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Abstract

Out of the 250 citations for Jamaica Kincaid in a database, apart from basic book reviews, most entries refer to flowers and plants, some to a creole voice, a few to mother-daughter relations, the obligatory pieces on Wordsworth and Milton in relation to Lucy and one or two to the female body. All these are perfectly reasonable pathways towards understanding Kincaid's writing, but I want to look at another, clearly uninspected facet of her work.

PAUL SHARRAD

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Out of the 250 citations for Jamaica Kincaid in a database, apart from basic book reviews, most entries refer to flowers and plants, some to a creole voice, a few to mother-daughter relations, the obligatory pieces on Wordsworth and Milton in relation to *Lucy* and one or two to the female body. All these are perfectly reasonable pathways towards understanding Kincaid's writing, but I want to look at another, clearly uninspected facet of her work. The slowly filling out photograph of a West Indian woman in her finery of patterned skirt, plain blouse, scarf and headscarf that provides the cover and chapter design in *The Autobiography of My Mother* indicates, as Kincaid's story 'Biography of a Dress' suggests, that part of the quest for identity running through her work is figured in terms of clothing.¹ This should not be surprising, since Kincaid was herself sent to work for the local dressmaker as a child (Ferguson), something reflected in sections of her earlier work, *At the Bottom of the River*; 'Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; ... when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum on it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash' ('Girl' 3); 'so is my life to be like an apprenticeship in dressmaking, a thorny path to carefully follow or avoid?' ('Wingless' 23).²

Cloth and clothing remain important motifs in Kincaid's other work as well. In her paradoxical self-construction through autobiography that is also a 'self-exorcism' (Ferguson 162) of confession and self concealment in fictive distancing, the writer marks relationships with dress. In *Annie John*, the girl narrator has a trunk under her bed where her mother has stored all the embroidered covers and smocked dresses of her first few years (20). Later however, Annie finds a bright piece of cotton and suggests it would look good on both herself and her mother, but is told, 'Oh no. You are getting too old for that.... You just cannot go around the rest of your life looking like a little me' (26). She gets her dress, but her mother chooses another, and whenever either are worn, Annie feels 'bitterness and hatred, directed not so much towards my mother as toward, I suppose, life in general' (26). When Annie grows up and is about to leave Antigua for England, the last thing she does is dress; she changes from 'an around-the-yard dress of my mother's' into a blue skirt and blouse (135).

If the void at the heart of personal relationships in Kincaid's fiction echoes the 'blankness' of slaving history (132–33, 186), then the turn to material goods (in all senses of the word) may be compensation for a fragile selfhood haunted by an oppressive past. External shows of property provide immediate ways of asserting one's worth and presence in provincial society stripped of alternative supports to self-esteem. When the narrator-protagonist in *The Autobiography* leaves her employ as a young woman, she observes: 'I had four dresses, two pairs of shoes, a very nice straw hat, and the five guineas given to me by my father; it was not nothing' (96). This is not merely the affectation of the poor black colonial: white plantation owners compensated for their nouveau riche class status and marginal colonial location by extravagant shows of dress. Drawing on historical records such as Lady Nugent's journals in his novel *Cambridge*, Caryl Phillips echoes a genteel English horror of unseemly excess in the accounts of Jamaican society in the 1830s:

I was to be afforded the opportunity of witnessing the traditional West Indian dinner, where the table laboured under a burden of ostentatious and substantial dishes....

Among the merchants as distinct from the planters, it is incumbent upon each new host to outdo his predecessor. Furthermore, at the earliest opportunity, newly acquired diamonds and strings of pearls must always be prominently displayed.... This addiction to ornament, at the expense of convenience, is at present a strong characteristic of the West Indies, luxuries abounding where decencies are often found to be lacking. It appears that this is a common consequence of a young civilisation lacking the constraints of a polite tradition. (114–17)

Elsewhere in the novel, a young woman on a fact-finding tour of her father's estates records her dismay at the extremes of slave dress — either shameless nudity or violent colourful display:

On Sundays and holidays, the negro will cap his festivities by indulging in a passion for dress, a love of which is curiously strong in these people. Male or female, they show the same predilection for exhibiting the finery of their wardrobes, and will generally adorn themselves in the following manner. The dandified males sport wide-brimmed hats and silk umbrellas, and promenade in windsor-grey trousers (which are generally embroidered about the seams with black cord). They complete the spectacle with white jackets and shirts with stiff high collars. The *sable-belles* are no less extravagantly modish in their ornamental silk dresses, gauze flounces and highly coloured petticoats which, though of the best quality, display patterns more commonly employed in England for window-curtains. Those who sport bonnets blend the fiercest shades in a close companionship with each other, so that these rainbow-hats dazzle one's eyes at a mile's distance. (66)

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys has Rochester complain similarly of the over-bright colours of the tropics (58–59) and the presumptuous affectation of freed Negroes such as the obeah woman Christophine:

‘... she might hold her dress up. It must get very dirty, yards of it trailing on the floor’.

‘When they don’t hold their dress up it’s for respect...’.

‘Whatever the reason it is not a clean habit’.

‘It is. You don’t understand at all. They don’t care about getting a dress dirty because it shows it isn’t the only dress they have.’ (71)

These fictional observations around the time of Emancipation repeat displays going back much further. Slaves were expected to make their own clothes from rationed cloth and feed themselves from allocated plots of land. Economies on work clothes and sale of surplus produce allowed the purchase of ‘portable wealth’ used as self expression in communal dances and religious groups (Higman 206; Walvin 76).

In the initial stages of plantation colonies, cotton print from India was used to trade with Africans, and then for clothing the slaves acquired through that contact. Bright checks from southern India became known to British merchants as ‘Guinea cloth’ (Dhamija; Lovejoy, 104), and once production from the US supplied Manchester mills, imitations of it kept the triangular trade of slavery operating (DuPlessis, Bailey 4; Higman 229). By 1815, when New England had begun its own textile manufacture, mills were advised to produce ‘large figures and lively colors as they are worn only by mulattoes and blacks and they are fond of anything that is dashing’ (Bailey 7).

Such show created social problems at an earlier point in Barbados society, and presumably elsewhere in the colonies, and no doubt this was exacerbated in the period immediately following the abolition of the slave trade. As Cecily Forde-Jones carefully demonstrates, dress was used as a means of policing the divide between white and black: plantation wives engaged in poor relief by donating finery to low-class immigrant white women so they would not fall below the standards of dress separating the races. In Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the social standing of declassé whites after the cessation of the slave trade is measured by the quality of their dress, such that we see the desperate efforts of a widowed mother to keep up appearances. Her daughter, young Antoinette, is at her lowest when she is obliged to wear the cast-off frock of her black playmate, Tia (21–22).

In keeping with Jamaica Kincaid’s other rewritings of Wordsworth and Milton in *Lucy*, her *Autobiography of My Mother* can be read as a retort to Rhys, presenting life in the same places of Dominica from the point of view of a Black Tia rather than a Buckra Antoinette, a redressing, in fact, of the exotic red dress with which the exiled creole sustains memories of island life amid the gloom of her English imprisonment.

Kincaid, like Rhys, draws on the romance of self-realisation by one of society’s victims (Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*) to reveal the cold heart of survival in the lower ranks of West Indian life, where history has determined that others and elsewhere

will govern what is secure and true. Jane Eyre even when destitute, is buoyed up by her sense of worth as a Christian Englishwoman, but for Kincaid's Xuela,

Everything about us is held in doubt and we the defeated define all that is unreal, all that is not human, all that is without love, all that is without mercy. Our experience cannot be interpreted by us; we do not know the truth of it. (37)

This is not far from the emptiness and imitation outlined by V.S. Naipaul as characteristic of the Caribbean, but Kincaid offers a kind of toughness as counterbalance: at worst a social economy of stoic indifference and a hierarchy of capacities to inflict pain on others (39), at best a defiant resistance wherein self-possession is expressed through silence, stubbornness and small material acquisitions — material (again) in both senses of the word.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the narrator is deprived of her mother at birth. Her 'farming out' to a stranger leaves her an alienated onlooker who develops preternatural talents of language and observation.³ She remembers vivid scenes, sounds, smells: the 'feel of the cloth of my skirt and blouse — coarse because it was new — a green skirt and beige blouse, a uniform' (12). This contrasts with the dress of the laundry woman who looks after her: 'of thin, badly woven cotton, the bodice of a color and pattern contrary to the skirt ... dirt had made it old, but dirt had made it new again by giving it shadings it did not have before, and dirt would finally cause it to disintegrate altogether' (10). Clothing continues to be a marker of class, self-perception and differentiation throughout the book. Xuela's first teacher, as a Black colonial woman trained by missionaries, wears her self-loathing 'like an article of clothing' (15), and it transpires that the narrator's father hides his mixed-race origins and maintains his authority with a facade of the neatly washed and ironed shirts he collects each week from his daughter's surrogate mother. Significantly, when he comes to 'rescue' her from her orphaned existence he arrives 'wearing the uniform of a jailer' — his police uniform (22). Eventually, he grows into his clothes until they 'covered completely who he was', and his son can only emulate his father through wearing a white linen suit like him (53–54, 90). To protect herself from her jealous stepmother, Xuela 'tried to cloak [herself] in an atmosphere of apology' (41). Xuela's own mother, a Carib, had been placed on the steps of a convent as a baby, wrapped in 'pieces of clean old cloth' with her name written on them in indigo ink and grew up there 'draped in blue sacks made from coarse cotton, a uniform' (80).

References to cloth and clothing therefore permeate the text, as both metaphors and specific material references. Towards the end of the book, Xuela refers overtly to the legacy of material and psychic dispossession left by slave history. Her dislike of uniforms of any kind seems to arise out of a hyper-sensitivity founded on the regimentation of natives and workers under colonialism and slavery. There is surely an echo in her mother's dress of the 'blue sallampores of Coromandel' favoured as clothing rations for slaves in the eighteenth century (Chaudhuri,

277), and with the shift to Lancashire mill goods, described as ‘blue naps’ and ‘Blue long ells’ (Higman 229).

But if her mother is swallowed up into the anonymity of a charity convent uniform, her daughter’s school uniform represents an escape route. Xuela is cut out from the crowd by her dress because her upwardly aspiring father atypically pushes his daughter into higher levels of education. Cloth marks identity throughout the text; it signals the younger Xuela’s transition to womanhood when she engages in an instinctive ritual of buying flourbags and turning them into menstrual pads (57–58). When she is farmed out to domestic service, she notes her mistress’s ‘white dress made of a coarse cloth with embroidery stitching of flowers and leaves; I noticed this because it was a dress people in Mahaut would have worn only to church on Sundays’ (63–64). Despite its good condition and cleanness, the poor fit of the dress reveals its wearer’s surrender to life’s disappointments. Madame seeks to take over Xuela’s person, using her to make good her own unfulfillable desires by passing her over to her husband as a sexual companion and potential bearer of a child for them. The means of entrapment is the gift of her old dresses:

One day, without any preparation, she gave me a beautiful dress that she no longer wore; it still fit her, but she no longer wore it. As I was trying on the dress I could hear her thoughts... I was standing in this room before her, my clothes coming off, my clothes going on, naked, clothed, but the vulnerability I felt was not of the body, it was of the spirit, the soul. To communicate so intimately with someone, to be spoken to so silently by someone and yet understand more clearly than if she had shouted at the top of her voice, was something I did not experience with anyone ever again in my life. I took the dress from her. I did not wear it, I would never wear it; I only took it and kept it for a while. (69)

She was stitching me a garment made from beautiful old cloths she had saved from the different times in her life.... how she wished to weave me into its seams, its many seams. How hard she tried; but with each click of the thimble striking the needle, I made an escape. (78)

A name in the islands, (the narrator’s is Xuela Claudette Desvarieux/ Richardson) ‘is at once [one’s] history recapitulated and abbreviated, and on declaring it, that person holds herself high or low, and the person hearing it holds the declarer high or low’; it can fill one with despair and self-hatred (79). A dress, however, while it can also declare the fixity of social standing, can be a means of disguise, protection or change. At one point, for example, Xuela burns her work clothes to return to live with her father (104).

Kincaid’s novel fixes on precise details about clothing but also ranges across a wide variety of cloth. When Xuela is taken from her adoptive mother, Eunice, her belongings are wrapped ‘in a muslin knapsack’ (24). Her stiff conversations with her father occur with her wearing a ‘white poplin dress’ (196) and her father changes from policeman-khaki to a civil servant dress uniform of ‘navy-blue serge pants and white cotton twill jacket with gold buttons’ (189). When

she returns to Monsieur and Madame La Batte after aborting her master's child, the mistress 'wore a new black dress with an old piece of crushed-up cloth pinned just above her left bosom. The color of the cloth was red, an old red that had only darkened with time' (94). There is an economical message here of the fashionable 'mum' of an upper-class style now outmoded, an echo of Xuela's dried blood as she lay on a bed of rags, and an allusion to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to emphasise that the shame is not Xuela's and she refuses to mourn or feel guilt. The bed of rags is contrasted to the birth of her father's new child 'lying on a bed of clean rags' perfumed to keep evil spirits at bay (108). Her stepsister rides to her seduction dressed to reflect her father's wealth and respectability, in white Sunday cotton (121); later she marries in white silk: 'it came from far away, it came from China, but it was said that she married in English silk' (127).

Such colonial snobbery alongside a tacit recognition of trading history is matched by other moments in the text. As a labourer, Xuela wraps her lunch in a 'knapsack made out of a tired piece of madras cloth' (99). Here we find a link to the 'guinea cloth' once traded with Africa and the Caribbean. Edward Long noted that 'well regulated' plantations in eighteenth-century Jamaica extended the stipulated clothing allowance for slaves to include 'a suit of warm woollen cloaths, hats, caps, checks, handkerchiefs etc.' The checks and handkerchiefs were 'guinea' or 'madras cloth' which 'creoles' twisted into turbans to keep damp and cold from their heads (qtd in Ward, 152). Later, print checks from Lancashire mills were substituted and also distributed for children's clothing (Higman 236).

Now I do not want to make out that textile history is a primary concern of the novel: questions such as 'What makes the world turn?' (131) and 'what possibilities or consolations are there for vulnerable people in a small soulless community at the edges of imperial history?' loom much larger. Nonetheless, it is possible to construct a reading in which such larger imponderables are worked out in terms of a tough, non-metaphysical alienated woman's experience, through the indexical use of materials. This is not the kind of modernist poetic prose used by George Lamming to give the impression of speculative peasant boys in 1930s Barbados, nor is it the redemptive symbol of black feminist community such as we find in *The Color Purple*. If anything, *The Autobiography of My Mother* is closer to the hard lyricism of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The latter book ends with the challenging, possibly ambiguous, claim, 'This is not a story to pass on'. Darryl Pinkney's comments on Kincaid's work might well serve as a gloss on that: 'Kincaid's voice ... turns the reader into a spectator. Her narrator will tell a story but will not surrender it.... It can be witnessed but not shared' (28). We might argue that Morrison's work is far more passionate and seeks to draw the reader into its dramatic recreation of history, but both texts, I think also operate to resist any easy sentimental appropriation and containment of horrific and bleak tales of dispossession and the struggle to reclaim selfhood, reconstruct dignity.

While the Dominica of the novel is neither the world of *Beloved*, nor the Jamaica plantations that most historical studies focus on, the broad system of plantation management does allow generalised comparisons to be made. The slow cessation of slavery brought several related changes in fashion amongst Afro-Caribbeans.⁴ Slave plantations commonly issued coarse cloth to workers, frequently made up as pants, shirts and dresses — Osnaburg linen, Pennington flannel and serge (Higman 229) — supplemented with woollen goods for night work and work in the cooler months. Emancipated Islanders brought the importation of woollen cloth almost to a total halt, changed their tastes to lighter cottons and shifted to cloth lengths which they made up themselves (Ward 245–46). It is significant that Xuela's stevedore lover steals for her not just cheap cotton lengths from the ships he unloads, but several coloured dress-lengths of *Irish* linen (169, 172). The better status of linen and its colours are mentioned several times and this resonates against the fact that a common slave cloth was osnaburgh, 'a coarse mostly grey linen' (Ward 151; Higman 229).⁵ As Roland's pilfering indicates, local finery is a rejection of the humiliations of the past, an appropriation of dignity, but it is also a continuation of economic dependency under a new form of small-scale cash economy and cheap machined cloth from Britain and the US. Islanders practice a kind of 'bricolage' that covers the nakedness of brute existence while it also reveals unspoken histories and ongoing conflicts.

Xuela's earliest memories are of being visited by her father when he came to collect his washed clothes: 'they were wrapped up like a gift in two pieces of clean nankeen cloth' (6). Later, when she goes to work on a road gang, she buys a man's 'old nankeen drawers, his one old pair of khaki pants, his old shirt of some kind of cotton' (98–99). Still later in the book, when she has a sexual encounter with her husband-to-be, she is 'wearing a nightgown made from a piece of nankeen my father had given me' (151). Her mother, she imagines growing up with the nuns in 'a dress made of nankeen, a loose-fitting dress, a shroud ... she wore a matching piece of cloth on her head that covered all of her beautiful hair completely' (200).

A glance through the ironically named 'Compact' OED reveals that 'nankeen' is a cotton cloth originally from Kiangsu province in China favoured for its durability and natural yellow colour. Trousers were commonly made from it and in later times ordinary cotton was dyed to give it the same colour. The first historical citation of its use is from *Songs and Poems on Costume* in 1757, when it is described as 'most like nature, most like skin' (clearly an irony in the pigmentocracy of the colonial Caribbean). By 1842 it was being manufactured in Manchester and the type of cotton was grown in the US by at least 1865. A list of Lancashire textiles between 1775–1785 records nankeen as a heavy cloth, categorised with jeans and towelling as 'fustian'. The word itself carries overtones of rusticity and poverty (Lemire 201).

Kincaid's book gestures towards the poor person's romance of 'rags to riches' (and possibly also to the self-improvement romance behind slave narratives). Xuela finally marries a white doctor and wears 'pink faille silk' to her wedding (214), but she rejects tidy love stories and sentimental illusions of memory and wealth. Her 'Reader, I married him' ending, redolent of *Jane Eyre*, is a sterile loveless one and she finds nothing to provide grounds for comfort or self-congratulation. There is not even the romantic desperation of Rhys's version. Kincaid's continuous references to nankeen serve in this context to counterpoint working routine and any *Jane Eyre* romantic outcome, and the several mentions of cloth being traded from other places carry the history of West Indies trading in people and labour in which Xuela locates herself.

Kincaid's story sets up Xuela as a subaltern voice speaking in silence. She is child (not adult), then woman (not lady, not man), and takes after her Carib mother instead of her half-Scots-half-African father. Orphaned, she has no connection with her mother's people, whom she sees as lost (198). Alienated, she knows her condition, understands the fragile society of pretension she lives within, but cannot completely escape it or express it to anyone other than herself: 'I own nothing, I survey nothing' (132). 'I, Xuela, am not in a position to make my feeling have any meaning' (137). She refuses the 'ambivalent reinscription' of colonial discourse's 'sly civility', seeing more what Homi Bhabha also recognises as the 'incommensurability' of subaltern and hegemonic experience (96, 152): the master cannot also be the friend (134), the owner knows about his workers/slaves but cannot empathise with them (135). Even she has no commonality with other oppressed figures: when she encounters the local gravedigger as fellow fringe-dweller, they can only grunt at each other: 'The idea of him and me really hearing each other was out of the question' (142). When she 'marries up' there is little communication either; her husband speaks to her in English and she to him in patois, she dresses him in pastels and wears black herself (218-19). Determined to live only in the present, she finds their relationship, like all things in the islands, haunted by the past (205, 223).

This haunting occurs in the silent stories of things. The rich man 'sits in a chair made from a fabric that is very valuable because its origins are distant, obscure, and involve again the forced labor, the crippling, the early death of the unnamed many' (135). His emulators in the colonies drink 'English tea' and 'English cocoa', though they are aware both products come from elsewhere (142). Xuela's resistance lies in her passionless deployment of her body for her own satisfactions, which has the effect of controlling men through complicated acts of simultaneous assertion and submission. The marker of this exchange, this trading in survival, is the wearing and divesting of cloth. There is little gain in this, no triumphalist success. Clothing here serves as a fragile sign of subaltern text, at once a silent speaking, a temporary shield, a disguise, a borrowed signature: nankeen, that rough second skin, attests to nakedness 'at once the bar

and bearer of difference' (Bhabha 101). In the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty, subaltern experience is a stubborn knot in the fabric of history (22, 27) that will not, however, 'celebrate the monumentality of historicist memory' (Bhabha 157).

It is instructive that the story is a 'biography of a dress', not an autobiography of the wearer, and that the irritating succession of qualifying comments in parentheses from the adult narrating persona is explained by the child becoming conscious of a split in experience between experiencing self and the self observing the experience. The narrator (a second-level observer of both child-personae) says she relies on the observer as being an act of self-invention, but admits that this 'true voice' is to be trusted least because it throws up a 'protective membrane which allows me to see but only feel as much as I can handle at any given moment'. In the autobiography/novel, the daughter-narrator says 'And I learned, too, that no one can truly judge himself' — honesty, integrity, penance appear to have their being in silence until someone else makes all the accusations without the forgiveness that self-confession carries with it (60). The play between subject and object, subjectivity and objectivity clearly relates to slaves, women, and people like Xuela's Carib mother, being made into objects: 'Bales of cotton, sacks of sugar' or bolts of cloth (*A Small Place* 37). The narrator has to find a way of bringing faceless people-as-objects into story and history as experiencing human subjects without turning them into the falsely autonomous rounded individuals of Western auto/biography. It is a dilemma Wilson Harris detects in the West Indian novel, and one differently enunciated by the Subaltern Studies group. The person's relationships with objects, then is one way of addressing the problematic — ownership of things makes one a person, but can also dehumanise when that ownership and the production that makes it possible (the manufacture of textiles and furniture) means that owners oppress workers; things made elsewhere turn owners into consumers, an objectified subjectivity represented in the book by imposed uniforms (12, 80), but consumers can make the things they only partly own into their own things, as when turning bolts of cloth into dresses. Silenced by 'living at the end of the world' (213) and at the edge of slave pasts, left unclear of where things rest because the names of people are given and change, the names of places are unknown, imposed and erased, individuals seem to be moved around in a 'haphazard mess' by forces outside their control. The colonised subject finds affirmation and order in a silent relation to things — shoes, dresses, jewellery — and voices subjective presence through objective cataloguing of their 'biographies'.

Jamaica Kincaid says in interview that she wants her books to upset people (Kreilkamp 54). So it is perhaps consistent with her 'Autobiography' (which is discomfitingly not an autobiography, except in so far as nothing changes from the mother's life to the daughter's) to note that the slavery of the past and its turn to dress is counterpointed today by uncomfortable facts. Many of the women using dressmaking skills as a way out of slavery and poverty now 'slave' over

machines in clothing factories. Despite a rise in apparel exports from the Caribbean to the US to \$3.6 billion in 1993, American employment in the region has fallen by 25%. Textile workers are reduced to sweatshop piecework, and young single women have been moved in to replace males. A database search under 'cloth' and 'slavery' these days produces articles not on the textile trade to sugar plantations, but on the globalised exploitation of textile workers. Kincaid's mothers are still toiling in silence at the end of the world, even though the world has come to their doorstep.

NOTES

¹ This autobiographical narrative, split between the adult narrator's self-conscious 'now' and the two-year-old child-self's 'then' is a meditation on a photo of the author in a dress made for a birthday photo by her mother, and the photo-based book design, though it does not declare it is an image of Kincaid's mother, signals a clear link to the earlier piece. Another connection occurs when the novel's narrator mentions a 'skirt of the white poplin dress I was wearing, and the poplin itself was from somewhere far away from here' (196). 'Biography of a Dress' begins with the narrator at two years of age, wearing 'a yellow dress made of cotton poplin (a fabric with a slightly unsmooth texture first manufactured in the French town of Avignon and brought to England by the Huguenots, but I could not have known that at the time)'.

The woman in the novel's photo appears to be wearing a white blouse with lace trim. This seems to indicate a French Caribbean origin and connects with the Dominican section of the book. However, the images of the narrator's mother (which are not her memories, since the mother died at her birth) do not at all coincide with the cover illustration (200): they are more akin to the narrator in her happier moments and may well in fact be the author posing in one of her own compositions touched up to appear as an old snapshot (see sections of the thesis by Doepp on Kincaid's self-representation/ media representation). The division of chapters by parts of illustrations seems to be a 'house style' in Kincaid's books, so the 'presence' of the photo is set against the 'artfulness' of the book design.

The text systematically performs and subverts its claims to authority and first-hand experience: autobiography on the front cover and fiction in the publisher's category on the back. Kincaid's work consistently engages in this play, her characters Lucy Josephine Potter and Xuela Desvarieux Richardson carrying traces of herself under her birth name, Elaine Potter Richardson, while Annie John is taken from her mother, Annie Potter. Kincaid's grandmother was Carib (Ferguson). There is the question of whose mother's autobiography this text represents: the grandmother's cannot be told, since the daughter had no contact with her mother; the handwritten title and author's name on the cover suggests it is Kincaid's mother's story, but even as a fiction that is impossible, since Xuela/Annie refuses to bear children (199). Given the difficult relationship between Kincaid and her real mother, the work may be both an attempt to understand Annie and a writerly act of self-creation/self-effacement by denying the parent.

² *Annie John* also ends with mention of her having been apprenticed to miss Dulcie the seamstress (138).

- ³ The short story has the same ‘cool’ analytic detachment from its subject as the later ‘autobiography’, both simulating and disturbing the idea of self-narrative as authentic because of objectivity. In *Annie John*, the clothes in the narrator’s trunk include dresses made for her first and second birthdays and a photo of her in the British Guiana earrings and dress of the short story (20). However, the first dress is yellow, while the one in the photo is pink. Here we have perhaps a mere lapse of memory, but also quite possibly another deliberate playing between documentary realism and realistic fiction.
- ⁴ I am aware that there were differences from island to island, especially between the English and French-controlled Antilles. Many of the historical analyses have worked with Jamaican material, and this will have shifts of nuance and trade history if we consider the novel’s setting of Dominica. However, the broad practices of slavery can perhaps be applied across the plantation system in the region.
- ⁵ DuPlessis explains this was a Scots manufacture specifically for the slave colonies and substituting for imported Central European cloth (36).

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