

4 Bodies: Embodied Enactments of History

The human body is the third medium considered by the present study, in addition to text and image, that Jamaica Kincaid employs in her works to engage with history. Her prose texts repeatedly foreground bodies through detailed descriptions of their attributes and functions. While I cannot consider actual physical bodies, the bodies I am interested in are mediated by text and image. Hence, my analysis of human bodies builds on the results of the previous two chapters. Nonetheless, within the visual and verbal printed media that make up Kincaid's oeuvre, bodies insist on their presence and make themselves known. As I will show, bodies occur as sites where concepts of selfhood and history are negotiated – both for the characters, who engage with their own bodies within the narrative, and for the texts, which refer to bodies as discursive sites in order to debate colonial discourses.

In these colonial contexts, history determines all notions of the human body in terms of the othering mechanisms which make it central to any colonial project, and which are imposed on bodies. Conceptions of race and gender, and of humanity itself, are negotiated through human bodies. Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that “[s]ince the historical encounter of the hemispheres and the onset of transatlantic enslavement were the fundamental acts of race-making, since they launched a global and world-historical process of ‘making up people’ that constituted the modern world, race has become the *template* of both difference and inequality” (106, emphasis in original). Understood as the “template” forming structures of behavior of the powerful and the powerless, race – which is constructed as a visually perceptible category by way of so-called phenotypes – also constitutes the template for ascribing meaning to bodies. Omi and Winant further point out historic parallels in the social statuses of women and enslaved people, thereby correlating the discursive structures of race and gender: “From conquest and slavery on, racial parallels and racial ‘crossings’ have shaped gender relations. Women and slaves were at best lower-status humans, at worst not human at all. [...] The corporeal distinction between white men and others over whom they ruled as patriarchs and masters, then, links race to gender, and people of color to women” (Omi and Winant 107).¹⁸⁷ The crucial point in this for me is the comparable approach to bodies that are read as different from the white, male, able bodies that are posited as the norm. Guillermina De Ferrari even regards the body as the key component to Caribbean thought. She estimates that “the symbolic appropriation of the body by medical, legal, and political discourses is the true origin of

¹⁸⁷ Omi and Winant here solely refer to historical structures of othering. This is not to be read as a general equation of racism and gender inequality.

the Caribbean, a process that accounts for but is not limited to the movement of bodies and cultures that is usually the focus of Caribbean theories" (2).¹⁸⁸ Issues of appropriation of the body in terms of race and gender discourses are also at stake in Kincaid's works and are at the center of the following analyses. I argue that through bodily practices, such as behavior and gesture, but also by grooming and dressing their own bodies, the characters in Kincaid's texts engage with concepts of the body that are shaped by colonialism. By engaging with their own bodies and by using them to interact with others, these characters both perform and question the categories of race and gender.

Human bodies become apparent as media to contest colonial history, when the characters in Kincaid's works discover that they are not neutral beings and may not be shaped solely by self-determination and a human's particularities, but that they are always already inscribed by discourse, which is largely linked to the visually perceptible features of their bodies. Elizabeth Grosz maintains that

bodies cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself. It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type. [...] [R]epresentations and cultural inscriptions quite literally constitute bodies and help to produce them as such. (x)

In Kincaid's novel *Annie John*, the prepubescent protagonist mistakenly assumes her body as a neutral entity and the experience of being ascribed with meanings and expectations as well as the recognition of such cultural and societal inscriptions are perceived as traumatic. In this, *Annie John* represents processes of gendered inscriptions on a pubescent female body and strategies of resistance to such inscriptions, which the later novels *Lucy* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* explore more radically.

In terms of racial inscription, Hortense Spillers notes that, in historical terms, the marking of the body indeed may be understood quite literally. Referring to the Black enslaved body, Spillers discerns that the inscriptions of brutalization in terms of wounded and scarred flesh, missing limbs, or the branding of a body denoting it as another's property indexically signify not only the past injury, but also the body's abject status as a destructible entity (in opposition to a body protected by juridical and moral discourses of humanity). These physical markings on the assaulted Black body, Spillers argues, "render a kind of hieroglyphics of the

188 De Ferrari here foremost refers to Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation.

flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color” (67). In other words, the body and its visible characteristics, here color of the skin, now signal its vulnerability. Such inscriptions, attributed and read by others, then are difficult to overcome, as these “markers [are] so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean” (Spillers 65).¹⁸⁹ Similarly, Omi and Winant point to the visual dimension of racialization, i. e., “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group,” as they term the attribution of racial categories (Omi and Winant 111). The visual is key to these processes. As Omi and Winant argue:

Bodies are visually read and narrated in ways that draw upon an ensemble of symbolic meanings and associations. Corporeal distinctions are common; they become essentialized. Perceived differences in skin color, physical build, hair texture, the structure of cheek bones, the shape of the nose, or the presence/absence of an epicanthic fold are understood as the manifestations of more profound differences that are situated *within* racially identified persons: differences in such qualities as intelligence, athletic ability, temperament, and sexuality, among other traits. (Omi and Winant 111, emphasis in original)

The mechanisms of racialization ascribe arbitrary significations to features of human bodies. The interaction of the visual and the verbal with the body thus act on the surface of bodies.

Analogous to such racial inscriptions, in Kincaid’s works discourses on sex and gender also constitute bodies. While bodies seemingly operate on their own when they change during puberty – producing new parts, for instance, such as pubic hair or female breasts, discourse also attributes meaning to these body parts in a way that means they can never exist in a neutral state. The female body here is always already marked with meaning in the sense of Judith Butler’s theorization of how language constructs categories of sex:

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. [...] This production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*. (*Gender Trouble* 7, emphasis in original)

¹⁸⁹ This is, for instance, also apparent in Frantz Fanon’s well-known train episode in which a white boy’s gaze ascribes meanings to Fanon’s dark skin, which Fanon can neither determine himself nor evade.

In this production of sex through gender, bodies are inscribed by being read as such and cannot be thought as unmarked, as every approach to the body already comes with a culturally predetermined set of readings.

My sketch here of useful theoretical notions of the human body in the context of Jamaica Kincaid's works has so far made quite extensive use of the metaphors of reading and writing in order to understand the body as a medium. In part this follows the terminological choices made by other scholars (Grosz: "inscription," Omi and Winant: "reading bodies," Spillers: "markers," "hieroglyphics"), yet it also reflects my own understanding of how the body functions in Kincaid's works. I contend that the body as a medium in its constitution is largely dependent here on both the visual and the verbal, i.e., on image and text.

However, the following chapters also show that, while the bodies of characters in Kincaid's works undergo and experience such inscriptions, and while the texts accordingly discuss processes that are acted out *on* bodies, the novels' protagonists also use their own bodies to resist such determinations imposed on them by others. Bodies withstand being fixed in categories and, via nonverbal practices, counter meanings ascribed to them. By enacting colonial discourse with differences that speak to the characters' agency, they contest colonial history that is that seemingly is already inscribed on their bodies.

The following analyses will focus on three of Kincaid's novels that center on female bodies as engaging with the world – *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Presenting in-depth readings of each novel in response to specific questions of the female body, each of the sections below, devoted to one of these novels, analyzes passages from the two other to support my interpretations. My aim is to chart how conceptions of the female body develop in Kincaid's texts. While *Annie John* in part exemplifies the devastating effects of an internalized white gaze, *The Autobiography of my Mother* presents more radical performances and rejections of colonial claims on its protagonist's body.

4.1 Transgressions of Gender:

The "Unruly" Female Body, Grotesquerie, and Odors

Annie John is the coming-of-age story of its eponymous protagonist. Chronologically narrated in retrospect by an autodiegetic narrator, the novel relates episodes in Annie John's life from ages nine to seventeen. The chapters detail changes in her social life, i.e., in her school education, friendships with her peers, a changing relationship with her parents, and how Annie's physical body goes through the changes of puberty while all of this is happening. Growing a visibly female body is a traumatic experience for Annie. She experiences the development of her

own body throughout puberty in terms we might call, with Bakhtin, grotesque. Yet the unruliness of grotesquerie simultaneously withstands social concepts attributed to the female body. This chapter explores the resistances of female bodies in Kincaid's texts to external rules that attempt to bind them together with fixed meanings. Their very physicalities defy discursive constructions of normative gendered behavior, as we see with Annie John's growing body and the way she experiences it as a distorting development. By presenting the changing pubescent body of its protagonist through grotesquerie, *Annie John* highlights the social and discursive inscriptions of gendered bodies in the sense of Judith Butler's approach to gender. "[G]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 519). Here, such a constitution is eminently marked by colonial ideals.

The first section of this chapter, "Growing the Grotesque Female Body," focuses on the physical changes during puberty that are linked to gendered and racializing projections. Reflecting on her changing self-image, Annie John initially presents an internalized white gaze that seeks to frame her body as strange and undesirable. As she grows up, however, she inverts the grotesquerie of her body into a challenge of the very colonial notions that had hitherto limited her. The pubescent body's transgression of its physical limits thus evolves into transgressions of gendered norms. As I will now show, the binaries of inside and outside, and of norm and deviation, are thus dissolved with and through Annie John's body. The second section of this chapter on "Offensive Odors" will then explore the challenge of racialized and gendered attributions through emissions of bodily odors. Drawing on approaches to race and gender in the new field of smell studies, this section presents the defiance of colonial discourse through the concrete physical body that makes itself known through its pungent smelliness in *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

Growing the Grotesque Female Body

Throughout the novel, Annie John's body is in constant flux. Going through puberty, her body transgresses its own boundaries with the excretion of body fluids and the growing of new appendages. Simultaneously, and because of these physical changes, Annie John learns to relate to the world differently. As her body develops from that of a child to that of a young woman, her immediate society begins to view her differently – people now expect a gendered behavior of her, which irritates her as she learns to navigate these new claims made on her body. The book presents this experience of the changing body and its changing relations to the

world as a series of transgressions by the body itself, by the world onto her body and her sense of self, and by Annie John herself, in moments when she crosses the perceived social boundaries imposed on her. This string of transgressions comes to her with a sense of alienation, which is presented by the text through descriptions of her body in grotesque terms. The narrative of Annie's growing up is conspicuously rife with portrayals of her body, its protruding parts and its excretions, such as pubic hair, sweat, and menstrual blood. In Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, "[t]he [grotesque] object transgresses its own confines, ceases to be itself. The limits between the body and the world are erased, leading to the fusion of one with the other and with surrounding objects" (*Rabelais* 303). While Annie John's body indeed changes and thus literally transgresses on the world, I read this as a metaphor for her new status in society as a "young lady" who is expected to behave according to gendered norms. The overt representations of Annie's bodily functions then signify her rejection of such social norms, as I will show in what follows.

Annie's changing body and social position leave her in a state of instability and uncertainty. Her body disrupts normality. To be sure, I do not personally regard any of Annie John's thoughts, feelings, or body functions as "abnormal" or as "grotesque" in a judgmental way (as the term might be understood in everyday language use). Rather, I am interested in Annie's own sense of alienation as presented by the novel, as well as the functions of the grotesque (in the strict sense of the transgressive, exaggerated, and excessive as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin or Mary Russo) as a literary technique to approach and comment on gender categories and the fixity of colonial discourse in general. The grotesque body in *Annie John* questions the fixity of the category of "normality." Mary Russo points out that the feminine and the grotesque overlap in their constructions and positions "as superficial and to the margins" (6). Russo even sees the two terms as doubling: "It might follow that the expression 'female grotesque' threatens to become a tautology, since the female is always defined against the male norm. Indeed, in many instances, these terms seem to collapse into one another in very powerful representations of the female body as grotesque" (12). Moreover, as Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund contextualize, in a "postcolonial context, grotesquerie can highlight 'difference' by identifying old and new spaces of centrality and normalcy, if only to transgress the boundaries that have been established by the forces of a colonial power" (124). In a British (post)colonial context, normality is regulated as "white," "male," and "able-bodied." This would per se define Annie John as deviant, simply by being black and female. Or, as Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert puts it, "[c]arnival, and what Bakhtin calls the grotesque – become avenues for the articulation of resistance to a dominant culture's tendency to undermine the static, seemingly unshakable hierarchies imposed by colonial rule" ("Carnival" 217).

Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* presents the resistance to colonial rule in the learning processes of a girl growing both into her own body and into the body of society, each of them governed by discursive regulations. Annie John's narrative of growing up includes a painful growing apart from her mother. Initially, the text presents the daughter as a double of her parent, a position of which she is soon deprived. The novel begins with the loss of the locus amoenus: at age nine, Annie moves with her family from their home to a temporary dwelling, as their house's roof needs to be replaced. Their home for the summer is located near the town's graveyard, a space that is most alluring to her. The first chapter is thus concerned with death, which anticipates the increasing loss of the idyllic in the following chapters. Simultaneously, the previously unchallenged union of mother and daughter, marked by a sharing of all activities (for instance shopping, cooking, bathing), begins to disintegrate. The novel thus begins with a change from an assumedly innocent childhood, sheltered by the nuclear family, to an awareness of life – and, as the proximity of the graveyard suggests, death – in society beyond the private realm.

This change prominently shows itself in an episode of shopping for a dress, which is necessitated by a growth spurt when Annie John is twelve years old. Annie John perceives the bodily changes that occasion the acquisition of this new garment as an alienation from herself: "My legs had become more spindlelike, the hair on my head even more unruly than usual, small tufts of hair appeared under my arms, and when I perspired the smell was strange, as if I had turned into a strange animal" (*AJ* 25). In this observation of her own body, Annie sees her body as rebellious. It is "unruly"; it acts on its own when new features "appear"; and it is unknown, unfamiliar, "strange" to her. Here, she experiences her body's "unruliness" as directed against herself. This will eventually change, and Annie John will use her rebellious female body as a tool to resist norms imposed on her as a young woman in a colonial society.

What Annie John describes in this early alienating encounter with her own body are the typical changes of human bodies during puberty, both male and female. Physical growth and hormonal changes that effect changes in the chemical composition of body fluids (such as perspiration) are a shared human experience. Annie's observation of her body thus is not out of the ordinary at all. The way in which Annie describes her body, however, casts it in decidedly grotesque terms. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin determines that "[t]he grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming" (25). The grotesque body then is "a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 317). The pubescent body would be a prime example of the grotesque in Bakhtin's concep-

tion. It transgresses itself, it reaches beyond its own boundaries by growing parts that extend from it in new ways, such as Annie's spindly legs or her axillary hair. These body parts protrude; they reach towards an outside world, which is for Bakhtin a key feature of the grotesque (see *Rabelais* 316–317). This is later heightened in the female body with the growing of breasts.

In Annie's first description of her pubescent bodily change, the grotesque also manifests itself in her perspiration. Again, a part of the body pulls from the inside to the outside; it transgresses its limits, a movement that is immediately connoted with strangeness. Indeed, Annie's perception of her changing body is so alien to herself that she voices it through another grotesque motif – the metamorphosis from a human into an animal being (see Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 316). Comparing her body with "a strange animal" emphasizes the physicality of herself, which during puberty becomes part of Annie's self-conception.

At the same time, Annie John also experiences the alienation from the body of her mother. She had been her mother's double, following her around and copying her ways of doing things and feeling as an extension of her mother's body. Now, Annie is deprived of this position when the mother refuses to continue performing sameness by wearing the same cloth. "Oh no," the mother says at Annie's suggestion for a role of cloth. "You are getting too old for that. It's time you had your own clothes. You just cannot go around the rest of your life looking like a little me" (*AJ* 26). So far, shared appearance in clothing had signaled familiarity. Now, the change of outward clothing performs an inward change – the emotional separation of Annie from her mother Annie.

Julia Kristeva takes up Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque and adds to it the dimension of gender in her concept of the "abject" as that which falls away from the "I" and, in the process, constitutes the "I" (Kristeva 3).¹⁹⁰ In a thought that resembles Bakhtin's grotesque in that the abject is also that which transgresses the confines of the body, Kristeva locates bodily excretions such as blood, pus, sweat, and feces beyond the border of the "I." "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. [...] Such wastes drop so that I might live, until from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver," Kristeva writes (3). Moreover, according to Kristeva, an awareness of the processes of abjection finds its origin in the detachment from the mother. As the child enters the symbolic realm in which "I recognize my image as a sign and change in order to signify"

¹⁹⁰ For instance, Mary Russo rightly points out that "Bakhtin [...] fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains in all directions repressed and undeveloped" (63).

(Kristeva 14), it abjects the mother who has brought it into being, in order to exist outside of her. Before the child becomes a subject, it thrives on mimesis “by means of which [s]he becomes homologous to another in order to become him [or her] self” (Kristeva 13). Through the abjection of the maternal the child enters their own personhood. In Annie John’s case, the child feels forced into a symbolic order, in which her own image is laden with significations, when she visibly grows into an adult female body. While she later may actively turn against the union with her mother, the girl initially feels rejected and deprived of her inherited mimetic position close to her parent. Here, the abjection of the maternal is presented as a forced process, initiated by the symbolic inscriptions of the female body which cannot be overcome. Annie’s sense of rejection here emphasizes the power of the symbolic, i.e., patriarchal policing discourses, which manifests itself on her body.

The daughter’s reaction to the realization that she is now forced to leave the comfort of maternal mimicry is performed by her physical body, which now suddenly is as beyond her control as the choice of cloth in which she might clad her body. The girl abruptly turns hot, then cold, “and all [her] pores must have opened up, for fluids just flowed out of [her]” (*AJ* 26). Elizabeth Grosz points to the menace of body fluids, such as Annie John’s perspiration, especially when they refuse to be controlled: “Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside (this is what death implies), to the perilous divisions between the body’s inside and its outside. They affront the subject’s aspiration toward autonomy and self-identity” (193). Annie John’s excessive perspiration could then be read indexically, physically pointing not only to her momentary emotional distress, but also to a disintegration of her perceived selfhood. Her mother’s forceful separation through the termination of their visual doubling threatens the girl’s very sense of self, as is expressed by the dissipation of her physical barriers to the outside world. Annie John quite literally cannot keep herself together.

Such transgressions of the boundaries of the physical body in a grotesque fashion moreover threaten the notion of order.¹⁹¹ As Mary Douglas emphasizes, systemic regulations are manifested on the individual body and “[i]t is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (5). In this, the conception of the personal body structurally functions in the same way as notions of “orderly” society, especially in a colonial system which defines its norms against “the Other.” Yet, here the seeping of body fluids is less threatening to Annie’s sur-

191 Bakhtin explicitly mentions sweating as an action of the grotesque body (*Rabelais* 317).

roundings than to her own position and subjectivity in it. Thus, the grotesque and its emphasis on the physical human body might foreshadow the body's unruly behavior in a societal context, but in this situation early in Annie John's life, it points to the uncertainty Annie experiences in being cast out of the amoenic spaces she inhabited near her mother and as her double.

Annie John's autodiegetic narrative position identifies her mother as the perpetrator of her pain. Her mother, however, cites her daughter's advanced age for her actions. She supposes that her daughter is "getting too old" for their harmonious union and notes that the girl is "on the verge of becoming a young lady, so there were quite a few things [she] would have to do differently" (AJ 26). What the mother refers to here would be the onset of puberty, which is visually manifesting on Annie's body. The amoenic is relinquished when her previously infantile body begins to evince the marks of a gendered body in puberty. This physical change is immediately linked here to a gendered social role into which Annie John is forced. Still, while the daughter's perception of her situation positions her mother as an agent of colonizing rules in *Annie John* – very similar indeed to the mother-daughter-dynamic in "Biography of a Dress"¹⁹² – she really only acts as a proxy in a system she cannot escape herself.¹⁹³

Again thinking about the girl's societal position with Kristeva's concept of maternal abjection, it becomes clear that the detachment process of this familiar relationship, which *Annie John* presents as a visual upending of sameness and which signifies the transcendence of the semiotic order, indeed points to the girl's entering of the symbolic order, which in Kristeva's term is tied to the realm of the father (13).¹⁹⁴ The figure of the mother now emerges as split, which is mirrored in the differing interpretations of the mother by various scholars. Some scholars read

¹⁹² See chapter 2.3, section "A Yellow Dress and a Brown Girl."

¹⁹³ This system is also marked by patriarchy. While patriarchy perhaps does not immediately emerge as a topic at hand as the majority of conflicts in *Annie John* are fought between mother and daughter and the father figure plays only a secondary role, the "rule of the father" nonetheless provides the basis for such conflicts throughout. Annie John's mother thus acts as an enforcer of both colonial and patriarchal rule, which are two sides of the same coin. See Moira Ferguson, *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body*, esp. chapter 2 "Annie John: Mother-Daughter – Christopher Columbus," for an analysis of patriarchy in *Annie John*.

¹⁹⁴ With the terms "semiotic" and "symbolic," Kristeva distinguishes two aspects of language and development of subjectivity. Kristeva denotes the symbiotic state of mimesis of child and mother as "semiotic," which is determined by emotion. In relation to the variability of emotion, semiotic language features a rejection of denotative fixity. After the Lacanian mirror-stage and after maternal abjection, the "symbolic," in Kristeva's terms, represents the patrilineal. Symbolic language then follows the principle of the patriarchal law, which relies on denotation. For a detailed discussion of this terminology, see also Judith Butler's essay "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva."

the mother-daughter relationship in *Annie John* as empowering to the girl,¹⁹⁵ while others read the mother as an extension of the oppressing colonizer.¹⁹⁶ The reason for this division in scholarly approaches to the mother figure in *Annie John* probably lies in the split within the character's significations itself. Chinmoy Banerjee also assesses the changing mother-daughter relationship as a change in the conception of the mother figure: "With Annie's splitting of her mother, the two mothers become politically antithetical, the cast-out bad object being identified with the colonial patriarchal power and norms and the introjected good object being identified with opposition and resistance" (40–41). While in my interpretation here the mother represents an alignment with the colonizer's ideals to the daughter, I generally do not intend to restrict the reading of the mother to this position. Rather, while keeping in mind the doubling of the mother figure (as both representation of colonizer and as empowering ally), I here foreground the mother's role as restricting and imposing colonizing significations on her daughter solely in the context of Annie John's changing body and society's new impositions on it.

Naked, Annie John beholds herself in a mirror:

I was so long and bony that I more than filled up the mirror, and my small ribs pressed out against my skin. I tried to push my unruly hair down against my head so that it would lie flat, but as soon as I let it go it bounced up again. I could see all the tufts of hair under my arms. And then I got a good look at my nose. It had suddenly spread across my face, almost blotting out my cheeks, taking up my whole face, so that if I didn't know it was me standing there I would have wondered about the strange girl – and to think that only so recently my nose had been a small thing, the size of a rosebud. (AJ 27)

Individual body parts and the body as a whole are exaggerated in their shapes and sizes in Annie's self-perception. She separately pays attention to individual parts of the body, verbally detaching them from the whole. They are described as disproportionately large, extending and protruding beyond Annie's body. The nose, which Mikhail Bakhtin likewise describes as one of the key grotesque features of the face (*Rabelais* 316), attains excessive size and takes over her visage. What is at play in this exaggeration within the mirror scene is Annie's double vision of herself. The focus on bouncy hair and a broad nose recalls racist stereotypes of Black people, which exaggerate just these features (among others, such as lips or eyes). Disproportion is a key component of racist caricature of Black bodies, as perpetuated for instance by cartoons and collectibles.¹⁹⁷ In centering on hair

¹⁹⁵ For instance, Donna Perry ("Initiation" 134) or Verna Ena George (40–43).

¹⁹⁶ For instance, Colena Gardner-Corbett (75), Laura Niesen de Abruna (281), or Simone Alexander ("I am Me" 52).

¹⁹⁷ See for instance Patricia Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies*.

and nose and in describing them in exaggerated terms, Annie applies a racist white gaze to her own mirror image, doubling it in the sense of Du Bois and Fanon,¹⁹⁸ which casts her image in that of a “strange girl.”

More problematic even than Annie John’s growth is her body’s ability to change on its own. Annie John is not in control here; her body has taken over. Her unruly hair cannot be flattened, and her later musing that she might screw herself into a set of clamps at night in order to combat her physical growing (*AJ* 27) might be read as a sign of the girl’s desperation to come back into agency and to govern her own body. At the same time, it signifies her desire to conform to parameters of colonial standards of beauty. She has as little power over her physical body as over norms of beauty, and with that, over the colonial ideals that reveal themselves in her own mirrored gaze.

Annie’s experience of bodily alienation culminates in the onset of her menstruation, as the presence of bodily fluids becomes a horror scenario. She experiences this as yet another, new strangeness that manifests itself in and on her body, and as one which moreover is laden with shame (*AJ* 51–52). Not only does her body transgress its borders in new ways, but she suspects that it even transmits this fact to the outside world: “I was sure that everything about me broadcast, ‘She’s menstruating today. She’s menstruating today.’” (*AJ* 52). This assumption that the body is operating on its own accord again highlights Annie John’s loss of control. Grosz connects female monthly bleeding with an ontological instability of womanhood:

[M]enstruation, associated as it is with blood, with injury and the wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks, uncontrollable, [...] indicates the beginning of an out-of-control status that she [woman] was led to believe ends with childhood [and its involuntary soiling of oneself and one’s clothes]. [...] This necessarily marks womanhood [...] as a paradoxical entity, on the very border between infancy and adulthood, nature and culture, subject and object, rational being and irrational animal. (205)

Grosz’s observations here emphasize the enduring state of transgression in which women are cast based on their bodily functions, which frames women in a position of ongoing grotesquerie.

In Annie John’s case, the image of the bleeding wound indeed is so threatening to the girl that it causes her to faint. The blackout once again demonstrates Annie’s current powerlessness and inability to control her own body. Her syncope occurs at school and the nurse quickly chalks it up to “the fright of all the unexpected

¹⁹⁸ See the section on “A Yellow Dress and a Brown Girl” in chapter 2.3 for details on the internalized white gaze as theorized by Du Bois and Fanon, as well as a detailed analysis of double-consciousness in Kincaid’s “Biography of a Dress.”

pain" (*AJ* 52), but the girl realizes that "I had fainted after I brought to my mind a clear picture of myself sitting at my desk in my own blood" (*AJ* 52). The imagined scenario links two horrors: the shame of public display of the abject, i.e., of menstrual blood flowing from her body, and the equally horrifying thought of bleeding out and dying without a direct cause. The body's grotesquerie here is characterized by its perceived acting on its own, which renders the girl utterly without agency.

This changes, however, when in Annie's group of peers, menstruation becomes a thing of value. While her changing pubescent body means the forced entry into a world ruled by gendered norms, Annie John also gains a new community – that of her female schoolmates. She enters a homosocial group of peers with whom she shares experiences of their changing bodies, such as the growing of breasts, which they perceive as an increasingly desirable development of their young bodies (*AJ* 74, 80). The novel's protagonist, who enjoys being at the center of her friends' attention, gains recognition by being the first to menstruate. Her best friend Gwen is moved to tears by Annie's revelation, but she is not crying out of sympathy for Annie's bodily horror, but for herself, as she had not yet experienced her menarche (*AJ* 52). Annie achieves further admiration when she presents her bloody sanitary cloth to her friends and shares her newly obtained knowledge of female monthly bleeding. For her, then, the admiration of her peers and her new knowledge render the previously daunting grotesquerie of her own body into a tool of power.¹⁹⁹

Kincaid's later novel *Lucy*, also evokes menstruation in a negotiation of power when the protagonist bleeds upon having penetrative sex for the first time during puberty. Realizing the presence of blood, her partner smiles and says "'Oh,' a note too triumphant in his voice" (*Lucy* 82). Refusing to be perceived as a special conquest, Lucy quickly notes that this blood would simply be her period coming on – no need for "triumph." "I did not care about being a virgin and had long been looking forward to the day when I could rid myself of that status, but when I saw how much it mattered to him to be the first boy I had been with, I could not give him such a hold over me" (*Lucy* 82–83). Lucy here negates the hold of body discourses on her in a two-fold way. First, she rejects the notion that female virginity might be desirable; sexual intercourse here is a way to defy this claim on her own body by preempting it. And second, she interprets the presence of blood

¹⁹⁹ One might similarly interpret the empowering experience of purposefully producing fart noises at a lesson in etiquette to which Annie John's mother sent her. The girl here disregards the instruction in colonial conventions and opts to make her peers laugh instead (*AJ* 27–28). Imitating sounds of the bodily grotesque, Annie resists the colonial power's attempted influence on her body, here literally, as the emulation of fart sounds takes place during curtsy lessons. See also Valens 126.

as something mundane, less exciting than proof of her “deflowering.” By citing menstruation, Lucy thus refuses the discursively fabricated exceptionality of this sexual act. In *The Autobiography of My Mother* menstrual blood even has magical properties, enabling women to charm men, as Lise LaBatte does with Jacques by mixing her blood into his food. He promptly becomes her husband (ABM 65). Through Kincaid’s oeuvre, menstruation thus evolves from a fearful experience to female potency.

In *Annie John*, the powerful aspect of the grotesque body with its unruliness and transgression as significations of agency is also indicated by Annie’s own desires in her friendships with other girls. Throughout the book, Annie entertains three close relationships with girls of the same age – Sonia, Gwen, and “the Red Girl.” For these girls Annie professes deeply felt love, which expresses feelings read by some scholars as beyond girlish friendships and rather as a queer desire for girls.²⁰⁰ Considering the colonial patriarchal society this takes place in, Annie’s taking a homosexual love interest in her female friends is the performance of a social transgression in itself. Keja Valens articulates this very clearly when she writes that

[t]he pursuit of desire between girls in *Annie John* is intertwined with anticolonial struggle, for it undermines colonial heteronormativity. The roots of heterosexuality in the Caribbean certainly reach beyond the history of conquest and colonialism, but while male-female relationships are extremely common throughout the Caribbean, they do not always take on the same institutional or symbolic roles that they do in Europe, more specifically in colonial England. The insistence on heterosexuality as the norm that can and must not be violated – and its concomitant regulation of the boundaries of gender and family roles – belongs to a Victorian morality whose imposition forms part of British colonialism. (124)

In this, Annie’s desire for female romantic relationships signals the girl’s departure from both heterosexual and homosocial norms.

Such a bypassing of social norms is also indicated by the specific girls in which *Annie John* is interested. While the narrator (and internal focalizer) Annie John describes all three as “beautiful,” the details of the physiques in their differing from “normality” rather mark the girls as social outsiders (Sonia and the “Red Girl” much more so than Gwen). Annie’s attraction to difference is evident early on, with her earliest school friend, Sonia, whom Annie – without qualms – de-

200 See for instance Valens or Strongman. A number of other scholars choose to read Annie’s fixation on her girlfriends as replacements for the previous loss of the close relationship with her mother (see, for instance, James Nagel or Diane Cousineau). While this interpretation suggests itself by the temporal order of the loss and gain of female significant others in *Annie John*, this does not exclude a queer desire from Annie’s future relationships.

scribes as a dunce. Her other schoolmates frown at Annie's interest in Sonia. Nonetheless Annie notes, "I found her beautiful and I would say so. She had long, thick black hair that lay down flat on her arms and legs" (*AJ* 7). Sonia's physical deviation through excessive body hair delights Annie; she enjoys interacting with the mass of hair on Sonia's body (*AJ* 7).

This delight in the differing body is repeated when Annie attends a new school. Here she meets Gwen and immediately falls in love with her. The scenes with Gwen are described as moments steeped in beauty, rays of morning sun illuminate the first meeting of the girls. Annie sees Gwen in terms of perfection. Her school uniform is orderly; her shoes are polished. Yet Gwen's hat, adorned with a satin ribbon, sits on her head lopsidedly (her head is too small for it); the hair ribbons hold together "shrubby" hair; her "bony knees [...] were always ash-colored, as if she had just finished giving them a good scratch"; and her lips were "the shape of a saucer broken evenly in two" (*AJ* 47). Annie's description of her girlfriend make clear that what signals perfection to her is phrased in terms of disruption – the crooked, the unruly, the scratched, the broken. With her appreciation of difference, Annie John's ideals of beauty have significantly shifted from the internalized white gaze she had previously applied to her own mirror image. Bones sticking out, bushy hair, and wide round lips now are not condemned, but appreciated.

Valens asserts that "Gwen's features are also distinctly Caribbean (shrubby hair, ash-colored knees, flat nose, wide lips, high cheekbones) [which] suggests that Kincaid elaborates a Caribbean erotics of the grotesque, which refuses colonial norms of beauty and instead embraces the negative stereotypes of Afro-Caribbeans as precisely their most beautiful and desirable qualities" (131). Reading Annie's new ideals of female beauty as transgressive of colonial standardized notions of beauty transforms the female grotesque body into the desirable body. The shift in desirability thus decenters the colonizer's power to police discourses of beauty and restores individual agency to Annie John.

The appreciation of nonconforming beauty becomes even more pronounced when Annie John makes the acquaintance of the "Red Girl," as Annie calls her. They meet when the Red Girl offers to pick guavas Annie cannot reach and the Red Girl expertly climbs the guava tree in the fashion of boys (*AJ* 56). Having been taught not to climb but to solely throw stones in the hope of hitting loose the desired fruit, Annie instantly admires the Red Girl, who makes use of a much more efficient method to achieve her goal. The interaction between the two girls echoes a conservative scene of heterosexual courting: The Red Girl here performs the role usually assigned to a boy, freely transgressing the boundaries of gender roles, whose pressures Annie feels all too keenly. Metaphorically, this episode might then be read as a comment on gender norms in general: the

Red Girl refuses to adhere to a gendered male advantage in a patriarchal society, which holds back girls and women with rules of propriety. It is this disregard of gendered expectations that attracts Annie John to her new friend.²⁰¹

In the course of *Annie John's* 148 pages, the conception of the transgressive female body changes from threatening the one who inhabits it to threatening gendered societal norms. Initially the gendered female body is a problematic discovery for Annie John, but while she grows into it, she learns to defy the restrictions placed on her body by colonial society. In this, Annie John begins to regard her body as a tool to assert herself in the world. This is most obvious at the very end of the book, when Annie John's separation from her mother is completed by a spatial separation. Growing up culminates in Annie's leaving the island by ship in order to start nursing school in the colonizing mother country Great Britain. The now seventeen-year-old girl is devastated at the prospect of leaving that was pushed by her mother, and Annie experiences this pressure as yet another betrayal. Simultaneously, she delights in redirecting the pain of separation to her mother, as she secretly vows never to return to her home in the West Indies (*AJ* 132–133). With this, the text has come to a completion of its story of separation of mother and daughter. Yet, this seeming linearity is disrupted by the circularity of return to the texts, beginning when Annie John again becomes the physical double of her mother: standing by the ship's rail, Annie John looks back at her mother and her former life, thinking of her mother's hypocrisy of professing her love for her daughter while arranging for their separation. Annie regards her secret plan not to return to her mother as retribution, but in this she repeats her mother's perceived patterns of action: "So now I, too, have hypocrisy, and breasts (small ones), and hair growing in the appropriate places, and sharp eyes and I have made a vow never to be fooled again" (*AJ* 133). Her body now has changed from that of a girl to that of a woman as symbolized by the breasts protruding from her chest. The female body now indicates equality to a previously oppressing force as symbolized by her mother. What had appeared horrifically grotesque to her before, now indicates the weaponry she now possesses to challenge others, and which she may use to find power.

In *Annie John*, the textual presentation of the grotesque body both highlights and questions binary structures. Grotesque physical transgressions point to the existence of borders between inside and outside, body and world, the normal and the nonconforming, etc. By presenting such binary structures through transgressing them, the book both reveals and challenges them. Ambivalence, according to Bakh-

²⁰¹ This is furthermore supported by Annie John's admiration of the Red Girl's state of unkemptness. See the following section on how odors and dirt upset colonial order in Kincaid's texts.

tin, is one of the grotesque's indispensable traits. "For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 24). This simultaneity through transgression and transformation decenters the very binarity of the two poles. As Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund put it, "the grotesque offers a creative force for conceptualizing the indeterminate that is produced by distortion, and reflecting on the significance of the uncertainty that is thereby produced. This means that the discombobulating juxtapositions and bizarre combinations found in the grotesque figures in literature and the other arts open up an indeterminate space of conflicting possibilities, images and figures" (3). The presentations of female bodies in grotesque terms in *Annie John*, I conclude, thus refuse the totality and fixity of colonial logic and open up conceptions of gender and normativity to a multitude of realizations.

Upsetting Colonial Order: Offensive Odors

Besides growing grotesque parts, bodies in Kincaid's texts also transgress their boundaries by emitting odors. While my analyses largely focused on visual aspects of the female body in the previous section on grotesquerie, also other senses take part in the negotiations of gendered and racial attributions in Kincaid's works. To emphasize the importance of senses, Mark Smith in his monograph *How Race Is Made* notes that "[e]ven though we know that 'race' is a construct, an invention and category that defies scientific verification, we still understand that construction as a largely visual enterprise. [...] But the preference for seeing race is as much a social construction as 'race' itself" (2).²⁰² Generally, other senses, such as smell, hearing, and touch participate in the making of race, although their mechanisms might be less conspicuous. Isabel Hoving rightly argues that by including the sense of smell with body conceptions, Kincaid's writing takes up a form of knowledge production that turns away from theorizing the body in terms of text or through textual metaphors (such as suggesting bodily fluids as evocations of ink), which in itself challenges Eurocentric forms of knowledge production (Hoving 226–227). In Kincaid's works, bodily smells thus become ways to engage with and challenge the discursive notions that take up odors in othering mechanisms, as the following section explores.

²⁰² Similarly, Andrew Kettler holds that "[r]acism is one of the many aspects of culture and language that is felt through the sensory organs" (213).

The protagonist of *Lucy* very well understands bodies as communicative media which may transgress what is obviously visible, as is evident in her perception and evaluation of body odors. For Lucy, odor becomes a means to assert oneself in the world. Thinking about Mariah, Lucy's employer, close friend, and substitute mother figure, Lucy regards her as a paragon of privileged white upper-class American women who are unaware of the ease of their own lives and who hence never had to develop any confidence to face the difficulties of life (*Lucy* 26–27). Considering Mariah's seemingly effortless physical appearance and beauty, Lucy notes that “[t]he smell of Mariah was pleasant. Just that – pleasant. And I thought, But that's the trouble with Mariah – she smells pleasant. But then I already knew that I wanted to have a powerful odor and would not care if it gave offense” (*Lucy* 27). Lucy evaluates Mariah's appearance and presence in general as “pleasant,” which is mirrored by her perceived odor. “Pleasant” here, however, is not connoted positively, but rather to be read as “vapid” and “inexpressive.” It does not contribute to an active presence. Lucy, in contrast, wants her own odor to announce her to her surroundings and to make her presence known. Scholars have variously read Lucy's desire for a strong odor as empowering.²⁰³ Here, I read Lucy's stance on odorous bodies in the context of two other novels by Kincaid – *Annie John* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* – and thus delineate a development in the conception of body smells in Kincaid's works and integrate this development into a reading of the physical body as engaging with colonial history through its odorous transgressions of order.

Lucy desires for her body to extend beyond its confines and to assert itself in the “outside” world via its odor. In Kincaid's previous novel, *Annie John*, the much younger protagonist locates her own body odor in the realm of the grotesque; as I expounded, she notices it simultaneously with her body growing beyond itself during puberty, which she experiences as frightening. Annie John finds her odors “strange” (25) and alienating. Lucy understands her bodily smells as part of herself that grows out from her body. In this transgressive quality of odors, Lucy repeats Annie John's notion of the grotesque. Yet the protagonist of the later novel does not regard this as an estrangement from herself; rather she sees its potential to “give offense” to others.

²⁰³ See for instance Marquis 100, Hoving 220, or Holcomb 308. In contrast, J. Brooks Bouson surprisingly reads Lucy's stance towards odor in a judgmental context of shame. Bouson equals Lucy's wish to be “dis-smelling” with being a “dirty individual” (Bouson 74) and argues that this points to her regarding herself with contempt. I disagree with Bouson and rather understand Lucy as making use of her own body to defy notions of shame that are imposed on her and which she does not support herself at all.

Although Annie John was offended by her own smell, the earlier novel anticipates the pleasure this smell may also provide, like it does to Lucy, as Annie begins to appreciate difference. For instance, the Red Girl's transgression of gender boundaries that Annie John so admires is mirrored by her physical appearance, which equally challenges societal rules.

The Red Girl and I stood under the guava tree looking each other up and down. What a beautiful thing I saw standing there before me. Her face was big and round and red, like a moon – a red moon. She had big, broad, flat feet, and they were naked to the bare ground; her dress was dirty, the skirt and blouse tearing away from each other at one side; the red hair that I had first seen standing up on her head was matted and tangled; her hands were big and fat, and her fingernails held at least ten anthills of dirt under them. And on top of that, she had such an unbelievable, wonderful smell, as if she had never taken a bath in her whole life. (AJ 57–58)

The girl is revered by Annie John for her seeming carelessness at her own deviant appearance. She refuses to adhere to norms of cleanliness with her dirty and torn dress, her unkempt hair, and the smell of her unwashed body.

Annie learns that the Red Girl's mother does not insist on daily bathing, as her own mother does, and she determines, "Oh, what an angel she was, and what a heaven she lived in!" (AJ 58). From an adult perspective, Annie John's descriptions of her friend might speak less to the girl's desirable independence, and more to her family's poverty and a possible case of child neglect. Nonetheless, from Annie's youthful perspective, the Red Girl's bodily deviance is enticing in expressing unruliness. Annie John's recognition of the state of the Red Girl's body and dress as "dirty" shows her awareness of societal hygienic standards, as well as her realization that the Red Girl is transgressing them.

Mary Douglas's inquiry into concepts of pollution and belief systems in *Purity and Danger* argues that "[t]here is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because [...] our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning and avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order" (2). Understanding dirt as yet another discursively defined entity, it becomes clear that its perceived negative aspects indicate not the threat of disease or decay – be it physical or, in a metaphorical sense, moral – but that what is regarded as dirt simply signifies a transgression of what is defined as "normal," i.e., of order. "In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are [...] re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea," Douglas clarifies (3). It is this bodily defiance of conformity that attracts Annie John to her new friend.

The appreciation of body odor is taken even further in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Initially, human odor is also introduced to the protagonist as something that offends the sensibilities of others:

My father's wife showed me how to wash myself. It was not done with kindness. My human form and odor were an opportunity to heap scorn on me. I responded in a fashion by now characteristic of me: whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most. I loved the smell of the thin dirt behind my ears, the smell of my unwashed mouth, the smell that came from between my legs, the smell in the pit of my arm, the smell of my unwashed feet. Whatever about me caused offense, whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing – those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted. (ABM 32–33)

The young protagonist Xuela, here seven years of age, connects her smell with her humanity. Soap, the common tool of odor erasure, is associated with the colonizing mother figure in *Annie John* and with the epitome of white womanhood, Mariah, in *Lucy*.²⁰⁴ In *The Autobiography of My Mother* the act of washing oneself is tied to the erasure of one's selfhood. The linking of odor and identity – be it individual, gendered, or racialized – takes up discourses of smell and exclusion, as the example from *The Autobiography of My Mother* suggests. Both *Lucy* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* point to gendered and racialized notions of smell when the texts' Black female protagonists desire odorous bodies, either in opposition to white womanhood or to preserve their identity.

Odors have a subversive effect on Eurocentric knowledge structures precisely because of their marginal position in a hierarchy of senses in the Euro-American culture of knowledge. Since the era of Enlightenment, smell is repressed by sight as the sense of knowledge acquisition. Sight moreover “became associated with men, who – as explorers, scientists, politicians or industrialist were perceived as discovering and dominating the world through their keen gaze” (Classen et al. 84). If sight is associated with power and masculinity, smell becomes an exclusionary factor to relegate “the Other” from the center of power to its margins. Classen, Howes and Synnott point out that Western olfactory discourse often assumes that the “Other” exudes a smell, while the self – which here is defined as white and male – represents olfactory neutrality (161, see also Hyde 56). Andrew Kettler notes that ascriptions of pungent odors to African bodies emerged during the seventeenth century and from then on informed English sensory culture (xi). Thomas Jefferson's remarks on Black people in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) exemplify such racist attributions of body smells: “Besides those of colour, figure, and hair, there are other physical distinctions proving a difference of race. They have less hair on the face and body. They secrete less by the kidneys and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour. This

²⁰⁴ See also my reading of “Biography of a Dress” in chapter 2.3, “Writing between and across Genres,” which contextualizes the role of soap within colonial regulations of Black bodies.

greater degree of transpiration renders them more tolerable of heat, and less so of cold than the whites” (139). Similarly, sociologist Georg Simmel writes over 120 years later that “[t]he exclusion of the Negro from high society in North America appears to be due to his body odor; and the complex and deep mutual aversion [of] Jews and Germans has been attributed to the same cause” (qtd. in and trans. by Hyde 56).²⁰⁵ In the typical fashion of racist ascription, Simmel here assumes that the attributed body odor of African American people, thought to be unbearable to white Americans (Simmel even regards this to be impossible to overcome – his word is “Unüberwindlichkeit,” 657), is an inherent quality of a Black body.²⁰⁶

It becomes clear that, as Andrew Kettler puts it,

the shifting of odor upon the racialized other is a timeworn tradition that was expanded within the Atlantic World to provide narratives of disease, pollution, miasma, and labor to justify numerous reprehensible colonialist and capitalist trajectories that situated and disciplined African bodies into a governable discursive and biopolitical space for commodification and political dominance during the Early Modern Era and well into the Scramble for Africa. (xx)

“Odors” in this context are often not even perceived olfactorily, but “smell” functions as a category to exclude, frequently on the basis of an initial *visual* racialized perception (see Classen 80). Odor in racist contexts might hence be regarded as a discursively constructed category, just as any visual category of racialization (as for instance noted by Omi and Winant 111), with which the sense of smell might intersect. “Mixing the sight of a black body with a vast cultural motif buried deep within the sensory membranes, groups of racially incentivized Englishpersons, Western Europeans, and Americans smelled Africans as pungent regardless of the material of bodily odors,” Kettler contends (219), emphasizing the intrinsic intersection of discourse and the senses. Bias can delude the nose.

Structurally, such “discursive racist smelling” mirrors olfactory conceptions of the female body. As “others” to the white male, women are also attributed with odors, either as foul-smelling sluts or as sweetly perfumed maidens (see Classen

205 German original: “Die Rezeption der Neger in die höhere Gesellschaft Nordamerikas scheint schon wegen der Körperatmosphäre [also termed “Geruchssphäre” by Simmel a few lines above] des Negers ausgeschlossen, und die vielfache dunkle Aversion von Juden und Germanen gegen einander hat man auf dieselbe Ursache geschoben” (Simmel 657).

206 For further discussion of racist odorous definitions of Black bodies, see Mark Smith 12–16 or Andrew Kettler. Moreover, this asserted body characteristic is neither only applicable to one ethnic group nor a thing of the past. Attributions of supposed odor are still used to exclude marginalized groups, such as immigrants today. See for instance Largey and Watson (31) on the odorous stereotypes white British people voice towards Pakistani Londoners.

87–90). The assumed malodor of women who are regarded as sexually deviant by societal policing of the female body, for instance shows itself in the etymology of the Spanish term for prostitute – *puta* – as Classen points out: “[P]uta is based on the Latin word for putrid, as are similar terms in other modern Latin languages. This stench is the metaphorical product of prostitutes’ and sluts’ failure to regulate their bodies in accordance with cultural norms and it signals their symbolically polluted and polluting status” (87). The word’s history plainly shows the correlation of the evaluation of bodies regarded as outside of the standards of normality (here via sexual practices) and the attribution of certain body odors.

Via their attributed odors, in this olfactory structure, women and people of color are moreover equated with animality in colonial and patriarchal discourses. Classen, Howes, and Synnott find this intersection of odor and notions of the animal in nineteenth-century evolutionary theory, such as that of Charles Darwin, which “postulated that humans lost their acuity of smell in the process of evolving from animals. The marginalization of smell in human society, therefore, appeared necessary of evolutionary and cultural progress, while any attempt to cultivate smell would signify a regression to an earlier, more primitive state” (89–90). As the signifier of “primitivity,” smell became associated with a conglomerate of “Others,” including people of color and women, as well as people of lower classes – all of whom were linked to a more animal-like state in this logic of attributing and evaluating body odors.

Odorous body characterization provides a reflection of imperialist power structures. While those at the center of power – white men – would be unmarked and represent olfactory neutrality, all those inhabiting the periphery of this power system would be assumed to exude body smells – be they malodorous or pleasant scents. The sheer possibility of being smellable here excludes from the position of power (see also Classen et al. 161).

It is not only in sociology that attributions of odor function as an exclusionary device; literature, too, has long picked up on the motif.²⁰⁷ And considering that body odor and its perception are located between the physical body and the verbal, since – as shown – odors are as discursively constructed and assumed as any other racial, gendered, or classed category, it is unsurprising that smell finds its space within textual media, as counterintuitive as this might appear.

207 See esp. Daniela Babilon’s study *The Power of Smell in American Literature: Odor, Affect, and Social Inequality*, or, for instance, references to odor in literature in Classen 81–82 and Largey and Watson 31. See also Larry Shiner’s monograph *Art Scents: Exploring the Aesthetics of Smell and the Olfactory Arts*, which goes beyond text and considers odors also in theater, film, music, and performance art, as well as perfume as an art itself.

As the above excursion into the field of smell studies has shown, materialized odors may be superseded by their significations, which are inseparable from visual signs and always already discursively charged with meaning. In this field of claims and ascriptions, actual odors and physical reality are as much entangled with discourse as they are virtually overlaid by the verbal. With Mark Graham, I understand smell – both in literature and without – not as essential and unequivocally ascertainable qualities of bodies (as for instance in Simmel's notion), but rather as performative. Reading smells in a queer context, Graham understands odors in structural parallel to Butler's theorizations of gender. As gender and desire “are the results of social practices and not eternal essences, [they] are open to contestation, they are inherently unstable and they are always in a state of actual or potential flux and transition,” so are smells, too, as Graham points out (308).

Understanding odors as performative then brings the physical and the discursive together, which bears the potential to subvert the verbal ascriptions to smells. In the case of Kincaid's protagonists, who so love their own odors, the texts do not question the smelliness of their bodies. In all three cases discussed here – *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and Xuela in *The Autobiography of My Mother* – the bodily odors are detected as powerful by those who emit them. While the younger Annie John finds this disconcerting, the two later protagonists appreciate their own smells for this quality. Comparing the protagonists' attitudes towards odor in Kincaid's three novels, it becomes clear that they develop significantly. This becomes especially clear when the mirror scene, which elaborated young Annie John's growing uneasiness with her changing body and her framing herself with a white gaze in the earlier novel, is repeated in *The Autobiography of Mother* with a difference. Here, the female protagonist reflects on her transitioning body while watching her own image in a mirror:

I used to stare at myself in an old piece of a broken looking glass I had found in some rubbish under my father's house. The sight of my changing self did not frighten me, I only wondered how I would look eventually; I never doubted that I would like completely whatever stared back at me. And so, too, the smell of my underarms and between my legs changed, and this change pleased me. In those places the smell became pungent, sharp, as if something was in the process of fermenting, slowly; in private, then as now, my hands almost never left those places, and when I was in public, these same hands were always not far from my nose, I so enjoyed the way I smelled, then and now. (*ABM* 58–59)

While Annie John had mused about forcefully keeping her body from changing (with a contraption in which she might screw herself), Xuela never doubts her own image or odor. Taking into account Annie John's double vision of herself, which is informed by the internalized colonizer's gaze, Xuela's contrasting self-love speaks to a much weaker influence of colonial ideals of the body and of beau-

ty on the girl's self-image. They might only play a role in that she defies them by *not* doubting herself and by accepting herself as she is. Annie John's association of body smell with "a strange animal" (*AJ* 27), recalls racialized and gendered notions of the body smells as abnormal, as elucidated above. Hence for Annie John, her bodily odor adds to her body's alienating grotesqueness, which, as her double-consciousness points to her yet uncritical repetition of colonial ascriptions. In contrast, Xuela explicitly connects her own odors with her "nativity" and her "human form" (*ABM* 32–33).

This leads me to conclude that the smelliness of the bodies in these novels resists the colonial and racist discourses that attempt to assign Black female bodies with negative odorosity.²⁰⁸ The body smells here defy discursive ascription through their physical presence. Pungent and offensive odors in Kincaid's works seemingly negotiate the stereotype of the foul-smelling Other especially since Mariah as the paragon of white womanhood smells pleasantly. Yet Lucy and Xuela turn the stereotype on its head when they adore their own odorous offensiveness. In this, I maintain, their odors perform the pungent Other with a difference that refutes racist ascriptions to their bodies. Bodily odors here signal humanity instead of animality, as they would in racist and patriarchal notions of the smelly body. Facing a discursive ascription that seeks to exclude them from humanity, Lucy and Xuela celebrate the reality of their human forms – their odors and their love of their own bodies thus challenging colonial categories of order.

4.2 Scripted Sexualities:

Revisions of the Female Body Through Sexual Practices

Bodily doing in Kincaid's works is often centered around sexuality. The texts' female characters frequently engage in erotic acts. They do so from a young age on, such as the kissing and pinching in *Annie John*. They are also frequently confronted with discourses of sexual morality that attempt to govern their sexual and reproductive bodies. As this chapter shows, scenes in Kincaid's works of sexuality and female procreation (or rather its forced termination) highlight the historical dimension of violent regulation and exploitation of colonized bodies. At the same time, the female protagonists' bodies subvert such claims through symbolic performances of emblematic scenes of colonial sexual violence.

²⁰⁸ Kettler (155–194) shows how historically Black enslaved people have long used odors and scents in strategies of resistance to slavery, such as masking one's own odor to throw off blood hounds (see also M. Smith 35). In contrast, Kincaid's contemporary texts celebrate the characters' *own* natural smells in contexts of resistance.

The regulation of sexuality in Kincaid's works is easily read as another yoke of the colonizer.²⁰⁹ Building on Michel Foucault's theory of the discursive deployment of sexuality,²¹⁰ Ann Laura Stoler spells this out when she contextualizes bourgeois and racialized sexuality. Stoler points out that the construction and maintenance of "'Europeanness' was not a fixed attribute, but one altered by environment, class contingent, and not secured by birth" (*Race* 104). It hinged on a successful performance including race, class, and a "normalized sexuality" (Stoler, *Race* 105). Racism and gender are fundamentally intertwined, Stoler argues, as "[t]he very categories 'colonizer' and 'colonized' were secured through forms of sexual control" (*Carnal Knowledge* 42). As such, women's bodies became a central site on which colonial ideals were projected, manifested, or denied. Anne McClintock describes this in terms of figuration when she states that "[c]ontrolling women's sexuality, exalting maternity and breeding a virile race of empire-builders were widely perceived as the paramount means for controlling the health and wealth of the male imperial body politic, so that, by the turn of the century, sexual purity emerged as a controlling metaphor for racial, economic and political power" (*Imperial Leather* 47). Taking this up, I read the textual representations of sexuality in Kincaid's texts as signifying power relations that are integrated with a wider framework of the texts' engagements with colonial history. "[S]exual control was more than a convenient metaphor for colonial domination. It was a fundamental class and racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power," as Stoler puts it (*Carnal Knowledge* 45).

Bodies in Kincaid's texts continually challenge sexual control that others seek to establish discursively. Bodily doing in the form of sex extends beyond the immediate action and always simultaneously engages with power structures. The younger protagonists in "Girl," *Annie John*, and *Lucy* negotiate admonitions of "sluttishness" as voiced by their mothers, who here represent colonial ideals.²¹¹ For instance, Lucy's enjoyment of her own sexuality and her taking pleasure in changing sexual partners subsequently contests such attempts at regulating her. Her quest for independence from her overbearing mother is expressed through her rejection of sexual control, articulated in letter to her mother: "I reminded

209 See for instance also Gardner-Corbett 87.

210 In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault shows how eighteenth-century regulations of sex became "anchorage points for the different varieties of racism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (26), as sexuality became a central aspect of the self-affirmation of those in power.

211 Various scholars have shown this. See, for instance, Mahlis, King, Ferguson (*Where the Land Meets the Body*), or MacDonald-Smythe ("Authorizing the Slut"). See also my discussion of the mother figure in "Biography of a Dress" as acting as an agent of colonial ideals (chapter 2.3, section "A Yellow Dress and a Brown Girl.")

her that my whole upbringing had been devoted to preventing me from becoming a slut; I then gave a brief description of my personal life, offering each detail as evidence that my upbringing had been a failure and that, in fact, life as a slut was very enjoyable, thank you very much" (127–128). Through her sexual behavior, Lucy thus seeks to free herself from persistent colonial claims on her body.²¹²

The following analyses in this chapter attend to passages in Kincaid's works in which the female protagonists' bodies engage with colonial history and its contemporary continuations. In two sections, I examine how the texts negotiate and counter sexual violence and exploitation through performative reenactments of violations of the colonized female body. The first section on "The Knowledge of Resistance" considers abortion in the contexts of sexual freedom. While the knowledge of how to end unwanted pregnancies simply aids Lucy in enjoying her sexual freedom without worries, the later novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* frames abortion in the contexts of colonial history. Here, the refusal to bear children highlights the biopolitics of slavery and the nonparticipation in it as a rebellious act. In the second section on "Stagings of Sex," I consider the performativity of sexuality that is exhibited in the sadomasochistic sexual practices in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Sexual encounters reenact colonial fantasies of regulating and subjugating female bodies, highlighting their scriptedness, subverting binary power structures, and enabling the protagonist Xuela to exert sexual agency by dominating her partner, who takes on the role of the white colonizer.

My thoughts on bodies engaging with history are guided by Judith Butler's notion of the performative. Butler makes a rhetoric of theater productive to think about bodily doing that participates in the construction of gender: "[G]ender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self," Butler writes ("Performative Acts" 519). In analogy, I read the constitution of colonized female bodies in Kincaid's text through their (re)enactments of the past.

The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies. Actors are always already on the stage, within the

212 The sections that follow investigate explicit bodily and sexual doing in terms of abortion and S/M practices. In this, I here focus on representations and reenactments of physical violence as historically perpetrated on colonized female bodies. A discussion of Kincaid's protagonists as "sluts" and their sexual performances challenging the sexual morality at the heart of this invective would rather attend to a negotiation of more explicitly discursive claims on female bodies. This work has convincingly been accomplished by other scholars, see especially Gary Holcomb or Antonia MacDonald-Smythe ("Authorizing the Slut").

terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives. (Butler, “Performative Acts” 526)

Through the “stylized repetition of acts” (“Performative Acts” 519), Butler further contends, identity is instituted, but it also bears the possibility to reinterpret or rewrite cultural scripts. It is the focus on repetition with a difference that makes Butler’s approach to bodies and the performative productive in the context of my study, as I will concentrate on repetitions and reenactments of scenes of sexual violence in Kincaid’s texts, to read them as symbolic repossessions of the female body that simultaneously rework and reinterpret colonial scripts of female sexuality and reproduction.

The Knowledge of Resistance: Abortive Practices

Several of Jamaica Kincaid’s texts explicitly mention terminations of pregnancies. The knowledge of how to end an unwanted pregnancy is presented as part of womanhood in Kincaid’s works. As much as the texts’ female characters exist in a largely patriarchal society, the choice to bear children nonetheless is unquestioningly theirs. This section on abortive practices in Kincaid’s texts explores the resistances to the colonization of women’s bodies through their procreative properties. Kincaid’s female characters’ decisions to (not) participate in biopolitics through reproduction highlights how class, race, and history are negotiated on and through human female bodies.

The recurring references to abortion throughout Kincaid’s oeuvre suggest that it may be as common in women’s lives as menstruation.²¹³ Abortion is already mentioned in one of Kincaid’s earliest works, the prose text “Girl” (first published in 1978 in *The New Yorker*; then collected in *At the Bottom of the River*). The short piece consists of a list of how to behave in a “female” way. As such, the mother’s instructions are a manual on how to perform gender, when they inform the eponymous “Girl” how to be a “girl.” Judith Butler emphasizes the performative aspect of female-ness: “To be female is [...] a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have to *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (“Performative Acts” 522, emphasis in orig-

213 See “Girl” in *At the Bottom of the River* 5, *Lucy* 69, *ABM* esp. 82, *My Brother* 174, *MP* 136.

inal). The list in “Girl” gives instructions for gendered domestic chores, such as cooking and cleaning skills, and for proper deportment, such as how to eat in front of others or how to smile. The succession of imperatives interweaves any rules a female body might follow in a conservative notion in order to establish “girl-ness,” including which kind of labor it might perform or how it might interact with other bodies (male or female). The mother thus provides the script – to use Butler’s term – that underlies the bodily performance of gender. She intends to initiate her daughter into the performances of gender, “an act that has been going on before one [here: both the girl and the mother] arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who made use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 526). The mother’s litany of instructions and imperatives puts forth aspects of gendered performance in a list-like fashion, stringing its contents together through continuation and semicolons rather than through narrative cohesion. The resulting equivalence of listed aspects indicates the inseparability of the laboring and the sexualized body in gendered acts. The instructions here are both delimiting and empowering in their transfer of knowledge.

Among the different topics covered, the reader finds mention of how to realize the termination of a pregnancy:

this is how to make bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don’t like. (Kincaid, *Bottom* 5)

I suggest that this reference to abortion in Kincaid’s earlier work establishes the topic’s position in her oeuvre. Mentioned in passing, almost hidden between instructions on food preparation, the mother’s voice shares information on abortive medicine with her daughter. It is the ordinariness of the instruction that makes it so noteworthy here. Knowing how to free oneself of possible unwanted children is as mundane as making bread pudding or as catching fish.

My reading of the reference to abortion in “Girl” as sharing empowerment and female bodily autonomy disagrees with Diane Simmons’s: she interprets the advice on abortion as an indicator for the instability of a reality marked by traumatic loss. Simmons writes that “in the last third of ‘Girl’ the mother’s voice continues the litany of domestic instruction, but added now is comment on a frighteningly contradictory world, one in which nothing is ever what it seems to be. The continued tone of motherly advice at first works to lighten the sinister nature of the information imparted and then, paradoxically, seems to make these disclosures even more

frightening; eventually we see that, in a world in which a recipe for stew slides into a recipe for the death of a child, nothing is safe" ("Rhythm" 468). While Simmons reads the ordinariness of abortion as nightmarish and frightening, I rather understand it as building resilience to the possible nightmare of unwanted motherhood in the face of everyday oppression by patriarchal societal structures. At the same time, such instructions on how to maintain a level of independence from possible claims on the girl's body are contrasted with three explicit warnings against becoming a "slut," which takes up rather misogynistic notions of female sexuality that are contrary to those of a self-determined female body.²¹⁴ I maintain that this contradiction is motivated by the complex characteristics of the texts' mother figures, who often simultaneously perpetuate patriarchal regulations of female bodies and provide their daughters with the knowledge and mindset to resist such claims on their bodies.

In *Lucy*, these two sides of motherly instruction are evident in its education about the female reproductive body. While the narrator Lucy foremost presents her mother as a distributor of colonial ideals who also projects them onto her daughter's body, this clear distinction of colonizing mother and rebellious daughter is challenged by the mother's navigation of a simultaneous allegiance to and a revolt against colonialism in sharing her knowledge of female biology and plant-based abortifacients with her daughter. In contrast to Annie John's experience with menstruation during puberty, which is linked to her separation from her mother, in Lucy's case the onset of menstruation leads to a strengthened mother-daughter bond based on a shared bodily function. Lucy's mother is kind and reassuring at her daughter's fright of the bleeding. Here, menstruation does not lead to the experience of alienation, but to a feeling of community. More importantly, this female bonding is further expanded when the mother includes her daughter in a genealogy of knowledge of the female reproductive system. In this context, female sexuality is still not explicitly verbalized, but it presumes it is possible to imagine women freely partaking in sexual activity. Much later, when Lucy indeed has sexual relations, the information gained from her mother enables her not to worry about unwanted pregnancy:

214 Moira Ferguson also reads the mother's warning as contextualizing them with colonial history: "If only through discursive repetition, the daughter is obliquely reminded that 'slut' as a cultural taboo marks colonialism. Its overuse – in a quiet reference to the historical sexual abuse of black women – underscores the status of the narrator as a young black woman. The mother's admonitions illumine the critical role that history has played and is playing in everyone's lives" (*Where the Land Meets the Body* 15).

If it [menstruation] did not show up, there was no question in my mind that I would force it to do so. I knew how to do this. Without telling me exactly how I might miss a menstrual cycle, my mother had shown me which herbs to pick and boil, and what time of day to drink the potion they produced, to bring on a reluctant period. She had presented the whole idea to me as a way to strengthen the womb, but underneath we both knew that a weak womb was not the cause of a missed period. (*Lucy* 69)

The topics of sexuality and the workings of conception remain silent in this exchange as *Lucy* recalls it. Still, knowledge is communicated through the joint picking of herbs and potion-boiling. *Lucy* and her mother partake in what Diana Taylor terms “the repertoire.” Taylor differentiates between “archive” and “repertoire” to describe two realms of memorial practices. Taylor describes the well-established memorial medium of text as the “archive”: “‘Archival’ memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change” (19). To consider social and cultural memory not included in such records, Taylor suggests looking to “performed, embodied, behaviors,” which might uncover the stories and memories yet marginalized by the archive (xviii). Taylor proposes to take into account the “repertoire,” which for him considers performance as an epistemological and memorial practice.²¹⁵

The repertoire [...] enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. [...] The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there,” being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning. (Taylor 20)

The shared activity of mother and daughter in *Lucy* transfers knowledge from one generation to another. The repertoire, which operates through the body as a medium of knowledge, provides *Lucy* with the agency to govern her own body; she may “force” its functions, “reluctant” as they may be.

The narrative of *Lucy* is set in a North American city in the second half of the twentieth century. The text details the sexual liberation of a young woman who regards sexuality, contraception, and abortion as her own choices. *Lucy*’s knowledge of abortive practices might thus be read as the personal version of a sexual

215 Taylor’s use of the term “performance” here encompasses a wide range of physical doing, such as “[c]ivic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, [which] are rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere” (3). In the widest sense, what Taylor refers to here can be grasped as “expressive behavior” (xvi) or as “[e]mbodied practice” (3) which participates in the making of memory and knowledge.

revolution. The young woman's access to a means of birth control liberates her physically, but also from the claims of sexual morality, i.e., from patriarchal definition of womanhood regarding all aspects of life. In this, Lucy's knowledge of how to force menstruation may be read alongside the freedoms gained by women when the contraceptive pill was released to the market – in the United States, the Food and Drug Administration approved “the pill” in 1960.

The Autobiography of My Mother is set much earlier in the twentieth century (specific years cannot be pinpointed) on the island of Dominica. Hence, this narrative is set in a much more specifically colonial space than *Lucy*. *The Autobiography of My Mother*, then, is more explicitly concerned with the history of colonialism, slavery, and the dehumanizing effects of the plantation system on people – including after the abolition of slavery. Accordingly, this later novel contextualizes abortive practices historically with the exploitation of female reproductive bodies during slavery and colonialism. As I will show, the abortions of Xuela Claudette Richardson recall the terminations of pregnancies that may have been performed by enslaved women before the abolition of racial slavery in the Caribbean.²¹⁶

At age fifteen, Xuela Claudette Richardson is sent from her father's house to Dominica's capital Roseau to live with a work acquaintance of her father's. Xuela is to carry out domestic duties in the household of Monsieur Jacques and Madame Lise LaBatte for room and board. Staying at Roseau allows Xuela to further attend school, as her father wishes, and to study to perhaps eventually become a schoolteacher. Xuela's comment on this housing arrangement already hints at the sexual services she is to perform: “I was a boarder, but I paid in my own way. In exchange for my room and board in this house I performed some household tasks. I did not object, I could not object, I did not want to object, I did not know then how to object openly” (*ABM* 63). Xuela here does not explicitly mention the sexual relationship she ultimately has with Jacques LaBatte, yet the objectionable in this quote insinuates it. To Xuela, sex with Monsieur LaBatte is not necessarily desirable, but as she points out, disagreement cannot even be considered as an option. Rather, serving the owner of the home is presented as mundane, like a common domestic chore. Simultaneously, Xuela's comment here emphasizes her powerlessness as a very young woman in a likely distressing situation.²¹⁷

After her arrival in Roseau, Xuela initially is content with her new housing arrangement, working for the LaBattes, attending school, and developing a deep

²¹⁶ Slavery was abolished in the British colony of Dominica in 1834.

²¹⁷ This power dynamic changes in the narration of the concrete sexual act, as the following section on the “Stagings of Sex” will present.

friendship with Madame LaBatte, whom Xuela pities for her loneliness, as she is married to a largely indifferent husband and without children. Still, the ostensibly warm and caring female companionship of Lise LaBatte and Xuela proves treacherous to the girl, as it lays the foundation for Xuela's sexual exploitation. In intimate moments with her motherly friend, Xuela anticipates the requests the LaBattes will eventually – wordlessly – make of her. “[S]he wanted something from me, I could tell that [...]. It never crossed my mind that I would refuse her. She wants to make a gift of me to her husband; she wants to give me to him, she hopes I do not mind” (*ABM* 68). Interestingly, this exchange regarding sexuality passes without words. As Nicole Matos notes in her careful study of cloth in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, this intimate communication between the two women is facilitated by a dress, once worn by Lise LaBatte, now given to Xuela. The dress becomes a medium that transports Madame LaBatte's thoughts and intentions to the girl (see Matos, “The Difference” 848). Hence, in sharing desires about sexuality, Lise and Xuela communicate via shared doing, rather than words – similar to how Lucy is introduced to knowledge of abortifacients by her mother.

The first sexual encounter with Jacques LaBatte then is called “inevitable” by Xuela (*ABM* 69). The ensuing frequent sexual acts between employer and servant girl are presented in a double-bind of coercion and enjoyment, which will be at the center of the following section on the performativity of sex in Kincaid's works. First, however, the analysis will focus on the resulting pregnancy and its historical implications.

I emphasize Madame LaBatte's involvement in her boarding servant's sexual relationship with her husband to highlight that Xuela's first pregnancy, which resulted from the nighttime meetings with Jacques LaBatte, is part of a larger structure of exploitation that extends well beyond the physical encounters of two people. Eventually it becomes clear to Xuela that Lise LaBatte's wish that Xuela sleep with her husband is motivated by her own desire for a child. Incapable of producing a baby with her own body, Lise wants her servant girl to bear her husband's offspring (*ABM* 77). In her own “defeat,” as Xuela immediately recognizes Lise's subject position (*ABM* 65), Madame LaBatte seeks to use the body of another woman to establish her own worth in a patriarchal society that values women expressly for their reproductive capacities. “The reason why children are so important for women can be partly attributed to the fact that, in a world of inequalities where stability is fragile, women's survival depends largely on the offspring they can bear, thus making their own bodies extensions of those of men through their children,” as Guillermina De Ferrari emphasizes (171). Accepting and perpetuating this subjugated position that is rooted in reproductive capability, Lise LaBatte col-

laborates with the discursive power of patriarchy by actively extending it to Xuela's body.²¹⁸

Structurally, Xuela's relationship and living arrangements with the LaBattes recalls the patterns of power of the plantation: the girl is left with her new masters to serve them in all domestic aspects. She enters the stately master's home only to be of service, while her own living quarters are relegated to the back of the property in a rougher shed next to the kitchen. Xuela is utterly powerless, unable to govern her own body so that even the thought of rejecting sexual advances is inconceivable. In their relationship with Xuela and with their claims on her body to please them sexually and reproductively, the LaBattes take on the roles of colonizers. Particularly the crucial aspect of sexuality and pregnancy in their interactions marks them as such. Orlando Patterson shows that the exploitation of female sexuality was an intrinsic aspect of slavery (173). Women were exploited for their bodies as working units both in terms of hard labor and in terms of reproductive labor to increase the colonizers' prosperity. In her study of the role of female enslavement in transatlantic slavery, Jennifer Morgan pointedly notes that "[w]omen's labor was at the heart of monoculture export economies in both the Caribbean and the American South, and their reproductive lives were at the heart of the entire venture of racial slavery" (4). Although *The Autobiography of My Mother* does not identify the LaBattes as white or distinctly French,²¹⁹ given their repetition of colonial structures it is unsurprising that some scholars indeed read Jacques and Lise LaBatte as white (for instance Alexander, "Postcolonial Hauntings" 125).

Having conceived a child from Monsieur LaBatte under these circumstances, Xuela decides to abort the pregnancy and seeks help from an older woman – most likely an herbalist – who prepares a strong dark drink for the girl and provides her with the space to suffer the abortion. Again, this proceeds wordlessly (*ABM* 82). Xuela lies in pain for four days until she bleeds from her womb.

218 This collaboration is also indicated by Lise's change of language upon learning of Xuela's pregnancy, as Giselle Anatol notes: while Lise and Xuela generally converse in French patois, a language which Xuela had earlier denoted as "the language of the captive, the illegitimate" (*ABM* 74), Lise now switches to English, "the formal language of oppression [...]. The use of English, the so-called 'father-tongue,' marks her [Lise's] complicity with patriarchal dictates for the oppression" (Anatol 946).

219 The text indeed does not mark them racially, for instance in terms of skin color, at all. In this novel, Blackness generally is unmarked while deviation from African heritage is commented on, such as is the case with Xuela's Carib mother; her half-Scot father; or her later white British husband Philip. Hence, I rather read the LaBattes as Black Dominicans. (Rhonda Cobham and Guillermina De Ferrari arrive at the same conclusion.)

After this immediate ordeal, the pain in her lower body and the bleeding continue for an unspecified amount of time (*ABM* 91).

Using folk medicine and plant-based abortifacients has a tradition going back to and beyond the times of slavery in the Caribbean. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, birth rates among enslaved women in the Caribbean were strikingly low, baffling slave holders at the turn of the century. Perhaps unsurprisingly, interest in women's reproductive bodies developed along the restrictions of the import of new slaves (see Schiebinger 142 or Bush-Slimani 86–87). Slave holders and planters at the time attributed low fertility to the harsh working and living conditions of enslaved women, but also to what they determined as immorality, promiscuity, or idling (see Bush-Slimani 88–89 or Schiebinger 143–145). Indeed, birth rates were so low that without a steady influx of new enslaved people, Caribbean enslaved populations would have decreased.²²⁰ Among such reasons as amenorrhea (absence of menstruation) for physical and psychological stress, the attempt to avoid sexual intercourse as not to participate in breeding capital for enslavers, abortion must be counted as a cause for the low birth rates. Historical records show that planters and slave holders counted knowledge of abortive practices among enslaved women as a factor in low fertility, as for instance Bush-Slimani, Schiebinger, or Morgan show. “Historians today have no way of saying how many women killed their unborn children in the West Indies. That abortion was practiced, is not in doubt, however,” writes Londa Schiebinger in her study on natural abortifacients (149). Barbara Bush-Slimani attributes contemporary absence of knowledge regarding slave reproduction to a historical blind spot based on gendered disbalances in records: “Absence of hard evidence should not be taken as proof that the practices [of abortion] did not exist. Because of the strong taboos against abortion in most patriarchal societies, knowledge of abortion practices has always been in the shadowy and hidden world of women outside the orbit of mainstream history” (93).²²¹ In this context, we may also read the silences regarding abortion in Jamaica Kincaid's works. As, for instance, also seen in the

²²⁰ See Schiebinger's work, which presents estimations by planters and historians (143) and, for instance, the calculation that one in 4.6 pregnancies was not carried to term, if women conceived at all (130).

²²¹ We might read the elusive suspicions of eighteenth-century colonists as illustrating this knowledge barrier, as well as the late emergence of historians' interest in the topic. Considering actively induced abortion as a possible strategy of resistance zooms in on the positions of women in enslavement, which in historical scholarship was long marginalized, as for instance Bush or Morgan highlight: The particularities of female enslavement were largely neglected by historians, esp. before the 1980s (Bush 121). Morgan still criticizes the lack of scholarship on reproduction and enslaved women's roles in it in 2004 (6).

interactions of Lucy and her mother mentioned earlier, knowledge of the female body is repeatedly transferred through shared activity. Bodily doing and objects, such as Lise LaBatte's dress, become media of communication. It is moreover noteworthy that while all of this is transported by text in Kincaid's works, again these texts remain silent when it comes to specifics. No recipes or instructions on how to actually prepare abortive medicine are shared with readers. The characters are shown to exchange them, but the recipients of Kincaid's texts remain on the outside of this community.

Londa Schiebinger, in her study of plants and empire, focuses especially on the "peacock flower," *flos pavonis*. Schiebinger investigates the nontransfer of knowledge by the example of this plant, which, as she shows, was known for its abortive properties to both indigenous and Afro-Caribbean populations (specifically Arawak and enslaved African women), while Europeans largely remained ignorant to the plant's medicinal use (Schiebinger 2). If we read the mentions of plant-based abortifacients in Kincaid's works alongside such intermittent structures of knowledge transfer, it becomes clear that the texts perform the same strategy of inclusion and exclusion – especially if we keep in mind that the readership of Kincaid's American-based publisher likely largely consists of people of European descent. In this, these texts simultaneously highlight the existence of women's knowledge and its marginalization and exclusion from verbal discourse.

Considering the external rule enslavers enforced on all aspects of enslaved women's lives, their refusal to bear children to the plantation system certainly constitutes acts of resistance. Women's bodies and sexuality thus became a ground of political negotiation (see Schiebinger 149 or Bush 121). Xuela's abortion in *The Autobiography of My Mother* suggests itself as a resistance to the commodification of her body as a sexual object and breeding vessel in the same way.²²²

Indeed, Xuela explicitly expresses her desire to be free of the claims laid on her by having a child (*ABM* 89), as this would mean for her to give up on herself, on her own future and desires (*ABM* 82). Ridding herself of the pregnancy, Xuela emerges as "a new person" (*ABM* 83). Through the abortion of her pregnancy, as Simone Alexander puts it, "Xuela rejects her designation as propertied possession" ("Postcolonial Hauntings" 116) and she "reconstructs the black female body as a site of resistance and resilience" (Alexander, "Postcolonial Hauntings" 117). While I agree with Alexander that Xuela's negotiation of subjecthood is carried out on and through her body, I also emphasize that it does not come away from this un-

²²² As such, and as withholding her child from being owned by others, *The Autobiography of My Mother* here is reminiscent of Sethe's killing of her child Beloved in Toni Morrison's treatment of childbearing and rearing during slavery in her landmark novel *Beloved*.

harmed. Further violence and pain are inflicted on Xuela's body, but with the important difference that now the choice to do so was Xuela's own.

Alexander and De Ferrari then read Xuela's emergence from her ordeal as a "rebirth" ("Postcolonial Hauntings" 124, De Ferrari 151). However, Jennifer Morgan reminds us that a "reductive view of reproduction does not move us beyond binaries" (167). The decisions of enslaved women to abort their pregnancies was not their only means of resistance,²²³ nor might resistance have been their only reason to abort.²²⁴ Rather, Morgan calls attention to the complexities of reproduction during slavery. Morgan's cautioning might also be taken to heart in reading Xuela's abortion as a repetition of the reproductive choices Caribbean enslaved women likely made. While I agree with other scholars who read Xuela's choice to end her unwanted pregnancy as empowering, I emphasize that this "rebirth" is a slow process and that the power to be gained by Xuela initially consumes her herself. Xuela becoming a new person also means that she has to become undone first: upon realizing that she indeed is pregnant, Xuela weighs future and past, presence and absence, her own existence and nothingness:

I believed that I would die, and perhaps because I no longer had a future, I began to want one very much. But what such a thing could be for me I did not know, for I was standing in a black hole. The other alternative was another black hole. This other black hole was one I did not know; I chose the one that I did not know. (*ABM* 82)

The Autobiography of My Mother repeatedly evokes bleakness and darkness as a general condition. For instance, the death of Xuela's mother and the girl's orphanhood are described in these terms in the very first sentences of the novel: "there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind" (*ABM* 3). It seems obvious to read the black hole Xuela always already inhabits as a metaphorical reference to the nothingness of History that affects Xuela. Her female genealogical link to the past was broken twice, as not only

²²³ Withholding the reproductive capacities from the economic system of slavery was but one way in which enslaved women resisted. See, for instance, Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650–1838*, esp. 51–82; or Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women*, esp. 176–195, for further investigations of the resilience of enslaved women in the Caribbean. Both scholars highlight that considering only women's bodies in this context would yet again be a reduction both of the complexities of their lives and their resourcefulness.

²²⁴ Morgan points out that also childbirth might have been a means of resistance during slavery, as "[t]hrough the birth of their children, enslaved women may have seen a means to reappropriate what should have been theirs all along" (132). Still, also this position should not be reduced to the image of the sacrificing slave mother, which in the ideology of perfect domesticity restores the woman's humanity, yet reduces her to the role of the doting maternal caregiver (Morgan 167).

she, but also her mother, was orphaned; she is part of a group of people regarded as eradicated and extinct, i.e., her Carib heritage is marked by absence. Communication with the past is thus silenced twice over, both personally and collectively, and the texts of History do not provide space for her either. Reading the metaphors of the two black holes in context with Xuela's abortion emphasizes that either decision has its downfalls. Neither carrying the child to term nor upending the pregnancy before that are options that offer happiness, but both are different paths in darkness.

Finally, Xuela's reference to a black hole here is also a literal one. She is led to lie in "a small hole in a dirt floor to lie down" by the herbalist who assists Xuela with the abortion (*ABM* 82). Eventually, Xuela rises again from this hole. Alexander interprets this as leaving a womb ("Postcolonial Hauntings" 121), while I propose to read it as a shallow grave. Regarding the abortion as an empowering act for the young woman and as a repetition of historical resistance, this literal hole is superimposed with the black hole of history from which Xuela attempts to free herself. Yet I maintain that this is far from simply leaving the shelter the old woman had provided and entering a new self-determined life, as the term "rebirth" might suggest. Rather, Xuela stays in such a metaphorical hole of nothingness for quite a while. After healing from her physical wounds at her father's house, she returns to the LaBattes, where she is met with Madame LaBatte's grief over the loss of the potential baby that she had wanted for herself. Wishing to leave her own grief and the memory of her ordeal behind and unable to create a distance to it in time, Xuela creates a distance in space by leaving the LaBattes.

Xuela's departure comes with a change of outward appearance. She thus processes her experience once again physically. She buys "from a wife the garments of a man who had just died: his old nankeen drawers, his one old pair of khaki pants, his old shirt of some kind of cotton" (*ABM* 98). Xuela also cuts her plaits and "wrapped [her] almost hairless head in a piece of cloth" (*ABM* 99). Moreover, Xuela leaves the domestic space and with it a gendered form of labor commonly regarded as feminine, in order to become part of a work crew that builds a road. She now takes on physically much more taxing labor outside the home.

Ostensibly, with these changes in appearance and occupation, Xuela toys with notions of gender – exchanging the typically feminine for a performance of masculinity. However, Xuela's cross-dressing here is not a playful negotiation of gender roles at all, but an expression of loss. While she indeed "adopt[s] different social identities" through cloth, as Anne McClintock in brief sums up cross-dressing (*Imperial Leather* 173), Xuela's donning a man's outfit is less geared towards trying on a male social role than towards disappearing from societal claims on her by not identifying with either a male or female role in this change of clothing. "I did not look like a man, I did not look like a woman," Xuela notes (*ABM* 99). As Mar-

jorie Garber shows, cross-dressing permeates the seemingly firm borderline between binarities, such as Black/white, master/servant, male/female (16). As such, Xuela's cross-dressing and her change in occupation plays on the ambiguities between the binary pairs and allows her to inhabit a space of nondefinition.

Even more than that, Xuela finds herself "living in this way for a very long time, not a man, not a woman, not anything" (*ABM* 102). In her own view, Xuela thus leaves the realm of binarities and enters a space of undefined ambiguity. Xuela refuses to perform the gendered scripts of femininity. Her taking on male props (clothing) still does not propel her into a performance of masculinity. She stops short in an in-betweenness and remains in this state of undecidability, effectively withholding herself from the structures of human interaction around her. Reading this with a somewhat hopeful notion, Kathryn Morris points out that "[t]he androgyny and her seclusion also allow a moment of transcendence from the realm of the social order where she exists as a woman, a fated, gendered subject" (964). Still, if we read Xuela's sexual exploitation and possible childbearing body in analogy to the lives of enslaved women, this offers another possible interpretation of the de-gendering of Xuela's body. Bush-Slimani for instance shows the doubled conceptions of the female slave body in its productive capacity both as an asexual labor unit and as unit of biological reproduction (84). Xuela's attempted nonperformance of gender in conjunction with taking on hard labor thus repeats the other role of enslaved women – that of the supposedly ungendered laborer.

More important than the masculinity of the clothes in which Xuela now clads herself, is their origin as having belonged to a dead man. Xuela inhabits a space of in-betweenness, not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of life and death. She has not allowed a life to form inside herself and to expel it, and she underwent a near-death-experience. Afterwards, she does not directly return to life, but in a traumatic repetition remains in this interstice of nothingness. Every morning, she drinks a strong cup of coffee, a "beverage that was thick and black and [...] pungent in flavor" (*ABM* 98). The repeated ingestion of this strong black drink points to a symbolic repetition of the consumption of the "thick black syrup" that initially had induced the abortion (*ABM* 82). Xuela's life now is enveloped by death. Absconding motherhood once and for all, she imagines the powerful, god-like destruction of any future children in downright biblical terms of God's wrath, such as unquenchable thirst or distorting disease (*ABM* 97–98). Kathryn Morris reads Xuela's imagined consumption of her possible future offspring in terms of what she calls the "Caribbean literary romance with death [which] might speak to the performance of the trope of cannibalism which metaphorizes the physical ingestion of flesh into a nostalgic incorporation of a lost body into a present body" (956). I concur with this in that I also read Xuela's excessive imagined acts of power, perpetrated on unprotected bodies, as an expression of anger

and grief over her former powerlessness and loss. She thus gains power over what she forced not to be part of herself – a child that she did not want to exist. Xuela's abortion indeed is empowering to her, but power comes with loss. Xuela repeats the severing of genealogical lines, just as she is separated from her mother, and her mother from her mother before that. In this way, Xuela links herself to her heritage of absence. In the absence of others, Xuela learns to love herself. She fills the "nothing" inside of her (*ABM* 99) with herself. In classic narcissistic fashion, she falls in love with her own picture, beholding herself in a pool of water and finding pleasure in her own body (*ABM* 99–100).

Xuela eventually leaves her self-imposed reclusion and returns to both wearing women's clothing and to living with her family. For the time being, her self-actualization is complete. She leaves the state of nothingness and ghostliness by burning her male clothes and departing in the middle of the night so as not to bring attention to her absence (*ABM* 104) as she returns to being a presence. Her distinctive self-love will stay with her.

Ultimately, Xuela's abortion highlights the repercussions of slavery and colonization on family structures, as Xuela repeats the breaking of genealogical links. The novel examines the absence of female genealogy, similar to the later book *Mr. Potter* attending to the absence of familial bonds in a male genealogy. Yet, the important difference in Xuela's repetition of abortive practices is her successful reclaiming of her own body by doing so. While she suffers, she has the power to govern this suffering as she pleases.

The Autobiography of My Mother replaces the absence of personal genealogy with that of women's shared bodily experience. While Xuela is dispossessed of a personal history, she is thereby linked with a Caribbean female collective history. Where personal memory must fail, the repertoire of plant knowledge establishes a female community with roots in a shared history that counters the black hole of History with a capital *H*. In this genealogy of shared knowledge, Xuela importantly draws on the history of both Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous women. While the expertise of plant-based abortifacients is recognized as traditional West African knowledge, often ceded in female community from mother to daughter (Bush-Slimani 90, 141), it also was part of Indigenous life in the Caribbean (esp. of Tainos, Caribs, and Arawaks) before European colonization (Schiebinger 128). Though it is now impossible to exactly trace how knowledge may have been shared between enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples, Schiebinger shows overlaps in familiarity with endemic abortifacients, such as the peacock flower (2). Creole Caribbean cultures thus incorporated both West African medicinal expertise and local knowledge (see also O'Donnell 102).

Xuela in Kincaid's novel frequently laments the extinction of her Carib ancestors, yet with her herbal abortion, she can take up the traditional teachings of her

forebears. Sadly, this presence of historical knowledge yet again reinforces and emphasizes the absence of Indigeneity here, as with Xuela's pregnancy it also aborts Carib future. This once more highlights Xuela's inheritance of nothingness. Veronica Gregg also notes that Xuela's abortion replicates "the aborted life that is her inheritance" (928). Simultaneously, because of its self-making potential, it offers a way to conquer this history of brutality and death. As such, "Xuela's abortions stand as a figure of the problems of West Indian language and history," Gregg determines (929). I add that with its circularity and revising repetitions, Xuela's abortion notably takes up the structures in which, as shown throughout this study, Jamaica Kincaid's works productively engage with both personal and collective history. What stands out here is Xuela's stage to negotiate history – her own body. The perpetration of sexual and other exploitative violence is inflicted on her, pointing to the long history of abuse of Black women's bodies. Yet, it is also via her body and via shared bodily doing that the text counters the erasure of women's bodies from history. As such violence physically disrupts female genealogies, in *The Autobiography of My Mother* shared women's history is moved from physical to cultural continuance. This collective knowledge – which pertains to female bodies – constitutes a female community that as repertoire in Taylor's sense withstands the violence of discursive History, which largely marginalizes them. This community is now not based on family ties but on a shared body of knowledge.

Stagings of Sex: S/M and Colonial Fantasy

Bodies in Jamaica Kincaid's works not only counter and defy discourse, but also take up memory work in moments where verbal communication is either absent or less usable for the texts' characters. This second section analyzes how the text presents concrete erotic or sexual acts and how this contributes to the novels' discussions of the entanglements of gender, race, and history. It is noteworthy that many of the erotic relationships in Kincaid's novels are marked by a confluence of pleasure and pain. Acts of affection or erotic arousal are often coupled with physical violence. I read this double-bind through the lens of S/M conceptions in order to highlight the performative aspects of the sexual (or erotic) interactions of human bodies in three of Kincaid's novels – *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

Practices of S/M (somasochism) are highly ritualized. Their focal point is explicitly *not* the usurping of power by one dominating party, exerting all-encompassing power on a submissive subject. Rather, as Anne McClintock shows, this assertion of power is part of ritualistic repetition and subversion of power structures. S/M revolves around an "economy of conversion: master to slave, adult to

baby, power to submission, man to woman, pain to pleasure, human to animal and back again” (McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 143). How do human bodies in Kincaid’s texts interact in meaningful ways that negotiate such binaries? How do bodies comment on the history of colonialism through erotic practices? Observing the performativity of S/M in this context opens up erotic and sexual scenes to readings of subversion of power instead to accepting the painful subjugations of the texts’ protagonists. The structure of my analyses follows the chronology of the three novels. *Annie John* was not only published first; it also features the youngest protagonist. Erotic play here does not yet use the paraphernalia of S/M, nor does it negotiate colonial history as explicitly as does *The Autobiography of My Mother*, but a more personal power structure between mother and daughter is at stake. Nonetheless, this chapter begins with an examination of relevant passages from this early work to chart a trajectory in Kincaid’s oeuvre, which builds up from *Annie John* and *Lucy* to two more explicit sexual scenes in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, one of which may be read as rape, which signifies historical violations of female bodies. The sexual relationship with Xuela’s later husband then presents an overt example of the bodily enactment (and reenactment) of such power structures, simultaneously subverting them by staging them through S/M play.

In *Annie John*, sadomasochistic behavior occurs less in heterosexual relations as in homosocial (and arguably homosexual) scenes between young girls. The text details Annie John’s growing up from childhood to young adulthood. Once she leaves her parents’ house to attend school, she forms intense friendships with other girls. While these are the relationships of pubescent girls en route to discovering their sexual bodies, and their physical interactions appear playful, they are no less erotic than the physical relationships of the adult protagonists in the later novels *Lucy* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

Annie John’s earliest friendships already feature a doubling of affection and cruelty. Annie, for instance, likes to buy a sweet treat for her friend Sonia, to then tug on the girl’s body hair until she cries while she simultaneously enjoys Annie John’s gift (AJ 7). “Love” and “torment” here occur in the same sentence and relationship (AJ 7). Declarations of love are accompanied with flurries of kisses (AJ 50), and body parts – including breasts – are presented to each other (AJ 52, 80) in a seeming competition of growth.

Both eroticism and S/M practices are then most pronounced in Annie John’s relationship with the Red Girl. As discussed in the previous chapter on “The ‘Unruly’ Female Body,” this girlfriend is of particular importance to Annie John because she transgresses boundaries – be it by disregarding gendered social roles or by refusing to adhere to hygienic norms. Annie John is charmed by this breaker of rules and attempts to woo her with presents. Meeting in secret by the lighthouse, the girls follow the scripts of a romantic relationship. Eventually, Annie

is forced to stay away for a few days after having been found out by her mother, who disapproves of her daughter's contact with a social outsider. Annie John thus abandons the Red Girl who keeps waiting for her in their usual meeting place. Once Annie turns up again, their encounter proceeds wordlessly until it turns into a bodily performance of the girls' emotions:

Then, still without a word, the Red Girl began to pinch me. She pinched hard, picking up pieces of my almost nonexistent flesh and twisting it around. At first, I vowed not to cry, but it went on for so long that tears I could not control streamed down my face. I cried so much that my chest began to heave, and then, as if my heaving chest caused her to have some pity on my, she stopped pinching and began to kiss me on the same spots where shortly before I had felt the pain of her pinch. Oh, the sensation was delicious – the combination of pinches and kisses. And so wonderful we found it that, almost every time we met, pinching by her, followed by tears from me, followed by kisses from her were the order of the day. I stopped wondering why all the girls whom I had mistreated and abandoned followed me around with looks of love and adoration on their faces. (*AJ* 63)

Annie John and the Red Girl here articulate themselves nonverbally. In the order of these events, the pinching might initially be read as a punishment for the abandonment of the Red Girl. In its combination with kissing and in the subsequently frequent repetition of this scene, however, the pain that the Red Girl inflicts on Annie John's body becomes a rehearsed performance of roles in their relationship.

Chinmoy Banerjee locates Annie John's physically painful practices with her girlfriend within S/M structures:²²⁵ with the Red Girl, Annie John ostensibly performs the submissive part, passively being pinched and kissed. Her repeated giving of presents to the Red Girl similarly "establishes the dominant position of the Red Girl (basic to S/M games)" (Banerjee 43). Still, Banerjee maintains that the power positions do not settle into a "gendered hierarchy, thus staying out of traditional fixed positioning of S/M" (43).²²⁶ Building on Banerjee's observation, I propose that the absence of a gendered (male-female) power structure here facilitates the Red Girl's appeal to Annie John. The denial of fixity Banerjee notes is the main attraction of the girls' S/M play here.

Annie John's submission to the Red Girl enables her to reevaluate other seemingly fixed power structures. Throughout the novel, Annie John seeks to establish independence from her mother, who attempts to regulate the girl's behavior and

²²⁵ Roberto Strongman also reads the pinching in *Annie John* (both with Sonia and the Red Girl) as a "coded form of sexuality" (31).

²²⁶ While I here agree with Banerjee, with McClintock I question whether S/M indeed "fixes" positions, as Banerjee seems to suggest. Instead, I will argue in the course of this chapter that S/M practices subvert binarities and fixity.

body. Her friendship with and submission to the Red Girl contrasts with the overbearing mother, who hitherto was the ruler of Annie John's life. Thus, Annie John's turn towards the Red Girl is a turn towards a new rule in her life that subverts the teachings of the mother. Kissing and pinching then are but one aspect of Annie's adoration of the Red Girl, her freedoms, and her challenging the power and fixity of her mother's rules.

Annie John's contact with the Red Girl enables further deviances: in order to bestow little gifts on her friend, Annie John steals money from her mother's purse (AJ 64). After having received three marbles from the Red Girl, Annie John is excited to spend her spare time playing marbles – an activity her mother had explicitly warned her against as unsuitable for girls. Annie John even perfects the game and to her satisfaction wins a prized marble for the Red Girl (AJ 65). For their secret meetings, the girls rendezvous at an old lighthouse, which is a place explicitly forbidden by the mother (AJ 58). Finally, the concealment of the friendship with the Red Girl leads Annie John to invent several lies and evasions to account for her absences. Striking up a secret relationship with her enables the girl to revolt against the mother's power over her in several small ways, such as lying, stealing, inappropriate activities and spaces, as well as absenting herself. In this way, submitting to the Red Girl's "un-rule" allows Annie John to transgress the boundaries that were previously set by her mother. Allowing a third into the tense mother-daughter connection, Annie John breaks with the binary she had been an integral part of and frees herself from the fixity of her mother's rules. As part of this, the physical S/M play with the Red Girl, which also transgresses binaries with its confluence of pain and pleasure, performs one aspect of Annie John's negotiations of power positions. With these subverting and liberating functions of S/M, *Annie John* sets the tone for further scenes that connect pain and pleasure in Kincaid's later works in ways that are sexually more overt.

The novel following *Annie John* continues to present eroticism and sexuality in and as negotiations of power. The protagonist of *Lucy* has left puberty behind and strives to establish her independence from her mother and mother country as a young female immigrant in the United States. Scenes of sexuality in this novel largely emphasize the protagonist's agency. For instance, reminiscing on her youth, Lucy reflects being assaulted at a library, when a distant acquaintance abruptly kisses her unsolicitedly. Lucy recalls that he "pressed his lips against mine, hard, so hard that it caused me to feel pain, as if he wanted to leave an imprint. I had two reactions at once, I liked it and I didn't like it" (*Lucy* 50). This perpetration on her body, which seeks to mark her as a possession of a random boy, as the term "imprint" suggests, does not leave Lucy violated and helpless. Instead, her reaction to the assault is doubled in pleasure and rejection. Lucy then immediately leaves the role of passivity and returns the favor by kissing the boy back. In this,

she takes it a step further, involves her tongue and leaves the boy perturbed: “The whole thing was more than he had bargained for, and he had to carry his school-bag in such a way as to hide the mess in the front of his trousers” (*Lucy* 51). Whereas the hard kiss felt like an “imprint,” i.e., a marking that affects a surface by indenting it, Lucy’s tongue kiss penetrates the boy’s body by invading his mouth. The boy’s consequent involuntary ejaculation leaves the initial aggressor hiding and embarrassed. This episode presents the bargaining of sexual agency in erotic exchange, just as it establishes Lucy as aggressive and capable. Her sexual body is a tool she can use for both pleasure and power, it will remain so throughout the novel.²²⁷

In Lucy’s later relationship with Paul, she enjoys her sexuality and emphasizes her own pleasure. She muses, “how surprised I was to be thrilled by the violence of it (for sometimes it was that, violent), what an adventure this part of my life had become, and how much I looked forward to it, because I had not known that such pleasure could exist and, what is more, be available to me” (113). Almost in passing, these lines refer to violent sexual practices. It remains unclear who – Lucy or Paul – might be the perpetrator or receiver of such violence, or whether the roles might be shifting interchangeably. It even remains unclear whether the violence indeed is physical, although this may be assumed based on the contexts. What is noteworthy, however, is the definite pleasure that another of Kincaid’s protagonists derives from violent sexuality. Though not obviously defined as S/M practices, Lucy’s comment here nonetheless emphasizes violence as part of sexual normality in her life. This might be kept in mind in reading Xuela’s sexual preferences in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. As the above examples from *Lucy* show, Kincaid’s oeuvre does not condemn physical violence in erotic encounters. Rather, this type of bodily interaction is framed as an enjoyable aspect of physical power negotiations.

Finally, the 1996 novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* presents the most overt cases of sadomasochistic sexual interaction in Kincaid’s works. Hence, the following main part of this section will be devoted to the analysis of two of the sexual relationships that the protagonist Xuela maintains.²²⁸ The violence in both allows for positions of domination and submission to be assumed, negotiated, and highlighted. In part, this performative highlighting also subverts seemingly rigid power positions, which I read as repetitions of colonial power structures.

²²⁷ See also Kristen Mahlis, who reads “Lucy’s awareness of her body as a source of resistance and sexual pleasure” (165).

²²⁸ Xuela has sex with more than the two men discussed here. For instance, she sexually enjoys the affair with Roland, a stevedore. Yet the sexual relations with Monsieur LaBatte and her later husband Philip Bailey are most interesting in the context of S/M practices, which is why this section solely focuses on Xuela’s sexual interactions with the two of them.

I will first focus on the sexual relations with Monsieur Jacques LaBatte, which led to the pregnancy and abortion discussed in the previous section. These first scenes of sexuality in *The Autobiography of My Mother* have variously been read as LaBatte raping Xuela.²²⁹ Other scholars here read a somewhat willing participation on Xuela's part.²³⁰ Given the exploitative structures in which Xuela is trapped,²³¹ interpreting Xuela's sexual encounter with Monsieur LaBatte as rape points to the systemic violence that confronts her. Carine Mardorossian, for instance, considers the historical implications of sexual abuse of women of color and contends that Kincaid's novel "exposed how rape has historically been configured as sexual aggression between classes and races and how victims and perpetrators have consistently been distinguished from one another on the basis of other categories of identity than gender" ("Rape by Proxy" 115). In other words, rape here does not signify the violation of a singular body, but with the historical conjunction of rape and race, issues beyond the personal are at stake. Nonetheless, I would here like to offer a slightly different reading, as a consideration of the details in the sex scenes such as space and lighting provide avenues to reading Xuela in these violent sexual encounters not necessarily as a passive victim opposite a forceful aggressor, but as an active participant in the events. My readings seek to enter a conversation with those of other scholars. While differing at times, I do not intend to downplay the violence of sexual aggression. Rather, I see my interpretations on the following pages as complementary to existing ones and emphasize the openness of the text to multiple, seemingly contrary readings.

Over the course of the four pages that detail the first time Xuela and Jacques LaBatte have sex, the text offers different interpretations – either as the exploitation of a girl in a vulnerable position, or as a consensual act, or a simultaneity of these two extremes. This variability, I argue, is a result of the contraction of pain and pleasure and how readers and scholars chose to evaluate the use of force in sexual acts. Xuela's initial description of her sexual encounter with Monsieur LaBatte as "inevitable" and her detailing that it "was no less a shock because it

229 See for instance Cobham, Mardorossian ("Rape by Proxy"), or Simone Alexander ("Postcolonial Hauntings").

230 See for instance Holcomb, Schultheis, or McDonald-Smythe ("Kwik! Kwak!"). It should be noted that in Antonia MacDonald-Smythe's 1998 article, a spelling error in the author's name occurred, dropping an "a" from her family name. For consistency's sake and so as not to confuse references, I have retained the erroneous spelling in my own bibliographical references to this particular article, but I call readers' attention to the correct spelling, which I will generally use when referring to this scholar.

231 See the previous section on abortive practices for a detailed analysis of Xuela's exploitation through the LaBattes, including a historical contextualization.

was inevitable" (*ABM* 69) already holds such ambivalence. Wherein exactly the inevitable or the shock lie, is left open to interpretation. In any case, this choice of words positions Xuela as vulnerable and the ensuing action is somewhat outside of her control. The same quote might also be read as a comment on the precarious position of women in a relationship of dependency with an employer, such as that of Xuela as a servant girl which leaves her open to sexual exploitation.²³² Then again, the same line might just as well refer to a female first experience of penetration of the vaginal canal. This transgression of a body's outside borders then incites the shock mentioned. In any case, the ambiguity of possible readings here superimposes female biology with gendered social precarity, emphasizing the vulnerable position of the young woman.

Xuela then continues her narrative of her first sexual intercourse with Monsieur LaBatte with his approach to her in the backyard of the LaBatte's property. Its textual details, I maintain, point to the complexities of the encounter – which is far from a simple opposition of powerful and powerless. Xuela is in the yard on her own at nightfall. She is enjoying touching herself intimately, when Monsieur LaBatte appears and wordlessly watches Xuela's masturbatory acts. This does not interrupt her, but she continues with her private enjoyment. "I saw that Monsieur LaBatte was standing not far off from me, looking at me. He did not move away in embarrassment and I, too, did not run away in embarrassment. We held each other's gaze" (*ABM* 70). Quite explicitly, Xuela here presents a state of equality in this exchange of gazes, rather than being overpowered by the male gaze. Xuela then brings her fingers to her face and enjoys the smell of her own genitals. "It was the end of the day, my odor was quite powerful," she comments (*ABM* 70). As discussed in the previous chapter's section on odor, I argue that in Kincaid's works body smells represent transgressions of the exterior borders of the human body. Through odor, bodies make themselves known and may subvert the order of established power structures. Here, Xuela's taking pleasure in her own vulva's odor, as she removes it from parts of her body that are out of sight (still under her clothing) and transfers it into the open, transports parts of her inside to the outside. Xuela thus emphasizes her genitals and affects the space around her. The adjective "powerful" initially describes only Xuela's odor, but metonymically refers to Xuela and her body as a whole. In this way, Xuela dominates the space around her. The male gaze of Monsieur LaBatte may participate here, but it has no power over Xuela as she counters it with her own in combination with her odor.

232 My analysis of Xuela's precarity as integrating her with historical vulnerabilities reads the "inevitable" in this vein; see the previous section on "Abortive Practices."

In the subsequent scene, *The Autobiography of My Mother* presents the approximation of Xuela and Jacques LaBatte through a symbolism of light and dark. The encounter begins with a setting at dusk: “The sun had not yet set completely; it was just at that moment when the creatures of the day are quiet but the creatures of the night have not quite found their voice” (*ABM* 69). Xuela identifies this in-between with a sense of loss – of mother, home, and love, i.e., the loss of a sense of belonging. The text thus locates the ensuing events in an interstitial space. Decoding the symbolism of light here, Xuela would be associated with the interstice between light and dark, whereas Monsieur LaBatte is a “creature of the night.” He remains quiet and at bay while the light fades and night falls. Only then he approaches and uses his voice to ask Xuela to fully remove her clothes (*ABM* 69–70). Yet again, the girl does not yield to his request. Encompassed by the darkness associated with Monsieur LaBatte,²³³ Xuela does not give up the space she had claimed by exuding her own body odors. Instead, she rebuffs him, as “it was too dark, I could not see” (*ABM* 70). Monsieur LaBatte then takes the girl to his private room, which is generally dark, only lit by a small lamp. Reading this interplay of light and darkness in this scene, Monsieur LaBatte’s room might be a space determined by him, yet with the dusky light the lamp provides, the room is affected by Xuela’s association with the in-between of twilight. In this, the symbolism of illumination contributes to the representation of Xuela as not without presence – and by extension agency – in this setting, which determines my reading of the following sex scene.

Xuela is now thrilled by the anticipation of what is to come. Again, the choice of words here hardly evaluates the situation: Xuela describes herself as “enthralled” (*ABM* 71), which points to her interest in the situation, possibly a desire to have a curiosity satisfied. When Xuela then begins to relate the actual penetration of her body by Jacques LaBatte, she uses the very terms she previously chose to introduce the whole episode with earlier:

And the force of him inside me, inevitable as it was, again came as a shock, a long sharp line of pain that then washed over me with the broadness of a wave, a long sharp line of pleasure: and to each piercing he made inside of me, I made a cry that was the same cry, a cry of sadness, for without making of it something it really was not I was not the same person I had been before. He was not a man of love, I did not need him to be. When he was through with me and I with him, he lay on top of me, breathing indifferently, his mind was on other things. (*ABM* 71)

233 In the ensuing sexual relations, too, Monsieur LaBatte is associated with the nights Xuela spends with him, while the girl’s time during the day is allocated to Madame LaBatte (*ABM* 74).

Although the male role here is portrayed as forceful and as physically breaching, Xuela's experience is not defined by negativity. Pain is immediately coupled with pleasure. Xuela emphasizes the physical enjoyment she derives from sexual intercourse, when she points out that a male body can make her feel "a wholeness with a current running through it, a current of pure pleasure" (*ABM* 70–71). The sensations of pain and pleasure are linked here by their immediate proximity, as they occur in the same sentence; by their unity in their definitions as "a long sharp line of"; and not least by the alliterative connection of the two words. Xuela's physical sensations thus are doubled in this seemingly contradictory pair of feelings.

The cries she utters, however, are not moans of arousal but of grief for the loss of her former self. Her audible expression of it once more speaks to her active participation in the scene. Sexual intercourse here marks a before and after in Xuela's life. This again is brought forth matter-of-factly, rather than in evaluative fashion. Xuela closes this brief account of her first sexual encounter by highlighting an equality in the couple: Monsieur LaBatte is not a lover and he is indifferent, but Xuela herself is indifferent to this circumstance, as she is focused on the physical here. Moreover, they are "through" with each other, i. e., Xuela emphasizes her participation in the sexual act, rather than denoting possible victimhood in her body having solely been used by another for their pleasure.

The physical violence of the encounter is related retrospectively, when Xuela is back in her room after the fact by herself. She here reflects on the lasting "ache" she feels in several body parts:

The place between my legs ached, my wrists ached; when he had not wanted me to touch him, he had placed his own large hands over my wrists and kept them pinned to the floor; when my cries had distracted him, he had clamped my lips shut with his mouth. It was through all the parts of my body that ached that I relived the deep pleasure I had just experienced. (*ABM* 72)

These details evoke a S/M dynamic with Monsieur LaBatte in the dominant position. If not for the repeated connection of ache and pleasure, this scene might indeed indicate Jacques LaBatte forcing sexual relations, i. e., raping Xuela or at least coercing sexual favors from her. Nonetheless, while the details of violence here suggest this reading, the passage does not victimize Xuela. The "ache" she feels points to a past pleasure itself in that it ambivalently denotes the physical pain and a yearning for the return of this touch.

In her analysis of the sexual scene in question, Rhonda Cobham understands the absence of victimhood as a rhetoric strategy on the part of autodiegetic narrator Xuela. She argues that "Xuela's self-directed monologue utilizes a language of negation that gives her a perverse strength in relation to all forces that seek to dominate her through language or action. [...] But the language Xuela uses to de-

scribe their [Xuela and Jacques LaBatte's] encounter manipulates negatives in ways that create the illusion of agency for the raped school girl" (876).²³⁴ Thus, what I read as agency in Xuela's sexual involvement, Cobham evaluates as belated rhetoric that refuses to admit to the girl's defeat. However, while Cobham's observations on Xuela's narrative strategies are compelling, I add that a consideration of space – as shown – supports a positioning of Xuela beyond the role of the victim.

Focusing on Xuela's resistances and participation then allows us to read the strength with which Xuela faces her vulnerabilities. On the conjunction of gaze and power, bell hooks holds that looking back is a means of resistance to domination – as is the case for Xuela in the LaBattes' yard that night, I argue. Taking Xuela's narrative and her sexual agency seriously does not exculpate the perpetrator Jacques LaBatte, but it may free Xuela from our readerly "gaze" framing her as the powerless victim. "We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels," hooks reminds us ("Oppositional Gaze" 128). I suggest to read Xuela's looking back at Jacques LaBatte as well as her later narrative of the ensuing events within the variable parameters of resistance as detailed by hooks in this quote. Reading the sex scene in a context of S/M thus means reading agency in Xuela's seeming passivity. As Anne McClintock writes, "[t]o argue that in consensual S/M the 'dominant' has power, and the slave has not, is to read theater for reality" ("Maid to Order" 87).

Finally, Cobham concludes that "by the end of the encounter it is no longer clear who has seduced whom; who has used whom to assuage whose passion" (878), with which my analysis here agrees. Ultimately, it is this confusion and ambiguity that makes a reading of Xuela's sexual agency possible. In any case then, whether we read the scene as rape or S/M, this sexual encounter in *The Autobiography of My Mother* evokes such differing interpretations because it is mediated by literary text. Sabine Sielke, in her study of the rhetoric of sexual violence in literature, regards rape as a "figure of power relations" (3). Sielke emphasizes that texts relate to rape in highly mediated ways and that "[t]he determinate given raw material of rape narratives [...] is not necessarily rape. [...] any historical issue is inseparable from its various cultural representations" (3). In the case of *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the indeterminacy of sexual violence highlights its status as a representation. Reading it as an enactment of predetermined ("inevi-

234 Carine Mardorossian agrees with Cobham and adds that the illusion of Xuela's sexual agency in the "seduction scene dismantles our assumption about both rape and sex because it turns the young girl into both victim and instrument of sexual subordination" ("Rape by Proxy" 124).

table”) roles makes Xuela and Jacques LaBatte’s sexual relation a presentation of rehearsed roles. Xuela notes this when she observes that “[h]e was behaving in a way that he knew well” (*ABM* 77). Monsieur LaBatte thus assumes the paradigmatic role of the exploiter.

This staging of violence (whether we explicitly read the scene as S/M or not) highlights the historical dimension of systemic sexual violence and provides space for a reclamation of Xuela’s self. Considering the history of rape in slavery, this is no less than a reclamation of the enslaved female body, which was – among other aspects – victimized via sexual violation. Angela Davis describes the sexual assault of Black women during slavery as “reducing her to the level of her *biological* being” (96, emphasis in original), i.e., rape constituted an assault on the subjectivity as human. Davis regards this as one aspect of the “terroristic texture of plantation life” (96). Taking this into account, I read the representation of sexual violence in *The Autobiography of My Mother* really as a negotiation of historical oppression of subjectivity during slavery. Carine Mardorossian comes to a similar conclusion:

By performing the role scripted for her by her oppressor’s colonialist fantasies, she [Xuela] exposes the ideological molds that contain his world as strings that control him as much as they subjugate her. Far from “naturalizing” the sexualized encounter, her apparent complicity exposes the rape as a scene in a play of power whose arbitrary rules she can perform again and again and from which she thus learns to distance herself. (“Rape by Proxy” 126)

This examination of personal and collective past through repetition and reenactment also is at stake when towards the end of the book Xuela enters a relationship with Philip Bailey, an English doctor.

The Autobiography of My Mother introduces Philip by reference to the typical interests of a representative of the British empire: he is infatuated with cultivating flowers and plants, landscape, ruins, and books (*ABM* 143–144, 146), i.e., he is fascinated with manipulating the original resources of the Caribbean, with naming and recording them in written form, as well as with the past. His hobbies recall the plant hunters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, who claimed and colonized by naming plants.²³⁵ In their desire to “order” and transplant botanical species for profit, these acts of colonization from afar are structurally the same as those of the transatlantic slave trade. *The Autobiography of My Mother* formulates Philip’s fascination with plants and lands quite explicitly as an inheritance of colonization:

²³⁵ See chapter 3.2 on further discussions of plant hunters and colonization in Kincaid’s *My Garden (Book)*. See also De Ferrari, who reads Philip as “a sort of eighteenth-century botanist” (155).

He had an obsessive interest in rearranging the landscape: not gardening in the way of necessity, the growing of food, but gardening in the way of luxury, the growing of flowering plants for no other reason than the pleasure of it and making these plants do exactly what he wanted them to do; and it made great sense that he would be drawn to this activity, for it is an act of conquest, benign though it may be. (*ABM* 143)

Philip is thus characterized by an inert desire to dominate and mold his surroundings to his liking. Yet in the early twentieth century he is but a remnant of the British colonizers who transplanted and exploited human beings during slavery and in Caribbean plantation societies. In this sense, Philip is rather a reminder of the past, a blunted “benign” version, yet still a representation of the desires of British colonialism. This status of the remnant is also indicated by his interest in “ruins, not the kind that are remains of a lost civilization, but purposely built decay” (*ABM* 143). Philip is interested not in the actual past, but in a manipulated version of it. This manipulation turns the past into a commodity, not only through the ruins as purported artifacts, but also through the books that picture them and make them fit for consumption from a distance.

Xuela’s relationship with the colonizer Philip is an extended repetition of her relations with Jacques LaBatte in her earlier years, yet with the difference that the stakes are much higher: Philip is a white Englishman whereas Jacques LaBatte was an upper-class Afro-Caribbean man; Xuela and Philip get married, while she only had a clandestine sexual relationship with Monsieur LaBatte; the sexual intercourse with Philip appears to be even more violent than with Monsieur LaBatte; and finally Xuela much more overtly orchestrates the relationship and thus glories in her own sexual agency, which in these contexts metonymically represents a small triumph of colonized over the colonizer.

The parallels between the two relationships begin with the circumstances that lead Xuela to meet the men in the first place. What brings Xuela to be with Philip, a doctor living in Roseau, is an arrangement that Xuela’s father made with a friend of his (*ABM* 128). Xuela is to be employed as a domestic worker, living in a room set apart from the main house, originally built to accommodate a nurse to the doctor’s office (*ABM* 150–151) – similar to the housing arrangement on the LaBattes’ property. Philip also is married and his relationship with Xuela would initially count as an affair with “the help.” Eventually, however, after the death of this wife, Xuela and Philip get married and Xuela lives in the main house.

The parallels of Xuela’s affair with Monsieur LaBatte and Philip do not stop here. The relationship with Philip is also narrated through the spaces it is set in. The first scene that establishes sexual desire between Xuela and Philip takes place in the doctor’s office. Philip examines his employee for a persistent cough, in the course of which she removes her garments, including the muslin strips

she uses to bandage her breasts to ease an irritation of her nipples. This room, in which Xuela's body is bared to view, is thoroughly defined by Philip's presence. His workspace is filled with paraphernalia that represent him, such as "white enamel basins which held syringes and needles and forceps" (*ABM* 148). Moreover, this scene again is accompanied with distinct detailing of the lighting in the room, which reflects the relationship of the characters within that space:

[T]he room had windows on three sides, the windows had adjustable wooden slats; the wooden slats were tilted half open and the sunlight came in through them, measured, each shaft three inches wide, and some of them fell diagonally across another part of the floor and then bent up against the wall and ended halfway there, and it gave the room a strange atmosphere, the pattern of shading and light, a fully clothed man, a woman explaining why she bandaged her breasts (*ABM* 148).

The light and the window slats fragment the room, while the interlacing pattern of light and dark separates and unites. Such patterning is repeated in the opposition of the clothed man and the half-naked woman, her bandages interlaced on her skin. Moreover, the interlacing and bending against the wall might be read as foreshadowing the later explicit sex scene in which the bodies of Xuela and Philip do the same. For now, although in his very own space, Philip turns away from it and towards the sunlight outside the room, as "all of a sudden he must have felt excited for he walked away from me [Xuela] and looked through one of the half-closed shutters" (*ABM* 148). Turning towards daylight, Philip turns away from Xuela's body, which he will nonetheless visit again in more dimmed lighting.

While this first scene of physical closeness between Philip and Xuela shows significant parallels to that with Monsieur LaBatte as discussed earlier, it differs in the details that ultimately position Xuela as much more self-determined than with Jacques LaBatte. For instance, this later passage leaves it open who initially approaches whom. On the one hand Xuela very innocently seeks out her employer's expertise on a health issue. The examination of her body then leads to lust on the doctor's part, which might be evaluated as unprofessional and inappropriate behavior. When the examination of her chest, however, leads to a focus on her breasts, which apparently suffer from a medical issue, Xuela herself introduces sexuality to the scene when she explains: "My breasts then were in a constant state of sensation [...] [that] ceased only when a mouth, a man's mouth, was clamped tightly over them and sucking" (*ABM* 147). Emphasizing not the ailment, but sexual stimulation as the cure, Xuela herself turns the attention to sexual aspects of her body. She also explicitly notes the absence of ulterior motives on her part when she mentions that she moved the muslin straps "as if I was alone, and this was because I was in the presence of a doctor, not because I wanted him to find it interesting in any way" (*ABM* 147); but she simultaneously tells Philip about erotic acts

as easing her condition. Xuela mixes up the professional and the erotic, so that this scene might just as well be read as seductive, i.e., as inducing Philip's unprofessional desires. Ultimately, both readings are viable, and the text leaves it to interpretation who incites the following sexual relations.

The concrete sexual acts then do not take place in his rooms but in hers. Here, ostensibly the scene from the LaBattes' yard repeats. Night has already fallen outside when Philip enters Xuela's room, apparently believing that he is crossing the distance between her and his living space in order to show her a book (*ABM* 151).²³⁶ He finds Xuela touching herself intimately. Xuela strokes her pubic hair and does not stop when Philip comes upon her. Instead, when he calls her name, she begins to remove her nightgown under which she is naked; but it gets trapped on the mass of her pinned-up braids, so that Xuela's body is fully exposed to Philip's gaze, while her face is hidden and her hands and arms are tied up in the garment above her head. This position already anticipates what is to come, when Xuela and Philip later enact the very same position. Philip begins to kiss Xuela and helps her out of her gown, which leads to the following sexual scene:

I turned around and removed his belt, and using my mouth I secured it tightly around my wrists and I raised my hands in the air; and with my face turned sideways I placed my chest against the wall. I made him stand behind me, I made him lie on top of me, my face beneath his; I made him lie on top of me, my back beneath his chest; I made him lie in back of me and place his hand in my mouth and I bit his hand in a moment of confusion, a moment when I could not tell if I was in agony or pleasure; I made him kiss my entire body, starting with my feet and ending with the top of my head. The darkness outside the room pressed against its four sides; inside, the room grew smaller and smaller as it filled up almost to bursting with hisses, gasps, moans, sighs, tears, bursts of laughter. (*ABM* 154–155)

Xuela's being tied up with a belt indicates a bondage scene. In this sexual staging, she assumes the role of the submissive, while Philip acts out the dominant part. In an S/M binary, Xuela is the slave, while Philip is the master. Still, by Xuela's repetition of "I made him," it is clear that she is the choreographer of this act, which upturns the ostensible binary of dominant and submissive. This fluidity and negotiation of power through sexual performance exemplifies what McClintock calls "the scandal of S/M," namely its "provocative confession that the edicts of power are reversible" ("Maid to Order" 87).

Xuela finds her pretend-submission delicious, as she realizes when she first is trapped in her nightgown. "I became eternally fascinated with how I felt then," Xuela notes. "I felt a sensation between my legs [...] the feeling was a sweet, hollow

²³⁶ Xuela, however, refuses to look at the book, an object identified with Philip the colonizer. She simply dismisses this advance. See *ABM* 151.

feeling, an empty space with a yearning to be filled” (*ABM* 153–154).²³⁷ Gary and Kimberley Holcomb, who also read the sex scenes with Philip in terms of S/M practices, similarly note Xuela’s agency within her supposed submission: “Xuela plays with received roles in the above scene, subverting the relation of passivity and bondage to activity and agency or dominance: she is the one ‘fascinated’ by the feelings she takes from exposure and restraint; she is actively aroused and in pursuit of pleasure rather than object of someone else’s desire” (13). Xuela overpowers Philip, as is also apparent in his “drowning” in her presence when he speaks to her “as if he were imprisoned in the sound of my [Xuela’s] name” (*ABM* 153). Xuela’s overwhelming presence is also once again signified by the room’s illumination. Her private space is dimly lit by a lamp that links Xuela to her maternal genealogy when she notes, “it had been my mother’s lamp and would have been the last lamplight she saw, because it was the lamp that lit the room at the time she died, which was the time I was born; and by this lamplight, too, she would have seen my father’s face as he lay on top of her, just before he withdrew himself from inside her” (*ABM* 150–151). The lamp thus connects Xuela with her personal history in that it is the first light Xuela would have seen at birth. Moreover, having sex in the light of this lamp performatively links Xuela to her lost mother who did the same. Xuela thus stands in the light of her inheritance, i.e., the room she and Philip now occupy is defined by Xuela’s past and female ancestral lines that the lamp signifies.

As the instigator and orchestrator of the S/M performance, Xuela forces Philip into the role of the colonizer, enacting his forceful perpetration on her body. Through the stylized form of S/M, making use of one of its typical props – the bonds – this scene lays bare the paradigmatic distribution of roles here. And as the lamp indicating female ancestry also suggests, Xuela’s binding presents her as a stand-in for the colonized female body. Guillermina De Ferrari logically contends that Xuela’s “body is never a fully private entity, but is instead a site where cultural scripts originally inherited from colonial history are constantly redeployed” (147). The very reenactment of sexual violence through S/M moreover brings about its subversion in that “S/M performs social power as scripted, and hence as permanently subject to change” (McClintock, “Maid to Order” 89).

Xuela’s dominating the performance relocates Philip to the role of the subjugated. Xuela generally refuses to regard her husband in his personal particularities; she solely sees him in his role as representing “the colonizer” (see *ABM*

237 See also De Ferrari who reads the nightgown’s concealing of Xuela’s face as doubling her role into “masked ‘master’ and tied ‘slave’” (160).

219).²³⁸ She thus defines their lives together through her negotiation of colonial history, which they perform in their sexual and everyday interactions. Although not an enslaver or conqueror himself, being regarded as such is his legacy. “[B]y the time Philip was born, all the bad deeds had been committed; he was an heir, generations of people had died and left him something” (*ABM* 146). Philip is an heir to the “victors” (*ABM* 217); his inheritance is social and economic power. But – as Xuela makes clear – it also the shameful association with the perpetrations of colonialism. “He was an heir, and like all such people the origin of his inheritance was a burden to him,” Xuela concludes (*ABM* 220). Philip’s love and devotion to Xuela might be an attempt to relieve himself of this burden, but his wife refuses him such ease when she keeps him in the role of the colonizer.

The S/M scene is thus integrated into a framework of Philip’s subjugation by Xuela. She moreover isolates him from society by moving him to the mountains (*ABM* 221), as she does from herself by withholding her presence from him (*ABM* 219). She lets him act as a colonial naturalist and explorer, but manipulates his efforts through purposeful sabotage. When he keeps small animals in terraria to observe them in different environments, Xuela obstructs Philip’s small-scale colonial efforts by “releas[ing] whatever individual he held in captivity, replacing it with its like, its kind: one lizard replaced with another lizard [...]. He was so sure inside himself that all the things he knew were correct” (*ABM* 222). Xuela thus keeps Philip in his role of the colonizer, yet rendered unsuccessful by her subversions, his very epistemological methods are rendered futile and through her manipulations they are rather turned into child’s play than the knowledge production he believes himself to accomplish.

In conclusion, S/M practices in Kincaid’s works as discussed in this section enable the texts’ protagonists to negotiate power structures that affect all aspects of their lives. They find symbolic expression in scenes of physical pleasure and pain – be it a questioning of gender roles as dictated by all-powerful mother figures and their prescriptions of (sexual) morality in *Annie John* or *Lucy*, or the power imbalances that are violently inscribed on the collective female body of color during colonialism as in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. “S/M is haunted by memory. By reenacting loss of control in a staged situation of excessive control, the S/Mer gains symbolic power over perilous memory. By reinventing the memory of trauma, S/M affords a delirious triumph over the past, and from this triumph an orgasmic excess of pleasure” (McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 100). As shown, in the case of

²³⁸ De Ferrari compellingly reads this in another sexual scene, when Xuela refuses to listen to Philip’s childhood stories and instead orders him to perform oral sex on her. “Xuela refuses him the right to a personal narrative by turning him into a sexual slave. The marks left on his face by her pubic hair evoke the branding of slaves as property” (159).

Xuela in *The Autobiography of My Mother*; the final (and most overt) S/M scene repeats sexual violence in a staging that inverts original power relations. The repetition of violent sexual acts from the scene with Jacques LaBatte to Philip Bailey thus points to a continuity of historical violation of female bodies in personal contemporary experiences.

Still, the two instances of violent sex in *The Autobiography of My Mother* significantly differ in that Xuela's sexual encounter may reasonably be examined as to whether it is consensual or forced, whereas in the later sex scene with Philip, Xuela is the director of the event. In this, the protagonist's sexual agency is developed from questionable to obviously manifested and acted out. This difference reverses both male and colonial sexual power over her (collective) body. Thus gaining symbolic power over the past and the historical violated female body, Xuela's actions also question the fixity of colonial binaries in general.²³⁹ Reenactments and bodily performance thereby stage historical drama and decenter the previously ruling power by placing Xuela's sexual agency and pleasure at its heart. In this, I conclude, the S/M scene between Xuela and Philip destabilizes the scripts of colonial power through bodily performance.

²³⁹ Gary and Kimberly Holcomb also read diffusion of binaries in Xuela's S/M orchestration: "Ultimately, S/M permits Xuela to rewrite the history of cruelty and barbarism enacted on her heritage, the centuries of a pain legally regulated, narratologically scripted, and epistemologically determined by the master by possessing, directing, controlling and exploring the uncharted island of her own pain. In shifting agency from the master's to the slave's body, Xuela simultaneously undermines the master's identity, reducing him to a near ghost, and changes the meaning of pain itself, from its association with colonial punishment and lust to a means of pleasuring the slave's desiring body; the distinction between slave and master blurs" (17).