

Gardening Homeland, Deforesting Nation:
Re-imagining the Tropics in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*

It has taken me over thirty years, and my race hundreds,
to feel the fibers spread from the splayed toes and grip
this earth, the arms knot into boles and put out leaves.
When that begins, this is the beginning of season, cycle,
time. The noise my leaves make is my language. In it is
tunneled the roar of seas of a lost ocean. It is a fresh
sound. Let me not be ashamed to write like this, because
it supports this thesis, that our only true apprehensions
are through metaphor, that the old botanical names,
the old processes cannot work for us. Let's walk.

(Derek Walcott, *Isla Incognita*)

Gardening is a personal thing It just turned out that the
way I garden looks like the landscape I was most familiar
with. You see, it's a landscape on a map. I grew up on an
island and all I could see was myself as a little dot in the
middle of all the green and pink and yellow, and blue.

(Jamaica Kincaid, "On Gardening: Interview with
Kathleen M. Balutansky")

In a metaphorical walk through the nostalgic narrative landscapes of Derek Walcott and into the dislocated Creole garden of Jamaica Kincaid, a reader finds an abundance of nature in the words and worlds of the Caribbean. This is true of the scattered archipelago but also of the entire terrain of Third World America. Either by writing of a broader landscape that involves lands and ocean like Derek Walcott, or by illustrating domesticated plants in a diasporic garden like Jamaica Kincaid, New World writers voice a collective nostalgic concern toward the geography in which their cultural memories are embedded.

This seemingly problematic generalization of Caribbean and Latin American cultures with the mere phrases Third World America or New World, actually introduces the common colonial history among countries of this area. As J. Michael Dash clarifies:

¹J. Michael Dash, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2005), 3.

A New World perspective is not the product of a polarizing, exclusivist politics or an attempt to create a new cultural enclave, but rather concerns itself with establishing new connections, not only among the islands of the archipelago but also exploring the region in terms of the Césairean image of that frail, delicate umbilical cord that holds the Americas together.¹

After Columbus' discovery of America, the imperial Western desire to intrude, claim, exploit, and rename New World territory enabled a collective

local consciousness obsessed with the originality of naming and possessing local flora and fauna. As the editors of *Caribbean Literature and the Environment* point out, “colonization of the New World tropics ... has been integral to the European rendering of the taxonomy of flora and fauna and has provided the epistemological ‘roots’ of discourse on environmental conservation”.²

With a shared cultural memory of plantation slavery, indentured labor and imperial colonization, the landscape of Third World America bears a wound as a result of history. As Édouard Glissant asserts, the Caribbean “landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history”.³ Thus, while early Anglo-American ecocritics scrutinized nature writing as resistance to civilization, within the New World scope, the relationship between human beings and nature is further problematized by the historical violence of human transplantation. Presenting a “nonhuman environment ... not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history”,⁴ writings concerning Glissant’s ‘Other America’ provide narrating voices that illustrate that these landscapes were once the inferior, renamable, undeveloped and exploitable virgin lands in history.

In this New World a gradually conscious Caribbean voice has manifested itself in recent writings through botanical naming and renaming that resist the inventive taxonomies of the imperial powers. Since “the establishment of self is impossible without the context of place”,⁵ it is through reclaiming indigenous ecological connections with the land that writers of the New World find ways to work through their geo-historical wounds.

Imperial colonization, as Annette Kolodny notes, “brought with it an inevitable paradox: the success of settlement depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else – a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, an urban nation”.⁶ Resisting such forced transformations of landscape, writers of and on the New World “allow the landscape to enter them in order to be expressed through their writing”.⁷ For Jean Rhys, a “tree shivers. Shivers and gathers all its strength. And waits”⁸ – and the people wait for the voices of nature to mourn their colonial history and their lost land.

The colonizers’ territorial intrusion into forced slavery plantations, alongside linguistic intrusion into botanical vocabularies, has its corporeal presences in the making of Caribbean history. For decades, Third World American writers have been dealing with traumatic memories of plantation slavery and indentured labor. Whether by writing on nostalgic memories of West Indian geography or on diasporic obsessions with horticulture, they employ languages of or about the landscape to articulate the unspeakable trauma of history: history of deforested lands, of exploited

² Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley, “Introduction”, in DeLoughrey et al., eds., *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2005), 5-6.

³ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 11.

⁴ Lawrence Buell, *Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7-8.

⁵ Neil Evernden, “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy”, in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 101.

⁶ Annette Kolodny, “Unearthing Herstory: An Introduction”, in *ibid.*, 174.

⁷ Michael J. McDowell, “The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight”, in *ibid.*, 381.

⁸ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Norton, 1992), 165.

⁹ Quoted in George B. Handley, “The Argument of the Outboard Motor: An Interview with Derek Walcott”, in De Loughrey et al., *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, 135.

¹⁰ DeLoughrey, et al., “Introduction”, in *ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ Jamaica Kincaid, “On Gardening: Interview with Kathleen M. Balutansky”, *Callaloo*, 25.3 (Summer 2002), 793.

¹² Helen Tiffin, “Man Fitting the Landscape: Nature, Culture, and Colonialism”, in De Loughrey et al., *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, 204.

¹³ Writing on Caribbean gardens often has its reference to the Garden of Eden, however, “while the Caribbean might seem to offer, for some, an abundant tropical paradise, it was one whose history had necessarily rendered it, as a potential New World Garden of Eden, parodic, ironic, and tragic”, *ibid.*, 202.

¹⁴ Sarah Phillips Casteel, *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2007), 7.

¹⁵ Isabel Hoving, *In Praise of New Travelers: Reading Caribbean Migrant Women's Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

soil, of transplanted slaves, and of compelled labor. In an interview with George B. Handley, Derek Walcott accordingly comments,

what I think has happened to the Caribbean ... is the degradation, the condition of humiliation that was there when the slave was brought in and the indentured servant. Now I think that that is something we have worked ourselves out of, and I think that is part of the geography of the place that permits that.⁹

Due to its agricultural connections to the land, the plantation system in the New World arouses in its very own geographical sites natural inspirations for colonial/postcolonial writings which defy imperial power: “these sites serve as vital repositories of indigenous and African beliefs and assertions of rebellion against plantation capitalism”.¹⁰ Interviewed by Kathleen Balutansky, Jamaica Kincaid says of gardening: “[i]t was in my first garden that I discovered the relationship between gardens and history, or that you could write a history of an empire through plants It's always an expression of power, though it looks so benign. It looks wonderfully unthreatening, but it's an exercise of power”.¹¹

As Helen Tiffin has pointed out, celestial botanical images in Third World American writings are rendered impossible by their “(re)creation[s] on the very grounds of genocide and slavery”.¹² However, they offer ways to rewrite Western imaginings of the unknown land of the Other.¹³ Hence historical reality incorporates horticultural domesticity to complicate the imperial structure of power. At the same time, the abundant Caribbean narration of gardening has a horticultural significance as a feminine construction of national identity, diasporic identification with the land, and domestic fulfillment of eco-historical consciousness.

The Local and the Diasporic

Sarah Casteel persuasively asserts that “[t]he question of place has a special resonance in the Americas, where traditional modes of emplacement currently are being reimagined. The Caribbean in particular has emerged as a key site from and through which to theorize the relationship between identity and place”.¹⁴ Because of its history of migration, its people have a complex sense of belonging, being connected to both roots and rootlessness. “Displacement”, writes Isabel Hoving, is “an ambivalent concept: it is a sign of loss, but also a potential for personal transformation, and thus an opportunity to choose new subject positions”.¹⁵ Thus, as Hoving points out, black and migrant women often journey in search of identities. Their “rhetorics of the journey are closely related to a politics of identity, just as Western postmodern poetics of travel are connected to the construction of the shifting, mobile identity of (post)-modernity”.¹⁶

Caribbeans are unable to directly trace their ancient heritages to either Africa or Asia (India and China). As a result, they journey in search of spaces with which to identify themselves.¹⁷ Urban spaces, for one, offer accessible environments due to their diverse racial residents and foreign cultures. Such “modern metropolis as we have conventionally imagined it is the theater in which new forms of belonging are worked out”.¹⁸ But within an urban narrative where nationalism and the displaced sense of locality are being imagined, rurality often takes place in the form of a horticultural imagination.

When identity is determined by a root, the emigrant is condemned (especially in the second generation) to being split and flattened. Usually an outcast in the place he has newly set anchor, he is forced into impossible attempts to reconcile his former and his present belonging.¹⁹

To reconcile his wandering presence, therefore, an emigrant attempts to identify with a distant national image, in which his sense of belonging finds consolation. Landscape, or primitive Nature, territorializes human connection to an ‘imagined community’ like a nation. As Casteel notes, “Diasporic writers exploit [this] double-edged quality of pastoral so that they may assert the need for place while simultaneously registering the historical realities of displacement”.²⁰

Interestingly, it is especially with women that such a nation-versus-garden process of identification ensues. As many critics have observed, Caribbean women writers share some concerns distinct from those of men’s. Antonia MacDonald-Smythe, for instance, contends:

while these male writers/theorists were consciously re-defining what constitutes history, they were ratifying the view that it is history that creates identity. Nevertheless, many West Indian women writers cannot accept this premise, for the history of the Caribbean as it had been told, and was being told, had presented woman as silent and her experience of colonialism as unremarkable.²¹

Despite my consent to the fact that these women writers do have their own heritages in terms of gender, I hesitate to agree that the female colonial experience is rendered silent and unremarkable. I consider, rather, that it is in the very silence of women that feminine language characterizes the traumatic historical experience of being woman in the West Indies. Such female experiences, in this sense, are made audible though the “very inaccessibility” of a historical “occurrence”²² – that is, the inaudibility of the feminine voice. Hoving, too, comments on voicelessness: “the concept of silence does not merely refer to the impossibility of (self)-representation. It is also used to open a space where the counterdiscursivity and the materiality of the female postcolonial embodied self can begin to be written”.²³

¹⁷ While “the city would appear to disallow an extensive experience of belonging insofar as it remains deeply bound up with modernist tropes of alienation and exile”, it may actually be “more accommodating of marginalized populations”, and therefore “significantly curtails these populations’ claims to belonging”, Casteel, *Second Arrivals*, 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 143.

²⁰ Casteel, *Second Arrivals*, 13.

²¹ Antonia MacDonald-Smythe, *Making Homes in the West/Indies: Constructions of Subjectivity in the Writings of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid* (New York: Garland, 2001), 11.

²² Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 8.

²³ Hoving, *In Praise of New Travelers*, 27.

²⁴ Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (New York: Plume, 1996). Hereafter references in the text as *NTH*.

In *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) by Jamaican American writer Michelle Cliff, Clare Savage's overall lack of speech makes her not inadequate but appropriate to engage a feminine monologue of the national un-/consciousness.²⁴ The novel centers on Clare's journeying, her search for identity, which propels the plot as well as the purpose of her life. As a U.S. immigrant, a foreign (Third World) traveler, and a daughterly land-reclaimer, Clare's identity is not transformed from one to the other. Rather, it is the simultaneousness of her different identities that molds Clare as a representative of female experiences in postcolonial and neocolonial Jamaica and among diasporic West Indians.

Despite her constant global mobility, Clare remains alert to Nature wherever she stays: in ethnic diasporic gardens, in metropolitan New York, in Bobby's recounted traumatic memories of land-clearing during the war, and, finally and significantly, in her reclamation of her grandmother's land. Clare's homecoming signifies less than her home-claiming does: for the former is her regression to motherland, while the latter is her will to recover power under a nationalistic trajectory.

²⁵ MacDonald-Smythe, *Making Homes in the West/Indies*, 11.

Apart from the mainstream narrative which focuses on Clare, the novel also stages a gothic feminization of territorial consciousness in the mystical chapter on the mythological woman warrior deity. As MacDonald-Smythe points out, "[t]he West Indian woman had been essentialized as the grand Mother Africa, the daughter of the Diaspora from whose womb her West Indian children had been expelled. She was the West Indian landscape, surviving repeated waves of conquistadorial assault, her fertility uninterrupted".²⁵ By tracing a Western tradition up to the Garden of Eden, such a feminization of the land (and vice versa) instead operates to resist the West-centered ideology that has been present not simply in Western texts but in postcolonial Third World texts as well.

²⁶ Tiffin, "Man Fitting the Landscape", 204.

... in the Caribbean, the redemption of a postlapsarian world is by contrast thwarted, not facilitated, by its particular form of labor in the earth: plantation slavery. Hence labor itself, in a rewriting of the Enlightening recovery narrative, becomes the serpent in the postlapsarian garden; and the mood of the Caribbean 'recovery' narrative is necessarily one of tragedy or regression, involving a reentry into slave and colonial histories and their interrogations and rewriting.²⁶

Accordingly, Caribbean gardens are written as resistance to imperial operations on the colonized land. While to reconstruct the postlapsarian garden is to rewrite femininity from the agrarian perspective, those postlapsarian texts attempt to recover cultural history from a feminized fragment of earth.

The Garden of Remembering

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched ... All Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush.

(Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*)

Neither natural nor domestic, a garden functions to balance the binary disjunction between home and landscape. By imitating nature and bringing the inhuman into semi-domestic spaces, gardens construct cultural dialogues between humans and nature. Such cultural dialogues often appear gender-specific as a result of women's particularly close connection to gardening.

Whereas men tend to exploit the unknown landscape, women domesticate nature with horticultural designs. As Tamara Fritze points out, "In rural areas of the West, women's transformations generally take place within the dooryard or barnyard, and their dooryard gardens are usually the most conscious attempt to alter the land, to culturize the land around them".²⁷ Such a dooryard garden "provides the gardener with a greater sense of her place in nature and in her culture", and hence "the garden and the gardener work together, each nurturing the other".²⁸

As "a space of becoming rather than of being",²⁹ a garden transforms nature into domesticity and labor into representation. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette reveals her anxiety through the equally anxious garden in which history intrudes in replacement of the heroine's narrative voice. Jamaica Kincaid, with her conscious engagement in horticulture, finds in the act of gardening the capacity to rewrite "a history of an empire through plants".³⁰ By employing oneself in the labor of planting, a gardener is engaged in the process of creating and recreating a landscape. And it is in these recreated landscapes that labor is transformed into representations of culture and of memory.

In *No Telephone to Heaven*, diasporic gardens distinguish diverse cultural memories with agricultural images displaced onto the foreign soil. Out of "Progresso and Contadina plum-tomato cans" that they empty into "well-defined and fertilized furrows", the Savages' Italian neighbors strive to plant tomatoes "unlike any the Savages knew": "Deep-red inside and out, they seemed to hold sunlight and had a sweetness that filled all three stories of the house when the woman inside boiled them down to make their own tomato paste. Italian tomatoes – from the old country" (*NTH*, 64). Because "[e]xile is the nursery of nationality",³¹ for the emigrants nostalgia lies in agrarian products of the land. To plant the crops imported from their motherland is to remember the land itself. The Italian tomatoes raised in recycled American (or Americanized Italian) plum-tomato cans,

²⁷ Tamara Fritze, "A View of Her Own: The Garden as Text", in Thomas S. Edwards and Elizabeth A. De Wolfe, eds., *Such News of the Land: U.S. Women Nature Writers* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001), 146.

²⁸ Ibid., 147.

²⁹ Casteel, *Second Arrivals*, 118.

³⁰ Kincaid, "On Gardening", 793.

³¹ Cit. in Benedict Anderson, "Exodus", *Critical Inquiry*, 20.2 (Winter 1994), 315.

³² Casteel, *Second Arrivals*, 118.

for instance, symbolically mark the Antonellis' dislocated agricultural memories. In this respect, "[g]arden writing" of the diaspora does not merely foreground "the labor of identity – and place making".³² It moreover maps the boundaries of ethnicity in terms of plants cultivated, and thus connects the crops to cultural memories.

Recollecting her mother's sense of loss in America, Clare remembers how "the sweetest mango seemed her cherished goal", and how "she always managed to find it in deep bush" (*NTH*, 173). Planting, for the first-generation emigrant Kitty, is the way in which the distant land of Jamaica can be accessed. During her exile, her terror as an outcast mystifies her imagination for gardening, for the maternal bond, and more significantly, for nature.

Just as she believed in planting when the zodiac was favorable, and knew which sign responded to which vegetable or fruit. Just as she arranged her flower garden according to plan. Just as she taught her children to fear Sasabonsam. To honor the Merry Maids in the river, for they brought eloquence to women. Just as she carved her calabashes with shapes she had been taught as a girl. Lightning bolts, a sign the spirits were alive in the heavens. Flying fish, the promise of resurrection. The eye of God. His merciful hand. His wrathful hand. His face moving across all creation ... And the righteous return as a spring in the Blue Mountains. A rock in the river. A tree bearing Ethiopian apples. The sun-warmed swallowtail. (*NTH*, 69-70)

³³ Ibid. With the way Kitty reminisces about nature, the landscape is "transformed by human agents in their effort to construct a sense of place".³³ Such a "shift from an observed to an acted-upon landscape," as Casteel asserts, is "key to their rereading of the garden, and it coincides with the redefinition of identity as processual".³⁴

³⁴ Ibid. It is in the process of reconstructing the garden and reimagining nature that Kitty attempts to scrutinize her dislocated identity. For her, the garden is not so much where national consciousness transpires as it is the resort where she finds a historical heritage from the domesticated primitive earth. Therefore,

³⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 13.

[t]he recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.³⁵

³⁶ "To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres", *ibid.*

Kitty's horticultural imagination and agrarian nostalgia hence transcend personal domestic experiences to signify remembrances that trespass borders: borders between individual and nation, between domesticity and nature, and between the homed and the unhomed.³⁶

The Land Remembered

She remembers the jungle. The contours of wildness...
She is the woman who has reclaimed her grandmother's
land.

Nothing but the chaos of the green – reaching across
space, time too it seemed. When only Arawaks and
iguanas and birds and crocodiles and snakes dwelt here.
Before landfall. Before hardship.

(Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*)

In contrast to Kitty's anxiety as an outcast, Clare's anguish resides in her uncertified identity. Kitty finds a solution to her problem in the homecoming to Jamaica while Clare remains perplexed throughout her journey. Tracing the reverse route of the British imperial expeditions, in moving from Jamaica (through the U.S.) to Britain, Clare continues to be frustrated by the ambiguity of her postcolonial identity. Her loss as well as the aimlessness of her mobility "remains hidden" (*NTH*, 91), under silence, whereas memories of primitive nature preoccupy her consciousness, marking her inevitable connection to the land.

On Clare's reclaiming of the land, MacDonald-Smythe interestingly comments that,

the particular rural landscape that the grandmother occupies has not even participated in the internal migration that marks rural life. Typically, in the migration of men to England and North America, women became sole bread-winners and had to relocate to urban centers in search of employment. As a landowner, the grandmother has a literal and metaphoric rootedness, a condition which her daughter attempts to approximate, a condition which her granddaughter admires but never attains.³⁷

Clare's ambiguous identity between out-of-place localness and local foreignness bonds her maternally to the agrarian roots she can neither apprehend nor acquire. Yet her unfitness in the locality does not decrease her connection to the land per se. Clare's effort "to reclaim connections to maternal origins in the face of the historical destruction of families and lineages" helps her to identify with a larger national consciousness as far as the locality is concerned.³⁸ Interrogated by the African guerilla leader, Clare herself explains her psychological bond to the place:

I... if anything, I owe my allegiance to the place my grandmother made.'
'Place again?
It represented a labor of love – once. (*NTH*, 189)

In contrast to the labor of gardening in exile, her grandmother's labor of love propels Clare to work on her identification with the locality. Whereas

³⁷ MacDonald-Smythe, *Making Homes in the West/Indies*, 90.

³⁸ Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

³⁹ "Ruinade: This distinctive Jamaican term is used to describe lands which were once cleared for agricultural purposes and have now lapsed back into 'bush'", *NTH*, 1.

⁴⁰ bell hooks, cit. in Angeletta K.M. Gourline, *The Difference Place Makes: Gender, Sexuality, and Diaspora Identity* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 48.

⁴¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁴² Evernden, "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy", 103.

⁴³ Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 64.

⁴⁴ Ileana Rodríguez, *House/Garden/Nation: Space, Gender, and Ethnicity in Postcolonial Latin American Literatures by Women*, trans. by Rober Carr and Ileana Rodríguez (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 7.

the labor of exiled gardening contributes to the process of identification through reconstructing the imagined/remembered landscape, the maternal 'labor of love' relates Clare's familial heritage as well as her diasporic complex with the land, which, for her, appears more realistic in memory. "Once she put the ruinade of her grandmother's place behind her, the road lay before Clare as a relief map, each feature – house, gully, ancient orange tree – familiar" (*NTH*, 183).³⁹ While her nostalgia, formed abroad, is developed through remembering (childhood memories) and recreating (imaginings of a homeland), it is embedded in a landscape obscurely remembered and nationalistically reimaged. Her nostalgic homeland images, built upon childhood memories, construct a national consciousness that is remade by the 'labor of love' upon her return and bonded by the land of allegiance. For Clare, the recent neocolonial history of Jamaica is distant.

To distinguish the idea of belonging in terms of displacement, bell hooks notes how "at times home is nowhere. At times one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is not just one place. It is locations".⁴⁰ For those unhomed, displacements usually detach them from identification with "neighborhoods",⁴¹ and as a result locations appear isolated and are not recognized as a locality. Whereas Neil Evernden asserts that "[t]here is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place",⁴² the individuality of diasporic people lies in their geographical exclusion from a place, namely, the locality. In such diasporic circumstances, the identification with a place is associated, as in the case of Clare, with reimaginings of a landscape. In this way, to imagine a land recreated from memories is to locate the displaced in place. And with the primitive wildness reconstructed, regression to the landscape evokes the nostalgia for a pre-colonial locality. With regard to the relationship between Africanity and its pastoral tradition, Buell argues:

Negritude can be thought of as a pastoral mode because it evokes a traditional, holistic, nonmetropolitan, nature-attuned myth of Africanity in reaction to and critique of a more urbanized, 'artificial' European order – and evokes it, furthermore, from the standpoint of one who has experienced exile and wishes to return".⁴³

The will to return from exile, however idealistically the locality is imagined, signifies a resistant national consciousness. That being the case, Clare, as the homecoming/home-reclaiming heroine in exile, signals "the presence of a consciousness clinging to the local geographies and soil, to the physical ground called 'national,' which social history registers as glimmers, gestures, indices of a 'national' bourgeoisie".⁴⁴

The Land Reclaimed

As Caribbean anti-colonial consciousness derives from the agrarian trauma inflicted by colonial history, history and geography are fabricated to portray a landscape beyond topographical features. In her short essay “In History”, Kincaid recounts the traumatic colonial history of the Caribbean isles in a semi-omniscient yet autobiographical, storytelling mode:

... a man setting sail with three ships, and after many, many days on the ocean, finding new lands whose existence he had never even heard before, ... and he empties the land of these people, and then he empties the people, he just empties the people. It is when this land is completely empty that I and the people who look like me begin to make an appearance, the food I eat begins to make an appearance, the trees I will see each day come from far away and begin to make an appearance, the sky is as it always was, the sun is as it always was, the water surrounding the land on which I am just making an appearance is as it always was; but these are the only things left from before that man, sailing with his three ships, reached the land on which I eventually make an appearance.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Jamaica Kincaid, “In History”, *Callaloo*, 20.1 (Winter 1997), 623.

The narrator’s understated tone does not understate the violent way Western colonizers intrude into the West Indies to transform the local landscapes. Neither is Cliff’s rendering of this intrusion less dramatic. Upon Clare’s return to Jamaica, she discovers her motherland in dismay, transfigured by colonial plantations, contaminated by neocolonial industries: “Weeds and flowers sprang from the ties and poked their heads from under the gravel between the rails, once tested by the weight of cane” (*NTH*, 185), and “the rivers run red ... and the underground aquifers are colored ... from the waste of the bauxite mines and the aluminum refineries” (*NTH*, 195). She observes how “[t]he waste leaches into the land. And the people for miles are covered with a fine dust which invades them” (*ibid.*). Apart from her ecological consciousness, Clare strives to imagine the agrarian exploitation in Jamaican history through her conversations with Bobby, who once engaged in land clearing. She learns from Bobby how clearing the land is like “trying to construct a landscape after a lightning flash when you have never seen the landscape before. Often, he said, the entire thirteen months he spent over there felt like that. The landscape shot with flashes of light – harsh, rapid. A violent nakedness ensuing” (*NTH*, 146). As land clearing represents manipulative Western control over the colonized earth, the transformed landscape ends up being configured by Western capitalist desire.

In Clare’s will to return to Jamaica, her power to reclaim her right to her grandmother’s land, and her consent to have the soldiers clear the ground, there lies a reconstructed order which repeats the history of colonization:

It took the soldiers months to clear enough bush to have land enough to plant. At first they used machetes, fixing themselves in a line against the green, the incredibly alive green, swinging their blades in unison, sometimes singing songs they remembered from the grandmothers and grandfathers who had swung their own blades once in the canefields. Some passing the blades to their children, and their grandchildren. (*NTH*, 10)

The primitive agricultural method adopted by these guerilla soldiers reflects the nationalists' ideal to go back to their "original" national history. As they partake in "rituals associated with clearing forests, making gardens, building houses, which always carry an implicit sense of the teleology of locality building",⁴⁶ their attempt to reconstruct the landscape nonetheless reflects their post-neocolonial desire. Such a desire, with the aim of reproducing the landscape and replacing the colonizers' power, only functions to transfer the colonizing power to another agent. The nationalistic desire to return the land to its origins and indigenous culture is consequently problematic here: whereas those freedom fighters strive to reconstruct a neighborhood of their own origins, they cannot erase the neocolonial influences on the local culture and environment. According to Appadurai to rebuild from scratch is impossible, hence to reconstruct a neighborhood is simply to rearrange elements of culture and civilization within the geographical context: "In this way, through the vagaries of social action by local subjects, neighborhood as context produces the context of neighborhoods".⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 183

⁴⁷ Ibid., 185.

However futile the guerilla's actions to resist and reconstruct, and however unavailing the hierarchy of colonial neighborhood to be overthrown, the power of nature lies profoundly beneath these political movements. During the process of land clearing, these soldiers find "things that had been planted long before – before even the grandmother – which had managed to survive the density of the wild forest. Cassava. Afu. Fufu. Plantain" (*NTH*, 11). And yet, these primitive crops do not only wait to be found. Rather, they take the initiative to claim the domestic space of the house, proclaiming dominion over the construction of human civilization.

By the time the group had decided to take the farm as a place to stay and conceal themselves, the forest had already moved in – long-time – around the house, edging the verandah. Mahogany. Broadleaf. Mosquito wood. Shadbark. Silk-cotton. Guango. Cashew. Lignum vitae. Ebony. Wild pine. The forest had obliterated the family graves, so that the grandmother and her husband, and their son who died before them, were wrapped by wild vines which tangled the mango trees shading their plots, linking them further to the wild trees, anchoring their duppies to the ground. (*NTH*, 8)

As these plants signify local tropicality, they invade the domestic space of the house, confusing history as well as human memory. With their primitive connection to the earth and their aggressive intrusion into the

house, these plants blur the ecological boundary between nature and civilization, and hence establish an agricultural means by which the land issues its resistance to power.

By providing narratives thus encroached upon by primitive pastoral presences, Cliff signifies the ubiquity of Nature that exceeds both human history and civilization. In this way, ecological consciousness intermingles with the imagination of an ideal primitive landscape, for which nationalism longs, and upon which the narrating voice of a nation obtrudes. In *House/Garden/Nation*, Ileana Rodríguez writes: “[l]and’ is the yearning for nation and nationhood. Land ... makes a history which is not the history of one narrative but of several, the history of an uninterrupted continental narratology, the history of a map of disputed borders, limits, and frontiers in the ever-polemical discussion of nation and nationality”.⁴⁸

Belinda Edmondson’s comments on the failure of the guerillas’ action at the end of the novel to bring up the way local ecology reflects the return of a land undisturbed: “even as the helicopters flying over the guerrilla’s hiding places in the bush tell us that their mission has failed, the novel ends with a burst of sounds – English, patois, bird sounds – which signify the unharnessed possibilities of discourse: the power to name, signify, create”.⁴⁹

Now, the place had a different pattern of sounds altogether. The only sound that remained from the grandmother’s time was the rush of the riverwater, but that, which had once sounded clearly through the open grove of citrus, was muffled by the new thick growth and fainter, more distant than before. It competed with the creak and rustle of the coconut fronds, the noises of the animals moving through the undergrowth, the population of the birds, and the steady gnawing of the rats making nests. (*NTH*, 9)

With the recoding of all these unprecedented sounds, the ending of the novel raises alternative voices to substitute for the previously dominant voice of the now-deceased Clare. As soon as Clare dies in the nationalist guerilla attack, these sounds emerge in time to bridge the voiceless gap in the narrative. Like the aggressive botanical intrusions into civilization, these audible presences of nature appear to take charge of the narrative, claiming the primitive locality’s ability to voice itself. Leslie Silko beautifully says:

Landscape ... has similarities with dreams. Both have the power to seize terrifying feelings and deep instincts and translate them into images – visual, aural, tactile – into the concrete where human beings may more readily confront and channel the terrifying instincts of powerful emotions into rituals and narratives which reassure the individual while reaffirming cherished values of the group. The identity of the individual as a part of the group and the greater Whole is strengthened, and the terror of facing the world alone is extinguished.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Rodríguez, *House/Garden/Nation*, 4.

⁴⁹ Belinda Edmondson, “Race, Privilege, and the Politics of (Re)Writing History: An Analysis of the Novels of Michelle Cliff”, *Callaloo*, 16. 1 (Winter 1993), 190.

⁵⁰ Leslie Marmon Silko, “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination”, in Glotfelty and Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 273–4.

With a postcolonial nostalgia for a land reimagined, the project of *No Telephone to Heaven* ergo endeavors in multiple respects to re-do: to return (to homeland), to reclaim (the grandmother's land), to regain (autonomist power), to rewrite (national history), and above all, to remember (origins). As the land acts through plants and nature speaks through sounds, Cliff demonstrates the land's ecological power, rather than colonial, neocolonial or post-neocolonial powers, with which a neighborhood reconstructs itself as the primitivity of Third World national consciousness.

Casteel mentions that “[a]s a consequence of the Americas’ composite character and their resultant anxiety of origins, the creation of viable modes of belonging and of ‘Americanness’ becomes one of the central projects of New World cultural production”.⁵¹ Either by simply portraying the landscape or by further endowing it with the ability to narrate, writers of the Americas “demonstrate the flexibility of landscape and botanical imagery”.⁵² In ecological re-imaginings like this, national and transnational identities – whether diasporic or colonized – of the Americas not only find ways to express themselves; they reconstruct the nostalgic memories of the landscape on which history leaves its trace. And hence “history is spread out beneath this surface, from the mountains to the sea, from north to south, from the forest to the beaches. Maroon resistance and denial, entrenchment and endurance, the world beyond and dream”.⁵³

⁵¹ Casteel, *Second Arrivals*, 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11.