

“Performing Delusional Evil: Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother*”

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David Scott, in his preface titled “Evil Beyond Repair” in *Small Axe* (2018), argues that it is important to “reorient our thinking about New World slavery in the direction of *moral* and *reparatory* history” (vii, italics in original). For him, moral history “is a history-of-the-present of past orders of evil” (vii) and reparatory history “aims to reconstruct these evil pasts in ways that potentially enable us to rethink the moral responsibility that the present owes in respect of them” (viii). Scott highlights the difficulty in seeing the wrongs inherited from the past in the present world, since they can appear “more opaque, less amenable to rational analysis” (ix). I interpret Scott’s comments as defining slavery as a moral evil that has a legacy in the present and that can only begin to be reckoned with by first acknowledging the past and thus the moral responsibility to make reparations for that past evil. Indeed, attempting to rectify the legacy of slavery without clearly seeing the past is impossible. Sociologist Kehinde Andrews, in his article “The Psychosis of Whiteness: The Celluloid Hallucinations of *Amazing Grace* and *Belle*” (2016), helps to identify how reasoning becomes impossible when the past has been distorted, a distortion which jeopardizes attempts to understand and deal with its legacy. Andrews employs elements of Critical Whiteness studies to analyse these films, but he also goes on to rebuke what he sees as the discipline’s fundamental flaw. First, he outlines this field’s understanding of “Whiteness”: it rests on a Eurocentric worldview; it is a category that continually shifts, changing which persons are included within this privileged group; and it promotes a global system of oppression. Andrews disagrees with this discipline’s underlying assumption that “if the processes of Whiteness can be uncovered, then [these processes] can be overcome through rationale [sic] dialogue” (436). He also claims that the systems of “[s]lavery, genocide, and colonialism are foundation stones of Western modernity,” and that it is “through neo-colonial economic policies and exploitation of developing world labor” that “the system [is] maintained”; however, Andrews continues, “[t]he system is held together by *ignoring* the chasm between myth [i.e. the myth of the just and benevolent West] and reality” (439-40, my

italics). Thus, “Whiteness” cannot be merely restricted to unembodied racist and oppressive systems, as these systems are manmade and their continuity involves people actively ignoring the chasm between fact and fiction. Andrews analyses two recent British films (*Amazing Grace* and *Belle*) to argue that the hallucinations of “Whiteness” distort and misinterpret history—that is, they diminish black agency and elevate class and gender oppression over racism. These cinematic narratives, he posits, “allow the viewer to feel that slavery was wrong, but that it is in the past and Britain can be proud of its role [in abolishing slavery], and herein lies the *purpose* of the psychosis” (451, my italics). Note the word “purpose” here, which suggests that this psychosis has deliberately been manufactured. For Andrews, this psychosis cannot be reasoned with and “prevents society from engaging in the disturbing reality” (451). He concludes: “Until the conditions that create Whiteness are destroyed, the psychosis will govern the thoughts and actions of Western society” (451).

Both Scott and Andrews focus on ways of thinking about the past in the present. For Scott, the evil is located in the past even though it has a legacy, whereas Andrews maintains that these racist and oppressive systems have been deliberately maintained through the creation of a mentality—“not reserved for White people” (442)—that has allowed past systems to continue and still dominates how the past and its legacy are viewed today. It is this perception of the world, which could be termed “delusional evil,” which is the focus of this chapter. Even though Andrews clearly states that his use of the word “psychosis” is a metaphor, the term is a medical diagnosis, which in Andrews’s use of the word erroneously supports the stereotype of the psychotic person being violent, harming others, and having grandiose delusions of self-importance. Considering that not all psychotic people are violent, speaking of psychosis here might be regarded as ableist, which is why I will use the non-medical phrase “delusional evil” instead. The word “delusional” here covers the same conceptual ground as Andrew’s metaphorical use of psychosis, but avoids any reference to, and therefore any possible stereotyping of, mental illness.

The ways in which this delusional thinking manifests as mental colonization in the oppressed have been explored in depth by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* and in Caribbean bildungsromane and poetry, such as Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey* and Olive Senior’s “Colonial Girls’ School”; however, less has been written about the delusional thinking among oppressors. The most notable exceptions are the works of James Baldwin and Amiri Baraka, “Going to Meet the Man” and *Experimental Death Unit I* being the most obvious examples. A Caribbean writer who also participates in turning the gaze back at the oppressor is

Jamaica Kincaid. In *A Small Place* (1988), she addresses and deconstructs the Western tourist who vacations in the Caribbean, and in her novel *Lucy* (1990), the eponymous narrator is fascinated by her white American employer, Mariah, and questions how the latter can deny her own white privilege: “How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?” (41). Sabine Broeck investigates this gaze in these two texts by Kincaid, but when she examines “Whiteness” in *The Autobiography of my Mother* (1996), she restricts her reading to the white character Moira. This, I will argue, limits an understanding of what Kincaid is doing in this particular novel. In contrast, this chapter will examine “Whiteness” by focusing on Xuela, the first-person narrator. She is the daughter of a black father and a Kalinago (historically known as Carib) mother who died giving birth to her. Xuela, I will argue, participates in moral and reparatory history by interpolating the past (genocide and slavery) into the novel’s present (post-slavery colonial Dominica), and by scrutinizing the “delusional evil” that maintains this legacy. What is more, not only does Xuela interrogate this mentality, but she actually *performs* it through the written word. This performance, it is important to stress, differs from the way in which the colonized can be said to be mimicking the colonizers: in the novel, Xuela’s black father is depicted as displaying this kind of mimicry that arises from mental colonization. Xuela, in contrast, often consciously and deliberately performs the role of the colonizer without actually inhabiting it as, I will later contend, there is nothing to suggest that she is delusional or that she carries out any of the “crimes” in which she implicates herself. What she is doing is exposing the evil and the delusions inherent in slavery, genocide, and their legacies. She tells us:

The depths of evil, its results, were all too clear to me: its satisfactions, its rewards, the glorious sensations, the praise, the feeling of exaltation and superiority evil elicits when it is successful, the feeling of invincibility—I had observed all of this firsthand. (215)

These insights are displayed for the reader in the novel via Xuela’s exaggerated enactment of delusional evil. My suggestion is not that she actually feels this superiority or that she is inherently “evil”—or possibly psychopathic—but rather that she performs these traits and actions out of vengeance against the oppressive colonizer.

Xuela herself has unsettled critics and reviewers. Simone Alexander suggests that the character is unable to love, walking “in and out of people’s lives, yet remain[ing] untouched or

unaffected by them” (77), and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert posits that “Xuela will win her battle for survival, but it is at the cost of remaining in an emotional void” (35). Using even stronger words, Elizabeth West argues that “while readers may applaud Xuela’s defiance, they may be less inclined to embrace the empty self that evolves from her superior insight” (21). Antonia MacDonald-Smythe, for her part, contends that Xuela “manages to provoke the reader’s sympathy and pity alongside curious disbelief, repulsion and a lack of identification” (177). Similarly, *New York Times* reviewer Cathleen Schine remarks that “Kincaid has written a truly ugly meditation on life” and that “Xuela’s own self-hatred becomes twisted into a grotesque self-love, perverse and fueled with resentment until she is reeling with disgust for the world.” “Her empty life,” Schine continues, “is disturbing certainly—almost unbearable—without ever feeling real” (n. pag.). These interpretations of the character seem to neglect the possibility that Kincaid’s Xuela deliberately constructs a fictitious self; it is on this possibility that this chapter will focus.

Kathryn E. Morris recognizes that Xuela is an unreliable narrator who creates a persona. She argues that Xuela performs the negative colonial stereotypes, myths, and fantasies about the “Carib” Kalinago woman, especially those associated with a carnal appetite (961), which were used to justify the “barbarity of the European conquest” (958). Morris goes on to conclude that Kincaid hyperbolizes the old stereotype of the Kalinago woman (961) and turns the “colonial self/other paradigm” “on its head” (962), by transforming the colonial gaze “into a self-objectifying gaze which belongs to the Carib subject” (965). Morris notes that Xuela’s narrative creates a mythical figure who is excessively fertile but has “cruel maternal tendencies” (966). While I agree with this reading, Morris’s conclusion that Xuela has “a profoundly abused psyche” (966) seems to contradict the fact that what we witness is literally a hyperbolic self-construction: Xuela *creates* this fictional self.

To reiterate, I am claiming here that Xuela is performing many different personas—including the white colonizer and the indigenous woman—in her description of herself and her life. To understand the specifics of this argument, it is helpful to identify how these roles pertain to different literary genres and modes of writing. As mentioned above, Morris has already written about myth and the “Carib” stereotype, but other genres and their associated figures come into play as well. Even though the main focus of this chapter is Xuela’s performances of the colonizer, she also plays out the roles of the slave in the (neo-)slave narrative (detailing her mistreatment by others). It is through blending these genres and personas together that Xuela shows us not only the terrible impact that the legacy of slavery and

colonization has on the oppressed but also how this “delusional evil” has affected the former oppressors (whose role she plays too).

In terms of genre, Kincaid also draws on and transforms the first-person narrator of what I term the “maniac novel.” This type of novel—of which Ford Maddox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (1915) and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) are prime examples—is typically narrated by a white man who is not only thoroughly unreliable but who also possibly turns out to be a homicidal maniac.¹ For instance, John Dowell, the narrator of *The Good Soldier*, initially appears to be a lonely man who is trying to understand previous events through relating his impressions of the past. However, the text deviates from an impressionist narrative, as even “facts” are unreliable and the reader soon becomes aware that the narrator is a violent man who has either completely invented the people featuring in the text or possibly harmed them. Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* adopts a different strategy to explore the idea of unreliability. The book consists of a long poem preceded by an introduction and followed by notes on the poem. This material is written by a fictional editor called Charles Kinbote, who uses the book to tell the reader about his life as a Russian Prince and his relationship with the murdered author of the poem in America. Nabokov’s device satirizes annotators and literary critics whose work is primarily about themselves rather than the text on which they claim to be working. Crucially, the text also creates a character that not only is stalking the poet but may have harmed him and/or his family. Thus, both *The Good Soldier* and *Pale Fire* force the reader to be extremely suspicious of the written word, narrators in general, and the idea that “facts” actually exist. However, neither text is postcolonial, and both are about individuals rather than a collective mentality. In addition, the narrative techniques that expose Dowell and Kinbote to be unreliable narrators are accidental on their part, as these individuals wish to appear sympathetic and rational. Xuela, in contrast, deliberately employs these techniques to compel the reader to question whether she is delusional, evil, and possibly homicidal even though, as I contend, she is not. What employing and transforming these techniques does is to compel readers to turn their attention both to the evil acts committed by the colonizer and to the delusions that allowed these atrocities and their legacy to continue.

To begin to demonstrate this, I must first highlight the parts of Kincaid’s text that inform us that the narrator is unreliable. One indicator is that Xuela narrates events in her early life that she was too young to remember. She also relates intimate details about her father, yet near the end of her narrative, we learn that “everything” she has told us has been constructed through observing him, as their relationship was not close enough for her to really “know him” (197). In

addition, at the end of the book, she tells us that the language of her thoughts is actually creole (219). As the novel is in English, we know then that she has intentionally created a barrier to keep us at a distance; she is translating for us. The text is also narrated by an old Xuela, who, significantly, tells us that “a memory cannot be trusted, for so much of the experience of the past is determined by the experience of the present” (214). Moreover, she states that “for me the future must remain capable of casting a light on the past such that in my defeat lies the seed of my great victory, in my defeat lies the beginning of my great revenge” (215-16). This implies not only that the older Xuela’s present self and experiences are shaping the way in which she remembers the past, but also that she is narrating her past in such a way that the text will serve her desire for revenge against the colonizer. Underscoring the unreliability of her narrative as factual autobiography, she informs us that

[t]his 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 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. (227-28)

The second part of this passage lends itself to several readings: we can interpret “the person who was never allowed to be” as Xuela’s children or her Kalinago mother, which would then mean that she did not allow herself to be like her mother (one of the defeated and dead) or like the children that she later tells us she has aborted. Adding to the possible meanings involved in this, and further complicating the issue, is the fact that Xuela has previously told us that her white husband became these aborted children: “He became all the children I did not allow to be born, some of them fathered by him, some of them fathered by others. I would oversee his end also. I gave him a kind and sweet burial” (224). In my view, this particular quotation contains an element of the “maniac novel” because it covertly suggests to the reader that Xuela may have killed her husband: the fact that she “would oversee his end” ostensibly refers to the funeral arrangements she makes for him, but the expression also lends itself to a more sinister reading. Moreover, the use of the word “oversee,” I contend, is more than merely coincidence because Xuela frequently combines hints that she may have been violent or cruel with language that is reminiscent of slavery. Through her use of language, she takes on the role of the murderous overseer during slavery, in a reversal of roles. It is important to remember that my analysis is

based on the premise that Xuela is acting a part rather than necessarily recording autobiographical facts; this is emphasized by her words, “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” (228). In other words, she may *enact* the part of the “maniac,” but there is no clear-cut evidence suggesting that she actually harms anyone, including her unborn children.

Fiction and fantasy are important elements in the construction of Xuela’s narrative, especially in relation to her analysis of the colonial psyche. There are two passages about her violent fantasies that contain many of the key issues touched on in the novel. Significantly, the same imagery frequently recurs in the sections written in what I perceive to be the mode of the “maniac novel,” which I will discuss later. Her fantasies, as well as the passages that either mention or hint at possible violence, make us recall the evils of slavery and colonialism, thus participating in the construction of Scott’s moral and reparatory history with which I opened this chapter—a history that, as already mentioned, “reconstructs . . . evil pasts in ways that potentially enable us to rethink the moral responsibility that the present owes in respect of them” (viii).

The first excerpt that I wish to examine from this perspective is part of a masturbation scene at the end of the first section:

The sound of the sea then, at night, could be heard clearly, sometimes as a soft swish, a lapping of waves against the shore of black stones, sometimes with the anger of water boiling in a cauldron resting unsteadily on a large fire I could hear the sound of those who crawled on their bellies, the ones who carried poisonous lances, and those who carried a deadly poison in their saliva; I could hear the ones who were hunting, the ones who were hunted, the pitiful cry of the small ones who were about to be devoured, followed by the temporary satisfaction of the ones doing the devouring . . . : all this I heard night after night, again and again. And it ended only after my hands had traveled up and down all over my own body in a loving caress, finally coming to the soft, moist spot between my legs, and a gasp of pleasure had escaped my lips. (42-43)

Xuela’s sexual fantasies are about the sea, a cauldron, poison, and snakes. First of all, the way she describes the sea and presents us with images of the powerful and the powerless is reminiscent of the transatlantic slave trade: the “black stones” experience the sea as a “swish,”

which might recall the whipping of slaves; this image is then merged with that of a boiling cauldron, which may evoke the common poetic image in Caribbean literature of the anger of the sea about the slave trade and all those that died crossing the Atlantic. The cauldron's associations with witchcraft, moreover, may be related to those slaves who rebelled and practised obeah against their masters.

Second, the words “those who crawled on their bellies, the ones who carried poisonous lances, and those who carried a deadly poison in their saliva” indicate that Xuela's fantasies are also about snakes.² Snakes are here explicitly associated with poison: like the boiling cauldron, this too may be reminiscent of the rebellious slaves who sometimes poisoned their oppressors, as well as the Kalinago who used poisoned spears to hunt their prey. In this way, Xuela's fantasies seem to be *simultaneously* about fighting back, like the enslaved, and about preying on the weak, like the colonizers.

The second fantasy occurs after she tells us that she has aborted her first child:

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. I would bear them in abundance . . . but I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god I would eat them at night, swallowing them whole, all at once. They would live and then they would not live. In their day of life, I would walk them to the edge of a precipice. I would not push them over; I would not have to; the sweet voices of unusual pleasures would call to them from its bottom; they would not rest until they became one with these sounds. I would cover their bodies with diseases, embellish skins with thinly crusted sores, the sores sometimes oozing a thick pus I would throw them from a great height; every bone in their body would be broken and the bones would never be properly set . . . it is in this way that I bore my children. (97-98)

Morris reads this paragraph as a hyperbolic stereotype of the Kalinago woman (966). Even though I concur with this interpretation, I would suggest that the image of the cannibal is also applicable to Europeans. While the Kalinago people's vilification as cannibals was used to justify European barbarity against them, cannibalism also was—and still is—applicable to the ways in which white Europeans “consume” subaltern others. I refer to bell hooks's metaphor of “eating the other” to explain cultural appropriation, and also to Mimi Shelter's chapter, “Eating

Others,” in her book *Consuming the Caribbean*, in which she explains how tourism, along with many other western interactions with the Caribbean, is imaged as cannibalizing the region.

The quoted passage also recalls the fact that it was the British who purposely infected the Native Americans with smallpox (the skin disease referred to in the extract) and that it was the Europeans who caused the enslaved and Kalinago to jump to their deaths off cliffs and ships. In short, the careless and destructive “god” that Xuela depicts above more accurately describes Europeans’ belief in their superiority and in their right to brutally colonize places and peoples—a delusion that, according to Andrews’s previously mentioned suggestion, has not been acknowledged and enables oppressive systems to persist. The novel, however, remains ambiguous as to whether this description actually applies to Xuela: it is indeed important to note that she repeatedly uses the modal “would.” “Would,” in this context, is used to indicate a future in the past: the old Xuela is speaking about a past event, but one that was still in the future for her younger self. As a result, the reader can only wonder: when exactly is this future and under what conditions did it materialize? Did she actually perform these actions? At the end of the passage, she abandons the word “would” and says that it is “in this way that I bore my children”—using the past tense. Again, we can ask whether she actually did this, as later she informs us that she has “refused to bear any children” (199): is Xuela really violent and homicidal; did she really abort her pregnancies, or is this merely theatrics?

In order to outline how the “maniac” mode of writing works in this text, it is necessary to go methodically through the novel in order to locate and analyse the passages that appear to be written in this mode, as Xuela’s presentation of herself as a possible murderer is key to understanding her depiction of delusional evil. In Kincaid’s book, as is the case in the “maniac novel,” individual scenes may not create suspicion when viewed in isolation and their significance can be easily overlooked. It is only when they begin to accumulate, and when one starts to put these passages together, that one realizes that the narrator may be a frightening individual.

It is Xuela’s descriptions of acts of violence in childhood that introduce us to this possibility. The first incident occurs after the laundry woman who is looking after her punishes her in a manner that the text explicitly associates with slavery:

She made me kneel down on her stone heap, which as it should be was situated in a spot that got direct sun all day long, with my hands raised above my head and with a large stone in each hand Why should this punishment have made

a lasting impression on me, redolent as it was in every way of the relationship
between . . . master and slave. (9-10)

After this event, Xuela collects “three turtles and place[s] them in an enclosed area where they could not come and go as they pleased and so were completely dependent on [her] for their existence” (11). When the turtles will not do what Xuela wants, she decides to “teach them a lesson” by “cover[ing] up the small hole from which each neck would emerge” and blocking the enclosed area where they live with stones (12). She forgets about them and later discovers that they are dead (12). I would suggest that the stones she was made to hold by the laundry woman as her “slave” are transferred onto the turtles, with Xuela cast in the role of the “master” this time. Thus, slavery and its legacy appear to be played out by a child. After the death of the turtles, a literal blank space appears in the text. This space separates this incident from the next paragraph and creates a significant visual silence about how Xuela felt about the death of the turtles, suggesting that she is, indeed, a careless god.

The next incident of violence is an act committed against Xuela’s stepmother’s dog after the stepmother gives the girl a necklace that Xuela tells us was meant to kill her. Xuela, unlike a “real child,” does not put the necklace on:

I was not a real child. . . . this dog was a gift from my father, it was to protect [my
stepmother] from real human harm, a harm that could be seen, it was meant to
make her feel a kind of safety. One day I placed the necklace around the dog’s
neck, hiding it in the hair there; within twenty-four hours he went mad and died.
(34-35)

Just as in the case involving the turtles, there is nothing in the text to indicate what Xuela’s motives might be or how she felt about what happened to the dog. There is also nothing to verify whether or not her stepmother was using obeah to try to kill her. What this passage does, however, is to alert us to the possibility that Xuela was a disturbed child, whilst simultaneously omitting to provide us with any evidence to substantiate it. In addition, her not being a “real child” may recall how enslaved children and some colonized children were robbed of their childhoods, and it could also be read as a hint that the child in this particular story is Xuela’s invention.

As previously established, Xuela's experience of living with the laundry woman is directly associated with slavery; so too is her later experience of boarding with the Labattes, because her father thinks it is necessary to remove her from "the presence of his wife" (62). She must work for her board and Madame Labatte makes a gift of her to her husband, who holds her down whilst he has sex with her. Xuela tells us that the wife wishes to consume her, which is symbolic of the metaphorical way in which slavery consumed the enslaved.³ Consequently, when Xuela lives with her stepmother, we are compelled to look for further parallels with slavery. For instance, the jealousy of her stepmother towards her, and the woman's possible attempt against Xuela's life, may be reminiscent of white women who were jealous of their husbands fathering children with slaves and who took revenge on the children.

On one level, each of Xuela's experiences reflects and reinforces the long-lasting and traumatic legacy of violent oppression and mistreatment. However, the gaps in the text about the earlier dog incident, and the fact that Xuela does not tell us her motives or her feelings in relation to it, lend an additional disconcerting element to the scene: children harming animals and feeling little emotion about it is one of the behaviours typically associated with psychopaths in childhood. Other elements in the text allow us to possibly link the dog incident with the "maniac novel." For instance, the scene is referred to multiple times in the narrative, and repetition is a device in the "maniac novel" to alert readers to a significant clue.

Also making us suspicious of Xuela's motives is the order in which the events are presented in the narrative. Immediately after the dog incident, Xuela jumps forward in time to tell us of her sister's accident and her brother's death. She describes her sister's accident thus:

On that road that I came to know so well, I spent some of the sweetest moments of my life And I knew a place just off the side of this road where the sweetest cashews grew . . . it was on that road that my sister . . . was traveling on a bicycle after meeting a man . . . when she had an accident, falling over a precipice, which left her lame and barren, her eyes unable to focus properly. This is not a happy memory; her suffering, even now, is very real to me. (50-51)

This passage does not seem particularly odd on first reading, especially since Xuela appears to feel for her sister (although her need to tell us that she does is rather strange in itself). More decisively, further on in the novel, we reach the previously quoted passage stating that Xuela is a "god" who would "walk [her children] to the edge of a precipice" and "throw them from a

great height” (97); “every bone in their body,” the text continues, “would be broken and the bones would never be properly set” (97). Reading these words, we may recall what happened to Xuela’s sister, who “[fell] over a precipice, which left her lame and barren” (51), and we may start to become suspicious about the protagonist’s role in her sister’s accident.

After narrating this event, Xuela tells us about her brother’s death: “I did not feel it was a tragedy, I only felt it was merciful that his life of misery and torture should be so short. His death was long and painful, its cause unknown, perhaps even unknowable” (55). That the cause of his death is unknown may appear slightly suspicious at this point, since we may have come to doubt that the narrator is being entirely truthful. This feeling is enhanced when Xuela once more alludes to the dog incident by telling us that her stepmother tried to kill her again: “the other attempts she made were only halfhearted. . . . When her son [Xuela’s brother] died, I was no longer living in her house” (55-56). The fact that Xuela tells us that she was no longer living in the same house may actually increase suspicion in itself. Why does she need to tell us this? We have also understood by this point in the narrative that there are ways to kill people without being present by using obeah. Before Xuela tells us about her siblings once more, the passage about her being a god appears in the text. Recall also that she tells us that she “would cover [her children’s] bodies with diseases, embellish skins with thinly crusted sores, the sores sometimes oozing a thick pus” (97). Significantly, shortly after this we learn that her brother’s body was “covered with small sores” (109) and that “[b]efore he died, from his body came a river of pus” (111). Furthermore, she adds two potentially significant elements: that he was reportedly “possessed by an evil spirit that caused his body to sprout sores” (109) and that “[j]ust as he died, a large brown worm crawled out of his left leg” (111). The mention of an evil spirit and the description of the worm suggest that he may have been killed by obeah. This fact, combined with the repeated mention of the dog incident, the need to tell us that she was no longer living with her brother, and the similarity between what she would do to her children and the way that her brother dies, makes us wonder whether she may have been responsible for his death.

Xuela’s next statement, about her stepmother, is equally striking, as it may also contain an elusive revelation: “I felt sorry for her then but not enough to forgive and forget that she had once tried to make me dead also” (112). While apparently expressing a moderate form of sympathy for her stepmother, Xuela’s statement can, in fact, be considered a veiled reminder that, on the one hand, she may have the capacity to kill and that, on the other, she has a reason to want to take revenge on her stepmother. If we think that Xuela caused her brother’s death, she could indeed be a homicidal maniac. However, there is nothing to suggest that she is actually

responsible other than the hints and the possible use of metaphor. It is her narrative style that focuses our attention on the possibility of violence.

After informing us of possibly killing her brother, Xuela then moves on to tell us, in no uncertain terms, how she killed her sister's unborn child:

She became my sister when . . . she found herself with child and I helped her rid herself of this condition. . . . I made her strong potions of teas. When the child inside her still refused to come out, I put my hand up into her womb and forcibly removed it. . . . I had become such an expert at being a ruler of my own life in this one limited regard that I could extend such a power to any other woman who asked me for it. But my sister did not ask me for it. I never became *her* sister; she never took me into her confidence, she never thanked me. (114-15, italics in original)

Xuela giving her sister “strong potions of tea” to abort her child and then forcibly removing the fetus in this manner is grotesque in itself. Furthermore, learning that her sister did not ask her to do it leaves us with the possibility that Xuela poisoned her sister and then attacked her when the poison failed to work. At this point, we can opt to distance ourselves from Xuela and view her as a monster or we can choose to read her actions as metaphors and recall all the ways in which white people have violated black women's bodies—for example, we may recall the brutality toward enslaved pregnant women that resulted in miscarriages. Yet, we must remember that Xuela's own actions may be completely fabricated, unlike those of the colonizer.

As previously demonstrated, the violent acts that Xuela relates to us remind us of the violence inflicted on African Caribbean and Kalinago peoples. In addition to these acts, at the end of the narrative, she informs us that she harmed her white husband and his deceased white wife:

It was said of me that I had poisoned my husband's first wife, but I had not; I only stood by and watched her poison herself every day and did not try to stop her. She had discovered—I had introduced the discovery to her—that the large white flowers of a most beautiful weed, when dried and brewed into a tea, created a feeling of well-being and induced pleasant hallucinations. (206-07)

We do not know whether Xuela actually poisoned the woman or if the latter became addicted to the tea, as Xuela claims: “her need for this tea grew stronger and stronger” (207). In any case, the narrator’s admission that she “introduced the discovery” to the dead woman hints at the possibility that Xuela might have aided her husband’s first wife to poison herself. Once again Xuela is simultaneously performing the role of the homicidal “maniac” and that of the enslaved woman who fought back during slavery by poisoning her mistress.

Significantly, the incident links together the ideas of poison and drug addiction, and Xuela goes on to mention that the potion “turned [the woman’s] skin black before she died” (207). This reference to the colour black is explicitly associated in the novel with the people of Dominica, “whose skin was such a color” and whom the woman despised “for that very reason” (207). Ironically, then, this passage casts the white woman into the role of the colonized, just as it casts the suspected murderer in the role of the colonizer. The white woman’s death, moreover, compels us to recall the effects on native populations of poisonous and addictive substances introduced by Europeans, such as alcohol. Once again, in such a scenario, Xuela’s role is highly ambiguous, as she is physically black—hence discriminated against “for that very reason”—but she is also the one who introduces her victim to poisonous substances just as the white colonizers did.

What Xuela relates about what she did to her white husband reminds us of her blocking up the shells and the homes of the turtles:

I translated for him. I did not always tell him the truth, I did not always tell him everything. I blocked his entrance to the world in which he lived; eventually I blocked his entrance into all the worlds he had come to know. (224)

Xuela treats her husband psychologically as she treated the turtles physically. Such an act of “blocking” recalls the physical, but also emotional and intellectual, experience to which the enslaved and the colonized were subjected. The turtles and her husband are shut up in “darkness” (49) just as she has told us the colonized live “in a darkness from which [they] could not be redeemed” (49), as they are taught that their reality is “unreal” and that they cannot even correctly interpret their own experience (37). This also reminds us of the mental darkness experienced by the enslaved, the kind that Frederick Douglass wrote about: “Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness” (55). Xuela has both experienced this as a colonized subject and subjected the other (her white husband) to this

condition. What is more, being shut up in mental darkness, being blocked from entering Xuela's world, is also the experience that she forces upon the reader who tries to enter the world of her narrative, as we have no way of substantiating any "facts" in her story. The reader is forced to experience what she and her ancestors were subjected to.

In effect, Xuela controls "reality" through the written word. She also directly describes how a person can commit atrocities. "Vanity" is one of the words that she uses to characterize what I have termed delusional evil, and she tells us that one of the "first tools you need to transgress against another human being" is to "be very pleased with who you are" (156). You also need "a malicious intent: to make [others] feel humiliated, humbled, small," which is in itself an "expression of vanity," as it provides your sense of self and "your own deeds" with a "perfume" that "is intoxicating" (59). What is more, you need to delude yourself that to connive, deceive, and murder are, in fact, based on "reason and logic" and "a theory of justice" (134). Murdering others and one's own humanity can be done with "complete calm" if one worships oneself and allows nothing to replace oneself in one's own mind (99-100). Vanity in itself can "be a weapon as dangerous as any knife" (19). As is evident, this grandiose narcissistic delusional view of the self and this distortion of reality (past and present) strongly resemble Kehinde Andrews's description of the psychosis of whiteness; it is this mindset that allows moral evils to occur.

Thus far, my argument has been that Xuela not only exposes delusional evil but that she also incorporates it into her own persona in a way that transforms the mode of the "maniac novel." Indeed, instead of focusing the reader's gaze on a disturbed individual who is mad and possibly dangerous, Kincaid's book clearly shows how the creation and perpetuation of "whiteness" is mad (in a non-medical sense) and dangerous: this is what delusional evil is. There is absolutely nothing in Kincaid's novel to suggest that Xuela herself is delusional or is, in fact, deliberately responsible for any harm done to any living creature except perhaps for the turtles (but we do not really know how this event came about, how she felt on discovering that they had died, or whether it actually happened). As Xuela tells us at the end, her narrative is "an account of the person I did not allow myself to become" (228). This sentence contains many possible meanings. As mentioned above, it could be read as Xuela saying that she did not allow herself to become defeated like her dead mother. Nevertheless, my reading of Kincaid's book also makes it possible to read the "mother" in the title as the "mother country." In this way, Xuela is performing an autobiography of Britain, complete with its evil acts and delusional mentality. Indeed, if Britain were to write a rational moral history of itself, it would need to

acknowledge the moral evil and delusional thinking inherent in its colonial past. However, according to Xuela, this is something that the establishment should not ethically do, as “to condemn yourself is to forgive yourself, and to forgive yourself for your transgressions against others is not a right that anybody can claim” (220). Thus, instead of the victors writing history, as has always been the case, it is time for the oppressed to write the history of colonization, to write the moral and reparatory history that Scott advocates, a history that, this chapter has argued, Jamaica Kincaid has written through her character Xuela. Admittedly, by reading Scott and *The Autobiography of My Mother* together, one might be left pondering how concrete reparations can be made without the former colonizers “condemning” themselves; but perhaps it is for the descendants of the enslaved and colonized to judge exactly what reparations need to be made, and for them to take control of this process.

Notes

1. I deliberately use the lay term “maniac” here as opposed to a medical term for two reasons: first, the characters in these novels do not display any symptoms that can be straightforwardly associated with a specific diagnosable mental illness; second, as Evelyn O’Callaghan points out, “it is foolhardy to attempt even a tentative medical diagnosis of a fictional character” (90)—according to Lillian Feder it is even “absurd” (cited in O’Callaghan 91).
2. Incidentally, the snakes may also remind us of Kincaid’s novel *Lucy*, in which the protagonist connects herself with Lucifer from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to explain her rebellion against her mother and colonialism. A similar Miltonian connection may exist in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, in which Xuela tells us that she was born into, and lives in, a “false paradise” (32) and that a picture on the wall in Eunice’s house (the washerwoman with whom she lives when she is very young) is entitled “HEAVEN” (9).
3. The sex scene mentioned in this list reminds us of another incident in the novel: when Xuela is later living with a white man (who will become her husband) and his wife, the first time that she has sex with him she ties her own wrists together, which can be read as a performance of slavery as it overtly depicts for us an image of bondage. Gary E. Holcomb and Kimberly S. Holcomb use S/M theory to analyse the novel and they argue that “[t]he psychodrama plays out the taboo (white male master/black female slave) in a way that fascinates us while it repels. Regardless of our own subject positions as readers, we become voyeurs of colonial history. Knowing that Xuela controls the scene does not comfort us but instead involves us in both the construction and subversion of colonial ideology” (972).

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