

“This Is How to Make a Good Medicine to Throw Away a Child before It Even Becomes a Child”

The Maternal Voice in Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl” and the Politics of Nature and Knowing in the Caribbean

This article argues that Jamaica Kincaid’s short prose piece “Girl” (1978)—sometimes referred to as a poem, sometimes a short story—merits a rereading based on the politics of contraception and natural knowledge in the Caribbean. In sparse and delicate prose, Kincaid manages to reflect on the historical ability of women to be both creative and practical in managing the relationship between their bodies and the natural world. A central theme of the story is the often-overlooked disappearance of particular forms of knowledge in particular places. The story is also about how human knowledge can arise from necessity and can provide individuals and communities with both power and agency. One of the key lessons in the story links Kincaid’s characters to the Caribbean practice of resisting gender norms and colonialism through the use of plant-based abortifacients.

In Jamaica Kincaid’s short prose piece “Girl” (1978)—sometimes referred to as a poem, sometimes a short story—a mother in Antigua gives advice to her daughter in a string of straightforward lessons. One of the key lessons in the story links Kincaid’s characters to the Caribbean practice of resisting gender norms and colonialism through the use of plant-based abortifacients. In the story, these instructions are given sharply and hastily, and the mother allows the child, the unnamed girl, only two brief responses throughout her long monologue. These responses are noted in italics to denote the girl’s interjections, but it is the mother who steadfastly proceeds. Much of the advice given reflects the mother’s particular knowledge of women’s daily labours and clear conception of gender roles: she explains to her daughter how to wash clothes and menstrual rags, how to hem a dress, and how to behave with men and manipulate them. Kincaid begins her story as if in the middle of the speech in the mother’s voice:

“THIS IS HOW TO MAKE A GOOD MEDICINE TO THROW AWAY A CHILD”

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off. (Kincaid 37)

Much of the literature about this very popular story and often-anthologized short piece considers the character of the mother and her distinctive voice. Still, the title itself allows the reader to understand that the mother is not the main character, but the maternal voice is only filtered through the listener, her daughter. Yet who is this mother? Literary critic Justin Edwards contrasts the mother's reference to the girl child as “the slut you are bent on becoming” with the line referring to the plant-based ways to “throw away a child,” and cites this as a contradiction in Kincaid's work (19). However, it is not the maternal voice that “disrupts clear communication on gender and sexuality” (19) but the characters' social positioning and the knowledge that they possess of the postcolonial racialized and gendered locations. Kincaid's “Girl” merits a rereading based on our understanding of contraceptive politics and the history of natural knowing in the Caribbean.

The mother in the story clearly communicates gender roles and sexuality, and maintains her agency within the oppressive society that she manages daily. Instead of seeing the girl as “trapped,” as Edwards argues, in a “world dominated by the all-powerful voice of the mother” (19), it is the mother who vies the all-powerful colonial powers and her daughter's place in it. It is, likewise, untrue that the mother's voice is at any point contradictory; rather, she clearly understands the role of her growing daughter in Antiguan society and demonstrates her own resistance to colonialism. Notably, the mother has also stepped outside of prescribed gender roles and urges her daughter to do so when she tells her, “this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you” (Kincaid 37). She is also straightforward about sexuality and again urges her daughter to think outside of the world that she knows: “this is how to love a man; and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up” (Kincaid 37).¹

Still, the most important lines of this short work are evoked in the recipes for food and medicine that the mother provides towards the end of the work. In a *New Yorker* essay, Kincaid reflects on the distinction between enjoyment and knowledge of the natural world and its practical application, and “Girl” is not the only place where Kincaid notes the complicated relationship between Antiguan and plants: “When they (we) were brought to this island from Africa a few hundred years ago, it was not for their pottery-making skills or for their

way with a loom; it was for the free labor they could provide in the fields” (qtd. in Stitt 150). In “Girl,” her work takes a more complicated route: she shows how plants are both part of a legacy of slavery and of resistance to colonialism and highlights the feelings of Antiguan women towards the natural world.

In “Girl,” each line later in the story begins with “This is how,” and the reader sees represented in spare prose the wealth of knowledge that Caribbean women possess about their bodies and the natural world. The list of instructions that the mother gives come near the end of the piece and contains recipes for preparing food and medicines: “this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child” (Kincaid 37).

Jamaica Kincaid was born in Antigua, where the indigenous Caribs and Arawaks were among the first to be colonized by Spanish colonists in the fifteenth century. Soon after the mass slaughter of these indigenous peoples, Europeans captured slaves in Africa and transported them to the Caribbean island. In Antigua, a violent plantation society based on enslaved labour was created as well as a distinct creole culture that still preserves much of the local knowledges and medicinal plants. Obeah religion permeates much of Antiguan culture, which is a blend of diasporic religious practices and a belief system derived from West African plant-based healing (Brazier 54-59). Contraceptive plant knowledge has remained central for Caribbean women as a political practice and is often part of their everyday lives (Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire* 238-241).

Eduardo Galeano, in his work *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of the Continent*, combines fiction and political analysis to provide a more complete history of a land that he says has been “condemned to amnesia” (6). He explains how the indigenous people on Antigua took poisonous plants to engage in mass suicide shortly after the colonizers arrived and made use of other plants to poison their children rather than subject them to the massacres and enslavement of the colonists (14-16). In *A People's History of the United States*, historian Howard Zinn tells the same story of fifteenth-century Caribs and Taino using cassava, an everyday plant food staple, to engage in mass suicides shortly after Columbus arrived in 1493 (3-5). More recent scholarship has reflected on the gendered history of laborious process of preparing cassava and on the way that this demonstrates the Caribbean population's maintenance of knowledge of plant use and preparation (Schacht 17). Clearly, then, native Antiguans have knowledge of cassava's existence and food use, as well as lucid understanding of the levels of toxicity in the plant, including the fermentation process that makes it safe to eat. Historical and political knowledge of plant usage appear in select histories and anthropological accounts. Tobacco

and quinine, for example, became important monocrops in the developing world. Medicinal plants, however, and especially those used for fertility and contraception, have an important political history often forgotten in the social sciences and contemporary development literature. Kincaid’s work provides a small piece of this political history in a short literary form, which is often overlooked in literary theory and discussions of her work.

To this end, healing activities remain a large part of women’s daily labours, and medicinal plant treatments are well known among rural Caribbean women,² so much so that Kincaid includes the preparation of a contraceptive plant in her description of a woman’s everyday life.³ Kincaid includes reference to its recipe immediately after how to cook some Antiguan specialties and make a cold remedy. One of the plants Kincaid may be speaking of is called “guinea hen weed” in Antigua, and this plant has remained central to Obeah practice and rural contraception.⁴

This is not to say that the use of these plants is widespread or a frequent topic of conversation; rather, this information belongs to certain people in certain communities. It is dismissed easily in scientific circles and by some, is deemed improper or evil. However, plants are central to political history and contemporary understanding of social relations. At the same time, links made between women able to heal and women able to harm reflects the complicated position of women and the role of gender and knowledge throughout history. Work in the past few decades from historians, such as John Riddle, suggests that population statistics can be used to imagine how much control women exerted over their fertility throughout the past few centuries, even though no direct records of contraceptive practice exist (Riddle 4). In *Eve’s Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West*, Riddle presents an extensive catalog of the substances that were most used by women and their effects in the Western world, but it has proved difficult to offer any similar history of plants that women have used in non-Western time periods, contexts, and places.

A paradox exists in that the knowledge women once possessed still survives in pockets of mostly rural parts of the world but is not generally known in modern science, particularly among Western populations. Not only was this knowledge not passed on to European science, but it also disappeared in an ongoing imperial process beginning with the colonial period and continuing today. Further research is required on which particular plants women continue to employ in their reproductive labour, and Kincaid’s narrator does not give us the name of the contraceptive plant that she imparts to her daughter. Indeed, little place exists in Western contexts for women’s knowledge that is not profitable in an increasingly global information age. The goal here, then, is to avoid reducing individuals and their many varied contexts to female identity and “Third World” geographical location (Mohanty 59)⁵ and to understand

how plant knowledges can have palpable effects on the lives of contemporary women that differ according to location and position. Kincaid's twentieth-century story effectively provides a way into considering both cultural colonialism and everyday botanical practice.

Reproductive Control in the Caribbean

Women's control of their own reproductive capacities has been an important contemporary political issue, especially for feminism. Yet women's reproductive capacity has historically held particular political purpose, apart from contemporary battles over state-granted access to contraception and abortion, and childbearing itself can hold specific political purpose, the same way a refusal to bear children can as well. Barbara Bush cites a number of methods of contraception used by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century enslaved Caribbean women to knowingly refuse to provide more slaves for the violent plantation system, which means that enough reproductive control was exerted so that Caribbean slave populations did not naturally reproduce themselves (Bush 122). Women used the late weaning of infants, self-induced sterility through mechanical or medicinal means, infanticide, and the ingestion of a variety of abortifacient plants, such as yam, papaya, lime and the roots and barks of cotton trees (Bush 124–142). In the early seventeenth century, German naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian recorded how African and indigenous women in Surinam used the seeds of *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* to induce abortion because they did not want their children to grown up as slaves as they did. Apart from the harsh living conditions, the frequent use of herbal abortifacients was the reason for the reduced fertility of female slaves, which created the need for the continuing import of new workforce from Africa (Bush 90).

Londa Schiebinger has done much to advance the study of the expropriation of botanical knowledge, including questions about how gender relations have guided European naturalists and how enslaved women and Caribbean populations used abortifacient plants (Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*; Schiebinger and Swan, *Colonial Botany*). The most important theoretical question addressed in her work is how to account for the knowledge that women once had of contraception that does not exist in a present Western worldview. Schiebinger addresses historical questions as well: why did the Caribbean abortifacient, the peacock flower known as *flos pavonis*, not enter the pharmacopoeia of doctors in Europe? Though well known among women in the Caribbean and though identified by various visitors, the peacock flower was disregarded by conventional medicine in Europe. She describes how this elegant plant made its way to Europe, where it was highly prized as an ornamental and grew to a great height in well-tended greenhouses (Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire* 151). It was

also used there for medicinal purposes but only for curing fever and stomach pains, never for its contraceptive properties. Her historical work, however, only suggests the ways that contemporary biopiracy remains the connection between colonialism in history and the contemporary knowledge base. Still, colonized peoples, especially women, are treated as nature itself. Eurocentric notions of property continue to take hold, defining medical knowledge as natural and genetic engineering as its improvement. As Vandana Shiva writes, this results in a world in which “the cultural and intellectual contributions of non-Western knowledge systems are being systematically erased” (Shiva, “Bioprospecting” 5). Certainly, contemporary women, such as the women in Kincaid’s story, maintain this knowledge and make use of it when necessary. Historically, also, there has been little to no difference between an abortion and a contraceptive. Enslaved African American women in the Southern United States used cotton root to restore their menses, and once it had been restored, they reported that they were never pregnant to begin with (Bush 12). A young woman in Guatemala who made use of *emmenagogues* that a midwife had given her told me that if she had really been pregnant, God would have made it so (Personal interview). Since the herb functioned to restore her menses, she said, she had never been pregnant. Only in certain parts of the world do women take pregnancy tests and use doctor-mandated ultrasounds to date their pregnancies; in other places, women’s knowledge of their own bodies and pregnancies is honored and respected and left alone.

Throughout early modern history, women have served as vessels for reproduction, especially enslaved women, whose breeding expectations intensified when the slave trade ended in the 1790s. Physician and naturalist Sir Hans Sloane wrote of enslaved Caribbean women in the early eighteenth century: “They are fruitful and go after the birth of their children to work in the fields, with the little ones tied to their backs”⁶ (qtd. in Bush 121), which reinforces the idea that only white European women were subject to pain in childbirth and that African women could produce an endless number of children. Bush, in this work on the system of Caribbean slavery, tracks the low rate of natural increase of the Caribbean slave population, often assumed to be a result of poor living conditions. Her work broadens the question the impact that attitudes to childbearing and resulting contraceptive practices in slave society had on fertility rates (Bush 121-132). Often resistant to serving the slave system in their reproductive capacity, enslaved women in Jamaica resisted the creation of weaning houses, aimed at separating mothers from young babies to restore their fertility soon after giving birth. This understanding suggests that slave women understood that later weaning would reduce their fertility, so much so that one planter in Jamaica at the turn of the nineteenth century could not get women to accept two dollars to wean their infants in the first twelve months

of life (Bush 127). Angela Davis writes that black women have been aborting themselves since the earlier days of slavery. This, she argues, had nothing to do with current discussion of freedom but was an act of desperation motivated by the oppressive conditions of slavery (205).⁷ Other scholars have cited this anti-motherhood attitude as a form of resistance. In the Caribbean, a “birth strike” was spoken of until the mid-nineteenth century, when women were more often forced to reproduce. It has been documented that they used “bitter herbs” to produce abortions (Mies 91).

Early Spanish sources also refer to the use of abortion and infanticide by indigenous peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean as a form of resistance to colonial oppression (de las Casas 70-72; Gage 18-25), which suggests that abortion needs to be studied more carefully as a contraceptive practice. Women in slavery voiced an especially strong protest against reproduction: abortifacients used by African women included manioc, yam, and the guinea pepper.⁸ Abortifacient plants are still the method of birth control most in demand among rural Caribbean women (Bush 141) and can be easier to obtain and hide from male partners than other contraceptive methods. In “Girl,” information about such a plant is passed to the central character from her mother when she is still a young girl and unmarried. In contemporary development literature, feminist scholars have argued that it remains a myth that women, especially in the developing world, do not regulate their number of births (Shiva, *Staying Alive* 9).

The colonial violence of Cortés and the Spanish conquistadors was recorded by Friar Bartolome de las Casas in 1540, when he wrote that the Caribbean islands “where there were once about five hundred thousand souls, today there is not a living creature” (de Las Casas 7). More closely tied to European apprehension about contraception and population control is his recording of events like these: “They [the Spanish] hung any doctor or female sorcerer who gave potions to expel infants from the womb, and they did the same to pregnant women who took something to achieve the same end” (de Las Casas 17).⁹ Sixteenth-century Spanish historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo describes indigenous women using abortifacients in his *Historia general y natural de las indias* in 1535. This account suggests that from the point of colonial contact, pregnancy and reproduction were politically charged issues for Europeans: “They are so friendly with lust that if they become pregnant they take a certain herb, that later stirs up and casts out the pregnancy” (Oviedo 7).¹⁰

Many ethnobotanists and historians continued to treat many herbal remedies as magical throughout the twentieth century. Walter Hodge’s 1957 recording of *Petiveria* in *The Ethnobotany of the Caribs* includes his interpretation of their plant usage as enchanted, not natural knowledge: “The Indians consider *kud-*

juruk to be both a charm and a medicine as it used in a ritual bath for the new moon and rubbed on the body to protect against evil spells” (556). Prepared as a tea, he writes, it is considered an “antidote to poisoning as well as an aid to women in parturition” (556). In botany, plants used by locals are almost always considered in terms of magic and their medicinal usage secondary.

In Trinidadian writer M. Nourbese Phillip’s work, *Looking for Livingstone—an Odyssey of Silence*, a woman travels alone through unnamed lands and searches for David Livingstone, celebrated by the West as a “discoverer” of Africa. Throughout her quest for knowledge and for Livingstone, the traveler visits many peoples, listens to their stories and their silences, and learns about their many silences, including their lost knowledge of the natural world. In “Stop Frame,” Phillip’s character also remembers her mother’s use of herbal remedies to cure her aching tooth: “And my mother packing the rotting hole with cloves that smelling sweet and sharp at the same time” (Phillip 19).

Kincaid’s “Girl” merits a rereading based on the politics of contraception and natural knowledge in the Caribbean. In sparse and delicate prose, Kincaid manages to reflect on the historical ability of women to be both creative and practical in managing the relationship between their bodies and the natural world. A central theme of the story is the often-overlooked disappearance of particular forms of knowledge in particular places. The story is also about how human knowledge can arise from necessity and can provide individuals and communities with both power and agency. In their continuing efforts to maintain control over their fertility and sexuality, and through time and across geographical space and cultures, women, such as Kincaid’s characters, have managed to direct their futures within a variety of limitations. They have made use of nature to enhance or reduce their fertility and childbearing, and pushed against a wide variety of constraints to do so, and they have managed to maintain access to contraception and abortion. They have negotiated understandings of pregnancy and reimagined them for their own benefit. In a globalizing world, where plant life is disappearing and corporations are attempting to circumvent those with natural knowledge in order to patent it and profit from it, women have continued to maintain this knowledge and pass it on to future generations.

Endnotes

¹Kincaid scholars too often theorize the mother-daughter relationship as small, private, individualized, and apart from larger themes of colonial education and governing. This is a larger question, of course, of where “the political” is placed, and Jocelyn Stitt develops this more fully in her 2006 work, “Producing the Colonial Subject.”

²In *Plants and Empire* (2004), Londa Schiebinger describes contemporary uses of plant contraceptives in the Caribbean and argues that knowledge of abortifacients did not move to Europe but remained in the Caribbean (239–241). In *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650–1838*, Barbara Bush cites an array of contraceptive and abortifacient plants that enslaved women employed to control their reproduction (120–149).

³Guinea hen weed is the local name for *Petiveria alliacea*, an abortifacient plant common in Jamaica and other parts of the Americas. A study in Jamaica in 2010 resulted in an international patent for *Petiveria* as an effective treatment of some kinds of cancer and is now undergoing clinical trials. The raw herb is used in the trials with a warning to pregnant women that its strong sulfur compounds can stimulate miscarriage (Tenney 2).

⁴Recent scholarship calls for the study of precolonial and postcolonial Obeah as located in between the written and unwritten history of the Caribbean plantation system (Sharpe 3–4), what Mary Louise Pratt calls “contact zones,” which are social spaces where cultures meet “in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt 4).

⁵Here, the concept of gender is central, but since this story is one of women’s knowledge of their own bodies, “women” as a category remains a legitimate and central point of analysis.

⁶Indeed, it has also been shown that many physician-botanists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries promoted the ideas that medicines derived from certain areas were only appropriate for the bodies that came from those parts of the world. They argued that certain peoples were more connected to the natural objects themselves.

⁷As Davis points out, any feminist movement for reproductive rights needs to be clear in dissociating itself from racist notions of “population control” and eugenics movements, and make opposition to involuntary sterilization an integral part of its politics (206).

⁸In the same time period, white women in the Caribbean had high fertility rates, which suggests that there was limited sharing of knowledge about contraception between enslaved black women and white European women (Behar 34–36).

⁹De Las Casas also writes of the ease indigenous women experienced in childbirth and in fertility “because of the nature of some secret remedy” (22), but interestingly offers a cultural explanation that their work patterns and diets led to ease of birth and early fertility.

¹⁰In this quote, Oviedo ties knowledge of contraceptive plants with representations of indigenous women as sexualized and available, a common depiction in the writings of early modern explorers and fully theorized in works such as McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* and Mohanty’s *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*.

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