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These bloody flowers: The Aesthetics of Resentment in Multicultural Literature

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Abstract

Many contemporary Anglophone Caribbean writers resent their colonial education's emphasis on British literature, especially Wordsworth's "Daffodils" poem, which—as V.S. Naipaul, Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Jean Rhys, and Jamaica Kincaid complain—impelled them to admire a flower they had never seen. This essay explores the resentful aesthetics spurred by "the daffodil gap," a critical trope reflecting the disconnect between colonial education and lived experience. Multicultural literature's and criticism's emphasis on "decolonizing the curriculum" encourages the resentful denigration of classic and beloved texts. This essay also employs a close reading of "I wandered lonely as a cloud" to demonstrate how an aesthetics of resentment misconstrues Wordsworth's poem, which explores human consciousness rather than simply celebrating the beauty of a particular European flower.

Keywords: William Wordsworth, "I wandered lonely as a cloud," daffodil gap, colonial education, post-colonial literary studies, resentment, aesthetics, mimetic theory, #DisruptTexts, culturally inclusive curriculum

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This essay is dedicated to Edmond Wright, whose several demonstrations of the explicative power of Generative Anthropology graced the pages of *Anthropoetics* from 2008 until his passing in 2017. Edmond was a brilliant and witty man, with whom I shared a love for the poetry of William Wordsworth. At the 2015 Generative Anthropology Summer Conference dinner, Edmond held all the guests spellbound as he recited from memory—in its entirety—Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." His conference paper that year offered an intriguing paradoxical reading of the poem, and was subsequently published in *Anthropoetics* XXI, no. 1. For Edmond, memorizing poetry was a way of expressing love for the hard-won insights into human experience that these works can capture and transmit. For several decades now, large swathes of contemporary academia have disdained Wordsworth—along with many of the other "canonical" poets whose works I studied in the course of earning my PhD in English literature—for his late-life conservatism and the cultural/literary imperialism enacted by twentieth-century educators in the British Commonwealth, who forced their students to admire his poems about landscapes and objects they had never seen. I offer this essay in tribute to Edmond, and in the hope that it will embolden Wordsworth's current and future readers to allow their love for his poetry to counterbalance and overwhelm the resentment of literary greatness fomented by identity-based literary criticism.

Marlene NourbeSe Philip is a Caribbean-born Canadian novelist, poet, and essayist, whose multicultural coming-of-age novel, *Harriet's Daughter,* has been a mainstay of Canadian high school English courses since its publication in 1988. In a 2017 interview, Philip identified the "central image that sums English literature studies in the Caribbean" as "the daffodil," explaining that as a child in Trinidad, she and her fellow students "had to engage with Wordsworth's daffodils at some time, although we had never seen them." This amounted to an injustice, said Philip, because it was as if "our very futures depended on being able to write about these bloody flowers," instead of the "flora and fauna" of her native land. Voicing the common multicultural complaint that "colonial education" neglects students' need to "see ourselves reflected back to us," Philip proffered a corrective to what she saw as the unearned centrality of Wordsworth's most famous flower: "A daffodil is not a hibiscus, poinsettia, croton, or flamboyant," all of which are—unlike daffodils—native to the tropical clime in which she was born and raised (Zucker interview).

I first became aware of Philip's enmity for daffodils at a Romanticism conference in 2019, when a presenter approvingly referenced it. At the time I took it as an expression of the recently ascendant trend in academia to "decolonize the curriculum," an imperative observable from kindergartens to doctoral programs across Western Europe and North America. An afternoon's research, however, revealed that Caribbean writers' resentment of Wordsworth's most famous lyric goes back more than half a century, and is widespread enough to have launched a longstanding trope in post-colonial literary studies: "the daffodil gap." In the words of Helen Tiffin, the daffodil gap is the difference "between the lived colonial or post-colonial experience and the imported/imposed world of the Anglo-written" (920). In fact, there is scarcely a writer from the tropical regions of the British Commonwealth who does *not* invoke the daffodil as the emblem of oppressive colonial miseducation. "I don't like daffodils," says a Dominican boy in Jean Rhys' 1960 story "The Day They Burned the Books," and the unnamed narrator silently assents, remarking "I was also tired of learning and reciting poems in praise of daffodils" (39). In a 1964 essay, V.S. Naipaul told of meeting a Caribbean writer who protested "against what the English language had imposed on us. The language was ours, to use as we pleased. The literature that came with it was therefore of peculiar authority, but this literature was like an alien mythology. There was, for instance, Wordsworth's notorious poem about the daffodil. A pretty little flower, no doubt, but we had never seen it. Could the poem have any meaning for us (23)?" Caribbean novelists of the 1980s and 90s—like Michelle Cliff and Edwidge Danticat—echoed Rhys' and Naipaul's complaints. In Cliff's *Abeng,* a schoolmaster requires his students to memorize "the 'Daffodils' poem of Mr. Wordsworth, 'spoken with as little accent as possible; here as elsewhere, the use of pidgin is to be severely discouraged" (84).

As a result, the narrator muses, across the empire on which "'the sun never set,'" "probably there were a million children who could recite 'Daffodils,' and a million who had never seen the flower. . .and so did not know why the poet had been stunned" (85). The dead mother of Sophie, the narrator of Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* loved daffodils, but as the story unfolds, we learn that only hybrid strains of the flower can withstand the Haitian heat, and instead of a delicate yellow, "they were the color of pumpkins and golden summer squash, as though they had acquired a bronze tinge from the skin of the natives who had adopted them" (20).

The most extensive—and angriest—treatment of the daffodil gap in these multicultural classics, though, is Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy,* an autobiographical coming-of-age novel as beloved in American high school English classes as *Harriet's Daughter* is in Canada. *Lucy* narrates the journey of its eponymous heroine from a dysfunctional relationship with her Trinidadian mother to New York, where she is hired as an *au pair* by wealthy Manhattanites Mariah and Lewis. Arriving in January, Lucy is discomfited by the winter cold she has never experienced, but Mariah excitedly tells her that in spring, she'll see "'daffodils pushing their way up out of the ground'":

> "And when they're in bloom and all massed together, a breeze comes along and makes them do a curtsy to the lawn stretching out in front of them. Have you ever seen that? When I see that, I feel so glad to be alive." And I thought, So Mariah is made to feel alive in the breeze. How does a person get to be that way (17)?

Of course, Lucy has never seen daffodils, but as a result of her colonial education, she has heard of them. As a ten-year-old pupil at Queen Victoria Girls' School, Lucy had been forced to memorize "an old poem" which she then recited to "an auditorium full of parents, teachers, and my fellow pupils."

> After I was done, everyone stood up and applauded with an enthusiasm that surprised me, and later they told me how nicely I had pronounced every word, how I had placed just the right amount of special emphasis in places where that was needed, and how proud the poet, now long dead, would have been to hear his words ringing out of my mouth (18).

These congratulations leave Lucy cold, however; instead, she attributes to this experience her first awareness of what we're invited to see as the colonizer's obliteration of her true self:

> I was then at the height of my two-facedness: that is, outside false, inside true. And so I made pleasant little noises that showed both modesty and appreciation, but inside I was making a vow to erase from my mind, line by line, every word of that poem. The night after I had recited the poem, I dreamt, continuously it seemed, that I was being chased down a narrow cobbled street by bunches and bunches of those same daffodils

> that I had vowed to forget, and when finally I fell down from exhaustion they all piled on top of me, until I was buried deep underneath them and was never seen again. I had forgotten all this until Mariah mentioned daffodils, and now I told it to her with such an amount of anger I surprised both of us (18-19).

Later, Mariah brings a blindfolded Lucy to a field of daffodils, hoping that seeing the flowers in real life will help the younger woman forget her anger. Lucy initially allows that the daffodils looked beautiful and simple, "as if made to erase a complicated and unnecessary idea." Unbidden, though, Lucy's rage returns:

> I did not know what these flowers were, and so it was a mystery to me why I wanted to kill them. I wished that I had an enormous scythe; I would just walk down the path, dragging it alongside me, and I would cut these flowers down at the place where they emerged from the ground (29).

Scholars of post-colonial studies have, as one would expect, eagerly interpreted Lucy's dream and her unacted wish to decapitate the daffodils as the return of the colonized repressed, the understandable rage of colonial subject impelled to admire a distant, unseen master. "In her act of repeating the words of the English poet laureate, William Wordsworth, Lucy exhibits the false consciousness that is the hallmark of the colonized," writes Kristin Mahlis (173). For Allison Donnell, Lucy's

> retrospective vision of reciting Wordsworth's poem works as both a literal example of colonial education and as a metonym for the colonial apparatus' promotion of an aesthetic which is ideologically motivated in its very essence of seeming to be devoid of ideology. . . . The poetic subject (daffodils) signifies the forced adoption of the motherland and the attendant suppression of difference (50).

To Ian Smith, *Lucy*'s "examination of Wordsworth's exportation to the tropics registers a concomitant exportation of desire so powerful that it requires self-invalidation and obfuscation of native, West Indian traditions" (802). Kincaid's trauma of being "forced to memorize a poem about daffodils, when none were to be found in the place I grew up" could be seen as the impetus for an "anticolonial" aesthetics, in which the standard of beauty is directly proportional to the contempt one expresses for the tastes of the master culture. This response is based, though, on an illogical imputation, which nevertheless serves to intensify the colonial subject's resentment. In saying that daffodils are beautiful, Wordsworth does *not* obfuscate or invalidate "native, West Indian traditions." Both daffodils and tropical flowers can be beautiful; praising the beauty of one does not necessarily denigrate the other as ugly or insignificant.

Like Kincaid's Lucy and, presumably, millions of other British Commonwealth schoolchildren around the world, Marlene NourbeSe Philip proudly carries into adulthood her childhood resentment of having to learn about something she had never seen. Now identifying herself as a “language poet” who has come deeply to distrust the ability of “any European language” to “truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of . . . decontaminating process,” Philip avenges Wordsworth’s domination of her literary education by dismembering the daffodil, “riffing” on the image to turn “out something like this:”

Is not a daffodil
is
and not
is— (

What Philip and the other Caribbean writers who resent Wordsworth really want is for their school days to have been structured along the lines of what is today called “culturally inclusive education” or “a decolonized curriculum.” In a 2020 interview, Philip complained that as a schoolgirl, she was forced to study the European flowers mentioned in the works of Shakespeare and Wordsworth rather than the Trinidadian *poui* trees that bloomed with yellow flowers every March and April. “And the blossoms dropped and there was this carpet of gold, across which I remember walking, so many mornings, to school. Do you know, it was like somebody had just thrown this carpet out for me. But we had nothing about that, you know? We had to learn about wandering daffodils [laughs] and things like that. . . . We need to see ourselves reflected back to us. . . . And a colonial education did not see us” (Zucker interview).

Pleas like this for “relevant” or “inclusive” curricula represent the orthodoxy in today’s schools of education, and undergird movements like #DisruptTexts, “a crowdsourced, grass roots effort *by* teachers *for* teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve” (https://disrupttexts.org/2021/01/02/january-2021-statement/). “For too long,” wrote Patricia Ebarvia in 2021, “the traditional ‘canon’—at all grade levels—has excluded the voices and rich literary legacies of communities of color. This exclusion hurts all students, and especially students of color.” And while the founders of #DisruptTexts assert that they have “studied, taught, and continue to teach from canonical texts,” their members (via conversations on X at #DisruptTexts) encourage teachers to jettison “irrelevant” classics like *The Odyssey* and *Moby Dick,* and have also attacked *To Kill a Mockingbird* for lionizing the “ineffectual white savior” Atticus Finch (https://disrupttexts.org/2018/05/13/disrupting-to-kill-a-mockingbird/).

Daffodils are native to North Africa, come in many colors, and are not gendered. So why all the hate? And is Wordsworth’s poem even *about* daffodils? Reading the poem through the lens of Generative Anthropology demonstrates that accusing this widely admired lyric—as the resentful Caribbeans do—of forcing them to admire a flower they’ve never seen misapprehends the text. First published in *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), the twenty-fourline lyric was originally titled by its first line, but is often called “Daffodils,” though Wordsworth never gave it that title in subsequent publications during his lifetime.

> I wandered lonely as a Cloud
> That floats on high o’er Vales and Hills,
> When all at once I saw a crowd,
> A host of golden Daffodils;
> Beside the Lake, beneath the trees,
> Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
>
> Continuous as the stars that shine
> And twinkle on the milky way,
> They stretched in never-ending line
> Along the margin of a bay:
> Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
> Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
>
> The waves beside them danced, but they
> Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:—
> A Poet could not but be gay
> In such a jocund company:
> I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
> What wealth the shew to me had brought:
>
> For oft when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> Which is the bliss of solitude,
> And then my heart with pleasure fills,
> And dances with the Daffodils (*Poetical Works,*311-12).

The poem identifies its real subject in the first word: “I,” the peripatetic poet in a recurring Wordsworthian situation, walking numbly through the countryside in a state of perturbed self-absorption—”lonely as a cloud.” His sighting of the *grouped* daffodils interrupts this reverie, with the flowers presenting themselves not as arrestingly beautiful natural objects perceived singly, but as numerous, and therefore the antithesis of the speaker’s solipsism: they are a “host,” a “crowd,” engaged in a “sprightly dance”—that is, in coordinated, harmonious motion. This glimpsed scene—taken in “all at once”—thus juxtaposes the single with the many, offering the poet an opportunity to rejoin a community from which he has been self-excluded. For the 1815 republication of “I wandered lonely as a cloud” in a collection of his works, Wordsworth appended a note stating that the “subject of these Stanzas is rather an elementary feeling and simple impression (approaching the nature of an ocular spectrum) upon the imaginative faculty rather than an *exertion* it” (*Poems,* 329). It is not the beauty, or even the distinct morphology of the daffodil that the poem celebrates. In fact, it could be any flower, or plant, or, for that matter, any individual thing put into motion that strikes the imagination, bringing forth a sudden perception of the originary juxtaposition of self and collective.

That daffodils are merely the vehicle for an originary insight is suggested by Wordsworth's description of the moment of the poem's inspiration as an "elementary feeling and simple impression." The poem's final stanza, which moves from the remembered sight at the lake shore to an imagined future, continues and elaborates the paradoxical trope of *prospective memory,* rendered most famously in "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey":

> And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
> With many recognitions dim and faint,
> And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
> The picture of the mind revives again:
> While here I stand, not only with the sense
> Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
> That in this moment there is life and food
> For future years (*Poetical Works*, 92).

In both poems, the speaker—with the inspiring sight still in view—feels a double bolus of pleasure from the realization that his imagination has both the power and willingness to reconstitute this scene in the future. Just as the sight of the beautiful Wye River valley will provide "life and food/For future years," the "wealth" that he will take from the sight of the "never-ending line" of daffodils stretched "along the margin of the bay" comes from the power of memory to assure the "vacant" and "pensive" poet of his membership in a community, constituted by the uniquely human capacity for memory becoming aware of itself.

So while "I wandered lonely as a cloud" can be said to celebrate nature, that's hardly the point. As many generations of readers have realized, Wordsworth celebrates nature not for its beauty, but for the insights nature furnishes into the fundamental operations of human consciousness. In light of this, it is useful to note what "I wandered lonely as a cloud" *does not* do. The poem does not provide its readers with a paean to the beauty of *narcissus pseudonarcissus,* nor, really, much in the way of description at all. Only one adjective is applied to the flowers ("golden"), and it merely specifies their color. While it could be argued that in order to imagine the flowers dancing, it is necessary to know that daffodils—unlike the flowering bushes and trees typical of the tropics—grow out of the ground on single stalks, and therefore are particularly apt to move in unison when stirred by the wind. But surely those raised in the tropics would have seen single-stalk plants moved by the wind. And there is no dearth of bodies of water in the Caribbean, over which the wind could stir the "sparkling waves" Wordsworth saw dancing next to the daffodils. The poem also refers to the Milky Way, a constellation certainly as visible in the West Indies as it is in England. Again, why so much anger at these "bloody flowers?"

Resentment, we hardly need reminding, is highly contagious. An anticolonialist aesthetics of resentment therefore has a great deal of mimetic energy to propel it forward. But like all mimetic phenomena, resentment succeeds at nothing so well as generating oppositional resentment at ever-escalating levels. If building a "new, more inclusive literary canon" begins with the petulant rejection of everything that has come before—symbolized by Kincaid's Lucy decapitating daffodils—how receptive are general readers going to be to #DisruptTexts' aim to "center Black, indigenous, and voices of color in literature?" If your starting point for reform of literary education is Philip's solipsistic claim that in our reading "we need to see ourselves reflected back to us" (Zucker interview), what hope can there be for finding any common reading? Under this way of thinking, literary criticism and education are doomed to devolve into schoolyard battles, an ever-escalating tit-for-tat in which trampling our opponents' flower beds replaces reasoned argumentation and aesthetic discernment. Do you detest daffodils, Marlene NourbeSe Philip and Jamaica Kincaid? Well, I hate your garish hibiscus, your poisonous poinsettias, and your voraciously colonizing bougainvilleas, which ruined the stucco on my house in Los Angeles. So there. And, by the way, the poem you find so traumatic is not even about daffodils; it depicts the benefits that accrue both to the individual and to society by the recognition—enabled, in many cases, by "canonical" authors like William Wordsworth—of our participation in a community that stretches far beyond what we already know.

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