

Violence and Metaphor:
Gender and Postcolonial Identity in *Abeng*

In Michelle Cliff's novel *Abeng*, set in a 1958 Jamaica that is on the cusp of the independence it won in 1962, the author forcefully disrupts previously stable identity categories grounded in race, gender, and colonial history to reveal an alternative set of burgeoning identities whose inscription lies "in-between" those fixed, earlier notions of being and belonging that were the heritage of the colonial encounter.¹ Through her young protagonist, Clare Savage, Cliff weaves a complex, differential narrative of belonging, inclusion, and kinship out of the quest for a gender and cultural identity that is equal to the challenges of independence. Indeed, as Belinda Edmondson has argued, "She attempts to construct narratives that map the history of black, white, and mulatto Jamaica, mixing genres of narrative-historical, autobiographical, myth to achieve a dialectical representation of the West Indian experience".² Through her reconfiguration of colonial and Caribbean history, Cliff not only elucidates Caribbean women's active participation in nation-building and identity-formation from the inception of colonial history, but illuminates the myriad ways in which women resisted the patterns of violence through which men sought to inscribe the practice of patriarchy by and through which the presumption of masculine pre-eminence had eventuated the hierarchical differentiations of Jamaica's social structure.

Along with Clare herself, and her growing awareness of the latent yet ever-present framework of violence that characterizes the occulted family history by which she is overdetermined, the narrative inscribes a number of female characters who diachronically interact with and impact Clare through varied discourses and from a number of different historical moments and perspectives. These range from Nanny, the Maroon leader, to the Jewish captive Anne Frank, to Inez, the captive mistress of her grandfather the judge who burned his slaves alive on the eve of emancipation, to her new-found friend Zoe, whose race and class differences paradoxically bind her to and separate her from Clare in their mutual search for an independent gender identity. Through this plethora of women's voices and perspectives, Cliff refutes the commonly-held notion that Caribbean women did not contest slavery and valorizes their contributions to the development of postcolonial communities and identities; more broadly, her discourse produces critical new perspectives on the practice of resistance, initially inscribed in a colonial context and now brought to material reality on the eve of independence. As a resistance

¹ Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984). Hereafter references will be indicated in the text as *A*.

² Belinda Edmondson, "Race, Privilege, and the Politics of (Re)Writing History: An Analysis of the Novels of Michelle Cliff", *Callaloo*, 16.1 (Winter 1993), 180-191, 182.

leader and obeah woman, Nanny importantly embodies the validity and praxis of violence as a liberatory and identitarian act, one that appropriates the colonial monopoly on violence and turns it (in)to an act of colonial contestation. Clare, meanwhile, is the victim and product of a colonial education policy that conveniently elides the role of resistance in colonial history; just as she has not learned that “Nanny was the magician of this revolution – she used her skill to unite her people and to consecrate their battles” (A, 14), she has on the other hand been taught “that there had been a freedmen’s uprising at Morant Bay in 1865, led by Paul Bogle; but that this rebellion had been unwarranted and of little consequence, and that Bogle had been rightfully executed by the governor” (A, 30). The devalorization of iconic events and personages of Jamaican history, and their erasure beneath the mantle of British colonial whiteness, is quite visible here, as is the decentering of colonial violence that is the corollary of this sanitized perspective. But, in an act that prefigures the liberation from familial, historical, colonial, and ethnic patterns and stereotypes that Clare herself seeks to instantiate, Inez, the Judge’s concubine, after having been repeatedly raped by him and having aborted the resulting fetus with the help of Mma Alli, the obeah woman, responds to this pattern of gender violence with a planned act of rebellion on a major scale. The money she steals from the judge during his absence will pay for slaves’ passage back to Africa, thus undermining the legitimacy and longevity of slavery at its very core.

On one level, these historical trajectories and their associated paradigms of resistance and identity impinge on Clare Savage’s desire for an independent postcolonial identity inscribed in race, gender, and history. At the same time, the selection of specific actors from the Jamaican historical stage, and the resulting focus on their experiences of submission and resistance, gender affirmation and cultural identity results in a discursive emphasis not only on the substantive role played by women in Jamaica’s colonial struggle, but on the searing, ever-present violence that was both part and parcel of the instigation of colonial domination, and was a key tool in the appropriation of an arch-Jamaican space for the articulation of an egalitarian identity-structure. The suppression of information regarding key events of revolt and resistance was integral to the maintenance of the colonial landscape, since teaching materials for every school were generated in and controlled by the metropole. This emphasis on the British experience meant that, as a consequence, colonial populations like that of Jamaica knew very little about their own past. Cliff emphasizes this lack in the text, pointing out in the narrative commentary how it was that Jamaicans did not know that “of all the slave societies in the New World, Jamaica was considered among the most brutal” (A, 18), or that “the death rate of Africans in Jamaica under slavery exceeded the rate of birth” (A, 18). And indeed, the historical erasure is almost total, as she continues:

They did not know about the Kingdom of the Ashanti or the Kingdom of the Dahomey, where most of their ancestors had come from. They did not imagine that Black Africans had commanded thousands of warriors. Built universities. Created systems of law. Devised language. Wrote history. Poetry. Were traders. Artists. Diplomats. (A, 20)

It can certainly be argued that being prevented from knowing one's past is a form of epistemic violence, in that being denied such knowledge means being denied at least the basis for the articulation, validation and valorization of identity. It is in seeking to re-appropriate this violence as she attempts to (re)shape her own identity, however, that Clare Savage will encounter a series of complications that will test both her subjectivity and the means by which she chooses to accomplish it.

Cliff's challenge is, to say the least, daunting; taking cognizance of Clare's multipolar inscriptions in race and culture, she must bring her to an understanding of what Edmondson calls "her peculiar position as both 'white' and yet 'Third World', 'black' and yet 'First World'".³ But these superficial categorizations, drawing on specificities of ethnicity and culture, themselves carry important caveats, in that Clare is in fact a mixed-race subject who has been encouraged to bury her blackness and to pass for white.

This condition of ethnocultural pluralism in its turn leads to the simultaneity of her "Third World/First World" identity, a liminal form and, indeed, a simulacrum of hybridity through which Clare's ongoing subjective tensions are ultimately worked through and cancel themselves out. It might also be claimed that both her parents collude, materially and symbolically, in the effort to mask her blackness, for while her father repeatedly insists that she is the inheritor of unsullied whiteness from those avatars of Englishness so treasured, despite their fall from grace, wealth and position, on his side of the uncoincidentally-named Savage family, her mother denies Clare her Africa-centered sense of belonging by concealing her valorization of her own blackness and family history, including regular acts of generosity to the poor and the importance to her of the young servant, Clary, who faithfully fulfilled her responsibility to take a young, sick Kitty to the hospital and after whom Clare is named. Overall, these complex behavior patterns correspond to a colonial pattern of psychosocial lack identified by Fanon, articulated as a desire to whiten the race, "in a word, the race must be whitened ... Whiten the race, save the race".⁴ Clare's subsequent actions are meant to be both a recognition of and a response to these patterns of erasure, as well as the forging of a new, independent path to self-affirmation.

Clare's critical, contestatory friendship with Zoe becomes the signal path into this world of black identity and history which has been concealed from her. As Anke Johannmeyer puts it, "it is Zoe who introduces Clare to her African heritage, her roots which she finally, after years of traveling through the world, returns to".⁵ The pair is a study in contrasts, separated

³ Ibid., 185.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 47.

⁵ Anke Johannmeyer, "Claiming the Wholeness She Had Always Been Denied: Place and Identity in Michelle Cliff's Novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*" (University Essay from Uppsala Universitet), (2005) 23-4, <<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-6027>>, 23 July 2010.

by stark differences, in race, class, social standing, and education but inalterably joined when they meet during vacations. Zoe, who is visibly black, lives in a one-room shack in the country and attends a one-room country school, all of which locate her in opposition to Clare, who is upper middle class, light-skinned, lives in an expensive suburb and attends an exclusive school. While their friendship is maintained despite these multiple patterns of division, Zoe and Clare, armed with the latter's grandmother's shotgun in what is arguably the key event in the novel, set out to shoot a well-known wild boar named Massa Cudjoe. However, the roots of this expedition, and of its important implications for the articulation of violence, gender and identity as key structural factors in the text, are to be found in an earlier incident, one that establishes both the hierarchical inscription and praxis of gender in the community, and the resulting corollaries of exclusion that make Clare's path toward the affirmation of an independent identity an even more complex one.

Earlier in the novel, during a period when, significantly, Zoe is absent visiting her own grandmother, a hog is ceremoniously killed on Miss Mattie's property. While "Clare had been ordered ... not to watch", the boys, in contrast, "had watched up close, had even been part of it – holding the hog still for their father" (A, 56). As the fire gets going preparatory to cooking the hog, this overt pattern of gender differentiation and exclusion – one that reinforces Clare's intrinsic secondary social status – is exacerbated when the boys begin cooking part of the hog that they refuse to either identify or share with Clare, "Dis sint'ing no fe gal dem". "Okay, I don't want none", responds Clare, "jus' tell me what it is". The boys' response, couched in refusal, makes it clear that "It no wanna business anyway. Is a man's t'ing" (A, 57-8). When, finally, it is explained to her that "Is de hog's sint'ing. His privates" (A, 58), this implicit valorization of an exclusivist masculinity has the paradoxical effect of illuminating both the unbridgeable divide that separates gender identity and its differential corollaries of praxis within the Jamaican social continuum. Indeed, her realization of the extent of this ineluctable social separation ironically elicits even more girlish behavior on Clare's part, in a key passage marked by the split subjectivity implicit in the free indirect discourse in which it is framed, "She hated to cry and ... she was acting like a girl, in front of two boys who had just shut her out". And in fact, the narrative commentary here makes the extent of her submission to this dominant discourse quite clear, "She felt that keen pain that comes from exclusion" (A, 58). But in spite of this overt act of self-recognition, I would like to argue in the remainder of this paper that it is Clare's misapprehension of the way to capitalize on this event to achieve an ongoing articulation of differential feminine subjectivity within a postcolonial Caribbean setting that occasions both her subsequent attempt to kill Massa Cudjoe and the derailment and re-siting of this act into the

new framework for gender and subjective articulation with which the novel closes.

Shooting Massa Cudjoe, who is “the descendant of what had been the predominant form of animal life on the island before the conquerors came” (A, 112), becomes the object of Clare’s alienated subjective perspective as she sets out to accomplish her vision of self-liberation. Clearly, Massa Cudjoe represents a displaced, symbolic form of indigenous masculinity in the text, such that Clare’s planned triumph over his atavistic untameability would constitute for her a form of gender and cultural independence. However, what she does not grasp is that the pattern of masculine subversion she undertakes is in fact a recuperation and a repetition of pre-existing binary gender patterns, “No doubt the experience of the hog-killing ... had something to do with Clare’s wish to capture and kill Massa Cudjoe” (A, 114). When they are initially unable to locate the hog, Zoe and Clare proceed to sun themselves on the riverbank, and when they are interrupted, Clare tries to scare off the intruder; taking hold of the shotgun with which they had armed themselves on their early morning outing, she aims it at the laughing peasant laborer, “and at the last second before firing, jerked the gun upward and shot over the man’s head, as if aiming for the coconut tree behind him” (A, 122). But this mis-aimed and mistimed shot is in fact a replication of an exclusively masculinist activity, and since it is ultimately nothing but a re-citation of pre-established male behavior patterns, (re)tracing these hierarchies is an act that remains far from accomplishing or capturing Clare’s original intent. Importantly, here, it has been shown that responding to the oppositions embedded in the texts of colonialism on their own terms does nothing to dismantle these hierarchies of signification, as Benita Parry argues,

a reverse discourse replicating and therefore reinstalling the linguistic polarities devised by a dominant centre to exclude and act against the categorized, does not liberate the ‘other’ from a colonized condition ... the founding concepts of the problematic must be refused.⁶

⁶ Benita Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse”, *Oxford Literary Review*, 9 (1987), 28.

Through this act of unknowing although, ultimately, destructive repetition, then, Clare manages neither to shoot the pig nor to elaborate an alternative inscription of gender difference, but instead takes out her grandmother’s prize bull, Old Joe, with the uncontrolled shot from her grandmother’s weapon, “The bull had been shot in the head by a bullet she had meant for no-one. He was dying” (A, 123), and in fact the horror of this shooting gone awry is clearly emphasized both to the reader and to the protagonists, “Stopped in front of the girls with his left eye running down his cheek – the socket pouring blood as the egg white of his eyeball ran down his snout and onto the ground below” (A, 122). Clearly, the significance of this gender-based catastrophe and its unintended outcome

is located in Clare's conviction that the royal road to gender and identity affirmation lay in this act of *uber*-masculine destruction. However she did not, or could not realize that as an imitation – or an invasion – of a pre-existing and exclusionary male domain, her act was ultimately both impermissible and invalid.

In the aftermath of the shooting, the fragmentation of Clare's psychic focus and sense of self is apparent, "A thousand things flew around in her brain, each one hard to connect to the one preceding or following it. The morning became a broken pattern of events, nothing held together, but all seemed to lead Clare to the same terrible place" (A, 123). If this fragmentation is the return of the repressed, it seems clear that what was indeed repressed was Clare's psychosocial construction and inscription of gender and identity difference(s), essentially inhibiting her attempts at subjective coherence in a pre-independence Jamaica. To bring these differences to fruition as an alternative to an already valorized masculinity demanded that Clare choose a path that would bridge discourse and agency to construct a framework for femininity that would neither mimic nor repeat these traces of masculinity.

As punishment, then, and to learn "just who you are in this world" (A, 150), Clare is banished to the country to live with Mrs Phillips, an elderly white Jamaican woman who will metonymically convey to Clare the privileges of race and class to which she has been born but which she refuses to recognize and to which she refuses to accede. Here Clare discovers an astonishing world of internecine prejudice and racism within Jamaica itself, one very different from the hybridized world she had constructed with Zoe, in that this world is marked by sameness rather than difference, "The days at Redfield Road stretched out in a deadly sameness ... the days all had the same texture. There was no difference between them" (A, 156). Mrs Phillips thinks more of her dogs – all three of whom are named after members of the British royal family – than of her black servants, and despises all those Jamaicans who are darker-skinned than she is, as well as what they saw as their culture, "Miss Beatrice was forever talking about 'culture' and what a cultural 'backwater' Jamaica was. A place whose art was 'primitive' and whose music was 'raw'" (A, 157).

But it is when they go to visit Mrs Stevens, Mrs Phillips' mad elder sister who apparently hasn't had a bath in more than thirty years, that Clare discovers the true price and seamy underbelly of this slice of Jamaican whiteness and class privilege. As Mrs Stevens takes her into her confidence, Clare discovers that Mrs Stevens' madness is the result of a doubled miscegenation of class and race, a desire-driven liaison with a poor black gardener that produced a mixed-race child that was immediately taken from her, "because her father was a coon and I had let a coon get too

close to me ... because I had a little coon baby, they took her away from me" (A, 162). The ravages of this episode and its consequences sum up the risks and penalties of difference and non-conformity from a myriad of perspectives; the social and psychological trajectory of mad Mrs Stevens, summed up as it is in the precariousness of her current condition, becomes an instructive lesson for Clare in the price of betraying a privileged heritage of class, race and gender, despite the dis-ease caused by the pressures of the postcolonial world. Caught in these multiple metaphors of psychic and social violence, Clare's extended experience of exclusion and difference will lead her to one final realization.

The novel's concluding episode is a dream of Clare's that marks more than a simple coda; despite its apparent simplicity, it in fact sums up the trajectory of Clare's psychosocial journey and subliminally suggests her implicit adoption of a liberatory path that both responds to and transcends these diachronic inscriptions of violence that have marked her journey to identitarian independence. As the dream begins, relations with Zoe appear to have reached a nadir, their bond of friendship seemingly irreparably broken and their mutual dependence now at a dead end, "Clare dreamed that she and Zoe were fist-fighting by the river in St Elizabeth ... when she woke the power of the dream was still with her" (A, 165). But it is this apparent conflict's deliberate contextualization as a dream rather than as material reality that signals its necessary decoding as a repressed wish. For if even 'negative' dreams are a form of wish-fulfillment, the wish here on Clare's part, I argue, is that the projected events do not occur. In other words, if Clare's dream regarding Zoe is a subconscious reflection and manifestation of her desire for a conscious resolution of her inner conflict regarding race and class, then the manifest content, or what is actually seen by the dreamer, masks the path to the identitarian conjoining of Clare and Zoe – and their transgression of the binary oppositions of race and class, language and education that simultaneously join and separate them across the temporal gulf of Jamaica's violent, masculine-dominated colonial history – that comes to fruition in the novel's final sentences.

In the end, then, the task of dream interpretation, and its implicit lesson of difference and non-conformity valorized, is beyond Clare herself, but is pointedly highlighted by the narrative commentary, "She was not ready to understand her dream. She had no idea that everyone we dream about we are" (A, 166). This somatic framework obliges us to recognize that Clare is always already one with Zoe, and together they become materially and symbolically indissoluble, embodying a dyad of gender and multiraciality whose simultaneities of separateness and integration valorize and relocate Clare's conundrum of belonging. The contradictions, paradoxes and erasures that emerge from the historical record and which have haunted both sides of Clare's family, and which have also overdetermined the

unbounded inscription of identity she seeks and the path she has traveled to accomplish it, are effectively confronted and contested in this culminating moment of subjective *métissage* and cultural renewal.

The range of complexities inscribed both in Clare's journey and in its ultimate outcome reveal the material reality of the multiple possibilities implicitly at work in our communal, postcolonial constructions of self and other. Indeed, the trajectory of this narrative and the tensions and positionalities of its subjects suggest that postcolonial inscriptions of national, cultural, and individual identity are not simply predicated upon that which is located within national borders, but rather that they are shaped and informed by our inherited perspectives on and definitions of nationalism and identity; any implicit limits and boundaries on the articulation or representation of these categories must undergo revision and amplification. Cliff's writing strategy here, one that emphasizes the importance of the compound tensions and hierarchies, the slippages, similarities and differences of race, class and gender that together make up the Jamaican experience, marks a bold new axis of Caribbean expression on the one hand, but can also appear to risk fragmenting the broader community into an artificially-constructed series of oppositional elements. But such a conclusion would re-cite the very binaries and oppositions that this text seeks to displace. Ultimately, through the conjunction of ethnicity and culture, race, class and history that is adumbrated and articulated by the tensions and teleologies of Clare's journey of self-discovery, new boundaries, spaces and frameworks for Caribbean identity and nationality are engendered, shaped, and valorized; indeed, Cliff's vision of race, class and gender as they are eventuated by history in a postcolonial Jamaica shows us that, as Stuart Hall puts it, "a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings – *a system of representation*".⁷ This will be the task of those metaphors of pluralistic ethnic and cultural practice that have been inscribed in this work, as new discourses transcend the historical inscriptions of race and violence, fashioning rather a certain commonality of vision for the island's people through their scattered yet ineluctably conjoined voices.

⁷ Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity", in Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew, eds., *Modernity and Its Futures* (London: Polity, 1992), 292.