
Michelle Cliff, *Everything is Now*
(Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 274 pp.

Reviewed by **Claudia Buonaiuto**

Everything is Now, a collection of old and new stories by Michelle Cliff, can be described as a memoir although she resents being defined an autobiographical writer. The short stories in this volume are however all closely related to her personal experiences. Many try to return to points of origins or first memories, that is, specific starting moments in life when particular events or situations have influenced one's present life. One of the recurrent points of origin is obviously birth. Cliff was born in Jamaica and presumably like one of her characters in "Screen Memories" she used to be dubbed a "white nigger" (149), a pejorative term for light-skinned Jamaicans.

The influence the island of her birth has had on the present woman and writer was already clear in her famous novel *Abeng*, where the re-discovery of Jamaica's colonial past, one of her ongoing cruxes, brought her fame and inserted her in a genealogy of Caribbean Creole women writers, which started with Jean Rhys. Jamaica is usually portrayed in her short fictions as the special setting of childhood, but it is more often seen as an uncanny place, as a place outside the window, disclosed through a dark curtain, only observed but never really lived. At other times, Jamaica is a place of confinement, as in "Contagious Melancholia", where Cliff ends with a personal comment on those long gone women who are still in her mind: "mad, crazy, eccentric, disappointed, demented, neurasthenic women of my childhood, where Bertha Mason grew on trees. Every family of our ilk, every single one, had such a member. And she was always hidden, and she was always a shame, and she was always the bearer of that which lay behind us" (222).

"My Grandmother's Eyes", with which the author significantly decides to start the collection, is a desolate celebration of her Jamaican point of origin. The writer asks herself whether she "actually has any real knowledge of it?" (8). At the beginning of the story, a woman writes to her granddaughter about her past as a green "lizard eyes" child who lives constrained in her grandmother's house in complete isolation; the child's reclusion is perhaps a punishment for being the offspring of an extra-marital relationship. The world outside is non-existent, it is only seen as a decadent and ruined space, bearing memories of other stories and forgotten pasts. The woman renames herself "Aristocoon", which shows Cliff's ironic eye and her ability to play with words, as she retraces the history of white British colonialism on the island. Indeed, the grandmother's house, a rum

distillery and a sugar-cane plantation before, still projects shadows of the slave quarters. But the child stares at the empty quarters without feeling any kind of resentment, for slavery is not commented upon, it is merely a fact that pertains to the past.

Another major topic in Cliff's stories is colonial education. This is to be expected of a writer who has committed much of her work to the historical revision of the Caribbean colonial past. In "My Grandmother's Eyes", the girl is not sent to school for it is considered as a waste of time. Education is provided for by the local minister who teaches her to write and read the Bible, but in secret, in her grandfather's library she manages to go through "dreadful" Dickens, Thackeray, and Shakespeare, which will eventually offer her the "vast possibilities of life through words" (10). The only relationship with the outside world is Winsome, the black illiterate nurse, to whom the girl decides to give the "gift of literacy", forbidden to women and of course to blacks, in exchange of information about sex and sexuality. When Winsome leaves the house at night to join the UNIA – "(For those with short memories, or ignorant of history, or both, the UNIA is the Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded in Jamaica by Marcus Garvey)" (6) – the disappointed grandmother, who has never really liked the dark-skinned lizard eyes girl, sends the granddaughter back to her mother. That is when the seventeen year old woman decides to escape from the island and seek her fortune in the United States. Finally free in New York – the story is set in the 1920's – she breathes the exciting atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance. During a demonstration she notices a poster which reads, "Poetry for the People". Cliff's authorial voice underlines the power of words during this cultural revolution and explains that those years were of great liberation for black people in the U.S. But it was also the time of the Stock Market Crash, when any job would do, and the young woman becomes a dancer at the Cotton Club, works in a theatre, and among many other things, also poses for a woman painter with whom she eventually begins a "secret life" (10). Although she will marry four times, she never forgot this love story. It is this memory which spurs her to write the revealing letter to her grandchild. The letter, in fact, ends with the unexpected sentence: "I only hope that my moment of death resembles a thrilling orgasm, like those I shared with J." (15).

It is not uncommon to find in *Everything is Now* characters of grandmothers telling or writing letters to granddaughters about hidden accounts of their lives. It is a way to transmit history, which inspires the writer throughout the book. These missives can be described, using a Derridean expression, as "strategies of the archive", when silenced histories are reported through personal writings. In Cliff's case they are mostly stories dealing with lesbian encounters and racism. Yet, these issues are never openly the topic of the stories, they are never presented as a matter

to be discussed or analysed. They are an integral part of the framework and are treated with extraordinary simplicity: lesbianism is simply ordinary, part of everyday life, partly hidden when the historical background didn't allow it to be openly expressed in public or was punished by law. In the early 1900's convention pushed women into marriage, even if these heterosexual unions inevitably ended in repeated failures. Cliff also suggests that lesbians are simply in search of tenderness, a natural need, thus she offers her own vision of what psychoanalysis uselessly tries to explain through complex theories: "No doubt Freudians would make hay of my experience – unmothered woman, etc., seeks female companionship – but I honestly don't think that was the case. Certainly I yearned for a tenderness which I had never really known. And tenderness was at the very center of our lovemaking" (10-11).

Lovemaking with a woman companion is also the closing of the short story "Everything Is Now", which gives the title to the collection – even if lesbianism has nothing to do with the rest of the story. It is a macabre ghost story in which Cassandra, a woman with the gift of speaking to the dead, gets into contact with "a shadow of a former self" (22). The ghost is reporting about a lover who died during the War, "the great adventure where as usual the USA saved the world" (19). 'War' is capitalized in the text as a way to refer to the warfare system that has characterised American history in the last fifty years. The issue here is the silenced voice of the "twenty-three thousand fallen" (21) in an unspecified war that haunts the living.

Even if remembering is a key aspect of Cliff's creative imagination and lesbianism an identity stance, it would be simplistic to define her fictions through those ideas. Cliff has lived most of her life in the U.S. and many short stories go back to America's history of militarism. Many stories reveal a radical anti-Americanism. Her intention is to denounce not only the dramatic violence palpable in the country but its pervasive culture of war. For instance, in "The Store of a Million Items", her 1950's childhood experiences in the US are vividly reported and speak of a society growing fast through commodities coming from the rest of the world. That same world which provides goods to American children and is nourishing their imagination through games, suffered from the terrifying U.S. bombings – in this specific case, it is the massacre of Hiroshima which is evoked. In another story, "Lost Nation Road", the looming shadow of the Iraqi war is the cause of assassinations and is seen as fostering a gun culture in American society. This radical stand is nonetheless counterposed by a multi-layered discourse on violence throughout the collection. As it moves across cultures and nations, Cliff shows that it has deep roots in human life and history. In the short story "Muleskin. Honeyskin" the news of a woman put to death through lethal injections today is bridged with a similar episode of

a twelve year old “mulatta” hanged in the same state, Connecticut, in 1786. Or in “Belling the Lamb” set in the Holborn neighbourhood of 1796 London, a woman writes a diary about killing her mother without feeling any kind of regret.

A significant aspect which needs to be reported about the collection is the use of a cinematic style, which provides its quintessential rhythm while writing/shooting images of the past. The writer has often admitted the influence movies have had on her work, referring to the family habit of taking the children to the cinema. As in the short story “Monster”, movies, shadows and magic inspire remembrances of her father who projected a film in her grandmother’s house in Jamaica for a special event, when she was a teenager. *Frankenstein*, “one of the best movies ever made” (215), cannot be but the movie to show, because as Cliff writes, “we are triangular people, our feet in three islands” (212) (read Jamaica, Great Britain, Manhattan, N.Y.). ‘Monsters’ never live happy lives, and in fact the house catches fire, but the father says, “What ever happens don’t stop the movie!” (217).

The many new and collected stories cover twenty years of Cliff’s literary career stretching from the collections *The Bodies of Water* (1990) and *The Store of a Million Items* (1998) to very recent short stories like “My Grandmother’s Eyes” in the first section of the book. *Everything is Now*, which is a sentence significantly taken from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, marks the ultimate celebration of the short fiction genre, which the author seems to have found thrilling to write and the reader will find enjoyable to read. These bitter prose poems on ghastly life experiences are moving and beautifully written.