

# THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER: LOOKING AT THE PAST WITH OLD EYES

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**Abstract:** *The Autobiography of My Mother* (Kincaid 1996) is Xuela's story. Xuela as the narrator and protagonist of the novel "moves between the imaginary world of the text and the real world of Kincaid's life" (Edwards 116-17). The Palimpsest metaphor shows to be useful to represent the 'palimpsesting of her identity' that Xuela does in her autobiography because the final perception of Xuela's identity implies a selection of experiences in which the visible surface makes it possible to perceive not only the young Xuela but that who never was and the life she did not allow herself to live.

**Keywords:** Fictional autobiography, trauma, power vs. love, mother, palimpsest.

**Resumen:** *The Autobiography of My Mother* (Kincaid 1996) es la historia de Xuela. Xuela, como narradora y protagonista de la novela, "se mueve entre el mundo imaginario del texto y el mundo real de la vida de Kincaid" (Edwards 116-117). La metáfora del Palimpsesto demuestra ser útil para representar el 'palimpsesteado de su identidad' que hace Xuela en su autobiografía porque la percepción final de la identidad de Xuela implica una selección de experiencias en la cual la superficie visible hace posible percibir no solo la joven Xuela sino también aquella que nunca existió y la vida que no se permitió vivir a sí misma.

**Palabras clave:** Autobiografía ficticia, trauma, poder vs. amor, madre, palimpsesto.

Jamaica Kincaid –Elaine Potter Richardson– is an award-winning writer, born in 1949 in Antigua, a former British colony, and living in the US since she was a teenager. Kincaid, as a postcolonial writer, is very critical with the European 'role in the West Indies and the Eurocentric construction of the history of the West Indies' (Gregg 2002: 920). Her writings are loosely autobiographical, with a reiterative presence of problematic mother/daughter relationships, which are a reflection of Kincaid's own experiences. Kincaid's mother has been always for the writer a source of anxiety and contradictory feelings. She is a figure that continued to haunt her for many years because Kincaid's mother 'couldn't or wouldn't love her' (Snodgrass 2008: 7). As a reaction Kincaid developed a rebel attitude against the authority of the family and social rules.

*The Autobiography of My Mother*, published in 1996 is an autobiography written by another person than the mother of the title, since the first person narrator Xuela Claudette Richardson remains childless by age seventy. Xuela's mother dies in childbirth, and the loss of her mother becomes her main obsession. She grows up haunted by the absence of a maternal figure and this loss apparently impedes her to have a loving or empathic

relationship with anybody. Without access to her mother's memories, Xuela recreates and imagines what she supposes her mother's life would have been, but what she actually narrates is her own life. *The Autobiography* is a fictional work. It does not conform to the conventions of an autobiography in which the first person narrator is also the author. However, the novel contains autobiographical elements, as Justin Edwards explains: 'As a character, Xuela is a product of Kincaid's imagination. However, she also moves between the imaginary world of the text and the real world of Kincaid's life' (2007: 116-17). Even Kincaid herself admitted that the story of Xuela 'is autobiographical in ideas but not in situation' (Edwards 2007: 117).

In this line of thought, *The Autobiography of My Mother* would be a fictionalized autobiography of the author, Jamaica Kincaid, what Leigh Gilmore calls 'limit-cases' which 'offer a means of thinking about the way autobiography is partially structured through the prescriptions it places on self-representation' (2001: 6). The purpose of this paper is to unveil contradictions arising in the text between seventy-year-old Xuela –the unreliable narrator of her life in retrospect– and the supposedly actual experience of her young self. Using the Palimpsest's metaphor, old Xuela overwrites *the text* of her life in an exercise of layering in which her life's narrative can be read as 'Palimpsestuous' that is, there is a 'simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation' (Dillon 2007: 3) between the young protagonist and narrator in which both of them make their presence felt in the surface or the text. The final perception of Xuela's identity is inextricable from the combination between old Xuela's narration and what is inferred from young Xuela, the protagonist of the novel. It is my contention that, to a certain extent the narrator recreates the story of her life in order to justify a desolate present at the same time that certain feelings of regret and loss can be inferred by the old narrator's mediations. This paper focuses on two fundamental pillars in the novel and in the protagonist's life: control/power relationships and love. Xuela's anxiety for control has impeded her to reach happiness as an individual and we can read under the surface of the novel what is not written, 'the person I (Xuela) did not allow myself to become' (Kincaid 1996: 228).

Xuela is, according to Elizabeth J. West, traumatized from birth (2003: 4). Thus *The Autobiography* would be a victim of trauma's autobiography. The distinction between facts and imagination, truth and lies is not the crucial point when an author is trying to narrativize its own traumas, even more when 'crucial to the experience of trauma are the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it' (Gilmore 2001: 6). The existence of trauma fiction may be paradoxical, since trauma precisely resists language and rational explanation. This difficulty is often displayed in fiction by mirroring traumatic experience through stylistic devices (Whitehead 2004: 3). Other literary scholars, such as Shannon Seiferth, accurately point out a tendency in survivors of a traumatic experience to narrate it through 'fictive or imaginative elements' (2012: 1) rather than emphasizing the historical/factual side. That is, they offer a fictionalized and even unrealistic/magical version of their past that seems to be the only one they are willing or able to endure. Likewise, Jo Langdon rightly remarks the 'unique ability to represent trauma' (2011: 14) magic realism as a narrative technique possesses. Caribbean understanding of reality in which the fantastic coexists with reality appears as 'Kincaid's unique version of magic realism' (Ferguson 1994: 33). Kincaid's personal version of magic realism is characterized by 'this fusion of

physical and metaphysical worlds, of personal and (post) colonial identities' (Ferguson 1994: 33) and appears in Xuela's narrative as an alternative way to narrate events that are not directly accessible to either the author Jamaica Kincaid or the fictional narrator, Xuela. This inaccessibility of actual knowledge is what makes very useful the palimpsest metaphor as a way to approach texts tainted with postcolonial settings and worries, even more when memory is involved in the equation, as Johannessen explains the Palimpsest 'implicitly speaks to and fro the idea and function of hidden traces and meanings that potentially surface amidst myriad memories and stories, it speaks to remembering and forgetting' (2012: 872).

Xuela is an unreliable and traumatized narrator who recreates and mythologizes her own history, intertwined with her mother's to acquire some final sense of control over her own life at least at the end, when she has to confront her approaching death. Xuela mirrors in a kind of *mise-en-abyme* what the real author, Kincaid, consciously does, which is to novelize her memories. Xuela provides the reader with a narrativized account of her life conformed by selected passages screened and filtered by the only point of view available, herself, the novel as a palimpsested performance does what according to Johannessen, Jean Rhys previously did in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: 'from the outset the novel signals its subject matter's entanglement with larger historical vectors' (2012: 889). Johannessen refers to historical facts and events such as the rivalry between the inhabitants of former Protestant and Catholic colonies, resulted respectively in English and French creoles (2012: 889). Xuela belongs to the latest ones and *The Autobiography* as a pheno-text, in Kristeva's terms, belongs and draws on the palimpsestuous textuality of post-colonial settings and narratives. The *Autobiography*, in coincidence with Rhys's novel, 'displays some of the same irreconcilable conflicts that many other postcolonial novels do' (Johannessen 2012: 888) while 'historical events are reflected and refracted through (Xuela)' (Johannessen 2012: 888). Gregg states that 'the spoken for, now speaks' (2002: 933). The problem is that Xuela does not allow any other voice to compete with hers since she also speaks for others. She is the only and subjective narrator, thus the reliability of her testimony, even in the fictional universe of the story, can be questioned. Kincaid herself, interviewed by Steavenson and asked about the single and therefore subjective point of view in the novel, affirms that 'she finds any deviation from the singular narrative 'limiting'. She has to "view everything through my (her) own eyes before it can be fictionally disseminated' because '(her) own voice is the most important', says Kincaid (1996: 37). Nevertheless and in spite of the author's assertion, in terms of meanings, *The Autobiography* would have a dual voice, because the solitary voice of the old narrator metaphorically branches into two when she renders the thoughts and ideas she had in the past. The narrator often expands and modifies what her young self asserts: 'so I was not afraid for myself in this situation. (And if it is not really true that I was not afraid then, it was not the only time that I did not admit to myself my own vulnerability)' (Kincaid 1996: 15). The old narrator points out the difference between what the young Xuela really feels and what she allows herself to feel. This duality of voices that can be observed, living together in the surface of the novel even if one of them –old Xuela– tries to overimpose her discourse on the young Xuela's, creates the palimpsest. The effect is that the inferred residual part of Xuela –what she really could have been– is what attracts attention. As Dillon explains: 'the process that creates palimpsest is one of layering . . . combined with the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script' (2007: 3).

In *The Autobiography* it is the old Xuela who remembers her past and relates it mainly in chronological order—only interrupted by some prolepses—from the moment of the death of her mother to her old age, the present in the narration. The reflections and thoughts that accompany the narrative are those of the older Xuela. When the story begins, she looks at her past with sadness, her story is not a happy one: ‘I came to feel that for my whole life I have been standing on a precipice, that my loss had made me vulnerable, hard, and helpless; on knowing this I became overwhelmed with sadness and shame and pity for myself’ (Kincaid 1996: 3-4). On the one hand the old Xuela presents herself as vulnerable and helpless, the innocent victim of the cruelty exerted over her as the consequence of the extreme alienation and oppression suffered by the weakest part in the postcolonial equation. However, on the other hand, with the development of the narration, the image Xuela projects of herself alternatively reaffirms it and departs from this initial portrayal of victim, even acquiring in some occasions certain characteristics that aligned herself with a perpetrator’s behavior. She also describes herself as tough, unable to love and feel empathy for anyone. Is it this the only truth, that she was a kind of heroic and unloved child above all without any possibility of happiness given the circumstances? Or may this be the far-fetched version that the older Xuela prefers to believe to justify a wasted life missed on account of hatred? As Helene Cixous explained ‘No sooner do I write... it is not true. And yet, I write hanging on to Truth’ (2001: 2039) or as Dillon states: ‘even the most innocent of palimpsest implies privilege, prerogative, and domination’ (2007: 13), that is, the exercise of memory that old Xuela does, implies a selection of experiences, a *palimpsestic exercise* in which the surface makes it possible to perceive not only the young Xuela but that who never was.

From her birth, Xuela’s life is marked by unfair and sad circumstances, such as her orphanhood, the lack of a father figure and her nearly murderer step-mother. In her teens she is virtually forced to have sex with an older married man, she is despised by her mid-sister, and theoretically obliged by the circumstances to abort each one of her unborn children. Xuela’s life is a tragedy, and should make her be pitied, but to the contrary she is almost hated. It is quite difficult to empathize with her. As Elizabeth J. West rightly defines her, Xuela ‘represents the existential protagonist who seats herself at the center of her world, constructing codes of ethics and morality that originate in her own self-conceived and self-validated paradigms’ (2003: 8). Xuela departs in her life from a powerless situation, but she uses her narcissism and superiority complex as a way of self-defense. Apparently she does not want to appear like a victim, she hates weakness. She mirrors Kincaid’s personal attitude in life since the author affirms ‘I loathe victims’ (Stevenson 1996: 37). Hardness, anger, sentimental isolation and lack of empathy have brought Xuela’s life to be barren but still now—in her old age and present of the narration—she justifies her decisions in life: it was imperative never to lose control of herself, even though this implies never loving anyone.

Xuela’s life is an incessant journey looking for identity. On the one hand she describes herself as part of the defeated but on the other she inexorably marks a steady course of action in her life, towards sentimental invulnerability. But in spite of her denial of sentiments, the word *love* appears very often in the novel. This fighting between love and hate, need and denial also can be related to Kristeva’s concept of abjection as explained by Johanneseen: ‘this oscillation between desire and repulsion that propels the gaze’s fixation of the abject’ (2012: 891) and it may be also a way of mirroring Xuela’s position in life, in sentimental

and cultural in-betweenness, needing, desiring and rejecting at the same time. Xuela is obsessed with love: 'I have tried to tell the difference between the two [love and hate], and I cannot, because often they wear so much the same face' (Kincaid 1996: 22). She will never surrender herself to feelings or people: 'I could feel that to love was beyond me' (Kincaid 1996: 99). She claims that she has never been loved and this is why she cannot love. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert explains that 'feeling unloved herself, she is unable to feel any love other than a twisted, grotesque self-love' (1999: 150). But in the novel there are several instances that indicate on the one hand her need for love and on the other her incapacity to accept the love she receives.

Xuela's first maternal figure is MaEunice, the woman who breast-fed her. But Xuela explains that she did not like the taste of her milk and 'did not like her and missed the face I (she) had never seen' (Kincaid 1996: 5). With this woman Xuela recognizes to have committed her 'first act of ingratitude' (1996: 6), because the first thing she did when she grew teeth was 'to sink them into her hand' (1996: 6). This passage perfectly illustrates firstly, the apparent exceptionality of Xuela or the probable fact that she is recreating her childhood, because of the impossibility of keeping memories from so tender an age, not only of the taste of the milk but also the impossibility of a new born missing someone she has never known. And secondly, it also illustrates the fact that Xuela commits several *acts of ingratitude* during her life, this was only the first. She does not avoid being ungrateful for the sake of her feelings control.

At the age of four, when Xuela speaks her first words in English 'a language I had never heard anyone speak' (Kincaid 1996: 7), Xuela is presented as fantastically insightful, perceptive, a kind of mythical heroine more related with fantasy than real life. Since she does not feel loved by MaEunice, one can expect to find a toddler hungry of love, suffering and demanding care to a mother, the only one she has known. But the baby Xuela rejects this woman. It seems that the narrator prefers to be an agent than a subject in the act of rejection. In other words, Xuela prefers to reject someone than to be rejected and this scheme is repeated all through the novel. Xuela was just a baby, but she is portrayed as enveloped in a halo of mystery and invulnerability well beyond her age and possibilities. Xuela herself declares herself beyond reality: 'I was not a real child' (Kincaid 1996: 34). It seems that Xuela is justifying her attitude in life, as if no other life could have been possible, as if she was marked by destiny and with each denial, whether real or imaginary, she adds hardness to her heart. Or maybe she is fantasizing and recreating her past as a kind of tale tainted with magic realism in which she is a heroine instead of a suffering child, because the real account would be harder to endure.

When Xuela is taken to live with her father and step-mother she perceives that she is hated by this woman, but instead of feeling appalled her 'spirit rose to meet this challenge. No love . . . in an atmosphere of no love I could live well; in this atmosphere of no love I could make a life for myself' (Kincaid 1996: 29). In view of her stepmother's rejection, there are only two possibilities for Xuela: either to suffer her situation as a powerless child or to create a personal shield to prevent her heart from being broken. Xuela takes the latter option and rejects what she is never offered. She says that 'the word *love* was spoken with such frequency that 'it became a clue . . . that this thing did not exist' (Kincaid 1996: 23-24) but surprisingly it is precisely Xuela who uses the word *love* with more frequency,

in a consistent repetition of the structure Y does not love Xuela, Xuela does not love Y (Kincaid 1996: 9;15;29). The constant litany, the claim that Xuela makes that she does not love anyone and has not been loved by anyone, points to the possibility that she could be trying to convince herself, the old Xuela, that she was right in her attitude. Maybe the old narrator wants to remember herself as powerful instead of hurt and selfish.

Xuela's insecurities and contradictions regarding love are evident when the narrator talks about her father. The same narrator who asserts that her 'father could not love' (Kincaid 1996: 113) at some point affirms 'my father must have loved me then, but he never told me so' (Kincaid 1996: 40), while in another instance she reports how her father told her that 'he loved me as much as he loved himself, perhaps even more' (Kincaid 1996: 23). Born without a mother, Xuela did have a father that ostensibly did not fulfill her expectations. Nevertheless it would be questionable to blame him alone for the deficient father-daughter relationship. Even though Xuela, the only voice in the novel, does not believe in her father's love, yet she admits she does not know the difference between love and hate (Kincaid 1996: 22). Her father was at the same time 'perpetrator and victim' and 'chose not at all surprisingly, the mantle of the former' (Kincaid 1996: 192), and unconsciously or not, Xuela chooses the same role. Born victim by her circumstances, she puts all her energies and love on herself: 'I allowed nothing to replace my own being in my own mind' (Kincaid 1996: 180). She does not allow herself to be vulnerable by loving her father: 'I did not love my father, I grew to love not loving my father' but it seems either she lies or her self-control was successful only on the surface, because she 'missed his presence, the irritant that was this loveless love . . . I felt a great sadness. I felt such pity, for he was dead' (Kincaid 1996: 211-2). Xuela is only able to love the things and persons she no longer has—her dead mother and father—because she clearly admits her affection for him when he dies (Kincaid 1996:214). By means of preventing attachment with everybody she spends much of her life trying to avoid pain, she clings stubbornly to control, but this strategy proves useless. She did not trust her father's love when he was alive, but now that he is dead she misses him. As the narrator, Xuela, says: 'to want what you will never have and to know too late that you will never have it is a life overwhelmed with sadness.' (Kincaid 1996: 76). She always missed her unavailable mother and appreciates her father only when he is also absent. It is Xuela herself who aligns with sadness.

The young Xuela is not an empathic woman with her own gender. All women in *The Autobiography* are presented as subjugated to men. The young Xuela—a woman who does not want to occupy a position of weakness— even positions herself outside of womanhood when she opines about marriage 'to want desperately to marry men, I have come to see, is not a mistake women make, it is only, well, what else is left of *them* to do?' (Kincaid 1996: 64, my emphasis). But in spite of this when she meets Madame LaBatte she admits that she has 'an instinctive feeling of sympathy for her' (Kincaid 1996: 64). But the young Xuela also feels 'revulsion' (Kincaid 1996: 65). She unfairly blames her for unhappiness and her premature ageing provokes Xuela's dismissal. The duality love/hate is present from the moment Xuela meets her. They are inseparable sentiments in the way she understands life, made by antagonistic contradictions. On the one hand with Madame LaBatte, Xuela, insightful as no one, achieves such a feat of reading her thoughts, the strongest connection ever with anyone in Xuela's life. But on the other, Xuela does not trust Madame LaBatte's

demonstrations of affection, as happened with her father's. According to Xuela, Madame LaBatte wanted her to conceive a child with Monsieur LaBatte. Xuela reads this desire in M. LaBatte's mind and she was initially ready to comply with any silent plea: 'It never crossed my mind that I would refuse her' (Kincaid 1996: 68). But Xuela 'was without mercy' (Kincaid 1996: 68) and eventually aborts the result of her sexual encounters. She leaves Madame LaBatte's home during the night, without taking the time to say goodbye to her. Xuela 'did not want the actual sight of Lise seeing me (her) leave her to haunt me for the rest of my life' (Kincaid 1996: 96). It seems that Xuela, in spite of her emotional distance and control, actually loved her, and her useless efforts to forget were doomed to fail because 'no one can ever forget someone else' (Kincaid 1996: 108).

This is the first abortion in a long list throughout Xuela's life. Abortions in Kincaid's fiction are according to Snodgrass an 'element of female powerlessness and vulnerability enforced by an androcentric society' (2008: 31). They are also interpreted as an 'act of fear because Xuela is afraid to perpetuate the cycle of abandonment and the cycle of motherlessness and lack of love that have plagued the women in her family' (Alexander 2001: 85). Both interpretations reinforce Xuela's victimization and ignore her strict self-control and strong will. But nevertheless, the young Xuela presents her refusal to give birth to any children as the most powerful demonstration of control over her life and body. As West properly claims, 'With god-like authority, she denies life to those who might threaten her own' (2003: 9). All her rage, anger and hatred are exteriorized in the metaphor with which she explains the way she bore her children: 'I would bear children . . . but I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god' (Kincaid 1996: 97-98). And although it is a conscious election, it is not a happy one. One more time Xuela's choice is that which denies herself any possibility of love or happiness. As Snodgrass annotates, 'She [Xuela] remains childless to the age 70, when loneliness overwhelms her . . . the cost of her autonomy leaves open to question whether volition equates with full liberation' (2008: 51). The young Xuela seems to tightly control her decisions, while only the older Xuela transmits the shadow of a doubt regarding the past: 'To reverse the past would bring me complete happiness' (Kincaid 1996: 226).

Xuela describes her life as alternating moments when she categorically asserts her control: 'I felt strong and I felt I would always be so' (Kincaid 1996: 65), stating the hardness that is an essential part of her personality, whereas there are other stances of suffocating self-pity, tainted with her consciousness of being a victim: 'What makes the world turn against me and all who look like me? . . . When I ask this question, my voice is filled with despair' (Kincaid 1996: 132). But it is crucial to notice that the asseverations of fortitude and courage are in the past tense whereas it is the older narrator who expresses her desperation in the present tense. It seems that the tyrannical control that Xuela exercised over her feelings has not given the expected results. Furthermore, the narrator questions her own veracity when she says that when she tries to remember a specific scene 'certain things are not in the same place they were in the last time I looked: different things are in the shadows at different times, different things are in the light' (Kincaid 1996: 33), as well as she admits the impossibility to render an impartial account of her life, because the imperious need of justification is unavoidable: 'I learned, too, that no one can truly judge himself, to describe your own transgressions is to forgive yourself for them' (Kincaid 1996: 60).

Xuela stubbornly clings to this self-imposed deprivation of love when she marries her only husband. This time she dares not negate that Philip, the white British doctor, loves her. Even when she meets him she concedes that he ‘sounded like a man, a very ordinary man, a man as I knew a man to be’ (Kincaid 1996: 147). When the narrator recollects her memories of their first sexual encounter, their inexactitude becomes manifest: ‘Did he knock at the door? Did I say, come in? Did he open the door with some hesitation? . . . Perhaps, perhaps’ (Kincaid 1996: 149). She disavows herself to love him, a descendant of the white colonizers, her condition of victim and colonized prevail over her human side and needs:

He did not look like anyone I could love, and he did not look like anyone I should love, and so I determined then that I could not love him and I determined that I should not love him. There is a certain way that life ought to be, an ideal way, a perfect way, and there is the way that life is, not quite the opposite of ideal, not quite the opposite of perfect, it just is not quite the way it should be but not quite the way it should not be either; I mean to say that in any situation, only one or two, maybe even three out of ten, things are just what you have been praying for. (Kincaid 152-153)

The young Xuela decides that this man is inadequate, she must not love him, but the older Xuela, the narrator concedes that this man, although initially not the ideal, would have been the adequate one. Xuela has established limitations and norms in her life. In Snodgrass’ words “for Xuela, odium stands as a bulwark against personal weakness and against the European construct of romantic love” (2008: 52). But in spite of this decision, Xuela would have loved Philip, even if she is unable to recognize it because it would be to admit that all her life has been wasted by an implacable hatred, that it could have been a different life:

I married a man I did not love, but that word “love” that idea, love— what could it mean to me, what should it mean to me? I did not know, and yet I would have saved him from death . . . Was this, then, a form of love, an incomplete love, or not love at all? I did not know. I believe my entire life was without such a thing, love, the kind of love you die from or the kind of love that causes you to live eternally, and if this was not actually so, I cannot be convinced of an otherwise. (Kincaid 1996: 216-7)

Xuela is unable to accept that she can be in love with Philip, a white man. Moreover, she fiercely denies his condition of frail human being, just like her, because if ‘he, too, was human, then would not all whom he came from be human, too, and where would that leave me and all that I came from?’ (Kincaid 1996: 220). Xuela is prisoner of her own prejudices. Reversing a process of rejection/abjection initially performed by the colonizer, Xuela mirrors what was previously analyzed/perceived in *Wide Sargasso Sea* considered as a palimpsesting performance : ‘on the individual psychological level one of the most disturbing rationales behind the colonizing project: the constitution of the other as non-form, the negation of acculturation, and hence, the impossibility of convergence of individual and nation’ (Johannessen 2012: 892). In Rhys’s novel, the ‘other’ is the creole woman –Antoinette– whereas in *The Autobiography* is Xuela’s husband the object of abjection. She displays a



kind of counter-racism against the British in retribution for the humiliations suffered by her people during the process of colonization, even at the cost of her own happiness.

In conclusion, it is undeniable that Xuela is a victim of emptiness, loss and isolation in her life. She tries to heal the wound caused by her birth traumas by means of using the healing power of narrative, often appealing to the unrealistic and fantastic, to the myth in order to reconstruct her memories. But it is also true that she is at the same time a perpetrator, who victimizes, not only those that dare to love her, but also herself. She is the one who suffers the consequences of her rigid, pessimistic and hopeless vision of life together with her enormous pride and narcissism. In her youth, Xuela obsessed with control, has never surrendered to love and even now when the seventy-year-old Xuela writes her memories she feels the need to justify her decisions and initially presents her past in the way it favors her positions, building a *palimpsestuous narration* in Dillon's terms in which several meanings and versions of her life are entangled together. The narrator recognizes her unreliability and admits that 'the past is a room full of baggage and rubbish and sometimes things that are of use' (Kincaid 1996: 205) and 'truth is always so full of uncertainty' (Kincaid 1996: 223). She selects in her narration what she considers useful to support her decisions and trajectory of life or what is much more important, the version of her past that comforts her. In her opinion she was doomed to unhappiness because of her orphanhood and general lack of love in her life, and death was her only destiny from the beginning of her life. She rebels against the impossibility of reaching a clear answer to her identity and tries to understand and reconcile with her inner self by means of writing this autobiography, when she is in the threshold of her own death. During the whole span of her life, she has rebelled against vulnerability and feelings. But when the old narrator revisits her past, she is really defeated but not only by sentiments but also by wasted time and opportunities in life. She ends up longing for death 'the thing to which I can submit' (Kincaid 1996: 228), but the saddest part is that 'love would have defeated me. Love would always defeat me' (Kincaid 1996: 29). In the end Xuela's life is a tragedy because of her own tragic flaw. Maybe all her rage was a waste of time after all.

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