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**Fragmentation as Condition and Strategy:
 History, Narrative and Resistance in the Work of Michelle Cliff**

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Abstract

Fragmentation has often been seen as ‘the curse of West Indian history.’ Jamaican author Michelle Cliff explores the meanings and effects of this fragmentation in all of her works, from her novels and short stories to her prose poetry and essays. She presents it as a problematic condition with which she and her characters alike struggle to come to terms, a condition that, she says, ‘breeds insanity.’ But she also uses fragmentation as a discursive strategy and turns it into a creative possibility: for Cliff, narrative and linguistic fragmentation represents a mode of resistance to colonial and post-colonial rule, whose power and authority largely rely on the assertion of a unitary hegemonic discourse. It allows her to question the master narrative of history produced by colonial power, and to give voice to those who have been excluded from it.

While Cliff has produced a fundamentally hybrid body of literature that breaks down generic boundaries (her fiction is partly autobiographical, her poetry is largely written in prose, and virtually all her texts echo and respond to one another), within each work the text is also fragmented. Language is often disrupted, sometimes even difficult to read. The narrative is non-linear, jumping back and forth in time, following a circular pattern and resisting resolution and closure. Several narrative voices share the text, supplying various kinds of information and offering different perspectives, thus subverting the traditional colonial narrative of history that presents itself as authoritative and definitive and subsumes all voices into one single, ‘objective’ perspective.

Abeng thus juxtaposes the story of Clare Savage, of her family and the history of Jamaica according to both the official colonial textbook and a less well-known, often erased or perverted oral tradition. Clare’s coming-of-age story is thus haunted by a subtext of resistance, notably embodied in Nanny, the Maroon warrior. But the two narratives never

meet, as Clare is too young and subjected to the colonial perspective, largely confirmed by her light-skinned, England-educated father, to be fully aware of the effects of the racial and class oppression that reigns in Jamaica and in America. The gap between the two narratives mirrors the division in Clare's character and her struggle to cope with her hybrid identity: torn between her two parents and their diverging view of life and history, she thinks she has to choose between black and white, mother and father, Jamaica and Europe/America.

The sequel *No Telephone to Heaven*, on the contrary, brings the two narratives together by having adult Clare embrace Nanny's legacy and engage in resistance. Finally acknowledging and accepting her hybridity, Clare, like Cliff herself, uses the many fragments of her multiple identity as the source of her social and political consciousness and the basis of her active resistance to oppression. Like the various narrative voices that are blended but have their own distinctive tone and perspective, and like Clare who in the end is 'a light-skinned woman, daughter of landowners, native-born, slaves, emigrés, Carib, Ashanti, English,' fragments are juxtaposed, even superposed, but never dissolved into one uniform, coherent whole. Nor are they ever fixed in an authoritative, definitive (counter) narrative. While Cliff's literary project is one of re-vision and reconstruction of history, her texts strongly resist the temptation to create yet another, if subversive, master narrative.

We are a fragmented people. My experience as a writer coming from a culture of colonialism, a culture of Black people riven from each other, my struggle to get wholeness from fragmentation while working within fragmentation, producing work which may find its strength in its depiction of fragmentation, through form as well as content, is similar to the experience of other writers whose origins are in countries defined by colonialism.¹

In one of her earliest pieces, 'A Journey into Speech,' Michelle Cliff reveals not only the critical place the notion of fragmentation occupies in her work, but also the various imports and significances it has in her writing. Cliff identifies fragmentation first as a condition, the legacy of a colonialism and imperialism that disrupted cultures and continue to threaten people's integrity, in all its dimensions: physical, spiritual, social, political, sexual. However, her texts also reveal that colonial and neo-colonial power paradoxically maintains its authority by imposing and perpetuating 'master narratives.' Such discourses dissolve people and cultures into a totalized, sometimes exoticized, always inferiorized whole. In this context, fragmentation is not only a condition with which the colonized must come to terms, a condition that many have seen as 'the curse of West Indian history.'² As a force of disruption that undermines the master narrative, it becomes, in Cliff's work, a source of strength and subversive power against cultural domination. This paper proposes to examine this double and complex use of fragmentation as both condition and resistance in Cliff's first two novels, *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*.

Michelle Cliff was born in Jamaica in 1946. She spent most of her childhood in the United States and completed her college education in England with a PhD on the Italian Renaissance. A very light-skinned woman who identifies herself as black, Cliff describes herself as ‘a writer of Afro-Caribbean (Indian, African, and white) experience and heritage and Western experience and education (indoctrination).’³ From her novels and short stories to her prose poetry and essays, her work explores the meanings and effects of living with what she calls a ‘split consciousness’⁴: of being a descendent of both slaves and slavemasters, colonized and colonizers. Because ‘This kind of splitting breeds insanity,’ she says, writing is a way for her to ‘draw together everything I am and have been, both Caliban and Ariel and a liberated and synthesized version of each.’⁵

In her first two novels, *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, Cliff explores the difficult and often painful path towards that ‘liberated and synthesized’ self. Clare Savage, the semi-autobiographical protagonist, takes a physical, emotional and political journey from fragmentation to some sort of ‘wholeness from fragmentation.’ Like Cliff, Clare is a Jamaican girl of mixed origins. From an early age, she feels torn between her light-skinned, British-educated, assimilationist father, Boy, and her darker, country-raised, working-class mother Kitty. Despite her desire to claim both parts of her identity, she is soon made to understand that she will have to choose one. As her transgender friend Harry/Harriet says after she decides to become ‘simply’ Harriet, ‘Cyaan live split. Not in this world.’⁶ And indeed Clare painfully comes to realize that in Jamaica — and even more so in America, where her family later emigrates — there is ‘no place for in-betweens,’ as her high school principal tells her. The system does not like ‘white chocolate’ (*NTH* 99).

Because she was born ‘fair,’ both her parents assume Clare will live up to the privilege of her light skin. Kitty, trying to keep her daughter from developing a double consciousness, slowly takes her distance from her and eventually leaves her to the sole care of her father. Boy therefore brings her up as his rightfully white girl and proudly teaches her ‘The definition of what a Savage [is] like.’ This definition is ‘fixed by color, class, and religion’ and supported by ‘a carefully contrived mythology’ that whitewashes their family history.⁷ Clare’s efforts to hold on to her matrilineal heritage are further undermined by her school education in the colonial system. In a history of Jamaica that is taught ‘only as it pertained to England,’ black people are virtually absent or, at best, passive. Clare knows next to nothing about the slave

past of the island, which ‘is slight compared to the history of the Empire.’ Her teachers do say that Jamaica was a slave society, but only to emphasize that ‘England was the first country to free its slaves.’ The existence and power of resistance is similarly downplayed: rebellions were, after all, ‘unwarranted and of little consequence’ and their leaders were ‘rightfully executed.’ Just as Clare’s family history is lost in mythology, Jamaica’s past is ‘lost in romance’ (A 30). As a result, Cliff explains, ‘A knowledge of history, the past, [is] bleached from [Clare’s] mind, just as the rapes of her grandmothers are bleached from her skin.’⁸

The narrative structure of *Abeng* reveals and reflects Clare’s ignorance about her cultural history. The main story recounting the girl’s development is frequently interrupted by historical vignettes running from a couple of lines to a few pages. Those passages detail a reality to which she obviously has no access: the true face of colonization and imperialism, the brutality of slavery, the power of Nanny and the Maroons, the economic reasons behind abolition. Clare’s story and the history of Jamaica are juxtaposed, but never meet. The text thus structurally and graphically suggests that Clare’s ignorance about her black heritage is what prevents her from successfully coming to terms with her double identity. However, as the girl grows more and more unsatisfied with her father and her teachers’ easy or evasive answers and starts investigating for herself, the historical subtext slowly recedes, as if it was absorbed by the girl’s developing oppositional consciousness.

Indeed, Clare instinctively questions the dominant binary conception of race and the received representation of the past, which do not fit with the reality she sees all around her. In *Abeng*, the girl is only 12 and she is therefore not equipped to effectively go against the ruling ideology. But in the sequel, *No Telephone to Heaven*, she grows into a more and more revolted, politically conscious and engaged woman. After spending the later part of her childhood in the United States, she takes her distance from her family to begin her ‘life-alone.’ She first goes to England, the ‘mother-country,’ ‘with the logic of a creole’ (*NTH* 109). She attends graduate school to study the Renaissance, ‘because it did not concern me,’ because ‘I was looking for something to take me out of myself’ (*NTH* 194). And it works, for a while. But she soon grows tired of the covert and overt racism around her and the ignorance and thoughtlessness of the people — even her closest friends — who remind her that she should not take racism personally because, after all, she is ‘not like our Jamaicans’ (*NTH* 117): she is ‘presentable ... somehow lower down the tree, higher up the scale, whatever’

(*NTH* 139). Finally realizing that she will never feel whole as long as she fends off half of her identity, she decides to return to Jamaica and re-claim her heritage.

Back home, she starts ‘educating’ herself about the suppressed history of her country. Because this history does not belong in ‘traditional’ archives, Clare must look for it in other sources, in artefacts dismissed by colonial historiography: ‘a conch knife...the shards of hand-thrown pots...the petroglyphs hidden in the bush...the stories about Nanny...the flock of white birds fly[ing] out at sunset from Nanny-town...’ She listens to ‘Stories of Anansi...Oshun...Shàngò...walk[s] the cane...poke[s] through the ruins...sw[ims] underwater,’ because ‘some history is only underwater’ (*NTH* 193). By recollecting this history fragment by fragment, she slowly recovers the many pieces that compose herself: ‘She is white. Black. Female. Lover. Beloved. Daughter. Traveler. Friend. Scholar. Terrorist. Farmer’ (*NTH* 91). Not only does she fully realize that she is ‘not outside this history — it’s a matter of recognition...memory...emotion’ (*NTH* 194), she is also finally able to see her place in it, at both ends of the chain of power. As a young girl she instinctively sided with the oppressed, but was not always aware of her privilege, or ready to relinquish it. She now decides to *use* this privilege, as the daughter of landowners, to *help* the oppressed. She puts her grandmother’s land at the disposal of a group of anti-imperialist revolutionaries who use it to hide and grow ganja they trade for American guns. She soon fully integrates the group and joins them in armed acts of resistance. *No Telephone to Heaven* thus brings together the two narratives that were kept separated in *Abeng*. Recovering the suppressed part of her cultural history and joining the Maroons in resistance helps Clare mend her fractured self. Tragically, she only seems to attain a real form of wholeness when she dies. The novel ends as the revolutionaries are about to attack a group of Americans who has apparently been warned, and are intercepted and killed by the army. The last lines of the novel subtly and beautifully describe Clare’s final moments of consciousness, and her fading into the Jamaican landscape. As Cliff herself explained in an essay on her protagonist, ‘In her death she has achieved complete identification with her homeland. Soon enough she will be indistinguishable from the ground. Her bones will turn to potash as did her ancestors’ bones. Her grandmothers’ relics will be unable to distinguish her from her darker-skinned sisters.’⁹

This ambivalent ending comes as a perhaps frustrating, certainly confusing, but also logical conclusion to an exploration of the complexities of fragmentation as condition. Indeed, Cliff is ever wary of simplifying or romanticizing the development of her protagonist. Besides, I

read her denying Clare the chance to become complete in life, as problematizing the notion of wholeness itself. Although she insists on the difficulties and pain a fragmented consciousness entails, there is also, she seems to suggest, *danger* in blending the fragments into an indiscriminate whole. Indeed, she identifies a totalizing impulse in colonialist and imperialist discourses, which tend to gloss over the class and colour divisions colonization itself created. For instance, she ironically notes tourist ads like ‘Jamaica, a world of culture without boundaries’ (*No NTH* 6); or the Americans’ common mistake, when considering the Caribbean, of ‘lumping the islands together, with an ignorant familiarity, as though they were indistinct places, sharing history and custom, white sands and blue waters indiscriminately’ (*NTH* 64). Such totalizing conceptions erase the complexities of Caribbean or Jamaican society and its painful history and allow for its depiction as a mere vacation paradise that you can just ‘make ... your own’ (*NTH* 187). This type of discourse, Cliff suggests, perpetuates cultural domination, and must therefore be actively resisted.

More particularly, the control over the representation of history is a powerful instrument of domination. The failed attack at the end of *No Telephone to Heaven* targets an American production team shooting a movie on Nanny, Jamaica’s popular hero. In this Hollywood version, Nanny the great Maroon warrior is played by ‘the actress called in whenever someone was needed to play a Black heroine, any Black heroine, whether Sojourner Truth or Bessie Smith’ (*NTH* 206). She is dressed in leather breeches and silk shirt and exchanges sweet-talk with Cudjoe in pidgin. By assimilating Nanny to ‘any black heroine’ and turning her distinctive language, Coromantee, into some form of pidgin, the movie colonizes or ‘cannibalizes’ an important and significant part of Jamaican history and absorbs it into the indefinite mass of Hollywood commodities.

This final scene underscores the common purpose of Clare’s armed resistance and Cliff’s political writing. While the revolutionaries try to fight cultural domination through bodily fragmentation (by literally blowing the colonizer to pieces), Cliff fights it through *discursive* fragmentation. Her work attempts to expose and dismantle the epistemological and ideological principles upon which its hegemonic discourse, or ‘master narrative,’ is based. While the master narrative presents a single point of view veiled behind an authoritative, supposedly objective voice, Cliff uses multiple perspectives not only to give voice to those people silenced in the official version, but to fundamentally challenge the Eurocentric view of history as a monologic narrative. In *Abeng* she offers pieces of a history that have been erased

from both the colonial record and collective memory. The fragmented narrative structure of the text thus does not only reflect the protagonist's fractured self, as I have been arguing: it also persistently undermines the authority of the colonial version Clare learns both at school and at home by exposing its limitations and silences. *No Telephone to Heaven*, on the other hand, does not offer glimpses of Jamaican history so much as show the effects of that history on the present, by recounting Clare's and other people's struggle with racism, classism, sexism, or homophobia. In this second novel Clare is no longer the single focalizer of the narrative, but one individual among others. By exposing a plurality of experiences and perspectives, Cliff diffuses the control over the knowledge about the past and reminds us that history is a constructed and collective discourse.

Delivering a history in fragments also allows her to dismantle the Western view of history as linear. But by fracturing the sequence of events Cliff does not only contest 'the ability of fluent, linear prose to truthfully reflect or represent a history and self that have been anything but fluent or linear.'¹⁰ She also aims at demystifying the implicit teleology of the colonialist and imperialist conception of history. Presenting the past as gone and favouring the present and the future allows the colonizer to emphasize civilization over conquest, abolition over slavery, tourism over misery. As Harry/Harriet says, 'we *are* of the past here. So much of the past that we punish people by flogging them with cat-o'nine-tails. We expect people to live on cornmeal and dry fish, which was the diet of the slaves. We name hotels Plantation Inn and Sans Souci' (*NTH* 127). And indeed both novels make clear, through fragmentary allusions, that slavery does not belong in the past. Poor working-class families are still separated, with parents forced to work and live away from home. Violence still prevails in most places, as people are lynched by the Klan, churches are bombed and nursing homes are set on fire. Clare's revolutionaries fight the same war the Maroons fought over two centuries earlier. And Clare, like Nanny, is betrayed and dies in the battle.

'I am afraid my place is in the hills,' Cliff writes in *The Land of Look Behind*.¹¹ In the hills of the Cockpit Country, with Nanny and Clare, fighting, dying. Unlike her protagonist, Cliff never really returned to Jamaica, except on occasional visits. In an interview, she said she could imagine a life there only 'as somebody who would be dedicated to extreme political change.' However, she added, 'I don't see that degree of change as a possibility in Jamaica.'¹² Maybe that is why her protagonist has to die. But where Clare fails with armed rebellion, Cliff is determined to keep on trying with writing. Her fragmented narrative

requires attentive reading, active participation and critical thinking. By forcing us to piece fragments together, fill the gaps and acknowledge our own subjective and active participation in the creation of the story, Cliff engages us to be wary of master narratives that pass themselves as absolute and objective truth. Before we can get rid of racism, sexism and the violence they entail, we first need to understand and deconstruct the discourses that have created and perpetuated them. Cliff's work thus invites us to be critical of our own ontological and epistemological assumptions and to confront our limitations, not only as readers, but as social actors.

Notes

¹ Michelle Cliff, 'A Journey into Speech,' in *The Land of Look Behind* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1985), 14-5.

² Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 234.

³ Michelle Cliff, 'Clare Savage as Crossroads Character,' in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. Selwyn Cudjoe (Wellesley: Calaloux Publ., 1990), 264.

⁴ Cliff, 'A Journey into Speech,' 14.

⁵ Michelle Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (London: Persephone Press, 1981), 11; Cliff, 'Clare Savage,' 264.

⁶ Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (London: Methuen, 1987), 131. All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Plume, 1984), 29. All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

⁸ Cliff, 'Clare Savage,' 265.

⁹ Michelle Cliff, 'Caliban's Daughter: The Tempest and the Teapot,' *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12:2 (1991): 45.

¹⁰ Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter, 'Michelle Cliff and the Paradox of Privilege,' *College English* 59:8 (December 1997): 902.

¹¹ Cliff, *The Land of Look Behind*, 103.

¹² Meryl F. Schwartz, 'An Interview with Michelle Cliff,' *Contemporary Literature* 34:4 (Winter, 1993): 600.