

“Weary of our own legacies”: Rethinking Jane Eyre’s Inheritance through Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother*
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In a 1998 interview with Kathleen M. Balutansky, Jamaica Kincaid claimed, “You can’t begin to understand me until you read certain things. I didn’t begin to understand myself until I read certain things. The things that were most important to me were written by people who didn’t look like me” (799–800). Indeed, the majority of the writers whom Kincaid cites as her influences—authors as diverse as John Milton, Charlotte Brontë, and Virginia Woolf—“look” more like the British settlers who colonized her native island of Antigua than like Kincaid herself. Given her concern with the destructive legacies of colonialism in the West Indies and her vehement criticism of the colonialist British education she received as a schoolgirl during the 1950s and 1960s, Kincaid’s avowed indebtedness to these canonical British authors seems to be at odds with her body of work. This seeming incongruity is highlighted by Kincaid’s admiration of Charlotte Brontë, whose 1847 novel *Jane Eyre* has, in recent decades, become emblematic of the nineteenth-century British imperialist project. Brontë’s (in)famous depiction of Bertha Mason, the “mad” Jamaican Creole woman whom Edward Rochester marries and subsequently imprisons in the attic of his English manor home, has drawn criticism from numerous postcolonial and feminist scholars, including Gayatri Spivak. In “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985), Spivak argues that *Jane Eyre’s* imperialist subtext complicates straightforward feminist readings of the novel because Jane Eyre’s movement from the margins to the center of Victorian society happens at Bertha Mason’s expense (259). Yet, despite—or perhaps because of—its imperialist subtext, Kincaid maintains that *Jane Eyre* is an important text, insisting in her interview with Balutansky that “[she] would sac-

rifice any amount of reading of any of [her own] books for people to read *Jane Eyre*" (799).

Kincaid herself read and reread *Jane Eyre* as a child (Garis 42), and its influence shows in her three novels, *Annie John* (1985), *Lucy* (1990), and *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). In her discussion of Kincaid and canonical English writers, Diane Simmons suggests that when read as a two-part *bildungsroman*, Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Lucy* bear a striking resemblance to *Jane Eyre* (77). She identifies many similarities in the novels' plots: both *Annie John* and *Jane* rebel against unjust treatment by authority figures, form close relationships with mother-figures, and leave unhappy domestic situations in order to attend school (79–80); both *Lucy* and *Jane* work with the children of the wealthy, endure insults from their employers' insensitive friends, and learn secrets that lead to the dissolution of the households in which they work (80–82). In all three novels, Simmons notes, the heroines are "constantly and unfairly put in the wrong by those whose interest is power, not justice" (77). In her 2006 article on *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Joanne Gass remarks upon the similarities between Brontë's novel and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, noting that both *Jane* and *Xuela* are motherless girls raised by women who do not care for them (65); both end up married to representatives of patriarchal British imperialism, powerful men who are, at the story's end, almost completely infantilized (71).¹

Given *Jane Eyre's* resonance within her body of work, it is unsurprising that Kincaid would declare Brontë's novel essential to understanding both her and her writing. But while *Jane Eyre* provides useful insight into Kincaid's novels, Kincaid's novels offer an equally useful commentary on *Jane Eyre*. Simmons asserts that the "fairy tale" ending available to *Jane* is impossible for Kincaid's protagonists because "[in] Brontë's world wrongs can conceivably be righted; in Kincaid's they cannot" (84). Thus, for Simmons, Kincaid enters into a dialogue "on power and oppression" with Charlotte Brontë's novel by foregrounding the legacies of colonialism, slavery, and racism in *Annie John* and *Lucy* (85). Gass makes a similar assertion, contending that Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* reveals "yet another level of racism" that both *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) ignore—namely, the mistreatment

of the indigenous Carib population by people of African descent (65). In doing so, Gass argues, Kincaid gives voice to the indigenous Carib people repressed by Brontë's and Rhys's respective narratives. Both critics emphasize how the points of departure in Kincaid's novels highlight the often insurmountable obstacles that Annie John, Lucy, and Xuela must face.

I would like to suggest that Kincaid's treatment of inheritance in *The Autobiography of my Mother* is one such point of departure, and it is in examining the complexities and paradoxes posed by inheritance in Kincaid's third novel that my reading of her intertextual engagement with *Jane Eyre* both builds upon and departs from the analyses offered by Simmons and Gass. While they are primarily concerned with how Kincaid negotiates her colonial literary inheritance by revising Brontë's novel, I am interested in how she employs the theme of inheritance in *The Autobiography of My Mother* in order to problematize issues of inheritance in *Jane Eyre*. Indeed, Brontë's and Kincaid's protagonists both raise moral issues about the transmission of property from one generation to the next, but only Xuela seems concerned with the origins of said property. Moreover, while Brontë uses "inheritance" in its most literal sense—that is, the passing of material wealth and biological traits from parents to their children—Kincaid broadens the scope of "inheritance" to include the violent historical and cultural forces that helped shape Xuela's ancestors and her island. In doing so, Kincaid calls attention to the ways in which Jane's and Xuela's "legacies" are inextricably intertwined: the same economic and legal systems that made it possible for Bertha Mason's family to amass a fortune—a fortune passed on, in part, to Jane Eyre's descendants—also led to the forced migration and enslavement of Africans, the near extinction of the indigenous Caribs, and the formation of a colonial administrative system that rewarded corruption and fostered mistrust among the island's poor inhabitants. Therefore, when Xuela declares, "In a place like this, brutality is the only *real* inheritance" (5; emphasis added), she points to the fact that in the West Indies, no inheritance, whether financial, cultural, historical, or even biological, is untouched by the legacies of slavery and colonialism.

Inheritances and their attendant legal and moral complications provide the driving force behind both *Jane Eyre* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*. In Brontë's novel, Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester's respective narratives are set in motion because of their lack of inherited property. While growing up in the Reed household, the orphaned Jane was defined by and constantly reminded of her lack of an inheritance. John Reed, her older cousin whom she likens to a "slave-driver" (8), uses her dependent status to justify his cruel treatment of Jane, telling her, "You have no money: your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma's expense" (8). Here, John demonstrates the importance that inherited property plays in determining social standing: although he and Jane are related—Jane's mother was John's aunt—John concludes that Jane's father's inability to secure an inheritance for his daughter before he died makes her somehow unfit to associate with him and his sisters, who are "gentlemen's children" (emphasis added). Furthermore, John Reed invokes his privilege as the male heir under the British system of patrilineal inheritance when he tells his cousin, "Now, I'll teach you to rummage my bookshelves: for they *are* mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years" (8; emphasis in original). The fourteen-year-old "Master Reed" has no qualms about using his soon-to-be property—in this case, a book—as a weapon: in an excessive display of his economic and social power, he hurls the book at Jane's head, reminding his dependent female cousin of her precarious place in the Reed household. It is Jane's impassioned response to John's cruelty—she flies at him like a "fury" (9)—that ultimately motivates Aunt Reed to expel the unwanted Jane from the household by sending her away to school, where she will be "kept humble" and "brought up in a manner suiting her prospects" (28). Aunt Reed's desire to keep her orphaned niece "humble" is so intense that she later tells Jane's uncle, a wine merchant who wishes to make Jane his heir, that Jane died of typhus while away at school.

While Jane Eyre's lack of inheritance leads her to the charity school Lowood and eventually to Thornfield Hall to earn her living as a governess, Edward Rochester's position as the younger son of an "avaricious"

(260) father unwilling to divide his estate evenly between his two sons leads Rochester to the Caribbean. There, Rochester enters into a hasty marriage with the allegedly “mad” Creole heiress Bertha Mason—a marriage that, he claims, was arranged by their fathers: in exchange for her dowry of £30,000, Bertha would secure a husband of a “good race” and a respectable family name (260). Rochester’s dissatisfaction with his already unhappy marriage is only intensified when he learns that his brother, Rowland, died shortly after Edward’s marriage to Bertha, thereby making him his father’s only heir. Upon his father’s death, he inherits the family estate in its entirety, but cannot enjoy his legacy because he is “bound” to Bertha for life. He returns to England with his wife, whom he locks away in Thornfield Hall before embarking on a tour of Europe. On the Continent, he maintains mistresses in multiple cities, using his mistreatment by his father as a justification for his debauchery. When Céline Varens, his former Parisian mistress, abandons her daughter, Adèle, and claims that she is Rochester’s child, he brings Adèle to live at Thornfield, where Mrs. Fairfax, his housekeeper, engages Jane’s services as a governess. Rochester returns from Europe and is besotted with Jane. He eventually proposes to her, again using his father’s underhandedness to justify his would-be bigamy, but the wedding is called off when Bertha’s existence is revealed. When Rochester attempts to explain his actions to Jane, she offers him sympathy but refuses to become his mistress. Thus, his father’s adherence to the primogeniture model of inheritance not only leads Rochester to enter into a marriage with a woman whom he does not love but also, in turn, makes it impossible for him to marry Jane during Bertha’s lifetime.

By using inheritance-related conflicts to drive the plot of her novel, Brontë offers a critique of the patrilineal system of inheritance that permits young male heirs to behave like tyrants to their female dependents and makes dowry hunters out of younger sons. Her critique only extends so far, however, because a *deus ex machina* in the form of a £20,000 legacy from an uncle—along with the convenient death of Bertha—paves the way for Jane’s reunion with Rochester, who, though divested of his ancestral estate, presumably retains Bertha’s dowry after her death. Moreover, Brontë is unconcerned with the origins of her characters’ re-

spective inheritances. Rochester's wealth is ostensibly derived from his estate—Mrs. Fairfax informs Jane that he is “considered a just and liberal landlord by his tenants” (89)—but Brontë gives no additional information about the source of the Rochester family's fortune. While Brontë does indicate that Jane's inheritance is derived at least in part from the Madeira wine trade, she does not suggest that the wine trade is the sole source of her late uncle John Eyre's income.² The Rivers siblings note that Mr. Eyre, who was their maternal uncle, was involved in multiple business ventures, one of which led to their father's near-bankruptcy (302), but the exact nature of these ventures is unknown. The origins of Bertha Mason's dowry are less mysterious: her father, Jonas Mason, was a Jamaican plantation owner and merchant, so it is very likely that the bulk—if not the entirety—of Bertha's £30,000 dowry was earned through labour provided by slaves of African descent.³

Yet despite the importance that slavery played in building the Mason family's fortune, Brontë avoids any discussion of the actual institution of slavery or the ways in which her characters may have profited from slave-labour and instead uses slavery metaphorically to signify financial dependence or legal obligations: Jane likens herself to a “rebel slave” at several points during her narrative, and Rochester appropriates the rhetoric of slavery when he implies that his father “sold” him to the Mason family, who purchased him to marry Bertha because he was of a “good race.”⁴ According to Susan L. Meyer, Brontë similarly employs the trope of colonialism by conflating gender and class oppression in Britain with the oppression of the “colonized races” in the West Indies and British India, overlooking the ways in which her characters' “legacies” are shaped by colonialism (249).

Jamaica Kincaid shares Brontë's concern with the moral complications of inheriting property in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, but whereas Brontë uses inheritance-related problems to drive *Jane Eyre's* plot, ignoring the problematic ways that slavery and colonialism have contributed to her characters' inheritances, Kincaid uses the concept of inheritance as a lens through which the financial, legal, and personal legacies of slavery and colonialism in the West Indies can be examined. Indeed, Kincaid's characters inherit nothing less than the race relations

and power structures born of colonialism and slavery in the West Indies, but only Xuela Claudette Richardson, the novel's protagonist, understands or even acknowledges how this inheritance impacts every aspect of life on the island of Dominica, where the majority of the inhabitants are only a generation or two removed from being property themselves. It is fitting, then, that issues related to the acquisition and transmission of property provide much of the novel's conflict. And, as in *Jane Eyre*, these conflicts play out within the protagonist's family. When Xuela comes to live in her father's house after living with Ma Eunice, her father's laundress, for seven years, her new stepmother is upset because the stepmother has yet to give birth to a son who could inherit her husband's property, making Xuela—or Xuela's potential child—the heir of the family (33). Because she sees Xuela as a threat to her and to her future offspring, the stepmother attempts to kill her by giving her a poisonous necklace. Even after she gives birth to a son and a daughter, Xuela's stepmother continues to see her stepdaughter as a threat and teaches her children to treat Xuela as “a thief in the house, waiting for the right moment when [she] would rob them of their inheritance” (52). Xuela, however, has no interest in “robbing” her stepsiblings of their inheritance because she abhors her father's obsession with acquiring property to bequeath to his offspring. She not only condemns the means by which he acquires his property, likening him to a “thief” (54) but also finds his desire to “[continue] to live on through the existence of someone else” troubling and absurd (110). In both cases, Xuela sees the legacies of colonialism at work: her father not only uses his position of power in the colonial administration to defraud the powerless by taking possession of their land and their property but also attempts to found “a dynasty” (110) by transmitting this ill-gotten property to his son—a son named Alfred, like himself—and by shielding his son from the “foul work of acquiring” (110).

Xuela's father's “dynastic” ambitions demonstrate how closely economic and biological legacies are connected to the imperial project in which material wealth, national culture, and socioeconomic power are passed along to one's male issue. But while Kincaid problematizes this model of inheritance, Brontë seems to unproblematically embrace it,

even going so far as to suggest that national and cultural “traits” are biologically determined. Rochester and Jane, for instance, easily dismiss the possibility that Adèle Varens is Rochester’s biological daughter because she does not physically resemble him and because she has “inherited” her French mother’s “superficiality of character, hardly congenial to an English mind” (153). Using Adèle’s appearance and “character” to conclude that she is not Rochester’s daughter not only absolves Rochester of the emotional burden of feeling fatherly affection for his mistress’s child and the financial burden of raising her as his own daughter but also makes it possible for Jane to overlook Rochester’s sexual relationship with Céline. Like Adèle, Bertha inherits her mother’s “character”—or, more specifically, her character flaws. After Richard Mason interrupts Rochester and Jane’s wedding ceremony and reveals Bertha’s existence, Rochester claims, “Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard!—as I found out after I had wed the daughter, for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points” (249). Here, Rochester implies that Bertha Mason inherits her “insanity” and “intemperance” from the matrilineal line, for Bertha’s father, Jonas Mason, is not only an Englishman; he is also an acquaintance of the Rochester family. Moreover, Rochester’s use of the appellation “the Creole” to refer to Bertha’s mother is particularly loaded. As Sue Thomas explains in “The Tropical Extravagance of Bertha Mason,” the precise meaning of “Creole” was far from fixed in mid-nineteenth-century Britain,⁵ and Rochester’s use of this term could have suggested to some readers that Bertha’s mother, and therefore Bertha herself, was of mixed-race—a reading supported by Jane’s “racialized” descriptions of Bertha’s appearance. As such, Bertha Mason represents a threat to English racial, cultural, and moral purity, and, like Céline Varens, is wholly unsuitable to produce Rochester’s heir. It is appropriate, then, that Jane, whom Brontë fashions as the consummate middle-class Englishwoman, gives birth to a son who “inherits” not only his father’s eyes but his property and his position of authority as well (482).

Because Kincaid is concerned with the relationship between race and nationality, biological inheritance—specifically physical appearance—plays an even greater role in *The Autobiography of My Mother* than it does in *Jane Eyre*. As the Martiniquean-born philosopher and activist Franz Fanon and others have noted, race is an embodied identity often experienced both physically and psychologically. Writing about his own bodily experiences of race and racism in “The Fact of Blackness” from *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon asserts, “I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me, but of my own appearance” (116). In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, which takes place during the first half of the twentieth-century when Dominica was still a British crown colony, physical appearance often indicates a character’s position within the socioeconomic system—a system that is not only structured by the race relations and ideologies of the slavery era but also dependent upon the perpetuation of these same relations and ideologies. Similarly, Kincaid’s characters are conscious that the physical traits they have inherited from their ancestors determine their position within the social and racial hierarchy, so, like Fanon, they become the “slaves” of their own appearances.

This brand of “slavery” has a particularly strong hold on the teacher at Xuela’s first school. As Xuela observes, “She was of the African people, that *I could see*, and she found in this a source of humiliation and self-loathing, and she wore despair like an article of clothing, like a mantle, or a staff on which she leaned constantly, *a birthright which she would pass on to us*” (15; emphasis added). The teacher, a product of the colonial educational system, is ashamed of her own supposed racial inferiority, and passes this shame along to her students, who are also of African descent. Just as Xuela is able to “read” her teacher’s appearance and determine that she is “of the African people,” so, too, can Xuela’s teacher and classmates identify Xuela’s Carib ancestry based on her physical appearance:

I had thick eyebrows; my hair was course, thick, and wavy; my eyes were set far apart from each other and they had the shape of almonds; my lips were wide and narrow in an unex-

pected way. I was of the African people, but not exclusively. My mother was a Carib woman, and when they looked at me this is what they saw: The Carib people had been defeated and exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden; the African people had been defeated but had survived. When they looked at me, they saw only the Carib people. They were wrong but I did not tell them so. (15–16)

Their “reading” of Xuela’s race is only partially correct: because the “Carib” features she inherited from her mother are more prominent than the African and European features she inherited from her father, her classmates and teacher mistakenly identify Xuela as wholly Carib, a mistake that she does not correct despite the negative stereotypes associated with a Carib racial identity. It is unlikely that an assertion of her African identity would have had any effect, for, like Fanon, Xuela is the “slave” of her Carib appearance, which signifies “defeat” to her teacher and classmates, all of whom occupy a higher position in the racial hierarchy of Dominica than the nearly-extinct Caribs (Gass 65). As such, Xuela’s teacher believes it is acceptable to dismiss Xuela’s precocious “ability to retain information, to retrieve the tiniest detail, to recall who said what and when” as a type of “evil” inherited from her mother rather than acknowledge the intelligence of her racial “inferior” (16–17). Xuela’s stepmother—a woman of French-African descent with a “long and sharp” nose and the “thin and ungenerous” lips of “people from a cold climate”—is also convinced of Xuela’s inferiority, which she attempts to inculcate in Xuela by speaking to her in French patois, the “illegitimate” and “made-up language” spoken by the Caribs and poor Dominicans of African descent (31). Moreover, Xuela’s stepmother and stepsister use Xuela’s “biological inheritance”—the Carib features inherited from her mother—to try to convince Xuela that she is not, in fact, her father’s “legitimate” daughter and should therefore be ineligible from inheriting any of her father’s property.

While Xuela embraces the identity of her mother’s “vanquished” people, her Scots-African father uses his biological “inheritance”—light skin and red hair—as a means to “[reject] the complications of the van-

quished" (186) and "[choose] the ease of the victor" (186). The son of a Scotsman who fathered many red-haired children throughout the Caribbean and an African mother about whom little is known, Xuela's father "inherited the ghostly paleness of his own father, the skin that looks as if it is waiting for another skin, a real skin, to come and cover it up, and his eyes were gray, like his own father's eyes, and his hair was a red and brown like his father's also; only the texture of his hair, thick and tightly curled, was like his mother's" (49–50). Because of his appearance, inherited from his colonialist father, Xuela's father is able to transcend his poverty and rise in the colonial administration by taking advantage of his own people. His unethical treatment of the island's poor inhabitants prompts Xuela to liken the colour of his skin to "the color of corruption: gold, copper, ore" (186). Yet Xuela also suggests that her father's appearance is a type of "slavery" as well, one that not only prevents him from identifying with the "African people," "in whom he could have found one half of himself" (186), but also makes it impossible for him to ever recognize the humanity of his own mother, whom he excises from his personal history.

It is the erasure of the mother from history—both personal and cultural—that prompts Xuela to take a moral stance against inheritance practices, and it is here that Kincaid offers the most radical departure from her literary foremother's treatment of inheritance. This is not to say that Brontë's *Jane Eyre* passively accepts the inheritance laws of nineteenth-century England: she does take a firm moral stance against practices that favour one relative and leave the others with nothing. Declaring that she has no wish to be "gorged with gold [she] never earned and [does] not merit," Jane divides her £20,000 legacy equally among herself and the Rivers siblings (415). Her generosity not only restores her cousins to their proper class position—thereby sparing Mary and Diana from the "slavery" of governessing—but also heals the rift that had arisen between the two branches of the family over the failed business venture between Jane's uncle and the Rivers's father. Yet despite this radical act and Jane's early rebelliousness, Nancy Pell suggests that Jane is ultimately "[reabsorbed] into the system of inheritance and primogeniture" when she marries Rochester, relinquishing all of her

property to him and giving birth to his son, who will inherit all of the family's property (418).

Xuela, however, refuses to be “absorbed” at all: while Jane gestures toward revising the legal and financial laws of inheritance from within “the system of inheritance and primogeniture,” Xuela attempts to exist outside of the system altogether. Key to her refusal is her rejection of the colonialist ethos of her father. Even as a child, Xuela had moral objections to her father's work on behalf of the colonial government, and she further objected to his abuse of the power that came with his position. She learns of this abuse firsthand when Lazarus, the emaciated gravedigger, asks her father for nails to rebuild his home after a hurricane. Her father, who had been charged by the government to distribute building materials to aid in the rebuilding effort, lied to Lazarus and, because he planned on selling the building materials for personal profit, told him that he had no more nails. Xuela, misunderstanding her father's motives, tells Lazarus precisely where the nails are, and after Lazarus leaves—without nails—her father takes her to the storage shed and pushes her “facedown into the barrel of nails, at the same time saying in French patois, ‘Now you really know where the nails are’” (190). Xuela, who is ten years old, realizes that this is “a true feeling of his” (190) because he is speaking patois instead of English, which she associates “with expressions of his real self” (190). Later characterizing the encounter between her father and Lazarus as a “struggle between the hyphenated man and the horde” in which the “hyphenated man” proves victorious, Xuela understands that her father treats the African residents of the island as members of an undifferentiated mass, unworthy of equal treatment. As a “hyphenated man” in a position of power, her father seems to have no moral qualms about divesting the island's poor of their property, and it is this property that he presents to the young Xuela as her future inheritance:

once, when I was a child, he had taken me to ground with him, wanting to show me the new land he had just acquired, which conveniently adjoined his old property. Without knowing why, I held my young self away from my inheritance, for that was

what was being shown to me. On the new land he had planted many young grapefruit trees, and showing it all to me with a wide sweep of his hand—a gesture more appropriate to a man richer than he was, a gesture of all-encompassing ownership—he told me that the grapefruit was natural to the West Indies, that sometime in the seventeenth century it had mutated from the Ugli fruit on the island of Jamaica. He said this in a way that made me think he wanted the grapefruit and himself to be One. (102)

Her father's desire to become "One" with the grapefruit—which, like himself, is a hybrid—suggests that he sees himself as somehow more evolved than the "native" Ugli fruit. And although she could not understand why she "held her young self away from [her] inheritance" (102) when it was shown to her, Xuela later recognizes that it is her father's desire to possess all, to colonize all—whether land, money, people—that repels her. She notes that "it was at that moment that I felt I did not want to belong to anyone, that since the one person I would have consented to own me had never lived to do so, I did not want to belong to anyone; I did not want anyone to belong to me" (104). For Xuela, the very notion of "belonging" is problematic because, with the possible exception of a child belonging to her mother, all other forms of "belonging" are reminiscent of a master/slave relationship.

Xuela's recognition of her father's motivations not only leads her to reject the inheritance of her father but also prompts her to reclaim the inheritance of her mother, an inheritance that, although grounded in the "defeat" of the Carib people, is based on a primary attachment to the island and its history. Xuela's relationship with the island of Dominica—with its "overbearing trees" and "harsh heat that eventually became a part of [Xuela], like [her] blood" (17)—becomes a substitute for her relationship with her mother. It is fitting, then, that she first dreams of her mother after falling asleep beside a small lagoon near Ma Eunice's house. As Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn suggest in their discussion of female inheritance, "If a woman is able to claim a connection to [land and female ancestors], she is well prepared for the

journey toward self-identity and fulfillment. But if she has been denied a developmental bond with her own mother, then the ‘mothers’ land’ itself may provide a surrogate” (218). Xuela does not fully understand the maternal nature of her relationship to the island until she refuses to become a mother herself. After undergoing an herb-induced abortion to rid herself of Monsieur LaBatte’s child, she dreams of walking through the island of Dominca, claiming its geography and its history for her own:

And that is how I claimed my birthright, East and West, Above and Below, Water and Land: In a dream. I walked through my inheritance, an island of villages and rivers and mountains and people who began and ended with murder and theft and not very much love. I claimed it in a dream. 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. (88–89)

Although Xuela’s relationship with the island is not necessarily the healing maternal bond that Morris and Dunn describe, it nonetheless provides her with the agency to resist her own victimization by using her “inheritance”—namely, defeat and brutality—to take a moral stance against the forces of racism and colonization.

This moral stance is most apparent in Xuela’s refusal to give birth and in her enjoyment of her own sexuality, both of which stem from her decision to “possess” and be “possessed by” (173) no one but herself. In *The Daughter’s Return*, Caroline Rody suggests that Xuela understands her refusal to bear children as a “radical political act”: “Xuela makes reproductive power her weapon; she deploys the power not to mother in explicit refusal to make ‘biological contributions to the ‘nation’ or the ‘race’” (129). But while Rody correctly notes that Xuela’s decision to abort her pregnancies is a “[refusal] to bear more racialized history”—in effect, a refusal to pass along the “inheritance” of brutality and defeat to another generation—she does not take Xuela’s insistence on her own bodily pleasure into account. Indeed, it is possible to understand Xuela’s rejection of the “burdens” of pleasure not merely as a

“refusal of connection” (130) with her potential offspring but also as an assertion that her body and the sexual pleasure it experiences has worth in and of itself.

Both the political and pleasure-seeking aspects of Xuela's decision to not bear children are at play in her relationship with her lover Roland, who works as a stevedore. Xuela values Roland for his physical beauty and for his ability to give her pleasure, noting that “when he first lay on top of [her she] was so ashamed of how much pleasure [she] felt” (168). Yet, like Xuela's paternal grandfather, the Scotsman who fathered legions of red-haired children throughout the Caribbean, Roland is a colonizer of sorts in that he has acquired a “large fortune” in children by impregnating many women. Although Xuela finds pleasure in having sex with Roland, she also takes pleasure in denying him a child. Nonetheless, she “[feels] much sorrow for him, for his life was reduced to a list of names that were not countries, and to the number of times he brought the monthly flow of blood to a halt” (176). For Xuela, then, Roland's womanizing is nothing less than another form of colonization: “He did not sail the seven seas, he did not cross the oceans, he only worked in the bottom of vessels that had done so; no mountains were named for him, no valleys, no nothing. But still *he was a man*, and he wanted something beyond ordinary satisfaction—beyond one wife, one love, and one room with walls made of mud and roof of cane leaves.” She continues to explain his obscure sense of wrongdoing: “though he could not identify the small uprisings within himself, though he would deny the small uprisings within himself, a strange calm would sometimes come over him, a cold stillness, and since he could find no words for it, he was momentarily blinded with shame” (176–77; emphasis added).

Interestingly, Xuela discusses Roland's desire to colonize in gendered terms. Because “he was a man” and because he had been denied the opportunity to colonize abroad—to name mountains and valleys after himself—he chose to colonize women by impregnating them. In framing her decision to possess and be possessed by no one but herself in terms of gender—often noting, “I own nothing, I am not a man” (132)—Xuela seems to suggest that colonization is the province of men.

By limiting her interactions with Roland (and other men) to those that bring her pleasure, she resists becoming part of his—or anyone else’s—“list of names that were not countries” (176).

Xuela also refuses to bear the children of Philip Bailey, the English doctor whose relationship with Xuela mirrors Rochester’s relationship with Jane Eyre—she begins as his employee, becomes his lover, and then, after the death of his living spouse, becomes his second wife—but whereas Jane becomes the vessel thorough which Rochester’s property and privilege are passed along to the next generation, Xuela ensures that Philip cannot pass along his “inheritance” by not giving birth to his children when she is still fertile and by marrying him so that he cannot father an heir with anyone else. While Xuela feels sorry for thwarting Roland’s “colonial” ambitions to impregnate her, she enjoys denying Philip, the self-satisfied “heir” of British colonialism, pleasure of any kind. Their initial sadomasochistically-charged sexual encounter indicates that any pleasure Philip derives from their relationship is merely the unintended consequence of Xuela’s own pleasure. As Gary and Kimberly Holcomb point out, “S/M permits Xuela to rewrite the history of cruelty and barbarism enacted on her heritage” (974). They go on to point out a crucial movement: “In shifting agency from the master’s to the slave’s body, Xuela simultaneously undermines the master’s identity, reducing him to a near ghost. She thus alters the meaning of pain itself from its association with colonial punishment and lust to a means of pleasuring the slave’s desiring body” (974). Xuela’s masochistic sexual pleasure becomes a radical political act, one that allows her to claim her mother’s “legacy” of brutality and defeat and to simultaneously undermine this inheritance by deriving both pleasure and power from acts that, at least on the surface, seem to be disempowering. And while Xuela recognizes that her loveless marriage to Philip, which appears to be a successful conquest, is in fact “a kind of tragedy, a kind of defeat” (212), she is also confident that “in [her] defeat lies the seed of [her] great victory, in [her] defeat lies the beginning of [her] great revenge” (216): by making personal “all that is impersonal”—namely, slavery, colonialism, and racism—Xuela uses her mother’s inheritance of brutality and defeat in order to defeat the “heir” of colonial power.

If Xuela's victory-in-defeat offers one model of coming to terms with the inheritances of colonialism and slavery, Kincaid offers another. Whereas Xuela stands outside of the system of inheritance in order to resist being implicated in the legacies of slavery and colonialism, Kincaid works from within the literary establishment in order to enter into a dialog with her own vexed inheritance—the British literary canon. Yet Kincaid, the literary “latecomer,” controls the terms of the dialogue, and has the power to change how readers interpret the works of her literary forebearers. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, a “re-envisioning” of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Kincaid demonstrates how the inheritances of slavery and colonialism cannot be written out of the life story of Xuela or any West Indian woman. In so doing, Kincaid asks us to revisit the fairy tale ending of Brontë's novel armed with the knowledge that Jane's happiness and financial security—as well as the happiness and financial security of her heirs—is built upon the exploitation and suffering of generations of people who were not merely marginalized by history and by literature, but who were never written into the narrative to begin with.

Notes

- 1 Gass convincingly argues that Kincaid's novel is a revision of both Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but for the purposes of this essay, I am primarily concerned with her analysis of *Jane Eyre*.
- 2 Slavery was abolished in Madeira in 1777 (Fogel 206), so it is possible that Jane's legacy was earned in industries that were not dependent upon slave labor.
- 3 As Heuman notes, most planters owned sugar or coffee plantations, both of which were so labour-intensive that the slaves of African descent outnumbered the settlers by nearly ten to one (141–42).
- 4 In “The (Slave) Narrative of *Jane Eyre*,” Lee analyzes Jane's (and Brontë's) appropriation of the rhetoric of slave narratives to suggest that *Jane Eyre* is a revision of Frederick Douglass's autobiography, “with the white English governess uncannily paralleling the emancipatory quest of an American fugitive slave” (318).
- 5 Thomas identifies four separate definitions of “Creole” in use before 1850: white people of Spanish ancestry born in Spanish America; non-aboriginal white people born in the West Indies; non-aboriginal people of any colour born in Spanish America; and white people of European ancestry born in the West Indies (2).

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