

2 Text: Narrative Encounters with the Past

At the heart of Kincaid's textual engagements with the past, I see forms of repetition and redirection that keep the texts in a state of seeming impermanence. I argue that Kincaid's poetics of impermanence multiplies perspectives, dismantles hierarchies, and breaks with notions of fixedness. Doing so especially in its considerations of the past, Kincaid's acts of writing decenter History with a capital *H* and allow for new and different versions of history to emerge. Édouard Glissant writes that in art repetition offers the possibility to tap into an otherwise imperceptible movement, which may allow for different perceptions and the expression of yet-unconscious but already existing perspectives:

Repetition [...] is an acknowledged form of consciousness both here and elsewhere. Relentlessly resuming something you have already said. Consenting to an infinitesimal momentum, an addition perhaps unnoticed that stubbornly persists in your knowledge. The difficulty: to keep this growing pile of common places from ending up as dispirited grumbling – *may art provide!* The probability: that you come to the bottom of all confluences to mark more strongly your inspirations. (*Poetics* 45, emphasis mine)

Continuous motion through forms of repetition that constantly take up previously unnoticed aspects is, I argue, likewise central Jamaica Kincaid's writings of history. Ultimately, the texts evince fixation and linearity because of their very medium. Text is read from left to right and remains on the page unchanged. Yet, as I show, Kincaid's poetics challenge this when they come back to what was written before (be it within her own texts or colonial intertexts) to reevaluate, revise, and lay bare the contemporary effects of past writing. In Henry Louis Gates's definition of Signifyin(g), "[t]o revise the received sign (quotient) literally accounted for in the relation represented by *signified/signifier* at its most apparently denotative level is to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning" (*Signifying Monkey* 47). The process of repetition with a difference thus is meaning-making in itself. In Kincaid's texts it allows contemporary texts to poetically examine History, to expose its silences, and to conceive different and possibly more suitable histories.

In what follows, I observe such structures of repetition and impermanence in Kincaid's texts in three chapters. "Writing Personal and Collective Memory" explores the different levels of repetitions of single words and the narrative repetition of a singular event, which creates a new relationship between the narrator and the past in *Mr. Potter*. "Writing with and through Other Texts" analyzes intertextual rewriting of received representations of history and the simultaneous production of new versions of history. The third chapter, "Writing between and across

Genres,” investigates the roles of generic categories in a negotiation of who has the voice and agency to produce versions of history.

2.1 Writing Personal and Collective Memory: Repetition in *Mr. Potter*

Mr. Potter is the narrative of a daughter writing the fictional life story of an absentee father, whom she possibly never met. Her story of him serves to explain his historically caused absence from her and from anyone's life, as he – because of the destructive effects of colonialism on the descendants of enslaved people in Antigua – is unable to maintain relationships with other people. Through imagination, the daughter-narrator renders her father's life in fiction. In these fictions, repetition produces various “possibilities of the real,” as the novel's narrator calls her multiple versions of the past. As I show, the narrator-daughter Elaine Potter uses this technique to claim her unknown father figure as her ancestor, while also creating a new sense of self in relation to her father Roderick Potter. While Elaine Potter's memory and narrative ostensibly focus on the past, they do not stagnate in it: instead, the technique of repetition with a difference propels the text forward into a future in which the past plays an important role, but in which it can also be evaluated and reevaluated according to present needs.⁴⁹ In this way, Elaine Potter writes her own personal history, tied in with colonial history, as Mr. Potter is a product of both a colonial past and colonial historiography that rendered him unnoteworthy to his daughter's writerly attention.

Writing (about) Roderick Potter, the narrator also produces somewhat fictional memories of Mr. Potter, as I show in the first section of this chapter on “The Creation of Memory.” The second section, “Saying it Twice,” shows how the narrator-writer uses reiteration to call versions of Mr. Potter into her text, through which she establishes a familial relationship with him. Employing repeated incantatory phrases, the narrator-daughter invokes a father who had hitherto hardly existed in her life. In a third section on “Meeting Mr. Potter,” I examine repetition with a difference as a textual strategy that creates and elaborates an encounter of the daughter with Mr. Potter. Repetition here poetically produces a memory of a presence of an absent father and lets the narrator emerge as a self-made subject who is able to determine her own history.

⁴⁹ While the technique occurs throughout the author's oeuvre, the 2002 novel presents particularly conspicuous cases of it, which even led one critic to deem it “plotless” (Roe). Because of this extensive use of repetition, the novel lends itself to an exemplary macrostructural reading of the technique.

The Creation of Memory: Imagination, Narration, Textualization

Elaine Cynthia Potter, the daughter of Mr. Roderick Potter and the narrator of *Mr. Potter*, presents herself as the (fictional) author of the book (for instance *MP* 87, 94, 185, 191).⁵⁰ She hardly knows her biological father since her parents separated before she was born. The daughter-author is aware that she produces her father – or rather a father figure – in fiction, which is as much informed by the narrations of others as by her own imagination. Both are unreliable. Fragments of the narrative of her father's life come to Elaine Potter from her mother: "And all this my mother has told me, all of this my mother has told me, my entire life as I live it is all my mother told me" (*MP* 127), the narrator explains, and thus points to the key element of *telling* in order to "make" a life. As the narrator regards her own life as made by her mother's narration, so she tells the life of her father into existence.

Facticity and reliability cannot be essential features of this form of biographical narration. The narrator excludes them from her source when she concedes, "I do not remember any of this, it is only that my mother has told me so and my mother's tongue and the words that flow from it cannot be relied upon" (*MP* 154). Further, Elaine Potter clearly states: "I am imagining this" (*MP* 54), evincing an awareness for the fictional nature of her memory work. She also emphasizes that her remembering happens in and through text: "These are all words, all of them, these words are my own" (*MP* 48), she writes, thereby claiming authorship for her father's and her own story instead of leaving the authorial power to the life-narrating mother.

Yet, while imagined, Elaine Potter's narrative of her paternal family members is still linked to past circumstances that must necessarily have existed, such as a biological grandmother. Of Roderick Potter's mother, Elfrida Robinson, Elaine Potter writes that, "she was of no account really, only she was the mother of my father and I cannot make myself forget that" (*MP* 73). The present-day narrator could hardly *remember* the details of Elfrida Robinson's life she relates, as Roderick Potter was absent from her life and could not have transmitted the knowledge of Elfrida's particularities. Moreover, as their later descendant imagines, Roderick Potter also suffered parental absence when his mother committed suicide while he was still an infant (*MP* 76). The particularities of her person and life can only be fictional. Writing Elfrida's life nonetheless lets the narrator-author access a link to the absentee grandmother. After Elfrida's death, as Elaine Potter writes, "no

⁵⁰ Clearly, Kincaid here plays with the conventions of autobiography, as her own given name was Elaine Potter Richardson before she changed it to Jamaica Kincaid in 1973. Nevertheless, *Mr. Potter* is designated as a novel on the cover of the book and I here read it as such. Hence, when concerning the narrator and the author, I here generally refer to the fictional author of *Mr. Potter*.

one thought of her again [...] and only I now do so, think of her, and she was Mr. Potter's mother, my father's name was Mr. Potter" (*MP* 77). Simply thinking of that unknown person's (former) existence provides the granddaughter with a role in relation to Elfrida – she is the one who remembers.

Elaine Potter moreover never witnessed her parents' relationship. Here, she also construes thoughts which she then regards as memories:

And in my mind, I turn over Mr. Potter and Annie Victoria Richardson [the narrator's mother], and they are in my memory, though that does seem an impossibility, that I could have known them before I was born of the two of them, and yet it is so: I have in my mind a memory of them from before the time they became my mother and father. (*MP* 137)

This quote is enlightening with regard to the narrator's conception of memory. She questions the possibility of "remembering" something she has not witnessed herself, which points to a notion of "memory" as a mental remnant of a past experience. "Experience" here would be defined by the physical and mental presence at an event and a form of participation in it. Still, Elaine Potter insists on the existence and validity of her own memory, as she emphasizes, "it is so." This conflicting relationship of the memory's existence and its impossibility evinces that in the understanding of Mr. Potter's narrator "memory" can indeed mean both the knowledge of a past personal experience and the imagination of a past event. While the two notions appear to mutually exclude each other, Elaine Potter accepts them as equivalent – especially in her project of writing her unknown relatives' lives.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" usefully speaks to the relationship of fiction and memory. "Postmemory" seeks to understand the generational transmission of memories of a traumatic past.⁵¹ Hirsch describes this form of belated memory as

the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – experiences that they "remember" only by means of stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation. (*Generation of Postmemory* 5, emphasis in original)

⁵¹ Hirsch focuses on the Jewish Holocaust in Europe, but she concedes that the concept of postmemory "may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences" (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 22).

Elaine Potter's memories of her father are in part mediated by her mother's narrations of him and in part by her silences.⁵² The mother thus filters her daughter's access to her biological father. His absence is emphasized by her silence, and his fictional presence is underscored by her unreliable narration. Nonetheless, the daughter-narrator claims her story of her father as her own, which highlights her own investment in the fictional making of a father figure. Taking her cues from necessary events in the past (such as births and deaths), she fictionally posits possible past events that serve as an explanatory model for the familial detachment.⁵³ The narrator-writer calls her versions of the past "possibilities of the real" (*MP* 137). Fiction here offers a form of access to the past, a way to establish relationships with people long dead, by telling versions of their lives. These might not be factual, but they allow their present-day relative to replace their absences with imaginations that establish and legitimize her as their descendant, and position her as "the central figure in Mr. Potter's life as he had been in [hers]" (*MP* 153). As such, facticity is not at stake here at all. Elaine Potter's narrative project replaces the void of parental absence with a fictional presence that consists of "possibilities."

Mr. Potter clearly is the central figure in the novel, not least indicated by the eponymous title of the book. The protagonist's name inescapably echoes through the pages, when the text foremost identifies Mr. Potter by the combination of the honorific "Mister," in the abbreviated written form of "Mr.," with his family name. Hence the name "Mr. Potter" occurs exceedingly frequent throughout the novel. Conspicuously, possible other denominations, such as "the man," "the chauffeur," "the Antiguan," are not used to identify the book's protagonist (except "father"). He is rarely called by his given name "Roderick," (for instance *MP* 48, 64, 98), and if so, most often still in combination with his family name. Less often even, Roderick Potter is called by an abbreviation of his first name, "Drickie," and if so, rather when referring to him as an infant or young boy (for instance *MP* 81, 89). Elaine Potter purposely refrains from calling her father "Drickie," as is made plain by her comment that "Drickie was the name people who loved

52 Elsewhere, *Mr. Potter's* narrator declares: "And how amazed I was to hear my mother, who was alive, tell me that my father had died, for he was dead, she had never told me of his being alive" (*MP* 186).

53 The daughter-narrator finds such reasons in the ongoing effects of colonialism and slavery on family structures. Throughout her text, Elaine Potter presents her paternal family, especially Roderick Potter, as paradigmatic figures for descendants from enslaved people in Antigua. In that, she not only engages with her family history and her own experience of parental neglect, but also with the collective history of colonialism in the Caribbean.

him and knew him very well called him" (MP 153). Her choice of address as "Mr. Potter" positions her outside of this group of people.

The daughter-narrator presents her insistence on "Mr. Potter" as her protagonist's name as a conscious choice. She explains that "I came to know him by that name, Mr. Potter, and the name by which I know him is the way he will forever be known, for I am the one who can write the narrative of his life" (MP 87). The project of transposing an unknown person into the realm of knowability, even if only by name and not by individual particularities, is reminiscent of Saidiya Hartman's recovery project in "Venus in Two Acts." Lamenting the absence of narratives of the lives annihilated by slavery, Hartman seeks a way to "paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible" (11). Not only are the lives of the enslaved destroyed, but slavery's archives equally perpetuate this violence in their dehumanizing records (Hartman 6). Drawing on Michel Foucault's intended project in "Lives of Infamous Men,"⁵⁴ Hartman ponders how to rescue life narratives from the colonial archive which "in this case, [is] a death sentence, a tomb" (Hartman 2) as it hardly transmits any knowledge, but only points to its absence. Finally, Hartman proposes what she calls "critical fabulation" (11): the voids of the archive, which denote gaps of knowledge may be bridged by imaginative narration. At the same time, these gaps cannot and should not be filled in, Hartman advises, "to respect black noise – the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity" (12). Ultimately, critical fabulation "is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said [...]. It is a history of unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive" (Hartman 12).

Like Saidiya Hartman, Elaine Potter has access to only fragments of Roderick Potter's life, but nonetheless seeks knowledge of him. The two projects differ in that Hartman is reliant on the archives of slavery, while Elaine Potter is dependent on the oral narratives of her mother and her willful unreliability. Elaine Potter's interest moreover is directed at her personal genealogy and history, while Hartman intervenes in the collective memory of transatlantic slavery.⁵⁵ The projects

54 Foucault is fascinated with the fragments of lives of people who have "been nothing in history, [...] having left no identifiable trace around them, they don't have and never will have any existence outside the precarious domicile of these words" (Foucault, "Infamous Men" 162). Foucault here refers to a collection of juridical documents denouncing people in abject positions. His "Lives of Infamous Men" was intended as the introduction to a recovery of the infamous from the archive.

55 However, as I argue in other chapters (1, 2.2), Mr. Potter is a paradigmatic figure who embodies the effects of colonial history. In this, Elaine Potter's memory work indeed takes up Caribbean colonial history beyond her personal family relations.

are nevertheless comparable in that both take up narration to negotiate absences. Although the past cannot be recovered, in *Mr. Potter* it is replaced with “possibilities of the real,” while Hartman looks for a “true [...] picture” (13), mourns its impossibility, and finds her own writing “unable to exceed the limits of the sayable dictated by the archive” (12). I argue that Kincaid’s fictional author Elaine Potter is not held back by the same constraints. With her interest in “possibilities” of imagination, Elaine Potter’s project is more closely related to Tavia Nyong’o’s “afro-fabulation”: “A fabulist is a teller of tales, but he or she also discloses the powers of the false to create new possibilities” (Nyong’o 71). Mr. Potter’s narrator does not disguise her imaginative work, which accomplishes to produce versions of the pasts. “In its very spur toward the inauthentic, the not yet, the people who are missing, fabulation is always seeking to cobble something together, to produce connections and relations however much the resultant seams show” (Nyong’o 77). Similarly, Elaine Potter imaginatively transgresses the boundaries of knowledge set by her mother and expands it in her own repetitions and revisions, disregarding any external limits to her desire to understand and participate in history.

After having been informed of her father’s death, Elaine Potter travels to Antigua to visit his grave. However, the record of his burial site turns out to be lost and the grave master can recall only anecdotes about a fight erupting at the funeral, but not the location of Mr. Potter’s grave. Physical traces of Roderick Potter are lost and narratives are all that remains of him. Elaine Potter’s search for her father’s gravesite offers up a comparison with the project of yet another writer: In 1973, Alice Walker was on a quest for Zora Neale Hurston’s grave in Florida. After navigating several contradictory oral accounts of the last days of Hurston’s life, Alice Walker finds herself in graveyard with a local guide who is even less knowledgeable than she is. In spite of adverse circumstances, such as heat, waist-high weeds, biting bugs, and the risk of encountering poisonous snakes, Walker searches the abandoned cemetery in Fort Pierce, Florida, only to find nothing more than a small area in which the earth is slightly more sunken in. Not marked, it is solely a “spot that resembles a grave” (Walker 105). Walker admits, “to tell the truth, I can’t be positive that what I found is the grave” (112). Still, undeterred Walker has a headstone erected at that very spot and claims having found Hurston’s grave (Walker 115), the site of which is now commonly acknowledged. In effect, Walker claimed Hurston’s grave, which could not be found anymore, just as Elaine Potter claims her father, who is not accessible anymore. Instead of a head stone, however, Elaine Potter commemorates Mr. Potter with a text, which presents a fictional version of his life. Faced with absence and inaccessibility, both women thus produce presences that hitherto had not existed, but are needed in their contemporary lives.

Saying it Twice: Incantations of Mr. Potter

In Elaine Potter's writing of her father's life, repetition is a key tool to create this father figure. The conspicuous repetition of the protagonist's name calls the character from obscurity into the text.⁵⁶ More so, it also assigns him and his narrator particular roles. The homodiegetic position of *Mr. Potter's* narrator is not clearly evident from the text's outset. Before revealing her relationship with her protagonist, Elaine Potter is an omniscient heterodiegetic narrative instance relating a day in the life of a seemingly random character living in Antigua, who works as a chauffeur. More context is provided when well into the first chapter, the narrator introduces herself as the daughter of the text's protagonist (*MP* 20). The daughter-narrator thus textually slowly advances Mr. Potter. In the following chapters, the mentions of her key character's name are not only noticeable for their frequency, but also for the redundancy of their pairings with the declaration that Mr. Potter is Elaine Potter's father. The conjunction of name and role occurs at least twenty times throughout the novel's 195 pages,⁵⁷ often in appositional insertions, separated by two commas: "Mr. Potter, my father;" (for instance *MP* 80, 86, or 157).⁵⁸

With the same arrangements of vowels and consonants, both ending on "-er," the two key words conjoined in the phrase – "Potter" and "father" – are not only linked by their seemingly redundant pointing to the same referent, but also by their homeoteleutonic sound quality. This gives the many mentions of "Mr. Potter" a rhythmical quality, which cumulates in the threefold doubling of the incantation:

56 Victoria Bridges-Moussaron reads *Mr. Potter* as a prosopopoeia of the narrator's dead father, composed of rhythm and sound. Jana Evans Braziel emphasizes the aspect of genesis in *Mr. Potter*; see, e.g., her article "'Another line was born...': Genesis, Genealogy, and Genre in Jamaica Kincaid's *Mr. Potter*."

57 See *MP*, for instance 36, 48, 49, 50, 55, 57, 58, 64, 77, 80, 86, 100, 147, 153, 157, 185, 194, or 195. Indeed, one reviewer smugly notes that, "[i]n *Mr. Potter*, Jamaica Kincaid seems to believe that if something's worth saying, it's worth saying twice" (Mars-Jones).

58 This certainly is not the only noteworthy stylistic device in Kincaid's texts in general and in *Mr. Potter* in particular. Here, I am only concerned with repetition as a means to create history. Most interesting, however, are also Gayatri Spivak's analysis of parataxes in *Lucy* (Spivak proposes that "with this literary characteristic of placing side by side without conjunctions, *Lucy* resists and alters any reading that would categorize it only by its subject matter;" 338), and Nicole Matos's inquiry into the same device in *Mr. Potter* (building on Spivak's arguments, Matos suggests to regard the parataxes here as "withholding [...] causal connections [and] as an ingenious, multi-functional ploy that engages questions of history, causality and genealogy in quite meaningful and consequential ways," in "Vicinity" 85).

Mr. Potter was my father, my father's name was Roderick Potter. (MP 57)

Mr. Potter was my father, my father's name was Roderick Nathaniel Potter. (MP 100)

Mr. Potter was my father, my father's name was Mr. Potter. (MP 195)

Separated and connected by the commas centered between them, the six clauses point to name and role of Mr. Potter in relation to his daughter. The commas ostensibly function as a mirrors between the sentences, the first one starting with the name, the second one ending with it, and the repetition of “my father” contracted in the center left and right of the comma.⁵⁹ However, since both name and the term “father” refer to the same entity, as the repetitions seem to enforce, all six paratactic clauses could be read as grammatically parallel, since all elements are set in nominative forms, which gives the sentences a chiasmic structure. This back-and-forth movement in and between the three repetitions of the sentences in question both emphasizes and coalesces name and role of Mr. Potter, the father.

Writing about his concept of Signifyin(g), Henry Louis Gates notes that “[t]hinking about [it] is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination. It is not the sign itself, however, which has multiplied. [...] [O]nly the signifier has been doubled and (re)doubled” (*Signifying Monkey* 44). This disrupts “the nature of the sign=signifier/signified” (*Signifying Monkey* 46). In the case of the three sentences above, the signifiers are not doubled within the individual sentences. Yet all of them refer to the same signified, namely a thought concept of the entity of Mr. Potter. The name Mr. Potter and the term “my father” denote the same person. Then the phrase “my father's name” refers to the name of Mr. Potter, which underlines the component of the name as a signified, but which ultimately also indicates the entity of Mr. Potter. Finally, the name is mentioned again, now with the added given name(s). In their particular arrangement, four signifiers thus conflate the name and the role (“father”), two signifiers, which in themselves already point to the same thought concept – the personage of the father Mr. Potter. In her book chapter “Rhythm and Repetition: Kincaid's Incantatory List,” Diane Simmons contends that “Kincaid's rhythms and repetitions, the long, seemingly artless, listlike sentences charm and lull the reader, disguising what is actually happening, which is that one thing is being transformed into another”

59 Bridges-Moussaron reads the phrases as “mirror image[s] of the other half, except for the addition of the word ‘name’ with which she gives him [Mr. Potter] what he denied her” (par. 17). I slightly disagree, as his name indeed was ceded to her (MP 153–154), what is lacking is the knowledge of the person from whom she inherited the family name.

(47).⁶⁰ The transformation here would be from name (“Mr. Potter”) to role (“father”), i.e. from unacquainted man, known only by his last name, to a familial relation, and back to a person known by name, which changes the concept of “Mr. Potter.” In the sense of Signifyin(g), the “[d]irecting, or redirecting, attention from the semantic to the rhetorical level [...] allows us to bring the repressed meanings of a word, the meanings that lie in wait on the paradigmatic axis of discourse, to bear on the syntagmatic axis” (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* 58) in this case of repetition in *Mr. Potter*. In the final mention of the name in the third example, which conspicuously is also the very last sentence of the book, the signified of the signifier “Mr. Potter” is transformed from being solely the name of an unknown person to the name of the person assigned by Elaine Potter. While the signifier remains the same, it now refers to a man who was appropriated by the writing of his daughter.

Quite obviously, moreover, the three sentences are not identical repetitions of each other, but they differ in that the name changes at the end of each sentence. The first sentence moves from honorific plus family name to the mention of given name with a repetition of the family name. Considering that “Mr. Potter” is the name the narrator-daughter chose to identify her father by (and by which she came to know him), it is not surprising that it would provide a starting point for her to claim him as a relative. The given name Roderick might signal somewhat more familiarity than the honorific “Mr.,” which would point to an increased or intended closeness between the narrator and Mr. Potter. Moreover, the sentence is set in a context of exploring Roderick Potter’s life. The addition of the middle name Nathaniel in the second sentence towards the center of the book establishes a relationship between the narrator-daughter and both her father and her grandfather from whom Roderick inherited his middle name Nathaniel. Claiming Mr. Potter as her father also lets her trace her paternal ancestry through names. Ultimately, however, the narrator reverts back to her initial choice of “Mr. Potter,” which highlights the distance between father and daughter, as well as it finalizes the narrator’s stipulation to make Mr. Potter known by *her* choice of name (see above and *MP* 87), for these are the very last words of the novel.

The family name “Potter,” moreover refers not only to one particular man, but it is also the narrator’s own name. However, it is not one she easily identifies with, as she explains: “[T]hat name, Potter, haunted me when I was a child, for I did not

⁶⁰ In her analyses, Simmons rather focuses on lists of domestic objects and duties and provides examples from the short story “Girl,” in which nurture is replaced with manipulation (*Jamaica Kincaid* 48). In *Annie John*, Simmons argues, the blissful union of mother and daughter is transformed into a painful separation (*Jamaica Kincaid* 49–50) and in *A Small Place*, the repeated phrase “you are a tourist” progresses from description to indictment (*Jamaica Kincaid* 52–54).

know any Potters [...], and that name, Potter, was a part of my own name and yet I had never met the man whose name I bore" (*MP* 153–154). Hence the daughter's insistence on calling her father and the protagonist of her narrative by his last name also inscribes her own name into her text. The distance she creates by using the honorific address thus also implicates a proximity of father and daughter, indicated by the shared family name.

Elaine Potter plays out her claims on her father in text. In doing so, she seizes the power to know him, which his absence had denied her throughout her life. While her project cannot be one of restoration, as Mr. Potter is lost to her after his death in terms of possibly establishing a personal familial relationship, she can – through text – nevertheless create a version of him and in that "birth" a father for herself. Now she is the maker and he is removed to the powerless position she had previously inhabited by his doing. Her creation of her own father is explicitly accomplished in text: "And I now say, 'Mr. Potter,' but as I say his name, I am reading it also, and so to say his name and to imagine his life at the same time makes him whole and complete, not singular and fragmented, and this is because he is dead and beyond reading and writing and beyond contesting my authority to render him in my own image" (*MP* 193). The daughter concedes that her voice renders him mute,⁶¹ which empowers her to create him on her own terms and in her own style of expression.⁶²

With incantatory repetitions of her father's name, the daughter-narrator calls a man lost to her, as well as lost to the world, into her text. She takes him from obscurity by making him known. But more importantly, the narrator-writer Elaine

61 Quite literally, Mr. Potter is hardly allotted any direct speech throughout the novel. His utterances are mostly restricted to "eh, eh." Justin D. Edwards reads this as "an expressive lack – a lack of language, a lack of self-awareness, and a lack of understanding" (141). Julin Everett adds that "eh, eh" can be read as "an expression used in the Caribbean to indicate disapproval, pleasure, surprise, and curiosity, or to call attention to an object or to oneself. The lack of precision in Mr. Potter's utterances demonstrates the little importance he places on words, and thus, on defining his own identity" (59). More than that, Denise DeCaires Narain interprets the absence of Mr. Potter's voice as indicating a political problem: "Mr. Potter's 'insignificance' as a subaltern *man*, located on the 'fringes of the world,' is compounded by his willingness to accept this marginality with unquestioning equanimity. In response to his abject position, he appears to be capable only of making sounds, half-words and half-sentences which indicate no interest in, or understanding of his position" ("Writing 'Home'" 503, emphasis in original).

62 Brazier moreover reads *Mr. Potter* not only as the creation of a father figure, but more broadly as a Caribbean genesis myth: "*Mr. Potter* is a postcolonial, postmodernist creation myth – postmodern in its sensibilities (language constructs transitory truths), yet modern in its historical crises (the past haunts not only the fleeting moments of the present but also of the future)" ("Another line" 129), through which Kincaid "joins a Caribbean 'quarrel with history' that is above all a pre-occupation with genesis (origins, creation, filiation)" ("Another line" 130).

Potter uses text to reverse power relations previously at the center of her relationship with her absentee father: he made her, but withheld himself, which put her at a disadvantage in that she felt the lack of filiation. Now, *she* creates *him*. Repetition bespeaks what hitherto was not, as is also the case in the daughter's fivefold narration of meeting Roderick Potter, as I will show in the following section.

Meeting Mr. Potter: Once, Never, Repeatedly

Kincaid's narrator in *Mr. Potter* not only calls her father into the text; through repetition she also constructs a memory of an encounter of father and daughter when she was a young girl. This meeting arguably might never have happened; or it might have happened but the memory thereof was distorted by temporal remove or by the mother's narrative interference. Nonetheless, Elaine Potter claims a memory of having met her father as her own. The repeated narration of the meeting turns Mr. Potter from an unknown and thus nonexistent entity into a father figure who the daughter interacted with – at least textually, when the event is narrated five times over the course of thirty-eight pages (*MP* 124–161). Each narration differs in detail and length. The daughter-narrator's writing and rewriting with a difference, I argue, establishes a connection with Roderick Potter, as well as it intensifies the familial relationship.

In her five narrations of (not) meeting Roderick Potter, the narrator-writer Elaine Potter “remembers” being sent to her father's place of employment, a garage at which he works as a chauffeur, in order to ask him for money for school supplies.⁶³ The first version of the episode is the longest of the five, extending over four pages (*MP* 124–127). In it, Elaine Potter establishes her encounter with Roderick Potter, while yet also focusing on the insurmountable space between them. She writes,

when I was about four years old, I saw Mr. Potter standing in the space that was between the street and the entrance to the garage, and that was the first time I can remember seeing him standing between the street which led to me and the world beyond and the entrance to the garage, which held inside it all the darkness of the world when it has been reduced and made small and powered by evil. (*MP* 124–125)

⁶³ Again, this memory is a mediated one, as Elaine Potter acknowledges: “I remember this incident of waving at him because my mother has told me about it and through my mother's words, I have come to see myself waving to Mr. Potter” (*MP* 127). Her mother's narrative involvement in Elaine Potter's memory is again mentioned twice on the following page, emphasizing the memory-making capacity of words, which the narrator equally makes use of here.

In Elaine Potter's perception and narration, spatial positions characterize the two parties involved: Mr. Potter is located in an interstitial space between the sunny street and the open garage gate which gapes like a black hole. The narrator's choice of words, referring to "all the darkness of the world," which is "powered by evil," here suggests the association of the garage with the colonial history of Antigua, which elsewhere is described as an evil force (MP 84). Behind the girl the street opens up to the rest of the world, from which Mr. Potter is excluded in his interstice between "the world" and "the darkness of the world" in the garage.

Perhaps inadvertently, young Elaine – or rather the adult narrator Elaine – attempts to bridge the gap between her body and her father's by claiming an affiliation: "I had waved at him, I had stood before him and wished him a good morning, and I had said, through gestures only, that he was mine and I was his, [...] that the seemingly invisible spaces between two people who shared a common intimate history were impossible to destroy" (MP 125). While this quote points to a hopefulness in the girl to build a connection with her father, it remains ambiguous in suggesting the very possibility of that. On the one hand, the "invisible spaces" that are "impossible to destroy" may be read as an indelible link. On the other hand, they may as well be understood as an impermeable barrier. In this, the spaces would not connect, but divide and keep apart. Ultimately, both of these suggested interpretations are equally viable, especially when thought together – what connects Elaine and Roderick Potter is their disconnection.

Mr. Potter's reaction to the girl's advance is one of utter disinterest. He does not even "dismiss [her] with a wave of his hand" (MP 126), but solely rolls his shoulders back and forth – a bodily movement with even less expressive power than the shrugging of one's shoulders. His daughter perceives his refusal to acknowledge her as worse than a dismissal: "Not only did he ignore me, he made sure that until the day he died, I did not exist at all" (MP 126). This nonexistence, however, is now challenged by her writing of the incident in which she connects her own person to his by writing about them both – albeit by describing the distance between them.

Twenty pages later, *Mr. Potter's* narrator-author again writes the incident of meeting and at the same time not meeting her father. In the rewriting, the girl's encounter with him is even more unsuccessful than in her first version of the event. Instead of being positioned in the sunny street, she now is aligned with the darkness of shadows herself (MP 146) while waiting for Mr. Potter to ask him for "something essential, [...]. Schoolbooks, for instance" (MP 146). The girl then is informed by a co-worker of Mr. Potter's that he would not come, but accustomed to waiting for him already, she stays anyway. "[A]nd then Mr. Potter came, driving a car with the brand Hillman or Zephyr stamped on it, and when he saw me, he waved me away as if I were nothing to him at all and had suddenly and

insanely decided to pursue an intimate relationship with him" (*MP* 146). Notably, the repetition of the incident takes its cues from the first, but with variations. The story stays the same – a girl tries to meet her biological father at his place of work in order to ask him for monetary support, but he disregards her. However, the differences in the repetition change the significance of the incident. In Elaine Potter's second narration, details become fuzzy. It is of little importance what exactly she is sent to ask for, or which car he drives. This is accompanied with changes in spatial order: a darkness encroaches from the father figure and the garage behind him towards the girl, which might symbolically denote an effect of the paternal rejection. Mr. Potter's response to the girl also intensifies in that he now actively rejects her. He communicates his rejection through gesture – one that acknowledges her no more than an abandoned dog, but also no less than that. In comparison with the first narration of the event Mr. Potter's rejection of his daughter intensifies. Elaine Potter's rewriting now includes a direct response to her claiming an "intimate relationship" with him, as she did in her first account of the meeting (*MP* 125). Elaine Potter's revisions also elicit a response from her father, such as gesturing towards her, which had previously been absent.

This development plays itself out further in the following three repetitions of the incident. The third, very short version again emphasizes the distance between father and daughter, when Elaine Potter recounts, "from across Redcliff Street, I, then a child with my name Elaine Cynthia Potter, saw Mr. Potter, [...] I had never met the man whose name I bore. I saw him from across the street and from across the street I asked him for money to buy books that I needed for school" (*MP* 153–154). Here, the space between the two is not crossed by communication or gestures. The repetition of "across the street" highlights the distance between father and daughter. No further communication takes place, which supports the daughter's assertion that she actually never met Mr. Potter.

The physical distance is then bridged by the fourth rewriting of the incident, which very shortly reads: "Mr. Potter slammed a door in my face when I was sent by my mother to ask him for a tablet of writing paper" (*MP* 157–158). This version is rather similar to the fifth and last in which the daughter-narrator declares: "I have only a vague memory of him ignoring me as I passed him in the street, of him slamming a door in my face when I was sent to ask him for money I needed to purchase my writing paper" (*MP* 160–161). With this last narration of the incident, it might be most obvious how much the five versions differ from each other. In the first one, any interaction between father and daughter is kept to a minimum with Elaine Potter only looking at Mr. Potter, and the father not even acknowledging the daughter. In the last version of the failed meeting, by contrast, his reaction is decidedly one of rejection. He ignores her just as she passes him, and although his reaction is not a favorable one, his ignoring her requires his recognition of her

presence. More so, when she verbally approaches him, he reacts with force by shutting a door in her face and thus shutting her out.

Writing becomes the tool to turn the power relations between father and daughter, when she now claims the authority to write him. This is particularly taunting, as writing also was at the center of the failed encounter with Mr. Potter – he rejected her when she asked for money for paper. Within the very medium of writing the daughter now frames Mr. Potter as *she* pleases. In the course of the five narrative repetitions of the encounter, father and daughter do not overcome the distance between them, but the intensification of actions and reactions establishes a relationship between them that replaces the absence of any connection at all. Textually, Elaine Potter creates a memory of having made a connection with Roderick Potter, even if it is an unsuccessful one. Although he must remain absent and unknowable, in this last instance she has indeed met her father.

Dramatist Suzan-Lori Parks also makes use of repetition, both on word level and in the dramatic structures of her plays. In her essay “From Elements of Style,” Parks elaborates her views on the technique, which she calls “Rep & Rev” and which is closely related to Gates’s Signifyin(g): “Characters refigure their words and through a refiguration of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew” (Parks 9). Through repetition, characters may then examine “something larger than one moment” (Parks 9).⁶⁴ Something similar is at play in Kincaid and Elaine Potter’s refigurations of meeting Mr. Potter. In her narrative the daughter returns to the experience of being rejected by the father, which may be read as paradigmatic for the father-daughter relationship in *Mr. Potter*, as the text overall presents the daughter’s simultaneous approach to and distancing from her absentee biological father.

In creating a memory of her father, Elaine Potter not only reverses the power relations between them, but she also emerges in the text herself. Just as she calls Mr. Potter into her text, Elaine Potter writes *herself* into being in her own work. Considering the five narrations of the girl (not) meeting Mr. Potter at the garage, it is noteworthy that while his reaction to her intensifies, also her presence in the text does.

In the first two narrations (*MP* 124–127 and *MP* 146), the focus lies on Mr. Potter and his position. Hers is foremost defined in relation to his. This changes in the third narration. To quote it again: “from across Redcliff Street, I, then a child with my name Elaine Cynthia Potter, saw Mr. Potter, [...] I had never met the man whose

64 For insightful analyses of Parks’s use of “Rep & Rev” to performatively investigate the history of slavery in her plays, see Ilka Saal’s *Collusions of Fact and Fiction. Performing Slavery in the Works of Suzan-Lori Parks and Kara Walker*.

name I bore. I saw him from across the street and from across the street I asked him for money to buy books that I needed for school" (*MP* 153–154). In this version, the space that the girl occupies is the one identified by the text (as "Redcliff Street"), in opposition to Mr. Potter's garage in the first narration. Moreover, in the two previous versions, the narrator (and her younger self) were only identified by the personal pronoun "I." Now, as that "I" attains a defined spatial position, the pronoun is "filled," when the narrator ostentatiously mentions her own name "Elaine Cynthia Potter." Volunteering her full name, almost as if physically holding it in front of herself, the girl presents it to her father, just as the narrator-author presents it to her readers, and she claims it for herself. While this lays claim to Mr. Potter by the shared family name, the enunciation (and writing) of the name also defines the speaker of the text and establishes the girl as a subject.

At the same time, the use of the pronoun "I" increases. In the few lines quoted above, it occurs six times. Whereas elsewhere Mr. Potter's name echoes through the text, here it is distinctly the "I" that does. I argue that this both aligns the pronoun with the specific reference of the full name and establishes a space for "Elaine Potter" within the text. The repetition of "I" carves out a space from which the text speaks. So while the father Mr. Potter does not recognize Elaine Potter, the text at hand *does*.

The coalescence of name and role in Mr. Potter's case constitutes the whole of a specific signified, namely the thought construct of Mr. Potter as Elaine Potter's father. In the same way, the multitude of signifiers here ("I") transforms an impotent little girl into a narrator-author who inhabits the position from which the text speaks. The repetitions here constitute Elaine Potter as a subject with agency and the power to control the narrative.

This empowerment is also evident in Elaine Potter's rejection of her father's only inheritance: parentlessness. Like his daughter, Roderick Potter suffered the absence of his father. He was regarded as having "a line drawn through him, and by this it was meant that he had no father; no father's name was written in that column on his birth certificate, only a line had been drawn through it" (*MP* 97). The line is transferred from the paper to the person. Decoding this metaphor, one could say that Mr. Potter's whole existence is denied by the absence of his progenitor. This begs the question of how Roderick Potter came to acquire his father's family name in the first place. The text clarifies that "his name then was Roderick Nathaniel on his birth certificate, his name then was Roderick Potter in his mother's mind" (*MP* 79), which suggests that the family name was not assigned by law and by a registrar, but by his mother Elfrida Robinson who associated her son with his father.

Of her own birth certificate Elaine Potter writes that

there is an empty space with a line drawn though it where the name of my father, Roderick Nathaniel Potter, ought to be [...]. And this line that runs through Mr. Potter and that he then gave to me, I have not given it to anyone, [...] I have made it stop with me, for I can read and I can now write and I now say, in writing, that this line drawn through the space where the name of the father ought to be has come to an end, and that from Mr. Potter to me, no one after that shall have a line drawn through the space where the name of the father ought to be, and that through him coming through me, everyone after that shall have a father and a mother. (*MP* 100–101)

The lines metaphorically running through Elaine and Roderick Potter stands contrary to a line of ancestry. Crossing the space on the official form, the lines cross out a possible line of names connecting past and present. The line thus presents a discontinuation of a family line. Yet the line itself is continued being ceded from parent to child through the absence of the parent. What indeed is inherited is a legacy of absence. To break with this legacy of nothingness, a presence is required, such as the one Elaine Potter vows to create by ensuring that her own descendants shall have both mother and father.

Moreover, the text that Elaine Potter produces in *Mr. Potter* discontinues the legacy of absence. The fictional account of Mr. Potter fills the empty space that the missing name of the father has left. In this, Elaine Potter's writing ties on to the line of ancestry she and Mr. Potter had previously lacked. By making her own father and thus reversing the order of genealogy, and by doing so in textual structures that deny the existence of a single continued (or discontinued) line of ancestry by exploring "possibilities of the real," Elaine Potter denies the legacy of absence and claims the name "Potter" as her own. In the absence of the father's name and recognition, Elaine Potter should likely have been named Elaine Richardson after her mother. Nevertheless, through text Elaine Potter assigns her own family name to herself and with that also her family affiliation. She thus filled the empty box where her father's name ought to be by rejecting the exact repetition of her father's family structures, both in writing and in her approach to her own descendants. Rather, she opts for a different outcome and creates it herself.

Ultimately, in these examples from *Mr. Potter* repetitions with a difference work out new meanings to the signs. The back and forth – or "hall of mirrors," as Gates phrases it – posits meanings that hitherto were beyond the surface, or even nonexistent. This technique of redirection gives the narrative a sense of impermanence. The continuous movement of the text that opens up spaces for creation, such as that of a father figure on the terms of a daughter who can claim the power to write him and herself into being and who can envision a different future for herself and her own descendants.

2.2 Writing with and through Other Texts: Intertextual Engagements with History

Jamaica Kincaid's oeuvre is fundamentally characterized by elaborate forms of referencing that work out new positions on seemingly established knowledge. This chapter on intertextual relations provides insights into the workings of textual referencing of other or earlier texts and how Kincaid's works thus engage both literary history and historical discourses.

As Renate Lachmann points out,

the original idea of making literature means first of all making literature *from* literature, that is, writing as continuation, writing as rejoinder, or rewriting. This notion of making literature out of literature has important implications for both the discreteness of any individual text and for its closure and 'totality.' Instead of a process of selection and combination that presupposes a grammar of forms, we are now confronted with a ramifying growth of meaning that proceeds from the interfacing of texts. (37, emphasis in original)

According to Lachmann's understanding of text, every text is always already entangled with other texts. This closely resembles Roland Barthes' conception of text as a web of structures, meanings, and other texts. Kincaid's texts pick up on these notions overtly, particularly in the latest novel *See Now Then*, which explores the simultaneous making of text and past through the metaphor of knitting (see chapter 1). In what follows, this chapter now explores the "woven" or "knitted" nature of Kincaid's other texts in more detail, particularly concerning the interplay of intertextuality, referentiality, and history.

Lachmann argues that because every text entails the heritage of other texts, "[t]he memory of a text is its intertextuality" (15). In my inquiry into textual engagements with history, I ask how this memorial aspect of intertextuality occurs in Jamaica Kincaid's texts. Rather than identifying individual intertexts to Kincaid's work – a task which has by now often enough been accomplished by other scholars⁶⁵ – I investigate how other texts and discourses are taken up in Kincaid's contemporary texts and what this play with reference discloses about the texts' conception of history.

The first section of this chapter, "Locating Kincaid's Works in a Web of Contexts," maps the literary and cultural contexts of Kincaid's work between the Caribbean and the United States. The following section is concerned with historical colonial discourses which Kincaid's novels *Mr. Potter* and *See Now Then* take up via

⁶⁵ See, for instance, Chansky, Gass, Pelt, Rodriguez, or Simmons ("Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon").

intertextual engagements with earlier (literary) texts. Both novels present how history and historiography affect contemporary thought and writing, which in *Mr. Potter*'s case is exposed through textual mimicry, and which is revised through re-signification in *See Now Then*. The third section of this chapter on "Heracles and Persephone" then investigates *See Now Then*'s engagement with Greek mythology and how intertextuality here facilitates the integration of contemporary literary and social structures that are based on colonial history into a web of larger historical contexts.

Locating Kincaid's Works in a Web of Con-Texts

Since texts should be read in their con-texts,⁶⁶ as Lachmann's conception of the making of text and Barthes's textile metaphor of texts as web-like structures suggest, this section considers the general contexts of Kincaid's works – in terms of the cultural and political contexts of their emergence as well as their places in Caribbean and North American literary histories – to unpack the breadth of the textual-cultural fabric into which, through which, and from which Kincaid's texts are woven.

Jamaica Kincaid was born on May 25, 1949, in St. John's, Antigua, as Elaine Potter Richardson. She grew up on the island, whose colonial history is already signaled by the name – Santa Maria la Antigua – given to it by one of the most famous Western colonizers, Christopher Columbus, upon passing the island at a distance. Since English colonists settled the island in 1632, it remained under British control. Tobacco and sugarcane were the main crops produced on plantations, for which enslaved Africans were imported. Slavery was abolished in the British colony in 1834. After becoming a self-governing state of the United Kingdom, in 1981 the country of Antigua and Barbuda gained independence from British rule but still remains part of the Commonwealth of Nations.

⁶⁶ The hyphenated spelling of "con-texts" here refers to John Thieme's variant spelling which seeks to "indicate postcolonial texts that engage in direct, if ambivalent, dialogue with the canon by virtue of responding to a classic English text" (4). Moreover, the syllabic separation highlights the prefix "con-" and hence the Latin origin of the word, which stems from "com" – with, together, and "texere" – to weave, make. I emphasize the con-/com- in "context" to highlight the coexistence of texts and discourses, be it contemporary ones or of earlier or later origin, in contrast to a notion of intertextuality that assumes the derivation of later texts from "parent texts," indebted to their predecessors for their own genesis and meaning-making properties.

Elaine Richardson's childhood and youth were spent in a British colony, well before its independence. As a girl, she received formal school education from the age of three and a half years until she was fifteen.⁶⁷ "In my generation," Kincaid said later, "the height of being a civilized person was to be English and to love English things and eat like English people. We couldn't really look like them, but we could approximate being an English person" (in Garis). This was also reflected by the curriculum of "Princess Margaret School," which Elaine Richardson attended: British national songs, such as "God Save Our King" or "Rule, Britannia" were as much part of education in Antiguan government schools as was canonical literature by authors such as William Shakespeare, John Milton, the Brontë Sisters, Thomas Hardy, or John Keats (see Kincaid in Cudjoe 397–398). Kincaid says about her school education that it "was very 'Empire,' [it] only involved civilization up to the British Empire – which would include writing – so I never read anything past Kipling. Kipling wasn't even considered a serious writer" (Kincaid in Cudjoe 397). Kincaid claims to never have read nor even known of works by Caribbean writers before leaving Antigua⁶⁸ and regards her early readings of the British literary canon as formative for her own literary endeavors.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Elaine Richardson began to attend school at this early age under the pretense of already being five years old as her mother wanted her out of the house during the day, as she claims (Kincaid in Cudjoe 397).

⁶⁸ In a 1994 interview with Moira Ferguson, Kincaid relates: "I had never read a West Indian writer when I started to write. Never. I didn't even know there was such a thing, until I met Derek Walcott. He said 'Do you know – ?' [...] I did not know. So I do not come from the West Indian writing tradition, and there is no such thing. There might be, eventually, but we are of the English-speaking tradition" ("A Lot of Memory" 169). For instance, scholar Carole Boyce Davies regards these claims of Kincaid's on Europeanness instead of on a Caribbeananness as highly problematic (expressed for instance at the conference "The Art and Craft of Grafting in Jamaica Kincaid's Works" in Paris, 2017). Indeed, it is somewhat baffling that Kincaid, who in other aspects insists on her individuality instead of being grouped with any kind of genre or political orientation, here self-identifies with a writerly tradition. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in contrast, maintains that "Black writers, like critics of black literature, learn to write by reading literature, especially the canonical texts of the Western tradition. Consequently, black texts resemble other, Western texts and employ many of the conventions of literacy form that comprise the Western tradition. Black literature shares much with, far more than it differs from, the Western textual tradition" (*Signifying Monkey* xxii). Moreover, Kincaid's insistence on the effect of colonial education also critiques colonial assimilation and highlights the opportunity of reversing the colonizing gaze/writing tools, as Kincaid does in her works.

⁶⁹ Kincaid's works are just one example of (post)colonial writers being affected by the British canonical texts. The same references occur in the biographies of other postcolonial authors: for instance, just as Kincaid regards British writer of children's books Enid Blyton as her first role model (Kincaid in Galassi), so does Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who recalls: "When I started to write, I was writing Enid Blyton stories" (qtd. in Boyagoda). And just as Kincaid's

While heavily affected by British colonial education, Elaine Richardson also grew up in a space determined by the Caribbean spiritual practice of obeah, a belief rooted in African traditions.⁷⁰ Obeah “is a system of beliefs rooted in Creole notions of spirituality, which acknowledges the existence and power of the supernatural world” (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 131). Both Richardson’s mother and grandmother were believers and practitioners of obeah (Simmons, *Jamaica Kincaid* 8). Kincaid later described obeah’s approach to the world as “chaotic” (Simmons, *Jamaica Kincaid* 8) and when asked about elements of magic realism in her work, she explained: “*The truth is I come from a place that’s very unreal. [...] The place I come from goes off in fantasy all the time so that every event is continually a spectacle [...]. I’m not really a very imaginative writer, but the reality of my background is fantastic*” (in Vorda 13, emphasis in original). A certain degree of being comfortable with the unreal, or with a coexisting variety of realities is also noticeable in several other interviews with Kincaid in which she claims that “truth often makes for a better art. [...] [T]he truth, incidentally, is multifaceted. A lie is one thing, one single thing” (Kincaid in Buckner 465–469).⁷¹ In Kincaid’s works, this notion of “the real” is evident in her narrative repetition which continually provides different perspectives on past events (as the previous chapter on *Mr. Potter* has shown), or in Lucy’s search for a hidden reality not visible to the naked eye, which she seeks to uncover when developing her photographs (see chapter 3.1). Modernist works approach the multifaceted representation of assumed reality in a similar fashion. Kincaid mentions writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Alain Robbe-Grillet, or Nadine Gordimer as inspiring examples: “When I read them [here specifically Robbe-Grillet’s short stories], the top of my head came off and I thought, ‘This is really living!’ And I knew that whatever I did, I would not be interested in realism” (Kincaid in Cudjoe 403). While realism claims faithfulness in representation, to Kincaid it is modernist writing that textually approximates her experience of life. Hence the Caribbean cultural practice of obeah with its fluent boundaries between reality and fiction, and writing styles of modernism

characters Annie John and Lucy wish to change their given names to “Enid,” “after the authoress Enid Blyton” (*Lucy* 149), “the author of the first books I [Annie] had discovered on my own” (*AJ* 51), so is the same-aged female protagonist of another postcolonial novel deeply affected by Enid Blyton and the Brontë sisters: Tambudzai in Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (93). Kincaid, too, claims Charlotte Brontë as her second early role model (in Galassi).

⁷⁰ Different scholars attribute the origins of the term “obeah” and of the practice are attributed to either Akan, Twi, or Igbo. See Rucker 40.

⁷¹ Kincaid makes similar statements on truth in other interviews, for instance with Perry, Sela, and Bonetti.

which are widely regarded as coming from a European tradition, converge in the rejection of singular truths by both Kincaid and her works.

Elaine Richardson left Antigua in 1965 for New York City at the age of sixteen to follow a common trajectory of immigrant workers in seeking employment as a nanny for an affluent white family in order to support her family in her native country with remittances. After her arrival in the United States, Elaine Richardson went to school at night and eventually obtained a high school diploma. Rather than continuing on the trajectory her family had projected for her, Richardson broke off contact with them; and instead of attending nursing school, she began to study photography in New Hampshire. Her early interest in visuality and particularly in photography continues to play a key role in Kincaid's works, almost all of which interrogate ways of seeing by referencing or even including photography.

A year later, Richardson returned to New York in search of opportunities to earn money through writing.⁷² She became acquainted with the New York literary scene of the early 1970s, which eventually led to her writing for *The New Yorker* in 1974, where she obtained a staff position in 1976 that she held until 1995.⁷³ Concurrently with the onset of her professional writing, in 1973 Elaine Richardson changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid in order to both claim her Caribbean heritage as well as to sever her ties from it. In an interview with Allan Vorda, Kincaid explained that she took on a new name to conceal her literary endeavors from the people she knew. On the one hand, she sought the freedom to take a shot at writing without possibly being ridiculed in the case of failure. On the other hand, Kincaid also desired anonymity to freely express her thoughts about both Antigua and herself: "I wanted to speak truthfully about myself without being myself" (in Vorda 15). While the name change thus foremost appears as a disguise and hence a device to distance herself from her origins, the choice of name also reflects a claim on precisely these origins, as Kincaid says that "[i]t was a kind of invention: I wouldn't go home to visit that part of the world, so I decided to recreate it. 'Jamaica' was symbolic of that place" (in Cudjoe 400). Elsewhere Kincaid appears to delight in the etymology of her chosen first name when she explains that "Jamaica" is an English corruption of "Xaymaca" (in Vorda 15), the original Arawak name of the island. In contrast to a majority of the Caribbean islands, Jamaica kept its Indigenous name (though Europeanized). Kincaid may thus delight both in the persistence of Arawak Indigeneity and in the reflection of colonial history in the corruption of the island's name. The choice of her new last name Kincaid nonchalantly

72 Her very first published piece was an interview with Gloria Steinem for the magazine *Ingenue* in 1973.

73 Kincaid's very early work for *The New Yorker* mostly consisted of unsigned pieces for the column "Talk of the Town," which were anthologized in *Talk Stories* in 2001.

presents as rather arbitrary, when she asserts that it just seemed to go with “Jamaica” (in Vorda 15 and in Cudjoe 400). The change from Elaine Potter Richardson to Jamaica Kincaid highlights a desire for self-making as well as a double-bind conspicuous throughout the author’s works that oscillates between approximation and distancing of the familiar and the unfamiliar, of the loved and the detested, of the colonized and the colonizing, all of which often converge in one.

In 1983, Kincaid’s first book *At the Bottom of the River*, a collection of short stories, was published to great critical acclaim. This was followed by the author’s first novel *Annie John* in 1985 and the nonfictional *A Small Place*, which resulted from her first visit to Antigua in the mid-1980s after nineteen years of absence from the island. These works all were written and published in the United States, and after Kincaid had lived there for almost two decades. Writing in the United States, but foremost concerned with the Caribbean in her texts, Kincaid’s migratory position is not uncommon to Caribbean writers of her generation.⁷⁴ Frank Birbalsingh thus counts Kincaid among a younger generation of Caribbean writers who became known in or after the 1970s.⁷⁵ Critical for Birbalsingh, however, is not the decade

⁷⁴ Compare, for instance, Olive Senior, Dionne Brand, or Michelle Cliff.

⁷⁵ Tobias Döring postulates a generational divide between Caribbean writers with a similar time-frame, although he differentiates the generations based on other premises: in his study *Caribbean-English Passages: Intertextuality in a Postcolonial Tradition*, Döring is concerned with the cross-fertilization of canonical British texts and Anglophone Caribbean literary works. He regards, for instance, Derek Walcott (b. 1930), Wilson Harris (b. 1921), and V. S. Naipaul (b. 1932) as the “pioneering father figures in Caribbean literature” (10), who had to grapple with “the profusion of previous writing,” by which Döring refers to the overbearance of English literary traditions and models (10). A younger generation of Caribbean writers, among which Döring counts for instance David Dabydeen (b. 1955), would have accordingly worked “in an already established Caribbean-English writing tradition” (Döring 10). Döring explicitly excludes female authors from this generational formation of Caribbean writers. He justifies this with reference to M. NourbeSe Philip, whom he reads as claiming that “for female Caribbean writers like herself the premise of literary production lies in ‘the absence of writing’” (Döring 10 and Philip 76). However, while Philip laments the absence of an Afro-Caribbean writing tradition (76), similar to what Döring reads in the trajectories of the “father figures of Caribbean literature,” Philip describes the struggle with the English language, which she regards unfit to express the fullness of the African-Caribbean experience (81–82). “That silence has had a profound effect upon the English-speaking African Caribbean artist working in the medium of words,” Philip diagnoses (82). “The Absence of Writing” to which Philip points with the title of her essay is thus caused by the overbearance of the English language. Moreover, a consideration of Kincaid and other female postcolonial authors mentioned disproves Döring’s assertion of the absence of literary ancestry for women writers: even though Kincaid testifies to an absence of Caribbean writerly role models, comparable to what Döring claims for Walcott et al., she does explicitly reference British canonical works, such as those by the Brontë sisters, Milton, or Blyton as texts by which she was thoroughly affected as a young reader and writer. This shows that pace Döring, both male and female Caribbean authors had to and have to navigate both the

of the 1970s itself, but independence from colonial rule which was achieved by most Caribbean countries in the 1960s. According to Birbalsingh, this induced a shift in writerly perspective: while Birbalsingh sees the previous generation of postwar and preindependence writers, such as Edgar Mittelholzer, Sam Selvon, George Lamming, or V. S. Naipaul as concerned with the ills of colonialism, he notes that younger Caribbean writers would focus on the postindependence experience. During her interview with Birbalsingh, Kincaid confirms that unlike for instance George Lamming, she does not rebel against “the great United States,” but “it is about the things that the powerful United States can do and does do” (142). The evolution in Caribbean author generations that Birbalsingh discerns thus reflects a move away from the rebellion against monolithic colonial power structures towards more differentiated critiques of social and political issues of postindependence Caribbean societies.

Moreover, Birbalsingh diagnoses a fourth generation of writers, which he calls “diaspora of Fourth Stage writers” (142), among which he also counts Kincaid. While the author herself rejects the label at the time of the interview in 1991,⁷⁶ as she did not consider herself “American” enough to be considered diasporic (in Birbalsingh 143), her work indeed is affected by her move to the United States.

With this varied field of literature in which Kincaid locates her own writing, from colonial British education and canonical literary works to obeah to modernist literature to the study of photography and the general circumstances of life in Antigua as well as in the United States, it is befitting that Kincaid herself “claim[s] the right to ambiguity, and the right to clarity. [...] I feel free to use everything, or not, as I choose” (Kincaid in Bonetti 129). It is hence unsurprising that Jamaica Kincaid is regarded both as a Caribbean and as an American writer, as for instance evidenced by the inclusion of her biography and works in standard anthologies or companions such as the *Encyclopedia of Caribbean Literature* and *The Routledge*

excess and the lack of literary models. Born in 1949, Kincaid would fall into both generational categories Döring postulates. Yet while Kincaid’s age might place her among the younger generation of writers and earlier male and/or female Caribbean authors’ texts already existed in her time, she claims she was not aware of them because she had had no access to their writings. Regarding the processes of becoming a writer, she would thus have to be counted among Döring’s older and pioneering generation of Caribbean writers, who had to grapple with English tradition, while she was also becoming a writer herself.

⁷⁶ This would change a year later. In 1993, Kincaid became an American citizen (Dance 152) and later in life she revealed how she was intrigued by African American culture and life (Rostron). Moreover, she converted to Judaism (also in 1993). She says: “I was trying to get the children to integrate all the different strands of their ancestral memory – that my family came from one part of the world through a certain set of historical events; their father’s [Jewish] family, through a certain set of events came from another part of the world and had its own ancestral memory” (Sela).

Reader in Caribbean Literature, or *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* and *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* and *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, or *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* and *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*.⁷⁷

Ultimately, both Kincaid's biography and her literary texts indicate that Kincaid's works should not be read in single (and singular) contexts, but the multiplicity of cultural influences on the person and on the texts introduce multitudes of interpretational approaches to her literary works. Some of the influences which occur in the form of intertextual engagements with other texts and discourses in Kincaid's works are at the center of the following sections, which offer analyses of intertextual references particularly in Kincaid's latest novels *Mr. Potter* and *See Now Then*.⁷⁸

Colonial Discourses: Visiting and Revising Textual Sites of History

In their engagements with history and historiography, Kincaid's texts take up colonial discourses to expose them as extending to contemporary textual production. I examine this in two exemplary readings of *Mr. Potter* and *See Now Then*. *Mr. Potter* is concerned with Antiguan colonial history and highlights the continuing effects of colonial sentiments on present-day conceptions of Antigua and its inhabitants by mimicking such discourses. *See Now Then* takes this a step further by reversing a literary motif of the nineteenth century and thus presents and questions seemingly established structures in racial relations. Both texts initially appear to repeat colonial texts rather uncritically. However, in *Mr. Potter*, the mimicking of intertexts exposes the totalizing claims of Western historiography, which is countered by the narrative of *Mr. Potter* itself. Similarly, in *See Now Then*, European claims to interpretative power over the bodies of others and of their textual

⁷⁷ These examples were chosen at random and do not reflect the full spectrum of anthologies including articles on Kincaid and her works.

⁷⁸ See also chapter 3.1 and chapter 3.2 for discussions of intertextual referencing of historical events of Columbus's travels in *Annie John*, and garden and travel writing in *My Garden Book*; respectively. Generally, the fact that Kincaid's works are replete with references to other texts has already been demonstrated by the works of several other scholars. In what follows, I will therefore not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of other (literary) works that found entrance to Kincaid's texts, but rather expose the functions of intertextual referencing in two choice novels by the author in which the referrals to earlier texts specifically amount to engagements with (literary) history.

representations are deconstructed when other perspectives reveal different histories.

In *Mr. Potter* the eponymous main character is displayed as affected by colonial history. Equally, the textual conception of this African-Antiguan character is written through colonial discourses. Intertextual references to Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel's assessment of African history and people and by extension also their descendants, such as Antiguan Mr. Potter, heavily bear on the descriptions of the novel's protagonist.

While actual events in the history of transatlantic slavery destroyed actual people in removing them from their homes and turning them into chattel, people were moreover obliterated by History with a capital *H* – their own histories were hardly preserved, nor was their humanity recognized in the writing of Western history that still continues to obliterate people, as is exemplified in the literary figure of Mr. Potter. What is presented as the effect of the past on the character Mr. Potter, ultimately is the effect of text on text in *Mr. Potter*.

Perhaps the most prominent feature of the novel's characters is their utter unimportance. In an apparent paradox, the text centers on people it presents as hardly worthy of narration. For instance, the narrator-author writes of Elfrida Robinson, mother to the novel's protagonist Mr. Roderick Potter: "[I]t [Antigua, home to Elfrida] was only the land of a very small island, an island of *no account*, really, and she was of *no account*, really, only she was the mother of my father and I know I cannot make myself forget that" (*MP* 73, emphasis mine). The reiteration of being of "no account" here points not to the narrator's own evaluation, but to an absence of importance conferred by textual treatment. The "account" here doubles in its meanings of "importance" and "narrative." Elfrida – and with her, any descendants of enslaved Africans (*MP* 85), or generally the inhabitants of Antigua (*MP* 121) – are described as not important enough to have accounts, i. e., narratives, of themselves. With this, the narrator Elaine Potter indicates the nonhistory of the Caribbean as it manifests with regard to personal histories. Nonetheless, she now writes of them, and she does so to sustain her own personal history. The quote above thus presents the central concern of *Mr. Potter*'s narrator: in her emphasis on absence, she bespeaks it and thus dissipates it (at least to some extent) for her very own personal interests in history.

Ostensibly, *Mr. Potter* generally is concerned with "nothing." The word is uncannily present throughout the text – people are "nothing" to each other (*MP* 150); Mr. Potter thinks of "nothing" (*MP* 27 or 34); fish pots are "filled with nothing"

(*MP* 43); songs sung mean “nothing” (*MP* 140).⁷⁹ The narrator’s observations of the ever-present “nothing” commonly refer to everyday Antiguan life. Harsher uses of the term are applied by Dr. Weizenger, a newly arrived immigrant who had fled from the European holocaust against the Jewish people. Although just having survived the attempted eradication of a whole people, Dr. Weizenger does not see Mr. Potter as an equal survivor of history:

Mr. Potter, the entity that made up Mr. Potter, was nothing itself, nothing in the sense of something without worth, nothing in the way a lighted matchstick when it is not needed, so Dr. Weizenger thought and so too thought the rest of the world, the rest of the world who could have an idea in regard to anything and then launch that idea into the realm of the everyday. (*MP* 19)

The European Dr. Weizenger is aligned with those who have the voice and agency to speak and to make their opinions known. In that, he represents a generalized Western opinion of people like Mr. Potter.⁸⁰

John Clement Ball contextualizes this overly present addressing of “nothing” with the absence that echoes through historiography: “With the constant repetition of ‘nothing,’ Kincaid echoes an enduring rhetoric of negation in Caribbean discursive history that dates back to writings of the earliest European visitors” (206). With “rhetoric of negation,” Ball refers to the repeated abjection of Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and English colonizers who settled in the Caribbean, in written accounts of this area, which deny the inhabitants of the Caribbean intelligence, morality, civility, and nobility. Ball illustrates this “rhetoric” with examples from travelogues and histories by the Dominican Tomás Ortiz (early sixteenth century), Edward Long (1774), James A. Froude (1888), and V. S. Naipaul’s dictum that “nothing was created in the West Indies” (Ball 206–207). I add here Hegel’s notorious take on the history of African peoples, which operates with the same rhetoric. Africa, according to Hegel, “is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. [...] What we properly understand by Africa,

⁷⁹ These are just a few examples of the occurrences of “nothing” in the text; the word features every few pages throughout the novel.

⁸⁰ We might read this as suggesting a disparity in the historiographic treatment of the Jewish holocaust in comparison to the transatlantic slave trade. Although both Africans and Jews suffered at the hands of racist Western Europeans, the history of African enslaved people here remains “nothing.” Although displaced, Dr. Weizenger retains the ability to speak, while Mr. Potter must remain silent. Curdella Forbes notes that Mr. Potter literally does not attain a voice here: “Mr. Potter’s agency as the subject of all the narrative sentences is erased by the fact that he speaks fewer than ten sentences, all of them rendered in reported speech or in translation from his Creole utterance, the Creole itself displaced by appearing in parentheses after the translation” (“Fracturing Subjectivities” 32).

is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still caught in the conditions of mere nature" (91–92), and he sees its inhabitants as "capable of no development or culture, and as we see them at this day, such have they always been" (91). In denying African history, Hegel attributes the continent with a different temporality altogether, one that passes slower and thus is marked by backwardness. The assumed absence of history transfers to African people in an assumption of inability of development, in Hegel's view. Thinking this together with the rhetoric of negation, which Ball attests to *Mr. Potter*, it points to a consistent and unrelenting monotony of life in the Caribbean.

This is also taken up in Elaine Potter's comments on "ordinariness" and "indifference" in addition to the prevailing nothingness that pervades Mr. Potter's life since birth. In 1922, Roderick Potter was born into a world that does not take any interest in this event: "And Mr. Potter was born, and all the world was indifferent to this" (MP 66). His mother Elfrida Robinson did not care, and neither did the midwife. Even the water the newborn was bathed in "was indifferent as to temperature" (MP 67). Generally, Mr. Potter's world is characterized by ordinariness and indifference. For instance, to his father, Nathaniel Potter, each day is ordinary (MP 58); the grave master who later shows the narrator-daughter to Mr. Potter's (possible) burial site is likewise an "ordinary man" (MP 49); all of Mr. Potter's daughters carry "ordinary names just like ordinary people" (MP 120); and the descendants of enslaved Africans are described as "of the ordinarily degraded" (MP 80). Events such as births or deaths do not make a difference here. When Mr. Potter's mother commits suicide by drowning herself, "the seas took her in, not with love, not with indifference, not with meaning of any kind" (MP 76). Elfrida is rendered as so unnoteworthy that she is not even met with indifference.

The emphasis on the ordinary in *Mr. Potter* paints a picture contrary to the development and movement Hegel regards as prerequisite for historicity. In this, narrator Elaine Potter repeats the ascription of an absence of eventfulness, which constitutes the absence of history in Hegel's view. In her repetition of this rhetoric of negation, Kincaid's text produces an excess of nothingness. "Nothing" is addressed to such an extent that this constitutes a presence that opposes the absence proclaimed by Hegel and others. The mimicking of colonial rhetoric simultaneously reverses it, as its continual references to nothingness transform the negation into a demonstration of colonial historiographic processes. In this way, Kincaid's text exposes that unimportance is indeed *not* an inherent characteristic of African people, but that processes of Western historiographic negation marginalize Black people. Homi Bhabha theorizes such repetition that already contains the subversion of the imitated as "colonial mimicry." On the side of the colonizer "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse

of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (122, emphasis in original). As such, the repetition with a difference that is at the heart of colonial mimicry, always already undermines the mimicked. "The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing" (Bhabha 123). Bhabha calls this the "menace of mimicry," by which he refers to "the disclosing [of] the ambivalence of colonial discourse [which] disrupts its authority" (126). This is also at play in *Mr. Potter*'s rhetoric of negation, which through repetition positions absence front and center in the text, calling attention to the historic negation of people in the Caribbean and of African descent.

The mechanisms of the menace of mimicry are also apparent in Elfrida Robinson's naming of her son: overwhelmed by the "great expanse of the life of George Brydges Rodney, the English admiral" (MP 64), Elfrida is inspired by his name. The narrator of *Mr. Potter* deems this British naval officer known for plundering, and who was stationed in the Caribbean among other locations throughout the British Empire, a "maritime criminal, [...] whose criminal nature and accomplishments had become so distorted in retelling that the victims of his actions had come to revere him" (MP 64). Elfrida's admiration for a character such as Rodney once more highlights the effect of colonial ideology and historiography on the colonized. For her son, however, "whose appearance in the world had no real meaning for her, she wanted a name that had no meaning at all to her, and this wanting of no meaning made her choose something different, and so she called him Roderick, not Rodney" (MP 64). In naming her son after a British hero, but not quite as she wishes to remain in the realm of meaninglessness, Elfrida performs an idealized form of colonial mimicry that attempts to approximate Englishness, but has internalized a presumed inferiority. Ironically, Elfrida's choice then subverts the assumption of inferiority, considering that Roderick, a Germanic name, actually means "famous ruler." As such, the mimicking of the name with a difference actually trumps it, when she does not name her son *after* the famous ruler Rodney, but she proclaims him a famous ruler *himself*.

This ordinariness and Elfrida's intended absence of meaning recalls Hegel's negation of African history, which he extends to an assumed inferiority of African people. Hegel maintains:

In Negro life, the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the contemplation of any firm objectivity – as for example, God or law – in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he has the view of his own being. In the indiscriminate, compact oneness of his existence, the African has not yet attained the distinction between himself as an individual and his essential generality [...]. The Negro as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state: one must abstract from all thought of reverence and ethics – all that we call feeling – if we would right-

ly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character. (86)

Hegel's racist opinion here relegates Black people to an animal-like state of backwardness. Hegel locates an explanation for general shallowness of character in his assumption of an underdevelopment of African people, which links typicality (in opposition to self-conscious individuals) to the absence of European conceptions of history.

Mr. Potter picks up on this assumed absence of consciousness in its presentation of its protagonist as lacking the ability of self-reflection: "Mr. Potter did not think that any part of him was reflected in [the] sight before him [...] none of this [what he saw] reminded him of himself in any way and that was only because everything he saw was so closely bound up to him and all that he saw there was no distance of any kind" (*MP* 5).⁸¹ In a Lacanian reading, Mr. Potter would have skipped the mirror stage, as he does not recognize the relationship between himself and his surroundings ("no distance") and for that matter he does not *reflect* on himself either: "he did not think [...] at all, for he was not at that moment separated from himself" (*MP* 21). According to Lacan, the mirror stage is imperative in the formation of the I, i. e., in attaining one's own subjectivity, which is thus denied Mr. Potter and others in the same situation. Roderick and Nathaniel Potter in this way just *are*; they are one with themselves (see *MP* 24, 45).⁸² Curdella Forbes assesses that "Mr. Potter is ironically, and contemptibly, at one with the natural universe, not because he has attained a transcendental understanding of his relation to it, but because he has failed to attain the basic condition for humanity – the capacity for self-reflection. Self-reflection recognizes one's relation to the cosmos and a radical reflection from it; it is the arrival of is-ness, of subjectivity" ("Fracturing Subjectivities" 32–33). This "oneness" that results from the absence of reflection seems to directly take up Hegel's assumption of an African "compact oneness of [...] existence" (86). In the general climate of ordinariness and indifference, Mr. Potter cannot emerge as an individual character in his daughter's narration, but he re-

⁸¹ Similarly, Roderick Potter's father, Nathaniel, does not differentiate between himself and the world he is a part of, when he "looked outside himself and he looked within himself [...] it was all the same" (*MP* 45).

⁸² The rhetoric of negation also participates in the frequent descriptions of Mr. Potter's illiteracy, which once more emphasizes his unreflectiveness: "[B]ecause Mr. Potter could neither read nor write, he could not understand himself, he could not make himself known to others, he did not know himself, not that such things would have brought him any amount of happiness" (*MP* 21). The equation of illiteracy and unreflectiveness moreover recalls colonialist notions rendering cultures of orality subordinate to literate Western cultures.

mains a “type,” being of no account and unable to give an account of himself.⁸³ His daughter’s textual exploration of the past provides an explanatory model of his absence from his own life.⁸⁴ When her characterization of Roderick Potter takes up colonial discourses on Blackness, she shows how they still determine the historiographic writing of the Caribbean and of diasporic Black people. In imagining her father through Hegel and the like, the narrator draws attention to the totality of Western history in Glissant’s sense, which excludes nuanced accounts of the descendants of enslaved people. In this way, she criticizes not only slavery and colonialism as they existed, but also their treatment in historiography, which still corrupts contemporary knowledge and imaginations of the past.

While the narrator of *Mr. Potter* repeats the “rhetoric of negation” of the Caribbean, she simultaneously denounces it in confronting it with her own voice. By imagining her father’s life, the narrator-author creates knowledge about the past that opposes the previous nothingness and silence. Her mimicking of colonial prejudices towards African people, and towards the utilization of misguided opinions like those that link illiteracy, consciousness, and humanity, frames her own narrative within a critique of colonialism and slavery, demonstrating its aftereffects as the causes for conditions that prevail today. Her repetition of colonial negation of Antiguans thus entails a “double articulation” (Bhabha 122), which exposes and disturbs colonialist literary and historiographic dominance. Within her intertextual acts of mimicry, the narrator of *Mr. Potter* carves out space for herself in writing a version of history, which narrowly resolves the colonial negation of her ancestors: through her writing, the narrator-author presents her own agency to break her ancestors’ cycle of silence, as she is able to give an account of Mr. Potter’s life story. Though the narrator does not give a voice to the silenced Mr. Potter, she gives one to herself in producing *Mr. Potter*.

In a similar way, *See Now Then* voices matters that in colonial textual production remained mute. This novel makes use of intertextual references in order to evoke the textual history of the issues it is concerned with. However, unlike *Mr. Potter*, *See Now Then* not only exposes and challenges its textual ancestry by mim-

⁸³ This is exemplified both in Roderick Potter and in his father Nathaniel: “And if someone came upon him then, he could not give an account of himself, not even one that began with ‘I was born...’ for he no longer had an interest in when he came into the world” (Nathaniel Potter, *MP* 42). Roderick Potter: “[H]e did not have a mind’s eye in which he could wander, he had no thoughts about his past, his future, and his present which lay between them both [...] he could not read and could not write and he could not render the story of life, his own in particular” (*MP* 130).

⁸⁴ Julin Everett also reads *Mr. Potter* as an autobiographical orphan narrative in which the narrator creates her father in writing to thereby become herself, i.e., to overcome the void of that missing personal history.

icking it; the later novel also reverses colonial meanings by literally making it possible to read what has hitherto been opaque. In what follows, I show how *See Now Then* visits and revises two earlier novels, *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys (1966) and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (1847). These two texts are already intertextually connected, as Rhys conceived her novel as a prequel to Brontë's nineteenth-century text in order to remove the character of Bertha Mason, who is famously known as the "madwoman in the attic,"⁸⁵ from this position and from obscurity by giving her her own life story.⁸⁶ *See Now Then*, I argue, enters a conversation with the two earlier texts and through redirection and resignification opens the previous texts to different meanings that decenter colonial claims on history.

See Now Then centers on the lives of the Sweet Family and their breaking apart. Narrated from the perspective of the protagonist Mrs. Sweet, the novel examines the dismantling of her marriage over the course of several years. The text reflects on the interracial relations of Mrs. Sweet, who immigrated to the United States from the Caribbean as a young woman, and her Euro-American husband Mr. Sweet. This constellation mirrors that of the Creole wife and her English husband in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*. *See Now Then* takes up these texts' discussions of interracial marriage, transporting them into the present by framing Mr. and Mrs. Sweet in the same structure of marital problems, and ultimately provides aspects of a female non-white perspective that remained absent in both *Jane Eyre* and (parts of) *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The first of *See Now Then*'s eight chapters sets out to establish the relationship of its two protagonists Mr. and Mrs. Sweet. The focalization here alternates between the two characters in their thoughts about and descriptions of each other. However, ultimately the text conveys only Mrs. Sweet's perspective, as she is the narrator and fictional author of the book, so that her husband's thoughts about her would have been assumed by her. One of her descriptions of herself through her husband's eyes is particularly noticable for its repeated mentioning (eight times throughout the book, six of which occur on its first eighteen pages): she is not American by birth, but came to the United States as an immigrant, possibly having traveled by boat. This is a grievance of Mr. Sweet's. He perceives his wife to be very different from himself in all regards, which the novel presents as leading to the eventual end of Mr. and Mrs. Sweet's marriage.

Mr. Sweet regards his wife as of lower education and intellect, as is apparent in Mr. Sweet's dislike for a fine coat that Mrs. Sweet had bought for him from

⁸⁵ See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

⁸⁶ Rhys claimed that she would attempt to write "[t]he real story – as it might have been" (qtd. in Pietrzak-Franger 11).

a fine haberdasher in the city where Mr. Sweet was born and he hated the coat because his benighted wife had given it to him and how could she know what a fine garment it was, she who had just not long ago gotten off the banana boat, or some other benighted form of transport, everything about her being so benighted, even the vessel on which she arrived. (SNT 9)

Although she gifted the garment, he denies her understanding of its finery based on her heritage. The tripled use of the adjective “benighted” in this passage emphasizes Mr. Sweet’s dislike for his wife. Beyond that, it points to his low opinion of her mental and educational development, as the term “benighted” entails converging meanings of backwardness, primitivity, darkness, and the absence of education in a Western sense.⁸⁷ The connection of darkness with these attributes might be read as pointing to underlying racist prejudices and misconceptions of people of color, which wrongly attest a perceived lack of learning to people based on skin color. The repeated use of the term “benighted” thus suggests Mr. Sweet’s harsh dismissal of his wife’s capabilities as racially charged. Mrs. Sweet is presented as thoroughly alien to her husband, further constituting Mr. Sweet as her opposite. He is aligned with the fineness of a coat from a fine haberdasher from the city he was born in, which establishes his heritage is as one of refinement.⁸⁸ Keeping in mind that Mr. Sweet’s thoughts and judgments of his wife are conveyed by *her* in *See Now Then*, what the text ultimately presents are Mrs. Sweet’s perceptions or possibly even imaginations of her husband’s opinion of herself. She finds his reasons for disliking her and being unable to understand her, and hence for their incompatibility as life partners, in their racial and cultural differences based on her origins outside of the United States. Mrs. Sweet thus locates their marital difficulties within racial discourses of otherness and immigration as a threat to whiteness.

The historical dimension of these discourses is evoked by references to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*, both of which also present marital relationships of white European husbands with immigrant wives from the Caribbean in which the unknowability of the perceived foreigner is at the center of the couples’ inability to communicate. In *See Now Then*, Mr. Sweet reads one indicator for his wife’s otherness in her eyes:

⁸⁷ Synonyms for “benighted” include “analphabetic, ignorant, dark, nonliterate, rude, simple, uneducated, uninstructed, unlearned, unlettered, unread, unschooled, untaught, untutored” (*Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*).

⁸⁸ Moreover, the phrase “banana boat” does not actually refer to a specific mode of transportation, but rather Mrs. Sweet’s non-Americanness, as Mr. Sweet immediately concedes that she may have travelled by another means than a steam ship transporting both fruit and passengers. The phrase “banana boat” thus much more works as a discriminatory term to frame Mrs. Sweet as an immigrant from a country less wealthy – and in Mr. Sweet’s opinion less enlightened – than the United States.

Her eyes, dark, impenetrable Mr. Sweet would say, as he looked into them, at first he said the word impenetrable with delight, for he thought of discovering something not yet known to him, something that lay in Mrs. Sweet's eyes and that would make him free, free, free from all that bound him, and then he cursed her dark eyes, for they offered him nothing; in any case his own eyes were blue and Mrs. Sweet was indifferent to that particular feature of his. (SNT 19)

This passage echoes one from *Wide Sargasso Sea*: the novel is set in the first half of the nineteenth century and is concerned with the relationship of the Antoinette Cosway, the Jamaican-born daughter of a plantation owner, and an unnamed Englishman, who had traveled to the colonial island in search of wealth. He married Antoinette in order to secure her monetary assets for himself and thus allow himself to keep performing his social role of a genteel Englishman, which the laws of primogeniture jeopardized, as he was born as a second son. The marriage was meant to free him from his precarious condition of having to secure a substantial amount of capital not to embarrass himself and shame his family in not being able to maintain his social rank. However, the Englishman in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is disappointed when he ascertains, after pressuring Antoinette into the union, that she was not the right choice for him to achieve his goals of social acceptability. As a Creole whose family had been established in the Caribbean for generations, Antoinette already has a lower social standing in the Jamaican colonial society than more recently immigrated whites, as “the whiteness of white Creoles has become somehow culturally invisible when white Creoles are seen as others within whiteness” (Eeva 249). Observing his own wife more closely, Antoinette's husband at once sees indicators of racial otherness in and on her:

I watched her critically. She wore a tricorn hat which became her. At least it shadowed her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either. (Rhys 37)

As in *See Now Then*, the wife's dark eyes are perceived as a marker of non-whiteness, which unnerves the English husband. It leads him to manipulate Antoinette in such a fashion that she becomes pliable to his wishes, for instance by calling her “Marionette” and eventually renaming her “Bertha Mason.” Ultimately, Antoinette ends up in the attic of his English mansion, just as her literary ancestor Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. At no point in *Wide Sargasso Sea* does the text present its female protagonist definitely as a person of color, or even as racially ambiguous. Rather, as different parts of the novel are conveyed from different perspectives by autodiegetic narrators, the text produces the Englishman's perception of his

wife, which exposes the motif of the eyes as an external description that allows him to read race on her body.

Werner Sollors determines the description of eyes as dark and unreadable as a popular marker to identify literary characters of African descent, as for instance in Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons" (1842/46), William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Sollors demonstrates how the dark eye became a "familiar descriptive convention of the eye" in nineteenth-century literature (213).⁸⁹ Drawing on the "convention of the eye," *See Now Then* not only refers to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but to a popular literary motif of racial otherness, which places the contemporary novel in historical contexts of literary interracial relationships.

However, *See Now Then* does not end with reproducing a technique of othering, but the contemporary text moves on to deconstruct it. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette Cosway's otherness is produced through her husband's perception and narration. While the text in general conveys the perspective of the marginalized Creole character Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*, here it remains mute, performing a silencing of the Creole wife. *See Now Then* responds to the motif of the dark, impenetrable eyes, when the contemporary text clarifies:

But Mrs. Sweet's eyes were not impenetrable at all to anyone else and everyone she met wished that they were so; for behind her eyes lay scenes of turbulence, upheavals, murders, betrayals, on foot, on land, and on the seas where horde upon horde of people were transported to places on the earth's surface that they had never heard of or even imagined, and murderer and murdered, betrayer and betrayed, the source of the turbulence, the instigator of upheavals, were all mixed up. (SNT 19)

See Now Then here affords a change in focalization from the Euro-American husband Mr. Sweet and his racially prejudiced literary forebears to the experience of those who have been marginalized. In making the eyes readable, *See Now Then* presents them as windows to a history of slavery and colonization from the perspective of the abducted and abused. Redirecting the significations of the motif of the dark eyes from otherness to indicating the crimes of the colonizers, *See Now Then* reveals the turbulent history of oppression as equally inscribed in the motif of the dark as the other side of the same coin. It thereby highlights the plurality of histories as opposed to one History. The motif's previous meaning of unknowability and alienness is negated when the eyes are decoded, which not only

⁸⁹ The Bertha Mason in Brontë's novel is also characterized by a dark appearance, with "a discoloured face," "black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes" and a "blackened inflation of the lineaments" (372).

suspends the authority of this colonial motif, but also questions othering techniques based on physical markers in general. In this way, *See Now Then* takes up an intertextual “memory” of an earlier text (in Lachmann’s sense) and revises it.

Although in *See Now Then* the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Sweet ends in divorce, this certainly is a happier ending than that of Mrs. Sweet’s two literary ancestors Antoinette Cosway and Bertha Mason in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*. Famously, Bertha Mason dies in a fire of the English mansion, which in Brontë’s novel sets her husband free of the burden of a mad woman for a wife. In Rhys’s reworking of the material, Antoinette also suffers incarceration at the hands of her husband, who hid his Creole wife from English society. The novel ends with Antoinette dreaming of setting her husband’s house on fire, which the text suggests she then does after waking (Rhys 123). In this case, it is Antoinette who is set free by the fire. This ending of the tragic characters of Antoinette Cosway and Bertha Mason is evoked in *See Now Then*, when Mr. Sweet muses that his wife “is strange and should live in the attic of a house that burns down” (159). Yet in this novel the fire remains a thought in the husband’s mind. In repeating the character constellation and racial structures of the two earlier texts, *See Now Then* shows how Mr. and Mrs. Sweet’s marital problems are far from unique,⁹⁰ and how nineteenth-century notions of interracial marriage affect contemporary imaginations of such relationships.

By framing its own characters in well-known narrative structures and evoking an established literary motif of othering, *See Now Then* visits the sites of colonial literary history, but in contrast to *Mr. Potter*, which highlights the effects of this legacy on contemporary textual production, the 2013 novel offers a counterperspective in resignifying the motif and thus decentering an objectifying white male gaze – both when it comes to concrete female subjects of color, and in terms of this gaze’s overall interpretive authority. By taking up and continuing the motif of the “dark eyes” with a difference, the book challenges the totality of this motif through added meanings. *See Now Then* presents another take on history not as new, but as repressed but present – and needing only to be read. *See Now Then*’s intertextual engagement with *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* directs attention from the concrete events of individual narrations to their underlying structures of repetition, employing renarration to reevaluation and decenter colonial discourse’s claims to interpretation.

⁹⁰ Giovanna Covi similarly reads the main events of *See Now Then* as oozing ordinariness: “Falling in and out of love is ordinary. What has happened to Mr. and Mrs. Sweet is conventional. Kincaid implies that it does not require a particular explanation. Their story is a common story, not even worth the telling, and the narrator Mrs. Sweet concentrates instead on the changed perception of reality through time” (“Creolizing Cultures” 146).

Heracles and Persephone: Mythologies of the Ordinary

Jamaica Kincaid's latest novel *See Now Then* offers a wealth of intertextual relations from contemporary American literature to children's books to popular culture.⁹¹ The novel's allusions to Greek mythology nevertheless stand out for their ubiquity. For instance, the Sweets' son and daughter are named Heracles and Persephone. Both characters also display features of their mythological counterparts, which makes for extraordinariness in the rather ordinary world of the Sweet family. The exceptionalism thus displayed in *See Now Then* starkly contrasts with the pervasive ordinariness in *Mr. Potter*, Kincaid's latest novel before this one. To *See Now Then*'s homodiegetic narrator, Mrs. Sweet, much of the world and especially her children are a marvel. This, I argue, is expressed through intertextual engagements with Greek mythological material. Within the renditions of Heracles and Persephone's lives, the extraordinary is moreover produced in the text's play with literal and figurative language, which diffuses meanings and continually lets the text spin off into excess and exaggerations that create both proximities and distances with its contents. In a motion of approximation and distancing, the text positions the banal as grand and the extraordinary as trivial. Ultimately, this back-and-forth motion between the exceptional and the conventional, created through intertexts and excess of detail, inscribes a nuclear American family into contexts of Greek mythology, which presents their daily lives as equally fabled as those of Greek heroes and heroines. At the same time, the text maintains the ordinariness of even the most exceptional circumstances and events, which in turn imbues the famous characters of Greek myth with human banality.

See Now Then spans the married life of the Sweets and the maturing of their two children from birth to their teenage years. The narrative is set around or just before the turn of the twenty-first century in the family's home in the small town of Bennington, Vermont. The description of the Sweets' house already contains references to other literary texts, as throughout the novel it is called the "Shirley Jackson house" (see for instance *SNT* 3, 21, 49, 72, 109, 135, 162, 182), named so for a previous resident of the home. Following up on the invocation of Shirley Jackson, a wealth of intertextual links between *See Now Then* and Jackson's own work reveals itself. The reading motion incited by the cue "Shirley Jackson house" at the very outset of the novel is exemplary for the play with intertextual cues. In many cases, the book incites paper chases through text after text that eventually lead

91 I am here referring, for instance, to Shirley Jackson (whose mention in *See Now Then* I will also discuss on the following pages), the mentions of Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* (*SNT* 124), Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* and *Runaway Bunny* (*SNT* 113), and the hip-hop duo Outkast (*SNT* 158).

to the simple realization that text generates further text. In this, *See Now Then* perfectly exemplifies the productive aspect of intertextuality that Renate Lachmann emphasizes: the intertextually organized text “is produced by process[es] of reference to other texts” (30). *See Now Then*’s engagement with Shirley Jackson demonstrates the text’s general mechanisms of its intertextual work. Hence, and because the Shirley Jackson house is itself entangled with the Greek intertexts based on its architecture, I will briefly focus on Jackson, before I attend to the Greek mythological intertexts and their links with a conception of history in Kincaid’s latest novel.

American author Shirley Jackson lived and died in the small village of North Bennington, Vermont. She and her family resided in several houses here, all rented except for the last one. The first of these is located on 12 Prospect Street, “an 1850 Greek Revival mansion complete with two-story columns” (Petrie). Jackson’s last North Bennington home, where she settled permanently in 1953, is located on 66 Main Street, which according to her biographer Ruth Franklin is still known in the Vermont town as “the Shirley Jackson house” (326). Kincaid in *See Now Then*, however, chose to give the moniker to Jackson’s first home, which is the one that also found entry to Jackson’s own literary works, as the covers of her non-fictional work *Life Among the Savages* suggest. For instance, the first edition (Farar, Straus and Young, 1953) or the currently easily available edition by Penguin Books (1997) feature the white columns of the house’s front porch in their front cover art. The Prospect Street house arguably is the setting of Jackson’s autobiography *Life Among the Savages* in which she describes the family home as “modeled [...] after, presumably, a minor Greek temple; [...] [with] four massive white pillars across the front” (11). Jackson assumes the reason for the architectural choices in the “classical revival [...] upon the country” when the house was built in roughly the 1820s (11). Enthusiast for writer’s homes Kathye Fetsko Petrie regards the Greek revival mansion on 12 Prospect Street as the setting not only of *Life Among the Savages*, but also of the later *See Now Then*. This is easily supported by *See Now Then*, which depicts its own setting as a “house with great big Doric columns, Victorian and Greek revival architecture” (SNT 135–136). The location of the house is moreover mentioned so specifically that it is easy to follow Mrs. Sweet on a map of Bennington, when she drives to pick up her children from a school bus stop. On their way back, they start out from Bennington Monument (SNT 127), driving along Silk Road, crossing the Walloomsac River, along Matteson Road and onto Harlan Road (SNT 131), which merges into Prospect Street.

Yet all this detective work of following the clues in *See Now Then*, which leads to the biography of another American author and a map of her home town, hardly provides deeper insights into *See Now Then* itself, except the real-life location of a house that serves as a setting for a fictional text. Further reading up on Shirley Jackson’s life reveals remarkable parallels to Mrs. Sweet’s own biography: both

their husbands – Stanley Hyman and Mr. Sweet – taught at Bennington college, both are of Jewish heritage, both their families were against the unions with non-Jewish wives, and both men left their wives for younger women, specifically their college students. This repetition of personal living circumstances of two women writers in a singular space but at a distance of roughly fifty years is expressed in the very similar narratives set in the space of the Prospect Street house: the peculiarities and banalities of domestic life with children.⁹² Moreover, it points to an absence of originality in human biographies, which is one of the main uses of intertextuality in *See Now Then*. Beyond that, such paper chases, which can be vastly entertaining to the willing reader, quickly exhaust themselves in laying bare only trivial connections, but they do not elucidate the intertextual relations. *See Now Then* continually makes such offers in suggesting external texts, which ultimately only lead back to the everyday lives depicted in *See Now Then*. For instance, the family car is a “Kuniklos” (SNT 103 and 134). The Greek name of the car might appear significant in the context of other Greek references in *See Now Then*. A hunt for meanings will eventually reveal that the German car manufacturer Volkswagen produced a model called Rabbit between 1974 and 1983. Outside the United States, this model would be known as a first-generation VW Golf. “Kuniklos,” of course, is Greek for “rabbit.” Coming back to *See Now Then* with this added knowledge does not open Kincaid’s text to further meaningful significations, but this is a return to an ordinary family driving an old car.

Just like the Jackson-Hyman family, the lives of the Sweets are ordinary ones. *See Now Then* illustrates this with a myriad of ostensibly unimportant details, such as how Mr. Sweet likes his coffee (Maxwell House instant coffee with creamless milk, SNT 72), the son’s favorite toys (McDonald’s Happy Meal gifts, SNT 24 or 49), or Mrs. Sweet’s knack for home-cooked French food (SNT 7). Descriptions of the family life center on domestic worries and duties, such as the disturbing noises of the washer and dryer (SNT 22 or 164) or due payments of car loans (SNT 61). The banality of the Sweets’ life is set within the ordinariness of small-town life. Here, neighbors help each other out, such as Homer cleaning out the gutters of the Sweets’ roof (SNT 4).⁹³ The Sweets’ neighbors, too, are generally characterized by their ordinariness. They wear the same pairs of socks for several days and worry about their boilers and pipes freezing during the winter (SNT 7–8). The so-

92 Apart from this overlap, Shirley Jackson’s and Mrs. Sweet’s literary works differ considerably, as Jackson is best known for her gothic novels and short stories, whereas Mrs. Sweet (like Jamaica Kincaid) is most interested in personal and colonial history (SNT 145).

93 On one of the novel’s first pages, the Greek writer Homer is evoked, if only by association when the text mentions the neighbor’s first name. Nonetheless, this sets the mood for the Greek intertexts throughout the book.

phisticated Mr. Sweet is angered by their falling asleep during his piano performance of Shostakovich (*SNT* 6–7), which leads him to despise his audience wearing “duck-feather-filled coats, which had trapped the smell of wood smoke” (*SNT* 8), with “their Subarus and second-hand Saabs” (*SNT* 9).⁹⁴ The descriptions of inconsequentialities, such as the socks worn more than once, or Mr. Sweet’s preference for burnt toast (*SNT* 72) thoroughly cast the Sweets and their neighbors in the ordinariness of rural small-town life.

This very profane world becomes a marvel through its narration, when Mrs. Sweet, “would find the simplest thing extraordinary” (*SNT* 87). Her references to Greek mythology seemingly transport extraordinariness into the ordinary. This is already evident in the children’s names Heracles and Persephone, contrasted by their playmates’ nondescript names Tim or Tad (*SNT* 96 or 149). The majority of *See Now Then* centers on the second-born child of the family, Heracles,⁹⁵ and his growing up from a nursing baby to a toddler to a boy in his preteen years. Heracles is characterized by his youthfulness (*SNT* 36) and physical prowess (*SNT* 107). He is tasked with different duties and has to weather perils that insert themselves into the life of the toddler. For instance, he is woken up by his sibling’s yells while asleep in his crib as an infant:

Wake up, his sister shouted at him, a snake with nine heads is lying next to you in your crib. And the very young Heracles then turned over into somersault, and facing the nine-headed snake directly stuck out his tongue at all those heads; without making too much of an effort, he tore off their heads and threw them over his shoulder; all nine of them. (*SNT* 45)

The danger of the snakes and the victory over them reminisces the fabled Heracles’s defeat of the serpents sent by the jealous Hera to kill the extramarital son her husband Zeus begat with the human woman Alcmena,⁹⁶ which Pindar tells as follows:

but the queen of gods with anger in her heart immediately sent snakes. When the doors had been opened they went into the deep recess of the bedroom, eager to wrap their darting jaws around the babies [Heracles and his half-brother Iphicles]. But the boy [Heracles] lifted his head straight up and engaged in his first battle, grasping the two snakes by their necks in

⁹⁴ Were Mr. Sweet’s biography written, it might well use the same title as Shirley Jackson’s, *Life Among the Savages*, for his dislike of Bennington’s inhabitants.

⁹⁵ Mrs. Sweet, the narrator, rather focuses on Heracles than on her first-born daughter Persephone. Persephone is portrayed to be her father’s daughter; Heracles as his mother’s son.

⁹⁶ Son of a human and a god, the Greek Heracles is born a demigod. As the realms of ordinary contemporary small-town life and myth are blurred by intertextual references to extraordinary feats of a small boy, so are the realms of human and divinity in the body of Greek Heracles.

his two inescapable hands, and as they were being strangled, the passage of time exhaled the life from their monstrous bodies. (Nemean Ode I, 9–11)⁹⁷

However, while in Pindar's rendition of the myth, Heracles's slaying of the snakes establishes his "extraordinary determination and power" to the fellow human beings of his world (to his adoptive father Amphitryon; Pindar 11), in *See Now Then* it does not. Here, the snake heads end up in an ordinary world which takes little notice of the infant's feat and which at most is inconvenienced by the outcome of this event: the organic waste produced in Heracles's fight very ordinarily lands "on the floor of Mrs. Sweet's newly cleaned kitchen" (SNT 45). Unimpressed by her son's victory and his averting of a deadly threat, Mrs. Sweet is more concerned with mundane household duties: "Oh god, she said to herself, that kid is always up to something, what a mess he has made now. And she picked up the nine snake heads and put them in a bag, wiped the floor clean, and asked Mr. Sweet to please come and put out the garbage" (SNT 45). The narrative immediately returns to normality after the serpents' deaths by removing the disruption and thus reverting the domestic space of Mrs. Sweet's kitchen to its previous state sans snake heads. While Heracles's achievement marks his exceptionality in the Greek myth, the contemporary text refuses to recognize this. The intertextual reference to Heracles's deed might fuel expectations of proclamations of heroism, but the return to Mrs. Sweet's kitchen disregards such implications. Marveling at Heracles's abilities is left to the reader.

See Now Then operates similarly when it comes to mythical Heracles's labors, which are intertwined with tasks of the young contemporary Heracles's (everyday) life:

wash the dishes, put them away, clean the stables, walk the horses, fix the roof, milk the cows, emerge from his mother's womb in the usual way, slay the monster, [...] lay waste to whole villages to the surprise of the villagers, trap and skin the she-fox, eat his green vegetables and his meat too, [...] cross the road by himself, tie his shoelaces, kiss a girl, sleep in his own bed. (SNT 36–37)

This list may be read as the labors of growing up, interspersed with metaphorical renderings of child's play, such as the destruction of toy figurines lined up in toy villages. When Heracles grows older, the mythical references become more pro-

⁹⁷ See also Apollodorus's *Library*: "When the child was eight months old, Hera desired the destruction of the babe and sent two huge serpents to the bed. Alcmena called Amphitryon to her help, but Hercules arose and killed the serpents by strangling them with both his hands" (Book II, Ch. ix, 175). Moreover, *See Now Then*'s Heracles kills a nine-headed snake, which additionally references the mythical Heracles's defeat of the Lernean Hydra.

nounced – as do the real-life dangers he encounters. The adventures his mother foresees in his life

might be cleaning the fabled Augean Stables, slaying the Nemean Lion and wearing his skin as a cloak, an encounter with the Erymanthian Boar, though not yet and perhaps never the policeman in the city of Boston, who traces himself through some long-dead people from Ireland, imagines the young Heracles has run through a red light and by that time, then and now, the young Heracles had become a young black man, whatever that might be, and even now, whatever that might be is not certain. (SNT 104)

The link of mythical Heracles's feats with the possible encounter with a policeman in contemporary Heracles's life suggests that being stopped by a white police officer is as perilous in the life of a young Black man in the United States (here Boston) as mythical Heracles's labors.⁹⁸ In turn, this implies that the survival of such an encounter would be as marvelous as the supernatural Heracles's victories over powerful beasts,⁹⁹ which exposes everyday tasks of African American men to be as perilous as the ordeals of a demigod.

The portrayal of Heracles's older sister Persephone similarly takes up the narrative of her mythical prefiguration: most noticeable about Persephone in *See Now Then* is her absence. Persephone hardly emerges as a defining presence in her mother's life or in her narrative. Mrs. Sweet attributes this to the efforts of the girl's father, who "[i]mmediately after Persephone's birth, [...] began to secrete her" (SNT 123). At times, Persephone is kept in Mr. Sweet's study (SNT 59), which is associated with death. To Mrs. Sweet her husband's private space "looked like a replica of a welcome area of a funeral home" (SNT 14). At other times Persephone is "carefully hidden in his pocket, out of her mother's sight" (SNT 79) from which she may emerge in spring (SNT 128–129). Persephone's absence, her associ-

98 Apollodorus's *Library* counts slaying the Nemean Lion, catching the Erymanthian Boar, and cleaning the Augean Stables among the fabled Heracles's labors, which he has to complete in order to earn immortality (see Apollodorus 185–237).

99 Kincaid and Mrs. Sweet point to the general perils of living as a young Black man in the United States, where traffic offenses might be imagined by police officers on the basis of skin color. This is as relevant as ever in the 2010s, which recorded the deaths of men including Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice that have become synonymous with excessive and unwarranted police force against Black men and boys in the United States. The proximity of the Greek Heracles's fabled labors and the young Black Heracles "adventures" thus also conveys a critique of contemporary social and political circumstances – in particular the contemporary life-threatening racism and brutality of law enforcement officers towards young Black men in the United States. Through its references to Greek mythology, *See Now Then* suggests that in order to survive day-to-day in the United States, Black men need to be superhuman.

ation with spring,¹⁰⁰ and her dwelling in a space associated with death recall the mythical Persephone's residence in Hades's underworld, from which she may travel during spring time.¹⁰¹ The mythological intertext motivates Persephone's absence and the unknowability of her character.

Tracey Walters maintains that "the Persephone and Demeter myth is by far one of the most popular myths adopted by Black women writers" (19). Refigurations of the myth, according to Walters, often serve to highlight Black women's precarious situations by focusing on the rape and abduction of the mythical Persephone (27). Moreover, the myth is often revised in such a way that Persephone's perspective is represented.¹⁰² Such a recovery project of a hitherto muted female voice is decidedly not at stake in *See Now Then*. Here, Persephone remains quiet and unknowable. In this way, the character remains a type,¹⁰³ mainly defined by character constellation, i.e., by her absence from her mother.

Since the diegetic world of North Bennington is a very profane one, it might be clear to the reader that Persephone does not fit into Mr. Sweet's jacket pocket at all, for she is a grown human girl, but the text here does not recognizably mark Persephone's living in a jacket pocket as metaphorical. Supernatural circumstances, such as conflicting sizes, are accepted as facts by the text. It pays no further attention to them. Here, the impossible is possible,¹⁰⁴ and the extraordinary mundane.

The mention of Persephone's living inside her father's jacket pocket is moreover embedded in a wealth of detail: the scene begins with Persephone and Heracles waiting for their mother to be picked up at a bus stop. Persephone's presence in this scene is specifically marked, which yet again emphasizes her general absence: "it was spring and she was released from living in the depth of the jacket of Mr. Sweet's old Brooks Brothers tweed jacket (and the lining of that pocket was made of silk purchased in Hong Kong)" (*SNT* 128). The second part of this quote doubly specifies the materiality of the pocket. Firstly, the jacket itself is de-

100 Persephone not only returns in spring, the text even equates her with spring itself: "the young Persephone was like a season, spring – just for instance – and spring especially!" (*SNT* 147).

101 See "Hymn to Demeter," lines 441–459, and Apollodorus, Book I, Ch. V, 41.

102 Walters here refers to works by Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, and Rita Dove.

103 Reading Heracles and Persephone as character types is moreover supported by their names almost exclusively occurring in compounds: "the young Heracles" and "the beautiful Persephone" (see *SNT* 3, 24, 43, 66, 90, 133, 173, 180, etc.). The narrator even bespeaks a permanence of the attributes of youth and beauty, which in the text at hand is manifested in the adjectives used as parts of the names: "the young Heracles who would always be so, not matter what befell him, and the beautiful Persephone, who would always be so, beautiful and perfect and just" (*SNT* 13).

104 The same literary technique is at play in Mrs. Sweet's knitting a pair of testicles from the heels of two woolen socks when her husband loses his original organs in an altercation with their adolescent son Heracles (*SNT* 46–47).

defined as being made of tweed and as having been manufactured by an established American gentlemen's outfitter. Secondly, the parentheses define the consistence of the pocket lining, which again emphasizes the material's exclusivity. While these details (again) establish Mr. Sweet as a man of particularly American sophistication, they do not speak to the topic at hand – Persephone's superhuman (changes in) size. Rather, these details disregard the exceptional aspects of Persephone and focus on very mundane aspects of the jacket.

A few lines further, Persephone seeks to comfort her brother who is distraught at their mother's absence and "[n]ot knowing what else to do, she lifted him up with much ease, [...] and she placed him in the right-hand pocket of her own jacket which was made from polyethylene terephthalate and the pocket itself was lined with rayon" (SNT 128). Persephone here repeats her father's concealing of the familial body. This passage also repeats the previous one in that it conveys details about Persephone's jacket pocket. The material polyethylene terephthalate is a specific type of polyester, better known by the abbreviation PET. As with the silk in Mr. Sweet's pocket, the detail of the exact material of Persephone's jacket does not add to the narrative except in disrupting the sentence with its two multisyllabic words from chemical terminology. Again, detail here obscures the extraordinariness of the events. Either Persephone must have instantaneously grown to enormous heights – and her apparel with her – or her brother just shrank to the size of a hamster in order to fit into Persephone's pocket. The text itself does not call attention to this unlikelihood, which normalizes the extraordinary, or – the other way around – turns the normal into the exceptional.

Ultimately, although mythical intertexts at first glance appear to intersperse *See Now Then* with exceptional, superhuman, and awe-inspiring moments, they do not. The supposed extraordinariness is inserted so seamlessly into the text of *See Now Then* that it loses its specialness. Generally, utter ordinariness prevails in the Sweets' home life and the threat of a nine-headed snake is of less interest to the characters than the inconvenient mess its death produces. In this, when *See Now Then* takes up names and characteristics of Greek myth, the contemporary text disregards their perhaps most important features – their exceptionality. Heracles and Persephone remain types, defined in part by their fabled actions, such as the labors in Heracles's case, or their character constellations, as with Persephone. Both characters do not develop psychological depth or individual character traits. Such "types" in conjunction with pervasive ordinariness uncomfortably recalls the general condition of Mr. Potter in Kincaid's previous novel. Here, as I am arguing, the ordinariness finds its cause in the hegemony of Western colonial history that does not allow for imaginations of a descendant of enslaved Africans as an evolved and well-rounded human being. *See Now Then* presents the same constellation of ordinariness, albeit in a different situation: a nuclear American

family is depicted as ordinary not through colonial intertexts, but by reference to Greek myth.

I contend that by taking up Greek mythology, *See Now Then* engages with the roots of Western history. Édouard Glissant locates the shared origin of literature and history in Greek myth. “Myth is the first state of a still-naïve historical consciousness, and the raw material of the project of a literature,” Glissant writes (*Caribbean Discourse* 71). *See Not Then*’s engagement with myth may thus be read as a turn to European ur-history in literature, into which the Sweet family now is integrated. Their different historical status is especially evident when considering Mr. Potter, who was of no account and thus excluded from history. The Sweets, however, are presented as embedded in much larger contexts that are the antecedents of colonial history.¹⁰⁵ The association of the contemporary characters with mythical figures presents them as universal types that are ordinary because of their humanity. The repetition of characters constellations and structures presents ordinariness as a ubiquitous human condition. The totality of colonial history cannot serve Kincaid’s characters, but stepping beyond that into literary history, the obscurity of myth can. As *See Now Then* renders the heroes of Western myth as ordinary as an American family of four, the text strips them of their extraordinariness.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, in this, *See Now Then* decenters the totality of Western exceptionalism both in literature and in history.¹⁰⁷

105 Barbara Goff makes the connection between the classics and colonialism clear: “Latin and Greek language and culture were so inseparable from the elite’s vision of itself that they become inseparable from the vision of the imperial role [...]. The role of classics in elite culture also predisposes it [...] to be closely connected with imperial projects: because classics bears with it the weight of tradition and authority, it can easily be pressed into service as a *sign* of tradition and authority in general” (11, emphasis in original). Hence in picking up Greek myth, *See Now Then* negotiates the prototypes of imperial writing.

106 In this, *See Now Then* is reminiscent of Derek Walcott famously transferring Greek mythology and history to the Caribbean in his epic poem *Omeros* (1990), which renarrates ancient text through more recent and still ongoing West Indian history with a focus on contemporary and especially ordinary characters: “Forget the gods, [...] and read the rest,” Walcott’s poet *Omeros* proclaims (283).

107 Lorna Hardwick also points out that “classical texts have been displaced from their perceived centrality in Western culture, [because] they have become part of a diaspora – migratory, open for interaction, yet enabling an awareness of their own tradition in the ancient world, which is increasingly understood as involving a multi-valent political discourse” (116).

2.3 Writing between and across Genres: Negotiations of Subject and Object, Self and Other

Jamaica Kincaid's work ranges from short texts, published in magazines (foremost *The New Yorker*),¹⁰⁸ to 200-page novels, and from descriptions of family life to travel writing. Kincaid collaborated with visual artists Eric Fischl (lithographs, 1986), Lynn Geesaman (photography, 1999), Ricardo Cortés (illustrations, children's book, 2019), and she worked as an editor for three anthologies (1995, 1998, 2005). Most of Kincaid's works are commonly regarded as being situated between autobiography and fiction. Likely for their recurring autodiegetic narrators, Kincaid's texts are often understood as fictionalizations of the author's own life. Kincaid explicitly rejects the concept of generic categories: introducing an edited volume of essays, Kincaid's first sentences reproach the genre that is at the center of the collection:¹⁰⁹

An Essay! The fixed form or fixed category of any kind, any definition at all, fills me with such despair that I feel compelled to do or be its opposite. And if I cannot do its opposite, if I can in fact complete the task that is the fixed form, or fill the fixed category, I then deny it, I then decline to participate at all. Is this a complex view? But I believe I have stated it simply: anything that I might do, anything that I might be, I cannot bear to have its meaning applied to me. (xii)

Kincaid then goes on – in this introduction to a collection of essays – to criticize the genre “essay” as a form that commonly expresses opinions and observations some people have on others, which “can only, ultimately, fix you, categorize you” (xii). Categorization and fixation as aspects of colonial world ordering thus align the essay in particular, and genre as textual categorization in general, with colonial thought. Nonetheless, Kincaid states that she finds pleasure in some such texts and posits her own idiosyncratic pleasure principle as the only criterion in the assembly of the following collection (xiii).

I propose that rather than musing about a “true-to-life-veracity” of certain auto/biographical aspects of her texts,¹¹⁰ or about her simultaneous dismissal and enjoyment of the essay form, we could understand Kincaid's back-and-forth between generic expectations as exemplifying what her texts perform – a questioning of *genre* itself. In “doing” genre differently, Kincaid's texts both investigate the histories of generic categories and present the inability of generic fixity to rep-

¹⁰⁸ See many of them collected in *Talk Stories* (2001).

¹⁰⁹ In 1995, Kincaid was the guest editor of Houghton Mifflin's *The Best American Essays* series.

¹¹⁰ See, for instance, Daryl Cumber Dance's meticulous research into the lives of the author and her family.

resent Caribbean colonial experience. The subversion of generic conventions thus opens them up to the voices of Kincaid's protagonists. Kincaid's poetics of impermanence dissolve generic fixity when the established form (that of the essay, the autobiographical, etc.) is both rejected and appropriated, when it is claimed for oneself and thus utilized to disintegrate the power of the colonizer/canonizer, and to claim one's own power to speak. Kincaid's works seem "to be concerned to critique and revise the modes of representation fundamental to the canonical texts" that make up traditions of writerly expression in the sense of Henry Louis Gates's Signifyin(g)¹¹¹ (*Signifying Monkey* 217). In Kincaid's case, these are conventions of the autobiographical, biographical, and the fictional that are signified on. I argue that in Kincaid's works structures of repetition enter these generic concepts into conversations with each other. Generic forms of writing are brought together and intermingle in a seemingly playful relationship. Ultimately, this refigures established forms, questions them, and utilizes them to comment on the colonial complicity of both autobiography and biography as forms of self-narration. By Signifyin(g) on them, and by thus laying bare their mechanisms of framing "the colonial subject" in a position from which it (or rather: he or she) cannot speak, Kincaid's works and especially *The Autobiography of My Mother* and the "Biography of a Dress," which will be at the center of the following analyses, interrogate genre conventions to negotiate the emergence of a speaking subject from an art form (writing) that has historically objectified the colonized. Through their engagements with genre conventions Kincaid's texts renegotiate the (post)colonial speaking subject.

In the following observations on Kincaid's texts' signifying on genre, I do not regard genres as fixed categories themselves. Rather, I grasp "genre" as a learned category that, as a reading strategy, imposes fixedness on text. Tzvetan Todorov writes on the origin of genres that "[i]t is because genres exist as an institution that they function as 'horizons of expectation' for readers, and as 'models of writing' for authors" (163). Just as expectations and institutionalized categories frame the reception of text, this reciprocates in texts in that they "participate" in genres, as Jacques Derrida puts it. Derrida describes the relationship between text and genre as a "participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set" (59). As such, genre "takes place" both in the text itself as well as in the modes of its production and reception. Kin-

¹¹¹ Gates phrases this with specific regard to Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* and its Signifyin(g) on the "tradition of the Afro-American novel," which comments "on the history of the black novel" (217). I take up Gates's wording to extend it beyond exclusively African American concerns to Kincaid's critique of "Western" colonial canonical texts in a Caribbean context.

caid's works, as I show, actively perform genre in order to highlight and subvert reader expectations.

Jacques Derrida notes that "the law of genre" is "a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy" (59). He furthermore emphasizes the vital "'anomalies' [that] are engendered [...] by *repetition*" (57–58, emphasis in original). Tzvetan Todorov refers to the "laws" of genre to describe the individual genres' categorizing principles (160). A text's nonconforming contamination in this conception then does not make genre "nonexistent; it is tempting to say that quite the contrary is true. And for a twofold reason. First, because transgression, in order to exist as such, requires a law that will, of course, be transgressed. One could go further: the norm becomes visible – lives – only by its transgressions" (Todorov 160). I regard such transgressions in Kincaid's texts as ostensibly performed for the purpose of commenting on genre's forceful aspect of categorization, which imposes meanings on texts, just as the colonizer imposes meanings on the colonized. At the same time, Kincaid's texts also relish in the productive aspects of contamination when they rework aspects of the genres they invoke to create space for the voices of the colonized, which in these genres historically are fixed in the positions of the object or the voiceless.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother* and "Biography of a Dress," as the titles of the two works already suggest, the genres in question are autobiography and biography. Along with that, *The Autobiography of My Mother* is denoted as "a novel" on the book's cover, and "Biography of a Dress" suggests fictionality in the unlikely writing of the life of an inanimate object. Thus, both texts bring forms of life writing into conversation with fictionality. As I demonstrate, Kincaid's texts repeat conventions and thus transform them into something else. Yet I do not reconsider the genres of autobiography, biography, and novel themselves to finally devise a new term to describe Kincaid's alterations to existing categories and to grasp them as a new (postcolonial) subcategory to established forms, as for instance Jana Evans Braziel or Leigh Gilmore do.¹¹² Rather, I focus on the texts' mechanisms in engag-

112 Leigh Gilmore considers Kincaid's oeuvre as "serial autobiography," with each new book adding a volume to the series ("What Was I" 100). "Serial autobiography permits the writer to take multiple runs at self-representation, more as a way to explore the possibilities present within autobiography than to produce a single, definitive solution to the problem of presenting identity" (*Limits* 103). This practice of seriality, in Gilmore's view, questions the concept of autobiography itself. It "challenges the limits of the genre by raising the specter of endless autobiography. That there will always be (another) autobiography means that there will be no last words and autobiography is a genre of last words" (*Limits* 96). This multiplication of self-representation thus transforms a key aspect of the genre in that it fragments the unity of Western autobiography by defying its finality. Jana Evans Braziel develops the notion of "alterbiography" with reference to Kincaid's works. Braziel compounds her neologism from "alter-" as in alterity and "biography." The focus on

ing with genres and their conventions to show how textual strategies, such as signifying on genre conventions, purport to perform genre (especially autobiography) in order to subvert them. Heteroglossia, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, creates a simultaneity of voices and versions of the self that question the objectification of the colonized and make space for speaking subject positions, or multiply the voices of those spoken for in a self-narration through an other.

The first section of this chapter, “Beyond Auto-Bio-Graphy,” focuses on *The Autobiography of My Mother* in which a debate of the genres autobiography, biography, and the novel plays itself out in a tension between an “I” and a “you.” The narrative of the singular self is opened up to the voices of a multitude, contained within the “I.” *The Autobiography of My Mother* engages in discussions of genre to present the lasting effects of colonial rule on a collective and demonstrates how generic conventions themselves participate in colonial discourse. The second section of this chapter attends to Kincaid’s shorter work “Biography of a Dress” and explores how the writing of the self here is entangled with the history of the eponymous dress, as well as a soap advertisement, which brings with it colonial discourses of beauty, purity, and girlhood. Historically once also a commodity, the body of the Black girl protagonist is spoken about by a narrating self, temporally removed from the experience of objectification. I argue that through the tensions between autobiography and biography, “Biography of a Dress” debates subject and object positions available to its girl protagonist and adult narrator.

Beyond Auto-Bio-Graphy: Writing the Self Through an Other

Kincaid’s 1996 novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* uses genre conventions to explore who has the agency to speak of oneself by exploring who might speak for or with whom. This section interrogates the engagement with established generic forms in *The Autobiography of My Mother* in order to examine the involvement of genre in the writing of both personal and collective history. *The Autobiography of My Mother* appears to adhere to the form of classic autobiography. Yet it is marketed as a novel. I read it as a fictional text that virulently offers autobiographical markers to its readers only to withdraw itself from fully being read as such.

alterity as in otherness to the typical Western autobiographical subject as well as on an Other as part of the constitution of a self is consistent throughout Braziel’s very useful analyses of Kincaid’s works, as it points to the transcendence of genre boundaries, especially between autobiography and biography. Likewise, Alison Donnell, in her article on *The Autobiography of My Mother*, initially grasps Kincaid’s work with Liz Stanley’s notion of “auto/biography,” which similar to Braziel’s alterbiography insists on the confluence of the lives of self and other.

The text appears to feed the readers' willingness to assume the existence of the narrator and protagonist in their own real world, as well as a truthfulness to the report of her life. In simultaneous offering and withdrawing of assumptions of authenticity, *The Autobiography of My Mother* performs different aspects of genre conventions without indeed committing to them. This confusion comments on the nexus of subject and colonial history: the lives of the text's characters are all inextricably bound up with the colonial history of the Caribbean islands of Dominica and Antigua. Written in the first person, a seemingly daughterly "I" narrates the life of a mother figure, which creates a tension between the writing self and the life that is written, i.e., between the *autos* and the *bios* in the term "autobiography." Moreover, while an "I" is at the center of the text, and while the protagonist Xuela uncompromisingly positions herself as the narrator, this "I" splits into a multitude of voices. History and genre thus are negotiated between self and other, which this section investigates by asking the following questions: Who speaks? Who is spoken about? How do these acts of speaking engage with categories of genre? Finally, how do its generic interventions speak to the text's engagement with colonial history?

Several aspects indicate the autobiographical mode in this novel. *The Autobiography of My Mother* explicitly bears the genre designation in its title. An autodiegetic narrator relates the life of Xuela Claudette Richardson, who also is the text's protagonist, in retrospective from infancy to old age. In his seminal work *On Autobiography*, Philippe Lejeune posits that to qualify as autobiography, a work must have an author, narrator, and protagonist that can be identifiable as identical. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, narrator and protagonist are explicitly presented as identical by the identity of their names. While the author name Jamaica Kincaid does not participate in Lejeune's assumed triad of identity, this lack is taken up by the title's suggestion of the autobiographical genre, which appears to offer the "autobiographical pact" in Lejeune's sense that advances the assumption of truthfulness in the reader's perception. The title of the book, however, also questions key suppositions of the genre. The pronoun "my" in the book's title points to a first-person speaking position. At the same time, it refers to "mother," who through the possessive preposition "of" is posited as the author – or at least owner – of the autobiography. This stands in opposition to the *autos* in "autobiography," which also requires an autodiegetic narrator. The title thus already contains two autodiegetic positions. Moreover, the book title, as printed on the cover of the first edition seemingly continues with "by Jamaica Kincaid." Both printed in handwriting, the title and author's name are not visually differentiated from each other. Rather, in its connection with the title through the preposition "by" it could be read as part of the book's title. This adds another entity to the list of possible speakers, namely that of a real-life author, which suggests that the speaking self might be that of Ja-

maica Kincaid and that the mother in question might be Annie Drew, the author's own mother. Such an assumption, however, is swiftly confounded by the addition "a novel" in the lower right corner of the cover. The claim to the fictional genre immediately discredits any inference about author and narrator. In all of this, the book's title already poses the questions "who is speaking about whom?" and "how do these speaking positions relate to each other?" These issues shall be discussed in detail later in this section, after attending to the general problem of speaking of the self in a (post)colonial context, which *The Autobiography of My Mother* showcases.

To begin with, the novel lays bare the lasting effects of colonialism and slavery on its (former) subjects by denying their ability to speak of and for themselves. This plays out in the negotiation of genre as a colonial category of classifying textual production. As a lasting effect of European colonialism, the social position of the novel's protagonist Xuela is precarious. She is an Afro-Caribbean woman who may visually be identified as the descendant of both African people and Dominica's native Caribs. Xuela understands herself as belonging to the "defeated" (ABM 215). With this term, she refers to the history of enslavement and colonialism in the Caribbean.¹¹³ History thus determines Xuela's contemporary position, which through her mixed heritage is doubly precarious: she describes the Dominican people of African descent as "defeated," but worse than that she sees herself as ostracized for her Carib ancestry. It is looked down on by other Dominicans as "exterminated, thrown away like weeds in the garden," while people from Africa at least "survived" the destruction of the colonizers and slavers (ABM 15–16). This historically conditioned circumstance, Xuela argues, positions her within the realm of the "unreal." With this, she frames the lives, experiences, and thoughts of those who have been "defeated" from the viewpoint of the victor. Xuela's definition of her position is thus informed by the entangled discourses of history. The victors determine what is "real" and what is not. "Reality" in this sense is far from what people experience. This precondition of a separation of reality and experience already problematizes the speaking of oneself. If autobiography is supposed as the truthful account of one's own past life, it would be impossible for Xuela, as one who has been "defeated," to participate in this genre, since her experience is discredited as insubstantial and fictitious from the start.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, negotiations of "reality" in giving an account of one's experience are apparent, for instance in Xuela's witnessing of a

¹¹³ Xuela's European ancestry does not play a role here. Her father is a half-Scot and has very light skin and gray eyes, which Xuela sees as a physical marker of his cruelty – both are inherited from his colonialist father (ABM 186).

boy who vanished on their way to school: her schoolmate was lured into the river by the apparition of a beautiful woman, whom Xuela perceived not to be human, but “something that took the shape of a woman” (*ABM* 37), i.e., as a being from a more mythical realm. Rhonda Cobham recognizes the female figure as “the West African Mammywata, known in Jamaica as ‘River Mumma’ and associated loosely with such traditional African goddesses as the Ibo, Uhamiri/Idemili, and the Yoruba, Osun” (871). While Xuela insists that “I believed in that apparition then and I believe in it now” (38), the absence of further such mythical elements in the novel is conspicuous. One could read this absence as performing the success of Western policing of discourse. However, Cobham explains that in Caribbean literature, folk culture has a difficult status as it has an ambivalent relationship not only with European tradition that trivializes Caribbean practices, but also with African sources. Of the water deity Cobham writes, “Mammywata as a symbol of Africa may signify the lost homeland, a source of cultural resistance and material well-being, or a way of having one’s self-worth affirmed. But Africa, like Mammywata is also a place that forgot to protect her own; that devoured her children in the pursuit of the promise of wealth” (875). Ultimately, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, all of this intersects in who determines “reality.” Dissuaded from talking about her witnessing of Mammywata’s abduction of the schoolboy, Xuela realizes that “reality” here is defined by colonial holders of power. As Xuela puts it, “[e]verything about us is held in doubt and we the defeated define all that is unreal, all that is not human [...]. Our experience cannot be interpreted by us, we do not know the truth of it” (*ABM* 37). While the example here is one of myth, the doubting of “reality” is extended to all aspects of life.¹¹⁴ Thus, every account that the “defeated” could possibly give of themselves is already discredited before it is even stated. This makes self-narration a project contesting the power of who polices discourse, i.e., the power of the colonizer.

The colonial policing of discourse also takes part in the definition of form. *The Autobiography of My Mother* explicitly comments on the dictations of genre in an episode in Xuela’s school life: at the age of seven, Xuela is taught the rules of one specific genre – “the principles involved in writing an ordinary letter” (*ABM* 18). Its five aspects of addresses, date, salutation, main body, and closing solely focus on the formal features of the genre. Xuela comments on the futility of such a subject taught to her, as it was common knowledge that she – in her abject position – would not need to employ this genre in her life. Exactly this futility elicits an al-

¹¹⁴ Bart Moore-Gilbert points out that it is “a consequence of its political history [that] Caribbean subjectivity is [often] presented as caught on several levels between the ‘real’ and the ‘fictive,’ domains which cannot, in any case, be easily distinguished themselves” (“A Concern” 99–100).

most perverse “satisfaction” in her teachers (*ABM* 18–19), which again aligns the interest in genre with the figure of the colonizer and correlates the rules of genre with a colonizing force. Moore-Gilbert notes that literary scholars have indeed considered autobiography to be a thoroughly “Western” genre in its supposedly defining conventions of the category, such as the “unity and sovereignty of the autobiographical subject” (“A Concern” 93) that establish a “‘value system’ which underpinned and encouraged colonialism, notably its demarcation of the ‘properly’ human and appropriate means to narrate that privileged identity” (Moore-Gilbert, “A Concern” 92).¹¹⁵ Jana Evans Braziel even links the sheer urge to categorize texts into genres to Western Enlightenment ideals which in other fields of study classified plants, animals, and even established the theoretical basis for the misguided notion of different human races (*Caribbean Genesis* 4–5). I do not imply to read performances of genre conventions in *The Autobiography of My Mother* in opposition to “Western” autobiography. Nor do I regard “Western autobiography” as a monolithic entity, as Moore-Gilbert’s phrasing of “unity and sovereignty” might suggest. Such a strictly categorized and demarcated concept of autobiography nonetheless offers itself for consideration as Kincaid’s own text, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, engages with a concept of generic rigidity that is arguably imposed by and aligned with colonial structures in order to transgress and transpose such boundaries.

In spite of restrictions of expression, Xuela masters the speaking of herself. She starts by appropriating the genre of letter writing at school. Instead of copying out letters of others (presumably English literary paragons deemed fit by her teachers), Xuela composes her own letters to her father who remained absent from the early years of her life. She describes her misery of being an outsider at school and at her foster home and wishes to be reunited with a loving father. Beginning her letters with “My dear Papa” (*ABM* 19), Xuela writes of herself within the tradition of nineteenth-century English orphan literature about impoverished children who will eventually be restored from hardship, as for instance exemplified by orphaned characters throughout Charles Dickens’s works. While Xuela refuses to mindlessly copy and thus repeat the written works of English “role models,” she nonetheless takes part in established forms of writing – here that of the orphan’s letter. With this, *The Autobiography of My Mother* points to the ubiquity

¹¹⁵ Moore-Gilbert here specifically refers to Georges Gusdorf, Roy Pascal, and Richard Coe, all three of whom posit autobiography as essentially European (see Moore-Gilbert, “A Concern” 92 and 105; see also Moore-Gilbert’s 2006 article “Western Autobiography and Colonial Discourse: An Overview”). Smith and Watson also maintain that autobiography “is a term for a particular practice of life narrative that emerged in the Enlightenment and thus became canonical in the West” (*Reading Autobiography* 3).

of writerly traditions from the colonial “mother country,” but their hegemony is decentered when the Afro-Caribbean child inscribes herself into a literary history that generally works to marginalize her, when she puts herself at the center of the orphan narrative. She points to her precarious situation as an abandoned child through text, a medium that so far could not serve her (as expressed in the perceived futility of letter-writing). Now centering herself in such a literary tradition, Xuela can utilize it. She does not write these letters in all seriousness, as she does not expect them to reach their addressee. Rather, she writes them to express herself. The girl hides her letters under a stone by the school gate, where they are found by a spiteful classmate, who turns them over to the teacher. Xuela’s fellow student had meant to hurt her as he expected her to be punished for writing about her maltreatment at school. The exposed letters, however, indeed make their way to Xuela’s father, who promptly arrives to collect the forgotten daughter with promises of a new life. As the orphan story prescribes, Xuela is saved from her current plight. She recognizes that her act of writing of herself elicited the change in her life: “[H]owever unconsciously, I had, through the use of some words, changed my situation; I had perhaps saved my life. To speak of my own situation, to myself and others, is something I would always do thereafter” (*ABM* 22).

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela narrates her life – foremost her relationships with her parents and with her lovers – from her own perspective. Moreover, the novel hardly contains any dialogue. Xuela does not grant much space to any voice but her own. The pronoun “I” certainly is one of the most used words throughout the book. However, (fictional) autobiography is not all that is at stake here. While the narrating voice may be identified as that of the fictional character Xuela, an uncanny entanglement of her life story with those of people outside her diegetic world remains, which multiplies the references of Xuela’s narrating “I.”¹¹⁶ As Alison Donnell rightly points out, any avid reader of Kincaid’s works, who knows the author’s biography as well as her other fictional and nonfictional works, might easily conclude that *The Autobiography of My Mother* depicts the life of Kincaid’s own mother, Annie Drew, née Richardson (127). However, it is just as obvious that Xuela could not possibly be a faithful rendition of Kincaid’s mother, since the protagonist of *The Autobiography of My Mother* refuses to bear children and never left her family to move from Dominica to Antigua as Mrs. Annie Drew did. Rather, some basic information from Kincaid’s family history

116 The confluence of fact and fiction is also furthered by the inclusion of a photographic portrait on the book’s cover. Through its placement it suggests itself as a depiction of the protagonist, which of course is impossible as Xuela is a product of fiction. See chapter 3.3 for an analysis of the play with authenticity through the relationship of image and text in *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

is taken up by the novel, such as the structures of family relationships (for instance the difficult father-daughter-relationship between Annie Drew and her father), Annie Drew's childhood in Dominica, or the family names (e.g., Richardson) that recur throughout Kincaid's works.¹¹⁷ This certainly suggests a relationship between Kincaid's family history, her personal biography, and her texts' characters, but it does not make them autobiographical. Nonetheless, suggestions of referential entanglements of the fictional character Xuela with actual people (Annie Drew and Jamaica Kincaid) add to the positions from which the life of Xuela is narrated *within* the "I" of *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson posit that narrators in general are "a composite of speaking voices, the 'I' is a sign of multiple voices" (*Reading Autobiography* 60). Taking up Mikhail Bakhtin's term "heteroglossia," Smith and Watson assume that any autobiographical "I" consists of more than one voice.

Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*. (Bakhtin, *Dialectic Imagination* 324, emphasis in original)

The question of who is speaking and who is being spoken about also stays relevant when leaving aside any speculations regarding autobiographical aspects of Kincaid's novels. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the "I" appears to contain more than one voice. As noted above, this multiplication of voices already starts in the book's title, which suggests two first-person speakers – a daughter within the possessive pronoun "my" and a mother within the defining morpheme "auto" of "autobiography." This tension between mother and daughter figure is continued in the first sentence of the novel. The text only partly adheres to the traditional notion of autobiography in beginning with its protagonist's birth. In fact, the first sentence of this text speaks to the mother: "My mother died at the moment I was born," are the first words of *The Autobiography of My Mother* (3). Considered in combination with the title, it remains unclear whose life narrative will unfold in the course of the book, as here the first-person narrator initially gestures towards a mother, which suggests that it might be her life that is to be told. However, it soon turns out that the "I" foremost relates to Xuela, who is thus aligned with the "auto" of the book's title. In this interpretation, the title "The Autobiography of My Mother" would be spoken from the position of a daughter, albeit one who does not exist within this diegetic world, as Xuela never bore children in

117 For instance, the names Annie, Richardson, or Potter occur repeatedly in variations in *Annie John*, *Lucy*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *My Brother*, and *Mr. Potter*.

this narrative of her life. If Xuela now speaks to her dead mother in the first sentence of the narrative, the text indeed addresses three generations of women: Xuela herself, her mother, and her (nonexistent) daughter(s). In this way, the text repeats the heteroglossic confusion that autobiographical speculation might evoke by multiplying references not only gesturing towards an extradiegetic world, but also within the diegesis.

A generating of generations through a heteroglossic narrative voice continues throughout *The Autobiography of My Mother*. For instance, the occasional departure from self-narration to the direct addressing of a “you” points to a multiplication of narrative voices: while the first-person pronoun takes on a distinct presence throughout the novel for its sheer frequency, at times it is interrupted by the emergence of a “you.” As is to be expected of most texts, the second-person pronoun occurs regularly in this narrative, typically in direct speech. Another common instance of the pronoun being used is the reference to an unspecified person, i.e., pragmatically it is used in the form of an impersonal pronoun, meaning “one.” I read such uses of the pronoun “you” as addressing a general circumstance in life, albeit from Xuela’s perspective.¹¹⁸

Something else is at play when “you” occurs in prominent clusters. Several times throughout the novel the second-person pronoun is used in a conspicuously frequent manner within a few sentences (for instance *ABM* 59–60, 69, 79, 202). Here, the possible addressees are multiplied within the pronoun “you,” just as speaking positions are doubled and tripled in other passages. In these cases, the text is either preoccupied with the importance of names or with the mother figure (or with both), as in the following example:

And *your* own name, whatever it might be, eventually was not the gateway to who *you* really were, and *you* could not ever say to *yourself*, “My name is Xuela Claudette Desvarieux.” This was my mother’s name, but I cannot say it was her real name, for in a life like hers, as in mine, what is a real name? My own name is her own name, Xuela Claudette, and in the place of Desvarieux is Richardson, which is my father’s name; but who are these people Claudette, Desvarieux, and Richardson? To look into it, to look at it, could only fill *you* with despair; the humiliation could only make *you* intoxicated with self-hatred. (*ABM* 79, emphasis mine)

¹¹⁸ For instance, when relating the life and desires of Madame LaBatte, Xuela’s host and employer when the young woman attends school away from home, a woman who so desperately wishes for a child that she wants Xuela to bear her own husband’s, Xuela notes, “[t]o want what you will never have and to know too late that you will never have it is a life overwhelmed with sadness” (*ABM* 76).

The general statement about one's own name at the beginning of the quote gradually turns into a direct address of Xuela the mother, who is also named Xuela, as the sentence nears an insertion of imagined direct speech, which in the first person could hypothetically be uttered by Xuela the mother, as the use of her full name signifies. The following sentences return to the narrating voice of Xuela the daughter, also set in the first person, musing about the generational identity of names. The last sentence of the passage again addresses a "you," and it remains unclear whom it refers to. It might either be a generic you, a direct address of Xuela the mother, or the expression of Xuela the daughter's sentiments in the second person. The back and forth between pronouns entangles possible references and thus embodies both the pronouns "I" and "you" with different voices and addressees. Such a multiplication is already anticipated in the doubling of names, which points to a shared personal history in the first name and to a shared collective history of colonial subjugation, as the surnames Desvarieux and Richardson are assigned to both Xuelas through colonial power structures.¹¹⁹

In other cases, the shift of the narrative voice into the second person not only points to yet another position from which the narrative of Xuela is told. For instance, in the following quote, the second-person pronoun refers to Xuela Richardson: "It was that time of day when all you have lost is heaviest on your mind: your mother, if you have lost her; your home, if you have lost it; the voices of people who might have loved you or who you only wish had loved you; the places in which something good, something you cannot forget, happened to you" (*ABM* 69). Although all conditions here are circumscribed by an "if," they directly apply to Xuela's experience. In this, the second-person pronoun directly addresses the protagonist of *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Thus, these passages could be read as not being uttered from Xuela's own position, but from an outside perspective speaking towards Xuela, which suggests a temporary departure from Xuela as the narrative instance. At the same time, in terms of a generic you, this passage may as well be read as speaking to common experience of human beings, which points to a simultaneity of a collective and an individual within the "you." Ultimately, not only is the narrating voice heteroglossic, but those who they are speaking to and about are equally multiplied.

119 Richardson was the name of Xuela's (the daughter's) paternal Scottish grandfather who abandoned his Dominican family after stealing their hard-earned savings (*ABM* 194–195). Claudette and Desvarieux are names that Xuela the mother was given by a nun "who was on her way to wreak more havoc in the lives of the remnants of a vanishing people," as Xuela the narrator puts it (*ABM* 80), pointing to the colonizing project of Christian missionary work. This nun found Xuela the mother as a baby abandoned outside her convent's doors and decided to name the girl after herself.

While *The Autobiography of My Mother* ostensibly narrates the life story of Xuela, I argue that the text really is concerned with the narratives of women like Xuela. Xuela Richardson here stands in as a “literary witness” for a collective of women who have the same history and thus live under the same social conditions. With the figure of the “literary witness,” Leigh Gilmore proposes to expand the testimonial archive beyond the actual texts of testimony to include literary texts. This, she argues, “expand[s] the limits of what it means to acknowledge and grieve the losses of history, and offer a traumatic witness capable not only of injury but also of speech, [which makes it] possible to see them in the articulation of what is always on the verge of disappearing: the human subject of historical and intimate trauma” (“What Was I” 83). Gilmore is interested in such literary witnesses as Xuela, who is her case study in her article, for their broadening of the archive considered in humanitarian discourse. In the context of my inquiry into genre, Gilmore’s concept of the witness is elucidating, as it points to Xuela’s capacity to speak for others. As Gilmore writes, “[t]he power of the first-person witness [...] rests on both the singularity and the wider representative capacity of the witness. In speaking to and for many, first-person accounts expand human rights beyond the frame of the individual” (“What Was I” 77). Gilmore notes that Xuela’s statement that “all that is impersonal I have made personal” (*ABM* 228) expresses the narrator’s project to voice a collective, “to particularize violence, to give it not only a human face and form but also a voice, a record made for those who cannot offer an account” (Gilmore, “What Was I” 80). Gilmore’s reading of Xuela as a literary witness then arrives at the same conclusion that *The Autobiography of My Mother* multiplies voices within Xuela’s, as my own analysis, which comes to the same conclusion by focusing on the literary form and techniques of the novel, particularly on heteroglossia and the redirection of references.

The intermingling of personal and collective becomes most obvious at the end of the narrative, when Xuela directly references her speaking as a representative for many:

This account of my life has been an account of my mother’s life as much as it has been an account of mine, and even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have, as it is their account of me. In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from. In me are the voices that should have come out of me, the faces I never allowed to form, the eyes I never allowed to see me. This account is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become. (*ABM* 227–228)

Xuela merges the lives of three generations in a textual motion from herself to her mother and her nonexistent own children. It also includes the possible life trajectories she did not take. Xuela’s autobiographical gesture to give an account of her

life thus goes beyond the singularity of one life and she speaks to those of many. A collective is cospeaking with the voice of Xuela, as well as Xuela tells herself through others. Xuela becomes a container and mouthpiece for the voices of others who cannot speak (for) themselves as they could not come into being or were obliterated by history. Xuela thus expresses possibilities of the past, present, and future, indicating their continuities. She speaks not only *to* others (“you”), but also *with* and *for* them. The singularity of Xuela in this does not dissipate. Making the collective personal rather pluralizes Xuela’s singularity when she contains and expresses a multitude of voices.

In conclusion, in this text speakers and addressees are multiplied within the pronouns “I” and “you,” as well as they blend with each other. The identities of “mother” and “daughter” are intermingled within the diegetic world of *The Autobiography of My Mother*; but it is also suggested that the author Jamaica Kincaid and her own mother Annie Drew are part of the referential multitude of “I” and “you.” Ultimately, however, my concern has not been not to disentangle this net of references. Rather, its existence itself, created through play with expectations and conventions of life writing, points to life narratives between *autos* and *bios*. They expand beyond the singularity of one life and speak to and for many. Xuela’s telling of her self with and through others opens up the text from generic fixation to the different possibilities of speaking of one’s own reality. *The Autobiography of My Mother* pretends to pretend to be an autobiography. While it seems to offer itself as an example of the genre, at the same time it clearly does not, and thus highlights the inability of categorizing and classificatory systems to transport (post)colonial experience that is simultaneously individual and shared by a collective. *The Autobiography of My Mother* performs a break with “Western” tradition, and Xuela provides one possible answer to the question posed by Smith and Watson: “If this autobiographical ‘I’ is a Western ‘I,’ an ‘I’ of the colonizer, then what happens when the colonized subject takes up a generic practice forged in the West and complicit in the West’s romance with individualism?” (“Introduction” 28). At first, Xuela’s narrative assumes the limits and rigidity of autobiography as a fixed (and fixing) genre. Such fixity resonates with the general colonial project of classifying and categorizing – from plants to people. The novel’s performed turn against the rules of genre represents a rebuttal of colonial ideology. *The Autobiography of My Mother* thus exemplifies Kamau Brathwaite’s expression that “the hurricane does not roar in pentameters” (10), speaking to the need for different literary forms to express (post)colonial Caribbean experience. The very contamination and confusion of genre and reference and the multiplications of “I” and “you,” however, in their performance of breaking with colonial epistemological categories, open the text up to possibilities of self-determined representation and narration.

A Yellow Dress and a Brown Girl: Writing Between Subject and Object

“Biography of a Dress” is a short text by Kincaid that offers itself for an inquiry into genre with its very title.¹²⁰ Its evocation of life writing centering on a lifeless object raises questions such as “How might a biography of an object be written?” or “Is a biography not usually written about human beings?” Thus, the title confounds common genre expectations. The text is written in the first person and relates the events leading up to its narrator’s second birthday, on which she is given a dress to wear which was made specifically for the purpose of celebrating the anniversary and photographing her in it to commemorate the day. A photograph of a toddler in a dress is included with the text, suggesting that this indeed is the image referred to by the text. This relationship of first-person narrator, relating memories of herself, in combination with a photograph which supposedly is one of the narrator and thus establishes her as a real person, evokes the genre of autobiography.¹²¹ This runs counter to the text’s title and questions who really is at the center of the text – the dress, as proclaimed by the title, or the first-person narrator, who ostensibly positions herself as central within the text.

The attempt to determine a generic category for “Biography of a Dress” is not aided by its publication history: the eight-page text was printed in a 1992 issue of the literary magazine *Grand Street*. The publication in this context suggests an intended audience of cosmopolitan intellectuals, interested in national and international literary and visual arts. The placement of “Biography of a Dress” in this magazine does not illuminate questions of genre, but rather leaves them open to be performed by the piece itself.¹²² The text begins on a right-hand page of the

120 From here on, I use “BD” to refer to Kincaid’s “Biography of a Dress.”

121 Jana Evans Braziel determines that, “[i]n the short story ‘Biography of a Dress,’ [...] Kincaid poses the question, what is biography?” (*Caribbean Genesis* 19). More than that, I argue, the text signifies on the relationship of subject and object in the complex terrain of coloniality through a negotiation of genre and its perceived boundaries.

122 A contextualization with the other texts in this issue does not help much, either. The issue was published (1992) before the magazine started to put out thematic issues (Winter 1994), so that the contents are brought together without overt correlation: “Biography of a Dress” is wedged between two poems, “The Tale of Murasaki” by Martine Bellen, and “Derision” by Horrah Pornoff. What is noteworthy, however, is that while *Grand Street* is interested in both written and visual arts, Kincaid’s work here apparently was not chosen for publication for its photograph, but rather for the text: other visual artwork in the issue is printed on especially glossy pages of thicker paper, which are reproductions of higher quality than Kincaid’s photograph, simply printed on the regular paper used for all pages containing text. All this leads to the conclusion that in the process of publishing “Biography of a Dress” the text was regarded as of higher interest than the image. The image is an accessory to the text. In my analysis, however, the photograph is of central importance.

magazine spread. The author's name, "Jamaica Kincaid," is placed at the top of the page, followed by the text's title "Biography of a Dress." Opposite, on the left-hand page, a photograph is printed on a gray background which covers the whole page and frames the photograph on the book page as a passe-partout would in a picture frame. The black-and-white photograph shows a small girl standing on top of a small desk in front of a blurry painted background with a white, trompe-l'oeil balustrade in the bottom right that gradually vanishes as the eye moves left. If familiar with Jamaica Kincaid, the reader would quickly detect similar facial characteristics between the girl depicted and public photographs of the author, which easily implies that the photograph might indeed portray Jamaica Kincaid as a young girl. *Grand Street's* list of illustrations at the very end of the issue details the photograph as "Jamaica Kincaid, c. 1951. Courtesy of Jamaica Kincaid" (216). Far removed from the print of the photograph itself, however, this note does not immediately affect how it is first read on page ninety-two of the book-length publication. As with the photographs in *Mr. Potter* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, discussed in chapter 3.3, the placement of the photograph here, too, implies a connection between text and image through proximity. Yet even with the confirmation that the photograph shows the author as an infant, it would be imprudent to assume this connection to be reliable, as Kincaid's works generally toy with notions of authenticity and fiction through a play with conventions.

The first lines of the text of "Biography of a Dress" strengthen the impression that text and photograph depict the same person: "The dress I am wearing in this black-and-white photograph, taken when I was two years old, was a yellow dress made of cotton poplin" (BD 93). This quote brings together all five elements mentioned here so far: the dress, the photograph, and the "I" of the text, which refers to both the person depicted in the photograph, the narrator of the text, and to the author Jamaica Kincaid. The concurrence of narrator and author in the first-person pronoun as well as the attribution of the "I" to the image suggest that the text at hand indeed is autobiographical. However, from the very first line of the text, the personal pronoun referring to a human being is set behind "the dress," which again puts the dress into a premier position, suggesting an importance of the dress in opposition to the person wearing it, just as the text's title does.

The narrative situation of the text initially appears as one typically occurring in autobiography.¹²³ Situated in a present time, a narrating "I" relates the ex-

For its prominent placement and its reciprocal relationship with the text, I regard it as equally essential to the whole of the work as the text.

¹²³ The text's effects here seem to work, for instance J. Brooks Bouson reads "Biography of a Dress" as an "autobiographical story" (43). Bouson unquestioningly equates the protagonist and the narrator of "Biography of a Dress" with the real person and author Jamaica Kincaid. Bouson

periences of a narrated “I,” which occurred in the past.¹²⁴ The narrating “I” is forty-three years old (BD 97) and claims to remember the photograph being taken, as well as the preparations leading up to this event, when she was two years old. The temporal distance is showcased by parentheses and inserted commentary. Throughout the text the narrating “I” comments on the events and circumstances connected to the portrait of her two-year-old self in brackets, as for instance in the following passage:

But I was then (not so now) extremely particular about what I would eat, not knowing then (but I do now) of shortages and abundance, having no consciousness of the idea of rich and poor (but I know now that we were poor then), and would only eat boiled beef (which I required my mother to chew for me first and after she had made it soft, remove it from her mouth and place it in mine), certain kinds of boiled fish (doctor or angel), hard-boiled eggs (from hens, not ducks), poached calf’s liver and the milk from cows, and so would not even look at the boiled cornmeal (porridge or fongie). (BD 93–94)

This sentence from the first two pages of “Biography of a Dress” contains six parentheses. Initially, they signal a temporal remove of the narrating “I” from the narrated “I,” clearly separating the two when the main text refers to a “then,” while the commenting parentheses locate the narrating instance in a “now.”¹²⁵ Moreover, when the narrating “I” comments on her own narration, evoking a temporal distance and layers to her story, the narrating “I” locates herself in two different spaces within the text. While the narrator stays the same, she appears to be split up into two voices.

Julia Emberley notes about the parentheses that “[h]istorical memory, both personal and impersonal, necessitates a break, a rupture. In the discontinuous present Kincaid brackets off the painful memory” of the experience of having the photograph taken of herself (469). I argue that it is not the memory which is bracketed off from the present, but rather that the present is inscribed into the narrative of the past. The “I” in the main text relates the story of its two-year old protagonist. The other “I” within the parentheses comments on this narrative and thus inserts her contemporary views and knowledge. In this, the narrating “I” tells of herself in

even goes so far as reading “Biography” as relating the young life of Annie John (43), protagonist of Kincaid’s novel *Annie John*. In this, Bouson regards these two textual figures as the same and as converging in Jamaica Kincaid.

¹²⁴ In using the terms “narrating and narrated ‘I,’” I am here referring to the categories laid out, for instance, by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography*, esp. 58–64.

¹²⁵ In this juxtaposition of temporal levels, “Biography of a Dress” operates much in the same ways as Kincaid’s later novel *See Now Then* (2013). See chapter 1 on “Time and Temporalities in *Mr. Potter* and *See Now Then*.”

the present. It thus emerges as a distinct presence which I regard as a second narrated “I.” In the parentheses, the narrating “I” finds the space to make herself known.

Yet the older narrating “I” does not appear to be a reliable instance, when an excess of details calls the accuracy of her memories into question. It seems rather unlikely that a forty-three-year-old narrator would be able to recall the experiences leading up to her second birthday so specifically, such as the interactions with a store clerk who sold the material for her birthday dress (BD 94), or the specifics of having her photograph taken at a studio (BD 99–100). While the experience of pain, such as having her earlobes pierced with two hot thorns (BD 97), may certainly be traumatizing and thus impress a lasting memory on such a young person, it nonetheless appears unlikely that the details of the events before and after would be as present after four decades, especially considering that the narrator repeatedly points out how her birthday was marked by triviality (for instance BD 94, 97, or 99). The impression of exaggeration bordering on fictionality lets the narrator appear rather unreliable, which begs the question of constructedness and – even more so – the purpose of producing not only the narrative of the two-year-old girl, but also the memory work of the older narrating “I.” It remains unclear from which position the narrated “I”s are constructed, which suggests yet another narrating instance within the first-person pronoun.

Another indication for the text’s fictionality is the magazine’s note on the origin of the photograph as “Jamaica Kincaid, c. 1951. Courtesy of Jamaica Kincaid” (216). As mentioned, the similarity of the girl depicted with the public photographs of the author Jamaica Kincaid already suggests the identity of the two, which is supported by the denotation that the image shows “Jamaica Kincaid” (although “Elaine Potter Richardson” might have been more accurate, as the picture would have been taken long before Kincaid’s renaming). Richardson/Kincaid was born on May 25, 1949. The two-year difference between 1949 and 1951 once more suggests the depiction of the author as a two-year-old. The “c.”, abbreviation for *circa*, however, calls aspects detailed in “Biography of a Dress” into question: if this really was the photograph taken on Kincaid’s second birthday, the date of its origin could be provided more specifically than only the year. Given the text’s insistence on the particular date of the photographing, the image source, which includes an oddly vague “circa,” would be outright absurd. The “c.” thus suggests a certain extent of fictionality to “Biography of a Dress,” which in turn suggests that the narrating “I” possibly might not be who she claims. Yet another narrating “I” thus enters the narrative, one who constructed the narrative as that of a forty-three-year-old “I” who, through a photograph, is linked to a younger narrated “I.” While this multitude of “I”s is a key element of any autobiographical text, “Biography of a Dress” conspicuously stages them through parentheses, and thus the narrating

“I” is not simply a vehicle to produce the story of the narrated “I,” but it overtly presents the heteroglossic multiplicity of voices within the “I.”

The separation of narrating and narrated “I” is later described by the text as having originated in an experience of immense pain. To commemorate her daughter’s second birthday, her mother had the girl’s ears pierced on that day. On the one hand, the pain here is physical, but on the other, it is also that of feeling violated, as the narrator muses whether her mother may inadvertently have “meant to express hostility and aggression toward [her]” (BD 97). Suffering this pain then has a dissociative effect on the girl: “[I]t was then that was the first time that I separated myself from myself, and I became two people (two small children then, I was two years old), one having the experience, the other observing the one having the experience” (BD 97). The separation the narrator describes is a method of self-preservation. The split between the physical experience and the cognitive understanding of this pain, which is described as an out-of-body experience, suggests that the entity relating the experience in text may be associated with the so-called observer who is distanced in and by the heteroglossic parenthetical comments. Considering this split within the “I,” I reason that the parenthetical writing style of “Biography of a Dress” with its plurality of narrated and narrating “I”s mirrors the psychological state of the girl as well of the narrator.¹²⁶

Such dissociation from oneself is a central aspect of colonial experience, as theorized for instance by W. E. B Du Bois in his concept of “double-consciousness.” In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois details his realization that he was Black when he was a schoolboy, which came about in a situation of exclusion and ostracization. Du Bois felt shut out from the world of his white school mates by a “vast veil” (2). Later, Du Bois explains his perceived position as doubled:

[T]he Negro is [...] born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an

126 Emberley even muses that Kincaid entitled the text “‘biography’ of a dress and not the autobiographical account of her second birthday” (469) with the intention to separate herself from a memory of violence, symbolized by the dress. While this thought is an intriguing one, I argue that the genre contextures are much more intricate. As I show in this analysis of “Biography of a Dress,” Kincaid does not simply attempt to distance herself from the object of the dress (as Emberley puts it, 469), but her narrating self performs the distance between experiencing “I” and her cognition, as well as the distance between herself as a speaking subject and her former objectified self.

American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2)

In Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness, the internal split of the minority, excluded from the dominant group, is caused by the internalized white gaze. Being looked *at* as "the Other" leads to the separation from one's own consciousness by simultaneously looking at oneself through someone else's eyes.

Frantz Fanon later, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, takes up Du Bois's notion in the famous train episode in which he is framed and frozen by the white gaze of a boy as a "Negro." Fanon sees no other option but to distance himself from his body, which is predetermined by the onlooking white people in racist concepts of Blackness. Fanon feels forced to escape cognitively. He writes, that "[d]isoriented, incapable of confronting the Other, the white man, who had no scruples about imprisoning me, I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from my self, and gave myself up as an *object*" (92, emphasis mine). In Fanon's explication, the inner split not only leads to "two-ness," as Du Bois put it, but to the objectification of the self – the white gaze leads to becoming less than human, i.e., to becoming a thing.

The separation of the girl from herself in "Biography of a Dress" is a protective measure, but it is one that is not innocuous, as it filters and thereby distorts any experience. Moreover, it affects the constellation of narrating and narrated selves:

And the observer, perhaps because it was an act of my own will (strong then, stronger now), my first and only real self-invention, is the one of the two I most rely on, the one of the two whose voice I believe to be the true voice; and of course it is the observer who cannot be relied on as the final truth to be believed, for the observer has woven between myself and the person who is having an experience a protective membrane, which allows me to see but only feel as much as I can handle at any given moment. (BD 97–98)

The observing self here is described as yet *another* instance separated from the "I" in this quote. The speaking "I" positions itself as central, separated from the experiencing self as well as from the cognitive self of the observer, but nevertheless as the location in which experiencing "I" and observing "I" converge. Simultaneously, this "I" is also an experiencing "I" as she realizes her nonexperience, while also separated from the generally experiencing self. As such, this "I" is located outside experience and observation, but by having awareness of both, she also encompasses them both. In an economy of the ability to speak, the "center" and the "observer" relate the life of the experiencing "I," as well as their own thoughts on it and on their present selves, while the two-year old experiencing self remains quiet. The little girl is the nonspeaking object of interest of the speaking subjects. Fittingly, Smith and Watson posit that the "narrated 'I' is the object 'I'" (60).

Considering the autobiographical characteristics of “Biography of a Dress,” the text’s narrating selves may be located in the author’s name “Jamaica Kincaid,” with which the text is overwritten. According to Philippe Lejeune, the “first person” is defined by “reference” and by “utterance:” “The ‘I’ refers, each time, to the person who is speaking and whom we identify *by the very fact* that he is speaking,”¹²⁷ Lejeune notes about the referentiality of the “first person” (9, emphasis in original). “In printed texts, responsibility for all enunciation is assumed by a person who is in the habit of placing his *name* on the cover of the book” (Lejeune 11, emphasis in original). Hence, the utterance of “I” is by convention assumed to be that of the person identified by name. In the “*initial section* of the text [...] the narrator enters into a contract vis-à-vis the reader by acting as if he were the author; in such a way that the reader has no doubt that the ‘I’ refers to the name shown on the cover, even though the name is not repeated in the text” (Lejeune 14, emphasis in original).

The connection of narrator, protagonist, and author through reference and utterance of the first-person pronoun is then supported by the connection with the photograph. The first line of the text (“The dress I am wearing in this black-and-white photograph”) explicitly links the pronoun “I” and the girl in the photograph by way of the deictic determiner “this,” the referential gesture of which is supported by the immediate proximity of the printed photograph on the opposite page, as well as by the correspondence of telling and showing in the presence of a dress in this photograph. This creates a referential relationship between depicted person, narrating I, and narrated two-year-old I. Here the selves now converge not only in the author name, as assumed by Lejeune, but also in the photograph of the child. The conspicuous resemblance between press photographs of the author and the image of the child also further the assumption of identity of the “I”s of the text and the depicted person in the photograph.

Still, the title turns the attention back to the dress, which again raises the question of the relationship of human and thing, subject and object. The text begins with the words, “[t]he dress,” and goes on to describe this dress before attending to the girl wearing it: it “was a yellow dress made of cotton poplin (a fabric with a slightly unsmooth texture first manufactured in the French town of Avignon and brought to England by the Huguenots)” (BD 93). Starting out with the history of the fabric, the text then continues to relate the history of this particular dress: its fabric was bought by the narrator’s mother (BD 94), together with yellow thread for embroidery (BD 95). The mother then took days to sew and embroider the dress by

127 Both Lejeune and his translator Katherine Leary use the masculine pronoun in reference to all authors and speakers throughout.

hand.¹²⁸ The narrator details: “the bodice of the dress appeared simple, plain, and the detail and pattern can only be seen close up and in real life, not from far away and not in a photograph” (BD 96). Indeed, considering the image provided, it is entirely impossible to make out such detail. In the black-and-white photograph it is even impossible to tell whether this dress is yellow at all; it might as well be white.

Within the photograph itself, the tension between girl and dress is just as prevalent as in the text: in stark contrast to the generally darker tones of the photograph, the dress stands out. It is centered right in the middle of the image. Shining very light, almost white, it eclipses the face and body of the girl wearing it.¹²⁹ The dress comes to the fore, while the girl’s skin almost merges with the colors of the background. Ghostlike, the dress and the light shoes appear to float in front of a background of gray tones. This visual effect of the blurry gray hues, which lets the girl fade, parallels the objectification of the girl by the text through literary strategies and by the mother, who turns her daughter into a colonial object by acting *on* her.

At the photographer’s studio, the girl is placed standing “on a table that made me taller, because the scene in the background against which I was to be photographed, was so vast, it overwhelmed my two-year-old frame, making me seem a mere figurine, not a child at all” (BD 99). In her perception, the girl is transformed from a human into the decorative object of a “figurine” – a lifeless small statue modelled after the shape of a human being. Indeed, it is not only the smallness of the girl’s body against the tapestry, but the act of being photographed itself, particularly without voluntary participation, that objectifies the girl. “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see

¹²⁸ In addition to the play with temporalities through the use of parentheses, the juxtaposition of photograph and narrative also relates to different temporalities, which on the one hand is based on the different capacities of the media, but on the other hand also on the specifics of the story told. As Nicole Matos similarly observes, image and text refer to two different time frames. “While the photograph itself captures a single moment [...] the story captures a weeks-long chain of preparations, culminating in the final hours before the picture is snapped” (Matos, “The Difference” 844).

¹²⁹ Brazier notices that in Kincaid’s works, “the colors yellow and white often symbolize decay and decadence and death. This color-coded textuality manifests a powerful critique of the political, cultural hegemony of whiteness by Kincaid” (“Daffodils” 91). In the “Biography of a Dress,” yellow is certainly associated with revulsion. The color is mentioned several times, and each time it describes an object that elicits disgust, such as a disliked food (fongie, BD 93), the intestines of a dead man (BD 94), or pus flowing from a sore on the photographer’s cheek, which is associated with the icing on the girl’s birthday cake (BD 100). The yellow dress joins the ranks of such repulsive objects. Moreover, it also symbolizes the imposing hegemony of whiteness, or rather Englishness, as Brazier observes, in that it represents colonial ideals encroaching on the body of the girl.

themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can symbolically be possessed,” as Susan Sontag puts it (14).¹³⁰ The driving force here is the girl’s mother, whose bathing, powdering, and dressing her daughter for the photograph illustrates an internalized desire to adhere to colonial beauty standards.

The mother acts through the scripts internalized by her own existence in a colonial system. She mimics the colonizer’s gaze and perpetuates it by acting it out on her daughter’s body. In this way the girl’s mother becomes an agent of coloniality who navigates within a colonial system enforced by material culture that extends to every aspect of life, as the dressing of her daughter exemplifies. Practicing her embroidery, for instance, the mother adorns her daughter’s dresses with “species of birds she had never seen (swan) and species of flowers she had never seen (tulip) and species of animals she had never seen (bear) in real life, only in a picture in a book” (BD 96). The three species mentioned here are in their combination typically associated with European imagery, which aligns with the distribution of European “culture” in colonized countries, here that of Great Britain in the Caribbean.¹³¹

The mother acts as a colonizing instance towards the girl when she tries to have her daughter look like a “proper” English girl. The contemporary narrator of “Biography of a Dress” locates the origin of this yearning in a soap advertisement:

[A] girl whose skin was the color of cream in the process of spoiling, whose hair was the texture of silk and the color of flax, a girl whose eyes gleamed like blue jewels in a crown [...] – that my mother saw, a picture on an almanac advertising a particularly fine scented soap (a soap she could not afford to buy then but I can now), and this picture of this girl wearing a yellow dress with a smocking on the front bodice perhaps created in my mother the desire to have a daughter who looked like that or perhaps created the desire in my mother to make the daughter she already had to look like that. (BD 96–97)

130 See chapter 3.1 for a detailed discussion of objectification through photography, especially in *Lucy*.

131 Another example from Kincaid’s works would be Lucy’s ire at daffodils upon seeing them in person for the first time, as they provoke memories of being forced to learn the poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” by William Wordsworth by heart. Lucy’s anger at the poem is caused by her disapproval of colonial education, centered on subjects far from the real world (see *Lucy* 30). Similarly, the decorative plate painted with an English landscape, meant to symbolize “heaven,” which is revered by Ma Eunice in *The Autobiography of My Mother* (9), transports English ideals via a commodity. See chapter 3.1 for a discussion of colonial imagery here.

This quote reveals that the fuss about preparing the girl and having her photographed is not to celebrate her second birthday, but to recreate the image of a white girl in a yellow dress, as known from a soap advertisement.

What affects the mother are the connoted meanings of the iconic message of the advertisement. In his analysis of a French pasta advertisement in “Rhetoric of the Image,” Roland Barthes expounds the connotations of the symbolic message of the image, which is joined with the linguistic message and the noncoded (denoted) iconic message (“Rhetoric” 36). The pasta advertisement consists of an open shopping bag with packets of pasta, sauce, and parmesan, and fresh onions, tomatoes, and mushrooms arranged within and next to it. These visual elements make up the denoted iconic message. To describe the symbolic iconic message of the advertisement, i.e., the aforementioned elements’ connoted meaning, Barthes contrives the term “Italianicity” (“Rhetoric” 41). He writes that “Italianicity is not Italy, it is the condensed essence of everything that could be Italian, from spaghetti to painting” (“Rhetoric” 48), which the articles in the shopping bag are meant to convey through their combination, arrangement, and color scheme (*tricolore*). In combination of the connoted and denoted meanings, the advertisement appraises not only packets of pasta, but a “feeling” of “Italianicity” that the consumer might acquire together with the tangible pasta.

Following this logic of the connoted signifier of the advertisement, I maintain that what the soap advertisement described in Kincaid’s “Biography of a Dress” connotes is proper English “girlness.” Considering the details of the iconic message – including the whiteness of the depicted girl’s skin or the silkiness of her flaxen hair – the message of the advertisement is not simply: “Buy this soap!,” but rather: “This soap signifies the capacity to cleanse and whiten ethnic markers to approximate white girlhood in aesthetic, moral, and sexual terms. If you desire the ascriptions of a white girl’s body – buy this soap!” A personal hygienic product and desirability of “white girlness” are thus entangled in the symbolic message of the soap advertisement. In the “Biography of a Dress,” the mother bathes and powders the girl (BD 98) before putting her into a yellow dress with a smocking (BD 99) in her attempt to recreate the image of the soap advertisement’s white “girlness.” The mother thereby repeats the internalized white gaze of the colonizer and thus objectifies her two-year-old child by attempting to reproduce an idealized image of English “girlness” through the body of her daughter, as well as through the photograph taken of her.

Yet the mother’s attempts to create a whitewashed daughter for herself must remain futile, as the narrating “I” explains: “My skin was not the color of cream in the process of spoiling, my hair was not the texture of silk and the color of flax, my eyes did not gleam like jewels on a crown” (BD 96). The girl could not possibly fulfill her mother’s desire to look like the girl in the soap advertisement. She can only

be “almost the same but not quite,” to use the phrase that Homi Bhabha employs to define colonial mimicry (127). Almost as a side effect of attempted “sameness,” objectification thus lays bare the mechanisms of mimicry. It unveils its double vision that reveals the colonizer (Bhabha 126).

The text of “Biography of a Dress,” I argue, counters the objectifying attempts of the girl that culminate in the photograph. The preparations leading up to it as well as the photograph being taken participate in framing the girl in a vision of the colonized other. The image itself fixes the girl in this projected “English girlness.” Initially, with its staged confusion of genres and title, the text repeats the marginalization of the girl. She is displaced by the focus on the dress, and framed as helpless by the text when it speaks for her. The experiencing “I” is not allowed to speak; another voice narrates her, writes her biography, which is also her own, but the narrated “I” remains detached from the “I” capable of acting. When the autodiegetic voice multiplies heteroglossically, it becomes increasingly unclear who is speaking. While such heteroglossia at first appears to be typical for autobiographical texts, in “Biography of a Dress” it is so overtly presented that it points to a fragmentation within the “I” that is distinctly (post)colonial. As such, the text’s use of typical genre features formally reverts to the underlying issue of human beings regarded as objects in a colonial system. It speaks through an “I” that is heteroglossic and fragmented, an “I” who was compelled to work itself through layers of objectifying colonial scripts (including what defines autobiography), producing an experience that the “I” now brings to the fore, in speaking about herself at all. In this way, the “I” is also a “she,” demonstrating the mechanisms of objectification and establishing herself as a self-determined subject.