Literary Identification from Charlotte Bronte to Tsitsi Dangarembga

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In the narratives discussed in the previous chapter, relations of identification between protagonist and counterpart serve as templates for thinking about the obligations of the self to others. The protagonist may not succeed, by the narrative’s end, wholly in meeting those obligations, but the narrative trajectory suggests that she will continue to strive to do so, and that perhaps—as in the case of the sequels to Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter and Nervous Conditions—she will grow to understand the relationship between self and other in broader, more public and political contexts. The plots of Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter and Nervous Conditions do not come to closure; their young protagonists, though they have already begun to experience loss and moral conflict, continue to look forward. The Mill on the Floss, concluding with a more conventional Victorian accounting of deaths and marriages, brings Maggie’s story to a bleaker end, and offers no sequel; but the narrative still (as Beauvoir’s reading of it suggests) allows for a more hopeful readerly identification beyond its beleaguered protagonist, with the voice of the narrator, who appears to possess the backward-looking wisdom that Maggie would have gained had she lived.

Optimism about the self’s capacity for autonomy and growth is a well-attested convention of novels of formation, and Brontë, Kincaid, and Dangarembga all wrote novels that display that optimism: Brontë’s Jane Eyre; Kincaid’s Annie John; Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions. Each of these novels was the author’s first to be published and each has attracted wide
readership, representation on syllabi, and significant critical attention, particularly from feminist scholars. In each case, however, a subsequent novel—Brontë’s *Villette*, Kincaid’s *Lucy*, and Dangarembga’s *Book of Not*—retells or continues the narrative of formation in a way that, while it retains a connection to the structure of the novel of formation, clouds the optimism of the earlier effort and in particular expresses great skepticism about the productive possibilities of identification. *The Book of Not* is straightforwardly a sequel to *Nervous Conditions*, continuing Tambudzai’s story from the point at which the earlier novel concluded and pursuing the development of the same characters as the earlier novel. Despite a difference in protagonist’s name and destination between Kincaid’s *Annie John* and her *Lucy* (at the conclusion of the first book, Annie is about depart for England; at the beginning of *Lucy*, the protagonist arrives in the United States), Lucy’s past experiences and present trajectory seem continuous with Annie John’s. *Villette* is not a sequel to *Jane Eyre*, but it reimagines the orphan’s tale of the first novel through a different, and less enchanted, set of experiences. Inhabiting different temporal, geographical, and political circumstances, and facing different levels of immediate domination and danger, the protagonists of *Villette*, *Lucy*, and *The Book of Not* nevertheless share the traumatic situation of marginalized subjects whose claims to personhood are not recognized or are rejected by dominant subjects. Rather, their historical situations of social subordination, produced by varying combinations of gendered, socioeconomic, and racial domination, demand of them that they not only function as but fully identify with the role of the *other*—that which is disavowed and abjected by dominant subjects who occupy the position of “self.”

The protagonists in this chapter, Brontë’s Lucy Snowe, Kincaid’s Lucy Potter, and Dangarembga’s Tambu Sigauke, seem to stand alone amid hostile others—the school-world, in the case of Lucy Snowe and Tambu; a white, urban elite, in the case of Lucy Potter. At points, however, their narratives are shadowed by a kind of negative inversion of the protagonist/counterpart relation; rather than a singular counterpart, they face a series of female antagonists, other women who embody the social denial of recognition, and thus of selfhood. Recognition by the other as foundational to the self is central to many psychoanalytic paradigms. “The basic relational configurations [in psychoanalytic theory],” Stephen Mitchell writes, “have, by definition, three dimensions—the self, the other, and the space between the two. There is no ‘object’ in a psychologically meaningful sense without some particular sense of oneself in relation to it” (33). For many psychoanalytic theorists, the earliest form of recognition
is offered by a caregiver who reflects the subject back to him- or herself, thus consolidating a sense of self. Psychoanalytic theorists of childhood development who may otherwise differ in emphasis use similar vocabularies of reflection to capture this foundational moment. Melanie Klein, for example, suggests that “One element in [a successful] maternal attitude seems to be that the mother is capable of putting herself in the child’s place and of looking at the situation from his point of view” (318). This ability is both the product of, and will in turn produce, a “capacity for identification with another person [that] is a most important element in human relationships in general, and is also a condition for real and strong feelings of love. . . . Ultimately, in making sacrifices for somebody we love and in identifying ourselves with the loved person, we play the part of a good parent, and behave towards this person as we felt at times the parents did to us—or as we wanted them to do” (311–12). Similarly, in his conception of the “good-enough mother,” D. W. Winnicott (who trained with Klein) considers that “a key aspect of her role is reflecting back to the child his own appearance, his own being. The capacity to experience and to hold a sense of one’s own being as real depends on the mother’s doing so first, mirroring back to the child who he is and what he is like” (Mitchell 32). Often, of course, this ideal mirroring situation fails (perhaps to be recreated and recuperated later through psychoanalytic intervention), but in these constructions the first encounter with the other is fundamentally self-consolidating.

The most literal—and less reassuring—formulation of the self as consolidated in reflection by the other is, famously, that of Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage,” in which the mother is not directly “reflecting back to the child his own appearance” (that is, in her own gaze and by her own facial expressions) but enabling his self-reflection: “The striking spectacle of a nursling in front of a mirror who has not yet mastered walking or even standing, but who—though held tightly by some prop, human or artificial . . . overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the constraints of his prop in order to adopt a slightly leaning-forward position and take in an instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it in his mind” (“Mirror Stage” 4). “In Lacan’s view,” remarks Shuli Barzilai, “the mirror is the mother of the ego. But the mother is not in the mirror” (88).1 Rather than grounding the subject’s sense of self in an exchange of gazes with a caring other, Lacan’s formulation suggests that the self will always be other, an unattainable fantasy of coherence and efficacy whose outcome is an alienated and defensive subjectivity, “a knot of imaginary servitude [to the ideal self-image] that love must always untie anew or sever” (“Mirror Stage” 9).
Lacan elliptically acknowledges that “love” alone will not suffice to “untie a knot” whose determinations are social as well as individual: “For such a task,” he admits, “we can find no promise in altruistic feelings, we who lay bare the aggressiveness that underlies the activities of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer” (“Mirror Stage” 9). The novels discussed in this chapter also “lay bare” the aggressiveness of even apparently philanthropic others, revealing the ways in which socially marginalized female subjects experience a more-than-imaginary if not quite literal “servitude” to a continually enforced reflection of themselves as alienated and abject others.

Of the novels discussed in this chapter, none makes the condition of alienated mirroring more literal than *Villette*. Here, for example, Lucy describes her conscription by the flirtatious, demanding Ginevra Fanshawe to compare their reflections before an evening party at Madame Beck’s pensionnat:

Putting her arm through mine, [Ginevra] drew me to the mirror. Without resistance, remonstrance, or remark, I stood and let her self-love have its feast and triumph: curious to see how much it could swallow . . . whether any whisper of consideration for others could penetrate her heart, and moderate its vain-glorious exultation.

Not at all. She turned me and herself round . . . and finally, letting go my arm, and curtseying with mock respect, she said:

“I would not be you for a kingdom.” (Brontë, *Villette* 179)

Ginevra’s “self-love” is fed by the comparison; Lucy’s self is negated. The many points of difference that Ginevra goes on to list between the two young women emphasize Lucy’s purely negative material and social condition as a subject: Lucy is “nobody’s daughter” with “no relations,” she “can’t call herself young” and has “no attractive accomplishments—no beauty,” and “no living heart will [she] ever break” (179–80; my emphasis). Lucy has, indeed, no positive counterclaim to make but resists Ginevra’s negations through her own negation—silence—suffering the comparison “without resistance, remonstrance, or remark.” It is perhaps not surprising that later in the novel, Lucy momentarily fails to recognize her own reflection (in the unfamiliar context of a concert-hall), and when she does, feels “a jar of discord, a pang of regret” (262). Lucy’s experience of mirrors makes literal the tremendous social pressure on each of this chapter’s protagonists toward occupying, vis-à-vis dominant forms of subjectivity, an abjected state of the not-self, the self defined by its lack or
absence. In the novel of formation, the protagonist usually occupies the role of the self to whom others exist in relation. Dangarembga’s title—*The Book of Not*—sums up the contrary experience of each of these protagonists.

What makes this a problem of psychological alienation as well as social oppression is the extent to which the protagonists internalize these negations and come to view *themselves* as abject others, skeptical of aid or love from other people, at various moments paranoid, angry, and self-doubting. Klein describes the vicious circle produced by this psychological position: “At the bottom our strongest hatred, however, is directed against the hatred [i.e., of our own parents for their perceived failures] within ourselves. We so much dread the hatred in ourselves that we are driven to employ one of our strongest measures of defence by putting it on to other people—to project it. . . . Hatred, as we have seen, leads to our establishing frightening figures in our minds, and then we are apt to endow other people with unpleasant and malevolent qualities. Incidentally, such an attitude of mind has an actual effect in making other people unpleasant and suspicious toward us” (340). Elsewhere, Klein names this “attitude of mind” “projective identification.” Projective identification, in Eve Sedgwick’s summary, “is related to Freudian projection but more uncannily intrusive: for Freud, when I’ve projected my hostility onto you, I believe that you dislike me; for Klein, additionally, when I’ve projected my hostility into you, you will dislike me” (“Melanie Klein” 636). Indeed, the “uncanny,” in the Freudian sense of inappropriately animated bodies or bodily fragments, or of objects out of place, makes striking appearances in all of these texts—in the recurring figure of the ghostly nun in *Villette*; in photographs that Lucy Potter takes that attempt to “reveal to me some of the things I had not seen” (Kincaid, *Lucy* 160).

As Sedgwick observes, “Klein . . . is fearfully attuned to human relations that are driven by the uncontrollable engines of ressentiment” (“Melanie Klein” 636), but in Klein’s writings, affects of hostility as well as love are largely contained within familial, rather than social or political, relations. In *Lucy* and *The Book of Not*, however, the racialized context of colonialism is inextricable from all relations. Frantz Fanon’s extension of Freud in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) responds directly to such a context with a paradigm similar to, but more politically specific than, Klein’s projective identification. “In the Antilles,” he asserts in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “the black schoolboy who is constantly asked to recite ‘our ancestors the Gauls’ identifies himself with the explorer, the civilizing colo-
nizer, the white man who brings truth to the savages, a lily-white truth. The identification process means that the black child subjectively adopts a white man’s attitude”—an attitude of contempt or condescension that makes the black child the other in his own eyes. This psychic identification of the self as abject other (seeing oneself as the object of the “white man’s” gaze) is accompanied by a physical self-dissociation as well: “In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person” (90).

Brontë’s, Kincaid’s, and Dangarembga’s protagonists, as we will see, each encounter, and try to evade, this experience of becoming “an image in the third person.” They find themselves the objects of projective identification by the novel’s other characters, particularly its female characters, for whom they embody the “intolerable parts” of female selves—poverty, loneliness, and powerlessness—within the regime of Victorian domestic ideology and its colonial descendants. In each case, the protagonists respond to this projective identification with their own hostile refusals. Lucy Snowe embraces a scornful isolation rather than accept the roles of discreet spinster, loyal companion, or bluestocking in which others would be smugly quick to place her. Kincaid’s Lucy Potter substitutes the transgressive identity of “slut” for the handmaiden roles—as nurse, au pair, or exotic muse—that others imagine as natural to a young, female, West Indian emigrant. Tambu, younger and more naïve than either Lucy, works hard to transcend her embodied identity, as a black African schoolgirl barely tolerated in a white-run convent school in white-dominated Rhodesian society, by becoming an honor student and developing a mental discipline of unhu, a bearing of personal dignity in response to others. This bearing cannot, however, avert the violence, exploitation, and indifference she experiences. Not surprisingly, loneliness, anger, and despair suffice these novels; and frequently, in addition to representing their characters’ rejection of or lack of opportunity for, identifications, the novels reject or severely qualify readers’ identifications as well.

CHARLOTTE BRONTË

THE POLITICS OF LONELINESS

The negative affects, particularly anger and loneliness, represented within Brontë’s novels have often provoked negative critical responses. Her perceived anger was a basis for Victorian disapproval or dismissal, as in
Elizabeth Rigby’s conclusion that *Jane Eyre* demonstrates the “tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism at home” (174) and Matthew Arnold’s assertion about *Villette* that “the mind of the author contains nothing but hunger, rebellion, and rage” (Allott 201). In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf also notoriously objects to Brontë’s anger, suggesting that a writer such as Brontë will find that “her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly” (72–73). Not only Brontë’s insistent expressions of anger but also her frank portrayal of female loneliness, romantic and implicitly sexual, have aroused critical unease. Like her anger, such representations often seemed unwomanly or overly revealing to Victorian readers. After reading *Villette*, for example, W. M. Thackeray condescendingly speculated that “rather than have fame, rather than any other earthly good or mayhap heavenly one [Brontë] wants some Tomkins or another to love her and be in love with” (Allott 197). After Brontë’s death, Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1853 autobiography attempted to redirect Brontë’s association with loneliness, depicting her not as a thwarted single woman but rather as a brave and blighted domestic angel who maintained a self-sacrificing devotion to her father as she was increasingly isolated by the successive deaths of her siblings. Gaskell transformed Brontë’s image from that of a lonely spinster to that of a Romantic *isolata*; later, twentieth-century feminist criticism transformed that icon, again, into a double-sided emblem of female rebellion. One side depicts self-sufficiency; the other, deprivation. For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for example, Jane Eyre’s is a journey of “astounding progress toward equality” representing an “emblem of hope” (370, 371); the later Lucy Snowe, however, is “from first to last a woman without—outside society, without parents or friends, without physical or mental attractions, without money or confidence or health” (400). This negative depiction has important implications for twentieth-century feminist criticism, since Brontë in this analysis becomes an object of readerly identification, “a powerful precursor for all the women who have been strengthened by the haunted and haunting honesty of her art” (440).

In a later analysis, however, Gilbert suggests that such a recuperation of Brontë’s “haunted and haunting honesty” by 1970s and 1980s literary criticism may have underestimated or undervalued how far she goes in the depiction of the romantic and sexual longing and loneliness, “refus[ing] to acknowledge the rebellious sexual passion” (355) that Jane Eyre expresses. The subtitle of the most recent academic biography of Brontë, by Lyndall Gordon, “A Passionate Life,” similarly captures an emphasis on a desiring
rather than simply enduring Brontë. Gordon's aim is not to deny Brontë's loneliness but to reassert "the strength that turned loss to gain" (4) in both Brontë's intimate relationships and her writing, and portray Brontë as a "fiery survivor" (23) in a social context that distrusted female passion and creativity. Other twentieth- and twenty-first century critics have recuperated Brontë's representations of negative affect for analyses not specifically feminist or focused on gender. John Hughes, for example, calls *Villette* "a great novel of affective estrangement" (711) that "provokes and, as it were, disquietingly reads the reader by implicating him [sic], through his fascinations and insecurities, in an affective drama in which he finds aspects of himself" (714). Christopher Lane argues that Brontë's novels capture an ambivalence at the heart of citizenship, in a "preoccupation with hatred" that exceeds protest against any specific social limitations (such as those of Victorian gender ideology) or any possibility of the protagonist's reconciliation with those limitations (199).

Brontë's representations of anger and loneliness, then, seem by now to have been recuperated as particularly truthful, if not liberatory, in a twentieth- and twenty-first-century context, especially when they can be understood as aggressive or at least assertive—as suggested by critics' use of words like "passionate," "provok[ing]," and "hatred." But if such recuperations honor Brontë's aggression, they also scant her ambivalence about the isolation of which such aggression is sign, cause, and effect. At the center of *Villette*, for example, is Lucy's *cri de coeur*: "Is there nothing more for me in life—no true home—nothing to be dearer to me than myself, and by its paramount preciousness, to draw from me better things than I care to culture for myself only? Nothing, at whose feet I can willingly lay down the whole burden of human egotism, and gloriously take up the nobler charge of labouring and living for others?" (453). These words do not celebrate "affective estrangement" or "hatred"—those affects are real but they are ones that, as *Villette* makes clear, Lucy feels herself to have been *forced* into as a matter of sheer survival. The longing for intimacy and even interdependency—not always synonymous with "rebellious sexual passion"—that coexists with hostility and aggression in *Villette* comprehends, I will argue, not only desire, or romantic intimacy, but also identification, the experience of the self reflected and made legible in the other and the opening of the self to the "others" with whom Brontë identifies the "nobler charge."

In *Villette*, all such intimate relations, including identification, are suffused with and finally foreclosed by the disintegrative operations of a particularly female form of humiliation. As Thackeray's response, for
example, suggests, Brontë’s analysis of the social and emotional forces that prevent intimacy for herself and her protagonists runs the risk of a reduction of the author to the abject status of the single woman or the even more shameful status of an unrequitedly desirous one. Brontë’s letters as well as her fiction make clear that she was all too aware of the shaming aspects, for a Victorian woman, of acknowledging loneliness. She writes to Ellen Nussey while finishing Villette:

My reserve . . . has its foundation not in design, but in necessity—I am silent because I have literally nothing to say. I might indeed repeat over and over again that my life is a pale blank and often a very weary burden—and that the Future sometimes appals me—but what end could be answered by such repetition except to weary you and enervate myself?

The evils that now and then wring a groan from my heart—lie in position [sic]—not that I am a single woman and likely to remain a single woman—but because I am a lonely woman and likely to be lonely.” (Brontë, Selected Letters 25 August 1852)

Defending herself against the accusation of “reserve” that Ellen Nussey has apparently leveled, Brontë re-performs rather than breaches that reserve, by insisting not only that there is “nothing to say” but also that she has already said it—no further revelation is possible. As if anticipating a response from Ellen that would supply, as the unspoken referent of this “nothing,” their shared status as single women, she insists that her difficulties belong to a “position” that refers to a general rather than a particularly matrimonial isolation. For to be “single,” of course—the identity that she rejects—is specifically to be unmarried, a state whose misfortune for women in particular was receiving increased attention in mid-Victorian society.³ The single woman was becoming a species, and as such taking on a socially recognized identity—but she was a species defined almost entirely negatively, as a problem, a surplus, a symptom of personal failure.

The humiliation of being single, and its relation to loneliness, forms a central theme of Shirley, the novel that immediately precedes Villette. Much of the novel is devoted to Caroline Helstone’s depression in the face of her lack of occupation and the prospective deprivation and humiliation of joining the “very unhappy race” (Brontë, Shirley 192) of “old maids.” But the humiliations of being a spinster, vividly illustrated by the bitter Miss Mann and the “very ugly” (196) Miss Ainslie, are surpassed by the shame of exposing a wish for romantic love, as Caroline fears that she has done. She “despise[s] herself” (236) for such revealing actions as having
asked Robert Moore for a lock of his hair. “A lover masculine [who is] disappointed,” the narrator explains, “can speak and urge explanation; a lover feminine can say nothing: if she did, the result would be shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery. Nature would brand such demonstration as a rebellion against her instincts, and would vindictively relay it afterwards by the thunderbolt of self-contempt smiting suddenly in secret” (128). That a woman should not be the first to declare her love was a nineteenth-century truism, and certainly responses to her own work could only have reinforced Brontë’s conviction of the “shame and anguish” courted by any such speaking.

In contemporary Anglo-American culture, the stigma attached to feminine displays of sexual interest, and the absoluteness of the spinster/wife divide, have greatly diminished (though not entirely disappeared). At the same time, the number and kind of subjects for whom being single implies a kind of failure seem only to have expanded. In article about the status of singleness in current queer culture and theory, Michael Cobb echoes Brontë’s distinction between “single” and “lonely”: “Now, instead of simply thinking ‘single,’ I’ve been thinking ‘lonely’ because I want a notion of sexlessness to be attached to singleness . . . . In fact, I want to suspend questions of sex and sexuality altogether . . . . to start asking other questions about what it means to be alone, to be in solitude, and whether or not that is now permitted when the world wants people to feel desperate, lonely, and ready for toxic forms of sociality. Cobb draws on Hannah Arendt to suggest that “the feeling of loneliness produces sensations of desperation that open one up to the cruel ideologies of totalitarianism—ideologies that produce compelling ideas, full of persuasive power, that have logics that are much too consistent, much too able to misread the circumstances of the world, providing, instead, a paranoid ‘sixth sense’ through which the strong idea can order the world, regardless” (447). While Villette is not a primarily a political critique, Brontë does represent Catholicism as something like a totalitarian ideology and Madame Beck as increasingly iron-fisted in her imposition of order; at her lowest point of “desperation” Lucy seeks solace, against all her prejudices and training, in the confessional. For both Brontë and Cobb, then, while the concept “lonely” may function less narrowly and less shamingly than the concept “single,” it does not resolve the threat to the self posed by a social context that does not facilitate intimate relations for all its subjects.

Brontë finds in “lonely” a description of her position that is less humiliating—in her case, less contemptuously gendered, narrowly sexualized, and weighted with socially conscripting identities (such as that of the spin-
ster) and drastic solutions (such as emigration, undertaken by Brontë’s friend Mary Taylor)—than the description “single.” Further, loneliness connects Lucy and Brontë to an elevated aesthetic tradition; it is the condition of Wordsworth’s Lucy Gray, who “dwelt among untrodden ways” and also of Matthew Arnold’s “mortal millions [who] live alone”; a condition both mourned and exalted in masculine poetics. In choosing “lonely” over “single” to describe her state, Brontë rejects identification with a socially stigmatized role for one both more rarefied and more potentially universal, from which she might still be able to depict with some frankness her protagonists’ need for intimacy and the social blockages to its fulfillment.

*Villette*, however, continually threatens to undo this distinction, revealing almost compulsively the extent to which Lucy Snowe’s apparently personal and private condition of being “a lonely woman” is already, and cruelly, constructed by her publicly recognized and shaming condition as a *single* woman in the most comprehensive sense—a woman lacking in familial protection or romantic companionship and, embodying these lacks, something close to a nonself. *Villette* is notoriously grim and lacking in palliatives. In *Shirley*, Brontë, after leading Caroline Helstone deeply into the despair and shame of singleness and loneliness, relieves her of both conditions, providing her in rapid succession with an intimate friendship, a mother, and a husband. In *Villette*, by contrast, Lucy fails to escape, and must rather learn to coexist with, the shame of the “divergence between [her life] and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood” (Berlant and Warner 553). She must come to terms with the loneliness that makes inevitable her singleness (how can she, with no family or position, attract a mate?); the singleness that becomes the crux of her loneliness (how can she, as a single woman, experience intimacy?); and the humiliation that shapes her experience and her representation of both by blocking her affective bonds, including bonds of identification, with other subjects.

Like many narratives of formation, *Villette* begins in its protagonist’s childhood, but only to establish its lack. Lucy lacks even the defined, if deprived, status of an orphan, like Jane Eyre or Pip. We encounter her only as a visitor from a home never described. Her non-home is that of her godmother, Mrs. Bretton, who, with her son, Graham Bretton, “bore . . . the name of their birthplace—Bretton of Bretton: whether by coincidence, or because some remote ancestor had been a personage of sufficient importance to leave his name to his neighborhood, I know not” (Brontë, *Villette* 1). This problem of nomenclature introduces, on the novel’s first page, an unproductive hypothetical detail about characters whose
ancestry is of no importance to the story, establishing from the outset an emphasis on lack—of knowledge, of history, of narrative connection—not only within the novel but in the reader’s relation to it. The excess of the Bretton name, its dual reference to patrilineage and autochthony, also serves to reinforce Lucy’s contrasting absence of connection to family or place, a point further emphasized by the equally hyperbolic surname of the Brettons’ other child visitor, Polly Home. Polly, too, is temporarily displaced, but she will go on to accumulate new names, and homes, at an impressive rate; the “Polly Home” of the first chapters becomes Paulina Mary Home de Bassompierre Bretton, the “little Countess,” in the novel’s third volume. Finally, marrying Graham, Paulina comes home—and brings Home—to the Brettons. Her changes of name and the movements they accompany reinforce a contrast with Lucy’s absence of familial or geographical roots.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, in which the family, as the earliest scene of nurture, is where identification first occurs, this blank of Lucy’s childhood not only anticipates but also precipitates her later experiences of loss, unstable selfhood, and failed intimacy. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud connects melancholia, as a pathological condition, with the loss of an object that is not grieved but rather is disavowed by the unacknowledged incorporation of aspects of the lost object into the self. Lucy Snowe’s circumstances suggest that she has experienced early and significant loss, and it appears “ungrieved” to the point that the founding experience of loss itself is lost to—cannot be represented within—her narrative. The causes of her apparently parentless state are referred to only briefly, by teasing ellipsis and metaphor, in the novel’s early chapters, before being banished entirely from the narrative:

On quitting Bretton . . . I betook myself home, having been absent six months. It will be conjectured that I was of course glad to return to the bosom of my kindred. Well! the amiable conjecture does no harm, and may therefore be safely left uncontradicted. . . . I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather. . . . However, it cannot be concealed that . . . there must have been a wreck at last. . . . In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished.

As far as I recollect, I complained to no one about these troubles. . . . Of Mrs. Bretton I had long lost sight. Impediments, raised by others, had, years ago, come in the way of our intercourse, and cut it off. (Brontë, Villette 42)
Lucy’s sarcasm suggests that, whatever family members constituted this “bosom,” she has certainly lost, if not her parents, the love and nurture that family is supposed to provide. Upon the death of her subsequent employer, Miss Marchmont, Lucy daringly emigrates to ‘Labassecour’ (Brontë’s fictionalization of Belgium) and talks her way into a position at Madame Beck’s school, but once there she “shrinks into [her] sloth as a nursery governess. . . . The negation of severe suffering was the nearest approach to happiness I expected to know” (94). It requires the actions of another (Madame Beck) to precipitate Lucy into action, and these actions are represented not as caring but as hostile: “At that moment she did not wear a woman’s aspect, but rather a man’s. Power of a particular kind strongly limned itself in all her traits, and that power was not my kind of power: neither sympathy, nor congeniality, nor submission, were the emotions it awakened. I stood—not soothed, not won, nor overwhelmed. It seems as if a challenge of strength between opposing gifts was given, and I suddenly felt all the dishonour of my diffidence” (95). In a slightly different narrative, Madame Beck could be, even if formidable, a mother figure: She is what Lucy becomes—the owner of a school; and she gives Lucy her start in this career. But Lucy as narrator disavows any identification with, or even gratitude toward, the older woman, as an object of emulation or a mentor, and Brontë as author represents Madame Beck as increasingly grotesque, developing from “a charitable woman, [who] did a great deal of good” (88) at the novel’s opening to a scheming harpy at its end, not above drugging Lucy into submission.

If Lucy’s early life is lost to her, our singular narrator, it must be lost to the reader as well, since whatever “residues of the lost object,” or “succession of phantasies” we might attribute to Lucy or to any fictional unconscious, there is nowhere that readers can recover them. We may posit, certainly, that Lucy did not benefit from the ideal Kleinian mother whose “capacity for love has developed in such a way that she can make a strong identification both with her child, and with a wise mother of her own whom she keeps in mind” (Klein 319), but Lucy herself never invokes the name of “mother.” Just as Lucy the character initially appears to lack psychological grounding for relations of identification, Lucy the narrator works hard to complicate a reader’s potential identification with her, or even understanding of her circumstances. Much as Lucy’s unreliability and hostility as a narrator has been critically canvassed, it remains difficult to over-emphasize how thoroughly dislocation, misrecognition, and failures of identification in all senses saturate the narrative. Consider, for example, an early interaction, between Lucy and one Mrs. Barrett, once Lucy’s
nurse and now housekeeper at a “grand mansion.” When Lucy, unemployed, seeks her advice, she has apparently little to offer:

The housekeeper was slowly propounding some difficulties, while she prepared orange-rind for marmalade, when a child ran past the window and came bounding into the room. It was a pretty child, and as it danced, laughing, up to me—for we were not strangers (nor, indeed, was its mother—a young married daughter of the house—a stranger)—I took it on my knee. Different as were our social positions now, this child’s mother and I had been schoolfellows, when I was a girl of ten and she a young lady of sixteen; and I remembered her—good-looking, but dull—in a lower class than mine.

I was admiring the boy’s handsome dark eyes, when the mother, young Mrs. Leigh, entered. What a beautiful and kind-looking woman was the good-natured and comely, but unintellectual girl become! Wifehood and maternity had changed her thus, as I have since seen them change others even less promising than she. Me she had forgotten. I was changed too; though not, I fear, for the better. I made no attempt to recall myself to her memory: why should I? She came for her son to accompany her in a walk, and behind her followed a nurse carrying an infant. I only mention the incident because, in addressing the nurse, Mrs. Leigh spoke French (very bad French, by the way, and with an incorrigibly bad accent, again forcibly reminding me of our school-days); and I found the woman was a foreigner. . . . When the whole party were withdrawn, Mrs. Barrett remarked that her young lady had brought that foreign nurse home with her two years ago, on her return from a Continental excursion; that she was treated almost as well as a governess, and had nothing to do but walk out with the baby and chatter French with Master Charles; “and,” added Mrs. Barrett, “she says there are many Englishwomen in foreign families as well-placed as she.”

I stored up this piece of information. (Brontë, Villette 53–54)

In what seems an arbitrary, if not downright hostile, distribution of narrative emphasis, readers learn the contents of Mrs. Barrett’s marmalade but not what difficulties she “propounds,” just as we learn that Lucy once had a nurse, a friend, and a different social standing, but no more about the family to whom that nurse must have been attached, the cause of the change in standing, or the failure of Lucy’s former friends to come to her aid. Orange rind aside, the narrative here favors abstraction even as it seems to offer detail. Speech is characterized—Mrs. Barrett speaks slowly,
Mrs. Leigh inelegantly—but not directly represented. The only piece of dialogue that appears in quotation marks—the French nurse’s remarks—belys them by being reported. The passage implies a connection between the nurse’s remark and Lucy’s own decision, in the next chapter, to leave England, but it is striking that she makes this decision not as a result of aid or advice offered by any character in this scene, but rather as the result of a series of chances whose contingency is emphasized: Lucy “only mentions the incident” of Mrs. Leigh’s entrance because it reveals, accidentally, that the nurse is a “foreigner,” prompting Mrs. Barrett to remark on the situation of similarly-placed Englishwomen, but not, apparently, directly to recommend such a course.

Lucy’s description of her relationship to Mrs. Leigh and her child is given in peculiarly tortured syntax: “We were not strangers (nor indeed was her mother a stranger)” conveys positive information (the two women know each other) negatively, and the information is then re-negated when we are told that “Me she had forgotten,” a phrasing that places Lucy in the syntactical and logical position of the sentence’s subject and yet contrives to return her to the objective case. This (non)-encounter with an old schoolfriend adumbrates the novel’s many later scenes of mis- or non-recognition. Sometimes Lucy recognizes while not being recognized, as in her identification of the louche pursuers of her first night in Labassecour with the two bullying professors for whom she later writes an essay on “Human Justice,” as well as in her recognition of the “Dr. John” of Villette as both the “true young English gentleman” (Brontë, Villette 78) of that same night and the “Graham Bretton” of her youth. Sometimes she fails to recognize others, such as, initially, Paulina Home, in Labassecour; Ginevra Fanshawe’s suitor, Alfred de Hamal, in disguise as a nun; even herself, in the mirror in an unfamiliar dress.

Such failures of recognition—literal forms of non-identification—are not surprising, given the disconcerting tendency of Villette’s characters to be unrecognizable even to the reader from one moment to the next. Madame Beck’s transformation from commanding professional to desperate housewife, mentioned above, is one instance; the baffling oscillation in the representation of John Graham Bretton is another. Brontë acceded to her publisher’s objection that there was a “defect [in] the want of perfect harmony between Graham’s boyhood and manhood; the angular abruptness of his change of sentiment toward Miss Fanshawe” (Brontë, Selected Letters 3 November 1852). Lucy (perhaps as a result of this response from George Smith) highlights this inconsistency. First she apologizes for the “modification” that her opinion of “Dr. John” seems to undergo by
saying “I give the feeling as at the time I felt it” (Brontë, *Villette* 239–40); then she ascribes “a seeming contradiction in the two views which have been given of Graham Bretton” to “the public and the private—the outdoor and the in-door view” (247). Such mutability might be viewed as conveying Lucy’s changing relationship to the characters, as underscoring the extent to which the narrative is controlled by her deeply subjective point of view. But rather than encourage readerly identification, as does the subjective narration of *Jane Eyre*, this oscillating point of view may disrupt it, by reminding the reader that these characters are fictive constructs, that a character called “Dr. John” is the same as one called “Graham Bretton” only inasmuch as, and when, Lucy says so, and that Lucy’s—or Brontë’s—motivations for such changes may escape readerly comprehension.

In its sometimes baffling subjective point of view, *Villette* not only challenges readerly identification but also avoids the expression of social critique. In *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone ponders at some length the social question of employment for young women and “old maids.” Although she docilely concedes that “nobody in particular is to blame . . . and I cannot tell . . . how [things] are to be altered for the better,” she nevertheless concludes, in a peroration of over two pages, that “single women should have more to do—better chances of interesting and profitable occupation than they possess now” (377). Lucy more thoroughly refuses to take on the sociological burden of the “Woman Question.” When she breaks down after being left alone, over the school vacation, in charge of a disabled boarder, she insists that her situation “is no living being’s fault” and that the blame lies with “a great abstraction on whose wide shoulders I like to lay the mountains of blame they were sculptured to bear . . . Fate” (Brontë, *Villette* 232). When M. Paul harangues her on the subject of “women of intellect . . . a luckless accident, a thing for which there was neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as wife nor worker,” she steadfastly repeats: “Cela ne me regarde pas: je ne m’en soucie pas [that’s nothing to do with me; I don’t care about that]” (445). In both cases, the narrative raises the possibility of placing Lucy’s trials in the context of social relations—her employer/employee relation with Madame Beck, the larger question of women’s position—only to dismiss it. Yielding to it, perhaps, would require Lucy to identify herself with the role of the “luckless accident”—a dependent single woman—in front of men whose fixed and conventional ideas of feminine perfection would not allow them to imagine solutions, either personal or social, to her troubles. It would thus do the same for Brontë in front of her readers, who were often—as publishers
and reviewers as well as readers—indicatively male, and of whose discomfort and potential condescension she was never unaware.

Nevertheless Lucy’s narrative repeatedly, if indirectly, demonstrates that it is her social context that eliminates opportunities for constructive identification with others and instead threatens her with coercive misidentifications. When the snobbish Ginevra Fanshawe repeatedly asks “Who are you, Miss Snowe?” the answers she expects are not, of course, psychological—Ginevra, her own mind “chaotic as a rag-bag” (Brontë, Villette 111), disclaims any interest in depth of character. She simply wants to classify, and class, her unclassifiable companion: “You used to call yourself a nursery-governess . . . and now Madame Beck treats you with more courtesy than she treats the Parisienne, St. Pierre; and that proud chit, my cousin [i.e., Paulina de Bassompierre], makes you her bosom friend!” (383). Lucy rebuffs Ginevra’s attempts not only to identify her socially but also to offer herself for another kind of identification. When she refuses to walk arm-in-arm with Ginevra because “when she took my arm, she always leaned upon me her whole weight, and as I was not a gentleman, or her lover, I did not like it,” Ginevra responds: “There, again! . . . I thought, by offering to take your arm, to intimate approbation of your dress and general appearance: I meant it as a compliment” (384). This exchange can be read for a cross-gendering of Lucy, in her relation to Ginevra, that harks back to their performance in the school play, where Lucy, in skirts and a mustache, plays the “fop” to Ginevra’s ingenue. Focusing on identification rather than desire, however, what I see here is Lucy’s refusal of Ginevra’s insistence that she acknowledge a likeness based on “approbation”: Ginevra’s projections, “proving . . . her incapacity to conceive how any person not bolstered up by birth or wealth, not supported by some consciousness of name or connection, could maintain an attitude of reasonable integrity” (385), only weigh Lucy down.

Other characters share this insistent desire to identify Lucy with some pre-existing type. Dr. John views her as a sisterly chaperone of both his first infatuation (Ginevra) and his settled love (Paulina). This misreading is more painful than Ginevra’s, since it overlooks not only her general capacity for passion but also her particular, though unexpressed, passion for him. After he calls her “quiet Lucy Snowe” and “a being inoffensive as a shadow,” she “wished he would just let me alone—cease allusion to me. These epithets—these attributes I put from me . . . not with scorn, but with extreme weariness”; in sum, she observes, “he always wanted always to give me a role not mine” (Brontë, Villette 394, 395). Similarly, “Madame Beck esteemed me learned and blue; Miss Fanshawe, caustic, ironic, and
cynical; Mr. Home, a model teacher, the essence of the sedate and discreet” (375). Everyone around Lucy, in other words, misidentifies her, eager to place her within a narrow range of female images: Paul Emmanuel goes so far as to recommend to her contemplation in Labassencour’s museum the four pious scenes from “La vie d’une femme,” comprising a church-going young girl, praying wife, young mother, and widow. Repeatedly Lucy is assured that she can achieve social and personal recognition only by identifying with positions and images that embody what is undesirable to others (the spinster schoolteacher) or unattainable or undesirable to herself (conventionally domestic femininity, here rendered particularly dismissable in Lucy’s eyes through its Catholic visual vocabulary). Paradoxically and damagingly, she can retain her sense of herself as a self (rather than as a stock character) only by refusing all such identifications and thus becoming almost invisible to others.

It is, as the examples above suggest, not only men in the novel but also other women seek to identify Lucy with stereotypes of failed or marginalized femininity, and their cruelty can be read as a form of projective identification. Projective identification, as summarized by Eve Sedgwick, results from a subject’s “prophylactic need to split good from bad, and the aggressive expulsion of intolerable parts of oneself onto—or, in Melanie Klein’s more graphic locution, into—the person who is taken as an object” (Sedgwick, “Melanie Klein” 636). For the novel’s female characters Lucy embodies the “intolerable” outcomes of loneliness, impoverishment, or class decline that seem to shadow Victorian middle-class women. Madame Beck’s professional success has demanded from her suppression of her own romantic desires (which, like Lucy’s, are directed toward Graham Bretton and Paul Emmanuel), and she is isolated by her position at the pinnacle of an edifice of surveillance. With a consciousness of social position but no money, Ginevra as much as Lucy is forced to live by her wits. Even the privileged Paulina is reminded by her father that Lucy’s fate could be hers: “If my Polly ever came to know by experience the uncertain nature of this world’s goods, I should like her to act as Lucy acts: to work for herself, that she might burden neither kith nor kin” (Brontë, Villette 356). Lucy herself completes the circle of hostility that Klein’s model anticipates; having functioned as the object of other female characters’ negative projective identifications, she reciprocally dismisses them all.

In a different narrative or psychological context the projective identifications of Madame Beck, Ginevra, and Paulina might be less definitive, since they coexist with gestures of goodwill or aid toward Lucy. Madame
Beck takes her in literally from the street and promotes her professional
development; Ginevra, in her own selfish way, befriends her; Paulina
offers genuine companionship—“I liked her,” Lucy acknowledges—and
an entrée into familial comfort. But Lucy remains trapped in a nexus of
scarcity that is social as well as psychological—for the displaced women
depicted in Villette, there is simply not enough intimacy, any more than
there is enough financial security, to go around.

At the end of the novel, Lucy does become, in one sense, someone
very much like Madame Beck, a lone woman mistress of her own school.
But this development is hardly presented as a triumph. Unlike Madame
Beck, who is a widow with children, and deeply rooted in the religious
and social life of her community; unlike Paulina; unlike even the flighty
Ginevra, Lucy never passes through the conventional stages of the “vie
d’une femme.” Most important, she never attains the psychological “true
home” for which she longs. In a geographical sense, as well, she remains
excluded from what she identifies as the “true home” of her nationality
and religion—England. Villette is not overtly an imperialist text, espe-
cially in comparison to Jane Eyre. In Jane Eyre, not only do colonized
female subjects form the metaphorical, abjected “other” to Jane’s liberal
autonomy, but also imperial expropriation, in the form of a legacy from
her uncle’s interests in Madeira, enables Jane to feel that she has achieved
a “true home” with Rochester because she is financially autonomous as
well. In Villette, by contrast, Paul Emmanuel’s imperialist mission to Anti-
gua to supervise an estate has the effect of destroying Lucy’s hopes, since it
is on his return that he is shipwrecked. Yet Brontë’s novel retains a nation-
alist, if not a colonialist, identification. Lucy’s continuing attachment to
England and English values is signified not only by her isolation from
Labassecourien society but also by her continued rejection of Catholicism
and “Continental” culture and her frequent laudatory invocation of Eng-
lishness and Protestantism as identical with freedom and truth. Indeed,
her anti-Catholicism is nourished by attitudes toward the other similar to
those of imperialist and colonialist ideology. As Rosemary Clark-Beattie
observes: “Like many of her contemporaries, Lucy escapes her insignifi-
cance within English society by fleeing to a setting where her adherence
to the mores of the very culture she has fled sets her apart, in her own
mind, as superior. Her identity is formed by the contradiction implicit in
the phrase ‘Protestant in a Catholic country’” (825).

In the novel’s most explicitly nationalist moment, M. Paul during a
class attacks “les anglaises” with a vituperation that falls “not only upon
our women, but upon our greatest names and best men; sullying the
shield of Britannia, and dabbling the union-jack in the mud.” Enraged, Lucy erupts, “Vive l’Angleterre, l’Histoire et les Héros! À bas la France, la Fiction et les Faquins [Long live England, history, and heroes! Down with France, fiction, and ruffians!]” (Brontë, Villette 429). This exchange is not only risible (“I suppose [the students] thought me mad,” Lucy acknowledges) but is also represented as more personal than political in its motivation: the reader understands M. Paul’s attack to be one of the manifestations of his jealousy of the relationship between Lucy and Graham Bretton. Inasmuch as Graham is emphatically represented as a perfect English gentleman, Lucy’s attraction to him and M. Paul’s jealousy of it might themselves be read as signs of national value. And her response here, echoing her mockery in the previous chapter of M. Paul’s “very inefficient” translation of “un drame de Williams Shackspire” (415), reveals her continued contempt for her adopted culture. Lucy’s exile serves less to liberate her from English culture than to put a distance between that culture and the “conditions of denial and privation” that she has actually experienced there. The ocean that separates her from M. Paul (through death) and from England (by geography) allows both the “true home” of domestic ideology and the homeland of English nationality to remain lost and idealized objects of identification. As we will see in the next section, the retention of this capacity for idealization is one of the most significant differences between the English Lucy Snowe and her West Indian descendant, Lucy Potter.

JAMAICA KINCAID

THE POLITICS OF APPROPRIATION

Jamaica Kincaid cites Charlotte Brontë as one of her favorite novelists, and a number of critics have analyzed the relationship between Kincaid’s and Brontë’s novels, which is typically characterized as one of revision. Susan Lanser, for example, writes that “Even as the narrator seems to honor the paradigmatic female voice of white nineteenth-century British fiction . . . a major project of Annie John is to reverse the racism of Brontë’s novel by re-presenting British characters and values through Antiguan eyes” (215). Kincaid herself claims Jane Eyre, rather than Villette, as Lucy’s precursor: “The great influences on [Lucy Potter’s] life are Genesis and Revelation and, strangely enough, Jane Eyre. . . . Lucy is a very moralistic person and she’s very judgmental. Her view of the world is very much shaped by a nineteenth-century view, filtered through the mist of colony and mother
country” (Vorda 22). Indeed, Brontë is present in Lucy only inferentially, when Lucy mentions “Emily, Charlotte, and Jane” as “the names of the authoresses whose books I loved” (Kincaid, Lucy 149); other writers and artists—Wordsworth, Milton, Gauguin, Simone de Beauvoir—are more explicitly referenced. Nevertheless, echoes small and large between Lucy and Villette abound, and Lucy Snowe embodies that “moralist . . . judgmental . . . nineteenth-century view” that forms part of Lucy Potter’s complex colonial heritage. Kincaid’s effort in Lucy, I will suggest, is not so much to “reverse” the proto- or implicitly imperialist narrative of Villette as it is to reinhabit it, to move it forward, to “write what [Brontë] would write were she in my place, or if I were she, yet living my life” (Schwartz, Ruined by Reading 67). In the full knowledge of the history of “foul deed[s]” that separates them, Kincaid in Lucy tacitly invokes what Susan Bernstein terms a “dissonant identification,” which “captures the value of affective engagement as a strategy for approaching, for self-consciously apprehending, traumatic knowledge” (158–59). Kincaid’s dissonant identification with Brontë’s Victorian protagonist apprehends the postcolonial subject’s “traumatic knowledge” of a colonial inheritance through reappropriation and refiguration that stop well short of reclaiming or reversing the effects of that burden.

For Kincaid, dissonant identification is expressed frequently, necessarily, through reappropriation. In an interview, Moira Ferguson asks Kincaid whether she “would position [herself] in the Caribbean writing tradition.” In response, Kincaid invokes Tsitsi Dangarembga:

Well, that’s a very funny question. I speak as someone from the British Caribbean. What tradition is that from? That is from English tradition. You know, most people, especially people from my generation, had an education that was sort of an English public-school education. We got the height of empire. They were trying to erase any knowledge of another history, another possibility . . . I was reading a book by a woman from Zimbabwe and it said that it was truly an African novel that doesn’t owe any debt to English writing. And that is not true at all. The book reminds me of Jane Austen in its humor and its kind of irony and its mannerisms. . . . The tradition of novels is not an African form, as far as I can tell. But what is so wrong with that? This woman has written a novel that draws on Jane Austen. Jane Austen and her people would not hesitate for one second if they found something in Zimbabwe that they liked. They would just take it. And so she could take Jane Austen. . . . [Nervous Conditions] is a fabulous book, borrowed from Jane
Austen, and who cares? It is a fabulous book. Take. It’s okay. (Ferguson, “A Lot of Memory” 168)⁹

This is a slightly startling comparison. While Dangarembga is frequently ironic, she is hardly writing Austenian social comedy. But to startle is part of Kincaid’s aim: intertextuality, identification, and influence in her hands are appropriative, aggressive, unsettling. What colonial conquest took from colonized people was (at least initially) not narrative forms but labor and the raw materials of wealth; the language and literatures of the “English tradition,” contrarily, as Kincaid suggests, were imposed. For Kincaid, however, these facts do not mean that narrative forms are not available for taking or that the trajectories of appropriation can never be altered.

Elsewhere, Kincaid is less insouciant about the complexities involved in “tak[ing]” the narratives of colonial power, in forms of identification that are so deeply linked to cultural and historical loss. The injunction to “take” Austen is made literal in repeated references to stealing books in Kincaid’s writing. Annie John, for example, steals library books and hides them under her house (Kincaid, Annie John 55). In their hiding place Annie’s books share room with her precious collection of marbles, tokens of unladylike play that she also conceals from her mother:

My mother now crawled under the house and began a furious and incredible search for my marbles . . . tearing apart my neat pile of books, which, if she had opened any one of them, would have revealed to her, stamped on the title page, these words: “Public Library, Antigua.” Of course, that would have been a whole other story, and I can’t say which would have been worse, the stolen books or playing marbles. (66)

What these two apparently unlike objects—books and marbles—have in common is that they embody pleasures and skills initially offered by representatives of the regimes of power (colonial and maternal) to which the young Annie hardly realizes her subjection; when, however, she attempts to make those pleasures and skills her own—to take them—she discovers they were never hers to keep, and that keeping them by force or stealth entails the danger of discovery and punishment.

In more recent narratives Kincaid links this desire to possess texts as a reader with the desire to produce texts as a writer. In an interview with Frank Birbalsingh and in the memoir My Brother (1997), Kincaid similarly recalls her mother searching out and burning all her books, because
Kincaid had neglected domestic and chores and childcare while reading. Kincaid’s reading here figures as a double theft: her (undiscovered) theft of books from agents of a colonial regime; and her theft of labor (chores undone) from a mother who also serves, in her commitment to domestic ideology, as such an agent. That her mother responds with a third robbery, (re)taking from Kincaid what is (not) hers, compounds the inextricability of textuality and theft. Recalling the event later, Kincaid claims it as an authorial origin story: “Books were the only things I knew and loved, and I did not know what would replace them. I didn’t know what else to love. It was a significant moment. I’d quite possibly spend the rest of my life trying to write the books that were taken away from me then” (Birbalsingh 144). Lucy can be read as part of that project, emphasizing dissonant identifications that take the form of reappropriations of Victorian and colonialist narratives, particularly Villette.

Lucy Potter’s initial situation in many respects resembles Lucy Snowe’s: the emigration of both is motivated by material deprivation and enabled by their perceived suitability, as young, powerless women, to perform the labor of childcare, in potentially exploitative circumstances, in their host countries. As Lucy Snowe is always a visitor or employee in the homes of others, so at the beginning of Lucy Potter’s narrative, in Lucy, we learn that the family she works for calls her “the Visitor. They said I seemed not to be a part of things, as if I didn’t live in their house with them, as if they weren’t like a family to me, as if I were just passing through” (13). Lucy’s employers are not, of course “like a family” to her, and she is “part of things” only on the thinnest of suffrances. With a surely willed obtuseness, her employer Mariah (who shares a given name with Lucy Snowe’s employer, Modeste Maria Beck) and her husband, Lewis, read her responses as though they could only signify individual affect. After she recounts a dream about Lewis in which she falls “down a hole, at the bottom of which were some silver and blue snakes,” Mariah laughs and says “Dr. Freud for Visitor” (14, 15). Not recognizing the reference, Lucy does intuit their failure to acknowledge her intended meaning: “I had meant by telling them my dream that I had taken them in, because only people who were very important to me had ever shown up in my dreams” (15). But though Lucy has been “taken . . . in,” in the sense of being offered shelter, by her employers, and she believes herself to have “taken them in” in the sense of beginning to care about them, both parties have been “taken in” in the sense of being fooled, for their lack of mutual understanding—particularly the employers’ inability to imagine the concrete details of Lucy’s experience—will be continually revealed.
As Lucy Snowe is circumspect about the “impediments, raised by others, [that] had years ago, come in the way of our intercourse” that initially prevent her from turning to her godmother, Mrs. Bretton, for help (Brontë, *Villette* 42), so Lucy Potter does not comment on the self-delusion that allows her employers to redescribe employer–employee relations as peer or family relations and puzzle over her assertion of distance. Evie Shockley calls the suspended state of “passing through” that Brontë’s and Kincaid’s Lucys share—their loss of ordinary social connection and their insistence on an independence that others are unwilling to recognize or grant—“gothic homelessness . . . the state of the individual who is unwilling and/or unable to achieve or maintain performances of ideologically privileged norms and, as a result, comes to be located socially outside or on the margins of domestic space and the communities privileged by domestic ideology” (49–50). For Shockley, the Lucys are united in their marginality and their repudiation of existing feminine roles.¹⁰

At the same time, in two crucial ways, one relating to personal and one to public history, the situation of the two Lucys is different. Lucy Potter, unlike Lucy Snowe, is not motherless: the references she makes to her mother throughout her narrative make it clear that she has had only too much mothering:

My mother . . . spoke to me in a language anyone female could understand. And I was undeniably that—female. Oh, it was a laugh, for I had spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother—I was my mother. And I could see now why, to the few feeble attempts I made to draw a line between us, her reply always was “You can run away, but you cannot escape the fact that I am your mother, my blood runs in you, I carried you for nine months inside me.” How else was I to take such a statement but as a sentence for life in a prison whose bars were stronger than any iron imaginable? (Kincaid, *Lucy* 90–91)

As Klein proposes, less vividly, “Some mothers . . . exploit [the maternal] relationship for the gratification of their own desires, i.e. their possessiveness and the satisfaction of having somebody dependent on them. Such mothers want their children to cling to them, and they hate them to grow up and to acquire individualities of their own” (318). In the absence of a mother, Lucy Snowe can idealize the maternal charge of “labouring and living for others” (Brontë, *Villette* 453). Lucy Potter has a more vivid sense of the price of that relation: “I said [in a letter to my mother] that she had
acted like a saint, but that since I was living in this real world I had really wanted just a mother” (Kincaid, Lucy 127). Like Virginia Woolf, Lucy imagines escaping her own identification with the angel of the house only through the angel’s total destruction: “She should not have married my father,” she tells the compatriot who comes to convey news of her father’s death: “She should not have had children. She should not have thrown away her intelligence. She should not have paid so little attention to mine. She should not have listened to someone like you. I am not like her at all” (123).

Lucy Potter’s relationship with her mother cannot be separated from its colonial context, with its strong impress of British Victorian culture. This is the second important difference between the two Lucys: though both are exiles, one is the citizen of what was, in the nineteenth century, the world’s largest imperial power, the other of one of the “small places” colonized by that power.11 For Lucy Snowe, Victorian culture is present time; for Lucy Potter, its persistent ideological traces represent the fraught articulation with modernity that imperial conquest imposes on colonized societies—at once insisting on the inevitability of “modernization” and yet stalling its subjects in the moment of colonization. The economic imperative that Lucy Potter feels to leave her home is the direct result of the colonial conquest that remains marginal in Lucy Snowe’s narrative. As a result, in Kincaid’s Lucy, a “true home” remains unavailable even as an object of fantasy. A moment of nationalist assertion comparable to Lucy Snowe’s occurs in Lucy when, at “fourteen or so,” Lucy Potter “stand[s] up in school choir practice and say[s] that I did not wish to sing ‘Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves; Britons never, never shall be slaves,’ that I was not a Briton and that until not too long ago I would have been a slave” (135). Like Lucy Snowe’s outburst, Lucy Potter’s occurs in a classroom, in the context of explicitly nationalist pedagogy; also as in Lucy Snowe’s case, the political implications of the protagonist’s resistance are de-emphasized. The young Lucy Potter’s immediate concerns are aesthetic: “If only we had been ruled by the French: they were prettier, much happier in appearance, so much more the kind of people I would have enjoyed being around” (136). The result of her outburst, too, is deflating: “My choir mistress only wondered if all their efforts to civilize me over the years would come to nothing in the end” (135).

Lucy Potter thus rejects the imperialist nationality with which Lucy Snowe identifies (“Vive l’Angleterre!”/“I was not a Briton”) and embraces the one that Lucy Snowe deplores (“À bas la France”/“If only we had been ruled by the French”). The relation between the two moments of protest,
however, is not simply one of reversal: Lucy Potter’s eruption is not proto-
but anti-nationalist. Her rejection of the “foul deed” (Kincaid, *Lucy* 135)
of English conquest necessarily involves a rejection not just of “Britannia”
but also of her own just-post-colonial homeland, marked as it is by Victo-
rian cultural norms imposed at the moment of conquest and not entirely
superseded by decolonization. Unlike Lucy Snowe, Lucy Potter is alien-
ated at the outset from even the most attenuated or abstract of attach-
ments to her mother country: “An ocean stood between me and the place
I came from,” she reflects, “but would it have made a difference if it had
been a teacup of water? I could not go back” (9–10). Although she out-
grows her initial impulse to exchange one colonial regime for another—“I
understand the situation better now; I understand that . . . my pen pal [on
a French-ruled island] and I were in the same boat”—she “still think[s]
those words [*liberté, égalité, fraternité*] have a better ring to them” (136).
Lucy’s fantasy is not of an aboriginally “free” homeland but of worse and
better colonial regimes.

As *Lucy* begins, Lucy has just arrived to work as an au pair in an
unnamed U.S. city (very much like New York) from an unnamed West
Indian island (very much like Kincaid’s homeland, Antigua). Everything
about her new situation—the weather, the food, her homesickness—ini-
tially surprises and disappoints Lucy. “In books I had read,” she reflects:

—from time to time, when the plot called for it—someone would suffer
from homesickness. A person would leave a not very nice situation and
go somewhere else, somewhere a lot better, and then long to go back
where it was not very nice. How impatient I would become with such
a person, for I would feel that I was in a not very nice situation myself,
and how I wanted to go somewhere else. But now I, too, felt that I
wanted to be back where I came from. (Kincaid, *Lucy* 6)

Lucy here records two unexpected experiences: homesickness and the dis-
covery of an unlooked-for home in a fictional tradition—the “books [she
has] read”—she had believed to be inadequate to her unique, non-fictional
experience. Previously she has not identified with the characters she has
read about in these abstractly summarized books; now, retrospectively, she
begins to see the possibilities of such identification.

Lucy’s initial comparison of her feelings to the feelings described in
“books I had read” is the first of many such comparisons that she makes
of present experience to proleptic textual representation. The accumula-
tion of these comparisons emphasizes what may not be apparent in any
single example alone: their inextricability from Lucy’s status as a colonial subject, whose compulsory education (at the evocatively-named “Queen Victoria Girls’ School” [Kincaid, Lucy 18]) has emphasized the aesthetic, geographic, and even meteorological norms of the English colonial power at the expense of local ones: “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” (30); “In one of the few films I had seen in my life so far, some people on a train . . . settled into their compartments” (31); “I had read of this lake in geography books” (35); “her blue eyes (which I would have found beautiful even if I hadn’t read millions of books in which blue eyes were always accompanied by the word ‘beautiful’), grew dim” (39); “as a child in school, I had learned how the earth tilts away from the sun and how that causes the different seasons” (85–86). The details of Lucy’s education work to replace her knowledge and experience of her own locality with a European, and particularly English, literature, history, and geography, interpellating her as a subject estranged from two cultures: a dominant but inaccessible colonial one and an accessible but devalued local one. Lucy’s experience of learning and reciting “Daffodils” as something she “had to” do, from which she immediately begins to dissociate herself, contrasts with Tambu’s embrace of her opportunity to recite Browning’s verses; Lucy, unlike Tambu, seems aware of these hegemonic implications almost from the start. There is much less distance between the older narrating and younger experiencing voices in Lucy than there is in Nervous Conditions.

Lucy’s experiences of readerly identification must always be moments of repudiation, disidentification, or dissident identification as well. Lucy Snowe, as we have seen, is silent about her name and familial origins. Lucy Josephine Potter, however, is bitterly aware of the origins of every part of hers; the effects of imperial history are difficult to evade, and Lucy Potter, unlike Lucy Snowe, does not represent herself as mysteriously sui generis. “Josephine” honors an uncle whom his family believed to be “rich, from money he had made in sugar in Cuba,” but whose death reveals him as a bankrupt who “had been living in an old tomb in the Anglican churchyard”—a revenant of English conquest. Lucy’s surname, Potter, “must have come from the Englishman who owned my ancestors when they were slaves” (Kincaid, Lucy 149). Growing up, she repudiates these names, with their colonialist history: “In my own mind, I called myself other names [than Lucy]: Emily, Charlotte, Jane. They were the names of the authoresses whose books I loved. I eventually settled on the name Enid, after the authoress Enid Blyton, because that name seemed the most
unusual of all the names I thought of” (149–50). These female authors, read outside of school, offer Lucy a sense of self apart from the official prescriptions of country, school, and family.

At the same time, however, the names Emily, Charlotte, and Jane are part of, rather than alternative to, the colonial history that Lucy rejects; in particular, as the names of women who wrote in the idiom of domestic realism, their names are freighted with the resonance of Victorian domestic ideology. Lucy’s use of the noun “authoresses” to describe the Brontës and Austen serves as a reminder of this anachronism and marks the distance of the older narrator from her childish preferences. Nothing in Kincaid’s fiction, with its depictions of what Ian Smith calls “the symbolic intersection of colonial territorialization and the writer’s embattled relationship to her mother” (804), encourages the reader to view women or female authors as inherently more liberating objects of identification than men or male authors. Indeed, Lucy remembers that her mother became “a ball of fury” when she voiced her preference for the name Enid, which she takes from Enid Blyton: “A woman with whom my father had had a child and who had tried to kill my mother and me through obeah was named Enid. . . . I felt ashamed of the mistake I had made. Even to hurt my mother I would not have wanted the same name as the woman who had tried to kill my mother and me” (Kincaid, Lucy 150). The fury of Lucy’s mother not only underlines the possibility of literally murderous relations between women, but also asserts a personal meaning where the reader might anticipate a political one: as an overtly racist writer and the representative of imperial power, Enid Blyton could be described, metaphorically, as a “woman who had tried to kill my mother and me.” The proper names of proper English women are not reliable signposts for Lucy’s own development as a colonial subject.

Nevertheless, in repossessing apparently colonial names and identifications—across nationality, across gender (when she later identifies her name with Milton’s Lucifer), and athwart relations of exploitation—Lucy insists on the ability of an individual to interpret and appropriate even the signifiers of oppression on their own terms. On a small scale, these cooptations exemplify Kincaid’s writerly advice: “Take. It’s okay.” Lucy has no choice about the colonialist pedagogy that has enforced her knowledge of the English literary canon; but she can choose to identify herself with an icon of masculine rebellion (Lucifer) rather than one of feminine renunciation, such as Wordsworth’s Lucy Gray—or, for that matter, the suffering Lucy Snowe. Repossessing these names, Lucy revises the Victorian norms of duty, renunciation, and sexual chastity that they represent,
that are exported and maintained by colonial history and colonial education, and that in _Lucy_ are represented as maternally transmitted and enforced.\(^{13}\) Despite her relative frankness about loneliness and longing, Brontë in _Villette_ remains largely loyal to these norms. Kincaid, through Lucy, rejects them with some fury. While her mother has brought her up to be “clean, virginal, beyond reproach” (Kincaid, _Lucy_ 97), Lucy writes her a letter in which “I . . . gave a brief description of my personal life, offering each detail as evidence that my upbringing had been a failure and that, in fact, life as a slut was quite enjoyable, thank you very much” (128). When she becomes involved with a photographer named, with an echo of Lucy Snowe’s most important relationship, Paul, she describes her sexual enjoyment in detail to the other mother-figure in her life, Mariah (113). As Gary Holcomb writes, “Among the aims of Lucy’s slut identity is to welcome dominant society’s condemnation for the slut’s body to release [her] from dominant society’s narrow authorization of how a young black woman of the servant and immigrant class may use her body” (307). This sexual pleasure—and the fact that Lucy has found a mother-figure who is not shocked by her recounting of it—seem like triumphant ripostes to the ideology of feminine purity embodied in and reproduced by the foremothers in Lucy’s life: her own mother; Brontë and the other nineteenth-century women authors Kincaid reads; and the fictional English Lucys whose name she shares. As Kincaid says in one interview, “I really do believe that whatever is a source of shame—if you are not responsible for it, such as the color of your skin or your sexuality—you should just wear it as a badge” (Garner). In embracing the term “slut,” she seems to refuse Lucy Snowe’s burden of shame.

In the novel, however, Lucy’s pleasure is short-lived; her relationships with men named Paul are (like Lucy Snowe’s) limited by the tendency of those men to view women as objects of dominance or possession. Her boyfriend Paul’s role is doubled in Lucy’s life by a connection with another Paul—the painter Gaugin. On a museum visit encouraged by Mariah, Lucy “immediately identified with the yearnings of this man,” despite her awareness of what separates them: “He had the perfume of the hero about him. I was not a man; I was a young woman from the fringes of the world, and when I left my home I had wrapped around my shoulders the mantle of a servant” (Kincaid, _Lucy_ 95). Once again, Lucy is able to identify with images of rebellion across gender, history, and ideology. But her relationship with her boyfriend Paul reminds her of the limitations of such attempts at dissonant identification. An ominous note sounds early in their relationship, when he takes her on a drive to “an old mansion in ruins,
formerly the home of a man who had made a great deal of money in the part of the world that I was from, in the sugar industry. I did not know this man, but if he hadn't been already dead I would have wished him so” (129). Soon enough, Paul reveals that in his eyes she is the object—exotic muse and model—rather than the subject of those yearnings she identified with in Paul Gauguin: “[Paul] . . . gave me a photograph he had taken of me standing over a boiling pot of food. In the picture I was naked from the waist up; a piece of cloth, wrapped around me, covered me from the waist down. That was the moment he got the idea he possessed me in a certain way, and that was the moment I grew tired of him” (155). Both boyfriend-Paul and his implicit namesake Gauguin recall Villette’s M. Paul, who wants to see Lucy Snowe as the one of the panels of “la vie d’une femme,” the domestic angel; Lucy Potter’s Paul sees in her the image of one of Paul Gauguin’s Tahitian women represented as sexually available to European men. The two masculine views, the domestic sexually repressive and the transnational sexually libertine, converge on the same possession of the feminine object, suggesting that the transgression represented by Lucy’s assumed identity of “slut” is not, in itself, enough to reverse the gaze or install Lucy in the position of the subject.

Both Villette and Lucy end ambiguously, with the protagonist isolated and mourning, on the one hand, but having established the authority to tell her tale, on the other. In Villette, all three of these elements are expressed indirectly. Brontë implies rather than describes the loss at sea of M. Paul by invoking “a thousand weepers.” “There is enough said,” Lucy concludes, “Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope” (Brontë, Villette 617). An audience and therefore an author are suggested by the address to “sunny imaginations”; audience and author are also invoked by Lucy’s final word, “Farewell” (618). But Lucy Snowe is not explicitly depicted as writing, or even as narrating orally to anyone in particular. Indeed, whenever Lucy Snowe engages in creative expression—when she performs in M. Paul’s play; when, at his behest, she writes an essay on “Human Justice”—she represents herself as doing so under duress and with reluctance. Any sense of Lucy Snowe (as distinct from Brontë) as an author remains only implicit.

Kincaid, however, holds out more possibility: unlike Brontë, she projects a future for her protagonist not just as a viewer or subject but as the creator of representational art. Lucy’s creative activities are facilitated not by the men in her life but by her visits to a museum to which Mariah, seeing her interest, gives her a membership. Lucy’s interest in photography expands on and revises Lucy Snowe’s relation to painting. Lucy Snowe,
in a defense of realism that is obviously also a defense of Brontë’s own methods, objects to paintings that are “not a whit like nature,” finding satisfaction only in “fragments of truth here and there which satisfied the conscience, and gleams of light that cheered the vision. Nature’s power here broke through in a mountain snow-storm . . . an expression in this portrait proved clear insight into character” (Brontë, *Villette* 249). Lucy Potter, as she becomes interested in photography, rejects Mariah’s travel albums, posed depictions of a happiness falsified by the crumbling of Mariah’s marriage, and instead takes quotidian pictures of “the children eating toasted marshmallows; a picture of them with their bottoms facing the camera . . . a picture of Mariah in the middle of an elaborate preparation of chicken and vegetables cooked slowly in red wine” (Kincaid, *Lucy* 120–21). While it’s hard to imagine Lucy Potter admiring a painted “mountain snow-storm” (as irrelevant to her national imaginary as Wordsworth’s daffodils), or Lucy Snowe amused by a photograph of children’s “bottoms,” in their different contexts both Lucys are champions of realist representation—what Lucy Potter describes as “photographs of ordinary people in a countryside doing ordinary things, but for a reason that was not at all clear to me the people and the things they were doing looked extraordinary—as if these people and these things had not existed before” (115).

The difference, however, is that Lucy Potter begins to create such representations, while Lucy Snowe remains a viewer. In *Lucy’s* concluding paragraph, this contrast is extended into the realm of written narrative:

> Then I saw the [blank] book Mariah had given me. It was on the night table next to my bed. . . . At the top of the page I wrote my full name: Lucy Josephine Potter. . . . I could write down only this: “I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it.” And then as I looked at this sentence a great wave of shame came over me and I wept and wept so much that the tears fell on the page and caused all the words to become one great big blur. (163–64)

Lucy’s words here are as much haunted as liberated. They are haunted by the relations of global labor that have brought her to the United States and precipitated Mariah’s gift; by the colonial history that produced those relations, encoded in her three names; and by the loneliness and shame, shared with Lucy Snowe, over her unfulfilled longing for intimacy. (“I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it” echoes Lucy Snowe’s desire to “take up the nobler charge of labouring and living for
others.” This impression of haunted writing, the retrospective lure of literary identification, complicates Kincaid’s injunction to “Take. It’s okay,” by acknowledging that fictional forms are freighted with histories that cannot be erased even by the appropriations of dissonant identification or disidentification. Nevertheless, they propel Kincaid’s Lucy into a future in which she can be imagined as the subject, rather than the object, of narrative representation.

TSITSI DANGAREMBGA
THE LONELINESS OF POLITICS

Like Nervous Conditions, Dangarembga’s sequel, The Book of Not, begins strikingly with a familial loss—not the offstage death of a brother, but the vivid dismemberment of a sister: “Up, up, up, the leg spun. A piece of person, up there in the sky. Earth and acrid vapors coated my tongue. . . . In the darkness, Netsai’s leg arced up. Something was required of me! I was her sister, her elder sister. I was, by position, required to perform the act that would protect her. How miserable I was, for nothing lay in my power” (3). Netsai, who is fighting for the chimurenga, the African resistance to white minority rule in Rhodesia, has stepped on a land mine. The scene is one of literal collapse: Tambu’s mother falls to the ground in horror at her daughter’s injury, and her uncle Babamukuru lies beaten almost to death by the rebels in the civil war now raging. Having been brought to the scene of this morari (a gathering aimed to inspire political fervor) by her mother, Tambu is not indifferent, as she was at her brother’s death, but horrifically powerless. She can identify fully neither with the bloodlust roused in the villagers by oppression and resistance, nor with the dominant position of her white peers at school, from whom she must hide her connection to such events.

Like Lucy Potter, she is also haunted by her identification with her mother, whom, at sixteen, she sees as “nothing” (Dangarembga, Book of Not 31)—and yet whose embodiment of impoverished, uneducated, exploited femininity is precisely what propels Tambu’s dedication to escape. “You don’t see the contradiction,” she observes retrospectively, “when the front of your uniform has plumped out and you have been brought the three sensible elastic bras stipulated by the senior school’s clothes list . . . when you yearn to say to your mother, ‘I’ll give you a book’ so that she can sit first her grade seven and then her form two and then her O-Level certificate. . . . No, you don’t see the contradiction of
being astonished at being oneself so plenipotentiary and begging God to make you not like your mother” (11). Under these intolerable conditions of both physical and psychic contradiction, of external and internal civil war, Tambu frequently “forced [her]self into an emptiness; and yes, it is better where there is nothing so there is nothing to tell” (19). The beginning of the narrative thus repudiates the condition of narratibility—an ironic echo of George Eliot’s dictum that “the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history” (MoF 385). Over the course of the novel, this enforced “emptiness” will destroy all of Tambu’s opportunities for identification and intimacy; her retrospective narrative anatomizes closely the ways in which this social situation results from the racist condition of minority white domination. In adopting the genre of the school story, through the relations of the students and teachers at the elite Young Ladies’ Convent of the Sacred Heart, *The Book of Not* recapitulates both the intensity and the setting of *Villette* (as well as the setting of Enid Blyton’s formulaic series) while asserting the historical specificity of Tambu’s suffering under English colonial rule.

This opening scene indicates the novel’s distance from *Nervous Conditions*: in the threat and presence of violence; Tambu’s despairing conviction that “nothing lay in [her] power”; and most important her growing estrangement from those around her, a social world arrayed in oppositional pairs—“African” and white schoolgirls; resistance forces and accommodationist elites; family of origin and family of aspiration. Tambu scorns the poverty of her parental family of origin and fears their close involvement with the rebellion; the upward mobility of her uncle’s family, to which she aspires, is threatened not only by the violence directed at her uncle but also by her own increasing incapacity to maintain the role of perfect schoolgirl and obedient daughter that he demands. Tambu’s relationship to her peers at the Sacred Heart Convent exhibits a similar double bind, for her relationships with her fellow “African” students are fraught with intimacy and rivalry, and those with the white majority of the students with distance and racism. As Rosanne Kennedy writes, this is a novel of “unbecoming—of the loss of identity, feeling, and attachments. Despite her concentrated efforts to exercise agency over her life, Tambu is repeatedly thwarted: by the psychic damage she sustains as a result of internalizing a Eurocentric view of her African ‘inferiority,’ by her mother’s respect for tradition, and by the violent events she witnesses during the war” (89). In fact, Tambu’s stubborn, if sometimes self-defeating, efforts to bear herself as a human subject in relation to other human subjects suggest that she never fully internalizes that view of herself as an inferior self,
an object for others. Nevertheless, as a result of her internalization of, and attempts to navigate, these oppositions, the dominant affect of The Book of Not recalls and amplifies that of Villette—a pervasive and corrosive shame. Like Brontë’s novel, but in the physically as well as psychically violent twentieth-century context of colonialism and anti-colonial resistance, The Book of Not narrates the psychic costs of socially structured failures of identification and intersubjective relations.

After its horrific opening, The Book of Not seems to revert to Tambu’s upwardly mobile trajectory of Nervous Conditions, reflecting the resilience of its protagonist’s youth and the forward-looking conventions of the narrative of formation. Babamukuru recovers; Tambu’s sister survives the loss of her leg; and Tambu herself returns to school believing that she can overcome the experience of trauma. Back at Babamukuru’s mission for the holidays, she reflects, sounding like the Tambu of Nervous Conditions:

My possibilities were infinite in my present circumstances! This I truly believed, and was ready to face the little inconveniences to be dealt with along the way. All in all, I felt I was all right now, and so was the world. I was on a direct route to a future so bright it—or I in those tomorrows—would light up more than my community; probably, I imagined, the whole universe. . . . Taking my cue from my uncle, I was very glad to remind myself, with a degree of superior gloating over lesser individuals who did not have the ability, how you didn’t enter institutions just like [Sacred Heart] by playing. My list of lesser mortals included [her father and mother] Baba and Mai, whose better qualities were, as far as I could see, not more than an envious sluggishness. (Dangarembga, Book of Not 82)

Tambu’s optimistic project of a brightly blazing future self—“I in those tomorrows”—recalls the Lacanian infant’s “jubilant” identification with the integrated self it sees reflected, ahead of its own bodily control, in the mirror, and recalls, too, Lacan’s representation of this identification as a misrecognition. Tambu’s substitution of her uncle and aunt (“I was home for the holidays. Or more precisely, I was at the place I called home, which was the mission” [80]) for her own parents likewise recalls Freud’s “family romance,” the fantasy of substituting for one’s own, unsatisfactory, real parents more glamorous progenitors and objects of identification. By drawing attention to the fantasies undergirding Tambu’s self-recognition, the retrospective narrator reveals it as a dangerous lack of recognition.
The degree of feverish exaggeration with which the retrospectively narrating Tambu represents her former self’s thoughts also signals to the reader their roots in misrepresentation and fantasy. Tambu’s ideal of belonging and achievement at Sacred Heart can be maintained only by hiding most of her life from others—her association with Netsai, the traumatic events of that school break—and, even more destructively, from herself. Attempting to do so, she is haunted by the image of her sister—“walking backwards over those stones of learning and concentration, hopping, going hop-hop-hopla because she had only one leg. I could see her clearly as I sat in class” (Dangarembga, *Book of Not* 28). This distraction, and the need it causes for mental retreat, conflict with Tambu’s aspiration to rise above the social contexts of racism and violence by ignoring the body, by focusing steadily on the academic achievements available to her, working for a place on the school honor roll, high marks on her O levels, the school medal, and the A-level scores that will earn her a University scholarship. These academic achievements stretch out like crossbars on a bridge perilously suspended over the whirlpool of racism, poverty, and violent resistance; if she can avoid looking down or being pulled down, she can reach the bright abstraction of “those tomorrows.”

But the body in its most uncanny form—fragmented—continues to haunt her. Even away from the violence of war, images of dismemberment recur as an embodiment of the fracturing of Tambu’s subjectivity by racist projections. These images give a political particularity to Lacan’s discussion, in “The Mirror Stage,” of the “fragmented body . . . [which] is regularly manifested in dreams when the movement of an analysis reaches a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual. It then appears in the form of disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically represented” (6). For Lacan’s analyst and analysand this “aggressive disintegration of the individual” is the sign of a successful, if difficult, psychic challenge to the “donned armor of an alienating identity” (6) encouraged by a more or less repressive society. For Tambu, it is fragmentation itself, symbolic as well as literal, that is a sign of repression. Her white teachers and fellow students frequently express their racism through metaphorical dismemberment of African bodies. The school’s headmistress, informing the black students of quotas on their admission, jokes about cutting them up: “Sister Emmanuel pulled one corner of her mouth down, then up while her eyes frosted with a cold humor. ‘Whatever memoranda they send us, we aren’t going to chop anyone in half, nor in any other portion. That is what I called you here to inform you’” (Dangarembga, *Book of Not* 73). In the
dining hall, Tambu’s white peers subject her and her classmate Ntombi to an alienating, disintegrative gaze:

“Look at them,” said Bougainvillea, gazing first at my hand as it hovered over the butter dish, and then at Ntombizethu’s. . . . “They’ve both got such fine hands. Look at those amazing fingers! . . . It’s not just those two! . . . It’s all of them! . . . See!” Bougainvillea stretched out her own [hand] as if she would touch her classmate’s, but did not quite. “Just look at the shape of that nail, and that crescent, it’s a perfect half moon! Isn’t it wonderful!” (37–38)

Bougainvillea as a character is something like Villette’s Ginevra Fanshawe (and like her named after a flowering plant). Like Ginevra’s, her self-regard and equal lack of regard for others of others have a kind of riveting candor. Like Ginevra’s gloating positioning of herself and Lucy in front of the looking-glass at Madame Beck’s, Bougainvillea’s insistent scrutiny offers Tambu a kind of mirror. Tambu sees herself in Bougainvillea’s gaze as fragmented and objectified; the reflection that this scrutiny offers is the opposite of the reflection by the other that, whether negatively (as in Lacan’s mirror stage) or positively (as in Winnicott) enables the ego-construction of the normative subject.

That such fragmentation is devastating to the young Tambu calls into question a celebration, in postmodern theory and literature, of fragmentation over a coherence that is assumed to be always false. As Lynne Layton observes, “In postmodern work that lauds indeterminacy, fragmentation is essentialized, universalized, and celebrated in a way that seems not to acknowledge what it feels like to experience it. As in the Lacanian frame, here, too, fragments do not derive from specific relational interactions or specific historical circumstances. But Lacanian theory situates the subject firmly within a patriarchal family structure, whereas the work on the play of fragments suggests that nothing constrains gender performances” (124). On the contrary, Layton insists, “fragmentation arises historically, from public and private developmental traumas” (139). Tambu’s response to her situation indeed illustrates both Layton’s perception that fragmentation itself is often the product of trauma and Lacan’s insight that the attachment to wholeness is dangerous in itself. Tambu is placed in an impossible position, and efforts to resist the fragmenting gaze lead her to an equally problematic identification: “Tracey was looking into her milk mug with embarrassment. . . . [I] decided this was a good way to distance
myself from what was going on and imitated [her] concentration” (Dans-
garembga, Book of Not 38). Tambu cannot reject the gaze entirely but can only identify with the less overtly racist white girl in the scene, who later will be awarded the school trophy that Tambu should have won.

Dangarembga most immediately draws for her psychological schema on Frantz Fanon’s theorization of a black internalization of and identification with the white racist fetishization of dark skin as a mark of otherness and abjection. Tambu resembles Fanon’s “black child [who] subjectively adopts a white man’s attitude” (Fanon 127) and has a “solely negating” experience of her own body (Fanon 90). In particular, she has internalized a taboo against contact between white and black skin. When her favorite (white) teacher, concerned, reaches out to touch her, “I was appalled at having let my skin and this white person’s touch. . . . I started with all my muscles to pull away. I was horrified to see my hand disobedient and motionless” (Dangarembga, Book of Not 32). The “disobedien[ce]” of Tambu’s hand might stem from an unwilled desire for the teacher’s forbidden touch or an equally unwilled rebellion against the racist taboo, but what it most immediately seems to represent is Tambu’s lack of control over her own person—her identification with a view of herself as not subject but object. In a passage that also focuses on the movement of the hand, Fanon suggests that the ability to control bodily movement mentally is a mark of coherent subjectivity:

I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to stretch out my right arm and grab a pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. As for the matches, they are in the left drawer, and I shall have to move back a little. And I make all these moves, not out of habit, but by implicit knowledge. A slow construction of my self as a body in a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It is not imposed on me; it is rather a definitive structuring of my self and the world—definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world.

(90–91)

Here, Fanon, like Layton above, emphasizes the importance of a bodily sense of wholeness—an “implicit knowledge” that enables a “definitive structuring of my self and the world.” This “schema” is not socially “imposed,” and unlike the “orthopaedic” form of wholeness that for Lacan becomes the “armor of an alienating identity that will mark [the individual’s] entire mental development with its rigid structure” (6), it remains “dialectic” in its relation to the other. Throughout The Book of
Not, however, this “definitive structuring” and the dialectical experience that it enables remain unavailable to Tambu, replaced by a white-imposed structure that intends to obliterate her. In another instance, she unwittingly ends up fighting with another mistress, Miss Plato, over a bedsheet and momentarily fails to recognize her own voice speaking (Dangarembga, Book of Not 56). Such moments of dissociation recall those of Lucy Snowe, also adrift in a community of girls and women in which she is a national and cultural outsider, regarded with suspicion or indifference. In Tambu’s case, however, such depersonalization is a direct result of the violent racism of colonialist dispossession—she is displaced within her own homeland and within her own skin.

The problem is not just that Tambu’s body continually eludes her control, but even more that its control is skillfully, lethally disassembled by and in view of her white classmates and teachers. Many occasions draw attention to bodily realities, of mutilation, hunger, and excretory functions that, for Tambu, reinforce a view of herself and her black classmates as less than fully civilized—embodied to the point of bestiality or monstrousness. On one occasion, torn between a desire not to be late and a need to move her bowels, she makes the fateful decision to use a more convenient white girls’ bathroom. Discovered by the matron, she exits the stall in humiliation, “without sufficient care of my nether regions, which felt messily moist and sticky,” and is then reprimanded for having failed, in her haste, to flush the toilet: “I who, unlike a lot of the other girls in my dormitory, had sat on flushing toilets at an early age [was] now being humiliated in this fashion!” (Dangarembga, Book of Not 67). The reader familiar with Tambu’s early history, in Nervous Conditions, might here remember her first encounter with a flush toilet, on arriving at Babamukuru’s house: “I had not used a panelled toilet before so it was necessary to experiment. I climbed on to the seat and squatted, first facing the cistern and then, more comfortably, facing away from it” (79). In this earlier context, still surrounded by family and optimistic about the future, Tambu registers some embarrassment at her lack of sophistication, but more confidence in her ability to adapt (and she is given enough privacy to do so). In The Book of Not, by contrast, Tambu experiences a shame that causes her to disavow her relationship to those “other girls in [her] dormitory”—that is, to earlier versions of her own self. This disavowal also recalls Tambu’s attempt to distance herself through pity from Ntombi, whose father is “responsible for the toilets” at a school. As Kathryn Stockton observes, “Freud . . . spelled out the ‘civilized’ assumption that moral and economic progress together require one to leave one’s attachment to the bottom
behind” (68). Here, the abjection of Tambu, who embraces such assumptions and would like to “leave . . . the bottom behind,” is enforced through the insistent public identification of her with those “nether regions”: her experience literalizes the metaphor of being treated like shit. Such treatment, in the school as in the society at large, enables a numerical white minority to project the status of minority—that is, abject—subjectivity onto and into the majority black population.

Striving after academic achievement, Tambu attempts to solve the problem of her identification with the fragmented or filthy body by reducing the amount of space occupied by her “person” to almost nothing. She cannot, however, get away from the body—her own memories of Ntswa’s amputated leg; her embodiment as black and female; her classmates’ and instructors’ objectification of her and reduction of her to bodily fragments and processes. In any case, she is always doomed to lose, because where their metaphoric reduction of the African students fails, the nuns and white students can resort to exercises of direct power. When Tambu receives the best O-level results in the school, the school trophy for this achievement goes instead to the white student, Tracey, who comes second, on the patently specious grounds that “‘This young lady . . . is also a champion swimmer’” (Dangarembga, Book of Not 155). Rather than take in fully the implications of this injustice, Tambu blames herself: “There must have been a mistake in the results, otherwise, as my uncle had pointed out concerning the report Sister Emmanuel once wrote, the headmistress would not have done it. . . . How afraid I was that in fact I was worth nothing” (157). Like Kincaid’s Lucy, the younger Tambu was an eager reader of Enid Blyton’s school stories. Her experience at Sacred Heart drives her, reluctantly, closer and closer to confronting the difference between the jolly world of Blyton’s Mallory Towers and Saint Claire’s and the one that she, as an “African student,” is forced to occupy.

In the last quarter of the book, the narrative tempo accelerates, at one point leaping over years before refocusing on daily life. When an increasingly disturbed Tambu does poorly on her A-levels, her angry uncle reveals that it was her mother who betrayed him to the rebels at the morari. Tambu, who vows “never to talk to [her mother] Mai again” (Dangarembga, Book of Not 192), is now thoroughly dispossessed, her dreams of bright tomorrows banished, and undertakes a series of temporary jobs (194). The arrival of Independence (in 1979, though Dangarembga does not note the date), and the subsequent departure of many white Rhodesians, abruptly open a place in the university to Tambu despite her exam results, and finally—possibly through the intervention of her white former
classmate, Tracey, now an account executive—she becomes a copywriter at an advertising agency.

At this point, post-Independence, narrative time slows and the narrative seems to repeat itself. Tambu’s experience working at the largely white firm of Steers, D’Arcy, and MacPedius and living in a nearby women’s hostel recapitulates her experience at Sacred Heart, producing the same failures of identification and intimacy, daily experiences of racism, inter- and intraracial rivalry, and exploitation. Just as the black “nannies,” or meal-servers, at Sacred Heart, “when they set a jug or plate before Ntombi or me . . . smack it down with a jut of the chin and spills, as though slapping a hard, crushing thing down on obnoxious crawling objects” (Dangarembga, Book of Not 46), so the “tea boy” at Steers “pass[es] up the office handing out mugs,” only to “snarl[] at me in Shona. ‘I’m not your boy, I’m not your servant, he!’” (219). Just as Tracey accepted, while at Sacred Heart, the medal that should have gone to Tambu, so now “the new Tracey, in the new Zimbabwe, advertising executive for Afro-Shine, a local product by young entrepreneurs in baggy suits” (216), patronizes and bosses Tambu and colludes with a white copywriter, Dick, to let him take the credit for very successful copy written for the Afro-Shine campaign by Tambu. This appropriation finally causes her to resign. She returns to the hostel to find that, just as Sister Emmanuel once threatened to expel her (89), so her landlady is evicting her: “‘If you’re that unhappy here . . . um . . . ’ she decided not to risk specification and continued ‘. . . my dear, I’m sure you could find somewhere else that suits you’” (244). The white landlady does not “risk specification” because she consistently confuses Tambu with another black resident, Isabel. Tambu’s narrative thus ends with her loss not just of external and contingent supports—her job, her home—but also of central features of identity by which the subject usually hopes to make herself known: her own thoughts, her own name. Racism and white domination mean that Tambu’s self has been formed not through positive forms of identification—not even through the reappropriation of dissonant identifications achieved by Brontë’s or Kincaid’s Lucy—but by the vicious misidentifications of others, which she has internalized: as a result, she is almost literally, at the end of the novel, unrecognizable as a subject.

She is as unrecognizable to herself as to others: “I could not go back to the homestead where Netsai hopped unspeakably on a single limb, and where Mai would laugh at me daily. I had forgotten all the promises made to myself and providence while I was young concerning carrying forward with me the good and human, the unhu of my life. . . . So this evening I
walked emptily to the room I would soon vacate, wondering what future there was for me, a new Zimbabwean” (Dangarembga, *Book of Not 246*). As the stress on emptiness indicates, this lack of recognition is ominous. Tambu’s self-characterization here as “a new Zimbabwean” seems more ironic than hopeful, since it is the term she also used to characterize Tracey, with whom her relationship has not changed from the “old” Zimbabwe. Like Lucy Snowe and Lucy Potter, Tambu is an exile; unlike them, she is an exile in her own land, cut off from both the consolatory fantasy of a prior national identity (such as Lucy Snowe nourishes) or the emancipatory possibilities of leaving a prior nationality behind, of an elsewhere that will allow her to begin anew.

Dismemberment still haunts her, in the vision of Netsai, “hop[ping] unspeakably on a single limb.” Unspeakability or “the curse on passing observations” (Dangarembga, *Book of Not 23*) is something that Tambu frequently notes as a sapping feature of the “new Zimbabwe”: “People thronged the streets [at Independence] rejoicing so thoroughly that there was no place for remembering the acts their hands and their feet, and their teeth, and the fingers, boots, and mouths of their children committed. So we never remembered and grieved together as women sorrow in groups many years after a birth” (196). Here, failure to remember is figuratively joined to the trope of dismemberment, through the attribution of the *chimurenga*’s violence to body parts, rather than persons. Failure to remember is indeed, as Dangarembga represents it, a kind of historical dismemberment, a disjoining of the present moment from the body of history.

The unsettled question is whether Netsai’s haunting single limb is a synecdoche for the disintegration of the self, or, on the contrary, for its persistence: she has, after all, survived. The very fact of Tambu’s narration, emerging from her own persistently whole body, and her ability to continue wondering about the future might also be taken as signs of hope for reversing these conditions of unspeakability and dismemberment. Kennedy acknowledges that the novel ends “bleakly” but finds some hope in the “release from her melancholic pattern of repetition” indicated by Tambu’s resignation of her position and renewed concern for *unhu*, or the practice of mutual recognition, in which Kennedy reads a “belated recognition that [Tambu’s] desire for success and recognition is implicated in the same hierarchical structures of colonialism that have damaged her” (102). Nevertheless, the novel ends on notes of loss and irresolution, and the question of whether the “melancholic pattern of repetition” in which Tambu finds herself trapped is individual or amenable to individual, rather than societal, reform remains up in the air.
The narrative of *The Book of Not* demonstrates the destructive effects of the failure of identification in its fullest operation—as the basis for mutual recognition. The novel’s relationship to its audience, as well as its construction of its characters, demonstrates some of these effects as well. Speaking of the novel’s effect on readers, Dangarembga says:

One of the points that came up in a reading [in Leeds] was what a painful read *The Book of Not* can be. One has to see that whole world unfolding as Tambudzai herself experiences it, and yet the reader also stands outside it so one can see the damage that is being wrought. My mother said the same thing. She said she got to one part of the book and had to put it away for several weeks before she went back to it. But interestingly, people do go back. I am aware that it is not a comfortable read, as perhaps *Nervous Conditions* was. And I was aware that people would wonder why it wasn’t so comfortable [laughs] but these things happen. (Rooney 62)

What makes the book less “comfortable” to read than *Nervous Conditions* is not only the presence of both inter- and intraracial conflict but also the greater distance between Tambu’s consciousness of the experiences she relates and the reader’s analysis of those experiences. Readers’ identification with the protagonist is mediated by the desire to repel Tambu’s own intimacy with depersonalization. Dangarembga suggests that this knowledge is as painful to represent as to read: “I do find it very difficult—especially in *The Book of Not* where the racism that Tambudzai experiences impacts very negatively on her—and she does not find a way of fighting it. It was very difficult for me to enter into that circumstance in the way that I needed to in order to make Tambudzai’s reactions credible. . . . One element was the whole process of having to understand Tambudzai’s psyche, to understand how minds can be so totally colonised. That really was a big process for me: I gritted my teeth and went through it” (Rooney 58). For author as well as for readers, identification with a self that has been “totally colonised” by the misidentifications of racism registers as painful and threatening.

Nevertheless, as Dangarembga observes, “people do go back,” even if occasionally they have to grit their teeth. Stark evocations of the unmaking produced by racist and colonialist histories run through Dangarembga’s work: her first published short story, “The Letter” (1985) is about a South African woman who is arrested because she cannot bear to part with the incriminating letter she has received from her husband, a politi-
cal dissident in hiding; Dangarembga’s play *She No Longer Weeps* (1987) concludes with its Zimbabwean protagonist, defeated by patriarchal oppression, about to go to jail for killing her ex-lover. Yet in interviews, Dangarembga speaks less about anger than about the power of narrative representation of all kinds: “I am conscious of the fact that, because I have been so very deeply affected by narratives—whether poetry, prose or film—that there have been certain turning points in my life created by these narratives. I am aware of the impact that narratives can have on people, and am very conscious that I need to guide the work so it has a positive impact” (Rooney 59).

It is hard to find statements of such directly didactic intent in the comments of Brontë or Kincaid on their work. Brontë asserts, perhaps disingenuously, that she “cannot write books handling the topics of the day. . . . Nor can I write a book for its moral” (*Selected Letters* 30 October 1852). Kincaid emphasizes personal expression and embraces anger; Judith Halberstam includes Kincaid in a heterogeneous but suggestive list of “antisocial writers, artists and texts” whose “dyke anger, anticolonial despair, racial rage, counterhegemonic violence, punk pugilism” comprise an “antisocial turn” in contemporary literature (“Politics of Negativity” 824). As I hope I have demonstrated, however, representations of an at least partly “counterhegemonic” anger and despair have nineteenth-century antecedents, and their representation, whether then or now, is not necessarily “anti-social.” The paradox of these novels’ address is that, although they depict the more-than-marginalization—the rendering of self into abject other—of their protagonists, for their readers, these protagonists are inevitably not marginal but central. Certainly the anger or despair of Brontë, Kincaid, and Dangarembga has sometimes discomfited or driven away readers. But when we do read, we are invited, perhaps even impressed, into a situation in which, as readers, we have the power to offer the recognition that the other characters have withdrawn. These novels leave no doubt that such recognition is, for the subject, a matter of life and death, and thus a profoundly social concern.