips/start.do?prodld=IPS (accessed January 31, 2008).

READING NARA'S DIARY OR THE DELUDING STRATEGIES OF THE IMPLIED AUTHOR IN *THE RIFT*

MARIE-ANNE VISOI

V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Rift* represents an obvious departure from what Bernard Mouralis calls the "classical African Novel" (Mouralis 1988, 14). As defined by him, Mudimbe's novelistic work belongs within the sphere of the "writerly": *The Rift* retraces the Barthesian questioning of how the reader becomes a producer instead of simply accepting or rejecting a text. Language, according to Barthes, is never transparent, free of ideology; it often reflects the way individuals and societies see the world (Barthes 1970, 4). The controversial idea of the "death of the author" which undermines the more traditional view of the primacy of the author's meaning, is singularly represented in Mudimbe's novel.

The narrative world of *The Rift* constantly moves the reader beyond the text to the extra-textual reality of objects. What I think of importance for my analysis is the challenging presence of the implied author in the "Preface", the section that precedes the other text, Nara's diary. From the first pages of Mudimbe's novel, it becomes clear that the implied author attempts to present a document another has written (Nara's notes) without having any claim to truth. Nevertheless, as one reads the "Preface", the role of the implied author in establishing the identity of the novel will be, in my opinion, essential to the understanding of the other text, Nara's diary. If we are to achieve some clarity regarding these complex relations between the two texts, we can assert that the "prolepsis" (Martin 1986, 124) in the narration stimulates the reader's activity. For this reason, my enquiry begins with a focus on the implied author's discourse and then moves to explore the "indeterminacies" of Nara's diary as well as its place in the narrative.

If we take a closer look at the text of *The Rift*, the accuracy of chronological detail seems to be the first thing that attracts our attention. The narration in its two main parts—the "Preface", and Nara's notes (untitled)—is presented in two ways: as a "summary" and as a "scene"

(Martin 1986, 124). In the "Preface", the implied author creates a fictional world by gradually introducing the characters and specific events. The setting is rapidly sketched; the preciseness of the date, as well as the references to Salim, an archivist at the library, provide the reader with empirical details which can be easily recognizable. The narrative slowly expands as the implied author presents the meeting with Salim: we find out about Nara, a historian who used to frequent the library as he was working on a thesis on the Kuba, an African tribe. The reason for Nara's death, reported with emotion by Salim, remains unknown. Nara's diary, started a week before he died, is given by Salim to the implied author in the hope that he might be able to verify aspects of its "truthfulness" such as the authenticity of the names mentioned by the historian and, perhaps, the reason for his death. Following his own reading of the diary, the implied author decides to publish it under the title *The Rift*.

This is the "summary" presented by the implied author in the "Preface", whereas the story told by a first-person narrator, Ahmed Nara, represents the "scene". In this context, the detail of the visit to the library (which might appear unimportant at first) is the convention that gives credibility to the implied author's "summary". As we are confronted with a "real" world where events are made to appear verisimilar, the implied author supplies the background information:

> The story of the narrative that I hereby publish begins on the twenty-fifth of last September. Having returned from a trip on the previous day, I had an errand to run in the neighbourhood of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. Once I finished, I decided to go and say hello to Salim, an old friend who is the archivist at the library. I was looking forward to seeing him again and promised myself that I would take him away from work to lunch with me. It had been a little over two years since I had seen him. (Mudimbe 1993, 1)

During his lunch with Salim, the implied author gathers some disturbing information about Ahmed Nara. Salim's request of his friend to read the diary appears not only as a compassionate urge to discover Nara's personality but also as an indirect address to the reader. We already know from the "Preface" that the first readers of Nara's diary are Aminata, (a friend of Nara's) and Salim. The implied author—who becomes the next reader—is thus given the task of putting together the facts in the diary in order to find out more about Nara and his mysterious death. Salim confesses his doubts with regard to the reliability of the diary. First, it is his dismissal of any intimate relationship between Aminata and Nara (despite the fact that Nara was living in Aminata's house at the time of his death). Secondly, a number of additional details presented in the diary are questioned by Salim, as it becomes apparent from his account of Nara's

death. By comparing the last events recorded in the diary with Aminata's version, Salim comes to the conclusion that Nara's death remains a mystery. In Salim's reported speech, we find other comments which contribute to arousing our interest, such as the fact that Nara was frequenting a circle of leftists. Also, according to Salim, everybody who knew the historian believed his death to be a suicide. Surprisingly though, the diary did not have any clear record of suicidal thoughts:

> According to the diary, there supposedly was a falling-out between him and Aminata on the evening of September fourteenth. He went to sleep right after dinner. He presumably woke up around ten o'clock at night and wrote until early morning. After that, it seems that he went back to bed at four in the morning and was planning to sleep in. At least, that is what he wrote. Aminata, totally unaware of all this, wanted to awaken him at the usual time. But he was dead. Since we know him, we obviously considered suicide…But his diary gives no hint of that…Well…You'll see for yourself. The autopsy showed nothing. Absolutely nothing. (Mudimbe 1993, 2)

Salim's repeated plea to read the diary is followed by the implied author's detailed account of his own reading. According to his faithful report, the implied author not only read Nara's diary, but took its contents as "true to life" and even met several people mentioned in it. In this context, the implied author's intention of attaching a portrait of Ahmed Nara to the text of the diary invites the participation of the reader who is indirectly asked to recognize and respond to textual references. The fact that he changes his mind regarding the portrait (he decides that the text of the diary itself will be sufficient for us to form an accurate image of Nara) signals the persuasiveness of his approach. It follows therefore that the "truth" about Nara will be found in the text of the notes we are asked to read. However, this invitation to read Nara's diary does not come to us free of the implied author's reflections: he questions Nara's intentions in writing it and furthermore, draws our attention to the language of the diary. The notes, we are told, needed to be rewritten, in order to be published. The implied author adds, critically, that the specific notations throughout the diary indicate Nara's intention to revise it:

> Was Ahmed Nara planning to write a novel based on his everyday experiences? Or did he only intend to jot down his days for himself? I do not know. Not one of his friends could give me an answer. Besides, not one of them knew that just one week before his death Ahmed Nara has begun to record his days in writing. The only thing that is certain is that he was not planning to surrender his notes as they stood. Indeed there are throughout his notebooks very specific notations, such as "to think

> about"…, "to be developed"…, "to be remembered"…, clearly indicating that the author was thinking of rewriting his journal one day. Would he have vastly modified it? Perhaps. What is most evident is that he would have revised it and very probably enlarged it by developing certain points. (Mudimbe 1993, 2-3)

By acknowledging that the diary has been published in its original form, the implied author brings into focus again the verisimilitude of his story. For the same reason, he describes in minute detail the notebooks which contain the actual diary:

> The text of the diary is contained in seven school note-books, twenty-four pages each, numbered with a clear Roman numeral in the center of the cover: l, ll, lll, lV, V, Vl, Vll. In the left-hand corner of the cover of the first note-book, the author had printed his name in capital letters: AHMED NARA. On the other notebooks, in the same corner, are his initials, A.N., instead of his full name, except for the fifth one, which carries no name. No other marks are on the covers. (Mudimbe 1993, 3)

What draws our attention is the comment made with regard to the implied author's intent to facilitate our reading. Obviously, his attempts to alleviate suspicions as to the reliability of the text of the diary are clear rhetorical devices which play on our credibility as readers. For instance, we are told that although many words have been crossed out, the new or rewritten sentences are clear enough to be deciphered. Moreover, we are told that he had to interpret certain words which were difficult to read and since he was not sure of his interpretation, indicated these "gaps" by question marks between parentheses. Such affirmations are clearly aimed at influencing our interpretation of Nara's notes. Can we indeed be certain that the written words above the deletions were accurately copied? Not to mention, of course, the implied author's own doubts about the "gaps'' in the text:

> Although much has been crossed out, in no way does it hinder the reading: it is precise and forceful, and the new word or the rewritten phrase appears clearly above the deletion. Only very rarely was I, unfortunately, not able to decipher the words above the deletion. I was forced to interpret the context and submit the reading that seemed most logical to me. In the published text this is indicated by a question mark between parentheses (?) (Mudimbe 1993, 3-4)

The "indeterminacies" thus created by the implied author's discourse clearly intensify our reading activity. In *The Act of Reading*, Wolfgang Iser describes in detail how, in the process of reading, the images produced

by the text come into contact with the reader's own images, generating a constantly shifting image. The reader's expectations are thus modified as new expectations arise. For Iser, it is the very presence of "gaps" or "blanks" that stimulates the reader's activity: the "gaps" in the text are filled by "each individual reader […] in his own way in order to build up the consistency of the text". The presence of a wide range of possible interpretations creates "areas of indeterminacy" and an "entanglement of the reader"; by breaking out of "his accustomed framework of conventions" the reader is able to "formulate that which has been unleashed by the text" (Iser 1982, 50).

It is obvious that in the "Preface", the implied author constantly teases the reader, not only by giving the assurance that the names of people and places have been preserved, but also by pointing out that the title itself, *The Rift*, symbolizes his own interpretation of the diary:

> Only the title of the book—"The Rift"—is mine. It seemed to bring together rather felicitously Ahmed Nara's questioning and the uncanny split in his being. My friend Salim, whose advice I sought, thought it particularly apt and to prove it, quoted Cioran, whom Nara read with devotion: "When solitude becomes so marked that it becomes our only faith rather than our given, we cease to be independent with the whole: heretics of existence, we are banished from the community of the living, whose sole virtue it is to gaspingly await something other than death." (Mudimbe 1993, 4)

As we can see, the implied author's discourse succeeds in presenting a fictional world through consistent use of conventions that add credibility to the narrative. The anticipation of events is aimed, undoubtedly, at affecting our reading. Since the events narrated in the diary become known from the "Preface", it would appear that the story cannot retain its element of surprise. In *The Rift*, however, it is the manner of narrating that arouses our curiosity. Although certain details are given about Nara's death, the narrative strategies of the implied author force the reader to re-evaluate the other interpretations of the diary (Salim's and the implied author's).

What the implied author strongly maintains is that the text of Nara's diary published as part of the novel, *The Rift*, represents, with minor modifications, Nara's notes. If he uses verisimilar details in order to build up the fictional world in which Nara lived, this is accomplished with the intention of rendering the story credible and his retelling of it reliable. Looking back at the whole discourse of the implied author put forward in the "Preface", we are now able to distinguish how the ordering of events becomes essential to our reading. The flash-forward technique confronts us with different points of view on events and people when reading Nara's

notes. As mentioned previously, the "reported" readings of Nara's diary contribute to form certain expectations and the reader's grasping of the text following the "Preface" is clearly guided by the implied author.

Once the readers are introduced to the fictional world of the novel, they become aware that Nara is the focus of narration. Eventually, what appears of prime importance to the implied author is Nara's intention in writing a diary. The possibility of Nara writing a novel is brought up by the rhetorical questioning that goes on in the "Preface", which addresses another problem: the language of the diary.

As mentioned previously, the implied author believes that the diary needed to be revised because of the historian's notations. In other words, the language of the diary we are going to read is fragmentary and cannot be considered as language commonly used in a novel. As we recall, Salim is the first one to point out that Nara's notes were not a novel but something between a diary and a novel. According to the implied author, the inadequacy of the language employed by Nara in his diary can thus be explained by the historian's sudden death. By telling us that his intention in publishing the diary was to produce a faithful image of Nara, the implied author succeeds in presenting the language of the diary in a different light: in this case, our reading of Nara's diary should focus on Nara's existence reflected in the events recorded by him rather than on the language used in the diary. These observations clearly turn the interrogation regarding the "identity" of the novel from the text to the reader. If we are to believe the textual references in the "Preface", *The Rift* is nothing but the "text" of the diary published by the implied author.

As we can see, the four pages of the "Preface" become crucial in the understanding of the rest of the novel. According to Barthes, the essential meaning of a work depends on the impressions of the reader and the "language" of the work itself. The idea that the author no longer has a privileged position is indirectly represented in *The Rift* through the rhetorical strategies of the implied author. How can we be sure that we are reading a novel when the author, Nara, is only a "scriptor"?

Let us take a closer look at Nara's diary. It starts abruptly, and since there is no title to separate the "Preface" from the notes, we notice the Roman numerals placed at the beginning of each chapter which indicate—as we have been explicitly informed by the implied author—the text of the notes in the school notebooks. These are obviously the textual markers already signalled in the "Preface" and intended to place the reader in front of Nara's dramatic discourse. This type of narration was discussed in detail by Gérard Genette who considered the term "immediate discourse" more adequate than the commonly used "interior monologue". In his

opinion, the first term illustrates with more accuracy the intimate nature of the narrative which allows the character to express his feelings freely and directly (see Genette 1972, 193). The flow of Nara's inner experiences is present throughout the whole text of the diary. As we read, the boundaries between us and Nara—a first-person narrator who seems to be talking to himself—become blurred. His consciousness surfaces in the unfinished sentences which act as stimuli to a series of other thoughts and ideas. This is the impression given by Nara's first sentences where his "exhaustion weighs" more heavily with the heat. External reality—the air conditioning which isn't working—acts forcefully upon his inner life, and arouses memories, bits of past conversations, repressed feelings:

> Exhaustion…My exhaustion…weighs me down so much…Like yesterday, the day before, a month ago… A heavy weight in the atmosphere tenses with the heat. The air-conditioning is working irregularly and with its noisy fits and starts is stirring up my helplessness and my rage: since the very beginning of the hot season they have promised to repair it…What a farce…And I keep waiting, exasperated by their unnecessary lies: "It's a promise, my dear Nara, tomorrow your air-conditioning will be in full working order; come now, a little patience…" (Mudimbe 1993, 7)

As our reading progresses, another fictional world is created. If in the "Preface" we come across "real" people and places, in the diary the world appears as filtered by Nara's feelings. His dissatisfaction with the people around him and with himself is inferred from Nara's reported fragments of conversation and his own thoughts. The constant temporal movement between the present of Nara's narration and the past of his recorded experiences will remain a predominant feature throughout the text of the notes: Nara thus records past events which are perceived from the present of his writing. With every day, the fictional world portrayed in the notes appears transfigured by contradictory feelings. This is what makes the readers' task increasingly difficult in spite of the relatively small size of Nara's world. The characters and places mentioned are few but, because readers have to distinguish between the temporal segments of the narration, the process of image building is constantly hindered. Since the narration is done in the form of a diary, there is a subjective view of people and events. In writing his notes, Nara goes back in time to relive instances which become gradually part of his present and consequently, the readers' image of Nara as a character in the notes is dependent upon Nara's own narration. The inconstancy of his portrait has its source in the multiplicity of his recounted "selves". He is, in turn, the depressed historian who returns to the African town to continue his research on the Kuba; the six-year old who is punished by his mother and locked for a

whole day in a tool closet in the company of a rat; or Isabelle's lover in Paris. The readers are only able to gather bits and pieces of Nara's notes and have the task of reconstructing his life, much in the way Nara himself, as a historian, reconstructs the life of the Kuba. It would seem that in Nara's attempt to put together his notes on the "tropical ethnic groups" there is a mirroring of the reading activity and the reader's interaction with the text of *The Rift*. This search for the Kuba returns obsessively in the narration of Nara's notes. In an effort to remember the first day, he records his impressions during the time spent in the library, after an interruption of nine months:

> As I arrived there, I thought I would pick up the rhythm of my work as it was before: fill out incomplete index cards, put together a program, overcome the crisis at last that has paralyzed me for nine months…Yes, see myself make some progress with this dissertation that I've been trailing behind me for almost ten years now…The archivist welcomed me with kindness. He seemed intrigued by my disappearing act. "You're coming back to us?"—"Yes," I said, "I've been travelling." (Mudimbe 1993, 9)

It is significant, I believe, that Nara's diary dates back to the precise time when he embarks again on his research. For Nara, his desire to reconstruct the life of the Kuba by bringing a new interpretation arouses, at times, an ancient fear of a divine presence. His hesitancy to continue comes not only from the novelty of his approach (he is a black historian who overturns well-established historical records of the white race) but also, from the dangers involved in transgressing the laws of the Kuba. This is why Nara realizes that his search has to be taken with utmost seriousness. His fear of occult powers is evident:

> I would like to start from scratch, reconstruct the universe of these people from start to finish: decolonize the knowledge already gathered about them, bring to light new, more believable genealogies, and be able to advance an interpretation that pays more careful attention to their environment and their true history. Often I find myself to be surprisingly hesitant. At such moments I feel like making fun of this unyielding ambition to make new inroads. But terrorized by I know not what, I tell myself that, as I come out of a fit of laughter, I would perhaps risk finding myself face to face with grimacing masks of Kuba slaves, buried alive at Nyimi's death. The service of the king is, in fact, eternal. I should describe and not profane it. (Mudimbe 1993, 13-14)

His "excursion" into the past of the Kuba is, as I propose to show here, fundamental to the readers' grasping of Nara as a character. The