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	In this chapter, deCaires Narain examines the complex and ambiguous ways that Jean Rhys and Jamaica Kincaid mobilize a variety of meanings and registers of “mad” and “madness” in their texts, including alienation, terror, anguish, and anger. She argues that a comparative reading of Rhys and Kincaid, attentive to the explicit and implied autobiographical traces in their work, suggests more complicated possibilities than the familiar alignment of Rhys with alienation and Kincaid with anger. In both writers, the autobiographical features less as a desire for “self-expression” than as a painstaking commitment to writing as a space for exploring the very possibility of selfhood. As such, their works resonate strongly with Frantz Fanon’s and Judith Butler’s commitments to a relational conception of selfhood.	

“Fighting Mad to Tell Her Story”: Madness, Rage, and Literary Self-Making in Jean Rhys and Jamaica Kincaid

Denise deCaires Narain

THE MADWOMAN IN THE ATTIC

The extensive scholarship on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) has established it as a canonical text with a pivotal place in debates about gender, writing, and feminism. Jean Rhys’s response to it, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), has, in turn, become a canonical text in postcolonial and Caribbean studies, where it is recognized for powerfully conveying the enduring psychological and social impacts of colonialism. It is easy to see what Rhys would have objected to in Brontë’s Bertha and why she might be, as she puts it, “fighting mad” to tell Bertha’s story (Rhys, *Letters* 157). When Rochester is finally forced to explain Bertha’s presence in his attic to Jane, he does so in binary terms which align him with reason and civility, and Bertha with un-reason and barbarity, “What a pigmy intellect she had, and what giant propensities! How fearful were the curses those propensities entailed on me!” (Brontë 334). In Gilbert and Gubar’s account of nineteenth-century women’s writing, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979),

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Bertha encapsulates the repressed woman writer, the raging, raving dark double of “the angel in the house” (22–29, 32, 86), furious at her exclusion from the literary canon. Indeed, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that Bertha is “Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead” (Gilbert and Gubar 360).

In her review of the 2006 re-issue of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Janet Gezari usefully summarizes the gist of Spivak’s critical response to its initial publication: “In Gilbert and Gubar’s allegorical reading, Bertha’s death exorcises Jane’s rage and makes her journey back to Rochester possible. In Spivak’s [reading], the ‘woman from the colonies’ is coldly ‘sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister’s consolidation’” (271–72). For Spivak, Gilbert and Gubar’s complete neglect of empire and ethnicity as crucial aspects of Bertha’s function in the novel produces the feminist subject as normatively white while endorsing a racialized hierarchy of literary subjectivity and self-making:

In this fictive England, she must play out her role, act out the transformation of her “self” into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction. (Spivak 251)

Gilbert and Gubar’s projection of Jane’s rage and madness onto the Creole woman ignores the white Creole’s subjectivity, compromising the universality of the scholars’ definitions of both “woman” and “feminist.” Further, their reading is premised on a rather literal connection between the fictional characters and the authors who construct them. So, in their figuration, it is Brontë’s own anger at gender constraints on her writing ambitions that she projects onto Bertha, who then becomes a symbolic repository of that rage, rather than being of interest in her own right. In the discussion that follows, I will argue, in contrast to Gilbert and Gubar’s line of thought, that Jean Rhys and Jamaica Kincaid make purposive use of “raving” and “raging” women in projects of literary self-making that are finely attuned to the geopolitical and cultural legacies of colonialism. Both writers recognize that “what is at stake, for feminist individualism in the age of imperialism, is precisely the making of human beings” (Spivak 244). For both writers, the autobiographical features prominently, but this is not a simple projection of authorial alienation and anger onto their literary creations but a complicated meditation on

self-making as an ongoing and precarious matter, one that traverses the many meanings of “mad” suggested below and that requires the writers to put themselves on the line.

“Is *mad* the same as *mad mad* and *mad mad mad*?” (Josephs 1)
Mad: (maed) mad+der, mad+dest. 1. mentally deranged; insane. 2. Senseless; foolish: a mad idea. 3. (often foll. by *at*) *Informal*. angry; resentful. 4. (foll. by *about, on, or over*; often postpositive) wildly enthusiastic (about) or fond (of).... 5. extremely excited or confused; frantic: a mad rush. 6. wildly gay; boisterous: a *mad party*. 7. temporarily overpowered by violent reactions, emotions etc. *mad with grief*.... *gemaeded* to render insane. (*Collins English Dictionary* 883)

Jean Rhys writes that she had “brooded over ‘Jane Eyre’ for years” and had been “vexed at Brontë’s portrait of the “paper tiger’ lunatic” (*Letters* 262). Rhys’s brooding and vexation eventually took literary form in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a text that has iconic status in relation to any discussion of madness in Caribbean literature. Evelyn O’Callaghan suggests that the novel is “perhaps the best fictional illustration of Laing’s concept of ontological insecurity” (46); Kelly Baker Josephs deems it one of the “canonical texts of madness” (6); and John Thieme argues that “[i]n *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), the best-known ‘madwoman’ in Caribbean fiction, Jean Rhys’s Antoinette, a reworking of the lunatic in the attic of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, feels her alienation is a product of her predicament as a white Creole” (96). The estrangement attributed to Antoinette as a white Creole is routinely extended to Jean Rhys herself. This conflation of author and protagonist is also strikingly evident in responses to the London/Paris novels, published before *Wide Sargasso Sea*, whose drifting, estranged women were read as manifestations of Rhys and her own experiences in those cities (her regular drinking, multiple marriages, bohemian lifestyle, and so on).¹ It remains commonplace in Rhys scholarship for “the Rhys woman” to refer to both author and protagonist.

Kenneth Ramchand established early on the terms on which *Wide Sargasso Sea* might be canonized when he argued that similarities in white West Indian writing emerged “involuntarily from the natural stance of the White West Indian” (224), rather than from authors’ familiarity with each other’s work.² He argued: “Adapting from Fanon we might use the phrase ‘terrified consciousness’ to suggest the White minority’s sensations of shock and disorientation as a massive and smouldering Black population is

released into an awareness of its power” (225). Thus, according to Ramchand, the white Creole writer, positioned by History in a perilously unstable place, is terrorized and disorientated, if not psychotic. More recently, Marlon James has concluded his (largely sympathetic) discussion of Rhys’s “worthless women” with a regrettable conflation of Rhys’s voice with that of Antoinette: “her [Rhys’s] manic voice, like her madly, fatally violent Antoinette’s, a shuttered shrieking cry, desperate and demanding to be heard.” Despite her combative efforts to recast Brontë’s “‘paper tiger’ lunatic” in more **racially** nuanced terms, Rhys is again conflated with her protagonists as equally hapless and helpless. This view disregards the care and caution that Rhys exercised in her efforts to craft her vexed “fighting spirit” into novelistic shape, as evidenced in the following: “That unfortunate death of a Creole! I’m fighting mad to tell *her* story. But it’s a good book—and so one must be wary and careful. Sober and plausible. At first” (Rhys, *Letters* 157, italics in original).

I would argue that the persistent alignment of Rhys with alienation and pathological passivity obscures the careful craft evident in her work and the energy and combative agency that this entails. Jamaica Kincaid, by contrast, is routinely associated with precisely this combative agency and regarded as “fighting mad to tell her story,” propelled by fury to set the postcolonial records straight, as this passage from her polemical essay-memoir, *A Small Place* (1988), indicates:

But nothing can erase my rage—not an apology, not a large sum of money, not the death of the criminal—for this wrong can never be made right, and only the impossible can make me still: can a way be found to make what happened not have happened? (32)

Rage features in Kincaid’s work so often and so variously that it might reasonably be described as her signature affect; it is certainly a regular topic in her many interviews. In one of these, she states, “So I just now use this slash-and-burn policy of writing, I just say what I have to say and get out” (“I Use a Cut and Slash Policy” 23). In another, she responds as follows:

Oh, that. It’s an interesting thing. And I wouldn’t mind being labeled as “angry,” if it wasn’t used to denigrate and belittle. First of all, I don’t feel I’m angry. I feel as though I’m describing something true. (“Does Truth Have a Tone?”)

The discomfort that Kincaid's anger often generates among critics recalls Audre Lorde's astute suspicion that white feminists in the 1970s rejected black women's anger because it disrupted the smooth ascendancy of "universal" feminist solidarity. Certainly, Kincaid's work frequently exposes complacent assumptions about the universality of women's oppression in ways that resonate strongly with Spivak's critique of Gilbert and Gubar's feminist championing of *Jane Eyre*, discussed above.

Kincaid has frequently named *Jane Eyre* as one of the most significant texts of her childhood reading: "When I was a child I liked to read. I loved 'Jane Eyre' especially and read it over and over" (Kincaid, "Through West Indian Eyes"). The text appears in several places in her own fiction as one that she associates with an idealized idea of literary sensibility—and of personhood—that people like her were encouraged to emulate but could never attain: "Of course there was the final hurdle that you could never pass, you could never be English. You could never be a real person" (Kincaid qtd. in Simmons 66). To put it in Spivak's terms, Kincaid recognizes that what is at stake in English literary culture is precisely "the making of human beings" (244).

The racially exclusive terms in which ideas of personhood circulated in writing has exercised many Caribbean writers, generating unease and anger as well as fuelling debates about how best such practices of ontological "unmaking" might be refused. Unsurprisingly, "race" featured prominently in determining how a writer was presumed to be positioned to resist colonial cultural power. So, if agentive anger aligns Kincaid with anti-colonial resistance, then terror and anxiety alienate Rhys from it. Their respective alignments are predictable; back in 1993, Kamau Brathwaite famously argued that whites were "too removed from the majority, black population" to be relevant to Caribbean writing and that

When most of us speak of 'the West Indian' we think of someone of African descent.... There are of course 'white people' in the West Indies, but these are regarded either as too far apart to count or too inextricably mixed into the whole problem to be considered as separate. (40)

Rather than focusing on this binary schema—terror, disorientation, guilt for white writers; ancestral rage and resistance for black writers—I prefer to mobilize the ambivalence in Brathwaite's idea that whites are "either ... too far apart to count or too inextricably mixed into the whole problem to be considered as separate." Can this uncertainty be productively extended

to writers “of African descent” to unsettle ideas about “the natural stance,” to use Ramchand’s phrase, of white *and* black writers? Jamaica Kincaid is of African (as well as Carib/Kalinago) descent but has regularly emphasized that “Africa is *not* my home” (“I Use a Cut and Slash Policy” 24, italics in original); instead, she has foregrounded that her writing derives from her immersion (albeit *enforced*) in English literature, rather than from an oral African heritage. In sum, both Rhys and Kincaid write *through* and *across* the wide spectrum of meanings of madness/anger and psychosis/rage that the Collins definition includes. In both writers’ texts, madness is a powerfully historicized and politicized force that is self-consciously mediated in ways that do not always line up with their presumed ancestral affiliations. Rhys’s and Kincaid’s writing implies an idea of subjectivity and self-making that is an unstable and mutable *process*, not a destination or identity to be arrived at. For both writers, the psychic damage that characterizes the postcolonial Caribbean cannot be *remedied* but must be examined and documented in all its ambiguous complexity. In this, resonances with Frantz Fanon’s work are striking.

It is indeed precisely this dehumanizing alienation and rage that Fanon exposes as the enduring psychic impact of colonial regimes on subject formation, for both colonizer and colonized. Ramchand, as we saw earlier, relies on Fanon when he describes the psychological embattlement of Antoinette, and Rhys herself, as examples of “terrified consciousness.” Josephs, too, draws heavily on Fanon in her discussion of madness in Caribbean literature though, significantly, because her focus is largely on national culture, she depends most heavily on *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), rather than the earlier text, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). David Macey argues that reception of Fanon’s work tends to be split between those more persuaded by the agentive, revolutionary anger of *Wretched* and those more drawn to the anxious uncertainty that distinguishes *Black Skin*:

The Third Worldist Fanon was an apocalyptic creature; the post-colonial Fanon worries about identity politics, and often about his own sexual identity, but he is no longer angry. And yet, if there is a truly Fanonian emotion, it is anger. (*Frantz Fanon: A Life* 28)

In this schema, postcolonial emphasis on the uneasy, questioning Fanon of *Black Skin* is presented as preferable to the focused anger that distinguishes *Wretched*. Describing his own introduction to Fanon’s work, Macey, in his

second monograph on the Martinican thinker, elaborates the powerful appeal of this anger: “Every brother on a rooftop who was taking care of business with a gun could, so it was said, quote Fanon.... It was his anger that was so attractive” (*Frantz Fanon: A Biography* xiv). Anger is presented as recognizably agentive when it is externalized in visible, targeted acts of violence; internalized anger and its attendant anxieties signal a degree of psychosis that is less easily harnessed to revolutionary aims. In the discussion that follows, I aim to eschew this dichotomized understanding of anger and madness, arguing that Rhys and Kincaid navigate across the continuum of meanings of madness, rage, and alienation so that they put themselves on the line, both literally and figuratively, in ways that are reminiscent of Fanon’s use of the autobiographical in both *Black Skin* and *Wretched*.

The normatively male image of agency consolidated in the figure of the armed brother contrasts strikingly with “the madwoman in the attic,” whose anger is configured as neurotically implosive and reactive, rather than agentive. *Black Skin, White Masks*, with its emphasis on the internalization of abjection, then, suggests more opportunities for bringing women into the frame, despite the fact that Fanon paid scant attention to women himself. Judith Butler offers a generous way of reading across Fanon’s male-centredness and the angry and anxious aspects of his legacy. She recognizes that Fanon proposes anger and violence as necessary for overthrowing colonial rule but argues that these are not presented as ends in themselves. Nor, indeed, are violence and anger his final word on the matter, as *The Wretched of the Earth* concludes with a call to readers: “For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man” (255). Butler suggests that we read this ending anachronistically, as *anticipating* the call with which the earlier text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, concludes:

Superiority? Inferiority? 234
Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? 235
Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of *You*? 237
At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness. 238
My final prayer: 239
O my body, make of me always a man who questions! 240
(231–32, italics in original) 241
242

The appeal for a non-hierarchical humanity, unmarked by race, represents a yearning to evade a reactive cycle of violence in which the “original” emasculation of the colonized must be overturned via hyper-masculine violence by the colonized. This yearning may have seemed impossibly utopian in 1961, when *Wretched* was published and the war for Algerian independence was still raging. But, rather than focusing exclusively on his revolutionary anger and assuming, like Sartre in his introduction to it, that violence is the privileged mode of agency for Fanon, Butler focuses on *Wretched*’s ending and its appeal for a new humanity. She harnesses this to the final lines of *Black Skin*, quoted above, in which Fanon yearns for a sensual language of mutual recognition where boundaries are porous and the well-being of “I” and “you” are intrinsically entwined. Butler amplifies Fanon’s call for a universally recognized personhood that extends beyond the binary of black and white, male and female, and I and you:

If there is a relation between this “you” whom I seek to know, whose gender cannot be determined, whose nationality cannot be presumed, and who compels me to relinquish violence, then this mode of address articulates a wish not just for a nonviolent future for the human, but for a new conception of the human where some manner of touch other than violence is the precondition of that making. (*Senses* 197)

Butler invites us to work with a more affectively attuned understanding of Fanon’s work, with an emphasis on sensory, non-violent modes of contact and communication that can be usefully extended to reconsider the alignments outlined above of Rhys with alienation and Kincaid with anger. Like Fanon, both Rhys and Kincaid recognize colonial oppression as violently all-encompassing; they also, like him, recognize that political, economic, and military structures for managing the colonized were always supplemented and mediated by cultural structures (education, religion, laws). This matrix orients all three writers to the powerfully distorting emotional and sensory force-fields that truncated possibilities for self-making during—and after—colonial rule. Fanon refers repeatedly to the all-pervasively oppressive atmosphere that defines the existence of the colonized subject, seeping through his pores into every aspect of his life. As he puts it in *A Dying Colonialism*, “There is not occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other... Under these conditions, the individual’s breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing” (65). In what follows, I discuss the ways that Rhys’s and Kincaid’s texts register

precisely the intimate, sensory impacts on women in the pervasively “occu- 280
pied” landscape that Fanon describes. 281

“THE DAY THEY BURNED THE BOOKS” 282

I turn now to a story collected in Rhys’s *Tigers Are Better Looking* (1968) 283
that traverses the mad/anger psychological spectrum I have been discuss- 284
ing and that resonates in fascinating ways with episodes in Rhys’s *Smile* 285
Please: An Unfinished Autobiography (1978). The story captures the co- 286
ordinates of race, sex, and class as they jostle together in Caribbean soci- 287
eties to generate an atmosphere of dense psychological and emotional 288
turbulence in which alienation and rage are paramount. Narrated by an 289
introspective 12-year-old girl, the story revolves around the tensions that 290
beset the marriage of her friend Eddie Sawyer’s parents. Mr Sawyer, care- 291
fully distinguished as an Englishman but not a gentleman (he “hadn’t an 292
‘h’ in his composition,” 37), works as an agent for a struggling steamship 293
line. This, and the fact that his wife is a “coloured” woman (“Though a 294
decent, respectable, nicely educated coloured woman, mind you”: 37), 295
compromises his privileged position as a white man in Dominica in the 296
early 1900s. Mr Sawyer appears to dislike the West Indies so completely 297
that “[n]obody could make out what he was doing in our part of the 298
world at all” (37). His attitude to his wife is equally contemptuous; when 299
drunk, he revels in making fun of her in public, calling her “nigger,” pull- 300
ing her hair to show guests that it is not a wig and abusing her verbally: 301
“You damned, long-eyed, gloomy half-caste, you don’t smell right” (37). 302
Mr Sawyer also owns a library of books housed in a purpose-built room 303
at the back of the family house. Whereas the two children, Eddie and the 304
narrator, make the library their private retreat, Mrs Sawyer “hated the 305
room and hated the books” (38), recognizing their cultural significance 306
as the other side of her husband’s visceral antipathy to the West Indies 307
and to *her*. 308

Mr Sawyer dies suddenly, and if the obeah his wife is rumoured to prac- 309
tise plays a part, we aren’t told, but she behaves impeccably at his funeral, 310
not taking her revenge until later when she flamboyantly clears out her 311
husband’s library. The children are surprised to find Mrs Sawyer and the 312
servant, Mildred, pulling the books out and sorting them into heaps. 313
Mildred explains that the “good-looking ones” are to be sold; these 314
include “*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *British Flowers*, *Flowers*, *Birds and* 315
Beasts, various histories, books with maps, Froude’s *English in the West* 316

Indies and so on,” all recognizable staples of a colonial canon. The pile of damaged books and less important paperbacks are to be burnt. While Mildred is nervously shocked and delighted, Mrs Sawyer is calm and moves with an easy rhythm that is described as “beautiful as the sky outside which was a very dark blue” (41). She throws the books energetically onto the piles, reserving particular opprobrium, the narrator notes, for those by women.

Mrs Sawyer’s burning of the books is a dramatic event, a spectacular destruction of her husband’s carefully curated collection. Book burnings, of course, have historically been associated with the public destruction of material deemed dangerous on religious, cultural, or political grounds. The ritualistic, public destruction of particular books is intended to signal clearly that certain views will not be tolerated; as such the act is a public performance of censorship. Mrs Sawyer’s book burning may be on a smaller scale but it is a powerful performance of her refusal of her husband’s investment in English civility and an exposure of the economic interests that such civility sought to disguise. The cavalier burning of the “unimportant” books has more complicated reverberations, signifying Mrs Sawyer’s recognition of their insidious cultural value to her husband—and to her son Eddie. She laughs when the distraught boy snatches the copy of Kipling’s *Kim* from the fire and the narrator grabs Maupassant’s *Fort comme la mort*.

The two named novels do not have the monetary value of the big, glossy tomes but Mrs Sawyer recognizes that, stacked together in the specially built library, they consolidate an aura of literary civility from which she is excluded because she is “coloured.” We know she is well-educated, so there is absolutely no question about her literacy; rather, Rhys emphasizes Mrs Sawyer’s critical assessment of these books and the cultural capital they represent. But the book burning is also presented as a cathartic conflagration, one that aims to destroy the “whiteness” the books represent and from which she is excluded. It is tempting to read this as a symbolic agentive strike against what Fanon describes in *Black Skin* as “All this whiteness that burns me” (114). The conflagration also, of course, calls to mind the fires in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* where the burning of Thornfield Hall in the former “frees” Jane to marry Rochester while in the latter it “frees” Antoinette to jump to her death, or to Tia, or out of the confines of the textual world represented by *Jane Eyre* itself.

Rhys draws our attention to the narrator’s perception in reading Mrs Sawyer’s face and the intensity of emotions that play over it as the woman

selects the titles to be burned. The range of affects the narrator witnesses 356
as Mrs Sawyer flings the books into the fire underscores the hermeneutics 357
at play in the scene: 358

And as for Mrs Sawyer—well, I knew bad temper (I had often seen it), I 359
knew rage, but this was hate. I recognized the difference at once and stared 360
at her curiously. I edged closer to her so that I could see the titles of the 361
books she was handling. (41) 362

The child may not be able to fully theorize what she sees, but she registers 363
the powerful significance of the emotions and affects that circulate. The 364
emotional extremes that the colonial context generates surface again in 365
the closing scene of the story when the children have a fraught exchange 366
in which Eddie suspects that the narrator won't believe his mother because 367
"she isn't white," to which the narrator repeats her father's view, "Who's 368
white? Damned few" (42). They both shed tears after this falling out, and 369
the narrator, seeing their tears merge as they fall on her hand, thinks, 370
"Now perhaps we're married" (43). I read the suggestion implied here of 371
a brief, sensory coupling as indicative of the possibility, however transient, 372
of alternatives to the madness and racial paranoia that characterize the 373
adult world. This is not to suggest that Rhys equates childhood with sim- 374
plicity and innocence, but rather that the language and perception of chil- 375
dren are porous and inherently relational, open to the emotional and 376
affective possibilities of being human that Fanon and Butler have 377
articulated. 378

Hate, rage, and the other registers of mad colonial after-effects that 379
inform "The Day They Burned the Books" appear in other of Rhys's short 380
stories, and they also animate *Wide Sargasso Sea* and provide the shadowy 381
emotional hinterland of the London/Paris novels. The psychological 382
landscape Rhys draws on is recognizably that of her Dominican childhood 383
and has led, as argued above, to a tendency to equate the life with the text. 384
In turning to *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*, I want to empha- 385
size how Rhys *mediates*—rather than simply gives readers direct access 386
to—her personal experiences in the account she offers, particularly of 387
postcolonial rage. Rhys's inscription of her own experience implies an 388
altogether more deliberated idea of the autobiographical or personal than 389
the conflation of Rhys with her mad protagonists suggests. The text opens 390
with the words "'Smile please,' the man said. 'Not quite so serious'" (19) 391
as a photographer cajoles the young Rhys to sit still for a family portrait. 392

Rhys then notes that three years after the photograph is taken, she sees that she *had* moved (one of her fingers is raised), a movement that comes to signify a shift away from that time and that self. The vignettes that comprise the eponymous first section of the memoir are carefully selected and shaped, the verbal equivalent of the snapshot with which it opens; the second section, “It began to grow cold,” by contrast, includes material that Rhys had not reworked and is strikingly less well-honed. The self that Rhys conveys glimpses of in her memoir, then, is shifting and mutable and mediated as much by her immersion in books as by her lived experience. It is a self that is performed in the process of the writing itself, rather than a self simply awaiting written expression. In the section titled “Books,” her siblings having left Dominica, Rhys is “alone except for books” (26), though her reading is often disturbed:

My nurse, who was called Meta, didn’t like me much anyway, and complete with a book it was too much. One day she found me crouched on the staircase reading a bowdlerised version of the *Arabian Nights* in very small print.

She said, ‘If all you read so much, you know what will happen to you? Your eyes will drop out and they will look at you from the page.’

‘If my eyes drop out I wouldn’t see,’ I argued.

She said, ‘They drop out except the little black points you see with.’

I half believed her and imagined my pupils like heads of black pins and all the rest gone. But I went on reading. (28)

As in “The Day They Burned the Books,” books represent profoundly significant and contested artefacts, indicative of an exclusionary cultural power that Meta, in a somewhat similar vein to Mrs Sawyer, deeply resents. Where Mrs Sawyer burns the books, Meta terrifies the child about the damaging effects of reading.

The section entitled “Meta” consolidates the nurse’s formidable power over the child. It opens: “Now it is time to talk about Meta, my nurse and the terror of my life.” She was “a short, stocky woman, very black and always, I thought, in a bad temper... She always seemed to be brooding over some terrible, unforgettable wrong” (29). Rhys implies that her child-self is culpable in some unarticulated way so that the terrorizing stories that Meta tells her of *louis-garous* and cockroaches that fly into one’s mouth, leaving bites that never heal, are a form of punishment, rather than amusement. Compounding this aural terror, the child also absorbs a sense of inexplicable resentment in the rough way that Meta treats her, hauling her along to the Botanical Gardens when she is too

young to be steady on her feet and dragging her past the sweet shop on 431
their daily walks. The climactic denouement of these torments is described 432
as follows: 433

She was forbidden to slap me and she never did but she got her own back by 434
taking me by the shoulders and shaking me violently. Hair flying, while I still 435
had any breath to speak I would yell, 'Black Devil, Black Devil, Black Devil!' 436
(31–32) 437

The sheer physicality and sensory intimacy of this encounter dramatically 438
foregrounds the corporeal as nurse and child seem locked in skin-to-skin, 439
if not hand-to-hand, combat. It is just this kind of everyday, ongoing 440
violence that distorts and truncates the possibilities for personhood of 441
both colonizer and colonized. Meta and the young Rhys's encounter 442
might also be read as the perfect example of Ramchand's alienated white 443
Creole, terrified as "a massive and smouldering Black population is 444
released into an awareness of its power" (225). But I think what this over- 445
blown rhetoric, with its emphasis on politically oriented identities, misses 446
are the profoundly intimate energies that circulate in the encounter 447
between nurse and child. Rhys crystalizes this powerfully charged 448
exchange—a literal and metaphorical "shaking up"—into a detailed, 449
mutually defining "moment of madness" that conjures the fractious inti- 450
macies of colonial relationships. 451

That Meta features with such intensity in the recollections of Rhys's 452
very early life that the writer gathered together at the age of 86 (with the 453
help of an amanuensis) in the winters of 1976 to 1978 clearly attests to her 454
powerful impact on Rhys. The section, "Meta," concludes: 455

I can't remember who took her place, or if anyone did. But in any case it was 456
too late, the damage had been done. Meta had shown me a world of fear and 457
distrust and I am still in that world. (32) 458

Meta continues to resonate as a haunting presence in Rhys's world view, 459
so that, in some sense, she is part of Rhys's imaginative and ontological 460
make-up. The rigid political and cultural hierarchies that framed Rhys's 461
childhood in Dominica do not fix or define her sense of self because she is 462
open to being impacted by the anger, rage and madness of the formerly 463
colonized that that hierarchy produces. It is this turbulent, mad, and abra- 464
sive atmosphere that permeates her writing. I am not arguing that the 465
"hate" the narrator recognizes in Mrs Sawyer is identical to that which the 466

young Rhys recollects in Meta but, rather, that Rhys is indelibly marked by these experiences and that they surface in her fiction. Like a palimpsest, her skin bears the intimate imprint of these everyday encounters with “colonialism”; where Fanon talks of “the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority” in relation to the black man (*Black Skin* 13), the dynamic in Rhys might be described as an inverse process: the epidermalization of the impacts of that original epidermalization. Rhys is alert to the daily excoriation of hate, rage, and bad temper and this circulates as an affective fog in much of her writing, an emotional hinterland that cannot be shaken off. She may not *comprehend* the rationale for Meta’s rage but she is not afraid to be profoundly unsettled by it.

If Meta’s rage leaves a sensory trace on the young Rhys’s skin that orients the young girl’s sensibility, then Rhys, the writer, puts that madness and her maddened response to work in her story. “The Day They Burned the Books” presents the apparently “irrational” impulse to burn the books as a complex combination of logic, rage and madness. In *Writing and Madness*, Shoshana Felman asks, “To speak of madness—in what language?,” and goes on to suggest an approach that does not ask what madness *is* but what it might *do*: “In other words, the theoretical tools will not function here as a new *meaning* to confer upon the text, but as a new way of *being affected* by the text” (21–22).

Mr BROTHER

I want to explore similar continuities between rage and madness in Jamaica Kincaid’s work. While she often, as we saw above, directly articulates anger in geopolitical terms, with 1492 and Columbus’s arrival pinpointed as the source of that anger, there are many bitter ironies knotted into this rage. In “On Seeing England for the First Time,” an essay whose title suggests a decorous meditation on England that it emphatically does not deliver on, Kincaid catalogues a childhood in which she was surrounded by objects stamped with the words “made in England” (33) and immersed in English literary culture (a world where “clothes rustled,” “people rushed” and “[e]vening approaches”: 34–35), to such an extent that it eclipsed her own lived realities and negated her very personhood:

To avert my gaze was to fall back into something from which I had been rescued, a hole filled with nothing, and that was the word for everything about me, nothing. The reality of my life was conquests, subjugation, humiliation, enforced amnesia. (36)

The inability to give her own experiences and opinions the authority associated with English culture echoes through many of Kincaid's texts in various formulations, perhaps most poignantly when the protagonist, Xuela, in *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), reflects that, unlike the English preacher's confident claim to the seasons of England, "I, Xuela, am not in a position to make my feeling have any meaning" (137).³ In a collection of essays on gardening, Kincaid begins the chapter entitled "In History" with a series of questions:

What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? 512
Should I call it history? 513
If so, what should history mean to someone like me? 514
Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound and each breath I take 515
in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over 516
...? ... what should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself? (*My* 517
Garden 114) 518

What does it mean to make a feeling have meaning? How are feeling and meaning connected? And what kind of feeling is *anger*? An event described in Kincaid's memoir, *My Brother* (1998), helps focus these questions while also bringing into the frame another familiar target of Kincaid's rage, her mother. Like "The Day They Burned the Books," the incident from Kincaid's memoir features a book burning at its centre. This book burning is Kincaid's mother's chosen punishment when her 15-year-old daughter neglects the 2-year-old brother left in her care. Evidence of the girl's neglect is the day-old stool that has hardened in her brother Devon's nappy while she has been reading. In Kincaid's telling, the stool becomes a precise measure of the straitened circumstances of her family, following the father's illness:

a weight that was not gold but its opposite ... a weight that only emphasized our family's despair: our fortunes, our prospects were not more than the contents of my brother's diaper, and the contents were only shit. (131)

The young Kincaid resents having to forgo her own enjoyment or miss school in order to help look after her younger siblings, but she understands that reading is associated with an idea of leisure that implies "contempt for working and any association with the dullness of the everyday" (133) and that this fuels her mother's rage:

In a fit of anger that I can remember so well, as if it had been a natural disaster, as if it had been a hurricane or an erupting volcano, or just simply the end of the world, my mother found my books ... and in this fury, which she was conscious of then but cannot now remember, but which to her regret I can, she gathered all the books of mine she could find, and placing them on her stone heap ... , she doused them with kerosene (oil from the kerosene lamp by the light of which I used to strain my eyes reading some of the books that I was about to lose) and then set fire to them. (132, 134)

The burning of the books is preceded in *My Brother* by another spectacular performance of the mother's anger when, unable to control the insects that overtook the passion fruit vine growing on the soursop tree, she uses kerosene and sets ablaze the whole entangled growth so that only the blackened stump remains. Though Kincaid was "not there to witness this inferno" (126) and "could only imagine it" (127), it serves to consolidate her sense of her mother as a force of nature. When the mother's rage is directed at *her*, Kincaid describes a sense of being annihilated by it, "a fury so fierce that I believed (and this was then, but even now many years later I am not convinced otherwise) that she wanted me dead" (131). Kincaid's narration spells out what Rhys leaves implicit in her presentation of Mrs Sawyer's blaze, namely that the fire which consumes the books also threatens the owner of those books.

In both Rhys's story and her autobiographical vignettes, the emotional atmosphere is created allusively and associatively, with small details providing significant clues, rather than via direct commentary. Kincaid, by contrast, signals her own authorial and autobiographical position more directly, laying bare her position in relation to the mother's monumental rage and the undercurrents that animate it: it is the mother who has taught her daughter to read and to love books, but the family's impoverished circumstances mean that the value of the literary must, of necessity, be calibrated against the everyday. Another textual strategy that Kincaid uses in *My Brother* is to embed episodes in lengthy passages where memories are repeated and interrupted by others and where long sentences and minimal punctuation convey a sense of the memories bleeding into each other. In Rhys, the autobiographical vignettes sit discretely separate, leaving the reader to make connections by amplifying the clues. In Kincaid, the unity of what happened *then* is provided through the sorting and signifying arrangement that the author chooses *now*. Immediately after the books are burned in Kincaid's memoir, we are told:

What I felt when this happened, the exact moment of the burning of my books, what I felt after this happened, the burning of my books, immediately after it happened, shortly after it happened, long after it happened, I do not know, I cannot now remember. In fact I did not even remember that it happened at all, it had no place in the many horrible events that I could recite to friends, or the many horrible events that shaped and gave life to the thing I was to become, a writer. (134–35)

Where earlier in the text, Kincaid claims that she can “remember so well” (132) her mother’s fury, here she is emphatic that she *cannot*. This contradiction indicates Kincaid’s responsiveness to the complicated navigations required when giving an account of herself and the volatility of attempting to narrate now what happened then. It also indicates commitment to the shifting trajectories that narration generates; the denial of remembering in the quotation above conspires to concentrate her own anger and extinguish other emotions, as if the fire has cauterized her feelings—or has forged them into a reactive anger equal to her mother’s. Any other more subtle traumatic impacts of the event must instead seep through the tone, syntax, and piling up of negatives. In another passage in *My Brother*, Kincaid affirms anger as the dominant emotion that she experiences as she leaves her dying brother, perhaps for the last time:

I did not feel strong, I felt anger, my anger was everything to me, and in my anger lay many things, mostly made up of feelings I could not understand, feelings I might not ever understand, feelings that everyone who knows me understands with an understanding that I will never know, or that someone who has never met me at all would understand as if they had made up my feelings themselves. (108–09)

The image conjured here is of a body saturated with anger to the extent that it occludes all other feelings, while also suggesting an idea of anger as a secondary emotion that masks more vulnerable, primary feelings. If we also consider that the memoir is punctuated with references to Kincaid’s achievements as a writer and to reflections on events and incidents familiar to readers of her fictions, the repeated use of “made up” steers our reading towards a more deliberated reflection on her own *writing out* of anger: writing out of the place of anger and writing out as catharsis; writing, then, as a way of recognizing, re-encountering, and re-evaluating her (angry) self.

Kincaid reflects on this directly in the closing section of the memoir when, sometime after Devon's funeral, she is doing a reading in Chicago (the timing would suggest it is from *The Autobiography of My Mother*) and reflects wryly, "I seemed to be having such a triumph, a book I had written interested people who knew nothing at all about me" (156). This "triumph" is tempered by the desperation that surfaces in the closing pages of *My Brother*: "I became a writer out of desperation, so when I first heard my brother was dying I was familiar with the act of saving myself: I would write about him. I would write about his dying" (195–96). Desperation and defiant anger are intertwined in the final pages of the text when Kincaid again revisits the book burning:

[M]y mother gathered up all the books I owned and put them on a pile on her stone heap, sprinkling them with kerosene and then setting them alight; I cannot remember the titles of these books, I cannot remember what they were about (they would have been novels, at fifteen I read only novels), but it would not be so strange if I spent the rest of my life trying to bring those books back to my life by writing them again and again until they were perfect, unscathed by fire of any kind. (197–98)

Anger is reaffirmed as a powerful impetus for her writing, but here it is also underpinned by a longing for the possibility of not *having to be angry*, of being "unscathed by fire of any kind." A small change of word choice in how the book-burning is described is notable here: where, in the first account, the mother "doused" the books with kerosene, in this last account, the verb is "sprinkling," a tiny linguistic shift that suggests the more muted tenor that striates this anger. Anguish might be read as a tempering counterpoint to the dominance of anger here.

In Kincaid's most recent and most obviously autobiographical novel, *See Now Then* (2013), she continues to reflect on writing as both mode of survival and of defeat and alienation, powered by rage but permeated by lament. Most reviews open by drawing attention to the autobiographical elements of the novel and many read the book as the wronged wife's revenge, indicated clearly in Dwight Garner's review in *The New York Times*, "The Marriage Has Ended; Revenge Begins." The book's protagonists, the Sweets, are in the process of separating; Mr Sweet, a composer, is leaving Mrs Sweet, a writer, for a younger woman, one of his music students. The novel, narrated by someone called "Jamaica," tracks the painful process of the marriage's end as it impacts the family, including the

couple's son, Heracles, and daughter, Persephone. Kincaid has a son and 650
daughter, named Harold and Annie, was married to a composer, and lived, 651
liked the Sweets, in the Shirley Jackson house in Vermont. Certainly, the 652
"home Sweet home" the Sweets share is filled with Kincaidian rage. Garner 653
opens his review by boldly conflating this rage with mental illness: 654

This bipolar novel is half séance, half ambush. "See Now Then" is the kind 655
of lumpy exorcism that many writers would have composed and then 656
allowed to remain unpublished. It picks up no moral weight as it rolls along. 657
It asks little of us, and gives little in return. 658

This review states bluntly what lurks in many other responses to Kincaid's 659
works: that the monumental scale of the anger is irrational—too personal 660
and confessional to justify the persistent intensity of its expression in her 661
works and that it is a "crazed" kind of anger, though few go for broke, like 662
Garner, and label it "bipolar." The complaint that the novel "picks up no 663
moral weight" also resonates with other critics who find that Kincaid's 664
anger does not allow for other familiarly ameliorating feelings: sympathy, 665
empathy, and so on. 666

But I would argue that *See Now Then* is precisely tracking the post- 667
1492 History that shapes the personal to produce, as an *inevitable* conse- 668
quence, a "crazy anger." This is not the personal, pathologizing anger of 669
Garner's "bipolar" label but one situated in the wider historical processes 670
that refuse the very humanity of some subjects. To speak of "moral weight" 671
at all is not a simple matter for a postcolonial writer such as Kincaid, whose 672
ontology signals "a hole filled with nothing" ("On Seeing England" 36). 673
In the novel, the narrator's West Indian origins are repeatedly invoked 674
when Mrs Sweet ventriloquizes Mr Sweet's thoughts, particularly his frus- 675
trations with a wife who does not understand or appreciate serious musical 676
culture or her husband's musical achievements. Mrs Sweet likes Aretha 677
Franklin played loudly, sings "like a milkmaid, like a girl singing to domes- 678
ticated animals" (85), speaks loudly, "louder than a town crier's, louder 679
than a warning of impending disaster" (46) and she loves to exaggerate 680
(15), qualities that, though expressed in a milder discourse, echo those of 681
Brontë's Rochester when recounting his wife's excesses (as indicated 682
above).⁴ Mr Sweet's studio provides a haven of quietude and civility, the 683
welcome antithesis to his wife's excesses and supposed lack of culture, 684
symbolized most powerfully in the repeated image of her arrival in America 685
on a banana boat: 686

687 I now live with that passenger, questionable passenger, on a banana boat, for
688 is she a passenger or is she a banana? If she was a banana was she inspected?
689 If she was a passenger, how did she get here? My mother was right: someone
690 who arrives on a banana boat is suspect.... (17–18)

691 It is entirely possible that Kincaid (then Elaine Potter Richardson) *did*
692 arrive on a banana boat since cargo boats from the West Indies regularly
693 transported a small number of passengers, but here she is exploiting the
694 image for its demeaning resonances, not least of which is the association
695 of “people like her” with cargo. In an interview about the novel, Kincaid
696 strenuously denies that her real husband would ever have said such a
697 thing (“Never Mind”). But even without this authorial statement, it is
698 clear that the novel is much more engaged with understanding processes
699 and continuities across time—from then to now—and how writing pro-
700 vides a dynamic space for reflecting on them. What is at stake is the very
701 possibility of self-making: whether it is possible to stage a rescue, in writ-
702 ing, of a self at all. Can the trauma and psychic disturbance of a history of
703 persistent negation be written out? What idea of self is possible in such
704 circumstances?

705 *See Now Then* suggests that the answers to such questions require a
706 writing process that is an ongoing, embattled, and melancholy one. Unlike
707 the quietude of Mr Sweet’s studio, Mrs Sweet’s study is a place of struggle
708 and strife, “that much-hated room, the room just off the kitchen” (145),
709 in which she “kept her true self” (95) private from everyone, including her
710 family. Her absorption in writing in that space generates “sympathy from
711 Heracles, simple hatred from Persephone, homicidal rage from Mr. Sweet”
712 (95). The narrator evidences what she imagines might generate this hatred
713 and rage by repeatedly referencing phrases and ideas associated with Mrs
714 Sweet’s work in the study, all of which are recognizable to anyone familiar
715 with Jamaica Kincaid’s oeuvre, as in the following passage:

716 [T]he room in which she would commune with the vast world that began in
717 1492, the room in which lay her mother and her dead brother and her other
718 brothers and all the other people whom she sought out even as they had
719 turned their backs on her, that room, that room: burn it down, cried her
720 children, burn it with her in it, cried Mr. Sweet, but Mrs. Sweet knew of no
721 other way to be.... (145)

722 The purging power of fire here echoes the fires energizing Mrs Sawyer’s
723 anger and Kincaid’s mother’s fury, as well as the figure of the furious,

madwoman-writer with which this essay began. This is consolidated in 724
another passage where Mr Sweet tells Heracles of his plans to leave his 725
wife, when the reference to the madwoman in the attic of Brontë’s *Jane* 726
Eyre is made explicitly: 727

I don’t love your mother, you know, we were always so incompatible, for she 728
did emerge from a boat whose main cargo was bananas, and she is strange 729
and should live in the attic of a house that burns down, though I don’t want 730
her to be in it when that happens, but if she was in it when the house burned 731
down, I wouldn’t be surprised, she is that kind of person. (159) 732

Kincaid here transposes Brontë’s Rochester figure to Mr Sweet to amplify 733
the historical continuities that extend from that novel to the present one; 734
the title of Kincaid’s novel suggests this call to see “now” and “then” as 735
inextricably linked. In a pivotal scene in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester tells Jane 736
that Bertha’s “propensities” (334) and volubility require her to be shut 737
away: “One night I had been awakened by her yells—(since the medical 738
men had pronounced her mad, she had, of course, been shut up)” (335). 739
The epistemic violence of Rochester’s world view, where Europe is associ- 740
ated with reason and light and the West Indies (and West Indians) with 741
darkness and uncurbed appetites, underpins the rage and madness that 742
Kincaid rehearses. The power of the novel lies not in some reductive per- 743
sonal confession about the banality of a marriage ending but in the repeti- 744
tive, never-ending labour of self-making in the wake of the conquest and 745
subjugation that followed 1492. 746

CONCLUSION 747

“Madness” is put to work in Kincaid and Rhys’s texts; it may not do the 748
same work, but each writer labours to excoriate the nuances of its mean- 749
ings and to expose the intersections and continuities that percolate across 750
and under madness, rage, anger, and alienation. Both writers are attuned 751
to a sensory repertoire of anger that is imprinted on the body and pains- 752
takingly cathected in the writing. Both writers put *themselves* on the line in 753
their texts in ways that complicate any understanding of the autobiograph- 754
ical as simply “confessional.” For both, writing is risky, maddening, and 755
life-saving. Rhys says, “I must write. If I stop writing my life will have been 756
an abject failure. It is that already to other people. But it could be an abject 757
failure to myself. I will not have earned death” (*Smile Please* 163). Kincaid 758

asserts, "I don't know what I would do if I didn't write. It is a matter of living in the deepest way. I can only do this. I would just be crazy" ("What a Lot of Memory" 169). Writing rescues Rhys from failure and keeps Kincaid sane. Both writers suggest an understanding of writing that is inextricable from their engagement with themselves, the world, and their place in it; rather like Kincaid's image of history as a wound, their texts conduct an ongoing conversation about the very possibilities of being in the world. In *Precarious Life*, Butler writes, "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something" (23). It is this openness to "being undone" that she identifies in Fanon "who must, in order to live, draw upon and develop another understanding of embodied freedom" (*Senses* 10). In their different ways, Rhys and Kincaid are both *fighting mad to tell their stories*; what they are fighting for is precisely "another understanding of embodied freedom" that might constitute more accommodating horizons of humanism for us all.

NOTES

1. Examples of the London/Paris novels mentioned above include *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939).
2. Jean Rhys clearly *did* know her white Creole colleague Phyllis Allfrey well, as they exchanged letters frequently and Allfrey regularly sent Rhys copies of the newspaper she edited, *The Dominica Star*. Rhys had read and liked Allfrey's novel, *The Orchid House*, and agreed to write a preface for its reissue by Virago, though she died before doing so.
3. This recalls Derek Walcott's argument about the way the English pastoral comes to define the very possibility of art: "But our contemners who see this climate as seasonless and without subtlety also see us as a race without temperament, therefore without any possibility of art" (55).
4. This also recalls the "Rochester" figure in *Wide Sargasso Sea* who seeks sanctuary indoors from the "too much" (59) everything of his wife's beloved world. It also recalls Kincaid's construction of Xuela as a town crier, shouting to shake those around her out of apathy and silence in *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

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