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**COLONIAL TRAUMA AND TESTIMONY IN MARY SHELLEY'S  
FRANKENSTEIN AND JAMAICA KINCAID'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF  
MY MOTHER**

Leana Rene

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COLONIAL TRAUMA AND TESTIMONY IN MARY SHELLEY'S  
FRANKENSTEIN AND JAMAICA KINCAID'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY  
MOTHER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
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ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

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by

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## ABSTRACT

### COLONIAL TRAUMA AND TESTIMONY IN MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN AND JAMAICA KINCAID'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER

Leanna Rene

This thesis will examine Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to examine the colonial trauma and loss found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother*, not just on a character level, but in a much larger colonial context. Some scholars have suggested that Shelley's monster is a symbol of a colonized other (due to his appearance and certain features he has). Kincaid's Xuela is for sure a colonized other because of the heritage of her mother. This thesis explores their abandonment by their creators as the abandonment of colonized nations from their colonizers. Even now, formerly colonized nations still have remnants of their oppression, and in many ways, they are still oppressed by the trauma of the loss of their history and invasion of their cultures.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1 .....	6
CHAPTER 2 .....	20
CONCLUSION.....	38
REFERENCES .....	39

## INTRODUCTION

What I have found out over the past couple of years is that being an English major ruins vacations. Recently, my family and I took a cruise trip to the Bahamas. Leading up to the trip, whenever we would mention it to someone, the reaction would be the same. The person's eyebrows would raise with appreciation and depending on the person, they would let out a long, drawn-out "oooooooooh" as a signal of how lucky we were to be getting away from New York's cold weather. I was excited to get away, but then we arrived in Nassau and I realized I could not enjoy being there as I had before. We had been to the island when I was younger, another vacation during another school year, and I remember having a great time. Now, though, I noticed things I hadn't before with eyes that had been reshaped by my collegiate education.

We had gotten off the boat, and we strolled along the shops around the port area. As we ambled around, we got to a square courtyard. It was a wide-open space in the middle of everything, with pink cobblestones and a few benches at its perimeter. At the head of the square, announcing itself with grandeur and regality was a statue of Queen Victoria. She was sitting on her throne, holding a scepter, her famous braids creating two perfect loops at either side of her head. The statue looked pristine, like it could have been erected the day before we arrived. The white stone didn't seem to have a blemish on it, and I could read the inscription perfectly on the base of the statue: VICTORIA REGINA. Admittedly, I geeked out a little when I saw the statue, as I am a fan of the literature that came out of the time period that bears her name, and I watch the television show that centers on her early life. As we continued walking to the other side

of the square, I noticed another statue. This one was noticeably smaller than the Queen's, it was only a bust on a tall pedestal. It must have been made out of copper, and I only concluded this because it was covered in the green rust you see on old pennies. As we got closer, I realized it was the bust of a man. I could tell he was a black man by the texture of his hair and certain features of his face. I tried to read the inscription on the base, but there was too much green rust to make out the words. I looked back at the statue of Victoria, and again at the statue of the black man, and marveled at the completely different states the statues were in. He must have been an important man, or else they wouldn't have bothered putting up a statue of him. Yet, they didn't bother to sculpt anything below his shoulders. Apparently, whatever this man accomplished didn't warrant his statue to be cleaned regularly.

For the rest of the day, I could not stop thinking about those two statues. I couldn't shake what they represented. The Bahamas gained their independence from Britain in 1973, almost fifty years ago, and yet there was that statue of a long-dead monarch, looking new as ever. I don't think I'll never know who that black man was; perhaps he wasn't someone to celebrate. Maybe he was a corrupt leader whose statue was there out of pure obligation. That explanation still doesn't explain why Victoria's statue was still standing. The British occupation of the islands could not have been pleasant, or else they would still be under the rule of the Crown today. Surely, Victoria was as much of a villain in the history of the islands' as that black man could ever be. And yet, her statue remained.

I thought about the school-aged children that must pass that square every day. We saw a few, in crisp navy blue uniforms later on in the day. What are they learning about in school? From what I have learned in my own schooling, they are more than likely learning within some sort of European curriculum, probably French or English. They probably walk through that square and know as much about Victoria as I do, but do they know the black man at the other end? Do they know the history of the Bahamas before the English set foot on the region, or do their textbooks begin with stories of the benevolent white settlers who came to teach the natives how to be “real people?” Who are these children taught to revere, and who are they taught to ignore?

While we seem to be living in a post-colonial era, the effects of imperialism are still a stain on society today. The influence of Empire is still something that is felt today, and the consequences of this manifest themselves in experiences like I had in that Nassau square. Imperial powers, at the height of the Renaissance, sought out to gain dominion over the world. These powerful nations, like Spain, England, and France wanted to have the entire globe in their hands. They went out and created countries that they imposed their ideologies on, destroying native cultures and histories in the process. Today, these countries have long since been abandoned by the colonizers, left to pick up the tattered pieces of their legacies, legacies that do not belong to them, but the versions of themselves that were shaped by colonialism. Their past and futures began when the first colonial man stepped foot on the land, a birth marked by the death of their ancestors.

This collective trauma, the erasure of history, has reverberated through the decades. The pain felt by the direct victims of colonialism are felt by their descendants as well. This trauma is sustained by social structures that are steeped in racism and anglicized cultures that privilege some while leaving others on the outskirts of society. This collective trauma interestingly follows the pattern of psychological trauma that Sigmund Freud outlines in his work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this exposition, Freud attempts to explain the reasons why people hold onto traumatic events that have happened to them. Specifically, he becomes interested in the psychological repetition of trauma in the mind of a victim. Instead of simply remembering the event, the victim seems to actively relive the traumatic event over in their minds, so far as to allow it to warp their perception of their present reality.

This paper will focus on the ways in which collective colonial trauma appears in 19th Century literature and postcolonial literature, namely through the novels *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and *Autobiography of My Mother* by Jamaica Kincaid. Both novels center around characters that are classified as “the Other.” The monster in Shelley’s novel gains its otherness from the fact that he is not at all human while Xuela, Kincaid’s protagonist, is classified as the other from the fact that she is a descendant of the Carib people. Both novels revolve around the effects that British imperialism has had on oppressed people and the generations that come after them. In the proceeding chapter, I will focus on how the monster in *Frankenstein* is presented as a colonized and oppressed Other. While Shelley addresses British Imperialism and its immorality throughout the novel, the monster’s suicide ultimately closes the door on the progeny of the Progeny. The monster is not given a chance to pass on its life or trauma to a new

generation, which is where the novel falls short. Through Xuela, Kincaid addresses the same colonial trauma that Shelley alludes to, but her novel acknowledges the afterlives of colonial trauma and the oppression that is passed down to descendants of oppressed people. Instead of ignoring canonical literature or seeking to dismantle it, Kincaid chooses to use the canon to reclaim the identity and stories of the oppressed. As a black Caribbean female who was educated under a white canon, Kincaid was able to use her education to understand her history, identity, and legacy as a descendant of oppressed people.

## CHAPTER 1

As Gayatri Spivak points out in her essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”, 19th-century British literature cannot be considered without acknowledging the imperialistic society in which it was created. Imperialism can trace its roots back to the Middle Ages when European religious figures made it their aim to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Lands of the Middle East, whereupon they encountered “monstrous races” that they barely classified as human (Khanmohamadi). Europeans were swift to deem themselves as more superior to these so-called monsters, and this attitude lasted as travel and exploration became less about religion and more about human enlightenment and greed. Imperialism found its height in the Nineteenth Century and it seeped its way into the literature of the time.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* begins as a narrative of imperialism. Robert Walton begins the novel by outlining his plans to reach the arctic, a mad dream that seems to be the driving force of his life. For Walton, discovering uncharted territory in the north is part of his destiny. He states in his first letter to his sister:

I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight...I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man. (Shelley 7)

Imagination and entitlement, along with privilege, allow Walton to give himself the authority to embark on this long journey up north to claim what he believes belongs to him through destiny. Such was the hallmark of imperialism. By the time the Nineteenth

century came around, travel and exploration were being fueled by scientific discovery and the curiosity of white European men. Walton's desire to explore the north, specifically the north pole, was a reflection of popular attitudes during the time period. Exploring the north pole was the aim of many explorers, and it was something emphasized in romantic poetry. Jessica Richard points out that in the 1818 version of the novel, Walton does not specify which poets or travel writers he read, but in the 1831 edition of the novel (in which Percy Shelley made changes to his wife's original text), he makes mention of travel writers and poets such as Coleridge and J.L. Lowes, along with more classic travel writers such as Herodotus, Pliny, and Virgil (Richard 295).

Mary Shelley presents Walton's desire to reach the north as an obsession and does not mask his self-entitlement as he expresses that his mission is a God-given right. As many critics will note, Walton's obsession mirrors Victor's obsession that is introduced later on in the novel, which is why an ailing and dying Victor tells Walton his story as a warning against an obsessive attitude. This is explicit when Victor states:

If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved, Cæsar would have spared his country, America would have been discovered more gradually, and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed. (Shelley 34)

Here, Victor makes the first clear dissent of imperialism of the novel. Victor makes the assertion that any pursuit that goes beyond the scope of everyday pleasures is harmful. In the latter part of the passage, he is clearly referring to imperialism and colonialism when he mentions the discovery of America which almost led to the complete eradication of indigenous peoples on the continent and South America suffered the same fate. While the feminist aspects of the novel are important and widely regarded, Shelley's clear disdain for imperialism cannot be ignored.

Mary Shelley was writing during a time when the economics and morality of British imperialism were at the center of public concern. This was particularly the case with chattel slavery in the West Indies and the Caribbean (Ball 32). Shelley was no stranger to this debate, as her mother was vocal about British imperialism and classism. Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, often promoted social justice in her writings. She highlighted the gap between a rich and luxurious court and the neglected masses and condemned it (Ball 33). Shelley was no doubt influenced by the binary her mother wrote about, and she invokes that in her novel as a world of good and evil, humans and monsters. However, she ultimately decides to complicate that binary by making her characters complex and hard to pin down as either good or evil or human or monster. As John Ball articulates, "[In] *Frankenstein*, the very act of perceiving and defining a monster has become problematic" (Ball 33). Shelley gives readers the task of answering the question: who is more monstrous, The progeny who is by definition a monster who strives for humanity, or the human creator whose monstrous ambition led him to create a being he could not control?

The time in which Shelley wrote her novel coincided with the anti-slavery movement in Britain. She wrote it between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the emancipation of slaves in 1833. She started writing after "one of the most violent and protracted slave rebellions to date" had taken place in May 1816 in Barbados (Ball 34), and at a time when emancipated black people found residence in London. Other readings of *Frankenstein* refuse to associate the novel with the institution of slavery or abolition, but those readings choose to ignore the cultural context in which Shelley was writing in, along with the social influences she had in her life, namely her mother as mentioned before, and the fact that she often disagreed with her father William Godwin over his utopianism politics.

The use of body imagery was used often in the language that characterized pro-slavery and anti-slavery arguments alike during that time period, and metaphors of deformity and monstrosity were often used to convey the immorality of a system that only valued black bodies for labor and abuse. Shelley's husband, Percy Shelley, put slavery among the social injustices he argued against. Some of his poems like "Queen Mab" and "The Mask of Anarchy" use images of slavery to argue for general reforms in government (Ball 35). Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin, was opposed to slavery, though some of his beliefs about racial difference were similar to those used to justify it (Sterrenburg 143); his novel *St. Leon* (1799) has been read as an anti-slavery text (Sterrenburg 143). Shelley's mother believed that slavery was the antithesis of individual freedom for all people. All of this influence made it into Shelley's novel, particularly through the characterization of the monster.

As stated before, Shelley does not present a simple good vs. evil narrative in *Frankenstein*. The monster, while named as such, presents a humanity that almost exceeds the at times dull and melancholic disposition of Victor, although he is fully human. This paper refers to Victor's creation as the monster for the reasons that 1) Shelley did not provide him with a name and 2) the designation of 'monster' is likely in reference to the fact that non-European and non-Christian races were deemed monstrous, stretching back to the Middle Ages. Monstrous races were nothing new by the time the 19th Century rolled around. During the medieval period, pilgrimages and the Holy Wars prompted travel from Europe to the distant parts of the what was deemed the Eastern world. There, European Christians encountered peoples whose customs and culture differed from their own. The European travelers, usually religious figures, were quick to deem these races as 'monstrous' or barely human. Today, race is identified through location and physical characteristics such as skin color, the categories of medieval races included diet, language, clothing, and weapons (Friedman 19). The term 'monstrous races', is widely used in medieval scholarship to avoid "projecting modern ideas about race back in history to periods that had very different ideas about how to divide people into groups and categories" (Friedman 19). Unlike today, race was characterized by seemingly arbitrary traits that did not always include physical characteristics. Everyday cultural differences in such things as diet, speech, clothes, weapons, customs, and social organization were what truly set alien peoples apart from their observers in the classical world, and the power of these cultural traits to mark a race as monstrous persisted into the Middle Ages and beyond (Friedman 20). Medieval experts such as Khanmohamadi affirm this categorization of people based on differences, especially in relation to

Western ideals: “The relation between these monsters and the human becomes clear soon thereafter: the monstrous is that which stretches, twists, or turns inside out the norms of the human form, life cycle, and social habits of Pliny’s antique day” (Khanmohamadi 21). Victor’s creation fits this mold entirely. The monster’s appearance goes far beyond what is perceived as normal, and it is that appearance that keeps him from assimilating into the world of mankind.

The monster in Shelley’s novel was very aware of his monstrosity, but he only draws this conclusion based on his comparison between himself and the humans he encounters and their reaction to him. During his time watching the De Lacey’s, he made note of the “perfect forms” (Shelley 78) of the family and lauded their beauty and grace. It was only when the monster admired his own form in a still pool that he bitterly acknowledged his own monstrosity:

...I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity. (Shelley 78)

The monster deems himself a monster by adopting the gaze of, what are in his eyes, superior beings. Notably, earlier in the same chapter as this self-recognition, the monster recalls the treatment he received from the “barbarous villagers” who attacked him. In that case, he turned the monstrosity on the humans based on their inhumane behavior toward him. He considered himself above those villagers because his own humanity surpassed theirs. However, the De Lacey’s came to represent the perfect specimen of humans

because of their apparent docility and kindness to one another. This is when the trauma began for the monster, as his own psychology began to war against itself.

It is one of the functions of imperialism to cause the “other” to vilify and condemn itself. As earlier mentioned, in the fetal days of imperialist thought in Medieval Europe, the “monstrous races” written about in literature and depicted in art were monstrous because they did not meet Western standards and European travelers at the time took it upon themselves to question the humanity of these races entirely (Khanmohamodi 32). This is the first step in colonial trauma for the other. In the case of the monster, his otherness convinced him that his monstrosity was innate, which calls into question why Victor would create a being that could never blend into the norms of human society. Victor’s ambition warped his creation, and although he chose to play god, he made a being that was comprised of human parts, in his image to an extent, but he failed to make a being that could assimilate successfully. In that way, Victor was the only tether that the monster had to humanity. Victor's motivation for creating the monster, a combination of knowledge- and glory-seeking, is related to the drives behind imperial exploration, territorial expansion, and settlement in the New World (Ball 38). Victor echoes imperialist images in stating his desire to "pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source" (Shelley 82). His missionary presumption is not unjustified; the Monster calls him "my natural lord and king" (Shelley 128) and says he regarded the De Lacey's as "superior beings, who would be the arbiters of my future destiny" (Shelley 143). Part of the trauma of imperialism is the stripping of the other’s identity and history. This trauma, in part, can be related to Freud’s theory of individual trauma.

Although colonial trauma transcends the individual experience, it can be understood by applying to it the same concepts of individual trauma, particularly the theory of the pleasure principle employed by Sigmund Freud. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is Freud's reckoning with the fact that the brain does not operate solely on a drive to gain as much pleasure as possible. This pleasure principle is something he calls Eros, a reference to the Greek god of love and sexual desire. Freud asserts:

It must be pointed out, however, that strictly speaking it is incorrect to talk of the dominance of the pleasure principle over the course of mental processes. If such a dominance existed, the immense majority of our mental processes would have to be accompanied by pleasure or lead to pleasure, whereas universal experience completely contradicts any such conclusion. (Freud 596)

While humans do have a strong tendency to seek out pleasure, that does not stop people from experiencing negative emotions, sometimes at their own hands. This is especially evident when it comes to people who have gone through great trauma. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a condition that often plagues people who have gone through a horrific experience, one they would usually like to forget. However, PTSD is characterized by a person's inability to escape the traumatic experience, whether it be through recurring dreams, triggers in everyday life, or even hallucinations in association with the trauma. Similarly, victims of colonialism face a sort of Post-Colonial Stress Disorder. When the colonizing power takes control (the trauma), its influence never leaves the country, and it continues to snake its way into the lives of the people who live there, keeping them in a state of disenfranchisement and loss.

Similarly, the monster that Victor created was at once, dominated by the tether he had to his creator, and left to his own devices in a world he could not fit into. Even so, that did not stop the monster from grasping at what he ultimately could not achieve, namely, the approval of human beings. His own creator did not accept him, and like the child in the *fort-da* game, he sought to spite his creator for being absent. The monster knew he surpassed Victor and other humans physically, but he sought to master the language and culture of his oppressor/creator in order to find his way in the world.

The monster did not have an original language of his own, but human language was not natural to him, though he sought mastery over it:

By degrees I made a discovery of still greater moment. I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it. (Shelley 77)

Complex issues are raised by Victor's refusal of responsibility for his creature and the monster's self-education and ultimate depression, rebellion, and supposed suicide at the conclusion of the novel. These relate to anxieties about the education and liberation of enslaved people and complex questions of accountability for their condition after emancipation. Although Victor created the monster and "endowed [him] with perceptions and passions," Victor renounced his duties as creator by casting the monster as an "object for the scorn and horror of mankind" (Shelley 98). What is interesting about Victor's own claim as being Creator is that he did not actually create life, rather, he restored life to

dismembered parts that were already once alive. God as Creator made the universe from nothing, so even as Victor obsesses over his Prometheus project, he falls short of being god-like, something he admits himself:

Remember, I am not recording the vision of a madman. The sun does not more certainly shine in the heavens than that which I now affirm is true. Some miracle might have produced it, yet the stages of the discovery were distinct and probable. After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter. (Shelley 32)

In a post-enlightenment world, man, particularly European white men, looked inward to themselves for ‘miracles’ rather than at religion. Victor makes the acknowledgement of a higher power by referencing the “sun in the heavens” and “some miracle” but he lauds himself for tapping into a “discovery” that already existed. Such is the case with imperial attitudes. Imperialism claimed and continues to claim that beyond Western civilization, the rest of the world is yet to be discovered, even though sophisticated civilizations already exist in these so-called unknown regions (Mignolo 45). In this way, native cultures and histories are dehumanized because they are objectified by imperialist who claim to have stumbled upon something new. The monstrous races that Khanmohamodi writes about were treated as a discovery themselves and aggregated with the land and resources colonizers sought to plunder. These medieval races and Victor’s monster were not monstrous by virtue of their innate qualities but by the trauma of having their existence dehumanized by Western ideals.

The monster's desire to master the language of those who reject him is evidence of the colonial trauma that the Other endures. In the process of colonization, the Other is at once forced to conform to western ideals, while at the same time being continuously distanced from the standards that oppress them (Seshadri 70). This causes the Other to reach for an ideal that they can never systemically achieve because while the oppressor seeks to mold the Other to their standards, it is vital for the oppressor to maintain dominance by keeping a cultural and often physical difference between themselves and the oppressed (Seshadri 70). The monster in Shelley's novel grappled with self-hatred, imposed by a creator that ensured that his creation was distanced from the realm of mankind, although the monster was clearly made in man's image, with human parts. Victor's aim to create a species that would "bless [him] as creator and source" was no doubt in order to maintain his dominance over the species he intended to create. Although the monster is physically (and evidently mentally superior by the speed at which the monster learns from the De Lacey's), the monster's ghastly appearance hinders him from reaching the goal he has of assimilating into the community of mankind. Victor takes no responsibility for the trauma he causes his creation, and leaves the monster destitute and in a state of limbo. Cultures affected by imperialism do not simply shed the influence of the oppressor when they gain their independence, as outlined in the introduction of this paper. The trauma lies in the distance the oppressor puts in between itself and the Other; it is in that space, that distance that the Otherization happens, and the oppressed internalizes their own dehumanization by means of anything from education to physical features and so on (Mignolo 126).

Despite his appearance, the monster does still attempt to win over the graces of humankind, particularly of the De Lacey's through his physical capabilities. He acknowledges that he will be rejected by his actual appearance, but he attempts let his actions precede and supersede his ghastly form:

I cleared their path from the snow and performed those offices that I had seen done by Felix. I afterwards found that these labours, performed by an invisible hand, greatly astonished them; and once or twice I heard them, on these occasions, utter the words good spirit, wonderful; but I did not then understand the signification of these terms. My thoughts now became more active, and I longed to discover the motives and feelings of these lovely creatures... I formed in my imagination a thousand pictures of presenting myself to them, and their reception of me. I imagined that they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanour and conciliating words, I should first win their favour and afterwards their love. These thoughts exhilarated me and led me to apply with fresh ardour to the acquiring the art of language. (Shelley 79)

Being a benign and “wonderful” spirit to the De Lacey's was the monster's way of developing his own humanity based on the behaviors he observed as superior. By imitating and learning from the gentile nature of his host family, the monster hoped to gain proximity to the realm of man. He especially relied on the blindness of the elder De Lacey, and he developed a plan to win over the family through action and a good word from the patriarch, but his plan ultimately fails. As Mignolo points out, one of the ways the Other is dominated by the oppressing class is through language (72). The monster's attempt at adopting the language of his oppressor/ridiculer was part of his attempt at

draping a new skin over himself, but the distance that Victor put between his monster and the world of men was irreconcilable, even as the monster gained an impressive intellect and emotional adeptness.

Shelley's novel outlines the trauma of the Other, outlining the harm of the imperialist attitudes that were prevalent during the time she was writing in. Her parents were no stranger to calling out the colonial injustices, and it seems their influence compelled her to seep her dissention in her writing. While this is true, Shelley's outline of colonial trauma in this novel is limited. When Victor dies, his colonial victim and creation dies with him, putting a period at the end of the monster's narrative with his apparent suicide. The monster was left with no legacy of his own, no history. Shelley thus allows the monster's trauma to form in a vacuum, and as reality shows, the colonial trauma of one generation seeps into the next and the next and the next.

As the next chapter will outline, while Shelley's novel has made its mark on the canon, it was just a precursor to what was to come for post-colonial literature. Jamaica Kincaid, a contemporary Caribbean author, puts emphasis on the canon, but reframes the classic narratives she grew up reading to reflect the colonial trauma that plagued her ancestors and reverberates in her own life. Her work extends this trauma to the collective, revealing the insidious tether that binds the Other across time. Xuela, the protagonist in Kincaid's novel entitled *Autobiography of My Mother* does what Frankenstein's monster could not. She recognizes the systemic oppression she must operate under, and uses the language of her oppressor to subvert colonial power. She also recognizes herself as one of many in a long chain of the Other, much like Kincaid herself. The next chapter will

also discuss what Kincaid's writing means for the canon of literature that is taught in academia, and how the canon will continue to shift in the future.

## CHAPTER 2

In *Autobiography*, Kincaid seems to pick up where Shelley could not continue. As nuanced as the monster was, his narrative was limited in its representation of the colonial Other, largely due to Shelley's own distance from otherness. Despite this, Kincaid advocates for the importance of canonical fiction, even if most of it was written by people who didn't look like her or share her identity:

I would happily sacrifice any amount of reading of any of my books for people to read *Jane Eyre*. 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.

(Balutansky 800)

In this excerpt from an interview Kincaid had with Kathleen Balutansky, she emphasizes how important the canon is, despite its lack of inclusivity. While she acknowledges her own progressive politics, she defends the canon by arguing that justice won't come from ignoring authors like Shakespeare or Chaucer. Rather, observing and acknowledging the whiteness of the canon will help inform the writing of otherness, including her own writing. Colonization is by no means the beginning of the history of the Other, but it marked the beginning of trauma that would last for centuries as it passed down through the DNA of the oppressed. It is from this collective trauma that Kincaid chooses to write.

In her relation to the English language and the English literature with which colonial children were so assiduously inculcated, Kincaid presents a paradox. The emphasis on England, Kincaid has said, the constant inference that England was the center of the universe, robbed colonial children of a sense of their own worth. Further, the

rigorous study of English only enhanced the power of what Kincaid has called “the language of the criminal” (Simmons 65). In an essay entitled “A Small Place”, Kincaid asserts

For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal's deed. the horror of inflicted on me. The language of the criminal can explain and express deed only from the criminal's point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me. (Kincaid 32)

Kincaid's interaction with the English language and literature served to diminish and erase her as a black person, while it enhanced the power of everything British. Her relationship with the British canon was complex. On the one hand, she recognized its colonizing power over her, but on the other hand, she saw an opportunity to learn about herself through the oppression. She was able to seek out questions of right and wrong in the works that she read and form her own morality through this practice. Like the monster in Shelley's novel, Kincaid also found herself relating to Lucifer in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It was that encounter with the canon that allowed her to process her own pain and trauma related to her race, and to better understand the powers that worked to oppress herself and people like her (Simmons 65).

In another interview, with Moira Ferguson, Kincaid admits that she had initially set out to write about her own personal trauma (Chang 107). She says:

In my first two books, I used to think I was writing about my mother and me.

Later I began to see that I was writing about the relationship between the powerful

and the powerless. That's become an obsessive theme, and I think it will be a theme for as long as I write. (Ferguson 176-177)

She goes on to say that the mother she was writing about was really Mother Country, namely colonizing powers like England and France. In her own personal pain, Kincaid saw reflected the pain and trauma of others like her, allowing her to transform her own story into that of millions of people around the world whose ancestors were oppressed and continually oppressed through the stories of their ancestors. In *Frankenstein*, the monster's pain was isolated, but Kincaid seems to correct the canon by reflecting the monster's experience through Xuela in *Autobiography* by acknowledging how collective trauma, especially in the colonial context is vital in the experience of the other.

Although colonial trauma transcends the individual experience, it can be understood by applying to it the same concepts of individual trauma, particularly the theory of the pleasure principle employed by Sigmund Freud. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is Freud's reckoning with the fact that the brain does not operate solely on a drive to gain as much pleasure as possible. This pleasure principle is something he calls Eros, a reference to the Greek god of love and sexual desire. Freud asserts:

It must be pointed out, however, that strictly speaking it is incorrect to talk of the dominance of the pleasure principle over the course of mental processes. If such a dominance existed, the immense majority of our mental processes would have to be accompanied by pleasure or lead to pleasure, whereas universal experience completely contradicts any such conclusion. (Freud 596)

While humans do have a strong tendency to seek out pleasure, that does not stop people from experiencing negative emotions, sometimes at their own hands. This is especially

evident when it comes to people who have gone through great trauma. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a condition that often plagues people who have gone through a horrific experience, one they would usually like to forget. However, PTSD is characterized by a person's inability to escape the traumatic experience, whether it be through recurring dreams, triggers in everyday life, or even hallucinations in association with the trauma. Similarly, victims of colonialism face a sort of Post-Colonial Stress Disorder. When the colonizing power takes control (the trauma), its influence never leaves the country, and it continues to snake its way into the lives of the people who live there, keeping them in a state of disenfranchisement and loss.

Colonial trauma is not individualized like PTSD, nor is it associated with just one event. It transcends language, culture, economics, familial structures, and generations. As Kalpana Seshadri puts it, colonial trauma is defined as:

... the trauma of colonialism as a fundamental expropriation of one's language manifested as the denigration and loss of the mother tongue, a partial or imperfect imposition of an alien tongue, de-legitimization of vernacular discourses and knowledge and variegated forms of censorship. This collective or historical trauma produces not a universal or generalized subject, but a condition of life that one could say broadly is at the core aphasic. Something un-nameable about an entire community's way of being in the world, its very historicity can be referenced only as rupture or death – an unacknowledged silence. (Seshadri 67)

As Emily Johnston puts it, trauma is at once a wound and the state or condition that brought about that wound. Colonial trauma is no different. The trauma of colonialism is not something that can be put into simple words, and individuals feel its sting in unique

ways. One important element of Kincaid's novel is the fact that Xuela continuously acknowledges her own trauma, but she frames it within the larger trauma of the Carib people and her mother. Though her mother died at her birth, Xuela's insistence on conjuring images of her mother is a sort of witnessing of trauma that Xuela employs, piecing together the narrative of a woman she never knew while seeing ways this fractured past will affect her present and future. Kincaid seemingly does a similar witnessing with her engagement with the traditional canon. She uses the very language and stories that work to oppress her to promote acts of restoration and reconciliation as Johnston asserts literature can do:

Witnessing trauma through reading traumatic literature in a classroom setting can become an act of collectively acknowledging and resisting injustice. As readers, we can sit with the discomfort of trauma—the pain of its still-open wounds—effectively engaging in the restorative process of reconciling horror with surviving that horror. As literary scholars, we can teach reading as decolonial activism by guiding our students to read as witnesses. (Johnston 6)

It would seem that Kincaid is guiding her readers to read as witnesses, forcing them to work through the colonial trauma that Xuela grapples with, and hopefully discovering their own colonial wounds to begin whatever healing is possible for them. It is this witnessing and healing that Shelley deprives the monster of in her novel by having him kill himself.

One of the ways colonial trauma is perpetuated is through education and literacy. When Europe began colonizing other parts of the world, literacy was used as a tool to take control of indigenous populations. In his book entitled *The Darker Side of the*

*Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, Walter D. Mignolo outlined how language was used by the Spanish in their effort to colonize South America. In order to successfully colonize a region, the dominating power used language as a means to tame the “Other,” or indigenous peoples of the region. One of the techniques that Mignolo highlighted was the development of proper grammars and written text to teach the indigenous people. For the Spaniards, the language of the natives, such as the Incans, was primitive and barbaric. It was something they could not understand, and they knew that they had to take control of that language in order to eradicate their culture and seize the land for themselves. The written word was very instrumental in this according to Mignolo when he states:

At the other end is the belief in the power of the letter to tame the voice, to preserve the glory of the prince and the memories of a nation, and to upgrade the social and cultural processes of the Amerindians, who, even though they were not barbarians, had not yet been blessed with the most marvelous human invention, which, as Nebrija had argued, was the letter.

(Mignolo 37)

As much power as the spoken word has, the written words have the power to censor and shape the spoken word. While the indigenous peoples of the Americas had a linguistic system that was complex and civilized in its own right, their method of recording was lacking a uniformity that the Spaniards and English linguistic systems had. As Mignolo states above, the letter has the power to influence spoken language because it is the means by which history and culture are recorded. By taking away the indigenous writing system, the colonizing powers were able to erase any ancestral culture and traditions the

natives had, especially by targeting the younger generation of natives. By educating them by way of the written word, primarily the Bible, the colonizing powers, in this case, the Spanish, were able to infiltrate the minds and speech of the natives into conforming to European standards. Xuela, the protagonist of Kincaid's novel, is at first a victim of this linguistic theft, but she is very self-aware of the way colonialism works around her. It is this recognition that allows her to resist the trauma and take control of her own life, even if she is still working within the confines of a colonial society, as will be discussed later.

This need for control, as Xuela displays, goes back to Freud's analysis of repetition of psychological trauma. Freud recognizes that the pleasure principle may not have dominance over a person's psyche, it is still perplexing why the subconscious feels the need to constantly bring up the trauma over and over again when it brings unbearable pain. One reason for the repetition of trauma in a person's mind, according to Freud, could be the need for control. When a trauma occurs, it is often unexpected to the person who goes through it. This undoubtedly causes a shock that makes the psyche feel out of control. The repetition can be seen as a coping mechanism, an attempt by the mind to make sense of the trauma that happens. In his book, Freud gives the example of a little boy who plays a game in which he throws a toy angrily away from himself, then moments later brings it back. After observation, Freud interpreted the game as a remaking of the child's mother leaving him and then returning. He states, "At the outset he was in a passive situation—he was overpowered by the experience; but by repeating it, as unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part" (Freud 600). For a little child, the absence of its mother, albeit temporary, can be a sort of trauma. It is something out of the little child's control. Likewise, when a person goes through a real

trauma, it is a situation in which they are passive victims. It is something done to them, a situation they have to endure. In repeating the trauma, however, the mind tries to take control of the trauma and take an active part in it, just as the young boy symbolically did so in his repetition of the fort-da game. Like the child, Xuela finds herself in a motherless state, but more importantly, she grows up in a society where she is taught to hate herself and her maternal heritage. Despite this, Xuela strives to take control of the situation by embracing the broken, vanquished parts of herself, reclaiming the mother and history she was stripped of. This is shown through Xuela's use of language and her resistance to her British education.

Xuela's story begins with the loss of her mother at birth. That is how we are introduced to her in the first sentences of her story: "My mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind" (Kincaid 3). The loss of her mother became a central theme in Xuela's story, and everything she experienced was marked by a pain and emptiness that she could never truly fill. Though the mother-daughter relationship, (or lack thereof) is essential in a literal sense, the allegorical implications of the relationship play a vital role in this narrative as well.

Xuela's absent mother was a Carib woman, meaning that her heritage stemmed from the indigenous people of the island of Dominica. In the novel, Xuela refers to her mother's people as vanquished and almost extinct due to the colonial takeover by the British. Here, we see the traditional colonial narrative where the dominating power essentially wipes out an entire culture, as Mignolo highlights. The death of Xuela's mother becomes a symbol of that erasure of indigenous culture, and Xuela is a symbol of

the colonial subject who would never know her true history. The fact that the moment of birth was mingled with the mother's death lends itself to the conversation of post-colonial trauma for descendants of indigenous and enslaved peoples. These descendants are thrown into a society that they cannot identify with, and one that will never accept them. A tactic that the Spanish used in South America, according to Mignolo, was targeting the youth of the indigenous people. The youth represent the future, and if the colonizing power could take control of the future, they could solidify their superior status. This stripped these colonial subjects of their original heritage, and robbed them of their original language.

A poignant scene in the novel is when Xuela utters her first words. She did not speak until she was four, but this was not because she could not. She made the choice not to speak, creating a silence in which she could process her life without her mother. The loss of her mother came with the loss of her mother tongue, the essential form of language that one uses to communicate early on in life. Instead of speaking in the French patois that was spoken by the lower class in Dominica, Xuela utters her first words in proper English, the language of the colonizer:

“Where is my father?” I said it in English—not French patois or English patois, but plain English—and that should have been the surprise: not that I spoke, but that I spoke English, a language I had never heard anyone speak. Ma Eunice and her children spoke the language of Dominica, which is French patois, and my father when he spoke to me spoke that language also, not because he disrespected me, but because he thought I understood nothing else. (Kincaid 7)

Despite the fact that Xuela never heard English spoken, she develops a mastery of it at a very young age. This was a source of trauma for her, because she knew English was not the language she was supposed to speak; it was the language of the enemy that stripped her ancestors of their history and homeland. Her caretaker, Ma Eunice, and her children were the part of the conquered people of Dominica. They spoke the language of the disenfranchised, the illegitimate language that was only reserved for those with dark skin and lowly status. Their lack of knowledge of English kept them tied to the land, land that had been raped and pillaged by the dominating class. Xuela's father was a member of the dominating class. He was of mixed heritage; his mother was from a country in Africa, and his father was most likely from Scotland which is evident by the way he is described with copper hair. He had pale enough skin to assimilate himself within the colonizing class, rising in the ranks as an important official. He was able to cast aside the part of himself that belonged to a vanquished people, and he was able to assume the identity of a conqueror. Unlike Ma Eunice, Xuela's father was bilingual; he knew how to speak the illegitimate language and the legitimate language of the colonizer. In the above passage, Xuela notes that her father would only speak to her in French patois. She also clarifies that this was not to insult her, or to show disrespect. This clarification shows that Xuela was well aware of the hierarchy of language in her colonial situation. She knew that language was the gauge by which people were judged, which could be why she waited so long to begin speaking. Her mother and the language her mother spoke were taken away from her, so her only option was to adopt the language of her captors, a survival mechanism in the wake of her pain and loss. This was her version of the *fort-da* game;

she knew she was in a society that would oppress her, yet she knew how to manipulate this society in a way that kept her in control.

Kincaid herself faced a similar narrative in her own life. Born in St. John's Antigua, she was all too familiar with the struggles of growing up within the walls of post-colonial trauma. In an interview, she is cited as saying, "The thing that I knew was English literature. It was not told to me because the English cared for me and wanted to educate me and thought it was a good thing if I had a mind. It was taught to me to reinforce their superiority." Kincaid did not grow up reading the works of people who looked like her or shared the same experience as her. Those literacy narratives were not elevated in the same way as literacy narratives from privileged white people who benefitted from the greener pastures of colonialism. Yet, her own works offer a critique of the very literature she grew up reading. Instead of taking the Brontes and Austen and elevating them to the gold standard, she changed the narrative to highlight the trauma of the colonized and vanquished. Kincaid's work is folded into a new literary canon, one that recognizes the struggle of the colonial subject, particularly the female Carib voice.

Xuela makes note of the language hierarchy in the way she describes her classroom. Despite the fact that Xuela is a girl, her father wants her to attend school so that she can become a school teacher. He enrolls her in a school that teaches the British curriculum, in hopes that she will become a perpetuator of Western ideologies as an educator of Dominica's youth. On her first day of class, she makes the following observations:

It was a small building with one door and four windows; it had a wooden floor; there was a small reptile crawling along a beam in the roof; there were three long desks lined up one behind

the other; there was a large wooden table and a chair facing the three long desks; on the wall behind the wooden table and chair was a map; at the top of the map were the words “THE BRITISH EMPIRE.” These were the first words I learned to read. (Kincaid 14)

From the description, the classroom was not a very elaborate or modern space. It reads like a classroom that one would find in a poor region, only adorned by simple tables for the children to work on and a solitary desk for the teacher. Xuela’s teacher and fellow classmates were part of the vanquished class; she describes the boys and her teacher as being part of the African people, the same people her father disassociated from in favor of his whiter half. Despite the bare conditions of the classroom and the heritage of those who utilize it, the curriculum being taught is from the upper, privileged, and more powerful class. The words that were in bold print at the head of the classroom, THE BRITISH EMPIRE, indicates that the classroom and everything taught in it were agents of the Empire; they were tools to pass along the ideologies of the self-proclaimed superior race. However, this education was not in any way intended to elevate the status of the black kids in that classroom. They were there for the purpose of being conditioned, of knowing their place in a society that would take advantage of them. The literacy that they would learn would only function to reinforce the racist, Christian-oriented and capitalistic values of the Empire, to ensure obedience and complacency of the disenfranchised. Anything taught in a classroom is rarely questioned or challenged, so in this way, literacy serves as an enslaving tool.

Xuela, being self-aware and wary of the ways colonialism worked around her, constantly found ways to resist the norm. She broke through any false-consciousness that tried to blind her from the reality of things. This is evident by her reaction to a vision that

she and her classmates witnessed walking home from school. The children were passing over a pond, and as they were, they noticed a beautiful woman surrounded by ripe fruit. She seemed to be a siren or a spirit of some sort that had appeared out nowhere. One of the schoolboys tried to approach, but he ultimately met his death by drowning. When Xuela tries to relay this experience to her father, he becomes angry with her, telling her that what she saw was false. This did not surprise her:

Everything about us is held in doubt and we the defeated define all that is unreal, all that is not human...Our experience cannot be interpreted by us; we do not know the truth of it. Our God was not the correct one, our understanding of heaven and hell was not a respectable one. Belief in that apparition of a naked woman with outstretched arms beckoning a small boy to his death was the belief of the illegitimate, the poor, the low. I believed in that apparition then and I believe in it now...If our schooling was successful, most of us would not have believed we had witnessed such a thing. (Kincaid 37-38, 49)

Here, Xuela is well aware of the ways literacy and education from the colonizer work to dehumanize the experience of the defeated class. The experience of the woman with the fruit did not fit into Western standards of experience; it was part of folklore, folklore that was destroyed by coloniality and modernity. The experience of the black children and anything that happens in their lives is subject to judgment by Western standards. What they say and the information they consume does not belong to them; their identities have been stripped from them through the colonizing process. What they learn by way of literacy gained in their plain classroom is under the crushing hand of the British Empire. Even though they will never be treated as more than peasants, they are still expected to

conform to the pedagogy of those who tower over them. In examining this same account, Veronica Marie Gregg writes, “In telling the truth that she knows and holding onto a vision considered degraded and superstitious, Xuela also explores its opposite: what passes as accepted and legitimate knowledge...and how it maintains its status as knowledge.” Her refusal to dismiss her experience was a reclaiming of her autonomy. That experience became a part of her lost identity, her mother’s identity, and the identity of the ancestors she never got to know. It was her way of pushing back against the system and symbolic powers of the colonizers and determining her own literacy narrative by holding onto the beliefs of the vanquished.

While Xuela is seen by many critics as the primary victim of colonialism, it can be argued that Xuela’s father himself is a victim as well. Throughout the novel, Alfred Richardson is portrayed as a brooding, unsympathetic agent of colonialism. His work was steeped in corruption, cheating the people of Dominica out of their money up until the very moment of his death. Giselle Liza Anatol, when speaking of Alfred, comments on his ability to speak both Creole and English asserts this about his identity: “Alfred Richardson’s ability to speak Creole by no means suggests his adherence to a [Dominica] nationalistic agenda. Although he can speak his ‘mother tongue,’ he in no way identifies with the majority of people who also speak this National language. Nothing suggests that Richardson’s ‘African-Caribbean-ness’ is ‘real’ or substantial simply because he can speak Creole.” Here, Anatol is suggesting that the ability to speak one’s mother tongue does not make for an authentic connection to their maternal ancestry. While that has truth, the fact still remains that Richardson is of mixed heritage by blood. This fact cannot be ignored, and neither can the fact that that he is a product of the society he was

brought up in. Alfred's father was Scottish, but his mother was of the African people, though the specific country is never specified. In his youth, Alfred loses his mother like Xuela, although it was not at the moment of his birth, but later. Since he was of mixed heritage, he was faced with a choice; he could embrace the African side of himself, his maternal side, or he could embrace the Scottish and privileged part of himself. Society would not let him embrace both. In the penultimate chapter of the book, Xuela takes an in-depth look at her father's life and the identity he chose to commit to. She states, "My father rejected the complications of the vanquished; he chose the ease of the victor" (Kincaid 186). Like Xuela, Alfred knew that he grew up in a society that could treat him like less than dirt because of his maternal heritage; unlike Xuela, Alfred had the privilege of being half white. He knew he could take advantage of this, so he threw away the African part of himself because of the colonial trauma he knew would come with that part of himself. Yet, he was not able to fully escape its bounds. In describing her father, Xuela often said that it was like her father was wearing a mask. Whether he had internal conflicts about his identity or not was never outright shown, but his willingness to disown half of himself is due to the ideologies that he was exposed to from his youth on. He was affected by colonial trauma as much as Xuela, though he manifested it in a different way.

Both Shelley's and Kincaid's protagonists share similar experiences of being otherized and victimized by imperial forces. Both characters are representations of "the Other." The monster's otherness stems from the obvious fact that he is not human, and Xuela's otherness stems from her connection to the Carib people, the heritage of her mother. In my analysis of both novels, particularly both protagonists, I conjectured that

Kincaid's novel was a revision of the history of the monster, an attempt to revisit or correct the story of a victim of Imperialism. A number of sources emphasize the role that imperialism has in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, starting with Walton's obsession with traveling north to claim land and unknown riches, a journey that he sees as his birth-right (Shelley 8). Victor's obsession begins with the origin of life and creating a magnificent being, but he ends up creating a being made from human parts but is not human in nature.

This is the goal of all imperialists when it comes to the indigenous peoples they encounter and ultimately force under their submission: to teach the "other" just enough to "create" beings that are familiar, but not quite the same. There is also the added layer of Safie's story in the middle of the novel, which deserves further analysis in this respect. Shelley does not hide her critique of imperialism, especially when she has Victor muse about the dangers of becoming too absorbed in a given field of study: "If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed" (Shelley 34). If Victor's entire story acted as a warning for Walton to abandon his obsessive journey to the north, then the monster was certainly a cautionary metaphor itself, that of the ways imperialism and the entitlement of white men could destroy the culture and history of native peoples and lands.

Kincaid does not use Xuela as a caution or warning against imperialism. Rather, Xuela is an example of a reclaiming of heritage and history from the oppressor. Xuela's life mirrors that of the monster's; she too came into the world without a nurturing figure

to care for her or guide her. She too had to learn in languages that were not her own, and she had to contend with the demonization of her maternal heritage and the realization that she was alone in life. But rather than set up her own fiery funeral as the monster did at the death of his creator, Xuela embraces her maternal heritage and reclaims her identity as her inheritance: “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, and 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” (Kincaid 88-89). Unlike the monster, Xuela does not give in to the defeat of being the “other”, although she acknowledges it. Kincaid allows Xuela to embrace the highs and lows of her otherness, and emphasizes that Xuela is not truly alone because she represents the past, present, and future of her mother’s people, even though they are physically lost:

This account of my life has been an account of my mother’s life as much as it has been an account of mine, and even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have, as it is their account of me. In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from. In me are the voices that should have come out of me, the faces I never allowed to form, the eyes I never allowed to see me. This account is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become. (Kincaid 227-228)

Overall this thesis, and the argument that my research has thus far supported, is that Shelley attempts to represent the desolation of the “other” through the monster, and highlights the damage imperialism does to the cultures and histories of indigenous

peoples. Kincaid revises the monster's story by presenting Xuela's story, one that acknowledges the collective colonial trauma of native peoples.

## CONCLUSION

Jamaica Kincaid's respect and familiarity with the traditional (and white) literary canon allowed her to subvert it through her determination to use its power to find her own. In *Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela is a symbol of healing and restoration from colonial trauma. Kincaid's writing is by no means a cure for colonial trauma in itself, but she makes room for healing to begin. Although a newer and more diverse canon should begin to emerge in academia, Kincaid is not wrong to assert that the currently established canon should not be entirely dismantled, not yet anyway. It is the foundation from which colonial trauma is witnessed through literary study. Works like Shelley's *Frankenstein* contextualize colonial trauma with history and bring to light the damaging Eurocentrism that is still prevalent today. Victor himself asserts, "To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death" (Shelley 31). The new canon cannot begin to evolve and grow without acknowledging the past, however horrible, that it emerged from, that it healed from. That isn't to say that post-colonial writers like Kincaid owe a debt to the dead white writers of the past. Overcoming trauma requires one to come to grips with the conditions that caused the trauma, and from their new life can begin to thrive.

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