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WALKING/SURVIVING IN THE FOREIGN LAND: RECONSIDERING JAMAICA KINCAID'S LUCY

Wang Tang-Wei

*Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Cheng Kung University Tainan,
Taiwan*

waynelw189@gmail.com

Abstract

In her most admired novella, Lucy, Jamaica Kincaid deploys a diasporic narrative to re-consider the atrocious British colonial ideology, on the one hand, and to level against the first world woman discourse, on the other. Set in 1969, the novel manifests how the Mariah's first woman discourse places the heroine in the dilemma of assimilation and resistance; nevertheless, it confirms Lucy's politics of location. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's insight into colonialism—particularly his analysis of atrocious colonialism in erasing the subjectivity of the colonized—this paper, first of all, argues that Mariah's white woman discourse is thinly disguised colonialism which distorts Lucy's conception with her whiteness. Moreover, this paper employs contemporary discourses on the politics of differences to argue that: first, Lucy's identity is constructed around the coercive colonial ideology apparatus—the atrocity

of which causes tremendous trauma—and is meanwhile predicated on the difference between her and Mariah. Secondly, Mariah’s hospitality and generosity dissipating the difference of black women should be perceived as an alternative “gaze of the colonizer.” Thirdly, Lucy’s divergent identity cannot be totalized by any essentialism and her becomingness deconstructs any essentialist understanding of cultural identity. As an immigrant who is from Antigua, Lucy’s ethnicity offers her a lens to counteract Mariah’s generosity and hospitality narcissistic and to detach herself from Mariah’s white universalism. In conclusion, the dialectics of Lucy and Mariah embedded in his novel bespeaks well the contingency of self-reflection on cultural identity. Thus, this paper will assert that Kincaid’s Lucy epitomizes the black diaspora’s “politics of location.”

Keywords

Jamaica Kincaid, Diasporic Narrative, Politics of Differences, Colonialism, De-terrorization, Politics of Location

1. Introduction

In *Lucy* (1990), not only does Jamaica Kincaid explore the atrocity and coerciveness of British colonialism but she also examines the first woman discourse in the context of immigration. Lucy migrates to the United States in 1969 and works as an au pair. Her employer, Mariah, a naïve and ignorant white woman, tends to neglect Lucy is from Antigua where she confronts the negative forces of colonial legacies. Given that she tries to incorporate Lucy into her white logic with unconditional hospitality and generosity, Mariah’s first world woman discourse is narcissistic, the logic of which tends to ignore there exists a historical gulf between her and Lucy. Indeed, Mariah’s discourse smacks of assimilation and essentialism yet Lucy’s inscrutable subjectivity vindicates the dialogue with Mariah in evaluating her discourse.

Drawing on Frantz Fanon's insightful critique of colonialism—particularly his analysis of the atrocious forces of colonialism in erasing the subjectivity of the colonized—this paper, first of all, argues that thinly disguised colonialism is Mariah's first world woman discourse which seeks to distort Lucy's logic of ethnical difference. Moreover, this paper applies Stuart Hall's and Charles Taylor's theory of politics of differences to argue that: first Lucy's cultural identity is partly constructed around the hideous history; in the same vein, her cultural identity is also predicated on the dynamic relationship between her and Mariah. Secondly, Mariah's hospitality and generosity that dissipate the difference of black women is an alternatively "gaze of the colonizer." Thirdly, Lucy's divergent identity cannot be totalized by any essentialism and her identity has the sharpest edge to undercut Mariah's essentialist understanding of cultural identity. An immigrant who is from Antiqua, Lucy has experienced the coercive colonial legacy, with the advent of which Lucy renders Mariah's generosity and hospitality otherwise narcissistic. In conclusion, what this novel bespeaks well is the contingency of Lucy's self-reflection on her cultural identity. Thus, this paper asserts that Kincaid's *Lucy* epitomizes the black diaspora's "politics of location."

2. Stuart Hall's Notion of Cultural Identity

In terms of Stuart Hall's perspective of cultural identity, cultural identity can be perceived from two senses. The first perceives of cultural identity is "in terms of one, shared, culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common"; in this perspective, culture identity is resonant with the common historical experience and shared culture codes, entailing a notion of 'one people' the "stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning" (Hall 223). Under this way of thinking of cultural identity, Hall, in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" claims that such a

cultural identity converges on a 'oneness' as underlying "all the other superficial differences" which is encapsulated in the truth and essence of Caribbeaness of the black experience (223). This identity construction is "at the centre of the vision of the poets of 'Negritude', like Aimee Cesaire and Leopold Senghor, and of the Pan-African political project" (223), a shared identity that "continues to be very powerful and creative forces in emergent forms of representation amongst hitherto marginalized peoples" (223). The discovery of this identity, in the post-colonial society, echoes the object of what Frantz Fanon once called a

[p]assionate research . . . directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others. (223)

The other way of thinking cultural identity is "doubleness." This second position represents that not only does there stand "many points of similarity" but also there exists "critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute "what we really are' or rather—since history has intervened—what we have become" (225). It should be acknowledged that

[w]e cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side—the **rupture and discontinuities** which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness'.

(225, emphasis mine)

In this second sense, Hall asserts that cultural identity is "a matter of 'being' as well as 'becoming'" which belongs to "the future as much as to the past" (225). It comes from somewhere, possesses histories, but undergoes "constant transformation" (225). Far from being "eternally fixed" in some essentialized past and far from being "grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity," cultural identity is the "continuous 'play' of history, culture,

and power, and is “the names which we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (225). Cultural identity, in this perspective, is not “once-and-for-all,” is not a “fixed essence lying unchanged outside history and culture,” and is “not some universal and transcendental spirit.” Moreover, it is “not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (226). Hall claims that cultural identities are framed by two axes or vectors: the vector of similarity and continuity; the vector of difference and rupture.

Crucially, this second vector of “difference and rupture persists in and alongside continuity” (227):

We belong to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the ‘Other’. We are at the outer edge, the ‘rim’, of the metropolitan world. . . . At the same time, we do not stand in the same relation. . . . And this ‘difference’, whether we like it or not, is already inscribed in our cultural identities. In turn, it is this negotiation of identity which makes us vis-à-vis other Latin American people, with a very similar history, different. . . .
(228)

This second sense of difference, de facto, challenges “the binaries which stabilize meaning and representation and show how meaning is never finished or completed” (229). As aforementioned, this identity is the matter of “becoming,” one that bespeaks the politics of differences. Furthermore, Hall holds that this new understanding of ethnicity as becomingness resists and replaces some archival discourses, such as nationalism. Due to the becomingness of cultural identity, Lucy, who has close personal contact with Mariah, exposes Mariah’s colonialist unconscious by activating the dialectics of the politics of difference and examining the relationship between her and Mariah.

3. Waking/Surviving in the New World

For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some people will argue that the situation has a double meaning. Not at all. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. . . . Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own. (Fanon 90)¹

In *Black Skin, White Mask*, Fanon embarks on the man of color's human condition. Under the "weltanschauung" of colonization, there exists "an impurity or a flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation" (89-90). This "an impurity or a flaw" is so called the "white gaze" under which the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his "body schema." Not only is the image of the man of color's body solely "negating" (90) but also the colonized is perceived as the other in the white society in which his being or culture is devalued and effaced. A man of color tends to become the "third person" who doesn't have the right to voice his own voice. Moreover, Fanon substantiates his argument by saying that "[t]he white man wants the world, he wants it for himself" and he discovers he is "the predestined master of the world and enslaves it" (107), underscoring that white people dominates the man of color and perceive them as their property. Under this condition, the white becomes the subject of speech, and the man of color the object.

The relation between black people and white people mentioned by Fanon resonates with the situation of Lucy's. When Lucy initially comes to America, she longs to introduce Lucy to the garden of daffodils. However benign her intention is, she doesn't notice Lucy's rejecting gesture:

Have you ever seen daffodils pushing their way up out of the ground? And when they're in bloom and all massed together, a breeze comes along and makes them do a curtsy to

¹ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Mask*. Trans. Richard Philcox. Grove Press, 1952.

the lawn stretching out in front of them. Have you ever seen that? When I see that, I feel so glad to be alive.” And I thought, So Mariah is made to feel alive by some flowers bending in the breeze. How does a person get to be that way? (16)

This quotation to some extent reveals the unconscious malignancy as embedded in British ideology state apparatus that exerts its colonialist ideology upon Lucy. As highlighted in Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, colonialism, de facto, is the cruel and inhuman ideology state apparatus which, Fanon observes, “is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content, *by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it*” (210, emphasis, added). For Lucy who is forced to recite William Wordsworth’s poem, this “perverted logic” distorts her conception of daffodils and throws her life off balance:

The night after I had recited the poem, I dreamt, continuously it seemed, that I was being chased down a narrow cobbled street by bunches and bunches of those same daffodils that I had vowed to forget, and when finally I fell down from exhaustion they all piled on top of me, until I was buried deep underneath them and was never seen again. (17)

What aforementioned passage also manifests is Mariah’s “profound naiveté, simplistic world view, complacent ethnocentrism” (Francois 81). As for Lucy’s grounding—the third world woman, who has suffered the aftermath of British colonialism, this position proffers her another perspective to scrutinize Mariah’s discursive practices. During her trip to Mariah’s house in the great lake with Mariah and her children, Lucy spots that

the other people sitting down to eat dinner all looked Mariah’s relatives; the people waiting on them all looked like mine. The people who looked like my relatives were all older men and very dignified, as if they were just emerging from a church after Sunday service. On closer observation, they were not all like my relatives; they only looked

them. My relatives always gave back chat. Mariah did not seem to notice what she had in common with the other diners, or what I had in common with the waiters. (33)

This is the first time when Lucy is sensitive to the cultural difference between her and Mariah. For Lucy, she is akin to the people, “older and very dignified,” who look like her relatives. On the contrary, Mariah doesn’t sense the contradiction of Lucy’s statement and isn’t aware the scenario Lucy describes. Indeed, Mariah takes “her privileged position of class and race as the norm” (Francois 87). In terms of this passage, Mariah immerses herself in the colonial discursive practices, further unconsciously educating and enlightening Lucy. In Lucy’s initial encounter with Mariah, Mariah makes fun of Lucy, jesting that she speaks and walks like “a nun.” This eccentricity “makes her feel at once sick to her stomach and sick with pity just to look at” (11). Furthermore, Mariah is outraged that Lucy befriends with Peggy, who smokes cigarettes, uses slang, wears very tight jeans, and doesn’t comb her hair properly and so on. Further to inculcate Lucy with western value, Mariah takes Lucy to the museum to see some paintings portrayed by a French man. As examples aforementioned, Mariah, no doubt, positions herself as the culture critic who strikes to impose her cultural characteristics and essence upon those people from the periphery. In a way, she pontificates her own culture, thereby enacting the Manichean logic of binary opposition.² Regardless, in order to let Lucy accept her discourse, she registers that she has “the Indian blood.” “By declaring herself part Indian (read: primitive—“good at catching fish and hunting birds and roasting corn”), in Nichols’ words, Mariah can absorb Lucy’s difference into herself, washing it away by making it part of her authenticity as a native inhabitant, not an immigrant” (Nichols 203).

Assimilation is the threat hidden behind Mariah’s statement, which is also displayed in her further dialogue with Lucy. After Lucy’ father’s decease, she and Mariah sit in the kitchen “one night, very late” (128). They chat about her situation with Paul; Mariah suddenly states

² JanMohamed R. Abdul. “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature. *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no.1, 1985, 59-87.

that “Why don’t you forgive your mother for whatever it is you feel she has done. This statement harkens Lucy back to her childhood, further enraging her. As for Lucy, she has been raised under “Victorian colonial rule within a social context” (François 91). In good intention, Mariah tries to comfort Lucy after learning her background; however, her words of comfort seem to still place Lucy “within an intellectual and homogenous cultural paradigm—a discourse within the protagonist categorically refuses to accept” (François 85):

she spoke of women in society, women in history, women in culture, women everywhere. But I couldn’t speak, so I couldn’t tell her that my mother was my mother and that society and history and culture and other women in general were something else together. (*Lucy* 131-2)

Furthermore, Mariah offers Lucy the book with the opening sentence—“Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, and ovary”—but this action shows Mariah’s intentional fallacy and misinterpretation. Undeniable it is that Mariah and Lucy are women; however one is white, middle-class and well-educated, the other has been raised strictly under colonial legacy embedded within a social context in which there was much cultural violence directed toward women based on popular attitudes toward “their sexuality and their bodies” (François 93). Murdoch holds that

West Indian men enjoy much greater social and sexual freedom than do West Indian women. They are the focus of society’s power relationships and occupy, in general, positions within it which inculcate concomitant attitudes of social and psychological authority. They maintain sometimes numerous and contemporaneous extra-familial sexual relationships, a luxury that women certainly are not afforded by them. . . . West Indian men, in other words, are allowed by society to indulge in libidinal pleasures; tacit recognition is given to their overwhelming dominant role in all social relationships. (328)

Moreover, Bush observes the Afro-Caribbean family still follows the patterns of the “slave family life” and thereby exhibits the vagaries of the post-emancipation Caribbean agrarian system:

Since emancipation changes in the economic and social infrastructure of West Indian societies have occurred which have had important ramifications on the black family structure. For, the de-emphasis of the father role amongst some segments of society, which has often been cited in support of matrifocal theories of black family organization rather than being a direct result of the weakening of the father role during the days of slavery, is far more plausibly the result of the migrant labour systems which developed after slavery ended. (84-85)

Citations aforementioned depict the imbroglio in which men possess the dominant social position; in contrast, women in colonial context are severely restricted from in gaining the opportunity for social mobility. Indeed, Lucy has been victimized and traumatized by this onerous ideology from both her father and mother who are, de facto, entrenched within this logic. Lucy, in hearing Mariah’s comment, indignantly states that:

My life could not really be explained by this thick book that made my hands hurt as I tried to keep it open. My life was at once something simpler and more complicated than that: for ten of my twenty years, half of my life, I had been mourning the end of a love affair, perhaps the only true love in my whole life I would ever know. (132)

Repeatedly, Mariah investigates Lucy’s condition without the awareness of Lucy’s difference and further attempts to interrogate Lucy into the white logic. However affectionate Mariah is, her intention is imbued with threats—marring others’ differences or evoking Lucy the “debilitating legacy of Plantation system on the mind, body and the memory” of the colonized (François 79).³

³ The condition of Women in West Indies and the West Indian Patriarchal mores are explicitly articulated in Edith Clarke. *My mother who Fathered Me*. London: Allen, 1972. and Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks.

Lucy's awkward position prompts her to think Mariah's discourse otherwise. "Not only does Lucy choose to remain outside the institutions that betoken her," Nichols holds, "but she also makes the space she occupies into a field chiefly characterized by its mutability; margins, generally defined only in opposition to the center, becomes spaces to be imagined outside that binary." (204) Furthermore, Lucy detaches herself from Mariah and contemplates Mariah's discourses and actions. Resonating with Alison Bailey's argument that the "[o]utsider within are [sic] thought to have an advantageous epistemic viewpoint that offers a more complete account of the world than insider or outsider perspectives alone" (qt. in Baile, 193), Lucy repeatedly rejects Mariah's naïve and narcissistic generosity and hospitality; on the hand, because of the marginality she possesses, and revalues the two cultures in juxtaposition. Moreover, Lucy and Mariah are in racial difference with which, to a certain degree, Lucy is a resisting reader who exposes that Mariah's colonialist ideology will gnaw her subjectivity. As Charles Taylor registers insightfully in "The Politics of Recognition," the development of the modern notion of identity has led to a politics of difference which "grows organically out of the politics of universal dignity through one of those shifts with which we are long familiar, where a new understanding of the human social condition imparts a radically new meaning to an old principle" (38-39). Furthermore this politics of difference, de facto, deconstructs the original concept—the politics of universal dignity:

with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness [which] has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. . . . In the case of the politics of difference, we might also say that a universal potential is at its basis, namely, the potential for forming and defining one's own identity, as an individual, and also a culture. (38-42)

'African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race.' *Signs* 17.2 (1992), 251-274.

The “universal potential” lies in “the struggle for freedom” and equality must therefore pass through a revision of these images” (66). Indeed, the minority tend to be entrenched in the hegemonic discourse of colonist ideology, with the majority inculcating the idea of into minds of their inferiority. The politics of difference proffers the minority the chance to value who they are, that is to say, recognizing the distinctness of the minority that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity (38). Under this condition, not only does Lucy have the potential to define and form her own specific identity, but she also vindicates the exigency of contrapuntally reading the difference between her culture and Mariah’s.

As to being an outsider from Antiqua, Lucy’s situation offers her an advantageous viewpoint than that of Mariah who, out of her ignorance, totalizes the difference of the other, thereby causing violence and danger. Likewise, she silences Mariah with her “condescending scorn, not only for her [Mariah’s] lack of awareness of social and racial inequalities but also for her employer’s attempt to intellectualize and universalize women’s experiences in a homogenous paradigm” (François 79).

4. The Aesthetics of Survival

Every scene or situation in the new country necessarily draws on its counterpart in the old country. Intellectually this means that an idea or experience is always counterposed with another, therefore making them both appear in a sometimes new and unpredictable light: from that juxtaposition one gets a better, perhaps even more universal idea of how to think. . . (Said 60)⁴

A diaspora, Lucy’s identity which “is tangled up in issues of race, class, and nation” (Nichols 200) is divergent from Mariah’s. Mariah tends to impose her value upon Lucy and

⁴ Edward W. Said. *Representations of the Intellectual*.

tries to integrate Lucy into her ideology. For instance, when they visit the house in which Mariah grows up in the great lake, Lucy states that:

 Mariah wanted all of us, the children and me, to see things the way she did. She wanted us to enjoy the house, all its nooks and crannies, all its sweet smells, all its charms, just the way she had done as a child. The children were happy to see things her way (35-36).

Ironically, Lucy doesn't take it as an invitation but a burden and horror:

 But I already had a mother who loved me, and I had come to see her love as a burden and had come to view with horror the sense of self-satisfaction it gave my mother to hear other people comment on her great love for me. I had come to feel that my mother's love for me was designed solely to make me into an echo of her and I didn't know why, but I felt that I would rather be dead than become just an echo of someone. That was not a figure of speech. Those thoughts would have come as a complete surprise to my mother. . . .(36)

Lucy cannot easily accept Mariah's love is not only because of Mariah's self-indulgence but also because of her love which spells out Lucy's unforgettable sufferings in Antiqua. Mariah doesn't realize her blasé attitude reminds Lucy of the hurt the colonialist ideology exerts upon, say, the issue of daffodils revolves around the outset of the novel; the daffodils are signifiers pointing to the violent imposition of colonial ideology that cannot be effaced for good:

 I remembered an old poem I had been made to memorize when I was ten years old and a pupil at Queen Victoria Girls' School. I had been made to memorize it, verse after verse, and then had recited the whole poem to an auditorium full of parents, teachers and my fellow pupils. After I done, everybody stood up and applauded with an enthusiasm that surprised me. . . . And so I made pleasant little noises that showed both modesty and

appreciation, but inside I was making a bow to erase from my mind, line by line every word of that poem. (17-18)

In contrast, Mariah anxiously “awaits the arrival of spring and all the seasonal offerings she will share with Lucy.” The quotation above reveals that there exist different conceptions of daffodils between Lucy and Mariah. As for Mariah, the daffodils in bloom are saturated with “a groove brimming”; however, Lucy refers daffodils as evoking in her mind a “scene of conquered and conquests; a scene of brutes and masquerading as angels portrayed as brutes”. Of course, Lucy comes from an island that Columbus didn’t name and Britain had colonized.

Given the fact that Lucy grew up in a colonial context completely dominated by British Empire, daffodils stand for “the violence of British colonial ideology, its Victorian mores as well as the debilitating of the Plantation system on the mind, body and the memory” (François79).

The citations cited above, revealing the contradiction between Lucy and Mariah, are pivotal. This is because in effect Lucy, in terms of the politics of difference, not only defines relationships between her and the Mariah but also differentiates Mariah’s cultural background and hers. As registered by Edward Said, “[t]he exilic intellectual does not respond to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, and to representing change, to moving on, no standing still” (Said 64). Lucy, the nomadic subject, de-territorialize the authoritatively given status quo—Mariah’s dominant discursive practice, further remapping the contour of her subjectivity imagined by Mariah.⁵ Indeed, the imperialist ideology is the absent presence which subtly dominates the interaction between the hegemony and the subaltern. However, with the advent of the politics of difference, obviously, the minority muscle themselves to

⁵ Ursula K. Heise in her *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* explicitly articulates that “[i]n search that countermodels to such nation-based concepts of identity, a wide range of theorists instead presented identities shaped by hybridity, creolization, mestizaje, migration, borderlands, diaspora, nomadism, exile, and deterritorialization not only as more politically progressive but also as potential grounds for resistance to national hegemonies. The abundance of studies focusing on such forms of identity often emphasized their marginal status in the mainstream culture and polity, an marginality that was viewed as both disabling and potentially empowering, insofar as it provided a view of dominant culture from outside” (5).

continually question or topple the dominant discourse in evasion of internalizing the value accepted by the hegemony. Exactly, Lucy's racially different identity offers her a divergent angle to judge Mariah's discourse which is engulfed with colonial unconscious and to resist Mariah's ignorance and ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, Lucy's rejection is not intended to reject the culture to which Mariah is accustomed, whereas she reevaluates whether the discourse of Mariah's is benign or jeopardizing, thereby revising Mariah first-world discourse.

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