

Fostering critical response-ability through feminist close-readings of transnational literature: Jamaica Kincaid's short stories as a case study¹

Verónica P. Recchioni – Universidad de Granada
 María Adelina Sánchez Espinosa – Universidad de Granada

 0000-0001-5263-8995
 0000-0001-5872-1431

Recepción: 06.07.2022 | Aceptado: 12.07.2022

Correspondencia a través de **ORCID**: Verónica Recchioni

 **0000-0001-5263-8995**

Citar: Recchioni, V y Sánchez Espinosa, MA (2022). Fostering critical response-ability through feminist close-readings of transnational literature: Jamaica Kincaid's short stories as a case study. *REIDOCREA*, 11(34), 407-417.

Área o categoría del conocimiento: Multidisciplinar

Abstract: We live in a world where we increasingly witness the crossing of borders by large populations. People are forced by different, often traumatic circumstances, to leave their homes behind in search of a better world. This results in what Susan Stanford Friedman (1998) regards as a transgression of physical and symbolic borders that gives room to complex intersections leading to the creation of very diverse subjectivities. Feminist transnational literary theory aims at providing a framework of analysis for the works produced by women in what we have come to understand as the field of "Transnational Women's Literature". Within these grounds, this article aims at fostering critically response-able students by illustrating how or to what extent the concepts of memory and nostalgia can offer new critical insights to the literature of Antigua-born author Jamaica Kincaid, with special emphasis placed on her process of identity formation. We will develop a feminist close reading of two of her short stories within the *At the Bottom of the River*² collection while we examine our position as situated critics. We will conclude by making a pedagogical proposal for the generation of response-able readings of other short stories within the gender and literature class.

Keywords: Transnational Women's Literature - Feminist close-reading - response-able criticism - situated knowledges

Fomentando la respuesta crítica responsable a través del "close-reading" feminista de la literatura transnacional: los cuentos cortos de Jamaica Kincaid como caso de estudio

Resumen: Vivimos en un mundo donde cada vez somos testigos de más movimientos de grandes poblaciones a través de las fronteras. Miles de personas se ven obligadas a dejar atrás sus hogares, a menudo por circunstancias traumáticas, para buscar un mundo mejor. Esto resulta en lo que Susan Stanford Friedman (1998) denomina transgresión de fronteras físicas y simbólicas que da lugar a complejas intersecciones y diversas subjetividades. La teoría literaria transnacional feminista intenta brindar un marco de análisis para las obras escritas por mujeres en el contexto de la literatura transnacional. Sobre dichas bases, este artículo pretende fomentar la responsabilidad crítica y la crítica responsable en nuestro alumnado al ejemplificar cómo o hasta qué punto los conceptos de memoria y nostalgia pueden brindar una nueva visión crítica de la literatura de la autora Jamaica Kincaid (nacida en la isla de Antigua) centrando nuestra atención en el proceso de formación de su identidad. Desarrollaremos una lectura crítica feminista de una selección de dos cuentos cortos de la colección "At the Bottom of the River" mientras examinamos nuestra postura como sujetos críticos situados. Concluiremos con una propuesta pedagógica para crear lecturas responsables de otros cuentos dentro de la clase de género y literatura.

Palabras clave: Literatura transnacional feminista - "close-reading" feminista - respuesta crítica responsable - conocimientos situados

¹ This article is one of the results of the following project: "Laboratorios de Enseñanza Responsable con Perspectiva de Género. La interacción entre culturas literarias y visuales como agente de intervención social" (I+D+I Junta Andalucía (AYUDAS A LA I+D+i, PAIDI 2020) Ref. Proyecto: P20_00337. PI: Adelina Sánchez Espinosa).

² All references to *At the Bottom of the River* in this article are abbreviated to *ABR*.

Introduction

Mass movements of people around the globe have become part of our current world, happening more and more often, and affecting all of us at glocal level. At the end of the last century critics such as Avtar Brah (1996/2003) were already pointing out that these migratory movements had been rising exponentially since the 1980s. The reasons for these migratory movements were, according to Brah, very various: “people on the move may be labour migrants (both ‘documented’ and ‘undocumented’), highly qualified specialists, entrepreneurs, students, refugees and asylum seekers or the household members of other migrants” (1996/2003, p. 613). What all of them seem to have in common is their search for a better life. And this is even more pertinent in 2022, facing the war that has just started in Ukraine and the global menace it proves, while European countries are trying to shelter the new flow of refugees right now as we give the finishing touches to this article.

Our article sets out from the need to use feminist close-reading as a methodology in order to promote situatedness and critical response-ability in our classrooms. Its ultimate goal is to help students face the current social challenges and threats from the grounds of what we, as researchers and educators, can do in order to transform this world. It is one of the results of the research we are at present conducting within the frame of the “Laboratorios de Enseñanza Responsable con Perspectiva de Género. La interacción entre culturas literarias y visuales como agente de intervención social” project (“Gender Responsible Lecturing Labs: Interfacing cultural and visual cultures for social transformation”), whose PI is Adelina Sánchez Espinosa, one of the authors of this article.

Two texts can serve as the starting point on two of the concepts mentioned above: *Teaching Gender: Feminist Pedagogy and Responsibility in Times of Political Crisis* (2017) edited by Beatriz Revelles-Benavente and Ana González Ramos, and *Times of Mobility: Transnational Literature and Gender in Translation* (2020) edited by Jasmina Lukić, Sibelan Forrester & Borbála Faragó. While Revelles and González reflect on Judith Butler’s and Athena Athanasiou’s claim (2013) that the basis of contemporary neoliberal policies is the economic, political and moral control of bodies and propose their work as a call for collective critical brainstorming on the need to oppose current political crises by promoting responsibility in our teaching practices; Lukić et al. remark that this new global panorama is problematising the idea of “home” particularly for women and demand an urgent study of the field of Transnational Women’s Literature and its epistemologies.

With our discussion of the identity issues set forward by Transnational Women’s Literature, we hope to contribute to a field of research that tries to counteract the negative effects of globalisation by creating room for new knowledges. In this article in particular we address the construction of identity in the first short stories by Jamaica Kincaid, an author who migrated from the Caribbean Island of Antigua to the United States. Our first responsibility is our situated response to the texts. We intend to construct what Donna Haraway (1988) calls “situated knowledges”, that is, we will look at the literary material from a particular stance that makes our life experiences and personal circumstances accountable for our readings. As Esther Sánchez-Pardo, inspired by Haraway, puts it: [responsibility] “demands a display of response-ability – an ability to respond and to account for one’s investment, interest, and position in any theoretic-material production” (2017, p. 74). This is, ultimately, the position that imbues the didactic proposal that closes this article encouraging students to explore their “ability to respond” in their literary criticism.

Transnational Women's Literature

Transnational Literature is a wide field of research which can be understood in multiple ways. While some authors place their focus on the transgression of actual physical borders and how this is manifested in literature³; others, such as Azade Seyhan, concentrate more on cultural borders and thus define this type of literature as “a genre of writing that operates outside the national canon, addresses issues facing deterritorialised cultures, and speaks for those in ... ‘paranational’ communities and alliances” (2001, p. 10), by which she means those communities “that exist within national borders or alongside the citizens of the host country but remain culturally or linguistically distanced from them and, in some instances, are estranged from both the home and the host culture” (2001, p. 10). As regards “today’s writing”, Seyhan also states that it “erupts at unexpected junctures and represents new linkages of disparate and distant places and identities” (2001, p. 8) making the connections between the local and the global self-evident and creating new dialogic links between borders, geography and history. In our case study, we will base our analysis on Seyhan’s approach but without leaving behind the crossing of physical borders.

This leads us to think of how we conceive the imagery implied by “borders”. Since we cannot go into a deep analysis here, we will present a brief context for this term. It was already in 1987 when Gloria Anzaldúa claimed that “borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, ...” [and] “a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (1987, p. 3). In the case of the U.S.-Mexican border, which Anzaldúa thoroughly develops, she sees the border as an open wound, which has its own culture where its inhabitants are “the prohibited and the forbidden” (1987, p. 3). However, in a later work she claims, “we are called to renew and birth a more inclusive feminism, one committed to basic human rights ... and the earth” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. XXXIX) meaning that our voices will become the long-awaited bridges. Brah (1996/2003), who is concerned with feminism in post-colonial studies, defines “borders” in a somewhat negative fashion, since she stresses that borders are “arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as out-siders, aliens, the Others ...” (p. 625). She later acknowledges a space where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed and where they interrogate one another. Finally, Susan Friedman’s conception of “borders” emphasises the balance between the separation and connection that borders entail, and she points to the space created by borders as a “site of interaction, interconnection, and exchange. Borders enforce silence, miscommunication, misrecognition. They also invite transgression, dissolution, reconciliation, and mixing” (1998, p. 3). In our view, these words suggest that borders can well turn into a fertile ground for creating one’s identity.

In this contribution we will be exploring to what extent the representation in literature of these interconnections, exchanges and transgressions of borders can be illuminated in view of the features that Seyhan distinguishes as representative of transnational literature: “the works ... [are] both creative and experimental and self-reflexive and theoretical [...] speech and writing, fiction versus nonfiction, history and story and official history and communal memory themselves become subjects of ‘fiction’ [leading to] a high level of aesthetic experimentation and critical transformation” (2001, p. 13). This observed experimentation and transformation is on the rise and transnational writers continue combining, applying and creating a multiplicity of “resources” to represent their complex subjectivities. All these features are also present in Kincaid’s short stories

³ See Rebecca Walkowitz (2006) for a review of scholarship within this framework.

together with two other aspects, memory and nostalgia which we address in the following section.

The Construction of Identity in Women's Writing, Memory and Nostalgia

Brown-Rose (2009) points out that Caribbean writers in the United States try to articulate their sense of belonging and identity by permanently "looking back to home" in a critical manner. This leads us to the concept of "nostalgia" which, in this specific context, Brown-Rose defines as "both a yearning for 'the old country' and a reflection of a need to find stability in 'that man's country', to establish a place within mainstream American society" (2009, p. 4). She also claims that nostalgia "links the national and the transnational; it is the memory of home that leads to the critique and evaluation of both the old country and that man's country" (p. 5). That is, through the memory of "home" and nostalgia transnational writers often "reconcile the national with the transnational" (Brown-Rose, 2009, pp. 4-5).

To illustrate the thesis in this article, we need to address new ways of thinking about feminism now that we are living in times when all types of borders are being crossed. This is why we take Susan Friedman's approach (1998) as she claims that within all this dissolution, ambiguity, contradiction, fusion and intersection transnational women writers are situated in a liminal space from which they try to negotiate an identity. She also develops the concept of "identity" as being constructed on the dialogic relationship between difference and sameness. That is, she claims that what differentiates us from the other is, in most cases, what makes us identify with another group, since it means that we have certain characteristics in common. She moves on to distinguish two opposing movements that are taking place in the present world dealing with the issue of identity: that of basing identity on difference (favouring borders) and that of looking for the liminal spaces in between (favouring hybridity).

For the purposes of the discussion on how identity is negotiated in our selection of short stories, we will make use of Friedman's approach to the relationship between identity and narrative. She argues that "identity is literally unthinkable without narrative, [that is], people know who they are through the stories they tell about themselves and others" (1998, p. 8). In today's world, these narratives are strongly dependent on two aspects: one, the dichotomy between the concepts of "roots" or "routes"; two, the intersectionalities between gender and other factors of oppression such as race, class and religion. While the term "roots" entails a connection with a specific location, the concept of "routes" "impl[ies] travel, physical and psychical displacements in space, which in turn incorporate the crossing of borders and contact with difference" (Friedman, 1998, p. 151). Friedman states that an identity based on "roots" is more deeply tied to sameness or similarity with the people from a specific location or with a particular group while an identity based on "routes" is more related to different locations and to diversity, so that it therefore encourages the emergence of hybrid subjectivities.

Friedman's dichotomy between "roots" and "routes" can be a valuable tool for addressing Kincaid's identity as a transnational woman writer. Also, we will apply Brown-Rose's concept of "split-consciousness" (2009) which she uses to discuss the conflicts of transgressing borders represented in the works by Caribbean writers in the United States, as in Kincaid's case. According to Brown-Rose, their struggle with multiple locations is articulated by the interplay between nostalgia and the memory of "home". Taking into account Kincaid's own declarations to the effect, Brown-Rose concludes that she sees contemporary culture in the Caribbean as closely linked to its people's historical memory and eagerly wishing for a change. In our view, the hybrid position in which

Kincaid finds herself results in the author's "split-consciousness" and her concern with negotiating her identity.

Methodology. Feminist close-reading

The methodology that we will follow is a feminist close-reading of the stories following the thesis by Jasmina Lukić and Adelina Sánchez Espinosa in "Feminist perspectives on close-reading" where they "re/evaluate the importance of close-reading while openly foregrounding gender as a critical concept" (2011, p. 105). By first reviewing the method of close-reading, traditionally considered as a "neutral" or "ahistorical" tool of interpretation, these authors later prove that the interpretative framework that we apply to our close-reading of the selected material deeply influences the conclusions at which we arrive. Lukić and Sánchez Espinosa pay special attention to the context of production of the material together with the position of the reader as a situated subject, which is precisely what we intend to address in this article. Our thesis in this text is that a close reading of the short stories within the framework of Transnational Women's Literature can illuminate our understanding of how or to what extent the interplay of memory and nostalgia bear significance in the process of identity formation of Jamaica Kincaid.

Brief introduction to the case study: Jamaica Kincaid and the At the Bottom of the River short story collection (1983/2000)

J. Brooks Bouson defines Jamaica Kincaid as "[a] memory-haunted woman who continually remembers and tries to make sense of her Caribbean upbringing on the island of Antigua, Kincaid is a writer out of necessity" (2005, p. 1). This approach is relevant to our analysis since it supports our interpretation that what the narrator's voice expresses in the stories can be applied to the author's life, and, indeed, Kincaid herself acknowledges the autobiographical and psychological nature of her works: "for me, writing is like going to a psychiatrist. I just discover things about myself" (as cited in Bouson, 2005, p. 1).

The patriarchal society where Kincaid was born and the roles she was supposed to assume are also relevant for our interpretation of the stories. As claimed by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (1999, p. 4), Kincaid's parents had great expectations for her brothers' futures (such as becoming doctors) but none of those expectations were the same for her, who painfully recalls that "[n]o one expected anything from me at all" (as cited in Paravisini-Gebert, 1999, p. 4). From this quote, we can infer that Kincaid was supposed to become a housewife, or at least, she was not expected to become an educated woman.

We have chosen *At the Bottom of the River* (1983/2000) in order to illustrate our tenets. Given the space limitations here we will focus upon only two out of the ten stories included in this collection⁴. These two stories are the first and the last tales in the book. We have chosen them since they are quite different in tone, structure and length and they mark the beginning and end of a process. All the tales in the collection defy categorization as to their narrative style since "although they are short fictional texts written in prose, as in the traditional short story, the tales lack the unity of plot and consistency of characterization that readers expect from short fictional prose" (Paravisini-Gebert, 1999, p. 49). Consequently, for a better understanding of the discussion, throughout our analysis of the stories, we will briefly tell their actual plotline. Another aspect that we need to cover is that *At the Bottom of the River* has been written

⁴ Nine of the short stories from the collection had been previously published in different magazines from 1978 to 1982. "Blackness" is the only one that remained unpublished until the whole collection was released.

(like all of Kincaid's works) after she migrated to the United States; however, we need to make it clear that in these short stories there are no explicit references to her life in America.

"Girl"

At the Bottom of the River begins with Kincaid's powerful short story "Girl". This story is made up of an extensive set of instructions which seem to be delivered by a mother to her daughter in a seemingly never-ending sentence that only finishes with the final full stop, which is actually a final question. The directives instructed by the mother deal with issues that concern the daughter's everyday life, for instance, how to wash herself and her clothes, how to cook certain dishes, how to mind her manners or pretend to have certain feelings in the presence of men or strangers, to name but a few.

For our close-reading of this story, it is significant that in "Girl" we do not find a clear or concrete physical location when we first approach the text. However, by means of the exhaustive list of directives and instructions characteristic of daily life the author successfully manages to set the story in the Caribbean. For example, the girl in the narrative is accused of signing "benna", which is defined by Paravisini-Gebert (1999, p. 52) as a folk song. Also, dishes typical of Caribbean cuisine are mentioned such as "doukona" and "pepper pot".

When taking into account the context of production of "Girl", especially the fact that this is Jamaica Kincaid's first short story, it becomes relevant that this story presents a young daughter in the process of becoming a woman who recalls the voice of her mother delivering an almost endless list of how to do all sorts of things. It seems that once the daughter is close to her coming of age, her mind is tormented by her mother's strong advice. Besides, for a comprehensive understanding of the story, it is particularly important to mention that the mother's voice in the narrative delivers all the already-mentioned instructions because she insists that her daughter is definitely going to become a slut. Consequently, the mother's advice tries "to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming" (*ABR*, p. 4). As the story unfolds, the mother's voice is even convinced that her daughter is already a slut and that following her words can just try to make people not "recognize immediately the slut I have warned against becoming" (*ABR*, p. 4).

If we take the situation presented in "Girl" and compare it to Kincaid's transition of becoming a writer, it seems that when she decides, or dares, to start writing in her hostland (that is, her new location which is set physically in the United States), her mind and her writing are "haunted" by the memory of her mother, which, in our view, could be interpreted as embodying the voice of Kincaid's home and/or homeland. As we have stated, this voice insistently tells her that everything she does will turn her (or more precisely, has already turned her) into a slut, especially what we see as the author's attempt to negotiate her "split-consciousness" through her writing, something that Kincaid's real mother disapproved of, as confirmed by Paravisini-Gebert (1999).

We believe that we could take this story as the way found by Kincaid to start articulating her own hybrid identity, in other words, what Brown-Rose presents as part of her definition of critical nostalgia, that is, the "need to find stability in 'that man's country'" (2009, p. 4) is full of memories of her past life in the Caribbean and her mother, a strict woman that pretended to raise an English-like daughter (Paravisini-Gebert, 1999). Nevertheless, we consider that the voice of the daughter in "Girl" does not portray "a yearning for 'the old country'" (Paravisini-Gebert, 1999, p. 6), instead, she seems to be willing for a different reality. This idea of yearning for a change is something that Brown-

Rose (2009) identifies as representative of Kincaid's writing in general. We can support our previous comment by analysing that the only two occasions in which the daughter in the narrative interrupts her mother's speech show that she does not quite agree with her mother's voice and that she is trying to have a say. The girl in the story is deeply influenced by her mother's viewpoint (which is, in turn, defined by "rules" imposed in colonial times combined with the "native" culture) but she also shows the need to articulate her identity somewhere else (probably due to the patriarchal norm that is implicit in her mother's rules). So, following Friedman's identity discourses, we observe that the girl's subjectivity is more deeply defined within the paradigm of hybridity. The girl is presented as "the product of cultural grafting" (Friedman, 1998, p. 24), a site where there is "painful splitting, divided loyalties, or disorienting displacements" (Friedman, 1998, p. 24).

In our interpretation of the story, the daughter's critical address of her homeland from her hostland, that is, portraying her former home as patriarchal, authoritarian, and restrictive through the voice of the mother makes the mother think of her daughter as prostituting herself regardless of what the latter does. This is why Kincaid addresses the daughter as a slut, as if she was being judged by her real mother. This is related to the fact that, as stated in different biographies of Kincaid (Brown-Rose, 2009, p. 45; Paravisini-Gebert, 1999, p. 11), in Kincaid's real life her mother and relatives in her homeland disapproved of her writing and therefore she changed her name so that nobody knew she was becoming a writer. Thus, what we see as the beginning of the articulation of the author's identity through narration is presented as a "prostitution" of the homeland's precepts, in other words, the "routes" the author has decided to take (defying patriarchal stereotypes and becoming a transnational woman writer) are rejected by the personification of her "roots".

"At the Bottom of the River"

"At the Bottom of the River" is the story that Jamaica Kincaid has chosen to finish her collection published under the same name. It is much longer than the previous stories and in it we find a closure to what we have stated earlier. Following our analysis of Kincaid as a transnational writer who is in a process of identity formation in which she turns to her memory and critical nostalgia, we see how in this story her need to articulate her "split-consciousness" becomes more explicit and at the end of it we witness how she starts to create her hybrid subjectivity.

The beginning of the story acknowledges the creation of something as it starts with the following sentence "This, then, is the terrain" (*ABR*, p. 62). Right after this, the author provides a description of wild nature in which she concentrates on a description of a path that the water from "the steepest mountains" (*ABR*, p. 62) makes in its way to get to a basin where it "collects itself" (*ABR*, p. 63). This natural setting "awaits the eye, the hand, the foot that shall then give all this a meaning" (*ABR*, p. 63), in other words, nature is described as waiting for a human presence that could make meaning out of it. Then, the author describes a man "who lives in a world bereft of its very nature" (*ABR*, p. 63) and who is waiting for something but he does not know what that is. After the extensive list of things that this man cannot even think of, this part of the story finishes by saying that "[h]e sits in nothing, nothing, nothing" (*ABR*, p. 64). Considering our close-reading, we interpret that when the author describes this man who is full of nothing, Kincaid is being critical of the people she has encountered in her hostland (the United States). According to the character's experience in the story, these people seem to have lost their connection with nature, with history and with simple daily things.

The second part of the story describes a day in the life of a carpenter, which we see as representative of the memory of Kincaid's step-father who was a carpenter. Within his daily routine, this man sees himself building something and then "survey[ing] a small accomplishment -a last nail driven in just so" (*ABR*, p. 65). This man contemplates nature and after wondering "And where shall I be? ... My body, my soul" (*ABR*, p. 67), he observes his wife, his children, the house he has built, the trees he has planted. However, he feels he is (or he has done) nothing when compared to the vastness of the world. The portrayal of this man, in our opinion, serves to represent an ordinary man in the Caribbean. This character is more connected to nature than the man previously described but again he cannot fully articulate his own importance within the grandness of the natural cycle.

In the next section (and until the end of the story) the voice of the narrator is introduced as first person narration. Due to the context of the story and the whole collection, we identify it with a female narrator who deeply reflects on death. She recalls memories of her past in which, among other things, she sees a house and some children and then she claims "dead is the past. Dead shall the future be" (*ABR*, p. 69), even what she is seeing right now. The narrator realises she is not newly born and she regrets that she and her strong will are powerless "in the face of death" (*ABR*, p. 70). After this reflection on death, in the following section, the narrator reflects on life and wonders what it is. Here the narrator presents memories of her past when she was a child. She remembers "how much [she] loved [her]self and how much [she] was loved by [her] mother" (*ABR*, p. 73), she worships her mother's beauty, she also sees herself singing with other girls at school and recalls the landscape there.

We think that in the first two sections of the story the author presents and analyses two settings where men cannot fully understand their reality. In the first description, which we identify with a man in Kincaid's "hostland", the man's consciousness is not even introduced, he is presented as if he was the result of his body parts having been assembled. The second man, whom we see as representative of a man in the Caribbean, acknowledges his self but he cannot find answers to his emptiness. We believe that Kincaid introduces these two men in order to depict the communities they inhabit and she presents their experiences to set the background for the dilemma about what is dead and what is alive that troubles the narrator. We consider that the first person narrator represents Kincaid's need to negotiate her identity in the transnational setting she finds herself. In this process, she discovers that neither here nor there she can find "her true nature". She is, thus, overwhelmed by a feeling of critical nostalgia, her need to negotiate her hybrid identity between her "routes" and her "roots" makes her aware of death, of everything that has died and therefore it makes her wonder what life is. In our view, the narrator's subjectivity (as she has known it) has died and she now realises that she is not "newly born" (*ABR*, p. 69), she is becoming (or has already become) an adult and "time and time again, [she is] filled up with all that [she] thought life might be" (*ABR*, p. 74). This quote suggests the author's "split-consciousness" which allows her to make a critical evaluation of her past and her new physical and/or metaphorical position in her hostland.

The fifth section of the short story addresses its title as the narrator (whom we regard as representing Kincaid) walks to the mouth of the river and when looking at the still water, she sees a house "at the bottom of the river" (*ABR*, p. 74). In that "location" the narrator describes what we interpret as the "place" where she will articulate her identity. The narrator notices that everything she sees "at the bottom of the river" is so true, "that is, true to itself" (*ABR*, p. 76), to its very nature. Then, she notices that everything lights up and, while she is full of "wonderment and curiosity" (*ABR*, p. 76), a woman appears and guides the narrator's eyesight to a place. When she manages to see what the woman is watching, she sees "a world where the sun and the moon sh[i]ne at the same time" (*ABR*,

p. 77). The light they make up together makes everything “in this world, on this terrain” (ABR, p. 77) appear transparent and there are no shadows. Then, numerous elements of nature and creatures are listed which “live in this world not yet divided, not yet examined, not yet numbered, and not yet dead” (ABR, p. 78). And the narrator finishes by saying “I looked at this world as it revealed itself to me –how new, how new– and I longed to go there” (ABR, p. 78).

According to our close-reading of the story, this world that is presented to the narrator signifies that she finally finds “the terrain” she has been looking for since the beginning of the story. We portray this place as the “location for creation”. This hybrid or in-between space is productive and innovative and, as Homi Bhabha states, “these ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood” (1994/1998, p. 1). In our framework of analysis, we believe that what Kincaid will create, or is beginning to create, is her transnational, hybrid subjectivity. Therefore, we identify the world described in the story as the world of narration since, as already pointed out by Friedman (1998), we define who we are through the stories about ourselves and others that we tell.

After discovering that world, the narrator looks at herself and does not recognise herself. The water in the river takes her to the sea and she questions her identity by saying that “I was not myself as I had once known myself to be: I was not made up of flesh and blood and muscles and tissue and cells and vital organs but was made up of my will, and over my will I had complete dominion” (ABR, p. 79). Therefore, she decides to enter the sea and the water feels as “a perfectly natural element” (ABR, p. 79) to her and she is not afraid. And the narrative voice states “I had no name for the thing I had become, so new was it to me” (ABR, p. 80), she says she stands like “a prism, many-sided and transparent, refracting and reflecting light ... that never could be destroyed” (ABR, p. 80) and she becomes beautiful in a way that she cannot compare to any other type of beauty. In this part of the story, it seems that first, the narrator loses or even “gets rid of” what she used to be so that she can consciously enter that sea, which we interpret as the vastness of the world of narration. She feels it is so natural and beautiful that she is confident and safe in it; it appears to be the perfect place to start “writing her own name” to negotiate her “multiple sites of belonging”.

The last section of the story begins with the narrator wondering “yet what was that light in which I stood?” (ABR, p. 81). Then, the morning light reveals to her the creation and the implacable force of nature. She tries to understand herself and goes into a room where she sees that a lamp lights many “perishable and transient” (ABR, p. 82) things which make her aware of her connection to all that is “human endeavour, to all that is past and to all that shall be, to all that shall be lost and leave no trace” (ABR, p. 82). After claiming those things are hers, she finally manages to negotiate her identity as the story ends like this “I claim these things then -mine- and now feel myself grow solid and complete, my name filling up my mouth” (ABR, p. 82).

Following the interpretative line of our analysis, the way in which Kincaid has decided to end the collection of *At the Bottom of the River* is particularly relevant. As the things the narrator finds in the room are some books, a chair, a table, a pen and also some ripe fruit, milk, wooden flute and clothes, we interpret that these elements will assist her in (re)claiming her name and will make her stand as a woman writer. By paying close attention to this list, we notice that elements for writing are first on the list. This observation considered in the context of the story and of the whole collection leads us to regard narration as the space where Kincaid (represented by the narrative voice) articulates her in-between subjectivity since narration turns out to be the medium whereby Kincaid can see the sun and the moon shine together, where she can become

a prism that refracts and reflects light at the same time, where she can claim the name she herself has given her.

Conclusions and pedagogical proposals

Throughout the present analysis, we have moved back and forth from issues that transcend physical and/or metaphorical borders to local specificities that concern our case study. We have placed our focus of analysis in the context of Transnational Women's Literature, and within this framework we have addressed the construction of Jamaica Kincaid's identity. As already mentioned, we see the author's identity as being deeply influenced by the concepts of memory and nostalgia which are reflected in the way she addresses the connection between her "roots" and her "routes".

Our feminist close-reading of Kincaid's stories has led us to identify that through narration she has managed to reconcile the national and the transnational or, rather, the multiple physical and symbolic locations she occupies. In her stories, we have been able to detect the ambivalent relationship she maintains with her "home" and her "hostland" which is reflected in her "split-consciousness". In the end, our interpretation of this work has guided us to the conclusion that by becoming a writer Kincaid has succeeded in subverting the imposed patriarchal stereotypes, as she has created a transnational, hybrid identity capable of counteracting them. We have come to these partial conclusions by looking at the literary material from a specific feminist theoretical background and our "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988). In other words, along this article we have been aware that "only partial perspective promises objective vision" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583) and thus we have developed a feminist close-reading (Lukić & Sánchez, 2011) which demonstrates that we are "responsible/ "response-able" readers, i.e., capable of answering to the present social challenges from our own situated engagement with them.

As for the classroom context, following these perspectives in the literature and gender class could well serve as a way of enhancing critical response-ability in our students. By fostering response-ability we will contribute to turning a regular classroom into a "room" where both teachers and students can co-create knowledge. We are trying to design guidelines to make students aware of their own "situatedness" so that they are capable of creating their own responsible/ response-able interpretations. This is just one possibility for contributing to a change in educational policies that stress social commitment to a global scale, as Harris and Sánchez Espinosa (2017) point out when they convincingly propose art therapy as a valid tool for a socially committed form of pedagogy.

Thus, as a pedagogical practice, we deem it desirable to create a safe and comfortable classroom environment where all voices are heard. It is crucial that each student becomes conscious of their own situatedness and from there and bearing in mind the feminist close-reading methodologies explained above, we could work together to create our partial, situated and response-able understandings of the transnational literary material. Finally, as a possible assignment, we suggest that students could choose a short story by a contemporary woman author and check whether she could be regarded as transnational. Then, students would analyse and explain what aspects of the author's work and life have led them to consider her as transnational or not. Finally, students would carry out a debate to examine whether the approach to identity presented in this paper can be traced in the selected story and whether the considerations about Transnational Women's Literature can become a gateway to students' responsible/response-able readings when applied to their specific case study.

References

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. (2002). Foreword, 2001. In C. Moraga & G. Anzaldúa (Eds.), *This Bridge called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (3rd edition., p XXXIX). Third Women Press.
- Bhabha, Homi. (1998). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge. (Original work published 1994)
- Bouson, J. Brooks. (2005). *Jamaica Kincaid: Writing Memory, Writing Back to the Mother*. State University of New York Press.
- Brah, Avtar. (2003). Diaspora, Border and Transnational identities. In Lewis, R., & Mills, S. (2003). *Feminist postcolonial theory: A Reader*. (pp. 613-634). Taylor and Francis. (Original work published 1996)
- Brown-Rose, J.A. (2009). *Caribbean Studies, Volume 23: Critical Nostalgia and Caribbean Migration*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. (1998). *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14 (3), 575-599.
- Harris, Angela and Sánchez Espinosa, M. Adelina. (2017). Feminist Ethics of Responsibility and Art therapy: Spanish Art Therapy as a case in point. In B. Revelles-Benavente & A. González Ramos. (Eds.), *Teaching Gender: Feminist Pedagogy and Responsibility in Times of Political Crisis*, (pp. 131-145). Routledge.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. (2000). *At the Bottom of the River*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. (Original work published 1983)
- Lukić, Jasmina and Adelina Sánchez Espinosa. (2011). Feminist Perspectives on Close-Reading. In R. Buikema, G. Griffin & N. Lykke (Eds.), *Theories and Methodologies in Postgraduate Feminist Research: Researching Differently* (pp. 105-118). Routledge.
- Lukić, Jasmina, Forrester, Sibelan & Faragó, Borbála. (2020). *Times of Mobility: Transnational Literature and Gender in Translation*. (pp. 1-16). Central European University Press.
- Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth. (1999). *Jamaica Kincaid: A Critical Companion*. Greenwood Press.
- Revelles-Benavente, Beatriz & González Ramos, Ana, Eds. (2017). *Teaching Gender: Feminist Pedagogy and Responsibility in Times of Political Crisis*. Routledge.
- Sánchez-Pardo, Esther. (2017). "It's a hell of a responsibility to be yourself". In B. Revelles-Benavente & A. González Ramos. (Eds.), *Teaching Gender: Feminist Pedagogy and Responsibility in Times of Political Crisis*, (pp. 64-80). Routledge.
- Seyhan, Azade. (2001). *Writing Outside the Nation*. Princeton University Press.
- Walkowitz, Rebecca L. (2006). The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer. *Contemporary Literature* 47 (4) 527-545.