

## A Girl with Kaleidoscope Eyes: Visuality and Resistance of the Colonial Subject in Kincaid's *Lucy*

In a world that shapes and is shaped by the traditional Western literary canon, it takes Kincaid's rendering visible "a teenage girl from the West Indies" through her novel *Lucy* (as her protagonist is described by journalist Richard Eder in the novel's blurb) for many to realize that such a figure has until very recently been, in fact, invisible. Kincaid links a motif of visibility and sight to the colonial subject in order to explore how this invisibility is not determinate, however, but highly complex and dynamic in its relation between colonized and colonizer. Indeed, it appears that Homi Bhabha's theory on colonial discourse and its utilization of the strategy of mimicry as set forth in his essay, 'Of Mimicry and Men: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', is one that is rooted in sight and visibility, whether this is manifested through the "synchronic panoptical vision of domination", or the "displacing gaze of the disciplinary double. (Bhabha, 126)" Yet, mimicry, as a "complex strategy" of at once "reform" and "recalcitrance", is distinctly marked by its ambivalence, a sense of incompleteness that limits its ability to fully either reform or resist as it hovers in both directions (126). Thus, Bhabha's essay helps illuminate Kincaid's suggestion that while visibility and sight may act as a site of resistance for the colonial subject, it can only do so in a limited capacity: While *Lucy* subverts the colonist gaze by adopting that gaze and turning it back onto the colonizer, it is not enough to bring her out of a space of ambivalence in which she is trapped, able to see, but not to penetrate, colonial power.

As alluded to in the introduction, Bhabha's text exploring mimicry and its function in colonial discourse is grounded in a concern with visibility and sight. He speaks of colonial domination in terms of its "vision": it is a "panoptical" force that "appropriates the Other" through its "visualiza[tion]" of "power" (126). The "menace of mimicry" lies, however, in its "double-vision", which "discloses the ambivalence of colonial discourse" and, in so doing, disrupts its authority (129). Mimicry is thus a two-way strategy rooted in visibility, in that just as it is used by the colonial power to "reform, regulate, and discipline," the colonial subject threatens the effect of this end and the resulting knowledges that arise from it by revealing its very ambiguity, or rather, "ambivalence" through its observation (126, 127). Through "the displacing gaze" of the "disciplinary double", the "reforming, civilizing mission is threatened" as this "gaze of otherness, that shares the genealogical gaze [...] liberates the marginal elements and shatters the unity of man's being through which he extends his sovereignty. (129)" In turning the colonizer's gaze in on itself, the gaze of the colonized subject, disturbs its unity through its very exposure, with the effect of

limiting its authority. Yet, this is only a partial reversal: “[...] [colonial] desire reverses ‘in part’ the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence. (131)” This emphasis on partiality, on an incompleteness, highlights the limitation of the ambivalence of mimicry on either side, as its double-vision allows for the vulnerability of both colonial and colonized authorities through their potential to be at once appropriate and “inappropriate” (126). In fact, it is in the ambivalent “visibility” of mimicry that the crucial representational difference lies: “Almost the same but not quite/white”, a fracture of the kind of unity desired by the colonizer – the unity of his power – and a fracture of the kind of unity desired by the colonized – the unity of acceptance. In *Lucy*, Kincaid adopts the motifs of visuality and sight, too, in order to explore whether the colonized subject’s relation to power has the potential to resist through a disturbance of visual dynamics.

One of the primary ways in which visuality manifests itself is through the hegemonic presence of the color yellow in the text, that serve as a metaphor for whiteness: yellow flowers, yellow houses, yellow hair, and yellow roads are streaked like gold paint across the narrative. Lucy narrates, “The yellow light from the sun came in through a window and fell on the pale-yellow linoleum tiles of the floor, and on the walls of the kitchen, which were painted yet another shade of pale yellow, and Mariah with her pale-yellow skin and yellow hair, stood still in this almost celestial light, and she looked blessed, no blemish or mark of any kind on her cheek or anywhere else. (Kincaid, 27)” Kincaid substitutes white for yellow as she paints Mariah as having “pale-yellow skin”. The image of Mariah that is consequently conjured is of Apollo’s daughter, a goddess, or a prized golden statuette, highlighting that white skin possesses the status of the gold standard. It also reveals Lucy’s observation of this association, and, in a way that is perhaps not evident to Lucy herself at this point, the extent to which Lucy covets this skin and the status it affords. Soon after her arrival, Lucy tells Mariah and Lewis about a dream she had about the three of them, in which “the ground on which [she] was running was yellow, as if it had been paved with cornmeal. (13)” This striking image of a yellow road immediately recalls the famous yellow brick road of the Wizard of Oz: the gold standard, a pathway to success and happiness. It is almost as if this image and this color have invaded Lucy’s dream, however, suggesting a subconscious internalization of an association of whiteness to success and happiness. While Lucy observes the dominance of this color and the halo of prosperity that it is accompanied by, as her narration reveals, it is evident that she may not be immune to their absorption and internalization, such that the threat to authority her observation potentially reveals is not even immediately apparent to herself.

However, just as Dorothy comes to realize that the promise of Oz's yellow brick road is ultimately misleading, so, too, does Lucy. Not only does the color yellow, which we may now understand as a metaphor for whiteness, have a hegemonic presence in the text, but that position is tethered to the "synchronic, panoptical" gaze of the colonial power, highlighting how visions is built into the power of whiteness and colonial oppression. The image of daffodils are not merely a reference to Wordsworth's poem, a classic of the Western literary canon and so an example of the attempts of colonial power to mold the 'Other' in its image, but it is also, of course, yellow – and what is particularly significant is how Mariah introduces Lucy to this image: "[Mariah] covered my eyes with a handkerchief, and then, holding me by the hand, she walked me to a spot in the clearing. Then she removed the handkerchief and said, 'Now, look at this look at this.' I looked. (28)" Using her handkerchief, Mariah restricts Lucy's very ability to see – a visual castration of the colonial subject. That she takes Lucy's hand after doing so serves as a larger metaphor for the colonial power's stripping of the subject's sight in order to facilitate their infantilization, placing them in a position where they must be led by another, that is, the paternal colonial power whose innocent goal – reflected by Mariah's own well-meaning innocence – is to civilize. Mariah quite literally guides Lucy's gaze as she uses her authority to instruct her to look at the daffodils, the idea of which was in turn participative in Lucy's indoctrination of Western culture. Lucy is trapped between Mariah and the daffodils, and that she is forced to see through Mariah's gaze, and not hers, suggests that she is in fact a participant in her own castration.

Lucy resists this visual castration, however, and attempts to reassert her gaze back into the narrative by manipulating the "double-vision" inherent to colonial discourse (Bhabha, 129). She confronts, "Mariah, do you realize that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen?" and then writes, "As soon as I had said this, I felt sorry that I had cast her beloved daffodils in a scene she had never considered, a scene of conquered and conquests; a scene of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes. (Kincaid, 30)" The verb "cast", with its connotations of representation and reproduction, highlight Lucy's almost authorial ability to reframe narratives surrounding the image of daffodils, while her use of oppositional syntax to describe conquests, brutes, and angels – classic orientalist archetypes – "reverses colonial appropriation" (Bhabha, 129). Such archetypes, combined with her references to casting and "scenes" build to create a language of theatricality and performance, underlining the existence of a schism between the appearance of the daffodils, versus their reality. The daffodils, extracted from the cultural paraphernalia imposed upon them by Mariah, appear "simple, as if made to erase a complicated and unnecessary idea" in Lucy eyes, and indeed, it is

through Lucy's gaze that readers now see and define the meaning of the image of daffodils (Kincaid, 29). Mariah's gaze and therefore authority has been effectively "displaced" (Bhabha, 130). "[Mariah's] eyes sank back in her head as if they were protecting themselves, as if they were taking a rest after some unexpected hard work,". Kincaid uniquely implies a new facet of the white (wo)man's burden – that of constantly shouldering a "synchronic, panoptical vision" (Kincaid, 30) (Bhabha, 127). Yet, Lucy shatters this "unity" – "where she saw beautiful flowers, I saw sorrow and bitterness" – and thus Mariah's "sovereignty" (Kincaid, 30) (Bhabha, 129), cementing Lucy's reversal of the colonial power dynamic in her favor.

However, the consequent bending of Mariah's "sovereignty" is fleeting and diminished by the "partiality" stressed by Bhabha. Lucy's gaze is as apologetic as it is radical, undermining any authority she is able to grasp as she regulates herself from stepping out of line – "As soon as I had said this, I felt sorry". Moreover, her small triumph arises out of a kind of crisis of sight, or signification, in that her life is built upon objects she "would not see in real life" unless she visited the home of these objects in the West. As she says elsewhere in the novel, "I came from a place where there is no such thing as a 'real' thing, because often what seemed to be one thing turned out to be altogether different", alluding again to the schism between appearance and reality, but highlighting in particular that her life was built within this liminal schism (54). Thus, here is another fracture of unity, that of Lucy's identity, which tempers the powers of her gaze, and underlines the ambivalent dynamic between the gazes of both her and Mariah.

Nevertheless, by converting her field of study from nursing to photography, Lucy makes a decisive choice that signifies a critical turning point in the text's narrative as she establishes a claim over a forceful and continuous "gaze of otherness", or counter-gaze. Now, it is Lucy's newfound interest, photography, that asserts an omnipresence in the narrative, eroding and substituting the hegemony of the color yellow of the initial chapters; Lucy now sees past the yellow, recognizing it as a façade. Lucy "follow[s], carrying [her] camera, which [she] now [takes] with [her] everywhere" (118). When she witnesses a moment of private weakness, of failure, between Lewis and Mariah ("the end was here"), "[she] said, 'Say 'cheese'' and took a picture. Lewis said, 'Jesus Christ', and he left [their] company in anger. (118)" Lewis' reaction signifies the effectiveness of Lucy's gaze to displace and create a threatening "intensification of surveillance" as Bhabha writes (126). Moreover, while Bhabha notes the intention of English missionary schools to breed colonial subjects for employment in departments of "Labour", Lucy's adoption of photography highlights her rejection of this colonial path (Bhabha, 128). Separate from this rejection, too, indulging in photography is perhaps the first, concrete assertion of her identity, as she takes it up "not with any ideas about [her]

life in mind,” but “only because [she] enjoyed doing this. (Kincaid, 160)” In this way, by the end of the novel, armed with her vision, Lucy denies and transcends the superficial, restrictive yellow brick road as she now recognizes it to be.

Yet, there is a distinct sense of frustration and limitation in Lucy’s photographic execution, highlighting once more, the ambivalence that pervades the effectiveness of her gaze as, despite her reclamation of vision, her gaze fails to help her see even her own self. To illuminate this, we need only to compare Lucy to Paul and the standard of his white, male colonial gaze. Paul is “a painter,” and his paintings are “of people, some of them women without their clothes on, some of them just faces. None of [his] paintings [were] straightforward; instead, the people all look like the reflections in a pool whose surface had just been disturbed. (97)” Paul paintings reveal the power of his gaze to objectify and fetishize, and that the people he paints are “reflections” also implies that he has molded their representations in the fashion of his own self, his own identity. Meanwhile, the subjects of Lucy’s photographs, are limited to domestic scenes – Mariah, the children – and do not even include “photographs of Lewis and photographs of [her]self.” Both the primary purveyor of colonial power, the white, male figure, and her own identity go beyond the bounds of her representation, her gaze (97, 120). Indeed, as she lies on her bed looking up at these photos, she reflects that she “is in a state of no state”, alluding again to the ultimate liminality, the insubstantial quality, of her identity, and thus, the authority of her sight, despite her embrace of photography (121).

Moreover, Paul’s careful effort to mix “colors” encapsulates Bhabha’s crucial articulation of distinctly visual slippage of mimicry, “almost the same but not quite”, insinuating that though it is a two-way ambivalence that is embedded in colonial discourse, most of the time, this ambivalence is insufficient in piercing the otherwise privileged white, male, colonial gaze. The colors in Paul’s paintings are “strange – not the colors any real person would be, but as if all the deep shades from a paintbox had been carefully mixed together in a way that still left them distinct. (Kincaid, 97)” Lucy’s photographs are, meanwhile, limited to “black and white”, revealing that, despite her possession of a gaze, her gaze is not equal to Paul’s, neither in terms of power, freedom, nor impact. Indeed, as a painter, the world is at Paul’s feet both to interpret and to disseminate his interpretations upon, while Lucy’s attempts to transition from documentary-style photography to printmaking as “unsuccessful” highlight her distinct lack of ability to place her mark upon the world (160). Thus, not only is the scope of Lucy’s gaze sorely limited in comparison to Paul’s, but the very mark of her gaze goes unseen. Looking down through her window, she says, “everything I could see made me feel I would never be part of it, never penetrate to the inside, never be taken in. (154)” The possession and

assertion of the gaze of her gaze as a colonial subject is almost enough, but not quite. While Lucy's gaze may have the power to displace, to resist, the overall worth of this power is questionable, as it appears insufficient in its ability to penetrate the ambivalence of mimicry to the extent that its force decisively and consequentially reverses the direction of the dynamic between colonial subject and colonial power against the latter.

In conclusion, Kincaid uses the motif of visibility and sight through specific, color-based imagery as well as the notion of the gaze and the various media through which that gaze is asserted in order to explore and expose the conflicting, dynamic relation between the colonial subject and the colonial power. Through the hegemonic presence of yellow and Lucy's initial awe of the whiteness and superiority that it symbolizes, Kincaid highlights the ability of the colonial power to shape the vision and desire of the colonial subject in such a way that the subject is also forced to participate in her own visual castration. Kincaid underlines, too, however, that this is not a power that is uninterrupted; in fact, it is the very disruption of unity, and therefore, a sense of sovereignty, that Lucy achieves through her manipulation of the double-vision inherent to colonial discourse. Nevertheless, while Lucy cements her reversal of the appropriative colonial gaze as signified by her adoption of photography, the power of this counter-gaze is not enough to bridge the crisis of Lucy's identity caused partly by its foundation upon the intangible objects of Western civilization, nor to pierce through the shield of privilege surrounding the gaze of the colonial power. For, while both colonial power and colonial subject may turn the ambivalence of the colonial discourse into a weapon against its opponent, the colonial power has at its disposal a much greater arsenal of weapons in addition.

*"It was hollow, my triumph, I could feel that, but I held on to it just the same."*

– Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy*

Works Cited

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