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I Am Heathcliff; I Am Lockwood: Moral Ambivalence and Imperialist Nostalgia in *Wuthering Heights*

Moral ambivalence is at the heart of imperialist nostalgia. The discomfort of this kind of sentimental murkiness results in a distorted projection of meaning onto the object of our nostalgic desire. In "Imperialist Nostalgia and *Wuthering Heights*," cultural critic Nancy Armstrong examines the context within which a young and chronically ill Emily Brontë crafted her magnum opus. This work revealed a complex, sinister, and passionate view of rural English life. Emily Brontë wrote with a psychological intensity that seemed to extend beyond her lived experience, causing consternation among readers and critics of her time (Armstrong 441; Peterson 334-5). Armstrong challenges this "morally ambiguous" accusation toward *Wuthering Heights* and confronts Charlotte Brontë's rectification of her sister's reputation as an extension of the period's inclination toward imperialist nostalgia (449). Through historical and cultural evidence and a close examination of the photographic documentation occurring around the time *Wuthering Heights* was published, Armstrong successfully contends the "moral taint" is not found in Emily, nor within *Wuthering Heights*, but in the ambivalent, possessive gaze of the privileged class ruling within an imperialist society (355). Armstrong's cultural critique is supported by Emily Brontë's portrayal of the characters Lockwood and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, who exist on either side of the social strata. Armstrong's argument is made more compelling by my connection to her essay as a descendant of a cultural minority group she

includes to bolster her claims and my reaction to the ambivalence of fetishizing the very thing imperialism was attempting to destroy (449).

As a cultural critic, Armstrong examines *Wuthering Heights* through the context of Emily Brontë's reality and, in doing so, challenges many preconceptions about the author and historical attempts to justify her "morally ambiguous position" (Peterson 334). Indeed, the Brontë mystique (Armstrong 450; Peterson 289) is in many ways a projection of our modern romantic and nostalgic fantasies of the brief, brilliant, and tragic lives of these three creative powerhouses, now deified in the English literary canon (Peterson 413). "Child, virgin, man, by nature reclusive and physically on the verge of dying, Emily wrote with a 'secret power and fire' that, her sister tells us, came strictly from within. Most scholars and critics have accepted this view" (Armstrong 430). In fact, the main "scholar and critic" Armstrong challenges in her critique is Emily's own sister Charlotte, who, when faced with public speculation about the "moral taint" (Peterson 335) of *Wuthering Heights*, vociferously defended her sister's intention with the novel. According to Armstrong, Charlotte's defence was a product of the cultural discourse of the time (441), a product we have since come to recognize as a result of the diminished status of women in Victorian England. However, Armstrong also claims Charlotte's defence was also the product of Britain's imperialist nostalgia turned inward. Instead of this nostalgia focusing on the cultures of the East or on the Indigenous cultures of the "new world," Great Britain cast its imperialist gaze within its own borders in what Armstrong refers to as "regionalism" (448). Much like the British gentry exoticized people from non-European countries, a fascination with the rural and traditional cultures of England, Scotland, and Ireland developed when *Wuthering Heights* was written (Armstrong 433). By referencing British folklorists of the day, Armstrong also provides photographic and archival evidence of this fascination with the local "peasantry" (qtd. in

Armstrong 443) that "reclassified ordinary life in much of the nation as exotic and backward" (433), and "the degree to which a local community depended on custom and oral transmission indicated how ignorant it was" (434). Armstrong includes photographic evidence of England's infatuation with regionalism in her essay, with images of traditional and country people—mostly women—taken at this time (440-5).

Imagine my surprise, then, while perusing the potential critiques in our assigned course textbook on which to do my analysis, one of the communities those early folklorists considered "exotic" and "backward" was of my own ancestry. In Armstrong's critique, on page 444 of *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: Wuthering Heights, 2nd Ed.,* is an image of a girl in garb very familiar to me. This image, a 19th-century photo, depicts a young woman in striped stockings and skirts, a basket perched on one hip and her fist resting defiantly on the other. I recognized this woman as one of my ancestors, but at the same time, she was utterly strange-looking to me. Her attire that of a Scottish fishwife was too clean, too well put together, as though she were in costume for the kind of period movie we would be familiar with today. The backdrop she posed against was not a Newhaven fish market, nor was it on the shores of the Firth of Forth; instead, it was painted scenery, a two-dimensional shoreline, a kind of stagecraft. Despite my family taking pride in our ancestry, and after seeing scores of New Haven imagery by early photography pioneers Adamson and Hill (see Fig. 1), I had never seen this image in my life. I also thought, other than perhaps the people of Edinburgh, the existence of the Newhaven fishing community was obscure, much of Scotland's history being homogenized in the minds of North Americans by Hollywood's depiction of the Highlanders. Most people just give me a blank stare when I say the words, "My great-great-great grannie was a Newhaven fishwife."

Fig. 1: Barbara Flucker, my great-great-great grandmother,
by Adamson & Hill, Newhaven, 1843-1847. Source: National Galleries of Scotland

The Newhaven fishing village was a small community on the outskirts of Edinburgh that continued its traditional customs and culture into the 20th century (Newhaven Heritage Centre), and Armstrong uses the Newhaven fishwife photograph as one example of the "cultural primitives" (436) that "polite readership" (442) would hang framed in their parlours, perhaps to demonstrate to others how "cultured" they were, or perhaps for novel enjoyment.

The Newhaven side of my family immigrated to Canada in the 1960s. As a white person born on First Nation land, I never had to live a life where my culture was threatened by imperialism before. Nor do I continue to suffer from the brutal legacy of colonialism. So, it was a curious experience to consider my ancestry was part of a group of a cultural minority that was not celebrated for its uniqueness but viewed as part of a homogenized peasant class, as a kind of yokel freakshow for a higher class of society to voyeuristically collect images of like tourists

would do of postcards and trinkets. Compared to the more reverential footage captured by Adamson and Hill, the studio portrait of an actress or model—not my ancestor—dressed in her stripey fishing "costume" was distasteful to me, not because of the model but because of the context. I had a hard time understanding why a society bent on erasing such traditional communities through modernization and industrialization, a society that looked down its nose on this lower class of people, would want these very same cultures and peoples immortalized in folkloric tomes and photographs. "…[T]hese textualizing practices all exalted another people so as to infuse with longing the very authenticity that they were in fact destroying. The inscription of unfamiliar landscapes and bodies provides not only a record of the passing of regional cultures, then, but also the technology for converting them into an ethnic periphery" (449). I was confounded by the moral ambivalence that comes with the longing for what one was simultaneously destroying.

As I read Armstrong's essay, it occurred to me that, in a way, "I am Heathcliff" (Brontë 88). Yes, Heathcliff, the alluring and formidable leading man in the iconic Gothic novel, *Wuthering Heights*. Even if one has not read Emily Brontë's masterpiece, they are probably familiar with the doomed and violently passionate relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff. Heathcliff, embittered by a world that rejected him based on his illegitimacy, a world that disrespected him because of his darker skin (Brontë 49), endures further torment by losing the only person who ever loved him for who he was, Cathy Earnshaw.

The fishing village of Newhaven and all the other regional cultures Armstrong uses as examples in her work are objectified by the imperialistic gaze, and Heathcliffs is also an example. In many ways, the cruel adult Heathcliff grew into was the result of being pushed into the ethnic periphery, much the same way the rural people of England, Scotland, and Ireland were

in Brontë's time. Although Emily shocked the nation with her very "unladylike" account of such a wild and oftentimes loathsome man (Armstrong 441), the fact is that Heathcliff was symbolic of a collective objectification at the hand of imperialist nostalgia. His character is complex, and he causes readers to feel a mix of pity, empathy and contempt; yet, he comes across as darkly mysterious and exotic: traits that hint at excitement and danger (Brontë 99). He is as desirable as he is reprehensible. Heathcliff's character is as beloved as it is loathed. At the intersection of this emotional paradox, we find the same moral ambivalence at the heart of imperialist nostalgia. Early critics of *Wuthering Heights* might have empathy for the young Heathcliff, for being unloved by his adoptive mother (Brontë 51; 54) and bullied by his adoptive brother (Brontë 52; 54); yet, they fail to acknowledge how they contribute to the abuse of young Heathcliff and other Heathcliffs of the world. With imperialist nostalgia, likewise, there is a saccharine sentiment toward non-urban or traditional communities: "Oh, look how delightfully rustic they are! Aren't they dear?" These higher society folks were oblivious to their condescension and how they contributed to and benefited from the exploitation of rural communities. The racialization of Heathcliff meant that he could be the target of imperialist projection: he is "gipsy" (Brontë 27), Chinese, and Indian (Brontë 67), all of these at once, yet also none of them. To honour him an identity would be to acknowledge his personhood, to spend the time to get to know him, and to know him would shatter the fantasy. Just like the people of the small rural villages of England, and just how Indigenous people have been stereotyped in the West, Heathcliff is the homogenized "other" of the imperialist gaze. If we took the time to understand the uniqueness of these different cultures, it would shatter the nostalgic fantasy. Imperialist nostalgia, longing for what we are destroying, means we do not know what to feel. We admire these cultures, but to admit that would shatter our sense of superiority. We know we are complicit in their

destruction, but to admit that would be to admit our guilt. We want the photographs of the fishwives and the country lasses, but we do not want to know the people in these photos, and all of these contradictions lead to a moral ambivalence, a whitewashing of our complicity with imperialism.

Armstrong makes me realize, however, that I am also Lockwood. Armstrong is not tender with her handling of Lockwood, the character who serves as a sort of external perspective for readers to navigate the drama that unfolds at *Wuthering Heights*, much the same way high society Victorian England voyeuristically engaged with the rural class. In fact, Lockwood is symbolic of imperialist nostalgia in Brontë's novel, and Armstrong likens him to the rise of the 19th-century folklorist (436). "Lockwood encounters the rural landscape as a tourist, converting that landscape and its occupants into a private aesthetic experience. He takes secret satisfaction in prying into out of the way places with his eyes" (436). As a foil to Heathcliff's rough nature, Lockwood epitomizes an aristocratic gentleman, full of polite manners and proper etiquette (Brontë 27-9). On the one hand, Lockwood has a welcome air of common decency (Brontë 29); on the other, he seems haughty and aloof (Brontë 31-6)

I gaze upon the antique photographs of my Newhaven kin the way Lockwood looks upon the young villager woman on his tour of the English coast (Brontë 27). "Lockwood wants nothing so much as the pornographic thrill of *just* looking" (Armstrong 437). Likewise, I imagine myself connected to the Newhaven people and their precious, traditional way of life in a way that they could never conceive of. Nor could they ever conceive of me since I exist in a time outside of theirs. I enjoy the thrill of imagining some Newhaven character traits are encoded in my DNA—my love of seafood, my penchant for wearing stripes—but the fact is I have absolutely no idea what it means to be a 19th-century fishwife in a community clinging to

its traditional ways. I look upon the Newhaven community with a nostalgic longing for something I think belongs to me but never did. The things I want, only the "good" parts of that culture, not the reeking of herring, peddling my ware on the cobbles, shucking shells until my hands are raw, waking early, hitching up my striped skirts as I wade out to sea to launch the menfolk in their boats, the harsh salt and cold burning my skin…. It seems imperialist nostalgia has tainted my interpretation of my ancestral past, so all I see is the romance and not the brutality of daily life. In this way, I am Lockwood: I only want to imagine. I only want to look. I am a tourist gazing at my ancestral past. I am living evidence of how imperialist nostalgia seeps in despite good intentions.

Nancy Armstrong claims the author of *Wuthering Heights* was also an object of imperialist nostalgia (441). Due to the pearl-clutching response to the work, Charlotte Brontë "did the only sensible thing. In order to make the novel more acceptable to a readership shocked at the behaviour of Heathcliff and Catherine, she consigned her sister to the rural world caught up in the framework for the novel and packaged for a mass readership" (441). In other words, in the same way countryfolk were thought of as inculpably ignorant due to their "primitive" state, likewise Emily, being a product of the moors did not know was oblivious to what she had done (Peterson 335). Charlotte sacrifices Emily's personhood for her reputation. Instead of defending her as a young woman with thoughts and ideas, both dark and light, who has intellectual and emotional intelligence, uncomfortable fits of passion and complexity, Charlotte robbed her sister's agency. Charlotte is denying Emily her personhood, but perhaps she felt she had no other choice when faced with the imperialist world *Wuthering Heights,* and indeed, the three Brontë sisters, were up against. "Like the culture indigenous to the north of England, Emily Brontë dropped out of a history that would not have valued her imperfections,

only her 'improvement.' Along with the countryside and way of life in the north of England that her novel memorialized, she came to be valued as something extremely rare and perishable that passed away" (Armstrong 442).

In *Imperialist Nostalgia and Wuthering Heights,* Armstrong acknowledges she needed a special proof to argue that the cultural discourse at the time the novel was written influenced the content of the work and its reception (430). Armstrong makes it clear that Emily's life experiences, her voice, and the world around her were woven into *Wuthering Heights* despite all the attempts to deny her these things (430). In addition to Armstrong's research into the history and culture of Brontë's time, the feigned shock of the book's critics proved there was a co-occurring cultural elitism, and imperialist nostalgia was one expression of that elitism. Emily Brontë's moral ambiguity was a false accusation projected onto her by the morally ambivalent those complicit in perpetuating imperialism, and my own personal experience and familial connection to Armstrong's essay attests to this phenomenon. It seems impossible to ignore the conditions under which an author lived, especially when Emily wrote about the place and landscape that helped shape her identity and her entire world.

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