

3 Images: Visual Engagements with History

Before she became an established writer of both fiction and nonfiction, Kincaid had intended to become a photographer. Although she eventually turned to text as her preferred medium, visibility still features strongly throughout Kincaid's works. Looking and seeing are central occupations of most of her characters as early as in the short stories collected in *At the Bottom of the River* or in *A Small Place*. Kincaid's fictional characters engage with images and with photographs in particular, above all in *Annie John* and *Lucy*. Other texts feature actual images, such as *A Small Place*, "Biography of a Dress," *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *My Garden (Book)*;, and *Mr. Potter*.

The images in Kincaid's works have intricate relationships with the texts with which they are placed (or, in the case of ekphrases, they are brought forth by text in the first place). In a 1994 interview, Kincaid comments on connections of text and photography: "I was in college and thought I would be a photographer, and I used to write out my photographs [...] – what I would take and how I would set them up. [...] I would write down what I thought the picture should feel like. And I would try to take a picture of what I had written down" (Kincaid in Ferguson, "A Lot of Memory" 163). Such connections of the literal meaning of photography – "writing light" – and actual writing culminate in Kincaid's use of ekphrases, particularly in her later works, *My Garden (Book)*;, *Mr. Potter*; and *See Now Then*.

Throughout Kincaid's oeuvre, visual media engage with personal and collective history when visibility in imagery is part of the metaphorical visibility of Black bodies in history. bell hooks explains that not to have one's picture taken means "to stand outside of history" ("Photography" 49), since, as one could add with Susan Sontag, "[t]o photograph is to confer importance" (28). Moreover, like written histories, "visual culture can play its part in redefining culture as a constantly changing, permeable and forward-looking experience of transculture, rather than as a clearly definable inheritance from the past" (Mirzoeff 132). I regard the visual art in Kincaid's works as such agents of the making of history – as a heightened form of what Hayden White calls *historiophoty*, "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images" ("Historiophoty" 1193). Demonstrating the openness of visual art to interpretation and (re)signification, Kincaid's works explore the capacities they possess to represent history, including different competing versions. Constantly questioning the nexus of visual representations and (past) reality, these texts reveal a flexibility in the relationship of signifiers and signifieds in both visual and textual images. And in uncovering these unexpected flexibilities, the engagements with images and with text-image rela-

tions take up the back-and-forth of the poetics of impermanence that I have identified, in the present book, as characteristic for all of Kincaid's oeuvre.

The following chapters investigate three different ways in which visibility occurs and engages with history in Kincaid's works: chapter 3.1, "Making and Unmaking Representations of the Past," analyzes images on the diegetic level of Kincaid's texts. The focus here lies on Annie John's iconoclastic acts and Lucy's production of images to demonstrate how the characters reject being framed by others in stereotypical (colonial) discourses, refuse to recognize colonial iconography, and seize the potential that photography offers to projects of self-making. The following chapter 3.2, "A Photo Album of History," is concerned with Kincaid's ekphrastic technique, in particular in *My Garden (Book)*. I argue that the book employs ekphrases, i.e., verbal representations of visual representations, as textual photographs that question the possibilities of representation in general and, more specifically, of representation in historical colonial contexts. Chapter 3.3, "Photographic Product(ion)s of History," focuses on the concrete photographic portraits that feature in *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Mr. Potter* to indicate the production of new versions of the past through the interplay of seemingly authentic photographs and fictional texts.

3.1 Making and Unmaking Representations: Intradiegetic Images in *Annie John* and *Lucy*

Jamaica Kincaid's early novels *Annie John* and *Lucy* are concerned with images and visibility on the diegetic level. The visual practices of the texts' protagonists engage with both personal past and collective colonial history. Annie John's iconoclastic engagement with family photographs and with images that reference colonial history decenters the significance of the images' referents and, with that, the significance of past events. Annie resists being passively framed in both photographs and social roles. She insists on her own agency to interpret images and to interpret the past. Similarly, Lucy refuses to be framed by either exoticizing colonialist imagery or by stereotypes of immigrant workers and domestic help. She then returns the gaze of these views in actively taking up the camera and, in a repetition of colonizing gestures, appropriating her environs in the United States by photographing them herself.

This chapter explores how the protagonists' interactions with visual media, particularly with photographs, address personal past, colonial history, and the relationships of both to the present. As a seemingly truthful medium, photography might be thought to provide uninhibited access to the past. However, as I will show, in Kincaid's works photographs are not conceived of as faithful renditions

of the past that offer up unambiguous significations. On the contrary, constant interpretative work is required for meanings to come forth. Here, meanings are not inherent to images; rather, the texts demonstrate how meanings are fundamentally attributed to images by the observer. Accordingly, Annie and Lucy do not use images to gain knowledge about the past. Instead, by manipulating and producing images, they negotiate their own subject positions in the present. My interest in the texts' discussions of visuality and in the characters' engagement with images is thus twofold: first, to explore the conception of visual representations as put forth by Kincaid's texts, and second, to examine the texts' understanding of personal past and collective history as it is displayed by Annie's and Lucy's visual practices.

In his seminal work *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes famously claimed that "in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past" (76, emphasis in original). Barthes emphasizes that the thing or person photographed must have existed and "been there" for the photograph to have come into being. In this, Barthes is not foremost interested in the photograph's iconicity, which signifies meaning by similarity (Peirce 157), but he does directly pick up on Charles Sanders Peirce's stipulation that "due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature, [...] they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection [indices]" (156). Following this, for Barthes the photograph is consequently proof of a past reality. As such, a photograph would indeed provide a form of access to the past. Susan Sontag, in contrast, notes that every photograph is already "an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are" (7).¹³² Accordingly, photographs may provide access to a mediated past, but not to an alleged reality. Rather in accord with Sontag, the images described in Kincaid's texts disrupt the Barthesian notion of the photograph as a gateway, in that they consistently deny any inherent meaning. The connection of the photographic signifier to a real-life object (or person), which Barthes also maintains when he writes that "[a] specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents)" (*Camera Lucida* 5),¹³³ is disrupted in Kincaid's works. One sees this, for instance, in *Annie*

132 By contrast, in "Rhetoric of the Image," Barthes insists that "[m]an's interventions in the photograph (framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed) all effectively belong to the plane of connotation; it is as though in the beginning (even if Utopian) there were the brute photograph (frontal and clear) on which man would then lay out, with the aid of various techniques, the signs drawn from a cultural code" (44).

133 Barthes does, however, concede that in special cases, it is ultimately possible to distinguish between photograph and referent: "at least it [the photographic signifier] is not *immediately* or

John, when components of the photographic sign are perceived individually, ultimately producing new indexicalities and, with that, different meanings. In every act of perception the images' significations thus need to be decoded anew, as they might constantly change in the eyes of their (different) beholders.

In *Lucy*, the family photo albums kept by Mariah, the protagonist's employer and surrogate mother figure in the United States, perfectly illustrate processes of meaning-making when emotional attributions to the medium (the album and the photographs it contains) prove more important than what the images signify. We see this, for instance, when Lucy notes that the albums fulfill the specific function of presenting a certain narrative of Mariah's family, and that of her and her husband Lewis in particular. The albums start with the initial meeting of Mariah and Lewis "in Paris in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower or in London in the shadow of the Big Ben or somewhere foolish like that. [...] And there were pictures of them getting married [...] and of their children just born in hospitals, and birthday parties and trips to canyons and deserts and mountains, and all sorts of other events" (*Lucy* 79–80). Mariah's photo albums present what Susan Sontag calls a "portrait-chronicle" of a family, "a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness" (8). Lucy realizes that Mariah ascribes emotional value to her arrangement of the photographs, which purports a coherent story of her family life. Yet Lucy also understands that this narrative is created by Mariah and did not occur naturally, as Mariah might like it to appear. On her discovery that the seemingly perfect husband Lewis is carrying on an affair with Mariah's best friend Dinah, Lucy notes: "But here was a picture that no one would ever take – a picture that would not end up in one of those books, but a significant picture all the same" (80). By arranging the images to her liking and by not including all possible significant events,¹³⁴ Mariah creates patterns for the narrative of her family history.¹³⁵ Mariah here uses the images symbolically: she foregrounds a cultural code of family photographs that signifies harmonious relationships by collecting them in photo albums, by placing others "all over the house" (*Lucy* 12) on display for the family and possible visitors, and further in the composition of the photographs, when the family members' "six yellow heads of various sizes were bunched as

generally distinguished from its referent [...]: it is not impossible to perceive the photographic signifier [...], but it requires a secondary action of knowledge and reflection" (*Camera Lucida* 5).

134 That said, Mariah could not have included photographs of Lewis's marital transgressions even if she wanted to, since first, such images were never taken, and second, Mariah is yet unaware of these events.

135 Mariah's structuring of the visual narrative here is highly reminiscent of Hayden White's notion of the employment of historical events as the transformation of sequences into narratives, as chosen by the historiographer (see White, *Metahistory* xii).

if they were a bouquet of flowers tied together by an unseen string. In the pictures, they smiled out at the world, giving the impression that they found everything in it unbearably wonderful" (*Lucy* 12). The family photographs thus "turn the past into a consumable object, [and] are short cut. Any collection of photographs is an exercise in Surrealist montage and Surrealist abbreviation of history" (Sontag 68). Lucy's recognition that by no means *all* major events of Mariah and Lewis's relationship are recorded in the albums indicates that the images' intended symbolic meanings originate with Mariah.

However, Mariah does not have an authorial prerogative of interpretation, as the meanings or signifieds of the photographs are nevertheless still realized by the individual beholders. While Mariah might think the pictures of herself and her husband under the Eiffel Tower or Big Ben are romantic, Lucy reads the fact that the photographs replicate the cultural codes of romance and of a happy family as indexical for Mariah's phoniness.

Later, Lucy pointedly asks: "Why is a picture of something real eventually more exciting than the thing itself? I did not yet know the answer to that" (121).¹³⁶ Considering Lucy's insights with regard to Mariah's photo albums, it becomes clear that what makes photographs so exciting to Lucy is the openness of the photographic signifier. It may be interpreted in various ways, which means that what it represents – a past event – is also always open to interpretation.

Annie John's Iconoclasm: Renouncing Representations of the Past

If the meanings of a photograph are eminently produced in the act of its perception, the relationship of the signifier, i.e., the photograph, and its signifieds are highly unstable, as they may change with every beholder. This suggests that an image's meanings may be altered on purpose: *Annie John's* protagonist makes changes to a set of family photographs and thus declines the significance of the referents and their impact on her present. This scene has generally been identified as a key passage in Annie's separation from her mother.¹³⁷ At the age of fifteen, Annie has recently had a serious quarrel with her mother. Annie John senior had called her daughter a slut for talking to a group of boys in the street, which left Annie junior feeling vastly misunderstood and misjudged by her overbearing mother. As a result, Annie does not accept her mother's rebuke and displays an air

¹³⁶ The consideration of the representation as more significant than its referent is later taken up again in Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*: See chapter 3.2.

¹³⁷ See, e.g., articles by Banerjee, Jackson, Murdoch, or Nasta.

of pride and indifference in rejecting her authority as a kind of punishment. She soon thereafter asks her father, a carpenter by profession, to make a trunk for her, in order to discard her mother's trunk, which she had used until then. Wanting a trunk of her own demonstrates Annie's separation from her mother, as Annie senior used her now symbolically charged trunk to leave her own parents, whom she felt oppressed by at the age of sixteen. Hence Annie's request has often been read as the beginning of her own flight from her family.¹³⁸ However, while these events might mark the onset of Annie's adolescent separation from the family's nucleus, in her request for a trunk of her own she ultimately integrates herself into the history of the family and in particular into that of her mother. Her attempt to demonstrate independence fails in that Annie here simply repeats her mother's pattern of behavior in asking for her own trunk. This entanglement of attempted separation and repetition, which unwantedly becomes a confirmation of affiliation, foreshadows Annie's further process of leaving her family – while she might want to gain independence, she cannot break the links as easily as she can carry out a performance of independence, which turns out not to be that at all.

After the altercation with her mother, it is ultimately Annie junior who suffers more from the break in the formerly close relationship, and not her mother, who now punishes Annie junior by withdrawing affection (*AJ* 103). In a combination of feeling angry, defeated, and heartbroken over the loss of the relationship, Annie falls into a depressive state that is described as an unexplainable "sickness" (*AJ* 124), which coincides with a lengthy period of rain. Although no physical ailment can be determined, Annie is too weak to leave her bed and feels pinned down by the rain that falls on the roof (*AJ* 109, 111). Since this weakness directly succeeds the quarrel between Annie and her mother, it may well be read as its psychological effect on the pubescent girl who agonizes over the changes in the family dynamics. Annie's subsequent engagement with a number of family photographs is part of this context.

Two weeks into her now delirious state, Annie is left alone by her parents, who begin to resume their regular daily activities when Annie shows no signs of improvement. As soon as she is by herself, a group of family photographs arranged in Annie's room attracts her attention, when they suddenly loom up big in front of her (*AJ* 118). The images depict important family events in Annie's life: "each illustrates one of the institutions into which Annie is in the process of being inducted as she becomes a social subject," as Marianne Hirsch explains ("Resisting Images" 258). In one photograph Annie wears her school uniform, in another she is a bridesmaid at an aunt's wedding, a third shows her father and

138 See, e.g., Jackson, Murdoch, Perry.

mother together, and a fourth depicts Annie on the day of her First Communion (*AJ* 118). While Annie is looking at them in the state of her sickness, the photographs take on a life of their own:

The photographs, as they stood on the table, now began to blow themselves up until they touched the ceiling and then shrink back down, but to a size that I could not easily see. They did this with a special regularity, keeping beat to a music I was not privy to. Up and down they went, up and down. They did this for so long that they began to perspire quite a bit, and when they finally stopped, falling back on the table limp with exhaustion, the smell coming from them was unbearable to me. I got out of bed, gathered them up in my arms, took them over to the basin of water on the washstand, and gave them a good bath. I washed them thoroughly with soap and water, digging into all the crevices, trying, with not much success, to straighten out the creases in Aunt Mary's veil, trying, with not much success, to remove the dirt from the front of my father's trousers. When I finished, I dried them thoroughly, dusted them with talcum powder, and then laid them down in a corner covered with a blanket, so that they would be warm while they slept. (*AJ* 119–120)

After the washing, the photographs are permanently damaged, as Annie notes: “None of the people in the wedding picture, except for me, had any face left. In the picture of my mother and father, I had erased them from the waist down. In the picture of me wearing my confirmation dress, I had erased all of myself except for the shoes” (*AJ* 120). Previous analyses of this scene, such as Marianne Hirsch's or Susheila Nasta's, have concentrated on the destructive outcome of Annie's handling of the images, to then interpret this psychologically.¹³⁹ I, however, will attend to her reasons for doing so that are apparent in the specific ways in which Annie engages with the images, to then ask how Annie understands the ontology of the photographs and investigate their capacities to represent Annie's personal past.

Marianne Hirsch argues that by effectively destroying the photographs, Annie alters her perception of the past: “In washing and changing the pictures and relationships they depict, Annie can attempt to weaken the ‘having been there’ [Barthes] of the referent. She can attempt to intervene in her past, to rewrite her memories in favor of representations that better fit with the new life she wants to explore” (Hirsch, “Resisting Images” 260). By weakening the photographic referent, she also weakens the memory of the past (Hirsch, “Resisting Images” 263), which creates space for new identity-constituting moments in Annie's life. As Susheila Nasta writes: “[P]erforming the deliberate action of erasure, she attempts to

¹³⁹ Hirsch, for instance, proposes that Annie “acts out her fear of adult sexuality as she tries to remove the photos’ bad smell, erase her parents’ bodies below the waist, and rub out the stain on her father’s pants and the wrinkles in the wedding veil” (“Resisting Images” 259).

posit the right to choose a future identity rather than remaining bound to an already prescribed narrative of her past” (79). I find these interpretations are convincing, particularly if we consider that when Annie first falls into her depressive state, she perceives her illness as embodied by a “black thing” in her head (*AJ* 111) that “shut[s] out all [her] memory of the things that had happened to [her]” (*AJ* 111–112). The break with her mother and Annie’s contemplation of this rupture already leave her calling her former self-identification into question. Her earlier life matters little in the process of becoming an adult in which she takes on a new self.¹⁴⁰

However, taking into account that Roland Barthes’s conception of the photographic referent, which Hirsch employs here, is concerned with the real object that was in front of a camera at one point in the past, Annie could not possibly “weaken the ‘having been there’ of the referent,” as Hirsch puts it, since Annie would not have access to a past reality. What she physically changes is the signifier of that referent, namely the photograph. Roland Barthes writes that “[w]hatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not what we see” (*Camera Lucida* 6). Annie’s washing of the photographs, however, foregrounds their mediality – the vehicle of the photographic sign is made visible.

While Hirsch’s and Nasta’s takes on the scene in *Annie John* highlight the variety of the possible meanings that photographs may implicate, they do not attend to the processes of Annie’s iconoclastic act. She does not just get up and drown the images in a washbasin with the clear objective to efface them. Rather, the photographs spring into action and engage with Annie, who initially remains a passive observer. In Annie’s (albeit feverish) perception, *they* come alive; they change sizes by blowing *themselves* up, which suggests that they possess some form of agency. Then they shrink to a size so small that Annie can hardly see them anymore, which indicates their power to evade Annie’s gaze. Annie clearly is not in control of the situation; on the contrary, the images decisively exclude her from their dance as Annie cannot even discern the music that seemingly provides the beat to which they change their sizes. Through their motion, the photographs moreover acquire a rather human bodily function: they begin to sweat. Just like humans would, the images are tired out by their exercise, which leaves them limp and exhausted. In this state, the photographs now give off a smell (most likely from their perspiration) that is “unbearable” to Annie and which finally incites her to take them up and give them “a good bath” in an appliance that is commonly used for human hygiene. Accordingly, it is not a will to destroy, but a feeling of disgust that prompts

¹⁴⁰ Hirsch points out that after this episode, Annie reinvents herself by wearing a new set of clothes, speaking with a made-up accent and eventually leaving Antigua (“Resisting Images” 259).

Annie to put the images into the basin. While washing them to remove the smell, Annie suddenly perceives the photographs as three-dimensional objects when she attempts “digging into all the crevices, trying [...] to straighten out the creases in Aunt Mary’s veil” (*AJ* 119–120). Here, Annie not only tries to clean the images’ contents, but significantly, her venture to straighten the creases is also an effort to eradicate the three-dimensionality. Annie attempts to make changes to the iconic sides of the photographic signs. The icon nevertheless remains stable; trousers and veil do not take on different forms, as the twice used phrase “with not much success” indicates. As little as Annie could get to the images’ referents, since they are located in the past, she cannot alter their iconic likenesses either. Her efforts remain arrested on the level of the images’ mediality. After all, she does change the photographic sign by washing and scrubbing it, but her work primarily affects the medium – the paper – and only secondarily (by way of destruction) does it affect the sign the medium transports.

Although Annie is unable to take hold of the photographic icons, they nevertheless appear before her. In their movement, the images transform so that the icons begin to dominate. Susan Sontag clarifies the difference between the photographic representation and its referent in terms of power relations: “a photograph is not like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of the subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it” (155). In Annie’s case, these roles are reversed when the photographs assail Annie and exert power over the girl. When she then washes the photographs, she pushes back against the power of the photographs that physically emerge into the room. Their human-like perspiration, which implies a corporeality, offends her as much as their three-dimensionality. Hence, in her washing of the images the intended goal is not to destroy them (although that is the inevitable outcome), but to return them to their former immobile and two-dimensional state of the photographic medium.

In immersing the photographs in the washbasin, Annie moreover repeats the act of producing photographic prints. During the process of printing, the developer bath brings forth the image on the previously (seemingly) blank paper. When Annie washes her family’s photographs, she, too, creates images. Although these are not new images, Annie’s imitation of the developer bath changes the photographs so that afterwards they show different versions of their former selves. Annie does not have blank canvases to work with to produce radically new versions of the photographs and, with that, of herself, as Hirsch puts it, but she is still able to create different versions, which reduces the visibility of the other family members and lets her own likeness appear at the center of some of the photographs.

After washing the photographs, Annie dries them, dusts them with talcum powder – a hygienic practice to prevent perspiration – and cradles them in a blan-

ket to keep them warm. Again, these are not destructive acts, but rather those of mothering. The use of an antiperspirant suggests the intention to prevent such an episode from happening again and thus rather takes care of the photographs than purposefully damages them. It also indicates that Annie intends a future use for the photographs and did not just instrumentalize them to act out a singular performance of separation and independence.

Ultimately, by handling the photographs the way she does, Annie changes and partly obliterates them. She does not, however, as Hirsch and Nasta have argued, directly act upon the photographic referents to alter her past. Rather, as shown above, in acting on the photographs Annie emphasizes their mediality. When the images' icons seemingly come to life, Annie pushes back against their presence and returns them to their medium – the two-dimensional paper. Furthermore, even though Annie tries to make changes to the referents' likenesses, she is unable to do so. She does, however, effectively change their medium and consequently their signifiers so that they not do not indexically point to their referents by way of the production process of photographs (see Peirce 159, Dubois 40–50), but now the altered surfaces of the images function as a trace that again points to the production process of the images, though this time to that of their alteration – the “second developer bath” that Annie gave them. Thus, the photographs' significations are redirected from family events and Annie's daughterly role in this social structure to Annie's washing of them and to her self-determination.¹⁴¹ The photographic sign now still works in the same way – indexically – but Annie's intervention on the plane of the medium has changed the signifieds. Perceiving photographs as medium that function as signifiers, questioning the images' referential power, and thereby destabilizing a conventionally direct connection of signifier

¹⁴¹ By erasing all faces except for her own in one picture and by expunging her confirmation outfit except for her shoes, which she had chosen herself and which had become a bone of contention, as her mother thought them inappropriate (*AJ* 119), Annie emphasizes her autonomy from her family. However, to be clear, while I argue that Annie takes a step towards self-determination and independence from her family in her treatment of the photographs, I do not maintain that she achieves it in this single performance. Several points would contradict this stance. First, she does not act as a self-determined subject in that she is in a delirious state, when she engages the photographs. Second, she does not choose to engage with them, but when they approach her, she initially remains passive until provoked by the smell the images give off. Third, the separation from her family remains incomplete throughout the text. While steps towards Annie's independence characterize her narrative, and although the book ends with her physically leaving Antigua to attend nursing school in England, Annie feels both relieved and devastated; just as her mother makes clear that their complicated relationship cannot be concluded by geographical distance: “It doesn't matter what you do or where you go, I'll always be your mother and this will always be your home” (*AJ* 147).

and referent provides space for new significations and finally allows Annie to produce a representation of her past – one in which she is not a dutiful daughter as the family photographs might suggest, but which establishes her as independent, and on the basis of which she now may proceed to negotiate her identity in the present and in the future on her own terms. I read Annie John's changing of family photographs as exemplary for the way in which Kincaid's works engage with historical representations. Through repetition (here of the developer bath), something is uncovered that was already inherent but obscured in and by the representation. Changes to the medium, such as Annie John's altering of the photographs, change the foci of perception and reveal versions of history that are not radically *new*, but radically *different* in that they now center on previously hidden participants in this history.

Such visual practices are employed by the characters of Kincaid's texts not only concerning their personal histories, but also with regard to collective colonial history. Visual representations of colonial rule are discarded, destroyed, and altered, which in each case entails meaning-making processes that do not conform to colonial ideals.

Annie John, for instance, rejoices about her new notebooks, which have a cover of black and white blotches mixed up together: "so glad I was to get rid of my old notebooks, which had on their covers a picture of a wrinkled-up woman wearing a crown on her head and a neckful and armsful of diamonds and pearls" (*AJ* 40). Shalene Vasquez identifies the portrait as that of Queen Victoria, "one of the most influential figureheads of colonial Antigua" (Vasquez 34). As such a figurehead, the image of the queen on a school notebook signifies the colonial indoctrination that was part of the educational system in British colonies. Annie's happy discarding of the books and her preference for the more neutral book covers then emphasizes her disregard of the colonial rule.¹⁴² Significantly, Annie does not even mention the person portrayed by name, which once more highlights her indifference to the supposed figure of authority. Similar to her erasure of the family photographs, in throwing out the notebooks with the queen on the covers Annie here refuses the visual representations of history to make space for a less overbearing present on more neutral terms.

More unequivocally even, the protagonist of *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela, breaks a decorative porcelain plate when she is a young girl. The plate displays an image of a landscape: "This picture was nothing but a field full of grass

¹⁴² One could even argue that a mix of black and white spots represents the exact opposite of colonial rule, as here no color prevails over the other but they are intermingled – be it literally with regard to blotches of color on a book cover, or metaphorically with regard to human skin colors.

and flowers on a sunny day, but it had an atmosphere of secret abundance, happiness and tranquility; underneath it was written in gold letters the one word HEAVEN. Of course it was not a picture of heaven at all; it was a picture of the English countryside idealized" (*ABM* 9). The owner of the plate, Eunice, is unaware of the idealization of England, according to Xuela, she indeed thinks that the image depicts a heaven that promises a carefree and worry-free afterlife (*ABM* 9). For Eunice, the plate succeeded in conveying English ideals and imagination in the colonized space, when it conjoins the English countryside by way of iconicity with the Christian promise of blissful eternity through the inscription, which connects the symbolic paradisaical meaning to the English countryside.

Xuela does not intentionally drop the plate to break it, but neither does she apologize for it. Eunice is devastated by the loss of the token and physically punishes the girl who is in her care, but still Xuela refuses to ask for forgiveness. Since at the time Xuela herself was unaware of the picture's colonizing agenda, her dropping of the plate is hardly an intentional performance of resistance against colonial rule. Nevertheless, this iconoclastic act occurs on the first few pages of the book and introduces the protagonist's deviant behavior and her instinctive rebelliousness against English rule, which are Xuela's central character traits that feature throughout the narrative of her life. Breaking the plate, Xuela destroys both the symbolic signifier of a Christian heaven as well as an idealized, idolized, and iconic signifier of England. She breaks not only the physical object, but in doing so, she also severs the connection of heaven and England which are linked in the picture. Ultimately, the breaking of the plate performs a repudiation of the colonizer's power over the imagery of the metaphysical concept of heaven as well as the paradisaical attributions to the glorified "mother country."

Such colonialist iconography is moreover rejected not by destruction but by alteration in *Annie John*, when the protagonist reassigns meaning to an image of Christopher Columbus in her school book. During class, Annie skips ahead in her history book and is immediately fascinated by one of the rare color pictures in the book: it shows Columbus sitting at the bottom of a ship with his hands and feet shackled, looking rather miserable after having been arrested by Francisco de Bobadilla for his poor government of Hispaniola. "How I loved this picture – to see the usually triumphant Columbus, brought so low," Annie muses (78). Seeing the image of Columbus in this position prompts Annie to think of her mother's rejoicing at her grandfather's physical demise. Annie John senior has had a quarrelsome relationship with her own father, Pa Chess, and spitefully relishes his inability to move about as he pleases. Pa Chess is shackled by a stiffness of his limbs, which he has acquired with his old age. Venomously, Annie John senior remarks: "So the great man can no longer just get up and go. How I would love to see his face now!" (78). Annie recognizes the analogy between her autocratic grandfather Pa

Chess and the colonizer Christopher Columbus, their shared physical inhibitions, and the delight of those previously oppressed by the two men. Fittingly, Annie then draws over the image's title "Columbus in Chains" and replaces the descriptive caption with her mother's dictum "The Great Man Can No Longer Get Up and Go" (AJ 78). By changing the caption, Annie effectively changes the meanings of the image. It now does not show a "great" European colonizer who simply was imprisoned at one point in his life, i.e., an authoritative historical figure; but by aligning him with her own disliked grandfather and appropriating him into her own genealogy, Annie removes Columbus's historicity. Christopher Columbus now is just an powerless man to be laughed at.

Alisa Braithwaite notes that "[b]y placing writing on a page that is already inscribed, [Annie John] changes the location of writing itself so that she can start her narrative wherever she desires. [...] There is no originary blankness on which the writer writes. The page is a text, a location already occupied upon which the writer negotiates her narrative" (151). Indeed, Annie does not write on blank space and her alteration of the image's inscription does not – strictly speaking – change the image itself. As with the family photographs, Annie's intervention results in a redirection of significations, which allows for different meanings to emerge. Like her personal past, embodied by the family photographs, the significance of colonial history can also be changed through visual practices, although it nevertheless keeps on determining Annie's present. Yet its weight can be changed, which is what Annie does in her modification of the image's caption. By altering the inscription, which adds, to the image's iconic meaning (an illustration of a moment in a man's life), a symbolic one (every ruler can be brought ever so low just like a common man, even the most famous one), Annie gains the agency to move from being a colonial subject to a more self-determined subject.¹⁴³ Again, and like Xuela, she refuses colonial iconography and its prescriptive meanings and thus affirms her own agency to be able to attribute meanings herself.

Jamaica Kincaid's characters deny fixation as a characteristic of images. Neither photographs nor other visual representations may fix the past – be it personal or collective. The characters claim the agency to interpret the images they encounter themselves and reject being governed by them and their representations of the past. It is this variability in the relationship of signifier and signified that opens the images to the possibility of altering perceptions of the past. In Kincaid's

¹⁴³ Adlai Murdoch here even reads a validation of Annie's identity: "By taking on established authority from one culture and imposing her own (written) will upon it, Annie in effect prefigures her eventual treatment of her mother's authority – by force of will, she rewrites the maternal paradigm, the clash of cultures signifying a portent of the means by which she engages in validating her own identity" ("Severing" 337).

later novels, *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Mr. Potter*, the instability of referent and representation becomes even more productive when actual photographs on the book covers create notions of authenticity for the novels' fictional accounts of the past. Here, it is not the characters but the novels' readers who discover the unfixability of the past in images, which then allows for new knowledge of the past to emerge, as I will show in chapter 2.3 "Photographic Product(ion)s of History." Likewise, if the image is not a reliable medium to access the past, this also opens them to the possibility of productively engaging the past, as Lucy does in her refusal to be framed by others and in turn by taking photographs herself.

Lucy's Photographs: Appropriations and Distancing in the Making of the Present

Whereas Annie John negotiates the meanings of her personal past as well as her current subject position by altering family photographs, Lucy's engagement with paintings and photographs highlights her liminal position as a newly arrived immigrant in the United States. In the process of negotiating new spaces and her positions in them, Lucy takes up a camera. I read Lucy's engagements with visuality as signifying on her subject positions, which are worked out in the negotiations of colonial visual topoi.

The novel *Lucy* sets out with the arrival of the nineteen-year-old in a chapter entitled "Poor Visitor." In the course of the novel, the text details Lucy's first year in the United States – both her joys and pains in navigating the strange new world around her and rejoicing at having left behind her former home in the Caribbean, while simultaneously being plagued by feelings of homesickness. In her former life in the Caribbean, Lucy objected to being forced into social roles, especially that of the dutiful daughter. With the move, she hopes to escape "the harsh judgments [...] by people whose only power to do so was that they had known [her] from the moment [she] was born" (*Lucy* 51). However, once in the United States, Lucy has to realize that even where nobody knows her, she is still not free from being framed by others. While in the United States she is not her mother's daughter, she now is an immigrant girl, a nursing student, the help, a girl from "the islands," or simply "the girl" (*Lucy* 58). Leaving the Caribbean lets her escape neither her personal past, nor a shared colonial history, which prevails in the form of casual racism (see, for instance, *Lucy* 56–58). Lucy traveled to the United States to work as a nursemaid for a wealthy American couple and to pursue a degree in nursing in

night school.¹⁴⁴ Uninterested in either of these occupations, Lucy hoped in coming to the United States to leave behind her former home in the Caribbean and with that her former life, i.e., her personal past. Putting a geographic distance between herself and her mother, who dominates Lucy's thoughts of home, however, is not enough for the girl to (re)invent herself on her own terms, as the longing for home and (more or less) loved ones only emerges in their absence. Lucy cannot achieve individuation and independence, because her past follows her into her new life in her memories. Simultaneously, she never fully arrives in her newly adopted country, as she is unwilling to fully assimilate, not least because she is entangled in the continual process of disengaging from her former home.

Lucy's physical move from the Caribbean to the United States presents a caesura that splits her life into two parts: The realization that she has left the tropics "entered [Lucy's] life like a flow of water dividing formerly dry and solid ground, creating two banks, one of which was [her] past [...] the other [her] future, a gray blank, an overcast seascape on which rain was falling and no boats were in sight" (*Lucy* 5–6). Lucy separates her life before and after her crossing of the ocean, and although she is eager to leave the Caribbean, what lies before her is not a positive outlook, but rather a bleak, unsteady future. While she has crossed the ocean physically, metaphorically she is still at sea, caught in a state of in-betweenness: torn between two banks, she sees "the present take the shape of [her] past" (*Lucy* 90). In her state of transition, Lucy carries the sea – the space of crossing – within herself, which becomes a constant in her life. Metaphorically illustrating the poetics of impermanence in Kincaid's works, the stability of two fixed poles is thus dissolved in *Lucy*. Instead of choosing between the binaries home/away and past/present, Lucy inhabits the interstice between the extremes and denies their assumed polarities. A seesaw motion is also played out in the text's narrative strategy of alternating between Lucy's present in the United States and her past, by associatively slipping into memories of her former life in the Caribbean. The narration thus churns between temporal levels and narrative spaces, emulating a movement of being at sea. Especially Lucy's photographic practices highlight this position. She appropriates her environs by photographing them, claiming moments and situations as her own, just as she conversely distances herself from

144 Indeed, *Lucy* is often read as a sequel to *Annie John*, as the protagonists' biographies are highly similar. *Lucy* appears to pick up where *Annie John* leaves off, with the protagonists moving away from their former homes in the Caribbean and towards the pursuit of a nursing degree – although Annie leaves for the UK, while Lucy arrives in the United States. See, e.g., Bouson 67; Simmons, *Jamaica Kincaid*, 120; Jackson, or Bolaki. I, however, regard Annie and Lucy as similar but separate characters in separate novels. The discussion of continuity consequently does not affect my reading of photographic practices in *Annie John* and *Lucy*.

her surroundings by putting a camera between them and herself. I argue that this back-and-forth motion is at the heart of Lucy's positioning and self-identification after her move to the United States.

Lucy's desire for individuality and independence is further evident, for instance, in her rejection of Mariah's well-intended suggestions to read feminist works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (*Lucy* 131–132). Since she regards her troubles her very own and is unwilling to be classed with *any* social group, Lucy refuses to recognize them as those of all women (see *Lucy* 139). She chooses not to identify with feminist agendas because that, again, would confine her to a role. Hence Lucy cannot get past the first sentence of Beauvoir's text: "Woman? Very simply, say the fanciers of the simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female – this word is sufficient to define her" (*Lucy* 132). Beauvoir's ironic reference to a biological definition of women leaves aside any individual traits and lumps together a very large group of people based on their having certain inner organs, which starkly contradicts Lucy's desire for autonomy. Furthermore, Nancy Chick observes that Mariah's advice could not possibly serve Lucy because it "resembles the argument espoused by many women of color that the Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 1970s has centered on the concerns of white, middle-class women, ignoring the perspectives of minority women" (93–94) – although, I add, Lucy would in all likeliness also refuse the category of "minority women."

In Lucy's life in the United States, one instance of being confined to a social position not only frames Lucy metaphorically, but quite literally frames her in an image: her boyfriend Paul makes her a present of "a photograph he had taken of me standing over a boiling pot of food. In the picture I was naked from the waist up; a piece of cloth, wrapped around me, covered me from the waist down" (*Lucy* 155). The image recalls exoticizing depictions of "island girls," presenting them both as innocent (carrying out everyday tasks, such as cooking and being unfazed by their own nakedness) and as sexualized (showing them bare-breasted). In this, such an image not only frames the depicted in the desires of the onlooker, but also deeply impinges on their privacy. A famous namesake of Lucy's boyfriend, who is also well known for such images of "island girls," is the French postimpressionist painter Paul Gauguin, who visited in Tahiti from 1891 to 1893 and after a brief stay in France again traveled to Tahiti to then move on to the Marquesas Islands in 1895, where he lived until his death in 1903.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Ironically, the editors of *Lucy* chose Gauguin's painting *Poèmes barbares* (1896) to illustrate the novel's cover. The choice of an image of a brown-skinned girl, only clad in a piece of cloth from the waist down, is an ironic one: the placement suggests an association of the image with Lucy, as pro-

Lucy rejects the photograph taken by her boyfriend Paul and its repetition of Gauguin's framing and exoticization in depicting the naked racial Other. She discerns: "That was the moment he [Paul] got the idea he possessed me in a certain way, and that was the moment I grew tired of him" (*Lucy* 155). Significantly, Lucy here connects imagery and possession. The painter Gauguin had himself observed about his work on the women of Tahiti: "I was aware that my exercise as a painter was like a close study of the subject's interior life, like taking physical possession, like a tacit and urging plea, like an absolute and definite conquest" (*Noa Noa* 47–48).¹⁴⁶ Paul's image of Lucy, though in a different visual medium, hardly differs from Gauguin's painting in terms of appropriative practices, since, as Susan Sontag notes: "[t]o photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power" (4). In this sense, both photography and painting constitute acts of colonization as the persons depicted are taken into possession by the onlooker and artist through the visual renditions of their likenesses.

Paul's possessive act is moreover twofold, as Lucy grows tired of him not when he snaps the picture, but when he presents it to her and thus demonstrates his ownership of her likeness and by extension of her body, as he is free to display it to the external world although the image was taken in an intimate situation.

Lucy reacted to being confined to the social role of the "daughter" in the Caribbean by physically removing herself and to attempting to do so emotionally, as well. Similarly, soon after receiving Paul's gift of the photograph, Lucy leaves Paul and ends the relationship. Lucy not only rejects being photographed and in this way being possessed by Paul, but like Annie John, she also objects to being presented in a manner that is not of her own choosing, i.e., to being put on display as the exotic Other by Paul's photograph. This once more elucidates Lucy's refusal to be fixed in representations by others – both in life in general and more specifically through visual depiction. Moreover, if one reads Paul's photograph as a repetition of Gauguin's colonial paintings of "exotic girls," as the artists' congruence of names further suggests, then Lucy's rejection of the image not only pertains to her own framing in Paul's picture; the text thus engages with the topos of the half-naked girl in colonial visual arts, which is both exposed and rebutted by Lucy's response.

tagonist and eponym of the novel (see chapter 3.3 for a discussion of image positions and assumed ties to characters within the texts), yet Lucy herself would vehemently reject such a portrayal. ¹⁴⁶ French original: "J'eus conscience que mon examen de peintre comportait, avec une profonde étude de la vie intérieure du modèle, comme une prise de possession physique, comme une sollicitation tacite et presante, comme une conquête absolue et définitive" (Gauguin, *Noa Noa* 47–48). Translation mine since the one by O. F. Theis (1919) is inaccurate and incomplete (see also Gauguin, *Noa Noa* (1919) 33).

In the course of the novel, Lucy reverses the dynamics of appropriation by turning her own gaze onto others. Her refusal to be the object of expectations and desires is followed by her own repetition of such colonizing gestures. Kincaid's text thus lays bare the colonial legacies that prevail in everyday interactions, as Lucy exposes them in performing them. She positions Americans as racial and cultural Others to herself, who can be framed in the same exoticizing ways as white colonizers did (and do) when travelling to non-Western countries.¹⁴⁷ This move is signaled by Lucy's identification with the painter Paul Gauguin, especially after the rejection of her own image in Gauguin-style.

Lucy reads Paul Gauguin's life as parallel to her own when Mariah takes her to a Gauguin exhibition. Moira Ferguson muses that Mariah might have taken her young friend to the exhibition with the intention to present her to paintings of people like her ("Lucy" 247). Lucy's interest, however, is not directed at the paintings, but towards the painter Gauguin himself,

a French man, who had gone halfway across the world to live and had painted pictures of the people he found living there. He had been a banker living a comfortable life with his wife and children, but that did not make him happy; eventually he left them and went to the opposite part of the world, where he was happier. [...] [I]mmediately I identified with the yearnings of this man; I understood finding the place you are born in an unbearable prison. (*Lucy* 95)

Lucy here perceives and identifies with the painter's discontentment and his attempt to geographically move away from it.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, before leaving for Tahiti, Gauguin felt himself and his art misunderstood by the European art scene of the late nineteenth century, as one of his letters to Vincent van Gogh shows: "Alas, I see myself condemned to be less and less understood, and I must hold fast to following my way *alone*, to drag out an existence without a family like a pariah. So the solitude in the woods seems to me in the future to be a new and almost dreamed-of paradise. The savage will return to savagery!" (Gauguin, "My Dear Vincent," emphasis in original).¹⁴⁹ Gauguin's travels in this sense present a

¹⁴⁷ See Kincaid's *A Small Place* for a comparison of colonialists up to the twentieth century and current neocolonialists who travel to Caribbean countries as tourists.

¹⁴⁸ Bénédicte Ledent even reads Lucy's voyage as "an echo of Columbus's original confrontation with the uncharted realities of a new world" (53).

¹⁴⁹ However, it stands to reason that Gauguin left France not to live a life more in accord with nature, but as cheaper than in France, as he was constantly strapped for money. Moreover, while he may have sought to perfect his art by immersing himself in an unfamiliar space and culture, he did count on a European demand for paintings of the exotic unknown (see Thomson 131).

flight from his current identity as an unsuccessful painter towards a self-invention as “savage.”¹⁵⁰

Lucy’s own desires to disengage from her old life structurally mirror Gauguin’s reasons to travel. Moreover, Lucy will eventually also repeat Gauguin’s picturing of the natives of the adopted country when she later takes up photography. Lucy thus chooses to identify with the subject position of the onlooker, the active party, the one who frames others, and hence with the one who performs colonizing gestures, rather than with the “island girl” who is the object of gazes and images. In her own performances of visual power, Lucy thus highlights and reverses prevailing racial relations of colonizer and colonized.

Jennifer Nichols asserts that “Lucy’s visit to [the] Gauguin exhibit helps her begin to see [...] herself as much of a creator as a character – rather than a completed project that may be represented but never altered” (195).¹⁵¹ While Lucy’s identification with Gauguin foreshadows her later role as a creator, it is not immediately incited by the visit to the painter’s exhibition. Another museum visit and the catalogue of a photography exhibition come before Lucy’s decision to create herself. Here, she is most intrigued by “photographs of ordinary people in a countryside doing ordinary things, but for a reason that was not at all clear to [her] the people and the things they were doing looked extraordinary – as if these people and these things had not existed before” (*Lucy* 115). Assuming that these photographs show people and things in an *American* countryside, the images could be the counterparts to Gauguin’s renditions of Polynesia, when in both the ordinary occupations of the Other are unfamiliar and hence exotic to the foreign onlooker and thus become worthy of attention. More importantly, Lucy perceives the people

150 *Noa Noa*, Gauguin’s written account of his stay in Tahiti, must in any case be taken with a grain of salt. As Belinda Thomson or Eckhard Hollmann have pointed out, for instance, Gauguin did not intend to provide a travel report for its own sake. Rather, his intention was provide the reader with access to his artistry as much as it was to make money from its publication (Hollmann 42). Gauguin’s extensive “borrowing” from both Pierre Loti’s *Le mariage de Loti* (1880), a widely sold travelogue of a French soldiers’ sexual relations with a Tahitian girl, and Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout’s *Voyages aux îles du Grand Océan* (1837) (see Hollmann 27, 48, and Thomson 156) moreover suggest that Gauguin wrote to please an audience, drawing on already established narratives of Polynesia.

151 Nichols derives this interpretation from Kincaid commenting on Gauguin that her interest in him “refracted onto the canvas of Kincaid’s novel through Lucy’s reaction to his work and his life. His brief role in the novel [...] sheds light on Kincaid’s textual practices of outing ‘purity’ as a deeply-rooted seed in American culture and using her protagonist to interrogate its conceits” (Nichols 195). While Nichols focuses on extratextual sources to interpret the occurrence of Gauguin, looking at the primary text *Lucy*, I nevertheless come to a similar conclusion, considering Lucy’s desire for change and self-making.

and things as only brought into being by their visual representations. Their existence is not only attested to by the photographs; in their perceivable and current forms they are rather *made* by the photographs when they exhibit their ordinariness as extraordinary. In this sense, photography indeed is creation and not simply the depiction of something that already existed. Reading this in parallel to the medial processing of the past into history, be it via text or visual media, Lucy's realization lays bare the importance of media in the creation of historical consciousness.

Lucy's conception of photography here picks up on twentieth-century discourses on photography as art in which photographs are not merely thought as mimetic depictions of a reality (see Dubois 31–40). Yet some in this tradition, such as Pierre Bourdieu, regard a photograph as the result of a random choice in selection of the subject and situation and accordingly as an edited rendition of reality (73). In this understanding of photography, the dark room is then not a space of neutral reproduction, but much rather one in which effects on photographs are consciously and purposefully created (Dubois 36). Lucy's interest in photography thus pertains to its creative properties as much as to its mimetic ones. Her encounter with photographs that render extraordinary both ordinary people and things finally incites her to buy herself a camera (*Lucy* 115–116).

The photographs Lucy initially takes are of her immediate environment: of the family she lives with and the space she occupies in their apartment. Attempting to imitate the mood of the images in her book of photography, Lucy takes pictures of Mariah while cooking and of the children eating marshmallows. Just as in the photographs she tries to emulate, and as in Gauguin's paintings, the people in Lucy's images are occupied with everyday tasks. Moreover, Mariah and her children had initially seemed very strange to Lucy (see, for instance, 12–13), so that the very common situations of preparing a meal or consuming sweets may appear somewhat unfamiliar to Lucy in her perception of the American family. The meal that Mariah cooks in the photograph is “an elaborate preparation of chicken and vegetables slowly cooked in red wine” (*Lucy* 120–121), which may well be the French dish *coq au vin* and which would certainly seem foreign to Lucy, as her incomprehension of “French-cut green beans” (*Lucy* 14) suggests. In picturing Mariah cooking, Lucy repeats Paul's image of herself, which she had so fiercely rejected, as well as Paul Gauguin's paintings of his racial and cultural Others. In reading the taking of photographs as colonizing acts, Lucy's picturing of Mariah moreover reverses and revises stereotypical racial power relations when the brown girl turns her gaze and her camera at white middle-class Americans.

It is noteworthy that Lucy takes photographs of others, but not of herself, as perhaps could be expected, considering her desire for self-making. bell hooks notes that “[t]he camera was the central instrument by which blacks could dis-

prove representations of us created by white folks. The degrading images of blackness that emerged from racist white imaginations [...] could be countered by ‘true-to-life’ images” (“Photography” 48). However, when Lucy takes up the camera, she is not invested in correcting representations of herself as they might be perceived by others or in producing a counter image to Paul’s exoticizing photograph of her. Lucy does not project her own image into the world, but rather takes hold of a world that is still alien to her and to makes it her own by photographing it.

Other early objects of photographic interest besides her employers’ family are her own possessions in her room, such as her “dresser top with [her] dirty panties and lipstick, an unused sanitary napkin, and an open pocketbook scattered about; [...] a necklace made of strange seeds, which [she] had bought from a woman in the street; [...] of a vase [she] had bought” (*Lucy* 120–121). Lucy here documents her cluttered belongings as one likely would only leave them in one’s private space, with dirty underwear and hygienic products on display. Hence, Lucy’s scattered array of personal items may be read as Lucy claiming her own private space and thereby a degree of independence. Read as indexical signs of Lucy’s progress in disengaging from external expectations, her way of displaying the very ordinary items would then turn them into extraordinary objects. They are Lucy’s very own, chosen by her, as the necklace and the vase, and put on display by her. Her photographing them yet again signals their extraordinariness. Lucy in this way puts this form of self-expression on display when she also places the photographs of her room within her room for herself to look at (*Lucy* 120–121). Rather than creating representations of herself for an outside world, Lucy here produces representations of her own space and choices for herself. “Cameras establish an inferential relation to the present (reality is known by its traces), provide an instantly retro-active view of experience. Photographs give mock forms of possession: of the past, the present, even the future,” Susan Sontag writes (167). Accordingly, through photography, Lucy not only claims space and choices; more than that, she can claim her own past, present, and future.

Eager to detach herself from anyone’s claims on her body and on her life, Lucy realizes how much her move to the United States is aiding her in her endeavor. After the first few months in this new country, she notes: “I could now look back at the winter. It was my past, so to speak, my first real past – a past that was my own and over which I had the final word” (23). It is this final word that is also at the center of Lucy’s photographic documentation of her room. The images present Lucy’s final word fourfold: first, in the acquisition of the objects; second, in how they are placed in the room; third, in that and how they are photographed; and fourth, in the display of the photographs that present her previous decisions. Susheila Nasta also reads Lucy’s visual practices as liberation from her former self

through the creation of a photographic chronicle of her own life (79–80).¹⁵² And although, as I have shown above, Lucy is less concerned with projecting representations of herself towards an outside world, bell hooks's assessment that "[m]ore than any other image-making tool, it [the camera] offered African Americans [and here an Afro-Caribbean immigrant] disempowered by white culture a way to empower ourselves through representation" ("Photography" 48) still holds in Lucy's case. The images of her possessions represent parts of Lucy's new past on her own terms, but much more than that they represent her process of actively taking control of her own life: when photography allows Lucy to claim her present spaces and choices as her own, then "what photography supplies is not only a record of the past but a new way of dealing with the present" (Sontag 166).

Later, Lucy's photographic interest leaves the domestic space of Mariah and Lewis's home, just as Lucy herself leaves the family in search of yet more independence. Increasingly seeking life outside the home, Lucy had begun to frequent parks and wander the city's streets. Eventually, she detaches herself from Mariah, too, whom she had come to love as a friend and surrogate mother figure, and Lucy takes up work as a secretary and general help for a studio photographer. Together with her friend Peggy, she rents an apartment and thus departs from Mariah and her family, who had for the past year provided a home to Lucy. She decides not to leave a forwarding address in order to be unreachable and thus repeats the departure from home that she had performed at the outset of the novel when she left her mother in the Caribbean.

Leaving the domestic space turns Lucy into a walker of the city. In the way of a modern-day flâneuse, she discovers the city, looking at men in parks, trying to read their sexual prowess on their bodies by studying their physiognomies without ever directly approaching anyone (*Lucy* 88–89).¹⁵³ Walter Benjamin describes this notion that faces might reveal the lives of those to whom they belong as the "phan-

152 Moira Ferguson, in her reading of Lucy's photographing, emphasizes the girl's detachment from her mother: "The camera proffers the illusion that material reality can be controlled when Lucy blocks and reverses her mother's gaze across the Caribbean and the Pacific. She uses the camera through which she gazes unrestrictedly herself to redeploy her mother's watchfulness. Scopic discoveries substitute for the unpleasant visual images rendered by her memories of the past. With a camera, memories can be rearranged, boundaries elided; photos can be used to manipulate and conceal the real" ("*Lucy*" 248–249). While this is a compelling reading, and while Lucy certainly feels her mother's overbearing power even when geographically distanced from her, I still argue that Lucy here attempts to escape not only her mother's gaze, but society's as a whole, both in the Caribbean and in the United States, as I have shown with regard to Paul's exoticizing gaze and Mariah's imposing feminist agenda.

153 For a general discussion of bodies as media and their being "read," see chapter 4, "Embodied Enactments of History."

tasmagoria of the flâneur" (*Arcades* 429). Although the categories – "profession," "ancestry," and "character" – that Benjamin's flâneur might seek out in unfamiliar faces become sexual abilities in the gaze of the young woman Lucy, structurally she nevertheless qualifies as a somewhat flâneuring figure, especially when it comes to Benjamin's dialectic of the flânerie of both being at the center of the gaze and disappearing in the crowd (see *Arcades* 420), which may well be read in Lucy's demeanor when she walks the city. Flânerie is a praxis that is highly comparable with Lucy's in-between position centered on both looking and being looked at, both being in constant motion and being without a destination. This dialectic goes hand in hand with "[t]he peculiar irresolution of the flâneur," which Benjamin describes as a condition of doubtfulness: "Just as waiting seems to be the proper state of the impassive thinker, doubt appears to be that of the flâneur" (*Arcades* 425). Attempting to shed her former self, Lucy is also unsure about who to be or who to become, in doubt about whether she really can leave her past behind. While a development is suggested by the progression of chapter titles, from the first entitled "Poor Visitor" to the last, which carries the protagonist's first name, "Lucy," the girl at the center of the novel does not attain a new or profound sense of selfhood or individuation. At the beginning of the final chapter, she muses: "I had been a girl of whom certain things were expected, none of them too bad: a career as a nurse [...]; a sense of duty to my parents; obedience to the law and worship of convention. But in one year of being away from home, that girl had gone out of existence. The person I had become I did not know very well" (133). More than ever, Lucy finds herself in a state of limbo, just as she had been a year before when she entered the United States. Lucy is still "at sea" and "caught between two banks," though one of them begins to fade into the background. While she was able to free herself from claims on her and obligations she detested, this did not work to create a whole new self; rather, it affirmed her undecidedness.

As I argue in the following, last part of this section on *Lucy*, her being in constant doubt about how and who to be is also expressed by Lucy's photographic endeavors outside the domestic realm, when her subjects change from things to human beings. She muses: "I most liked to take pictures of individuals, just scenes of people walking about, hurrying to somewhere. I did not know them, and I did not care to" (*Lucy* 160). With her camera, Lucy here observes the "crowd" that is also constitutive of flânerie.¹⁵⁴ Susan Sontag explains that "photography first [came] into its own as an extension of the eyes of the middle-class flâneur [...].

¹⁵⁴ Benjamin describes the "masses" as "stretch[ing] before the flâneur as a veil: [...] they efface all traces of the individual: they are the newest asylum for the reprobate and the prescript. – Finally, within the labyrinth of the city, the masses are the newest and most inscrutable labyrinth" (*Arcades* 446).

The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes" (55). Lucy's photographic interests thus turn to people who are – like her – in a state of transition, which she then freezes into unmoving permanence in her photographs.

In *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry determines that "[t]he strolling flâneur was a forerunner of the twentieth-century tourist and in particular of activity which has in a way become emblematic of the tourist: the democratized taking of photographs – of being seen and recorded, and of seeing others and recording them" (127). Although not a tourist herself,¹⁵⁵ with her camera and her way of perceiving her surroundings, Lucy certainly employs a tourist gaze in her heightened visual awareness.¹⁵⁶ This already becomes apparent at Lucy's arrival in the United States. On the way from the airport to the city, "someone would single out to [Lucy] a famous building, an important street, a park, a bridge that when built was thought to be a spectacle" (*Lucy* 3). The sights are already known to Lucy. Before arriving, she had daydreamed that seeing them and experiencing them herself would provide her with a happiness that would counter the unhappiness she felt at home (see *Lucy* 3). Lucy here displays a tourist's anticipation, which is "constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, TV, literature" (Urry 3). However, according to Urry, since "satisfaction stems from anticipation, from imaginative pleasure-seeking, [...] 'reality' rarely provides the perfect pleasures encountered in daydreams" (13). Lucy's expectations are, moreover, disillusioned during her arrival and when she first sets sight on tourist sites. "Now that I saw these places, they looked ordinary, dirty, [...] and it occurred to me that I could not be the only person in the world for whom they were a fixture of fantasy," Lucy realizes (4).¹⁵⁷ Lucy's tourist gaze emphasizes her status as a vis-

155 Urry conceives of the tourist as a traveler who intends to return to a fixed space of "home" after a predetermined period of time (see Urry 1–3), while Lucy had come to the United States to remain there indefinitely.

156 The tourist gaze is a way of looking, which may have originated with the classic tourist but is not necessarily tied to the figure anymore and has come to be attached to a way of approaching one's environs in any situation: "What I have termed the 'tourist gaze' is increasingly bound up with, and is partly indistinguishable from, all sorts of other social and cultural practices. This has the effect, as 'tourism' per se declines in specificity, of universalizing the tourist gaze – people are much of the time 'tourists' whether they like it or not" (Urry 72).

157 Lucy's disappointment regarding the realities of the country she has visited once again presents a similarity to Paul Gauguin's travel trajectories and his perceptions of Tahiti: both Lucy and Gauguin were looking from the land of their dreams – or rather of the medialized representations of their respective times – and are unable to find them in their realities. Paul Gauguin had meant to travel to a Tahiti that, to his disappointment, did not exist anymore. In his travel account *Noa*

itor at the outset of the novel as much as it highlights her disillusionment at finding a perfect new life in her new country.

While not a tourist per se, Lucy keeps touring the city with her camera, the tourist's essential tool, which lets her visit new spaces without entering into more intimate relationships with them or the people who inhabit them. As Lucy notes, she does not even care to know them (160). Susan Sontag describes how relating to unfamiliar surroundings can be eased by taking pictures, as it may have a calming effect on the photographer: "The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter. Unsure of other responses, they take a picture" (9–10). As this quote suggests, a generic tourist would appreciate the sights in front of them, which expresses a sense of wonder. At the same time, the foreignness of what is photographed creates a sense of insecurity that can more easily be comprehended because of the distancing that is created when the camera is physically placed between oneself and what is being perceived. According to Sontag, the camera thus aids the tourist in claiming space for themselves in unfamiliar environs, just as it frames the people who are photographed as objects that are utterly alien. Understood in this way, photography is a tool of exoticization as much as painting was for Paul Gauguin. Appropriately enough, for instance Bénédicté Ledent reads Lucy's street photography of Americans scurrying about as similar to Gauguin's renditions of Polynesian people (63).

Susan Sontag moreover determines this distancing effect as one that is generally inherent to acts of photography, i. e., as not just occurring in tourist situations; or rather, photography generally lets one become a tourist in another's reality (Sontag 57). One does not need to travel far to find foreignness, as Sontag points out with regard to (newly) American photographers within the United States, who, when "[f]aced with the awesome spread of alienness of a newly settled continent, people wielded cameras as a way of taking possession of the places they visited" (65).¹⁵⁸ Lucy's acts of photographing thus repeat both the exoticizing, dis-

Noa, Gauguin writes: "A profound sadness took possession of me. The dream which had brought me to Tahiti was brutally disappointed by the actuality. It was the Tahiti of former times which I loved. That of the present filled me with horror" (*Noa Noa* (1919) 18). However, the Tahiti Gauguin was looking for in all likelihood never existed: since the island's "discovery" in 1786, the term "Tahiti" had come to transport island imaginations of paradise on earth and utopias of societies without moral corruptions. Tahiti's realities were disregarded so that in the European imagination the island became more of a mythical space (Heermann 147).

158 Sontag also points to photographers such as Jacob Riis or those of the Farm Security Administration, who depicted some Americans as foreign on the basis of class differences.

tancing gaze of the tourist turned (neo)colonizer and the possessive gaze of the American making a home. According to Sontag, this double bind of appropriation and distancing is at the heart of any photographic act; it is “one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation” (10), even as “[p]hotographing is essentially an act of non-intervention” (11). Ultimately, “[b]ringing the exotic near, rendering the familiar and homely exotic, photographs make the entire world available as an object of appraisal” (Sontag 110).¹⁵⁹

In my reading of Lucy’s visual practices, the act of taking photographs with its doubled effect of appropriation and distancing, as Sontag describes it, mirrors Lucy’s general ways of relating to the world and her attempts to find a place for herself in it. As I pointed out above, since she came to the United States, Lucy is continually caught in a feeling of being at sea, torn between a desire to distance herself from her former home and feeling homesick, and between the desire to adopt her new country and feeling alienated by it. Photography, I argue, with its similarly torn characteristics of approximation and removal, structurally represents Lucy’s state of in-betweenness. Keeping her distance and taking possession via photography exposes Lucy’s general struggles of self-making in the United States in a fashion similar to Sontag’s appraisal that “picture-taking is both a limitless technique for appropriating the objective world and an unavoidably solipsistic expression of the singular self” (Sontag 122). By finding ways to relate to her environs photographically, Lucy also finds ways to express herself, which, as was seen above, is not marked by stability but rather its opposite.

Framing Others by her gaze, symbolically taking possession of them, and thus repeating colonizing gestures may provide an outlet to Lucy’s desires to turn the tables and to liberate herself from the position of the colonized “island girl,” but it does not relieve her of her search for wholeness. This can, for instance, be read in Lucy’s handling of the photographs she has taken, when she notes about the developing process: “I would try and try to make a print that made more beautiful the thing I thought I had seen, that would reveal to me some of the things I had not seen, but I did not succeed” (160). Lucy’s attempts to find hidden meanings that might reveal themselves through images recalls her flâneur-like attempts to read the faces of men by gazing at them.¹⁶⁰ Disillusioned by her recognition that her visual expectations of the United States were immediately ruined when she ar-

¹⁵⁹ Maria Helena Lima describes precisely this process when she assesses that Lucy “defamiliarizes the ordinary experiences of life, making the strange familiar, and the familiar, strange” (“Imaginary Homelands” 860).

¹⁶⁰ Moreover, the search of a hidden reality that might reveal itself through photographs takes up American photography discourses, such as when Jacob Riis, for instance, looked for the unknown reality of “the other half” (see here Sontag 55).

rived and first saw the country, Lucy here might be looking for a new set of signs for her to decode in the photographs she has taken. It even stands to reason that Lucy's manipulations of the photographs are attempts to create signs that are readable and desirable to Lucy. Although Lucy can only attempt to produce purportedly concealed meanings by manipulating the developing process of the photographs, her actions nevertheless signal a desire for the ability to create.

In conclusion, Lucy's acts of self-expression, produced for herself, highlight that artistic expression may work to constitute a sense of self, however fraught it might be – or perhaps even more: that artistic expression is able to enunciate the very precariousness of the self. “I understood that I was inventing myself, and that I was doing this more in the way of a painter than in the way of a scientist. I could not count on precision or calculation; I could only count on intuition. I did not have anything exactly in mind, but when the picture was complete I would know,” Lucy realizes about her processes of individuation (134). While the present Lucy creates is not be clear cut one, through photography she is able to define it as her own, as something on which she may work as she wishes. She thus posits herself as a person with the agency and the power of creation, which gestures towards a self-made future.

At the very end of the novel, Lucy then turns from photography to writing and takes up a notebook to write her life, which suggests that she may have exhausted the possibilities of visual media for her project of discovering herself. Throughout Kincaid's oeuvre, however, visibility is increasingly made productive to engage history and questions of representation, particularly through interplay with the written word, as will be explored in the following chapters.

3.2 A Photo Album of History: Ekphrasis in *My Garden (Book)*:

Jamaica Kincaid's collection of nonfiction essays *My Garden (Book)*: seems invested in describing the author's garden and her activities in it throughout the year.¹⁶¹ The texts appear wholly concerned with Kincaid's passion to tend to the plot of land behind her house in North Bennington, Vermont. The book opens with Kin-

¹⁶¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published in *America After Nature. Democracy, Culture, Environment* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016). I owe thanks to Verena Laschinger for drawing my attention to the link of nature and visibility in Kincaid's works. This chapter benefitted greatly from our discussions and her giving me the opportunity to present my thoughts on the panel “Shock and awe, beauty and despair – it's all there”: Eco-Photography's Views on the Transnational Landscape” at the conference “America After Nature” (Würzburg 2014).

caid's discovery of her interest in plants and her learning about bloomers, shrubs, and trees that take to the South Vermont climate, and it concludes with a travel account of her seed gathering in China to supplement her own garden with species from far away. In this, Kincaid's account of the garden and her hobby are of a rather personal nature. However, the discovery of her interest in gardening also leads to the discovery of various meanings that underlie the concept of the garden in the Western world. On one level, then, *My Garden (Book)*: is merely a gardening memoir, but it also traces the gardener's realization of her own participation in colonial practices. In doing so, the book positions gardens as representations of colonial history in prompting their owners to repeat and replicate acts of colonization. *My Garden (Book)*: questions the colonial history of single plants as well as the practices of transplantation and naming as they occur in gardening and botany.

While the garden is ostensibly at the center of the book, its continuous links to colonial history also bring questions of representation to the fore. Moreover, the garden itself is represented by another medium – the book. That various forms of representation really are at the heart of *My Garden (Book)*:’s concerns is already hinted at by the book’s title: the parentheses and the colon point to the inseparability of the garden and the book as its representation.¹⁶² One could read the title as “my garden, which is this book, will begin after the colon,” i.e., the garden is located *within* the book. Text and visual media are also intertwined in *My Garden (Book)*:; as it is replete with images and a page design of leafy twines. Most interesting, however, is the occurrence of the visual *within* the verbal in this book, when images of the garden are created through extended descriptions that halt the narrative flow of the text to attend to the purported sights.

This chapter explores the ekphrastic writing in *My Garden (Book)*: and its participation in negotiations of history. I argue that the complex relationship between visibility and text turns *My Garden (Book)*: into a photo album of sorts that collects textual images of Kincaid's garden. Moreover, this garden is not only the space of personal pleasure and interests, but it becomes a representation of colonial history. In *My Garden (Book)*:; the history of every plant is intertwined with the history of colonialism, and every act of gardening is reminiscent of colonization. Finally, my analysis of the doublings of representations of history in the garden and the book through text and images demonstrates how *My Garden (Book)*: reflects on

¹⁶² Other scholars have analyzed Kincaid's critique of colonialism in her garden writing in detail. See, for instance, the work of Rachel Azima, Jeanne C. Ewert, Wendy Knepper, Melanie A. Murray, and Susie O'Brien. These scholars, however, focus more on the content of *My Garden (Book)*:; while I seek to add to the discussion with an analysis of representation through visual and verbal media and their interplay in the book.

the nature of representations in general, identifies them as colonial legacies, and calls for an awareness of colonial remnants in any act of naming or framing – whether in the garden or in art.

An Ekphrastic Photo Album: Citing the Sight of the Garden

The garden in *My Garden (Book)*: is Kincaid's own. The plot of land located behind her home in Vermont is large enough to have a section called "woodland" (*MGB* 16) and a "soft fruit garden" (*MGB* 18). It houses both rosebushes and a pumpkin patch. Yet the kitchen garden is not intended to feed the family; rather, it is a luxury. Like her other plantings, Kincaid grows the fruit and vegetables for her enjoyment as these are "things that would be much cheaper to buy at the store" (*MGB* 123).

Foremost, the garden exists to bring pleasure to the gardener. Kincaid describes how she tends to it, frets over it, plans next year's garden, and spends excessive amounts of money on it. It is a project that takes up time and energy all through the year. However, the most frequently performed action in the garden is looking at it. Throughout Kincaid's occupation with the garden, "watching," "getting a glimpse," "staring," "seeing," "observing" it (all verbs are found on two opposite pages of *MGB* 52–53) are at the center of her account of it.

Kincaid also compares the garden to other visual arts, such as painting or sculpture. She judges the garden to be "the most useless of creations, [...] it won't accrue value as time goes on" (*MGB* 111). Yet establishing the garden as a piece of art that exists through its creator's "act[s] of will" (*MGB* 111) once more emphasizes its purpose as a visual joy, similar to paintings or sculpture. With this emphasis, *My Garden (Book)*: is less concerned with the garden itself than with the visual perception of it.

Visuality already plays a role in this individual garden's history. The previous owner of the house and garden in North Bennington, Vermont, Robert Woodworth, was a professor of biology and botany at Bennington College and a member of the science faculty from 1935 to 1989.¹⁶³ The garden's former owner likely had the same (if not greater) botanical interest in plant species as Kincaid. Woodworth also was a pioneer of time-lapse photography.¹⁶⁴ "I do not know if the exciting and unusual

¹⁶³ See the articles on Robert Woodworth in *The New York Times* and on the *Our Bennington* website.

¹⁶⁴ According to Kincaid, he even "invented time-lapse photography" (*MGB* 31). However, his work was preceded by stopping motion in photography which was accomplished as early as in the 1870s, e.g., by Eadweard Muybridge (see, for instance, Orvell 68–69).

collection of trilliums, jack-in-the-pulpit, squirrel corn, Solomon's seal, and mayapple that are in the bed just outside the kitchen window are the very same ones that are in his films on time-lapse photography," Kincaid writes (*MGB* 31), but her musing about it already suggests such a connection. Time-lapse photography collapses a period of time while focusing on one object. And just as Woodworth conflated time while perhaps observing the plants in his own (later Kincaid's) garden, so does Kincaid collapse time in her writing about the garden. In that, Robert Woodworth is positioned as a predecessor to Kincaid's own project in *My Garden (Book)*. While she takes up the medium of text instead of photography, in analogy to the contraction of time in Woodworth's work, Kincaid's descriptions of looking at the garden halt time in narrative progression. Static and purely descriptive passages culminate in lists of what the gardener sees (*MGB*, e.g., 27, 69, 125, 173–174). Kincaid here uses ekphrases in the classical sense to present the garden. In Hellenistic rhetoric,

the ekphrasis as an extended description was called upon to intrude upon the flow of discourse, and, for its duration [...] to rivet our attention upon the visual object to be described. [...] It was, then, a device intended to interrupt the temporality of discourse, to freeze it during its indulgence in spatial exploration. (Krieger 7)

While the halting of narrative also freezes time in ekphrastic passages, in *My Garden (Book)*: temporalities are also converged in the study of sights of the garden, as for instance in the following passage:

(again) that wisteria blooming now (or then) so close to the buddleia which in turn is not too far from the *Phlox paniculata* "Nor[al]h Leigh," which is also somehow in the middle of the *Phlox paniculata* "David," is all pleasing to my eye, as I was looking at it then (now); at that moment of the wisteria, turning left or right (counterclockwise or clockwise), this is what I could see in front of me [...]: the perennial pea (*Lathyrus latifolius*) in bloom in its guzzling way [...], some cultivars of *Lobelia siphilitica* (bought from Dan Hinkley because I was so taken by his description, and I remain open to seeing this lobelia just the way Dan described it) on the verge of blooming, an accidental planting combination of *Platycodon grandiflorus* blue and pink (*MGB* 22).

The contraction of "now" and "then" transports a form of "seeing" the plants into different temporalities: "now" refers to the author's present while observing the garden; this is then recapitulated in the author's memory while writing about it; and finally, "now" also refers to the present of the reader, who follows the narrator's description of "looking at it then (now)." The present of the reader at the moment of their comprehension, that of the author while remembering the sight of the garden and simultaneously producing the text, as well as the gardener's present when observing the garden in front of her, thus accumulate in the word

“now.” The same word refers to a plurality of signifieds and thus converges temporalities. *My Garden (Book)*: here makes use of repetition in the same way as the later novel *See Now Then* does in bringing forth simultaneity.¹⁶⁵ This conflation of temporal levels in *My Garden (Book)*: equates the physical sight of the garden with its memory as well as with the imagined image of it.

Temporal entanglements purport to affect the representative capabilities of the visual. Now the visual can occur anywhere and is not tied to actual sight. *My Garden (Book)*: thus suggests that the sight of the garden can be conveyed by verbal means when it proposes that text induces imaginative visions of the garden. This is also apparent in Kincaid’s evaluation of descriptive text in garden catalogs: “The best catalogues [...] will not have any pictures” (*MGB* 62), as the absence of the actual image allows for imaginations as experiences of sight: “and my imagination takes over as I look out at the garden, which is a blanket of white [with snow], and see it filled with the things described in the catalogue I am reading” (*MGB* 88).

In the conflation of imagination, memory, and sight *My Garden (Book)*: operates in the way of a photo album: it collects snapshots that were taken in the past. This is also evident in the book’s design. Corresponding with its main subject, *My Garden (Book)*:’s pivotal hue is green, which extends from the dust jacket and binding to the fly-title and title page to all printed watercolors to the design of the text pages. The title page is adorned with a centrally positioned watercolor below the book’s title. Wholly in green tones, the picture shows a female figure from behind. She is dressed in overalls, a simple white shirt, and a sun hat. In a quintessential gardener’s outfit, she sits by a window and looks out at a garden. The image is framed by a square, dark-green border; but its four corners are set apart in a lighter tone of green, mimicking photo corners. Imitating a photo album with this detail, the title page’s illustration sets the tone of the book: in a photograph that is emulated by a drawing and watercolors, a gardener is looking at the garden.

The design of the photo corners recurs in the page design of *My Garden (Book)*:. The white pages are encased by light-green frames which are decorated with trims of single strands of stylized leaves. Most noteworthy, though, is the form of the green frames that encompass the text: they are not fully square, but have little, round indentations towards the white in every corner, suggesting stylized photo corners. This design then frames the text like a photo album that collects the memories of the garden’s sights. Moreover, the book contains a number of watercolors by illustrator Jill Fox, again all in green. Not all images, however, are directly linked to the text by showing what the text describes. Details differ considerably. It is rather as if the artist took her general cues from the text and

165 See chapter 1 on “The Perpetuity of the Present and the Presentness on the Past.”

processed them with her own craft and imagination. Some of the images have no immediate links to the text at all (see, for instance, *MBG* 38). It would therefore be wrong to assume that these watercolors are visualizations *of* the text. They are rather representations of the garden in their own right.¹⁶⁶ Nonetheless, in terms of their mediality, they link image and text in that they both occupy the same white space within the pages' green frames. The watercolors "bleed" onto the same white pages where the text is located. In this, text and image present as equal here.

From the argument that *My Garden (Book)*: imitates visuality in text through ekphrases and a photo album in design, one might conclude that it is the book's project to make the reader see through text, rather than through images. However, text (including ekphrases) can only produce the sight of letters and their arrangements on a page. Beyond that, the "seeing" must rely on imagination as "the material [to be seen] dissipates into the airiness of words" (Krieger xv). Or, as W. J. T. Mitchell puts it:

A verbal representation cannot represent – that is, make present – its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can "cite," but never "sight" their objects. (*Picture Theory* 152)

Kincaid seems to be aware of this impossibility, as although she appears to attempt an amalgamation of the visual and the verbal in *My Garden (Book)*:, and to some extent also achieves this, she writes about the relationship of the two media: "In the narrative that we are in (in the Western one), the word comes before the picture; the word makes us long for a picture, the word is never enough to the thing just seen – the picture!" (*MGB* 130). While she specifies "the narrative that we are in" as that which is determined by the knowledge and values of Western culture, it simultaneously also refers to *My Garden (Book)*:, since this is the text in which the phrase occurs. Further declaring that, in both Western culture and the text at hand, "the word comes before the picture" establishes a hierarchy between the verbal and the visual, but we might as well read this statement temporally: the word precedes the picture, or the picture follows the word, which suggests that the word may create a sort of picture through ekphrases. The passage immediately retracts this possibility, however, when it concludes with "the word is never

¹⁶⁶ They rather randomly present different aspects of Kincaid's gardening and certainly are aesthetically pleasing. As my interest here is in visual-textual engagements with history, however, my analyses leave these watercolors aside and focus on the ekphrastic representations of the garden in *My Garden (Book)*:.

enough” in comparison with the picture. The “ekphrastic hope,” as Mitchell terms the moment in which “the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a ‘sense’ in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: ‘to make us see’” (*Picture Theory* 152) remains arrested, as ultimately sight through text can only be attempted, but never achieved.

From Plant to Medium: The Garden’s Representation of Colonial History

Beyond the images of a personal life that could also be collected in a photo album, the garden also represents aspects of the world history of colonialism.¹⁶⁷ Kincaid condenses personal and historical memory in the garden in the assertion that it is “an exercise in memory: a way of remembering my own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is my own (the Caribbean Sea) and the past as it is indirectly related to me (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings)” (*MGB* 8). The example of the conquest of Mexico, led by Hernan Cortés from 1519 onward, here refers to European imperialism in the Americas in general. As I will show in the following, Kincaid positions the garden as a medium of memory and history. By highlighting the colonial legacies of gardening in acts of transplanting and naming, she shows the garden as a small-scale colonized space.

W. J. T. Mitchell proposes to understand landscape as a medium: “It is a material ‘means’ [...] like language or paint, [...] a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meanings and values” (“Imperial Landscape” 14). *My Garden (Book)*: takes this up with regard to the smaller space of the garden or even individual plants. Kincaid became cognizant of the garden’s representational faculties when she read William H. Prescott’s *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843): “I came upon the flower called marigold and the flower called dahlia and the flower called zinnia, and after that the garden was more to me than the garden as I used to think of it. After that the garden was also something else” (*MGB* 6). It is the consideration of the history of gardening and the plants grown in the garden that transforms it from merely a pleasurable sight into “something else,” namely a representation of a history of conquest.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ See O’Brien, Tiffin, Ewert, Azima, Knepper, and Murray. These scholars also observe the connections of gardening and colonialism. I add to this discussion by explicitly understanding the garden as a medium.

¹⁶⁸ It is not only in *My Garden (Book)*: that plants are imbued with historical meaning. For example, in *Lucy* the daffodil becomes a symbol of colonial power. Upon seeing the plant for the first time after travelling to the United States, Lucy becomes enraged as to her it represents the impositions of colonial education that had her learn William Woodsworth’s poem “I Wandered Lonely

Kincaid elaborates on the colonial legacy of gardening with the example of the dahlia's history: its Aztec name, *cocoxochitl*, and the recognition of its use as a medicinal plant as well as its cultivation for its beauty were utterly disregarded by the Europeans after Cortés's invasion. Kincaid polemically highlights the assumed European view that "these plants from far away, like the people far away, had no history, no names, and so they could be given names" (*MGB* 122). Today, the Aztec knowledge of the *cocoxochitl* is still superseded by the name "dahlia," after the Swedish botanist Andreas Dahl (*MGB* 118–119), by which the plant is now commonly known. The dahlia thus represents the conquest of the Aztec Empire as well as colonialists operating with disregard of knowledge, language, and culture of the people and thereby negating their worth and even their existence. The dahlia also shows how a plant is claimed as "European" through its renaming (or supposedly being named in the first place) after a European botanist.

Further examples of plants as media of history are the breadfruit and the hollyhock. The breadfruit was imported to the Caribbean from the East Indies as a low-cost provision for slaves (*MGB* 136), and Kincaid sees it as "not a food, it is a weapon" (*MGB* 137). Similarly, the hollyhock signifies the history of slavery in the United States: when in bloom, the hollyhock closely resembles the *Gossypium* (both belong to the family of the *Malvaceae*). *Gossypium* is better known as cotton, which has tormented people throughout Kincaid's own ancestral history (*MGB* 150), as well as throughout the American South in general. Helen Tiffin reads such associations of plants with history as part of Caribbean cultural heritage and discerns that "the practices of agriculture and horticulture were necessarily and variously associated by different Caribbean populations with dispossession, slavery, and servitude, exile and colonization" ("Replanted" 149).

The title of one of *My Garden (Book)*'s chapters programmatically declares: "To Name is to Possess." Kincaid admonishes colonial naming practices as "a spiritual padlock with the key irretrievably thrown away, [...] a murder, an erasing" (*MGB* 122). In contrast, she highlights acts of liberation from colonial powers through choosing one's own name: Rhodesia renamed itself Zimbabwe after independence from British colonial rule and the African American poet and author Amiri Baraka discarded his former name LeRoi Jones (*MGB* 122), "Bantuizing and Swahilizing" it to dispose of the American "slave name" and to change "into a blacker being" (Baraka 376). To be added is the name change of Elaine Potter Richardson, who in 1973 became Jamaica Kincaid so that her name would indicate

as a Cloud" by heart without ever having seen the flower that is not grown in the Caribbean. In this, the daffodil attests to the colonizer's claim to totality of Western (here British) art and sensibilities (*Lucy* 30).

the area of the world she is from, but also to free her from her former identity as a British colonial subject and the daughter of an overbearing mother to be able to write without the restraints of being Elaine Richardson (see Kincaid in Vorda 14–15).¹⁶⁹ In highlighting the significance of naming, Kincaid reveals the parallel between colonialists and botanists, since both “emptied worlds of their names; they emptied the worlds of things animal, vegetable, and mineral of their names and replaced them with names pleasing to them” (*MGB* 160).

The naming and renaming of plants, animals, lands, and peoples interrelates with transnational movements: European colonization was based on transatlantic movements from Europe to Africa and the Americas, first with the purpose of conquest, then with the intentions of exploiting peoples and lands and returning the spoils of this exploitation back to Europe. On a smaller scale, such transnational movement is repeated in the garden. In a move that reenacts the travels of European colonizers, the gardener Kincaid travels to China to gather seeds from Asian indigenous plants to cultivate them in her very own backyard (see *MGB* 188–219). Linda Lang-Peralta and Jeanne C. Ewert convincingly identify Kincaid’s consumerism as participation in colonialist practices. In addition to the chapter in *My Garden (Book)*, Kincaid later wrote about her seed gathering travels in her 2005 travelogue, *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*. Her crossing the line from colonized to colonizer (*MGB* 123) is especially apparent in her journeys to China and Nepal, as exploring the world with the purpose of collecting foreign plants and species repeats previous explorations of that kind in colonial times.¹⁷⁰ Kincaid spells this out by referencing Frank Kingdon-Ward’s *Plant Hunting on the Edge of the World* (1930), Ernest Henry Wilson’s *Plant Hunting* (1927),¹⁷¹ Patrick Syngé’s *Mountains of the Moon: An Expedition to the Equatorial Mountains of Africa* (1938), and Reginald Farrer’s *Among the Hills* (1910) (*MGB* 190). The author notes that these books are “a small part of how a journey like this, for someone like me, begins” (*MGB* 191). To be more specific, her journey begins not only with, but *in* these

169 Kamau Brathwaite, for instance, also renamed himself from his given name Edward. He emphasizes the importance of names “especially in a colonial or post-colonial situation where we have been named by other people and where it is therefore our responsibility to rename & redefine ourselves” (qtd. in Naylor 143). Similarly, bell hooks regards her own renaming from Gloria Jones as empowering (*Talking Back* 166).

170 See also Londa Schiebinger’s book *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* on the history of plant-gathering voyages. Fittingly, Schiebinger calls such gatherers “biopirates” (35).

171 Kincaid here actually refers to “a book by Ernest Wilson, *Plant Hunter’s Paradise*, an account of his travels looking for plants in China” (*MGB* 190). However, *Plant Hunter’s Paradise* is a book by Frank Kingdon-Ward, published in 1937, about his travels through Burma and to the Tibetan border. Wilson’s *Plant Hunting* (1927) is an account of his plant hunting journeys all over the world.

books (see *MGB* 190). The preposition “in” articulates not only that Kincaid’s plant-hunting travels repeat those of the European botanists at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also that her writing about it is rooted in a charged tradition. This is also indicated by her chapter title “Plant Hunting in China,” which overtly echoes the titles of Kingdon-Ward’s and Wilson’s books. The reference to the botanists’ journeys once more highlights the roots of present-day gardening in this history of conquest as it is already set up in the texts from the beginning of the twentieth century. For instance, in *Plant Hunter’s Paradise* Frank Kingdon-Ward refers to the continuation of conquest at home when he writes at the end of the book: “The journey was over. But only the journey. Not the exploration. This would be continued, year after year, at the flowering of the rhododendrons, in many an English garden” (328).

However, while repeating both the seed gathering journeys as well as the writing about it, Kincaid is conscious of her complicity in colonial practices. In “Plant Hunting in China” (*MGB* 188–219) as well as in *Among Flowers*, Kincaid becomes the tourist she admonished so vigorously in her early “angry and provocative book” *A Small Place* (Murray 116). Here, she exposes the tourist as an “ugly thing” to whom it never occurs “that the people who inhabit the place [...] cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness” (*Small Place* 17). Yet the irony of her becoming a tourist herself does not escape Kincaid (*Among Flowers* 20), and while she is unable to remember the names of the Sherpas who cooked for the tourist group and schlepped tables and chairs up the Himalayan mountains for their comfort, Kincaid is adamant that her neglect does not reflect a colonizing relationship. It is solely her anxiety, unease, and unfamiliarity that prevent her from interacting properly with the Sherpas, she maintains (*Among Flowers* 26–27). Kincaid thus suggests that the nature of such encounters originates in globalization, rather than in colonization. In her seed gathering and gardening activities, Kincaid implicates herself in processes of globalization that are grounded in the very colonizing practices she criticizes, but in doing so, she exhibits an awareness for her participation in such relationships.¹⁷² This focus on participation may also be read as upturning previous hierarchies. Gary Holcomb reads something similar at play in Lucy’s travelling and notes its subversive qualities: “Recognizing that the subjectivity of travel writing operates at the center of colonial domination, Kincaid, with Lucy, assails the certitude written into who may write travel and who may not” (292). Holcomb’s observation equally holds

¹⁷² Murray shows that “through the deployment of irony [Kincaid] reveals her awareness of the contradictions” (123) between her critique and her participation in globalized tourism. See Feder for a detailed analysis of Kincaid’s position as a tourist in *Among Flowers*.

true for Kincaid's travel writing in *My Garden (Book)*: and *Among Flowers*. Simply by travelling and writing about it, Kincaid upsets colonial literary standards.

Representation and Appropriation: The Book as a Simulacrum of the Garden

What becomes apparent in the consideration of the garden as a visual pleasure, as a work of art, and as signifying history within *My Garden (Book)*: is that it exposes not only mechanisms of colonialism, but also those of representation. The garden in *My Garden (Book)*: is positioned in a triad of signification and reference. First, the garden plants represent history based on the individual roles they have played in it. Second, it showcases the craft and with that the power of the gardener, which in turn, third, references the power of the colonizer to transplant and dominate. The garden as a space in which the power of mankind is exercised thus represents the history of colonialism. This conception of the garden is brought forth by a book that itself consists of a complex combination of visual and verbal representations, since it functions in the way of a photo album. In a suggested amalgamation of textual and actual gardens, the text draws attention to the representation of the visual (the ekphrastic descriptions of the garden) within the verbal, while what is to be "seen" through the ekphrases – the actual garden – already is a representation itself. Ultimately, I argue, the book questions not only history, but also modes of representation and relationships of representations and their referents.

Such doubling of representations is also at the heart of W. J. T. Mitchell's definition of ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of the visual representation" (*Picture Theory* 152). In their definitions of the literary figure, both Mitchell and James Heffernan are adamant about the verbal representing *another medium of representation* (see Heffernan 300).¹⁷³ In the case of the garden and its plants, which are imbued with history, the representation is not bestowed on the object by the artist, but the meaning is presented as inherent to the raw material and the sheer act of working with it, i. e., the plants themselves and their transplantations which signify on the history of colonialism. Mary Lou Emery interprets ekphrases as gateways to the "real" in that "ekphrasis seems to grant us access to that which lies beyond representation" ("Refiguring" 263). In *My Garden (Book)*:, I argue, ekphrases are employed to very different ends: through the uses of a variety of representations, *My Garden (Book)*: showcases the acts of representations

173 In this, Mitchell and Heffernan go beyond the definition of the rhetorical device as simply halting narrative flow through extensive description, as quoted at the outset of this chapter.

themselves, which in the context of discussions of colonial history invites us to think about possibilities of representation in general.

My Garden (Book): repeatedly references other visual artworks concerned with the garden. Kincaid compares the sight of her own garden to that of another gardener and artist: gazing at some nasturtiums growing over a walkway in her garden, she recalls a photograph of nasturtiums that lean into a walkway in Claude Monet's famous garden at Giverny. Interestingly, the representation of the flowers in Monet's garden is again doubled by the note that the image was found in another book on gardening (Wayne Winterrowd's *Annals for Connoisseurs*, MGB 54). Comparing Monet's planting of nasturtiums to her own, Kincaid notes: "At first I felt wonderful that I had had the same idea as a great gardener, and then, unable to help myself, I felt envy, because his nasturtiums had turned out much better than mine. His looked like a painting – the way all natural beauty looks. Mine were just a planting of nasturtiums" (MGB 54). According to this quote, all natural beauty looks as if it were created by an artist, or, the other way around: artists of visual media are able to create natural beauty. Of course, this beauty is not natural at all but artificial. What is beautiful then, is the static representation of the natural in a visual medium, and not the organic and natural itself. Hence Monet's nasturtiums are not more beautiful than Kincaid's, but indeed their portrayal in a photograph is. The image thus conveys more meaning (beauty and naturalness) than its referent could.

Moreover, a referent may also take on the cultural meanings of its representation and in the process lose its naturalness. The English landscape, for instance, adopts the qualities of its own representation: Kincaid marvels at the English people who "obsessively order and shape their landscape to such a degree that it, the English landscape, looks like a painting (tamed, framed, captured, kind, decent, good, pretty)" (MGB 132). Here, the English landscape in Kincaid's writing functions as a "medium of cultural expression" in the sense of W. J. T. Mitchell's definition ("Imperial Landscape" 14). Mitchell finds a doubled representation in landscape painting: the visual art represents "something that is already a representation in its own right" ("Imperial Landscape" 14). In *My Garden (Book)*: the English landscape is ordered according to ideals (MGB 110) and demonstrates how the imperial project not only moved outward, creating such spaces as the Botanical Garden in St. John's, Antigua,¹⁷⁴ but also moved "inward toward a reshaping and re-presentation

¹⁷⁴ An exceptional space for the display of taking possession of things and people in the way of the colonizer-gardener are the public gardens of the empire. Kincaid describes botanical gardens as "the back yard of someone else, someone far away, someone's landscape the botanical garden can make an object" (MGB 148). In this light, the botanical garden in St. John's in Antigua, for instance, comes to represent domination, as it is associated with "the English people, their love, their

tation of the native land” (Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape” 17) as pleasant and benign.

In another examination of a painting, Monet’s work once more serves to exemplify the relationship of visual art and its referents. Visiting Claude Monet’s garden in France, Kincaid compares the actual garden in front of her to the paintings depicting it: while contemplating the plants before her, she “had their counterparts in Monet’s paintings in [her] mind” (*MGB* 126). The image already known supersedes the actual sight. Looking at the pond’s famous water lilies lying on their sides, Kincaid writes, “but on seeing them that way I immediately put them back in the arrangement I am most familiar with them in the paintings,” with them sitting upright on the water (*MGB* 127). Accordingly, the perception of reality is preconceived by a sight that was “learned.” Kincaid’s question about whether the water lily garden would be the same without the paintings (*MGB* 126) is thus straight to the point. Especially the absence of the Hoschedé sisters, whom Monet painted in a boat on the pond, points to this interweaving of the known image and simultaneous visual perception of the same sight, as Kincaid is almost startled by missing the girls on the pond: “On the day I saw it, the pond, the Hoschedé girls (all three of them) were not in a boat looking so real that when they were seen in that particular painting (*The Boat at Giverny*) they would then define reality” (*MGB* 127). Again, the painting – the visual representation of the pond – defines what is real and not the actual sight itself. As with the photograph of the nasturtiums that defined natural beauty, here the painting defines reality. These examples of visual representations and their referents reveal the power of the likenesses over the original, as they are more “natural” and beautiful and even more “real.” They even affect the perception of reality in that the images known from pictorial media superimpose themselves over actual scenes of reality.

In a last observation of visual art, a collection of glass sculptures at the Harvard Botanical Museum, Kincaid even more specifically speaks to the effect of representations. The museum displays specimens of fruit and flowers made of blown glass:

These fruits and flowers [...] are all beautiful, and, as is the way of likenesses, seem more representative of the real than do the things that they are meant to resemble. The creation of these simulacra is also an almost defiant assertion of will: it is man vying with nature herself. To see these things is to be reminded of how barefaced the notions of captivity and control used to be, because the very fabrication of these objects [...] attests to a will that must have

need to isolate, name, objectify, possess various parts, people and things in the world” (*MGB* 143). Accordingly, the garden, and the botanical garden in particular, is more than a collection of plants. It is also the power of domination represented by such a collection.

felt itself impervious to submission. How permanent everything must feel when the world is going your way! (*MGB* 79–80)

Again, the representations here hold more meaning than their referents. Furthermore, the assessment of likenesses in visual art establishes a parallel to gardening and to colonization. The creation of art is indicated as an “act of will,” just like the creation of the garden (see *MGB* 111). Considering that representations are capable of altering the perception of nature, they are, on this basis, also able to alter nature itself, as the English culture landscape makes evident. In her analysis of ekphrasis in Caribbean literature, Emery contends that a verbal representation of a visual representation “reframes” its content in a way that addresses the relationships of possession the paintings represent (*Modernism* 183). Although Emery focuses on ekphrases of paintings that frame women and people of color, her assessment equally applies to Kincaid’s multiple representations of the garden: through the use of ekphrases and considerations of other art works, Kincaid highlights modes of representation and thus showcases the acts of naming, framing, and transplantation in the garden as well as in art.

My Garden (Book): is a work comprised of representations and likenesses in text itself; in text that alludes to visuality; in design that suggests a photo album; in illustrations that supplement descriptive text; and not least in its topic – the garden – itself, established as a representation of colonial practices and history. Thus framing the garden in a multitude of representations, *My Garden (Book)*: as a whole becomes a likeness of the garden. As the glass sculptures captivate and control their referents, so does the book. Hence it can be read as a simulacrum of the garden. It similarly takes power over its referent: although it is marketed as a nonfiction work, the average reader would not be able to verify Kincaid’s account of her own garden. It may as well be a product of her imagination and writerly craft. Neither is it relevant whether the garden truly exists as described in *My Garden (Book)*:. The book in this way contains the garden; it is not just an account of it. *My Garden (Book)*: is a likeness of the garden even in structure in that it demonstrates the ambivalence of beauty and horror similar to the garden itself: looking at the garden, we are presented with its beauty, but beneath the surface we find that the creation of the garden is based on the principle of radically asserting one’s will and of taking possession of “nature.” In parallel, reading *My Garden (Book)*:, with its artful design and poetic language, may be enjoyable, but when considering the form of representation that is brought forth in an interweaving of the visual and the verbal, it becomes apparent that the book appropriates nature in the same way as the garden. The multiple representations in *My Garden (Book)*: thus reveal colonialist practices in the garden, but demonstrate that artistic power is equally appropriative. Thinking about the mechanisms of historiography

and History with a capital *H*, Kincaid's formal highlighting of the power of representations points to the possibility of totality in any representation. Considering the formal aspects of *My Garden (Book)*: thus turns it from the musings of a solitary gardener into a discussion of the workings and functions of media in general.

However, *My Garden (Book)*: does not blindly repeat colonizing mechanisms. Like Kincaid, who in her garden and travel participates in global and neocolonial moves, but shows an awareness of this, *My Garden (Book)*: repeats with a difference: Kincaid delights in ordering the garden according to her whims and pleasures (see, for instance, *MGB* 120–121) and in thus taking a colonizing position in it. But her joy also, and perhaps even more so, lies in the garden's own will. "The spontaneity of life in the garden defies efforts to conquer space," Wendy Knepper writes (44). The unpredictability agitates and vexes the gardener, but she also finds happiness in this excitement, and delight in the garden's ability to defy her imagination through organic growth (*MGB* 14). Gardening then is not only pleasurable because of an exercise of power, but equally because of an unspoken hope that her power might be defied by the colonized, namely the garden.

In the same sense, *My Garden (Book)*: is not a static text. Knepper reads the book with Wilson Harris's notion of the living text (see Knepper 42). Corresponding to Mitchell's idea of landscape as a "medium of cultural expression," Harris regards landscape as a "living text." In accordance with the concept of a landscape-text, Knepper interprets *My Garden (Book)*: as another kind of living text in that it is a space that allows for a negotiation of changing spatial praxes of home and world, just as the garden does. Moreover, the multiple representations framing the garden exhibit the framing itself. In this, colonization is not only repeated, but the repetition stages the mechanics of colonization. This exhibition of underlying processes presents an awareness of them, which Kincaid calls for: "I do not mind the glasshouse; I do not mind the botanical garden. [...] I only mind the absence of this admission, this contradiction: perhaps every good thing that stands before us comes at a great cost to someone else" (*MGB* 152). As is the book's program, *My Garden (Book)*: demonstrates this doubling of presentation and deconstruction not only in content, but also through form. Hence, the standstills and the colonizing freezing in permanence that it performs through ekphrases are concurrently destabilized. The impossibility of ekphrasis does not let visual images emerge, but their evocations result in a constant back and forth between the verbal and the visual, which dismantles the static framing that they seem to establish. *My Garden (Book)*: accordingly undermines its own colonizing acts: the organic aspect of the garden provides space for growing, and so does the book in showcasing its ostensible taking power of the referent through ekphrases that do not freeze the garden in permanence after all.

3.3 Photographic Product(ion)s of History: The Portraits of *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Mr. Potter*

Four of Kincaid's monographs and shorter works feature actual photographic images: the two novels *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Mr. Potter*, the nonfictional book *My Brother*,¹⁷⁵ and the uncollected short essay "Biography of a Dress" accommodate photographic portraits on their book jackets or throughout the text. As the texts' titles suggest, all of them are concerned with the genres of life writing.¹⁷⁶ This chapter demonstrates how Kincaid's works draw on claims of authenticity, as attributed to photography and the confessional mode of life writing in the creation of fictional knowledge about the past. In chapter 3.1 I showed how Annie John's and Lucy's engagements with photography allow them to negotiate their social and historical positions by manipulating or producing representations of themselves and others. The exploration of spaces of in-betweenness and the redirection of meanings between assumedly stable positions – be it social binaries or the components of a photographic sign – changes hitherto fixed meanings and opens up spaces for new significations. Similarly, *My Garden (Book)*'s ekphrases explore such representative capacities of signs and media (see chapter 3.2). The entanglement of the visual and the verbal is equally productive in the medial interplay of actual photographs and fictional texts in Kincaid's later novels *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Mr. Potter*, as the following chapter will show.

Drawing on the assumed quality of photographs to authentically represent their referents, combined with the particular positions of the images, Kincaid's works highlight the importance of presuppositions of the ontology of signs and media in the productions of (versions of) history. While in the earlier works the discovery of new meanings constituted by the images was the task of the novels' protagonists, in *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Mr. Potter* this is transferred to the reader, who is presented with photographs directly. The photographs in Kincaid's works are few and arranged in such conventional positions that they could well be presumed illustrations to the text. However, I contend that they should not

175 I am here referring to and analyzing the books' first editions published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. Although the same photographs frequently appear on the covers of later as well as translated editions, they often are cropped or scaled down, and the book titles and author name are arranged differently in relation to the images. Kincaid's *Talk Stories*, too, a collection of essays that previously were published in *The New Yorker*, features a photograph of the author on its front cover, but its lack of links to the text means it is not of interest to this inquiry.

176 See chapter 2.3, "Writing between and across Genres," for analyses of the texts' play with notions of (auto)biography in "Biography of a Dress" and *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

merely be treated as complements to the verbal discourse, but as art in their own right. In *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Mr. Potter* (less so in *My Brother* and the “Biography of a Dress”) photographs are presented as products of history, but their links to the fictional texts manifest new meanings through which the photographs participate in the production of history through visual means.

Photography and Authenticity

Photographs have long been – and still are – regarded as a medium that provides evidence of past events. André Bazin notes: “The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re-presented*, set before us, that is to say, in time and space” (13–14). Similarly, Roland Barthes emphasizes photography’s claim to register reality, when he notes a convergence of reality and of the past in photography. When Barthes maintains that the thing or person photographed must have existed and “been there” for the photograph of it to have come into being, he establishes the image as proof of a past reality (*Camera Lucida* 76). Susan Sontag also points to this documentary quality commonly attributed to photographs: They “furnish evidence. Something we hear about, no doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. [...] A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened” (5). Based on the development of new technologies that allow digital manipulation of photographs, nowadays the reality of a photograph’s referent is easily questioned, which leads Nicholas Mirzoeff to proclaim that today “photography is dead” because it has lost its claim to reality (65). Umberto Eco clarifies that the manipulation of photographs was possible long before digital technology: “We know that, through staging, optical tricks, emulsion, solarization, and the like, someone could have produced the image of something that did not exist” (223). Nevertheless, the assumption that a photograph reveals evidence of a past reality still clings to the medium, especially to photographs that (presumably) were produced before the digital age. Appropriately enough, Jens Ruchatz calls photography a “storage medium” (368) that allows us to access our memory and in this way ostensibly also to the past. Harvey Young, in his analysis of the well-known daguerreotypes taken in 1850 of Alfred, Fassena, Jack, Jem, and Renty, five Africans who survived the Middle Passage and were enslaved in the United States, as well as Delia and Drana, American-born daughters to Renty and Jack respectively, muses that “the photograph, as a historical document, reveals to the viewer, in the present, a past presence that is now absent” (57). Similar to Barthes, Young expects that the photographs’ freezing of moments

in time would grant him “a privileged glimpse into a moment that no longer exists” (57) and that the images of the African captives would provide him, their present-day reader, with access to their experiences in the nineteenth century (see Young 29). Likewise, Laura Wexler turns to a photograph of a young Black woman holding a white baby with the anticipation “that close, attentive readings of historical photographs can restore voice and context to historical knowledge that may have been hidden or repressed” (161).¹⁷⁷ These scholarly examinations of photographic images – all of them portraits – set out to salvage the photographs’ subjects from history. They perform what Walter Benjamin described as the beholder feeling “the irresistible urge to search such a picture for a tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it” (“Photography” 510). Wexler’s and Young’s works are attempts to recover the individuals, their personal circumstances, and the circumstances of the images taken. It implies that the photographs might “reveal” such information about their subjects, if only one found the right way to read them.

The portraits in Kincaid’s works are of particular interest to my investigation of the production of presences in the face of the void of History, because of photography’s unique relevance to people whose history was lost. bell hooks points out that “[w]hen the psychohistory of a people is marked by ongoing loss, when entire histories are denied, hidden, erased, [photographic] documentation may become an obsession” (“Photography” 48). David Boxer, collector of Jamaican historic photographs, exemplifies this when he explains his fascination: “This colliding of time, the familiar seen through the veil of history, is precisely the quality in early Jamaican photography that made me want more and more. [...] each work I acquired [...] offered a window back into the past and allowed me to relive in a way that past which had been the present of my parents’ parents and the present of generations of my ancestors even back to the generations just emancipated from their centuries of bondage” (8–9). Photography then becomes a central medium to “keep history” (hooks, “Photography” 48). Harvey Young, as well, equates family photographs with “history” itself (56). Moreover, photography may not only provide access to a past of which representations are scarce, but it equally plays a role in the recovery of a subject position in the present, when the camera here becomes a tool for positive self-representation to counter racist representations of “the Other” (see, for instance, Willis, hooks, Young). Photography thus has a double

177 A comparable position is held by Douglas Daniels, who asserts that “[s]cholars can use photographs to study historically ‘inarticulate’ segments of our population” (9).

function here: to record the past and to resist racist misrepresentations. Accordingly, the power of evidence attributed to photography is amplified by these social and historiographic functions.

I am here concerned with the specific form of photographic portraits of people of color in the transatlantic context that (presumably) were taken for private purposes and in the past, i.e., before digital manipulation became common practice. This photographic genre implies a set of yet more specific attributions to the images, since personal portraits and family photographs perform distinct functions in engagements with history because of the likely familiarity of the depicted. Siegfried Kracauer distinguishes here between contemporary and “old” photographs: “[P]hotography, which portrays phenomena familiar to contemporary consciousness, provides access of a limited sort, to the life of the original,” he writes (429). The contemporary photograph allows its beholder to immediately recognize the photographic subject. They do not (have to) focus on details, but see the subject for themselves at first glance. Such a photograph accordingly performs the mediating function of an optical sign for the depicted (Kracauer 429). However, according to Kracauer, it is only within the parameters of space and time that a photograph can record what it depicts (425). The content or meaning of what has been photographed are contained, in contrast, in what he calls the “memory-image,” (426) which is not linked to dates or temporal distance as a photograph is. Contemporary photographs can accordingly provide access to what they portrays only in the sense that they may evoke a memory-image of it. In her discussion of different approaches to personal photographs, Patricia Holland terms the processes of accessing an image’s content as “using” it if the onlooker already knows the world depicted in a photograph. A person unfamiliar with the photograph and its subject would perform a “reading” of it. According to Holland, users have intimate connections with the photographs: the images were taken of or for users, or they were inherited together with a surrounding knowledge (121). Holland’s users and Kracauer’s beholders of contemporary photographs are able to access information about what an image shows without excessively studying it. Their reading, or “studium” – to use Roland Barthes’s term (*Camera Lucida* 26) – exhausts itself in the recognition of an already familiar subject. Any knowledge about that subject, however, is not located within, but outside of the image; it is invoked by it, it was already available to the beholder before they looked at the photographic representation of the subject.

An “old” photograph, in contrast, calls for different attentions. Its subject cannot simply be recognized as it is not a priori known to its beholder, “the immediate reference to the original is no longer possible. [...] If one can no longer encounter the grandmother in the photograph, the image taken from the family album disintegrates into its particulars” (Kracauer 429). Once the person is not recognizable at

first glance, either because of a temporal remove, or, as I would like to add, because the face has never been familiar in the first place, the focus of the beholder must shift to details in the image that might help to identify the person or thing that has been photographed. A different studium is required here to come to conclusions about both the image and what or whom it portrays. Holland aptly opposes the “user” to a “reader,” to whom “a hazy snapshot or a smiling portrait from the 1950s is a mysterious text whose meanings must be teased out in an act of decoding or historical detective work” (121). For the reader, “old” photographs “lose their specific meaning in favor of more general insights into social and cultural conventions” (Ruchatz 372). This form of studium is more analytical, since no memory-image would interfere with the study of the photograph and cultural conventions are consciously taken into account of the analysis of the image to grasp its content.

Jamaica Kincaid’s works present cases of purposeful blending of the personal and the unfamiliar when reproductions of seemingly private portraits are publicly printed on the covers of books that play with the notions of life writing’s authenticity and are not meant for private use but to be widely sold. Hence I am here interested in the amalgamation of the two forms of studium, that which conjures up a memory-image that seemingly underlies the photographic representation but really is projected onto it by the beholder who is familiar with the image’s subject, and that of the old or unfamiliar photograph that demands a more detached and detailed “reading” or examination.

Of the photographs in Jamaica Kincaid’s oeuvre, I am particularly interested in those that are part of *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Mr. Potter*. Although both *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Mr. Potter* have been read as parts of the author’s “family album” that she produces through the body of her works (see Nasta), I contend that the texts are less concerned with individual characters – and even much less with Kincaid’s own parents Annie Richardson Drew and Roderick Potter – than with the collective memory of Caribbean colonial history and its still-lasting effects on present-day society and relationships. This begs the question of how photographic portraits that show individual people, and thereby document the very existence and presence of these individuals in front of the camera, may contribute to the imaginative production of knowledge about history.

A Portrait of a Fictional Protagonist: Creating Authenticity

The Autobiography of My Mother features two photographs: The sepia-toned cover image shows the reproduction of an Afro-Caribbean woman’s portrait, and the backside presents an author photograph of Kincaid in black and white. To be

clear from the beginning, the woman on the cover of *The Autobiography of My Mother* is decidedly not Kincaid's mother, as can easily be discerned by consulting a public family photograph such as that of Annie Drew, Jamaica Kincaid, and Kincaid's daughter Annie Shawn by photographer Mariana Cook in her collection of family portraits (21). Apart from skin color, headkerchief, and a flowered dress, Annie Drew in Cook's portrait and the woman in the cover image hardly have any physical characteristics in common. The woman on the front cover of *The Autobiography of My Mother* is young, perhaps middle-aged, with brown skin that suggests both African and European ancestry. Her dress indicates that she might be Caribbean, as she wears a variety of the *douillette* (or *dwiyet*). This is the Creole dress of the Caribbean islands that were colonized by the French, particularly Dominica and St. Lucia, which came into fashion in the eighteenth century and according to Dominican folklorist Cissie Caudeiron was frequently worn until the 1930s (see "The National Dress" and Caudeiron). The costume here includes a long flowing jupe (skirt) with a large floral design, a white chemise tucked into the jupe, slightly trimmed with embroidery and with half-length sleeves. A printed foulard (scarf) tucked into the waist of the skirt front and a madras headpiece complete the outfit. With this costume, the woman portrayed not only presents a traditional Caribbean (Creole) dress, but also what Cissie Caudeiron identifies as the direct offspring of the Sunday dress of a female enslaved or freed woman (32). The figure moreover wears a necklace of dark polished beads that is wrapped around her neck several times, and eardrops of similar but smaller beads, as well as a simple metal bangle of about one inch width on her left wrist. These adornments are part of the Creole dress (Caudeiron 33).¹⁷⁸

In the portrait, the woman's lower legs and feet are not visible as the photograph (with the book cover) is cut off at about the height of her knees. Her right shoulder is slightly turned away from the camera, which results in a not quite but almost frontal pose. Her right hand is not visible, as it is hidden in the folds or a pocket of her skirt. Of her right arm only her elbow is visible between shirt and shirt. Her left hand rests on her left hip, which gives the impression of her arms akimbo with both elbows standing out. Still, her left hand is bent back, so that her arm actually rests on her wrist, which appears rather as a leisurely pose than a tense one. Her face looks relaxed, a slight hint of a smile plays on her lips. While she seems to look right into the camera, her gaze also appears distanced and disengaged, which conveys an impression of inaccessibility. Altogether, her posing conveys the assumption of this being a photograph produced

178 See also page 81 of Michael Ayre's picture volume *The Caribbean in Sepia* for a portrait collection of women in this traditional costume in the 1870s.

with intent and purpose, perhaps even taken at a studio. The lack of background as well as the subtle lighting from the upper left would corroborate this assumption. It can further be inferred that the woman may herself have commissioned the portrait, since she seems to be posing freely. Then again, her leisurely yet also adverse pose and the disengaged look on her face may also suggest that someone else commissioned the photograph, with which she complies, albeit half-willingly, as expressed by the small resistances in her posing. This suggests that this could be a type portrait of “la belle creole” as often taken in studio settings and collected by photographers at the end of the nineteenth century to depict the “picturesque other.”¹⁷⁹

The photograph moreover shows markers that suggest its age. It is entirely in sepia tones, which seem to bespeak its age, since it either yellowed over time or was produced in an age when sepia toning was still fashionable, before color photographs became popular. On its right side, water stains have damaged the image, which also suggests that it has existed for some time. However, the stains do not disturb the image; rather, their blending of lighter and darker sepia tones corresponds well with the rest of the colors and shades in the picture. It might even be speculated that the stains were placed there on purpose to evoke the impression of an authentic old photograph. Small specks of dirt in the upper half of the portrait may be interpreted along the same lines, as well as a lighter line in the bottom left corner that looks like damage from a dog-eared corner of the photograph. Another indication for possible photo retouching is the coloration of the space around and behind the female subject. The background has the same color as her blouse; only the space in her immediate proximity is darker, as if she threw a shadow. However, it is more likely these areas were darkened on purpose to create a contrast to her figure, since the darkest tones are to her immediate left, although a light source must have been positioned on that side, as can be concluded from the lighter areas in her face and the darkest space of the image being located on her other side around the area of her left hand.

All in all, neither the background nor the subject herself unequivocally reveal the purpose of the portrait, and a close inspection of both raises more questions than it provides answers. It is even possible to suppose that the image was specifically designed and produced as a cover image for *The Autobiography of My Mother*, especially considering how strikingly well the picture fits with the narrative of Xuela, who also is a woman who stands by herself and whose attitude to her circumstances and to history would very well be illustrated by her arms slightly

179 For examples see Boxer and Lucie-Smith 230–237, or Ayre 21, 70–77, esp. 79–81, 195–197, 230–233.

akimbo and with a hint of a smile on her face. However, since Xuela is a fictional character and could therefore not possibly appear in an (authentic) photograph, a search for photographic evidence, i.e., “the thing that has been there” in Barthes’s terms, could only conclude that a woman in the dress described stood in front of a camera’s lens at some point in the past. Who this woman is or was, however, remains obscure. The photograph thus provides evidence of the existence of a person, but it does not offer knowledge about that person. Meaningful insights into whom an unfamiliar photograph portrays can hence hardly be deduced from the sole consultation of that photograph. Moreover, in the photograph in question here the subject cannot be further identified, as her name is unknown. The place and time when the photograph was taken can likewise only be supposed, since the hints that the photograph provides may as well be manipulated.

Ultimately, this interpretation of the portrait must be a reading – i.e., an attempt to decode the image – solely of my own.¹⁸⁰ Since I have no other information about the portrayed, I can only revert to “historical detective work,” as Holland puts it (121). In my reading of the image, I thus follow the claim that images “must be understood as a kind of language; instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification” (Mitchell, *Iconology* 8). The image nevertheless may reveal other insights to other readers. Laura Wexler astutely notes that “[p]erspectives on photographs, as on history, differ from individual to individual and from social location to social location” (161). However, one thing becomes clear: whatever meanings such a photograph may convey, they emerge from the interpretation of its beholder and are not inherent to the photograph itself.

As open as this photograph may be to interpretation, through its ties to the novel’s text, meanings are both suggested and withdrawn again. As seen above, the interpretation of the photograph on the cover of *The Autobiography of My Mother* does not yield fruitful insights without verbal context. Harvey Young and Laura Wexler also rely on text, such as captions or photographers’ records, to conduct their analyses, which indicates that even in such thorough analyses of historic portraits as Young’s and Wexler’s, the study of only the photographs themselves does not necessarily yield satisfying results and that verbal discourse about their subjects needs to be taken into account. Hence, while I agree with

¹⁸⁰ In the only scholarly consideration of the image to date, Jana Evans Braziel indicates the photograph as “enigmatic, its reference ambiguous” (“Transmutations” 93), without commencing further investigation concerning the subject.

Young that photographs may collapse “the past with the present with the promise of extending it to the future” (50), I would challenge the assumption that they indeed may give us access to the past or restore hidden parts of history (in Wexler’s terms). While Wexler argues that the historical contextualization of photographs may open a kind of wound “that offers a way for a subjugated history to be spoken” (160), in Kincaid’s case, it is not historical, but contemporary contextualization that opens the photographs to new ways of engaging history.

However the photograph originated, it was consciously selected to be reproduced on the cover of a novel entitled *The Autobiography of My Mother*.¹⁸¹ If the text were an autobiography, based on convention, it could safely be assumed that the book’s cover shows its protagonist, i.e., the portrait of a veritable person. This cannot be the case, as *The Autobiography of My Mother* is a work of fiction. The label “a novel” at the bottom of the cover should make it sufficiently clear that the text’s protagonist could not be depicted in a photograph, as Xuela is a fictional character. The term “autobiography” in the novel’s title nevertheless evokes such assumptions. The impression that the woman on the cover and the novel’s protagonist might be identical is corroborated by the appearance of the same image throughout the book: before the first page of text, the novel begins with a mostly blank page with the print of a small corner of the photo in its upper left corner. With the beginning of each subsequent chapter, an additional snippet of the cover image is revealed. This gradual exposition of the portrait implies an analogy to the progression of the text, in which each chapter discloses more about the life of its main character Xuela Claudette Richardson. Finally, with the last chapter, the whole picture of the woman on the cover is shown, as well as the text’s reader now has presumably been presented with Xuela’s whole life story.

The proximity of the image to the novel’s content thus implies a connection of the woman portrayed in the photograph and the woman portrayed by the text. This suggestion of identity creates a cycle of redirection from the historic portrait that one is presented with at first glance, to at closer examination a perhaps artificially produced cover image that is unrevealing because of a lack of historical context, to a depiction of Xuela Claudette Richardson, whose life story the reader is familiar with through the novel’s content.

The lettering of the book title and author name, which are printed onto the book cover and its photograph, similarly participate in processes of redirection. The title and author name are printed in two lines at the top of the cover above the woman’s head and mostly on the background of the portrait, which leaves

181 Inquiries to the publishing house Farrar, Straus and Giroux concerning the selection process unfortunately produced no response.

the image's subject largely untouched. Interestingly, title and author name are not separated by space or differing typeface as they are set together in two lines in handwritten letters. They are even further tied together through the preposition "by": *The Autobiography of My Mother by Jamaica Kincaid*. Before the connecting preposition, a very slight and almost horizontal line floats between the words, which could be read as the hint of a separating dash that fell off its line. However, because of its crooked angle, it is more likely that this small line is part of the following b, which was interrupted by a momentary lack of ink. The close relation of title and author once more suggests a proximity between the author's person and the text, as already advanced by the genre marker "autobiography." Then again, the title also calls attention to the fragility of such relations, since writing the life story of one's mother would be a biography. The term "autobiography" adds the self of the author to the title, which questions the relationship of author and biographical subject. In this way, the book's title picks up on the mode of re-directing from one meaning to another.

The title and author name are moreover printed in handwriting. A comparison of the letters reveals that the two lines indeed appear to be written by hand before being reproduced on the cover, as recurring letters are not identical and show irregularities.¹⁸² A notion of authenticity is attached to handwriting, since the assumption behind this form of script is that it must have been produced by a veritable person. Its effect is thus comparable in one sense to that of a personal photograph, since the writer, just as the photographic referent, must have existed. This effect is yet again amplified by the word "autobiography," which in itself suggests a personal and authentic written account. However, just as the cover image is not a real photograph, but merely a reproduction which possibly might even have been manipulated, this is not actual handwriting, but solely a reproduction of what appears to have been written by hand. The cover and its writing then do not present a personal, handwritten document, but solely a production that advances this impression.

That this indeed is not an autobiography or even a biographical text is made clear by the label "a novel." Distinctly not part of the title, these letters are not capitalized and are located in the lower right corner of the cover, i. e., in the farthest location from the title. In this way, a solution to the ambiguous title is provided, but it is positioned most unobtrusively. The label "a novel" of course relieves the author of the demands of authentic life writing, which the title and

182 To clarify, this is in most likeliness not Kincaid's own handwriting, as already a brief comparison with her signature evinces.

its relation with the author name prompt. Nevertheless, the questions of truth, fiction, and their relationship are already proposed.

The author photograph on the back jacket additionally ties into this set of relations. A black and white portrait of Kincaid extends over the whole back of the book, bearing striking similarities to the cover image: portrayed by herself, Kincaid wears a long flowing frock that could be a dressing gown. Though more detailed, it shares a floral print with the skirt of the woman on the front. Both attires share a loosely falling material, half-length sleeves and a V-neckline. Kincaid is situated before a neutral background, which in this case is black. Further similarities are in their framings and positions: Kincaid, too, is tightly framed and the ratio of her body to the overall image is the same as that of the woman on the front. As she sits in a dark chair that is almost completely concealed by her figure, her left shoulder is slightly turned away, which gives her body an angle to the left, i.e., the opposite side as in the other portrait. She rests her head on her left hand, which is bent in a similar angle as her counterpart's left hand. Similarly, both of Kincaid's elbows are bent – though not outwardly, but close to the core of her body and her right hand is hardly visibly between the folds of her gown. Her lower legs and feet, too, are not visible, but cut off by the borders of the portrait. Kincaid's face has a serious look, and the fact that she is holding her head in her left hand gives her a thoughtful expression. Just like the woman portrayed on the cover, Kincaid looks directly into the camera, but as her head is slightly tilted to rest in her hand. She evokes the impression of dreamily – or disinterestedly – looking past the camera and, with that, past the photograph's beholder. In this portrait, the light source is located to its subject's right side, i.e., to the opposite side in comparison to the cover photograph. This image could well qualify as professionally produced for the cover of an autobiography and hence corresponds particularly well with the one on the front.¹⁸³

When the book jacket is folded out fully, the two portraits face each other and because of their identical proportions relative to the overall photos, the nearly identical angles of their subjects' positions, and the light source we might imagine between them, they correspond exceptionally well. In this juxtaposition, author and novel, i.e., reality and fiction, are confronted with each other, just as in the arrangement of title and author name on the cover. Moreover, the similarity of the two portraits once again creates a proximity of the author and her fictional work. Between both photographs, one finds the title *The Autobiography of My Mother by Jamaica Kincaid*. If one reads the portrait on the front cover as Xuela, or at least as a representation of the novel's content, the correspondence

¹⁸³ Indeed, it was also taken by Mariana Cook (1992).

of the two portraits would imply that the text, as represented by the title on the book's spine between them, was created between both of them – between the woman portrayed on the front and the one on the back. The author portrait thus also partakes in blurring the lines between the genres of (auto)biography and fiction. It creates space for speculative musings about authenticity and fiction similar to those advanced by the portrait on the front cover.

In this way, the photographs and their placements take up the play with referents that is also at stake in the novel's title. In a confusion of preconceived notions of both genre and photography, the image with its ascriptions of being an "authentic" medium depicts a fictional character. It lends its assumed credibility to the text and supports a reading of the novel as life writing. The front cover photograph participates in positioning Xuela's story as a historical biographical account. Reading this the other way around, and assuming that this indeed is an old photograph, Kincaid's novel provides a narrative to the image in the sense of Young's and Wexler's readings of historical photographs that seek to restore voices. Ultimately, we do not know whether this is an old photograph or one produced and manipulated specifically to cover Kincaid's novel, but the medial mechanisms remain the same in their suggestions of authentic representation.¹⁸⁴ It does not matter whether the photograph is as "fictional" as the text; in their interconnection both enact a presence where previously there was none, performing medial conventions to produce the historic account of a life to which we would otherwise have no access.

The Image of a Fictional Father: Creating a Presence

The images on the book jacket of *Mr. Potter* work to similar ends. The wrapper here features three photos in total. The inner backflap shows a small author photograph of Kincaid, though this is of less interest for the absence of direct ties to the novel. The front cover displays the portrait of a boy, standing in front of a wooden swing door, holding what could perhaps be a rolled-up newspaper. This novel, too, evokes the genres of life writing with a daughter-narrator who as the fictional author pens the life of her father, the eponymous character, to establish a relationship with an absentee parent. Following the conventions of biography, an identity of the boy on the cover of *Mr. Potter* and the novel's protagonist may be presumed. Most inter-

¹⁸⁴ Kincaid's works here make another characteristic of photographs productive: "Photographic 'literacy' is learned. And yet, in the real world, the image itself appears 'natural' and appropriate, appears to manifest an illusory independence from the matrix of suppositions that determines its reality" (Sekula 86).

esting, however, is the third photo, the portrait on the back jacket, as it further plays on Kincaid's own family history.

The image on the back of the book shows an elderly man in a wicker chair, flanked by two women standing to his sides. The photograph is sepia-toned, which blends with the rest of the jacket design in similar beige tones. The seated man is at the center of the portrait. He is past his prime and could well be going on sixty years of age. He appears to have dressed for the photograph, wearing an impeccably white double-breasted suit, a white shirt with a classic Kent collar, a dark tie, dark shoes polished so diligently that they reflect the light, and matching dark socks. His legs are crossed, and in a leisurely pose he has folded both his hands around his upper knee. The women to his sides also are attired well, in almost matching bright dresses. The woman to the left stands slightly closer to the man in the center of the portrait. She could be about the same age as him. Her dress is white or perhaps colored in a discreet pink (which is difficult to discern because of the image's sepia tones) with a pattern of small merging circles in different colors. Both hemline and sleeves are half-length and just cover her elbows and knees. Her hair is neatly tied back and she is adorned with simple jewelry of small metal hoops in her earlobes, a necklace, and a narrow bangle on her left wrist. The third finger of her left hand shows a metal ring, which is likely a wedding band, given its placement. This hand is laid on the man's right shoulder, but not resting there in a relaxed position – her thumb and little finger are not laid down, but hover in the air just above his shoulder. On the other side, a younger woman stands upright in the same pose as the woman on the left, also facing the camera, in a dress of the same style, but of different cloth. Matching her white dress, she wears white leather shoes and a white hat. She is wearing similar earrings as the woman on the left and a watch on her left wrist. Her hand is also placed on the seated man's shoulder, and her fingers do not curl affectionately, either, but are kept straight and, in an unusual angle, do not point to the front but toward the man's head, which gives the physical touch an awkward and staged look.

The three of them are located before a blank wall, with the corner of a rug showing in the foreground of the image. The wicker chair is of a plain design, and some strands are coming loose at the bottom of the front legs. Taking all of these details into consideration, it is most likely that that this is a staged family photograph. The age difference between the women and the wedding band suggest that the woman on the left may be the seated man's wife, with the woman on the right being their daughter; although, of course, other family relations could be at play. The positioning of the man with the women to his sides nevertheless indicates a familial connection with the patriarch at the center and the women demonstrating their connection to him through the placement of their hands.

This portrait does not extend over the whole back side of the dust jacket as do the images on *The Autobiography of My Mother*, but it is integrated into a design. The edges of the images are blurred and blended with the background of the book cover. Here too, then, the two women are only half-visible, their outer shoulders fully effaced as their faces begin to merge with the background. They are thus rendered less important not only by their positions within the portrait, but also by being obliterated in being blended into the background of the jacket design. In this way, the man in their midst is positioned at the center of interest not only in the original portrait, but also in the design of the book's dust jacket.

The background of the jacket is based on the reproduction of a threadbare woven material that looks old and worn and appears to resemble the binding of an old book or journal. The worn look of the suggested binding adds to the impression of something that has traveled through time, just as the photograph has. This is further corroborated by an array of flyspecks all over the image, which in effect are similar to the watermarks and the dog-ear of the portrait on the cover of *The Autobiography of My Mother*; in that they suggest that the image may have existed or been on display for a longer period of time to have attained the smudges and damages.

That a book often read as the biographical account of Kincaid's own father Roderick Potter shows a classic private family portrait, easily leads one to assume that the image might indeed represent Roderick Potter and some of his relatives. This is further corroborated by the image's copyright note: "Back jacket photograph courtesy of the author;" which establishes a connection between the author, her family, and the novel's characters. Yet the information that Kincaid provided the image neither confirms nor proves that the picture indeed was culled from Kincaid's own family album. She may as well have bought it at a flea market.

The redirection of the portrait's meanings here works similarly to that performed by the images of *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Ways to read the image on *Mr. Potter* range from private but unfamiliar family photograph to illustration of a fictional text to again private photograph shared with the reader by the author Kincaid. This redirection suggests that if the photograph depicts the book's Mr. Potter, this in turn advances a biographical reading of the novel and attributes a truthfulness to Kincaid's fictional account of a character thoroughly determined by colonial history.

It is in this intermingling of the authentic and the fictional, in both the novels' texts and photographs, that the productive moment in their engagements with the past lies. The texts provide information that convention and references lead one to read as context to the portraits. As the portraits themselves reveal rather little, their contexts must aid the production knowledge about them and about the past. While a photograph provides historical reference in that it evidences a mo-

ment in the past, without text, such as a caption or inscription, the image loses its singularity, or, in Kracauer's terms, the memory-image of what it depicts has faded. In his "Little History of Photography," Walter Benjamin aptly asks: "Won't inscription become the most important part of the photograph?" (527). Marianne Hirsch argues that "[m]ore than oral or written narratives, photographic images [...] function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world. They enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch the past, but also to try to *reanimate* it by undoing the finality of the photographic 'take'" (*Generation of Postmemory* 36, emphasis mine). The "fragmentariness of the two-dimensional flatness of the photographic image, moreover, makes it especially open to narrative elaboration and embroidery" (Hirsch, *Generation of Postmemory* 38). Or, as Allan Sekula puts it, "the photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the *possibility* of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome. Any given photograph is conceivably open to appropriation by a range of 'texts,' each new discourse generating its own set of messages" (91, emphasis in original). Without narrative, photographs reference a moment in the past, the moment when the camera's shutter closed, but it is only with difficulty that they can be placed in historical context or be attributed to individuals. In this sense, while the photographs in Kincaid's works do not lose their authenticity as historical products, they nevertheless become blanks for interpretation and reanimation in the present, which allows for the connection of fictional text and photograph.

In his work on photography and memory studies, Jens Ruchatz productively draws from C. S. Peirce's semiotic model in a way that is helpful to understand how the the meaning of the photographs in Kincaid's works is redirected. Ruchatz argues that private photographs are usually read by way of their indexicality (371), i.e., their signification of their origin. The images here do not signify the moment they were taken in spatial and temporal parameters, but rather meaning that is held by the memory-image (Kracauer).¹⁸⁵ In Holland's terms, this concurs with the "user" of a private photograph, who is taken to a world of memories by seeing the image and who focuses on its content. In contrast, "collective memory favors the photographs that support a symbolical reading" (Ruchatz 372), i.e., a decoding that is based on conventions and norms and, with that, a more detailed studium or reading of the image. The images in question here can hardly be read indexically,

¹⁸⁵ The photographs' iconicity is not as pertinent here, "[a]s *icons* photos signify by similarity. The light that is reflected onto the light-sensitive emulsion delineates the objects in front of the lens in such a manner that no code is required to recognize them" (Ruchatz 371, emphasis in original). Although the unfamiliar reader would not recognize a photographed person as an individual, this person will nevertheless be identified as a human being with certain physical characteristics.

since the people depicted in the portraits would be unknown and unfamiliar to the readers of Kincaid's novels. The circumstances in the photographs were taken can only be assumed, since any text that could confirm the images' origins is (largely) absent. These photographs are not provided with defining captions, but they are linked to whole novels that suggest certain interpretations without ever confirming them directly. In this way, the images that show individuals are opened to a variety of interpretations, since none of them can be proven without a doubt. However, the fictional texts appear to relate the life stories of the portrayed, which seems to allow the readers to become users of the portraits, since now they have access to the world of those the photographs depict. The fictional narratives aid the imaginative reanimation of the portraits, as they provide a basis for (fictional) memory-images of the persons they depict. In this sense, the photographs are once again being read indexically, though now they do not signify their own origins, but the fictional contents of the novels. A shift occurs here from solely being able to discern that something or someone has been there to the assumption that certain persons (here the fictional characters of Kincaid's novels) have been in front of a camera.

It is in this redirection that the productivity of enactment of history lies, as the shift from a symbolical to a fictional indexical reading creates the potential for new knowledge to be created, which nevertheless retains the same status of authenticity as truthful accounts of the past – as, e.g., real biographies of Kincaid's parents would. In addition, this fictional indexical reading is still open to symbolization. Xuela Richardson and Roderick Potter are not individual characters, but they represent a collective affected by colonial history.¹⁸⁶ When the likenesses of unidentified individuals on Kincaid's book covers are opened to a variety of interpretations, the persons they portray come to represent a variety of people. Thus, it is not only that the life stories of Xuela and Mr. Potter are authenticated by their interactions with the photographs; their paradigmatic nature is also endowed with the status of authenticity. The photographs' referential power as products of history persists and, through the purported connection to the texts, works to authenticate the texts' fictional productions of history.

¹⁸⁶ I argue this in detail in chapters 2.2 and 4.2.