

**“SO YOU ARE FROM THE
ISLANDS?” THE
ARTICULATION OF
STRUCTURAL AND
HISTORICAL TRAUMA IN
JAMAICA KINCAID’S
*LUCY***

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Abstract

The transposition of the medical concept of “trauma” to the field of literary criticism in the 1990s inaugurated a new theoretical trend, “Trauma Studies”, a spin-off of the so-called “turn to ethics” in the Humanities, born, partly, as an attempt to come to terms with the traumas inflicted by colonialism. This essay analyses the ways in which the coordinates of imperialism traverse Lucy —the protagonist of Kincaid’s homonymous novel— in the light of Trauma Studies. LaCapra’s distinction between structural and historical traumas and his re-elaboration of the Freudian concept of working through, will be drawn upon in order to better understand this coming-of-age story. I will also resort to Mowitt’s “trauma envy” and Delrez’s “settler envy”, to

Resumen

La transposición del concepto médico de “trauma” al campo de la crítica literaria en la década de los noventa del siglo XX inauguró una nueva escuela de teoría, los “Estudios de Trauma”, considerados un subproducto de lo que se conoce como “la vuelta a la ética” en las Humanidades y nacidos, en parte, en un intento de dar respuesta a los traumas infligidos por el colonialismo. Este artículo analiza cómo las coordenadas del imperialismo marcan a Lucy, la protagonista de la novela homónima de Kincaid, a la luz de los Estudios de Trauma. La distinción de LaCapra entre el trauma estructural y el trauma histórico y su aproximación al concepto freudiano de “re-elaboración” resultan particularmente interesantes para una mejor comprensión de esta novela de formación. Recurriré asimismo a los conceptos de “envidia del trauma” (Mowitt) y “envidia del colono” (Delrez) con la intención de estudiar cómo el trauma en esta obra no es

study how trauma is not the prerogative of the ex-colonial subjects. Reading *Lucy* against the trauma paradigm casts light not only on its thematic concerns but also on Kincaid's choice of narrative mode, as *Lucy* is a limit-case autobiography, a form that merges trauma and self-representation.

Keywords: structural trauma, historical trauma, trauma envy, settler envy, limit-case autobiography.

exclusivo de los antiguos sujetos coloniales. La lectura de *Lucy* desde los postulados de la crítica del trauma arroja luz no solo sobre las preocupaciones temáticas de la novela sino también sobre la elección de modo narrativo por parte de Kincaid, ya que *Lucy* se puede leer como una autobiografía límite, una forma textual que combina el trauma y la auto-representación.

Palabras clave: trauma estructural, trauma histórico, envidia del trauma, envidia del colono, autobiografía límite.

This essay revisits Jamaica Kincaid's 1990 novel *Lucy* from the perspective of Trauma Studies, a discipline that has proved to be a productive critical tool for understanding the various traumatic disruptions that characterise colonial and postcolonial dynamics. Critics like Laura Niesen de Abruna, Moira Ferguson and Giovanna Covi, writing shortly after the novel was published, already pointed out the close connection between the story of coming of age of the homonymous protagonist and the history of dispossession of her native Caribbean island. Lucy's relationships with her homeland, her family of origin and the US family which takes her in as an au pair, can be further explored as manifestations of structural and historical trauma, two categories Dominick LaCapra establishes in order to distinguish between a kind of trauma that is of a universal nature and an altogether different kind that affects particular individuals living under certain historical circumstances. Interestingly, and concomitantly, the novel also proves fertile ground for the analysis of what some scholars have called "trauma envy" and, more specifically, "settler envy". The reactions of Mariah, Lucy's white employer in the US, to her experience of dislocation and imperialist imposition are meant to be sympathetic, but also denote an attempt, however unconscious, to appropriate the traumatic history of the colonised peoples. To approach *Lucy* in the light of Trauma Studies opens up a further dimension, as it poses questions about the nature of representation itself. As many a critic has noted, the difficulties of articulating the various forms of trauma in fiction have led authors to redraw the borders of traditional narrative modes. This is precisely the main thesis of Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001), a study of how the current proliferation of life-writing genres is intimately connected to the new trauma paradigm. Gilmore devotes the chapter entitled "There Will Always Be a Mother" to reading Kincaid's semi-autobiographical saga as an example of "texts about trauma that test the limits of autobiography" (2001:3) and turn self-referential

writing into “an expansive, extendible system of meaning, one that enables readers to do much more than search out sources, proof or evidence of a corresponding reality” (100). My analysis of the novel will thus take into account not only trauma as theme but also these more formal concerns as well.

“So you are from the islands?” This is how Dinah, a white North-American, first addresses Lucy, a nineteen-year-old black West Indian girl, now working in the United States as an au pair for Dinah’s friend Mariah. “The way she said it”, states Lucy,

made a fury rise up in me. I was about to respond to her in this way: ‘Which islands exactly do you mean? The Hawaiian Islands? The islands that make up Indonesia, or what?’ And I was going to say it in a voice that I hoped would make her feel like a piece of nothing, which was the way she had made me feel in the first place. (Kincaid 2002:56)

The white woman’s insensitive remark and Lucy’s never-uttered angry reply show that the bildungsroman unfolds against the backdrop of an imperial past and its long-lasting consequences, reaching well into the post-colonial present. Like Jamaica Kincaid herself, Lucy, her fictional alter ego, is part of the twentieth-century Afro-Caribbean diaspora, a side-effect of colonialism, which brought about, in the words of Philip Kasinitz, “chronic overpopulation, scarce resources, seclusion, and limited opportunities to small island nations” (in Sagar 1994:472). Lucy has her own personal reasons for emigrating. Her one-time fulfilling relationship with Annie, her mother, has turned into a suffocating bond that hampers her development as a person: “I had come to feel that my mother’s love for me was designed solely to make me into an echo of her; and [...] I would rather be dead than become just an echo of someone” (36). The analysis of the mother-daughter relationship is a staple in the criticism of Kincaid’s work. Scholars like H. Adlei Murdoch (1990), Laura Niesen de Abruna (1991), Eleanor Ty (1993) and Simone A. James Alexander (2001), among several others, have written extensively on the ambivalent relationship between Kincaid’s protagonists and their biological and surrogate mothers. They have also delved into how the figure of the mother reverberates in Kincaid, as well as in other postcolonial authors, with echoes of the colonial Motherland. The intricacies of Lucy’s relationship with her mother, echoed and complicated in the way she relates to Mariah, will be next approached within the framework of Trauma Studies.

In his work *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), Dominick LaCapra makes an important distinction between structural trauma and historical trauma. Structural trauma, he states, “is related to [...] transhistorical absence [...] and appears in different ways in all societies and all lives” (2001:76-77). “Everyone is subject to structural trauma”, he remarks (79). One of the ways in which this kind of

trauma can be evoked is the separation from the (m)other (77). In contrast, historical trauma “is specific, and not everyone is subject to it” (78). He relates it to “particular events that [...] involve losses”, such as the Holocaust, the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, slavery and the apartheid (80, 81). Drawing on the Freudian legacy, LaCapra also mentions and elaborates on three complementary ways of dealing with trauma: denial, acting out and working through. In fact, what distinguishes his work from that of other scholars in the field is his emphasis on working through trauma, that is, the need to overcome trauma over and above the denial or the compulsive repetition of the traumatic event. Denial and acting out may be necessary stages in the process, he says, but it is working through that enables individuals to face up to their traumatic pasts and fully re-engage in life. As LaCapra puts it, “to the extent one works through trauma [...] one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one’s people) back then, while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future” (22). The process of working through, however, is more difficult in the case of structural trauma, since it is more of a condition than a specific problem derived from a particular historical event. Structural trauma can be mitigated or counteracted to a certain degree, but it is “dubious to believe that one can overcome or transcend structural trauma or constitutive absence to achieve full intactness, wholeness, or communal identity” (84). One of the reasons why structural trauma cannot be cured is its ambivalence, the mixture of anxiety and elation it evokes. By contrast, the legacy of historical trauma can be worked through, LaCapra defends, “in order to further historical, social, and political specificity, including the elaboration of more desirable social and political institutions and practices” (85). The acting out of the traumatic event gives way to a process of mourning that offers “the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or ‘recathexis’ of, life that [allows] one to begin again” (LaCapra 1998:45).

Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* participates in the interest in self-representation, confession and testimony that characterises contemporary culture, and that, according to Leigh Gilmore (2001:2), is intrinsically connected with current fictional and non-fictional representations of trauma. The novel is a first person account of Lucy’s new life in an unnamed city in the United States. She relates her love-hate relationship both with her mother Annie and with Mariah—the mother in the family she works for—, describes the apparently perfect relationship between husband and wife that ends in Mariah’s divorcing Lewis, who is having an affair with her friend Dinah, and talks about her new friends and about her past and present sexual life.

It is the central theme of the mother-daughter relationship that can be read as the main site of personal trauma in the novel. The normal predicaments

accompanying the separation from the mother are further complicated in the case of Lucy by her displacement as an only child. Lucy's relationship with her biological mother changed dramatically after the birth of her three brothers. Up to the age of nine she had been an only child and she now feels neglected by her mother. Since the moment her brothers are born, her parents start making plans for them to go to university in England and become doctors or lawyers. No similar future is planned out for Lucy, who begins to call her mother to herself Mrs Judas: "I began to plan a separation from her that even then I suspected would never be complete" (130-131). Lucy's words echo LaCapra's: structural trauma, as a condition, cannot be fully overcome. The culmination of her estrangement from her mother is her decision to move to the United States and never return to her native island. Once there, she breaks all contact with her family and refuses to reply to, and even read, the letters her mother writes to her, to the point that she has to be informed of her father's death by an acquaintance visiting the States. The long-term effects of separation from the mother are described by Lucy in the following terms: "for ten of my twenty years, half of my life, I had been mourning the end of a love affair, perhaps the only true love in my whole life I would ever know" (132). As is usually the case with manifestations of structural trauma, Lucy derives both pain and pleasure from her mother's absence and from her efforts to counteract her influence, as she admits in a letter she writes after her father's death: "I remembered her that my whole upbringing had been devoted to preventing me from becoming a slut; I then gave a brief description of my personal life, offering each detail as evidence that my upbringing had been a failure and that, life as a slut was quite enjoyable, thank you very much" (127-128).

Leigh Gilmore draws on Julia Kristeva in order to contextualise the "trauma of the daughter's individuation from the mother" (105). In her opinion, Lucy "embraces abjection passionately, makes an erotics of it, and glories in its pains" (105). Abjection –the rejection of the gross materiality of the (m)other– is the entrance fee to the symbolic. "To enter into language and become a self, the child must abandon the blissful continuity it experiences with the mother's body" (105). The mother as "the all-embracing matrix" (105) must be expelled, since she now "threatens the establishment of an autonomous identity" (105). This is no easy process. Despite all efforts to throw out what remains of her mother in her, Maud – Annie's emissary– can still detect her presence: "You remind me of Miss Annie, you really remind me of your mother" (123). "I'm not like my mother. She and I are not alike. She should not have married my father. 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 have ignored someone like you. I'm not like her at all" (123). Between Lucy's two denials –"I'm not like my mother", "I'm not like her at all"– lies a string of sentences all expressing obligation, all beginning

with the pronoun “she”, which perfectly expresses Lucy’s uncertain position in her process of individuation. The “she”, “she”, “she”, “she”, “she”, “she” can be read as both a symptom of the overwhelming presence of the mother in her and a desperate attempt on Lucy’s part to spit her out, while the repetition of “should” evokes the laws and obligations that characterise the symbolic order in which the “social I” is constituted. Earlier in the novel Lucy reveals she carries letters from family and friends inside her brassiere: “I carried them around with me wherever I went. It was not from feelings of love and longing that I did this; quite the contrary. It was from a feeling of hatred. [...] isn’t it so that love and hate exist side by side?” (20).

A similar love-hate relationship develops between Lucy and her employer, another powerful (m)other figure in the text. “The times that I loved Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother. The times that I did not love Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother” (58). Not that Mariah, a kind, well-meaning woman, does not do everything in her power to make Lucy happy. It is Lucy, in fact, that tries to keep her at a distance, as she does with her mother, in an attempt to assert her own personhood. Trying to bridge this distance and show her empathy, Mariah –a blonde, with blue eyes– tells Lucy she has Native American ancestors: “I was looking forward to telling you that I have Indian blood, that the reason I’m so good at catching fish and hunting birds and roasting corn and doing all sorts of things is that I have Indian blood. But now, I don’t know why, I feel I shouldn’t tell you that. I feel you will take it the wrong way” (39). Mariah is right. As she expects, Lucy is angry rather than pleased:

To look at her, there was nothing remotely like an Indian about her. Why claim a thing like that? I myself had Indian blood in me. My grandmother is a Carib Indian. But I don’t go around saying that I have some Indian blood in me. [...] To me my grandmother is my grandmother, not an Indian [...].

Mariah says, “I have Indian blood in me,” and underneath everything I could swear she says it as if she were announcing her possession of a trophy. “How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?” (40-41).

Lucy’s reaction to Mariah’s announcement resonates on various levels, all of them increasing rather than reducing the gap between them. Her looks, Lucy notices, seem to contradict her claim. Moreover, she cannot understand why Mariah is so proud of something she herself shares but does not boast about. She comments, as well, on her employer’s tendency to lose herself in abstract concepts while she, instead, is simply concerned with individuals. Lucy also senses and is suspicious of Mariah’s reification of the natives. Finally, besides reductively conflating the histories of dispossession of American Indians and Afro-Caribbeans, Mariah’s positioning herself as a surrogate victim, Lucy observes, collapses the categories of victimiser and victimised. This incident acquires full significance in

the context of the debate among trauma scholars about who can claim victimhood. Dominick LaCapra (2001:79) opposes the generalisation and appropriation of historical trauma, and insists on the need to distinguish between structural trauma, which everybody can experience, and the kind of trauma provoked by a specific historical event, as is the case with the effect of colonialism on the native populations and other exploited groups. In historical trauma and its representations, it is crucial to distinguish between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, LaCapra asserts. It is also important to distinguish between those who experienced the traumatic event directly and their descendants, who sometimes can claim to be suffering from the effects of trauma themselves.

Besides resonating with the complex issue of trans-generational trauma, Mariah's confession to Lucy also connects to the related concepts of "trauma envy" and "settler envy". Earlier in the novel, in relation to some childhood memories closely knitted to Lucy's experience of colonialism, Mariah tells her: "What a history you have". "There was a little bit of envy in her voice", Lucy thinks, "and so I said 'You are welcome to it if you like'" (19). "Envy", states Melanie Klein in "The Study of Envy and Gratitude", "is the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable –the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it" (in Mowitt 2000:291). According to John Mowitt, in the current climate in which "everything is potentially traumatic", trauma "is invested with such an authority and legitimacy that it elicits a concomitant desire to have suffered it" (2000:283). Moreover, the fact that traumas result "from the moral failings of their perpetrators" (282) provides trauma victims with something Mowitt calls "moral capital" (295), to the point that he has defined trauma as "the stunning wound that produces moral authority" (282). In the eyes of Mariah, Lucy's history of trauma places her –a clear representative of the white colonizer in the novel despite her claim to having Indian blood– in a position of moral inferiority and this stirs in her a desire to take possession of Lucy's wound. Significantly, Mowitt states, "envy shares a volatile border with guilt" (280). For Marc Delrez, trauma envy is a characteristic aspect of what he has labelled "settler envy", the appropriation of the founding traumatic experience of colonialism on the part of the perpetrators and their descendants, "a reversal of the respective position of the privileged and the underprivileged" (2010:56). In "Fearful Symmetries: Trauma and Settler Envy in Contemporary Australian Culture", Delrez warns against uncritically applying Trauma Studies to the former white settler colonies, since this runs the risk of glossing over the difference between "victors" and "vanquished" — as Lucy has it– contributing to "a fashionable discourse about the universality of trauma which tends to obscure historical and sociological specificities" (Delrez 2010:62).

Curiously enough, settler envy has developed in Australia in the midst of the country's process of reconciliation with its native population and it is precisely the settlers' empathy towards the Aborigines, Delrez states, that stirs "the desire to take possession of the wound itself" (57). Differences notwithstanding, what Delrez says in the context of contemporary postcolonial Australia can be extrapolated to the situation in the States at the time the action of *Lucy* unfolds. In fact, Mariah's boasting of her practical survival skills invites reading in the light of Delrez's theories. "Settler envy", affirms Delrez, drawing upon Haydie Gooder and Jane M. Jacobs, typically involves "some strategic gesturing towards 'an indigenous equivalence' [...]—a nativist posture that has been a long-standing one" (2010:56). "This kind of identity politics", continues Delrez, is what Terry Goldie described in his *Fear and Temptation* as "indigenization" (2010:56), something that can be spotted in Mariah's claim to Indian Blood. According to Delrez, in this process of reverse assimilation in which members of the dominant culture adopt the manners of the native population in order to assert for themselves an equal belonging to the land, "the settlers must be given [...] sacred places of their own" (61). By taking Lucy to the natural spots invested with meaning for her, Mariah reasserts her nativist tendencies: "She said we would leave the city and go to the house on one of the Great Lakes, the house where she spent her summers when she was a girl" (19). Extrapolating from Delrez, Mariah's "pastoralist past" (61) is, as he would put it, an instance of "legitimacy by proxy" (56).

That the structural trauma of the mother-daughter relationship is intricately connected in *Lucy* to the historical trauma of colonialism and slavery is hinted at in the way Annie, a colonial subject, has internalised the norms of imperialism and tries to pass them on to her daughter. But it is Mariah, her employer and surrogate mother, that more clearly reminds Lucy of the imperial background against which she tries to develop as an individual. Notice Lucy's comment on Mariah's reaction when she decides to leave the family and rent her own apartment: "Mariah spoke to me harshly all the time now, and she began to make up rules which she insisted that I follow; and I did, for after all, what else could she do? It was a last resort for her—insisting that I be the servant and she the master" (143). Mariah's earlier attempts at bridging the gap between coloniser and colonised revert to the power imbalance upon which the colonial enterprise is founded when she feels abandoned by Lucy.

The psychic repercussions of colonialism on Lucy are brought to the fore in an emblematic and oft-quoted scene. When spring comes, a season that is new to Lucy, Mariah tells her she is looking forward to seeing the daffodils in bloom. This triggers off an old memory in Lucy she had long forgotten. What Mariah welcomes as a pleasing manifestation of the arrival of spring, evokes in Lucy an experience of an altogether different nature. As a ten-year-old child and a pupil at Queen Victoria Girls' School, she had been made to memorize Wordsworth's poem on the

daffodils, a must in colonial education, and recite it in front of parents, teachers and her fellow pupils (18). Although she did it nicely and everybody congratulated her, she remembers it as a traumatic experience, one that she afterwards attempts to deny, but is, in fact, forced to act out. “Inside”, she says, “I was making a vow to erase from my mind, line by line, every word of that poem” (18). The following night she has a nightmare: “I dreamt, continuously it seemed, that I was being chased down a narrow cobbled street by bunches and bunches of those same daffodils that I had vowed to forget, and when finally I fell down from exhaustion they all piled on top of me, until I was buried deep underneath them and was never seen again” (18). The complete erasure of the subject under the weight of the British literary canon is at the same time an expression of the colonisers’ lack of interest and disregard for non-Western cultural forms. In the words of Victoria Burrows, “The British colonial curricula [...] indoctrinated children throughout the Empire with a sense of inferiority and alienation” (2004:72). As this shows, imperialism as historical trauma is also founded on cultural loss. Such is the force of Kincaid’s episode that, Burrows states, “the psychic displacement [...] between the embodied experiences of the colonised and the imposed phantasmatic economy of the [works] of such luminaries of the Western literary canon as Shakespeare, Milton, Keats and Wordsworth has been termed the ‘daffodil gap’ in contemporary postcolonial theory”.

As stated earlier in the paper, the representation of trauma in *Lucy* stretches the borders of form as well. In *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001), Leigh Gilmore analyses Kincaid’s novels as examples of limit-case autobiographies, “stories of personal pain” (2001:5) that question some of the traditional assumptions of the autobiographical genre and that have an overt socio-political function since “they have the power to voice events which have been silenced in the course of history” (147). “Everything in my writing is autobiographical –down to the punctuation”, admits the author herself in an interview (in Wachtel 1996:55). However, according to Gilmore (2001:100), “what and how the autobiographical signifies within and across her texts is fairly complicated”. Like several other contemporary writers, Jamaica Kincaid practises serial autobiography (Gilmore 96). Throughout six novels to date –*Annie John* (1985), *A Small Place* (1988), *Lucy* (1990), *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), *My Brother* (1997) and *Mr Potter* (2002), she weaves her “ongoing self-representational project” (Gilmore, 2001:97), offering fictionalised portraits of her family and herself against the backdrop of her native island. Self-representation is thus turned into an open-ended project, expanded with each new publication, “raising the spectre of endless autobiography” and engaging in this way with the ultimate limits of life and death (96, 97). “Writing multiple autobiographies offers a mode of writing against death”; it is a “way to resist the little death that ending an

autobiography represents” (97). As I see it, and extrapolating from Peter Brook’s famous study of plots and their relationship with the human end, Kincaid’s open-ended autobiographies can be read as attempts to defer the inevitable ending of the book which enacts the no less inevitable ending of reader and writer alike. The reader’s desire for death, dissolution and total knowledge is therefore frustrated and what emerges is the ongoing continuity of life over and above the faked completeness of traditional life-writing.

Kincaid stretches the limits of self-referential writing in a further sense. Characteristically, in her autobiographical novels “the subject-who-writes” is not “the subject-in-the-text” (97). By changing the names and the circumstances of her protagonists from novel to novel, she lays bare a central feature of traditional autobiography: “the author and protagonist [...] tend to be collapsed through the feature of their shared name into the same entity despite their significant and demonstrable differences”, Gilmore asserts (98). “To admit the difference between the writer of the text and the autobiographical protagonist” –as Kincaid does– “threatens the truthfulness of the scene for some readers and critics” and “reveals too clearly the constructedness of autobiography, both its inevitable affiliation with fiction and its recalcitrant realism” (98). It is not the stability of the I-figure that lends unity and coherence to Kincaid’s project, but the themes and “preoccupations that persist across texts” (98), such as “an interest in self-naming and renaming” (101), “the mother-daughter relationship as a site of enigmatic trauma”, “the legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean” and “a persistent even signatory anger” (102). Although these concerns are based on Kincaid’s personal experience, Gilmore is more interested in studying this dense intertextual net as “evidence of the biographical limits”, rather than in tracing the parallelisms with the author’s life. As she puts it, “*Lucy* depends as much upon the texts that go before and follow it, as it, or any single text, depends on its similarity to Kincaid’s life” (99). The fact that it is a first-person account of trauma further contributes to the destabilization of autobiographical conventions, especially the centrality of the sovereign self.

The subject in traditional autobiography is typically a stable unified entity. In contrast, the I-figure in *Lucy* is far from unified. Lucy is portrayed as a subject under construction, whose instability becomes even more patent by the end of the novel. Unlike the typical protagonist of the *Bildungsroman*, whose identity solidifies in the process of growing up, Lucy’s sense of self is more and more precarious as the novel progresses. The last chapter of the novel, entitled “Lucy”, foregrounds the question of names. “The function of a name”, Gilmore says, “is to identify, to stabilize meaning, to fix and hold in place. Except in Kincaid’s work” (102). It is not, in fact, until this final chapter that the protagonist is finally given a name. The personal and the historical meet once more as Lucy imagines Columbus naming all the lands he discovered (135) at the same time as she reflects about her

own name. For the first time in the book, she gives her full name as it appears on her official documents: Lucy Josephine Potter (149). She also recalls how, around the time she was leaving Mariah, she had told her that her life stretched out ahead of her like a book of blank pages (162-163), which had prompted Mariah to give her a notebook. Alone at home one night, Lucy sees the book: "Beside it lay my fountain pen full of beautiful blue ink. I picked up both, and I opened the book. At the top of the page I wrote my full name: Lucy, Josephine Potter" (163). But this further assertion of her individuality does not last long, as the very last paragraph of the novel shows:

At the sight of it, many thoughts rushed through me, but 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. (164)

For J.A. Brown-Rose (2009:55), Lucy's ending the novel in tears is a proof of "the paradox of defining the self in light of an oppressed and un-reconciled history". Lucy cries because all she has in the end are "her memories, her anger and despair" and because "she recognizes the losses she has had and the lack of hope in her future". I would like to suggest a different reading that does not assert the perpetuation of trauma. In my opinion the novel's open ending points at the possibility of Lucy's working through her trauma. After all, many a fictional character, and many a real person too, has been able to recover from trauma through what is often referred to as "the writing cure". The novel, I believe, invites reading in retrospect as a *Küntstlerroman*. Lucy's tears are in this sense cathartic, and signal, as water symbolically does, the idea of rebirth. In fact, it is on a similar note that the last chapter begins: "It was January again; [...] I was making a new beginning again" (133); "I was inventing myself" (134); "Your past is the person you no longer are, the situations you are no longer in" (137). The precariousness of Lucy's identity at the end of the novel can also be read in the light of Emmanuel Levinas's words in *Alterité et transcendence*, as she appears "without intentions, without aims, without the protective mask of the personage contemplating itself in the mirror of the world, reassured and posing [...]. Without name, titles or place in the world" (in Gibson 1999:39). The erasure of her name and her freshly acquired identity, her new vulnerability and her desire to love someone so much that she would die from it, are a proof that the dissolution of the self is a precondition for love of the other. As Levinas says of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Lucy's despair is "an inexhaustible source of hope" (in Gibson 1999:122). On a further level, Lucy's personal process of mourning tentatively opens the door to historical reconciliation, for, in the opinion of Dominick LaCapra (1998:43),

working through, like some other fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, undercuts “the binary opposition between the individual and society.”

In the course of this essay, Lucy has been analysed as the site of both structural and historical trauma. Her sense of personhood comes out of her troubled relationship with her mother and employer and is built upon the legacy of a colonial past. Structural trauma, affirms LaCapra, cannot be completely overcome. But it can be mollified to a certain degree. In this last chapter, Lucy’s anger towards the two mother figures has softened. It is in fact Mariah that is now angry at her parting: “It was a cold goodbye on her part. Her voice and face were stony. She did not hug me. I did not take any of this personally” (144). However, as Lucy foretells, “someday [they] would be friends again” (144). More importantly, perhaps, Lucy is eventually able to write to her mother on friendlier terms: “I told her that I would come home soon, and how sorry I was for everything that had happened to her. I did not say that I loved her. I could not say that” (140). “Full intactness, wholeness, or communal identity” (LaCapra 1998:84) are out of the question and out of reach. Besides, they are not what Lucy has achieved at the end of the novel. All her efforts to become a person culminate in a kenosis that links the idea of person to that of possibility. Embracing emptiness is embracing reinvention. For LaCapra, working through historical trauma is not only possible but also desirable. In the last analysis, it is in each and everyone of those who have suffered it that historical trauma can be worked through.

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