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POSTCOLONIAL HAUNTINGS: GHOSTLY PRESENCE IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER*

Simone A. James Alexander
Seton Hall University

Contact: Simone A. James Alexander, Seton Hall University
simone.alexander@shu.edu

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Abstract

The Autobiography of My Mother tells the story of loss, abandonment, survival, and resistance. This chapter explores the haunting or ghostly presence of both the living and the dead. The ghosts of slavery and colonialism haunt the character/s and the text; in retaliation, Xuela/Kincaid performs a "ghosting" by defying narrative conventions, by blurring the line between fiction, myth, biography, and autobiography.

Jamaica Kincaid's novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* tells the story of loss, abandonment, survival, and resistance. A creolized subject (daughter of a Carib mother and a half Scot, half-African father), the novel's protagonist, Xuela Claudette Richardson, embodies resistance, for she not only survives her mother's death, but she also survives her father's subsequent abandonment and several foster homes. Xuela's mother dies shortly after giving birth

to her, leaving her in the care of her father who, in essence, abandons her as she is shuttled from foster home to foster home:

When my mother died, leaving me a small child vulnerable to all the world, my father took me and placed me in the care of the same woman he paid to wash his clothes. It is possible that he emphasized the difference between the two bundles: one was his child, not his only child in the world but the only child he had with the only woman he had married so far; the other was his soiled clothes . . . That I was a burden to him, I know.” (p. 4)

In the various foster homes, Xuela not only endures cruel treatment, but she also experiences sexual abuse at the hands of her foster parents, Jacques and Lise LaBatte. Ever resilient, Xuela outlives everyone, including the LaBattes, her husband, and her sister, living until the age of seventy. Xuela’s traumatic birth resonates with the traumatic colonial history of the Caribbean, namely Dominica. Thus, Xuela’s personal account of her life experiences echoes the collective narrative of loss, displacement, extinction, and exploitation of the island’s history and its people. Critic Shu-li Chang (2004) reminds us that many women writers engage allegory as a narrative strategy: “In contemporary women’s narratives, private traumas are almost always deployed as an allegory for collective traumas” (p. 106). While Xuela’s mother’s death symbolizes the extinction of the Carib people: “The Carib people had been defeated and then exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in the garden,” as a creolized subject, Xuela’s birth suggests the forging of a new nation, a Creolized community: “The African people had been defeated but had survived. When they looked at me, they saw only the Carib people. They were wrong . . .” (p. 16). Facing extinction and erasure, symbolized by the “x” in her name, Xuela registers her resistance.¹ The simultaneous embodiment of loss and gain, the irruption/interruption of a life (of lives), of a cherished past: the loss of her mother and the loss of her Carib and African ancestors and culture are markers of Xuela’s identity and existence. She captures this loss as follows: “This realization of loss and gain made me look backward and forward: at my beginning was this woman whose face I had never seen, but at my end was nothing, no one between me and the black room of the world (p. 3). Xuela’s birth coincides with the birth of the nation; both the nation and Xuela are born of resistance. Furthermore, Xuela’s birth coincides with the birth of the novel, the creation of a “new” auto/biographical genre, a counter genre that resists narrative conventions. Xuela’s autobiography doubles as her mother’s biography; hence, Xuela is able to chronicle her life (and her mother’s life) as an “other” and a “self.” In writing as a “self” and an “other,” Xuela assumes literary power over her personal narrative, her mother’s history, and the island’s history. The doubling/merging of the text renders indistinguishable the private/personal experiences from the collective experiences; it also shifts and blurs the boundaries/definition of an auto/biography. In

writing her autobiography, Xuela creates self and community; Xuela and her mother's story is the history of the island.

Kincaid's "disguise" of the novel as an autobiography engenders a kind of grafting that challenges the strict and inflexible definitions of the traditional autobiographical genre.² By definition, an autobiography is an account of a person's life written by that person. Kincaid's autobiography takes on hybrid characteristics, merging personal history with collective history, literary writing with myths, memories, and dreams. This genre-merging sets the text apart from the traditional male-centered and European autobiography.³ Kincaid's works resist easy classification, owing to her dismissal of European classifications of genres and refusal to accept "the purity of genres," resulting in a literary excavation of sorts that Jana Evans Braziel (2009) refers to as "autobiographical ambivalence" (p. 7). This literary excavation results in the toppling of traditional autobiography.

Arguing that the stretching of "autobiography's generic seams" is not new, "and can be likened to a restless and unmade bed [where] discursive, intellectual, and political practices can be remade," Alison Donnell (1999) stresses that the goal of *The Autobiography* is not "to define itself unproblematically as a piece of life-writing which takes either herself or her mother as its subject, but as a piece which addresses the multiple imbrications of self, m/other, and writing" (p. 124). While Donnell calls attention to the importance of women's autobiography, and particularly to Kincaid's "stretching" of the traditional autobiographical genre, her analysis is still limited to the personal: self, m/other, and writing. As discussed earlier, Xuela and her mother's personal experiences are linked to the collective, the Dominican community as a whole. Kincaid's blurring/splicing of subjects presents a formidable challenge to traditional autobiography; at the same time, it results in the undecipherability of determining to whom the auto/biography belongs: mother or daughter, or both mother and daughter. Or is it a tribute to the mother/land?⁴ This unknowability lends itself to "ghosting," an undecipherable haunting presence (as well as absence) that prompts Donnell to question if there is one or more than one auto/biographer of the text, and if it is "Kincaid's mother's auto/biography, then Kincaid is still present as the 'ghost' writer/biographer" (p. 127). Kincaid's "ghosting," her role as a ghostwriter is indisputable, evident in her repeated obsession with the mother (figure), her unrelenting portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship that is often fraught with tension. In *Annie John*, Kincaid portrays her imminent departure from Antigua as "ghosting," separation from her mother, ending the mother-daughter relationship. Similarly, the eponymous heroine of the novel, *Lucy* refuses to read her mother's letter in an effort to silence her.⁵ Kincaid is "ghosted" equally by her mother; in *Annie John*, Annie John Senior abruptly ends the practice of mother and daughter dressing alike, causing

her daughter, Annie, great angst and separation anxiety.⁶ Convinced that she was writing the self, Kincaid finally concedes that she was writing the m/other:

At the top of the page, I wrote my full name . . . At the sight of it many thoughts rushed through me, but I could write down only this: ‘I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it.’ And then as I looked at this sentence a great wave of shame came over and I wept and wept that so much that the tears fell on the page and caused all the *words to become one big blur*. (*Lucy*, pp.163-4, italics mine)

True to its definition, a ghost or “ghosting” has inherent, interchangeable, nebulous attributes as both mother and daughter function as a ghost/writer; they both inhabit the body/space of a ghost/writer. Furthermore, the ghosts of slavery and colonialism both haunt and instruct their writing. Xuela muses:

I knew the history of an array of people I would never meet. That in itself should not have kept me from knowing them; it was only that this history of peoples that I would never meet—Romans, Gauls, Saxons, Britons, the British people—had behind it a malicious intent: to make me feel humiliated, humbled, small. Once I had identified and accepted this malice directed at me, I became fascinated with this expression of vanity: the perfume of your own name and your own deeds is intoxicating, and it never causes you to feel weary or exhausted; it is its own inspiration; it is its own renewal. (pp. 59-60)

Xuela’s authoring, her recalling or “ghosting” of her dead mother, in this auto/biography, “can be seen as a type of ghost writing” (Shima, 2004, p. 63). Operating within the trope of “ghosting,” this chapter explores the haunting or ghostly presence of both the living and the dead.⁷ In response, or more poignantly, in retaliation to the haunting occasioned by slavery and colonialism, Kincaid performs a “ghosting” of the autobiographical genre by defying narrative conventions, by blurring the line between fiction, myth, biography, and autobiography. For example, under the spell of colonialism, Ma Eunice, Xuela’s first foster mother, is unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. Fascinated by,

a picture painted on [a plate made of bone china], a picture of a wide-open field filled with grass and flowers in the most tender shades of yellow, pink, blue, and green; the sky had a sun in it that shone but did not burn bright . . . This picture was nothing but a field of grass and flowers on a sunny day, but it had an atmosphere of secret abundance, happiness, and tranquility; underneath it was written in gold letters the one word HEAVEN. Of course it was not a picture of heaven at all; it was a picture of the English countryside idealized . . . Eunice thought that this picture was a picture of heaven.” (pp. 8-9).

This blurring-cum-doubling is a recurring theme in *The Autobiography*, and unsurprisingly, these blurred lines extend to the mother-daughter duo who functions as a “deathly double” that disrupts and derails colonizing forces. Ghosting speaks of simultaneous imitation and innovation; it registers hypervisibility and invisibility, hyperembodiment and disembodiment (Brown, 2015, p. 16).

Kincaid’s work has been characterized as embracing numerous contradictions and *The Autobiography of My Mother* is no exception. Contradiction resides in the trope of blurring/doubling as Xuela’s role as victim is interpreted as contradictory. As I discuss later, some critics are hesitant to identify Xuela as a victim of rape. Moreover, this contradiction resides in the title and the text, *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Accentuating the subversive theory that Kincaid engages routinely, Louis Simon (2005) writes: “The paradox of the title signals a subversion of language, a twisting and refuting of convention and conventional meaning that undergirds the entire text” (p. 31). Attempting to render decipherable what is often deemed undecipherable in Kincaid’s writings, Daryl Dance surmises that despite the fact that Xuela bears Kincaid’s own mother’s last name (Richardson), she is more like Kincaid, the daughter, than the mother, Annie (p. 2). Misnomer is another narrative strategy that Kincaid adopts in *Autobiography*. Dance accordingly explains the contradictory title of the novel surmising that mother and daughter are one: “The mother and daughter are indeed one helps to explain the oft-noted incongruity of the title, for the ‘autobiography’ of her mother seems truly her own autobiography” (p. 2).

This blurring/merging between the mother and the daughter, between the present and the past, challenges linearity as it chronicles the chaos, the traumatic experiences endured by the characters: mother, daughter, and the island. We are duly reminded by Sandra Pouchet Paquet’s (1990) that non-linearity is “normative” as “West Indian autobiography is varied and complex” (p. 357). Furthermore, the non-linearity and complexity of *The Autobiography* manifests in the role of the predominantly female “authors”: Kincaid, Xuela’s mother, Xuela, and the island.⁸ Kincaid’s insertion of women into the text (read the national narrative) is not coincidental. Autobiography, for the most part, has been a male enterprise. Kincaid’s seeming ease with challenging narrative conventions, encapsulates “[the] intense and creative struggle with the conventions of autobiography, and engage[s] directly with the social and political issues that have preoccupied West Indian culture and society” (Paquet, p. 358). Kincaid’s *The Autobiography* is also infused with the personal; as argued earlier, the personal mother-daughter relationship is politicized, metonymically representative of the mother/land.

Notably, Kincaid dedicates *The Autobiography* to the late Derek Walcott who, in his long autobiographical poem *Another Life*, stresses “a value other than autobiography” (Paquet, 1990,

p. 358). Walcott himself confesses that in *Another Life* “he abandoned autobiography for elegy and intellectual history” (quoted in Paquet, p. 358). Walcott does not dismiss or devalue autobiography completely, for the poem is infused with autobiographical references. However, he does write a biography, so to speak, of his native West Indies. Kincaid’s dedication is symbolic, for Walcott himself engages the bending of genres; this autobiographical poem comprised of over four thousand lines of verse is grouped into four parts. Walcott’s rewriting and subversion of the poem to suit his post-colonial needs resonates with *The Autobiography* that gives Kincaid poetic license to fashion her novel to her own liking, to engender the proverbial intermarriage of the individual experience with the collective, colonial experience, and to personalize history and politics. Moreover, Walcott’s *Another Life* navigates the political, personal and historical spheres, rendering an evocative portrayal of the West Indies, even as he writes an elegy of himself and man, humankind. Symbolically, *The Autobiography*, with its routinized breaking of conventions, is also an elegy. Kincaid/Xuela seeks, demands, and desires another life (a pun of the title of the poem), free from enslavement and colonial invasion. Furthermore, despite the innate tragedy of loss and abandonment, Xuela’s mother is experiencing “another life,” an afterlife: Xuela is also, albeit vicariously, as well as Dominica, in a postcolonial state. Illuminating how the brutality of colonialism has left the island’s inhabitants in a zombified state, particularly Ma Eunice, who is debilitated by her inability to mother effectively, Xuela muses: “In a place like this, brutality is the only real inheritance and cruelty is sometimes the only thing freely given” (p. 5). The embodiment of the collective dilemma of a colonial Caribbean history (Paquet, p. 360), Xuela/her mother nevertheless exercises agency, for *The Autobiography* functions as a vehicle for self-exploration and self-articulation beyond the conventional/colonial text, beyond the dictates of patriarchy. As the representative voice of the vanquished, as both participant and witness, Xuela writes both herself and her mother into the narrative.

Despite her hypo-presence, Xuela’s dead mother is hyper-present; her memory is kept alive by Xuela’s constant return to, reimagining, and reconstruction of the past: “For me history was not only the past: it was the past and it was also the present. I did not mind my defeat, I only minded that it had to last so long; I did not see the future and that is perhaps as it should be. And yet . . . and yet, it made me sad to know that I did not look straight ahead of me. I always looked back.” (p.139).

Even as she acknowledges the importance of a collective history, Xuela’s uncontrollable urge to “look back” is an act of remembering, of recollecting and re-visioning her dead mother. *The Autobiography* itself is a repeat, a re-vision of her mother’s life/death. Xuela registers both her and her mother’s ghostly presence, lending validity to the idea that haunting not only invokes but also evokes “and like any other haunting, it has the desire to be seen” (Brown, 2015, p. 17).

Morris's (2004) observation, "Jamaica Kincaid's writing thrives on bringing erasures back to life" (p. 954), echoes Veronica Marie Gregg's (2002) that establishes that the haunting presence manifests as a "form of spirit possession" furthers this argument (p. 928). By looking back or gazing back onto the hauntings of the past, Xuela lends voice to Toni Morrison's (1988) classic phrase: "This is not a story to pass on" (p. 275). The decimation of the Carib people, the enslavement and subsequent colonization of black people should not be forgotten, must be remembered, must be memorialized for posterity.

The sporadic appearances of the dead mother, specifically, the appearance of her levitating heel, in Xuela's dreams,⁹ the dead mother's refusal to be stilled—all contribute to the haunting, they "mark her presence as a haunted and haunting absence" (Gregg, p. 928). Xuela captures this horrific and melancholic void:

I looked over my shoulder to see if someone was coming, as if I were expecting someone to come, and Ma Eunice would ask me what I was looking for, at first as a joke, but when, after a time, I did not stop doing it, she thought it meant I could see spirits. (p. 5)

Xuela's return is, in essence, a re-articulation of her mother's history, the island's history, and by default, her own history. Xuela manipulates her dreams, bringing back her mother from the dead: "I lay down to sleep and to dream of my mother—for I knew I would do that, I knew I would make myself do that, I needed to do that" (p. 31). In like manner, Xuela orchestrates her own resurrection through self-creation and bodily self-possession.

As a postcolonial subject and as an orphan, Xuela is forced to construct her identity via loss, destruction, and death of the mother/land.¹⁰ Death, ironically, becomes the impetus for her existence, for her living. Since death is a destructive force, these constant images of the dead that serve as impetus for the living are precarious. The body's vulnerability finds resonance in the scarred and broken bodies of black women that repeat, that are passed down, in this case, from mother to daughter, making visible slavery's and colonialism's aftermath: the violence, the haunting, that has occasioned black women's vulnerability. The recurring and repeating visions of Xuela's mother engender continuity that resonates with what Kimberly Juanita Brown calls "the repeating body." Nevertheless, acknowledgement of the body's vulnerability empowers women to reclaim their bodies and sexual agency. Repetitions and duplications engender the reliving of memory, rendering those once invisible visible. Xuela, who bears the same name as her mother, gives voice to this duplication in the following quote:

This account of my life has been an account of my mother's life as much as it has been an account of mine, and even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have,

as it is their account of me. In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from. In me are the voices that should have come out of me, the faces I never allowed to form, the eyes I never allowed to see me. This account is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become. (p. 227)

Addressing the injuries, the scars inflicted by colonialism, Xuela portrays how generations are affected by this invasion-cum-violation. Colonialism has created a nation (read an orphanage) of orphans. Marie-Claude Perrin-Chenour (2013) suggests that the repetitions testify “to an absence of evolution in spite of age and experience . . . mak[ing] it impossible for any [author, narrator and character] to become an integrated subject” (pp. 170-171). Repetitions, however, do not suggest stasis; in actuality, they offer “visual . . . and gendered iterations of the indelible memory of slavery” and colonization (Brown, p. 13). In the above quote, Xuela demonstrates how this memory has impacted both the mind and the body that are scarred indelibly.

The mother’s ghostly presence both interrupts and engenders the flow of the narrative. Xuela’s own birth is marked by interruption, the death of her mother who dies during childbirth. As noted earlier, this cycle of interruption becomes the defining moment of Xuela’s existence as she asserts: “I came to feel that for my whole life I had been standing on a precipice” (p. 3). The “precipitous” existence is arguably the bane of Xuela’s existence as death is the motivating factor of her life/living. She ironically forms relationships only after someone dies: “My brother dies. In death he became my brother” (p. 110). Debatably, she fuels her fall from grace by not heeding to the cautionary message meted out to the adolescent girl, and to girls in general, in Kincaid’s short story “Girl” that demands that she practice and display proper feminine behavior: “Try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are bent on becoming” (p. 3). Xuela’s inability to live up to the ideals of womanhood is rendered palpable by the wife of Philip, the English doctor.¹¹ Xuela recounts: “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, the everyday—a bowel movement, a cry of ecstasy—with her” (pp. 158-159). In contrast, Xuela embraces the “everyday” with fervor and passion, resulting in her exhibiting slut-like behavior: loving her body odor, overtly displaying passion and sexual desire, providing minute details of her sexual encounters: “Whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most. . . . Whatever about me caused offense, whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing—those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted” (pp. 32-33). Xuela’s de-sanitization of her experience is a direct rejection of Victorian modes of decorum and decency. Thus, young women are walking a tightrope as they stand on the precipice of an endangered female sexuality. Both Xuela and her sister are expected to subscribe to and uphold the politics of respectability.

Questioning the politics of respectability, Kincaid interrogates patriarchal mandates that demand that women practice proper feminine behavior, meanwhile men's conduct remains unchecked. By sharing Xuela's age at the time of her first sexual encounter with Monsieur LaBatte, Kincaid calls attention to the fact that she is still under-age and therefore her violation constitutes statutory rape.¹² Paradoxically, two paragraphs prior to her father's delivering her to Monsieur LaBatte, Xuela spoke fondly and proudly about her school days; in particular about how she excelled and surpassed expectations. The juxtaposition of her reminiscing about her school days and her "capture," her being transported to Jacques LaBatte's house, sheds light on her imminent loss of innocence.¹³ Paradoxically, Xuela's father is a policeman, an enforcer of the law; his colonial authority finds representation in his policing of her body that culminates in his delivering her to her "jailer," Jacques. In a revealing scene, Xuela paid the price for defying her father's colonial authority. She challenges her father who claimed that he had no nails to give to the gravedigger, Lazarus, insisting that he had a full barrel:

When Lazarus left, without the nails he had come for, without the nails he needed, my father grabbed me by the back of the neck of the dress I was wearing and dragged me through the house to the shed where he had the barrel of nails, and he pushed me facedown into the barrel of nails . . . This pain he was causing me, this suffocating me in a barrel of nails, was a true feeling of his. (p. 190).¹⁴

Therefore, Xuela has changed hands from one jailer to another. Her initial (geographic) dislocation that initiated her out-of-body experience: "I had never been to Roseau until that day" precedes her rape, her body estrangement (p. 60).

Forced by her surrogate mother, Lise, to have continued sexual relations with her surrogate father, Monsieur LaBatte, renders Xuela's rape more heinous. The LaBattes' presence calls attention to the elites/whites that dominated/haunted the plantation economy. This imagery of slavery and forms of enslavement is prevalent, with Xuela revealing that she performs household chores in the "main house" before she leaves for school (p. 73). The violent act of rape mirrors the willful violence of Xuela's forced abortion: "If there was a child in me I could expel it through the sheer force of my will. I willed it out of me" (p. 81). Motherhood is defined by bodily rejections of childbearing. Xuela is not only forced into an illicit sexual affair with Monsieur LaBatte, but she is also used as a surrogate, as a vessel of reproduction. In other words, her body is used as capital. We are all too familiar with the fact that "Slave women's bodies, specifically their procreative capacity, were considered prime real estate capital and accordingly they were marketed for maximum profit" (Alexander, 2014, p. 75). Deborah Gray White (1999) reiterates that once it caught on that the "reproductive function of the female slave could yield a profit, the

manipulation of procreative sexual relations became an integral part of the sexual exploitation of slaves” (p. 68). Consequently, Xuela can be likened to her enslaved female ancestors, whose worth was determined and defined by their reproductive capacity. She later becomes fully aware of her exploitation by the husband-wife duo, but specifically by Lise. Complicit in patriarchal undertakings, Lise LaBatte does not see the need to examine her “contradictions of self, woman as oppressor” (Lorde, 1984, p. 130). Lise is more invested in putting forth her own agenda: her fervent desire to have a child by any means necessary and the attendant commodification of Xuela, who is not blinded to this fact: “She wants to make a gift of me to her husband; she wants to give me to him. . . . It was herself she wanted to save; it was me she wanted to consume” (p. 68, p. 94).¹⁵ In this regard, Lise is complicit in using the black female body as property, for profit. Lise’s action is akin to female betrayal, despite reassuring Xuela that she should trust her and “make [her]self at home, to regard her as if she were my own mother, to feel safe whenever she was near” (p. 66). Lise, instead, opens up the historical wounds that find efficacy in the slave woman’s body violation and subjugation.

Of her consumption, Xuela writes: “He took me to the room in which he counted his money, the money that was only some of the money he had. It was a dark room and so he kept a small lamp always lighted in it” (p. 70). Moreover, she occupied “a room that was attached to the kitchen; the kitchen was not a part of the house itself. . . . [She] slept in the room with the floor of dirt” (p. 67, p. 71).¹⁶ Her commodification is rendered most palpable when she reveals that her father knew Monsieur LaBatte “through financial arrangements they made with each other” (p. 60). Nevertheless, Xuela subverts the patriarchal manipulation by literally taking matters into her own hands when she performs an abortion. Invoking the historical practice of abortion that slave women performed, Xuela rejects her designation as propertied possession (Xuela’s father, Monsieur LaBatte, and Lise LaBatte possessed her body through violence). Along these lines, she subverts the notion of the sexual “helplessness of the female slave, who was forced to be a breeding machine for the plantation” (Ormerod, 1985, p. 101).

Xuela’s unequivocal refusal to become a designated mother (of the state) does not go unnoticed: “I had never had a mother, I had just recently refused to become one, and I knew then that this refusal would be complete. I would never become a mother, but that would not be the same as never bearing children. I would bear children, but I would never be a mother to them” (pp. 96-97). This distinction between being a mother and bearing children is of critical importance as it harkens back to female enslavement. Assigned the role of breeder, Xuela is deprived of her ability to mother and be/come a mother and thus unequivocally registers her challenge to this female (sexual) subjugation via the abortion. In her effort to thwart the LaBattes (the patriarchy)

from profiting from her, Xuela engages a theory of subversion of sorts by liberating her unborn children:

I would bear children, they would hang from me like fruit from a vine, but I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god. I would bear children in the morning, I would bathe them at noon in a water that came from myself, and I would eat them at night, swallowing them whole, all at once.” (p. 97)

Suffice it to say, this form of self-fashioning finds representation in self-devouring, a form of narcissistic cannibalization. Furthermore, this motherly, liberatory act is not new. We are reminded of Toni Morrison’s *Sethe* (1988), who, after being made aware of Schoolteacher’s decision to claim her children, steadfastly articulated: “No notebook for my babies and no measuring string either” (p. 198). The haunting Xuela experiences by Lise claiming her unborn child is no less evocative or telling: “This vision she would have, of a child inside me, eventually in her arms, *hung in the air like a ghost*, something only the special could see. Not for every eye, it was for my eyes, but I would never see it, and it would *go away and come back*, this *ghost of me with a child inside me*. I turned my back to it; *my ears grew deaf* to it; *my heart would not beat*” (p. 77, emphasis mine). Whereas Xuela narrowly escapes death: “my heart would not beat” by refusing to give birth to this unborn child, Edwidge Danticat’s mother-protagonist, Martine Caco’s parting words were: “I could not carry the baby” (p. 224) for she feared that her lover, Marc “gave her the baby that’s going to take [her] life away” (p. 190).¹⁷ Both women are haunted by the recurring/repeating images of the unborn. Xuela’s abortion, therefore, bears the imprint of an exorcism; similarly to Martine, she must exorcise the demon, Jacques’s child, from within. Laying claim to black bodies replicates the slaveholding tradition of having control over women’s bodies. Thus, Xuela has chosen to mother, to make herself: “No one observed and beheld 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” (pp. 56-57); and in doing so, she reclaims her reproductive rights and sexual agency.

Xuela reconstructs the black female body not as a site of violence but as a site of resistance and resilience. The language of female resistance she invokes affords her the opportunity to claim ownership of her narrative of rape, and by extension, of her body. Celebrating her self-actualization, she writes: “Exhausted from the agony of expelling from my body a child I could not love and so did not want, I dreamed of *all the things that were mine*” (89, emphasis added). Self-devouring that carries the narcissistic imprint of self-loving is an act of self-actualization, also witnessed in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973). In response to her grandmother Eva Peace’s advice that she “get married [because] you need to have some babies. It’ll settle you,” Sula brazenly interjects:

“I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (p. 92). Like Sula, Xuela dismisses the procreative possibilities of female sexuality in favor of self-fashioning. In choosing self-articulation over patriarchal mothering, sex’s primary purpose is recreational. Performing the abortion affords Xuela the ability to shed the cloak of victimization she earlier inhabited and don one that celebrates and promotes female agency. The termination of her pregnancy, therefore, is illustrative of resistance, rejecting further invasion/penetration of her body that in turn signals her refusal to procreate and to reproduce the nation, specifically, to replicate the traumatic colonial history of Dominica. Registering her disgust and disapproval of slavery and the subjugation of her people, Xuela chooses self-isolation over patriarchal subjugation: “My impulse is to the good, my good is to serve myself. I am not a people, I am not a nation. I only wish from time to time to make my actions be the actions of a people, to make my actions the actions of a nation” (p. 216). Yet, in this declaration, in this refutation of the nation, is the yearning/mourning to belong to a community.

Xuela expertly uses language to intercept her geographic —and body—destabilization. I reason that Xuela, similarly to her creator Kincaid, is a master-manipulator of language. This fact becomes manifest in the following passage: “He did not move away in embarrassment and I, too, did not run away in embarrassment. We held each other’s gaze. I took off my clothes and he took off his clothes . . . When he was through with me and I with him . . .” (p. 70). The language used portrays unwavering self-assurance and intimates that Xuela initiated the sexual encounter and that she is Monsieur LaBatte’s equal.¹⁸ However, this is far from the truth as we later find out that not only is it her first sexual experience, but that it also happens with an adult male who happens to be her father’s age: “It was the first man I had ever seen unclothed and he surprised me. . . . I was *acting from a feeling I had*. The feeling I had, the instinct I was acting from, were *all new to me*. [Later] I washed the thin crust of blood that had dried between my legs and down the inside of my legs. I knew why it was there. I knew what had just happened to me” (p. 77, p. 70, p.72, emphasis added).¹⁹

The language of victimization surfaces here, albeit momentarily, illuminating Xuela’s false sense of security and her vulnerability, and shattering the protective wall of indifference she had built around herself. Brown cautions against refusing to acknowledge the body’s vulnerability and slavery’s and postcolonial violence. In a self-reflective moment, Xuela confesses that her “loss had made [her] vulnerable, hard, and helpless” and, shortly after being raped repeatedly, she confesses: “I could no longer be a child” (p. 4, p. 77). The phrase “I knew what had just happened to me” chronicles an out-of-body experience over which Xuela seemingly had no control, even as it gestures that Xuela is an unenthusiastic participant. Xuela inhabits a dual space: as spectator and participant. Despite Xuela’s lack of enthusiasm, she nevertheless “validate[s] her own sexual

pleasure within the gendered and racial oppressions which govern her life” (Schultheis, 2001, p. 8).²⁰ It becomes self-evident that, “Sexual pleasure does not equal happiness nor transform Xuela into an adherent of the law of the father” (Schultheis, p. 26). As spectator, Xuela attempts to deflect the devouring colonial male gaze; she does so through the act of doubling, through (body) disassociation, that affords her the ability to transform the self or to assume another form or self (Alexander, 2014, p. 174). “A form of masking, doubling functions as a skillful strategy for survival that permits one to deal with brutality and harsh realities of life” (Alexander, 2014, p. 174). Protagonist Sophie Caco, of Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes Memory*, effectively doubles during sex.²¹ Similarly to Sophie who receives temporary relief by doubling during sex, Xuela’s disassociation from the physical act and the “actor” empowers her: “The body of a man is not what makes him desirable, it is what his body might make you feel when it touches you that is the thrill. . . . I was surprised at how unbeautiful he was all by himself . . . it was anticipation that kept me enthralled.” (p. 70-71). Schultheis offers an explanation to this disassociation or critical distance: “Repeated experiences of displacement simultaneously produce the condition of self-reflexivity or critical distance that Xuela manifests so completely” (p. 15). This disassociation, in turn, engenders Jacques’s disembodiment and subsequent disempowerment, as his virility and potency are fiercely interrogated: “His hands hanging at his side . . . the limp folds of flesh on his stomach” (p. 71). Hence, without the act, the actor, Jacques, is zombified, is rendered ghost-like. By focusing on the anticipated action rather than on the actor, Xuela creates an alternative space beyond the reach of patriarchal control. While Jacques LaBatte may have temporary access to her body, Xuela does not relinquish her mind and spirit.

Xuela appropriately invokes the language of violence to give voice to her body violation: “To each piercing he made inside me, I made a cry that was the same, a cry of sadness” (p. 71). “Physical pain,” according to Elaine Scarry, “does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (p. 4.). Numbed by her experiences (both personal and historical): “Everything in my life, good or bad, to which I am inextricably bound is a source of pain” (p. 7), Xuela no longer succumbs to pain; instead, she is overcome by sadness. “Whatever pain achieves,” Scarry surmises, “it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (p. 4). When language fails Xuela, she captures her sexual exploitation via imagery that bears the imprint of physicality: His hands . . . not yet inside me . . . not yet opening my mouth wider to *place his tongue even deeper in my mouth* . . . the force of him inside me. A long sharp line of pain . . . each piercing that he made inside me” (p. 71, emphasis added). The near-suffocation that Xuela experiences earlier when her father forced her face into the barrel of nails surfaces here again as Jacques “place[s] his tongue even

deeper in [her] mouth.” These images of forced penetration encapsulate “what the female body undergoes during the physical act of rape . . . [in other words] representation of rape is thus achieved by highlighting the physical properties of sexual violence and revolves around the bodily reception of that violence” (Jean-Charles, 2009, p. 40). Xuela later admits that the sexual encounter had changed her: “I was not the same person I had been before” (p. 71).²²

Xuela’s manipulation of language has prompted some critics to dismiss that she was raped, and to disregard her bodily experiences of rape, arguing instead that she welcomed the sexual encounter and was an equal and willing participant. Daryl Dance, for example, claims:

It is no exaggeration to say that often Kincaid (according to her writings) and the Kincaid characters (especially Lucy and Xuela) delight in acting the part of the ‘slut’ as Kincaid always delighted in doing the opposite of what her mother desired—and shocking everyone. (Dance, 2016 p. 70).²³

Because of her deliberate embrace of what one may deem a wanton and reckless sexuality, her unabashedly pleasuring herself and smelling herself in Jacques’ presence, her refusing to wear underpants, her articulating both the pain and pleasure she experiences during sexual intercourse, Xuela is perceived as the active pursuer and seductress, becoming “the slut [she was] bent on becoming.” Ann Cahill (2001) provides an accurate assessment of Xuela’s ambivalence, of her assumed guilt and complicity: “Rape, itself, as a phenomenon, is profoundly multiple, deeply differentiated by a host of diverse and, at times, conflicting discourses. Yet, its possible meanings, while diverse, are always directly related to that complex interplay between the body and subjectivity” (p. 118). Acknowledging existing tensions embedded in the representation of rape, Régine Jean-Charles cautions against mythologizing rape survivors, against further victimization of the victims, noting that “The myths are about the context in which rape occurs, about the perpetrators of rape, about what a rape victim looks or acts like, and about how people respond to rape” (p. 44). She also challenges black women’s dehumanization, the widespread belief that they are not victims of sexual violence. In spite of her bodily assaults, “out of this ambivalent social status comes [Xuela’s] ability to claim instruments of power for herself” (Schultheis, p. 13). Therefore, Xuela’s perceived reckless and wanton behavior is her articulating resistance to a colonial structure that aims to silence women literally and bodily. Her weapon of choice to combat female oppression is female sexual agency.

Xuela is not a consummate victim, and consequently her laying “claim to her desires disrupts any simplistic reading of the power dynamics between her and Monsieur LaBatte (Schultheis, p. 24). At the same time, this blurring of the relationship does not construct Xuela as a hopeless and helpless victim. Actually, it allows her the space to articulate resistance; it aids in

her self-reconstruction. Xuela exercises female agency by discursively manipulating the colonial language and by embracing her corporeality, by inhabiting her body (language). Unabashedly identifying with a “slut,” using her own body as an instrument of pleasure and power, is Xuela’s challenge to Victorian ideology of decency and propriety. In short, she refuses to be ashamed of her sexuality.

Fittingly, Xuela experiences a rebirth after confessing: “I could no longer be a child. . . . I was not the same person I had been before.” This rebirth is appropriately heralded by torrential rain:

It had rained during the night, a rain that was beyond torrential, and in the morning it did not stop, in the evening after the morning it did not stop; the rain did not stop for many, many days. It fell with such force and for such a long time that it appeared to have the ability to change the face and the destiny of the world. . . . I was in a *state of upheaval*. *I would not remain the same*, even I could see that; *the respectable*, the predictable—such was not to be my own destiny. (p. 73, emphasis mine)

The state of upheaval and disruption mirrors the complex birth process. Here, Xuela not only interrogates respectability politics—exposing the hypocrisy of the patriarchy that sanctions female morality, while men routinely engage in immoral acts—but she also laments her lost innocence. Chronicling her return to infancy, she writes:

For the days and nights that the rain fell I could not keep to my routine: make my *own* breakfast, perform some household tasks in the main house in which Madame and Monsieur lived, then walk to my school . . . wash[. . .] my *own* clothes and generally tak[e] care of my *own* self. (p. 73, emphasis mine)

Thus, Xuela’s helplessness that resonates with infancy is brought on by her rebirth that takes place in the very room with the dirt floor. The room is imitative of the womb, and Xuela’s fetal-like position is epitomized by her inhabiting the “smaller version of the larger deluge”: “I was standing in the *middle of a smaller version of the larger deluge*; it was coming through the roof of my room, which was made of tin” (p. 73). We witness a similar rebirth in *Annie John*, in the scene where young Annie, after suffering a breakdown because of a fractured relationship she has with her mother, is saved by her grandmother, Ma Chess.²⁴ Whereas Ma Chess’s presence facilitates new life for her granddaughter, Annie, Lise assumes the role of the “white savior.” Well aware of Lise’s patronization, Xuela articulates guardedly:

She came *to rescue me*, she knew how I must *be suffering* in the wet. . . . She *could hear my suffering*, caused by this unexpected deluge, this unconscionable downpour; to be alone

in it would be the *cause of much suffering* for me, she *could already hear me suffering so.*" (p. 73, emphasis added)

Xuela's denigration is marked by Lise's infantilization of her, her portrayal of her as needy and dependent. Xuela's suffering is central to Lise's role as benevolent and wise liberator; as a suffering daughter, Xuela needs protection. Revealing the rampant pathologizing of black subjects, Xuela intimates that the colonizers deem suffering an innate characteristic of the colonized: "She could *already* hear me suffering so." Notwithstanding, she counters this narrative of black female victimhood: "But I was not making a sound at all, only the soft sighs of satisfaction remembered" (p. 74). This narrative of the suffering "other" even permeates Xuela's mother's relationship: "Placed outside a place where some nuns from France lived, they brought her up, baptized her a Christian, and demanded that she be a quiet, shy, *long-suffering, unquestioning, modest wishing-to-die-soon person*. She became such a person" (p. 199, emphasis mine). Interestingly, religion (Christianity), and suffering are coupled, presented as not-so-strange bedfellows. Lending voice to this "white savior" myth, Guyanese poet, Grace Nichols, registers her disgust with the portrayal of black women as sufferers and as suffering. Verbally indicting those who are comfortable with black women being trapped "in a stranglehold of perpetual dependency and victimization" (Alexander, 2014, p. 128),²⁵ she quips that, to fuel the (master) narrative of black female victimhood, the "abused stereotype / already in their heads," they need to perpetuate "a mother-of-sufferer / trampled / oppressed" (Nichols, 1990, p. 285). Kincaid concurs that this narrative of black female oppression is preferred. Responding to the critics who were dissatisfied with and therefore critical of Lucy's identity-formation, she unapologetically retorts: "They wanted to hear about her oppression, and her racial discrimination;" adding that Lucy "is going to be disappointing for a small-minded reader" (p. 23).

Xuela's propertied status is magnified by Lise insisting that she wear her dress, which symbolically superimposes a colonial identity onto Xuela's own identity. This scene bears resonance with a similar scene in *Annie John* where the mother abruptly discontinues the practice of dressing alike with her daughter. The mother in *Annie John* expresses real fear of the consequences of her daughter's assuming or "wrongfully" appropriating an adult-woman's identity.²⁶ She is trying to deflect the male (gaze) from consuming and devouring her daughter. In other words, she is averting unsolicited male sexual advance. On the contrary, Lise's goal is to consume Xuela, to subsume her identity, transforming her into an object of male (and female) desire. Despite a perfect fit, Xuela chronicles her physical discomfort: "The dress fit me perfectly, I felt most uncomfortable in it, I could not wait to remove it and put on my own clothes again" (p. 75). Lise's dress becomes a symbol of Xuela's haunting, her being hounded. Wearing Lise's dress speaks of erasure of an identity and the re-inscription of a colonial identity. Subsumed,

Xuela becomes an apparition, ghost-like. Xuela is reminded that her own mother's identity was erased by the nun who found her outside the orphanage and arbitrarily added her name, Claudette Desvarieux, to Xuela's mother's original name. This superimposition of a colonial identity is redolent in the following passage: "[Lise] was *stitching me a garment from beautiful old cloths* she had saved from the different times in her life, the happy times, the sad times. It was a shroud made of memories" (pp. 77-78, emphasis added). This scene that reinforces Xuela's body consumption also signals Lise's domestication of her, which stands in for another form of colonization: "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. Her frustration and my satisfaction were in their own way palpable." (p. 78). Domestication furthermore bears the imprint of sexualization, as Lise forces Xuela to wear the dress to be desirable and sexually appealing to Jacques; she also conflates Xuela's sexualization and attendant subjugation. Lise's attempt to literally "graft" Xuela is intended to subsume her identity. Furthermore, this pastiche of sorts, this trope of weaving that resonates with the African American tradition of quilting, arguably is a form of cultural appropriation of black culture, a theft that ultimately is intended to culminate in Xuela's body theft. In a case of role reversal, whereas Xuela is expected to be Lise's (sexual) double, Lise is engaged in cultural appropriation. We witness a classic case of cultural appropriation, of theft, that plays out on a grander scale, as the British colonizing mission is in effect: "My sister wore a dress of white silk; it came from far away, it came from China, but it was said that she was married in English silk" (p. 127).

Xuela captures Lise's haunting presence, her desire to possess her in words: "My heart was not unmoved by the sight of Lise haunting the space of ground that stood between the house in which she lived and the small hut I occupied . . . I did not want the actual sight of Lise seeing me leave her to haunt me for the rest of my life" (pp. 93-4, p. 96). This haunting comes to a head when Lise shadows Xuela like a ghost as she awaits her return after the abortion.²⁷ In mourning, Lise wears "a new black dress," as she plants "small bushes that bore white flowers" and then uproots and replaces them with lilies that "would eventually bear flowers the color of the inside of an orange" (p. 94). This rooting and uprooting of the flowering plants bears resemblance to Monsieur LaBatte's planting his "seed" in Xuela, resulting in her pregnancy. Hence, both husband and wife engineered the haunting, the rape. The white flowers that symbolize purity and innocence, most likely Xuela's, are replaced by "flowers the color of the inside of an orange," that blood-like imagery attesting to innocence lost. Furthermore, the reddish, fleshy inside of the orange bears resemblance to the female genitalia. The white flowering plants that signify Xuela's burgeoning sexuality serve as a testimony to her subsequent deflowering. This scene of Lise planting flowers parallels a similar scene in which Philip also "had an obsessive interest in

rearranging the landscape,” prompting Xuela to conclude: “Gardening in the way of luxury . . . is an act of conquest” (p. 143). Thus, if Xuela’s body is representative of the land, evoking Moira Ferguson’s title “where the land meets the body,” then Lise facilitates Xuela’s disembodiment, her conquest.²⁸ This parallel scene of Lise and Philip’s (strikingly, his name evokes royalty, a member of the conquering class) obsession with planting (colonizing) speaks of Lise vying for supremacy, a fact that comes to light when Xuela observes that “she wanted to graft herself onto [Jacques], the way it’s done with trees” (p. 76). Understandably, Lise wanted her and her husband to become one, congruent with the grafting of plants where tissues are joined to continue their growth together, and evocative of the matrimonial phrase: “a man shall . . . hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one.”²⁹ However, Jacques “would not be had, he would not be contained” (p. 76).

Xuela later moves out of Lise’s house into her own home; she also purchased the clothes of a recently deceased man— “I bought from his wife the garments of a man who had just died”— in which she went to work daily (p. 98). Completing the rebirth, “I cut off the two plaits of hair on my head; they fell to my feet *looking like two headless serpents*. I wrapped my almost hairless head in a piece of cloth. I did not look like a man, I did not look like a woman” (pp. 98-9, emphasis added). The headless serpents, symbols of deceit, are representative of Lise and Xuela, both disempowered under the patriarchal regime. Thus, Xuela denounces female deception. Her new androgynous appearance is her refusal to be linked with treachery and deceit of/by women and with patriarchal control and violence of men. She frees both Lise and herself from the reigns of patriarchy and patriarchal designs of female sexuality. This de-gendering or de-sexualization— exemplified by the cutting off of her two plaits and her donning “masculine” attire— aids in deflecting the haunting and penetrating male gaze. Moreover, it provides relief, albeit temporarily, of the objectification of the female body as sexually desirable and as the vessel of procreation.³⁰ Kathryn Morris (2002) expounds on this line of reasoning: “The androgyny and her seclusion . . . allow a moment of transcendence from the realm of the social order where she exists as a woman, a fated, gendered subject” (p. 964). Xuela’s bodily self-possession is complete when she removes herself from the patriarchal home in which Lise and Jacques reside.

Grafting or joining characterized as a horticultural technique is most commonly used in asexual propagation of plants. Thus, Xuela’s rejection of surrogacy or othermothering registers her distaste and distrust of non-genetic relations, of artificiality. Further, this artificiality finds representation in the strained relationships she has with her adopted/surrogate mothers, resulting in her rejection of all forms of surrogacy, including becoming a surrogate mother for Lise. In designating Xuela as a vessel of reproduction, Lise participates in her asexualization, denying her sexual agency. Along similar lines, Lise’s proverbial weaving of Xuela into the seams of her dress is akin to cloning as Lise attempts to make Xuela to her own liking/image. Drawing an interesting

parallel, asexual or vegetative reproduction always produces plants that are identical to the parent. Xuela is keenly aware of this colonizing mission, which she avoids by refusing to reproduce, to become a “mother of the nation.” This refusal is exemplary of a decolonizing act as she rejects the white nation as represented by the colonizers, Lise and Jacques LaBatte. In this way, Xuela simultaneously refuses to reproduce the nation and to feed the concept of the nation as family.

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Endnotes

¹ The symbol “x” is used to refer to a person, thing, and agency of unknown identity. See <https://girvin.com/blog/the-symbolism-of-the-x/>

² This refashioning of the autobiographical genre is reminiscent of Audre Lorde who created a new literary genre that she titles “biomythography,” a combination of history, myth, autobiography, and fiction. See Lorde’s biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*.

³ In a powerful portrayal of resistance to traditional, patriarchal definition of an auto/biography, Kincaid titles her essay, “Biography of a Dress.” In this essay, she chronicles her mother and her ambivalent relationship, and their relationship to the m/otherland.

⁴ Kincaid is known for blurring the lines between mother, motherland, and mothercountry. For a more detailed analysis of this “trichotomy,” see Alexander, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*.

Kincaid arguably uses personification here, another narrative strategy that denormalizes the normative autobiography.

⁵ Although Kincaid has claimed that her novels are not autobiographical, my reading of these novels is determined by their autobiographical content. My argument, therefore, is that Kincaid’s work is semi-autobiographical.

⁶ “Ghosting,” in the form of doubling or haunting/shadowing the m/other, is rendered palpable in the title of the book, *Annie John*. The mother and daughter are doubles, Annie John Senior and Annie John Junior. Moreover, this appropriation and subversion of the patriarchal practice where boys are given the names of their fathers traditionally, engenders a “ghosting” of the colonial practice.

⁷ While the term “ghostly presence” is oxymoronic, as the presence of a ghost suggests (bodily) absence, it is befitting the pervasive contradictions and ambiguities of the text.

⁸ I am referring to the island as female/feminine because often nations are referred to in the female gender. My use of personification is also in keeping with Kincaid’s adoption and adaptation of figures of speech.

⁹ Xuela does not characterize these appearances as dreams or dream-like, but they are real and function as part of her daily routine.

The appearance of only the mother’s heel exemplifies Kincaid’s use of metonym whereby part is representative of the whole.

¹⁰ The postcolonial subject is orphaned in essence, for s/he is deprived of a mother/land.

¹¹ Xuela married Philip after his wife passed. She is quick to point out that she is not a substitute lover: “But this is not to say that I took her place” (p. 160). Paradoxically, Philip’s power is diminished (they moved to the mountains to live among the Caribs). His conquest is reduced to him cataloguing books: “He now busied himself with the dead, arranging, disarranging, rearranging the books on his shelf. . . . He now lived in a world in which he could not speak the language” (p. 224).

¹² The age of consent in Dominica is 16 years old. The age of consent is the minimum age at which an individual is considered legally old enough to consent to participation in sexual activity. Individuals aged 15 or younger in Dominica are not legally able to consent to sexual activity, and such activity may result in prosecution for statutory rape or the equivalent local law. Dominica statutory rape law is violated when an individual has consensual sexual intercourse with a person between ages 14 and 16. For additional details, see <https://www.ageofconsent.net/world/dominica>.

My interchangeable use of rape, sexual exploitation, sexual violence, sexual experience, sexual encounter, sex relation is not intended to diminish the severity of the act/action, or to dismiss the manipulation of procreative sexual relations, but rather to lend to the ease of analysis and the narrative flow.

¹³ This “delivery” arguably is akin to human trafficking, engendered by geographic dis-, re-location. Similar to those trafficked, Xuela is psychologically and emotionally vulnerable, she is experiencing economic hardship, resulting in a nomadic existence, and she lacks a social safety net.

¹⁴ The phallic-like nails that are the source of Xuela’s pain and near-suffocation also have the ability to pierce her. Later, we witness a parallel scene at play in which she lends voice to the pain and piercing she experiences during her rape.

¹⁵ This scene is reminiscent of slave masters “gifting” their wives slave children. Specifically, when a slaver’s child “was born or married, he or she might receive the gift of a black attendant.” See

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/family/history2.html> .

In the contemporary situation, Xuela arguably is “sold” as a sex slave, for her relationship with Monsieur LaBatte is purely sexual. He never functioned as her surrogate father.

¹⁶ This room with the floor of dirt that is attached to the kitchen is exemplary of Xuela’s class position in this household, and in the nation of Dominica as a whole. She belongs to the class of the vanquished. Her marginal status/role is evocative of the marginalization of her people, Africans and Caribs.

¹⁷ Refusing to reproduce the nation, Martine takes her unborn child by killing herself. Here, the act of protest has a doubling effect: abortion and infanticide. For a more detailed discussion, see Alexander, *African Diasporic Women’s Narratives: Politics of Resistance, Survival, and Citizenship*.

Similarly to Xuela, Martine also complained about being unable to breathe (p. 191).

¹⁸ Xuela calls attention to class hierarchy: “Monsieur LaBatte was already a rich man, richer than my father. He had better connections; he had not wasted his time marrying a poor Carib woman for love” (p. 67). Like his predecessors, Monsieur LaBatte is on a colonizing mission.

¹⁹ Xuela intimates that Jacques LaBatte was a “repeat offender”: While she was “acting from instinct, he was behaving in a way he knew well” (p. 77). Like Xuela’s father who left Xuela’s face stuck in the barrel of nails to enjoy the tranquility of the sea, Jacques is unencumbered by acts of violence.

²⁰ Xuela’s ambivalence brings to the fore the precipice (the uncertainty, the unpredictability) that she is constantly fearful of falling off. She speaks of the simultaneous pain and pleasure of sex “a current of pure pleasure,” “ache of pleasure” (p. 71, 72).

²¹ To avoid being “tested,” a symbolic rape of sorts, where a mother inserts her index finger into her daughter’s vagina to ensure that her hymen is intact, Sophie engenders her own self-rape by ramming a pestle into her vagina.

²² Monsieur LaBatte’s dominion and domination of Xuela is most tangible in the scene, after the rape, when Xuela observes his coins, “their sides turned heads up; they bore the face of a king” (71). This observation is followed by her sharing with the readers that her room has a dirt floor.

²³ In a recent review of Dance’s book, *In Search of Annie Drew: Jamaica Kincaid’s Mother and Muse*, I questioned Dance’s interpretation of Kincaid’s perceived wanton sexual behavior. See *Journal of West Indian Literature*, (April 2017), 25.1, 113-17.

²⁴ This scene is analyzed in detail in my book, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*, 69-72. Notwithstanding, Annie describes her fetal-like position in the following manner: “I would lie on my side, curled up like a little comma, and Ma Chess would lie next to me, curled up like a bigger comma, into which I fit” (p. 125-6).

²⁵ For a detailed analysis of Nichols’s poems, see Alexander, *African Diasporic Women’s Narratives: Politics of Resistance, Survival, and Citizenship*.

²⁶ This appropriation resonates with the Caribbean trope of being “forced-ripe,” that is, becoming a woman prematurely, before one’s “time.”

²⁷ This shadowing, reminiscent of policing, reinforces that the LaBattes, in keeping with and perpetuating the policing role Xuela's father assumes, function as her jailers.

²⁸ Xuela elaborates that Philip's obsession with the growing of flowering plants did not wane because "these plants d[id] exactly what he wanted them to do" (p. 143).

²⁹ <http://biblehub.com/esv/genesis/2.htm> .

³⁰ Of noted significance, Xuela did not only purchase a pair of trousers and an old cotton shirt from the wife of the man who had recently died, she also purchased his "old nankeen drawers" (p. 98).

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