PLACING THE BODY: A STUDY OF POSTCOLONIALISM AND ENVIRONMENT IN THE WORKS OF JAMAICA KINCAID

BY

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated in memory of my heroes, Peggy Caudle and Terry Pratchett.

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ABSTRACT

This project examines the work of Jamaica Kincaid for iterations of the body, specifically how Postcolonial and Ecocritical theories may inform those representations. I will look at the narrators of *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother* for examples of embodiment, negotiations and hierarchy of place, and the different spheres of environment that each narrator must engage with. Though both terms, postcolonial and ecocritical, have wide and varied definitions, I will be focusing my discussions on those aspects of place that constitute each discipline. Within the ecocritical, I will target the environment and surroundings and how those effect and are mediated through the bodies of the protagonists. As for the postcolonial, I will pay attention to the experiences of the colonial and how each narrator reconciles the search for plenitude and source within the displacement of colonialism. Narrowed to the body, my topics will include the figure of the mother, sex and smell, death, and several other topics relevant to each novel.
INTRODUCTION

“Oh, to be part of such a thing, to be a part of anything that is outside history, to be a part of something that can deny the wave of the human hand, the beat of the human heart, the gaze of the human eye, human desire itself” (*Autobiography of My Mother*, 218).

The term *postcolonial* has a wide, sweeping reach, encompassing theoretical, critical, practical, and political studies. To imply that the term is limited to one set, or any set, of geographical or temporal margins is to immediately invoke a myriad of other possibilities. Ato Quayson gives a working definition of postcolonialism as a study involving an “engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies as well as at the level of more general global developments thought to be after effects of empire”. He continues that this “often also involves the discussion of experiences…of slavery, migration…race, gender, place…” (2). Though the literary component of postcolonialism may seem to encompass an undefined spectrum of global and local, it also offers a very specific entrance into the context and situatedness of the literary subject. This subject’s cultural and societal profile will be identifiable and to some extent predictable due to their relationship to the colonial.

Similarly, *ecocriticism* allows for a range of definitions from theoretical studies on ecology, to literature’s obligations in our current time of ecological crisis, to works
redolent in the language of nature and all things natural. Cheryll Glotfelty gives the essence as, “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xvii). She does go on to further expound upon the idea, saying, “all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (xix). Just as post colonialism lays a foundation for the study of the effect of cultural and societal positioning, the ecocritical offers an understanding of how that postcolonial subject may connect to their material surroundings, their physical and natural environment.

A primary commonality between these two disciplines is the study of place and what implications place may have to the people that are inhabitants of or agents within a given environment. Postcolonialism’s standard of place is actually a function of displacement, re-placement, and the negotiations of the past, present, and future place of the colonized and the colonizer. Within ecocriticism, place is a subset and function of space, a marker of positioning within an environment having solely to do with who or what inhabits said space. When we combine these studies, we can begin to understand the how and why of that inhabitation. As Jeff Malpas points out, “The appearance of place as a central, if problematic, concept is clearest in discussions that touch on aspects of human existence and experience…place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (33). In this postmodern connection of people and place, the addition of an eco-critical base of knowledge to the study of postcolonial literature is not only helpful but in a way, aesthetically and intellectually crucial. This combination of theoretical and
actionable thought manifests as a highlighting of place and situatedness. Glotfelty emphasizes the importance of place by questioning, “In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category?” (xix). Elizabeth Deloughrey answers Glotfelty with the combination I seek to engage:

…to speak of postcolonial ecology is to foreground a spatial imagination made possible by the experience of place. Place has infinite meanings and morphologies; it might be defined geographically, in terms of the expansion of empire; environmentally, in terms of wilderness or urban settings; genealogically, in linking communal ancestry to land; as well as phenomenology, connecting body to place… postcolonial studies has utilized the concept of place to question temporal narratives of progress imposed by colonial powers. (Postcolonial 4)

And so I echo that answer with a resounding yes! Put simply, where a person is situated, located, what constitutes their surroundings and environment must be considered and engaged.

Another unifying element within each discipline, and one that also relies on place, is the idea of the search for source, the longing for a return to those attachments that have been severed. For the environmental, this comes by way of the phenomenological, for “it is also a philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world…” (Merleau-Ponty, vii). In postcolonial literature, this idea is present in the estrangement from the homeland and an aspiration of political parity and cultural belonging. What I’d like to venture is that the most fruitful way of connecting these points, following these patterns, is through attention to
representations of the body; the human, corporal, material being. Further, for a most illuminating and rich use of body and place, I look to the work of Jamaica Kincaid. Her narrators enact this search for source through the body—echoing the longing present in postcolonialism and environmentalism—because as David Abram so eloquently states, “Humans are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils—all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of others” (ix). This may seem a drastic constriction, going from the set of global, somewhat indeterminate ideas that encompass the postcolonial and ecocritical, to something so precise, so relatively small as the human body. But the movement is natural when considering that having this groundwork, the organizing and identifying functions of colonialism and environment—these powers of place—allows for a narrowing of focus to a particular recurring theme. For Kincaid, the body is a means to both experience and control her narrators’ attachments and negotiations of place. Again I turn to David Abram to point to this same idea within ecophenomenology: “The recuperation of the incarnate, sensorial dimension of experience brings with it a recuperation of the living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded” (65). And so it follows that I argue that as the body is the only primary and constant environment we must inhabit, as well as that medium through which we experience all other environment and all subsequent concepts and iterations of place, it is a viable and compelling device to both consider the effects of the environment and colonialism, but also as a means of understanding an tracking any evolutions of attachment to those very same.

Though theoretically this is not a novel concept, I did come to the idea naturally via the primary text. I defer here to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on
phenomenology for a definition and clarification, as he describes, “To be a body, is to be tied to a certain world, as we have seen; our body is not primarily in space: it is of it” (148). The body is intrinsic in the emergence of our identities, and it is identity that is at the core of postcolonial literature. Merleau-Ponty also speaks to this when he claims, “Bodily experience forces us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning which is not the work of a universal constituting consciousness, a meaning which clings to certain contents” (147). The fact that we even question how the particular culture, society, place, and time in which we find our bodies determines how we identify ourselves shows that true unbreakable connectedness of body and condition.

As illustration and exploration of this composite of body and place, I will study Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *Autobiography of My Mother*. Kincaid’s works are of particular relevance, as Susie O’Brien explains that “by drawing out the complex connections between local human/nature interactions and the world-shaping force of colonialism, Kincaid calls into question the geo-physical terms by which ‘environment’ is frequently understood” (168). Kincaid, through the colonized body, creates new concepts of and new avenues to inhabiting place and environment. It is this postcolonial ecology, this *place* of the *colonized body* that I will study.

My goal for each chapter is to first consider how the novel as a whole and in particular the protagonist is situated within the colonial. Though each protagonist hails from a small Caribbean island, each stands in different places in relation to their home island and within varying degrees of colonial presence. I will then, within each chapter, study how the colonial effects the natural environment, but more importantly how the body of the protagonist is in conversation with her environment. This will flow naturally
into a continual touching back to the phenomenological, that connection of the body to all
that surrounds it, environmental and colonial.

All of the above requires first a theoretical and critical grounding in the
disciplines considered—this follows shortly. This will include, but is not limited to: an
eye for any differences between place and environment; for variations of displacement,
travel and migration; and for what is encompassed when the body and embodiment are
spoken of. My goal in this introductory survey is to find those intersections and
commonalities in the theoretical works and associate them in such a way that my
application of the works of Kincaid is relevant and coherent.

I do want to preface the following survey with a note to my intentions: my goal
here is pointing to those ideas and theories I am building my work upon, selectively
considering and translating those constituents of the postcolonial and ecocritical canons
that pertain to and engage with my own objectives. If it is my claim that these schools of
thought build an inroad to Kincaid, and that in turn her use of the body illustrates the
conditions resultant, then I must define just what previous work I am basing these claims
on. This is not to say that I will be cherry-picking theorists; I also cannot, in order to give
my central topic the space it needs, devote the time and energy that a more complete
compendium of the disciplines would entail. In short, though I am frontloading this
paper with theory, the body of this work will not be a theoretical roll-call, rather a deep
reading and attention to the primary text.

The Postcolonial

Jamaica Kincaid writes during and after the decolonization of her home island of
Antigua, a 108 square mile island in the Caribbean, which she left for American in 1965.
Her grandparents were of African, Scottish, and Carib Indian origins. (Paravisini-Gebert, 2). To say that she has a foreknowledge of the colonial is a given, but she also has the fairly unique position of being from a land only relatively recently postcolonial. Thus, each of her works are different, varying in degrees of saturation with the colonial and the after-effects of such.

Though I gave a brief definition earlier of the postcolonial, for a meatier, more politically charged definition though, I turn to Homi Bhabha:

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of east and west, north and south. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. (437)

Bhabha’s concluding taxonomy—nation, race, community, personal—and the relationship that to that ‘authority’ are the subjects I study. Further, the postcolonial does and must include the cosmopolitan subject. This is especially pertinent to my study, for it includes, as Bruce Robbins describes, “Instead of an ideal of detachment, actually existing cosmopolitanism is a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance” (3). In the novels I study it is these attachments, these negotiations of belonging and connection that drive and define the narrators. These connections—or the lack of them—create a cosmopolitan of each protagonist.
Kant’s original idea of a simultaneously uniting and diversifying existence through an international presence has naturally morphed in the more than 230 years since that idea was proffered. It is now imperative to include in the definition that which Anthony Appiah describes as the

…possibility that everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different, people. The cosmopolitan also imagines that in such a world not everyone will find it best to stay in a natal patria, so that the circulation of people among different localities will involve not only cultural tourism…but migration, nomadism and diaspora.

(Cosmopolitics, 92).

This is a fairly lovely way of describing James Clifford’s more politicized, more potent phenomenon of discrepant cosmopolitanisms, or “cultures of displacement and transplantation [that] are inseparable from specific, often violent histories of economic, political, and cultural interaction..”(36). It is these discrepant cosmopolitanisms that fill Kincaid’s novels as her protagonists either escape their islands for their only chance at education and a life unfettered by colonialism, or stay but remove themselves from the grips of that colonialism as much as is possible on a tiny island.

The Ecocritical

My wish with the ecocritical studies I use to illuminate the text, much like the postcolonial, is to enact a focusing on those definitions and examples of the environmental that are in direct conversation with postcolonial literature and can be
expressed through the body. David Abram describes this connection, this
ecophenomenology as a returning to the power of the body, the senses, and a
“recuperation of the incarnate, sensorial dimension of experience…a recuperation of the
living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded” (63). It is this embeddedness
that constitutes my entrance into Kincaid’s novels. There will be discussions of the
natural world, as well as the overarching idea of spaces. This still leaves a great deal of
variety available for study, for as Lawrence Buell points out, “That the concept of place
also gestures in at least three direction at once – toward environmental materiality,
toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond – makes it
an additionally rich and tangled arena for environmental criticism” (63). Thus the further
constriction of place to body offers a more manageable and understandable site of
information.

There are those from this school of thought that would fault my focus on the
body. Glen Love warns that scholars must “outgrow our notion that human beings are so
special that the earth exists for our comfort and disposal alone,” and that nature oriented
literature should be solely non-human, wary of the “ego-consciousness” (230). He is not
alone in this opinion, but neither is his viewpoint the predominant one. Cheryll Glotfelty,
in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* speaks with some authority when she
says, “But nature per se is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation.
Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers,
mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the **body**” [emphasis mine](xxii).
Jana Braziel also warns against this exclusion of the human, and of the body, especially
within the confines of the postcolonial:
...to do so is to ignore the ways in which history and colonial power have denied large segments of humanity its subjectivity and its ego and to perpetuate the deleterious distinction between “Man” and “Nature.” ... What would it mean for those history denied their humanity ... to be called upon by posthumanist ecocritics to renounce the ego- for eco-, when such a call merely reiterates historical locations of erasure (and collapses them into a dominated nature)? (111)

As I have already stated, this study is grounded in the idea of the body as the primary place. This is a step further than what Nicholas Entrikin describes as, “The geographical concept of place refers to the areal context of events, objects and actions. It is a context that includes natural elements and human constructions, both material and ideal” (6). This is to say that the body is included in nature, and is ecological in its status of biological. Further, it is the body’s connection to the natural and thus to the environment surrounding it that allows both that body and that place to be a possible source of plentitude and abundance.

The Study

For the core of my thesis, I will be considering Kincaid’s *Lucy*, *Autobiography of My Mother*, and *Annie John*. Because my argument of the importance of body and place relies on well-established theoretical work, I will use that previous scholarship to determine which elements of the novel place it in the aggregate of both postcolonial and environmental literature. I will then offer a deep reading for Kincaid’s use of body, both as a primary environment and as interface through which all other environment is processed. These three levels of study will be consistent, but my take on how Kincaid has
approached each (the postcolonial, environmental, and body) will necessarily differ in each novel. I will focus on several main themes that permeate each novel, each involving the body and its situatedness. These themes have in common a purpose of being a proxy for the place of origin and sense of source that the narrators each lack. Stuart Hall describes this phenomenon saying, “Who has not known, at this moment, the surge of an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for ‘times past’? And yet, this ‘return to the beginning’ … can neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery…” (402). It is these ‘lost origins’ and the search for the source, both as an effect of colonialism and a return to nature, that will temper and fill each aspect of these novels.

Beyond illuminating these connections of theory and literature, there is an end goal to the progression of my chapters. As I will follow Kincaid’s work chronologically, moving through her works as her distance to the colonial—both temporally and spatially—grows, I will track those things, those changes and shifts in representation, that point to the authors evolution of thought and attachment to her home and the colonial. Put simply, I expect to find Jamaica Kincaid is the one unified narrator within each novel, and that she will speak of her own relationship to place and body as a condition of the colonial, and that that same relationship will mature along with her.

The Novels

I start with *Annie John*, whose first real discovery of body and place as a young girl centers around death, and as she ages moves to the domestic. As is a theme in all
three novels, there will be a large focus on the mother and of losing the place of plenitude that her mother represents as the narrator matures and her body changes. This change causes Annie’s search to find her own worth first geographically, externally and then internally. This chapter will consider the colonial as well the ideas of home and of migration presented in the novel. I will study specifically how academic and domestic affect and define the protagonist. In her education, she is taught the values and lessons of another place. In her home, she is losing that place she was born into. In the process of this her body becomes a manifestation of the alteration of her identity.

In *Lucy*, Kincaid combines the body, the environment, and the fundamentals of postcolonial literature through the exploits of a young woman traveling away from her Caribbean home in the midst of a sexual awakening. This is a novel about escape and the power of place and environment to both haunt and be haunted. In terms of body, *Lucy* is rich in illustrations of the female body, how it functions and what power it has, and how the aforementioned haunting affects such. In this chapter, I will write specifically on the ideas of home and away. In *Lucy*, these are concepts that are often conflated as Lucy states, “I understood finding the place you are born an unbearable prison and wanting something completely different from what you are familiar with” (95). This chapter will include discussion on the difference between migration and travel, and the agency inherent in each. To travel denotes a sense of leisure, of free time, and the eventual ability and desire to return to some starting point. Migration offers no such potentiality of return and Kincaid’s protagonist denies any desire to do so. Again, a study of the mother will be presented, though in this case I will consider the trope of the search for source and how
*Lucy* parallels the mother and the motherland. Further, I will pay close attention to sex and smell, extensions of the body into a shared space.

In *Autobiography of My Mother*, narrator Xuela fulfills the postcolonial trope of being in search for a sense of source and a place of plenitude as she contemplates the memory and myth of her dead mother. This is significant in terms of body, as “probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies” (Rich, 3). It is this unrealized search for source that compels Xuela’s actions, her struggles with both the native and the colonial within herself, as well as her exploration of her own personal territory. Much like *Lucy*, there is an undeniable focus on sexuality, and of the agency provided a female body, though in this novel the impetus is not exploration but as an equation to a firm grasp on mortality. Further, Xuela’s notions of place are not of international travel, but of the conflicts latent between a domestic space and the environment of a small Caribbean island. I will also explore how Xuela is the culmination of the previous two narrators.

As I have explained, I will take on these three novels chronologically in order to suss out how Kincaid’s use of body reflects changes in her negotiations of the colonial and place throughout her career. Each chapter will include a survey on place and environment, and how changes in each are both signifiers of postcolonial literature, and signified by the body and its situatedness. As Stuart Hall says, “What we say is always ‘in context’, positioned…it is worth remembering that all discourse is ‘placed,’ and the heart has its reasons” (392). As these novels are all considered at least partially autobiographical, it stands to reason that Kincaid’s protagonists’ lives speak to Kincaid’s memories of colonialism and her connection to it the further away she is, the longer she is
away from that aspect of her life. This is not to suggest one can completely break from the legacy of colonialism. Kincaid herself is post-colonial, and as Hall writes, “The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as simple, factual ‘past’, since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always-already ‘after the break’. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (395). I posit that this is the very reason for the narrative temporal structure of her novels. There is no real sense of linear time in any of these works, save for when a narrator mentions their age in context to the scene presented. Kincaid also resists any popular culture references that may pinpoint her narrator in any specific era or decade. This leads to an unsettled temporality, a sense of displacement within the timeline of the protagonist’s life. What is fascinating is how that displacement is a mirror of the experience of colonialism. Again I look to Stuart hall, as he describes that “what we [persons post-colonial] share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity; the peoples dragged into slavery, transportation, colonisation, migration…” (395). This interruptedness, this sense of life stopped and not started again, is present in Kincaid’s style of narration and organization.

To reiterate, my aim is not to create a new hybrid critical or theoretical species. Rather, I wish to explore how the combination of these two disciplines may offer new insight on already available work, even work that has been studied under one lens or the other. It is my argument that a study of body can clarify the intersection of disciplines. Though the concept is not new – cultural geographers such as Michael Landzelius have noted “In emphasizing the production of knowledge, identity, ethics and politics as positioned practices embedded in particular social and cultural conditions, these strands...
of thought have turned the body as a key site for understanding the workings and
differentiation of society and thus for the reworking of social theory as well as politics”
(280)—I believe the application of these ideas to Kincaid’s work, and the outcome of that
study will offer a new perspective.
Chapter 1

*Annie John*

First in the chronology of the books of this study and the first of her novels, *Annie John* was published in 1985, not many years after Antigua disassociated with Britain in 1981. Understandably, the novel is entirely set within colonization yet still manages to be a work about beginnings, endings, change, and the process of self-defining. As Annie becomes conscious of both her body and her surroundings, there follows an awareness of space and environment. She begins to explore how her self fits into the many levels and variations of place she encounters. There is also a focus on how Annie negotiates the different spheres she must inhabit as she grows and changes. These spheres, these layers of place, constitute Annie’s reality and the struggles she confronts as she explores her own particular situatedness. She describes, “[My friends] sitting around me, the church in the distance, beyond that the school…the courtyard, beyond that the world, how I wished that all would fly away so that suddenly we’d be in some other atmosphere…”(53). These layers may seem simple—social, home, school, world—but because of the saturation of the colonial into each, Annie wishes for self-exile, to escape the grasp of colonialism and its authority. This novel is the translation of that search for self-authority, as Annie moves from an embeddedness in home and mother, to creating her own place of being to inhabit.

The Colonial

Throughout *Annie John*, Kincaid spends much time firmly seating her protagonist in the colonial. Annie’s direct experiences with imperialism occur mostly within the school setting. This is new and unsettling to her at first, for she finds herself in “a world
in which I was not even near the center”(41). This condition of being displaced from the center speaks of the othering unavoidable in an educational setting that favors a book on Roman Britain over A History of the West Indies, and notebooks illustrated with “a wrinkled up woman wearing a crown on her head and a neckful and armfuls of diamonds and pearls…”(40). Stuart Hall, describing a similar personal experience, says, “They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other’” (394). Even Annie’s favorite teacher participates as she reads The Tempest, a Shakespearean play concerning both being stranded on an island and the claiming of a birthright, certainly an interesting combination considering the colonial setting. This sort of hierarchy of place is echoed in the scene in which Annie is lauded for her moving autobiographical essay. Annie’s classmates write about traveling, leaving their island, and girls who “looked forward to one day moving to England to live” or who knew someone who knew someone that had tea with a Lady (40). However, Annie’s is set on the island and involves her mother, the two things that most constitute Annie’s sense of self at that time.

The school setting contains the two most literal instances of the influences of colonization within the novel, and they occur one as the result of the other. The first scene is one of the few which directly and with no allusion addresses the issue of race, colonialism, slavery, and history. Annie speaks of her white classmate Ruth, who:

…did not know the answer to many questions about the West Indies…Ruth had come all the way from England. Perhaps she did not want to be in the West Indies at all. Perhaps she wanted to be in England, where no one would remind her constantly of the terrible things her ancestors had done…Her ancestors had been
the masters, while ours had been the slaves…our ancestors had done nothing wrong except just sit somewhere, defenseless. (76)

But as Annie continues her description of the atmosphere of the classroom, the real issue comes to the surface: “Of course, sometimes, what with our teachers and our books, it was hard for us to tell on which side we really now belonged…for it was all history, it was all in the past and everybody behaved differently now; all of us celebrated Queen Victoria’s birthday…”(76). The girls, the inhabitants of the island, have been subsumed in the trappings of the British rule and Annie is well aware of the hypocrisy of this. As Nicholas Entrikin theorizes, “The conflict between the relatively objective, external vision embodied in our theoretical outlook, and the relatively subjective internal vision that we have of ourselves as individual agents represents a basic polarity of human consciousness” (9). This conflict of ideas translates as Annie being torn between being a part of and leader to her mates, and rejecting the system of learning created and supplied by the colonial structures that her schoolmates are a part of.

It is the aforementioned Ruth’s inability to answer a question on the discovery of Dominica that indirectly calls attention to Annie’s defacement of her schoolbook. The illustration is “Columbus in Chains” and represents an insulting appropriation of the imagery of the slave. This illustration signals that one instance of a European in shackles is important enough to merit a full illustration in their textbook, where no so mention is made of any art of the multitude of slaves who would have stayed in chains. The picture is in color and Columbus wears the rich clothing of the European. Annie takes joy in this picture, in the idea of the temporary reversal of the roles described earlier of the master and slave. Annie captions the picture “The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and
Go,” scripted in Old English calligraphy, perhaps as a counter-appropriation (82). Her script is discovered by her teacher and called blasphemous, for Columbus was the “discoverer of the island that was my home”(82). Annie’s punishment is to copy parts of Paradise Lost, an English poem devoted to the fall of man. That she is forced to replicate a part of the imperial canon is an illustration of how Amilcar Cabal proposes the cultural sublimation of colonialism operates:

The experience of colonial domination shows that, in the effort to perpetuate exploitation, the colonizer not only creates a system to repress the cultural life of the colonized people; he also provokes and develops the cultural alienation of a part of the population, either by so-called assimilation of indigenous people, or by creating a social gap between the indigenous elites and the popular masses. (57)

Annie is shamed in front of her class, her status of prefect is removed, and she fears the punishment and reprobation of her mother, all for the act of mocking this forefather of the imperial.

In addition to this episode, the haunt of slavery is quite real and throughout the novel there are allusions to the commodification of the body. In one such scene, during Annie’s extended and unexplained illness, Annie tells of how “…my father carrying me on his back, my mother walking by his side with her head bent down. The doctor, a man from England…now examined me from head to foot, poking me here and there…” (110). There follows a thorough examination of her body that on the surface likens Annie to livestock though, when taken in context of the rest of the novel, smacks of the slave trade. This all serves the purpose of reiterating Annie’s condition of being a colonial subject.
The Environment

Kincaid goes beyond placing Annie politically, in the cultural geographical sense. She also situates her as a part of and participant in the environment. There is much language to be found that points to just how interconnected Annie is, not simply with her home, but with the physical being of the island itself. As Annie begins to feel the rejection of her mother, she emotes this as “the earth swept away from under me” and “the ground washed out from under me” (27). And when she is happy, elated to make new friends, “the earth may have grown and inch or two larger” (39).

Kincaid is offering a pattern of the relationship between Annie’s body and the very ground she dwells upon. So when the discord between she and her mother hits its apex, Annie says “The ground had opened up between us, making a deep and wide split. On one side of this split stood my mother…on the other side stood I” (103). Similarly, when Annie is disoriented, uncomfortable, or is experience an unsettling change, the imagery of water is used. As her mother repeatedly calls her a slut, Annie claims “…suddenly I felt as if I were drowning in a well…pouring in through my eyes, my ears, my nostrils my mouth” (102). In the midst of her illness she dreams of drinking in the sea until it is gone, saying, “The sea filled me up, from my toes to my head…[until] I burst open. The water ran back and made up the sea again” (112). Annie then wakes to find that her body, in her dream state, has literally made water, reverting back to the condition of a small child wetting the bed in fright.

All of these illustrations, of colonialism and of the connection of Annie’s body to the earth work to situate the protagonist and provide a starting point for the journey Annie takes through the novel.
A Place for Death

Annie begins the process of self discovery that spans the novel by means of comparison: to the father, to her mother, to her classmates who “had no different ideas of how to be in the world, they certainly didn’t think that the world was a strange place to be caught living in” (90). This comparison eventually includes her own past and future self, and a recollection of the levels of place and situatedness that constitute her existence.

As will become a repeated device, Kincaid titles her chapters as a way of establishing her characters. *Annie John* begins with ‘Figures in the Distance’ and introduces Annie, marks her narratively-current place in the world, and raises the figure of Death. Death will become not only a condition but a place and a spectacle, and figuratively a symbol of the changes that occur within the novel. This chapter truly does begin with a geographical positioning of Annie, as in the same breath that she discloses her naiveté on death she also lists the road names of all the places she has lived. This immediately gives the sense of how very small her notion of the world and the realm of her experiences are.

Annie’s knowledge of death creates an interesting dichotomy. On one hand, she claims, “Until then I had not known children died” (4). This is significant because she herself was a child, and had not enough awareness of her own body to consider that it was finite and fallible. Annie lives in that condition of knowledge of the body that Merleau-Ponty describes as, “[The body’s] permanence is not a permanence in the world, but a permanence from my point of view” (90). She cannot fathom the temporariness of her own existence. And yet she has at that age a surrounding knowledge of obeah. Obeah
acts in this novel and the others in this study as a reclamation of original belief and practices in opposition to the European colonization and its effects. More specifically in this instance, it blurs the lines between the place of the living and the place and ambulatory powers of the dead. Annie claims, “I was afraid of the dead, as was everyone I knew…because we never could tell when they might show up again …sometimes they would show up standing under a tree just as you were passing by. Then they might follow you home…they might wait for you and follow you wherever you went” (4).

Death, normally a separation of body and consciousness, enters the state of ‘other’ within obeah and signifies in Annie the lack of a realized connection between body and being. What finally acts as catalyst and fixes death for Annie is the story of a girl younger than herself who “died in my mother’s arms” (5). Here, death comes to visit in very close proximity to Annie’s source (a subject I will dissect at length later). It is here, with the young girl as token that death becomes a signifier of change. Immediately after this is the first instance of many where Annie considers and subsequently rejects the body of her source, her mother. She recollects, “My mother had to prepare the little girl to be buried. I then began to look at my mother’s hands differently…For a while, though not for very long, I could not bear to have my mother caress me or touch my food or help me with my bath. I especially couldn’t stand the sight of her hands lying still in her lap” (6). That her mother’s hands deal in death, especially one so young as she, unsettles Annie and turns the familiar uncanny.

Soon Annie begins to realize that the body is a transient, mutable thing depending on its status and the space it inhabits. Annie says of someone she knew, was familiar with in many settings, “I tried to imagine her dead. I couldn’t. I didn’t know what someone
looked like dead” (8). Though certainly Annie had known this person in the act and place of many other circumstances, and so figured surely the woman must look different in death. For Annie’s reasoning, circumstances have changed, the body is left soulless and without purpose or action, thus it must have lost its connection to place and must be physically changed itself.

Annie further explores the connection of body and being as she becomes obsessed with death and the rituals surrounding it. She attends funerals for some time before finally finding one of someone she knew and for whom she had some bodily reference point. Of the young girl she says, “Lying there dead, she looked the same, except her eyes were closed and she was so still…when I looked at this girl, it was if the View-Master wasn’t working properly” (11). Annie’s allusion to a toy reestablishes her youth. However, this experience leads to yet another change and another measure in the separation of Annie and her mother. Annie lies about where she has been, the first of many instances of Annie’s anxiety of the place she inhabits. As punishment she must eat her supper “outside, alone, under the breadfruit tree” (12), a place previously mentioned only as a place of the dead, where they may visit and haunt. In fact, throughout the novel, the space beneath a tree acts a liminal place of both life and death, or rather a place of not quite being. Annie speaks of the tree under which her mother sat while pregnant with her, before Annie had officially entered the world (20). That Annie’s mother makes this an area of punishment several times is intriguing as in doing such she takes further control of Annie’s being. The trees become a combination of the environment and the precariousness of the body, all while acting as yet another arbiter of Annie’s process of
change. And yet it is fitting, as the space under tree is a place of questionable “being” for those who inhabit that space are in flux, between their current space and the next.

The Homeplace

As Annie matures and moves towards an establishment of self, she must negotiate several degrees of place. Once such specific layer of her world is the domestic. As Gaston Bachelard describes in *The Poetics of Space*, “…Our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first Universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (4). This iteration of place is interesting in that it is a space of intimacy, and yet is a shared space that you must inhabit, learn, then leave and recreate elsewhere. As another noted theorist of cultural geography, Yi-Fu Tuan, explains, “…the lifepath of a human being moves naturally from ‘home’ to ‘world’, from ‘hearth’ to ‘cosmos.’ We grow into a larger sphere of activity and responsibility” (2). This is an area of vulnerability for Annie as the thought that “the day might actually come when we would live apart I had never believed” (29). The condition of cohabitation is all Annie has known, and so to her, to live is to be in constant proximity to her mother. Domesticity encompasses her realm of experiences to this point, as well as her body and to an extent her belief system. “My mother and I often took a bath together…my mother would bathe different parts of my body; then she would do the same to herself. We took these baths after my mother had consulted with her obeah woman…” (14). At this stage in Annie’s life the domestic—the home—has been purely the domain of her mother. This means entirely more than just the grounds and architecture, and the running of a household; it means also the lives of those dwelling under her roof, particularly Annie. Her mother is the master of the home and of Annie herself and while she is young she respects that and worships her mother and her
role, saying “I would sit in a corner of our yard and watch her. She never stood still” (25).

The mother seems to share a physicality with the house, that for Annie, the home is an extension of the mother’s body and the nurture and protection of it provides. In this home, with child-Annie, the roles are clear. She has yet to question her place and the effects of colonialism have not yet made themselves known to her.

But Annie necessarily changes, grows, matures, and is “on the verge of becoming a young lady” (26). She explores this development, examining her body “behind closed doors,” out of the reach and gaze of her mother, though still within her domain. This is in contrast to the later scene of Annie’s partially exposed form amongst the tombstones with her classmates. Annie’s mother senses these changes, of her new knowledge of her own body and begins to groom Annie for a life outside of her home. Annie is bewildered at first, wondering, “And why was my mother carrying my new state so far? She took to pointing out that one day I would have my own house and I might want it to be a different house from the one she kept” (28). This worry represents an anxiety of the loss of source and abundance that until this point had been in the form of the mother and the home, connecting the body to the domestic.

As Annie becomes more and more self aware, the domestic becomes a space of contention and of rebellion. The space beneath the house, where the home goods no longer in use are stored, becomes Annie’s space. Here, in this cramped area between the earth and the home, Annie takes her first steps away from the rule of her mother. Here she keeps her stolen books (55), and her illicit marbles (66), those few things that belong to and were gotten solely by her. Annie is aware, if subconsciously, of the connection of habitat and her rebellion as she says, “I always slammed the gate to our yard behind me
when I was up to something” (54). This highlights Annie’s knowledge that she must begin to separate herself and her exploration of such from the home and all that it entails.

Clothing the Body

A significant motif situated both within and without the domestic is the sartorial. Clothing, which is made and donned inside the home but for the purpose of the out-of-home-sphere, is especially pertinent because it is what we cover and protect the body with while still attempting to define ourselves by those choices. Clothing morphs along with Annie as she matures and gains independence. Early in the novel, her concern is the infant and children’s clothing her mother made, now kept in the trunk with all the things she finds most important of her childhood. These things comfort her as they symbolize her mother’s protection and command over her body. In fact, for some time Annie and her mother “had many dresses made out of the same cloth, though hers had a different, more grown up style…” (25). At this point, Annie is still an extension of her mother’s body, covered in the same fabric. The very first scene in which Annie’s mother initiates a separation, and the first instance Kincaid writes of Annie’s distress regarding her mother involves clothing.

The summer of the year I turned twelve, I could see that I had grown taller; most of my clothes no longer fit…my mother and I had gone to get some material for new dresses…I immediately said how much I loved this piece of cloth and how nice I thought it would look on us both, but my mother replied, “Oh, no. You are getting to 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.” (26)
Though I will speak at length about Annie and her mother, and how the progression of their relationship mirrors Annie’s reconciliation of body and place, I must make brief mention of it here in relation to the sartorial. Annie and her mother go from dressing in the same cloth, just as once they inhabited the same body and space. The mother initiates a detachment which at first discomforts Annie, then serves as a focal point of her own rebellion and subsequent awakening. Kincaid hints that this defiance is analogous amongst Annie’s peers, a shared experience as they defy their schoolmasters. They dance and sing, and embrace a sort of school-girl wantonness that leaves them “missing ribbons and other ornaments from our hair, the pleats of our linen tunics became unset, the collars of our blouses were pulled out, and we were soaking wet all the way down to our bloomers” (80). Some even go so far as to wear “underpants trimmed with lace and satin frills” (81). Here, amongst their friends, at the end of the school yard and between the tombs and gravestones of those long dead, the girls loosen their clothing, they shift the barrier between their bodies and the world. Their play turns to a celebration of their newly-discovered bodies, virile over the dormant remains of the colonizers.

The idea of clothing being an intermediary between body and environment is again affirmed by the description of Annie’s clothing after she breaks free of her bedridden depression. “I needed new uniforms…I had the skirt of my uniform made to a length that ended just below my calves…I bought a hat whose crown and brim were too big for me, and when I wore it, my head was held down and it was difficult to see my face” (128). Annie has decided that her life, and especially the island, no longer fits properly. As she makes this discovery, she also begins building the material wall between herself and the island that she will need to survive the severing to come.
A Sharing of the Body

In terms of repeated themes throughout Kincaid’s works, sex and sexuality ranks among the most utilized (second only perhaps to the mother figure which I will cover later). Sex serves as an outward projection of the body, and as a means of sharing place with another person. It is also, in this novel, a means of defining the place the body already inhabits, and the relationship of those in proximity. For much of the novel, Annie’s expressions of sexuality have a Sapphic quality. Annie claims to love all of these girls, including Sonia and Gwen with whom she was “not touching but feeling as if we were joined at the shoulder, hip, and ankle not to mention heart” (48). It is with girls such as these, classmates, that Annie discovers the power and beauty of her body.

It is conceivable that Annie chooses to express her sexuality amongst other girls—besides the obvious and entirely valid notion that she’s gay—for several reasons. One possibility is that she is seeking source through a surrogate female body. Another option that it is pure proximity and convenience, going to an all girl’s school and without opportunities for social interactions with boys. There is also a potential that her avoidance of boys is due to a previous trauma. Annie tells the story of Mineu, only a few years older than her who tricked her into “a game we were making up on the spot, I took off all my clothes and he led me to a spot under a tree, where I was to sit until he told me what to do next. It wasn’t long before I realized that the spot he had picked out was a red ants’ nest. Soon the angry ants were all over me, stinging me in my private parts…he fell down on the ground laughing…”(100). So it is possible that this memory and this anxiety of violence causes Annie to seek comfort and sameness in other girls. She claims, “Since in
the world we occupied and hoped forever to occupy boys were banished, we had to make
do with ourselves. What perfection we found in each other…”(50).

These experiences seem innocent and natural explorations of the body, especially
when compared to Annie’s relationship with her Red Girl. This infatuation turned
obsession takes a quite masochistic turn as she describes, “Oh, the sensation was
delicious—the combination of pinches and kisses” (63). Annie revels in the
punishment/redemption cycle of her affair, enacting and embodying the increasingly
hostile relationship between her and her mother, but with a more acceptable, pleasurable
conclusion.

In light of these experiences, there is an irony in the fact that it is Annie’s only
noted interaction with a boy after she has entered puberty—and a fairly innocuous
meeting at that—that brings her mother’s wrath and acts as a tipping point for their
relationship. Annie’s mother accuses her of promiscuity, of sharing her body
indiscriminately, and behaving in way that did not fit the particular place she was in.
Annie says, “The word ‘slut’ (in patois) was repeated over and over until suddenly I felt
as if I were drowning…As if to save myself, I turned to her and said ‘Well, like father
like son, like mother like daughter’” (102). It is her mother’s response that undoes Annie,
for she says, “‘Until this moment, in my whole life I knew without a doubt that, without
any exception, I loved you best’ and then she turned her back…” (103). This act of the
mother physically removing herself, rejecting Annie from her source, instigates the
depression that eventually leads Annie to separate herself from the island and her mother
altogether.
However, the separation truly begins well before this with another scene of the body and sexuality at its impetus. Annie witnesses a scene of intimacy between her parents and later she describes her mother’s voice to Annie afterwards as cross and “sort of something else” (31). Annie claims, “I was sure I could never let those hands touch me again, I was sure I could never let her kiss me again. All that was finished” (32). In realizing that her mother is sexually active, Annie realizes that she is not the only one to have known her mother’s body, to have a shared that place of intimacy and closeness. Later, in the midst of her delirium, Annie ruins a photo of her family, erasing with water her parents from the waist down and herself nearly entirely. Annie, in her depression, seeks a new definition of herself and chooses to erase her origin and the proof of her parent’s copulation. And as she strives to create her own self, she must cease to be the product of her parents’ union.

The Mother

I have spoken much already on the figure of Annie’s mother, though now I must push further into this topic as I feel a more intense study serves several purposes. First, Jamaica Kincaid surely offers no dearth of writing on the archetype of the maternal, and to downplay the topic ignores a vital component of the motivations and character building of her novels. Second, the mother figure offers the quiet answer to a major apparatus of postcolonial literature: whether it be the exile or migrant without a home, or the colonial subject lacking a sense of belonging, in these conditions there follows a search for source, a quest for a place of abundance and plenitude. Replacement can be found in the mother. To my final point—as my purpose is to consider how Kincaid uses the body to express place and that subsequent relationship to the postcolonial, and as I
have argued that the body is the primary place of experience—it stands to reason that the mother, and especially the body of the mother must be factored in as progenitor of that narrator’s body and of her situatedness.

It is evident that during her early years, Annie’s fixation on her mother was all-consuming. Beyond the idea of learning and embodying the domestic, Annie seems to be building an ontology based around her mother. This is true throughout the breadth of the novel. Annie’s first sense of being is an attempt at being a replica of her mother. “I spent the day following my mother around and observing the way she did everything…How important I felt to be with my mother” (15). At this age, she still views her mother as some omniscient, omnipresent being, more than just source and closer to a thing of wonder. This foreshadows some of the later relationships Annie forms—especially with Gwen and the Red Girl—infatuations and adorations that envelope her. Kincaid makes it apparent early on that as part of this building of self, what Annie feels, she feels entirely.

Annie’s past is the domain of her mother, who opens and presents the contents of the trunk, this thing that becomes synecdoche of everything that happened before Annie’s condition of “young-ladyness.” She states, “No small part of my life was so unimportant that she hadn’t made note of it, and now she would tell it to me over and over again” (22). These stories date all the way back to when Annie was en utero, so it follows that the trunk represents the mother’s bid at claiming that title of source. No one else would know Annie’s story so well as the one who wrote it, as the only one who had been there from the absolute beginning. As she hears these stories, Annie returns to the stage of being physically connected to her mother, claiming, “As she told me these stories, I sometimes sat at her side, leaning against her, or I would crouch on my knees behind her
back and lean over her shoulder” (22). It is as though as Annie explores her source in order to build her self, there is a need to connect to the physical, bodily manifestation of that source.

When physically describing her mother, Annie speaks as if describing a work of art. She covers every aspect of her countenance, but what struck me was that “her head looked as if it should be on a sixpence” (18). This allusion to royalty is indicative of the level of reverence Annie pays her mother. It also points to the subtle encroachment of colonialism into not just the everyday life, but also into their relationships. There is also that undercurrent of the idea that Annie’s mother is an analogy of the colonial, the mother-land embodied. As Giselle Anatol defines it, “African-Caribbean Women in particular must reconcile themselves with a maternal role that is not only affected by the legacies of colonialism, including the metaphor of the ‘mother’ country, but is also intricately bound up in the violence and dehumanization of enslavement…replaying a situation of loss, longing, lack, and unanswerable desire” (938). This may seem counterintuitive, but in the case of Kincaid’s novels, the mother represents the figure of authority that promises protection and then becomes the oppressor, thus embodying that loss of nurture as well as the longing for source.

I have mentioned before the scene of Annie’s mother preparing another young girl to be buried, and the subsequent revulsion Annie feels towards her mother’s hands. To Annie, the knowledge that her mother had physical power in this liminal space of death makes Annie uneasy, though she may not express it as such for her universe is already wrapped so completely in her mother. When one of Annie’s early loves loses her mother, Annie cannot even speak to her for, “She seemed such a shameful thing, a girl whose
mother had died and left her alone in the world” (8). Annie finds the idea of being completely without the physical presence of source an uncanny and unsettling idea. That the mother died while pregnant alludes to a father still being present, but to Annie, to be without a mother is to be entirely alone.

This condition of being without mother and thus entirely alone is echoed later in the novel in the form of Annie’s autobiographical essay in which she finds herself unable to be physically connected with her mother and is thus terrified. This preview of loss so affects Annie that she wears the physical effects of it on her body and she says, “I had let the tears just dry there and they had left a stain” (44). This scene is quite telling in terms of just how much Annie’s young world revolves around her mother, so much so that the language actually encompasses both the body and the surrounding environment. “The only way I could go into the water was if I was on my mother’s back, my arms clasped tightly around her neck, and she would then swim around not too far from the shore. It was only then that I could forget how big the sea was, how far down the bottom could be, and how filled up it was with things that couldn’t understand a nice hallo” (42). The resulting realization that she could and eventually would be separated from her source is so pivotal to Annie that she chooses to focus her story of self, her autobiographical essay on it.

And yet even here, in this vignette, is the haunting of what is to come when that severing is complete, for Annie describes, “A huge black space then opened up in front of me and I fell inside it” (43). This is an illustration of the lack of source being equivalent to a displacement, a stateless sense of being. The blackness is also a prelude to the depression Annie will enter as she finishes the extrication of her ontology, her self, from
that of her mother’s. I will certainly touch on that later but for the moment it is worth noting this split is far enough in the process that she has the presence of mind to lie about her mother’s reaction to her nightmares about that day. Though she tells her class that her mother comforts her, her state of ‘young-ladyness’ actually earns her a turned back, an even deepening schism between her and her mother.

Annie’s relationship and interaction with her mother goes through a metamorphosis, moving from something akin to a symbiosis to a separation nearing repulsion. The very earliest stages of this change begin at the onset of the novel, as Annie recognizes simultaneously that her mother’s body is not simply an extension of her own, and that her own body was vulnerable. Suellen Campbell describes this period, “we emerge from the unity of infancy only when we begin to experience ourselves as separate from everything else, especially from our mother’s bodies…At the core of our sense of self, then, is our feeling of loss and the desire for unity that is born of loss” (134). As Annie finds independence, she gains a sense of loss that is unknown to her until this point. It is this confusion of experiences that colors their encounters.

Eventually Annie’s relationship with her mother becomes one of contradictions, a nod to the cliché “can’t live with her, can’t live without her,” though in a very literal sense. Annie laments, “Suddenly I had never loved anyone so, or hated anyone so…But I could not wish my mother dead…I could not imagine my life without her. Worse than that, if my mother died I would have to die too…” (88). Annie has not yet completed her task of self creation; she still considers herself entirely linked to her mother and thus her relationship becomes one of self-preservation.
This eventually changes, as Annie moves towards an individuality, and as she claims, “I missed my mother more than I had ever imagined possible and wanted only to live somewhere quiet and beautiful with her alone, but also at that moment I wanted only to see her lying dead, all withered and in a coffin at my feet” (106). Annie is aware to some extent of this slow estrangement and the necessity of it. Adrienne Rich, in her seminal work *Of Woman Born*, describes this perfectly: “The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother. That earliest enwrapment of one female body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo; but it is, at the beginning, the whole world” (219). In a tableau that encompasses the idea of how our source and our bodies mediate how we encounter the world, Annie worries that to continue her relationship with her mother as it is would to be to run the risk of being unable to distinguish “when it was really my mother, and when it was really her shadow standing between me and the rest of the world” (107).

This realization comes immediately after a scene I consider crucial in Annie’s metamorphosis. Annie asks for a trunk of her own, a simple enough request. Up until this point the trunk has symbolized the past the she and her mother shared, a past that her mother controlled. In asking for one of her own (106), Annie both denounces that past and reclaims for that object is original purpose: movement and travel. Whether or not she means to, she is stating her intention to leave, for her mother’s trunk was originally used to leave her home island. Further, her grandmother’s trunk allows her to come and go as she pleases. Annie seeks to claim the agency of movement for herself.
A Separation

The request for a trunk of her own comes, at least in the narrative chronology, right before Annie begins the final steps in the process of her independence. I have previously termed this period Annie’s “depression” or “illness” for lack of a better word, and because the terms certainly describe the outward appearance of what Annie experiences. But to consider this period deeper, and with the foreknowledge of Annie’s transformation, it seems the word depression may almost be an antonym of sorts for what is actually happening. The image of the butterfly encasing itself comes to mind, so perhaps I’ll consider it ‘chrysalisation’ (which is a much prettier word that the actual scientific term of **molting**).

In the penultimate chapter that encompasses this period, “The Long Rain,” Annie enters a state of flux, delirious and dreaming, yet with no physical symptoms, just as the rains begin their deluge that bring the sea to the sky and land. With this comes the connection that Annie recognizes, saying, “I knew quite well that I did not have the power to make the atmosphere feel as sick as I felt, but still I couldn’t help putting the two together” (126). David Abrams, in *The Spell of the Sensuous* describes this connection of body, ecology, and emotion: “The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn” (33). Yes, the rain washed away so many natural features of the island, but it was also necessary for the growth to come. For as the rain left so did Annie’s darkness. It leaves behind the realization for Annie that she “longed to be in a place where nobody knew a thing about me…” (127).
The time Annie spends in this state introduces a new connection of body and place, one that is technically void of either: those liminal spaces of dreams, memory and even delirium. These are places that Annie inhabits within herself and a theme that will appear again and again with Kincaid. Annie insists, “My dreams were not unreal representations of something real; my dreams were a part of, and the same as, my real life” (89). And Annie speaks frequently of dreams, daydreams, of sensations of falling into dark empty spaces. She imagines her body changing, morphing into the unrecognizable. What these moments have in common is that they take Annie’s self out of her actual place. These dreams, as dark as they are, are the beginnings of her ultimate self-exile. It is when this ‘chrysilisation’ ends that Annie gains the agency and control she needs to complete her revival: “When I stepped on the ground, it didn’t move. The sounds I heard didn’t pass through me in a giant angry funnel. The things I saw stayed in their places” (127). As Annie emerges from this state, she is no longer at the mercy of her environment, maternal or colonial.

A Situating

Just as Kincaid begins her novel with an accounting of place, so she ends with a re-census of sorts. Again, the chapter title is indicative of the protagonist’s situation. “A Walk to the Jetty” recalls the movement of Annie, both within the spheres of place she inhabits, and within her search for self. The very first sentence of the chapter is a declaration. “’My name is Annie John.’ These were the first words that came into my mind as I woke up on the morning of the last day I spent in Antigua, and they stayed there...” (130). Lucy has completed the detachment from her mother and now must do the same from her island. There is a sense of obligation to the self that leads Annie away
from her home, “I did not want to go to England, I did not want to be a nurse, but I would have chosen going off to live in a cavern and keeping house for seven unruly men rather than go on with my life as it stood. I never wanted to lie in this bed again, my legs hanging out way past the foot of it” (131). Annie realizes that she must leave; she literally no longer fits on the island. In being removed from her source—her mother—she must then relocate her place of being, leaving her home, her island, and all behind. Annie recognizes that her growth and self establishment cannot happen under her mother’s roof, and her mother’s roof encompasses the island. “The bitter thing about it is that they are just the same and it is I who have changed, so all the things I used to be and all the things I used to feel are as false as the teeth in my father’s head”, Annie claims, “This is what I add up to” (133). And so she prepares to go, to sail to England. And it is as she is leaving, that ‘walk to the jetty,’ that her life on the island lines up before her for one last reckoning of herself and place, for she says, “It was all of half an hour’s walk from our house to the jetty, but I was passing through most of the years of my life” (138). And the effect this movement through both time and place has on Annie is unsettling for she says, “As I passed by all these places, it was as if I were in a dream…I didn’t feel my feet touch the ground, I didn’t even feel my own body…” (143). There is a sense of a real and physical detachment occurring. But she presses on, and it is her fear that reminds her how she came to be in this place, “I was on the verge of feeling that it had all been a mistake, but I remembered that I wasn’t a child anymore…At that moment, we came to the ship, and that was that” (146).
is a novel of endings and beginnings. Annie’s childhood ends and her relationship with her mother degrades as her body matures and her attention to situation and place heightens. There is an establishment and a sense of discovery that will be carried forward to the following novels, built upon both as the narrators change, mature and age, and as their relationships with their home islands alter.

 establishes the criteria by which I will track Kincaid’s shifting, maturing allegiances. Here, Annie speaks of her youth, of her mother’s attention to her, how “she might stoop down and kiss me on my lips and then on my neck” and how because of these things, because of her mother acting at that point as this source of protection and abundance, “It was in such a paradise that I lived” (25). Kincaid herself nearly echoes this sentiment, with a commentary on not just mother, but motherland, “No one growing up in any of these islands ever thinks it's a paradise. Everybody who can leave, leaves. So it's not this paradise that's a big influence on me. It's not the physical Antigua. It's the paradise of mother in every way: the sort of benign, marvelous, innocent moment you have with the great powerful person who, you then realize, won't let you go” (147). It is this interconnectedness of mother and island, and the inseparability of the daughter and mother that fill the novel. These are the correlations that allow inferences which illuminate the reading and place it in context. For Kincaid this first novel is a beginning commentary, a primary airing of her relationship with her home island, the colonial, and the attachments she severed when she left. Her reconciliation at this point has just begun. It is the child-Annie, just discovering a separateness and the implications of that detachment.
Chapter 2

Lucy

As is Kincaid’s custom, her first chapter, especially the title—*The Poor Visitor*—immediately situates the protagonist, fitting her neatly into two very distinct categories. Before the narrator is even introduced Kincaid has set Lucy as a visitor, a non-native inhabitant of a place for an indefinite but limited amount of time who ostensibly has designs to leave, perhaps to return to an origin, perhaps to move to the next site of visitation. This idea of visitor is troubled by the fact of Lucy’s socioeconomic status. James Clifford writes, “I struggle, never quite successfully, to free the related term ‘travel’ from a history of European, literary, male, bourgeois, scientific, heroic, recreational meanings and practices” (33). Lucy is none of these things and has not traveled so much as migrated. This makes the moniker of “visitor” especially ironic, when considering that the person who gives Lucy the nickname fits nearly all of Clifford’s qualifications. The ‘poor’ epithet is vague as to whether it points to the pitiable or denotes a socioeconomic status, or perhaps a bit of both. I believe it much more likely that Kincaid chose this title in order to call to mind the émigré, as Lucy is not a tourist and she does not set out as a leisurely consumer of culture. She is indeed a poor traveler and her lack of status is evident in her very first words: “It was my first day.” Just that, no other qualifiers. Her narration quickly moves on to her settings and in that very first page, of what was her ‘first day,’ Lucy makes clear just how crucial place is to her. Even down to the mere ideas and imaginations of place. She remarks, “…all these places were lifeboats to my small drowning soul” (3) of those landmarks she encounters.
With this classification of visitor comes the first sense of the connection of body and place, between the person and the space that they inhabit. A person may become part of the environment or an agent in the function, even existence of a place. It is this anthropocentric view of her environment that Kincaid grants Lucy. Lucy’s interactions with her surroundings are much less about observation and appreciation and instead are almost entirely tied to memory, status, and agency. In fact, nearly immediately after her confessed daydreams of the monuments of the big city, Lucy laments, “Now that I saw these places, they looked ordinary, dirty, worn down by so many people…” (4). I think this reaction is partially due to Lucy being troubled by the disconnect between the dreamspace and the physical world, that what lived in her imagination might not be entirely hers, accessed by so many other bodies in reality. I think it is equally likely that Lucy, upon arriving in the United States, is so eager to shuffle off the weight of her home that she immediately realizes she is now part of those “so many people.” John Agnew’s theories on nationalism help explain this, as “…physical images, buildings, monuments, and scenes encountered in everyday life come to provide a mundane or banal element to nationalism itself…Monumental spaces and other places of memory have been of particular significance in potentially bonding current residents to a common past” (233). She has left the collective of her island only to be swept into the definition of a new nation. Lucy carries the status of visitor or immigrant from a nation that is still, at least in the setting of the novel, colonized. She comes to a nation that is both a universal refuge and at the same time, technically—in a very past-tense sort of way—postcolonial itself. This creates a constant awareness of and reverence to place and location. Because of this, much of the novel is concerned with where the line is drawn between immigrant and
visitor, between traveler and migrant, and what part embodiment and agency plays in these questions. Lucy is aware that the status of visitor is automatically applied to her by both her host and her compatriots who “couldn’t wait until the day came when I returned” (11). But in effort to reclaim and retain the agency of deciding upon her own place and position, she struggles with and eventually rejects the idea of returning, saying, “I could not go back,” (10) and “I knew I never wanted to live in that place again” (51). By choosing her place, she marks her intent at building her own self and identity.

Being Postcolonial

Kincaid has written the character of Lucy as person-postcolonial, as she has left her island and its colonialism behind. I’d like to address the lingering effects of colonialism and how those manifest in Lucy’s body and the characters surrounding her. Clifford describes this as “diasporic forms of longing, memory, and (dis)identification [that] are shared by a broad spectrum of minority and migrant populations” (247). Though she has left the island, the island is inextricable in who she is and how she experiences her new home.

There is a vignette to Lucy’s life on the island that is referenced several times in the novel: the trope of the daffodils and Lucy’s visceral, physical reaction to them. The first mention of them is as a part of a poem that Lucy was made to memorize at “Queen Victoria girls school”, which anchors them, though they are part of the natural world, as a colonial object. They do not belong to Lucy or on her island, and so they quickly become a symbol of the intrusion of colonization. Lucy, unaware of what the flowers even look like, has nightmares of them (18), and when she finally does encounter them, her reaction nears violence: “They looked beautiful; they looked simple, as if made to erase a
complicated and unnecessary idea. I did not know what these flowers were, and so it was a mystery to me why I wanted to kill them” (29). This complicated and unnecessary idea is Lucy herself, her people and their subdued collective. When she is told the name of these flowers, in her reaction there is an attention to body and place that illustrates just how linked Lucy’s experiences of colonization are to her current self:

…how could I explain to her the feeling…that it wasn’t exactly daffodils, but that they would do as well as anything else? Where should I start? Over here or over there? Anywhere would be good enough but my heart and my thoughts were racing so that every time I tried to talk I stammered and by accident bit my own tongue (29). [emphasis mine]

This brings to mind James Clifford’s explanation of an aspect of the diasporic experience, which he states as “The co-presence of ‘here’ and ‘there’ is articulated with an antiteleological temporality. Linear history is broken, the present constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired, but obstructed, future: a renewed, painful yearning” (264). There will always be a “there”, an origin for Lucy to compare her “here” to. Mariah, her American employer, is unable to comprehend Lucy’s reaction, even as Lucy tries to explain her bitterness, her anger at having her own culture preempted for a British poem “about some flowers I would not see until I was nineteen’(29). Kincaid further deepens the divide between the experiences of Lucy and Mariah, as the latter is unaware of and untouched by the specter of violence and oppression and is therefore unable to picture “her beloved daffodils in a scene she had never considered, a scene of conquered and conquest…where she saw beautiful flowers, I saw sorrow and bitterness” (30). This instance does not stand alone in terms of the marked separation between Lucy and
Mariah, as Kincaid uses Mariah as a sort of situational photo-negative. For instance, the language Mariah uses off-handedly, words like ‘minions’ of which Lucy claims, “A word like that would haunt someone like me; the place where I came from was a dominion of someplace else” (37). This is just one example of how Lucy’s place of origin has made her vulnerable.

Lucy, for much of the novel, lives in a situational limbo as she recognizes and comes to terms with the effects of her immigration, the imprints of her abandoned island life, and her struggle to establish her place and subsequent identity in America. As she travels with Mariah there arises a conflict between her new ability to be just that, a traveler, and her visually obvious belonging to a race that did not have such a history of being able to travel of their own free will. “The other people sitting down to eat dinner all looked like Mariah’s relatives,” Lucy describes, “the people waiting on them all looked like mine” (32). And so Lucy’s status is troubled, for she is in an uncharted space of working, serving even, a white family, and at the same time eating dinner on a train while on the way to a vacation destination. James Clifford writes of this phenomenon, “A host of servants, helpers, companions, guides, and bearers have been excluded from the role of proper travelers because of their race and class, and because theirs seemed to be a dependent status in relation to the supposed independence of the individualist, bourgeois voyager” (33). This problematic situation provokes nightmares, as Lucy is well aware that the land she is riding through and the holiday she is going on are not fully hers. “I would wake up sure that thousands of people on horseback were following me, chasing me, each of them carrying a cutlass to cut me up into small pieces” (32). Lucy’s subconscious cannot escape the shadow of her cultural memory of violence. Kristen
Mahlis comments on this theme, saying “In describing the violence of colonial conquest, Kincaid emphasizes a fundamental loss of security and belonging… the colonial condition of existential rootlessness. The seizure of land, the disruption of sexual and familial relationships, the erasure of culture—all these make up the legacy of colonialism” (164). This condition of vulnerability persists to Lucy regardless of her geographic location.

Even as the novel follows Lucy’s progress towards claiming herself and her body, these moments of fragility highlight just what terrain Lucy must cross to stake that claim. Lucy must extricate her embodiment from the aforementioned position of service, as she explains “when I left my home, I had wrapped around my shoulders the mantle of a servant” (95). So in leaving the West Indies, Lucy yoked herself and her body to the notion of the subaltern. That Lucy would choose the uncertainty of America—though it is a place where her body and her appearance may well require the raiment of subservience—that she would choose this over remaining in her home speaks volumes of the oppressions, cultural and personal, of colonialism. This position of being no longer willing to stay home, yet being also unable to claim any other place as one’s own demonstrates my previously discussed definition of the hybrid cosmopolite. This idea is even voiced by Lucy, as she says, “I was lying there, in a state of no state, almost as if under ether” (121). She has become a citizen of the world but at home in no place

The Natural

Though Kincaid has certainly made clear that her protagonist is trying to make her own place in a new world, there can be no question of her relative foreignness. Lucy
is subject to the notions of exoticism and othering, which Kincaids presents in an ecological fashion.

These two plants grew so plentiful where I came from that sometimes they were regarded as a nuisance, weeds, and were dug up and thrown in the rubbish. And now here they were, treasured, sitting in a prominent place in a beautiful room, a special blue light trained on them. And here I was also, a sort of weed in a way.

(99)

It is here that Lucy recognizes a particular value of her otherness. She is likened to a work of art, specially lit and prized. There is an undertone here of the objectification that accompanies the status of the adored, but Kincaid chooses to forego any deeper acknowledgement of that, and offers instead an unexpected aggregate of the biological and cultural.

The combination of this reference to nature and Lucy’s being and her awareness of that affiliation highlights another sharp juxtaposition between Lucy and Mariah. Whereas Lucy is a weed, there is a sense that Mariah can only superficially connect with the environment, using her social influence to champion a cause. But like others of her status, she is unable to understand the “connection between their comforts and the decline of the world that lay before them” (72). Further, for much of the novel, Lucy struggles to affect the space around her in spite of her class and economic standing, whereas Mariah’s wealth changes the space around her without her recognition. This is not to say that an awareness of and connection to the environment and the fiscal and cultural ability to travel at will must be mutually exclusive. But Kincaid paints an undertone of, if not disingenuousness, then at least a cluelessness to Mariah’s attempts at association with the
otherness that Lucy inhabits. At one point, Mariah attempts to ally herself with Lucy by claiming to be some part Native American. This self-othering, rightly unsuccessful, leads Lucy to question “How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?” (41) If Lucy’s struggles with place and the notion of home are an attempt at least in part to come to terms with her source, both maternal and geographical, then Mariah’s attempts constitute yet another form of the appropriation that litters the colonial landscape. Even the phrase Mariah uses, “I have Indian blood” (40) seems simultaneously a desperate grasp at legitimacy through legacy, and also to be showcasing the specter of violence. Instead of saying that she descends from, or has ancestors that are, Mariah says “I have Indian blood,” leaving the reader to be haunted by the absent “on my hands.”

Mother and Motherland

Though Lucy attempts to completely extricate herself from her home, she is never able to completely separate her place of being from her place of origin. As I have previously and will continue to discuss how Kincaid writes of the act of carrying homeland with you as you travel, mentally and culturally, Lucy manages to also do this physically and materially. Lucy’s various letters from home come to act as synecdoche of her island, as she keeps them together, relegated to her room in a private space of intimacy. They are personal, though she refuses to open them or even consider them. They are all voices from her past and memory, and while she would have them near to her physically, she knows that were she to open them she would unbalance the tenuous hold she has on her place in New York. She fears any reconnection of those attachments she has begun the process of severing.
It is when she is forced to acknowledge the letter from her mother that the connection of home (and by extension, place) and body and letter is fully realized. “I had been holding on so hard to the letter…that it had become a part of my body and I no longer noticed it,” Lucy says of the letters that plead, “I must please come home now” (126). This appeal from her mother creates another instance in which Lucy must attempt to reconcile that interconnectedness of origin, place, and being. It is as if, in encompassing those letters as a component of her embodiment, Lucy must then allow the imperative from her mother and homeland to also become a part of her.

It is this scene, combined with less dramatically consequential instances throughout the novel, that highlight a fairly significant phenomenon reiterated throughout each of Kincaid’s novel included in this study: the relationship of the protagonist to the mother and by metaphorical extension, the motherland. Unlike Annie John where the ties between the mother and the colonial are on a more metaphorical plane, and the protagonist is in the beginning stages of recognizing a separation, the relationship between Lucy and the two entities of mother and motherland are fraught in much the same way, and appear to progress simultaneously. Kincaid herself speaks to this in an interview: “It dawned on me that in figuring out the relationship between the girl and her mother, and observing the power of the mother, and eventually her waning authority, that it was leading me to a fictional view of the larger relationship between where I came from and England. I must have consciously viewed my personal relationship as a sort of prototype of the larger, social relationship that I witnessed” (Birbalsingh, 144). Frantz Fanon echoes this:
On the unconscious plane, colonialism therefore did not seem to be considered by the native as a gentle, loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather as a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts. The colonial mother protects her child from itself, from its ego, and from its physiology, its biology and its own unhappiness which is its very essence. (37)

That he uses the language of the mother in combination with the colonial supports my assertion that both of these entities can be sources of either abundance or neglect, and that the attachments to both are constitutional of identity and agency.

*Lucy* is a novel that is mostly void of the significant positive female relations typical in feminist literature, which Katherine Sugg describes as writing that “focuses on inferences of gendered, if surreptitious, desires for connection and highlights intergenerational stores of nurturing identification between women, especially mothers and daughters” (161). Gary Holcomb writes, “Beginning with *Lucy*, the portraits of motherhood exhibited in Kincaid’s work have consistently been deprecating, suggesting anything but a celebration of black women as collective force” (296). This would support my claims of Kincaid’s evolving relationship to the colonial past playing out in the narrative of her novels.

As Lucy expounds further upon her discontent with her mother, she vows even more fervently to never return to her island. My theory on the cause for this quest for rending is twofold. Primarily, the conflicts with mother and motherland stem from the same oft-found postcolonial trope of the search for source and the ache for a home and a
place of abundance. Lucy is denied all of this from a mother that focuses her nurturing on her younger sons, rejecting her daughter. This neglect is mirrored in a homeland that preferences the colonial, the supplanter, to the native, now made the Other. Brenda Yeoh describes this as “marks of colonial ideology continue to underscore the definitions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ that lay at the heart of spatially diverse and contradictory understandings of nation, whiteness, power, subjection…as well as shape the imagined geographies and identity politics of postcolonial diasporas” (376). Neither entity, mother nor country, provide Lucy with that sense of belonging and nurturing that she so requires.

In fact, Lucy is shocked to find some of this nurture and at least the beginnings of a reconciliation between her body and her present place, in her host city, as she says, “That the world I was in could be soft, lovely, and nourishing was more than I could bear…” (23). The divide between Lucy and her origin is great and does not lessen as the novel progresses. Lucy ultimately outright affiliates her homeland and her mother, claiming, “If I was ever forced to live there again, I would never accept the harsh judgments made against me by people whose only power to do so was that they had known me from the moment I was born” (51). This conflation is furthered as Lucy explains, “My past was my mother…the few feeble attempts I made to draw a line between us, her reply always was ‘You can run away but you cannot escape the fact that I am your mother, my blood runs in you, I carried you for nine months inside me’” (90). The language here is so indicative of this duality of place/body and home/mother that the mother’s usage of “run away…cannot escape…blood” must recall a potential violence that belies the language of nurture in the terms “carried” and “inside me.”
This conflict between Lucy’s need for connection with provenance and her inability to reconcile her sense of abandonment works to defy any sort of settling. She claims, “I would not come home, ever,” followed by her mother’s reply that “she would always be my mother, my home would never be anywhere but with her” (128). Lucy destroys the letter that holds this message from her mother, burning it even as she admits that her attempts at disentangling herself from her mother and home is a task “that even then I suspected would never be complete” (131).

My second theory on the cause of strife between Lucy and her mother is by no means mutually exclusive of the first, and in fact correlates well. I posit that since it is Lucy’s goal to claim both her own body and a space belonging to her, her vexed relationship with her mother goes even deeper than that aforementioned sense of abandonment. Lucy states, “I believed she had betrayed me also…I had really wanted just a mother” (127). I think her attempts at separation are further troubled by a notion that I will revisit later, as I enter an exploration of Lucy’s use of body and place in relation to sex; the fact that in only two predictable instances are people able to occupy the same space, in coitus and in utero. The state of being in utero is even more significant because mother and child share not only space, but share and exist within the same body. This is connected to but goes a step further than the condition that David Abram describes when he says, “While one’s own body is experienced, as it were, only from within, these other bodies are experiences from outside; one can vary one’s distance from these bodies and can move around them, while this is impossible in relation to one’s own body” (37). As Lucy is bent on bodily ownership and strives to deny restrictions of place,
her rejection of her mother is textually logical. Adrienne Rich identifies this as the following:

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers’; and in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (236)

So Lucy’s extremes, her unbending need to be apart from her mother is part and whole of her claiming of identity and the process by which she self-defines the space she inhabits.

Lucy’s struggle with her homeland is particularly troubled as she processes her experiences of a place she is no longer in. She must attempt a reconciliation within the space of memory. As I discussed in my previous chapter, the Katherine Sugg introduces the importance of memory and place in regards to Lucy’s “expressions of disgust and horror toward the mother and the home culture and traumatic experiences of loss and displacement…” (164). Lucy’s mourning and melancholia are not the result of exile, but instead of her experiences of maternal abandonment, which represents an opposition of the traditional themes of postcolonial and Caribbean narratives where the “alienating experiences of exile” lead to a deep-seated longing for return (Sugg 156). In this instance, “Lucy’s anger and despair result more from her experiences of ‘home’ than of her experiences of leaving” (Sugg 157). So the affect/effect script is flipped and Lucy’s sense of loss leads to her exile instead of resulting from it.
However, Lucy’s attitude towards her homeland is not the Freudian model of “disparaging it…even as it were killing” the memory of the object of desire that Sugg describes. Lucy instead vacillates between incessant recall of her mother and motherland, and denial of those things. She cannot ‘kill’ her desire for reconciliation, her longing for the plenitude of both motherland and mother, and yet she refuses to, as Sugg puts it “work through” or “get over” the anger and despair of her situation (165). Sugg describes this as “a strategy of trying to maintain a self that is both product of a particular past…and one that is liberated from the past” (165). Lucy’s actions deny the space of memory, making that space all the more powerful. For example, Lucy employs a sort of apophasis, refusing to name things including herself until near the end of the novel.

Names denote lineage and history, and in the case of her ancestors, ownership. This is something Lucy strives to separate herself from as she is moving towards a place of self-ownership. Lucy never names the painter she feels a connection with. She never mentions the last names of her employers, or names the City, or the Great Lake in which she lives while in the United States. And while it can be assumed she is from Antigua like the author, her motherland is never called anything but ‘the Islands’ or ‘the West Indies’. If she refuses to name these places, they cannot name and define her. Katherine Sugg writes “Lucy’s is a nostalgia that works through negativity, through feelings and actions of refusal; but that is not to suggest that Lucy denies her experience of nostalgia” (164). All of this leads to the tone of longing that permeates the novel. At times at cross-purposes, the reader yearns for satisfactory resolutions just as the protagonist strives for self-identification.

Sex and the Body
Thus far I have studied at length the ways in which Lucy and her body have experienced the environment and the effects on such of colonialism. I have mostly only discussed instances of Lucy being an object of her environment, a conduit almost, *someone to whom place has happened*. I turn my focus now to ways in which Lucy enters and becomes part of the environment, specifically how her body and its functions come to create their own environment.

One significant extension of the body that Kincaid employs is sex and the subsequent gain or loss of agency in connection with the acts and ideas of such. Kincaid’s use of sex is particularly pertinent as sex is, cliché as it may sound, one of the only instances where two people may inhabit the same space at once. As I have already discussed, motherhood is the other instance. Here, in sexuality, Lucy is at free will to decide with whom she will share her body, and likewise inhabit the same space.

In my exploration of the criticism related to this idea, I encountered the work of Gary Holcomb. In his article “Travels of a Transnational Slut: Sexual Migration in Kincaid’s Lucy”, he asserts, “Lucy’s project is to shatter the mold of the male Western travel writer-creative artist by fashioning her own adventure through a self-invention, an act that licenses her to become the sexual traveler” (300). Holcomb infers that Lucy travels “to search for social spaces where [she] may more openly pursue sexual activity impermissible at home” (298). I find these ideas both intriguing and problematic.

I certainly agree that Lucy’s travels open a figurative door for her sexual self-exploration, and this is in turn a portion of the impetus behind her growth and evolution in her new home. But to say that her travel has at its roots a search for a place of promiscuity is a bit heavy handed. This would imply that until she left the island, she
followed her mother’s wishes and was chaste, which is simply not the case. She tells us of Tanner who was “the first boy with whom I did everything possible you can do with a boy” (82). She even has the wherewithal to claim that the blood on a towel he laid down was from her period, not the loss of her virginity. She said this as a reclaiming of that power, she would not let him have that status and says, “I could not give him that hold over me” (83). While sexual discovery may have been a driving factor in her exile, I do not consider it a crucial one.

Fortunately Holcomb tempers his theories as he writes further, “Through the act of inscribing her own sexual adventuring, a self-creation that permits her to become a sexual traveler, Kincaid’s project therefore is a destruction of the model of the metropolitan, chiefly male sexual adventure” (298). Lucy gains agency and legitimacy in a culture that preferences the mobile masculine simply by being a woman that travels. In such, the act of traveling is so gender specific that by assuming the role of the traveler Lucy also assumes the masculine tendencies associated with travel, i.e. sowing wild oats. As Lucy makes her place in America, she takes on three lovers, each of whom she denies being in love with, which Holcomb explains as “allow[ing] her to maintain a control over sexual ‘adventure’ to use Lucy’s word, that is traditionally permitted only to men” (304).

In a particularly interesting episode, Lucy speaks of discovering a connection with a French painter that is assumed, due to biographical similarities, to be Paul Gauguin. “I identified with the yearnings of this man; I understood finding the place you are born in an unbearable prison and wanting something completely different from what you are familiar with,” (95). But her fascination does not last as she finds his exploits to be romanticized and eventually un-relatable. The effect is that Kincaid turns Gauguin into an
archetype and writes her male characters in varying degrees of Gauguin-ness. The most obvious of these shares a name and profession with Gauguin, Paul the artist (Holcomb 307). He makes her feel “instantly deliciously strange,” (Kincaid 97) in other words, exotic, native, a reimagining of the Other, the inverse of Edward Said’s Orientalism. She says, “The question of being in love was not one I wanted to settle then; what I wanted was to be alone in a room with him and naked” (100). This sentiment is the result of the aforementioned image of the tropical “weed”, and Lucy’s realization of the agency possible in her own Otherness.

Paul is again likened to Gauguin when he brings Lucy a picture he has taken of her, naked except for an apron, and cooking. This imagery is doubly important as Holcomb explains, “For she is not only captured fulfilling a maternal and domestic role, cooking, she is also seen as the bare-chested native” (306). Lucy says “That was the moment he got the idea he possessed me in a certain way, and that was the moment I grew tired of him “(155). And the moment when she decides she has grown tired of him is when she realized what she means to him, for as she says, “he loved things that came from far away and had a mysterious history” (156). He is guilty of Said’s Orientalism, “a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world…” (12). It stands to reason that Lucy, who has been bent on the claiming her self and creating a place for her body, would resist and reject any others who tried to “capture” it.

Her first sexual exploit in the US, Hugh, has traveled and is considered worldly, and Lucy is attracted to him instantly because he has the good sense to ask her where exactly she is from. He is plain and short and their conversation is unremarkable until he
says “Isn’t it the most blissful thing in the world to be away from everything you have ever known—to be so far away that you don’t even know yourself anymore, and you’re not sure you ever want to come back to the things you’re a part of?” (Kincaid 66). Again, Lucy resists any emotional ownership, and instead links her connection with Hugh to place, as she claims, “It must have been because I was so far from home. I was not in love” (67). Lucy allows Hugh to “bur[y] his face in the hair under my arms…”, offering him not only her body, but a portion of such that is typically abject, and in its unshaven state presents as foreign and taboo.

Along with sex and the body comes a particular extension of both that Jamaica Kincaid utilizes heavily: smell. My reading on this brought to mind a theory I considered oddly and interestingly relevant to smell, namely Arjun Appadurai’s *diasporic public spheres*. Appadurai’s describes these as “…phenomena that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social changes” (4). I do understand that relating this to a person’s smell seems like a hell of a stretch, so I will explain. Pollock et al reword Appadurai’s theory as “living at home abroad or abroad at home—ways of inhabiting multiple places at once” (11). Thus, a person’s own smell—the aroma that their primary place of experience creates—becomes a representation of self that comes with them and into the spaces of others. Even further, as a person’s scent can range from normative to culturally taboo, smell also becomes a symbol of place of origin. This idea would open an explanation for Kincaid’s repeated use of the trope. Lucy considers a person’s smell as relevant in evaluating, judging, and categorizing them. As Lucy is concerned with occupying a possessive space, her (or anyone’s) smell can be projected into a larger, public space, a subtle yet real way of
sharing place. Thus, the smell you choose to project represents the space you choose to share. In an almost counterintuitive fashion, she finds natural, sometimes unpleasant, smells more genuine, and perfumed smells a sign of weakness and conformity. Holcomb explains this: “One associates the pleasant odor with bourgeois values, a part of the construction of social restrictions that endeavors to deny unpleasant natural scents produced by the female body” and he takes this a step further by saying “Lucy’s pungent odor is an expression of an emancipated sexuality” (308). This corroborates my assertion that both sex and smell are a way in which Lucy projects her self into her environment, her body into a shared space.

Lucy says of her foil Mariah, “I could smell the residue of the perfume from the shampoo in her hair. Then underneath that I could smell Mariah herself. The smell of Mariah was pleasant. Just that—pleasant. And I thought, But that’s the trouble with Mariah—she smells pleasant. By then I already knew that I want to have a powerful odor and would not care if it gave offense” (27). Mariah has committed the compound sin of covering her natural scent and having a body that produces an inoffensive, unremarkable smell. Lucy prefers her body to leave a mark on the senses. This is significant as it is an example of Lucy drawing distinctions between herself and the society in which she now lives. She has chosen to retain her own natural scents, and by extension her own customs and culture.

When describing Peggy, her friend and eventual roommate with whom Lucy has become a bit disenchanted, she says “she smelled of cigarettes and old food; she had not yet taken a bath or brushed her teeth…her hair smelled of lemons—not real lemons, not lemons as I knew them to smell, not the sort of lemons that grew in my yard at
home…Peggy did not know what a real lemon smelled like” (155). Lucy passes judgment on Peggy, not only for a lack of hygiene, but for a lack of worldliness and a failure to inhabit and project her body into a natural space.

Lucy says of her charge Miriam, “She was the first person I had loved in a very long while, and I did not know why. I loved the way she smelled, and I used to sit her on my lap with my head bent over her and breathe her in” (53). Miriam’s is a natural, innocent smell, unperfumed. Lucy’s cousin Cuthbert had breath that “always smelled as if it were morning and he had just got out of bed—stale and moldy” (116). Lucy enjoys these scents, as these are the smell of a body unaltered, a body acting on its environment as opposed to being acted upon. One of the rare moments of positive connection with Mariah comes when she introduces Lucy to peonies, inviting her to smell them. She explains, “I told her that this smell made you want to lie down naked and cover your body with these petals so you could smell this way forever” (60). Here is a scent that represents them both, and the tenuous bond they share. This is a beautiful, sweet smell, yet it is completely natural and thus acceptable to Lucy.

Kincaid also uses scent as a signifier in Lucy’s sexual forays. When speaking of Tanner, she mentions that she “liked the way behind his ears smelled” (43). This is the boy she eventually gave her virginity to, and it can be inferred that his scent is part of what draws her to him. On the contrary, when speaking of the boy with whom she had a brief library affair, she says “I eventually found the smell of the brilliantine he wore to keep his hair in place unpleasant” (51). His smell is artificial and signifies the attempt to order the body according to an unnatural standard. In a less direct sense, Lucy speaks of Mr. Thomas, an older man from her island. Though she laments not being able to
remember his hands, she does remember his smell. She says, “He smelled more of tobacco than he did of the sea” (106). This is significant as Kincaid writes that smoking is not something grown men do in front of young girls that they are not related to (106). So he smells strongly of something taboo, fitting with the knowledge of his history of sexual deviancy with a young girl.

Finding Place

I have chosen to focus the remainder of my study of Lucy on the final chapter. This chapter, fittingly titled “Lucy,” serves the function of finally situating Lucy in relation to the colonial, her environment, and her embodiment. This chapter contains the lion’s share of the novel’s text regarding Lucy’s relation to place, her origin, as well as narrative on the re-formation and re-shaping of Lucy herself. It is here, at the end of the novel, that Kincaid truly highlights the movement of Lucy from visitor to immigrant, from island to city, from native to cosmopolitan.

Kincaid connects Lucy to her environment in this last chapter on several different levels, in what eventually reads as a sort of postcolonial hierarchy. Starting with her origin, the colonized island with a British presence and the constant haunting of violence and oppression, Lucy says, “I had realized that the origin of my presence on the island—my ancestral history—was the result of a foul deed…that I was not a Briton and that until not too long ago, I would have been a slave” (135). To the empire, she is a subject not far removed from being a property.

Lucy’s life had been so affected by this colonialism that it doesn’t occur to her to imagine what her home and her life may have been like otherwise. She sees the absurdity
of the situation, as in the story of her pen-pal who physically and geographically, is quite close and whose island is visible from her own shore. And yet in terms of ruling country, of political geography, she is empires apart. But in her refusal of the British rule, Lucy does not fathom the idea of self-rule. She instead wishes for the rule of the French, who were “prettier, much happier in appearance, so much more the kind of people I would have enjoyed being around” (136). So Kincaid situates Lucy in the world view as a subject, and subsequently a person who must find her own way out of the circumstance of being ruled. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, states, “To be governed people must be counted, taxed, educated, and of course ruled in regulated places…” (327). This is the condition that Lucy is born into and as she leaves her home island, she fulfills another condition of the subject according to Said, as he considers the work of Theodor Adorno, “…anything that is not reified, cannot be counted and measured, ceases to exist” (333). Lucy is no longer on her island, no longer under British rule, and has thus ceased to exist for those that would rule her. This allows her the freedom then to negotiate and define her own existence.

The island is Lucy’s home and despite her choice to leave, this is the place she is from and this place has dictated what she takes with her when she leaves. “I did not have position, I did not have money at my disposal. I had memory, I had anger, I had despair” (134). What Lucy has is a lasting internal legacy of an island so deeply imbedded in her psyche that the manifestations are physical. Neil Evernden describes this connection as “the recognition that the establishment of self is impossible without the context of place casts …The significance of place is a very personal thing and…the right to place, to where one is from, is a right that is difficult to argue…” (102). To Lucy, her home is life
and death, it is the very marrow of her bones and so she claims, “I could not go home and so I could not die yet” (141). This condition is echoed by Judith Butler as she describes this connection of self and source: “Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (20). Her anger and rejection of her home stand in for the source of plentitude and abundance she would seek there. She has, through her departure, managed to transpose place: where home should be a safe refuge, it is instead a place of disquiet, good only when dead. It is her host city, where Lucy is Other, that becomes, if not more hospitable, then to Lucy at least a place to not just survive but thrive. “I didn’t think of it as home, only as the place where I know lived” (156) [emphasis mine]. This connection of place and life and death also translates on a more particular level of identity, as Lucy says of her former self, “…in one year of being away from home, that girl had gone out of existence. The person I had become I did not know very well…I understood that I was inventing myself” (134). Kincaid has so submersed her protagonist and narrative in place that ontology and environment are inseparable. Pollock et al explain this, “For many, Colonialism was an acute experience of displacement…These experiences gave meaning to nationalist emphases on a family of ideas all of which, in the end, connected identities to imaginations of place: home, boundary, territory, and roots”(2). These are the attachments that Lucy, like the other narrators, must negotiate and reconcile.

As a further emphasis on the consequence of environment, temporality and space are troubled throughout the novel by the use of flashbacks and memory as well as Lucy’s attention to the future. This is done in such a way that allows a fluidity of temporal
placement, as in this final chapter where there is very little that is linear about Lucy’s narration. Her own past and future merge with the past of her island and the present of her host city. Much like with physical place, temporality performs as ontology. “I had begun to see the past like this: there is a line; you can draw it yourself, or sometimes it gets drawn for you; either way, there it is, your past, a collection of people you used to be and things you used to do. Your past is the person you no longer are, the situations you are no longer in” (137). This final chapter is littered with the words “I used to” followed by some sense of being or doing that is not necessarily denied to Lucy in her present (or at least her narrative present) except by choice. What is absent from the text is any sense of the present, of where those realizations of self and situation have led Lucy.

Certainly we are presented with Lucy’s thoughts and conjectures on her circumstances and changes thereof. But it is especially fitting that there is no shape of settlement in this last chapter. If the reader is expecting any sort of satisfactory closure, they must be denied, for here is a beautiful example of narrative and content mirroring form and by extension, reality. In way of explanation, this last chapter lacks any concrete placement of Lucy in context of time, space, or general disposition, just as the reality of colonialism does in the context of post-colonialism. A settled, happy ending would have been disingenuous here, for as much as the immigrant may bring their homeland with them, they are still a displaced people. For these, there is a troubling of the connection of place and time, as their homes are in the past and the space of their futures are uncertain. As Stuart Hall describes, “…instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process…” (392). Lucy is the story
of the process, of the progress of the identity of a woman in exile finding her place and
discovering just how she might inhabit that new sense of self.

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Annie John was a novel reflecting Kincaid’s first negotiations with her colonial
past, still new and in the process of discovery. In Lucy, Kincaid has matured, moved from
an exploration to a claiming of self and place. Regarding her island, Kincaid shares
Lucy’s reluctance to return. Kincaid says, “I knew …that I would never go back to
Antigua…I thought I could never go home, because it would kill me, drag me down”
(Sugg 168). However, like Lucy, Kincaid admits to being unable to actually leave it
behind: “When I left Antigua, I thought; I’m free of this! But I couldn’t be free of it in
my head. I would carry it around with me—the thing that turned me into a writer, my
mother, all of it” (Sugg 169). Again, we see the body acting as a manifestation of that
evolution of attachments. Lucy’s sexual liberation mirrors her Kincaid’s further removal
from the colonial, and Lucy’s experiences of her new place of being points to Kincaid’s
further detachment from the place of her past.
Chapter 3

The Autobiography of My Mother

*The Autobiography of My Mother* stands apart from Kincaid’s previous novels as a more robust, certainly more introspective work. This is not a story of leaving, as my previous two chapters have been. Instead, this work concentrates on the acceptance of place and situation and a deeper reconciliation of attachments. Gone are the story lines and organization (no neat map of chapter titles) and the experience of time is muddled, with no certain narrative chronology. *The Autobiography of My Mother* is simultaneously a distillation of and expansion on the previous two novels. Published 11 years after Annie John, and 6 years after Lucy, the novel seems both predecessor and descendent, for Kincaid follows the protagonist into old age and said protagonist seems even at a young age to have already mastered the lessons the previous protagonists attempted in their respective novels.

Lack of chapter titles aside, Kincaid does continue her tradition of situating her protagonist immediately at the onset of the novel. *Autobiography of My Mother* starts “My mother died at the moment I was born and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity…this realization of loss and gain made me look backward and forward” (3). And so Kincaid introduces Xuela by means of her lack. The fact that her mother died in the moment of her birth will be repeated many times throughout the novel, as though by summoning that fact Xuela may gain control of the occurrence of her mother’s death and in doing so create some connection to her mother’s life.
It is around this lack that all other conditions of Xuela’s ontology are built, for as Stuart Hall posits, “…identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (394), and for Xuela, the past is a sense of absence. And yet the novel is fairly sparse on actual references to Xuela’s mother, save for a few episodes of the same dream, as Xuela’s past loss remains her present and future lack. What saturates the novel are those things which Kincaid includes to at least some degree in each of her novels. On a smaller scale, Autobiography includes an attention to the sartorial, much as in Annie John. Xuela notes the worn and dirty dress of her foster mother, the intimidating uniform of her father, and the dresses she is given by her first lover’s wife which fit perfectly but are uncomfortable. Xuela also describes wearing the clothes of a dead man when she chooses to leave society for some time. And just as Annie does, Xuela judges others for the barriers they choose to put between the world and their bodies.

Living Colonialism

As in Kincaid’s previous novels, there is an attention paid to place of origin. On the small island Xuela inhabits there is certainly a hierarchy of source and foreignness. Even from an early age Xuela is aware of this hierarchy, as even her teachers of African descent treat her differently due to her Carib descent. She claims, “When they looked at me, this is what they saw. The Carib people had been defeated and exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden; the African people had been defeated but survived. When they looked at me they saw only the Carib people. They were wrong, but I did not tell them so” (16). Xuela rejects this narrowing of her origin, describing several times throughout the novel her father’s African and European lineage. She claims more than
one origin for herself and yet asserting, “I did not yet belong anywhere” (107). What I find interesting is though Xuela resists the classifications of origin others attempt to apply to her, she still participates in the same categorizing behavior. Her lover, Roland, “did not even have a country, he was from an island…and a small island is not a country. And he did not have a history; he was a small event in somebody else’s history” (167). This novel is littered with Xuela’s judgment of characters based on their heritage, African, English, or otherwise.

All of this leads to and is part of a central theme in all of the novels surveyed. In *Autobiography of My Mother*, more so than her previous novels, Jamaica Kincaid has centered her protagonist in the grips of colonialism. Xuela not only has entirely more interactions with the colonizers, she is acutely aware of just what it means to colonize and be colonized. Her reaction to the status of Other is not so much a glorification of that status as it is an accepted occupancy of that condition that she shares with so many. There is no express wish from Xuela to join the ranks of the ruling class. Xuela’s view of colonization is written in binaries: “…captor and captive, master and slaves…the big and the small, the powerful and the powerless, the strong and the weak…” (10). The saturation in the novel of colonialism is apparent quite early, as Xuela’s first words at the age of four, though she is Dominican, are in English.

This instance is an illustration of Xuela’s attitude in regards to her own status as colonized. “That the first words I said were in the language of a people I would never like or love is not a mystery to me; everything in myself, good or bad, to which I am inextricably bound is a source of pain” (7). Giselle Anatol questions this, saying, “The narrator’s vehement anti-colonial attitude appears incompatible with the fact that when
she enters the realm of orality, she employs the English language, even though she has never heard anyone speak it” (941). But not only does Xuela correlate that English language with pain, she fulfills the idea of the oppressed speaking in the language of the oppressor, and does so to call for her father, a man that will come to represent the colonial.

Language will continue throughout the novel to separate and classify in terms of the colonizer and the colonized. For instance, as Xuela speaks of her step-mother’s use of patois to her, saying, “I recognized this to be an attempt on her part to make an illegitimate out of me, to associate me with the made-up language of a people regarded as not real—the shadow people, the forever humiliated, the forever low” (30). Though Xuela’s step-mother is herself of African descent, still of the class ruled, not ruling, she uses the language of the conquered people to make conquest of Xuela; she is unsuccessful.

In a scene illustrating just how far into the culture of the island the imperial has crept, Xuela describes a piece of china that her foster mother holds most dear, one with “Heaven” gilded on, and painted with a scene from an English countryside, a place the foster mother has never been or even knew existed. That this plate, with its “atmosphere of secret abundance, happiness and tranquility” (9), belongs to Xuela’s foster mother is especially telling for Xuela has no affinity for her and disdains those of her situation—race, class, gender—who would hold in high regards their own colonizers.

But there is no escaping this influence, for every aspect of her island is controlled at least partially by the colonizers, even down to the education system. Xuela tells the story, “’THE BRITISH EMPIRE.’ Those were the first words I learned to read” (14).
And there is no denying that the prevalence of the imperial has not only oppressed the colonized peoples, but it has also led to a culture of self-abhorring within that same situation. I will cover this further as I speak on Xuela’s father, but Xuela speaks to it directly when she describes how her father and her community encouraged an atmosphere of not trusting or befriending each other.

That ‘these people’ were ourselves, that this insistence on the mistrust of others—that people who looked so very much like each other, who shared a common history of suffering and humiliation and enslavement, should be taught to mistrust each other, even as children, is no longer a mystery to me. The people we should have naturally mistrusted were beyond our influence completely. (48)

Xuela, fully aware of her own worth, has here articulated the root problem with the hierarchy of origin I mentioned previously. There is, along with the realization of her own worth, acknowledgement of who would negate that and the means by which they would try to do so. Xuela speaks of learning this at an early age, “…it was only that this history of people that I would never meet…had behind it a malicious intent: to make me feel humiliated, humbled, small” (59). And it is this view, this atmosphere of being subjugated directly, that sets a tone different from the previous two novels. Xuela is—more so than the other protagonists—adversarial to an extreme the other women did not reach. Xuela’s relationship to the colonial is so contrary perhaps because she is so mired in it. I wrote previously of binaries, and that device is applied through all facets of the novel. For Xuela, there is the “man proud of the pale hue of his skin…[with a] privilege in the hierarchy of everything” (131) and on the other side of the coin, there is “ones who looked like me, had long ago been reduced to shadows; the forever foreign, the margins,
had long ago lost any connection to wholeness, to an inner life of our own invention” (133). Xuela pits these “people who had never been regarded as people at all” (177) against one who “drew her sense of who she was from the power of her country of origin, a country which at the time of her birth had the ability to determine the everyday existence of one quarter of the world’s population…” (208).

But there is a hypocrisy in these dichotomies presented, for as Xuela describes cloth from Ireland, she explains “it came from a real country, not a false country like mine” (172) and it is unclear whether there is any sarcasm there, whether she is mimicking the tone of the English or if she truly does not consider any colonized country a true one. Xuela also seems to find no issue in forgiving the sense of manifest destiny in some people, seemingly choosing arbitrarily or even by relation how she will ignore their transgressions. She speaks often of her husband Philip, who is British with “an obsessive interest in rearranging the landscape…for no other reason other than …making these plants do exactly what he wanted them to do…an act of conquest, benign though it may be” (143). Philip is clearly of the colonizing ranks, and yet Xuela marries him, tying her life to his indefinitely. And she enjoys his company, living with him in their house in the mountains until his death. The question of how Xuela reconciles this very literal marriage of the colonizer and the colonized is answered in an indirect fashion.

So how much pity should I extend to him? Could he be blamed for believing that the successful actions of his ancestors bestowed on him the right to act in an unprecedented, all-powerful way, and without consequences? He believed in a race, he believed in a nation, he believed in all this so completely that he could
step outside it; he wanted at the end of his life only to die with me, though I was not his race, I was not his nation. (225)

Xuela seems to draw the line neatly between each side, “a master cannot be a friend” (134), but these rules and judgments are blurred more often for the men in her life. She is harsh with her assessment of women, such as her half sister and her husband’s former wife. But for Xuela herself and the men she is most connected to, she works to justify living on both sides of that line.

The Failure of the Father

Throughout the novel Xuela recalls again and again her father. In her search for source, she turns to him and finds him lacking. His pride in his father and “the trail of misery this drunk from Scotland would have left in his wake” (183) presents as antithetical to Xuela’s longing for origin. And there is certainly a bitterness there, for as she states, “my mother died when I was born…unable to protect me. My father was able to protect me; but he did not” (210). And yet, perhaps to preserve the only parent she has left, her only sense of origin outside of her self, she explains away the deep seated colonial characteristics that she laments for much of the novel.

In my father there existed at once victor and vanquished, perpetrator and victim, he chose, not at all surprisingly, the mantle of the former, always the former: this is not to say that he was at war with himself; …he proved himself commonly human…who among us would not choose to be among the people with head held up, not head bowed down. (192)

Xuela reasons this out, further adding credence to her father’s ideologies and behaviors: “His father was a Scotsman, his mother of African people and this distinction between
‘man’ and ‘people’ was an important distinction for one of them came off the boat as part of a horde…the other came off the boat of his own volition” (181). This acknowledgement and uneasy acceptance of her father’s duality can be difficult for the reader to reconcile. For the majority of the novel, Xuela’s father represents the colonial, not merely as one born into the station, but more so one who chose it.

Xuela’s descriptions of her father eventually sound like descriptions of the imperial as a whole: “The jailer, the thief, the liar, the coward—all were unknown to him. He believed himself to be a man of freedom, honest and brave…” (54). These markers are all the more problematic as Xuela’s father is half African from his mother’s side. Following my argument that the mother is the source of initial abundance (stress on ‘initial’), Alfred’s rejection of this half of him, and especially in light of his daughter’s preoccupations with the mother figure, is even more troubling. Xuela says, “He came to despise all who behaved like the African people…all who were defeated, doomed, conquered, poor, diseased, head bowed down, mind numbed from cruelty” (187). What all of this adds up to—the saturation of colonialism, Xuela’s relationship with her husband and father, both varying extensions of the colonial—is a novel with a protagonist completely inextricable from the ruling class of her island, and who is yet also a part of and identifies with the ‘native’ peoples. In considering the cause for what seems to be Xuela’s casual acceptance of her situation, there are several possibilities. I think that Xuela’s ethnic make-up, being parts Carib, African and Scottish, representing the extinct, the surviving, and the oppressor respectively, creates a necessary amalgamation of loyalties. This in turn affects a sort of neutrality in her stance, she is more an observer
than participant. Xuela is attached to her island and all that living there entails, including living within the colonial.

An Island Place

Having illustrated how Kincaid has placed her protagonist in the colonial, I’d like now to explore Xuela’s relationship to her environment. For Xuela, the natural components of her island become part of her. These components are a symbol of that which will not be changed depending upon whoever happens to be ruling or ruled, for the island has “a great beauty and a great ugliness and great humility all at once; it was itself: nothing could be added to it; nothing could be taken away from it” (26). The island is comfort to Xuela, its natural surroundings offering a solace and a solitude that she lacks from any other source. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes this connection of life and place, when he says, “The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible” (xvii). The island offers a stability and most importantly a permanence not found in any other source. Xuela speaks of the island almost as a person, saying it “…was both a mystery and a source of much pleasure…the harsh heat that eventually became a part of me like my blood…and the river…it was while sitting in this place that I first began to dream about my mother” (18). And it is this island personified that offers some sense of abundance and source that allows Xuela to feel as if she has connected with that ultimate origin, her mother.

Much like the other novels studied, there is a connection between the natural environment and human emotion. Xuela’s sexual awakening coincides with a rainstorm lasting “many, many days. It fell with such a force and for such a long time that it
appeared to have the ability to change the face and destiny of the world…” (72). Xuela’s correlation between the deluge and her own discovery of pleasure illustrates just how linked she is to her surrounding environment. It is a nurturing relationship that she turns to again and again. As a child, in the midst of her fear of her stepmother, she “had made a small place in the everlasting thick grove of trees at the back of the house” (34). This act of making a place in nature for herself is all part and parcel of what Xuela does to further define herself, filling in those spaces of lack that are left by the death of her mother. She says, “A human being, a person, many people, a people, will say that their surroundings, their physical surroundings, form their consciousness, their very being…they invisibly, magically, conquer the distance that is between them and the beauty they are beholding, and they feel themselves become one with it, they draw strength from it…” (191).

The Missing Mother

Another thread that ties together all three novels is the protagonist’s relationship with the mother, that biological origin, source of plentitude and comfort, and the first body with which we all share a space. Each novel presents this bond differently, but Kincaid offers in this novel an encompassing view and then narrows it in regards to Xuela. Even through this narrowing, the idea of a separation between mother and daughter that is present in each novel is discussed in terms of an ultimate loss:

The attachment, spiritual and physical, that a mother is said to have for her child, that confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh, that inseparableness which is said to exist between mother and child—all this was absent between my mother and her own mother…was also absent between my mother and myself, for she died at the
moment I was born…again how can any child understand such a thing, so profound an abandonment. (199)

Helena Cixous discusses this expectation of a place of nurture and source, “There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other”(881). She further expounds on this idea: “I don’t mean the overbearing, clutchy ‘mother’ but, rather, what touches you, the equivoice that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force…”(882)(You will notice here that I’ve invited a feminist scholar to the party. Not that I needed permission, but William Howarth states, “Ecocriticism finds its strongest advocates today in feminist and gender critics, who focus on the idea of place as defining social status” [81], and Cixous has a great deal of important things to say about the body). Xuela longs for that bodily and spiritual connection with the mother, the flesh from which her flesh came and the source of nurture that is so lacking. But this connection is not possible, for as she says, “I was just looking for that face, the face I would never see even if I lived forever” (5). Thus Xuela must seek this source for herself. This leads to a protagonist that is not so affected by the actions and ideas of those around her, those that would subjugate her, for “I was not afraid, because my mother had already died and that is the only thing a child is really afraid of…” (14).

It is interesting to consider, though, just what positive things may have Xuela’s condition of lacking at their provenance. For if Kincaid’s novels are any indicator, there is no guarantee that Xuela’s mother would have been any more of a source of comfort and nurture were she alive. Even within this novel there is the idea of the living mother being inadequate, as Xuela speaks of her step-sister, “ Her tragedy was greater than mine;
her mother did not love her but her mother was alive, and every day she saw her mother and every day her mother let her know she was not loved” (53). And so the mother’s death acts as a pre-empting of the anxiety of separation and the angst of a fraught relationship that is present in the previous novels.

Another aspect of this lack of source, one that Kincaid never quite expounds upon though is subtly present throughout the novel, is the sense of latent potentiality. Xuela’s mother is certainly her past, and her existence even in its previous state is part of Xuela’s identity, for she explains, “My own name is her name…the name of any one person is at once her history recapitulated and abbreviated” (79). But that lack of mother in the present leaves space that must be filled. I will later discuss the women that, with varying degrees of success, serve as surrogates to Xuela. But in truth, nearly everything that Xuela does, loves, hates, longs for and makes attachments to in the novel are a form of substitution. For if these are all the things that Xuela chooses (as opposed to a mother she had no choice over) to surround herself with, these things that build an identity and carve a place for Xuela, then surely these are the things that have at least partially met that lack.

Titling a novel The Autobiography of My Mother, Kincaid must have known her reader would expect the novel to be redolent with images of Xuela’s search for any method of connection with her mother at all, photos, belongings, people who could tell her stories, what have you. These items are not present, however, and instead we see only the mother’s heels, a most humble part of the body. This leaves the reader with a similar (albeit to a much smaller degree) sense of lack as the protagonist. What is found instead is a deciphering of the title: Xuela’s attempt at fulfilling that role for herself, being responsible for her own comfort and nurture, becoming her own source.
Surrogates

Despite the above conclusion that Xuela manages to create her self both in spite of and because of her lack of mother, this does not preclude the fact that Xuela does look elsewhere, in other women, for a potential surrogate mother. Xuela speaks of her first caregiver, Eunice, who does not love her and whose milk she finds sour, a poor replacement for even a non-existent mother. No better a choice is her stepmother, who also did not love her and whose lips were “thin and ungenerous. Her eyes were black, not with beauty but with deceit” (29). That Xuela describes both of these women in terms of their bodies speaks to just how deeply she associates the best qualities of a mother with physicality. As Adrienne Rich explains, “For most of us a woman provided the continuity and stability—but also the rejections and refusals—of our early lives, and it is with a woman’s hands, eyes, body, voice, that we associate our primal sensations, our earliest social experience” (12). That which Xuela lacks, the body of the mother, she seeks elsewhere, never satisfied. What these two women have in common is their initial rejection of Xuela, their unwillingness to mother her despite her young age and her obvious need. Xuela attempts to understand this, to reason through this neglect, “Her wishing me dead was an automatic response; she had never loved me, she had never wished to see me alive in the first place” (55). Somehow, for Xuela, it is not unreasonable that the only path a woman may take to loving a child is if it is her own, one that was previously part of your own body and thus you wish to ensure its well-being.

A more successful though still flawed surrogate can be found in the wife of Xuela’s first lover, a woman who implores her to “regard her as if she were my own mother, to feel safe whenever she was near,” to which Xuela thinks, ”She could not know
what such words meant to me, to hear a woman say them to me” (66). And yet by now it is too late, Xuela concedes, “Of course I did not believe her”, especially considering that Xuela soon finds out the woman’s ulterior motives. The woman wishes to satisfy her husband’s sexual desires vicariously via Xuela, then only 15 years old. Though this woman is as close as Xuela gets to a positive female role-model, she fails to fulfill any of Xuela’s expectations, for “I knew it was not herself she wanted to save; it was me she wanted to consume” (94).

Even through these brief examples, it is clear that Xuela will not find an external surrogate, nor does she find any sort of positive connection with the other women of the novel. She looks to these woman in hopes of finding that missing well of comfort and origin and they have, for various reasons, fallen short. Giselle Anatol puts this claim of inadequacy in more succinct terms that are nonetheless accurate, stating, “Her fixation causes her to mythologize her mother, thus creating an image of motherhood that is impossible for any other woman, including herself” (939). The other women of the novel are not just unsuccessful mothers, they fail any sort of esteem in Xuela’s eyes through their own misdeeds to other women. Kincaid writes the living women of the novel as nearly uniformly antagonistic. In some cases they do not just dislike Xuela, they dislike all other women. Xuela says of her step-mother, “That she did not think very much of the person who was most like her, a daughter, a female, was so normal that it would have been noticed only if it had been otherwise…she favored [her son] because he was not like her: he was not female” (53).

Helena Cixous writes on her theory of just why there is this discord amongst the women, “Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently,
they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves... They have made for woman an antinarcissism!...They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove” (878). And I certainly find this to be a valid and applicable argument to this case, especially when considering how Xuela responds when attacked by the wife of her lover, who calls her a slew of cruel things. Xuela says, “I could see that her mouth formed a familiar hug around these words—poor thing, she had been used to saying them. I was not surprised” (171). Xuela also speaks of the wife of her future husband, and Englishwoman whose identity rests on a title, “…she was a lady, I was a woman, and this distinction for her was important; it allowed her to believe that I would not associate the ordinary…with her…for it is true that a lady is a combination of elaborate fabrications, a collection of externals, facial arrangements, and body parts, distortions, lies, and empty effort” (159). That the wife makes sure to mark the distinction between lady and woman, is amenable to Xuela, for to her a lady is a social construct and woman is the source that she seeks.

Rather than put the entire blame for this air of antagonism on the shoulders of men and the patriarchal hegemony of the system of colonialism that Xuela lives under, I’d also like to consider that these women are simply reacting to the presence of another woman and possible usurper of position. So yes, perhaps they are in essence jealous creatures. That Xuela judges them for this is a special sort of irony, for in at least three cases, Xuela is indeed sleeping with their husbands. I will speak later on Xuela’s gain of agency through sexuality, and certainly that is relevant here, but I would like to consider this facet of the novel as an experiment by Xuela to re-create and appropriate the hegemonic system of bodily and cultural value that she lives in through colonialism. The
women whose husbands she slept with have defined themselves through their husbands. Whether it be their class, race, nationality, etc., these women—the wife of her future husband, the wives of two of her lovers, her stepsister whose fiancé she slept with—all have based their self-worth on their husbands’ subjective worth. Perhaps by conquering these men, by sexually subjugating them, she attempts to make herself—and the body which she eventually turns to for a source of plenitude—the new, substituted standard by which these women calculate their worth. This may be a somewhat troubled reading, but viewing this aspect of the novel, there is a possibility of, as Cixous explains, “a universal woman subject who must bring women to their sense and to their meaning in history” (876), and Xuela may be attempting to be that woman.

Knowing the Body

Until this point, my study has been on just how Kincaid places Xuela’s body in relation to her colonial and Caribbean environment. I will turn now to the body itself, its functions and abilities, and how her particular embodiment dictates Xuela’s search for source and identity. The body and its powers are certainly a source of inspiration and fascination for Xuela. Merleau-Ponty waxes theoretical about this connection of a viable, active body and its environment when he states, “If bodily space and external space form a practical system…it is clearly in action that the spatiality of our body is brought into being…” (102). In other words, we are not until our bodies have made themselves known in space. Xuela sees in the body—and its process of growing, aging, experiencing life—the root of the sense of abundance and plenitude that she seeks and lacks.
Observing any human being from infancy, seeing someone come into existence...to see experience collect in the eyes, around the corners of the mouth, the weighing down of the brow, the heaviness in heart and soul, the thick gathering around the waist, the breasts, the slowing down footsteps not from old age but only with the caution of life—all this so wonderful to observe, so wonderful to behold...an invisible current between the two, observed and observer, beheld and beholder, and I believe that no life is complete, no life is really whole, without this invisible current, which is in many ways a definition of love. (56)

But here, exactly here, is the fountainhead of Xuela’s sense of lack for she says, “No one observed and held me, I observed and beheld myself; the invisible current went out and it came back to me. I came to love myself in defiance, out of despair, because there was nothing else” (56). Xuela turns to the bodies of others, observing and calculating, searching and judging, giving consideration to each as a possible source of that current. She notes the “thick pouch that was her stomach,” hair, eyes and cheeks of her foster mother (8). But these are not comforting, for their nurture is denied to Xuela. Of her father, she repeats descriptions of his skin, which “looks as if it is waiting for another skin, a real skin, to come and cover it up” (49), in contrast with his policeman’s uniform which “was as if eventually they grew onto his body, another skin” (90). These descriptions give the sense of falseness, unnaturalness, for the father’s actual skin has an air of the uncanny and his uniform—his connection to authority and colonialism—has become the skin which he presents to the world.
This is how Xuela judges those that have failed their role of nurturer, though Kincaid certainly points to how Xuela and others may be judged by the hegemony for their bodies. Xuela speaks of appearing modest, “which is to say, I did not seem to them to have any interest in the world of my body or anyone else’s body. This wearying demand was only one of many demands made on me simply because I was female” (42). Xuela certainly was, even at that young age, very interested in the body and the pleasure inherent. Though as Ashcroft et al. describe, “The ‘difference’ of the post-colonial subject by which s/he can be ‘othered’ is felt most directly and immediately in the way in which the superficial differences of the body and voice (skin colour, eye shape, hair texture, body shape, language, dialect or accent) are read as indelible signs of the ‘natural’ inferiority of their possessors” (289). This is echoed in the novel, as Xuela explains of her schoolmates “their bodies already a source of anxiety and shame, were draped in blue sacks made from coarse cotton, a uniform” (80). This occurrence of considering the human body, making abjection of it, and then bending it to the will of the oppressor is exactly the process that Xuela must and does escape in order to fully own her own body. Louise Bernard supports this theory, stating “Though (universal) woman is defined as lack, the black, colonized woman is doubly inscribed as object…yet Xuela’s body stands as a powerful symbol of resistance.” (125).

This is not to say that it is solely the conquering class that would restrict Xuela’s body. There is a recurring theme in the novel of how the men in Xuela’s life wish to control her body and its functions. She is to these men an heir, a commodity, an incubator, and an idol. They then become to her something to pity and at times scorn. Xuela refuses these limitations on her body and as Bernard suggests “in the process of
refusing this interpellation she is forever in the process of attempting to negotiate the polar positions of the victor and the vanquished” (125). Indeed, in doing so, Xuela begins the process of creating the agency she requires to become her own source of plenitude. In *Laugh of the Medusa*, Helena Cixous furthers this idea, and makes a statement on how the woman must extricate herself, as Xuela does, from these objectifications. “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display…Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.” Cixous’s answer for this censorship is for women to define the body for themselves, “…this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak. A woman without a body…is reduced…” (880)

Kincaid writes several times of Xuela’s complete knowledge and adoration of her own body. Xuela claims, “To rid myself of this fear I began to look at a reflection of my face in any surface I could find…I began to worship myself…My own face was a comfort to me, my own body was a comfort to me…I allowed nothing to replace my own being in my own mind” (100). This combination of embodiment and ontology, discovered when she is still young, is echoed later in the novel as Xuela is elderly. Even at 70, she still claims “I was alone and I was not afraid, I accepted it the way I accepted all things that were true of me: my two hands, my two eyes, my two feet, my two ears, all my senses, all that could be known about me…” (223). Xuela needs only look to what is constant, the body that belongs to her, for a sense of source and wholeness.
Life, Death, and Sex

The familiar theme of sex and sexuality is not only present in this novel, but dominates a large portion of it. This extension of the body serves several concurrent purposes for Xuela. Kincaid writes Xuela’s sexual exploits as an expression of power and agency, as a tool for judging others, and perhaps most crucially, as an access point to that sense of abundance and comfort that the body (both Xuela’s and her lovers’) can offer. Xuela uses the terms of both the body and lack and fulfillment:

I became eternally fascinated with how I felt then. I felt a sensation between my legs that I was not unfamiliar with…but I had not allowed myself to acknowledge how power a feeling it was. I myself had no word for it, I had never read a word for it, I had never heard someone else mention a word for it; the feeling was a sweet, hollow feeling, an empty space with a yearning to be filled, to be filled up until the yearning to be filled up was exhausted. (154) [emphasis mine]

But Xuela’s sexual experiences do not begin with a lover. They begin as a solitary bid for comfort, an effort to stave off the fear of the dark world outside of her home, and by extension the knowledge of her own mortality: "I could hear, outside, the long sigh of someone on the way to eternity; and this, of all things, would disturb the trouble peace of all that was real...and it ended only after my hands had traveled up and down all over my own body in a loving caress...and a gasp of pleasure had escaped my lips which I would allow no one to hear" (43). Xuela negates the fallibility of the body by turning to herself as a source of comfort via masturbation; she has discovered the most primal self-affirmation. She has also done, through her own body and sexuality, what her mother failed to do: live.
This illustration of sex as affirmation of life is reiterated later, as she is alone in the garden of her eventual lover, "It was that time of day when all you have lost is heaviest in your mind: your mother, if you have lost her; your home, if you have lost it...as I sat there, I touched various parts of my body...I was running the fingers of my left hand through the small thick patch of hair between my legs and thinking of my life as I had lived it so far..."(70). Again, Kincaid equates self-pleasure as a right of the survivor, of the now sole owner of the body. In Cixous writes of women who, in secret, employ “a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity” (Laugh, 876). Kincaid has written Xuela as unafraid of her own sexuality, as a woman who takes charge of not just her body but its pleasures. In this capacity, Kincaid has written sex for Xuela as, “an act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (880).

In a novel in which language and voice hold so much potency, the scene in which Xuela has her first sexual encounter with the man that will become her husband is especially telling. She says, “I had been sitting on the floor, caressing in an absentminded way various parts of my body...I wanted to respond in a normal way…but I could not do this, my voice felt as if it were trapped in my hand, the hand that was trapped in the hair between my legs” (151). Xuela holds her voice there, beside or inside her own sex. It is through her body that that she communicates when words fail her.

As Xuela begins to adventure further into her sexuality, she describes her first lover and the pleasure he brings to her as “a wholeness with a current running through it,
a current of pure pleasure” (71). She uses the language of wholeness, mirroring the words she uses to describe the relationship between the body and its source, namely the “invisible current.” But now instead of that current returning to her (56), it travels through her and her lover. Here, this spark of life is achieved through sex and Xuela no longer must “observe and behold” herself.

Naturally, Xuela’s sexual experiences with partners take on a much different tone than those when she is by herself. It is then, when she is with men, that she uses sexuality as agency beyond the source of abundance I spoke of earlier. Xuela asserts a power and control over herself and at times her partner. She speaks of growing tired of hearing her husband speak, and so she says, “I would put a stop to it by removing my clothes…and order him to his knees to eat and there make him stay until I was completely satisfied” (145). Xuela enacts the negation of the norms that Cixous speaks of, “We’ve been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty” (885). As Xuela describes her first sexual encounter with the man that would become her husband, she recounts a scene of submission, dominance, and bondage: “I closed my eyes and 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” (154). Though her hands are tied, she reiterates through her repetition of “I made him” when describing their positioning that she is still in control (154). Xuela’s experience of the body walks the line where “I could not tell if I was in agony or pleasure.” Gary Holcomb describes this, “pain is liberating, an experience that through control and pushing the boundaries of discipline permits a knowledge of the body inaccessible via the constraints of more socially
sanctioned sexual activity” (972). This certainly relates to Xuela’s access of the sense of plentitude available in her own body, for both pleasure and pain are certainly life affirming.

Holcomb goes on to state that Xuela “plays with received roles… subverting the relation of passivity and bondage to activity and agency or dominance” (Holcomb, 972, Sadomasochism). When viewing the above scene of bondage, and several other of Xuela’s experiences, through the lens that Holcomb offers, a new possible interpretation is opened. While Xuela’s search for source via the body is my main claim, I think it is also possible that she is in essence reenacting on a singular level the slave trade, and the subsequent colonialism. Xuela has appropriated that historical event, reclaiming that power and agency forcibly denied her predecessors. Her husband—British, white, much older—stands in for the colonizer while Xuela recreates a horrific reality as a pleasurable experience, denying the conquerors any further ability to oppress.

This is not all to say that all of the objectives of sex in the novel foreclose the complex pleasure of the act. In fact, Xuela judges her partners via their ability, or lack thereof, to provide pleasure, as in the case of her half-sister’s fiancé, whose “hands had been incapable of providing pleasure” (126). This indicates that he was unworthy, selfish and less of a person. It also objectifies the men, for as Xuela claims, “The body of a man is not what makes him desirable, it is what his body makes you feel when it touches you” (70). Xuela’s husband on the other hand, was “obsessed with an activity he was not very good at,” which she tempers by saying, “but he took directions very well and was not afraid of being told what to do, or ashamed that he did not know all the things there were
to do” (143). Thus he was completely redeemable by sheer fact of his willingness to make sex a learning experience.

Sexuality in the novel is not limited to the act itself, but includes the after effects and products of coupling. Kincaid writes of pregnancy, more specifically the termination of such. For Xuela, this begins with her refusal to be surrogate for the LaBattes. When she finds she is pregnant and declares that she can “expel it through the sheer force of will” (81) and when that does not work, she visits an obeah woman who performs what is in essence a chemical abortion. She leaves changed, have going through a world of pain and become more aware of her embodiment because of it. “I had carried my own life in my hands” (83), giving her ultimate power over her own body and all that it creates and destroys. Louise Bernard writes, “Xuela maintains this position of sexual control by refusing the primary goal of exchange, namely the reproduction and regeneration of the patrilineal line” (126). This statement is confirmed when Xuela describes her pregnancies as “burdens I did not want to bear, burdens that were a consequence of pleasure, not a consequence of truth” (207). So these abortions were not simply ridding herself of an inconvenience, but acted as Xuela’s assertion of control of her own body and a reclamation of the life that would have been altered by an unwanted child. By controlling her own reproduction, she has created a singular body, one that will not share place for any reason other than pleasure.

Sex is not the only function of the body that Kincaid highlights: in yet another familiar theme, Kincaid writes of the ability of the body to produce odors, natural and naturally offensive. She does this in part as a way of refusing the hegemonic abjection of the products of a woman’s body, much like in my above discussion on abortion. In
essence, she displays the body in all its glory and horror. Gary Holcomb considers this Kincaid’s effort to negate “the construction of social restrictions that endeavors to deny unpleasant natural scents produced by the female body” (308, Travels). As Xuela matures and becomes more sure of herself and less satisfied with the authority figures in her life, she becomes more and more defiant. This results in a woman who claims “I chose to possess myself” (174). This defiance-as-agency coincides several times with the trope of smell. As Xuela is moved to her father’s house and encounters her stepmother, symbolic of this repression of the natural body:

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...those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted.(32)

This contrariness and lauding of the naturalness of the body and its sometimes smelly consequences coincides perfectly with what Ashcroft et al. states:

In a more general way the ‘fact’ of the body is a central feature of the post-colonial, standing as it does metonymically for all the ‘visible’ signs of difference, and their varied forms of cultural and social inscription, forms often either undervalued, overdetermined or even totally invisible to the dominant colonial discourse. Yet, paradoxically the resulting self-consciousness, as Fanon perceived, can drive the very opposition which can undo this stereotyping (289)
Xuela in particular returns again and again to the smell of her own loins, adding a sexual nature to her resistance: “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” (59). This is explained later, as Xuela speaks of the smell of the bleeding that occurs during her abortion, “perhaps I only loved it because it was mine” (91). It follows that if Xuela has found some sense of source in her self, in her body, then the smell inherent in such would be included.

Although Kincaid does not end *Autobiography of My Mother* with a concise chapter title, there is nonetheless a resolution of placement, both of Xuela’s body and her relationship with her environments. Kincaid places Xuela in terms of her ongoing conflicts with her heritage and her colonial surroundings, “I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation” (226). And so Xuela moves to the mountains of her mother’s people, where her husband is never allowed to feel at home. It is from there Xuela speaks at the end of the novel as a 70 year old woman, still longing for that sense of source and finding it in herself. There are two moments that speak to each other in the novel that capture this: “I did not want to belong to anyone, that since the one person I would have consented to own me had never lived to do so, I did not want to belong to anyone…” (104) and “The impulse to possess is alive in every heart, and some people choose vast plains, some people choose high mountains, some people choose wide seas, and some people choose husbands; I chose to possess myself” (174). And that is exactly what Xuela has done, for the novel closes with her assurance that “at last a great peace came over me, a quietness that was not silence and not acceptance, just a feeling of peace, a resolve” (223). Xuela’s
‘resolve’ is a making of peace with her island, her past, and her self. She enacts what Neill Evernden describes as “…the sensation of being part of a known place…In other words, there appears to be a human phenomenon, similar in ways to the experience of territoriality, that is described as aesthetic and which is, in effect, a ‘sense of place,’ a sense of knowing and of being part of a particular place. There’s nothing very mysterious about this – it’s just what it feels like to be home…It moves to correct its feeling of placelessness…to that small slice of environment in which it fits and by which it is defined” (100).

In terms of the arc of the novel and how it fits in with the other two, *Autobiography of My Mother* offers a completion of sorts. There is a return to the island, and the idea that Kincaid never left in the first place, that she has always and will always be there. This is affirmation that place, especially origin, is intrinsically tied to being. Kincaid’s journey, her search, is over. She has found her source in her self, thus reconciling and mending those attachments that have troubled her all along. There is the real sense in this novel that Kincaid has surveyed all these effects that comprise her life—the colonial, the island, her body, her mother, her relationships—and come to terms with their part in her identity.
Conclusion

One of the most enjoyable parts of the study of these novels has been unearthing the many anecdotes and ideas that are nearly identical in each novel. These shared stories—of obeah women; of fathers who have many other children and former lovers who seek revenge; of uncles dying in the same, most gruesome way; of great-grandmothers who adopt fathers and then die in their shared bed; of the dead waiting in nature to follow you home—they can all be explained easily by the fact that these novels are all partially autobiographical and the stories are for the most part true. However, I prefer to think that these duplications have more intention behind them. Kincaid tests the bounds of setting, both spatially and chronologically. More importantly she, through these shared stories, has created a sense of a universal island community, where someone might be related to someone else because they know the same story, or they have shared the same experience. She has clued the reader in to what it is like to live on a tiny island where everyone knows each other. The reader remembers these stories from elsewhere, from the other books, and becomes by extension a part of those memories. Mieke Bal, in his collection of essays “Acts of Memory,” opens memory to categorization, specifically psychological or individual, social, and finally cultural. Bal claims, “We also view cultural memorization as an activity occurring the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future”(vii). Kincaid, through her repetition of the personal, has enacted the cultural.

As I stated in my introduction, it has been my purpose to follow the narrative arc Jamaica Kincaid presents through her protagonists within the three novels studied. I
looked for how their relationships with the colonial changed from book to book, using the narrators’ connection with their environments and their expressions of embodiment.

What I did not expect at the outset was the beautiful cycle that surfaced as I compared the works. If I were to consider the narrators as one person, and consider that person as Jamaica Kincaid herself, these novels have made me privy to Kincaid’s life’s journey, especially in terms of her affair with her home country and her reconciliation with that past.

In relation to the body, there is a definite sense of maturation, not just of agedness, but a declaration of the power of the body. Annie is the youngest of our narrators, still connected to her mother when the novel starts. She discovers that her body is her own, apart from her mother’s, and goes through the event I dubbed the ‘chrysilisation,’” followed by the subsequent awakening of her body and the establishment of a personal sense of environment. Lucy, the middle daughter, moves beyond her own founded body into an exploration of the space around it, and a claiming of the agency inherent in it. For Xuela, whom we follow the longest and see at the oldest age, the ownership, and exploration of the body is never a problem, for “…there was never a moment that I can remember when I did not know myself completely…” (225). Xuela represents the acceptance of the body, and its eventual mortality.

The geographical passage of each narrator creates another evolution. All three women must negotiated their homelands and the various other locations to which they are tied, as Bruce Robbins points out, “Yes, we are connected to the earth—but not to ‘a’ place on it, simple and self-evident as the surroundings we see when we open our eyes.
We are connected to all sorts of places, causally if not always consciously, including many that we have never traveled to…” (3).

Annie, in an effort to create her self apart from her mother, must leave home. As the novel closes, her final interaction with her mother is a warning, “’It doesn’t matter what you do or where you go, I’ll always be your mother and this will always be your home.’ I dragged myself away from her and backed off a little, and then I shook myself, as if to wake myself out of a stupor” (147). That Annie is leaving for England, the motherland of the colonizers, is evidence that she has not severed either of these (colonial or matriarch) connections completely.

And indeed, as we meet Lucy, we realize that she has not completely shaken off the mother or the motherland. She has fled to New York City, the land of many postcolonialisms, an amalgam of cultures, subalterns, and Others, where everyone is from somewhere else. “The city embodies human aspiration, confidence, and power. …In the city, people build up an image of human possibility as they observe, and learn to participate in, an extraordinary range of activities undertaken, peacefully, by individuals and groups who are strangers to one another” (Tuan, 154). And it is this condition of being surrounded by people she doesn’t know (not mother, not motherland) that Lucy has sought, and here she can acknowledge that life and place are correlated: “I was alone in the world. It was not a small accomplishment. I thought I would die doing it” (161).

Finally, Xuela ends up just where she began, in a more figurative sense, for “…she does not recognize having reached the land of "true" belonging until she moves back to the mountains, the place where, very symbolically, her mother and her mother's people were born” (Anatol, 950). Though she never leaves the island, she is not immune
to the struggle with places abroad, though they are represented through people, such as her husband and father, instead of geographically. And yet she accepts her duality of origin, her half native-half colonizer being. As she claims of her husband, there is no love, but there is companionship. And so she remains on her island, re-claiming it for herself in a final act of defiance.

All of this adds up to the sense that where you started is just as important as, and in fact entirely connected to, where you end up. Whether they stayed in their island paradise, escaped to the site of imperialism, or joined the multitudes in the New World, Jamaica Kincaid has written three protagonists that have, through explorations of their selves and their surroundings, lived and thrived after the experiences of colonialism.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Curriculum Vitae

Jennifer Hutcherson
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Education:

Wake Forest University
Candidate for Masters of Arts in English Literature (2015)
Concentration: Postcolonial Literature

University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Literature (2003)
Member of Mary Foust Residential College

Conferences:
“Reconceptualizing Narrative: Structures, Systems, Boundaries”
Rice University, Houston, TX, September 2014

Paper Presented: “A Place of Being: Studies of Travel, Borders and Home in Edwidge Danticat’s The Farming of Bones”

Professional:

Wake Forest University School of Law
Coordinator of International Programs and Enrollment- Current

- Assisting international candidates on a full range of topics related to enrolling at Wake Forest, including the admissions application, I-20’s and other Visa related documents, course registration, housing, parking, and others. Organizing and executing the orientation program for incoming international students. Developing resources to aid international students in the transition to Winston Salem.
- Facilitating two European study abroad programs for the law school from recruitment, application processing, and communication.
- Assisting the JD admissions team as necessary, specifically in the role of relationship manager between the times of acceptance and matriculation. This includes the coordination of communications between the office, faculty, alumni, and the prospective students.

Coordinator of Admissions and Financial Aid- May 2013- September 2014

- Retaining all duties of an admissions counselor, now overseeing operations, especially pertaining to applicant contact. Creating and implementing marketing strategies and materials. Generating and analyzing complex
statistical reports relating to applications and enrollment, and adjusting approaches accordingly.

**Admissions Counselor** - November 2008 - May 2013

Responsible for all aspects of Admissions, including but not limited to:
- General admissions counseling including candidate interviews and applicant advising. Was the first point of contact for prospective and entering students. Assisted the Dean of Admissions in all areas. Created and processed each applicant’s file, averaging more than 3k files a year. Smoothly transitioned the office into a paperless process.

**Mullen Advertising Agency** - December 2006 - July 2008

**Junior Copywriter**

- Copywriting for several national accounts, including direct mail, digital, and television placements. Provided account team support for all clients.

**Executive Assistant to CMO & Group Director**

- Managed appointment calendars and business contacts for two executives. Created expense reports for both miscellaneous monthly charges and client trip reimbursement. Planned travel for executives and several account teams.

**Grandparenting Program and Family Resource Center**

**Winston Salem State University/Kellogg’s Foundation** - December 2005 - November 2006

**Non-Profit Program Coordinator**

- Created and maintained databases of highly sensitive data necessary for several concurrent research studies. Provided support and structure to a staff of case workers, nurses, and administrators. Acted as a resource for the clients in our program including facilitating several college-preparedness programs for at risk and low-income youth.

**Internship:**

Wake Forest University School of Law - 2013
Department of Communications and Public Relations
Copywriting, Marketing
Publication “From Soldier to Student: Interviews with Veteran Law Students.”

**Personal Interests:**

Proctor for and active member of Mensa of America. Active supporter of several local Arts initiatives. Former mayoral appointed member of the Sister Cities Board for Winston Salem, NC.