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Autobiography, Time and the Palimpsest in Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then: A Novel*

Abstract: This article analyses Jamaica Kincaid's autobiographical novel *See Now Then* through the metaphor of the palimpsest with the aim of exploring the frictions between the different generic and thematic layers that make up the text. It argues that despite the novel's generic openness, its thematic concerns, most notably its treatment of time and narrative temporality, encourage a backward-looking stance that reasserts the past. The theories of Sarah Dillon and Lene Johannessen on the nature of palimpsests, especially the difference between the palimpsestic and the palimpsestuous and the interaction between the horizontal and the vertical, the new and the old, will be drawn upon in conjunction with Leigh Gilmore's investigations into limit case autobiographies – works, like Kincaid's, that question the borders between fiction and life-writing under the pressure of traumatic experiences.

Keywords: Jamaica Kincaid, autobiography, (auto)pathography, post-colonial palimpsest, trauma, narrative temporality

1. Introduction: Limit Case Autobiographies and the Metaphor of the Palimpsest

Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then,* published in 2013, is the second novel the West Indian author sets outside her birthplace. Unlike *Annie John* (1985), *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), and *Mr Potter* (2002) – inspired by the lives of her parents, and, to a lesser extent, her maternal grandparents – the plots of this her latest novel to date and the novella *Lucy* (1990) unfold in the United States. Lucy, the eponymous teenage heroine, works as an au pair in an unnamed city that closely resembles New York. She has fled her Caribbean home to escape from a love–hate relationship with her mother, a staple of Kincaid's fiction. *See Now Then*,

set in a small village in New England, pictures the joys and miseries of the Sweet family, bringing into focus the debilitating effects of the parents' divorce. Upon publication, both novels met with controversy because of their heavy reliance on autobiographical material that invited connections between the characters and real-life people. To be sure, nineteen-year-old Lucy and middle-aged Mrs. Sweet have been read as thinly disguised versions of Kincaid at different stages of her life. More controversially, however, the autobiographical tour includes intimate details of people very close to the author who the novels depict in a rather unfavorable light, leading readers like J. Brooks Bouson to "question the ethical propriety of Kincaid's adversarial autobiographical performance" (357). At the core of *Lucy* and *See Now Then* lies the portrayal of an ugly divorce: that of Mariah and Lewis, the affluent couple Lucy works for; and the divorce of the Sweets, which reviewers were quick to interpret as being based on Kincaid's failed marriage to composer Allen Shawn (Cohen 224; Gilbert 62; Row n.p.).

Although Kincaid, especially in her early career, has often candidly admitted that her life constitutes the main raw material of her fiction (Ferguson 176; Wachtel 55; Bonetti n.p.), of late, she has grown wary of what she calls "the autobiographical question" (qtd. in Cumber Dance 9), particularly so when it concerns the characters and events that make up *See Now Then*. Asked by Celeste Headlee about the coincidences between the book and her own life, Kincaid retorts:

> why does it matter? It doesn't matter to me that it's autobiographical. But it seems to matter to people as a way to read it, you know, except I think it's a way of diminishing what I think might be remarkable about the work. And it's painful, in its way, to be dismissed because, well, it's about her marriage and revenge or something. It's not that at all. (Headlee n.p.)

To a certain extent, Kincaid is right to reject a purely autobiographical reading of *See Now Then* as simplistic. But, to me, the key question is how to reconcile the fact that the author's life experience obviously matters for a fuller comprehension of her fiction – despite her protestations – with the need to go beyond the intricate mesh of autobiographical parallels in her work.

Leigh Gilmore seems to have found a way out of the conundrum. She considers Kincaid's deployment of certain events in her life as paradigmatic of significant transformations undergone by contemporary life writing. Gilmore puts forward the term "limit case autobiography" to refer to works that tether on the edge between the fictional and the factual when representing traumatic experiences. These liminal works disrupt expectations in that they are more concerned with the author's recurrent preoccupations, prompted by a traumatic event, rather than with conventional truth claims. In the case of Kincaid, her works *Annie John* (1986), *Lucy* (1991), *My Brother* (1997), and – only in passing – *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) are analyzed as limit case autobiographies, part of an "ongoing self-representational

project," in Gilmore's own words (2001, 97). This serial *sui generis* autobiography, starting back in 1983 with the collection of short stories *At the Bottom of the River*, is characterized not so much by a stable traditional autobiographical subject but by the matrix of the essentials of Kincaid's fiction, revisited work after work. There is certainly no doubt that her later novels *Mr. Potter* (2001) and *See Now Then* have come to engross the list of Kincaid's hybrid writings of the self. Two recurring sources of trauma feature prominently in the author's work: one of a personal nature and the other an archetypal instance of historical trauma, namely, her troubling relationship with her mother, and the legacy of colonialism and slavery. These topics are part of the backdrop of *See Now Then*, which is, nevertheless, mainly concerned with domestic trauma, combining the stark realities of Kincaid's deteriorating relationship with her ex-husband, together with fiction, alongside some flights into pure fantasy.

Besides providing insights into a fictional work, metaphors can also play an important role in the growth and development of literary research. Jamie Herd has published an ingenious article that analyses *See Now Then* through the metaphorical figure of grafting in order to explain its intertextual and generic intricacies. She graphically describes Kincaid as "a master grafter set on embedding multiple fruit-bearing shoots into the rootstock of *See Now Then*" and taking a step back to watch "the intertextual and intergeneric grafts disrupt time as they branch out in new directions" (31). As Herd clarifies, "the grafter plays with time, making old trees bear new fruits and young rootstock grow scions of fruit-bearing trees of the past." She puns on the title of Kincaid's novel when she adds that looking at the grafted tree "is seeing time defied, at once seeing now then and seeing then now" (31). Like Herd, I acknowledge the centrality of time in *See Now Then*, as well as the constant interplay between the past and the present, the old and the new that characterizes the text. However, I would like to put forward a complementary figure that further helps advance thinking about the novel and that has a long tradition as a metaphor in literary criticism: the palimpsest.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey, Gérard Genette, Jacques Derrida, and within a feminist agenda, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* are some eminent examples of the figurative use of the palimpsest among writers and critics alike. As is well known, palimpsests emerged in ancient times, when writing materials were scarce and costly to obtain. By erasing the older text, writers made room for new inscriptions. Three main aspects define the structure and the logic of the palimpsest: the possibility of re-inscription; the overlaying of different texts; and – perhaps its most intriguing characteristic – the fact that, over time, traces of the underwriting often end up reappearing on the surface. I argue that these aspects can make important contributions to the analysis of *See Now Then.* In keeping with the logic of the palimpsest, Kincaid's autobiographical project is open-ended, always already open to future re-inscriptions. In Gilmore's words, the "preoccupations that persist across [her] texts," compel the

author to return to "the autobiographical scene" (2001, 98) and raise "the spectre of endless autobiography" (2001, 96). The palimpsest's layeredness and its uncanny ability to simultaneously erase and preserve, conceal and reveal – sometimes unintentionally – prove particularly fruitful for investigating the novel both in terms of genre and theme. Sarah Dillon has studied the relationship between the layers that compose a palimpsest in depth, unravelling the new analytical possibilities that the friction between its surface and what lies beneath opens up. This article puts her insights in dialogue with Lene Johannessen's explorations of the cross-fertilization between the postcolonial figurative palimpsest and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity.

2. The Palimpsestic Versus the Palimpsestuous

In "Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies," Dillon distinguishes between the terms "palimpsestic" and "palimpsestuous," two different but complementary ways of approaching a multi-layered text. Palimpsestic, she explains, refers to the process of adding layer upon layer, while palimpsestuous, in contrast, alludes to the final result, that is to say, the interpenetration of the different layers visible on the surface (2005, 245). In Dillon's opinion, the palimpsestuous can yield more exciting results as a critical tool than the palimpsestic. In fact, a palimpsestuous reading serves as the basis for the textual analyses she provides in her monograph *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*. Besides, drawing on Foucault's theory, Dillon equates the palimpsestic with the archaeological and the palimpsestuous with the genealogical (2005, 253). Like archaeology, a palimpsestic reading is mainly interested in reaching down to the deeper layers – the hidden meaning of a text that is supposed to be its true and most valuable story. In Dillon's opinion, this form of reading is necessary but often not sufficient. She advocates instead a palimpsestuous approach to texts that stays on the surface. After all, the palimpsest provides only an "illusion of depth […] while always in fact functioning on the surface level" (McDonagh; qtd. in Dillon 2007, 3). Palimpsests, corroborates Brecht de Groote, "do not actually arrive in neat layers that can be peeled down to their ever delayed core like the skins of an onion: they are by definition a single surface inhabited by multiple dissociated discourses, each of which is its own irreducible moment" (124). In the same way as genealogy traces the "strategic connections" between the discourses that have been made visible (Foucault; qtd. in Dillon 2005, 254), a palimpsestuous reading focuses primarily on the surface of the text and explores the intersections between the dominant discourse and the traces of encrypted texts. Dillon labels this quality "palimpsestuousness," defined as "a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation" that preserves "the distinctness of its texts, while at the same time allowing for their essential contamination and

interdependence" (2007, 3). According to Dillon, the palimpsestuous corresponds to the adjective "involuted," used by De Quincey in a similar context (2005, 245). The different "texts that inhabit the palimpsest […] are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other" (Dillon 2007, 4), like De Quincey's "involuted" surface structure in which "our deepest thoughts and feelings pass to us […] in compound experiences incapable of being disentangled" (De Quincey; qtd. in Dillon 2005, 245).

In *See Now Then*, the tensions generated between the pull to dig out the connections with Kincaid's personal experience and the need to trace the genealogy of Kincaid's concerns can be productively explored by pursuing a palimpsestic, as well as a palimpsestuous, reading. The first, palimpsestic approach, will touch on the factual layers of the novel, which Kincaid claims to have erased. More importantly and more comprehensively too, I will adopt a palimpsestuous approach to the different discourses on time and temporality so as to examine the way they circulate Kincaid's characteristic concerns as they re-emerge in the variegated "Now" of the novel. This will prove to be of far greater value, as the surface of the palimpsest eclipses the interest of what lies below. In *See Now Then,* a horizontal approach studying competing discourses on the surface text level yields more abundantly than a vertical one excavating personal and generic origins.

In correlation with Dillon's differentiating between the palimpsetic and the palimpsestuous, the archaeological and the genealogical, Johannessen argues that postcolonial palimpsests invite a double reading that consists in an "oscillation between vertically oriented disclosures of pasts on the one hand, and, on the other, a horizontally oriented unveiling of concurrent contexts" (873). Despite the apparently conflicting logics of the palimpsest – grounded in "the principle of imposition and attempted erasure of the word that precedes it" – and Bhabha's idea of the hybrid – following "the principle of dialogue" and integrating "various […] discourses into some form of whole" (897) – Johannessen affirms that some postcolonial palimpsests work to encourage hybridity. This happens because the older layers are not granted "the authority of being prior in the sense of being original: they are prior only in the sense of being anterior," thus giving rise to a "third space," "something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation and representation" (Bhabha; qtd. in Johannessen, 880).

Other postcolonial palimpsests, in contrast, do not participate of this "thirdness" (Bhabha; qtd. in Johannessen, 885) and simply reassert the pre-eminence of the past over new hybrid forms (872). In the words of Darby Lewes, there can be two different outcomes of the superimposition of layers: "when the old bleeds through and reasserts itself, or when old and new combine to make a third discourse." In the case of the latter, "the final result is simultaneously new/old, and not new/not old. The oppositions are deconstructed, and privilege is obliterated" (qtd. in Johannessen, 872). Clearly, this final image evokes Herd's words on the result of Kincaid's grafting different genres and intertexts in *See Now Then*. However,

by examining the novel in the light of Dillon's theory, I intend to demonstrate that despite the hybridity encouraged by genre conventions, thematic concerns promote a backward view that forcefully reinstates the past. This is especially the case when the different conceptions of time and temporality are analyzed, most of them revolving around the figure of Mrs. Sweet and contaminated by trauma. In an image that conjures up the structure and the dynamics of the palimpsest, Mrs. Sweet strives to keep her past in check but ultimately fails: "Mrs. Sweet had buried her past – in the cement that composes memory, even though she knew quite well that cement deteriorates, falls apart, and reveals eventually whatever it was meant to conceal" (Kincaid 2013, 93). Only in the last two pages of the novel, as a last-minute afterthought or, more appropriately, as the embryo of a different, more hopeful re-inscription, the novel begins to contemplate the possibility of the future.

3. A Palimpsestic Approach to *See Now Then*

As noted, two main generic layers blend in *See Now Then*, one tapping into autobiography and the other following the conventions of fiction. Without doubt, the book's subtitle – "A Novel" – hints at the author's intention to foreground the fictional over the factual. However, and despite the fact that Kincaid has repeatedly dismissed autobiographical readings of her work ("10 Questions…"), the text presents obvious parallels with her life. Extrapolating from Johannessen on the mechanics of the palimpsest, in *See Now Then* "intended absence becomes unintended presence" (872). As she puts it, "the layeredness of the palimpsest operates chronologically and vertically, lending itself to the unearthing of meanings and stories" (872). Thus, a palimpsestic approach to the novel would keep critics and readers in the know busy excavating, so to speak, the details of Kincaid's family life, especially the circumstances surrounding her divorce in 2002.

The main character, Mrs. Sweet, is – like Kincaid – an Afro-Caribbean writer and keen gardener. She is in the process of coming to terms with the fact that Mr. Sweet – like Shawn, a Manhattan-born pianist and composer – has left her for a younger musician. The couple has two children, Persephone and Heracles, and lives in Vermont, where Kincaid, Shawn and their children Annie and Harold resided for years. Most reviewers of the novel point out the autobiographical subtext of *See Now Then*. Paula Marantz Cohen writes: "The couple at its center is transparently lifted from life: a short white man raised in New York City and a tall black woman from the Islands" (227). Jess Row situates the novel in the context of Kincaid's "incendiary autobiographical nonfiction" and her heavily autobiographical previous fiction (n.p.). She discloses in great detail the nonfictional undertone of the novel:

> The resemblance isn't just a matter of biographical details in the public record: *See Now Then* represents Mr. Sweet, the father of the family, as the agoraphobic, intensely

> limited, and solitary man Shawn has described himself to be in his own memoirs. It refers to Mrs. Sweet as the author of novels about the Caribbean including *Mr. Potter* (the title of Kincaid's own 2002 novel), and describes her virtuosic gardening and her conversion to Judaism – that is, it represents Kincaid exactly as the public figure she has become over four decades of writing. (n.p.)

The fact that Kincaid sets the spotlight on the ugly details of her divorce brings the novel close to (auto)pathography. This is the term Joyce Carol Oates employs to designate biographical writing primarily engaged with describing "dysfunction and disaster" (qtd. in Ward, n.p.) and encouraging a kind of morbid voyeurism in readers. *See Now Then* portrays the Sweets as a dysfunctional family where the husband hates his wife and son and sets his daughter against her mother. Mr. Sweet constantly harbors thoughts of hatred and contempt about his wife, "that bitch of a woman born of beast" (Kincaid 2013, 10), and fantasizes with stumbling by surprise upon her dismembered body. The children too feel at times neglected due to their mother's addiction to writing and gardening, and at other times overwhelmed by her suffocating attentions. The wife is referred to as "that poor dear woman" (35), "poor, benighted Mrs. Sweet" (133) and "poor Mrs. Sweet" (165), which – although the adjective poor is on occasion also applied to Mr. Sweet and Heracles – can be read as dramatizations of Kincaid's self-pity.

This archaeological, palimpsestic approach aimed at unearthing the facts of the author's life must necessarily be supplemented by an analysis of the themes that emerge to the surface of *See Now Then*. Borrowing again from Johannessen, the hidden autobiographical traces and meanings "potentially surface amidst myriad memories and stories" (872). Since critics and the author herself affirm that time is the centerpiece of the novel (Bouson, 371; Cumber Dance, 9; Headlee, n.p.), Section 4 explores the implications of the different approaches to time and narrative temporality that blend and clash in the text. The decision to carry out a palimpsestuous approach to the patterns the multi-layered realities and legacies make on the surface of the novel is taken on account of both textual and extratextual aspects: the dense, convoluted style of the novel; the generic conventions of limit case autobiographies that highlight recurrent preoccupations rather than factual details; and the genealogical relationship with Kincaid's earlier autobiographical works.

Like her previous works, especially *Mr Potter*, *See Now Then* departs from the traditional conventions of life writing in its choice of a lyrical, deeply subjective style that steadily draws attention to itself, working as a screen rather than a mirror of reality. According to J. Brooks Bouson "the convoluted, digressive, and highly repetitive style of *See Now Then* serves to partly conceal rather than reveal the painful events surrounding the collapse of Kincaid's marriage to Allen Shawn" (371–372). In her review of the novel, Prudence C. Layne notes the "heavy-handed repetition" and charges Kincaid with overindulging: "The repetitiveness of the opening chapters, the run-on sentences, the oblique assertion of

the present as already passed, of 'Now' and 'Then' being the same thing, become a bit overbearing" (218). Notoriously, the novel defies chronology and linearity and embraces repetition with slight variation. Mrs. Sweet reminiscing a rehearsal of an orchestra perfecting the Goldberg Variations (Kincaid 2013, 110) – Bach's famous piece made up of an aria and an assortment of thirty variations on the main theme – provides a hint at how the main character remains trapped in a loop of obsessive ruminations on her family life. Mrs. Sweet's reflections on her writing practice, plainly an extension of Kincaid's own, further contribute to the style's involutedness in a clear metafictional fashion, which is made even more apparent when "dear Mrs. Sweet" decides to read to "the young Heracles a chapter from a book called *See Now Then*, against her better judgment." The external narrator explains that "she was unable to stop, the pages of the book compelled her to continue, her eyes were glued to them, her tongue was an ingredient of the pages" (Kincaid 2013, 111).

Besides Kincaid's flair for repetition and the deployment of metafictional strategies, the grammar of *See Now Then* is a further invitation to stay on the surface of the text and undertake a horizontal palimpsestuous reading. Commenting on the stylistics of *Mr. Potter*, Nicole Matos has drawn attention to Kincaid's preference for parataxis over hypotaxis. Her paratactic structures, Matos asserts, "form a world that proliferates horizontally" (9). Albeit the use of coordination and juxtaposition over subordination is not as striking in *See Now Then* as it is in *Mr Potter*, the novel still features significant paratactic renderings of events, like the one on its very first page:

> and she could see the firehouse where sometimes she could attend a civic gathering and hear her government representative say something that might seriously affect her and the well-being of her family or see the firemen take out the fire trucks and dismantle various parts of them and put the parts back together and then polish all the trucks and then drive them around the village with a lot of commotion before putting them away again in the firehouse and they reminded Mrs. Sweet of the young Heracles. (3)

See Now Then is written in the style of Modernism, imitating the stream of consciousness of the main characters, especially Mrs. Sweet, who often ponders on the passing of time, the way in which her "Now" quickly turns into a "Then" and the "Then" still painfully impinges on the "Now." In *See Now Then* "the nonlinear plot collapses current and decades-old events into an almost stream-of-consciousness story of family and betrayal" ("See Now Then…"). Mrs. Sweet's memories – in the form of free indirect style – combine the domestic and the historical and feature the staples of Kincaid's fiction, such as her troubled relationship with her mother, the joys and the grieves of motherhood and her anger about the legacy of colonialism and slavery. As a limit-case autobiography, it is the genealogy of concerns Kincaid revisits in this serial project that matters more than the factual detailing of

the events of her life. Unlike the novel's hybridity as a generic palimpsest opening autobiography to new inscriptions, on a thematic level a palimpsestuous reading reveals that the "Now" of the novel forcefully reasserts the past.

4. A Palimpsestuous Approach to *See Now Then*: The Role of Time and Temporality

Even though palimpsests partake of the inseparability of time and space, in *See Now Then* the temporal presides over the spatial. Its title, explains Lauren Gilbert, hints at "the author's conceit that everything can be glimpsed in the same instant, and the narrative moves vertiginously forward and backward through time, sometimes within a single paragraph" (62). Significantly, in the title of the novel, the "See" that precedes the stark juxtaposition of present – "Now" – and past – "Then" – subordinates time to the experience of the human subject, in an invitation to characters, readers, and perhaps the author herself, to perceive the interconnection between what is and what was. According to Dillon, the palimpsestuous relationship established between past, present and future on the surface of the palimpsest leads to the spectralization of temporality: "The 'present' of the palimpsest is only constituted in and by the 'presence' of texts from the 'past,' as well as remaining open to further inscription by texts of the 'future,'" thus evidencing "the spectrality of any 'present' moment, which always already contains within it 'past,' 'present' and 'future' moments" (37). Mrs. Sweet's ruminations in *See Now Then* neatly reflect how the present, the past and the future haunt each other: "she was thinking of her now, knowing that it would most certainly become a Then even as it was a Now, for the present will be now then and the past is now then and the future will be a now then, and that the past and the present and the future has no permanent present tense, has no certainty in regard to right now" (Kincaid 2013, 13). In this spectral relationship, as the analysis of the different conceptions of time and temporality will show, it is the past that wins the day, eclipsing the now and possibly hamstringing the future.

Paul Ricœur's reflections on narrative temporality can throw some light on the representation of past, present and future in *See Now Then.* He distinguishes between three levels that Heilna du Plooy summarizes as follows: "a) time 'in' which events take place, b) time as 'historicality' seen as the weight of the past, c) time as temporality reflecting the care emanating from reflection on the complexity of time in its simultaneity of past, present and future (ontologically and in representation)" (6). The events in the novel are mainly narrated in the past tense, with brief forays into the present. That the "Now" of the title is overshadowed by its "Then" is proof of the burden of both personal and historical pasts. Moreover, the preoccupation with time and human boundedness in time that make the bulk of Mrs. Sweet's and, to a lesser extent, her husband's and their children's cogitations, epitomize Ricœur's third level, adding a layer of metaphysical reflection. The

presentness of the time of writing thematized whenever Mrs. Sweet is portrayed in the act of holding a pen (Kincaid 2013, 28, 30) contrasts with the backward view that the novel's heavy reliance on memories promotes. As we shall see, the interaction of the various forms of time evoked in the Now of the novel mainly works to reassert the bitter past that leaks through the characters' nostalgic recollection of better times. In *See Now Then*, the mythical clashes with the historical and the human scale of time is set in contrast to the eras of geology. The different conceptions converge in the personal experience of time, depicted both in its everydayness and in the throes of an acrimonious divorce, at the same time that they are disrupted by the time of trauma.

Mrs. Sweet, steeped in the Greek classics, has given her children the names of mythological characters. The goddess Persephone, born of Zeus and Demeter, ruled over the underworld with her husband Hades for part of the year. He had abducted her to the desperation of her mother who, during the time Persephone was away, made plants and crops wither bringing about winter ("Greek Mythology"). It is certainly apt that Mrs. Sweet, a keen gardener, is equated to the goddess of agriculture and harvest. In the novel, however, the father usurps the place of the god of the underworld, as Mrs. Sweet recounts on several occasions how Mr. Sweet would keep "the beautiful Persephone away from her mother" (59) in order to train her as a musician. This might be one of the reasons why Mrs. Sweet – like Kincaid herself – hates winter (Kincaid 2013, 11; 1999, 59). More importantly, the myth helps explain Mr. and Mrs. Sweet's relationship with their daughter. In the same way as the mythical Persephone ends up falling in love with Hades, Persephone Sweet will side with his father when estrangement between her parents comes. The Sweet's son Heracles – like the Greek mythological hero after whom he is named – is described as having a "mighty force" (Kincaid 2013, 95) as well as many tasks to perform. Some tasks are real, like "hitting balls, large and small, into holes of all sizes" to the point of perfection (36), but some are imaginary, echoing those of the strongest of mortals, according to Greek mythology: "slay the monster, cross the river, return again, climb up the mountain, descend on the other side, build a castle on the top of a hill" (36). Heracles remains closer to Mrs. Sweet, described as an "adoring mother worshiping her young son, a hero to her already" (62). She laments having "failed to keep him from knowing the bitterness of a weak and jealous father […] who knew not at all how to love a son" (168). The names of the children – always accompanied by typically Homeric epithets – evoke mythological time. The traces of the mythical bespeak a time not yet ruled by chronology and akin to the time of the seasons, with Demeter/Mrs. Sweet bringing winter over the earth every time Persephone leaves to join Hades/Mr. Sweet in the underworld. Its cyclicality is resonant with the repetitiousness of the style and impregnated with the atemporality of archetypes: "The young Heracles would always be so, then, now, and then to come, as would his sister the beautiful Persephone be so, then, now, and then to come" (95).

In the "Now" of the novel, myth meets with history, the cyclical perception of time contrasting with the linearity of historical events. Like Kincaid, Mrs. Sweet comes from a Caribbean island that, she says, is "only a footnote" to larger historical events (Kincaid 2013, 112). She arrived in the US in what her husband disdainfully calls a "banana boat" (9), as part of the Caribbean diaspora. For Kincaid, history, more often than not, equals the process of colonization of the West Indies. "What should history mean to someone who looks like me?" – she wonders in her essay "In History" – "Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound and each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again, over and over, or is it a long moment that begins anew each day since 1492?" (1997, 620). In *See Now Then*, Mrs. Sweet's thoughts and her writing regularly return to the empire and the Atlantic Slave Trade – "a monstrosity, a distortion of human relationships" (Kincaid 2013, 12), "the vast world that began in 1492" (145): "No morning arrived in all its freshness, its newness, bearing no trace of all the billions of mornings that had come before, that Mrs. Sweet didn't think, first thing, of the turbulent waters of the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean" (18). Colonialism and slavery, Mrs. Sweet affirms, are events she has to keep writing about to prevent people from forgetting them (129) and to save them from becoming just a footnote to history (112). Mrs. Sweet, in the same way as Jamaica Kincaid, constantly strives to keep these historical events that happened "Then," before she could even read and write (30), alive in her readers' "Now."

As a limit case autobiography, *See Now Then* complicates the relationship between writing of the self and recording history. According to Philippe Artière, "[b]iography is the worst of the historical genres. In itself it is perfectly contrary to the historian's approach since historical time does not coincide with biological time and it is impossible for the trajectory of a single individual to be significant" (qtd. in Burdiel 13; trans. B.A.). Contrary to this opinion, Gilmore states that limit case autobiographies can be considered a form of testimonial writing, since she endows the subject with the capacity to represent traumatic historical events beyond his/her individuality. In "'What Was I?' Literary Witness and the Testimonial Archive," Gilmore analyses Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* as literary testimony, a form of "public mourning" that expands "the limits of what it means to acknowledge and grieve the losses of history" (2011, 83). Kincaid's as well as Mrs. Sweet's reflections on the nature of history conflate the chronology of the historical encapsulated in the year 1492 with the time of trauma, which challenges linearity, brings about the dissolution of temporal boundaries and fuses past, present and future at the same time that it leaves the subject perpetually at the mercy of the past, caught up in the acting out of the traumatic event and unable to work through and reengage life (LaCapra, 21–22). "The unforgettable," Jenny Edkins states, "testifies to an unspeakable perhaps similar to what we call the traumatic, before or outside any particular social or symbolic order and yet inhabiting it at its core" (127). There is no day, Mrs. Sweet states, that she does not think of

the legacy of imperialism and slavery. In *See Now Then*, it could be stated that the linearity of history is halted by the experience of trauma.

Mrs. Sweet's concerns are belittled when the span of a single human life and the time of history are contemplated in the background of geology. Geological time, embodied in the many eras that Mrs. Sweet reels off in her mind – "Precambrian, Hadean, Proterozoic, Paleozoic, Cambrian, Ordovician, Silurian" (Kincaid 2013, 181) – evokes once more the image of the palimpsest. Notice Mrs. Sweet's description of the stonewall surrounding her house: "the stones are of mica schist formed 400 million years ago in the Lower Devonian Period […] the result of sandy mud sediments that had been resting at the bottom of an ancient sea" (99). Mrs. Sweet is often portrayed at her window, looking out at the mountains, the river and the valley, what "remained of a great geologic upheaval, a Then that she was seeing Now" (2013, 10), "the remains of the violence of the earth's natural evolution" (11). Again, the inseparability of time and space and the bleeding of the past through the present as an effect of trauma are implicit in her thoughts. The future erasure of her current concerns is hinted when she ponders that her present "will be buried deep in [all that remained of a great geologic upheaval]" (10). Mr. Sweet also entertains thoughts in which the geological is associated with permanence and endurance. However, being an urbanite who hates living in the countryside, his musings do not revolve around the natural world but around his love of skyscrapers: "tall buildings made to look as if they were made from granite or something indestructible, something eternal, something that will always be there" (16–17). Likewise, Mrs. Sweet finds strength in gazing at the mountains, the lake, the river, the valley, "all serene in their seeming permanence, all created by forces that answered to no known existence" (18). The vast expanse of geological time and its accompanying feeling of permanence and stability contrast with the ephemeral nature of human timeframes. The earth is "indifferent to a unique individual consciousness" (149), Mrs. Sweet ponders. On some occasions, a planetary perspective complements her interest in the geological, further enhancing the irrelevance of the span of a human life: "the world turned, continuing in its mysterious way, mysterious to any human being trying to understand her place in it" (40).

While the mythical primarily recalls Mrs. Sweet's children Persephone and Heracles, the historical and the geological intertwine in significant ways when she thinks of her husband as a rodent from the Mesozoic (24) or as having the size of a "young Tudor prince" (68). Besides highlighting her husband's small stature, it is revelatory that Mrs. Sweet associates his white US husband with the Tudors, as the first colonization efforts of America by the British happened under Tudor rule, thus placing Mr. Sweet in the uncomfortable position of the colonizer. These disparaging comments are a reminder of how the different forms in which time comes in the novel are always mediated by personal experience, especially that of Mrs. Sweet, and tainted by the messy divorce that has come to disrupt the ordinariness of family life. It is this subjective, more intimate, conception of time that dominates

the "Now," the surface layer of the novel. I will draw on Heidegger's distinction between the ontological everyday within-time-ness of subjects and their "thrownness among things" – that is to say, the need to contend with the unexpected, "the unsympathetic, cold and hard aspects of real life" (du Plooy 6) – in order to lend clarity to the analysis of the personal experience of time in the novel. Mr. Sweet's decision to leave his wife for a younger woman constitutes a complete breakdown of continuity in the lives of the characters. It is undoubtedly a proof of the subject's thrownness into the world, a "threshold event," in Heilna du Plooy's phrase. Since "people and circumstances develop and change in ways which are sometimes very traumatic" (22), time as experienced by humans is inevitably exposed to dramatic breaches in the linearity of experience (21).

According to Mrs. Sweet, it is on the personal plane, in contrast to the historical, that joy and happiness are to be found along with disaster and catastrophe: "See Now Then, See Then Now, just to see anything at all, especially the present, was to always be inside the great world of disaster, catastrophe, and also joy and happiness, but these two latter are not accounted for in history, they were and are relegated to personal memory" (65). Every now and then, Mrs. Sweet's memory turns to the time before estrangement and divorce materialized, when Mr. Sweet loved her and her love for Mr. Sweet "was taken for granted, like the mountains Green and Anthony" (12). Mrs. Sweet's anger at being abandoned blends with her nostalgia for the everyday within-time-ness of the couple: "he used to enjoy her company" (87); "his beloved Mrs. Sweet – formerly so at any rate, for he must have loved her when they lived all alone and together at 284 Hudson Street" (79). De Quincey's resonant metaphor of the "palimpsest of the mind" – a fantasy of resurrection that allows him to preserve the memory of his dead sister (Dillon 2007, 36–37) – can explain the way Mrs. Sweet treasures the joys of her marriage by turning to these more amiable times in her mind. The novel, nonetheless, is taken up by the difficulties of parenting, the arguments, the resentment, the misunderstandings, and the mutual accusations leading to the divorce. The placid ordinariness of everyday existence is shattered by this traumatic reminder of the subject's thrownness into the world. Mrs. Sweet's "Now" is irredeemably contaminated by a past where disaster and catastrophe have outweighed happiness and joy: "There is always a Then to see Now" (Kincaid 2013, 71); Mrs. Sweet experienced "a moment of Then, Now" (72). The convolutedness of time as well as the certainty of things past bleeding through and overwhelming things present becomes evident when Mrs. Sweet states that "[e]very morning is the next morning of the night before" (68).

After a painful process of coming of age, Lucy – an early protagonist of Kincaid's open-ended self-representational project – purposefully writes her full name and the first sentence on the blank pages of her notebook. She is alone at home and the rigors of the long winter have given way to the warmer air of spring (Kincaid 1991, 161). Lucy's tears then "fell on the page and caused all the words

to become one great big blur" (164), metaphorically providing her with the opportunity to further reinvent herself. The tableau of Mrs. Sweet looking at the future at the very end of *See Now Then* echoes similar feelings of dissolution and new possibility. "All that is to come will change the way right now is seen […] what is to come will make, distort, and even erase right now" (181), Mrs. Sweet thinks as she looks out the window and hopes to finally put behind this painful phase of her life. This also happens in spring, the paradigmatic time for renewal and rebirth. Mrs. Sweet notices that "outside *now* there was spring" and that there "were large trees, some of them evergreen, some of them deciduous and right *then* in bud" (182; emphasis mine). The adverbs "now" and "then" in this last sentence of the novel parallel the title. However, instead of reinstating the traces of the past in the present moment as it occurs in the bulk of the book, they both allude to the coming of spring. As Plooy explains, threshold events often mark the point of beginning of a new time, triggering "the processes of finding and adapting to new identities" once a boundary is crossed (Plooy 4). The ending of *See Now Then* opens up the protagonist's life – palimpsest-like – to possible new inscriptions, offering a tenuous glimpse of a different future, hopefully to be described by Kincaid in a new instalment of her limit-case autobiographical scheme.

5. Conclusion

See Now Then is further proof of Kincaid's compulsion to mythologize herself in her literary production. Neither purely fictional nor transparently autobiographical, the novel deconstructs the barrier between the conventions of fiction and life-writing to produce a third hybrid discourse, characteristic of what Gilmore has labelled "the limit case." By analyzing Kincaid's latest contribution to her serial autobiography in the light of the metaphor of the palimpsest, this article has revealed the contrast that exists between the newness of genre, which opens up different possibilities of representation, and the reassertion of the pre-eminence of the past when themes are concerned. Following Dillon and Johannessen, the palimpsest has been regarded both as a vertical succession of layers and as a horizontal plane simultaneously presenting the new alongside the old. A palimpsestic, archaeological reading has been pursued in order to foreground what the text hides in its depths, particularly the autobiographical subtext based on the facts of Kincaid's divorce. However, the analysis has put the spotlight on the intricate pattern of discourses emerging to the surface layer. In this palimpsestous approach, *See Now Then* appears as a convoluted array of different forms of time and temporality whose study has revealed the weight of the past in the text, be it personal, mythological, geological or historical. It is only at the very end of the novel that the traces of the past make room for the faint promise of a different future, opening the text, like a palimpsest, to new inscriptions. The analysis has also foregrounded

strategic connections with earlier instances of Kincaid's limit case autobiography like her recurrent concern with the legacy of colonialism and slavery. In *See Now Then*, however, it is the domestic trauma of the protagonist's divorce that occupies center stage, detracting from the representativeness of the Kincaid character as the inheritor of historical traumas in her earlier novels.

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