

# History and identity in so far from god and the autobiography of my mother



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The characters in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* each straddle a line between two worlds representing old and new, the conqueror and the defeated. Kincaid's narrator, Xuela Claudette Richardson, is a product of colonialism in the Caribbean: a mixture of European, African, and Carib. Meanwhile, the people represented in Castillo's novel are Chicano, Mexican, and Spanish living on the border of the United States and Mexico. In many ways, Kincaid and Castillo's characters are defined by their ancestry and the histories of their families. This definition, or the forging of identity based on history and legacy, is expressed as problematic in both novels due to the natures of colonization and defeat: the ancestral lands of the people of Tome, New Mexico are bought by white newcomers and the Carib people, who Xuela identifies her mother and, therefore, herself with, are now extinct.

Consequently, the characters in both *So Far From God* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* are creating identities based on a shadow world, a world that exists through the idea of ancestry but, at the same time, is unable to survive because of the oppressive events of history. In their novels, Castillo and Kincaid write of the struggle of forging an identity against, or in spite of, history—in other words, the struggle to find a unique and empowering identity rather than accepting the invisible and non-existent identity that history has determined. Both novels present characters who struggle with the fact that their identities (the ones based on history and ancestry) are either fading away or completely non-existent. In *So Far From God*, characters such as Sofia and her unnamed friend, known as “la comadre”, are faced with the loss of their land and the ability to be self-sufficient (Castillo 138). La comadre states, “All we have ever known is this <https://assignbuster.com/history-and-identity-in-so-far-from-god-and-the-autobiography-of-my-mother/>

life, living off our land, that just gets más smaller y smaller. You know that my familia once had three hundred acres to farm and now all I got left of my father's hard work—and his father's and his father's—is casi nada...Barely enough for my family to live on" (Castillo 139). Both Sofi and la comadre are fighting against the force of history, or the gradual loss of their ancestral land: although their families have owned that land for generations, " los gringos" have been slowly taking over leaving the Mexican Americans of Tome with nothing (Castillo 139). Consequently, the people living in the borderland of New Mexico are left with a fractured identity: their ancestral remnants and overall way of life are threatened and taken away from them as they are forced to succumb to financial and historical defeat—who are they if they can no longer identify with the ancestors of their people?

Additionally, Xuela from *The Autobiography of My Mother* is forced to face a world that sees her as non-existent. Through her mother, Xuela comes from the Carib people, a people " regarded as not real—the shadow people" (Kincaid 31). Xuela states that " the Carib people had been defeated and then exterminated" (Kincaid 16). Therefore, Xuela does not belong to any existing groups of people (the people of her mother are extinct and she has never belonged to her father); she is very much left without an identity due to the oppressive course of history: " I was lonely and wished to see people in whose faces I could recognize something of myself. Because who was I? My mother was dead; I had not seen my father for a long time" (Kincaid 16).

Although Xuela aches to create an identity through a relation to another individual (or group), she is unable to as the only ancestry she can connect to (her mother's) is just a shadow. Similarly, the people of Tome who have ancestral claim over the land are slowly becoming shadows as their

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ancestry, culture, and origins are being taken over and changed. While Xuela is largely unable to create a substantial existing identity, some characters from *So Far From God* are able to forge identities and find empowerment in the process. Although Sofi does create an identity for herself as “La Mayor of Tome” (a powerful identity that thrives despite the fact that her lands are being sold and the identity of her people is threatened and dwindling), Caridad’s creation of an identity is the most profound in the novel as it works against historical oppression and defeat (Castillo 142). At the time of her death, Caridad (along with Esmeralda) is guided by Tsichtinako, “the Invisible One”, and most likely becomes something similar to a supernatural mythic being (Castillo 211). The narration states that Caridad and Esmeralda did not go “out toward the sun’s rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where [they] would be safe and live forever” (Castillo 211). Therefore, while the people of Tome are unable to keep their land that is so important to their overall identity, Caridad is able to become a part of the land where she will reside eternally. In this instance, Caridad overcomes both death and defeat; she is able to live on (with a strong identity intact) in the land of “the oldest city in all of the Americas that has had constant habitation” (Castillo 208). Because she leaves the world of the living in “the oldest city” and is guided by the force that “nourished the first two humans”, Caridad becomes one with the origins of her culture and land (Castillo 211). In doing so, she succeeds in creating an identity that is tied to her ancestry and people—this is an identity that the course of history is unable to defeat. Xuela, on the other hand, cannot find an identity because of the course of history; she is unable to find an identity based on ancestral or parental ties. Xuela regards her narration as an “account of the person

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who was never allowed to be and an account of the person [she] did not allow [her]self to become" (Kincaid 228). Xuela constantly connects her sense of self to her mother. However, because her mother is of the Carib people, a people that was defeated and exterminated, Xuela does not allow herself to have an identity (as she cannot find anybody to identify with). Just as Caridad finds empowerment in death, Xuela finds substance and meaning in death despite her inability to create an identity while alive. Although Caridad's death explains and completes the identity that she was trying to create while still alive, Xuela's death will give her substance for the first time. Xuela states, " Since I do not matter, I do not long to matter, but I matter anyway. I long to meet the thing greater than I am, the thing to which I can submit...Death is the only reality, for it is the only certainty, inevitable to all things" (Kincaid 228). Although Xuela does not believe that her life matters (because her mother's life did not matter), she does believe that her identity matters in death; in other words, only death can give her an identity. This identity, this state of meaning, must submit to death, " the only reality"—it does not, however, have to submit to colonial defeat like the Carib people (as death is " inevitable to all things"). If Xuela was able to form an identity in life, based on her deceased and unknown Carib mother, she would be creating an identity based on defeat. By refusing to forge that identity, she is establishing some agency in her life despite that fact that she does not know who she is or where she comes from. This sense of agency is reflected in Xuela's abortions: " 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" (Kincaid 227-8). Through these abortions, Xuela (like Caridad) is ending the historical cycle of defeat, as her children would be part African, Carib,

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and white European. By preventing life, Xuela is emphasizing her belief that, for “ the shadow people”, meaning and identity can only be found in death. As the rough course of history takes its toll on the cultures and the people represented in *So Far From God* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, identities are made vulnerable and, for some, are impossible to create in the first place. The people of Tome, living on the border of the United States and Mexico, are forced to succumb to history. In the past, the culture had to fight to thrive against Spanish colonization and American defeat. *So Far From God* more directly discusses the continuance of the culture’s fight to survive in that the people of Tome are forced to sell the land of their fathers’ (and their fathers’ fathers) to “ gringos” based on financial necessity. Meanwhile, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela connects herself with the Carib people: a group of people defeated by European colonization. Because historical defeat is a common aspect of the two novels, both novels present groups of people who are forced to live in two different worlds at the same time and, consequently, struggle to create and maintain identities. Works Cited Castillo, Ana. *So Far from God: A Novel*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993. Print. Kincaid, Jamaica. *The Autobiography of My Mother*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1996. Print.