



2004

No beginning, no end: The legacy of absence in Jamaica Kincaid's *The autobiography of my mother*

Alan Shima

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

Recommended Citation

Shima, Alan, No beginning, no end: The legacy of absence in Jamaica Kincaid's *The autobiography of my mother*, *Kunapipi*, 26(2), 2004.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol26/iss2/8>

No beginning, no end: The legacy of absence in Jamaica Kincaid's *The autobiography of my mother*

Abstract

A sea is large. If placed in the middle of it, you will feel the pull and tug of waves, each mounting swell adding volume to what is before and beneath you. Jamaica Kincaid's writing can be a sea. Her narratives unfurl in the heave and thrust of thought curling back upon itself. Incidental descriptions may have the simple surface of account; but think twice because the emotional undertow of her work will take you elsewhere.

ALAN SHIMA

No Beginning, No End: The Legacy of Absence in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*

A sea is large. If placed in the middle of it, you will feel the pull and tug of waves, each mounting swell adding volume to what is before and beneath you. Jamaica Kincaid's writing can be a sea. Her narratives unfurl in the heave and thrust of thought curling back upon itself. Incidental descriptions may have the simple surface of account; but think twice because the emotional undertow of her work will take you elsewhere.¹

In narrating the accidental and unavoidable events that shape the consciousness of her characters, Kincaid frequently uses the idiom of poetic imagery. This versification of views estranges the familiar, making experiences indelible and beyond common recognition. This lyrical quality in Kincaid's writing is not driven by a metaphysical or transcendental impulse. Instead, her narratives are motivated by everyday concerns, ones that have precise locations and specific contexts. Primarily situated in the minds and migrating genealogies of culturally split subjects, Kincaid's texts recall a disputed and undecided Caribbean history, reformulated in references that loop from the muted past to an open-ended present. Similar to her contemporaries Derek Walcott, Michelle Cliff, and Caryl Phillips, Kincaid places personal and political history in direct contact, recollecting the unrestricted privileges and private abuses that wrought the New World into an extended set of Old World interests.

From her earliest short fiction, collected in *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), to her most recently published novel, *Mr. Potter* (2002), Kincaid voices the way a mind, a perceptive mind, understands (or misunderstands) a world that often refuses to acknowledge it. This critical reflection is placed in relation to what might be called the mystery of identity and its withheld anterior. Thematically, this issue is addressed in the form of an immemorial, pre-colonial origin irreversibly altered by the logic of domination. For Kincaid's female narrators, there are no easy solutions to the problems that evolve under such circumstances. There are, however, choices to be made. If the vanquished cannot re-write a past that has disinherited them, Kincaid's first-person narratives suggest that a person can invent a present, devise a reckoning that need not be paid in guilt and violence; that individuals can venture beyond the myth of race and nation and the other myths that have made people strange to themselves. It is this dimension of Kincaid's work that I wish to focus on.

A DAUGHTER'S RECALL

Kincaid's novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) is probably the most compelling example of what I have outlined above. The West Indies island of Dominica, during the first half of the twentieth century, provides the novel's principal setting. The question of colonial experience is explored at the personal level where the effects of colonialism, during the time of the narrated events, appeared benign and natural to many. This incongruity reflects a historical gap for the oppressed, a primal disruption in the sequence of sense and order. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the legacy of ruin left by colonialism is initially cast as a deep yet single misfortune. Kincaid's seventy-year old narrator, Xuela Claudette Richardson, begins with a dreadful disclosure: 'My mother died the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind' (3). Xuela, however, informs the reader that the wound of a personal disaster, in her case, cannot be isolated from the devastating imprint of colonialism and the inheritance of misery that multiplies in the form of self-denial among the conquered. Xuela's personal loss is thus articulated against the background of an overdetermined Caribbean past, one that has been hollowed by generations of subjugation and brutality. Under such conditions, the dispossessed are repeatedly left in the depth of their own demise, beyond concern, without history, anonymous even in the light of day. Yet there are those who do succeed in surviving such conditions and who do achieve a kind of grace, though it is grave and without splendour. Xuela is one who survives.

The novel's exploratory, self-reflecting prose feels uncompromisingly immediate. In Kincaid's writing there is the inward turn of thought found in writers like Montaigne or Jean Genet. Similar to Montaigne's sixteenth-century, self-probing essays, the text reaches into the interior of thinking, wedging its way into under-explored crevices of conjecture and doubt. Comparable to the nocturnal voice in Genet's *A Thief's Journal*, Xuela interrogates the beautiful, and admires the unsightly; she looks at herself without shame and embraces what is unloved. However, Montaigne and Genet were not women, nor did they bear the inheritance of slavery. Consequently, Kincaid's writing is unmistakably other. The sea that surrounds Xuela's story has a different history, one that is inflected by the 'middle passage' and the institutionalised cycles of prolonged suffering.²

Embedded in Xuela's original loss, however, is a fearsome aspiration to overcome disaster, but she is not heroic. She is not sympathetic in the way Celie is in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, nor is Xuela composed with the fortified compassion of Sethe in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Some readers will surely find Xuela unlikable. As a fictional figure she lacks warmth. There is even a streak of hostility in her temperament. On the other hand, Xuela does not read like a realistic character. Kincaid's text makes a point of Xuela's affective nature. She is possessed by a bottomless pain and she functions more like a pressure point in the narrative rather than a complex personality. This does not mean

Xuela is without complex feelings or is not elaborate in her analysis of her social and historical circumstances. Mimetic features of realism are, however, notably missing as Xuela textualises the trauma of her loss and the loss experienced by those around her.

In its form, the 'autobiography' of Xuela's mother can be seen as a type of ghost writing. The lost presence of a mother's life is authored by a daughter's recall. In Xuela's case, however, memory is (has to be) a means of invention, a strategy that conjures an origin that can neither be recovered nor passed on in any ordinary sense. This imaginative aspect of the novel is composed, in part, through Kincaid's distinctive use of language. On one level, Xuela's narrative is true to the common conventions of confessional autobiography. Self-reflective statements and observations of what Xuela remembers and laments structure the narrative. Penetrating analysis and associative remarks add density and texture to Xuela's self-inquiry. There is very little dialogue offered in the text, and on the occasions this occurs it is normally alluded to through indirect speech.

On the stylistic level, Kincaid uses a less conventional mode of reporting past events and of rendering their significance. There is a preponderant use of repetition and the multiple use of negation phrases, a strategy that creates syntactic rhythms as well as measures in thought that initially appear mannered or theatrical.³ For instance, when recounting the first time she observed a naked man, the one whom she first had sex with, Xuela notes: '[W]hen I first saw him, his hands hanging at his side, *not yet* caressing my hair, *not yet* inside me, *not yet* bringing the small risings that were my breasts toward his mouth, *not yet* opening my mouth wider to place his tongue even deeper in my mouth ... I was surprised at how unbeautiful he was all by himself, just standing there...' (emphases added 71). The repetition of negation phrases used here, with its positive orientation towards a fulfilled and completed future, draws attention to Xuela's form of expression as well as her mode of pleasure. Arranged in the beat of a chant, the run-on sentence invokes the intensity and expectancy of this encounter. Xuela herself concludes that it was not the male body or the concrete act of sex but 'the anticipation that was the thrill' (71). Xuela's remark moves attention to the textual rather than the mimetic dimension of this 'memory'. Because her internal sadness is without external reference (her mother is dead), her feelings, regardless of whether they are of pleasure or pain, can only be expressed along irregular routes of yearning and compensation. Thus, in the process of narrating in her mother's place, Xuela must come to terms with an absolute and terrifying void.

Her grief is large and binding and like the distance between stars it is immense and beyond petition. As an infant, Xuela's sense of irreversible abandonment is enlarged when her father leaves her in the care of Eunice Paul, the woman who does his wash. Now severed from both parents, Xuela evolves in a world of wrecked relationships. Though she suffers deeply, Xuela is not emotionally paralysed. She feels strongly but her passion is not expressed in conventional utterances or responses. She learns to be suspicious and cautious. She does not speak until she

is four. When her father fails to appear after a fortnight, as he usually does to pick up his clean clothes, Xuela's first words take the shape of a question: 'Where is my father?' (7). This simple query, spoken with candour (and in 'plain English')⁴ of a not so innocent child, addresses issues of kinship, gender, and history. Xuela knows that her mother is dead, a fact that precludes any chance of reunion. Consequently, the demand to know where her father is holds an added but unexpressed meaning. 'Where is my father', for Xuela, is a question that is always supplemented by the other, more basic question, 'where is my mother'. Xuela's mother is dead of course, but this is not the answer to the question that is reformulated throughout Xuela's life. Xuela continuously seeks a primal familiarity, a self-image constituted and reflected in the immanence of her mother. Yet this unequivocal proximity of bodies and spirits, 'the confusion of who is who' (199), was eliminated at birth. Xuela's father is the only link she has to an origin that remains unreal.

This primal absence is overlaid with other absences. Xuela's mother was of the Carib people, the near extinct indigenous inhabitants of Dominica. As an infant, Xuela's mother was abandoned by her own mother and left at the gates of a French convent wrapped in a cloth with the name Xuela sewn in it. Claudette Desvarieux, the nun who found the infant, added her name to the child's original one. The nun's vain indulgence extends the colonial decimation of subjugated people through a re-inscription of identity, a practice initiated by Columbus's renaming of Caribbean islands as possessions of a foreign state. Thus Xuela, in the body of her full name, Xuela Claudette Richardson, bears the mark of her mother's own abandonment and displaced identity.

OF MAN, OF PEOPLE

Xuela's father, Alfred Richardson, also carries the stamp of a colonial past, but his legacy is rather different from that of her mother's. A man of humble beginnings, Xuela's father achieves wealth and status as a local official. He, however, is corrupt — manipulative and canny in his cruelty — but these flaws are progressively contextualised and somewhat mitigated in Xuela's narrative. If Xuela's mother is a mystery to her, then her father is a severe reality. Alfred Richardson, the father who left his new born daughter in the care of the woman who washed his dirty clothes, unavoidably takes on a significant role in a text that is ostensibly dedicated to the life of Xuela's mother. Yet it is not surprising that Xuela dwells deeply on her father's life. At one point, Xuela expresses a crucial insight about her relationship with her father:

He was an animal of neutrality. He could absorb love; he could absorb hate. He could go on. His passions were his own: they did not obey a law of reason, they did not obey a law of passionate belief, and yet he could be described as reasonable, as someone of passionate beliefs. I was like him. I was not like my mother who was dead. I was like him. He was alive. (108)

The ability to endure is what Xuela and her father have in common, but this fact cannot dismiss questions of ethical conduct and responsibility. How does one survive under the strain of personal grief or institutional forms of oppression? In a manner that resists categorical reasoning or solutions, Kincaid's novel explores some of the options.

Unable to tell the story of her mother, Xuela strategically takes up the story of her father intermittently throughout the novel. This shift in narrative focus allows for an oblique approach to Xuela's primal loss and provides a set of alternative references by which to know herself. Alfred Richardson is a conflicted man, yet he is not aware of this. His behaviour and values betray his history, or perhaps they are a perverted extension of his history. Replicating the gestures and desires of colonial authority, Xuela's father repeats the abuses and crimes committed against his own colonial past. To phrase this suggestion in the terms outlined in Franz Fanon's analysis of a postcolonial bourgeoisie, Alfred Richardson, in his occupation as a police officer, is part of a new regime, one that specialises in opportunism, promotes private advancement, and is inventive in keeping the mass majority of the population pinned to poverty and servitude.⁵ Alfred may be a survivor of colonial oppression, but it seems that his bounty is plunder. However, Kincaid does not give us a reductive view of Alfred's complicity with colonial transgressions. Alfred Richardson, like the unspeakable absence of Xuela's mother, is complex; an unutterable pain also plagues him, though he does not acknowledge this fact. It is only in the advanced stages of the novel that the reader learns relevant details that shed light on Alfred's unspoken grief and his career as a merchant in profit-making transgressions.

Alfred's father, John Richardson, was a Scotsman. Alfred's mother, Mary, was a descendent of the African slaves who were brought to Antigua. Contemplating the relationship between her father's parents, Xuela dwells on 'the distinction between 'man' and 'people' (181). Mary's people were part of a suffering multitude, damaged in will, broken in spirit, while John, and his kind, was a man who possessed himself, who looked at the sea and heard the call of destiny. She informs the reader that John and Mary were married 'in a Methodist church in the village of All Saints in the parish of St. Paul, Antigua, on a Sunday afternoon in the late nineteenth century' (181). These details are then contrasted with a series of uncertainties. Xuela states that there are no pictures of her paternal grandparents, that she does not know whether Mary was beautiful or whether John was handsome. She adds, 'How these two people met and fell in love then, I do not know; that they fell in love I do not know, but I do not rule it out, nor any other combination of feelings' (182). In her account of the past, Xuela moves between description and conjecture, and her speculations have a dreamy yet truth-seeking edge to them. The mark of reservation and the insertion of a provisional claim is a recurring trait in Xuela's narrative, for this conditional mood is necessary when addressing the unalterable consequences of Xuela's genealogy and personal history.

Xuela's backward glance at the life of her father's father bares forth composite meanings. John Richardson, the reader is told, was a rum trader. He lived the life of a rogue, travelling throughout the Caribbean where 'he had many children with many different women in these places where he had lived, and they were all boys and they could tell that they were the sons of John Richardson because they all had the same red hair, a red hair of such uniqueness that they were all proud to have it, the hair of John Richardson' (182). Xuela's commentary here is as much allegation as it is description. The enterprise of empire is shown in its diminutive form. John Richardson's sexual escapades are implicated with colonial aggression. This charge, however, is made comically. Xuela does not reproach through political rhetoric, though the statement is unmistakably political. Instead, she appropriates a near nursery rhyme tone. The effect casts a fairy tale frame around the exploits of John Richardson. His promiscuous behaviour, his proliferation of red-haired sons and the circumference of his irresponsibility are all made to look comic and to undermine the mythology of masculine virility.

A replica of his father's mindset, Alfred Richardson, before he marries Xuela's mother, is a rogue too. In the midst of Xuela's speculative contemplation over the moment her father first met her mother, she states, 'He had by then been from island to island and fathered children with women whose names he did not remember, the children's names he did not know at all' (200–201). This knowledge is painful to Xuela, not because her father commits shameless acts with sufferable consequences. What pains her is the fact that her father did not continue his life as a promiscuous scoundrel. Instead, for some inexplicable reason, he felt the need to settle down and marry Xuela's mother. 'My poor mother!' is Xuela's expletive response while pondering on the sequence of chance events that eventually culminates in her birth.

Xuela insists, however, that chance events are unavoidable. No one is exempt from the careless repetitions and deviations that compose existence. This fact is powerfully exemplified as Xuela recounts the circumstances of an unredeemed tragedy that forever marked her father's life. As mentioned earlier, Xuela's father did not start out wealthy; he was without a birthright that automatically insures comfort or respect. Alfred's father may have been white but his mother was black. Xuela recalls events from the time her father was a boy. One story he told her when she was a young girl is of particular importance. An old woman had given her father an egg. She was a neighbour, who lived alone, and the egg was a token of appreciation for the help Alfred offered even before being asked. Alfred placed the egg under one of his mother's hens. It hatched and the chick became a hen and produced more eggs. Eventually the sale of Alfred's eggs and chickens amounted to a tiny and dearly loved treasure. Xuela asserts: 'He never ate eggs after that (not all the time I knew him); he never ate chickens after that (not all the time I knew him), only collecting the bright red copper of money and polishing it so that it shone and giving it to his mother, who placed it in an old sock and

kept it in her bosom awake and asleep' (194). A reader may easily presume that embedded in this modest enterprise is the seed of miserly greed that takes on a callous and more gluttonous form in Alfred's adult life. However, there is a more important point to make here.

Diligence and hard work result in a sizeable sum of money for the young Alfred. With a specific wish in mind, Alfred gives all his savings to his father so he can buy 'material, English material, to make a suit for wearing only on Sundays' (194-5). The New World myth of industry and profit, culture and respectability, is innocently played out in Alfred's young mind, but something unexpected, something inevitable happens: Alfred's father never returns. A squall supposedly sinks John Richardson's Scotland bound ship. The actual reason for his disappearance, however, is left suspiciously unconfirmed. Alfred's father and Alfred's savings, a boy's lifetime of labour, are lost forever. Xuela's remarks regarding her father's reaction to this crucial experience are deeply insightful:

[M]y father never saw his father again, my father never saw his profit again, and he may have spent the rest of his life trying to find and fit into that first suit he had imagined himself in again and again — though he would not have known he was doing that, I believe—and his whole life may have been a succession of rewards he could never enjoy, though he would not have seen that. (195)

If Xuela is right, her father's adult life, his plots of corruption, his abuse of authority, his complicity with colonial logic is not simply a matter of unreflected mimicry of those mightier than the masses. At a fundamental level, unadmitted to himself, Alfred is trying to (re)cover his childhood losses.⁶

PIERCING TRUTH

At the age of ten, at a time when Xuela admired her father's looks, his handsome form surrounded by sun or his presence in a parade, she senses for the first time what is concealed beneath the beautiful cut and fit of his idealised figure. Xuela recounts the occasion when Lazarus, a gravedigger, came to her father and asked for nails. Two years earlier, a hurricane had swept through the area and Xuela's father, 'the highest government official in Mahaut then' (188), was in charge of distributing needed material and building supplies to the local population. Lazarus's home had been damaged by the hurricane and he was making a humble request according to local ordinance. Xuela's father, however, refuses to give Lazarus nails; he claims he does not have any. Xuela knows the truth differently. She recalls:

I knew he had a large barrel of nails and other things in a shed at the back of the house, so in innocence, believing that he might have completely forgotten about it, I reminded him of it, I told him of the barrel full of nails, I told him just where the barrel was, what the barrel looked like, what the nails looked like, what the nails lying in the barrel one on top of the other — frozen, shiny — looked like. He denied again that he had any nails at all. (189)

This contradiction marks a crucial turning point in Xuela's mind. No longer does she understand her father singularly as the person he projects in public. She observes an otherwise concealed side of him: 'The sound of his voice was not new; it was just that I heard him for the first time' (189). Xuela's emphasis on sound, as the embodiment of a deeper reality, stands in stark contrast to her father's accent on sight. Alfred's obsession with appearances, his insatiable need to possess and fill the garment of admiration and respectability has no sympathy for a man like Lazarus. Alfred cannot help but despise the failure represented in the appearance of Lazarus. He might have given Lazarus what he requested had the gravedigger not been so miserable, so derelict, so utterly without dignity. This point is underscored by Xuela when she comments about her father's mixed heritage and his twofold nature:

Outside, outside my father, outside the island on which he was born, outside the island on which he now lived his life, the world went on in its way, each event large, a rehearsal of the future, each event large, a recapitulation of the past; but inside, inside my father (and also inside the island on which he was born, inside the island on which he now lived), an event that occurred hundreds of years before, the meeting of man and people, continued on a course so subtle that it became a true expression of his personality, it became who he really was; and he came to despise all who behaved like the African people: not all who looked like them, only all who behaved like them, all who were defeated, doomed, conquered, poor, diseased, head bowed down, mind numbed from cruelty. (187)

The distinctions made in this passage are penetrating. Xuela's commentary moves beyond the common arguments regarding racial politics. Alfred's malice towards Lazarus, according to Xuela, is motivated by an overarching contempt for the powerless. Xuela's remarks braid political consequences with the composition of personality; the scorn Alfred directs towards Lazarus is really a displaced form of self-hatred. The offspring of a white father and a black mother, Alfred chooses to duplicate the 'conduct' of a Scotsman and to look down on the 'behaviour' of the African people, because in the economy of power, in the patriarchal world that was known to Alfred as a boy and now as a man, there is always a hierarchy of authority and submission. Xuela's innocent reminder that there indeed were nails to be had challenges this hierarchy and she is dealt with severely when Lazarus leaves empty handed.

Alfred, true to his public role as police officer and jailer, grabs the collar of Xuela and tows her through the house to the shed where the barrel of nails is kept. Xuela recalls the event without hyperbole:

[H]e pushed me face down into the barrel of nails, at the same time saying in French patois, 'Now you know where the nails are, now you really know where the nails are.' He spoke patois, French or English, only with his family or with anyone who knew him from the time he was a boy, and I associated him speaking patois with expressions of his real self and so I new that this pain he was causing me, this

suffocating me in a barrel of nails, was a true feeling of his. He gave my head one last push and then he quickly left me. (190)

Xuela's account of this incident is remarkable for several reasons. The punishment suffered by Xuela is heightened by the dispassionate manner in which Alfred's fury is described. Here, Kincaid's prose is a model of restraint. The reader has already been given a detailed description of the barrel's content, 'the nails lying in the barrel one on top of the other — frozen, shiny' (189), and this prior image is already lodged in the reader's mind when Xuela's face is forced against the density and haphazard piercing of her father's anger. Whatever terror might have been experienced by the ten-year old Xuela is not an issue in this recollection nor is the excess and disproportion of a parent's outrage considered as an isolated topic. As a self-reflecting narrator, Xuela has other points to make. Rather than dwelling on the pain of the moment, she speculates associatively about her father's actions.

She comments that when he left her he 'went to sit in the room that looked out on the sea, the room that had no real purpose, it was used so infrequently: the sea's surface was still, and as he looked at it he removed wax from his ear and ate it' (190). The juxtaposition of the nail barrel scene and the strange serenity of a room overlooking the sea is jolting; reckless wrath is contrasted with a repulsive, unconscious and presumably habitual form of self-consolation. Instead of contemplating on the injustice she has suffered, Xuela asks: 'what could my father have been thinking about' (190). It is at this point, after a short lyrical interlude that meditates on the inextricable connection between people and place, that Xuela recounts the events and circumstances that emotionally surrounded her father's loss of his father. Retrospectively considering Alfred's refusal to give Lazarus nails and Alfred's subsequent cruelty towards Xuela in the frame of an original trauma (the loss of Alfred's father and his little boy fortune); the reader senses a legacy of injury that exceeds Alfred's individual acts of abuse. In narrative currents that run deeper than chronology, Xuela offers an imaginative reconstruction of fundamental debts, accidents of life that are spliced with colonial and sexual exploitation. Defenceless against the calamities of life, Alfred seems to displace his anger in order to conceal the real source of his pain and outrage. Perhaps these feelings were wordlessly entering Alfred's mind as he sought sanctuary in a 'room that had no real purpose'. Xuela's rhetorical question 'what could my father have been thinking' is not directly answered. Instead she suggestively recounts the irredeemable absence of her father's father and the ordinary and dreadful forces that lead us along one path rather than another.

RESURRECTING MEMORY

The episode connected with Lazarus's request for nails is replete with symbolism and intertextual resonance. Lazarus's visit to Xuela's father's house was not the first time Xuela had met the gravedigger. In an earlier section of the novel, Xuela asks 'what makes the world turn against me?' (140). It is another

one of Xuela's simple and terrifying questions. In lieu of an answer, Xuela offers the reader an observation. She recalls a chance encounter with Lazarus in the cemetery where her mother was buried: 'I came upon him face-to-face in the graveyard, carrying a bottle (pint size) of white rum in one hand and holding up the waist of his trousers with the other; an insect kept trying to feed from a small pool of saliva that had settled at the corner of his mouth ...' (140-41). Lazarus attempts to brush the insect away with the hand holding the pint but the insect maintains its ground. He automatically alters his strategy and Xuela's account of this incident deepens the significance of occurrences we normally judge to be embarrassing or condescendingly consider pathetic. She remembers that 'instinctively, without calculation, he let go of his pants waist and firmly brushed the insect away. The insect did go away, the insect did not return, but his trousers fell down to his ankles, and again instinctively, without calculation, he reached down to pull them back up and he became as he was before, a poor man driven out of his mind by a set of events that the guilty and the tired and the hopeless call life' (141). It is not Lazarus's desperate appearance that is ultimately appalling but the 'set of events' that has disfigured this man. Xuela's question 'what makes the world turn against me,' the question that precedes the telling of this episode also addresses the anguish represented in the figure of Lazarus.

Before giving the details of her chance encounter with Lazarus in the graveyard, Xuela comments on the gravedigger's name: 'his mother would have thought that such a name, rich and powerful as it was with divine second chance, would somehow protect him from the living death that was his actual life; but it had been of no use, he was born the Dead and he would die the Dead' (140). The reader is made to believe that this is a reference to the defeated existence of a black man reduced by the conspiracy of racial politics and humiliated by the irony of his name and occupation, but what we learn is more unsettling than this. With his pants sacked around his ankles, '[he] looked like a living carcass; the bones in his body were too prominent, they were too close to his skin, he smelled sour, he smelled of stink, he smelled like something rotting, when it's in that sweet stage that can sometimes pass for a delicacy, just before real decay sets in ...'. Xuela concludes this ghastly close-up with an equally striking observation: 'before his trousers met his waist again, I saw the only alive thing left of him; it was his pubic hair: it covered a large area of his crotch, growing in a wide circle, almost hiding all of his private parts; its color was red, the red of a gift or the red of something burning rapidly' (141). The colour of Lazarus's crotch unquestionably marks him other than of pure African descent. The red imagery employed by Xuela is suggestive. It alludes to the red-haired sons of John Richardson and consequently to Alfred Richardson himself, who claimed, without irony, that when he met a red-haired man 'that he would know that this man was related to him' (183).

Beyond this internal textual link, the fiery hue of Lazarus's pubic hair associatively slides to folkloric African-American tales of deception and capture.

After reviewing documented statements of informants who were the grandchildren or the great-grandchildren of Africans abducted into slavery, historian Michael A. Gomez found a number of accounts that illustrate how West Africans were lured by European slavers. Gomez concludes: ‘the source of attraction [was] some form of cloth, usually red in color’ (200). Though accounts vary, there are many common references in the testimonies examined by Gomez. According to the informants, Europeans who had arrived in ships strewed colourful items, clothes and ornaments, on the shore. The natives collected these objects believing they were gifts. More items were scattered along the beaches and on gangplanks. Once lured on board, Africans met a less generous fate. Gomez underscores that these stories of deception and capture are the product of ‘an intergenerational crafting by those who were actually captured and by those who were born on American soil. The story was not told as it actually happened but recast to convey what the African-based community perceived as the essential truth of the experience’ (199). Similarly, Xuela’s narrative can be understood as a crafting of truth. The details of Lazarus’s red crotch, Alfred’s contempt for the defeated, and the prolongation of Xuela’s suffering are not simply representations of facts but rather a form of communication that points to the everyday concerns and specific emotions that are often repressed and left unacknowledged in official histories of individuals and people.

This legacy of absence is not easily overcome. Placed outside of history, it is difficult to see how one is to become authentic to oneself and in the eyes of others. Xuela remembers how her chance encounter with Lazarus in the graveyard ends in what appears as an act of mutual nullification:

This brief meeting of a gravedigger and myself had no beginning and so it could have no end; there was only a ‘Good day’ from me and an ‘Eh-eh’ from him, and these things were said at exactly the same time, so that he did not really hear what I said and I did not really hear what he said, and that was the point of it, we might have murdered ourselves or put in motion a chain of events that have come to an end only with our hanging from the gallows at midday in a public square. (142)

Xuela’s polite salutation is more routinely delivered than sincere and it helps disarm the shock and embarrassment of seeing Lazarus so intimately revealed. Xuela’s proper English greeting is contrasted with Lazarus’s patois ‘Eh-eh,’ which is as habitually constructed as a ten-year-old’s politeness. At the age of seventy, Xuela now understands this incongruous encounter within the long sequence of irreversible events that shape the lives of individuals like herself and the gravedigger. Though she is a girl and he is a man, they share the distinctiveness of the dispossessed. It is an admission that is impossible to make at the time, which is why the incident ‘had no beginning’. Likewise, ‘it could have no end’, which makes the recollection of that day ironically eternal. Had the two realised the gravity of their condition then, Xuela claims they might have committed suicide or perhaps revolted violently leading to their public

execution. The disposed sometimes take such a course but Xuela makes other choices.

In the end, Xuela assumes a stillness that is vast like the sea that surrounds her emptiness. As a child she learned to fear nothing and refused to be disgraced. In her youth, she took lovers as a way to confirm what was loveable within her but without name. Later, she decides never to bear children and marries a man who she does not love. In her recollections, she wanders through the personal histories and life stories of those who are near and remote and finally, one by one, Xuela speaks of the death of her half-brother, half-sister, step-mother, father and husband. In the broad wake of these losses, Xuela's voice remains calm and undiminished. The casualness in which Xuela's speaks of despair levitates like a mythic tale, and like myth it cannot be properly confirmed and it is impossible to wholly deny. Xuela concludes that she has been speaking interminably in place of the mother who she never knew and the children she never bore, identities barred from existence yet overbearingly real in their absence. At a more fundamental level, one that is as perplexing as it is profound, Xuela states: 'This 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). Xuela's final remarks break from the conventional opposition between presence and absence and reinforce the paradox of identity. Figured in the shadow of history and multiplied in the art of fiction, Xuela is a subject apparently without beginning and without end, and it is in her vast reflection that the legacy of absence is placed inescapably before us.

NOTES

- ¹ Jamaica Kincaid's work is receiving growing critical attention. For example, the summer 2002 issue of *Callaloo: Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters*, edited by Rhonda Cobham, contained many thought-provoking articles that explore the spectrum of political and cultural issues raised in Kincaid's fiction and non-fiction. Of particular interest is Kincaid's idiosyncratic appropriation of the *bildungsroman* tradition and her coming-of-age narratives set in colonial and postcolonial modes of consciousness. In spite of what appears to be Kincaid's clearly marked domains of political and cultural inquiry, what fascinates me is the unpredictable drifts and the subterranean forces present in Kincaid's writing and how her texts continuously reframe the question of who we are. Consequently, it is the unpredictable and subterranean movements in Kincaid's writing which mark the starting point of this article.
- ² In this respect, *The Autobiography of My Mother* shares literary kinship with Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), where Hurston, informed by her anthropological training, reworked the tenor of autobiographic writing to express the cultural and folkloric myths that constitute a dynamic and perpetually changing sense of self. Defining identity as an imaginative performance rather than a literal fact of reality is ultimately what *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* have in common.
- ³ Similar to Gertrude Stein's writing, Kincaid's repetitions evoke experiences based on a textual reality that figures what we see by the way we see it. This emphasis on

compositional performance allows one to veer from the staked paths of memory and into the imaginative making of life. See Stein's essay 'Poetry and Grammar' regarding the compositional aspects of repetition.

- ⁴ Xuela comments that her speaking Standard English, a language she never heard before, ought to have been the deeper surprise, not that she spoke for the first time. Xuela's inexplicable embodiment of the coloniser's language clearly has symbolic implications. French or English patois was the vernacular spoken in Xuela's speech community. The gravity of her question is thus reinforced by the appropriation of the coloniser's English, but beyond the language politics displayed in this episode, Xuela's sudden birth into speech has a mythologising function. Irreversibly severed from her mother, she invokes a legend of self-creation.
- ⁵ See Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, in particular the chapter 'Pitfalls of National Consciousness', for an examination of the institutional structures and modes of thinking that maintain economic and political inequity after national independence.
- ⁶ In her earlier novel *Lucy* (1991), Kincaid also examines the grave consequences of severed familial relations and their psychic discontinuities. After being told of her father's death, the novel's narrator, Lucy, recalls a memory from her childhood that contains fragments from her father's past: 'His mother, after asking his father to bring him up, left for England. He last heard from her when he was twelve years old. She had sent him a pair of shoes for Christmas, black with small holes that made a decorative pattern on the front; they were too big for him when he received them, and so he put them away, but when he next tried them on he had outgrown them. He still had them in his safe, where he kept his money and other private things and every once in a while he would show them to me' (124–45). The tokens of loss expressed in *Lucy* take on a darker guise in Kincaid's rendering of Alfred Richardson's unspoken sense of abandonment.

WORKS CITED

- Cobham, Rhonda (ed) 2002, 'Jamaica Kincaid: A Special Section', *Callaloo*, 25.3, pp.773–989.
- Fanon, Frantz [1963] 1991, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, Grove, New York.
- Genet, Jean [1949] 1964, *The Thief's Journal*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, Grove, New York.
- Gomez, Micahel Angelo 1988, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation Of African Identities In The Colonial And Antebellum South*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- Hurston, Zora Neal [1942] 1971, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Lippincott, Philadelphia.
- Kincaid, Jamaica 1983, *At The Bottom of the River*, Farrar, Strauss and Girou, New York.
- 1991, *Lucy*, Jonathan Cape, New York.
- 1996, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Vintage, London.
- 2002, *Mr. Potter*, Farrar, Strauss and Girou, New York.
- Montaigne, Michel de (1572–1588) 1958, *Essays*, trans. Donald M. Frame, Stanford UP, Stanford.
- Morrison, Toni [1987] 1992, *Beloved*, Knopf, New York.
- Stein, Gertrude [1935] 1975, 'Poetry and Grammar', *Lectures in America*, Vintage, New York.
- Walker, Alice 1982, *The Color Purple*, Harcourt, New York.