Race, Literacy, and Postcoloniality in Jamaica Kincaid’s Mr. Potter

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Throughout her fiction, the Antiguan-American writer Jamaica Kincaid focuses on the personal and the familiar to highlight the legacies of slavery and colonialism in the contemporary Caribbean. As she told Donna Perry in an interview,

I sort of think about [politics] as part of my domestic life. I reduce everything to a domestic situation. [...] that's just how I understand things. [...] The idea that things are impersonal occurrences is very alien to me. I personalize everything.¹

What is remarkable about this approach in one of the latest instalments of her serial autobiography² is the extent to which, in contrast to previous postcolonial engagements with these issues, the personal and the everyday in Mr. Potter are represented not through disruptive or climactic events in her protagonist’s domestic life (such as eating disorders, interpersonal or intimate violence, adultery, etc.), but through the most benign, unexamined, and banal aspects of his existence. The novel’s representational politics expose the continuity between colonial and postcolonial practices but without relying on the typical identificatory strategies many writers use to appeal to the reader’s sympathy. While we are made privy to the effects of slavery and racism on Mr. Potter’s life, this recognition occurs not thanks to the reader’s identification with either the character or the narrator, but despite a lack thereof. On the one hand, Kincaid’s protagonist Mr. Potter, who happens to be the narrator’s father, is neither really likeable nor even remotely self-reflexive. He is completely unaware of and indifferent to the racial, class, and gendered dimensions of his own existence. He is

an ordinary man bereft of charisma, who fathered children he neither cared
about nor cared for and whose thoroughly unexamined relation to his own life
makes it all the more difficult for readers to identify with him. On the other
hand, nor does the narrator provide a site of unproblematic identification. The
narrator of Mr. Potter’s story, ironically, is Elaine Cynthia Richardson (Kincaid’s
real name), whose mother Mr. Potter abandoned right before their child’s birth
(perpetuating, in so doing, a tradition of family abandonment to which he him-
self and his father before him had also been subjected). Yet, this is a narrator
who seems stuck in compulsive repetitive patterns of writing that are sympto-
matic of unresolved trauma and in response to which she repeatedly empha-
sizes her ability to “read and write,” in stark opposition to her father’s illiteracy.
Caught between a narrator who cannot forgive/forget and a protagonist who
cannot reflect back, readers are left to their own devices to try and make sense
of the narrative of a trauma that does not even seem to be one. Indeed, how can
we process as ‘trauma’ – a reading that the text’s compulsive repetitions and
“mantra-like prose”3 do encourage – the story of a daughter’s abandonment by a
father she neither knew nor met until she was thirty-three years old? What is
more, the gap this representation creates between narrator and title character
generates discomfort, since there is something disturbing about this eurocentric
rehearsal of the association of the ‘human’ with literacy and the capacity for
interiority and self-awareness.

I argue that Mr. Potter stages a postcolonial process of re-membering in
which the narrator’s emphasis on the ‘healing’ potential of writing backfires,
since, instead of smoothing out the ‘inassimilability’ of trauma, it only highlights
the wounds of racialization and colonization that are interspersed in the text.
While the belated process involved in her confrontation of her ‘(non)-trauma’ is
one the narrator cannot fully control, it does allow for alternative visions of Mr.
Potter to emerge in the text. We may not identify with the protagonist but we
are led to see him as a product of the place and history to which he belongs and
to recognize his profound humanity in ways that challenge the usual reliance in
fiction on psychological depth and rounded characters. Significantly, the narra-
 tor’s relationship with her father really only consists of a vague childhood
memory that was mostly reported by her mother, a couple of black-and-white
pictures that are reproduced on the book’s cover, and the remembrance of a
single, anticlimactic meeting with him in adulthood. The abandonment by the
father is therefore revealed as a (non-)event in the narrator’s past, but it is one

3 Andrew Marton, review of Mr. Potter, by Jamaica Kincaid, Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service