



Victoria Brown

How We Write When We Write About Life: Caribbean Nonfiction Resisting the Voyeur

Long before *Medium* launched as a social media platform for writers, I subtitled my own, now dormant, blog, “The Medium.” My vision was to serve as interpreter of maladies for the world, or at least for anyone who wanted an unbiased unpacking from a neutral, questing perspective. I also intended this without hubris. Personal branding is established and strengthened by capitalizing on one’s intellectual property: what about your authentic experience is consumable? As *the medium*, I envisioned myself an impartial arbiter of, particularly, race relations in America, but also of other narratives, no less compelling in their universal appeal. As someone externally African American identifying and identified, but in reality born and raised in the Caribbean, I saw myself possessing another intersecting identity, a wide-open third eye, a tripled consciousness if you will. I understand the way *I* (or who you think I am) am seen, but reject your narrow construction because I have not been conditioned to accept the pejorative imagination held by the dominant majority. *The Medium* not only sought to write the wrongs (in beautiful, literary nonfiction prose) committed against subordinated groups in an oppressive society, but also to tell stories unharnessed from the American obsession with race. I had lofty goals.

Thankfully, this mediating task has been undertaken by many other nonfiction writers. For comparison, I want to pay closer attention to three authors, Jamaica Kincaid, Claudia Rankine, and Krystal Sital, whose lived experiences overlap some of my own cultural intersections. All are female, Caribbean-born, and all write nonfiction, though not exclusively. Kincaid exists as my literary forbear and mentor. I first read her novel *Lucy* in 1994, while working as a nanny in Manhattan’s Union Square. I can’t quite

explain my emotions as the novel revealed its shape, a surprise text illustrating the life I was currently living. Was I even reading fiction? Its protagonist showed herself to be me, a teenage Caribbean nanny, away from home, working for a wealthy New York City couple. Like her [Lucy], I too was reading a book given to me by my employer. There were differences, but *Lucy* held up the exact mirror I needed to look into at that uncertain point in my life. My drudge existence as a child minder had been elevated to art and that alone had an ameliorating effect in what had previously been a momentum-ceasing bind. After, I searched for everything Kincaid had written, and of course found *A Small Place*, her 1988 literary nonfiction polemic (words which should certainly be oxymoronic, but in Kincaid's work isn't). I read the text then without fully grasping the shades of shade its less than one hundred pages managed to cast. More than twenty-five years later, much like her uber-anthologized short story *Girl*, the much maligned tone and content of *A Small Place* endures.

In contrast to the longevity of Kincaid in my consciousness is my more recent familiarity with poet and essayist Claudia Rankine, who left the Caribbean as a small child. Rankine first came to my attention at about the same time all of America was unable to look away from her work. Her 2014 *Citizen*, subtitled *An American Lyric*, gut-punched its way into a society that didn't quite yet realize how necessary its words were. Her text shone like a literary flame illuminating the Trumpian sludge snaking toward 2016, and in which we now live mired. *Citizen* sent me to Rankine's earlier *Don't Let me be Lonely*, and paired, the two command a new, plaintive way of seeing, revealing truth like a deck of playing cards palmed open.

I also want to consider Krystal Sital, author of the powerful memoir, *Secrets We Kept*. We met during graduate school at Hunter College in New York City, Krystal earning her MFA in nonfiction, and I in fiction. Despite our different genres, we had much in common, including being from Trinidad and Tobago, and an interest in examining "home," a place we remembered too rosily having left too young to understand the complexity of our island society. Sital pivots from the obsessive focus on race in America, and draws her readers' attention to the other powerful stories existing outside its borders.

All are authors whose sentences conjure images that leave me breathless. We locate our nonfiction topics in the stuff of life, but our individual approaches speak to the myriad ways we experience and find meaning in the world we inhabit. Each, I would argue, has found a way to produce nonfiction writing that repels cultural voyeurism and manages to avoid Rob Nixon's "cultural industrialization of the real."

The communion I share with Kincaid is not easily adopted by readers, even the progressive English majors at my liberal arts institution who register for my advanced Transnational Literature seminar. Students react *strongly* to Kincaid's *A Small Place*, a deceptively short piece of literary nonfiction that manages to call into account most of the players in the history of colonialism. Each semester the text appears on my syllabus, I steel myself for a barricade of crossed wrists blocking faces to ward away her potent narrative. In *A Small Place* (talk about a text that *survives*) Kincaid is incendiary. She refuses to coddle the accused or temper her anger. She indicts for sins past, present, inherited, and assumed. Her goal is to question the role and responsibility of all participants. Of American or European tourists, the descendants of the once exalted rulers no longer powerful, but still economically dominant and able to travel at will to the Caribbean, she writes of their ability to ignore how:

the West got rich from the free (free—in this case meaning got-for-nothing) and then undervalued labour, for generations, of the people like me you see walking around you in Antigua ... (isn't that the last straw; for not only did we have to suffer the unspeakableness of slavery, but the satisfaction to be had from "We made you bastards rich" is taken away, too), and so you needn't let that slightly funny feeling you have from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into full-fledged unease, discomfort; you could ruin your holiday. (Kincaid 9-10)

Of Caribbean citizens, the descendants of the once noble slaves no longer exalted, she implicates in corruption from the taxi driver at the airport who cheats by, "quoting you a price of the top of his head

which is so vastly different (favoring him) from the one listed,” to the politicians who, motivated by money are, “corrupt men [who] have given their country away to corrupt foreigners” (Kincaid 5). We’re all culpable now. More than thirty years after its publication, *A Small Place* still pulses with an oversized urgency. The text shocks. A reader who confronts, “An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish,” can surely be wary of delving deeper, but admirable in Kincaid’s writing is the offering she holds out to her reader: an anger to partake of; her vitriol is a gift of anger, one she dares you to refuse. This is the salve I offer my students on the brink (of dropping my class, of reporting me to the Dean, of calling their parents). Kincaid isn’t interested in making you feel guilty about your wealth and privilege or in keeping tourist dollars away from a foreign currency dependent island population. Rather, she poses a challenge to the reader: Your mission, should you choose to accept, and how can you refuse if we have been living in the same world, is to take up your mantle and come be angry with me and we shall dwell together in this beautiful garden of plundered, Latinate botany—despite *A Small Place*, her nonfiction is mostly about plants and gardening—and be angry forever; or at least, until spent, we fall exhausted to the fecund ground and rise up, together, somehow, in a kind of way.

I’ve seen and heard Kincaid read and lecture enough times to discern a brightly drawn line separating the persona on the page demanding a reckoning from the soft-spoken woman onstage. I was taken aback the first time I heard that practically unaccented, whispery voice at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in conversation with the essayist Phillip Lopate. In dreams, I drape a crocheted shawl over this Kincaid’s (now aging, but by no means aged) shoulders against imaginary drafts, serve her herbal tea with honey. Still, during the conversation when Lopate told her an anecdote was going on too long, she laughed and, ignoring him completely, asked the audience hadn’t they come to hear her. I wonder if time has tempered some of that unsparing frankness? In a 2013 interview with *Guernica*, Kincaid’s unrelenting form is intact. She says, “The people who invented race ... were inventing and categorizing their ability to do

something vicious and wrong ... We give them too much power. They ought to be left with the tawdriness of it, the stupidity of it.” Her blatant refusal to accept any subordinate definition of the self, of *her* self, as construed by an other, is later echoed in Claudia Rankine’s seemingly rational request that each person needs to be understood as an individual in their own particular situation.

My nearly obsessive rereading of Rankine’s multi-genre work (her American Lyric style is a study in prosody) leaves me feeling exhausted and vulnerable; exposed in a way I am unwilling to accept as normalized. I who for years wished humanity had chosen nakedness over going clothed. But, choosing nudity is different from being involuntarily stripped of your clothing, and so your dignity. “The world,” she writes, “is wrong. You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard (*Citizen* 63). Rankine manages, and especially throughout *Citizen*, to seed that malignant indignity and its wearing effects. Her use throughout of the second person “you” implicates. The pilgrim reader, the reader who comes to the text as supplicant, seeking to *know*, is drawn into an unimaginable reality; a reality that, in situation after situation, Rankine illustrates cannot be entered into without conscious effort (and even then you may not fully get how this never-ending onslaught, *forget micro*, grinds a body down; and if even for a fleeting moment you do, you get to leave).

For weeks after my first time reading *Citizen*, I wanted to slip the book under my clothes, to serve as a shield or a talisman, against the assaults Rankine exposes on the page. In her texts, both *Citizen* and the earlier *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, she writes of depression, of migraines and a need to take to bed, of mood-stabilizing medication and trauma therapy, a cycle of debilitations and treatment. Here, her use of a second person persona, lends the reader temporary portal into the, try-as-hard-as-you-like, there’s no-exit from the insanity. She writes of:

The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken to her on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients ... which turns out to be locked.

At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?

And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? She spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry. (*Citizen* 18)

Multiply this, or any insult here, by a lifespan, she seems to be saying. If Kincaid invites her reader to come sup at the temple of anger over the way we have debased society, Rankine's seeks to engulf the reader in true madness, in *maladie*, for how can one/you remain sane, well and whole, in the face of endless barrage?

Though I can find Caribbean echoes in Rankine's work, she came with her family from the Caribbean to the United States when she was seven years old. I imagine the transition must have been quite disorienting for a child. To go from one minute running around in plaits surrounded by friends and family who look just like you, to arriving in the Bronx, in the early 1970s into the middle of an oppressive society meant to devour your potential whole. I'm extrapolating some—perhaps—giving Rankine plaits and a carefree Caribbean childhood, but surely some of this is true? Surely the Bronx in 1970 was not a hospitable environment for a young black child despite how happy her home life? Surely Rankine's decision to open *Citizen* with a memory—a white child tells a black classmate she smells nice and has features like a white person—is the writer cutting to the quick of her story, giving backstory without backload? What other proof do we need to establish the foundation she's writing from? Here's the genesis of the hurt and the hurting. Imagine this happening to *you*?

Krystal Sital does remember life in the Caribbean, and unlike Rankine shifts focus away from America to explore her family's opaque history. Her memory is imperfect, and her memoir, *Secrets We Kept*, is her attempt to understand the complicated choices made by her grandmother and mother in order to

survive her tyrant grandfather, a true literary villain. The book though, is published by Norton, an American publisher. I was interested in how Sital managed to write a compelling narrative that attracted readers (book-buyers!), while maintaining fealty to both the people and the place she writes about. Where Kincaid proffers a righteous anger, and Rankine a voluntary implication, Sital beckons with language, offering her grandmother's story to a wider audience while making sure to avoid alienating the very people she writes into perpetuity.

Sital's use of language is best understood in its duality, a retelling tossed (crafted) into the air neither cleaned up nor interpreted for any audience or ear. Visualize the text as almost written in a split-column poetic enjambment, an enactment Sital performs by switching from standard English to untranslated Trinidadian rural vernacular; a seamed rather than seamless juxtaposition of here and there, of then and now, and of homeland and metropolis. Use of dialect forces the oral and the aural into the written, making Sital's storytelling accessible to the original audience and the ears of the unfamiliar voyeur. The grandmother says:

*When ah give birt tob one ... meh pregnant again wid ah nex one. One on one bress and the one on the uddah.
When me eh hab milk ah gib dem flour pap.*

Pregnant or not, she toiled the farm with cutlass and sickle ... His blows were no less brutal when she was with child, perhaps worse, as though rage could drive him to rip the baby bloody from her insides. (Sital 257)

Sital employs this linguistic bifurcation throughout the text and resists presenting the grandmother as an objectified character; *she* recognizes herself and her story. If she [the grandmother] is literate and can read, or if not and the text is read out loud to her, she can "hear" her narrative and affirm that it was so.

During revisions for this piece I was invited to discuss Derek Walcott's 1974 essay, "The Muse of History," on *Manifesto! A Podcast*, hosted by National Book Award winner, Phil Klay and the writer Jacob Siegel.

Walcott, born in St. Lucia in 1930, seeks to create a New Adam for the New World: a protagonist who is no less diminished despite having been uprooted from history, denied the right to his own trajectory, and finally freed, is relegated as unsubstantial in the world. Walcott fancies himself one of the few Antillean authors (and in 1974 probably the only one) who seeks to posit his personas (for he is primarily a poet) in a new Eden, surely created from a history of slave and master, but post emancipation, post-colonialism, is redefined not only in the context of actors who perpetrated brutality or were brutalized. How, decades later, does Kincaid, Rankine, and Sital's work, my work, fit Walcott's parameters: a call to writers to resist producing art which only memorializes loss and appeases "the masochistic critic by the required attack on his 'values,'" that is, the voyeur.

I'd argue that Kincaid, writing of the Caribbean in *A Small Place*, can support Walcott's recalibrated starting point, but she doubts whether a majority of Antiguan fully understand, "why they are the way they are, why they do the things they do, why they live the way they live, why the things that happened to them happened" (56). Kincaid can't decide if they are, "children, eternal innocents, or artists who have not yet found eminence in a world too stupid to understand, or lunatics who have made their own lunatic asylum." How can any new protagonist or narrative emerge, she seems to be saying, if self-awareness is lacking? She might not be ready to grant them agency, artistic or otherwise, but, unlike Walcott, Kincaid does consider how, "the descendants of those noble and exalted people, the slaves," ended up here, and how those patterns of dominance and subjugation manifest in the now.

Rankine, born in the Caribbean but writing mainly about America, sees the problem of race primarily as a pathology. She too, pushes back against Walcott's suggestion "that amnesia is the true history of the New World. That is our inheritance" ("Muse"). New Eden, indeed. The African American persona-protagonist still struggles to arise from the nightmare that landed her here centuries ago. Loss remains an unbroken line, although Rankine can wryly concur, "remembering was never recommended. Forget all that, the world says. The world's had a lot of practice." Her New Adam (you), landed outside the

Caribbean, has never been allowed to forget his historical positioning, to rise anew and contemplate. He is *still* to be considered an equal heir of the New World. Walcott can write of “the possibility of the individual Caribbean man, African, European, or Asian in ancestry, the enormous, gently opening morning of his possibility...his memory, whether of grandeur or of pain, gradually erasing itself...the possibility of a man and his language waking to wonder here” (Muse 53), but for Rankine, “Memory is a tough place. You were there. If this is not the truth, it is also not a lie. There are benefits to being without nostalgia. Certainly nostalgia and being without nostalgia relieve the past” (*Citizen* 64). Lack of nostalgia *can* relieve the past and yet, and yet, if society continues to deny New Adam/Eve status to some of its citizens, and instead remembers them only in postures of humiliation and subjugation, the performance of the protagonist remains pantomime.

Avoiding mimicry, Walcott seeks to align himself with Neruda, Borges, and Brodsky. He takes as his subject authentic folk life, but writes with the “elevated” language, diction, and form of poetic tradition. No overt Sital-esque dialect for him. Instead, it is New Adam’s original tone that gives specificity to his voice. Listen. I am in no place to criticize the towering majesty of Noble Laureate, Derek Walcott, but as I reread “The Muse of History,” the masculinity of the text struck me, and the very male-hewn table where Walcott (rightly) seeks to be seated. No women writers are mentioned. Interpreting “Muse” through a 1974 originalist lens, I understand Walcott is simultaneously theorizing his artistic work as he is producing his poetry, but in the process of announcing his arrival, does he marginalize and unnecessarily minimize, even hobble because of his outsize influence, the contemporary and emerging Caribbean authors who, in addition to his talent, did not possess his very privileged set of circumstances: higher education, relative wealth, creolized (read: colorized lineage), status, freedom to travel, and a phallus? Kincaid has spoken of her debt to Milton, but she’s not too beholden to call out the contradiction between the beauty of the inherited language and the hypocrisy of the source.

Maybe Sital comes closest to creating a protagonist most closely aligned with Walcott's call for "elemental man." Her memoir is a narrative about a small place and people of no obvious significance to history told without the framing device of race in America. Her consecutive placement of dialect and standard English accommodates Walcott argument that "language anchors New Adam." The writer's "function remains the old one of being filter and purifier, never losing the tone and strength of the common speech as he uses the hieroglyphs, symbols of alphabet of the official one" ("Muse"). Shiva, her grandfather, is a fine/rough example of Walcott's elemental man: a larger-than-life figure who rules his household with an iron fist and manipulates almost everyone around him. Small scale setting, but we recognize the dictator patriarch and his dominated family as a common literary trope. *Secrets We Kept* reveals trauma inflicted by a man who let his mother and sisters use his "wife" (he never deigned to marry her) like an indentured laborer, kicked her with a booted foot while she was pregnant causing her deliver four stillbirths, refused her food and medical care, treated her like an unpaid domestic worker and breeder of farm labor. A man who also selectively gave love and presents to his children, thus pitting them against each other for life. Fascinating in its particulars, it is a familiar story.

In addition to being my real life friend, Krystal Sital is also my Facebook friend. And, because *Secrets We Kept* is nonfiction, I also know the pseudonymous characters in the memoir are the same aunts and uncles who people and comment on her feed. The Poojas and Aryas and Gitas are the surviving children of the now dead Great Man. The deified grandmother now living in America, who loves the escape of cinema, is the brutalized young woman, the victim of the booted heel (*she* survives). I try to reconcile the "We love and miss you daddy" and "Best daddy ever" Facebook posts with the monster in the book and find confirmation of the human capacity to endure. Is this social media performance, putting the best face forward, or a necessary erasure and (re)membrance [for the children, now grown] to function, to live? Does each mask a fragile layer just below threatening to erupt at any minute, a blow-up with a complete stranger over a minor infraction, a harsh word or slap to a disobedient child, too much

drink, the enticement of a narcotic? There's nothing foreign in a text that speaks to the universality of human nature.

How to situate my work in the ranks of these writers interrogating their worlds through our multiple lenses: woman, Caribbean immigrant, daughter, descendant. How do we artistically tell truth while appealing to or reaching the widest possible audience? While steadfastly refusing to accept personal limitations because of externalities, in the necessity of becoming a character, my nonfiction often takes me back to my first role, the one I played in my childhood: peacemaker. I grew up in a large, rambunctious, often contentious, family. By luck of birth-order draw, I felt loved by everyone and was mostly left to my own devices. This freed me to try see every conflict from each potential angle. The holdover is that in my writing I'm sometimes angry, but am too much of an optimist for anger to last. Like Rankine, I recognize the pathos in American race relations, but my Caribbean foundation was well set before I migrated to America. Inoculated, infection never took. And like Sital, I can speak for the ones who remain at home, but after three decades in America, there's less urgency (though not less interest) to tell those stories. Mostly, I find myself writing about race. A sampling of my most recently published nonfiction pieces include an essay in the *Times* about telling my son the meaning of the N-word, an essay in *Apogee* about being pulled over by the police and fearing for my life, and an essay in *Lenny Letter* about being in an interracial relationship. What do I write that isn't concerned with race? If I had to choose an adjective to describe my work, I'd go with plaintive or maybe earnest. I'm trying to insist, to whomever reads my work, the absurdities of our current discourse. Come with me; I know another way.

I do think about where my nonfiction essays would have roamed had I not migrated to the US and become mired in the race bilge pumping without end through America. Like Walcott, more odes to place perhaps, known histories, ancestors, the New Adam and Eve characters who peopled my childhood and their small backstories recorded large. A Naipaulian Biswas bigness to lives lived and ended in obscurity, large only to me, a wide-eyed child listening with utter fascination to elders born with one foot in the

nineteenth century. Realizing only too late the wealth in their words; the people, places, and events to which they had firsthand access. Mossie Cudjoe, a name repeated in my great aunt's stories; a childhood tormentor who died young in a tiny village in a tinier island. Tinier even than small Trinidad. Another great-aunt, born in 1909, told me her older sister died in 1918 from a terrible sickness that went through the entire island; it took me twenty more years to realize she'd meant the Great Flu. And, when Mrs. Lilin (b. 1907), who I knew to be illiterate told me she'd heard her own mother talk about pregnant slaves having to lie over a hole they'd dug themselves in order to protect unborn children during whippings, I'd later read of similar accounts in history books. My own grandfather, born in 1896 told stories of struggle during the war (WWII). I knew him; he was my frail Da in the back bedroom coming to the end of his life just as mine began to blossom independent thoughts. Maybe I would have written narratives closer to Sital's. Narratives that dig deep into family secrets and buried histories; narratives of the dead or for the silent. My own mother's narrative, perhaps, prying loose the many details she keeps carefully sealed behind a blank smooth wall, guarded by her beloved Jesus. What would be the scale of consumption for small stories such as these?

In the book-length memoir I dream of writing, perhaps after tenure during the sweet, promised sabbatical, when in addition to day-drinking I will write all the time, I imagine crafting the story of the house I grew up in. It is a story of love, and poverty, and family, and ambition. Of a man like Naipaul's Biswas, my father, who never got ahead in life, but who was a raconteur, who loved his children (but not all of them equally). It is a story you must wait for.

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