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Polluted Postcolonialism of a White West Virginian, or, A Transversal Gaze toward Transnationalism

G. Sue Kasun

I'm not sure what to do with being somebody's "Other." This article is an exploration of my own sense of being Othered (Brown, 2005) in contradictory ways, and the responses to that othering my research is taking, arcing between postcolonial theory and transnational theory—all the while, looking for "home." On one hand, I'm nobody's Other. White, married, presently living in a middle-class home; what could be more normative? Writing this as a self-reflection likely fits the norm of progressive, liberal White women trying to "find themselves," too. I cringe about this over-autobiographical reflection, but I need to write this. The perspectival voice I try to articulate is one that has been too long suppressed (Delgado, 1989). This article is an attempt to decolonize, to claim the voice from drowning in Whiteness, capitalism, patriarchy (Smith 1999)—the many faces of hegemony. It is also an exploration of my positionality as an educational researcher and my attempts to locate myself in the historical moment, which is strongly linked to transnationalism.

Theoretical Beginnings

Postcolonial theory best frames the story of the place where I grew up, a place where structures of power were generally mystified by my formal schooling but where subaltern resistances created fissures which would support my adult discovery of postcolonial theory and my yearnings to reframe the story of where I was raised. I share some of those subaltern resistances and theorize more broadly about the conditions of my home state, West Virginia, and how it has been internally colonized in the U.S. I explain the postcolonial sense of exile (Said, 2000) I have experienced as someone who is now an outsider to West Virginia.

In this article, I explore demonstrative events from growing up in West Virginia, the ways race plays into the postcolonial condition and the role of "poor Whites," and how West Virginia's historical trajectory has become better explained through

transnationalism. I then turn toward transnationalism as a “conceptual acid” which can be used to demonstrate the contestations, interruptions, and contradictions of globalization (Briggs, McCormack, & Way, 2008, p. 627). I theorize that my exile has pointed me in the direction of transnationalism, in both my life experiences as someone who became bilingual after living off-and-on for many years in Mexico and in my research agenda, where I seek to highlight what can be learned from the potential of those who live their lives in both hybridity and transnationality.

As a first-generation college graduate from a working-class West Virginia family, I am someone’s Other. In “Theorizing modernity in Appalachia,” Susan Keefe explains:

Mountain people have been typically cast along with non-Western peoples as the Other in the modern paradigm, representatives of an earlier traditional era at one end of a unilinear continuum with modern Western society marking civilization’s progress at the other end. (2008, p. 160)

I think to middle school when my brother, a graduate of West Virginia University, explained what it was like to attend college in our home state with so many people from New Jersey. “They come to West Virginia to study because it’s so cheap, but they all think they are so much better than West Virginia.” This sounds just like the kind of tourism and even credentialing available to individuals from the centers of empire who visit former colonies for similar reasons. Sure enough, three years later after I “got out” of West Virginia at 18, I was on a study abroad trip to Guadalajara, Mexico, in a bus, with a young woman on the program from New Jersey. I had been lucky and “gotten out” (typical brain drain phenomenon of former colonies and economically “backward” places like West Virginia). She argued with me, red in the face, that people from West Virginia simply were not intelligent. She did this in front of the 20 or so student colleagues and faculty advisor from my small liberal arts college based in North Carolina. No one joined in my defense as I appealed to various arguments as to why her point simply wasn’t true. This was not the only time I ran to West Virginia’s defense, just one of the most memorable.

Getting Out

From a young age, I had understood on visceral levels that I would need to leave West Virginia, like so many dislocated people of color and others internally colonized in the U.S. [see, for instance, Juan Carrillo’s treatment of being a Chicano in East LA and his journey through the Academy (2009)]. How had I sensed that I needed to leave home? I would become un-homely (Bhabha, 1994), a fragmented creation of a not-wanted, not-recognized place that nevertheless exists for the people who live there and in the imaginations of those who recognize its existence in their imaginations. The accent of the people where I grew up would never stick; to this day I cannot even imitate it, though one of my two brothers speaks regularly with the accent. He happens to be the only one who stayed. I would dislocate

geographically and psychically. The Appalachian culture of all my grandparents would nonetheless infiltrate my ways of knowing; yet I would not see the faces of my ancestors as those values and feelings articulate(d) themselves through me.

Yet this was part of my problem, and still is. What systematic discourses do we have to appeal to as Appalachians (to broaden my sense of self-authoring)? I have begun to find Home in postcolonial theory as a way to articulate my own intersections of oppression and also interest in my work toward social equality in the field of education. Surely there are Appalachian Studies, but do the discourses circulating in those studies affect larger audiences? When do national magazines, national newspapers, films, or mass-produced music speak to the situation of what it means to be Appalachian, beyond the shame-inducing caricatures of in-bred hillbillies? (I allow the reader to know what I mean about this caricature without forcing the deconstruction of it.) When, for instance, ethnic studies continue to carry currency among the many diasporic communities of Africans, Latinos, and native peoples—Appalachians are . . . what? I will attempt to answer this later, but first I recall my prior and partial sense of self (recognizing these senses will always remain partial and shifting). Previously, I had figured myself as being from a working class background, drawing connections to being fatherless at age seven, with a murky sense of West Virginian-as-other, in order to make sense of why I care about working against social inequities in schooling. I'm beginning to refigure that sense.

Race Making—Tropes of Whiteness from the Hills

Before proceeding, I do not want to suggest that the kinds of oppression I have lived and carry with me are the same as those who are racialized as “Other.” I agree with Fanon that the racist creates his inferior (Fanon, 1967), and that to be Black, or any form of non-White (regardless of where one is in the world) is a marker of difference I will never understand as theory in the flesh (Moraga, 1981), where the lived experience of Blackness or being a person of color is experienced in a way that burns beyond the intellect into one's cells. I draw attention to the racialization of the “Other” as being central to the historic process of colonization. However, I wish to invoke theories regarding Whiteness which complicate the Black-White binary to suggest that the idea of poor Whites works as a buffer zone, a sort of “other” Other to non-Whiteness (Allen, 2008; Hartigan, 2005). It is a dangerous, perhaps horrifying mirror for Whites who did not grow up as other-White, as most Appalachians have. Indeed, it may be like rafting through the river of the film in *Deliverance* to discover an underworld of other-Whites who might destroy the “right” Whites, as Hartigan demonstrates in his text. For me, this racial/non-racial Othering plays out like this—while I have never been denied my seat at the table in a restaurant because of my skin color, I have wondered over and over again if I belong there because of *where* and *how* I grew up. Here I invoke Bourdieu's sense of habitus and “not for the likes of us” when I think of myself at a French restaurant

in the Washington, D.C. area, for instance. Nonetheless, I have passed, time and again (as far as I know, but my habitus will always keep me wondering). A different kind of cellular oppression.

In recognition of carrying the privilege of Whiteness, I argue that part of the trap of being Appalachian is disguised by that same Whiteness. It is an external marker which masks the oppressions lived in Appalachia. Recently, at the largest, U.S.-based education research conference, I found myself lamenting out loud, “How do I show who I am here? This whole machine homogenizes us, makes us alike, so bourgeois.” I didn’t want to be just another pressed-pants smart woman who passes as middle class, sipping a glass of chardonnay among thousands of people who somehow looked and smelled just like me. So I asked out loud, “Should I wear a white t-shirt with yellow under-arm stains that might indicate how I grew up?” The very mechanism researchers rightly critique—racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Leonardo, 2009; Roediger, 1999)—simultaneously helps mask possible positions of deeper solidarity of multiply oppressed peoples because of the oppositional discourses raised against racism.

Let me not be too innocent. At times I *do* enjoy the privilege of passing as a pressed-pants, smart, middle-class woman. In my studying and work abroad, the same White privilege has opened the door for me to explore new forms of identity, for instance. Privileged other-as-exotic-bearer-of-Whiteness, and in my case, U.S.-based Whiteness. Yet let me also say that it would almost be impossible to explain the material wealth I grew up with in the U.S., which felt very working class (and would be consensually understood as such throughout the U.S.), as being somehow on parallel with working class folks in formerly colonial countries. The West Virginia part is completely lost unless I attempt to bring it to light, and even then it’s hardly understood. The message can only be as strong as the deliverer, and there’s little to enforce the notion of being from a geographic minority in the global/transnational media echo chamber. In these outside-the-US contexts, I have been able to engage in spheres where the painful context of being from West Virginia is conveniently invisible, where researching among materially poor women in Guadalajara became a way for me to co-identify with the subaltern without having to theorize my own alterity (Author, 1996, 1999). Instead, I co-identified with them as women, as working class. I listened to their stories of strength and drew strength from the stories and their interlocutors.

And as a further disclaimer against my innocence, there is the question of generational history. No doubt the great-grandmother and great-grandfather who came from Croatia knew their kids could trade up from what must have been peasant stock to full-on, non-hyphenated Americans in all their Whiteness (they died suddenly in the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918, their stories largely lost—my own granddad realized on his deathbed, when I asked him, that he must have spoken Croatian with his mother but had no recollection of it, this language loss was clearly part of the wages of Whiteness). And so will my case be. Yes, it will have

taken my offspring three full generations to escape Appalachia (and precisely as many from my husband's side as Polish immigrants, interestingly, to escape the sounds of any Polish words or deep traditions), but our kids, should they materialize, would be fully integrated into the benefits of Whiteness with their over-educated parents and the trappings of middle class taste preferences (when was the last time we ate buttered noodles or generic brand hotdogs for dinner, the very stuff I grew up on?). I contrast this intentionally with non-Whites in the U.S.; their lot would (typically) not be the same. Their children, unless able to phenotypically "pass," would clearly be marked by physical difference. Sure, my White children would have some residual, curious senses of their backgrounds, but they would only be fleeting resonances which make for interesting conversation, much like the people I meet who claim to have a dad or mom from West Virginia.

Exile

But let me go a bit deeper into the question of moms and dads exiled from West Virginia. Because of this longing to say everything, this counter-hegemonic feeling of wanting to scream into the microphones of broadcast news, to tip over church altars at the moment of consecration, to bleed and at once feel it, I speak of exile. There is no script for us, no compass. Glissant explains of the ability to speak, "In the poetics of the oral African text Everything can be said" (1999, p. 137), unlike the Western disciplining of maintaining the line on the unspeakable. Exiled West Virginians, we simply pass into Whiteness in all its normativity and leave the rest unsaid. Yet I refuse to pass so willingly, and I invoke the wisdom of Anzaldúa in this refusal: "I will have my serpent's tongue, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (1999, p. 81). There is no guidance on healing the wounds of childhood shame about the condition and location of the house where one grew up. How many times did I pray my friends would not notice the construction company that looked like an industrial machine dump as their parents drove me to the home so close to that site? How often did I wonder about what the city only an hour's drive away, Pittsburgh, was like, from the town where I grew up, whose population had decreased half in size from almost 65,000 when I grew up as a result of the closed mines and steel mills? My mom, like so many who had led the isolated lives of Appalachia, was terrified, and still is, of driving into any city. And yet I had no one to discuss this with. A childhood girlfriend, whose pantry was consistently empty, and I pretended that all was well. It was as if language didn't exist to describe how we lived. It seems there is no bridge between the values of thrift and stoicism, for instance, and the white middle class ways of spending-on-credit and, say, therapy.

There is the exile from the familiarity of the land where I grew up as well. The creek that ran in front of my house runs today, still, but I wouldn't today get knee-deep in it again to build an earthen dam again so that my brothers could catch

minnows as fishing bait. There are hills in front of and directly behind the house where I grew up, the same house where my mom resides today. Yet they feel lower than how I remember them as a child, and at once more formidable. I can only go so far up one of them before I wonder what it is I hope to achieve as the brush and trees grow almost impenetrably dense. The open spring from which my granddad collected all his drinking water in reused gallon milk containers has since been blocked off. I never investigated why. Would I learn of carcinogens from mills and mines? I could still feel comfortable walking through the trails of a park, built today for consumption by tourists. Would I not just be a tourist, however, strolling the paved pathways?

Despite the dislocations of my sense of exile, the lived experience of it is also one of my lenses of analysis. Said (2000) discusses his sense of exile and his ability to see with a multiplicity of lenses. On some levels, I believe that I, too, have the lenses of exile as I approach social science research. Despite the pain and isolation of it, I am also grateful, and it is in postcolonial theory where I have been able to connect my sense of exile to the way it has been theorized by those most deeply burdened with postcolonial conditions.

I call out and wonder if the words will merely bounce among mountain walls or perhaps resonate with someone in ways that I wish I had heard them when younger. In the era of hyper-communication, the time-space compression (Jameson, 1991) has allowed me to reconnect with my age-mates from West Virginia. It has become painfully clear that what I thought was imagination surrounding my exile for so many years is real. The people with whom I was connected as a child? Now there is little more than an occasional exchange about someone's lovely child. The friends who grew up working class in West Virginia have either traded up into a system which now works for them economically, or they maintain the social conservatism where the unsaid must stay that way. I find my affinities stronger with a few other West Virginians in exile. We commiserate about mountaintop mining, the devastation of the local environments, the killing of more miners so that coal might power up the Eastern Seaboard. We ache, minimally vocal, in guilt-ridden gulps of lattes our brothers and sisters back in West Virginia consider superfluous.

Polluted Postcolonialism

With angst, I theorize my experience, and that of West Virginia, as a sort of polluted postcolonialism. While it is obvious that the state of West Virginia lies within the world's largest empire-power, it acts in terms of statehood, as poor whites do, to help maintain racialized oppressions, bearing some of the burden of those oppressions, rather than enjoying the full privilege of whiteness. Like poor whites, West Virginia can be the brunt of jokes told by people of all stripes without the fast and ready accusation of being a racist, yet the boundary maintenance of racial hegemony is maintained by those jokes. Also like poor whites, the idea of West Virginia fills the imagination of people throughout the U.S. with all kinds of unseemly ideas—the unspeakable.

Incest, poor nutrition, and genetic mutations are among the images both poor whites and West Virginia conjure. I contend that the racial issues of boundary making by the notion of poor whites are under-theorized for two reasons. First, I believe most poor whites who do trade up to normative whiteness are relieved to leave the stigma behind and feel little obligation (or have the discursive tools) to further explore it. Second, I believe the avoidance of the discourse surrounding how whiteness works, and in this specific case as it is imagined in West Virginia and Appalachia, helps maintain the hegemony of racial boundary making.

Another problem of portraying West Virginia and Appalachia as postcolonial is the ethnic and racial make-up of the majority of people who have lived there since European White settlers displaced native peoples from the lands. It is obvious that those who settled the lands had hoped for prosperity and perpetrated the very kind of exploitation of colonizers. The interesting double-bind is that in the particular case of West Virginia, those who live there never seem to cash in on the prior generations' investment in settlement. On the contrary, those who stay in West Virginia generally maintain a lower status than other Whites throughout the United States. What complicates this, as I demonstrate below, is that most of the land and industry owners do not reside in the state itself; throughout the state's history, they never have. One large question here is that if the very people who historically arrived to exploit the land and people later became the exploited themselves, how exactly do we theorize this situation? While I argue that postcolonial theory is helpful in understanding the current situation of exploitation, what of the historical bind to the complicity? I will return to this question with thoughts on transnationality later.

Other researchers have theorized West Virginia and Appalachia as a colonial entity, a corrective to casting West Virginia's people as merely inhabiting a "culture of poverty" (Fones-Wolf & Lewis, 2002, pp. ix-x), though, like so many "others" thrown into a net of a culture of poverty, the depiction remains durable. Part of the culture of poverty includes the depiction of the poor (and the colonized) as lazy, thereby justifying low wages and a perpetual cycle of material poverty leading to a perceived need for the colonizer's protection (Memmi, 1965). I revisit some of the material/historical conditions to help reclaim the histories I was not offered as part of my formal academic training.

In April 2010, twenty-nine miners died in Montcoal, West Virginia in one of the United States of America's worst mine disasters in decades. One might imagine their deaths were unanticipated from the way the tragedy was covered in national media. However, it appears that only the high number of deaths was out of the ordinary. In West Virginia, according to the Office of Miners' Health Safety and Training, every year there are multiple mine deaths (2010), and mining tragedies have existed as long as the coal has been mined from West Virginia. While national media portrayed West Virginia as dependent on jobs related to mining, the decrease of coal-based labor has been exponential. In 1930, there were 130,000 coal-related jobs; in 2010, there are about 30,000. Poverty, health, and education rates remain

among the very worst in the country [see data reports from the Appalachian Regional Commission for state and regional comparisons (2010)].

Common sense reasons for West Virginia's lack of economic development abound. West Virginia is the only state entirely contained by the Appalachian mountain chain; as such, it has proven difficult to create paths of transportation in and through West Virginia. Unlike the rest of the country, hundreds of small farms are still maintained, often for supplementing or providing subsistence. Because of the geography, there has been a historic sense of isolation from the rest of the country. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated a segmented approach to modernity on the terms of Appalachians themselves (Hatch, 2008; Keefe, 2008). One reason that is not regularly discussed is the colonial nature of who holds the land and industrial production. The top three coal mines in the state are run by corporations whose headquarters are not found in West Virginia, and it is unlikely any of them are. Logging companies engage in the lucrative removal of trees for mountaintop removal, simply for their own profit. Additionally, the chemical manufacturers and auto plants are also operated by out-of-state entities. In fact, many of these entities are now transnational corporations. With such dislocations of business interests, it's little wonder that the people who live in the state are subject to the exploitative work conditions of, say, the threat of death in mines. The largest coal-producing county in the state, McDowell County, also has the highest poverty rate, at 37.7% (Brookings-Institution, 2006). Over 90% of the land is held by out-of-state landowners. This is an illustrative case of how postcolonial frameworks can apply to West Virginia.

Other Othering, the Turn Toward the Transnational

I am not from McDowell County; I couldn't be much further from it and still claim to be West Virginian. In fact, I'm from a small, northernmost region of West Virginia referred to as the "northern panhandle." Throughout the rest of the state, I've been told I'm not a "real" West Virginian because there are cultural distinctions in the tiny geographic arm of where I grew up. So not only do I find I do not fit in as a full-on White in the US, I'm not fully accepted as West Virginia-enough by fellow West Virginians.

None of this erases the histories of my family. My mom's parents grew up in coal camps and farms and lived part of their lives in central West Virginia. The same granddad had worked for a chemical manufacturer through most of his adult life; part of his daily labor was the checking of instruments where he put his bare hands through asbestos to check the gauges. He had also labored in mines in his youth. One wonders what combination of asbestos and coal dust worked his lungs to their death after several years on oxygen; he literally gasped for his last breath as his lungs ultimately failed (and, yes, like most men of his generation he did smoke tobacco as well, but he had quit 20 years before his death). My dad died of a rare form of cancer in his mid-40s, a man who had otherwise been known for

his strength and athleticism. One wonders if the contaminants of mills and chemical industry that settled into the Ohio Valley had anything to do with his untimely death. But these histories are not easily and readily explained in my journeys in West Virginia; the accent I unconsciously worked so hard to cultivate as a child betrays me as a northerner in the eyes of other West Virginians.

While it is helpful to use the tools of postcolonial theory to understand the case of West Virginia (and its situatedness in Appalachia), the tools of transnational theory are also being crafted in ways that help us reframe and extend our thinking. Transnational theory allows Glissant's notion of transversality to come into play, where diversity and "creoleness" can find many homes among the un-homely to take roots and offer new shoots (Glissant, 1999). We move further away from the oppressor-oppressed binary and so many of the other Western binaries critiqued by postcolonial theory. Ong explains that transversality is one component of transnationalism, ignited by the "changing logics of states and capitalism" (1999, p. 4). Transversality allows us to shift toward understanding multiple intersectionalities of experience on a global scale.

In the case of West Virginia, Richard Hassler draws comparisons to the mass privatization of land in southern Africa to the "rape of the land" in West Virginia's mountaintop removal, where entire mountaintops are blasted with dynamite to extract the tons of coal beneath them, leaving both degraded ecologies and communities in their wake (2005, p. 98). He argues that a sense of "postfrontierism" is at the heart of the sense that humans can use and abuse the land, without "moral authority of ownership, stewardship, or proprietorship," in many global contexts. This postfrontierism is a global phenomenon which fits the sense of empirical case study in transnational research (Khagram & Levitt, 2008).

Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc explain that "[a] global perspective must explicate the role and dynamic tensions generated by global capitalist hegemony," (1994, p. 15). Their contribution to the theorizing of transnationalism allows the optic to shift, "which asks a different set of questions based on different epistemological assumptions" (Khagram & Levitt, 2008, p. 1). In the case of West Virginia, I can begin to understand how a transnational corporation like DuPont owns the largest coal producing company in West Virginia. I can also begin to weave together the counter-practices of various social networks who contest transnational companies' practices across national boundaries with varying degrees of success and experience (Ansley, 2001-2002).

Finally, on a most personal level, I can begin to see my own un-homeliness coming back home. Home begins to be the connections, however temporary, with people involved in struggle, involved in (re)claiming multiply-manifesting senses of history and identity in hybrid, un-homely ways. While I may never feel fully comfortable back in the geographic space that once was home, I recognize home among my colleagues in a march for the recognition of rights of immigrants in the U.S., among people from multiple backgrounds. Home really was there when

I was among the women I researched with in the 1990s, albeit temporarily. I find home in brief glimpses with West Virginia friends-in-exile on Facebook, and even when I am in West Virginia, in short moments. I recognize it in my yearnings to connect immigrant students to find a sense of rooting, however fleeting, on U.S. soil. Home is the assertion of my voice and the polysemous ideas I speak, with my “poet’s voice.” Home is the breathing in of so many suppressed voices from print, conversation, articulations of art.

While full rooting in a transnational context is likely no longer tenable, what’s to say we cannot have momentary co-rootedness in acts of solidarity? Those moments may be apoeretic, fleeting. Yet in our efforts to invoke intellectual exile, as suggested by Said (2000), we can all cast the analytic toward the transversal in an increasingly transnational moment. My future research will link my own lack of rootedness to the rootedness of home in these fleeting but meaningful, contested, hybridized contexts. With some measured ambivalence, I claim that’s the best I can hope for, and somehow it is comforting—like home.

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