Narrating the Ghost: Memory, Narrative and Incommensurabilities in and Jamaica Kincaid’s The Autobiography of My Mother and Roberto Bolaño’s Nocturno de Chile

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National memory moves with fragmentary knowledge, formed through different signs to indicate the direction its historical narrative will impose on the nation. However, Homi Bhabha in his article, “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern” states:

In the seizure of the sign . . . there is neither dialectical sublation nor the empty signifier: there is a contestation of the given symbols of authority that shift the terrains of antagonism. The synchronicity in the social ordering of symbols is challenged within its own terms, but the grounds of engagement have been displaced in a supplementary movement that exceeds those terms. (208)

The “seizure of the sign” displaces the temporal and spatial continuity from the “social ordering of symbols” using the tools of those symbols with the added displacement creating the necessary distance to challenge this ordering. However, challenging these symbols comes back to doing so within the social ordering of symbols on its own terms which, in a sense, moves to exceed the movement of the ordering that does not move exactly as those symbols but still exists within its social order. This “contestation of the given symbols” and “grounds of engagement” frame my comparison between Jamaica Kincaid’s The Autobiography of My Mother (1996) and Roberto Bolaño’s Nocturno de Chile [By Night in Chile] (2000). Both works explore their protagonist’s complicated relationship with their memory and respective historical narratives as sites of inscription for a larger national narrative, the grounds of contestation. Yet the instability shown in both stories explores both memory and identity as sites of the selves’ that cannot be held together coherently in this larger narrative. As disjunctive narratives, their memories act more as countermemories, as sites of incommensurabilities, or the seizure of the sign that functions to exceed the movement of larger national narratives. This project will examine the function of memory as a site of divergence from a historical narrative and the tools used to accomplish this, such as Kincaid’s confrontation of Caribbean history through her protagonist’s conflicted relationship with language and its colonial memory in that space, and the confession as a form of atonement in Bolaño’s Nocturno de Chile and its exaggerated relationship with/against Pinochet’s rule. The displacement of these narratives reveals both the limits of memory when it is contoured to a specific narrative and the hidden signs that exceed the limits of the specific narrative as a ghost drifting from the social ordering of their world, but still essential within it.

For the political transitions shown in the two novels, the storyteller in their role can either serve the obligation to the nation or accept the distance in their role. In the opening line of Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” (1936), Benjamin examines the characteristics of the storyteller as a visceral but hidden presence: “Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant” (83). In his description of the author of the novel, the “solitary individual,” who without counsel and unable to express himself, writes the novel that carries “the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life” (87). Memory in both Kincaid’s and Bolaño’s novels share this quality of the incommensurable with narrators acting in contention to the formation of identity though the ties of self with nation; in the form of thought, the language used to engage in its construction, also functions within its restrictions. If it is tied to what can be expressed within this language, what can be expressed then is inexpressible unless it is in this “horizon of meaning” (Derrida 562).

For Bhabha, the notion of time and nation in, “Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation”, sets the cohesion offered by nationalism in its narrative as the “arbitrary historical inventions” held together with: “cultural shreds and patches . . . . Any old shred would have served as well. But in no way does it follow that the principle of nationalism . . . is in the least contingent and accidental” (qtd. from Taylor in Bhabha 142). For
the nation to project itself in cultural production, or to project a space where nationalist identities may be thought of, this production of narrative depends on the “pedagogical and the performative” (146). For the pedagogical, the nation’s people are in a predestined historical plane, part of a patriotic body politic, rooted in the past. In the performative, the nation’s people must be in a state of forgetting in their enforcement of this past narrative as its “subjects” in a process of both validating and reproducing it ambivalently through obtaining and practicing this knowledge. In this space and movement is a loss of reflection by being validated in the sphere of “people-as-one” (150). The ambivalent movement between the two acts of the pedagogical and the performative, in past and present, becomes important for the continuity of a national identity. In Bhabha’s reinterpretation of Benjamin’s “incommensurability” from the “margins of modernity” toward a cultural difference counter, or disjunctive, from the national historical narrative, the borderline of both “history and language, on the limits of race and gender”, the storyteller positions the reader “to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity” (170). The hidden storyteller illuminates the extremity of this border into a space of solidarity where the presence of differences furthers its incommensurable quality digressive from the linearity of national narratives.

As sites of disjunctives and cultural differences through their incommensurable qualities, both Kincaid and Bolaño’s novels shift memory from its unity towards its fragmentation held together as an assemblage; it shares the quality of the rhizome as it increases “in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections. There are no points or positions in a rhizome such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines” (Deleuze 31). As attempts for the nation to maintain power through a unitary movement, the notion of unity is only a site of power through regulatory signifiers to encompass and maintain the multiplicities of fragmentations as norms within the nation. To present both novels with an emphasis on the instability of memory as the “arbitrary historical inventions” that nationalism has defended through “cultural shreds and patches” the lines towards an origin becomes a site revealing the vulnerability of these practices and make it possible to digress from national narratives in its reliance on memory.

Kincaid’s protagonist, Xuela Claudette Richardson, utilizes language as a digressive site in exploring its long history as a contested issue for people of color in the Americas.4 After various political and social campaigns in the Caribbean, those who were colonized had turned from the stigmatization associated with colonization and employed Creole as a symbol of resistance, making linguistic action a supremely political action. The stigmatization, though, did not completely disappear in day-to-day life, as Creole was still conventionally perceived as “bad or broken” English, Dutch, Spanish, or French. The function of language is “to name and give voice to the experience and image and so house the being” (Philip 276), but the negative connotations of Creole as apart from the accepted norm invalidates the Creole cultural reality and alienates its speakers from their experiences. But Xuela charts the developing anti-colonial attitudes in the Caribbean through her relationship with language, instead as a function of unbecoming through the memory of her own past, a non-being that disappears and counteracts against the self and womanhood in the colonial narrative. Like Caliban in Shakespeare’s The Tempest, Xuela enters into the “master” discourse to condemn her colonizer through the pain inherent in it, but never relinquishing to exist in it: “That the first words I said were in the language of a people I would never like or love is not now a mystery to me; everything in my life, good or bad, to which I am inextricably bound is a source of pain” (7). Ironically, Xuela is immersed in Creole from the time almost immediately after her birth and the death of her mother, but her alienation from her biological mother results in her rejection of or alienation from her “true” mother tongue, or its larger connotation. A literal connection to biological mother connotes an immediate connection to the mother tongue, and certain connections to culture and homeland inextricably bound to each other. Since no direct communication is made with the biological mother of the protagonist, her obligation to blood relations, or continuing to exist within the bounds of its terms, leads instead to reinterpreting the bonds of gender beyond blood relations.

With no identity formed through her mother or the father who abandons her after birth, Xuela’s self becomes the formation of colonial language, logic, figures, and identities inscribed on her. Moving forward, she has only two choices: she can live in the language of the colonial story or she can refuse it. The rest of the story follows her reflection of choosing the latter in a mode of narrative moving through the instability memory provides against a normative form of reflection informed by the terms of blood relations. She further describes her reflections as:

... if they were happening in a very small, dark place, a place the size of a dollhouse, and the dollhouse is at the bottom of a hole, and I am way up at the top of the hole, peering down into this little house, trying to make out exactly what it is that happened down there. And sometimes when I look down at this scene, certain things are not in the same place they were in the last time I looked: different things are in the shadows at different times, different things are in the light. (33)

In what she can bring to light, there is a negotiation between what can be present and what will be forgotten. What she can see or invoke through the spoken word and the subject’s positionality brings forth in her memory the historical moment of colonialism in which she negotiates the political dynamics of this phenomenon.

When Xuela is offered to move back in with her father and his new wife, a new dynamic begins to form in how she and her father’s wife negotiate the spatial relationship with language in their home. Xuela’s stepmother speaks to her in French Patois when they are alone, and in English when they are in the presence of Xuela’s father; this routine constructs a feeling of resentment against Creole as the relationship between space, language and gender informs her father’s wife that Creole is “an attempt ... to make an illegitimate of me, to associate me with the made-up language of people regarded as not real—the shadow people, the forever humiliated, the forever low” (30). Xuela realizes the intricate struggle for power that occurs on the level of the spoken word—a reminder, once again, of how words can serve as “a source of pain” (7). Yet as a form of detaching herself from the patriarchal attitudes of the household, Xuela speaking Creole allows her to shift her self in the realm of her father to those who are cast aside for...
Speaking in Creole. Throughout the book, neither her father nor the reader ever hears these conversations. Could it be she is hiding as well from the reader's own gaze to interpret thoughts and actions that could be reduced or diminished through translation? Creole in the household serves as a specifically cultural ground used to break from social propriety and the self under the colonial gaze. In this conflict to negotiate this space in a specific language, she instead grows to identify the possibility of losing speech as "delicious" (51).

Her growing acceptance of Creole points toward hesitation to fully accept its possibilities since its meaning for her shifts towards a more constricted signification. When Xuela turns fifteen, her father—recognizing the need to remove his daughter from his second wife’s presence and to further her English education—sends her to the capital city of Roseau to live in the home of Jacques and Lise LaBatte. In exchange for her room and board, Xuela performs household tasks for “Monsieur” and “Madame.” Here again, this space must be negotiated through language as Lise and Xuela communicate with each other in Patois, but in English around Jacques. Creole, as the illegitimate language, is also named the “the language of the captive” by Xuela (74): Lise is held captive to a man she loves but he does not love back due to her inability to bear any children; Xuela resides in their home as a boarder/servant, a young black woman with no financial means of independent survival and no influence in society. Spoken language is one of the means by which the two women bond; however, Xuela and Lise eventually attain such a level of familiarity and understanding that they experience a form of silent communication seemingly akin to "preverbal" communication. Xuela comments: "To communicate so intimately with someone, to be spoken to silently by someone and yet understand more clearly than if she had shouted at the top of her voice, was something I did not experience with anyone ever again in my life” (69). The growing idealized mother figure as the "preverbal" in Lise, however, is disrupted by remembering the disconnection with either the biological mother or the mother tongue to shape the idea of a mother since, according to Xuela: “I do not know in what language she would have said such a thing. I did not know her; she died at the moment I was born” (188).

Kincaid’s explorations of the connections between language, gender, and nationalism take on the starkest political connotations in her representation of Xuela’s affair with Philip Bailey. Xuela works for, seduces, and then marries a white British physician later in her life. Their relationship upholds the gendered notions of language as Xuela speaks the Creole “mother tongue” while Philip speaks English. In taking care of and forming her self through this relationship, the “mother tongue” or the “mother” shifts away from the limitations of the biological link of the mother. The relationship she takes on with Bailey does not place any submission on one another through language, but Xuela holds the power and inverts the traditional hierarchy in which the white male colonist is viewed as the superior communicator, and thus the superior being. Philip, instead of Xuela, will be the foreigner in their home, as Xuela asserts: “He now lived in a world in which he could not speak the language, I mediated for him, I translated for him . . . I blocked this entrance into all the worlds he had come to know” (224). The space she was born into, with predetermined signifiers to structure herself within, changes into a space where she occupies a position of power to determine the access of language and the movements she would have otherwise moved ambivalently through.

Although she lived on the island of Dominica for her entire life, she does not recognize having reached the land of “true” belonging until she moves back to the mountains, the place where, very symbolically, her mother and her mother’s people were born. In Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat introduce the book by interrogating the false opposition of home and exile, inside and outside. They claim that for the migrant:

Home, that place and time outside place and time, appears to mingle promiscuously with its opposite—exile, the outside, elsewhere. Hence its attraction for a critical practice that seeks to undo such binaries as belonging/unbelonging, loyally/disloyally, to unpack their ideological baggage, to make visible the multifarious ways in which they participate in the production of social relations as second nature. (Mufti and Shohat 8)

Xuela’s implicit condemnation of the often essentializing relationships to biological motherhood, mother tongues, and motherlands undercuts the rigid boundary between “authentic” and “inauthentic” in language, gender norms, and national subjectivity. Even though the novel ends with Xuela’s achievement of a metaphorical maternal connection, Kincaid’s destabilization of the mother tongue and mother love tropes causes the reader to question the implications of this conclusion. As for Bolaño, destabilization through the reliance on confession as the site of memory, or the testimonio, instead of the figure of the mother reflects vulnerability through deterioration in its exaggerated trajectory.

Through the 1970’s and 1980’s, the champions of testimonio flourished in Latin America as a body of literature with the aesthetic functions to denounce “literature tout court as an institution coextensive with authoritarian power and essential to the maintenance of social exclusion” (O’Bryen 475). Chile’s transition from dictatorship under Pinochet into democracy required it to fit into an idealized neoliberal landscape of rebirth, sanitization, and transparency. In Cultural Residues: Chile in Transition, the “transition” from Pinochet’s paradoxically imposed rule (the 1982 restoration of electoral rule which ensured Pinochet’s rule for another eight years, and his position as head of the army for another sixteen), to Patricio Aylwin’s election in 1990, set a desire to “de-narrate” Chile’s historical past to cleanse it of any Third World “detritus” likely to impede the flow of deregulated global capital as a tabula rasa to rewrite a new story for the rebirth of nation from years of systematic abuses. This framework formed larger gaps that never resolved many of the ongoing issues post-Pinochet, such as the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation Rettig Report of 1991. In this attempt to reconcile and unify the country under a rhetoric in which the truth will resolve the distrust between citizen and nation, it failed to bring those responsible for terror before justice. One example was the failure to prosecute General Contreras due to an illness and unsuitability for jail when charges were brought up against him for his involvement with the government’s kidnapping and disappearances of Chilean citizens.
literary critic, problematizes the self-justification and guilt he attempts in his deathbed to appropriate the confessional for atonement. His guilt, however, is tinged by the added physical pain felt through the movement of his confession:

Ahora me muero, pero tengo muchas cosas que decir todavía . . . . Hay que ser responsable. Eso lo he dicho toda mi vida. Uno tiene la obligación moral de ser responsable de sus actos, si, de sus silencios, porque también los silencios ascienden al cielo y los Dios y sólo Dios los comprende y los juzga, así que mucho cuidado con los silencios, Yo soy responsable de todo. Mis silencios son inmaculados . . . . A veces me sorprende a mí mismo apoyado en un codo. Divago y sueño y procura estar en paz contigo mismo. Pero a veces hasta de mi propio nombre me olvido. (11-12)

I am dying now, but I still have many things to say . . . . One has a moral obligation to take responsibility for one’s actions, and that includes one’s words and silences, yes, one’s silences, because silences rise to heaven too, and God hears them, and only God understands and judges them, so one must be very careful with one’s silences . . . . My silences are immaculate. Let me make that clear. Clear to God above all . . . . But what am I talking about? Sometimes I surprise myself as I find myself propped up one elbow, rambling on and dreaming and trying to make peace with myself. But sometimes I even forget my own name. (1)

Lacroix’s story drifts and digresses uncontrollably with indications of past traumas leaving him in tatters, mentally and physically, as he invokes bursts of memories of his actions and immaculate silences. The silences he addresses (even though they are given the quality of being immaculate) depict the uncertainty in entering into them with an obligation towards God, which may mean a determination towards an idealized confession above what may have actually occurred. But, his physical trauma cuts himself midway through, along with his poor memory, from properly portraying these silences in his final moments. The access to these silences is not limited by trauma and passive forgetting, but an exaggerated recycling in the hands of power.

Bolaño’s choice of a priest with the role of a literary critic as a narrator makes his political motivations more apparent as reading entails a disavowing not so much with the pastness of the figures that choke his often breathless delivery, but their haunting presence in his attempt to narrate his confession. Instead of immersing himself into the political changes in Chile, he withdraws instead into the church of his literature, the holy shelter he retreats to immediately after the triumph of Allende’s Unidad Popular in the comfort of his home, first by burying himself in the Greek Classics:

Empacé con Homero, como manda la tradición, y seguí con Tales de Mileto y Jenófanes de Colofón y Alcmeón de Crotona y Zenón de Elea (que bueno era), y luego mataron a un general del ejército favorable a Allende y Chile restableció relaciones diplomáticas con Cuba . . . . y yo leí a Título de Esparta . . . . y el gobierno nacionalizó el cobre y luego el salitre y el hierro . . . . y yo leí a Esquilo y a Sófocles . . . . y después vino el golpe de Estado, el levantamiento, el pronunciamiento militar, y bombardearon La Moneda, y cuando terminó el bombardeo el presidente se suicidó y acabo todo. Entonces yo me quedo quieto, con un dedo en la página que estaba leyendo, y pensé: que paz. (97-99)

Respecting the tradition, I started with Homer, then moved on to Thales of Milethus, Xenophanes of Colophon, Alcmaeon of Croton, Zeno of Elea (wonderful), and then a pro-Allende general was killed, and Chile restored diplomatic relations with Cuba . . . . and I read Týrtaio de Sparta . . . . and the government nationalized the coppermines and the nitrate and steel industries . . . . and I read Åschylos and Sophocles . . . . and then came the coup d’état, the putsch, the military uprising, the bombing of La Modeda and when the bombing was over, the president committed suicide and that put an end to it all. I sat there in silence, a finger between the pages to mark my place, and I thought: Peace at last. (81-82)

In simulating Lacroix’s reading, the text condenses three years of Chilean history—between Allende’s election in 1970 and the coup of 1973—into three pages. By doing so, it dwarfs that history by framing it within a sequence of classical texts he reads until he achieves peace in Allende’s death. His reading of classical texts removes himself as far away as possible from his involvement in transition from Allende to Pinochet; the world of myths and early philosophy occupy the same terrain in his memory as the ongoing violence around him that very quietly shelters him from the onslaught of history. In his analysis of history, he instead chooses a method of disjunction to avoid his own interpretation of this transition through an immersion of a different kind of history. But, in silencing the historical ghosts with literature and muffling their raging torments, slowly a growing voice within the text of his confession appears.

Hermeneutics and shadows also come together during a conversation at a café between Farewell, another literary critic and Lacroix’s mentor, over a rumor about a Guatemalan painter and the feelings this provokes for Farewell about his own mortality. As the two of them sit together, observing the rush of the crowd around them, their observations parallel Plato’s myth of the cave, with Lacroix assuming the crowd was not noticing them “como haciéndose los distraídos, a la chilena, las figuras chinescas que aparecían y desaparecían” (62) [“in that typical Chilean way, watching the shadow play” (42)]. Eventually the function of literature and people begin to merge together when Lacroix asks Farewell: “¿. . . . de qué sirve la vida, para qué sirven los libros, son solo sombras . . . . Y yo: qué le dicen esas sombras, Farewell, cuénteme? Y Farewell: me hablan de la multiplicidad de las lecturas. Y yo: múltiples pero bien miserables, bien mediocreos” (64) [“What’s the use, what use are books, they’re shadows, nothing but shadows . . . .

And I: What are those shadows telling, Farewell, what is it? And Farewell: They are telling me about the multiplicity of readings. And I: Multiple, perhaps, but thoroughly mediocre and miserable” (45)]. Farewell, under duress of his own mortality as his life is filled with the shadows of literature, attempts to redeem his own role as a literary critic by democratizing his role with those around him, to bring them all out of the shadow. He then feels overwhelmed by Lacroix’s cold transformation and detachment from the social world into a world where everyone is kept in the shadows with a set of strict values as opposed to bringing them out with their multiplicitious interpretations.
The condition for the voice forms further after Pinochet completes a course with Urrutia Lacroix on Marxist theory and asks what his motivations were to take the course. He feeds into the nationalistic motivation of Pinochet of better serving the country. Pinochet confirms this, but also includes his commitment towards preparations against his enemies; he states: “Siempre hay que estar preparado para aprender algo nuevo cada día, Leo y escribo. Constantemente. Eso no es algo que se pueda decir de Allende o de Frei o de Alessandri, ¿verdad?” (118) [“One should aim to learn something new every day. I’m always reading and writing. All the time. Which is more than you could say for Allende or Frei or Alessandri, isn’t it?” (89)]. Compared to this mimetic analysis in which to “read” the enemy can be a form of understanding and proceed with recognition, his reading and analyzing of his enemies does not diverge too far from Marxist analysis itself to understand capitalism and recognize its means and ends. Gareth Williams in his study on Bolaño observes, 

In the parallel lives Bolaño creates there is plenty of fraternity and equality. However, for there to be freedom he would have to engage actively in the narrative deconstruction of the inherited trenches and fortifications of the friend/enemy divide, rather than recurring to its melancholic reassembly time and time again, in an eternal return of the same with only a nominal difference. (Williams 139)

Through the novel, the truth is never brought to light since the atrocities of what happened remain hidden within the silences and shadows that Lacroix constructs, but in this binary of light/dark, he also constructs a friend/enemy divide to instead reflect the inherent compliance in the narrative. Before meeting Pinochet and his advisors, Lacroix reflects on his presence there, and regretfully catches his distorted reflection in a cup of tea, from which he realizes that this moment is the lowest point in his life. Yet his feelings shift instead towards ambivalence: “Permaneci hierático, inexpresivo. Puse cara de aburrimiento. Revolvi la taza y probé él té. Bueno. Buen té. Bueno para los nervios” (108) [“I remained hieratic and expressionless. I put on a bored look. I stirred my tea and tasted it. It was good. Good tea. Good for the nerves” (81)]. The tension and guilt crystallized in the solid sugar is dissolved and forgotten once it silently disappears in the sweet taste of peace he feels after the first sip of his tea. The body is relieved from its pangs and hesitation and relaxes enough to move forward to Lacroix’s first session with Pinochet.

In this structured worldview, however, crumbling under the weight of pain and guilt is the taunting of the spectral, the growing voice, the multiplicitous force, “el joven envejecido” [“wizened youth”]. “El joven envejecido” and his poets thwart all forgetting. He links the sound of haunting screams to the “los chillidos lejanos de una bandada de pajaros” (68) [“screeching flock of birds” (55)] that Lacroix attempted to suppress through the church’s plan to have him learn falconry. The screams are aligned with the remnant of what Lacroix resists in his confinement of the past. “El joven envejecido” laughs at him, mocking his digressions in fondly idealizing his memory of the meeting spot for artists that the government eventually uses as a site to torture political prisoners (Bolaño 124). More importantly, this rattling alter ego also denounces Lacroix’s last-ditch recourse to the cynical view that literary culture will always pay lip-service to the machinations of state power. When Lacroix learns of the torture-chamber concealed in the basement of Maria Canales’ house, a writer and wife of another acclaimed writer in Chile, in an effort to appease his guilt he quips, “Asi se hace la literatura en Chile . . . asi se hace la gran literatura de Occidente” (147-148) [“That’s how literature is made in Chile . . . that is how the great works of literature are made” (126-128)]. In Ignacio López-Vicuña’s work on Bolaño’s Chilean literature, he finds echoes of Benjamin’s “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”, and of Adorno’s view that to write poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarity (Lopez-Vicuna, 2009: 163). This view acquires an aura of dirty pragmatism in Lacroix’s hands in him justifying literature’s complicity with state violence as “business as usual” under Benjamin’s interpretation of history and Adorno’s criticism of literature. “Me tetelo en la cabeza, le digo” (148) [“You better get used to it” (128)], he says to silence “el joven envejecido.” Notwithstanding, in his final apparition, Lacroix sees his response: “El Joven envejecido lo que queda del no audible” (148) [“The wizened youth, or what is left of him, moves his lips mouthing an inaudible no” (128)], shaking his head as if to rouse the reader from the tone of the confession with a cynical worldview. The apparition, even under suppression, breaks away from complicity in the narrative of the dictatorship’s justification of its actions, to shake the ambivalence in the temporal and spatial movement of progress from Chile’s transition. The wizened youth rises out of the exaggerated notions and extremities in the dichotomy of guilt/innocence and barbarity/progress in both an understanding of history and a digression away from it to no longer hide away from the light of it.

In Nocturno, “el joven envejecido” haunts within the unconscious of Lacroix, a negative space breaking from the progressive narrative of Chile’s transition to reveal his complicity to his crimes, as well as a bigger implication of many individuals complicit with the crimes that the government carried out under Pinochet. Creole silently escapes the gaze of the reader and patriarchal forces under a colonizing language to break away from the progress of independence under complicity with a continuing colonial presence. These negations through the ghosts imbiber in the language of the novels form a critical relationship with power, haunting within. Their ghosts voiced the protagonists’ ability to observe and point out the limits of power and its discourses to show where “something else begins its presencing” (Heidegger 46). This something else for these novels would be the narratives thought to have disappeared, only to be continued under a different form of discursivity.

Notes

1. For this project, I will be using the translation of Nocturno de Chile done by Chris Andrews.

2. The impetus to place these two works against each other has to do with the two author’s relationship with fictionalizing their own respective country’s past, but also the trajectory of their narrator’s life as a roman à clef. Both stories also utilize the form of autobiographical narratives in order to illustrate a historical period between the 1960’s to the early 90’s reflecting the major transitions happening in the America’s in the midst of
the Cold War. Given these two novels are against a backdrop of Cold War politics between a Neoliberal ideology against a Communist or Socialist ideology, they break away from these binaries situated in an ironic distance from either an extremely exaggerated involvement in the development of national narratives to an insular world detached from its norms.

3. Derrida in, “The Supplement of the Copula,” argues how both the structure of language and thought in western metaphysics have been separate entities since Aristotle to form an ontology based on “being”, as opposed to what the linguist Émile Benveniste argues linguistics unite. However, in creating this taxonomy, and a series of taxonomies built on top of this, language itself becomes restricted to those categories based in metaphysics, where our grammar has been constructed in a way so we can only bring into “being” through the copula. Yet it also means, the copula functions as a supplement as opposed to a determinant, the grounding of “being” then can begin to loosen the grips it has on language.

4. The distinctive ways in which women have been involved in these linguistic struggles however are often overlooked. Prior to the European invasion of the Caribbean, Carib Indians raided Arawak Indian settlements for women, known for their agricultural skills. Language played into the strict sexual division of labor practiced by the Caribs: men spoke one language, and women another” (Reddock 28). Literary critic Eric Cheyfitz details how European explorers subsequently arrived in the islands and subjected Amerindian peoples not only to “linguistic colonization” but also to the feat of “rhetorical acrobatics” that constructed them as human-flesh-eaters in the European popular imaginary. Columbus’s translation of his Arawak guides’ descriptions of the Carib Indians merged “carib” and “cannibal” and brought the image of the flesh-eating West Indian savage to Europe (939).

5. George Yúdice, in his study on testimonios as a form of social activism, had noted the heterogeneous characteristic of the genre functioning to bring communities together or at least for individuals to share their stories by the urgency brought on by a situation such as war, oppression, or revolution (Yúdice 17). A specific quality though which addresses its presentation helping to constitute a narrative going beyond purposes of self-defense or survival included “ . . . the subjects of the testimonial discourse rework their identity through the aesthetic” (19). This aesthetic, however, in the course of this paper will be appropriated though as those prosecuted for human rights violations invoke the aesthetic in order to portray their own abuses. The analysis of Nocturno del Chile emphasis he exaggeration of the supposed apolitical connotation of the protagonist’s confession.

6. Some of the narratives arising from this move came from ex-militants-turned informers and others involved in the dictatorship, such as confessional tales by Luz Arce and Marcia Alejandra Merino who raised guilt and repentance into a “framework of narrative atonement” (Richard 37). The tone in many of these confessions were oftentimes imitations of religious confessions as the confessors sought atonement by repaying one betrayal (informing on their comrades) with another (confessing the names of victims and victimizers).

Works Cited


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Complete summary of Jamaica Kincaid's The Autobiography of My Mother. eNotes plot summaries cover all the significant action of The Autobiography of My Mother. As in Jamaica Kincaid's other fiction, the themes of The Autobiography of My Mother explore what happens to a young woman who grows up in a loveless household, in this case the child of a mother who died at her birth. Intermingled with Xuela's immediate story is the story of the Caribbean island of Dominica, a land that once lived under the cold stepparent of colonial rule.