

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Dissertations and Theses

City College of New York

2022

Self-Reclamation through Death: Attaining Creoleness in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *In Praise of Creoleness* by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant

Phillip J. Jordan
CUNY City College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/996

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Self-Reclamation through Death:
Attaining Creoleness in Jamaica Kincaid's The Autobiography of My Mother and In Praise of
Creoleness by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant

Phillip James Jordan

MA Thesis – English Literature
The City College of New York

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Lyn Di Iorio
Second Reader: Kedon K. Willis

9 May 2022

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole.

-Derek Walcott

1

Death, Self-Reclamation and Empowerment

The Autobiography of My Mother is the narrative of Xuela Claudette Richardson's maturation from the age of six into her seventies. No other characters' thoughts are contained, we are exposed only to the thoughts and musing of a single individual. A large part of Xuela's musings are focused on her own bodily processes, particularly her sexual cravings and liaisons. But bodily death is also an object of obsession for Xuela.

In fact, the narrative of her life begins with a description of her mother's death. These are the opening lines of the novel: "My mother died the moment I was born...at my back was always a bleak, black wind" (Kincaid 3). Xuela's mother, a Carib woman, dies giving birth to her. As her father is part black and part white and she is not in touch with any Carib relatives, her mother's death immediately severs Xuela's relationship with her Carib ancestry. This is the first example of how death cuts Xuela off from important aspects of her life, a nurturing mother, and indigenous Caribbean identity. Eventually this experience of death and loss will lead to rebirth but, for the moment, this loss leaves Xuela "vulnerable, hard, helpless; on knowing this I became overwhelmed with sadness and shame and pity for myself" (Kincaid 4). The acknowledgement of the "bleak, black wind" symbolizing death coupled with the loss of her mother at the outset of life challenges Xuela emotionally in the narrative. When Xuela is seven she has what could be described as an existential panic attack: "I did not know my mother. I did not know my father or where he was from or whom or what he liked; I did not know who I was or why I was standing

there in that room of the occasional purpose with the lamp. A great sea of what I did not know opened up before me, and its powerful treacherous currents pulsed over my head repeatedly until I was sure I was dead” (Kincaid 28). This passage indicates Xuela’s inability to make sense of the “great sea”, a metaphor for the current and rhythm of life. The sea washes ashore new things and then carries out others, without reason or warning, a frightening principle to accept at such a young age. Given that Xuela is born without a clear role model or nurturer, her everyday life presents constant danger and mistreatment, battering her like the sea with the unknown.

The first third of the novel depicts Xuela carrying fear and an uncertainty about who she is. Often she has dreams of her mother that symbolize her incomplete understanding of her mother’s identity and consequently, a constant sense of her own insecure and fractured identity: “She came down the ladder again and again, over and over, just her heels and the hem of her white dress visible; down, down, over and over. I watched her all night in my dream. I did not see her face” (Kincaid 31). Xuela’s inability to see her mother completely, her inability to fully realize her mother’s figure, to even see her face at all, is symbolic of her inability to understand her mother; the Carib woman, and the legacy and history of the Carib people. Of course this loss of her mother, the Carib woman, is also symbolic of the loss of indigenous identity in the Caribbean, resulting from the Spanish conquest and enslavement of the indigenous Tainos, which resulted in the death of the majority of the indigenous population from enslavement, massacres and disease. In point of fact, the only pure indigenous pockets left in the Caribbean were the Caribs of Dominica and St. Vincent. Xuela’s uncertainty about her own identity and place in the world allows men such as her father and Jacques Labatte to take advantage of her. Significantly, as white or half-white and half-Black men who abuse their privilege and power, these men are identified with white colonizers.

By the time Xuela is fifteen her father has given her over to his business partner as an au pair or housekeeper. The lady of the household, Madame LaBatte, underhandedly, without Xuela's knowledge, attempts to use Xuela as a surrogate mother for a child she is unable to conceive: "She wanted something from me, she wanted a child I might have" (Kincaid 77). As a young fifteen-year-old girl with no mother or clear feminine guidance, Xuela exercises her sexuality naively while in residence at the Labatte household. In her narrative she often depicts her sexuality as something that she revels in. However, as readers we must remember that she is fifteen at this point, and has had very little guidance from older females about sexuality. She is in essence at this point in the novel, a naïve girl, in servitude to adults who do not have her best intentions in mind, therefore her unreliability as a narrator must be stressed here:

I wanted to smell myself. It was the end of the day and my odor was quite powerful. This scene of me placing my hands between my legs and Monsieur Labatte watching me lasted until the usual sudden falling of the dark...He took me to the room in which he counted his money, the money that was only some of the money he had...I took off my clothes and he took off his. (Kincaid 70).

She is frank about her desire, indifferent towards Madame LaBatte, and even seems to place little blame on Monsieur LaBatte. Her repeated sexual encounters with LaBatte leads to her pregnancy. Upon becoming pregnant Xuela decides to abort the child. She visits an Obeah woman who gives her the medicine and the shelter to abort her pregnancy:

She gave me a cup of thick black liquid...For four days I lay there, my body a volcano of pain...The pain was like nothing I had ever imagined before, it was as if it defined pain itself; all other pain was only a reference to it, an imitation of it...I was a new person then, I know things I had not known before, I knew things that you can only know if you have

been through what I had just been through. I had carried my own life in my own hands.
(Kincaid 82).

This transformation through the act of abortion, and having control over death, significantly the death of her own child, is definitive for Xuela. It also signals her first act of defiance towards a master, madam, and a world that has and will assume her submission as a person of African and Carib ancestry and a woman. Her decision to not give the Labette's what they wanted, a child, shows how she has decided to take control of her life by taking control of her body.

Xuela's choice to abort the child without consulting the Labette's, her father, or any other adult is an act of defiance that occurs by taking control of death. Elizabeth West supports this idea in her essay, In the Beginning There Was Death: Spiritual Desolation and the Search for Self in Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother*: "Her first abortion awakened her to the power she possessed to will out unwanted life" (West 9). After the abortion Xuela's tone changes from insecure and self-questioning to confident and declarative. Xuela awakens to the perception of Madame Labatte, not herself, as defeated "someone was defeated, someone resigned, someone was changed forever. I was not defeated; I was not resigned" (Kincaid 93). From this point forward in the novel Xuela is kept by no one, she takes control of her own fate, and claims herself and what she refers to as her "birthright" for her own. Significantly, though there is a contradiction here in Xuela's strategy and identification. For in deciding to defeat rather than be defeated, to destroy rather than be destroyed, Xuela places herself in a category opposed to what her mother, the Carib woman, symbolized and in the category of those who wield both power and destruction, like her father and Monsieur LaBatte.

Upon recovering from the abortion, Xuela leaves the Labatte home without notice and describes her travels around Dominica. It is unclear whether Xuela dreams of this travel or

literally does walk across the island. Regardless, it symbolizes the reconnection Xuela experiences as a result of her spiritual rebirth through taking control of death by aborting her child. The novel states:

I walked through my inheritance, an island of villages and river 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. (Kincaid 89).

The description and emphasis given to Xuela's dream or journey highlights Kincaid's emphasis upon Xuela's reclamation of herself, and is a key step in the process of her creolized identity formation. In the above quote Xuela dreams of "all the things that were mine", recognizing her connection to Dominica.

Xuela's decision to wield death on her own terms, to abort the child, the flesh of her employer, stands out as brave and strong, especially when looked at within the historical context of Dominica in the early 20th century. West's essay supports:

Her own emergence into life through the death of her mother compels Xuela to deny the emergence of life through her own body. With god-like authority, she denies life to those who threaten her own (West 9).

It is through this act that Xuela awakens the confidence to reclaim her self-identity. The transformation Xuela goes through in this chapter is pivotal and symbolic of her change from the "defeated" to the "transformed".

Xuela's act of expulsion: of wielding death, aborting a child that a colonizer wished her to have, mirrors In Praise of Creolness's call to its readers to abort the "exteriority" of racial essentialisms created by colonizers. This "exteriority" can be defined as colonial values and

cultural expectations, namely European, projecting their influence upon enslaved and formally enslaved peoples. The essay supports, “We are fundamentally stricken with exteriority. This from a long time ago to the present day. We have seen the world through the filter of Western values” (In Praise of Creoleness 76). It is this “exteriority” for the writers of In Praise of Creoleness that must be cast out in the road to self-empowerment and self-reclamation, that Xuela manifests in her act of death or abortion.

The essay, written by three Martinican writers, and Xuela, a character depicted as a part-Carib, part-white, and part-Black Dominican, both emphasize the importance of accepting gaps and fractures in self-understanding in order to create a more pliable and healthy identity as well as a literary production that people in the Caribbean will consume. “Caribbean literature does not yet exist. We are still in a state of preliterate: that of a written production without a home audience, ignorant of the authors’/readers’ interaction which is primary condition of the development of literature” (In Praise of Creoleness 76). Myrian J.A. Chancy’s in “The Challenge to Center: Caribbean Literature”, also notes: “Indeed, there is no national literature of the Caribbean...” (Chancy 329), indeed the discussion around the semantics of “Caribbean Literature” is in itself problematic; lumping a complex diverse region into a single denomination. It demonstrates a gap in the collective understanding globally or domestically about Caribbean identity and therefore must be addressed by its authors. In Praise of Creoleness states:

We have seen the world through the filter of western values, with the eyes of the other. All along overdetermined, in history, in thoughts, in daily life, in ideals (even the ideals of progress), caught in the trick of cultural dependence, of political dependence, of economic dependence, we are deported out of ourselves at every moment of our scriptural history. (In Praise of Creoleness 76).

The authors of the essay identify the solution to this problem, “To create the conditions of authentic expression amounted also to exorcising the old fatality of exteriority...Creoleness is an annihilation of false universality, of monolingualism, and of purity” (In Praise of Creoleness 90). Furthermore, to accept our individualistic interior vision of ourselves, “We could even go so far as to say that interior vision is a result of self-acceptance” (In Praise of Creoleness 86). This is a clear example of the essay being the call to annihilate false universality, purity, and the “exterior” expectations of Western values and the story of Xuela as the creative response. The essay states that to create an authentic expression, false perceptions of one’s self must be exorcised. Xuela impregnated under surreptitious circumstances, is reborn after aborting the child put upon her by colonial patriarchy. After doing so, she thereby begins the path to a more fluid creolized identity.

Both Kincaid’s *Xuela* and In Praise of Creoleness are clear in their rejection of superficiality or “exteriority” belonging to an identity, meaning a race, and therefore a given culture, by which may be constructed a racially essentialist perspective. The authors instead suggest that:

Creoleness is an open specificity...In multiracial societies such as ours, it seems urgent to quit using the traditional raciological distinctions and to start again, designating the people of our countries, regardless of their complexion, by the only suitable word: Creole (In Praise of Creoleness 90).

Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant call this perspective either colonial or an “African illusion.” They note that “Negritude replaced the illusion of Europe with an African illusion.” (In Praise of Creoleness 82), Kincaid’s *Xuela*, a firm believer in her own independence and self-

centered spiritual autonomy, comes to reject the entire notion of belonging to any race, “I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation.” (Kincaid 226).

In the 1930s the origins of literary and social movements associated with the ideas of Pan-Africanism and “Back to Africa” movements were becoming more definitive, and had a strong effect on Martinican writers. There are many facets of the Pan-African movement, all of which are important to study on their own. However, given the Caribbean lens and the essay’s direct conversation with the “Negritude” movement our analysis of such movements will be limited to “Negritude.” Furthermore, this positions The Autobiography of My Mother as an appropriately complex response to the Negritude movement due to the novel’s publication date of 1997, and the publication of the seminal book of poetry, Notebook of a Return to a Native Land by Aimé Césaire in 1939. The character Xuela’s early perception of herself is “I was of the African people” (Kincaid 15) but later this perception evolves and changes.

One of the writers most closely associated with the Negritude movement, Aimé Césaire, a poet, politician, and public figure from Martinique, has been described as “a surrealist poet committed to black particularism, with a colonial branch of European communism.” (Eshleman/Smith 3). His most notable work Notebook of A Return To The Native Land, best describes the term Negritude he is most associated with as “taking root in the ardent flesh of the soil / it breaks through the opaque prostration with its upright patience” (Cesaire 35). This literary movement saw writers like Césaire use surrealist imagery to denounce negative, racist, and degrading portrayals and ideas associated with people of African background. They instead invoked continental African imagery, language, and folk tales evoking a self-perception that all African descendants belong to an idealized mother Africa. The prominent writers in the movement such as Aimé Césaire and Paulette Nardal also drew upon Marxist ideas to create a

unified message of both racial and societal class struggle for people of African descent. The subject of this poetry was targeted at denouncing false and degrading colonial stereotypes of African descendants. The poem does this through the use of alliteration and imagery connected to indigenous African customs and traditions. The following selection from Notebook of A Return To The Native Land illustrates this point:

Pity for our omniscient and naïve conquerors!

Eia for those who never invented anything

for those who never explored anything

for those who never conquered anything

Eia for joy

Eia for love

Eia for grief and its udders of reincarnated tears.

(Cesaire 36).

The verse listed above in the poem is meant to be weapon, a weapon by which to evoke resistance and counter colonial mindsets.

The impact of the Negritude movement upon Kincaid's protagonist Xuela can be understood through the ways in which the authors of In Praise of Creoleness write about Césaire as both a means of "initiation" and "ending":

Cesaire had exclusively the formidable privilege of symbolically reopening and closing again the circle in which are clasped two incumbent monsters: Europeanness and Africanness. two forms of exteriority which proceed from two opposed logics - one monopolizing our minds submitted to its torture, the other living in our flesh ridden by its

scars, each inscribing in us after its own way its keys, its codes, its numbers. (*In Praise of Creoleness* 80).

The description of Africaness in *In Praise of Creoleness* as a form of “exteriority”, a monster “inscribing” in the flesh its “codes, keys, and numbers” describes the authors’ handling of the African component of creole identity. It does not denounce the tendency to emphasize Africaness. However, the authors recommend that it must not be allowed to affect creolized self-identity, much the way Europeaness must not be permitted to do so. This perspective is also shared by Xuela in the novel, “I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation” (Kincaid 226). This form of “exteriority” is essential to understanding Creolized identity moving forward. It serves as point of reference for what must be left behind if creolized self-identity is to take place. However, both Kincaid and the authors of *In Praise of Creoleness* present to the reader not only the rejection of the individual’s perception that bodies and therefore mindsets are connected to a particular culture based on blood lines, but also that inherited ideas focused on racial essentialism must also be rejected in the movement toward self-reclamation. It therefore stands to reason that both the body and the mind must suffer a “death” in order to be reborn, to shed the previous identity, to forget and forgive the past.

2

Rejection of Colonial Mindsets

As a child Xuela accidentally breaks a plate belonging to Ma Eunice, the woman who cares for her and does her father’s laundry. The plate depicts a utopian idealized countryside with the caption “HEAVEN” written underneath it:

This picture was nothing but a field full of grass and flowers on a sunny day, but it had an atmosphere of secret abundance, happiness, and tranquility; underneath it was written in gold letters the one-word HEAVEN. Of course it was not a picture of heaven at all; it was a picture of the English countryside idealized, but I did not know that,...And neither did Eunice... (Kincaid 9).

Neither Ma Eunice or Xuela know it at the time but this depiction of heaven is modeled after the English countryside, a far different environment than either Ma or Xuela are likely able to or will in the future exist in. Therefore, the breaking of the plate, although unintended by Xuela, comes to symbolize the character's conflict or break from the European idealized setting and existence.

In this same vein of childhood brainwashing towards an idealized Europe, the first words Xuela reads are: “‘THE BRITISH EMPIRE’ These were the first words I learned to read.” (Kincaid 14). Xuela from an early age is soaked in the suggestions and education of an idealized and dominant Europe, one that is a mystery to her and that she does not fully comprehend. Idealism and idolatry arguably can only be achieved if the one engaged in the worship does not fully comprehend the idol/ideal that he/she is worshiping. Xuela, a young girl does not understand why she likes the words “The British Empire”, however they are associated with success and endorsed by her teachers.

Throughout this section of the novel Xuela is presented to us as an inquisitive and diligent student. So much so that by the age of fourteen she has exhausted the learning provided to her at the tiny school in Massacre. Upon her graduation she is sent to live with the Labattes. However just before Xuela is sent off she reflects upon her education:

I also knew the history of an array of people I would never meet. That in itself should not have kept me from knowing them; it was only that this history of peoples that I would

never meet--Romans, Gauls, Saxtons, Britons, the British people--had behind it a malicious intent: to make me feel humiliated, humbled, small. (Kincaid 59).

She understands that the type of education she is offered is meant not just to inform her but to enforce her submission, as a colonized subject, to the colonial power, to make her identify with that power and want to mimic it, despite her difference, and her position as a subaltern.

After Xuela's break from the Labattes and her institutionalized schooling she begins an untethering from perceiving Europe as ideal. "This education I was receiving had never offered me the satisfaction I was told it would; it only filled me with questions that were not answered, it only filled me with anger" (Kincaid 79). From this near midpoint in the novel Xuela will come to exercise her own will and detach from the mainstream culture and familial norms of colonial Dominica. Her will is at times brutal and vengeful, even cruel when she deems necessary. It does however follow the same principles laid out in the essay In Praise of Creoleness of self-acceptance, self-love, and the rejection of that which is unsuitable. One such early example is her perception of her own body beginning to change, "My own face was a comfort to me, my own body was a comfort to me, and no matter how swept away I would become by anyone or anything, in the end I allowed nothing to replace my own being in my own mind" (Kincaid 100).

Upon returning home, due to her brother's sickness, Xuela observes her place amongst the household of her father, half-brother, half-sister, and stepmother as fractured and difficult for her to identify with: "I could not see anything of myself in this house; I could see only others. I did not belong in it. I did not yet belong anywhere" (Kincaid 107). Xuela's continued detachment from society's expectations and her family's expectations demonstrates her rejection of the colonizer idioms of the foundations of what society should be (education, family, loyalty).

Xuela, like the authors of In Praise of Creoleness, suggests instead to move towards a more “open specificity” (In Praise of Creoleness 67) one in which she begins to embrace herself as an impure, complicated, and unique individual. Xuela states: “whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most...whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing--those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted” (Kincaid 32). In Praise of Creoleness's authors go through a similar narrative of identifying how they have identified with European ideals, which they then rejected in favor of a call to self-empowerment and the reclamation of a creolized identity.

In Praise of Creoleness states: “All along the overdetermined, in history, in thoughts, in daily life, in ideals, caught in the trick of cultural dependence, of political dependence, we were deported out of ourselves at every moment of our scriptural history” (In Praise of Creoleness 76). One such example of being “caught in the trick of cultural dependence” is a poem by Claude McKay, a Jamaican poet. In his poem “Old England”, first published in 1912, he romanticizes going to London and seeing the seat of imperial power:

I would view Westminster Abbey, where de great of England sleep,

An' de solemn marble statues o'er deir ashes vigil keep;

I would see immortal Milton an' de wul'-famous Shakespeare, Past'ral Wordswort',
gentle Gray, an' all de great souls buried dere.

I would see de ancient chair where England's kings deir crowns put on,

Soon to lay dem by again when all de vanity is done;

An' I'd go to view de lone spot where in peaceful solitude Rests de body of our Missis
Queen, Victoria de Good.

An' dese places dat I sing of now shall afterwards impart

All deir solemn sacred beauty to a weary searchin' heart;

So I'll rest glad an' contented in me min' for evermore,

When I sail across de ocean back to my own native shore.

(Mckay "Old England")

Each island educated its people in the tradition of that European nation which colonized it. McKay's homeland, the island of Jamaica, being Anglophone, had its people steeped in the traditions of England. People from each island were from birth given familiarity with their colonizer's idioms, clichés, stereotypes, foods, and literary character types. These puns, literary forms, national clichés of the colonizer show up in the work of various writers across the Caribbean in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

The above poem attempts to copy the literary forms of its homeland's colonizer, England. The rhyme scheme is in ballad form, popular among the English Romantic and Victorian poets. The introduction of the slang terms "dat", "de ocean", etc. convey a subjectivity "enraptured" by English society and government and yet still an outsider, a tourist, an exotic, the disenfranchised. The narrator praises English things, which he describes candidly, sadly enthralled by the culture he is a part of and yet outside of at the same time. Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant explain, "We had our fabulists, our romantics, our parnassians, our non-parnassians...Our poets to indulge in bucolic drifts, enraptured by Greek muses..." (In Praise of Creoleness 77). This is what Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant make literal mention of and

what Kincaid's Xuela explains as "people I would never meet-Romans, Gauls, Saxons, Britons, the British people [all of which] had behind it a malicious intent: to make me feel humiliated, humbled, small" (Kincaid 59). There is an expectation to adopt, replicate, integrate, make part of the Caribbean person, a different culture, in this case European, its myths and customs. This implies that one's own people, one's body, one's way of life is not enough, that in addition to who you think you might be you also need to be educated by European standards, dress according to its fashion, and take on the manners of European culture in order to be seen as respectable by a ruling class.

3

The Reclamation of Identity Free from Racial Essentialism

Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant provide a broad and provocative definition for Creoleness: "Creoleness is the annihilation of false universality, of monolingualism, and of purity" (In Praise of Creoleness 90). As we move into the 21st century it is increasingly important to consider the argument that idealizing a cultural identity could go against the happy co-existence of peoples worldwide. Creoleness and harmony amongst peoples of many cultures opposes the falseness and impossibility of purity. Creoleness defies definition and can only be defined as an identity or way of being that defies expectation and specificity. It counters tribalism and is an ideal not a state of being, one that the authors of In Praise of Creoleness and Xuela move towards with compassion and courage.

The term "Creole" is wonderful. It is elusive and at the same time specific. It can be a hushed word of insult and a celebrated word of independence. The word takes on different meanings depending upon the culture of the people evoking the discussion in which the term is

being used. Spanish, French, English, American, and island Caribbean cultures all use the word uniquely and with different valences to describe someone or something and it can also be used as a noun. In New Orleans, a place often associated with this term, residents might say without second thought “That is good creole cooking” or “Ohhh she is a creole”.

In the early colonial period a Caucasian person born in Cuba was referred to as a “criollo” or “creole,” someone born and bred in the Caribbean. In New Orleans, the most northern city in the Caribbean, the term is almost always used to describe someone of mixed racial ancestry. In the early 1800s the Spanish colonial government in Mexico used the term to describe anyone born of either mixed indigenous and European heritage or anyone born in the new world at all. From the start, the Spanish colonizers of the Caribbean used the term as a denunciation to ensure that high ranking jobs were given to those who were born in Europe, who were perceived as being more loyal to the crown.

However, some threads do run through all of these semantic discussions. The term is almost always applied to someone or something being born or originating in the “new world”. It therefore unifies a direction or cultural movement that opposes the pedigree of colonist culture. The term both heralds the new world and stands as a linguistic historical marker of its deviation. It defies definition as one type of person, thing, or style. To be completely literal about using the term would be against its meaning and could often be met with opposing and contentious viewpoints. It therefore defies the intention of the individual attempting to linguistically cage or categorize the term and instead stands as a testament of defiance against those who would wish to define it.

In Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi essay “Language, Identity, and Gender: A Study of Creole in the Caribbean” the author states:

In the Caribbean, since there is no single Creole signaling the concept of identity explicitly, the room for understanding for the ethnic creolization emerges when we study how multiple/plural identities are signaled simultaneously in the region (Dwivedi 14).

The term “creole” can therefore be used to define those individuals or groups who seek a path towards that which is undefined, a path based on that group or single individual’s own actions and character, and not the trenches and tropes of established identities and racial essentialism. Because historically the term has consistently defied definition, it can therefore be used as a means of forging a new individualistic form of self-identification. This path, however different from person to person, culture to culture, writer to writer, does share the same result of being both specific and elusive at the same time. It is this semantic discussion of the root word “creole” that lends itself to the process of creolization that both the writers of In Praise of Creoleness and Xuela move towards with the hope of creating new and unfettered identities.

Xuela takes the first steps towards recreating her identity when she has the abortion. It is not literally stated as such, but Xuela testimony reads like a vampire’s account of his/her transformation from the mortal to the immortal, “I was a new person then, I knew things I had not known before, I knew things that you can know only if you have been through what I had just been through. I had carried my life in my own hands” (Kincaid 83). The last line in particular comes to define the tone of the rest of the novel. Xuela from this point forth carries her life in her *own* hands. This signifies the beginning of Xuela’s process of self-reclamation.

The first step Xuela takes in this process is the aforementioned recognition of her homeland Dominica, her “inheritance”. This section illustrates Xuela’s embrace and acceptance of her birth place, Dominica. Earlier in the novel, when she is a child, she is at odds with where

she is born, “sight of that sea and those mountains, so unpitying. I would exhaust myself in tears” (Kincaid 5). She stands at odds with nature and the animals of the island when she cruelly tortures turtles along the beach:

To teach them a lesson, I took some mud from the riverbed and covered up the small hole from which the neck would emerge...When they came to my mind again, I went to take a look at them in the place where I had left them. They were all dead. (Kincaid 12).

The killing of the turtles is an attempt to wield control, which fails. The abortion, however, shows self-mastery, in that it is a direct response to the colonizer’s attempt to control Xuela. The sequence of events, the abortion/death, followed by the vision or dream of Xuela embracing her birthplace is no coincidence and marks Xuela’s first passage of self-reclamation.

She next begins to see her own body as a source of confidence and comfort, “My own face was a comfort to me, my own body was a comfort to me” (Kincaid 100). In the short amount of time following her recovery from the abortion Xuela has embraced her birthplace and has begun to view her body as a source of strength and comfort. These two reconciliations come one after another and are indicative of the change Xuela has undergone after having the abortion.

After Xuela leaves the Labattes she pays for a small apartment on her own and works a casual labor job that requires very little of her time. After she visits her dying brother she observes her sister’s attempt to forge a “traditional” relationship with a young man. Xuela observes “She was in love with him, and what did that mean? It was something I hoped never to know, for she made it look like the definition of foolishness itself” (Kincaid 121). This rejection of traditional relationships and courtly romance is part of her process of transformation. By realizing the foolishness of traditional courtly romance and eliminating romantic possibilities, she narrows her focus upon her own self development and what is authentic to her. However, her

resolve can be callous and at times cruel. As readers we are uncertain of Xuela's true intentions, we are only given what she as the narrator tells us. Therefore, her sexual encounters with her sister's husband Monsieur Pacquet, are either philosophical statements she is making to her family; showcasing to her family the foolishness of marriage in the traditional European sense or is the act meant to belittle her sister and serve as a petty personal attack against her? It is this lack of trust that we as readers must acknowledge in Xuela as part of her humanity. Kincaid wrote Xuela as unreliable, flawed, even incomprehensible at times, because that is the truth of how we as people think and narrate. Xuela is intended by Kincaid to act as a philosophical reflection of human/creole identity. But in order to be authentically human she will inevitably be a bit unreliable, flawed, and incomprehensible. Regardless, Xuela's actions stand outside of the traditional European expectations of love and romance. She sees herself as free from being looked down upon from the moral high ground of European morality.

In the few chapters remaining Xuela matures and the narrative shifts from day to day accounts to large portions of the chapter devoted to philosophical musings. These musings come to a head when she takes into account her perception of her own history:

to me history was not a large stage filled with commemoration, bands, cheers, ribbons, medals, the sound of fine glass clinking and raised high in the air; in other words, the sound of victory....I did not mind my defeat, I only minded that it had to last so long; I did not see the future, and that is perhaps as it should be. (Kincaid 139).

This statement comes to represent Xuela's penultimate meditation on her journey towards self-reclamation. Xuela understands in a philosophical sense that there is no success without a defeat and that "is perhaps how it should be". The poetry of Bob Dylan's "Love Minus Zero" also carries in it this sentiment of a woman very much like Xuela:

In the dime stores and bus stations

People talk of situations

Read books, repeat quotations

Draw conclusions on the wall

Some speak of the future

My love she speaks softly

She knows there's no success like failure

And that failure's no success at all

(Dylan 0:50)

Both Xuela and the woman in Dylan's poem understand that failures or defeat are moments of realization of something, and that in that moment of failure if the failure is understood, you transcend your defeat and succeed. For Xuela that realization does not make the process any less painful and therefore Xuela complains "I only minded that it had to last so long".

The authors of In Praise of Creoleness again echo this philosophy that Xuela puts forth, "By taking us away from the Other, interior vision compels us to solicit our original chaos" (In Praise of Creoleness 100). The "Other" in these lines refers to that which Xuela and the authors of the essay have left behind or hope to leave behind, the defeats and therefore the triumphs as well. In Xuela's case she has left behind her depressed, uncertain, muzzled, self. She has shed the skin of the "Other" and now treads towards self-actualization and creolization. In the essay the authors refer to us leaving behind, our former selves defined by race and its symbols, and elements of colonialism as discussed earlier in the thesis. The essay goes on in further detail to describe the necessity to accept failures and defeats, much in the same way Xuela moves through

her defeats and accepts herself “we want to know ourselves, bare in our flaws, in our barks and pulps.” (In Praise of Creoleness 100).

The title of the novel The Autobiography of My Mother is itself a paradox, if taken literally Xuela is both her mother and her own daughter. It can be reasoned therefore that Xuela, in regards to the fictional placement of her authorship, stands somewhere in-between these two identities, that she is neither, author or subject, she evades classification. In the text she states:

I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation. I wanted only, and still want, to observe the others who do so. The crime of these identities, which I know now more than ever, I do not have the courage to bear. Am I nothing then? I do not believe so, but if nothing is a condemnation, then I would love to be condemned. (Kincaid 226).

The lines “I wanted only, and still want, to observe others who do so” refers to Xuela becoming an observer or pupil of people and their identities; she is becoming a writer, social critic and philosopher.

Given that Xuela is our only voice in the text, and as the title suggests “Autobiography” it stands to reason that Xuela is the “author” of the autobiography. That being said, we can assume that the events earlier in the text were written by the older Xuela at the end of the book.

Therefore, as an author she has again fulfilled the role stated by the authors of In Praise of Creoleness: “Once our interior vision is applied, once our Creoleness is placed at the center of our creativity, we will be able to re-examine our existence, to perceive in it the mechanisms of alienation, and above all to grasp its beauty. The writer is the detector of existence” (In Praise of Creoleness 100). Xuela engages in self-reclamation of a creolized identity as the authors of In Praise of Creoleness suggest, “Creoleness” they point out, “liberates us from the ancient world... We call Creole the work of art which, celebrating within its coherence the diversity of

meanings, will preserve the mark which justifies its pertinence regardless of how it is understood” (In Praise of Creoleness 113). Xuela’s transformation and diversity as a character in the narrative justifies her pertinence as a voice of creolization regardless of whether we as the readers truly grasp her meaning. The process of creolization for Xuela, and the principals of creoleness in the essay, mirror Xuela’s position as the author of an autobiography in which she is positioned as both the mother of and daughter to the knowledge and wisdom gained throughout the book’s narrative.

In conclusion, Xuela the protagonist of the novel The Autobiography of My Mother and the principles of the essay In Praise of Creoleness mirror one another in their narrative movement towards establishing creole identity. Xuela’s process of creolization represent the individual’s vision and journey towards self-realization, whereas the essay represents the shared vision of a group towards self-actualization through creolization. Both texts reject the harmful thinking produced by colonialism as well as rigid racial essentialism and nationalism, in favor of diversity, self-acceptance, and self-mysticism. “We call Creole the work of art which, celebrating within its coherence the diversity of meanings, will preserve the mark which justifies its pertinence regardless of how it is understood.” (In Praise of Creoleness 113).

Works Cited

- Bernabé Jean, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant. *In Praise of Creoleness*. Translated by M. B. Taleb-Khyar, Gallimard, 1995.
- Bernard, Louise. "Counteremory and Return: Reclamation of the (Postmodern) Self in Jamaica Kincaid's the Autobiography of My Mother and My Brother." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2002, pp. 113–138., <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2002.0002>.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Translated by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- Dwivedi, Amitabh Vikram. "Language, Identity, and Gender: A Study of Creole in the Caribbean." *Linguistics and Literature Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015, pp. 11–17., <https://doi.org/10.13189/lis.2015.030102>.
- Dylan, Bob. "Love Minus Zero" *Youtube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZzyRcySgK8>.
- Eshleman, Clayton and Annette Smith. "Introduction." *Aimé Césaire: The Collected Poetry*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983.
- Glissant Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, The University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Hembrough, Tara. "Isolation and Inclusion: The Modulation of Limited and Plural Points of View in Jamaica Kincaid's *the Autobiography of My Mother*." *SAGE Open*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017705168>.
- Holcomb, Gary, and Kimberly Holcomb. "Abusing The Colonial Desiring Machine: Sadoomasochism in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*." *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol. 8, no. 2, Apr. 1999, pp. 10–18.
- Narain, Denise. "Every Woman is an Island? Love, Sex, and Mourning in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*." *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1 Apr. 2000, pp. 99–101.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *Autobiography of My Mother*. Harper Collins, 1996.
- McKay, Claude. *Complete Poems*. University of Illinois Press, 2008.
- Ortiz, Fernando. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Translated by Harriet De Onís, Duke University Press, 2003.

West, Elizabeth J. "In the Beginning There Was Death: Spiritual Desolation and the Search for Self in Jamaica Kincaid's 'Autobiography of My Mother.'" *South Central Review*, vol. 20, no. 2/4, 2003, p. 2-23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3189783>.