

## CHAPTER 1 HOLISTIC READING

We have left the land and embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us- indeed we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us. Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean: to be sure, it does not always roar, and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness. But hours will come when you realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity... Oh, the poor bird that felt free now strikes the walls of this cage! Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more freedom- and there is no longer any "land."

- Nietzsche

Each man's life represents a road toward himself, an attempt at such a road, the intimation of a path. No man has ever been entirely and completely himself. Yet each one strives to become that- one in an awkward, the other in a more intelligent way, each as best he can. Each man carries the vestiges of his birth- the slime and eggshells of his primeval past-... to the end of his days... Each represents a gamble on the part of nature in creation of the human. We all share the same origin, our mothers; all of us come in at the same door. But each of us- experiments of the depths- strives toward his own destiny. We can understand one another; but each is able to interpret himself alone.

- Herman Hesse

*In this chapter I suggest a new method of reading, which I call “holistic reading.” Building on the spiritual model of the Self offered by Jiddu Krishnamurti and the psychological model of “self” offered by Dr. Richard Gillett, I suggest that reading occupy itself with the task of exploring the self, rather than exploring the other. I argue that in reading we often do little more than use the book to confirm our pre-existing beliefs, rather than interacting with what is actually before us. As such, we are not letting ourselves come face to face with a text. Instead we are consuming it and appropriating its voice. In order to create a different space in which to read a book, I offer a different reading practice than the one that most of us presently use. A holistic reading practice might entail reading the same book repeatedly, in order to access the richness and depth that might not be visible in a cursory reading. It also incorporates meditation and mindfulness, for reasons I will explain in chapter 2. At the end of the chapter I give a brief introduction of the self I will be exploring in this text by explaining my own background, and giving the back story of my relationship thus far with Kincaid and her texts.*

I am proposing a different way of reading, a different method of what to do with the information that our eyes scan and our minds perceive when we read. This method is interested in the reader, and hopes to articulate a way of reading that might lead the reader on a new journey of self-exploration. The objective is to use the practice of reading as a mirror in which our Self might examine our “self.” This is the philosophical Self—the Agent, the Knower, the Ultimate Locus of personal identity, God—examining the shabby patchwork of beliefs and understandings we have crafted from scraps of culture and experience that we identify as “self.”

We don’t often think of reading as something that has different ways of doing. At first glance, it’s just words on a printed page that we scan from left to right. Not much to it. And yet, if we think about it, we know that there are different ways of reading. What

a 5 year old does with his mind while he reads is very different from what a 16 year old does, which is very different from what a 45 year old does. Reading a steamy novel while on vacation at the beach is different from reading the job manual your new boss just set in front of you, which is different from reading a breakup letter left for you on the kitchen table. Reading serves different purposes at different times or situations in our lives.

I am talking now mostly of the mental processes involved in reading. To quote my mentor, Santiago Colás, who has the same goal, “I want to share a way of reading; a way of approaching and engaging literature that feeds and is in turn fed by a way of living, a way of approaching and engaging life” (*Book of Joys*). Colás sees reading as holding the potential to lead to joy by reinventing the practice through reconfiguring its components. He underscores “the capacity to take up the raw materials of the reading process (text and reader and world, affect and intellect, complexity and uncertainty) and find, though [sic] open-ended experimentation, enjoyable ways to rearrange those materials.” My method of reading builds on this idea of reconfiguration Colás describes, as well as on the philosophy of reader-response criticism of the 1960s and 1970s, to a certain extent. I am suggesting an ethical pedagogy of the practice of reading by focusing on the reader’s relationship to the text. This method or way of reading is intended to subtly shift the reader’s mental focus from the characters or the author to the construction of self. Thus, reading becomes a self-centered exercise, one in which we think about how we think. Books become passports to worlds that exist inside of us. We are able to get to know ourselves, slowly, through adopting a completely different approach to reading.

This implies, perhaps asserts, that there is a “way of living” that might be preferable to another. I will own an ethical standpoint in this work, connected as it is to promoting unity through a better, broader understanding of difference and freedom. I will also cop to a pragmatic belief that if the meaning of a given proposition is found within the practical consequences of accepting it, then we might start at the end, envisioning what we would like the end result to be, and *then* figuring out what we would have to believe in order to achieve that end result. In Pragmatism, William James writes:

The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many? – fated or free? –material or spiritual?—here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic model in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences (28).

I think that the pragmatic method is a useful one for examining our own thought processes. I have employed this method myself to examine which beliefs support my vision of the world and which do not. I have also used the pragmatic model to examine many of our cultural beliefs—the meta-narratives that presently have currency. Some of the characteristics that I find negative and problematic in American culture are: the materialism and the narrow view of success that it inspires; the unmediated and often excessive consumption; the misconception and misrepresentation of love; the narcissistic individualism; the unhealthy relationship to the body; the dichotomous, linear, univocal thinking. These will be explored at length in this text. I am not prescribing blanket happiness, but I am issuing a blanket invitation to self exploration, so that we might know intimately what stands between us and happiness, if happiness happens to be our objective.

Theory and practice are not separate spheres; rather, theories are tools and maps for the practice of finding our way in the world. As John Dewey attests, there is no question of theory *versus* practice. Instead, there is a question of intelligent (or conscious) practice versus stupid (or uninformed) practice. In recent times I have undertaken the project of trying to produce scholarship that has resonance and relevance beyond the academic, into the personal and the lived. William James writes, “Our beliefs are really rules for action... to develop [sic] a thought’s meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct for us is its sole significance” (28-29). My academic project has been to think about what type of conduct I would like to see produced- in the academy, in the United States, in the world, in myself- and what thoughts and ways of thinking might bring about this conduct. If, as James asserts, “all realities influence our practice, and that influence is their meaning for us” (29), I am interested in how realities are constructed and given meaning in light of a given practice.

I call this type of reading holistic because it offers an effective counter-balance to blind subscription to master narratives. Holistic thinking emphasizes the organic or functional relation between parts and the whole. Rather than scrutinizing an object under a microscope, we see it with a wider lens as a part of something bigger. With this lens we are able to see that even our seeing becomes a part of what is seen. Thus, an individual endeavor to understand and master the self has reverberations into our families, our societies, and ultimately the entire world. We cannot change society without changing ourselves.

I see the holistic phenomenon evidenced in the increased popularity of sustainable and ecologically sound living, the augmented awareness of the role of stress and nutrition

in health, and even arguably the pull toward community that fuels social networking sites like Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter as indicating that a re-education of sorts has already been taking place. Dissatisfied with the meaninglessness, lovelessness and hopelessness that Cornel West calls nihilism in his book Race Matters, many Americans have sought a restructuring of their beliefs, values, and practices, and they have used holistic means to foster this re-education. Spiritual, self-help, and New Age books frequently become best-sellers, indicating that there is a market out there of people thirsty for a new understanding of themselves, the world, and God. I am interested to see how holistic thinking can be incorporated into academic learning. Of course, I can't set a moral agenda for the nation, nor do I intend to. I am not advocating the enforcement of certain or specific values. I do not see myself as endorsing swapping one fiction for another fiction. Instead, I encourage each of us to cultivate an awareness of one's own values and to bring mindful attention to where they come from, and what they enable and disable for us.

## IDENTITY AND THE SELF

The premise of this work is that oppression is not (only) a complex interweaving of insurmountable institutional policies and practices, it is also a condition of mind. If we are able to decolonize our own minds, as everyone from Ngugi Wa Thiongo to Franz Fanon has implored us to do, then we can begin to navigate the landscape before us on our own terms. In Rock My Soul, bell hooks writes, "Used politically in a relationship to governments, the term decolonize means to allow to become self-governing or independent. In a personal sense decolonizing the mind means letting go of patterns of

thought and behavior that prevent us from being self-determining” (69). To do this requires us as individuals to look within and examine our beliefs, and ultimately to abandon those beliefs that are limiting. This is a difficult but very worthwhile practice, in my opinion. To some this may sound like mind control. But I would argue that while we cannot control circumstances, we can exercise control over our reactions to them. We need not be at the mercy of our emotions. Through examining the numerous factors that contribute to our beliefs, such as culture, race, family, gender—to name but a few—I think we are able to observe our own beliefs with less attachment and more objectivity.

In this work, I evoke concepts of identity and self. Identity is an umbrella term used throughout the social sciences and humanities to describe an individual’s comprehension of herself as a discrete, separate entity. I think of identity as primarily threefold, consisting of a personal identity (or the idiosyncratic things that make a person unique), a social or cultural identity (or the collection of group memberships that may or may not define the individual), and a psychological identity (or a person’s mental model of him or herself, comprised of self image, self esteem, and individuation). My work draws on the interconnections and fluidity of all three of these ways of looking at one’s identities, acknowledging the multiply-determined ways we identify with the world around us. Identity is not a fixed thing, but rather floating, adaptable, and contingent. Identity is not just what we know; it is also how we know. If we call on intuitive powers, rational thought, gut reaction, dreams, if we are able to express ourselves through drawing, through dance, through words, through song, this is also a part of who we are and how we identify. From within our identity, from inside our world view and our complex network of identifications, we function. Our identity serves as the motherboard

of our mental computer, the set of processing systems that tell us what to do with the information coming in.

If identity is the series of identifications that mediate how we know, the self is perhaps who or what we are striving to know. I see the self as being a multi-layered entity, and though I will try to give names to different elements of the self that I explore, one must bear in mind that these are fluid and contingent categories that are in no way hard, fast or definitive. Jiddu Krishnamurti writes his holistic version of the self:

You know what I mean by the self? By that I mean the idea, the memory, the conclusion, the experience, the various forms of nameable and unnamable intentions, the conscious endeavor to be or not to be, the accumulated memory of the unconscious, the racial, the group, the individual, the clan, and the whole of it all, whether it is projected outwardly in action, or projected spiritually as virtue; the striving after all this is the self (126).

When I unravel Krishnamurti's complex bundle, I see the self as having some identifiable key components. There is, for example, the Self with a capital "S." This is the spiritual, philosophical Self within us that observes. Rather than the one acting, it is the one observing the acting. It is linked, for some, to a concept of the divine, where this Self might be seen as our God Self, our innermost consciousness that is linked with all other consciousness. With the notion of the Self as God, where "I am" is God, our very existence indicates our godliness. For others, a better image might be that the Self is your primordial, foundational, or true self.

There is another self as well, the "self" with quotation marks and a lowercase "s." This might be seen as synonymous with the ego. It is a gross accumulation of positive and negative beliefs about ourselves, from "My Auntie always told me I had a nice



smile” to “I have my father’s temper” to “Women can’t be president” to “We are all born in sin” to “I’m a failure” to “Nice girls don’t give it up” to “Being poor is shameful.” Furthermore, it is the hidden beliefs that we do not even realize we have. *It is what we think everybody else sees when they look at us.* Our “self” is constructed around and within these various conscious and unconscious beliefs. Some of these beliefs come from our immediate society, from our parents, friends, or members of our race, social class, gender, or sexual community. Others are taught by our religions, schools, or by the media. Others are ideas that figure into our national identity, the ways in which we position ourselves globally and grow to embody on a personal level many of the things we tell ourselves about our nation. Still others function on a preconscious level and may be erroneous conclusions that we drew on our own based on the dynamics of our family.

Krishnamurti says that this identification process is the essence of the self (22). These messages are tossed to us by friends and family, pushed on us in school and in hierarchical social interaction, vomited on us by corporate advertising telling us what is and is not possible, and for whom. Our “self” is formed in relationship to these imposed beliefs. These beliefs end up creating the very limiting framework from within which most of us operate, similar to Marilyn Frye’s birdcage in her seminal feminist essay, “Oppression.” She writes:

Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere... It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment. It will require no great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of

which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. It is now possible to grasp one of the reasons why oppression can be hard to see and recognize: one can study the elements of an oppressive structure with great care and some good will without seeing the structure as a whole, and hence without seeing or being able to understand that one is looking at a cage and that there are people there who are caged, whose motion and mobility are restricted, whose lives are shaped and reduced (176).

This is what happens to us all. All of us began life as children, bursting with beginner's mind. Beginner's mind is the state of wonderment and awe that comes from experiencing things for the first time (or as if for the first time, but more on this in Chapter 2, "Beginning with Beginner's Mind"). Within beginner's mind is the joy of an unmediated interaction in and with the present moment, the dizzying stimulation of something genuinely new. We begin life thinking that anything is possible, full of beginner's mind, full of joy, but day by day, instance by instance, circumstance by circumstance, we are taught and re-taught limiting beliefs about who we are and what it means to be who we are. Wire by wire, the birdcage is constructed. There are mysteries and magic everywhere for a child, but these slowly disappear as we grow up. As we grow out of our natural beginner's mind, we begin to think we know "how things are," we know "how it is," we know "how it goes." We become "the ones who know," who have figured it out. Wire of experience by wire of information, we construct our world view, our understanding of how the world works, and our identity within that world, who we perceive ourselves to be in relation to that world. From money to relationships to war to our own bodies, we decide upon a personal meaning for everything in our universe, based on our experiences and what information we have at the time. We make meaning.

Our powerful drive to understand and make sense of the universe is the reason we abandon the awesome magic of beginner's mind.

There is a third self I would like to define: the self, lowercase, no quotation marks. I see this self as both the Self and the "self," everything that falls under the heading of "who I am."

The relationship between these selves is well articulated in Conversations With God by Neale Donald Walsh. In response to the question "Who am I?" God responds:

Whoever you choose to be. Whatever aspect of Divinity you wish to be—that's Who You Are. That can change at any given moment. Indeed, it often does, from moment to moment. Yet if you want your life to settle down, to stop bringing you such a wide variety of experiences, there's a way to do that. Simply stop changing your mind so often about Who You Are, and Who You Choose to Be (21).

John Dewey once wrote that "What man does and how he acts, is determined not by organic structure and physical heredity alone but by the influence of cultural heredity, embedded in traditions, institutions, customs and the purposes and beliefs they both carry and inspire. Even the neuro-muscular structures of individuals are modified through the influence of the cultural environment on the activities performed" (30). Our life goals are influenced by our view of who we are, what we are like, the way we would like to be (or would like to avoid being), as well as our perceptions of what is feasible. These perceptions impact more than just our goals, however. As psychiatrist and psychotherapist Dr. Richard Gillett explains in Change Your Mind, Change Your World, "Our beliefs about ourselves and the world alter our perception, our memory, our hope, our energy, our health, our mood, our actions, our relationships, and eventually even our outward circumstances." (13) Thus, the self as a construct has far-reaching implications

for behavior, self-esteem, motivation, and emotions as well as for interpersonal relationships, society, and culture.

When we look at the world around us, we often see and process information that confirms our beliefs while rejecting or ignoring information that contradicts them (Gillett 53). It is hard to admit that our subjectivity is mired in the muck of our culture/s, our family/ies, and our own preconscious inventions. It is difficult to acknowledge that what we thought was objective thought is actually quite subjective. At times it is hard to even see that we participate by observing. As Gloria Karpinski explains in When Two Worlds Touch, “Since the 1920s when Werner Heisenberg developed the uncertainty principle, science has been showing us that there is no such thing as purely objective analysis. Our observation of a thing is part of its reality—and our own” (25). Gillett points to physical and mental limitations to explain the futility of thinking in terms of “reality” or “truth.” He writes, “There is no such thing as seeing the world ‘realistically,’ because our very sense organs and brain mechanisms are highly selective in the extent and quality of information they handle” (27). Furthermore, as Gillett explains, “The way we see the world is based on our senses, our language, our innate prejudices, and our personal history” (27). But there is freedom in acknowledging that our truth is not the Truth, but rather it is simply one truth, and it can be a temporary one if it is not serving us. We might accept Antonio Benitez Rojo’s assertion that, “There cannot be any single truth, but instead there are many practical and momentary ones, truths without beginnings or ends, local truths, displaced truths, provisional and peremptory truths of a pragmatic nature” (151).

We cannot see the truth because we cannot handle the truth, quite literally. The so-called “truth” of “what is” contains too much information for us to rationally process.

Gillett gives some valid sensory examples:

We can see wavelengths of light only between about 400 and 700 millionths of a millimeter. This is a tiny proportion within the vast band of electromagnetic waves, of X-ray, gamma-ray, ultraviolet, visible light, infra-red, microwave, and radio wave. In other words, most electromagnetic information simply passes us by.... Our hearing, too, is limited by the capacity of our ears, which hear only wavelengths between 20 and 20,000 cycles per second, and have limited sensitivity and discrimination.... These examples illustrate the relativity of our senses... Since much of what we believe tends to be based on trusting our senses, it reminds us to understand that our senses, for all their magic, are limited and highly selective encoders of information (28-9).

The capabilities of our senses place limits on what we can know of the information present at any given moment.

Gillett also points to the distortions of language as a reason that we cannot grasp truth. “The divisions and generalizations of one language create a different picture of reality from the divisions and generalizations of another.” (Gillett 29) He uses another interesting example:

Richard Bandler and John Grinder tell of a Native American language in northern California called Maidu, which divides the basic color spectrum into three colors. In Maidu there is a name for red, a name for green-blue, and a name for what we would call orange-brown-yellow. In English the rainbow is usually seen as divided into seven colors. So in English a yellow object and a brown object will be seen as different, while in Maidu they are the same color. In physiological reality, the human being is capable of 7,500,000 discriminations of color between different wavelengths of light. So where we draw our lines between colors is arbitrary (29).

Language simply becomes a coded frame, a filing system for the millions of bits of information hurled at us. It is very difficult to see and understand beyond the limits of one's language.

Gillett makes another distinction about language—that there might be many words for slight varieties of a thing in a culture where that thing is seen as important.

Eskimos have many different words for different kinds of snow; in Sanskrit, the language of ancient India, there are over fifty words for “consciousness”; while in Luganda (one of the languages of Uganda spoken by the tribe of Baganda) there are over forty different words for a *banana*. To them a *matoke* is completely a different thing from a *gonja*, while to Americans, they are both just bananas (29).

Gillett points out that ultimately language functions as a handicap. “No matter which language you speak, the divisions are matters of convention which determine how we organize our thoughts and how we classify the world” (29-30). Language functions as an important lens that mediates our experience of the world around us.

Julio Cortázar's observation was really quite astute, that:

Everything is fiction, that is to say a fable... Our possible truth must be an *invention*, that is to say scripture, literature, agriculture, pisciculture, all the tures of the world. Values, tures, sainthood, a ture, love, pure ture, beauty, a ture of tures (384).

Upon examination, we notice that what we consider reality is really quite subjective, an invention. How we choose to understand information determines what that information can and will mean. Knowledge is, after all, an invention according to Nietzsche, as Foucault says, “behind which there is something quite distinct from it: an interplay of instincts, impulses, desires, fear, will to appropriation” (14). Thus, the framing itself becomes part of the *experience* of the thing and, as such, the *knowing* of it. It is a fiction

we choose, and as such we are free to choose differently.

## READING

I contend that, for the most part, we read like we live our lives. We make generalizations and then we filter our experiences so that they confirm the generalizations. Gillett says, “A generalization about life is like a fixed compartment or a square box. If life does not fit the box, we distort it until it does” (31). While many generalizations from experience are good and instructive, some generalizations may become extreme and actually limit the believer. Gillett gives an example of this, showing how a useful generalization might become limiting if it is taken to extremes:

If a boy’s father beat him whenever he spoke out as a child, the generalization that the father is dangerous and that it is probably therefore unwise to speak out in front of him would probably be useful. It is already a generalization because the father is almost certainly not dangerous in all situations. Nevertheless it is a reasonable protective assumption. If however the generalization becomes more extreme, for instance: “Men are dangerous and it is unwise to speak out in front of men in general,” then the boy would begin to distort reality and to limit his choices. When the generalization becomes more extreme still, for example, “People are dangerous and I will never speak out in front of anybody again,” then he lives with an oppressive illusion and his choices are crippled. It may affect every relationship with every man for the rest of his life. Quite automatically he will assume that men are threatening whether they are or not. He will misinterpret benign expressions as hostile. He will even find a negative motive for a kind action: “He only gave me that because he wants to control me.” In short, he cannot see reality because it is distorted by his belief (34-5).

Similarly, when we read, we become readers who “know how to read.” After the beginner’s mind wanes and wears thin, we read generalizations into the text that correspond to our beliefs, and then we push the text to fit this contrivance. We come to both life and texts with satchels of generalizations and stereotypes hanging from us.

There are the ones that come from our given culture and country (or cultures and countries), from our school and education, from our class, from and about gender, about body image, wealth, power, about aging and death, just to name a few. We use this information to confirm or justify our relationship to the text, which is often something that we decided long before we ever opened the front cover. We participate while we swear up and down that we are merely observing.

How to Read a Book, the 1970s revised version of the 1940 bestseller, explains in plain language exactly what the title says. Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren explain in detail the different levels of reading that exist (which they define as Elementary, Inspectional, Analytical, and Syntopical), and offer practical information on different ways to read. The book explains the activity and the art of reading—how to “come to terms with an author” by understanding their use of terminology, how to determine an author’s message, how to criticize a book “fairly,” how to agree or disagree. How to Read a Book might be seen as a book explaining what to do with the information in a book, how to relate to a text, and even how to manipulate the text according to your own needs. They outline a few concrete ways to configure the elements involved in reading. I think that Adler and Van Doren’s exploration of what one should do when one reads offers a compelling springboard from which to launch my own suggestions of what might be done when one reads.

Reading as an adult is not often an exercise in discovery. It frequently becomes little more than a way to affirm what we already “know” of the world. We choose our genre of choice—news journalism, juicy romance, detective thriller, celebrity tabloid, comic book, instruction manual, academic journal—and we approach the text with a



pretty good idea of what to expect, and what not to expect, from it. We do not anticipate finding spiritual nourishment, for example, in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, and we do not imagine finding a new hairstyle, for example, writ into the stories of the bible. We anticipate new information from reading, but we generally expect for literatures to stay true to genre. These expectations create the circumstances where we are hardly ever disappointed, perhaps because we ourselves are disabling other possibilities.

Adler and Van Doren illustrate this phenomenon, seeing it as reading to gain information rather than understanding.

There is the book; and here is your mind. As you go through the pages, either you understand perfectly everything the author has to say or you do not. If you do, you may have gained information, but you could not have increased your understanding. If the book is completely intelligible to you from start to finish, then the author and you are as two minds in the same mold. The symbols on the page merely express the common understanding you had before you met (7).

The majority of reading that most of folks do in everyday life is this one, reading to gain information. This type of reading “is at once thoroughly intelligible to us” (9). We are not fumbling in the language, or struggling with meaning. They explain, “Such things may increase our store of information, but they cannot improve our understanding, for our understanding was equal to them before we started. Otherwise, we would have felt the shock of puzzlement and perplexity that comes from getting in over our depth” (9).

Adler and Van Doren make a distinction between reading from which one gains information and reading from which one gains understanding.

Let us take our second alternative. You do not understand the book perfectly. Let us even assume—what unhappily is not always true—that you know enough to know that you do not understand at all. You know the book has more to say than you understand and hence that it contains

something that can increase your understanding (7).

The authors reveal that what they are calling “understanding” is really an analytical frame or paradigm, something that might “throw a new and perhaps more revealing light on *all* the facts he [the reader] knows” (9). In this second sense of reading, reading to gain understanding or to possibly reframe our existing understanding, the book has “more to say” than the reader can comprehend. Adler and Van Doren point to an inequality between the author and the reader as a prerequisite of such reading.

Here the thing to be read is initially better or higher than the reader. The writer is communicating something that can increase the reader’s understanding. Such communication between unequals must be possible, or else one person could never learn from another, either through speech or writing. Here by “learning” is meant understanding more, not remembering more information that has the same degree of intelligibility as other information you already possess (9).

In the academy reading frequently functions similarly, falling into the same two camps but with different percentages attached to them. There is reading that is done for information and reading that is done for understanding, and at times a mixture of the two. While we don’t necessarily attribute it to “inequality,” we can at least acknowledge that texts often have “more to say” than we are able to hear. Many of these are “hard” theory texts that we read together in graduate seminars. Others are literary texts that elude our analytical nets like clever butterflies. Most—perhaps all—are texts that we are translating across some sort of divide—linguistic, cultural, national, temporal, spatial.

Adler and Van Doren ask a valid question- what to do with these texts you can’t understand?

What do you do then? You can take the book to someone else who, you think, can read better than you, and have him explain the parts that trouble you. (“He” may be a living person or another book—a commentary or

textbook) (7).

This is a fairly common practice in the academy. We decipher in class together. We often defer to interpretations and readings by others of “difficult” texts. At times we even use the work of others to help us understand what we ourselves think of a text.

Instead of enlisting the help of others, Adler and Van Doren suggest “doing the job of reading that the book requires” (8). This is accomplished in only one manner.

Without external help of any sort, you go to work on the book. With nothing but the power of your own mind, you operate on the symbols before you in such a way that you gradually lift yourself from *a state of understanding less to one of understanding more*. Such elevation, accomplished by the mind working on a book, is highly skilled reading, the kind of reading that a book which challenges your understanding deserves (8, their emphasis).

I am particularly intrigued by this second type of reading that they suggest. In it there is just the reader and the text working with and on each other. This suggests becoming an active and mindful participator with the book. In a sense, the reader becomes the co-creator of the text. We are invited by the text to cast off our usual way of thinking about things, in order to meet the book wherever it is. Rather than casting our net of generalizations over the book, we let it fly free. And as the text soars about the landscape, we are free to choose who we are in relationship to the soaring text, what we are going to do about it, or with it, if anything. I am interested in what we can *do* in these readings Adler and Van Doren recommend. How can we read in such a way that reading enables us to get to know ourselves? What would have to change about reading itself in order to create these different readings? Can we attempt to rearrange the elements of reading, as Colás suggests, to activate new possibilities?

I believe that reading in a different way will produce different readings, ones that do not necessarily reinforce stereotypes and reiterate damaging social meta-narratives, ones that might invite us to challenge and question our limiting views of ourselves and the world. Thus, reading becomes an exercise in freedom and an invitation to power. There is a way in which we can read texts “to live” as Colás asserts in his work. There is a way in which we can read texts not to dissect them or manipulate them to prove a point, but rather to learn tools for life. These tools can range from the practical to the esoteric, from the mundane to the spiritual.

These readings also engender new ways of knowing, moving the notion of “knowing” out of our heads and into our bodies, growing there to embody the understanding that Adler and Van Doren describe. I call these alternative ways of knowing “feminine” or “Yin,” because they call on more subtle and indirect understandings that are very different from what we often consider “knowing” or “knowledge.” Far from an essentialist reiteration of cultural stereotype, I draw from the Eastern concept of “the feminine” as a necessary energetic force bound to and interdependent with its male counterpart. Gloria Karpinski is an author who is very much in touch with forms of Yin knowing. She will describe a vision she had while meditating, or even intentionally “take” a subject into meditation and report on her findings. She trusts herself as a vessel of knowledge. One of the big myths of Western culture is that knowledge comes from outside the body; her work confounds that idea and encourages others to do so as well.

I define Yin knowledge as knowledge or information that comes from the inside out, whereas masculine or Yang knowledge goes from the outside in. Thus, Yin

knowledge would be found in intuition, dreams, experiential knowing, embodiment, and various other forms or directives that come from within the individual. Yin knowledge can also come out of the individual in different forms, such as poetry, myth, art, and symbols. Yin knowledge, for me, encapsulates the many alternative ways of knowing that fall—like the black swirl in the yin/yang symbol—into darkness and outside of normative ways of knowing. Yang knowledge, by contrast, includes what we are told, what we read, and various other directives that come from outside of the individual. Gloria Karpinski defines Yang knowledge in Barefoot on Holy Ground as “specificity, knowledge, hierarchy, dominance, and possession, extremes that led to separations from each other and the earth” (43). The construction of “knowing” in the academy is more often than not Yang—rational, linear, dichotomous thought—and it is privileged and maintained through more widespread and/or more deeply engrained cultural frames. These frames are upheld through interpersonal relationship to and communication of an ideology that seems to breed a climate of fear. More subtle experiential or extra-linguistic ways of knowing are given little currency because they can’t be accurately transmitted from within this framework, and the corporate/academic culture makes it feel risky to try to work beyond the existing frames.

Both masculine and feminine knowledge are ever-present in balanced amounts in everything, though we might not always perceive that fact. Karpinski explains the specifics of the relationship between Yin and Yang. She writes that “The Taoists describe the movements within wholeness as *yin* (feminine) and *yang* (masculine). The one is always in process of becoming the other. We are not one or the other; rather we are both. Yin and yang are movements of energies, not identities” (53). Margo Anand

confirms this, “Each of us has an Inner Man that is associated with dynamic, active energy; with setting and achieving goals; and with getting things done. This is what the Taoists call the Yang aspect of our nature—the engaged, noncontemplative self. And each of us also has an Inner Woman, a natural capacity for letting things happen, for going with the flow of life without setting goals, for relaxing and being playful. This is what the Taoists call the Yin aspect of our nature—the contemplative, intuitive, communing self.” If we want to read holistically, we must approach wholeness by reading in a way that incorporates the feminine as well as the masculine. Karpinski reminds us that “This [is] but an outer dramatization of the collective inner drama, a drama that is neither male or female but human” (43).

Part of the difficulty we have been having with introducing feminine paradigms into the academy is that we have been attempting to use masculinist frames and masculinist lenses to perceive feminine knowledge. We strive to capture multiplicity, simultaneity, and interdependence within a system of linear and dichotomous classifications. This is similar to seeing an iridescent-blue-and-black butterfly pinned to cork in a display case. If we think that we can “know” the butterfly by observing it in the case, we are missing out on most of its story. We have no idea of its starts as a caterpillar, of the goings-on inside the cocoon. We don’t know what it’s like to see a butterfly in an open field. We don’t even know that it flies (though we might assume so based on wing-size and other assessments). Feminine ways of knowing, by contrast, are engendered primarily through experience.

Certain practices help to cultivate Yin knowledge. Two of these elements are beginner’s mind and mindfulness meditation, which draw the attention inward and widen

the lens so that we might see holistically. The way of reading I am advocating—and practicing—in this book takes the usual elements of reading and combines with them the practice of mindfulness meditation and the practice of creative expression, which often puts us in touch with our beginner’s mind. By cultivating different practices, we can know things in a different way. Practice in this case becomes a revolutionary tool because it is reiterative and re-inscriptive. One key to personal and global change is cultivating a regularly recurring practice that corresponds to and confirms what one wants to see existing in the future, whether that thing be world peace or a new car. This is a literal spin on Gandhi’s words, “Be the change that you want to see in the world.” I am not proposing that we abandon other ways of reading entirely. Rather, I am advocating some people sometimes trying something different, ostensibly, reading such that the text is a mirror that reflects ourselves back to ourselves, reading as a journey of self-exploration.

One of the reasons I am advocating for a different method of reading is because I believe that reading books gives us an opportunity safely and intimately examine our beliefs. Books can take us all around the world, deep into different cultures, often seen through the eyes of someone possessing a completely different belief system. They can also take us into the deeper inner workings of lives of people we see as “like us.” The most interesting thing that we encounter when we read is not the “other,” but ourselves. Through our judgments, likes, dislikes, thoughts and emotions—all of which often come out during reading—we are able to get a firmer grasp on what it is that we believe. Like the meditation cushion, reading can create a safe haven in which our thoughts and actions

cannot harm another, but can be explored. I truly believe that the combination of reading and meditation might engender some very different understandings of the self.

The ultimate goal of this dissertation is to outline, explain in detail, and demonstrate in action how different practices enable new, more ethical frames and lenses by reading a text in this way myself. I have chosen to perform this experiment using the highly autobiographical “fiction” of Jamaica Kincaid as my text. I chose Kincaid mainly because I have a long and strange relationship with her. She functioned literarily/figuratively for me as a big sister because I closely identified with her in my late adolescent years. Yet with each novel, I felt more and more betrayed by the choices she made in her life and in her writing. I have come to a point where I can honestly say that I intensely dislike her and disagree with her choices. Because of this, I have not been able to read her in a way in which I am actually open to what she is saying. When I have read her in the past, perhaps I have read her to confirm my beliefs about her rather than to shut up and hear her. It would be a really interesting journey for me to read her in an ethical way.

Because I need to situate this reading for an audience, I work inter-textually with her, drawing from many of her novels, her personal story (which includes a renaming of herself, which I saw in the past as the moment when she posited herself as the center by adopting the very same white, imperialist lens she so passionately opposed in her early writings. It also includes a marriage to a white man and moving to Vermont, which I saw in the past as basically whitening herself), and her essays. But my focus is on reading one text by her, My Garden [Book]; repeatedly. I will read with different lenses and different objectives, but I will be reading the same words in the same book three times.



The text is the mirror in which I will take a good, honest look at myself. The text is central, but my goal is not to investigate the center.

### MY READING PRACTICE

My practice will be: meditating for 5 minutes, reading for 45 minutes, meditating for 15 minutes, then doing automatic writing or doing something creative for at least 10 minutes. The 10 minutes of creative work is intended to help me cultivate beginner's mind by taking me out of the familiar and into the unknown. I will do this 6 days a week until I have completed three different readings of My Garden [Book]. Each reading will have a different focus. The first will strive to cultivate beginner's mind in relationship to the text. I endeavor to come to it as something completely new. The second reading strives to read the text as Self. In this reading I endeavor to find points of commonality, to develop empathy, and to understand what of myself I see in the text, good or bad. The third reading is one in which I employ differentiation to engage a dialogue with my Self. I am able to better understand my own beliefs and values by looking at what I judge in the text, and examining what those judgments tell me about myself. Finally, I will try to embody growth by being the crossroads at which this text, My Garden [Book], can be Self and "other," or "not Self." Hopefully, this growth will include a better relationship between me and Jamaica Kincaid.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sometimes it is important to be personal. Despite the calls in the scholarly world to retreat to a safe distance from subjectivity, we know, as women, that it is the submerged life which orchestrates both our strengths and our

difficulties. We do not confront prejudices, ignorance and resentment which seek to silence our voices and prevent our development by pretending to operate within the same intellectual constructs which have long served male control of the world. Disclosure becomes, then, a vital political touchstone of our work, and a means of bringing to the open many hidden aspects of experience which are the secret referents in any conversation, any judgment passed, any alliance made.

- Carol Boyce Davies

Before I can talk about Jamaica Kincaid, perhaps I need to tell you about myself. That way you will, perhaps, understand the magical way that she came into my life, an older sister figure, wiser about the ways of the world than I. You will understand, perhaps, how we shared struggles, as young black women of Caribbean descent negotiating what those labels might mean to us. You will see, perhaps, similarity in our book-wormy childhoods and later in our struggles to assert our independence from our mothers. But there you will also see the start of small cracks, growing over time into small rifts between us growing over time into a gaping chasm. But you will at least understand the roots of the resentment, even as I undertake to heal this divide. In the style of John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*, and the style and spirit of Gloria Anzaldúa's *autohistoria/autotéoria*. I bring my own educational experiences—both as a student and as a teacher—to bear on some of the themes I will be exploring. Foucault said, “Each of my works is a part of my own biography” (59), and I hope to use this opportunity to tell my story, what I see, how I see it, what I experience, and how I experience it.

It was dissatisfaction with my own education that led me to graduate school. I was searching for the language to articulate what was wrong with it, since I had received what would be considered a “great education” at a magnet school in New York. Hunter College Campus School is a specialized public school funded by Hunter College, which

is a part of the City University of New York (C.U.N.Y.). While there is no tuition, Hunter remains one of the best high schools in New York and in the country by maintaining a high level of selectivity- out of some two thousand applicants, approximately one hundred eighty students are chosen to enter the seventh grade. Fifty of the hundred eighty are students who attended Hunter Elementary School, like me. These students gained admission to Hunter at the equally competitive nursery or kindergarten level. Although their education has been geared toward a successful transition into the high school, the sixth graders too must take the admission test. Although admission is basically guaranteed to continuing students, low scorers and students who have previously had academic difficulty at Hunter are strongly dissuaded from remaining there. Although I never really thought much about race as it related to continuing in school, I realize now that many of the African-American and Latino students from elementary school did not go to the high school. At least 10 minority students out of the 50 total students in sixth grade, chose to attend junior high school elsewhere, though I am unsure as to whether that was their own decision or the strong persuasion of the school.

Hunter is located on the affluent upper east side of Manhattan. Nestled between Park and Madison Avenues on 94<sup>th</sup> Street, it is the last predominantly White neighborhood before East Harlem. The building is a renovated armory and resembles a brick castle (so much so, in fact, that it was used as one in the film “The Fisher King”), set not unremarkably between the apartment buildings and brownstones that are common to the area.

Although Hunter High School is a public school, the racial make-up was far from diverse when I attended. My class of one hundred eighty graduated fourteen African-Americans and far fewer Latinos. The African-American and Latino communities were also the ones with the poorest retention rates. The students belonging to these communities could seemingly slip through the cracks, unable to survive without assistance in an academic climate as feverish as Hunter's. The majority of the students were white and Asian. The white students were primarily of Jewish descent, although there were a small number of Catholic students. Most of the students seemed to be upper-middle class, with a few students above and below that mark. Most of the student body, were they not at Hunter, would most likely be in private school. The parents of the white students were college educated, and many had continued their education past the undergraduate level. One of my best friends from high school, in fact, was the daughter of a Nobel Prize winning scientist. It would not be a stretch to assume that academics were stressed in these households. That these students would go to college was generally taken for granted. Many parents were in a position to pay for it, as they had saved thousands that they would have spent on private school.

The Asian student body appeared to be more diverse. There were students whose parents were immigrants as well as second and even third generation Asian-Americans. The economic status of these students ran the gamut from lower to upper class. Their educational backgrounds were equally varied. Gaining acceptance to the college of an Asian student's choice appeared to be more difficult, because that student was placed in competition with his Asian peers. The Asian students at Hunter seemed to prefer Ivy League Schools, but were put in direct comparison with the rest of the Asian students

when applying to them. I recall a friend of mine who was highly upset after receiving her SAT score of 1560 out of 1600. I told her that I thought it was a great score, but she was still upset. One of her Asian peers who was applying to the same school had scored a 1590. She needn't have worried- they both happily enrolled at Harvard that fall.

The African-American community was primarily middle class. Most African-American parents had finished high school, and many had completed at least some level of undergraduate study. They were, for the most part, professionals, often teachers or corporate business-persons. The African-American students were much less competitive among themselves than their Asian counterparts, but in some ways I think we were allowed to be. We were already aware that we would be coveted by many schools and would most likely gain admission to at least one of our top picks. We too tended to choose Ivy League schools. Small liberal arts schools ran a distant second, while historically Black schools might pull one or two students every couple of years.

The academics at Hunter were highly rigorous. The eighth grade curriculum was actually New York City's required ninth grade curriculum. Students have finished all but one gym requirement for a Regent's diploma from the city by the end of eleventh grade, but the vast majority continue through their twelfth year to earn their Hunter diploma. By the time one finishes eleventh grade, one has taken at least four years of English, four years of French, Spanish, German or Latin, four years of science, two years of music, both history and theory, two years of art, both history and practice, one and one-half years of American history, one year of European history, and one semester each studying two of the following: African, Asian, Latin American, or Russian history, or economics.

The only tracking that occurred at Hunter was in the mathematics department. In eighth grade, the students were given a test which determined the course of their mathematics study. The students were placed either in “E” math, meaning experimental, or “R” math, meaning regular. E math was considered two years ahead of the New York City curriculum, whereas R math was only one year ahead. The students in E math, therefore, did not have to take the city’s mathematics Regent examination at the end of ninth through eleventh grades. E math geared students toward taking advanced calculus their senior year, while R math prepared students for introductory calculus. Although it was fairly easy to switch from R to E, or to move down from E to R, most students stayed where they were placed. Students joked about the two levels, not really implying that there was any intellectual gap between students of R and students of E.

“How much of a tip should we leave?” one student would ask his lunch partner in Jackson Hole Restaurant.

“You’re in E math,” she would dryly reply, “You figure it out.”

The division of the social studies seemed to me to be the most blatant institutionalized racism existing at Hunter. In a slapdash, semester-long course on **both** the continent of Africa and the continent of Asia, we were taught that Africans lived in huts and wore grass skirts and drank the blood of animals in ceremonies (whereas Asians created elaborate Kanji, beautiful paintings, Confucianism and Buddhism). Our studies of Africa, Asia and Latin America were done in a very cursory manner and with an ethnographer’s lens, making us feel like white observers of an ethnic and cultural “other.” This education was also done quite early in our academic careers- seventh and eighth grades- which made it difficult for us to truly engage it on a critical level. Our European

and American history courses were taught from a white male perspective, rendering Native Americans, Africans, Asians and women obscene, making only short guest appearances in this white male “his-story” show. Yet I don’t think the social studies department had much say in what was taught and when. Unlike most other departments, there were three Regents examinations (which determine one’s eligibility for a New York diploma) given to specific grade levels on specific subjects in social studies. It was the job of the department to prepare us as much as possible for these exams. They worked within that structure as best they could to give students the best learning experience possible.

In most English courses we would cover only one token book by an African-American author (Black Boy, The Invisible Man, The Bluest Eye, I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, A Raisin In The Sun, and The Color Purple) or other non-whites (I can only recall reading Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston) per semester. In these books the protagonists invariably seemed to lament their non-white existence (with the exception of The Autobiography of Malcolm X, read in 10<sup>th</sup> grade history class with hippie rebel teacher Mr. Steinfink, which opened me up to the possibility of hostility and resentful antagonism against the predominant [read white, hegemonic] paradigm). I usually felt excluded from, and yet represented by those few black voices in those few black texts, feeling that the conflation of race and class and the use of texts by non-whites as representational insight into the culture of non-whites left me without a voice of my own. These texts, read almost ethnographically, were nestled awkwardly among the lavish scenes laid out in The Great Gatsby, The Bostonians, Pride and Prejudice and the like. I got a distinct sense that—by the book—there were some people who counted and

some who didn't. As a black girl descendent of primitive, blood-drinking savages, inheritor of an entire literature of poverty and oppression, I didn't. Most often the people who mattered were white, most often male. More than anything, I was aware of being "other"- not white, but also not enslaved, not poor, not miserable in my blackness, as were all of the protagonists of texts by African-Americans included in our curriculum.

I think that schools miss out intentionally on the opportunity to educate students about race when they choose not to open dialogue between students about race and racism. I wouldn't have been as frightened of racism and its power if it wasn't hidden and embedded in our educational system. All in all, perhaps Hunter was an excellent education, in that it prepared students for entry into high ranking schools, generally paving the way for students to enjoy a level of social mobility and a diverse spectrum of career options, from which I have greatly benefit. The education itself stressed critical engagement and inquiry over factual memorization and learning by rote, which benefitted me as well. And yet... I have always felt that there was a creepy, insidious way that race was instructed there, that racism, even when absent from the instructors, was lurking in the curriculum, seeping into students and teachers alike like the asbestos of our country's history, embedding itself in our young minds and hearts. While my education's liabilities certainly do not compare to the impact of learning in floor-less, ceiling-less, classroom-less schools like the ones described by Jonathan Kozol in Savage Inequalities, they were no less crippling.

bell hooks describes this feeling in her memoir of childhood, Bone Black:

She has learned to fear white folks without understanding what it is she fears. There is always an edge of bitterness, sometimes hatred, in the grown-ups' voice when they speak of them but never any explanation. When she learns of slavery in school or hears the laughter in geography



when they see pictures of naked Africans—the word *savage* underneath the pictures—she does not connect it to herself, her family. She and the other children want to understand Race but no one explains it. They learn without understanding that the world is more a home for white folks than it is for anyone else, that black people who most resemble white folks will live better in that world. (31)

My life at the time felt very small. Except for dance classes, I spent most of my time after school watching situation comedies on television by myself until my mother got home from work. I lived a very sheltered life, but still had fruitless crushes and a few close friends from jazz chorus. I read a lot of teenage romance novels and fell in love with romantic love, something I had never seen in my one parent home. I got my first kiss at sixteen, my second at seventeen, which was quickly followed by a sexual experience in which I felt that I had no choice, one where I was left questioning if I could consider it rape if I said "no" and "I don't think we should" only a few times and without much authority, and then froze up until it was over. My boyfriend assured me that it wasn't; so we stayed together for almost a year.

All the while I was pursuing God on my own by starting to regularly attend church with a friend of the family. I knew that my relationship to God could include more than saying grace before meals and prayers before bed, but that was all the religious instruction I received at home. The rest I was forced to pursue on my own. Though I was christened as a baby, my baptism at 18 marked my conscious assertion of my belief in God- whoever or whatever God was. The very much unwanted burden of sexuality coupled with my recent blossoming into attractiveness and mild popularity at school, complicated by my burgeoning spirituality and no way of making sense of it all, left me with a variety of "selves" which I performed contingent upon the situation. I could play the good daughter, the dedicated student, the flirty pretty girl, the sexual girlfriend, but in

reality I was none of these things. I had no integrated self, no true voice, and lacked even the language to explain what was occurring in me.

In high school, I became more keenly attuned to both the social elements of race as they played out in my own life, and the subtle but firmly institutionalized racism of both the curriculum and the way in which we were taught. Though I never had anyone call me “nigger” or deny me outright because of my race, I was exceedingly debilitated by the institutional racism of my secondary education. I was also wounded by the painful alienation I felt directed toward me from both Black and White people. High school was also a time when, socially, I didn't belong. I was an honorary member of many cliques, but never really an integral part of any community. I was frequently accused of talking, thinking, dressing, or acting like I was white, an indictment that I could never fully refute because I wasn't sure what *being* black was. I was someone who existed in the margins, often rendered “inauthentic” by others based on my unique conflation of race and class. Eventually I gained enough credibility and likeability to be an honorary member of the black clique as well.

My high school years were fraught with feelings of alienation from my education as well as my peers. I was consistently left feeling like what I was being taught was the history, literature, art, and logic of the important people of the world, and that the important people were not like me. I have always looked to reading as equipment for living. I always thought that *was* the purpose of reading - that the books I read were supposed to instruct me, either directly or through a fictional protagonist, on how to live my life, how to govern and conduct myself in this world; or, if not, that my interaction

with these books would be mediated by a learned way of understanding them which would make my experience of them conducive to growth.

These ideas are taken up by John Dewey in Experience and Education. In a section called “Criteria of Experience,” he discusses the traditional idea of education as preparation for the present and future as lived experiences:

The assumption [of traditional education] is, that by acquiring certain skills and by learning certain subjects which would be needed later (perhaps in college or perhaps in adult life) pupils are as a matter of course made ready for the needs and circumstances of the future. Now “preparation” is a treacherous idea. In a certain sense every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience (47).

In high school, I remember feeling most unsure of what my relationship to my education was meant to be, what exactly my instruction was meant to provide and how my fledgling identity- my uncertain and persistent questioning of who I was- was supposed to be guided by my studies. As an African-American and a Caribbean-American woman, my experience of the canon offered few livable models of ways of understanding the world and our/my place in it as an African-American woman.

#### INTO MY ADOLESCENT LIFE SAUNTERED JAMAICA KINCAID

Tall and cool, stylish and older, full of poetic cynicism and a refreshing post-colonial angst, she cut a dazzling figure in my teenage imagination. I too was tall and awkward, beginning to fill out, but still possessing the graceful self-consciousness of a young dancer. I imagine I must have been around 14 or 15 when I first read At the Bottom of the River, a collection of lush and lucid short stories. I imagined Kincaid to be only a few years older because, though she is actually 25 years my senior, her

protagonist's voice in this first book was closer in age to my own. She too seemed to be growing reluctantly out of girlhood. She was deeply conflicted about her identification with her mother. I felt similarly, smothered by my own mother in some ways, neglected in others, yet loved overall. I was at the age where my mother was first beginning to see that I was my own person, and that she wasn't going to always like who that person was. Though we butted heads from time to time, I was a mama's girl struggling with the heavy bonds between mother and daughter.

So, it seemed, was Kincaid, in the shoddy guise of her "fictional" protagonist. In At the Bottom of the River, Kincaid devotes a full chapter to her relationship to her mother, whose presence is already felt throughout the text. Though Kincaid adds layers of meaning and imagery by endowing the mother and daughter with supernatural, mythological powers, it is obvious that her main concern is a disconnect between them. She writes:

Immediately on wishing my mother dead and seeing the pain it caused her, I was sorry and cried so many tears that all the earth around me was drenched. Standing before my mother, I begged her forgiveness, and I begged so earnestly that she took pity on me, kissing my face and placing my head on her bosom to rest. Placing her arms around me, she drew my head closer and closer to her bosom, until finally I suffocated (53).

Even the thought of wishing my mother dead seemed so over-the-top radical and impossible that Kincaid really seemed like a rebel to me. She was angry and passionate and bold and ballsy. Her prose was humid, dense, sensual, and challenging.

And she was Caribbean-American, like me! Well, not like me exactly. She was from Antigua, but relocated to New York, then to Vermont. My father is Haitian and on my mother's side, my grandfather's parents were from the Dutch Caribbean. Yet my Caribbeanness was instilled by my southern born, New York raised African-American

mother and grandmother. My grandfather died the year before I was born, and my mother split from my father while she was pregnant. I've met my father only a few times in my life, to my recollection, and I've never been to Haiti. I spent a lot of time in the Caribbean though, on St. Maarten, where my grandfather had built a house, and other islands. Kincaid was Caribbean-American as I was, and her writing evoked a Caribbean that was familiar to me—its beauty, its intensity, its strangeness. For the first time, someone was speaking directly to my experiences, reminding me of myself, in literature. I felt, in some important way, authenticated.

There is a very unique pedestal that teenage girls put other girls on. It is similar to a crush on a boy, and yet has at its center a much deeper and less self-conscious love that comes from identification with—yet agonizing differentiation from—its target, the other girl. Moments of obsession ensue as the teenage girl realizes that no matter how much time, attention, and love she puts into her object of affection, she will never achieve the result she desires—*being* that other girl. The other girl can serve as a mirror, but the teenage girl can never merge with the image in the mirror, she can never *be* the other that she wants so desperately to be “self.”

This association deepened when I read Lucy. I imagine I read it around its time of publication in 1990, but it might have been anywhere from then to 1992. That would put me in the age range of 16-18. I think my friend Anne lent the book to me, though I have no idea if this is true. Anne was one of my artist/activist friends, the one with the Nobel Prize winning dad. Lucy was angry, bitter, hateful, sarcastic, mocking of white privilege. I loved it. I was so angry myself, on the inside. I felt very misunderstood and wronged because of my blackness. I grew more and more quietly outraged at the wealthy

white people that surrounded me. I resented the ease with which white people were able to navigate life, partially because of race and partially because of class. I resented the lavish sweet sixteens and bas mitzvahs, the country houses. My invitation to these fêtes and weekend getaways made me an insider. My inability to extend such invitations myself made me an outsider. The \$45 Guess? Jeans they would outgrow by summer, the \$200 CB ski jackets, the \$100 Doc Martins—cool kids always wore expensive uniforms that I could not afford.

Kincaid fashioned herself as an outsider as well. She captures this feeling most eloquently at the end of Lucy: “I was alone in the world. It was not a small accomplishment. I thought I would die doing it. I was not happy, but that seemed too much to ask for” (161). Her desire for this kind of separation is evident from the beginning of the text. She describes the reason that the family gives her the nickname “The Visitor:”

It was at dinner one night not long after I began to live with them that they began to call me the Visitor. They said I seemed not to be a part of things, as if I didn't live in their house with them, as if they weren't like a family to me, as if I were just passing through, just saying one long Hallo!, and soon would be saying a quick Goodbye! So long! It was very nice! For look at the way I stared at them as they ate, Lewis said. Had I never seen anyone put a forkful of French-cut green beans in his mouth before? This made Mariah laugh, but almost everything Lewis said made Mariah happy and so she would laugh. I didn't laugh, though, and Lewis looked at me, concern on his face. He said “Poor Visitor, poor Visitor” over and over... (13-14).

Although Kincaid represented herself as isolated in several other texts, the time in her life chronicled in Lucy seems to be the first time that she comes to terms with it. A way of coping with her perceived rejection by her parents and her own choice to alienate

herself from the family for whom she worked, Kincaid's acceptance of her aloneness represents the moment in which she became—in her mind—self-possessed.

I loved Kincaid's anger, directed toward her mother, her brothers, Antigua, colonialism, white and male privilege, and her employers, Mariah and Lewis, but I felt like a lot of it was misdirected. Lucy, for example, was living with a perfectly nice family, and her behavior toward them was just short of cruel. She judges them, their words, and their actions in order to build a case in her own head of her own superiority.

An example of this from Lucy occurs in the second chapter, entitled "Mariah:"

One morning in early March, Mariah said to me, "You have never seen spring, have you? And she did not have to await an answer, for she already knew. She said the word "spring" as if spring were a close friend, a friend who had dared to go away for a long time and soon would reappear for their passionate reunion. She said, "Have you ever seen daffodils pushing their way up out of the ground? And when they're in bloom and all massed together, a breeze comes along and makes them do a curtsy to the lawn stretching out in front of them. Have you ever seen that? When I see that, I feel so glad to be alive." And I thought, So Mariah is made to feel alive by some flowers bending in the breeze. How does a person get to be that way? (17).

I imagined Kincaid felt the same hostility at the privilege of her employers that I did at the privilege of my peers. Her phrasing—"So Mariah is made to feel alive by some flowers bending in the breeze"—belittles the perceived frivolity of such a way of being. I can relate to Kincaid's experience because this is a very charged and traumatic moment, when one experiences the master narrative as a lived reality and, as such, fear that it is the only reality available. This is the feeling of suffocation on the margin, combined with the envy of the ease and luxury of the center. Kincaid confirms this perspective at another moment in the novel when she is once again talking to Mariah.

Mariah says, "I have Indian blood in me," and underneath everything I could swear she says it as if she were announcing her possession of a trophy. How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?

...I now heard Mariah say, "Well," and she let out a long breath, full of sadness, resignation, even dread. I looked at her; her face was miserable, tormented, ill-looking. She looked at me in a pleading way, as if asking for relief, and I looked back, my face and my eyes hard; no matter what, I would not give it.

I said, "All along I have been wondering how you got to be the way you are. Just how it was that you got to be the way you are."

Even now she couldn't let go, and she reached out, her arms open wide, to give me one of her great hugs. But I stepped out of its path quickly, and she was left holding nothing. I said it again, I said, "How do you get to be that way?" The anguish on her face almost broke my heart, but I would not bend. It was hollow, my triumph, I could feel that, but I held onto it just the same (40-1).

Kincaid's post-colonial discontent is unleashed on her unsuspecting employers.

They wanted an au pair, they got a self-proclaimed devil (Lucy's mother told her that her name is short for "Lucifer"). She was in their space hating them, a dynamic she would later warn against and chastise tourists for in A Small Place, hating the native inhabitants of a space. Lucy seemed to be taking out her anger and hostility against the entire white race on a few unlucky individuals. This seemed unfair to me. I react very strongly when people withhold love from me, and for Lucy to withhold love from her ignorant employers and their innocent children seemed wrong. There is no redemptive resolution offered by Kincaid at the end of the novel; instead, Lucy seems vindicated but unloved, as if this were the moral of the entire story.

Kincaid was wrestling with the perceived limitations of black, Caribbean womanhood. So was I. She was confronting class and questions of worth. So was I.



She was challenging whiteness, holding up a mirror in which whiteness and privilege were not shown as idealized norms. I wanted to do that too. I wrote faintly imitative stories, but could only express my frustration circuitously. I lacked the language to express myself. I remember reading The Bluest Eye around the same time in High School English and feeling a sense of indignant shame that Toni Morrison was telling my white classmates that black girls (like me) wanted to have blue eyes. In “Mirror Mirror,” Marcia Ann Gillespie succinctly paraphrases the drama of The Bluest Eye:

In Toni Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), a little dark-skinned girl, her hair short and nappy, looks in the mirror and longs for blue eyes. She is a Black child called ugly to her face and behind her back, devalued, unloved, sexually abused, longing to be physically transformed. Blue eyes symbolize all that she is told she is not, all that she does not have. If she had blue eyes, she’d be thought beautiful, like the dolls with the pretty dresses and bows. Her hair would be long and silky if she had blue eyes. She’d be loved and happy like the children in the storybooks. Were this a fairy tale with one of those they-lived-happily-ever-after endings, the people around her would be transformed, suddenly able to see her beauty and their own. But it is not. Black does not become beautiful, the white goddess of beauty continues to reign, and a little girl is forever lost. (184).

Already outnumbered and tenuously placed in a relationship to the text that I’m hoping that 20 years of educational progress has thwarted—that of minority texts being taken as representative of the thoughts, dreams, lifestyles, and ambitions of those groups—I found that language failed me when I tried to explain that I wasn’t forever lost. I didn’t want to be white. Yes, I wouldn’t mind appropriating certain material goods, nor perhaps the ease with which white girls could style their hair, with its flatness, sheen, and the ability to look exactly the same every day. Those things did seem cool. I might even love to have green eyes, or hazel ones. But I did not want blue eyes. *I did not want to be white!*

I remember having my grandmother come to speak to that English class, my desperate attempt at making those white folks understand that I didn't harbor any desire to be white. My life was just fine, black as it was. My grandma spoke of her experiences in life, being the second generation in our family to go to college, flying around the world with my grandfather the pilot, attending Lyndon Johnson's inaugural ball. I can now see that a large part of what was bothering me so much was the conflation of race and class. I was unwilling to buy the meta-narrative that all Black Americans are poor and oppressed, particularly when my own life and experience were pretty firmly grounded in the upper middle class. I could feel the lenses of my peers zooming in and out, trying to resolve the lack of clarity. Was I Nicole, one of them, or was I Black, "other?"

What was I? I didn't know myself.

The best way I could express my feelings of frustration, anger, and injustice was by stealing. I became a thief. I shoplifted mostly, things like lipsticks and eyeliner that would fit in the sleeves of my blue wool Gap jacket. I resented the suspicious eyes of shopkeepers, and yet they were justified in watching me warily. I wanted them to know I wasn't a statistic, I wasn't a demographic, I was a person and I had every right to shop in their store. And all the while I was pilfering all that I could, padding my blue bomber jacket with all kinds of cosmetics that seemed both wildly exciting and a bit beyond my means. This was before the days of \$30 products in drug stores. These were things that cost maybe \$6 dollars tops. I felt entitled to them. I felt like I deserved to have those things and it wasn't fair that I couldn't afford them. So for years I stole, out of anger, out of a refusal to accept my class, I guess, my unwillingness to be a have-not. Kincaid also

had reported times in her life when she stole books from libraries both in Antigua and upon her arrival in the United States.

The next book I read by Kincaid was 1998's A Small Place. In this slim volume, Kincaid lets loose a vicious diatribe against tourism, whiteness, Englishness, corrupt Antiguan government officials, and just about anything and anyone else that crosses her path. Whereas, as Moira Ferguson points out in Jamaica Kincaid: Where Land Meets the Body, "By her own admission, Jamaica Kincaid views her first publication, *At the Bottom of the River* (1993), as the text of a repressed, indoctrinated subaltern subject: 'I can see that *At the Bottom of the River* was, for instance, a very unangry, decent, civilized book and it represents sort of this successful attempt by English people to make their version of a human being or their version of a person out of me'" (7). By contrast, A Small Place is fierce, bold, and unapologetic. It seems to be coming from someone who has obviously thrown off any mantle of racial or gender inferiority. She calls European slave-owners "human rubbish" (80) and asserts over everyone in Antigua—white and black—a sanctimonious superiority. However bitterly, Kincaid does tell some important truths about the realities of colonialism, postcolonialism, and decolonizing the mind. I loved her brutality in A Small Place, even though it did scare me to an extent. There are not many black people who speak this candidly in front of a mixed audience, particularly not a predominantly white one, as I imagine her readership might be. We might have choice words about racism and hypocrisy, but they are rarely directed at the perpetrators of the racism and hypocrisy themselves, and if they are they are rarely as eloquently indicting. I also felt betrayed that she did not spare Antiguan her wrath. Instead of identifying with them, she staked out a place for herself wherein she is able to fall outside of Antiguan

identity. She established from the outset that she wasn't a team player, she was out for self, and it was she who would decide just who this "self" was.

This sanctimonious, superior being that narrates A Small Place seems to be the one that Jamaica Kincaid morphed into when she changed her name from Elaine Richardson Potter. She named herself "Jamaica Kincaid" in 1973. This was, according to one of her biographers, J. Brooks Bouson, "an act of self-creation that also served as a self-protective disguise" (6). She didn't want her family to laugh at her if she failed as a writer. She also wanted a protective mask from behind which she could write the stories of her family. "I wanted to write and I was going to say brutal things about myself and my family and I did not want them to know it was me." (Wachtel 63) As we see in A Small Place, Kincaid extend this brutality to include Antigua as well.

Naming, Kincaid argues in My Garden (Book): and throughout her oeuvre, is crucial to possession. The name of one of the chapters in My Garden (Book): is "To Name Is To Possess." It is important to note that Kincaid chose her own name, having been Elaine Potter Richardson previous to her reinvention. In Lucy we see the protagonist receive a fountain pen and a notebook from her employer as a parting gift. At very end of the novel, the protagonist writes her name.

Then I saw the book Mariah had given me. It was on the night table next to my bed. Beside it lay my fountain pen full of beautiful blue ink. I picked up both, and I opened the book. At the top of the page I wrote my full name: Lucy Josephine Potter. At the sight of it, many thoughts rushed through me, but I could write down only this: "I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it." And then as I looked at this sentence a great wave of shame came over me and I wept and wept so much that the tears fell on the page and caused all the words to become one great big blur (163-4).

As Brita Lindberg-Seyerstead describes, “She writes her name at the top of the first page to claim it as her own book, and so, the reader surmises, she begins to set down her story, a heartbreaking one which causes the first few words to become blurred by tears of longing and shame” (136). I imagine that in this moment of watershed Jamaica Kincaid is born, and these words are to become her literary career.

Kincaid’s feelings about her birth name are strongly linked to her feelings about her mother. This becomes apparent in Mr. Potter, the novel about her biological father’s life. She writes:

And Mr. Potter did not move toward his death swiftly and inexorably, and he did not leave Mr. Shoul’s employ in that way either. It was in Mr. Shoul’s household that he met my mother, Annie Victoria Richardson, where she worked as the nursemaid taking care of Mr. Shoul’s children; one of them, a girl, was named Elaine, and my mother, to demonstrate to this small girl her power to transform the world, said that she would bear a child, a girl, and name that girl Elaine. And without knowing any of this, I hated my name and planned to change it every day of my life until the day I did do so. And now I do not hate the name Elaine, I only now, even now still hate the person who named me so, and that person is now dead. My mother is dead. And she moved toward her own death swiftly and inexorably even though she was alive eighty years (162-3).

Kincaid’s name is seen as coming from the relationship that her mother had with another child, rather than as a definition of herself. Her mother’s reason, “to demonstrate to this small girl her power to transform the world,” seems boastful and arrogant. It is not portrayed as a name given to honor the young girl, but rather to show off her mother’s power. Kincaid does not give the reason for hating her own name, but offers this as explanation of why she is justified in that hatred. This hatred, both of her name and of her mother (or, more aptly, of her identification with her name and her identification with her mother), fueled her choice to write about her youth with such graphic bitterness. As

Laura Niesen de Abruna remarked about the reception of Kincaid's book Autobiography of My Mother, "In the New York Times Book Review, Cathleen Schine claims that this is a 'shocking' book in which the narrator is 'intoxicated with self hatred,' providing a 'truly ugly meditation on life'" (181). This hatred alludes to one of the crucial problems apparent in Kincaid's texts, as well as in her life.

She chose the name Jamaica Kincaid for herself when she decided to live her dream of being a writer. I like the way Bouson describes these bohemian New York days for Kincaid:

In her third-floor, two-room apartment on West Twenty-second Street, she slept on the floor in one room, first on newspapers and then on an old mattress she had found. The other room contained a large desk, a typewriter, and books stacked on the floor. Living the spare life of the would be artist, Kincaid spent the little money she had in used-clothing stores buying vintage clothing. "I would wear a lot of old clothes and sort of looked like people from different periods—someone from the 1920s, someone from the 1930s, someone from the 1940s," she recalls (19).

She dressed up in bizarre thrift store clothes, shaved off her eyebrows, and dyed her hair blond. Kincaid describes this time in her life:

Being very thin... I looked good in clothes. I loved the way I looked all dressed up. I bought hats, I bought shoes, I bought stockings and garter belts to hold them up, I bought handbags, I bought suits, I bought blouses, I bought dresses, I bought skirts, and I bought jackets that did not match the skirts. I used to spend hours happily buying clothes to wear (Cudjoe 216).

As Bouson notes, "Kincaid would also spend hours getting dressed as she decided which 'combination of people, inconceivably older and more prosperous' than she was that she wanted 'to impersonate' on any particular day" (19). She stopped sending money home to her family, seeing her brothers as "her mother's mistakes" not hers. Instead, she bought crazy fashions so that she could be someone else, this Jamaica

Kincaid that was in the works. Part of me can totally relate. I am a Goodwill shopper myself. It seems weird to me to spend more than six dollars on an article of clothing. When I get a shopping itch, I head to thrift stores. I have often been very imaginative in what I felt was a “great find” at Goodwill, coming home to proudly show off my 1950s saddle oxfords or my 1960s gogo boots to my horrified mother. Another part of me is thinking, how selfish that your family is struggling in poverty and you are more concerned with your wardrobe. This shows Kincaid’s departure from a more communal concept of her life to an individualist one. “Fuck them,” her actions say, “Let them eat cake.” And yet she can’t shake her family. They haunt her, they fill her books. Without her unending life story, she would have no writing career. Without her contested family, she would have nothing to say.

Along with this new look and new name came a new vocation. Kincaid says “I changed my name, and started telling people I knew that I was a writer. This declaration went without comment” (“Putting Myself Together” 94). I find the various manifestations of her change in identity quite interesting, mainly because they corroborate with the suspicion I have—that Jamaica Kincaid is not black. Elaine Richardson Potter was, but in her reinvention, Kincaid tossed off blackness as she did other ill-suited facets of her former identity.

I too struggled with my identity. When I left for college, it was not to embark on a quest for my own voice, but rather to study economics and Japanese. Marketable knowledge from a prestigious institution, I hoped, would pave my way to some sort of well paying job, maybe even a really well paying job. I wanted access to those things I

felt cut off from. My senior year quote in the yearbook was from a song by Sade called “Jezebel.” It read:

*Reach for the top, she said,  
And the sun is gonna shine.  
Every winter was a war, she said,  
I want to get what’s mine.*

I poured over The Preppy Handbook, dreaming of being a “have” rather than a “have not.” I can even confess to picking my college based on its aesthetics, which reminded me of the TV show “The Facts of Life” and a book series I had enjoyed, The Girls of Canby Hall. Both the show and the book series had a lovable Black character, so I felt there was hope for me. I wanted to matter, to be among the counted, the ones who counted.

I got a C in first year Japanese and never ended up taking an economics course, but the biggest slap in the face came from realizing that there was a lot more out there than I realized, a lot more ways of thinking about things and a lot more possibilities than I had ever been offered previously. I was dumbfounded by the idea that language encodes our perception, that our beliefs are actually choices that we make. I was shocked to find that the voices of people of the African Diaspora were many and came in different languages. I studied English, Black Studies, Francophone Studies, and began to understand what it was I was looking for. I wanted to figure out what I believed- not what my parents had taught me, what my education had enforced, or what I had learned from television and movies. I had no idea.

I spent my college years experimenting with ways to be, not very aware of the beliefs that must have produced my actions. I played rugby, I enjoyed the popularity that being considered one of the “hot chicks” on campus afforded me, I fooled around a lot



and slept around a little, I sang as a soloist in various groups, I got my first hangover, tried my first drug, smoked my first cigarette. I also had some very real experiences of God while singing with the gospel choir. I never found a church home in college, but my experiences in the gospel choir confirmed and strengthened my belief in God. I was ambivalently embraced by the black community of Amherst, only to reject them myself in the end because I felt their concept of blackness limiting. I struggled off and on with an eating disorder, with feelings of loneliness, of being out of control, of being inferior. Sometimes it felt that we minorities were at Amherst only to give the paying white customers a feeling of diversity, a splash of color.

Without really knowing or noticing it, I began to divorce myself from the larger Amherst community, favoring the small co-op community where the closest things to hippies at Amherst College frequently resided. I didn't like the sport-dominated dining hall culture at Amherst, where who one ate with was a very political decision. I also didn't like having so many unhealthy eating options available to me, a bulimic, and wanted to start to set some healthy boundaries with food. I developed some strong bonds in the co-op, became a little healthier, a little happier, and a little more aware. This was when I first started exploring intentional community as a site of liberatory potential.

I don't recall re-encountering Jamaica Kincaid again until my senior year. I took a class on creative writing with a visiting writer, a Caribbean man whose novels had enjoyed some moderate success. He was a notorious womanizer, and happened to be sleeping with the captain of my rugby team, or so the rumor went. He invited other writer pals to come and speak to the class. While it was very interesting to visit with Grace Paley and Scott Turow, I felt this was more a gesture of him flexing his muscles to

impress the college, and padding some of his writer buddies' pockets all the while. I disliked him intensely, not just because of his pompous Britishness, nor simply because he carried himself as if he thought he were much more attractive than he actually was. I also disliked him because I, like just about every rugger on my team, had an Angelina Jolie-esque crush on our captain, the coed he was purportedly porking. In his class, I wrote a biography of Kincaid, in which I questioned her "reinvention" of herself. I read interviews with her for the first time and found out that she was really just narrating her own life story. He didn't like the paper and gave me a C+ in the course. I felt that this was unfair and contested it, going so far as to meet with the dean. He wouldn't budge. I noticed recently that he wrote one of the endorsements on the back cover of one of Kincaid's books. Turns out that he glowingly reviewed one of her books for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. I guess he didn't like what I had to say about her.

But I didn't really like what I had learned about her. I didn't approve of the ridiculous getups she donned to garner attention, in order to make herself a "writer." I didn't approve of the way she just ditched her family, completely absolving herself of any responsibility for them. I didn't like that she chose the name Jamaica. As a person from a small island, myself, I personally resented the way in which Jamaica got to claim most of what was considered Caribbean culture for a long time. At least in New York, Jamaica's voice was for a long time the loudest Caribbean voice heard. I didn't like that she chose the surname Kincaid. Kincaid once described herself as "part African, part Carib Indian" and "a very small part... Scot" (7). Although she claims that she chose the last name Kincaid because it "seemed to go with... Jamaica" and she "liked the sound" (Bouson 7), commentators have noted that Kincaid sounds like a Scottish name. Allying

herself with the alleged Scot part of her heritage seemed strategic. Perhaps this was where she was getting her superiority from. Perhaps Jamaica Kincaid was actually white, as her chosen surname indicated. It certainly wasn't her slave name, nor an African name, nor an X.

Ironically, Jamaica Kincaid received an honorary degree from Amherst at my commencement ceremony. I felt a Lucy-esque derision at this, the obnoxious ease with which she was able to simply show up and receive something for which I worked decently hard and paid a lot of money, most of which I had yet not even earned. "How does a person get to be that way?" I asked myself, echoing Lucy's repeated question about her employer, Mariah. My teenage crush was over. I had no love for Jamaica Kincaid anymore.

## CHAPTER 2

### BEGINNING AGAIN WITH BEGINNER'S MIND

*The first reading I intend to do of Jamaica Kincaid entails reading her anew, with beginner's mind. In this chapter I explain what beginner's mind is, how it is achieved, why it is important in general, and what it might add to an academic reading practice. First, using Stephen Levine and Shunryu Suzuki's explanations of beginner's mind, mindfulness, and meditation, I describe in depth the practice and process of mindfulness in detail. I also discuss why beginner's mind might be a useful concept to introduce into the academy. I then perform a reading of My Garden (Book); based upon the perceptions I gleaned from reading Kincaid in this way. This serves as an example of what scholarship utilizing this type of reading might look like.*

Beginner's mind refers to the practice of having an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions when studying a subject, even when studying at an advanced level, just as a beginner in that subject would. The complete involvement of the senses, heightened focus, excitement, revelation, attention and care are all part of what is considered beginner's mind. In Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, Buddhist monk and influential teacher of Zen Buddhism in America Shunryu Suzuki advises us never to know what we are doing. This isn't meant in an "ignorance is bliss" way, but rather in a way where you give your full attention to something, drinking in the nuances experienced

by each of the senses in the present moment. Suzuki explains, “Suppose you recite the Prajna Paramita Sutra only once. It might be a very good recitation. But what would happen if you recited it twice, three times, four times, or more? You might easily lose your original attitude towards it” (1-2). The original attitude would be an awareness not only of the words, but of one’s self in relationship to the words—the feel of the words tangling or slipping from the tongue, the meaning of the words as taken at first glance rather than after deep interpretation and reflection, an awareness of the sound and timbre of one’s own voice alight, of a dry or scratchy throat, the size of the font, the glare or warm-casted shadow from the light in the room. After that first recitation, some of these elements would be lost or changed, one’s focus shifted to new things that the new level of familiarity enables.

Beginner's mind is able to recapture the mind-blowing nature of a first trip to the circus for a child (or the strip club for an adult)—with its colored lights and awesome sights, frights, heights and delights. It is able to bring back the *firstness* and *newness* of experience, even if you yourself are the clown (or the stripper). I ask you, reader, can you remember the first time you did something? Rode a bike? Went on an airplane? Finger-painted? You had no idea what you were doing, but you were intently focused on figuring it out. Your senses were picking up on everything around you—the wind against your face as you pedaled faster, all the buttons to push in the armrest of your window seat, the gooey swirls and streaks following your fingers’ every move. You were at once in the present moment.

In his essay entitled “Beginner’s Mind,” Darren Henson describes beginner’s mind as “developing a sense of awe, a feeling of excitement and wonder when

approaching or re-approaching a subject of investigation... You can learn something new even if it is a subject you have already explored.... If you keep looking you're bound to see something new, this in itself can be very exciting, wonderful, and awesome" (Iron Palm). Buddhist Abbess Zenkei Blanche Hartman says that "It is the mind that is innocent of preconceptions and expectations, judgements [sic] and prejudices. Beginner's mind is just present to explore and observe and see 'things as-it-is'" (Chapel Hill Zen Center). Gloria Karpinski calls beginner's mind "The teachable mind, empty of opinions and sureties and therefore empty of limitations" (91). Karpinski's notion of a teachable mind is an important one. A teachable mind *does not know* the thing it is being taught and it is *willing to learn* it. It is what in Buddhism is sometimes called "don't know mind." This mind is open to any possibility because it does not know what to expect and, as such, has few or no expectations. Most of us want to have teachable minds. We want to continue to learn, continue to be taught, surprised, and awed by life and the world around us. We want to discover new things about ourselves, about our friends, family, and lovers, about our work and our passions, so we can add depth and richness of understanding to our lives. In the fast-paced whirlwind of contemporary American culture where people prefer sound-bites to meaningful conversation, it is valuable for us to learn to stop. Look. Listen.

Children, naturally, are full of beginner's mind. They walk around, excited and curious, exploring their surroundings with their eyes, hands, tongues, endeavoring to experience everything around them. Spending time with children is said to give adults a "second childhood" because they are able to experience things from the child's perspective. They are able to laugh at bubbles or smell and taste a blade of grass as if for

the first time. This is because they are cultivating beginner's mind simply by witnessing a child brimming with it. Abbess Hartman confirms this idea, saying that to practice beginner's mind is to engage a childlike (though not *childish*) attitude toward the world around us. "I think of beginner's mind as the mind that faces life like a small child, full of curiosity and wonder and amazement. 'I wonder what this is? I wonder what that is? I wonder what this means?' Without approaching things with a fixed point of view or a prior judgement [sic], just asking 'what is it?'" (Chapel Hill Zen Center).

Hartman gives an example that shows clearly what she means:

Earlier this week I was having lunch with Indigo, our small child at City Center. He saw an object on the table and got very interested in it. He picked it up and started fooling with it: looking at it, putting it in his mouth, and banging on the table with it—just engaging with it without any previous idea of what it was. For Indigo, it was just an interesting thing, and it was a delight to him to see what he could do with this thing. You and I would see it and say, "It's a spoon. It sits there and you use it for soup." It doesn't have all the possibilities that he finds in it (Chapel Hill Zen Center).

Hartman concludes that "When he spoke of 'beginner's mind,' I think Suzuki Roshi<sup>1</sup> was pointing to that kind of mind that's not already made up. The mind that's just investigating, open to whatever occurs, curious. Seeking, but not with expectation or grasping. Just being there and observing and seeing what occurs. Being ready for whatever experience arises in this moment" (Chapel Hill Zen Center). This type of open mind bespeaks an engagement with the present moment, rather than the neurotic past or the wistful future. The objective of beginner's mind is to draw oneself back into the present moment.

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<sup>1</sup> Roshi is a word meaning "teacher" in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. She is referring to Shunryu Suzuki

Krishnamurti describes awareness, which is seen by him and by Stephen Levine as synonymous to beginner's mind:

Being aware does not mean learning and accumulating lessons from life; on the contrary, to be aware is to be without the scars of accumulated experience. After all, when the mind merely gathers experience according to its own wishes, it remains very shallow, superficial. A mind which is deeply observant does not get caught up in self-centered activities, and the mind is not observant if there is any action of condemnation or comparison. Comparison and condemnation do not bring understanding, rather they block understanding. To be aware is to observe—just to observe—without any self-identifying process. Such a mind is free of that hard core which is formed by self-centered activities. (125)

Suzuki's reasoning for the importance of beginner's mind is that "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few" (1). By having a beginner's mind, one does not close off possibilities, nor judge one choice better than others, because one is aware that one does not know what on earth is going on. Or if one does, it is with the awareness that it is simply a shot in the dark, trial and error. Beginner's mind helps create a space in which to *experience*, to *be*, promising that life is not a nihilistic existence without objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value. The experience itself is the value.

This runs counter to our drive—perhaps instinctual, perhaps culturally learned—to know-it-all. Abbess Hartman explains that even children start to want to be know-it-alls. She writes, "Children begin to lose that innocent quality after a while, and soon they want to be 'the one who knows'" (Chapel Hill Zen Center). She feels this drive is understandable, but very limiting. Part of the problem with being "one who knows" that Hartman conveys is that it leads to expectations and potentially to suffering.



We all want to be the one who knows. But if we decide we "know" something, we are not open to other possibilities anymore. And that's a shame. We lose something very vital in our life when it's more important to us to be "one who knows" than it is to be awake to what's happening. We get disappointed because we expect one thing, and it doesn't happen quite like that. Or we think something ought to be like this, and it turns out different. Instead of saying, "Oh, isn't that interesting," we say, "Yuck, not what I thought it would be." Pity. The very nature of beginner's mind is not knowing in a certain way, not being an expert... As an expert, you've already got it figured out, so you don't need to pay attention to what's happening. Pity (Chapel Hill Zen Center).

## MINDFULNESS & MEDITATION

Beginner's mind is engendered through the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is described by Vietnamese Zen luminary Thich Nhat Hanh as knowing "how to observe and recognize the presence of every feeling and thought which arises in you" (37). This is done by bringing all of one's attention to the present moment, observing without judgment what one is doing, feeling, and thinking. It is through being uniquely in the present moment that one can ascertain beginner's mind, for one can grasp that *this* moment is truly unlike any other. Mindfulness, Hanh reveals, confirming Levine and Krishnamurti, "is the life of awareness: the presence of mindfulness means the presence of life, and therefore mindfulness is also the fruit. Mindfulness frees us of forgetfulness and dispersion and makes it possible to live fully each minute of life. Mindfulness enables us to live" (15).

Mindfulness can be practiced while walking or doing simple repetitive tasks. Walking meditation helps to break down habitual automatic mental categories, "thus regaining the primary nature of perceptions and events, focusing attention on the process while disregarding its purpose or final outcome." Similarly, performing a simple task

such as washing the dishes can become an exercise in mindfulness. Hanh describes this process in The Miracle of Mindfulness. He writes,

While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes. At first glance, that might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on a simple thing? But that's precisely the point. The fact that I am standing there and washing these bowls is a wondrous reality. I'm being completely myself, following my breath, conscious of my presence, and conscious of my thoughts and actions... If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not... alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can't wash our dishes, the chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either. While drinking our cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked into the future—and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life (5).

Mindfulness can be also cultivated through training in the practice of meditation.

One can see mindfulness as a kind of meditation, or as “meditation off the mat,” bringing to everyday life and the outside world the attention and care that one brings into meditation itself. Meditation is a discipline of consciousness, beyond the conditioned, “thinking” mind. It is recognized as a component of almost all religions, and has been practiced for over 5,000 years, but it is also practiced outside religious traditions. Thomas Merton described it thus:

To meditate is to exercise the mind in serious reflection. This is the broadest possible sense of the word ‘meditation.’ The term in this sense is not confined to religious reflections, but it implies serious mental activity and a certain absorption or concentration which does not permit our faculties to wander off at random or to remain slack and undirected. From the start it must be made clear, however, that reflection here does not refer to a purely intellectual activity, and still less does it refer to mere reasoning. Reflection involves not only the mind but also the heart, and indeed our whole being (43).

Merton saw the intentions of the meditator as quite lofty. He writes:

In study we can be content with an idea or a concept that is true. We can be content to know *about* truth. Meditation is for those who are not satisfied with a merely objective and conceptual knowledge *about* life, *about* God—*about* ultimate realities. They want to enter into an intimate contact with truth itself, with God. They want to experience the deepest realities of life by *living* them. Meditation is a means to that end (43-44).

Different meditative disciplines encompass a wide range of spiritual and/or psychophysical practices and emphasize different goals – from achievement of a higher state of consciousness to greater focus, creativity or self-awareness, or simply a more relaxed and peaceful frame of mind (Wikipedia). Meditation has been defined as: "self regulation of attention, in the service of self-inquiry, in the here and now" (Wikipedia). Different techniques of meditation vary in their focus. In most forms of meditation, the meditator sits comfortably and silently, centering attention by focusing awareness on an object or process (usually the breath, but also a sound: a mantra, koan or riddle, a visualization, or an exercise). The meditator is usually encouraged to maintain an open focus. In their work "Meditation: Concepts, Effects and Uses in Therapy," Alberto Perez-De-Albeniz and Jeremy Holmes describe this focus:

The meditator, with a 'no effort' attitude, is asked to remain in the here and now. Using the focus as an 'anchor'... brings the subject constantly back to the present, avoiding cognitive analysis or fantasy regarding the contents of awareness, and increasing tolerance and relaxation of secondary thought processes (Attracted Actions).

There are other ways to meditate as well. Concentration meditation is another form of meditation that is frequently used in varied religions and spiritual practices. Forms of meditation that use visualization, such as Chinese Qi Gong, concentrate on flows of energy (Qi) in the body. Other meditative traditions, such as yoga or tantra, are common to several religions, but can also occur outside of religious milieus (Wikipedia).

## ZAZEN AND NON-DUALITY

The practice of meditation aids in the development of beginner's mind and the quality of mindfulness. Meditation can take place sitting, lying down, or walking. In Japanese Zen Buddhism, seated meditation is called zazen. The aim of zazen is just sitting. That is its sole goal. If you sit, you have done it. Suzuki says, "These forms are not the means of obtaining the right state of mind. To take this posture is itself to have the right state of mind. There is no need to obtain some special state of mind" (25).

The traditional posture of zazen is seated in lotus position, with folded legs and an erect but settled spine, but one may modify this position with a meditation bench or even sitting upright in a chair. Sitting in the full lotus position is done for a good reason, however. Suzuki explains:

When you sit in the full lotus position, your left foot is on your right thigh, and your right foot is on your left thigh. When we cross our legs like this, even though we have a right leg and a left leg, they have become one. The position expresses the oneness of duality: not two, and not one. Our body and mind are not two and not one. If you think your body and mind are two, that is wrong; if you think that they are one, that is also wrong. Our body and mind are both two *and* one. We usually think that if something is not one, it is more than one; if it is not singular, it is plural. But in actual experience, our life is not only plural, but also singular. Each one of us is both dependent and independent (25).

This idea of "the oneness of duality" is an important one, as it serves as a beginning to probing our linguistic and cultural dependence on binary or dichotomous thinking and understanding them for what they are—usually false and often destructive. Through zazen we begin to hold the contradiction of something being both two and one by *embodying the contradiction*, or "being a crossroads," as Gloria Anzaldúa phrased it in Borderlands/La Frontera. This embodiment and experience of the oneness of duality

makes it true. Others can disagree, but the experience of it makes it necessarily true for us. In zazen, it is the experience of non-duality that is embodied in the posture. One need not be able to get into lotus position to enjoy zazen, however. There are several other postures that can be effectively used.

Suzuki advises us of more details of the zazen posture:

The most important thing in taking the zazen posture is to keep your spine straight. Your ears and your shoulders should be on one line. Relax your shoulders, and push up towards the ceiling with the back of your head. And you should pull your chin in. When your chin is tilted up, you have no strength in your posture; you are probably dreaming. Also to gain strength in your posture, press your diaphragm down toward your *hara*, or lower abdomen. This will help you maintain your physical and mental balance. When you try to keep this posture, at first you may find some difficulty breathing naturally, but when you get accustomed to it you will be able to breathe naturally and deeply.... You should not be tilted sideways, backwards, or forwards. You should be sitting straight up as if you were supporting the sky with your head (26).

Again there is a deeper meaning to this practice:

This is not just form or breathing. It expresses the key point of Buddhism. It is a perfect expression of your Buddha nature. If you want true understanding of Buddhism, you should practice this way. These forms are not a means of obtaining the right state of mind. *To take the posture itself is the purpose of our practice.* When you have this posture, you have the right state of mind, so there is no need to try to attain some special state (26, my emphasis).

Suzuki's words echo J. Krishnamurti's contention that "Freedom is in the beginning, it is not something to be gained at the end." Although one often thinks of enlightenment as the goal of meditation, Suzuki reminds us that the real goal of meditation is to be without a goal. The true objective of meditation is to sit in a certain way for a certain amount of time on a regular basis, giving the practice as much of our full attention as we can. He reminds us that we do not need to know Zen in depth, in fact we cannot if we want to cultivate beginner's mind.

The most difficult thing is always to keep your beginner's mind. There is no need to have a deep understanding of Zen. Even though you read much Zen literature, you must read each sentence with a fresh mind. You should not say, "I know what Zen is," or "I have attained enlightenment." This is also the real secret of the arts: always be a beginner. Be very careful about this point (22).

Breathing takes on a more meaningful role during meditation, though the process of inhaling and exhaling does not really change. The breath becomes a conscious connection with and an understanding of the ways and workings of the universe. Without the breath, we cannot be. Our bodies would cease to function without breath. And yet the breath is a function largely independent of our will. We do not consciously regulate it. It simply, elegantly, is. We know that we are poised on the brink of a momentous possibility, but that is no better than this very moment.

The embodiment of this experience renders the practitioner not just an observer or a thinker but a participant in and an example of the beliefs. On breathing, Suzuki writes:

When we practice zazen our mind always follows our breathing. When we inhale, the air comes into the inner world. When we exhale, the air goes out to the outer world. The inner world is limitless, and the outer world is also limitless. We say "inner world" or "outer world," but actually there is just one world. In this limitless world, our throat is like a swinging door. The air comes in and goes out like someone passing through a swinging door. If you think, "I breathe," the "I" is extra. There is no you to say "I." What we call "I" is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale. It just moves; that is all (29).

Breathing too is a tool for fostering understanding and embodying the idea of non-duality. Suzuki explains this connection:

Our usual understanding of life is dualistic: you and I, this and that, good and bad. But actually these discriminations are themselves the awareness of the universal existence. "You" means to be aware of the universe in the form of you, and "I" means to be aware of it in the form of I. You and I are just swinging doors. This kind of understanding is necessary. This

should not even be called understanding; it is actually the true experience of life through Zen practice (29).

When we become truly ourselves, we just become a swinging door, and we are purely independent of, and at the same time, dependent upon everything. Without air, we cannot breathe. Each one of us is in the midst of myriads of worlds. We are in the center of the world always, moment after moment. So we are completely dependent and independent (31).

In Peace is Every Step, Thich Nhat Hanh explains one pragmatic reason why the practice of conscious breathing is important.

While we practice conscious breathing, our thinking will slow down, and we can give ourselves a real rest. Most of the time, we think too much, and mindful breathing helps us to be calm, relaxed, and peaceful. It helps us stop thinking so much and stop being possessed by sorrows of the past and worries about the future. It enables us to be in touch with life, which is wonderful in the present moment (11).

What conscious breathing does (on one level) is train the mind. The mind is like a playful puppy that we must train through repetitive instruction of “not that, this” so that he can happily coexist with us. Left to its own devices, our minds, like a playful innocuous puppy, can destroy our happiness and peace, leaving mental piles of dog shit and shredded shoes of emotion. In training our mind through conscious breathing, we are better able to examine its contents.

Like training a puppy to go potty outside, meditation is intensive training in bringing our minds, whenever possible, gently back to the present moment. We are most often thinking about something in the past or future, very seldom focusing our attention and energy on what is actually going on right now. If we are arguing with our partner in this moment, also present are the unresolved issues of yesterday and worries about the future. Sometimes we are looking to the past for meaning, hoping our understanding in the present will help in the future. Other times we are looking at the present through the

lens of the past, leaving little hope and limited options for the future. We are very rarely cognizant of what is actually going on in the present moment, of what actually is. Hanh promises that "If we keep breathing in and out this way for a few minutes, we become quite refreshed. We recover ourselves and we can encounter the beautiful things around us in the present moment. The past is gone; the future is not yet here. If we do not go back to ourselves in the present moment, we cannot be in touch with life" (12).

Unwittingly, we have already begun a practice of embodying non-duality and non-attachment simply by sitting. *To take the posture itself is the purpose of the practice.* Even the crossing of the legs in the lotus position, we have seen, is construed as embodying non-duality. These concepts will be invaluable for us on our path, whether our goal is a spiritual one or simply a wish for better health and more fulfillment. Whether this awareness occurs while sitting, doing yoga, or walking, alone or in a group setting, the ultimate purpose of meditation is bringing its practitioner to the awareness of now. There is only one now, only one present moment, lived and experienced in myriad, perhaps infinite, ways throughout the universe.

## THE MENTAL WORKINGS OF MEDITATION

The first thing you might notice in meditation is that—like a rocket—your mind takes off in about a thousand different directions, each taking you further and further away from the present moment. It seems almost impossible to quiet the incessant chatter in your head. Although Suzuki tells us “If you want to obtain perfect calmness in your zazen, you should not be bothered by the various images you find in your mind. Let



them come, and let them go” (32), it’s a heck of a lot more difficult than one might imagine. His counsel is based on his assertion that concentrating on something is not true Zen. “The true purpose is to see things as they are, to observe things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes.” (33). His reasoning is also practical. “When you try to stop your thinking, it means you are bothered by it. Do not be bothered by anything” (34).

In Zen Training, by Katsuki Sekida, he equates the meditating mind to boiling water:

When you sit down to practice you will almost certainly find that your mind is in a condition like boiling water: restless impulses push up inside you, and wandering thoughts jostle at the door of consciousness, trying to effect an entrance on the stage of the mind (66).

In A Gradual Awakening, meditation teacher Stephen Levine describes the restless internal dialogue by describing its preoccupations:

The internal dialogue is always commenting and judging and planning. It contains a lot of thoughts of self, a lot of self-consciousness. It blocks the light of our natural wisdom; it limits our seeing who we are; it makes a lot of noise and attracts our attention to a fraction of the reality in which we exist (2).

One might say that the thoughts of the “self” obscure the light of the Self. The noise of internal dialogue brings our attention to the different activities of the conditioned mind, or the mind attached to its beliefs about what is and what should be. This mind is unable to pull itself out of its attachments and suffers because of it.

Krishnamurti similarly describes the restless mind in meditation.

So our problem is that our thoughts wander all over the place, and naturally we want to bring about order. But how is order to be brought about? Now, to understand a fast revolving machine, you must slow it down, must you not? If you want to understand a dynamo, it must be slowed down and studied, but if you stop it, it is a dead thing, and a dead thing can never be understood. Only a living thing can be understood. So a mind that has killed thoughts by exclusion, by isolation, can have no

understanding, but the mind can understand thought if the thought process is slowed down (4).

This slowing down that Krishnamurti describes affords us a moment in which to engage with our thoughts. We do not have to have nor examine our thoughts in “real time.” Instead, we can examine our thoughts, turn them over, trace their history, and ponder their future. We can create a space between stimulus and action in which we are not as deeply identified with our thoughts.

Levine explains the basic concept at the root of all thoughts of this conditioned mind:

At the base of the conditioned mind is a wanting. This wanting takes many forms. It wants to be secure. It wants to be happy. It wants to survive. It wants to be loved. It also has specific wants: objects of desire, friendships, food, this color or that color, this kind of surrounding or some other kind. There’s wanting not to have pain. There’s wanting to be enlightened. There’s wanting things to be as we wish they were... Therefore, much thought has at its root dissatisfaction with what is (13).

This dissatisfaction renders the present moment imperfect, filled with lack and dissatisfaction. At the root of this dissatisfaction is desire for things outside of the present moment, and often outside the self. Levine explains:

We discover there are many ways that desire causes this dissatisfaction. There are, for instance, things we want that may never come our way, or things we only get once in a while, or which don’t stay for long. There are also things we get, and, after we get them, we don’t want—which is really disconcerting. Sometimes I see this with my children. They will want something so badly that we’ll go from store to store until we find it. Then, we get it and an hour later they’re saying, “I wish I hadn’t gotten this... I wanted the blue one.” That’s really a heartbreaker. And, that’s in all of us. We want and we want... and nothing can permanently satisfy us because not only does the thing we want change, but our wants change too. Everything is changing all the time (15).

Equally disappointing is the realization that because everything is changing, there is no such thing as lasting satisfaction stemming from things outside of us. Levine remarks on this as well, noting:

The next thing we discover is that nothing we want can give us lasting satisfaction because everything is in flux and nothing stays forever. Whatever it may be—the finest food, the most gratifying sex, the greatest sense pleasure—nothing in the universe can give us lasting satisfaction, it will all come and go. It is this condition which gives us that subtle, queasy dissatisfaction we carry about with us most of the time, even when we get what we want, because deep down we know eventually it will change.... We don't see reality. We see only the shadows that it casts and those shadows are our concepts, our definitions, our ideas of the world (10).

He offers a filmic panorama of our internal landscape.

If we watch the mind as though it were a film projected on a screen, as concentration deepens, it may go into a kind of slow motion and allow us to see more of what is happening. This then deepens our awareness and further allows us to observe the film almost frame by frame, to discover how one thought leads imperceptively to the next. We see how thoughts we took to be “me” or “mine” are just an ongoing process. This perspective helps break our deep identification with the seeming solid reality of the movie of the mind. As we become less engrossed in the melodrama, we see it's just flow, and can watch it all as it passes. We are not even drawn into the action by the passing of a judgmental comment or an agitated moment of impatience” (2).

The purpose of meditation is to change and monitor this relationship between ourselves and our desires and wantings.

When the wanting becomes the object of observation, we watch with a clear attention that isn't colored by judgment or choice; it is simply bare attention with nothing added: an openness to receive things as they are. We see that wanting is an automatic, conditioned urge in the mind. And we watch without judging ourselves for wanting. We don't impatiently want to be rid of wanting. We simply observe it (15).

Levine's proposed strategy—to become an observer of the wanting rather than the wanter—divorces the person from their identification with the wanting (as the “wanter”)

and places them in the more powerful position of “observer” of an emotion called “wanting.” As “wanter” they can choose only “wanting,” but as “observer” they might choose to observe something else, such as “satisfaction” or “happiness.” By not associating with the identity of “wanter,” the person is able to see beyond the wanting.

Krishnamurti, as I mentioned, also asserts that the process of slowing down one’s thoughts brings order to one’s mind. It enables the mind to be something called “understood,” which I think is perhaps closer to “perceived” and “observed without judgment” than to the intellectual exercise we currently associate with “understanding.” Krishnamurti offers an analogy that is similar to Levine’s to explain what he means by “understanding:”

If you have seen a slow motion picture, you will understand the marvelous movement of a horse’s muscles as it jumps. There is beauty in that slow movement of the muscles, but as the horse jumps hurriedly, as the movement is quickly over, that beauty is lost. Similarly, when the mind moves slowly because it wants to understand each thought as it arises, then there is freedom from thinking, freedom from controlled, disciplined thought (4-5).

Zen teacher and author Katsuki Sekida also notes the importance of deepening our awareness of our inner landscape. In Zen Training, he explains the relationship between meditation’s slowing of the mind and self-knowledge. He writes:

Man thinks unconsciously. Man thinks and acts without noticing. When he thinks, “It is fine today,” he is aware of the weather but not of his own thought. It is the reflecting action of consciousness that comes immediately after the thought that makes him aware of his own thinking. The act of thinking of the weather is an outward-looking one and is absorbed in the object of its thought. On the other hand, the reflecting action of consciousness looks inward and notes the preceding action that has just gone by, wrapped up in thinking of the weather—still leaving its trace behind as the direct past. By this reflecting action of consciousness, man comes to know what is going on in his mind, and that he has a mind; and he recognizes his own being (108).

This “watching of mind” divorces us from our usual attachment to thoughts and emotions in the present moment. We are able to practice non-attachment as we realize that what we are seeing is not really “self” at all, but rather our subscription and adherence to the melodramas of life. The objective of this watching is simply to see what is, rather than participate in the drama. Levine explains:

When we simply see—moment to moment—what’s occurring, observing without judgment or preference, we don’t get lost thinking, “I prefer this moment to that moment, I prefer this pleasant thought to that pain in my knee.” As we begin developing this choiceless awareness, what starts coming within the field of awareness is quite remarkable: we start seeing the root from which thought arises. We see intention, out of which action comes. We observe the natural process of mind and discover how much of what we so treasured to be ourselves is essentially impersonal phenomena passing by (3).

The non-action of seeing and watching gives us access to the roots and complex processes that underlie our beliefs and actions. We are able to simply regard what is, without an attachment to a certain way of thinking or doing. We can watch the internal dialogue rather than participating in it.

Levine stresses the importance of observing without judgment, or practicing acceptance:

The more we accept of ourselves, the more fully we experience the world. The more we accept our anger, our loneliness, our desire systems, the more we can hear others and the more we can hear ourselves (53).

He explains the deeper significance of this acceptance.

When we can surrender into the moment without any attachment anywhere, so that anything that arises is seen as a soft, non-judging mind, we experience completeness. We can be with our loneliness, or our fear, or even our self-consciousness in a very complete way. We see that those are just passing states of mind, and, though they may be painful to acknowledge, the recognition of their presence is the truth and the truth is beautiful. It means really accepting all of what we are (53).

As Levine explains, removing judgment ultimately enables the emotion to move out of the shadow of our self and be observed and understood for what it is: simply, what is. The objective is not to create more pleasing sensations and moments, but to realize the impermanence inherent in both the pleasing and the displeasing moments, and ultimately accepting them both gratefully and gracefully.

### BEGINNER'S MIND: HOW DO YOU GET IT?

At this point, perhaps beginner's mind sounds pretty good, a possible solution to some of the ills of the world. You are ready to sign up, whip out your credit card, call now, or whatever it takes to "get" this thing called beginner's mind. After so many infomercials, so many advertisements promising you that to *be* what you wish you need only to *buy* their product, you are used to being able to purchase pills, books, DVDs, or what have you. You are not used to being asked to *do* something. "There is no time to *do* something!" you exclaim, pointing at the unopened workout DVD, the unread "must read" book, the untested recipes in the healthy living cookbook.

Yet I argue that there *is* time to *do* something. Let's create more meaningful practices in our lives! At first glance, our lives may feel too chaotic and too busy to add anything else to them. We so often forget that we *do* the things we *do* because we *choose* to do them. Deepak Chopra writes that "You and I are essentially infinite choice-makers. In every moment of our existence, we are in that field of all possibilities where we have access to an infinity of choices. Some of these choices are made consciously, while others are made unconsciously. But the best way to understand and maximize the use of karmic law is to become consciously aware of the choices we make in every moment"

(40). Each item on our “to do” list is chosen by us, even though it seems at times like we have no choice. But it is easier to think that we have no choice than to see ourselves as powerfully controlling our lives. From household chores to social engagements to work or family obligations, we don’t *have to do* anything! We can be confronted with the same circumstances and make very different choices.

It is in the choices we engender that transformation occurs, and it is in understanding that we are always free to choose differently that we find power. Chopra asserts that our present day situation is the result of our past choices, and that our future will be the result of today’s choices. This is easy to see when talking about something like race or politics, but harder to acknowledge on an individual level. He writes, “Whether you like it or not, everything that is happening at this moment is a result of the choices you’ve made in the past. Unfortunately, a lot of us make choices unconsciously, and therefore we don’t think they are choices—and yet, they are” (40).

He offers some examples and explanation to illustrate:

If I were to insult you, you would most likely make the choice of being offended. If I were to pay you a compliment, you would most likely make the choice of being pleased or flattered. But think about it: it’s still a choice. I could offend you and I could insult you, and you could make the choice of not being offended. I could pay you a compliment and you could make the choice of not letting that flatter you either.

In other words, most of us—even though we are infinite choice-makers—have become bundles of conditioned reflexes that are constantly being triggered by people and circumstances into predictable outcomes of behavior. These conditioned reflexes are like Pavlovian conditioning. Pavlov is famous for demonstrating that if you give a dog something to eat every time you ring a bell, soon the dog starts to salivate when you just ring the bell, because it has associated one stimulus with the other.

Most of us, as a result of conditioning, have repetitious and predictable responses to the stimuli in our environment. Our reactions seem to be automatically triggered by people and circumstances, and we forget that

these are still choices that we are making in every moment of our existence. We are simply making these choices unconsciously (40-1).

Similar to Hanh, Levine, and Krishnamurti, the course of action that Deepak prescribes is simply to step back. “If you step back for a moment and witness the choices you are making as you make those choices, then in just this act of witnessing, you take the whole process from the unconscious realm into the conscious realm. This procedure of conscious choice making and witnessing is very empowering” (41-2). This witnessing is something we can bring with us into our everyday interactions by cultivating it in meditation. It helps create and maintain a space between our thoughts and feelings and how we choose to respond to them, between the stimulus and the action. This mental space gives us more of a chance to intentionally choose our reactions. When we are able to divest our thoughts of their immediacy, we are able to exercise greater choice in how we will respond.

#### WHY THE ACADEMY WOULD BENEFIT FROM BEGINNER’S MIND

Academia could stand an infusion of beginner’s mind, to be sure. Caught up in our culture’s meta-narratives of expertise and our own “been there, done that” ennui, academics in particular occupy a space in our culture where we are supposed to know more than others. “Wow, you must be pretty smart!” is the typical layperson’s response to finding out one has or is obtaining one’s Ph.D. If others *think* they know it all, academics are the ones who actually might. Or so we tell ourselves, building our egos around this concept of ourselves as “smart,” “intellectual,” “genius,” or whatever high-fallutin’ adjective floats our boats. We become experts, often these days in random, obscure sub-subjects that no one else really cares all that much about. This is done in the



effort to create a niche and write “original scholarship” in an increasingly specialized job market. We pride ourselves on our expert mind, seeing it as wise and efficient. Cornel West confirms this view of academics in his dialogic book with bell hooks, Breaking Bread. He writes, “Historically, academic intellectuals have been viewed, to varying degrees, as elitist, arrogant, and haughty... It is important to break down that kind of image and reveal oneself” (4).

It’s not (only) our faults; the commodification of education and the focus on gaining transferable skills and knowledge have mandated the performance of the role of “expert” or “professional,” guiding the paying customer/student through a pre-packaged course. The exorbitant prices students pay for their university degrees, coupled with a version of globalization that privileges market value, makes education no longer about joyful exploration or discovery. bell hooks comments on what she calls “the banking model of education” in Teaching to Transgress, which she says is “based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used at a later date” (5).

This was not always the case however. Education used to be seen as something other than a commodity. As John W. Moore notes in his article “Education: Commodity, Come-On, or Commitment?”

Through their governments, citizens of democracies have traditionally made strong commitments to education on grounds that without it individuals would not be able to act responsibly and to make wise decisions in voting booths and public meetings. All citizens have a stake in everyone's education, because a better-educated citizenry benefits all of society. In this country such a commitment has produced a system of public schools and public universities that offers opportunities to many who otherwise could not afford a level of education commensurate with their talents. But there are signs that this commitment to public education

is flagging. Many students, teachers, and administrators view education as merely a way to enhance personal prosperity (805).

The narratives of civic duty and service no longer ring as loudly and clearly through the hallowed halls of our colleges and universities. Nor do models of mentorship and apprenticeship proliferate. We have been encouraged to accept a very small version of what we can *be* and *do* as educators. In his essay “Globalization and Education as a Commodity,” William Tabb notes the ways in which globalization(s) change the landscape of the university and the course(s) of professors and students.

Today we are often told that education must be made more efficient by being forced into the market model, moving away from the traditional concept of education as a publicly provided social good. This neoliberalism—the belief that today’s problems are best addressed by the market, and that government regulation and the public sector should both be as minimal as possible—is not unique to debates over education: it dominates economics, politics and ideology in the U.S. and most of the world.

There are three elements involved in the neoliberal model of education: making the provision of education more cost-efficient by commodifying the product; testing performance by standardizing the experience in a way that allows for multiple-choice testing of results; and focusing on marketable skills. The three elements are combined in different policies—cutbacks in the public sector, closing “inefficient” programs that don’t directly meet business needs for a trained workforce, and the use of computers and distance learning, in which courses and degrees are packaged for delivery over the Internet by for-profit corporations (25-26).

Tabb’s philosophy has at its foundation problematic beliefs about the role and importance of education within a culture. As we move toward a banking model, where, I wonder, will this leave the study of literature? Poetry, according to the Latin poet Ovid, and literature in general, according to Englishman Sir Philip Sydney in his “Apology for Poetry,” has as its mission ‘*docere delictendo*,’ or to teach by delighting (Barry, 22).

How does such delight fit into this neo-liberal educational prototype? Are there ways to

standardize pleasure, or turn it into a marketable skill? Is the goal of education today to establish a universal base of knowledge? Shouldn't or couldn't it instead establish a knowledge of self, of the cultural, political, and religious assumptions inherent in an individual, thereby rendering them choices rather than assumptions?

Jeffrey Williams also comments on the professionalization of the academic's role within the academy, a result of this banking model of education. He writes, "It is not hard to see why professionalism often carries a negative charge and seems at best a necessary evil, that interferes with and constrains intellectual activity (the red-tape, bureaucratic sense of institution), or warps intellectuals into a narrow academicism, or serves as a kind of careerist devil's bargain, prompting intellectuals to sell out—for prestige, power, money, or simply a secure middle class life" (?).

J. Krishnamurti's Education and the Significance of Life presents a perspective on education that asserts that education itself has little to do with bringing about integrated individuals, that "conventional education makes independent thinking extremely difficult" (9). He goes so far as to blame education at least partially for hindering one's development. He writes:

In seeking comfort, we generally find a quiet corner in life where there is a minimum of conflict, and then we are afraid to step out of that seclusion. This fear of life, this fear of struggle and of new experience, kills in us the spirit of adventure; our whole upbringing and education have made us afraid to be different from our neighbor, afraid to think contrary to the established pattern of society, falsely respectful of authority and tradition... Though there is a higher and wider significance to life, of what value is our education if we never discover it? We may be highly educated, but if we are without deep integration of thought and feeling, our lives are incomplete, contradictory and torn with many fears; and as long as education does not cultivate an integrated outlook on life, it has very little significance (10-11).

The complicity of academics with the institution makes us part of the problem rather than part of the solution, I might note here. We become the upholders of its somewhat arbitrary rules and regulations, participants in its schemes. From the first bluebook exam to the dissertation defense, educators enforce the often arbitrary laws and guidelines handed down from the institution. *“Well, what else would you have me do?”* you ask. *“Cultivate beginner’s mind!”* I respond enthusiastically. *“For in the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the experts there are few.”* We might see things differently if we were able to look upon them with new, unjaded eyes.

It is so easy to be jaded. But if we choose to adopt a practice that cultivates beginner’s mind, we may see and enable other possibilities besides *“been there, done that.”* Henson reminds us that, *“It may be true that you have been there, and you may have done that, but perhaps your conception of reality was not the whole concept, ‘the big picture’ if you will”* (Iron Palm). He uses as an analogy the story of six blind men encountering an elephant for the first time to illustrate his point. Each man touched a different part of the elephant. One touching the trunk, another the body, another the tail, another the ear, and so on. Each man felt that he understood what the elephant *“was”* based on his experience. Henson asks, *“what if the above happened to one blind man on six different occasions? Each time his concept of an elephant would change, grow and be enhanced. Yet he still would have more to learn about the true essence of an elephant. But if our hypothetical blind man stopped after the first visit, “Been there - Done that,” his concept would be stuck at a lower level of understanding. He would miss out on the ‘Big Picture’”* (Iron Palm).

In academia, we reinforce the privileging of “thought” and “word,” leaving “deed” out of the experience of education. To “know” something in school is not to *experience* it, but rather to have read and written about it, or listened to someone else talk about it. This creates disembodied, inexperienced knowers working under the misled assumption that they have acquired knowledge or attained mastery without this key experiential component.

A Zen parable further illustrates the limitations of this way of thinking:

A university professor went to visit a famous Zen master. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked about Zen. The master poured the visitor's cup to the brim, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflowing cup until he could no longer restrain himself. "It's overfull! No more will go in!" the professor blurted. "You are like this cup," the master replied, "How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup" (Iron Palm).

In order to cultivate beginner's mind, Henson says that “To begin, we must all empty our cups of all the preconceived ideas, concepts, techniques and methods that prevent us from receiving the new. This seems like a simple thing to do, but can be quite difficult in practice” (Iron Palm). In the case of academics, this requires the challenging shift away from our quietly prized stature as know-it-alls. There seems to be a lot at risk by cultivating beginner's mind, particularly for academics. A peek behind the curtain or an acknowledgement of weakness might seem to compromise the academic's appointed role of educational overseer, cracking his whip over his ignorant slaves. It's a step I am not sure every academic would be willing to take. The idea of being a beginner takes some of the wind out of the letters that sail brightly behind y/our names. Furthermore, part of the role of “professor” requires (or at least seems to require) the adoption of the

stance of the master, fully competent, knowledgeably guiding the less advanced in their achievement. “How can I be a teacher, and a beginner?” one might ask oneself.

Being able to hold a space for this type of seeming contradiction and even to embrace it, enables new possibilities for both the teacher and the student. Jennifer Ouellette writes about the importance of this practice, citing her personal experience as a case in point:

Several years ago I earned my black belt in jujitsu. Before tying the belt around my waist, the grand master had me don my old white belt, which designates a beginner. He then instructed me to look into a mirror and reflect on what it had been like to walk onto the dojo mat for the first time. The reasoning behind the ceremony is that in order to effectively teach a beginner any given technique, an instructor must be able to break it down into its most basic components. Ergo, it’s vital to remember what it was like to know nothing about the technique at all (Symmetry Magazine).

This is perhaps the most practical and basic reason for a teacher to cultivate beginner’s mind. Many professors do not present material as if their students are learning from scratch. But if they themselves can cultivate beginner’s mind, recapturing the excitement, confusion and joy they felt when they first were introduced to the concepts and ideas they now know so well, they might gain invaluable insight into the minds of their students. The ability to empathize with someone who is seeing something for the first time is a powerful tool, and one we will need if we want to build a brighter and more meaningful world.

Education should, I believe, offer students tools necessary to succeed and have a positive experience of life, regardless of race, gender, or creed. As Roshi Philip Kapleau points out in Zen: Merging East and West, “A vital problem for teachers of Buddhism in North America and Europe has been how to accommodate to our Western psyche and

culture a Zen heretofore expressed through Asian cultural forms.” (?) What I am interested in is how the tools and practices of Zen can be applied to American life, academic practices, and social thought in order to enhance and supplement what I see as a painfully limited perspective of the world and its workings leading to a debilitating subjectivity that leads few to the success of self realization and even fewer to genuine happiness.

### READING BEGINNER’S MIND

Usually academics urge us through texts to think as they do, and this coercive accord is the main action their work intends to inspire. Through their artful language and persuasive rhetoric, many authors endeavor to sway their reader over to their camp. *What you need to do*, they seem to be saying, *is listen to and agree with me*. In spite of this, readers come to texts firmly rooted in their own preconceived notions and pre-established beliefs. One of my strongest dislikes is readers who use the text against itself, so to speak, in order to confirm and validate the choices they have made in their own life, and their own tenuous construction of their identity. Rather than meeting the author in a space where reading enables new possibilities for them, they use and manipulate the text to affirm, “This is why I am the way I am.” Stephen Levine calls this the judging mind.

He writes:

The judging mind has an opinion about everything. It selects from the mindflow who it believes it ought to be and chides the rest. It’s full of noise and old learning. It is a quality of mind addicted to maintaining an image of itself. It is always trying to be somebody (43).

We can see that beginner’s mind offers an alternative to performing this kind of reading. This state of mind that is born from the practices of mindfulness and meditation

is likened to the experience of a child, when everything was fresh and new. The ability to see the world without its myriad contexts means that true possibility exists to transcend culture and actually see what is, stripped of all the convoluted meaning we give to it. I am not the first person to suggest the introduction of beginner's mind into reading. My mentor, Santiago Colás, opens his book Living Invention, or the Way of Julio Cortázar with a passage that vividly captures the experience of beginner's mind. The protagonist is "sitting alone" (perhaps in meditation?) when he finds himself in the middle of a shower of toys. He writes:

I am sitting alone when the miracle happens and the toys begin to fall all around me in a gentle shower, falling slowly like snowflakes. They don't hurt. They aren't hard or sharp until they've splashed softly to the ground and then sprung back into the shape of an animal, a car, a balloon, a drum. I'm rolling in them and playing with them all at once somehow. Somehow I'm splashing crazy in this soft ocean that is each unique toy and all of them together all at the same time and the rain of toys keeps falling warm on my face and the waves of toys are growing and crashing into me knocking me down laughing into the sliding surf of toys, and the salty drops of toy go up my nose and down my throat and I can feel the toy flowing inside me and outside of me all at the same time (1).

The experience is articulated at once as a miracle, invoking from the very first line a concept of the divine. A miracle is a visible interruption of the laws of nature, such that can only be explained by divine intervention (Wikipedia). The "miracle" in question is that of being. Rather than questioning why toys are falling, who this protagonist is, or wondering what this has to do with Julio Cortázar, the reader (this reader) is pulled into the scene by the vivid language and the immediacy of the scene. The language Colás uses brings the reader into the present moment, where even the notion of falling toys is new and unheard of. Unlike other narratives where we can guess as readers what is occurring, Colás introduces a shade of magical realism to pull his reader out of his/her



rational mind and into a new space that is unknown. This act leaves the reader no choice but to proceed with beginner's mind, since this brash choice of sitting an unnamed narrator down in the middle of a toy-storm doesn't echo any other choices made in any other texts he has read recently, perhaps ever.

The dreamlike image of a person sitting amidst flakes or drops of as-yet-unformed "toyiness," shows a protagonist playing, as it were, with pure potentiality. The toys are not yet toys in reality, but in the mind of the protagonist, they are toys even in the moments before they hit the ground. The narrator says that he is "rolling in them and playing with them all at once somehow." The "somehow" iterated in this line, and reiterated in the next, suggests that the narrator is not consciously acting; he is not in control of his or her actions. His or her actions are instinctual, unconscious, intuitive, occurring even as he questions them. As he gets caught up in the moment, the toys—and the words—come faster, taking on the form of the ocean. The effect of the prose is a surge that mimics the feeling of being pulled under by the force of the waves. The toys begin to flow "inside me and outside me all at the same time." In this moment, traditional boundaries do not exist or have been disabled. Inside and outside are both flooded with "salty drops of toy." In this moment we see the protagonist and the toys as embodying the non-duality encouraged, engendered, and expressed through mindfulness and meditation. There is no longer an "inside" and an "outside" to the protagonist in relationship to the toys; there is no separation between the protagonist and the toys. The protagonist is completely immersed, drowning in his experience.

I do not think it is an accident that Colás chose water as the metaphor for the toys. Snowflakes and raindrops and waves are all forms of water. Water is both fluid and

powerful. It is universal—we all come from the waters within our mothers. Water takes the shape of its container, freezes, condenses. The evocation of water also reminds us of the difficulty, at times futility, of trying to control water. Floodgates cannot contain hurricanes and tsunamis. It is merely our egos that tell us that we can contain water in our structures. Relating this to reading, we as readers often try to use our rational mind to contain fluid, feminine forms of knowledge. But one of the problems with these feminine forms of knowing is that they often defy rational logic- they are non linear, they are non-binary, they incur simultaneity, forms of multiplicity not normally acknowledged and engaged. As such, trying to compartmentalize them rationally is an exercise in futility.

As the toys begin to consolidate into an ocean of toys, so the novelty and excitement with which the protagonist first embraced the situation evolves into frustration and impatience. This impatience is with his inability to control the situation. Colás writes:

I stand on shaky legs, excited to share this wonder with my friends... I begin to gather the toy together as if it were an ordinary pile of toys, as if there were such a thing as an ordinary pile of toys. I'm already forgetting the magic. I begin to gather them together like ordinary toys, still happy but growing tense now, impatient to get these toys to my friends, they aren't so fun now they are more like the stupid old toys in my room, but I move my sweating little hands faster and faster clutching and grasping more and more, pulling them into my arms I am sweating and as I try to stand with my arms full, the ball slips out of my arms and bounces into the ebbing tide of toys, I bend over to grab it again and a soldier falls to the ground followed by the clatter of a train engine.

The protagonist began the experience immersed in it without judgment, simply explaining the unique nuances of the passing moments. He metaphorically became a part of the moment, flowing with the toys, unconcerned with the specifics of his actions, but understanding that toys were both inside and outside of him. But as he began to codify

and control the experience, initially by creating an expectation (that he would like to share the toys with his friends) and treating this experience as he had other experiences of toys (that toys could be put into “ordinary piles”), he realized that the event itself—in this case toys, but in our case as readers our thoughts or beliefs—was frustratingly evading his control. The yielding, Yin, beginner’s mind nature that characterized his first reactions and interactions with the toys has been usurped by a desire, however good natured, to collect the toys and share them. The idea of giving and action in this passage indicate that Yang energy has swayed the balance. He is being active, he is controlling the situation (or so he thinks), and he has determined what one does when one is inundated with toys. He has stopped being governed by intuition and excited interest and has instead turned to logic and reason. As Colás put it, “I’m already forgetting the magic.”

What happens next is telling of the overarching moral of Colás’ allegory. Despite the protagonist’s aggravated efforts to gather the toys up, they cannot be contained. A ball, a soldier and a train engine all fall to the ground despite the his struggle to keep it all together. The irony is that the toys have not changed their nature once during this story. The toys came in falling and they continued falling. What changed was the protagonist’s relationship to the falling toys. But the protagonist is not even aware that he is making a choice in how to act, react, and interact with the toys. He allows the situation to escalate.

Stupid toys and my teeth hard against each other my eyes burning I will  
get you still I am stubborn pick you up little soldier in my arms and train  
engine and ball and take you to my friends at once while the mast of a  
sailing ship stabs me in the arm when I turn and everything clatters to the  
ground ...

It is at this moment of rupture that the protagonist begins again to exist in the moment. By this I mean that he is not motivated by visions of the future (sharing the toys with friends), nor by assumptions of the past (that these toys could be made into piles like “ordinary” toys can, indicating a reliance on precedence). This leads to a different outcome.

...my legs do too so that I'm sitting burning eyes on the hard basement floor and there's no rain and the ocean seems so far away I can't see it and there's just stupid toys and the huge sobs, that ocean inside me, huge sobs exploding out of me, tossing me on to the concrete where the waves were, pounding my arms against the floor, huge and my breath is coming in short, great hiccoughs and then in a bit the huge sobs have passed through me and I am tired...

“Nothing gets added from outside the given situation,” asserts Colás, “and the original, given the situation remains, now embedded, within the new one” (6). The protagonist has let go of any desire to control the situation. He has also let go of his frustration, so that he is existing within the emotion he is feeling, riding the sobs like waves. As Stephen Levine points out:

Letting go means not dwelling on something which has come to mind. It also means experiencing that quality of non-grasping awareness which pulls nothing from the flow—experiencing a great spaciousness which simply lets everything come and lets everything go.

By letting go of all we believe we are, by letting go of thinking we're the body or the mind, that we're brilliant or stupid, a saint or a fool, we at last become whole again and awaken to the universe within us. If we let go of everything, we can have anything. But if we hold anything at all, we lose everything else and that thing we cling to eventually becomes a cause for pain (40).

It is obvious in the case of this protagonist that letting go alleviates the frustration of the situation. The ocean has moved from outside the protagonist to inside, his sobs

have become the uncontrollable entity. Tossed this way and that, he is no longer in control, no longer striving for control. He is the ocean, he is the toys, he is the sobs. This oneness is what I strive to achieve through reading.

### READING JAMAICA KINCAID WITH BEGINNER'S MIND (DURING READING PRACTICE)

I am currently reading differently, against this grain, by reading (or trying to read) with beginner's mind. I practice a 5 minute "mind clearing" meditation at the beginning of my reading period of 45 minutes. I find this particularly useful because I have a moment of peace and respite during which I can put away the activity of the day and switch gears so as to be fully present while reading. I read for 40-45 minutes, and then I have an 18 minute meditation at the completion of my reading. I did this first reading of My Garden (Book): in a comfy chair on the third floor porch of the Zen temple, where I live (more on this later). From this seat, I overlook the garden and the tree-line of the horizon. I do this reading at about eight o' clock in the evening. It is June, and the air has cooled a bit by that hour, though it is still very light out. The various birds sing an insistent chorus that I learn to ignore. I time myself with my iPhone, letting a Xylophone melody mark the end of each portion of this practice.

My "creative activity" is actually walking. I walk either in the garden at the temple, or around the neighborhood of Burn's Park in Ann Arbor. I actually began this practice much earlier, but it lent itself to reading a book about gardening. I spent the early spring walking around this lovely, affluent neighborhood, examining the first furtive flowers to poke their heads out from beneath the snow. The crocuses and

daffodils often sat on beds of slush, offering the first promise that the long Midwestern winter was finally ending. I watched the tulips slowly outshine all their peers, planted in bright beds of a single color, or in kaleidoscopic bursts. The magnolias began pumping their perfume into the air. The irises showed off their petals like the plumage of an exotic bird. And then...everything burst into life, the air thickened. Frequent rain pushed everything into fervent exposition reminiscent of a carnival. I ride the waves of the exquisite colors and smells that meet me on my evening walks.

I like to look at the gardens of others. Many summer gardens look overrun and crowded, poorly planned and executed, like good ideas in theory that, when tried, weren't very good ideas at all. Greenery grows to four and five feet, dwarfing flowers and overtaking sidewalks. I learn from looking—what works, what doesn't. What makes me say “ooh!” and cross the street to get a closer gander. What looks cluttered and messy. I plan my own garden. I dream. I myself am a budding gardener. I have had one small garden of my own in Ann Arbor, and have worked in two community gardens. Now that I am married, expecting my first child, and moving into the role of “Lady of the house” in the home my late grandparents' built, I will finally have a yard of my own to cultivate. I am both excited and nervous at the possibilities. Like Kincaid, I feel limited only by my imagination (and my budget, a problem that does not seem to concern Kincaid).

I think it is important to read with beginner's mind. Reading in this way enables us to transcend our rational way of engaging a text and endeavor to meet the text as what it actually is: something completely new. Even if the text is not new to the reader, the moment is new, and the text will resonate with this moment in new ways. Beginner's mind enables us to “not know,” opening us up to the opportunity of actually being present

with what actually “is” in a text. We also can become aware of our own thought processes and attachments at play in reading. We can begin to mindfully observe our own thoughts as they arise with relation to reading. We can be aware of where dissatisfaction arises, anger, frustration, excitement, boredom, and rather than attaching to it and identifying with it, we can simply watch these states of mind pass through our awareness like clouds through the sky. Like the meditation cushion, books offer us a low-stakes opportunity to truly examine the self.

It is not easy for me to meet Kincaid in the open space of beginner’s mind. A part of me is already thinking, “If she mentions her mother again, I’m leaving.” But I am curious about this new genre she has delved into in her writing. Furthermore, I am interested in the woman that she has become, in what she has to say. I want to be open to hear it. This means dropping many of my defenses, my preconceived notions, my assumptions, and my emotions regarding Kincaid. I am meeting her in the field past rightdoing and wrongdoing. Or, at least, I’m trying to.

#### A NOTE ON THE PROCESS OF READING & WRITING (AFTER READING PRACTICE)

I found the process pretty interesting. I really enjoyed the first 5 minutes, when I was able to settle into the present moment. As a pregnant woman with two moves scheduled and a dissertation defense scheduled, I am not always the pillar of calm I’d like to be. The first 5 minute meditation gave me a moment to really settle into being fully present with the book. I enjoyed reading. I felt like my own environment made the reading itself more sumptuous, surrounded as I was by gardens and trees. I wrote small

notes to myself of places in the text where I felt like reacting or responding. In re-reading these notes, I was able to observe when judgments would come up in me. The meditation at the end was supposed to be 20 minutes, but I found myself getting antsy toward the end of it. The mosquitoes were often out by then, and I just couldn't sustain it. I would find myself checking the iPhone to see how much time was left. I read indoors one day, in my room, because it was raining.

Writing is a very different process and animal than reading. In order to write coherently for an audience, I decided not to write every thought I had. Instead, I looked at the idea of beginner's mind and picked up the theme within the text itself. Explorations of beginner's mind need not discuss beginner's mind itself, however. This was just what popped out at me in this case. I also had in mind that there would also be a reading for "self" and a reading for "not self," as I described earlier, so I was able to select what I thought would be most pertinent to this discussion, aware that there would be others to follow. I was able to "play" with Kincaid, creating a reading of her text that I might not have been able to see had I not cleared away some of the debris of my own identifications with her.

## FIRST READING

Jamaica Kincaid fancies herself a gardener, though she spends a lot of time explaining that she has no skill at it. My Garden (Book): opens with her various failures and shortcomings in her newly chosen field. She reveals that she has very little control over what happens in her garden. From her very first experience with planting, in which "nothing grew," it has been Kincaid's "enthusiastic beginning familiarity with



horticulture” rather than any actual acumen or ability that has fueled her garden experiments. This makes Kincaid’s new identity, “gardener,” a bit odd. Why would someone who is not very good at gardening proudly profess herself a gardener? With my tennis skills, mediocre as they are, I would hesitate to ever call myself a tennis player. Yet Kincaid proudly adopts this new title, revealing that perhaps there is more at play, and at stake, than first meets the eye.

It seems that in her practice of gardening Kincaid cultivates something akin to a beginner’s mind. She enjoys her “don’t know” mind about gardening, curious and confused by what is occurring quite naturally around her. She begins the My Garden (Book): looking for the answers she does not have: “Is there someone to whom I can write for an answer to this question: Why is my *Wisteria floribunda*, trained into a standard so that it eventually will look like a small tree, blooming in late July, almost August, instead of May, the way wisterias in general are supposed to do?” (11). Kincaid demonstrates here an interesting distinction in her gardening—she knows the names of the plants, but she does not know how the plants actually function in real life. She can quite easily put a label on this plant—*wisteria floribunda*—and she can even describe what it is she thinks it is bred to do, but she has no insight into why and how it does what it does. She asks herself what to do with what is in front of her, but she has no knowledge to draw from. Kincaid explains what she likes about not knowing:

I like to ask myself this question, “What to do?” especially when I myself do not have an answer to it. What to do? When it comes up, what to do (slugs are everywhere) and I know a ready-made solution, I feel confident and secure in the world (my world), and again when it comes up, what to do (the wisteria are blooming out of their season), I still feel confident and secure that someone somewhere has had this same perplexing condition (for certainly I cannot be the first person to have had this experience), and he or she will explain to me the phenomenon that is in front of me: my

wisteria grown as a standard (made to look like a tree) is blooming two months after its usual time (12).

Kincaid notes that she knows that these questions are not unanswerable, but that she simply does not know the answers. When she does have the answer, a “ready-made solution,” she says she feels “confident and secure in the world (my world),” which means she has left beginner’s mind and returned to the knowing mind, which she describes as functioning to confirm “her world.” She prefers to not have an answer, to remain in her beginner’s mind where no response comes when she asks “what to do” and she is forced to invent her own solution. She consoles herself with the knowledge that someone somewhere has dealt with this before.

In this garden space, Kincaid learns experientially through trial and error how to create on an external landscape other than the literary one. Rather than model her own yard after those of her neighbors, she chooses to define her own standards of beauty, almost by accident:

I had begun to dig up, or to have dug up for me, parts of the lawn in the back of the house and parts of the lawn in the front of the house, into the most peculiar ungardenlike shapes. These beds—for I was attempting to make such a thing as flower beds—were odd in shape, odd in relation to the way flower beds usually look in a garden; I could see that they were odd and I could see that they did not look like the flower beds in gardens I admired, the gardens of my friends, the gardens portrayed in my books on gardening, but I couldn’t help that; I wanted a garden that looked like something I had in my mind’s eye, but exactly what that might be I did not know and even now do not know (7).

This brand of quirky personal style is not new to Kincaid. She actually began her career as a writer in New York by trying out different uniforms for this new vocation. “I would wear a lot of old clothes and sort of looked like people from different periods—someone from the 1920s, someone from the 1930s, someone from the 1940s,” Kincaid

recalls of this time (quoted in Bouson 19). She was, she says, “impersonating” those who were “inconceivably older and more prosperous” than she (Bouson 19), even dying her hair blond to presumably fit that role. In her garden, however, Kincaid seems to be creating based on no previous model.

Kincaid has grown accustomed to people not understanding her new creation. She writes that her large, strangely shaped beds “became so much more difficult to explain to other gardeners who had more experience with a garden than I and more of an established aesthetic of a garden than I. ‘What is this?’ I have been asked. ‘What are you trying to do here?’ I have been asked. Sometimes I would reply by saying, ‘I don’t really know’ or sometimes I would reply ‘.....’ (with absolute silence)” (7). She shares another anecdote on this subject:

I once invited a man to dinner, a man who knows a lot about landscape and how to remake it in a fashionable way. He did not like the way I had made a garden and he said to me that what I ought to do is remove the trees. It is quite likely that I shall never have him back for a visit to my house, but I haven’t yet told him so. After he left I went around and apologized to the trees. I do not find such a gesture, apologizing to the trees, laughable (34).

It is unclear why she is creating this garden. It is obviously not for the admiration of others, nor for their validation. It appears to be more so a place of self-realization where her ignorance is her bliss. In fact, Kincaid does not actually seem to be creating a garden. Instead, she is taking the elements of a garden—lawn, soil, flowers, and trees—and creating something uniquely her own, an invention. This harkens Colás’ suggestion that his readers “take up the raw materials of the reading process... and find, through open-ended experimentation, enjoyable ways to rearrange those materials such that the process of reading becomes, first and foremost, the process of cultivating desire

and joy, and of communicating... these to others.” Rather than there being a set way of doing this thing—whether reading or gardening—both Kincaid and Colás argue for experimental “play” with the elements at hand. Colás uses the word “play” to denote “what we can do when we suppose ourselves to be free of objective limitations.” The garden space feels to Kincaid limited only by her imagination. It represents to her a space of pure potentiality. She writes of her irritation with her beginner’s mind, “Nothing works just the way I thought it would, nothing looks just the way I had imagined it, and when it sometimes does look like what I had imagined (and this, thank God, is rare) I am startled that my imagination is so ordinary” (14). Although she expresses a good deal of fret and frustration with her garden, she acknowledges it as a positive feeling. “How vexed I often am when I am in the garden, and how happy I am to be so vexed” (14). Kincaid approaches her garden with a nervous excitement, a blithe concern typical of beginner’s mind.

“What to do?” is the refrain that repeats in the first chapter, “Wisteria,” about some of the many challenges that crop up in her garden. She is confounded by a blue wisteria that is blooming out of season, two months behind its stated blooming time. She laments its “droopy, weepy sadness in the middle of summer” (12), because its anachronistic flowers remind her of “mourning the death of something that happened long ago” (12). Perhaps this is a first clue as to what is occurring in the garden—a midsummer mourning of the distant past? The strangeness of this phenomenon is matched by the actions of another wisteria, the “supposed-to-be-white-blooming wisteria” that “never bloomed” (13). While such things might merely cause most people to shrug, Kincaid is deeply affected.

I found two long shoots coming from its rootstock one day while I was weeding nearby and I cut them off with ferociousness, as if they had actually done something wrong and so now deserved this. Will it ever bloom, I ask myself, and what shall I do if it does not? Will I be happy with its widish form, its abundant leafiness and the absence of flowers, and will I then plant nearby something to go with all that? What should I do? What will I do? (13).

Kincaid's garden, like her beginner's mind... and her writing, seems to be tinged with regrets and dissatisfaction, even a hint of anger, as we see in the above passage. She is not allowing the garden to keep her in the present moment. As Colás says, she is "already forgetting the magic." She cannot stay in the present moment because, according to Kincaid, the garden is inextricably linked to her memory of the past. She tries to explain the connection, or the impossibility of understanding it. "Oh, how I like the rush of things, the thickness of things, everything condensed as it is happening, long after it has happened, so that any attempt to understand it will become like an unraveling of a large piece of cloth that had been laid flat and framed and placed as a hanging on a wall and, even then, expected to stand for something" (24). This represents a new perspective for Kincaid, one in which the interconnection of things figures strongly. Kincaid is up to something in this garden, beyond the mere cultivation of plants. She is using the garden to link her past and her present.

The last statement in her introduction to My Garden (Book): becomes more relevant in light of the role that I suspect the garden is serving for her. In this passage, she reveals at least in part what she is doing in her garden:

... It dawned on me that the garden I was making (and am still making and will always be making) resembled a map of the Caribbean and the sea that surrounds it, I did not tell this to the gardeners who had asked me to explain the thing I was doing, or to explain what I was trying to do; I only marveled at the way the garden is for me an exercise in memory, a way of remembering my own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is my

own (the Caribbean Sea) and the past as it is indirectly related to me (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings) (8).

While this is quite revealing, it is still a bit enigmatic. It is not clear what Kincaid means by “exercise in memory.” What exactly is this relationship between the garden and her memories of the Caribbean? The garden seems to offer access to several kinds of pasts, her own and those that are indirectly related to hers. But those that are indirectly related are not her own; the garden gives her access not only to her own past, but to the pasts of others.

Mining her statement for more clues, I note that her mention of Mexico foreshadows a somewhat unexpected theme for a garden book—that of the conquistador. She explains that at the time that she began her garden she was reading a history book about the conquest of Mexico, “or New Spain, as it was then called, and I came upon the flower called marigold and the flower called dahlia and the flower called zinnia, and after that the garden was to me more than the garden as I used to think of it. After that the garden was also something else” (6). What else it was is not exactly clear. What is clear is that Kincaid is affected by her growing awareness of the ways in which colonialism has impacted gardening. She learns that plants that are present in abundance in North American gardens were indigenous to Mexico; as such, their transplantation to the north is reminiscent of the movements of peoples by these same people—the colonizers, the conquerors.

Somewhere down the line of her writing career, Kincaid shifted her allegiance from the colonized to the colonizers. In My Garden (Book): she identifies herself as being of the “conquering class” rather than the “conquered class.” She relays that she has named one of her beds “Hispaniola,” which is the name the colonizer chose for the

island, rather than the names that the colonized gave it upon gaining their independence. She establishes that there is a hierarchy in place in her garden, one in which “common maples” and “undistinguished evergreens” rank below the more exotic varieties that Kincaid has gone into debt to cultivate. She has adopted the peculiar practice of calling almost all of the plants by their Latin names. This is an intentional choice, as she says that Latin “came later, with resistance” (6). She calls these their “proper” names, as opposed to the “ordinary” or “common” names by which they are known. These labels are a curious choice, coming from one who once lamented that the only language she had to talk about her oppression was that of her oppressors.

Ironically, Kincaid seems to be out of her league in terms of cultivating her garden. She doesn't seem to have the faintest clue what she is doing, although she has purchased the best of the best for her garden. She even seems to be out of her economic class—though she is of the alleged “conquering class,” she says more than once that her gardening purchases have almost led her family to financial ruin. For example, she says that on one winter day, “the mail was mostly from my creditors (garden related), first gently pleading that I pay them and then in the next paragraph proffering a threat of some kind. But since there was no clear Dickensian reference (debtors' prison), I wasn't at all disturbed, and when I saw that along with the bills there were some catalogues, all caution and sense of financial responsibility went away” (61). At one point she explains that she had “two thousand dollars' worth of heirloom bulbs to place in the ground” when the first snowfall hit (59). At another point she describes what happens when all thirty three of her purchases arrive on the same day:

On the day I returned from the Talbots' [nursery], I met the plants I had ordered from the White Flower Farm and Wayside nurseries. Those

orders, along with the many plants I had just bought from the Talbots, along with some other plants Jack Manix had grown for me, were lined up in the garage, spilling out onto quite a bit of the driveway. The plants were in small pots, large pots, trays of six packs. It was not a pretty sight. When you look at a garden this is not what comes to mind. The children complained, and underneath their worry was the milk-money problem: had their mother spent all the money on plants, would they be hungry? They see the garden as the thing that stands between them and true happiness: my absolute attention” (186-7).

She goes so far as to include as a chapter entitled “An Order to a Fruit Nursery Through the Mail,” which details one such exorbitant bill (\$225.00), an expenditure that hardly bore fruit. “This was such a disaster.” Kincaid writes, “Only the pear trees are thriving now, and only in the last two years have they flowered” (100). She gives her beginner’s mind as the reason for her folly, projected onto the careless or cruel experts who did not direct her:

It isn’t easy to grow hard fruits in the garden in my climate and no one told me so; not the catalogue, which succeeded in convincing me that their nursery was situated in a climate even more severe than my own; not my fellow gardeners, who were always serving me a delicious apple pie from their exceptionally productive little orchard—but they had inherited the little orchard from the farmer whose house they had bought (100).

All she inherited, she whines, are two apple trees, but their apples are not acceptable. “...the apples always turn out distorted and crippled-looking, as if someone had assaulted them on purpose when they were tiny; and on top of that, when I cook them, I have to add a lot of sugar just to get a taste sensation of any kind” (100). Despite this experience, however, Kincaid finds that her imagination still leads her more than her experience. She writes, “It is six years since I sent this order, and after vowing never to order fruit trees through the post again, I am looking at this very same nursery’s catalogue and I am making up an order. Oh, please, someone, Help Me!” (100-101).



It is hard to tell what exactly is at play here for Kincaid. Is she led by her blind optimism and her vivid imagination about growing fruit, or is she simply addicted to gardening? Sometimes Kincaid seems to lose her beginner's mind by getting caught up in the materialism of the garden. Rather than immersing herself in the beauty of the garden itself, she focuses on the consumptive aspect of it. She includes several chapters that do not discuss gardening, but shopping for plants. She describes several trips she took to England, France, and China, seemingly for the sole purpose of looking at or for flowers. She even writes mini-reviews of her favorite catalogues. This seems to have a few of the characteristics of an addiction—uncontrollable spending (“Oh, please, someone, Help Me!”), the addiction coming between the person and her family members (as she indicated in her introduction and the passage above), and obsessive thinking about the object of the addiction (“What to do?” she repeats).

There is also an obvious elitism that rubs me the wrong way. Being of the “conquering” class comes with perks that Kincaid doesn't hesitate to enumerate. She mentions her nanny and her housekeeper, the men who do construction for her, the man she enlists to grow starters of certain, difficult to cultivate plants, and the several other men who do her garden dirty work for her. Furthermore, Kincaid seems quite convinced that she can buy entry into the inner circle of rare and exotic botany, and perhaps in some way she has. She drops the names of several well known botanists and gardeners, to whom she has access because of her hefty and repeated purchases.

But perhaps *I* am losing the magic here. Instead of seeing what is new and amazing about this garden, I too am focusing what I perceive as the negative aspects of Kincaid's projected “self.” I am stuck on her imperialist attitude and her self-positioning

as a conqueror (because of her class) rather than as one of the conquered (because of her race). I am falling back into old patterns, falling back on earlier judgments I held of Kincaid. I will table this discussion of imperialist identity in Kincaid's work and return to my own beginner's mind.

Kincaid is cultivating a garden that is truly unique, not because of its beauty, nor even the rare flowers one would find there. Kincaid's garden, I believe, is a literary one. She has married her love of plants and her love of words such that her garden itself is an unsightly eyesore, but the words that are associated with it are lovely. She gives the Latin names for various plants, as well as their variety, skipping their commonly-used name entirely. The flowers she is most attracted to have very European sounding names: *Reine des Violettes*, *Madame Isaac Pereire*, *Souvenir de la Malmaison*. From garden books to catalogues, Kincaid seems lured into a world of plant language and literature. One of the main reasons for her many costly purchases is the bewitching effect that the stories about the plants have on her. She describes several that she purchased from Dan Hinkley: on one occasion "[They were] bought from Dan Hinkley because I was so taken by his description, and I remain open to seeing this lobelia just the way Dan described it" (22); on another occasion, she says of two clematis growing "of Himalayan origin" in her yard, "I cannot remember their names, only that he [Dan] was so enthusiastic about their good qualities, and I can't remember those, only that I like them very much and do not know any other gardeners who cultivate them" (23).

She attests that:

The best catalogues of any kind, whether they are offering fruit, vegetables, flowers, shrubs, trees, will not have any pictures; the best nurserymen in this country will not sully their catalogues with lavish pictures but will only now and then print some little illustration of a leaf, a

bird perched on a limb of something... the best nurserymen will sometimes not give you any information on growing zones or instructions regarding cultivation; the best nurserymen just assume that if you are interested in what they have to offer (all of it so unusual, it is sometimes not to be found yet in any plant encyclopedia) they will be chatty enough about it; they will be full of anecdotes in regard to the season just past, but they will not show you a picture and certainly will not have a little passport-sized photograph of them grinning up at you (62).

The best nurserymen use only words to seduce the readers of their catalogues into their world. Small wonder then that Kincaid has become so transfixed, and that she has adopted this new identity—as a writer, a master of words, she must feel that she has entry into this very discursive world of plants. She attests that “The best catalogues for reading are not altogether unlike wonderful books; they plunge me deep into the world of the garden, the growing of things advertised (because what are these descriptions of seeds and plants but advertisements), and that feeling of being unable to tear myself away comes over me, and there is that amazing feeling of love, and my imagination takes over as I look out at the garden, which is blanket upon blanket of white, and see it filled with the things described in the catalogue I am reading” (88). Kincaid’s imagination is fueled by what she reads in the winter months, catalogues that read like wonderful books.

The garden as literary invention has given Kincaid a chance to move beyond her Caribbean past and into a space that gives her access to her memory without allowing the memories to control, confine, or define her. Kincaid is in love with the words of the garden and the memories they evoke. She writes:

In early September I picked and cut open a small, soft, yellow fleshed watermelon, and I was suddenly reminded of the pictures of small girls I used to see in a magazine for girls when I was a small girl myself: they were always at a birthday party, and the color of their hair and of the clothes they wore and the light in the room were all some variation of this shade, the golden shade of the watermelon that I had grown. I would wish then to be a girl like that, with hair like that, in a room like that—and the

despair I felt then that such a thing would never be true is replaced now with the satisfaction that such a thing would never be true. Those were the most delicious melons I have ever grown (57).

It is obvious in this memory that Kincaid is talking about feeling envy of blond-haired, white girls and a certain golden quality that was present in their clothes, the light surrounding them, and, metaphorically speaking, their lives. But she has removed the whiteness and replaced it with yellow (a frequent choice which I will discuss at length later), which removes the emphasis on racial privilege. With this construction, she is able to say “I would wish then to be a girl like that, with hair like that, in a room like that” without saying outright “I would wish then to be white.” She transcends usual racial definitions which enables her to not feel the outrage that was so much a part of her in A Small Place. Instead, this golden hue, this racial privilege, has become something consumable, the flesh of a golden watermelon. Her pleasure is apparent in her statement, “Those were the most delicious melons I have ever grown.”

In the same way that Colás plays at reading and Kincaid plays at gardening, I am able to play with Kincaid now too—reading and writing about her in ways that haven’t been readily available to me before. I can marvel at her new invention—gardening not for the sake of gardening, but gardening for the sake of reading and writing about gardening. Perhaps this is my own invention—what I am choosing to see in Kincaid rather than what is actually there. But I appreciate being able to at least in part move past my previous judgments of her and be open to something new. Even if the stodgy haughtiness of her tone sometimes still throws me, I am able to actually listen to her now. There are a few more possibilities open to us now, it seems. I can abandon my role as impressionable younger sister just as she abandoned hers as young, sensual, passionate,

Caribbean woman to become the privileged outsider. I can build a new story around Kincaid and what she is doing, perhaps at least slightly more open to and aware of the fact that it is I who is building the story.

## CHAPTER 3

### 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY AMERICAN NIHILISM

*This chapter will explore why we so desperately need the kind of internal space that beginner's mind provides at this juncture in American history. There are a lot of cultural beliefs that, I believe, need to be questioned—turned over and pragmatically examined for their usefulness. By articulating some of the many changes that have occurred over the past half century, I paint a picture of the America to serve as a mirror in which to see ourselves. Using Jean Baudrillard and Cornel West's portrayals of America, I examine this moment in American history. I then examine the beliefs that gird this cultural structure, explaining how the individual can begin to harness and mindfully choose her own beliefs. The most important way that we can question these cultural beliefs is by questioning our individual beliefs. American culture is one of the many filters at play in the construction of our individual belief systems. By seeing our individual selves in the collective, the ways in which we too are part of the problem rather than part of the solution, I hope we might be inspired to change. I then explore in depth how Kincaid fit herself into this dominant model of American life and ultimately has created a nihilist world in which flowers become a paltry replacement for true connection with other people. I point to her own belief system as having played a large part in this choice of plant over human contact.*

Many of the notions which we would usually regard as the basic ‘givens’ of our existence (including our gender identity, our individual selfhood, and the notion of literature itself) are actually fluid and unstable things, rather than fixed and reliable essences. Instead of being solidly ‘there’ in the real world of fact and experience, they are ‘socially constructed,’ that is, dependent on social and political forces and on shifting ways of seeing and thinking. In philosophical terms, all these are *contingent* categories (denoting a status which is temporary, provisional, ‘circumstance dependent’) rather than *absolute* ones (that is, fixed, immutable, etc.). Hence, no overarching fixed ‘truths’ can ever be established.

-Peter Barry

One thing we can be sure of, as Bob Dylan sang, is that “the times, they are a changin’.” Yet the old adage goes, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Changing with the times seems inevitable, yet at the same time it is a personal choice whether we will go along willingly, shuffle our feet, or dig in our heels in resistance to the change. As Tama J. Kieves observes, “We live in crackling times. Change seems to electrify the air, in our individual lives and in the world... For most of us going through change, fear pounds on our door. Yet this discomfort brings an invitation to awaken our passion and aliveness as never before. Something larger wants to express itself in our lives. Pain often nudges our growth or illuminates where we have been holding back our true selves. Most of us seem to need a pinch of desperation to awaken our honesty and inspiration. As poet David Whyte says, ‘Absent the edge, we drown in numbness’ (58). Kieves sees change as a positive thing because it opens up opportunities for personal growth. Many of us never answer the door of fear, and the result is a dulling of our passion and aliveness. The more times we ignore the knocking, the duller our lives seem to get as we “drown in numbness.” Change leaves many of us clinging to our belongings and our beliefs in white-knuckled resistance. Sometimes we would almost rather stay in a bad situation than change and face the unknown. Stephen

Levine comments similarly on change, also seeing it as an opportunity. “Can we think of any pain in our life that was not caused by change? But when we deeply experience this flux we don’t recoil in fear of what might be coming but rather begin to open to how things are. We don’t get lost in fatalistic imaginings or “nothing matters” nihilism, but instead recognize that everything matters equally” (15).

For better or worse, we have come to a time when previously delineated boundaries and institutions often feel artificial, where the lines drawn seem to connect things at least as much as they divide them. It all depends on our perspective. We can attribute this phenomenon of interconnection to whatever cause we like—globalization, the erosion and evolution of social categories, the transformative power of the internet—but the fact remains that, for many, life and identity exceed the parameters of easy classification, categorization, or compartmentalization. As Americans, we have had change hurled upon us left and right over the last half century. Yet it sometimes doesn't look as if things are changing for the better. It seems obvious at this point that many of our culture’s old, failsafe beliefs and assumptions are no longer working, at least not for the majority of us. We can see this evidenced in the decrease in health and happiness of those around us and ourselves, the dissolution of intimacy between partners, within families, and in communities, and the disillusionment of many with the way things are. We have learned as a nation that some of the beliefs we had taken for granted are no longer true.

For one, the assumption that “if you work hard and play by the rules, you will succeed” has proven itself false. A small portion of the nation's people control a majority of the nation's wealth. Many of us have unwittingly become serfs in an insidious



psychological feudal system fueled by large corporations. Our failure to achieve and live the American dream is construed as our own fault rather than a failure of the system itself. The belief is that whatever you desire—wealth, success, fame, love, or a great body—is there for the taking. This does not jibe with the real-life experiences of most, however. For many, life does not feel like an endless string of opportunity for growth and achievement, and the notion that “anything is possible” rings false.

The assumption that “you are safe at home” has also proven untrue. Instead, it often feels like we are coming home to a second job, fraught with responsibilities, conflicting personalities, and usually under (re)paid (in kindness, appreciation, or shared good times) labor. The dramas of the family can feel just as unsafe and unhealthy as any that might happen outside the home. Home may be where the heart is, but at times it is where the heartache is as well. For many, home has become representative of failures, whether that failure takes the form of intimacy, sex, status, fulfillment, respect, love, or ambition. *When, we ask ourselves, did my life become this?*

Our assumptions about gender and sex have certainly been shaken up over the last few decades. The opportunities afforded to women in particular have expanded dramatically, such that we have come to see women hold top positions in many fields. This has led to a dramatic expansion of gender roles, amending the categories associated with female and the feminine, as well as the male and the masculine. Gender roles for both sexes have slackened in many ways (though perhaps they have become more rigid in others). These changes have impacted sex quite profoundly. A puritanical shame and hush-hush surrounding sex has remained part of our national identity, but its shadow self—the porn star as pop icon (Pamela Anderson, Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian)—is

widely viewed by young women today as an acceptable vehicle into the public limelight. Feminist values, coupled with self-help aisles at Borders and the normalization of porn in mainstream culture, have left no stone unturned in terms of exploring sex as a practice, as a communication tool, and even as an instrument of power. Beyond Our Bodies, Our Selves and Revolution from Within, women's exploration of their sexuality has grown to include their partner in the discovery, as well as solo time. These days, women might more readily explore The Joy of Sex than The Joy of Cooking.

In the academy in particular, assumptions about gender and sex have evolved dramatically. Gender was determined, along with race, to be socially constructed much more so than biologically determined (Kessler 1994). This change in perception mandated the birth of intersectionality as a method for navigating and negotiating the complex interactions of various categories of identification, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, age, etc. (Crenshaw 1995). Scholars also realized the importance of understanding masculinities as it became more apparent that masculinity was not monolithic (Gardiner). Methodologies that include qualitative research, personal narrative, and feminist ideology have emerged and been found useful in myriad disciplines. Women have become a perfectly acceptable subject of study, the personal has taken its place as political, and the larger fight for the inclusion of women in the canon and the workplace has generally ceased, the battle won.

Assumptions too about race have evolved both within the academy and in mainstream culture. While Martin Luther King Jr.'s inspiring dream has not yet been fully realized, we can concede that bits and pieces of it do occur far more often now than previously, moments where we can see through and beyond the lens of race, as if it really

didn't signify much of anything anymore. If we choose to view the occupation of positions of power and prestige by people of color as a sure indicator of successful progress toward racial equality, we have achieved that. But it is difficult to overlook the realities of poor education (often caused by allegedly “race-neutral” city zoning laws) and limited opportunities (if only limited by one's education or lack thereof) that pervade Black communities, as well as the increased threat of imprisonment for a disproportionate percentage of Black men.

Overall, the deep-rooted assumption of “the superiority of whites and the inferiority of Blacks” seems to be relatively unchanged, however. The select few African-Americans who make it to the top of their given field are seen as “the cream of the crop,” the rare exception (perhaps W.E.B. DuBois' prophetic “talented tenth?”), having risen in stature assumedly because of their perceived merit and their ability to transcend and/or manipulate the class implications often conflated with race. The rest of us black folk, the lore seems to imply, simply do not have what it takes to succeed. In contemporary American culture, we have witnessed dramatic success for a select few people of color, with the vast majority still struggling from within the invisible birdcage of interlocking oppressions. Black Americans are left to navigate schools, jobs, and their related social interactions with this subtext of either being exceptional or not having what it takes to succeed. This leaves us at the mercy of a positive (or at least neutral) judgment from those controlling the keys to important gateways of opportunities and advancement, for it is these individuals who confer power and access. The debilitating result for many is failure—failure to transcend race, class, and educational difference, but also failure to

succeed, failure to seduce the gatekeepers and rise to the top, failure to live our dreams and our highest visions of ourselves.

No one attributes the success of select African-Americans to the contemporary assumption about Blacks, namely, that “a few of them are all right.” The rest, it seems, remain in the primitive savagery and presumed inferiority of the Jim Crow era. The overall portrayal of Black men as violent, criminal, and sexually potent still shapes our nation's beliefs, and in doing so creates a mold of black masculinity that is difficult to break. While women have benefit from the loosening of gender roles, men of all races seem to still be at the mercy of very rigid strictures regarding masculinity. For Black men, however, this is particularly devastating, because the limited range of available expressions of masculinity are often seen as directives given from within a multi-dimensional system of bias combining the prison-industrial complex, the educational system, the police and judicial systems, the media, and popular culture. All of these sectors of our culture are predisposed to disempower, ostracize, villainize, and dehumanize Black men.

Many of the caricatured assumptions about Black women still exist as well. The sexualized Jezebel caricature of Black women is still apparent in popular culture, shaking her ass (but watching herself) in music videos. She has also crossed over to “reality” TV, where the sexy, angry, Black bitch is reproduced through the skillful storytelling the editors of those shows do, leaving any deeper images of Black femininity on the cutting room floor. The asexual/ sexual mammy still lurks in the homes of wealthy white women, as well as in corporate and government offices. She might be as Jamaica Kincaid was—a young Caribbean woman living with and caring for an affluent family.

A walk around any of the more affluent neighborhoods in New York City on a nice afternoon will reveal many brown women pushing white children in strollers. But there are more metaphorical ways that this caricature is also evoked. For example, the idea of Condoleezza Rice in bed with George W. Bush intrigued Americans both politically and physically for a time. Many were more than willing to impose a traditional silhouette of interracial interaction over their relationship, rendering her his beloved mammy, a caregiver taking care of him and his family in the Big/White House, offering him her body in illicit sex, all the while feigning a wholesome devotion devoid of sexual longing. Black men of a certain stature have at times felt entitled to the same privileges of care and sexual availability from the Black women on their staff or in their workplace. America was shocked by the words and actions of Clarence Thomas toward Anita Hill. But more shocking were the ways in which Thomas was defended by empathetic men. Fifteen years later, Anucha Browne Sanders brings similar charges against Isaiah Thomas, head coach of the New York Knicks. While titillating, the story did little to raise awareness of or interest in the larger underlying issues at stake. One can only imagine how many women in less prominent positions face similar degradation every day.

In the face of such sad reiterations of stereotypical caricature, however, I can also see and appreciate the widened variety of options for self expression available for African-American women over the past few decades. A very small, but still significant example of this is Black hair. Black women now have a wide variety of hairstyles available to us and considered acceptable for the workplace, from weaves to braids to natural styles like dreads and afros to chemical straighteners like relaxers. This may,

however, only be indicative of the co-opting of Black women into the corporate machine as a target for consumption rather than actual transcendence, for with more diverse Black hair-styles came more Black hair-care products. Even at my tender age, I can remember when major chain drug stores didn't carry any products for Black hair, even if they were in the middle of a Black neighborhood. But, as Lisa Respers France acknowledges, "Far from being superficial, black hair and its care goes well beyond the multibillion-dollar industry it has become and is deeply rooted in African-American identity and culture" (CNN). One visit to a Black hair show and one must attest that creativity and imagination abound in terms of re-creating and celebrating the uniqueness of Black women's hair and culture, both of which no longer have much interest in emulating the constructions of femininity of and for white women. The hair shows, the church hat culture of African American women, and the many dread and natural hair websites and blogs were thriving even while white America was convinced that "The Rachel" was the choice in terms of hairstyle.

Technology has perhaps most dramatically impacted our assumptions by integrating itself quite thoroughly into our day-to-day lives, and connecting us all in new and important ways. There really do seem to be only six degrees of separation left, from Kevin Bacon or anyone else. We can talk, tweet, text, email, skype, or send photos or mp3s to distant corners of the planet. I can invite everyone to the (digital) revolution, though the invitation might end up in a spam folder. Many people have made room in their life for online social networking on MySpace and Facebook (which a friend of mine suggested they consolidate into a time-saving combo of "MyFace," though I might prefer "Spacebook"). Technology itself even seems to be moving faster, collapsing the time it

took to invent and proliferate the cellular phone, the digital calendar/Palm Pilot, caller ID, the digital camera, the hand-held gaming system, the internet, the GPS system, YouTube, and the iPod into the blink-of-an-eye combination of all of them in the iPhone and similar devices. We can now download movies directly to our television, computer, mp3 player, or phone, which is easier than getting movies in our mailbox from Netflix, which was easier than going to the local Blockbuster, which has only been around since the middle of the 80's, anyway, before which we had to actually go to a movie theater to see a film. In a time when technology makes us instantly accessible to others, and makes so much accessible to us at any given moment, it is difficult to stay in the present moment.

The past 25 years witnessed small but cumulatively significant steps toward the racial integration of the United States, giant leaps in medicine and technology, the birth (and death?) of the MTV generation (with subsequent marketing strategies), and the growing up of the baby boomer generation (with subsequent marketing strategies). We have seen the birth and evolution of reality TV, the death of what at least gave the pretense of being nonpartisan news. We have observed a boom in individualism among intellectual and liberal circles—away from Communism and away from the communal. These days, community and group-consciousness seem more often to be mistrusted than idealized. But this is met by the strong counter-force of fundamentalist Christians (as well as other fundamentalist religious groups) in America. Regardless of religious, political, or intellectual differences, however, the overall contemporary expression of individualism is underscored by a bizarre undercurrent of conformity in everything from the dress to the dreams of Americans. Even counter-cultures seem commodified these days. You can get fake Birkenstocks at Walmart and blue hair dye at CVS.

Yes, times have changed, but it often does not feel for the better.

### CORNEL WEST'S NIHILISM

There is a meaninglessness in contemporary American culture that stems at least in part from the proliferation of material goods in our lives. Meaning here might be seen as non-monetary worth or value. Meaning seems to be imparted onto objects as we become more aware of them as connectors between us and others. It comes from a heightened awareness of the object itself, and a deeper relationship with that object. Objects can simply be things that populate our world, or they can connect us to our family, culture, nation, or planet. A sweater given to a man by his late grandmother might have more value to him than one made of the finest cashmere. A fish that a boy caught himself might taste that much more delicious. A woman might be more dismayed at losing her original wedding band than had she lost a more expensive ring. These things are valuable because they have a meaning imparted by the individual that stretches beyond mere function.

As Cornel West mentions in Race Matters, "American mass culture presented models of the good life principally in terms of conspicuous consumption and hedonistic indulgence" (55). Americans frequently buy indiscriminately, thinking we are entitled to anything that we can swipe a card to purchase. "I shop, therefore I am" is more self-evident these days than the Cartesian logic it parodies. 43% of American families spend more than they earn (MSN Money). Many people want for nothing, yet still want more things—or at least different, more expensive things. The more expensive the thing, the



better it is assumed to be. There is a widely held belief that there is a product that will create a better life and-- more explicitly-- that money creates real and lasting happiness.

This explosion of consumption has been coupled with the proliferation of corporate culture into all walks of life. This combination of the passionate, not at all trivial pursuit of material items for consumption, paired with the incorporation and trademarking of our daily lives, is partially responsible for everything from the over-medicalizing and over-medicating of American people (courtesy of Pfizer and Eli Lilly) to the erosion of the American political culture (thanks to the generous donations of lobbyists for corporate interests). Our practices around consumption serve to reinforce the idea that we are not connected to others, that we are isolated. Material items are used to display freedom, to carve out freedom, to perform freedom—where freedom is seen as unlimited access with no responsibility. But what to make of this freedom- is it freedom from anonymity? To be anonymous in America today is to be powerless, voiceless, trapped. So why conform if one's true (hidden) goal to be peerless, groupless, representative only of oneself? Why does our society privilege conformity, then challenge us to stand out while still conforming?

Our consumptive practices with food are among the most disturbing. It has gotten such that activities are closely associated with the foods they offer us—popcorn at movies, hot dogs at baseball games, cotton candy at carnivals, to name a few. We as a nation are so obsessed with consumption that one of our largest industries is diet and health-related products—we even consume things that are supposed to either block, inhibit, or negate our consumption! This type of food consumption has led to health problems for many. Our diet often does little to offer us balanced nutrition through

reasonable quantities of food, nor does it stabilize our energy or mood. Movies like “Supersize Me” and “Fast Food Nation” demonstrate the grotesque in contemporary American cuisine.

Yet sometimes it is hard to believe that there are other possibilities available to us in any given moment. With our food traveling an average of 1500 miles before it reaches our plates, Americans are often so far removed from the production of the goods we consume that it feels virtually impossible to instill in that consumption some type of meaning. We often have no idea where our clothes are made, where our strawberries are grown, where our food is prepared or packaged. We don’t know who makes our clothes, who picks our strawberries, who prepares and packages our food. We have no clue what language they speak, if they are treated kindly, whether or not they go to bed hungry or fed.

Our society seems to be plagued at this juncture with the nihilism that Cornel West described in Race Matters and reprised in Democracy Matters.

*Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness and (most important) lovelessness (22, his emphasis).*

The meaninglessness that West sees in American culture stems from the prosaic repetition, the day in-day out, the over and over, the same old thing. In other words, we have cultivated practices that do little to enhance our happiness, health, or well-being. Without the change that Kieves described earlier, we drown in the numbness of same old-same old. This type of repetition creates a feeling of meaninglessness because we are not seeing the change implicit in each moment, the power, nor the beauty. We are not seeing

things as they are. We frequently fix something or someone with a label (ugly/ fun/ boring/ beautiful) and do not bother to notice and observe changes in that thing or person from moment to moment over time. Many American rituals are secular, empty repetitions that do little more than wear grooves into our brains. We often mistake the rituals for the meaning itself—many see holidays such as Valentine’s Day or Christmas not as opportunities to show our loved ones how we feel or celebrate the birth of Christ, but as mandatory shopping times. This meaninglessness is not often discussed as such, but it is lived and felt.

The hopelessness comes from not knowing how to change our situation(s), not feeling in control. Although we as Americans have more freedom than many peoples on the planet right now, many of us don’t *feel* free. We feel constrained by obligations—many financial, others professional, some emotional— to stay the same course, to not change, to not explore other aspects of who we are. Our culture romanticizes love and success, which sends most young people scrambling after both. It is only once the love is lived, complete with its moments of loneliness and hurt, resentment and boredom, or the success is achieved, complete with its moments of competition and conniving, insincerity and insecurity, that we notice that we never got to see what “happily ever after” actually looks like. Many of us want more and better, but we can’t seem to get it.

Lovelessness, the third component of West’s definition of nihilism, is the result of not feeling connected to/interconnected with everything around us. In spite of the technological ease with which we can connect, our thoughts and choices frequently leave us feeling very isolated and alone, longing for human connection. “The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world.

Life without meaning, hope and love breeds a cold-hearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others” (23).

In Democracy Matters, West complicates this hopeless, meaningless, loveless state he described in Race Matters, linking it to a cultural ideology of “free-market fundamentalism” and observing that:

The dangerous dogma of free-market fundamentalism turns our attention away from schools to prisons, from workers’ conditions to profit margins, from health clinics to high-tech facial surgeries, from civic associations to pornographic Internet sites, and from children’s care to strip clubs. The fundamentalism of the market puts a premium on the activities of buying and selling, consuming and taking, promoting and advertising, and devalues community, compassionate charity, and the improvement of the general quality of life. How ironic that in America we’ve moved so quickly from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Let Freedom Ring!” to “Bling! Bling!”—as if freedom were reducible to simply having material toys, as dictated by free-market fundamentalism (5).

This is an interesting point that West makes—in American culture right now, the individual’s needs are placed above those of the community. While this is true, the individual’s deeper needs are fulfilled only with the approval of the community. The individual lives in fear of the group, a fear that is taught through the culture, rather than in living in symbiotic harmony. Alexis de Tocqueville—whose work Cornel West calls “The most powerful and poignant work ever written about America” (45)—describes the insidious way that our culture threatens our individualism. "Under the private culture monopoly it is a fact that 'tyranny leaves the body free and directs its attack at the soul. The ruler no longer says: You must think as I do or die. He says: You are free not to think as I do; your life, your property, everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us'" (133). By attacking our souls, this brand of tyranny has left us a

nation of isolated individuals who fear expressing our individuality, a fear used against us by the multi-media marketing machine to sell everything from hamburgers to homes.

We want to be unique at the very moment that we realize its impossibility. We settle for exploring the limited number of combinations and permutations of what is seen as acceptable within these cultural confines. Our consumption, then, becomes a method of differentiation, a key component in our identity. Work becomes a necessary evil for sustaining one's life-style, money becomes the vehicle through which one may construct an image. West feels that the dogma of free-market fundamentalism "redefines the terms of what we should be striving for in life, glamorizing material gain, narcissistic pleasure, and the pursuit of narrow individualistic preoccupations" (4). It is precisely this "should"—a dictate from outside of our self—that takes away our freedom. Likewise, it is this reliance on culturally pre-determined markers of success or happiness that rob us of our power to be Self-defined. We are told that we are free, then goaded into participating in American culture through pre-approved, corporate-sponsored avenues.

American lives are now seen in terms of numbers, demographics, and dollar signs. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno assert that "the universal criterion of merit is the amount of 'conspicuous production,' of blatant cash investment" (124). In America, this idea can be applied to products of culture (movies, for instance, where the amount spent on making the movie is meant to indicate its merit to moviegoers, and its gross at the box office is intended to indicate its value as art), as well as people as products of culture (the amount of money spent on one's education, for instance, coded in the name-brand of the school, is meant to indicate one's merit to prospective employers and one's entry into a fraternal bond with other graduates of the school already in the workforce).

It becomes easy to see what Americans view as important and what we view as unimportant by examining how much money we give to energize it.

We prefer to see ourselves as being the controller rather than the controlled when it comes to consumerist culture. But as Thomas Merton, a Catholic monastic contemplative and writer, remarks in Contemplation in a World of Action:

Though we still pay lip service to the old myth that what is good for the market is good for everybody, as a matter of fact the development of new products and the marketing of commodities has really little or nothing to do with man's real good and his real needs. The aim is not the good of man but higher profits. Instead of production being for the sake of man, which, while proclaiming its humanism and pretending indeed to glorify man as never before, is really a systematic and almost cynical affront to man's humanity. Man is a consumer who exists in order to keep business going by consuming its products whether he wants them or not, needs them or not, likes them or not. But in order to fulfill his role he must come to believe it. Hence his role as consumer takes the place of his identity (if any). He is then reduced to a state of permanent nonentity and tutelage in which his more or less abstract presence in society is tolerated only if he conforms, remains a smoothly functioning automaton, an uncomplaining and anonymous element in the great reality of the market (31).

How did our consumption become our identity? How did we get to this point where lives can be appraised? Nowadays it feels as if we can get an estimate on our self-worth by plugging some numbers (SAT scores, GPA's, net worth, zip code, age, weight, clothing size, credit rating) into some arbitrary and unarticulated formula. Do these numbers give meaning to life? Horkheimer and Adorno claim that numbers do give a certain meaning, in that they help group people into markets. "Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type" (123). Our numbers (clothing size, age, income, zip code) help determine what type of consumer we will be

and what type of lives we will lead. This numbers game is symptomatic of the (false) myth of America as a meritocracy; it is also indicative of the confusing and often contradictory rhetoric of conformity and individualism which pervades American thought.

### JEAN BAUDRILLARD'S AMERICA

America, land of the (buy one, get one) free, home of the brave (consumer). America is shockingly beautiful and poetic in its splendor, opportunity, and power. But contemporary American culture has come to a grotesque point that flouts even the best of the flawed ideals of its founding fathers. In his book America, postmodernist scholar Jean Baudrillard shares his caustic perspective of American hyperreality, gleaned from a coast-to-coast road trip through the deserts and cities of the United States. Baudrillard portrays America similarly to West, devoid of meaning, hope and love (a result perhaps, for Baudrillard, of his postmodernist underpinnings). He observes the conflicting ideas upon which this nation is based:

...there is a violent contrast here, in this country, between the growing abstractness of a nuclear universe and a primary, visceral, unbounded vitality, springing not from rootedness, but from the lack of roots, a metabolic vitality, in sex and bodies, as well as in work and in buying and selling. Deep down, the US, with its space, its technological refinement, its bluff good conscience, even in those spaces which it opens up for simulation, it is the only remaining primitive society (7).

This “primary, visceral, unbounded vitality” sounds to me like spirituality (that is, a concept of spirit, life, or energy), but one that springs from “sex and bodies,” “work,” and “buying and selling.” This vitality Baudrillard describes is uprooted, a belief system lacking in an understanding of the connections between us all, other than in terms of the

connections of “sex and bodies” and “buying and selling.” Thus, Americans become Baudrillard’s noble savages, a pagan culture for whom a dehumanizing form of capitalism has become vital. In his essay “What is Primitivism?” John Fleiss gives a definition of primitivism that seems more relevant to this century than the Enlightenment era in which it was penned. “Perhaps the easiest way to understand primitivism is as a counterweight to the pull of technology. Primitivism as a whole is the positioning of a counter-force to the thrust of technological progress. Given the integrated nature of technological development, primitivism may be the only human-oriented response to technology that goes far enough not to be subsumed by it” (Primitivism). One can see this brand of American primitivism as a response to the hyper-technological, hyper-scientific, postmodern disconnect and discomfort brought about by our unique history and circumstance. Our primitive god is money, our primitive religion is science, and our primitive mantra is “progress.”

Baudrillard’s America is a digital snapshot of an anemic nation. This image is used to illustrate and back his claim that the human experience is a simulation of reality rather than reality itself. According to him, modern society has replaced reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and it has become so reliant on simulacra that it has lost contact with the real world on which the simulacra are based. America is hyperreal in Baudrillard’s eyes because it has blurred the line between mass media and real life, fiction and reality. In an essay which examines the effects of technology and capitalism on culture entitled "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Horkheimer and Adorno say that "real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies" (126). Baudrillard claims that "in America cinema is true because it is the whole



of space, the whole way of life that are cinematic. The break between the two, the abstraction which we deplore, does not exist: life is cinema" (101). Americans want to solve all their problems, save the day, win the race, get the girl/boy, and be the casually affable center of attention—just like the plastic stars of the formulaic movies they know and lovingly, unquestioningly consume. This should not be construed as narcissism, however, according to Baudrillard. "What develops around the video or stereo culture is not a narcissistic imaginary, but an effect of frantic self-referentiality, a short circuit which immediately hooks up like with like, and, in so doing, emphasizes their surface intensity and deeper meaninglessness" (37).

Jean Baudrillard's America offers a poignant, if romantic, outsider's perception. Yet his exterior subjectivity does not detract from his sad but valid commentary on America. "America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too" (28). Cornel West's depiction of America in mirrors Baudrillard's some respects. Yet West attributes America's paradox not to postmodernism, but to the impossibility of its original dream- to build a free nation on the backs of the unfree. West writes:

The fundamental paradox of American democracy in particular is that it gallantly emerged as a fragile democratic experiment over and against an oppressive British empire—and aided by the French and Dutch empires—even while harboring its own imperial visions of westward expansion, with more than 20 percent of its population consisting of enslaved Africans. In short, we are a democracy of rebels who nonetheless re-created in our own nation many of the oppressions we had rebelled against (43).

Perhaps Baudrillard's hyperreal America is a result at least in part of America's self-assured utopic vision of itself being marred by the hypocrisy of its actions toward non-white peoples. As West displays the complex contradictions of revolutionary leaders who were also slaveholders, like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, he asserts:

The most painful truth in the making of America—a truth that shatters all pretensions to innocence and undercuts all efforts of denial—is that *the enslavement of Africans and the imperial expansion over indigenous peoples and their lands were undeniable preconditions for the possibility of American democracy*. There could be no such thing as an experiment in American democracy without these racist and imperial foundations (45, West's emphasis).

White America was asserting its utopian nature at the same time that it was committing genocide against the indigenous peoples and enslaving Africans. It was declaring its freedom at the same time that it was robbing others of their freedom. This practice has extended over time into our foreign policy, forcing our growth and profit at the expense of others. West reminds us that America “truly has become an empire—a military giant, a financial haven, a political and cultural colossus in the world. The U.S. military budget accounts for over 40 percent of the world's total military spending. It is six times the size of the military spending of the number two nation (Russia) and more than that of the next twenty-three nations combined.” (59) Everything and everyone American is huge, literally and figuratively, taking up more space, requiring more attention, hogging what is available. We are the free world, but we are as reckless with our freedom as a nation as we are unconvinced of our individual freedom.

Baudrillard, by contrast, constructs America as the prototype for a history-less society barraged by signifiers and messages, all centering around the mighty dollar which has self-realized into the "God" in whom "we trust." He concludes plainly, "This country

is without hope," (123) but I think that meaning is what is missing from many lives in America. The Last Poets sang, "'Put more meaning into everything you do. More meaning into loving, eating and living and there will be more meaning in you, which means everything!" I believe that our individual actions and choices can impact the greater whole. Even seemingly small choices—like making buying locally grown produce a priority over saving money—can have a profound impact.

This country is not without hope. It has been, perhaps, in some respects, without meaning... and direction... and dignity. "Dignity is as compelling a human need as food or sex, and yet here is a society which casts the mass of its people in limbo, never satisfying their hunger for dignity, nor yet so explicitly depriving them that the task of proving dignity seems an unreasonable burden, and revolt against the society the only reasonable alternative" (Sennett & Cobb 191). In constantly looking outside ourselves for satisfaction, we are less able to appreciate the abundance and meaning that already exists. But there are possible meanings and directions that we might adopt and pursue as individuals, communities, and a society so that we might live differently, fully, responsibly, with love, dignity, spirituality, acceptance, community and peace at the forefront of our existences. Rather than suffering the maelstrom of meaninglessness that postmodernism thinks into being, we can each choose to impart meaning. Whether we realize this or not, it is what we already do.

## THE ISSUE OF BELIEFS

As I said earlier, it is important that we examine our own beliefs as individuals. Rather than pointing outside ourselves at what is wrong, we can begin to make peace inside ourselves through the type of non-judgmental observation I described in the chapter on beginner's mind. We can begin to see how our culture and our own individual beliefs are connected. As Krishnamurti remarks, "What we must realize is that we are not only conditioned by environment, but that we *are* the environment—we are not something apart from it. Our thoughts and responses are conditioned by values which society, of which we are a part, has imposed on us (56-7). Gloria Karpinski puts it thus in Barefoot on Holy Ground: Twelve Lessons In Spiritual Craftsmanship: "Our whole consciousness, expressed through the body, emotions, and mind, is in constant process with our many environments—the immediate ones, the remembered ones, and the ones we fantasize" (84). The repercussions of this are significant, for what we can be and do is limited (more often than not) by our beliefs and their corresponding actions. Karpinski writes in Where Two Worlds Touch: Spiritual Rites of Passage, "Whatever you believe is true—for you. We do not act outside our perception of reality. Whatever shape and structure our belief system takes on any subject is our "form." Our forms allow us to express ourselves within the parameters of whatever we perceive ourselves to be. *Good, bad, possible, impossible*—these concepts are meaningful to us to the degree that we believe them" (73). By examining our beliefs, we can see more clearly the ways in which we are complicit with our culture's morés and practices. We can get to know the ways in which we have been seduced or coerced into participation and compliance with societal

norms. We are then better able to pragmatically choose for ourselves if these endorsed beliefs and practices are actually serving us. Intimately understanding our beliefs takes away their power over us, freeing up space in which we can choose our beliefs with awareness. In this section I try to illuminate how beliefs function so that we might have more insight into them.

Richard Gillett quips that “It is more work to maintain a belief than a car” (53). We don’t notice the work that we are doing, however, because it is mostly automatic and unconscious. Gillett breaks down the things that we do in order to “keep our precious beliefs intact.” He describes how we make life choices that both reflect and confirm our beliefs about ourselves and our beliefs about others. He contends, “To some extent we choose situations and people that fit our perceptions” (53). He gives two examples, “A woman who believes that change is dangerous will choose secure relationships and a secure working situation so that she does not have to test out change. A man who believes he is stupid will choose manual work or repetitive mental work requiring little creativity or initiative—in this way he never develops his mind and is able to retain his belief” (53). These people he describes never test the validity of their beliefs. Instead, they choose actions and situations that are based upon their beliefs and help maintain them.

For example, I’m sure we all know (or perhaps are) someone who is always the victim in every story told. Even in stories where the person seems to come out triumphant, s/he insists that s/he was somehow victimized. Energy medicine pioneer and author Caroline Myss has this to say about the origins of victimhood:

Being a Victim is a common fear. The Victim archetype may manifest the first time you don’t get what you want or need; are abused by a parent,

playmate, sibling, or teacher; or are accused of or punished for something you didn't do. You may suppress your outrage at the injustice if the victimizer is bigger and more powerful than you. But at a certain point you discover a perverse advantage to being the victim (116).

This advantage is the reason that the victim often clings to and insists upon that identity. S/he goes to great lengths to maintain the role, filtering out experiences and situations that contradict his/her belief in his/her victimhood. S/he might remember the same situation differently than others who were present. S/he takes the truth and manipulates it to support his/her beliefs. Much of this is done unconsciously, or on a continuum of awareness. Steven Covey writes about this in Principle-Centered Leadership, a follow-up book to his wildly popular Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. He places victimhood at the low end of a spectrum measuring effectiveness, with self-awareness at the high end. He sees victimhood as a lack of self-awareness. He writes:

At the upper end of the continuum toward increasing effectiveness is self-awareness: "I know my tendencies, I know the scripts or programs that are in me, but I am not those scripts. I can rewrite my scripts." You are aware that you are the creative force in your life. You are not the victim of conditions or conditioning. You can choose your response to any situation, to any person. Between what happens to you and your response is a degree of freedom. And the more you exercise that freedom, the larger it will become. As you work in your circle of influence and exercise that freedom, gradually you will stop being a "hot reactor" (meaning there's little separation between stimulus and response) and start being a cool, responsible chooser—no matter what your genetic makeup, no matter how you were raised, no matter what your childhood experiences were or what the environment is. In your freedom to choose your response lies the power to achieve growth and happiness (42).

Viewing victimhood in this way acknowledges that while there may be real or imagined limitations existing in the world, we cannot know for sure how much the world is actually oppressing us until we stop oppressing ourselves. For surely we can name at

least a few people who have come from circumstances far worse (in our judgment) than our own and have somehow soared far higher than we ever imagined possible for ourselves. We can attribute it to genius or luck, if that serves us. But it is also possible to see these people as able to transcend and transgress the limits enforced by others in order to realize the potential within themselves by simply refusing to believe what the world tells them about themselves.

This type of belief maintenance is done not just with victims but with a variety of identity roles. We look around for evidence that supports our beliefs, and look right past any information that doesn't, or even contradicts them. We see, by and large, what we want to see. Thus does a belief become a self-fulfilling prophecy. While the phrase "self-fulfilling prophecy" smacks of some sort of hocus-pocus, Gillett explains that it is simply the way in which our pre-existing thought causes us to treat others as if our thought were already true. He contends that it is actually our thoughts and actions that call forth in the other the very behavior or quality we were guarding ourselves against.

The self-fulfilling prophecy of the man who believes "women are manipulative" goes something like this: "Women are manipulative, therefore I won't trust her." Because she feels treated with suspicion, she keeps her distance from him. Intimacy therefore disappears and they are left with a relationship of emotional dishonesty and mental manipulation. The part she takes in that process proves that "women are manipulative." Of course, people are hardly ever aware of the mechanism behind the self-fulfilling prophecy. Events happen that seem to vindicate the belief-- the man *does really* act like a brute and the woman *does really* manipulate, and both are unaware of the strings *they* pulled to create or manifest that reality in the other (52).

Although we do not notice our own role in bringing our self-fulfilling prophecies to fruition, Gillett argues that we "mold, select from, exaggerate, or distort the past to

make it support our current belief. The process is so automatic, however, that we do not even realize our own bias” (55).

We also rationalize contradictory evidence when it does arise. “Rationalization,” Gillett explains, “Is the last ditch attempt, when all else has failed, to make the aberrant world fit the confines of a belief system” (59). We use the imagined future to support our stance, often giving reasons why “it’ll never work” or “it’ll never happen.” We use our imaginations against ourselves to manufacture an undesirable or impossible outcome. We often assume our reality will remain the same into perpetuity. The imagined result, Gillett maintains, directly impacts what we believe is possible in the present. If I believe “I am never going to get out of debt,” I will not bother to attempt to try by changing my spending habits. If I believe “I am never going to lose weight,” I will feel like it doesn’t really matter if I eat this donut now. This keeps us from changing, keeps us stuck in the same cycles.

Our beliefs also impact the future by filtering the past. Eckhart Tolle, a prominent spiritual teacher explains how the past functions to limit beliefs in the present. He refers to the egoic mind, or the mind wrapped up in “self”-consciousness. He writes:

The egoic mind is completely conditioned by the past. Its conditioning is twofold: It consists of content and structure. In the case of a child who cries in deep suffering because his toy has been taken away, the toy represents content. It is interchangeable with any other content, any other toy or object. The content you identify with is conditioned by your environment, your upbringing, and surrounding culture. Whether the child is rich or poor, whether the toy is a piece of wood shaped like an animal or a sophisticated electronic gadget makes no difference as far as the suffering caused by its loss is concerned. The reason why such acute suffering occurs is concealed in the word ‘my,’ and it is structural (34).



Tolle explains an important force at play in all of these manipulations, “One of the most basic mind structures through which the ego comes into existence is identification. The word ‘identification’ is derived from the Latin word *idem*, meaning ‘same’ and *facere*, which means ‘to make.’ So when I identify with something, I ‘make it the same.’ The same as what? The same as I. I endow it with a sense of self, and so it becomes part of my ‘identity’” (35). This identification is ultimately what causes our suffering when we are painfully reminded that we *are not* the thing we have convinced ourselves that we *are*. Whatever the identification, whether with a material thing like a car or a house, or with a title or occupation, or with a role such as mother or doctor, or an emotional state like grief or depression, or with one’s race or gender, religion or sexual preference—it is ultimately a construction of our mind, as Tolle asserts, in which we make the thing the same as us. The deep identification with a label or role causes the person to consistently interpret whatever content s/he is given such that it fits into the pre-determined structure that is in keeping with his beliefs about himself. *We become* in our mind these things that are really little more than practices that we have chosen.

Tolle explains, “What kind of things you identify with will vary from person to person according to age, gender, income, social class, fashion, the surrounding culture, and so on. *What* you identify with is all to do with content; whereas, the unconscious compulsion to identify is structural” (36). This idea of content as separate and apart from structure is a useful one. It shows the mechanisms at work so that a victim, for example, can maintain the structure of his victimhood while changing the content to suit the occasion. So closely identified is the victim with his victimhood that he often does not see the structure, only the content, which in his mind justifies or vindicates his thoughts

or actions. It is by examining the structure—the way in which the victim seeks out situations in which he will be victimized, manipulates the elements in the situation to render himself the victim, or only notices situations that confirm his victimhood—that the victim can stop looking at the content and start looking at himself. Victimhood is a locus of power. There is tremendous power in articulating what is not possible, what I can't do, what is not available to me. Many of the prisons in life are self constructed, based upon our firm reliance on limiting beliefs.

### THE ADVANTAGES OF LIMITING BELIEFS

There are many advantages to maintaining limiting beliefs. One advantage is what Gillett calls “the ego advantage.” This refers to the way that “with great dexterity of mind, any belief, however narrow, can be converted into a personal superiority” (44). Gillett contends that we are able to take our weaknesses and turn them—in our own minds—into strengths. He discusses how we are able to see ourselves as superior to others based on a structure that perceives a quality in them as a flaw or disagreeable or negative, then views the very same quality in ourselves as positive. We do this by sugar-coating the trait linguistically and making it in line with our beliefs about what is worthwhile or positive, recasting what we have shunned in another as a prized trait in ourselves. Gillett provides some wonderfully clear examples:

Take the situation of the man who has difficulty in crying or being tender: It is usually much easier for him to think to himself “I’m a man”; “I’m not weak”; “I’m strong”; “I can take it,” than it is for him to admit his own difficulty with, or even disapproval of, tenderness. It is easier to say: “I know what’s best for me” than to admit you are frightened of change because you have an old belief that change is dangerous. It is easier to consider “I am above money” or “money is dirty” than to face the possibility that you cannot successfully sell goods because you do not

really believe you are good enough. Quite often underlying beliefs are lightly hidden beneath a sugar-coating of ego, which makes the belief palatable (44).

Thus, our inability to keep a job is seen in ourselves as “free spiritedness,” our unwillingness to commit to a relationship is attributed to our positive quality of “being picky” or “not settling.” We find ways to spin our misdeeds into virtues in our own minds. We then judge others who do not share our limited belief. As Gillett describes, “The man who has difficulty being tender calls the man who weeps ‘soft.’ The woman who is frightened of change calls the person who changes freely ‘inconsistent’ or ‘untrustworthy.’ The man who cannot sell his product thinks of the successful salesperson as a ‘money-grabber’” (45). As he explains, “The worst liabilities can become marvelous assets” (45).

Another advantage to limiting beliefs that Gillett points out is the illusion of safety that accompanies them. Gillett explains, “As long as we stay within the confines of our belief systems, we are afforded a feeling of security. There is no need for the anxiety of uncertainty because any new input will be rejected before it is effective, or else distorted to fit the parameters of our beliefs” (47). Gillett contends that we reject new information, not allowing it to permeate our consciousness, or we force it into accordance with our pre-set beliefs. Gillett asserts that this is true even when the beliefs create dangerous situations for the believer:

For example, women who believe “men are violent” or “I deserve to be mistreated by a man” tend to choose violent men over and over again. Although they are genuinely fearful and do not like pain or humiliation, the “old situation” provides a paradoxical sense of security. The familiarity of a repeated situation, created by a belief, somehow feels like home. We know the score. We know the rules of the game. Spiritual teachers say that it’s necessary to repeat situations until we master what we need to learn. There is certainly a curious attraction to repeat

experiences that fit with a limited belief, and this continues until we learn to change the belief (47).

The predictability of the outcome makes the situations feel comfortable and familiar. We know the outcome before we even get to the end, mainly because we are helping create it. When it arrives, we think “I knew this would happen!” Whether “this” is getting rejected by a friend, cheating on a new girlfriend, being bested by a sibling, or feeling abandoned by a parent, our limiting beliefs help bring it to fruition. Gillett explains the mechanisms of such prediction:

First, our interpretation and perception of events are distorted to fit into our system of belief. If you don't like somebody, for example, they look uglier and your interpretation of their motives is tainted with suspicion. Secondly, we selectively remember and perceive events that fit our beliefs, and selectively forget and ignore events that do not fit. If you think the world is an awful place, you will notice and focus on the one dead leaf in a bunch of beautiful flowers. Thirdly, we make life choices that fit our belief. For example, if you are a woman who believes “men are brutes,” you will have a tendency to marry brutes. If you are a man who believes women are manipulative, you will tend to choose manipulative women. Fourthly, implicit in every belief is a self-fulfilling prophecy. I have always found that there is a rational explanation how a belief gets translated into reality (51).

Holding limiting beliefs ultimately makes us less responsible for the outcomes in our lives. As Gillett says, “it exonerates us from action” (49). Why bother when we know it won't work out anyway? I have had many people tell me what they want to do, and when I give them encouragement and support, they start their list of reasons why they can't do it. Most of these are projections, “my husband would never let me go back to school,” assumptions, “I probably couldn't qualify for a loan,” or recollections of past events, “the last time I started working out I pulled a muscle,” or even associations with unrelated information, like “my parents are divorced, so I'm not sure I'm cut out for marriage.” We don't have to try, don't have to challenge ourselves. We don't have to do

anything really. And we don't. We dream of greatness while clinging to our safe, limited versions of what we are and what we are capable of. We determine what causes us pleasure and what causes us displeasure, and we try to live such that we only encounter and experience the pleasurable things. While it is arguable that these likes and dislikes are simply judgments that prevent us from being fully present and accepting what is, I hardly expect any of us to rush out and order a plate of our least favorite food. It is perhaps even instinctual that we endeavor to create a safe and comfortable environment for ourselves, as relatively vulnerable creatures that protect ourselves mostly with our minds. But, over time, for many of us, our preference of safety and comfort takes over and becomes rigid. We know what we like and we're not too interested in experimenting, not even with things we have never experienced.

Gillett argues that even our body language and facial expressions help to attract the situations that fit our beliefs. He contends that "We are all equipped with an automatic, unconscious understanding of the basic body language that constitutes genuineness" (59). We communicate our beliefs about ourselves with our bodies as well as our minds. "A woman with wide-open eyes, slightly caved-in chest, raised shoulders, and shaking hands is proclaiming through her patterns of muscular tension and the stance of her body: 'I'm scared—protect me.' This message acts as an aphrodisiac on all those men who believe 'I am the great protector.' Like moths drawn to a light, these men will pursue her one after another" (54). Our body is informed by our beliefs and many of our physical illnesses can be traced to problematic limiting beliefs as well.

Above and beyond all the ways that we maintain our beliefs previously described, we do one very important and insidious thing: we manufacture feelings that support our

beliefs. While we often rely on our feelings and often take them as “truth,” Gillet argues that “Many feelings are no more than emotional representations of the restrictions of the mind” (61). In the example of racial prejudice, “A person has to have the prejudice—the misinterpretation—before he or she can feel the hate. Feelings are easily manufactured from attitudes” (61). We often use our feelings to validate our beliefs, ignoring the ways in which they inform one another.

While we may (or may) not be able to control the events that occur in our lives, it is inarguable that we can control our responses and reactions to them. What might be the moment to throw in the towel for most is the moment for a few others to try harder with renewed conviction. What might be life ending for some is life-beginning for a few others. It all depends on our own perspective of the events of our lives, our positive or negative judgments of those events, and who we see ourselves to be in relationship to those events. One guy gets into a car accident, loses his legs, and becomes a depressed, reclusive alcoholic; another guy gets into a car accident, loses his legs, and ends up winning the Special Olympics for downhill skiing a few years later. Our choices depend on our perspective.

### BECOMING AWARE OF LIMITING BELIEFS

As Stephen Levine pointed out in Meetings at the Edge “...growth is really a letting go of those places of holding beyond which we seldom venture. That edge is our cage, our imagined limitations, our attachment to old models of who we think we are, or *should* be. It is our edges that define what we consider ‘safe territory’” (44).

Understanding that limiting beliefs exist, and that we create our reality with our thoughts

to a larger extent than we often acknowledge, is an important first step toward change.

We are able to take responsibility for our lives to a greater degree.

The next step is to diagnose and decipher our own limiting beliefs. Some of these will be obvious, others will be much more subtle and obscured. This is where it stops being an intellectual exercise and becomes a personal and embodied one. Gillett gives some guidelines for diagnosing your beliefs.

Get a notebook and sit in a relaxed position. It is important to answer the following questions quickly and without censorship. Allow yourself to be irrational—allow yourself to write down things that you disapprove of or that you are not sure of. Making a mistake will cause no harm, but trying to avoid mistakes will stop you from discovering anything you don't know... Go over these...questions a day or two later. Do not make any deletions but add on any other thoughts or feelings that come up. Do not be concerned if there are contradictions. You will find that your answers provide a rich supply of beliefs and self-imposed limits (124-125).

His suggestion of an automatic writing process is intended to keep you, the writer, from self-editing. The editing itself would be a form of judgment and, as such, counterproductive to the exercise. He then offers several questions to answer honestly. Some of these are:

- "What are my goals in life?" He notes that "They do not need to be realistic in terms of your present situation and they should not take into account anything that anybody else wants or needs from you." (125)
- "What is it that stops me from having these goals right now?" He suggests that "For each goal write down all the things that seem to you to be in the way— aspects of yourself (your body, your feelings, your inner self, your mind, your characteristics), aspects of others, of society, the past, your age, time, loyalties, the inevitable way life is. Write fast. Don't think too much. Allow yourself to be unreasonable." (125)
- "What do I disapprove of?" He recommends that you "try to make the

suggestion into a definitive statement, even if it sounds dogmatic and off the walls. Remember that this is a process of exploration which eventually aims to go beyond the limiting belief. The first step is to have the personal honesty and courage to see what the limiting belief might be.” (128)

- “What do the people of things that I disapprove of have in common?”
- And then, the clincher, “So what does that make me?” or “How am I different?” or “How am I similar?” Exploring the relationship between your disapproval of others and what that means in terms of your own ego is very interesting.

He then offers a really interesting list of questions that help to identify a lot of beliefs. When you read your responses, they might sound absurd, contradictory, racist, sexist, conservative, unfair, and completely irrational. And that’s okay. The point is not to judge what we think, but to uncover it. The next several questions were quite revelatory for me.

- “What were or are my parents’ belief systems?” You can figure this out by remembering or thinking about what they approve(d) and disapprove(d) of? Sometimes your own beliefs will be opposite of your parents beliefs.
- “What generalizations about life did I learn from:
  - My country?
  - My culture?
  - My class?
  - My education?
  - My color?
  - My religion?
  - My gender?
  - My body image?
  - My profession?
  - Other influential people in my life?” (131-2).



Gillett explains, “Once you have dislodged your belief from what you used to think was reality, you are free to create a better belief. Such a simple statement may seem hard to accept at first. Many people have tried positive thinking techniques, only to find them unreal or too good to be true. A limiting belief is, by nature, cynical. When faced with the unlimited, it projects a screen of disbelief: ‘Come on, you've got to be kidding,’ it says. Somehow the old limiting belief is so firmly ingrained in the mind as reality, that the new positive thinking is simply unbelievable” (137). According to Gillett, this simply indicates that there is more work to be done.

I have included my own list of limiting beliefs as an appendix.

#### READING JAMAICA KINCAID AS SELF (DURING READING PRACTICE)

I am reading for “self” right now in Kincaid. By this I mean that I am reading with awareness, noticing the places where I feel connection, and where I feel disconnect. This clues me into where I see my “self” in the text— a “self” that is either resonating with or ruffling against Kincaid’s “self.” My objective is to get to know my self through the process of reading. I do this by trying to be fully present with Kincaid and noticing where there is resistance, where judgment arises, where I feel kinship or camaraderie. In doing this I can better see the places where I have identifications, where I ‘made it the same’ as me. Already I have noticed some contradictions in my own beliefs. I want for race as a category to be transcended, yet I chide Kincaid for doing just that. I feel like she has betrayed the group through her dissociation. I want her to be responsible to

others at the same time that I tout freedom for everyone. I try to simply be aware of these discrepancies without judging myself or Kincaid.

This reading is not going as well as the first, mainly because I have had a lot of life circumstances interfere with my practice of reading. I still practice a 5 minute “mind clearing” meditation at the beginning of my reading period, and I still read for a duration of 45 minutes. I have made the final meditation 19 minutes long. I have not had one location for this second reading, and I think this is part of the difficulty I am having. I moved from Michigan to New York during this reading. As such, I missed a few days, or performed a modified meditation in the interest of time. I realize now that this “interest in time” was really me placing my reading lower on my list of my priorities than other things. This might be justified, but the result is that my practice feels choppy and irregular.

This irregularity frustrates me because the concept of practice is an important part of this work that I am trying to do here in my dissertation. I will discuss practice at length in chapter (?). I can acknowledge that I am not “walking the talk” this week. Part of it is just an anxiety and a restlessness that I feel that seems to keep me a bit agitated. Yet I can see that when I do sit down and do the practice, I feel calmer, more in my body, and less stressed. Still, it is hard to bring myself to do it consistently. I have learned through experience that if I continue in spite of my reluctant resistance, cultivating a practice does get easier. The practice itself takes on a new dimension as it takes root in my life. I have also learned to be gentle with myself. If this is what my practice looks like this week, this is what it looks like. Choppy is choppy—the determination that choppy is negative is my own. The more I can accept of myself and my circumstances,

the easier it is to take the snares in life in stride.

### A NOTE ON MY CREATIVE ACTIVITY (AFTER READING PRACTICE)

For my “creative” activity, I have been cultivating my own little garden here in New York. As I said, I am a budding gardener, which feels very much like being an artist without a medium. Now I finally have the main ingredient, a lawn. It is a fairly large lawn right now, with very “retro” (to me) hedges close to the house—the landscape hasn’t much changed since my grandfather built the house 50 years ago, though there have been some small changes. There used to be two hedges at the beginning of the driveway, but my mother cut them down a few years back. To me, their stumps are actually far lovelier than they were. A few trees have had to come down for various reasons. But, otherwise, a snapshot of the front of our house from the 1960’s would look pretty similar to one taken today, from a botanical perspective.

I have gradually taken over the cultivation of these two empty spaces where the hedges used to be (in the front of the house, by the driveway) from my mother, an annual planter at heart. She begins with starter plants, indicating to me in some ways an immediate need for gratification and a mistrust of the process of nature inherent in seeds. I am a perennial girl myself. I like the idea of a self-perpetuating garden rotating through a temporal trajectory of blooms. My mother’s annual ritual of planting annuals always seems unnecessarily grueling and expensive. Why reinvent (and pay for) the wheel each year? Her logic confounds me.

I first planted a (perennial) lavender plant on one side of the driveway, where the hedge used to be. The next year I purchased and planted another, on the other side, where the other hedge used to be. I also put an Echinacea on that side, purchased with the lavender on Martha's Vineyard during a Labor Day excursion with my then fiancé, now husband. I liked the idea of having such a souvenir from such a trip. It builds meaning into my garden by enabling me to associate the thing—a lavender plant—with a memory—a nice vacation with my then fiancé, now husband.

This year I went out there with a few dozen packets of perennial seeds that I got from the Zen temple and put them in the ground. I did this in May, hopeful that my tardiness would not be a deal-breaker for them all. For some I dug small holes by poking my finger into the earth. For others I drew thin lines with my trowel so the seeds could live just beneath the soil. Others I pressed into the surface of the earth. And then I left, putting my seeds in the care of my mother for water and nurturance. She reported to me on their growth, and on the unevenness of the two beds (one flourishing in full sun while the other grumbles in shadow of my neighbor's imposing hedge). She also reported the strange fact that even though I planted about seven different varieties of flowers, all of their leaves looked the same. There was also a curious phenomenon where several (annual) alyssum flowers that my mother planted last year have returned on their own.

While I was still in Michigan, I cultivated my New York garden in my imagination by drawing pictures of the front lawn and backyard, rough sketches of different possibilities I could envision. I thought about which Ann Arbor yards I particularly appreciated and what qualities made them special (surprise and continuity as one example, mulch and stones as borders as another). I tried to take into account

pragmatic necessities like accessibility of paths, symmetry (impossible to create in a split-level ranch, I realized), and how to work with what is already here. It was fun to read of Kincaid's folly while planning my own garden, and I think I learned a few things about gardening from reading her. I could identify with her excitement and passion about her garden—even if it seems a bit extreme—because I have similar feelings about cultivating a garden of my own. I want to grow my own food and flowers and live off the earth. I realize that not everyone shares this desire, so I do feel a sense of kinship with Kincaid for sharing an interest in such earthy delights.

When I came home, I saw that my mother was right. All of the plants growing were the same. They looked lush and plentiful—but nothing like the seeds I planted. I referred to the pictures on the packets, comparing the leaves. I looked at the plants. I looked at the pictures. I fretted. I began to feel the anxiety that Kincaid speaks of, that pervasive feeling of “What to do?” Yes, indeed, what to do, I asked myself. I really wasn't sure. But then a memory of this plant came back to me. Last year this plant—an ugly plant that produces little ugly flowers—popped up out of nowhere as well, if my memory served me. Maybe 6 or 8 of them, unsolicited. The more I thought about it, the more certain I felt that this was the same plant. My anxiety increased. What the heck were these plants? My mother and my husband offered the possibility that the seeds I planted were given to the temple because they were mismarked. I dismissed this theory as foolish. I fretted. What to do? What was this plant? I turned to the internet. Unable to locate it and identify it online, I emailed my two gardener friends, snapping a few shots of the offending shoot with my iPhone. They had never seen it in their lives.

I decided on the spot that the plant was invasive—“the devil’s spawn” I said as I pulled them angrily from the soil. These plants had self-seeded at an alarming rate over the course of one year. If I let them flower, I was convinced they would take over the world. They had to come OUT. NOW. They grew uglier and uglier to me, particularly because I didn’t know what they were. I could empathize with Kincaid’s butchering of the rootstock of the wisteria—I felt a similar anger toward this infestation of hideous, unidentifiable plants. They had robbed my seeds of a chance of success this year. Removing them revealed the pathetic beginnings of what could only be my plantings. They had taken over and ruined everything, at least for this year. My mother laughed at my vehemence. Another moment of identification with Kincaid came—she would understand. She might even know what they were called, these evil, ugly plants.

In this garden I am all beginner’s mind, but it does not always feel good. Although I did learn for a summer about permaculture, I am really a novice at gardening. Like Kincaid, I find the whole process of cultivating a garden bewitching and confounding. I like the feel of the dirt under my fingernails (though I think I noticed last time that some gloves might help salvage my manicure), the color the water turns the soil as it seeps in. But I also feel completely ignorant, without a roadmap. I have removed the offending Unidentified Growing Objects and have some hope again. I will do some transplanting in the fall, some bed preparation, and then I will wait eagerly for spring.

## SECOND READING

It is nice to finally hear a new story from Jamaica Kincaid. After decades of discursive rumination on the injustices of her youth and the challenges of her young adult

life, it is refreshing to meet Kincaid in a space that seems less psychologically loaded and emotionally laden: the garden. Kincaid seemed stuck in a rut for a long while of not being able to get past her past. Her world view was such that she saw herself as a victim of that past, and she seemed unwilling to release that identity for a long time. It is in her literature that we see some of the structures at play in maintaining the belief system she created. Kincaid's work is highly autobiographical in content, which might relate directly to which stories she tells, and which ones she tells repeatedly—for her reiteration cements her identity. Her writing functions as a means of “self” creation, narrating her past and her present in a way that accords with her beliefs about herself. Yet even My Garden (Book): is not a new story, really. This story is in keeping with the evolution that Kincaid has undertaken in her writing, though perhaps reaching a new extreme. But before we look at the identity Kincaid has adopted presently, perhaps it would serve us to look back at the previous incarnation of Kincaid as victim.

When Kincaid first began writing, it was of a young girl robbed of the paradise of her mother's attention and affection. As J. Brooks Bouson remarks, “Kincaid was an only child until age nine, and from ages nine to thirteen her life was disrupted by the birth of her three brothers: Joseph, Dalma, and Devon” (6). She was dealing, it seems, with feeling like she lost the attention and nurturance of her mother and step-father to these younger half-siblings. Quite suddenly, the narcissistic only child was forced to relinquish both her centrality and her childhood. In At the Bottom of the River and Annie John, Kincaid explores the evolution of her relationship with her mother from ideal to contentious. Kincaid reveals in Annie John, “I spent the day following my mother around and observing the way she did everything” (15). She chronicles the blissful

moments she spent shadowing her mother as she performed domestic tasks. Kincaid portrays this as a positive time, when she felt very loved and treasured by her mother.

As my mother went about from pot to pot, stirring one, adding something to the other, I was ever in her wake. As she dipped into a pot of boiling something or other to taste for correct seasoning, she would give me a taste of it also, asking me what I thought. Not that she really wanted to know what I thought, for she had told me many times that my taste buds were not quite developed yet, but it was just to include me in everything (17).

Kincaid develops a strong identification with her mother, literally basking in her presence. As Kincaid remarks in her most recent writing for *Harper's Magazine*, "She seemed to us not a mother at all but a God, not a Goddess but a God" (24). This idolatry is evident in Annie John and At the Bottom of the River as Annie/Kincaid marvels repeatedly at her mother's beauty and manages to objectify her mother by creating a God out of her with her thoughts and practices.

My mother sat on some stone steps, her voluminous skirt draped in folds and falling down between her parted legs, and I, playing some distance away, glanced over my shoulder and saw her face—a face that was to me of such wondrous beauty: the lips like a moon in its first and last quarter, a nose with a bony bridge and wide nostrils that flared out and trembled visibly in excitement, ears the lobes of which were large and soft and silk-like; and what pleasure it gave me to press them between my thumb and forefinger. How I worshipped this beauty, and in my childish heart I would always say to it, "Yes, yes, yes." And, glancing over my shoulder, yet again I would silently send to her words of love and adoration, and I would receive from her, in turn and in silence, words of love and adoration (River 73-74).

At this juncture in her childhood, this worshipful relationship seems to serve Kincaid just fine. She writes:

As she told me stories, I sometimes sat at her side, leaning against her, or I would crouch on my knees behind her back and lean over her shoulder. As I did this, I would occasionally sniff at her neck, or behind her ears, or her hair. She smelled sometimes of lemons, sometimes of sage, sometimes of roses, sometimes of bay leaf. At times I would no



longer hear what it was she was saying; I just liked to look at her mouth as it opened and closed over her words, or as she laughed. How terrible it must be for all the people who had no one to love them so and no one who they loved so, I thought (Annie 23).

Kincaid's union with her mother at that time was perfect in her eyes. She describes the happiness of her fulfilling relationship with her mother. "Sometimes she might call out to me to go and get some thyme or basil or some other herb for her, for she grew all her herbs in little pots that she kept in a corner of our little garden. Sometimes when I gave her the herbs, she might stoop down and kiss me on the lips and then on my neck. It was in such a paradise that I lived" (25) In this passage we see the mother "stooping down," as if from a pedestal upon which Kincaid has placed her.

This passage also gives us an interesting tidbit of information—she and her mother shared a garden in her youth in Antigua. Thus Kincaid's love of gardening is foreshadowed in her earlier works and gardening, in some sense, is a nostalgic practice, evoking memories of a garden grown with a now deceased mother. She wrote about her mother's garden in My Brother:

I know now that it is from our mother that we, he [Devon] and I, get this love of plants. Even at that moment when he and I were sitting on the lawn, our mother had growing on a trellis she had fashioned out of an old iron bedstead and old pieces of corrugated galvanize a passion-fruit vine, and its voluptuous growth was impressive, because it isn't easy to grow passion fruit in Antigua. It produced fruit in such abundance that she had to give some of it away, there was more than she could use. Her way with plants is something I am very familiar with; when I was a child, in the very place where my brother's house is now, she grew all sorts of vegetables and herbs (12).

While their Caribbean garden was probably more practical in nature—since Kincaid characterizes the gardens of her homeland as generally being devoted to the

production of food rather than to aesthetic valor—it is nonetheless where the seeds of a love of gardening were planted in Kincaid.

Kincaid's early writings portray her childhood, but it is her childhood remembered from her young adulthood. What this is, then, is the romantic and nostalgic manipulation of the past by an older Kincaid, now living in America and endeavoring to write books rather than magazine op-ed pieces. The manipulation may not be malevolent, nor even intentional. It is simply the result of Kincaid trying to tell a story with her past. She herself admits that she is not actually writing non-fiction in these texts, she is using the events of her life to tell stories that she is creating. This is why she considers them fiction. Kincaid's genre is not really the novel, but the *bildungsroman*, which Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert describes in Jamaica Kincaid: A Critical Companion as a “novel of development, which chronicles the moral, psychological, and intellectual development of a young man or woman” (86). As such, Kincaid is more or less telling the story of herself, of who she is, and how she became that person. She is narrating—and in doing so also choosing—the story of her identity and how it was constructed. Kincaid herself says, “I am sort of lucky or privileged to do this thing called writing, in which basically all I am doing is discovering my own mind.... Really, for me, writing is like going to a psychiatrist. I just discover things for myself” (Perry 132).

We can see that her early relationship with her mother in particular, played a large role in how she saw herself. She sees her mother as “self” through an attachment that alternately craves and resists complete union with her mother. Yet it becomes apparent that in Kincaid's mind they are one, regardless of her acceptance or resistance to it. Kincaid resists seeing them as separate, individuated beings. She writes:

I fit perfectly in the crook of my mother's arm, on the curve of her back, in the hollow of her stomach. We eat from the same bowl, drink from the same cup; when we sleep, our heads rest on the same pillow. As we walk through the rooms, we merge and separate, merge and separate; soon we shall enter the final stage of our evolution (River 60).

It is this union, this complete identification, which enables Kincaid to write a book entitled The Autobiography of my Mother, and which causes Kincaid such trauma when faced with differentiation. Moira Ferguson pinpoints a defining moment for Kincaid:

A key turning point surfaces when Annie John outgrows her clothes. She is horrified to learn that the mother has called an arbitrary halt to look-alike dresses. She equates her mother's clumsy efforts to separate with a personal abandonment: "You are getting too old for that. It's time you had your own clothes. You just cannot go around the rest of your life looking like a little me" (46).

Kincaid feels helpless in the face of this shift. In At the Bottom of the River, she frequently refers to herself as "defenseless and small" and to her mother as large, sometimes larger than life. Kincaid portrays this as her mother rejecting her. But the fact is that Kincaid is not willing to be the person she would need to be to regain her mother's favor. As she gets older and adopts more familial responsibility, Kincaid begins to resent her mother's rules and judgments. Kincaid renders herself a victim of her mother's abandonment, refusing to acknowledge that she too is changing and shifting the balance of their relationship. As Kincaid develops interests that fall outside of her mother's strict and conservative opinion of how a young woman should behave, she frequently chooses to lie to her mother rather than risk further rupture by exerting her autonomy. From playing marbles to cultivating friendships to experimenting with her sexuality, Kincaid tries to hide the person she is becoming from her mother. She feels constantly criticized and reprimanded. These emotions mar the previous enjoyment Kincaid felt in following

her around and learning how to be a woman. She documents the strain in their relationship in At the Bottom of the River, rendering her formerly ideal practice of shadowing her mother into a list of imperatives and a barrage of criticism:

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum on it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash... is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don't sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions;... *but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*; ...this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem is coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming;... always squeeze the bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread? (5)

The entire chapter is a list of what Kincaid must and must not to, culminating in her mother's condescending question. Thus, in Kincaid's mind, the relationship of mother and child is one fraught with smothering devotion, criticism, and deceit. She craves her mother's love and attention at the same time that she resents how it is given. Rather than acknowledging that she herself has certain stipulations about their relationship that are not being met—how they might spend time together or how she might be given constructive criticism, for example—she casts herself as the helpless victim. Rather than see her mother's feelings as outside of her control and influence, she internalizes these feelings. She is not her mother, no matter how much she wishes to be. Ferguson explains:

Nurturing hatred, fearing abandonment, Annie John longs for a return to intimacy. She secretly harbors a notion of herself as a person so

monstrous that her mother wants to be free of her. In another sense, Annie John displaces onto her mother antagonistic feelings of rejection, of confused self-location that in turn engenders psychic fragmentation. Since her birth, she has lived in her mother's shadow, and now that she has to fend for herself in her own spotlight, she seeks shade. She assumes that she cannot live up to her mother's level of competence. Put another way, since she can barely conceptualize, let alone accept, her mother's cultural construction, she ceaselessly tries to fashion a subjectivity in opposition. Meanwhile she internalizes all this turmoil (46-47).

Her inability to reconcile this information that conflicts with her established belief system is illustrated in the following passage from Annie John:

I turned back to look at my mother, but I could not see her. My eyes searched the small area of water where she should have been, but I couldn't find her. I stood up and started to call out her name, but no sound would come out of my throat. A huge black space then opened up in front of me and I fell inside it... I couldn't think of anything except that my mother was no longer near me... I don't know what, but something drew my eye in one direction. A little bit out of the area in which she usually swam was my mother, just sitting and tracing patterns on a large rock. She wasn't paying any attention to me, for she didn't know that I had missed her. I was glad to see her and started jumping up and down and waving to her. Still she didn't see me, and then I started to cry, for it dawned on me that, with all that water between us and I being unable to swim, my mother could stay there forever and the only way I would be able to wrap my arms around her again was if it pleased her or if I took a boat... When I told her what had happened, she hugged me so close that it was hard to breathe, and she told me that nothing could be farther from the truth—that she would never leave me. And though she said it over and over again, and though I felt better, I could not wipe out of my mind the feeling I had had when I couldn't find her (44).

Kincaid asserts here that the closeness she longs to feel with her mother is out of her control. She cannot call to her mother, she has no voice. She cannot swim, cannot reach her mother; it is her mother who must return to her, if she so chooses. Kincaid here is completely helpless and abandoned, and she cannot get past the realization that their closeness is out of her control.

Although Kincaid feels suffocated by her relationship with her mother, she is unwilling to let go of the deep association she has with her. Yet her hand is forced, in a sense, since her existing belief system no longer supports reality. Though she resists it as long as she can, ultimately Kincaid must find a way to make her beliefs and her reality coincide. Kincaid decides that, in order to save face, she must also reject her mother. Kincaid develops a resentful antagonism toward her mother that tries to coincide with her deep love and identification. We can see both extremes of these emotions at work in At the Bottom of the River:

Immediately on wishing my mother dead and seeing the pain it caused, I was sorry and cried so many tears that all the earth around me was drenched. Standing before my mother, I begged her forgiveness, and I begged so earnestly that she took pity on me, kissing my face and placing my head on her bosom to rest. Placing her arms around me, she drew my head closer to her bosom, until finally I suffocated (53).

In reconfiguring her relationship to her mother, Kincaid complicates typical assumptions about a mother—namely, that she must be loving and nurturing. Her mother's love, Kincaid insists, is suffocating her. Kincaid points to select stories from her past to show how her own assumptions about a mother/ daughter relationship were challenged. The stories she chooses to include—and surely the ones she chooses to omit—are selected to inform us of how Kincaid has reconstructed her own identity and her own belief system to support this new relationship between them. Ultimately, she transfers the intense, obsessive love she felt for her mother onto other women—her friends Sonia, Gwen, and the Red Girl.

Kincaid's resentment of her family grows as her own priority—her education—takes a backseat to her family's need for assistance. As J. Brooks Bouson notes, "For Kincaid, one of the great betrayals of her life was her family's interruption of her

education after the birth of her brothers” (5). Bouson describes a pivotal moment that displays the extreme lengths that both Kincaid and her mother would take to assert their beliefs:

When fifteen-year-old Kincaid, who had been asked to babysit her two-year-old brother, Devon, became so absorbed in a book that she failed to notice that his diaper needed to be changed, Annie Drew, in a state of fury, gathered up all of her daughter’s treasured books and burned them. (5)

Kincaid’s actions are more subtle in their assertion of her priorities and her beliefs, but they do so nonetheless. Her mother’s reaction to this—burning Kincaid’s books—indicates that she sees the books as the object standing between her and her daughter. The books are inscribed with meaning for both, and this difference in meaning causes great conflict. Kincaid writes that she used to steal books from the library, and that the public library in Antigua closed and remained closed for a long time. Thus books come to represent a form of education for Kincaid that she felt she had to steal. Since she was robbed of her educational opportunities, she chose to claim her education for herself. It is an act of self-preservation, covertly executed in defiance of colonial and post-colonial education, gender inequality, and her mother. The fact that the library was closed shows that Kincaid’s passion for education was, in her mind, an anomaly in her island’s culture. Justin Edwards asserts in Understanding Jamaica Kincaid that “A frequent theme of Kincaid’s fiction is the way that this ten-by-twelve-mile island traps its citizens and discourages them from reflecting upon their experiences, analyzing their situations, or controlling their destinies”(4). Kincaid chooses not to see that, in stealing the library’s books, she was doing the same thing—robbing others of the chance to educate themselves.

Kincaid attributes the choice by her parents to remove her from school to assumptions they held about gender. Edwards notes that “At an early age, Kincaid recognized that daughters were treated very differently from sons, and that Antigua had been severely scarred by its history of British imperial rule” (3). Kincaid says in an interview:

“My brothers were going to be gentlemen of achievement, one was going to be a Prime Minister, one a doctor, one a minister. I never heard anybody say that I was going to be anything except maybe a nurse. There was no huge future for me, nothing planned. In fact my education was so casually interrupted, my life might very well have been destroyed by that casual act... if I hadn’t intervened in my own life and pulled myself out of the water.” (quoted in Bouson 6)

She writes of how these gendered beliefs affected her in Lucy, “Whenever I saw her eyes fill up with tears at the thought of how proud she would be at some deed her sons had accomplished, I felt a sword go through my heart, for there was no accompanying scenario in which she saw me, her identical offspring, in a remotely similar situation” (131). After the birth of her three half-brothers in rapid succession and her step-father falling ill, her family is left in a financial crisis. They send Kincaid to the U.S. in an effort to help support the struggling family. This is a contentious and devastating decision in Kincaid’s eyes at the time, proving that she is not really important to her mother any longer.

Lucy is the last book that Kincaid writes about her former self—Elaine Potter Richardson—the person she was before she became Jamaica Kincaid. It tells the story of the transitional time in which Kincaid was sent by her family at the age of sixteen to the United States to work as an au pair for an affluent white family. In Lucy, Kincaid explains her psychological and emotional dilemma more clearly. Edwards explains,



“Lucy’s feelings about her mother pull her in two different directions. She sees her mother as the great love of her life and as the figure she must separate herself from if she is to develop her own identity” (64). The stifling love that is written into the books about her childhood reappears in Lucy. “Lucy, then, views maternal love as something that threatens to kill her through suffocation. ‘I had come to feel that my mother’s love for me was designed solely to make me into an echo of her; and I didn’t know why, but I felt that I would rather be dead than become just an echo of someone.’ If she is to grow into a complete individual, Lucy must extricate herself from the maternal bond” (64).

As an au pair, Kincaid has the opportunity to experience a very different type of mothering than she received from her own mother. She sees her employer, Mariah, as a mother figure, writing “Mariah was like a mother to me, a good mother” (110). Mariah is wealthy, white, and American. Perhaps it is this mother, Mariah, then, that gives birth to Jamaica Kincaid as Elaine Potter is put to rest. For it is after this point in her life that Kincaid chooses a new identity, one which might be seen as closer in many respects to Mariah’s than to her birth-mother’s in Antigua. Although Kincaid sees herself as her own creation—calling herself her own parents in one interview—the similarities between the character of Mariah and the narrator of Kincaid’s later works warrant examination.

While Kincaid was still Elaine Richardson—still of “the conquered class,” as she calls it in My Garden (Book):—this first-hand education on racial and social privilege that she received from Mariah was met with what many readers—including myself—saw as bitter resentment. From early on in Lucy, the protagonist is literally put in her place—“the maid’s room” (7). Although her employers tell her that she should “regard them as [her] family and make [her]self at home” (7), her room tells her a different story. It

resembles to her, “a box in which cargo traveling a long way should be shipped” (7).

This evocation of slavery reveals that, despite their efforts to welcome Kincaid into their lives as a make-believe equal, she is intent on maintaining the hierarchy in which they are the conquerors and she is the conquered. But now Kincaid has joined—in her words—“the conquering class” (123). She has been reborn, perhaps, as she claims, from herself, but in the likeness of her former employer, from whom she created the character of Mariah. The stories that Kincaid now tells about her own life are strikingly similar to those she told about Mariah, and her beliefs about the world and herself now mirror Mariah’s.

Perhaps the greatest lesson Lucy/Kincaid learned from Mariah/her employer is the ability to play the fence—that is, to be both the conqueror and the conquered. In a critical scene in Lucy—one which represents a moment of rupture in this text, but also a moment of revelation when read inter-textually—Mariah tells Lucy that she is of Indian descent. I will revisit this moment, mentioned briefly in the first chapter:

She was almost out of the room when she turned and said, “I was looking forward to telling you that I have Indian blood, that the reason I’m so good at catching fish and hunting birds and roasting corn and doing all sorts of things is that I have Indian blood. But now, I don’t know why, I feel I shouldn’t tell you that. I feel you will take it the wrong way.” This really surprised me. What way should I take this? Wrong way? Right way? What could she mean? To look at her, there was nothing remotely like an Indian about her. Why claim a thing like that? I myself had Indian blood in me. My grandmother is a Carib Indian. That makes me one-quarter Carib Indian. But I don’t go around saying that I have some Indian blood in me. The Carib Indians were good sailors, but I don’t like to be on the sea; I only like to look at it. To me my grandmother is my grandmother, not an Indian. My grandmother is alive; the Indians she came from are all dead... Mariah says, “I have Indian blood in me,” and underneath everything I could swear she says it as if she were announcing her possession of a trophy. How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also? (39-41)

This question seems to be at the crux of Kincaid's new identity: how do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also? Kincaid cannot understand how this blond, privileged, white woman can claim the history and the traits of an oppressed people. Kincaid notes that she herself has Indian blood, but that this blood does not imbue her with traits associated with Indians. She seems to be taking issue with the fact that Mariah is able to select likeable qualities, like fishing and hunting and roasting corn, and appropriate them for herself. She equates it to possessing a trophy—Mariah is able to enjoy a history and a heritage for her own pleasure and amusement, deciding not only what aspects of Native culture she wants to own, but also whether or not she chooses to reveal this. Mariah does not have to wear this race on her face; it is more like a race card she can pull proudly at her discretion.

Kincaid's tone in Lucy seems at first acerbic and cold, as if she scorns Mariah for her privilege. Lucy marvels at Mariah, repeating a question that has been a refrain in the text:

I said, "All along I have been wondering how you got to be the way you are. Just how it was that you got to be the way you are." Even now she couldn't let go, and she reached out, her arms open wide, to give me one of her great hugs. But I stepped out of its path quickly, and she was left holding nothing. I said it again. I said, "How do you get to be that way?" The anguish on her face almost broke my heart, but I would not bend. It was hollow, my triumph, I could feel that, but I held onto it just the same (41).

While she is still the vanquished, Kincaid cannot embrace this appropriation, just as Lucy cannot embrace Mariah. As her employee, all she can do to inflict suffering on Mariah is withhold her affection. She cannot embrace this social positioning, just as Lucy cannot embrace Mariah after she proclaims it. In doing so, for a brief moment, she becomes the victor in a hollow triumph. However, as Kincaid's life comes to mirror

Mariah's more and more, as she transitions into the "conquering class" as a well-received author, mother, and ruler of the domestic sphere of her family's life, she herself—perhaps unwittingly—ends up playing the same fence, occupying the stance of both the victor and the vanquished. Lucy at first sees Mariah's privilege as shielding her from difficulty or strife, and she marvels at this characteristic.

She said, "I have always wanted four children, four girl children. I love my children." She said this clearly and sincerely. She said this without doubt on one hand or confidence on the other. Mariah was beyond doubt or confidence. I thought, Things must have always gone her way, and not just for her but for everybody she has ever known from eternity; she has never had to doubt, and so she has never had to grow confident; the right thing always happens to her; the thing she wants to happen happens. Again, I thought, How does a person get to be that way? (26).

Although this is proven untrue—for Mariah's husband cheats on her and manipulates her into a separation and divorce—Kincaid tries to emulate this privileged quality. We see this most clearly in her description of her life in *My Brother*. She is informed of her brother's sickness, AIDS, she writes, "I was in my house in Vermont, absorbed with the well-being of my children, absorbed with the well-being of my husband, absorbed with the well-being of myself.... At the time the phone call came telling me of my brother's illness, among the many comforts, luxuries, that I enjoyed was reading a book, *The Education of a Gardener*, written by a man named Russell Page" (7). Kincaid writes very little about her Vermont family, except that their life is idyllic and uneventful. The biggest doubts Kincaid expresses nowadays are about her garden. Her doubts are trivial, almost gratuitous, like wondering if spring will ever come again.

Perhaps what Lucy/Kincaid dislikes is not Mariah's privilege, but the fact that she downplays it. Kincaid originally learned about American privilege from her employer, as

Lucy does from Mariah. This served as a new and overriding form of instruction in how to be the lady of the house, enhancing and at times replacing what Kincaid received from her birth mother, Annie. In light of this, Kincaid's constant questioning of Mariah's beliefs and actions seems less bitter and sarcastic and more genuine as a query: how does one get to be that way?

In some ways, Kincaid has found the answer to her question in the appropriation of material things. She has moved into a house that she coveted—a large, four bedroom in Vermont of which ten of her thirty windows look out on a mountain (Garden 29). She writes, “I love the house in which I live. Before I lived in it, before I was ever even inside it, before I knew anything about it, I loved it... I longed to live in this house, I wanted to live in this house” (Garden 29-30). It is not so different from the large and beautiful house that Mariah grew up in on the Great Lake, where she took her family and Lucy to spend their summers (Lucy 35). Kincaid acknowledges the privilege of occupying such a large space, saying that it is “at least twenty times as big as the house I grew up in, a house in a poor country with a tropical climate” (Garden 37). It is noteworthy that she does not name the island, Antigua, but instead describes it with two adjectives—poor and tropical. Her association with her homeland has dissipated to a flippant and reductive reference to wealth and weather. The specifics of her history are no longer important, because, as she says, “I had lived in America for a long time and had adjusted to the American habit of taking up at least twenty times as much of the available resources as each person needs” (37). The repetition of “twenty times” renders her childhood home sufficient, that is, tropical but not poor.

Kincaid defines herself, in some respects, through this space that she owns and occupies. Because she is writing of the garden, she feels that the story of the property on which the garden dwells is somehow relevant. She devotes an entire chapter entitled “The House” to describing her house, its former inhabitants, and the series of events that led to her acquisition of it. The couple that owned the house, their children, and their grandchildren are described in depth, as if their history in the house is an inextricable part of her own. It appears that Kincaid believes that purchasing the house entitles her not only to the property, but to its history as well. Although the occasion that made the house available for purchase was the death of Bob Woodworth, its former owner, Kincaid feels fine attending the funeral of this person she never actually met (40-41). Kincaid appropriates the story of the house and the family it housed while leaving her own story in relative obscurity, not even bothering to call her childhood island home by name. This might be because she has exhausted the topic—having written already about her childhood, her mother, her father, her step-father, her brother, and Antiguan bureaucracy. She is telling a new story, but it is not really her story—she bought it, it seems, with the house.

Yet is in light of her new home that Kincaid is able to reflect on her past and see it from a different perspective. She rehashes an anecdote she has told before—about learning from her mother about domestic chores—but it does not have the nostalgia of Annie John nor the resentment of At the Bottom of the River. Thus, she is telling old stories along with the new, but this past has become much more matter of fact—perhaps because she now has her house to invest with meaning. This house even begins to house her memories of her own childhood. She writes:

My house looks quite like the outside in which I grew up. The outside in which I grew up had an order to it, but this order had to be restored at the beginning of each day. This restoring was done by my mother and by me as I grew up, for my mother was training me to do things the way she had done them (there was nothing sinister in that, everyone who is good at anything likes an apprentice). In the middle of my yard stood the stone heap, and this was covered with soapy white clothes on Monday mornings. The stone heap was a mound of stones about a foot high, and I do not now know its diameter but it was properly wide; the stones, which were only stacked one on top of the other with no substance to hold them together, would come apart, it seemed during the night, and from time to time they had to be rearranged (43).

In this passage we see a Kincaid who no longer harbors ill will toward her mother—she was simply teaching her daughter what she was good at, she rationalizes. This acceptance of her mother’s teachings is a new belief for Kincaid. The white clothes on the stone heap which were seen in At the Bottom of the River are no longer associated with a list of mandatory chores. Kincaid’s mother restores order, and Kincaid views her role in her own home and garden as similar. She continues:

My mother would preside over the yard with an agitation that perhaps is endemic to people in her situation. The dishes are clean, then they are dirty, and then they are clean and then they are dirty. The stone heap will not stay in its immaculate mound.... Nothing behaves, nothing can be counted on to do so. Everything eventually becomes smudged, falls out of place, waiting to be restored. All of this was my yard. And all of this continues outside my house today, only the details have changed. The collection of stones has been made into a wall; the trees are different, but they provide more or less the same function of usefulness and pleasure. Only, this area outside my house today is called the garden (44-45).

I wonder if Kincaid’s mother’s agitation is similar to Kincaid’s, that is, a happy agitation (“How agitated I am when I am in the garden, and how happy I am to be so agitated” (14)). For, as we can see, Kincaid still identifies with her mother—but the identification is no longer judged positively or negatively because it is divested of its meaning. It simply is. Kincaid seems to have come to terms with the fact that she, like

her mother, has the role of restoring order to the world outside her door. As she says, “only the details have changed.” The garden is to Kincaid what her mother’s yard was to her. Although Kincaid portrays herself as a woman of privilege as the owner of a four bedroom house on several acres of land on which hundreds of costly plants grow, she is able to insist that she is little more than an order-restorer, like her mother. Like Mariah, Kincaid can be privileged in one moment and downplay or erase her privilege in the next.

Kincaid now has a staff of domestic workers—“the lady who cleaned the house... the women who helped me take care of my child” (3), and several workers who till her soil (6), dismantle her chicken coop (31), control the presence of rodents (24), rebuild her stone wall (67), remove plants (182), “rearrange patches of land” (183), and grow starters from seeds for her (214). This makes her much more similar to Mariah—who had Lucy working for her as well as a maid—than to her mother, who pulled Kincaid out of school to help shoulder the burden of domestic responsibility. Kincaid’s staff is much larger, in fact, than Mariah’s, and much of their employ revolves around the upkeep of her garden (and, of course, the watching of her children while she tends to her garden and her garden staff). Kincaid is living the American dream of privilege, and exercising those privileges quite sanctimoniously. She writes of two of the laborers she oversees:

One day, as they worked, I sat on a stone step (also in need of repair) observing them, reveling in my delicious position of living comfortably in a place that I am not from, enjoying my position as visitor, enjoying my position of not-the-native, enjoying especially the privilege of being able to make sound judgments about the Other—that is, the two men who were stooped over before me, working” (67)

In this passage we see that Kincaid not only enjoys the position of privilege, but she enjoys judging those who are not as privileged. This was one of the qualities in Mariah that she disliked, her ability to choose to either see or turn a blind eye to her



privilege at the same moment that she is exercising it. A story of one of Mariah's family's employees articulates this dynamic:

When we got to our destination, a man Mariah had known all her life, a man who had always done things for her family, a man who came from Sweden, was waiting for us. His name was Gus, and the way Mariah spoke his name it was as if he belonged to her deeply, like a memory. And, of course, he was a part of her past, her childhood: he was there, apparently, when she took her first steps; she had caught her first fish in a boat with him; they had been in a storm on the lake and their survival was a miracle, and so on. Still, he was a real person, and I thought Mariah should have long separated the person Gus standing in front of her in the present from all the things he had meant to her in the past. I wanted to say to him, "Do you not hate the way she says your name, as if she owns you?" (33-34).

Kincaid can tell the story of Bob Woodworth and his family with impunity, however. Kincaid does a lot of name dropping in My Garden (Book); including the names of prominent garden celebrities—nurserymen, garden magazine editors, botanists—while giving only the first names of her household staff (referred to as "the housekeeper Mary Jean and Vrinda" (17)). Some of her workers remain unnamed, they are referenced only in terms of their use to her.

My Garden (Book): reveals that Kincaid has become a woman who is made happy or sad by the weather, not so unlike her former employer. This marks another of Lucy's questions successfully answered. She writes of Mariah's feelings about the weather:

One morning in early March, Mariah said to me, "You have never seen spring, have you?" And she did not have to await an answer, for she already knew. She said the word "spring" as if spring were a close friend, a friend who had dared to go away for a long time and soon would reappear for their passionate reunion. She said, "Have you ever seen daffodils pushing their way up out of the ground? And when they're in bloom and all massed together, a breeze comes along and makes them do a curtsy to the lawn stretching out in front of them. Have you ever seen

that? When I see that, I feel so glad to be alive.” And I thought, So Mariah is made to feel alive by some flowers bending in the breeze. How does a person get to be that way? (17).

On the very day it turned spring, a big snowstorm came, and more snow fell on that day than had fallen all winter. Mariah looked at me and shrugged her shoulders. “How typical,” she said, giving the impression that she had just experienced a personal betrayal. I laughed at her, but I was really wondering, How do you get to be a person who is made miserable because the weather changed its mind, because the weather doesn’t live up to your expectations? How do you get to be that way? (20).

These statements seem particularly ironic in light of Kincaid’s writings on this exact topic—the seasons—in My Garden (Book): Compare Mariah’s emotions to Kincaid’s: “I was putting the garden to bed for the winter when, looking over the empty spaces that had not so long ago been full of flowers and vegetables, I was overcome with the memory of satisfaction and despair, two feelings not unfamiliar to any gardener” (49). Or, “The surprise, the shock, of winter has become to me like a kiss from someone I love: I expect it, I want it, and yet, Ah! For it holds the expectation of pleasure to come: spring...” (61). The biggest difference is that Kincaid’s flowers “bow” rather than curtsying (23). And I think, So, Kincaid is made to feel satisfaction and pleasure by flowers and vegetables. She also feels despair, but, as she describes it, this despair is “of the pleasurable kind, the kind that everyone living in the area of the world that starts in the Sudan and ends in southern Africa ought to have, just to begin with” (27). This despair has nothing to do with survival, but rather with what to do with unruly plants that are not behaving as she thinks they should. It is the kind of despair that Kincaid wishes on Africans—a “pleasurable kind” that ultimately is little more than an overreaction to

the aesthetics of her flower beds. This is the despair of the conqueror rather than the conquered—much ado about nothing too meaningful.

In one of the several chapters devoted to her dislike of winter (her twist on Mariah's love of spring?), Kincaid writes:

I do not like winter or anything that represents it (snow, the bare branches of trees, the earth seeming to hold its breath), and so I disliked the ground being covered with this soft substance (sticky and at the same time not so), with a color so definite (white) as if it wished to dispel any doubt that might arise in regard to this particular quality (its color, white) (59).

The snow so early did not go away; the snow stayed and the air grew colder and so winter started in mid-autumn. I began to complain and make a big fuss about this, but when I took a look at a pathetic journal of climate that I keep and make entries in from time to time, I saw that each year I say the same thing; winter always starts at about the same time (mid-autumn) and I always feel that this is unusual, that it comes too soon (60).

At one point Kincaid's materialism is given as the reason that she is upset with the changing seasons. She had "two thousand dollars' worth of heirloom bulbs to place in the ground... when almost one foot of snow fell on the ground" (59). She repeatedly mentions her own misery in winter, saying "I hear that the temperature will drop to such a low degree that it will cause a frost, and I always take this personally, I think a frost is something someone is doing to me" (71).

The one redeeming thing about winter for Kincaid is the catalogue shopping. She is made happy by their arrival. "On the day the temperature was 10 degrees below zero, the Ronniger's Seed Potatoes catalogue arrived and that was the cheeriest thing, for I then spent the afternoon sitting in a bathtub of hot water, trying to satisfy a craving for overchilled ginger ale and oranges, and reading this little treasure" (86). She explains that the catalogues are actually a part of her gardening practice. "The process of

receiving and reading catalogues may not be as important to my garden as my weeding is, but that is the way I begin the gardening year. Actually, first I despair that there will never be a gardening season again, and then just when that conviction sets in, the seed and plant catalogues start to arrive” (87). I imagine that this too is the enviable kind of despair that she would benevolently wish on others—the kind that apparently happens annually and is always assuaged by a little retail therapy.

Kincaid’s new stories are those of a woman obsessed with a garden, the same way she was for a long time obsessed with her mother. The garden represents her past, her wealth and material excess, her upper echelon connections, her botanical erudition, and her passion. That she can balk at spending money on AZT to treat her brother’s AIDS and decide against allowing him to live with her to receive better medical treatment, citing as her reason “I’m not rich” (Brother 48), then she can spend thousands on rare breeds of flowers and special exotic tomatoes indicates that Kincaid truly has become American, and that she suffers from the nihilism described earlier in this chapter. Kincaid demonstrates that she is living “the good life” to which Cornel West referred, “principally in terms of conspicuous consumption and hedonistic indulgence” (55), in this case of all things garden related. The meaninglessness of possessing a Himalayan clematis, the lovelessness of placing limits on what she is willing to do to help an ailing and still “conquered” relative who does not have the means to help himself, and the hopelessness of despairing over spring will come (the answer: it will, “as it must,” which she wrote in My Brother (61)), depict a life in which consumption very obviously correlates with priorities and beliefs. Kincaid is deeply connected to little more than her garden. It is a safe place to put her trust, for its betrayals are so trivial and its stories

always offer another chance at redemption with the next growing season. It is apparent that Kincaid, in transcending her class and moving from being conquered to being a conqueror, had to shed some of her beliefs about her “self” in order to do so. Kincaid has overcome the circumstances caused by her racial heritage and her class position, but it is another shallow-seeming triumph. Being one of the few Blacks that is “all right” doesn’t win Kincaid much more than the opportunity to spend cash on different, more esoteric things. She has invested all of her money and her meaning into a garden, yielding little more than pretty flowers poorly combined in oddly shaped beds.

## CHAPTER 4

### BLACKNESS AND BLACK “SELF” CONSCIOUSNESS

*In this chapter, I probe deeply into the identity category of race. Seeing it as a social construct, I offer in its stead the concept of interconnection as a more liberal and ethical paradigm. Rather than dominant hegemonic constructions of power and freedom, I suggest a more liberating perspective. I look at the ways in which the academy still serves the racist patriarchal norms on which it was founded. I contend that American scholarship in the humanities frequently reiterates and re-inscribes dominant hegemonic narratives and norms, which has lived consequences for those it functions to marginalize. In light of this, I examine the linguistic lens of race and the ways in which it uses stereotype to become a self-proliferating and self-perpetuating entity. I look at the trope of blackness in American culture, in my own life, and in the work of Jamaica Kincaid. My final reading of My Garden (Book): reveals how Kincaid has resolved the conundrum of race in her life by holding up as her mirror the most detestable character in the history of the Americas—Christopher Columbus—and realizing that she is not so different from him after all.*

Cultural identity... is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

It is my belief that everyone has power. There are different kinds of power and different ways of using that power, but inherent in all beings is a power that must be cultivated in order to be fully understood. As I said in the previous chapter, our circumstances can define us, limit us, or offer us opportunities for growth. When we realize this, we are less likely to simply give our power away. It is also my understanding that true power is infinite. As such, a gain in power by one is not a necessary loss of power by another. Instead, we are all tied together and our freedom lies in realizing through our interconnections that the power of the whole is far greater than that of the sum of its parts. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us in his speech, “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,” that:

Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.

John Donne caught it years ago and placed it in graphic terms: "No man is an island entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." And he goes on toward the end to say, "Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind; therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." We must see this, believe this, and live by it if we are to remain awake through a great revolution."

We live in a time and place where many of us don't even know our neighbors.

We would often rather connect digitally to someone we already know than meet the

person sitting next to us. Our media culture instructs us to mistrust those who are not already in our circle—making the exploration of our interconnection seem risky. While living in New York City, I have often felt that the swarms of people around me were not subjects at all, but moving objects, part of the landscape, extras in the movie that is my life. Despite the amazing proliferation of information that technology affords us—it is still very easy to cast the role of “other”, whether that “other” be a Rwandan orphan on a PBS special or the Mexican janitor at our workplace. It is often easier—and more in keeping with our existing belief system—to see those around us as “other” than to feel that we are brothers intertwined in a single destiny. Martin Luther King, Jr. was able to be involved in mankind long before many of us. The concept of a brotherhood of wo/man consisting of all of us does away with allegiance based on race, alliance based on gender, or association based on sexual preferences. Our interconnection renders each of us equally important in relation to “what is.” And, as King reminds us, I cannot be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and vice versa. When we see the upliftment of another as a necessary component of our own upliftment, then their gain in power is not construed as our loss. Similarly, their victimhood becomes our concern. We see that we are each contributors to the whole, endowed with the potential to enact great and wonderful change, when and if we are able to meet the challenge.

Gloria Karpinski describes the role of a contributor who is aware of our interconnection and able to align self-interest with the interests of the greater whole:

When we create out of the lower will only in order to satisfy greed, our finest productions fall before time as easily as sand castles give way to the sea. But when we listen to our deepest impulses from our highest will, we create from a blueprint that seems much larger than our own. We become co-creators with the universe, bringing into the physical realm new sounds, symbols, social concepts, discoveries, and inventions that enrich



us all. Such creations are beautiful, and they endure because they provide for the good of all (35).

Through acknowledging and understanding the interconnection and interdependence that King and Karpinski describe, we are able to see our own importance in relationship to the whole. Thich Nhat Hanh writes extensively on interconnection, or “interbeing,” as he calls it. He gives an example of this connection between all things:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. “Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter-” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, *inter-be* (95).

Hanh stretches this notion of interbeing, extending it beyond the connection between the cloud and this sheet of paper.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. Without sunshine, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine *inter-are*. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. The logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist... We cannot point to one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word *inter-be* should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to *inter-be*. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to *inter-be* with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is (95-96).

Hanh’s construction is useful in beginning to extricate social categories from hegemonic hierarchies. In order for you to be a powerful man, it is no longer necessary to construct me as a helpless woman; for you to be a wealthy white, I no longer have to

be a poor Black; for you to be a moral heterosexual, I need not be a deviant homosexual. We don't have to fix the "other" in order to construct our "self." Instead, we can see that all of these things exist within our Self. When we can do that, we are able to see life as an opportunity to get to know ourselves and to mindfully create from our unique vantage point. True subscription to this belief does a lot toward the erasure of race, class, or gender- based hegemony.

One might choose to see the relationship of power and freedom as being this: power is the ability to influence others, whereas freedom is the ability not to be influenced by others, to fall outside of the sway of power of others. This feels at first like a sound construction, one that adequately sums up one's experience of it—if I have power I can make you do what I want you to do and if I have freedom I don't have to do what you tell me to do. But I think there is more to it—there is a way to construct power and freedom that is not so limiting. Perhaps real freedom is knowing that we are always choosing, and therefore always able to choose differently. Power then becomes not the ability to influence the choices of others, but something else. Power is perhaps the ability to attract and accumulate the energy required to achieve an objective or meet a goal.

In spite of this power and freedom that are accessible to us all, so many of us feel that our hands are tied in our own lives. We do not *feel* free to do, explore, have, or be whatever it is we want. Someone or something bigger and more powerful than us makes the rules and it is our lot in life to merely enforce or abide by them. Our world view, ethics, and culture frequently exert considerable influence over us, making us feel that we have no choice. Motivated by the desire to be a good husband, father, Christian, friend, worker, or whatever, we cannot see that each of these signifiers is actually almost empty.

We have filled them with our own (or our culture's, or our family's, or our race's) ideas and perceptions of what they mean. It would probably sound incomplete to many to define a mother as "the feminine progenitor of an offspring," because it says nothing of the relationship between the mother and child. But, honestly, the rest—the nurturance, the love, the connection / or the neglect, the resentment, the disconnect—are all choices or the results of choices made consciously and unconsciously. The extent to which we are unwilling to admit this is directly connected to the extent to which we are attached to our own world view and its beliefs.

To Krishnamurti, freedom is first and foremost the absence of fear, both from without and from within. He equates ambition with the fearful struggle to be somebody, indicating that one is not accepting of what is. Krishnamurti explains further the conditions in which freedom can and cannot exist. "So there can be true freedom only when the mind understands this whole process of the desire for security, for permanency.... All your political, religious, and social activities, whatever they are, are based on that desire for permanency... So long as the mind is seeking any form of security—and that is what most of us want—as long as the mind is seeking permanency in any form, there can be no freedom." (9-10)

It is when we understand that we are choosing what these words we associate with our "selves" mean, that we have been choosing—sometimes consciously, often unconsciously—what we have enabled and disabled as viable possibilities based on our definition of various terms and our level of association or identification (or disassociation or non-identification, as the case may be), that we realize that we are free to choose differently from this moment on. This echoes Stuart Hall's notion of identity as a process

rather than a fixed entity. When we can see that what we think of a circumstance, action, or event—as well as what we do or do not do about it—are all choices, then we are free. Then we have power. This freedom is the awareness of the ability to choose. This power is the ability to make things happen that we want to have happen, not at the expense of others, but for the betterment of all. This construction has more liberatory potential, in my opinion, than one in which power is concentrated in the hands of the few and they are the only people who are free.

### “SELF” SUSTAINING IN THE ACADEMY

The half-hearted invitation for non-white, non-males, non-heterosexuals and other “nons” to incorporate ourselves into the pre-existing American models and institutions was received by many exactly as it was intended, as an empty and forced gesture not of genuine love and acceptance, but of unconvinced acquiescence to a tidal shift in our culture. We were dealt into the white man’s game, to be played by his rules and on his turf. Many were so happy to have a seat at the table at all that the fairness of this was not debated. I invite those who do see their location as central to deeply examine what beliefs about themselves it serves to maintain the beliefs they have about others. When we are able to see our own worth independent of others is when we have truly transgressed the boundaries and begun to play our own game.

It is rather presumptuous of this so-called center to think that our lives on the margins revolve around them. And yet, for many, they do. Some people code their lives in terms of haves and have-nots and create for themselves a very realistic location from which to enact the drama of the victim. Whether clinging to a nostalgic past with vapid

traditions or projecting fret and worry onto the uncertain future, we play mind games with ourselves to stay put, anchored to our view of the world. While American culture prides itself on progress, America's citizens often do whatever they can to keep from changing.

Genuinely distraught over the oppression and degradation of, among many others, peoples of color, white women, the lower class, immigrants, homosexuals, the elderly and the disabled in the United States, I have examined the tactics by which these groups have inserted themselves into the academy, "American" culture in general. Why do we/they want to continue this painful insertion into American discourses and institutions? I have scrutinized the lives of groups who don't see themselves as oppressed and realized that theirs are not much better. Why do we continue to compete in a game that is not enjoyable? Liberation will not come from white scholars quoting scholars of color with the respect and frequency accorded their white counterparts—Cornel West is a testament of this, for his being exceptional does nothing to elevate the perception of Black American men overall. Instead, he is one of the few who is “all right.” Equality, if understood as equal inclusion and representation, will probably never happen. The game itself must be reconfigured in order to enable other possibilities. I do not think we can beat the system at its own game, but we can introduce a new game, a game within a game, or even a game outside of the game.

I find it ironic that many minority scholars struggle to insert themselves into a structure, an institution, or a dialogue that is predicated on exclusion, on patriarchy, and on the predominant hegemony; or that they create equally problematic oppositional responses. If one truly believes in equality, how does it make sense to create a binary

between "them" and "us"? Doesn't that perpetuate dichotomous thinking, which, clinical studies show, may perpetuate hierarchy? Doesn't seeing oneself as disenfranchised and white males as empowered create that reality, at least to a certain degree? But, then again, I think it might be easier to fight for insertion or fight against the "hegemonic white patriarchal male" and his system than trying to create something completely different. Or, at least, it may seem easier.

According to bell hooks, "Teachers are often among that group most reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which white-supremacist thinking informs every aspect of our culture including the way we learn, the content of what we learn, and the manner in which we are taught" (25). This is not an indictment of contemporary scholars, because I don't think this reluctance is intentional, per se. I see much of it as the brilliant self-proliferating and self-protecting design of this living organism called the American university. Like most species, it has survival plans built into its blueprint. There is an implicit belief system built into the superstructure. When facing up to it, usually as a vulnerable individual with something at stake, like a successful defense or a positive tenure review, its enormity make it appear insurmountable. Our own work must be in keeping with "how things are done" in our field, our university, and our department. Our objective is to produce new scholarship, but not so new that it seems a non sequitur or out in left field, lest the authority of those signing off on the work be questioned.

Yet at the same time, I am aware that it is people, not institutions, who uphold rules and perpetuate beliefs. It is people, not the institution, who confer degrees and grant tenure. We as individuals choose our level of identification with the institution, and that determines how we respond to the roles assigned to us by it. The dominant norms and

narratives are often taken up by the individual because they offer safety, or they conform to the individual's other beliefs, or the individual feels helpless to change them. But, like everything else, as I have argued exhaustively, this is a choice, and our power comes in understanding that we are always able to choose differently.

In an essay entitled "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," hooks asks, "How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as a movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization? Opposition is not enough. In that vacant space after one has resisted there is still the necessity to become-to make oneself anew" (15). I would go so far as to say that opposition is actually hurtful to any given objective, because it calls upon the divisive construction of "self" and "other," or "us" and "them," and employs a notion of power as finite. This makes it easier to lay blame, but it also makes change more difficult, for it reinscribes "their" power and makes "ours" predicated upon "their" permission, which usually never comes. But, as Wayne Dyer says in a presentation on The Power of Intention "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." To enact social change, to change the structures of the university, to move beyond archaic and racist stereotypes, I truly believe that we need only to examine our "selves."

If you are curious what this kind of scholarship might look like, hooks' texts discuss her various classroom strategies for creating an engaged educational environment in which a feminist praxis can be effectively established. These views extend into her own "transgressive" pedagogical theory, which borrows from Paulo Freire but is still uniquely her own. Her discussion of her own successes and failures in the classroom

give helpful techniques and reassurance to younger teachers like myself, but might offer insight to anyone who hopes to find a way to teach differently. hooks proposes a different model for what might happen within a university classroom. In texts such as Teaching to Transgress and Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope, she shares her own methods of teaching race and racism, examining gender and sexism, and incorporating the practice and principles of democracy into the classroom.

hooks' narratives often revisit a nostalgic segregated childhood, ruptured by an insistent integration into a physically distant and culturally foreign predominantly white school, where hooks felt first-hand the effects of racism on her own education. She writes, "Racial integration ushered in a world where many black folks played by the rules only to face the reality that white racism was not changing, that the system of white supremacy remained intact even as it allowed black people greater access." (Teaching Community, 52) Her memoir, Wounds of Passion, focuses specifically on her own story, while works such as Teaching Community and Breaking Bread use her experiences as a springboard for theoretical discussion of race, education, and self-esteem. It is easy to see the relationship between these experiences with race and education in her formative years and her views on these subjects many years later. Her texts are often segregated themselves, writing for and about Black American people, or perhaps for all people willing to acknowledge the ways that white supremacy shapes American culture and everyday lives. She presents white supremacy as pervasive, but still a choice made by the individual to either accept or reject this belief. hooks declares, "No one is born a racist. Everyone makes a choice. Many of us made the choice in childhood. A white child taught that hurting others is wrong, who then witnesses racial assaults on black



people, who questions that and is told by adults that this hurting is acceptable because of their skin color, then makes a moral choice to collude or oppose.” (53) In some interesting and important ways, hooks has created both real and discursive communities of “oppressed” or “anti-racist” peoples, crossing boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality.

I think that teachers miss out (perhaps intentionally) on the opportunity to educate students about racism when they don't try to open dialogue between students about race. I think I wouldn't have been as frightened of racism and its power if it wasn't left hidden and embedded in our educational system. Perhaps this apprehension is because teachers feel ill-equipped to address these issues in a formal setting. I know I feel ill equipped when “colored people” come up in my classroom. hooks argues that the main hindrance to this kind of teaching is our own fear:

The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, class, etc., is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained. To some extent we all know that whenever we address subjects in the classroom that students are passionate about, there is always a possibility that there will be confrontation, forceful expression of ideas, and, at times, conflict (93).

We have to find a way to insert something into this cycle—a new discourse about difference. I don't think there is much power in opposition, because it is predicated on the idea that a gain by “us” would be a loss for “them.” And, as hard as it is to acknowledge, what we are opposing is a part of ourselves that we have denied, negated, and thrust onto another. The power of racial stereotypes can only be fought from the inside out, on an individual basis. We must probe our own beliefs to discover our own true mind.

## RACE AS A LINGUISTIC LENS

Race has enjoyed a long, successful career as a social category. It remains one of the most facile vehicles for constructing an “other,” as well as for reinforcing limiting definitions of power and freedom. Even though there is more variety among races than between them, we still rely on race as an important marker of difference. As Henry Louis Gates notes in his introduction to “Race,” Writing, and Difference, “Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of “the white race” or “the black race,” “the Jewish race” or “the Aryan race,” we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors” (4). In spite of this, race retains its currency as a category, mainly because it has become a “package-deal,” in which the almost empty signifier of race has been filled with other social and cultural connotations. Gates explains, “The sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term ‘race’ has both described and *inscribed* differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural abilities such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, fidelity, and so forth. The relation between ‘racial character’ and these sorts of characteristics has been inscribed through tropes of race, lending the sanction of God, biology, or the natural order to even presumably unbiased descriptions of cultural tendencies and differences” (5, his emphasis). Although it has been proven to be little more than a construct, race persists nonetheless as an important category and marker. We identify to a greater or lesser degree with our race and at times our ego/ “self” feels the need to position our race among other races (or our nation among other nations, or our ethnic group among others,

or whatever it is with which we are identifying). Some people strongly identify with their race and draw from it a sense of belonging. Others use race to situate themselves in a historical continuum, taking pride in the past achievements of people of their race or citing past injustices. Some use the past as a predictor of what is possible for their race in the future. For others race is little more than an afterthought, yet even this stance is nuanced. Many privileged people are rarely put into a position where they have to think about race, while others are forced to confront race every day. Regardless of how race functions in the life of the individual, many people feel that it is often easier to lug along the stuffed suitcase of race than to take the time to open it, unpack it, and take out just what we actually need.

Besides, when we look at the world, it is difficult to see that for which there is no language. We might see it, but we cannot express it from within the narrow confines of linguistic communication. Since there is no word in English, for example, for the space between trees, we do not really think of that space as an entity. If there were a word for it, we might pay more attention to it. But there is no word and, as such, we do not have qualifiers for it; we do not note larger spaces and smaller spaces, prettier, or sunnier spaces. We do not pay attention to the space between trees, and we cannot discuss it without using the trees themselves as referents. Similarly, we have had comparatively little scholarship that examines blackness (or the space between blacknesses), gender (or the space between genders), or any other categories of identity without making the “tree” of whiteness/ maleness/etc. its referent.

Many contemporary American literary scholars do not often freely and creatively explore these in-betweens. Academic scholarship in the humanities (by which I mean the

practices of reading, writing, research, and teaching) in the U.S. frequently reiterates and re-inscribes dominant hegemonic narratives and norms, particularly with regard to the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. It often does little to de-center the normalizing of whiteness and heterosexuality or the privileging of maleness, though it conceivably could if it endeavored to do so. Instead, there is much scholarship that helps to construct and maintain “American” ideology, without regard for the implications of this assistance. It does this in many different ways, one of which is through language itself, which becomes a lens through which experience is understood. As Mikhail Bakhtin points out in “Discourse in the Novel:”

Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own. (Quoted in Gates 1)

Many scholars do not undertake this process of making words their own. They are content (or feel there is no alternative but) to adopt the general connotations and work from within someone else’s linguistic framework. But this re-inscription of racist, sexist, heterosexist, patriarchal language is problematic and continues to have very real repercussions for those whom they function to marginalize. The naming process often results in the imprinting of a hierarchical lens. A ranked name becomes part of the way in which the so-called “other” is understood, even by the other itself. An example of this would be the class-based notion of a “Third World,” which has at its root implicit

economic subjugation. The moniker “Third World” became passé recently, and has sometimes been substituted with the equally hierarchical “developing countries.” This designation posits that “developed countries” are more “advanced.” We do not mean only that we are more technologically advanced. We are a *fait accompli*, indicated by the “ed” at the end of our name (developed, advanced). We *are*, in some very meaningful senses, while developing countries *are not*. They aspire to be, to become, but are locked through language in a permanent state of aspiration and yearning incompleteness. The newest handle, “Global South,” might hold some possibility if it gains enough currency, though it may just be a re-drawing of a line in the sand with its own implicit hierarchy. Another example of the difficulty with naming might be discomfort I feel when a student talks about “colored people” instead of “people of color.” An innocent mistake by an ignorant college kid can easily unsettle me, evoking Jim Crow and its direct teaching of black inferiority. If I let it go, I feel I am doing the students a disservice, wasting a teachable moment. If I mention it, I feel like I am inviting limiting, archaic hierarchies into my classroom space. I end up stuck between the narrative that posits me at the top of the class hierarchy as the instructor and this inadvertently evoked historical narrative that places me at the bottom.

This points to a key power of language that is often overlooked—*language has a prophetic quality*. It not only tells of the past and the present, but also tells of the future, which in many ways dictates what is possible in that future. Naming fixes things. As Eckhart Tolle asseverates in [A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose](#):

Words, no matter whether they are vocalized and made into sounds or remain unspoken as thoughts, can cast an almost hypnotic spell upon you. You easily lose yourself in them, become hypnotized into implicitly believing that when you have attached a word to something, you know

what it is. The fact is: You don't know what it is. You have only covered up the mystery with a label. Everything, a bird, a tree, even a simple stone, and certainly a human being, is ultimately unknowable. This is because it has unfathomable depth. (25)

Once we stick a label on something, it is easier to think that we "know" that thing.

We lose our beginner's mind and stop discovering what is new and different about the thing in each moment. We blindly feel the trunk of the elephant, make our pronouncement, and we are done with it. We tack the butterfly to the piece of cork and call it a day.

I bring attention to this naming and renaming process to show how the Western linguistic conceptualization of the alleged "other" ("third world:" as being from another "world" that is lower in rank; "developing:" as being in process and in some sense striving to become what we are; "global south:" as little more than a set of geographical coordinates that end up being represented visually as "beneath" their "developed" northern neighbors), says quite a lot about the "self" that is being constructed both globally and personally, much more than it says about the "other" (if there is, in fact, an "other" at all).

J. Krishnamurti asks interesting questions about the "self" and "other," calling them the "observer" and the "image" because of the nature of their relationship:

Now, when I build an image about you or about anything, I am able to watch that image, so there is the image and the observer of the image... It is from that centre that I observe and make my judgment, and thus the observer is separate from the thing he observes. But the observer is aware of more than one image; he creates thousands of images. But is the observer different from these images? Isn't he just another image? He is always adding and subtracting from what he is; he is a living thing all the time weighing, comparing, judging, modifying and changing as a result of pressures from outside and within—living in the field of consciousness which is his own knowledge, influence and innumerable calculations....

So we come to a point where we can say, ‘The observer is also the image, only he has separated himself and observes (95-96).

Sharon Salzberg reveals the dehumanizing reality of “othering,” which gives us insight into how it helps to perpetuate domination and exploitation. She writes:

Can we ever actually see another person? If we create an “other” out of our projections and associations and ready interpretations, we have made an object of a person; we have taken away their humanity. We have stripped from our consciousness their own sensitivity to pain, their likely wish to feel at home in their bodies and minds, their complexity and intricacy and mutability (25).

Tolle posits “the other” as a concept that plays a large part in the maintenance of the ego, which can be seen as interchangeable with the “self” as I have constructed it within this work. He characterizes this “self” or ego as “the incessant stream of involuntary and compulsive thinking and the emotions that accompany it.” (59) He relates this to Descartes’ thinker in the statement “I think, therefore I am,” then links it to Sartre’s assertion that he is not the thinker, but the one observing the thinker. In Tolle’s work, the Cartesian thinker is the ego/ “self”, the involuntary and compulsive thinker.

As long as you are completely unaware of this, you take the thinker to be who you are. This is the egoic mind. We call it egoic because there is a sense of self, of I (ego) in every thought—every memory, every interpretation, opinion, viewpoint, reaction, emotion. This is unconsciousness, spiritually speaking. Your thinking, the content of your mind, is of course conditioned by the past: your upbringing, culture, family background, and so on. The central core of all your mind activity consists of certain repetitive and persistent thoughts, emotions, and reactive patterns that you identify with most strongly. This entity is the ego itself (59-60).

The ego/”self”, according to Tolle, uses “the other” as an anchor for its free-floating and delicate existence. He claims that all egos operate with the same structures, thriving on identification and separation. He explains, “When you live through the mind-made self comprised of thought and emotion that is the ego, the basis for your identity is

precarious because thought and emotion are by their very nature ephemeral, fleeting. So every ego is continuously struggling for survival, trying to protect and enlarge itself. To uphold the I-thought, it needs the opposite thought of ‘the other.’ The conceptual ‘I’ cannot exist without the conceptual ‘other’” (60). The “self” and the “other” inter-are.

Language functions in determining what is possible for the other—by which I do not mean the concept of “the other,” but the lived reality of those who have been grouped as such—even into the future. This prophetic nature of language is born of reiteration. In Declining the Stereotype, Mireille Rosello reveals the functioning of reiteration in the dissemination of stereotypes, revealing it as that which gives stereotypes their power and potency as forms of classification and transmission of knowledge, more often than not of a so-called “other.” Rosello explains:

Stereotypes are very successful particles of language and ideology that cannot be reduced to or dismissed as the mechanical repetition of trite clichés or delirious narratives about certain races or communities. Like a block of cast iron, they form a whole that cannot be dissolved and whose main purpose is to be repeated endlessly... The stereotype is systematically implicated in the issue of repetition (23).

According to Rosello, stereotypes are not the individual units, but rather the chunks of generalization that we force upon ourselves and others. These stereotypes have lived results for those stereotyped. Rosello explains, “Cultural theorists who seek to read transnationally are rightly concerned with the increasing number of marginalized individuals whose powerlessness can be described accurately as a lack of access to the benefits provided by the wealthier nation-states. When we deal with national or ethnic or gender communities, exclusion almost systematically entails the loss of rights, the loss of privileges, or in the most extreme cases, the loss of all dignity and hope” (11).



Since the stereotypes are often more widely agreed upon than our personal beliefs, they often feel truer and even more like fact. “The targets of stereotyping are maneuvered into certain roles, so that a vicious circle develops, in which reality seems to endorse the stereotype.” (17) We can see this vicious circle at work with the chicken and egg story of the Black American man and prison. Statistics about Black men in the American prison system are staggering. In 2008, one in *nine* Black men between the ages of 20 and 34 was incarcerated, compared to one in *thirty* for men of other races in the same age group. Ben Jealous, president and CEO of the NAACP, says that “According to The Sentencing Project, one in three Black men born today can expect to go to prison, if the current trend continues... On any given day, one in every ten Black men between the ages of 25 and 29 is incarcerated” (*Essence* 102). Since 1990, the U.S. prison population, which was already the world’s largest, has doubled. State governments are spending nearly \$50 billion a year on jails and prisons to contain over 2.3 million prisoners. Five states, Michigan among them, now spend as much or more on corrections as they do on higher education (Washington Post A01).

Because of the power of stereotype, criminality is branded into Black men’s skin. The stereotype of the criminal Black man leads to more racial profiling, to harsher sentences for comparable crimes, to less attention in the classroom, to limited job opportunity, to the normalizing of criminality in the Black community, to the normalizing of Black criminality in the national media, to unfair treatment by police, to ambivalent legal counsel. I often wait to see the sketch or the photo of the person who has just murdered an old woman or raped a teenager on the evening news, hoping that the person will not be Black. Thanks to the news, I have probably seen thousands of Black men

over the years with their heads bowed, their hoodies on, being led to and from police cars in handcuffs. I have grown accustomed to seeing someone who looks like my downstairs neighbor's son or my mailman splashed across the news for committing heinous crimes. I have seen black and white footage of the very same thing since the Civil Rights movement, where the heinous crime was simply asserting one's right to sit in a certain place. We can definitely see how the stereotype of Black men as criminal has resulted in a self-fulfilling prophecy that makes it seem that this were so. We can also see in this example how very damaging a stereotype can be.

Rosello argues that it is impossible and "self-defeating" to attempt to debunk stereotypes by reiterating them. She says, "To declare them wrong, false, to attack them as untruths that, presumably, we could hope to replace by a better or more accurate description of the stereotyped community will never work" (13). She sees stereotypes as having within them "a sort of built-in antidote against all attempts at discrediting them." (Rosello 18) This is because "Stereotypes were precisely created to protect ideas from the wear and tear of materiality" (23). I feel that the best way to approach stereotypes is to examine the role they serve in maintaining cultural beliefs. "Ethnic stereotypes are always at the service of some ideological system, but they cannot be reduced to the system" (16). These stereotypes become "self-fulfilling prophecies" (17) of what is and isn't possible for groups that are stereotyped. It is important to understand that beliefs about the "other" are no different and no less limiting than the other beliefs examined in Chapter 3. Sometimes, even in the face of contradictory personal experience, we will cling to the safety of the stereotype. This is at least in part because the stereotypes may figure into our own belief system in ways we are not willing to rethink. If my "self" has

as part of its construction a notion of racial superiority, I will be loath to relinquish this idea even if my experience disproves it. Thus, it is only in exploring my own beliefs that I am able to engender the possibility of moving beyond such stereotypes.

## PARADIGMATIC FRAMES

Ideology is also perpetuated in scholarship through frames, or epistemological paradigms (which can be understood here as “a model, theory, perception, assumption, or frame of reference. In the more general sense, it’s the way we ‘see’ the world—not in terms of our visual sense of sight, but in terms of perceiving, understanding, interpreting.” (Covey 23)), which place limits on what can be known. Such paradigms as linearity, hierarchical, and binary thinking, for example, leave no space for the type of inter-being that Hanh describes, nor for simultaneity, synchronicity, multiplicity, and other forms of non-duality . These other ways of “seeing” the world are not as easy to work with because they are not as simplistic as “either this or that” or “first this then that.” Yet without these other, lesser used paradigms, it is impossible to understand the complex interplay of different categories, the ways in which they inter-are. In his essay, “‘Who Are Our Own People’ Challenges for a Theory of Social Identity,” Michael R.

Hames-García explains this in relationship to identity categories:

Memberships in various social groups combine with and mutually constitute one another. Membership in one group (e.g., “femaleness” means something different in the context of some simultaneous group memberships (e.g., “blackness”) than in others (e.g., “motherhood”). The totality of these relations in their mutual constitution comprises the self. One important consequence of this fact is that one cannot understand a self as the sum of so many discrete parts, that is, femaleness + blackness + motherhood. The whole self is constituted by the mutual interaction and relation of its parts to one another. Politically salient aspects of the self, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and class, link and imbricate

themselves in fundamental ways. These various categories of social identity do not, therefore, comprise essentially separate “axes” that occasionally “intersect.” They do not simply intersect, but blend, constantly and differently... They expand one another and mutually constitute each other’s meanings (103).

Hames-García argues that using the traditional paradigms actually perpetuates the problem. “Separate and fragmented become ways of seeing others and oneself that facilitate domination and exploitation” (120). By using these reductive frames, the full story can never be told. If I can only answer “Yes” or “No,” there is no room for “No, but...” or “Yes and...” or “Well, yes and no...” or “Yesterday, yes, but today, not so much.” For some, multiplicity is hard to express, and for others it is hard to perceive. As Hames- García says, “Unfortunately, this multiplicity of the self becomes obscured through the logic of domination to which the self becomes subjected... What does it mean to be understood exclusively in terms of one’s race, gender, or sexuality? It means that one is understood in terms of the most dominant construction of that identity” (104).

In her benchmark book Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, Patricia Hill Collins writes that, "Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group" (xii). This is apparent even in the fact that anger and blame are frequently absent from multiethnic discussions of race, particularly academic ones, ostensibly to benefit the white people that are present. I have heard more than once that anger would not be “productive.” Perhaps not, but it might be authentic and it might be warranted. Even so, the discussion of race must often be framed in a way that makes it easy for the dominant group to hear. While at first glance this might seem like a progressive attempt to do away with blame and

“them” versus “us” constructions, when examined more deeply, it is also an assertion that the discomfort of the dominant group takes priority over the discomfort of the oppressed group.

Stories that are not familiar or are uncomfortable are harder to hear. I can give two examples to support this claim from my own personal observations and experience growing up in the 1980s and 1990s as a Black and Caribbean American. For one, the mainstream media conflated race and class by frequently taking the experiences and culture of lower class and working poor Black Americans as representative of the experience of all Black Americans. This was why so many Americans, Black and white, were in an uproar about “The Cosby Show” in the 1980s. They felt that the premise of the show—a doctor and a lawyer raising functional children in an upper middle class, two parent household—contradicted the previously offered narratives of Black experience. Blackness, in this case, was framed in a way that many people could not, or were not willing, to understand and accept. Blackness had become so inextricable from poverty in American culture that it was genuinely puzzling to many to see this variation in the interaction of race and class.

Another example would be the way in which Jamaican culture was seen for a long time as synonymous with Caribbean culture, since its popularity gave it higher visibility. Furthermore, Jamaicans seemed to embrace the idea of their culture as the authentic Caribbean experience. Bob Marley, dreadlocks, the Ethiopian flag, and the marijuana leaf came to represent the Caribbean and Caribbean-ness in the eyes of many Americans who saw no distinction between Caribbean cultures. Thus, for many Americans even to this day what they see and define as Caribbean culture is a stereotyped caricature of one

group, Rastafarians, that emerged on one particular island, Jamaica. The 1980s and 1990s were full of such generalizations, where little distinction was drawn *among* groups. Mainstream culture's arrogance and ignorance saw Asian cultures as all more or less the same as one another, Latino cultures as lacking specificity, and Caribbean cultures as being the "same shit, different island." Sadly, because tourism is the primary industry in a large part of the Caribbean, this erasure was tolerated and perhaps even endorsed by many Caribbean nations. In St. Maarten, for example, I could easily find a hundred hats with dreadlocks sewn in or t-shirts that promise, "No Problem, Mon," both symbols of the Rastafarian culture prevalent in Jamaica and, while present to some degree, hardly defining of local culture. I would be much harder pressed to find something that one might define as a national literature (save perhaps using calypso songs as literary texts).

Yet at the same time that Hill Collins' explanation points to an accurate ascertainment of a legitimate challenge, it does not leave an opening or enable a different relationship in the future. This relationship of education and experience—education serving to unpack and decode the lived experience—neglects the crucial fact that education also prophetically mediates the experience itself by providing the linguistic lens and paradigmatic framework through which it can be understood. But if I include the future in my equation of the relationship between education and experience, certain understandings are enabled and others are disabled precisely because of the results they will produce. Thus, education might serve to unpack, decode, then *repack* the lived experience. Our understanding of the past and present must also facilitate our desired future. If I were to agree with Hill Collins, then that would fix my identity within the category of "oppressed." Identifying as oppressed would be problematic because it would

make my existence relative to and contingent upon a central “oppressor,” without whom I could not maintain this identity. It would bring my own ego/ “self” into play, making me a player in an ongoing battle between oppressor and oppressed, and creating a personal attachment to and identification with the identity of the victim. If I were to become attached to the idea of myself as victim, I would have a hard time relinquishing it and seeing myself as other than that. It would become a part of my story, my history and as such, “every memory, every interpretation, opinion, viewpoint, reaction, emotion” would have this oppressed identity woven into it, as Tolle mentioned. To no longer be oppressed would be to unravel my egoic identity, which my ego would never let me do anyway.

With many things that I read in my first few years of graduate school, like Black Feminist Thought, I often felt I was being handed the wrong tools and techniques to excavate and carve out my own experience. They were valuable tools, but they were not of much help in the work I was undertaking. I was trying to sculpt a vessel, but was being given paint brushes and lessons in finer painting techniques. Unlike other branches of scholarship where the truths of the past still hold true today, talk about race today has little to do with discussions of race in the past. There are many structures and functions of race that certainly carry over from the past and merit examination, but a lot of cultural assumptions have changed since the 90s, let alone the 80s, 70s, or 60s— many spurred, as I have mentioned, by globalization and advancements in technology. In constantly revisiting the past in racial discourse, we walk a thin line between reiterating and reinforcing stereotypes, as Rosello outlines, and making progress toward lived and perceived equality (if that is, in fact, the goal).

In my scholarship, I try to render textual and academic performances that are not simply compliance with what is deemed "scholarship" by a hegemonic academy. My work endeavors to serve as a reminder that many of the rules and strictures only exist if we choose to uphold them for ourselves and others. Inspired by the work of hooks, West, and Anzaldúa, I reject—and encourage other scholars to reject—the adoption of a so-called "scholarly tone" that presents itself as objective or neutral, precisely because it attempts to obscure or erase much of the subjectivity of the author. Its performed neutrality is normally associated with whiteness and maleness, probably because white males were scholars in Western culture long before anyone else was allowed to be. As Ruth Frankenberg remarks, "In this line of thinking, whiteness operates by being 'invisible,' so ubiquitous and entrenched as to appear natural and normative." Here whiteness operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and racialized, the seemingly un-raced center of a racialized world" (10). It is from the 'neutral' position of the white male that many scholars—white and non-white, male and female—write, forgetting that "white people are 'raced,' just as men are 'gendered'" (1). As Richard Dyer notes, "White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular." (67) Thus "College" seems race neutral until we introduce the term "Black College," which puts a "White" in front of what before was taken to be everyman's "College." "Government" seems similarly race neutral until we realize how long government was exclusively white, and how long it has been predominantly white. Likewise, we discover this invisible "White" lurking in front of what has been called "academic voice" or "scholarly tone." In adopting this white mask, non-white scholars often end up "other-ing" the non-white people that they discuss, including themselves, in



the process. I can recall times when I was writing a paper about African-Americans and started to write “they” instead of the more accurate, yet more confrontational sounding “we.”

This performance of whiteness, whether intentional or not, fixes the non-white subject in the realm of the oppressed and fragments the speaker into both oppressor and oppressed. Paula Rothenberg points out the underlying belief that this academic practice reinforces. “This assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas colours are something else, is endemic to white culture” (10). Mab Segrest explains the painful result. “Because racism normalizes whiteness and problematizes ‘color,’ we whites as ‘generic humans’ escape scrutiny for our accountability as a group for creating racism and as individuals for challenging it” (42). In Blood, Bread and Poetry (1984), Adrienne Rich states: “We are not urged to help create a more human society here in response to the ones we are taught to hate and dread. Discourse is frozen at this level” (220). One of the reasons that discourse is frozen might be the tone and gaze that scholars have been encouraged to adopt, in that it ends up limiting the questions that one is able to ask and the stories one is able to tell.

It is particularly difficult to verbalize and demonstrate the multiplicity and concurrence of such a thing as blackness in ways that make rational, logical sense. How do I explain, for example, to a predominately White audience how blackness can be a disadvantage, but can also be an advantage? Being “Black” has afforded me a (real? imagined?) connection to some incredible things- the black church, a legacy of survival and resistance, a richness and depth of spirit that isn't rooted in the material, a strong and beautiful family history, a mind-blowing and diverse artistic tradition through which I

can explore and express myself, an impressively self-sacrificing work ethic, and a sense of pride and hope at the accomplishments and beauty of Black peoples from myriad diasporic locations who have excelled and innovated in spite of historic and present-day societal biases. How do I articulate that what most would point to as the main cause of my oppression—the color of my skin, interpreted and codified in this society as Black or African-American—has also been the cause of infinite joys; that I wouldn't trade it for anything? I have felt an overwhelming and heartwarming sense of belonging, love and kinship based on my race—in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States. And, in spite of instruction to the contrary, I love my blackness.

Blackness has also caused torment and tragedy for me and my family and friends. I have experienced staggering alienation from being either the only or one of few African-Americans in virtually every academic setting I have encountered; yet I have also felt estranged from many of my African-American peers because of various markers of my class and educational background and/or my genealogy (i.e., the way I talk and dress, the texture of my hair, my ease in interacting with whites). I have been told more than once that I don't "act black" or "talk black" which more often than not left me feeling inauthentic in my blackness. As E. Patrick Johnson explains in Appropriating Blackness:

...talking "white" is equivalent to speaking Standard English and talking "black" is equivalent to speaking in the black vernacular. (Race and class are also elided in this instance because many white men do not talk "white" either.) The black American who either chooses not to or simply cannot speak in the (black) vernacular is cast as a traitor to the race—indeed, as "white." (5)

This sentiment of inauthenticity snakes through and around my blackness sometimes, causing me to feel only peripheral in my membership to any given Black community. I have even felt disunited from some African-Americans for *not* being

racist, for judging people based on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin as Dr. Martin Luther King prescribed. This has been a bone of contention most particularly in relation to interracial dating, which I have defended in principle (if one wants to eliminate racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia in society, I contend, one cannot judge others based on race, gender, class or sexual orientation), but have cursed at times in practice because of the way some white suitors left me feeling objectified and sexualized because of *their* perceptions of my race. It is difficult to cultivate a genuine, loving relationship predicated on the assumption that you are the exotic “other.”

So riddle me this-- how do I explain this unique location to a (real? imagined?) predominantly white audience/ academy/ readership with an awareness of and inclusion of non-white readers in the framing of my scholarly performance, without privileging that white audience and writing exclusively to and for them? How do I then go on to discuss the plight of the African in America or the liberation of all peoples of African descent from oppression when I have already alluded to some of the joys and benefits that are exclusively ours and stem- at least in part- from the many combative and coping tools that we have developed in the face of that oppression? How do I discuss blackness without essentializing? How do I strive to transcend race and gender in my life and my scholarship without neglecting, at best, or degrading, at worst, the historical and cultural specificity of that race and gender, of the intersection of that race and that gender? In other words, how do I keep it *real* and *progressive* and *scholarly*?

My answer to myself is to acknowledge that race is merely another limiting belief. If I view race as a function of the ego/ “self,” there is renewed possibility of unraveling it. Race might then be seen as little more than a limiting attachment or identification, instead

of the life-defining juggernaut that it sometimes can be. I can try to notice race when it comes up in myself or in others without judging it, similar to how I might observe anger or jealousy or sadness. Often race comes up in conjunction with, or as an explanation for, another feeling, such as inferiority, superiority, membership, or isolation. But, upon examination, more often than not, I believe that we will see that race is the content and not the structure—it is merely being used to support or uphold pre-existing structures of inferiority, superiority, membership, or isolation. That is to say, it is being used to uphold ego/ “self” structures.

I’m not naïvely asserting that race can be done away with by seeing it as a mental construct. I am suggesting that we each own our own beliefs about race, and our own racist beliefs. It will take all of us looking honestly at race on the individual level to change the way that race impacts greater society. We cannot expect more from our culture than we expect of ourselves. Most of us don’t really want to know our true feelings about race. We don’t want to question our liberal stance, nor our quiet bigotry. Some pretend that we are all equal, while others pretend that they are superior. Many are told that they are inferior, and some of them believe it. When we can see our beliefs about race as a liability of our own thinking rather than a limitation of the imagined “other,” it loses some of its power over us. Race does not exist solely in the mind, however, because it fuels many actions and choices that impact our lives. Race colors our country’s politics, industry, foreign policy, education, and much more. It tempers our interactions and mediates our understanding. But it is when we can detach and stop identifying with our race that we can transcend the limits that racial thinking impose.

Blackness has certainly meant many things to me. But when I can allow it to mean more things, different things, and—ultimately—nothing, will be when I have truly detached from it. When other blacknesses—Jamaican ones, lower class ones, conservative Christian ones, racially exclusive ones—stop threatening my own blackness(es), I will know that I have stopped identifying with race. To me, transcending blackness doesn't mean I have moved beyond race, it means I have embraced race and all its myriad expressions. And yet I am able to see race for what it is, a crutch that sometimes feels useful but more often feels useless, an unhappy comfort zone of our own creation.

#### A NOTE ON READING PRACTICE (DURING READING PRACTICE)

This reading is going more smoothly than the last one. I have been able to establish a routine—reading on my bed after I put the dogs to sleep in their kennel. Building it into my schedule has helped me to maintain the practice. Making it a regular practice is important to becoming consistent. In Everyday Enlightenment, Dan Millman emphasizes the importance of cultivating regular practices, reminding his readers that “A little bit of something is a lot better than nothing. You are more likely to do, and continue doing, what is convenient and simple. Better to meditate, contemplate, or pray for only sixty seconds every day than for an hour once every week” (44). Millman uses the example of exercise to illustrate his point.

If you don't exercise every day but would like to start, then get up tomorrow morning and remember to do one jumping jack; then, the next morning do another jumping jack; and the next morning, and the next.

That one jumping jack every day is a profound step in the right direction, because it gets your foot in the door—you are forming the habit of dedicating a portion of your day, no matter how small, to exercise. The following month you may decide to trade in your daily jumping jack for a brisk walk around the block or two minutes of free-form movement and deep breathing... To transform your life, begin simply, with a foot in the door. (45)

Anyone who knows me well knows that I deeply believe that anything is possibly if we just take small, diligent toward a given goal. Little by little, step by step, we approach our goal. And when it gets difficult, when we are discouraged, we need only turn around and notice how far we've come already, how much ground has already been traversed. By making reading and meditating part of my routine, I am less likely to judge the moment and decided that I don't feel like doing it. Brushing my teeth, for example, has become a regular practice that I do regardless of whether I really want to or not. I don't decide that my teeth are "clean enough" for today and skip it, or decide that brushing them is "boring" and put it off until tomorrow. By doing it regularly, it becomes just another thing that I do every day, almost automatically. This reading practice functions much in the same way.

But cultivating a practice requires discipline, the ability to consistently make something a priority, even when it is inconvenient or difficult. About discipline, Gloria Karpinski writes:

We might have to deal with resistance to the word *discipline* because of the negative associations it has for us, notably in terms of parents and educational and religious institutions who attempted to mold us to their image. But personal discipline is liberating. It allows us to prioritize in the midst of overwhelming choice (377).

According to Karpinski, discipline affords us the opportunity to prioritize what is important to us consciously and mindfully. Discipline enables us to put our new, more

expansive beliefs into action. To use Millman's example, by choosing to do even a little bit of exercise regularly, someone who formerly thought "I will never get into shape" will see that his new practice does not support this belief. As he sees even slight changes in his physical composition, he will realize that this limiting belief is no longer the truth of his experience. In this contradiction he finds the freedom to formulate new unlimited beliefs, the freedom to choose differently in this moment and in subsequent moments. Shunryu Suzuki explains in Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind. "Perfect freedom is not found without some rules. People, especially young people, think that freedom is to do just what they want, that in Zen there is no need for rules. But it is absolutely necessary for us to have some rules. But this does not mean always to be under control. As long as you have rules, you have a chance for freedom" (34).

Millman adds that, "Discipline leads to freedom, according to an old spiritual law. This seems a contradiction, since most of us view discipline as doing something we don't want to do and freedom as doing whatever we want. But those of us who have achieved financial freedom, social freedom, the freedom to travel where we wish, the freedom to share the fruits of our labors and learning with others, and the freedom of good health have done so through self mastery"(49). Thus, discipline might be seen as the mental attitude that leads to practice. We might also say that *practicing with mindfulness is discipline*. In our world of immediate gratification, the idea of having the discipline to develop a practice is not au courant. We live in the time of the quick fix, of instant gratification, and of the binge. The concept of delayed gratification barely factors into our mass culture. Most people seem to prefer to take a pill to fix their blood pressure than walk for 10-20 minutes daily. Many people would have surgery get thinner if they

could afford it, rather than cultivate a healthy lifestyle. Similarly, there were several nights when I would have preferred to just go to bed than do my reading practice. I could have cited various rationalizations to justify not doing it (I'm pregnant and need rest/ it's already 10:00/ I can do it first thing in the morning/ I've already read this dumb book twice for goodness sake!), but I did it anyway. And I am glad I did.

### READING JAMAICA KINCAID AS NON-SELF (AFTER READING PRACTICE)

In sitting, I see that I am still relatively angry with Kincaid, even though she has done what I have been suggesting we do throughout this text—she has renegotiated her identity on her own terms, choosing not to be defined by others. She has even overcome her past obsessions, thrown off the mantle of victimhood so pervasive in her earlier writing. She has done away with many of the beliefs that weren't serving her. She has chosen what blackness, motherhood, caribbeanness, and many other facets of her identity will mean to her. She has eschewed linearity, upturned dominant hegemonic paradigms. So why am I not applauding the ways in which she has shaken loose from societal constraints?

I think about the ways in which—whether fair or unjustified—I have judged Jamaica Kincaid's blackness. I have felt betrayed by the ways that constructs like race or kinship do not function in her writing, which transparently describes her life. She has used biting words to publicly attack her family, her island, her friends, and Europe indiscriminately. She seems to hold no allegiance to anyone other than herself and her immediate family of husband and children (though she may even be turning ever so slightly on them as well, as evidenced by her most recent essay in *Harper's*, but more on



this in a moment). Furthermore, I can't help feeling like she has thrown everyone else under a bus in order to save herself. She adopts an imperialist gaze and tries to *fix* others in her definitions and judgments of them. While she claims and practices freedom with regard to her identity, she does so in a way that—I feel—disallows that freedom in others. She seems to build her identity on the backs of those closest to her, those who have smaller voices and have no international audience—like her dead brother or the nation of Antigua. They cannot respond with their own truths.

Indeed, I have built quite a case against her in which choices she made—such as taking a Scottish last name, dying her hair blond in her early 20s, and basically formulating an identity around her family with a white academic in Vermont and her love of gardening— indicate that her ‘transcendence’ of blackness was really little more than an appropriation of whiteness. She did not reconfigure blackness, she simply chose not to be black. She didn't redefine caribbeanness, she simply talked her way out of it. She seems to be fine with being one of the few Blacks that is “all right.” Quite an indictment! I have not left any space in which her blackness, whatever that is, might be acceptable.

Kincaid describes her take on blackness in her first book, the novella At the Bottom of the River:

How soft is the blackness as it falls. It falls in silence and yet it is deafening, for no other sound except the blackness falling can be heard. The blackness falls like soot from a lamp with an untrimmed wick. The blackness is visible and yet it is invisible, for I see that I cannot see it. The blackness fills up a small room, a large field, an island, my own being. The blackness cannot bring me joy but often I am made glad in it. The blackness cannot be separated from me but often I can stand outside it. The blackness is not the air, though I breathe it. The blackness is not the earth, though I walk on it. The blackness is not water or food, though it flows through my veins. The blackness enters my many-tiered spaces and soon the significant word and event recede and eventually vanish: in this way I am annihilated and my form becomes formless and I am absorbed

into a vastness of free-flowing matter. In the blackness, then, I have been erased. I can no longer say my own name. I can no longer point to myself and say “I.” In the blackness my voice is silent. First, then, I have been my individual self, carefully banishing randomness from my existence, then I am swallowed up in the blackness so that I am one with it... (46-7)

Kincaid evokes a world in which everything is covered in blackness. She is playing with her relationship to it, striving to understand how it is so much a part of her and so apart from her at the same time. This ubiquitous blackness seems to be the cause of her “annihilation,” a flow into the formless and the silent. It causes her erasure, leaving her voiceless and without an identity, without an “I.” She is what she calls “her individual self” before being subsumed in blackness. This might be seen as her coming to understand that the blackness, like the blackness of her skin, will always be there as a part of her. She is, as she says “one with it,” and as such her individual self has been erased. She is silenced.

Yet Kincaid finds liberation within silence.

I hear the silent voice; it stands opposite the blackness and yet it does not oppose the blackness, for conflict is not a part of its nature. I shrug off my mantle of hatred. In love I move toward the silent voice. I shrug off my mantle of despair. In love, again, I move ever toward the silent voice. I stand inside the silent voice. The silent voice enfolds me. The silent voice enfolds me so completely that even in memory the blackness is erased. I live in silence. The silence is without boundaries. The pastures are unfenced, the lions roam the continents, the continents are not separated. Across the flat lands cuts the river, its flow undimmed. The mountains no longer rupture. Within the silent voice, no mysterious depths separate me; no vision is so distant that longing is stirred up in me. I hear the silent voice—how softly now it falls, and all of existence is caught up in it. Living in the silent voice, I am no longer “I.” Living in the silent voice, I am at last at peace. Living in the silent voice, I am at last erased. (52)

Kincaid chooses ultimately to abandon her blackness, preferring instead to live “in the silent voice,” wherein she finds peace in erasure. I see this erasure as a

detachment from her previous identification with blackness, in which her black “self” is abandoned and her peaceful, spiritual Self is recognized as her true self, who she is. This spiritual Self is silent, it does not speak and, as such, cannot tell anyone who or what it is. It can only be. Its silence keeps it from having boundaries. It creates safe space for her, where there is no separation and no boundaries exist.

Yet I am hesitant to believe that this is the place from which her subsequent writing comes, this silent, peaceful place of no-“self.” As much as I want to accept her and her blackness, it still rubs uncomfortably against mine...

I guess there is more work to do.

### THIRD READING

Like many early Black writers in America, Kincaid emerged as a writer from a people who did not have a literature. In *Antigua*, Kincaid asserts, “No one in the history of the place I come from wrote” (*Columbia Chronicle*). Kincaid’s role as a mouthpiece for those assumed to have nothing to say is similar to the role that early Black writers held in the United States and Europe where, as Henry Louis Gates describes in his introduction to “Race,” Writing, and Difference, a correlation was assumed between race and the ability to write. “Accused of lacking a formal and collective history, blacks published individual histories which, taken together, were intended to narrate in segments the larger yet fragmented history of blacks in Africa, now dispersed throughout a cold New World” (11). As Gates explains it, these autobiographical narratives were integral to transforming the face and voice of blackness in the white imagination.

The narrated, descriptive “eye” was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual “I” of the black author as well as the collective

“I” of the race. Text created author; and black authors, it was hoped, would create, or re-create, the image of race in European discourse. The very *face* of the race was contingent upon the recording of the black *voice*. Voice presupposed a face, but also seems to have been thought to determine the very contours of the black face. (11)

Black Antigua’s post-colonial beginnings were similar to those of emancipated slaves in the United States. As Brita Lindberg-Seyersted remarks in Black and Female: Essays on Writings by Black Women in the Diaspora, “Kincaid’s writings date from the period when Antigua’s colonial yoke was gradually being lifted, first by its joining associated groups of a few Caribbean islands, later when it achieved the status of an independent nation” (130). This autobiographical current in early Black American writing helped establish Black subjectivity in the face of a dominant culture convinced of racial inferiority. Lindberg-Seyerstead sees the autobiographical genre functioning similarly in Antigua. “As part of the Caribbean world, Antigua typifies the post-colonial dilemma of what to do with the new freedom; what to preserve—if anything—of the colonial legacy; and how to decolonize the *mind*” (129, her emphasis). This decolonization Lindberg-Seyerstead articulates is consistent with what I described in Chapter 1, a release of thoughts and behaviors that impede independence. Like many post-colonial peoples, Antiguans were freed from colonial rule, but not from the subjugation of the colonial belief system, which relied heavily on the trope of race to maintain and justify its balance of power.

One might view, Lucy, her novel about her experience as an au pair to a white, American family, as Kincaid’s own slave/emancipation narrative. Ripped from her family by greed, sent to live in a foreign place in servitude to a privileged white family, and then discovered by and wed to another privileged white family, Kincaid’s story is

quite similar to that of other Black American women around the civil war era. Childhood poverty, domestic work, travel, and marriage that benefit the bride's socio-economic status are consistent themes in the earliest writings of Black women in the Americas. Nancy Gardner Prince, for example, a freeborn woman who was sent from her family at age 8 to work as a domestic, shares striking similarities with Kincaid. In her autobiography, Prince writes of similar economic challenges that sent her and her siblings into homes to perform domestic service. After a summer of Prince and her brother supporting their mother, a widow who had already placed three of her eight children with other families, on the sales of various berries they had picked and fish they had caught, they realized that an even greater contribution was necessary from the remaining children. She writes:

We stayed with our mother until every resource was exhausted; we then heard of a place eight miles out of town, where a boy and girl were wanted. We both went and were engaged. We often went home with our wages, and all the comforts we could get; but we could not approach our mother as we wished (Busby 42).

By "approach," I believe that Prince is referring to the maternal dynamic whose loss plagued Kincaid. Prince describes her mother as "young, inexperienced, with no hope in God, and without the knowledge of her Savior. Her grief, poverty, and responsibilities were too much for her; she never again was the mother that she had been before" (Busby 42). Thrice widowed and overwhelmed by the thought of raising eight children, Prince's mother changed like Kincaid's from one who gave nurturance to one focused on survival. Kincaid did not try to alleviate her mother's burden of a sick husband and several young children. (Stanton 45) Instead, Kincaid claims, "I insisted on reading books" (Stanton 45). This might be construed as Kincaid being so wrapped up in

her own escapism that she was unable to offer aid to others, but Kincaid toes the line between being unable and being unwilling to help. Kincaid explains that books were her priority over her family, leading her on one occasion to read a book instead of tending to Devon, an infant at the time, left in her care. “I would have said that I loved books but did not love [Devon] at all, only that I loved him because I was supposed to and what else could I do” (Brother 129). This belief that books take priority over her brother is reiterated by Kincaid. Devon, the brother depicted in My Brother, is the brother whose birth propelled her permanently out of the idyllic world of maternal love that Kincaid had been grasping for—and losing—as she grew older. Of that brother she writes, “I saw him when he was three years old and didn’t see him again until he was twenty-one” (149). Later on which Devon is again put in her care, this time as a HIV patient who needs her assistance getting medication, Kincaid again places reading above him, but what she is reading is of equal importance, for kernels of Kincaid’s aspirations as a gardener were foreshadowed in My Brother:

At the time the phone call came telling me of my brother’s illness, among the many comforts, luxuries, that I enjoyed was reading a book, *The Education of a Gardener*, written by a man named Russell Page. I was in the process of deciding that as a gardener who designed gardens for other people, he had the personality of the servant, not the personality of the artist, that his prose was fussy, tidy, timid; though the book bored me I would continue to read it because it offered such an interesting contrast to some of the other gardeners whose writing I loved. (I only thought all that before the phone rang. I now love *The Education of a Gardener* and look forward to reading it again.) And so when the phone rang I put this book down and answered it and I was told about my brother. (10)

This short passage alludes not only to Kincaid’s career aspirations—ostensibly to move her writing into the garden—but also to her new vision of herself as a member of the privileged, “conquering” class. Judging Page’s writing “fussy, tidy, timid” and seeing

that as relating to “the personality of a servant” belies her own beginnings as a domestic worker. She no longer identifies with that period of her life. It is as if she has told that story already, and as such may put it to rest. Very little about her past as an au pair appears inter-textually, whereas Kincaid’s mother seems to appear at least briefly in every text.

To return to Prince, after several years of working for various families in Massachusetts, she determined that she wanted to leave her country (Busby 49). She wed Nero Prince and traveled with him to Russia. After her marriage and departure, she lived a life of relative luxury and leisure in comparison to her years as a domestic. She writes of her arrival in St. Petersburg:

There I spent six weeks very pleasantly, visiting and receiving friends in the manner of the country. While there I attended two of their parties; there were various amusements in which I did not partake, which caused them much disappointment (Busby 46).

Because her husband was the servant of a sea captain as well as a princess, Prince spent time in the imperial palace and even met the Emperor and Empress, Alexander and Elizabeth. Kincaid made a similar ascent to the leisure class when she wed Allen Shawn, son of her former employer and editor at *The New Yorker*, William Shawn. Like Prince, who wrote of her childhood and her travels to Russia, Europe, and Jamaica in her book of memoirs, A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince written by Herself (1853), Kincaid has written autobiographically on similar topics.

In Kincaid’s writing, repetition and rhythm have been said to indicate “an intensification of emotion, signaling both loss and grief” (Stanton 43). As I have mentioned before, I think this repetition also serves to reinforce her version of her past. As such they recur across texts. It is through the stories that are told and re-told that we

can see Kincaid's interpretation of her past, and her beliefs about it. Her identifications and the choices she makes about what stories she does and does not tell reveal how she has selectively remembered the past in order to build the "self" with which she presently identifies. This "self" was a lover of books from early on, at the top of her academic class, brilliant but suppressed and eventually rejected by her family, enamored of her mother but dismayed by her mother's unwillingness or inability to reciprocate love. As Lindberg-Seyerstead remarks of Kincaid's first three published works, "In all the books we find the same girl with her traumatic love for her mother, the respected matriarch; with the same rather neutral relationship to a gentle and responsible father (who nevertheless in the end will leave his widow penniless); and with her own "two-facedness," as she calls the split she has identified within herself—a split between an outside and an inside, between a false side and a true side" (131). Kincaid's writing for a time grappled with her nostalgic paradise lost, and the emotion-fraught betrayal that propelled her from its grace. Kincaid's relationship in particular with her mother and her mother country are tense and hostile.

Kincaid's oeuvre chronicles the evolution of her identity. Her writing demonstrates the phenomena described earlier that constructing an identity entail. Kincaid very obviously manipulates the past to create one that jibes with her present view of herself. Even as her vision of herself shifts, so does her memory of the past. This original rejection and expulsion by her mother from her motherland has been a large part of her writing, particularly her early works which strove to grapple with her perceived victimhood and salvage an identity that could have healthy self-esteem. Thus, her struggle is also similar to the struggles of black people as a whole in America to find a



path to Self-love and “self”-acceptance. Having survived this perceived trauma, Kincaid has been reluctant, if not outright unwilling, to take on certain identities in her adult life. In order to move beyond her past, she has had to create anew who she is. Some of the decisions she has made about who she is *not* are quite telling.

Kincaid became a mother herself, giving birth to two children, Annie (which is both Kincaid’s mother’s and daughter’s name in real life, and is the name of the daughter, not the mother, in Annie John), and Harold. It is significant that when she herself became a mother she was released, in some respects, from her attachment to her identity as her own mother’s daughter. Kincaid settled into her writing career and her new and carefully tailored identity quite gracefully. Her writing no longer derived from the hectic pace of New York and the demanding rigor of writing for the *New Yorker*. It no longer had the acerbic tone that I think was meant to serve as a stern dose of reality to the primarily white and primarily privileged folk who might regularly read the *New Yorker*. That writing came at a time—the late 80s to early 90s—when the notion of white privilege was just gaining currency, thanks to feminist scholars like Peggy MacIntosh whose work helped question the assumption that whiteness and maleness and the privileges associated with them were “normal” and everything else was somehow deviant.

Kincaid first claimed her space as “other” while writing at *The New Yorker*, where her biting tone indicated her ire toward her perceived audience and their effortless location in the center. Kincaid addressed her first writings to the center and positioned herself on the margin, but in the privileged position of one who was on the margin but had access to the center, had a voice that could be heard by the center, and as such could

say things that she imagined the center had never heard before. In these first writings, her perceived (and probably actual) audience fit the stereotype of the hegemonic, white, patriarchal norm who probably saw that location as natural and deserved. Kincaid was a bug in the ear of some of New York's privileged people, reminding them of their interconnection with the "other," calling attention to the ways in which their actions adversely affected people like her. Now, almost thirty years later, it she longer has the desperate urgency of the first few books to be heard. Nor does she seem to want to be heard by everyone—for her foray into garden and travel writing virtually insure a smaller audience. She has, in some ways, calmed down.

This newfound tranquility stems from having constructed a world and a world view that confirm Kincaid's beliefs about who she is. The roots and seeds of this newfound identity are found within all of her texts, which function inter-textually and can be arranged at least somewhat chronologically to tell Kincaid's story of her world as she sees it. It makes sense then that at this juncture in life, where her most immediate family in Antigua has passed away and she has raised a family of her own in Vermont, some of Kincaid's anger has cooled. Her most recent books, Among Flowers and My Garden (Book): delve into new genres for Kincaid—garden and travel writing. Having exhausted her Caribbean family drama and choosing not to expose any American family drama by painting a very controlled and minimal image of her life with her husband and children in her texts, Kincaid has turned to garden/travel writing as an outlet for her passion, amazement, distress, and distaste. At first glimpse, it seems an odd choice for her to make this aesthetic and marketing choice for her writing. However, through the garden, Kincaid is able to reprise and continue to explore issues of domination, privilege, and

devotion; she even manages to bring colonialism and racism into the embarrassment of plants and flowers that she describes. My Garden (Book): does not deviate from the path that Kincaid has chosen in her career. Instead, it merely chronicles her evolution into the living the “self” she has always presented in her texts—a privileged “other,” and now a new identity as a “conquistador.” As I described earlier in terms of how beliefs function, hers have become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is telling that she became a gardener around the same time that she became a mother. The occasion for her first planting is a Mother’s Day gift from her husband of some garden tools and seeds shortly after she first gave birth. She was able to create a new moniker for herself: gardener. Giving birth did not turn her into a mother, interestingly, but a gardener. Perhaps the label of “mother” was still too emotionally charged and psychologically laden for her to adopt willingly. Having experienced so much pain in her own mother-daughter relationship caused Kincaid to shy away from identifying herself as mother. This might be because she has always slated herself the daughter/ victim; she fears flipping the coin and becoming the mother/victimizer. She refuses this role to the point that she dedicates My Garden (Book): “With blind, instinctive, and confused love, for Annie & for Harold who from time to time are furiously certain that the only thing standing between them and a perfect union with their mother is the garden, and from time to time, they are correct.” The garden serves as a both natural and artificial boundary between Kincaid and her children.

Creating this boundary is an interesting choice by Kincaid. She even goes so far as to literally separate her garden from her daughter’s “with a new little tiller” in My Garden (Book):. I can’t help but think that her new identity as gardener gives her an

excuse for not being available as a mother. From the very start of motherhood she expresses ambivalence about embracing the role. She leaves her daughter in the care of surrogates, “the *women* who helped me take care of my child” (4). In her most recent piece of writing, a piece that appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* in the Spring 2009 issue, Kincaid notes that Annie and Harold, her children, apparently took issue with this dedication, as she reveals in *Harper’s Magazine*:

By the time my mother died, I was not only one of her four children, I had become the mother of two children: a girl and then a boy. This was bliss, my two children in love with me, and I with them. Nothing has gone wrong, as far as I can see, but tears have been shed over my not being completely enthusiastic about going to a final basketball game in a snowstorm, or my saying something I should have kept in my mind’s mouth. A particularly unforgivable act in my children’s eyes is a book’s dedication I made to them....”

She goes on to cite the dedication to *My Garden (Book)*;, which I will cite here again: “With blind, instinctive, and confused love, for Annie & for Harold who from time to time are furiously certain that the only thing standing between them and a perfect union with their mother is the garden, and from time to time, they are correct.” Here we can see more of this boundary that she has drawn between herself and her children. This time it is a psychological boundary that subtly establishes that she is not willing to lose her *self* for the sake of being a mother. Since “to name is to possess,” according to Kincaid, she is insisting on being self-possessed. She is not someone’s mother (the apostrophe indicating possession), she is a gardener, which is to say, her self.

But perhaps the identity she is refusing is not (only) that of mother. It seems that Kincaid is refusing the domestic roles typically associated with the women. She mentions on the first page not only the women that care for her child, but the woman who

cleans her house as well. From the outset she is establishing that gardening—and being a gardener—is hard work. As noted in the last chapter, it requires a staff of many working under Kincaid. Her gardener identity is not a feminine one; it is androgynous, as is evidenced by the absence of sexuality in the text. She expresses none of the homo-erotic playfulness of her childhood that was present in Annie John and At the Bottom of the River, nor the robust sexuality that marked Lucy. We do see sexuality, but it is inappropriate and markedly Caribbean—the babysitter with whom Kincaid is left would have sex while watching her (93) while Kincaid would pretend to be “a little girl from somewhere else” (96). More than one reference is made—in this text and others—to herbs that are grown in Antigua to induce abortions. The only glimpse we get as readers into Kincaid’s bedroom, however, is the one she shares with her friend Dan Hinkley while traveling together to China. They are both married, she explains, “he to someone named Robert and I to someone named Allen” (193).

So sexuality, domesticity, and motherhood are not part of this identity Kincaid has created as gardener. Nor, it seems, is race. Kincaid is no longer writing a slave narrative. She gives two accounts of racist encounters in the chapter entitled “The Garden in Winter.” In both, Kincaid does not seem to be angered. The first, where a friend’s mother’s racist remarks about some lilies (“just look at these nigger colors” she said to her daughter) were revealed to Kincaid, she expresses regret for mentioning to the mother that she too hated the color. Had she known about the mother’s remark, Kincaid says she “would have embraced the Asiatic lilies and their repulsive colors with a force that perhaps only death could weaken” (67). Her reasoning is that “If someone will go to such lengths to nourish and cultivate prejudice, extending to an innocent flower the

malice heaped on innocent people, then I certainly wouldn't want to be the one to stand between her and her pleasure" (67).

In the second account, a worker hired by Kincaid to rebuild a stone wall in her garden shares with her a story about his only trip to New York, when his school bus was pelted with stones. "... he said that not all of the people who threw the stones were colored; and I said, Oh, but I wondered what he really wanted to say, and then he said that he liked colored people but his father did not. I said, Oh, to that too, but I wondered what it was he really wanted to say" (69). Kincaid holds her tongue, which gives neither her employee nor her worker any insight into what she is thinking. The employee continues:

...he said that his father did not like colored people because he was in the army with some colored men and they all got along very well until they were ordered into battle, and all the colored men in unison turned and ran away, and ever since then his father had not liked colored people. And then I was sorry that I had shared my organic cashews with him earlier in that day, and I was sorry that I had brought him a nice glass of cold spring water to drink after he ate the cashew nuts; I said to him that it was so sensible of the soldiers to run away, I would most certainly have done the same thing, and he said nothing to that; and then I said that it was just as well that the soldiers were colored, because if they had been people who looked like his father (white), then most certainly his mother would have been someone who looked like me. And he stared at me and stared at me and said he saw what I meant, but that couldn't be true at all, because I couldn't see right away what I meant (68)

Kincaid's first regret is sharing the fruits of her privilege—organic cashews and spring water—with this man. Her subsequent verbal lashing is so genteel that even she is not sure what the insult is. The man obviously regretted his statements, because "The next day he brought me a small paper bag full of bulbs, each the size of three thimbles, and he did not know the name of the flower the bulbs would bear, he described it (small, white, star-shaped), and he said it would bloom early in the spring, much before anything

else” (69). The man reaches out to her through a language he feels they can both understand, but his gesture is unsophisticated—giving a plant connoisseur a paper bag full of nameless bulbs—and because of this Kincaid is able to reestablish the hierarchy that existed previous to their conversation. Although she says she intended to plant the bulbs, she ends up discarding of them. “...At the beginning of each day as I began to work in the garden I would promise myself to plant them, at the end of each day I would resolve to myself to plant them; and then one day, with gestures that were completely without anger, I took the bulbs and placed them in the rubbish bin, not the compost heap” (69). Kincaid’s action—determining that the man’s gift is not even worth salvaging as compost—is able to be performed without anger because she is able to let go of the identity that he evoked, colored, and return to her own definition of herself.

My Garden (Book): takes what at first seems a strange turn toward the end. Kincaid completely abandons her family to go off on a month-long flower hunting expedition in China. Even in this moment she seems more regretful to leave her garden than her children. “And what did I leave behind? Two children—a boy who is ten, a girl who is fourteen—a husband, a garden full of autumn color (hibiscus, aconitum, anemone, cimicifuga, crocus, maples, cercidiphyllum, franklinia, clematis, *Heptacodium miconiodes*)” (191). This moment marks an important step in Kincaid’s evolution, for she is attempting to take on a new identity: plant conquistador.

Linda Lang-Peralta explains that while this may seem to be an odd choice to her readers, this new identity category offers resolution for Kincaid of many of her identity issues. With this new “self” that she is establishing, she can make her beliefs and her practices jibe and unify in a way they hadn’t previously. She writes:

In her garden book, Kincaid seems to answer many of the questions raised in previous texts. In *A Small Place*, she couldn't understand why the English would have chosen to live among the Antiguans, but here she seems to find an answer in her own identity. In *Lucy* and again in the garden book, she angrily describes having to recite Wordsworth's poem about daffodils, but she reveals that blooming in her garden is an exquisite yellow daffodil that ultimately turns a creamy color she finds irresistible. In Antigua, she had not understood why the English had brought plants from conquered lands to create a botanical garden... Now she travels as far as China and the Himalayas to bring back foreign plants to her garden, carefully listing their scientific names" (43)

It makes perfect sense, in light of this new identity that Kincaid is trying on (as she did the clothing of people from different periods in her early days), for if she wants to be an explorer and a conqueror, she must be able to do all the things that conquerors do—penetrate and possess the feminine terrain. Amy K. Levin writes that:

Recent theorists on geography and region have made cogent cases for viewing geography like any other structure of knowledge; that is, they argue that geography as it is traditionally understood is primarily a construction of white European men that values certain elements while rendering others invisible. The glorification of the great explorers who 'discovered' uncharted territories suggests that only places that have been seen and named by white men exist, and the language of exploration, beginning with its assumption that unmapped lands are virgin, has put into play a series of metaphors that gender the land as female to be possessed and known by men (78).

Kincaid no longer wants to play the fence. She has chosen a side to be on: the conqueror's. And though she does explore the imperialist impulse in botany, it is not with the rage and betrayal of someone victimized by it. She merely marks the parallels between the oppression, acquisition, and sublimation of indigenous plants and the same actions by the same people toward people. Lang-Peralta agrees that Kincaid has an "increasing identification with the side of the binary that she previously attacked" (41). Kincaid has embarked, left the shores of the known to explore this new identity, as so



many European explorers once did. She is no longer Black, no longer woman: she is gardener, she is conqueror.

If the garden is “an exercise in memory” (8) for Kincaid and memory “is an anchor” (61), it is apparent that she is trying to unmoor herself from her previous memories and build new ones around voyages to “the edge of the world” (200). This new identity trumps her previous gendered one where she was denied education because of her gender; it overrides her previous racialized one which enabled her employer, fictionalized as Mariah in Lucy, to fall back on the paradigm of master servant when she feared losing Lucy in her life (143); it enables her to have a new relationship to her nationality and to the world around her than the one she had in the essay “On Seeing England for the First Time,” in which she writes:

When I saw England for the first time, I was a child in school sitting at a desk. The England I was looking at was laid out on a map gently, beautifully, delicately, a very special jewel... England was a jewel all right, and only special people got to wear it. They wore it well and they wore it everywhere: in jungles, in deserts, on plains, on top of the highest mountains, on all the oceans, on all the seas, in places where they were not welcome, in places where they should not have been (344-345).

Kincaid indicates that before seeing the map of England she had “long been conquered” by the myriad other ways she was made to feel “awe at its existence, small because I was not from it” (347). To illustrate this, she writes “I knew the details of the year 1066 (the Battle of Hastings, the end of the reign of the Anglo-Saxon kinds) before I knew the details of the year 1832 (the year slavery was abolished)” (347). This new identity affords Kincaid a way out of all of the identity markers that have limited her in the past.

But she hasn't quite figured it all out yet. Kincaid still expresses ambivalence, which Homi Bhabha defines as "the complete mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized" (quoted in Lang-Peralta 33). She still clings to vestiges of her birth by writing things that are not in keeping with this new identity. She does not see the irony, for example, that the same person who can boldly profess "It is best just to accept what you have and not take from other people the things they have that you do not have"(74) can also travel a great distance to collect exotic seeds. Her own actions have moved beyond her scrutiny, and while she is able to disparage others for their actions, she has constructed such a privileged location for herself that she is able to function above her own law. Acceptance may indeed be best, but Kincaid acknowledges just two pages later that she is dissatisfied. "By tomorrow I want to be in a place that is the opposite of the one I am in now" (76), she writes in lamentation over winter.

Kincaid explores the concept of domination at length in My Garden (Book);, marveling at the ways that the assumption of superiority can alter one's experiences in life. "How permanent everything must feel when the world is going your way!" she exclaims while discussing the imperialist nuance of the botanical garden (80). Discussing the work of Oakes Ames, she writes "He was a nineteenth-century man of European descent: his sense of possession is funny now only because he is dead. On his way to Cuba, to visit Harvard's botany station there, he wrote this to his wife, Blanche: 'We are surrounded by the usual uninteresting people one meets on a journey to Cuba and back; people who are well enough to watch, but undesirable to meet.' This is the kind of confidence you have when the world is yours" (80). Yet Kincaid's reaction to the

Chinese that populate the landscape of her plant-hunting ground is strikingly similar: “I saw a large family having a wonderful time as they ate their dinner; it was so heartening it made me homesick, and I wanted to join them; but the baby of the family was having a bowel movement on the floor right then; it was all very comfortable for them, but I had come to China to collect seeds, not to be comfortable with what Chinese people did” (192)

Earlier in her career we could see both Kincaid’s original anger, cultivated in association with the victims of conquest (the conquered) and the beginnings of an appreciation and acceptance of the standpoint of the conquerors. In an interview that was first published in 1990 Kincaid says:

All these people are very admirable when you think of what they did—these “great men.” People thought the world was flat. A very poetic idea. In some ways, these explorations to the New World were very touching. I realize that one of the things that is bound up in this horrible thing that happened (slavery—the domination) is the great curiosity in every human being. I mean making maps, building a boat—there’s something really extraordinary about it, very moving, when you think of these people just going somewhere without knowing what really they would find (Perry 135)

Yet this narrative of the touching explorer contrasts queerly with Kincaid’s foreword to Babouk, published in 1991. Kincaid writes:

It would seem that the thing we call civilization can’t be achieved without uprooting whole groups of people from everything they have ever known—who and what they know their individual and collective selves to be; the place they have always lived; their mothers, their fathers, their children—and forcibly made subject to the will of others. Why this is so is not a mystery to me. I look at it this way: suppose I am living in a nice village situated in a nice forest, or, say, my nice village is surrounded by some beautiful mountains, their tops changing color with the changing position of the sun. I go fishing every day, and every day I catch some fish—just the right number to satisfy me. I cultivate a small plot of land

and I always have as much food from this land as I need, so that I never have to have a larder. To keep myself company, I make up some tales about how I got here and where I will go when I am not here anymore. This is a nice little set-up I have here, my definition of contentment; and the thought of going off somewhere to pile brick upon brick in the hot desert sun to make monuments commemorating vicious people and their vicious deeds, or working in someone else's fields, or doing any of the horrible things that a civilization requires in order to be a civilization—none of this appeals to me at all.

Now, then, I try to imagine this: I am living somewhere that's not in the least nice—the weather is terrible (England); the people in other countries like your country better than they like their own because something more than the weather is terrible about where they live; I am surrounded by plenty but still I feel very greedy; I want more than I have; I have heard about all sorts of things somewhere else on the other side of the world and I would like to have them and I would like to have them for nothing. I have ideas about a lot of things. I feel I know how the world ought to look, the language most people ought to speak (my own), the sort of god they should believe in (my own again), and so on and on. Unfortunately, none of the things I want for myself or the things I want to do, none of my desires, can be realized where I am, so how terrific, how nearly perfect to find a defenseless people somewhere to be mere instruments of my will, some people over whom I have complete dominion. Who can resist this? No one has ever done so (v-vii).

Apparently this impulse is irresistible even to Kincaid. But she has been intrigued by this identity—embodied most often in her work in the iconic form of Christopher Columbus—for quite some time. When she was “conquered,” she had a dislike for him that seemed quite natural. Yet she also likened herself to him from early on. In *At the Bottom of the River*, she identified with him and his story as discoverer. “Perhaps I stand on the brink of a great discovery, and perhaps after I have made my discovery I will be sent home in chains” (21).

In “Upon Seeing England for the First Time” she writes of his desire to dominate:

The space between the idea of something and its reality is always wide and deep and dark. The longer they are kept apart—the idea of thing, reality of thing—the wider the width, the deeper the depth, the thicker and darker the darkness. This space starts out empty, there is nothing in it, but

it rapidly becomes filled up with obsession or desire or hatred or love—sometimes all of these things, sometimes some of these things, sometimes only one of these things (350).

There was Christopher Columbus, an unlikable man, an unpleasant man, a liar (and so, of course, a thief) surrounded by maps and schemes and plans, and there was the reality on the other side of that width, that depth, that darkness. He became obsessed, he became filled with desire, the hatred came later, love was never a part of it. Eventually, his idea met the longed-for reality. That the idea of something and its reality are often two completely different things is something no one ever remembers; and so when they meet and find that they are not compatible, the weaker of the two, idea or reality, dies. That idea Christopher Columbus had was more powerful than the reality he met, and so the reality he met died (351).

Yet even in her description of this unlikable man we can see a hint of empathy in the acknowledgement that he was simply living his circumstances. She similarly empathically derides Columbus in Lucy, where Kincaid writes that he “could not have known that he would have so many things to name and I imagined how hard he had to rack his brain after he ran out of names honoring his benefactors, the saints he cherished, events important to him. A task like that would have killed a thoughtful person, but he went on to live a very long life” (135). Antigua, which is named after a church, was given its name without Columbus even setting foot on its soil.

Kincaid writes at length about Columbus in My Garden (Book); in a way where, again, she seems conflicted. She calls upon the dominant Eurocentric and hegemonic narrative, asserting that “My history begins like this: In 1492, Christopher Columbus discovered the New World” (153), but at the same time she asks:

What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? If so, what should history mean to someone like me? Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound with each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over, and is this healing and opening a moment that began in 1492 and has yet to come to an end? Is it a collection of facts, all true and precise

details, what should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself?  
(153).

She renders herself obscene, saying that she is “not yet I the picture” and that she does “not yet have a name” in 1492 (155). As such, she is not yet angry or confused by the assertion of discovery. Instead, she is left with a burning curiosity. “Who is he?” she wonders. I find it interesting that history still begins for Kincaid with this “discovery.” The notion that being “discovered” when Europeans laid eyes on you gives centrality to Europe in defining and naming you. But I guess if Kincaid genuinely believes that to name is to possess, that “the person who really can name the thing gives it a life, a reality, that it did not have before” (156), then this positioning would make sense. She also seems to want to leave space in which to examine him without the judgment and blame she might have previously held toward him. She writes:

He, Christopher Columbus, then discovers this new world. That it is new only to him, that it had a substantial existence, physical and spiritual, before he became aware of it, does not occur to him. To cast blame on him now for this is childish, immature, small-minded, even with all the moral substance of a certificate given to a schoolgirl for good behavior; to be a well-behaved schoolgirl is not hard (154).

Kincaid regresses back to being a well-disciplined schoolgirl, even though she was actually considered a troublemaker, though very bright. She is trying to look upon him with beginner’s mind, seeing him anew without the baggage of her colonial/post-colonial past. She rationalizes his position:

When he sees this new world, it is really new to him; he has never seen anything like it before, it was not what he had expected, in his mind he had images of China and Japan, and though he thought he was in China and Japan, it was not the China or Japan he had fixed in his mind; he, after all, had never been to China and Japan ever. When he saw this new world, he couldn’t find enough words to describe what was before him: the people were new, the flora and fauna were new, the way the water met the

sky was new, this world itself was new. It was the New World—but New only because he had never seen it before, new to him in a way that heaven itself could not have been (154-155).

She concludes that “This blankness, the one Columbus met, was more like the blankness of paradise; paradise emerges from chaos and chaos is not history, chaos is the opposite of the legitimate order of things. Paradise, then, is an arrangement of the ordinary and the extraordinary, but in such a way as to make it, paradise, seem as if it had fallen out of the clear air”(155).

Kincaid realizes that allying herself with the botanists of the world is to adopt this power to name and to make permanent, to seek and find paradise. To be a conqueror is, in some sense, to be a God, one who is able to create the world around him by naming it.

Kincaid here makes the connection more solid:

The botanists are from the same part of the world as the man who sailed on the three ships, the man who started the narrative from which I trace my beginning. And in a way, too, the botanists are like that man who sailed on the ships: they emptied worlds of their names; they emptied the worlds of things animal, vegetable, and mineral of their names and replaced these names with names pleasing to them; these names are pleasing to them because they are reasonable; reason is a pleasure to them (160)

In becoming a gardener, a plant hunter, a botanist, Kincaid is becoming the master of her own destiny. She is choosing what relationship she wants to have to her surroundings and making it manifest. When she is able to put her identity as a conquered person aside, she sees that it really is quite poetic and impressive, what these “great men” have done. They have taken the unknown and found a way to know it. They have taken the world around them and forced it into a mold in which it makes sense to them; by force they have caused the world around them to mirror their beliefs. For someone who has suffered from her beliefs, having spent a lifetime feeling rejected by her mother and

not knowing what to do with that belief, this type of rigid reason is most desirable for it places the believer in control.

In the end, Kincaid finds her own paradise in China. She evokes the Garden of Eden, which she sees as “an idea state of mind and an ideal as a place in which to live day after day after day” (221). There, in China, thousands of miles away from her husband and her children, she finds her peace of mind, a state in which she could dwell in to perpetuity.

This is the garden! I said to myself, as I walked up and down the side of some mountains in southwestern China, this is the garden! I was thinking of the beginning of so many garden books I have read, I was thinking of the accounts of gardens by the many gardeners I have read, and I was thinking, Is this Eden, that thing that was banished, turned out into the world as I have come to know it—the world of discarding only to reclaim, of rejecting and then claiming again, the world of such longing that its end (death) is a relief (222).

Thus, the gardener’s role is not so unlike God’s role. Kincaid empathizes with William Robinson, who wrote The Wild Garden, sharing his sentiment that the joy of the garden is “the luxury of stating and enjoying the results of your own will, your own idea of how the things in front of you ought to be, to do what a God would do!” (228). Her desire to hunt plants from far away, like the desire of the botanists, and of Christopher Columbus himself, is “to bring in from the wild as many things as can be appreciated, as many things as it is possible for a gardener [conqueror/God] to give meaning to, as many things as it is possible for the gardener to understand” (226).

It is quite amazing, poetic, and touching that Kincaid has gone from writing slave narratives to writing explorer’s travel-logs to writing her own scripture. She has overcome circumstances that she swears would have killed her otherwise. She has fashioned a self with whom she seems quite content and comfortable. And yes, it’s too



bad about everyone she had to pitch under that bus, but she saved herself, which in the end is all anyone would do in the same situation. Now she is divorced, her children are grown, and she is teaching creative writing at Harvard. She began as a writer from a people who did not have a literature—now she is a writer who doesn't have, or need, it seems, a people. She used to be an "other"—now she is her own. I can only imagine what she might write next.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: BE A CROSSROADS

To survive the Borderlands  
-You must live *sin fronteras*  
Be a crossroads.  
- Gloria Anzaldúa

Aware that money is not the golden ticket to happiness it is often made out to be, and that psychology is not the cure-all it was once thought to be, this seems an opportune moment for us to begin to reclaim soul, both in our work and our lives. In Care of the Soul, Thomas Moore alludes to Plato's expression "techne tou biou," translated as "the craft of life." Moore sees the potentiality in this expression, writing "When *techne* is defined with sufficient depth, it refers not just to mechanical skills and instruments but to all kinds of artful managing and careful shaping. For now, we can say that care of the soul requires a special crafting of life itself, with an artist's sensibility to the way things are done. Soul doesn't pour into life automatically. It requires our skill and attention" (xvii).<sup>i</sup> This artistic practice of crafting life renders life an impassioned expression of our interior world of imagination.

The universe is one of infinite possibility, and though some scholars (like James A. Snead in his essay "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture" in Black Literature and

Literary Theory) believe that “people have by now had to make peace with the idea that the world is not inexhaustible in its combinations, nor life in its various guises” (59), I beg to differ. It is an easy way out of owning one’s own power to say that “everything that can be done has already been done.” It leaves us little more than repetition as a possibility. While this enables certain beliefs—as Judith Butler attests in her scholarship—it disables others that are equally viable. Snead’s is not the perspective of an artist. Artists know, perhaps inherently, that there are no limits to what can be created. As Kincaid herself attests, we are limited, at times, by resources, time, energy, and imagination, but these are limitations that form based on individual circumstances, not on what is possible. The roles of artists in a culture are many, but we are often mouthpieces expressing what is, what has been, and what might be. Part social commentator, part visionary, the artist strives to do two things: to express something within her/himself, and to connect with this thing in others. We endeavor to hold a balance between these two functions, to be a crossroads.

The crossroads represents an intersection— for, as Gloria Anzaldúa explains in Borderlands/ La Frontera, “the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (preface), it is the crossroads that joins these two disparate entities. Thus, our classrooms, books, or our self could be considered a Borderland, where “self” and “other,” or many “selves” and many “others,” rub against one another. The crossroads, long a spiritual signifier in many African diasporan cultures, opens the door to the spirit and serves as a gateway between the mundane world

and the spiritual world. In being the crossroads, we are able to know deeply that there is no real border, no distinction—these are only imaginary lines drawn in the sand to create and maintain various identities.

## SPIRITUALITY AND THE ACADEMY

Experience is a very weighty aspect of spirituality, and should be an integral part of academic scholarship as well. Experience is not “thinking,” nor “saying,” but “being.” In this trinity of thought, word, and deed, it is the “being” part, the experiential element that closes the circle, enabling us as humans to bear witness and to *know* ourselves as Creators of our own experience. Experience is, ultimately, what throws a wrench into our belief systems and pulls us out of the safe categories we rely upon. We see that our beliefs about ourselves or others and our experience do not correspond. Thus, we are forced to either privilege our experience and reconsider our beliefs, or discredit our experience so that we can hold fast to our beliefs. More often than not, people choose the latter, mentally reconfiguring their experience so that it can fit into their poorly constructed world view. But there is an opportunity here to begin again with beginner’s mind, to question the beliefs and assumptions we take for granted, and to mindfully create our experience so that it reflects our highest vision of our Self. This is the work that must be done—both outside and inside of the classroom. If we continue to check our spiritual Selves at the classroom door, feigning an impossible impartiality that is little more than a mimicry of the scholarship of members of an elite group in a homogeneous institution long gone, I wonder if we can ever find true peace in our lives. Moore warns that:

If we do not claim the soul's power on our own behalf, we become its victims. We suffer out emotions rather than feel them working for us. We hold our thoughts and passions inward, disconnecting them from life, and then they stir up trouble within, making us feel profoundly unsettled or, it seems, turning into illness. We all know what it feels like to hold anger in our hearts, as it builds and transmutes into corrosive resentment and rage. Even unexpressed love creates a pressure that demands release in some kind of expression (135).

As bell hooks remarks, "In the introduction to *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education*, editor Steven Glaser shares the observation that many people fear religion or spirituality in education because "they are afraid of the imposition of identity" and "the indoctrination of particular beliefs." He explains: "Out of this fear of imposition a great tragedy has taken place... the wholesale abandonment of the inner world. This fear has allowed us to ignore in our classroom (and lives) the existence of the inner realm, the realm of spiritual formation, of spiritual identity." (hooks 178-9) Of course no teacher wants the lectern to turn into a pulpit or a soap box, and no student wants her grade determined by whether or not she has been converted to the teacher's beliefs. Yet I feel that incorporating the spiritual into literary scholarship activates and actualizes a relationship in which literature can be seen as a vehicle for bringing Self into dialogue with "self," toward the goals of Self-realization. I think that anyone who teaches must acknowledge that their own beliefs, interpretation, values and understanding, as well as those of the institution which they assume they must uphold, are ingrained in their teaching in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. There is a place for the spirit and the spiritual in the academy, particularly because there is a place for it in our lived experience. As Wade Clark Roof notes, "The polls indicate that 94 percent of Americans believe in God, 90 percent report praying to God on a fairly regular basis, nine out of ten claim a religious affiliation" (quoted in Frankenberg 5-6). Both Cornel West and bell hooks

write extensively on spirituality, as did Gloria Anzaldúa, who even began to theorize spirituality with her constructions of “El Mundo Zurdo” and “Nepantlera.” An invitation into the academic study of the spiritual by such important scholars seems noteworthy. I am particularly interested in how we academics might approach contemplative traditions that go beyond socio-cultural frameworks and beliefs in order to produce new thoughts, words, and deeds around the concepts of race, gender, class and sexuality. As William James says, “If there be any life that is really better we should lead, and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would really be *better for us* to believe that idea” (42).

The exploration of the frames and lenses of race, gender, class and sexuality must necessarily return to spiritual questions, because it is upon certain logical structures that are very much rooted in the Christian faith—and more so in the *practice* of Christianity—that much of our national, ethical, and educational understanding is built. Hierarchical, self-centric, linear, dichotomous thinking is at the root of not the actual beliefs of the Christian faith per se, but these constructs have figured greatly into the actions of Christians around the globe. These logical structures end up limiting what is possible for those who use them, eliminating from possibility the ideas of non-linearity, of non-binary (multiplicity, simultaneity, interdependence, mestizaje), of universality and connection among all things. Within the very confining walls of Christianity as a practice, the “dark” side of people, the side that was capable of committing the seven deadly sins, the side that was not filled with Christ-like love and goodness, was cast into the shadows of our self perception.

Rather than see this as a balance to be held gracefully, being a crossroads between light and dark, we fought to sublimate our perceived darkness, our shadow self, and beat it back into submission. This aggressively fought “war” between our dualistic sensibilities led to everything from self-flagellation and deep-seated self-hatred to the ability to subject so-called “heathens” to the cruelest atrocities and, on a personal level, to sometimes abuse the ones we love most dearly. There is an implicit assumption within this mindset that *it is okay to inflict harm on something or someone that is not good/ not of God*. There are many implicit assumptions such as this one that are a part of the fundamental logical code that by and large governs our society. We are educated from within this framework, and part of our education often mandates that we disallow anything that falls outside of this framework. The dichotomous construction of the margin gave Christian-white-male-centric culture a dumping ground for its shadow self, so abhorred and abnegated that it was seen as “other.” Woman became “other,” non-European became “other,” non-heterosexual became “other,” poor became “other,” disabled became “other.” These real and imagined “others” have functioned as the receptacles for the many different qualities that Christian white male-centric culture had sublimated in its constituents: sexuality, emotion, instincts, passion, violence, to name a few. Perhaps there’s a reason we don’t want to know the other side of ourselves. Perhaps we prefer to think of parts of us as unknowable and thus force it to maintain its space in the margins. But what if we can know it? What if we can begin to know things, perhaps not in the way we know other things, like mortgage rates and capitals of states and the history of super-delegates, but in a different way, one which we might need to reconfigure language to accommodate.

It is this binary that made Jamaica Kincaid think she had to choose a side—and ultimately she chose “good” which elides with “white” and “male” and “privileged” and “self-centered” in our culture. Small wonder that after a few decades in America her writing no longer represents the angry, sexual, Black woman she once was. The woman she was would be relegated to the margins in American culture, and Kincaid was unwilling to reside there, as she made clear in Lucy and A Small Place. The margins, which would seem to be the site of something unimportant and ob-scene, are the ballasts, bastions, and buttresses of the center’s identity, and the basis for its argument for its own centrality. It is for this reason that understanding the margin has always been essential to understanding the center. Margins enumerate the many things that are not seen as good or “of God” at a given time within a given culture— and quite frankly I am tired of serving time in this ungodly margin. Until we establish other frames and other lenses for understanding the world of “self” and “other,” we will perpetuate the myth that there is an “other.”

I do not think it is possible to dismantle the master's house, with the master's tools, as Audre Lorde disclosed. Thus, I feel compelled to introduce other tools, ones which enable different relationships among things. Our educational system stresses binaries and linearity at the expense of other modes of thought. We must work through the linguistic limitations imposed by language itself—ways in which we cannot easily account for simultaneity, multiplicity, synchronicity, and other forms of non-duality like interdependence. We can understand ways in which things are multiply determined or otherwise evade normal either/or categories, but we haven't developed the language to express these spaces between the trees... or have we? In some fields of spirituality there



is extensive information about these non-binary, non-linear ways of knowing. These other ways of knowing are engendered not only through language, but through experience and through cultivating practices that bring them to the fore.

I recommend being able to rethink our paradigmatic frames and linguistic lenses by stepping back with beginner's mind to see into how they are constructed. Spiritual theories and precepts enable different relationships to texts, and new ways reading and deciphering multiple oppressions. They offer different paradigms, etiologies, ontologies, symbolisms, and mythologies, thus providing both the substance and structures for completely different interpretations of life and its events. They take up the important job of "soul work," learning how to perform Self-care. As such, they merit evaluation.

Another argument for the inclusion of spirituality in academic literary and cultural scholarship is quite pragmatic. If you venture into your local bookstore, you will notice that a disproportionately large number of books fall under the subheadings of "spirituality," "self-improvement," "self-help," "religion," "relationships," and "New Age." You might also notice the absence of the tomes of writing of most academic scholars from most of these mainstream venues. I think that this shows two things. Firstly, it demonstrates that Americans are thirsty for a deeper understanding and practice of spirituality in their everyday lives. We are beginning as a culture to see physical health problems as also being spiritual problems (see Northrup, Einstein, Schultz). We are beginning to understand that a spiritual foundation is an essential undergirding for even simple practices such as finding a fulfilling job or maintaining a successful marriage. Secondly, it shows that the scholarship academics are currently performing often has little resonance and relevance beyond the academy. We might be able to

actually help people (and perhaps even have book sales in the millions, as so many New Age writers do) if we adopt as areas of inquiry things that actually matter to people: how to be happy, how to be healthy, how to be free (as well as how to deal with being unhappy, unhealthy, and unfree). My argument here is that spirituality is a subject that drives non-academics to read on their own in what is largely becoming a non-literary culture. If we choose to see one function of reading as providing equipment for living, then it follows that we should survey the variety of tools available so as to include them in our scholarship.

In a pivotal scene in the movie “Shaka Zulu,” the first of many negotiations of power occurs based not just on race, but also on the outward manifestation of each man’s perceived superiority based on his own construction of “self.” The great warrior king Shaka meets a European man with glasses for the first time in his life. He has the man’s spectacles brought over to him and he looks through them interestedly. After he has seen through the man’s lenses, he proclaims “This man does not want to see the world as it truly is.” Although at first this seems a naïve pronouncement, I think, in some sense, Shaka was right. This man did not want to see what other ways of knowing might be present were he not to use the frames and lenses afforded him. These other ways of knowing would probably be the blurrier, fuzzier, more embodied and experiential ways of understanding that I associate with feminine epistemology. These are, perhaps, more like what “seeing” is without the lenses and frames, without the “spectacles” which do the job of focusing for us.

## MY CONCLUSIONS ABOUT MY READING PRACTICE

All in all, I learned a lot from my “experiment” with reading. I liked how meditation enabled me to just be with the text, rather than me manipulating it. By being silent I was able to let the text speak to me, sometimes not in words. I wasn’t meditating on the text specifically. I was focusing on my breath and really just trying to stay in the present moment. It was invariably easier with the shorter meditation before reading than with the longer one following. I found that the practice led me to different readings than I normally have had of Kincaid, freeing up some space for both her and me to co-exist. We may both be Caribbean-American women from small islands with no national literature, a frighteningly deep love for our mothers, an avid interest in gardening, and a passion for books and writing, but it is okay if the similarities end there. I realize that now that I am not a teenager, I don’t need Kincaid to speak for me. Perhaps I never did. While I don’t agree with all of her decisions, I would still sit down with her for tea and conversation. I offer her the freedom to choose her own path, just as I choose for myself.

I am excited at the possibility of trying this method in a classroom. I think it would create a very different dynamic which might enable new readings and new relationships to education and scholarship. While I did incorporate a meditation practice into the class I led last year—which some students loved and others thought was a boring waste of time—but it wasn’t correlated specifically with reading. I look forward to incorporating this method into my teaching so that I might dialogue with others engaged in the same self-examination through literature.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1

### BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

#### **Eight Realizations of the Great Beings**

1. The first realization is the awareness that the world is impermanent. All political regimes are subject to fall; all things composed of the four elements are empty and contain the seeds of suffering. Human beings are composed of five skandhas, aggregates, and are without a separate self. They are always in the process of change – constantly being born and constantly dying. They are empty of self, without sovereignty. The mind is the source of all confusion, and the body is the forest of all impure actions. If we meditate on these facts, we can gradually be released from *samsara*, the round of birth and death.
2. The second realization is the awareness that more desire brings more suffering. All hardships in daily life arise from greed and desire. Those with little desire and ambition are able to relax, their bodies and minds free from entanglement.
3. The third realization is that the human mind is always searching for possessions and never feels fulfilled. This causes impure actions to ever increase. Bodhisattvas however, always remember the principle of having few desires. They live a simple life in peace in order to practice the Way, and consider the realization of perfect understanding as their only career.
4. The fourth realization is the awareness of the extent to which laziness is an obstacle to practice. For this reason, we must practice diligently to destroy the unwholesome mental factors which bind us, and to conquer the four kinds of Mara, in order to free ourselves from the prisons of the five aggregates and the three worlds.
5. The fifth realization is the awareness that ignorance is the cause of the endless round of birth and death. Therefore, bodhisattvas always remember to listen and learn in order to develop their understanding and eloquence. This enables them to educate living beings and bring them to the realm of great joy.
6. The sixth realization is the awareness that poverty creates hatred and anger, which creates a vicious cycle of negative thoughts and activity. When practicing generosity, bodhisattvas consider everyone, friends and enemies alike, as equal. They do not condemn anyone's past wrongdoings, nor do they hate those who are presently causing harm.
7. The seventh realization is that the five categories of desire lead to difficulties. Although we are in the world, we should try not to be caught up in worldly matters. A monk, for example, has in his possession only three robes and one bowl. He lives simply in order to practice the Way. His precepts keep him free of

attachment to worldly things, and he treats everyone equally and with compassion.

8. The eighth realization is the awareness that the fire of birth and death is raging, causing endless suffering everywhere. We should take the Great Vow to help everyone, to suffer with everyone, and to guide all beings to the realm of great joy.

These eight realizations are the discoveries of great beings, buddhas and bodhisattvas who have diligently practiced the way of compassion and understanding. They have sailed the *Dharmakaya* boat to the shore of *nirvana*, but then they return to the ordinary world, having abandoned the five desires, with their minds and hearts directed toward the noble way, using these eight realizations to help all beings recognize the suffering in this world. If the disciples of the Buddha recite these eight realizations and meditate on them, they will put an end to countless misunderstandings and difficulties and progress toward enlightenment, leaving behind the world of birth and death, dwelling forever in peace.

#### **The Four Agreements**

1. Be impeccable in your speech.
  2. Don't take anything personally.
  3. Don't make assumptions.
  4. Always do your best.
- (From The Four Agreements by Dom Miguel Ruiz)

#### **The 10 Living Principles of Yoga**

Yamas- Wise Characteristics

1. Ahimsa- Compassion for all living things
2. Satya-Commitment to truth
3. Asteya- Not stealing
4. Brahmcharya- Merging with the One
5. Aparigraha- Not grasping

Niyamas- Codes for living soulfully

6. Shaucha- Purity
7. Santosha-Contentment
8. Tapas- Burning enthusiasm
9. Swadhyaya- Self study
10. Ishvarapranidhana- Celebration of the spiritual

#### **The Eight Limbed Path (Ashtanga) of Yoga**

1. Yamas and
2. Niyamas- 10 ethical precepts
3. Asanas- Dynamic internal dances in the form of postures
4. Pranayama- Breathing practices

5. Pratyahara- Drawing one's attention toward silence rather than things
  6. Dharana- Focusing attention and cultivating inner perceptual awareness
  7. Dhyana- Sustaining awareness under all conditions
  8. Samadhi- Return of the mind into original silence
- (From Yoga Mind, Body & Spirit by Donna Farhi)

### **The Five Mindfulness Trainings**

1. Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.
2. Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, I am committed to cultivating compassion and learning ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I will practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.
3. Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.
4. Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating compassion and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain and will not criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or community to break. I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.
5. Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I will ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being, and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest food or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films, and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society, and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger, and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.

(From For a Future to be Possible by Thich Nhat Hanh)

### **On Children**

Your children are not your children,  
They are the sons and the daughters of life longing for itself  
They come through you, but they are not from you,  
And though they are with you, they belong not to you.  
You can give them your love but not your thoughts.  
They have their own thoughts.  
You can house their bodies but not their souls  
For their souls dwell in a place of tomorrow  
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.  
You can strive to be like them, but you cannot make them like you.  
(From The Prophet, by Kahlil Gibran)

### **Desiderata**

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.  
As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons.  
Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant;  
they too have their story.  
Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit.  
If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter;  
for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.  
Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.  
Keep interested in your career, however humble;  
it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.  
Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery.  
But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;  
many persons strive for high ideals; and everywhere, life is full of heroism.  
Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection.  
Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment,  
it is perennial as the grass.  
Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrender the things of youth.  
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.  
But do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and  
loneliness.  
Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.  
You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars;  
you have a right to be here.  
And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.  
Therefore, be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be,  
and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life,  
keep peace with your soul.  
With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.  
Be careful.  
Strive to be happy.  
(From The Desiderata of Happiness by Max Ehrmann)



## **The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings Introduction**

(from Interbeing by Thich Nhat Hanh)

### **1. The First Mindfulness Training: Openness**

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones.

Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for.

### **2. The Second Mindfulness Training: Nonattachment from Views**

Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We shall learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to others' insights and experiences. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives.

### **3. The Third Mindfulness Training: Freedom of Thought**

Aware of the suffering brought about when we impose our views on others, we are committed not to force others, even our children, by any means whatsoever - such as authority, threat, money, propaganda, or indoctrination - to adopt our views. We will respect the right of others to be different and to choose what to believe and how to decide. We will, however, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness through practicing deeply and engaging in compassionate dialogue.

### **4. The Fourth Mindfulness Training: Awareness of Suffering**

Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us develop compassion and find ways out of suffering, we are determined not to avoid or close our eyes before suffering. We are committed to finding ways, including personal contact, images, and sounds, to be with those who suffer, so we can understand their situation deeply and help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace, and joy.

### **5. The Fifth Mindfulness Training: Simple, Healthy Living**

Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, and not in wealth or fame, we are determined not to take as the aim of our life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure, nor to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying. We are committed to living simply and sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those in need. We will practice mindful consuming, not using alcohol, drugs, or any other products that bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness.

### **6. The Sixth Mindfulness Training: Dealing with Anger**

Aware that anger blocks communication and creates suffering, we are determined to take care of the energy of anger when it arises and to recognize and transform the seeds of anger that lie deep in our consciousness. When anger comes up, we are determined not to

do or say anything, but to practice mindful breathing or mindful walking and acknowledge, embrace, and look deeply into our anger. We will learn to look with the eyes of compassion at ourselves and at those we think are the cause of our anger.

7. The Seventh Mindfulness Training: Dwelling Happily in the Present Moment  
Aware that life is available only in the present moment and that it is possible to live happily in the here and now, we are committed to training ourselves to live deeply each moment of daily life. We will try not to lose ourselves in dispersion or be carried away by regrets about the past, worries about the future, or craving, anger, or jealousy in the present. We will practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. We are determined to learn the art of mindful living by touching the wondrous, refreshing, and healing elements that are inside and around us, and by nourishing seeds of joy, peace, love, and understanding in ourselves, thus facilitating the work of transformation and healing in our consciousness.

8. The Eighth Mindfulness Training: Community and Communication  
Aware that lack of communication always brings separation and suffering, we are committed to training ourselves in the practice of compassionate listening and loving speech. We will learn to listen deeply without judging or reacting and refrain from uttering words that can create discord or cause the community to break. We will make every effort to keep communications open and to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

9. The Ninth Mindfulness Training: Truthful and Loving Speech  
Aware that words can create suffering or happiness, we are committed to learning to speak truthfully and constructively, using only words that inspire hope and confidence. We are determined not to say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people, nor to utter words that might cause division or hatred. We will not spread news that we do not know to be certain nor criticize or condemn things of which we are not sure. We will do our best to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten our safety.

10. The Tenth Mindfulness Training: Protecting the Sangha  
Aware that the essence and aim of a Sangha is the practice of understanding and compassion, we are determined not to use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit or transform our community into a political instrument. A spiritual community should, however, take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.

11. The Eleventh Mindfulness Training: Right Livelihood  
Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society, we are committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. We will do our best to select a livelihood that helps realize our ideal of understanding and compassion. Aware of global economic, political and social realities, we will behave responsibly as consumers and as citizens, not supporting companies that deprive others of their chance to live.

12. The Twelfth Mindfulness Training: Reverence for Life

Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict, we are determined to cultivate nonviolence, understanding, and compassion in our daily lives, to promote peace education, mindful mediation, and reconciliation within families, communities, nations, and in the world. We are determined not to kill and not to let others kill. We will diligently practice deep looking with our Sangha to discover better ways to protect life and prevent war.

13. The Thirteenth Mindfulness Training: Generosity

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, we are committed to cultivating loving kindness and learning ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. We will practice generosity by sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. We are determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. We will respect the property of others, but will try to prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other beings.

14. The Fourteenth Mindfulness Training: Right Conduct

(For lay members): Aware that sexual relations motivated by craving cannot dissipate the feeling of loneliness but will create more suffering, frustration, and isolation, we are determined not to engage in sexual relations without mutual understanding, love, and a long-term commitment. In sexual relations, we must be aware of future suffering that may be caused. We know that to preserve the happiness of ourselves and others, we must respect the rights and commitments of ourselves and others. We will do everything in our power to protect children from sexual abuse and to protect couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct. We will treat our bodies with respect and preserve our vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of our bodhisattva ideal. We will be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world, and will meditate on the world into which we are bringing new beings.

(For monastic members): Aware that the aspiration of a monk or a nun can only be realized when he or she wholly leaves behind the bonds of worldly love, we are committed to practicing chastity and to helping others protect themselves. We are aware that loneliness and suffering cannot be alleviated by the coming together of two bodies in a sexual relationship, but by the practice of true understanding and compassion. We know that a sexual relationship will destroy our life as a monk or a nun, will prevent us from realizing our ideal of serving living beings, and will harm others. We are determined not to suppress or mistreat our body or to look upon our body as only an instrument, but to learn to handle our body with respect. We are determined to preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of our bodhisattva ideal

APPENDIX 2  
MY OWN LIST OF LIMITING BELIEFS

Smart people are superior.  
Spiritual people are superior.  
Beautiful people are superior.  
Beautiful people deserve more.  
Beautiful people get more.  
Beautiful people achieve more.  
Beauty is important at any cost.  
You can always become more beautiful.  
Long hair is more attractive than short hair.  
Hair is very important.  
I can't have long hair.  
Women should be financially supported by men.  
Women make less money than men.  
Black men are scary and complicated.  
Black men have HIV or STDs.  
Black men are unfaithful.  
Black men are kinda dumb.  
Women dislike me because I am attractive.  
Women are competitive  
Women are prudish  
Guys are more mellow than women.  
Girls create drama.  
Black women are overall less attractive than women of other races.  
Poor Black women have bad attitudes.  
Black people are conservative.  
Black people are Christian.  
Black people don't accept responsibility for their lives.  
I am ashamed of Black people.  
White men have money.  
White men are more financially secure.  
White men are freaky.  
Black men would be much more sexually satisfying.  
I am divorced from my body.  
I am my mind.  
My stomach must be flat.  
My body must be attractive and slim.  
I am more concerned with looks than health.  
Fat people are unlovable.  
Fat people are out of control.  
Fat people are gluttons.  
Fat people are sinners.  
If I get fat I will not love myself.  
If I get fat I will not be beautiful.

If I get fat I will get depressed.  
Fat people are losers.  
Thin people are winners.  
Intimacy is scary.  
Enjoying sex is wrong.  
I am frigid.  
I have something to prove.  
I don't know how to enjoy sex.  
I can live without sex.  
I cannot live without sex.  
Sex with a stranger/ someone new would get me out of my head and into my body.  
All I need is a good fuck.  
I have never enjoyed sex.  
I am pretending I enjoy sex.  
Opening up sexually is painful.  
I am repressed.  
I am hurting inside.  
I am perverted.  
If a guy doesn't go down on you, he doesn't love you.  
Sex is about thrills and excitement.  
Sex is about intimacy.  
Intimacy is boring.  
If I enjoy sex I might lose control.  
Sex is unsafe.  
Sex is about domination.  
Sex should feel kinda dirty.  
Men are irrational about sex.  
I am going to be rich, so I don't have to worry about money.  
I will always be poor, so why bother worrying about money.  
Money will resolve itself once I am done with school.  
I can't afford what I really want.  
I am not free because I am in debt.  
Debt is shameful.  
Black people have debt.  
I am a victim of my race.  
I am a victim of my class.  
Life is about having material things.  
I will never own a home.  
I will never have kids.  
I will never get married.  
I don't want a normal life.  
I don't deserve a happy life.  
I want to be the best.  
I want to give back.  
My voice won't be heard.

I can't make a difference.  
I'm not good enough.  
People won't like the real me.  
I am an untrained singer.  
I have a slow, lazy, flat voice.  
I am uninventive.  
I will not be acceptable if I just let it out.  
What I have to offer is not wanted.  
What I have to offer is not special.  
People don't want to change.  
You never know with money.  
Some people are lucky, some are not.  
Your parents have to have money for you to have money.  
I won't have money because my mom doesn't have money.  
I will never get out of debt.  
Money is freedom.  
I am not free.  
I will never be free.  
If I do what I love I won't be rewarded.  
If I don't get my Ph.D., I have failed.  
I don't want roots.  
Having kids means fun ends.  
Credit is bad.  
White people are scared of black people.  
White people have the power.  
Sex is about power, not love.  
Sex is financial.  
Our government has failed us.  
We have failed the world.  
I am ashamed to be American.  
If you have more, you should give to those who have less.  
Having more is unfair.  
Everyone should have the same.  
Most people want to use me.  
I need more time.  
I waste time.  
I am inefficient.  
What I want to do is not what I should be doing.  
I must be productive.  
Productivity is good.  
Laziness/ inefficiency is bad.  
I own all of my lovers.  
I might miss my chance to have kids.  
My kids will be the most important contribution I make to the world.  
I must be doing something productive at all times.  
My needs are not important.

Men don't really care.  
My father did not/ does not love me.  
I am not worthy of love by being me.  
I have to do things to earn love.  
I have to do things to prove love.  
Love is earned.  
Love is proven.  
Love fades.  
No one really loves anybody.  
I love, but others do not.  
I want the love of everyone.  
Love is just ego gratification.  
Love isn't real.  
Addicts are out of control.  
Addicts are selfish.  
If I don't hold my boundaries, people will walk all over me.  
My mother hurt me by leaving my father.  
My father should have wanted to know me.  
My father is lost, I can't find him.  
I do not love my father.  
Loving my father means not loving my mother.  
Men do not love.  
Men leave.  
Men can't be trusted.  
I am lacking because I don't have a relationship with my father.  
I do not have a father.  
I am not worthy of love because my own father did not love me.  
All black men might be my father.  
I reject my father.  
Dirty people are lazy.  
Laziness is bad.  
Laziness is unacceptable.  
Most people are stupid.  
Most people are lazy and inefficient.

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