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Gendered Use of Violence in the Caribbean

No matter who dies, the antecedent is often a history of repeated male violence, not of repeated female violence. This is a common pattern known in the United States since the 1950's and one that continues today.
(R. Emerson Dobash, Russell P. Dobash, *Women, Violence and Social Change*)

This special issue of *Anglistica* on female narrations and contemporary forms of violence explores the way in which women writers, artists, poets, historians, and literary scholars narrate physical, psychic, and symbolic violence both in our pasts and in our present. It draws attention to the way violence lingers in the memory of women and the innovative ways they have found to tell those stories.

The title of the issue “Violence in Paradise: The Caribbean” takes its cue from Michelle Cliff’s keynote lecture at a 2007 conference organized by the center “Archivio delle donne” and the Department of American, Cultural and Linguistic Studies at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, Italy. In her talk Cliff reconfigured the Caribbean as a site of abuse and violence. She pursued a broad set of emphases which we have taken in, but also extended, and which include the Caribbean’s historical past, the legacy of slavery, colonialism, U.S. imperialism, as well as the anxieties and traumas of the repetitive and disordering forces of violation, rupture, dislocation, and displacement.

Caribbean women are re-telling the stories of violence they have experienced or witnessed and are also creating them in fictional forms. Still the myriad configurations of violence are not always depicted as major catastrophes as they have often insidiously entered our lives and are enmeshed in them. The writers explore how brutality flourishes in economically deprived areas, how it is normalized in the media, and how narrations help re-create a sense of self.

It is disconcerting that a decade into the twenty-first century, we still feel the need to address gender-directed violence with such a sense of urgency. Yet here we are proposing a series of rich and complex reflections on the “many-headed demon of oppression”, on the many forms of domination which plague our lives.¹ This issue of *Anglistica* opens with Fatimeh Vahdat’s powerful images which cut across cultural barriers to denounce the dismaying forms of violence against women worldwide. These visual reminders are immediately followed by the essay “A Theatre

¹ Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Boston: Kitchen Table - Women of Color Press, 1983), 195.

of Violence Behind a Curtain of Paradise”, as an homage to Michelle Cliff who denounced the class, color, race, gender, and sexual hierarchies of her native Jamaica back in 1982, in her famous essay “If I Could write This in Fire I Would Write This in Fire”. This is another invitation to take a behind-the-scene look at the many faces of violence in the Caribbean basin. As Cliff candidly and poetically enters her personal history to trace wherein the source of her narrative energy, her writings, like that of other female writers included here, express the trauma of living in “a world that doesn’t love women, a world that doesn’t like women”.²

A world which is not only patriarchal but misogynistic at its very core cannot but constantly violate the female body, and if this world also functions thanks to engrained asymmetrical race and class relations, it cannot but keep women of color, third world and multiracial women engaged in a continuous process of recreation, of reinvention of self to overcome disparagement, denigration and abuse. As Patricia Powell ponders in regard to this process in *The Fullness of Everything*, “What was the source of violence for the characters, what was it in them, in the environment, that made them want to lash out? What is it we are truly, desperately seeking but can’t seem to find? What is the source of our unfulfillment, our frustration, and if we can locate it, and fill ourselves, will that stop us from lashing out at ourselves and each other?”.³

To counteract the violence of History and that of gender roles, the violence of language, which has crystallized them as subalterns, and that of identitarian politics which is essentially exclusionary, women have reclaimed a voice “as historical subjects” and have become “agents of an oppositional discourse”.⁴ As Foucault elaborates, “agency is always on circumstances. At each point of power there is resistance, but that this resistance cannot exist or be viewed as exterior to the relations of power within which it is produced”.⁵ Focusing on the psychic and material violence which has shaped their subjectivities, taking a stand against the unitary category of woman and refusing to see gender as the preponderant source of oppression, Caribbean women have tried to recuperate alternative modes of knowledge and produce novel epistemologies. For instance, M. Jacqui Alexander has proposed to shift the ground of experience – “a category of great epistemic import to feminism” – from the Secular to the Sacred to counteract their antithetical relation;⁶ Eudine Barriteau has sounded the alarm over the erasure of women’s contribution to epistemology. She has pointed out that the use of ‘gender’ as an analytical category, ambiguous as it may be, is no longer recognized as having been generated by feminist thought.⁷

Women are challenged on many fronts. Thus their work, as Chandra Mohanty has asserted, must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes”.⁸ If systemic violence has to be

² Dionne Brand, *No Language is Neutral*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998), 38.

³ Quoted in Irlene François, “Unchaining the Unconscious. An Interview with Patricia Powell”, included in this volume, 124.

⁴ Benita Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse”, in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 50.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1990), 98.

⁶ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 295.

⁷ Eudine Barriteau, “Theorizing the Shift from ‘Woman’ to ‘Gender’ in Caribbean Feminist Discourse”, in Eudine Barriteau, ed., *Confronting Power; Theorizing Gender. Interdisciplinary Perspectives in the Caribbean* (Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), 33.

⁸ Chandra Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles”, *Signs*, 28.2 (Winter 2003), 501.

addressed, dimorphism must be re-conceptualized, the many layers of selfhood recognized, and the very mechanisms of power dismantled. The concurrence of power and violence is central in the analyses proposed here: the brutality of political and state power, as much as the everyday acts of cruelty. As Veena Das has written, “violence attaches itself into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary”.⁹

⁹ Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 9.

In her essay, Michelle Cliff sees the everyday practices of humiliation as the wellspring of violence in Jamaica, the island which is transformed into a stage which the characters must exit in order to survive. This “paradise [is] drenched with blood”, this Caribbean inferno, is also the setting of her collection of short stories described here, in Claudia Buonaiuto’s review. Two other contributions in this issue examine the construction of island space as paradise: the book review by Enrica Picarelli and Yi-Peng Lai’s essay which analyzes the “agrarian trauma inflicted by history”. Taking her insight from eco-criticism, which has opened new productive avenues for research and new ways to investigate connections to the land, Lai points out how writers like Cliff have had to “work through their geo-historical wounds” in order to reclaim their connections with the land. Environmental devastation is also discussed by Franca Bernabei through Dionne Brand’s long poem *Inventory*. There, Brand grieves for our “ravaged world” and for the loss of lives as a result of concerted or spontaneous violence. Patricia Powell’s comments on this regard are illuminating: “I think too of the land ravaged by so many years of bloodshed and violence, starting first with the decimation of the Indians, and then the brutality of slavery that lasted all those years, then indentureship. I think about the land locked now in poverty and hard life, the land still carrying all that grief, all that anguish, the dead still in shock, the dead grieving still. I think about our lives inextricably bound up with that land and I often find myself wondering – if the land is still in pain, wouldn’t we too be in pain, since we live on that land, we eat off the land, the land is in us”.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Patricia Powell’s incisive personal essay “Violence and Its Unmaking” included in this volume, 115.

The horror of these legacies, compounded with the acquired familiarity with gruesome details of deaths and dismemberments in contemporary culture, produce what Franca Bernabei describes as “horrorism”. The term borrowed from Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero refers to forms of violence in a world in which, as Hannah Arendt suggested, “speechless horror at what humans are capable of, not beauty or pleasure, marks the contemporary experience of wonder”.¹¹ But as women scholars involved in the investigation of gendered lives, we must also study “how women may have taken these noxious signs of violation and reoccupied them through the work of domestication, ritualization, and re-narration”.¹²

¹¹ Franca Bernabei, “Ravaged Bodies, Ravaged World”, included in this volume, 91.

¹² Das, *Life and Words*, 59.

It is the question Laura Sarnelli’s essay addresses. Her approach to the counter-memories of violence in the Caribbean female novel traces a genealogy of queer writing which, beginning with Audre Lorde, posits the

erotic as power. Foucault lurks in the background of this paper in which traumas inscribed on the body are overcome in heterotopic spaces which, in Shani Mootoo's novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, bear the name of Paradise. However, specific social relations organize the sex/gender system in different ways and require adequate answers. Writing conveyed as an avenue for the recovery of self is demonstrated as eminently western and male in Myriam Warner-Vyiera's novel *Juletane*. As Irlene François and Jennifer Bess point out, in the African context, writing becomes a tool which undermines Juletane's quest and actually reinforces her sense of loss. Whereas collective wisdom is the form of knowledge which can empower women and query the assumptions of Eurocentric feminisms.

Betrayal of a privileged heritage, as Adrienne Rich indicated in her suggestive title "Disloyal to Civilization", is what Cliff's character undertakes in her first novel *Abeng* tackled here by H. Adlai Murdoch.¹³ In his analysis, Murdoch weaves his way through the ambivalences of the novel to valorize women's contributions to the development of postcolonial communities and identities. He indeed fleshes out the "metaphors of pluralistic ethnic and cultural practices" which "lead to new configurations of the Jamaican nation". Two of the episodes he discusses (the hog hunt and Clare's dream) are analyzed from a fresh perspective. His unorthodox reading of Clare's dream goes back to the stone throwing episode in *Wide Sargasso Sea* which still provokes new responses today, like the one Nourbese Philip has written for this issue of *Anglistica*. As Nourbese Philip states, her poem is an answer to the debate between E. Kamau Brathwaite and Peter Hulme over the relationship between Antoinette the white urban Creole and Tia the poor, black peasant girl. For Brathwaite the link between the two was emblematic of the incomplete creolization of the Caribbean inasmuch as the two girls' friendship "could never become future".

These relationships based on the class and race divide are further enacted through Claire and Zoe in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*. Thus creative and critical texts resonate with one another and with Nourbese Philip's poem and are finally echoed in Simone James Alexander's essay on *The Farming of Bones*. Despite the intimate relationship between the Haitian servant Amabelle and Señora Pico, a friendship between the two could never develop, for as Danticat succinctly puts it through Amabelle's words, "All the time I had known her, we had always been dangling between being strangers and being friends" (300). The reference to Cliff's Harry/Harriett in Mootoo's text and Cliff's own citation of Nourbese Philip in her essay is further evidence of the intertextual quality of Caribbean women's work, thus of the dialogue between writers of the region.

A significant and timely contribution comes from artist Fahimeh Vahdat who fled Iran in the wake of the regime's persecution of the Bahá'í religious minority. The subaltern position of women in Iran adds another dimension

¹³ Adrienne Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia", in Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (London: Virago, 1980).

to the politically and religiously inspired violence against opponents of the theocratic state Iran became with the return from France of Ayatollah Khomeini. France has a tradition of receiving refugees but also former dictators: Khomeini at the time he opposed the Shah, as well as Baby Doc Duvalier who had ransacked Haiti.

Female revulsion for the crimes committed against innocent women in Iran and against Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic is condemned through words and images in the same outcry against military abuse. The language of loss, pain, and suffering which emerges in *The Farming of Bones* is insightfully played out by Simone James Alexander, the violence of language which is used to create belonging and consequently becomes a tool of discrimination. According to Elaine Scarry, pain defies communication through language, yet it is through words which testify to her ordeal that Amabelle is able to survive and tell her story to those who will listen. As Audre Lorde reminded us, "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own".¹⁴ Gender norms are performing violence on women every day. But every day women are resisting and countering them – Caribbean women no less than others as they theorize their culture through their aesthetically valid work. This has given us an exciting opportunity to edit an issue replete with insightful readings of texts, narratives and theoretical thoughts.

¹⁴ Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism", in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1984), 133.

Fahimeh Vahdat

**“What Will Befall Them?”
Artist’s Statement**

We take language and home for granted; they become nature and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and Orthodoxy...

Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.

(Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*)



Fig. 1: Fahimeh Vahdat, *What Will Befall Her*, 2008, charcoal on handmade paper, 7 x 5 inch., courtesy of the artist.

Growing up in a culture that has been under a long period of censorship, I have learned to speak through the language of metaphors. Currently the metaphor speaks through the layers of canvas and fabrics in a multitude of traditional and non-traditional ways. I cut, dye, sew, draw, paint, print and use space as a raw material for my work. The installation of most of my pieces requires corners.

I feel I have been cornered by the dual life of an artist in exile who lives in ‘a world between’, who has been banned from going back to the motherland for over thirty years. The corners in my work are subject to that experience of ‘transitional duality’. The two realities that merge or separate are the experience of ‘in-betweenness’ that I speak of in my work. The issues of gender, identity and politics become the fabric of these works. In truth, they represent mass numbers of young women and men who are willing to give their lives for freedom in my un-adopted country. For that truth to come to reality, I voice the voiceless and my art becomes the face of the faceless.

My direct visual narrative deals with a single iconic image that is simple on the surface until the viewer encounters the fluid layers of meaning that reveal the depth of human suffering. More specifically the work confronts female oppression, violence and human rights abuses.

I strive to make art that questions rather than to provide answers.



Fig. 2: Fahimeh Vahdat, *Threat*, from the *Object of Violence* series, 2009, monotype on hand dyed canvas and mixed fabrics, 75 x 48 inch., courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3: Fahimeh Vahdat, *Rope*, from the *Object of Violence* series, 2009, monotype on hand dyed canvas, etching, mixed fabrics and rope, 77 x 49 inch., courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4: Fahimeh Vahdat, *Stop Shaking Me*, from the *Object of Violence* series, 2009/10, monotype and collage on hand dyed canvas and mixed fabrics, 238 x 82 inch., courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5: Fahimeh Vahdat, *Lace*, from the *Object of Violence* series, 2009, monotype on mixed fabric, 148 x 50 inch., courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6: Fahimeh Vahdat, *We Will Reach the Sun*, 2009, monotype and hand writing on mixed fabric, 173 x 48 inch., courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 7: Fahimeh Vahdat, *For Freedom*, from the *Freedom* series, 2009/10, wood block and embroidery on hand dyed canvas, felt and fabric, 106 x 58 inch., courtesy of the artist.

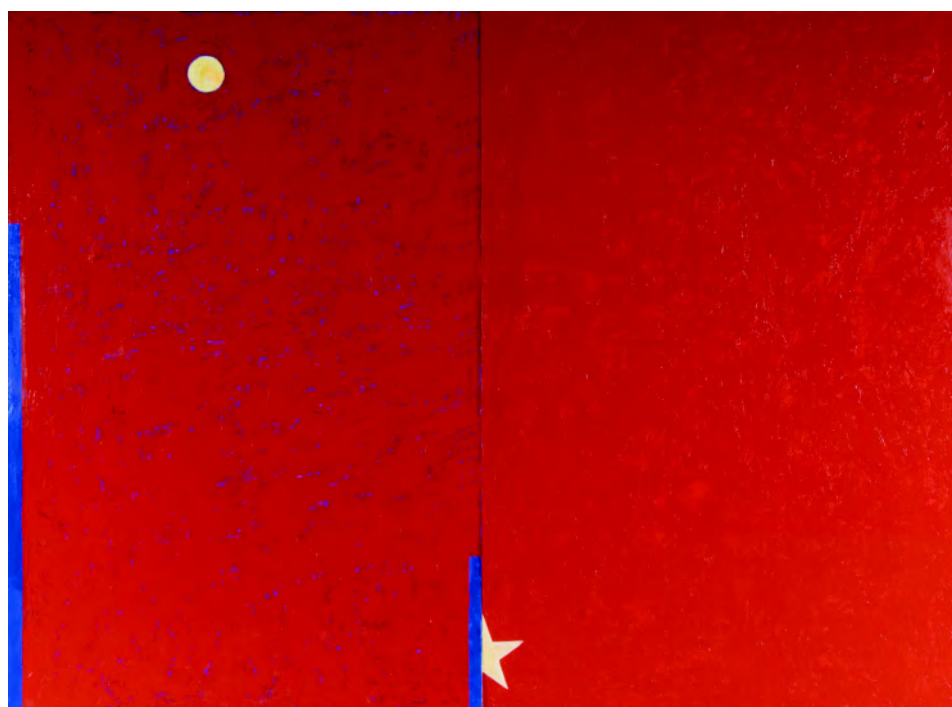


Fig. 8: Fahimeh Vahdat, *Eclipse*, 2008, oil, wax, collage on board, 8 x 8 inch., courtesy of the artist.

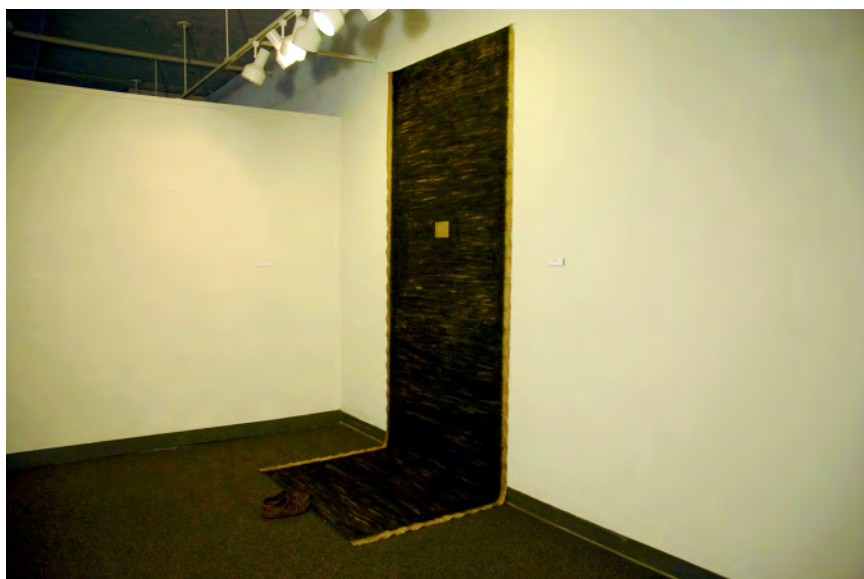


Fig. 9: Fahimeh Vahdat, *Kahriziak; Four by Six*, from the *Freedom* series, 2009, charcoal on linen and plastic sandals, 148 x 52 inch., courtesy of the artist.

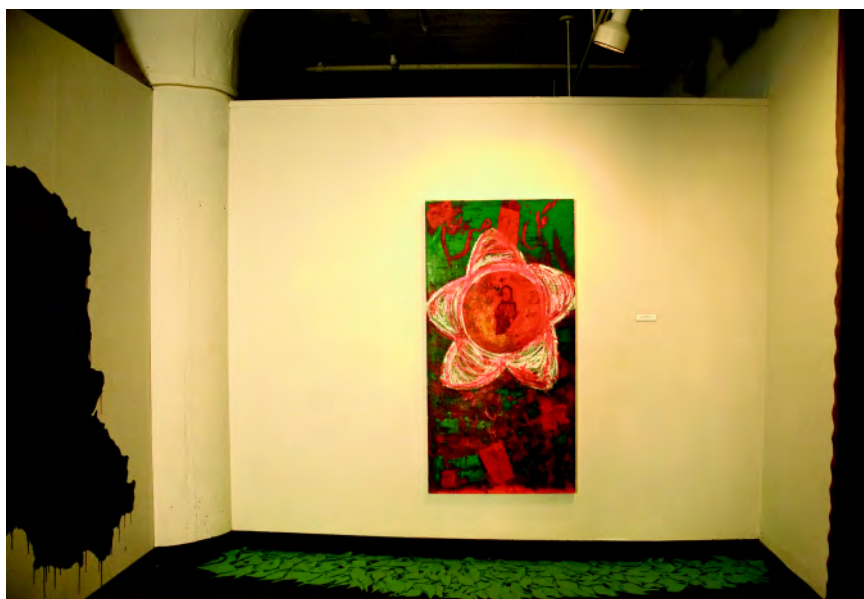


Fig. 10: Fahimeh Vahdat, *Gole Maryam; Neda my Hero*, 2009/10, encaustic and collage on canvas, felt and thread, 48 x 30 inch., courtesy of the artist.

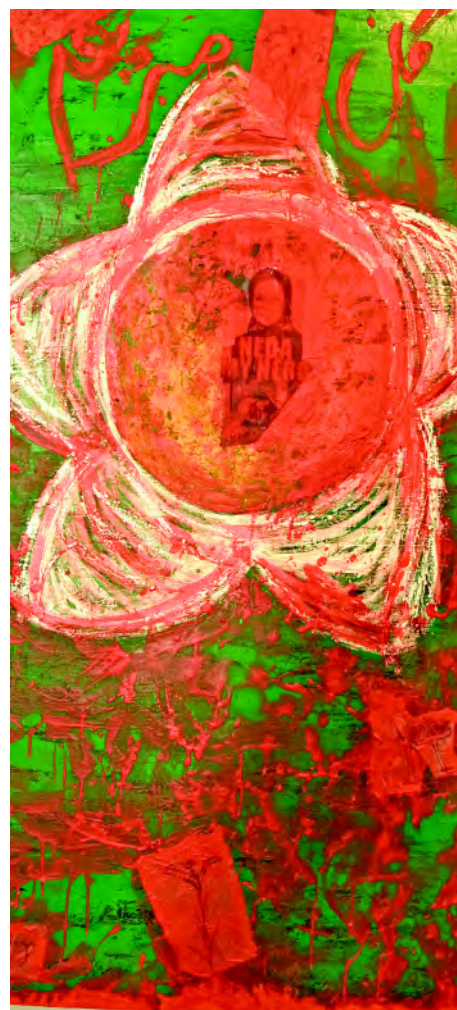


Fig. 11: Fahimeh Vahdat, detail of *Gole Maryam; Neda my Hero*.

A Theatre of Violence Behind a Curtain of Paradise

“My work as a writer has been from the beginning ... to capture the desire for the reciprocal basis of truth and liberty and the possibility of freedom ... imagination is the deepest need of freedom.”

(Iris Zavala, “A Gaze of One’s Own: Narrativizing the Caribbean,” *Trois*, 5, 1.2, 1989)

“Fiction is about telling lies, but you must be scathingly honest in telling those lies.”

(Marlene Nourbese Philip)

In her essay on *The Iliad*, which she calls the “poem of force”, the philosopher Simone Weil speaks to the threat of violence and its effect on the psyche, the imagination, the expectation of freedom and how this threat burdens the soul:

“Here we see the force [or violence] in its grossest and most summary form – the force [or violence] that kills. How much more surprising in its effects is the other force [or violence], the force that does *not* kill, i.e., that does not kill just yet. It will surely kill, it will possibly kill, or perhaps it merely hangs, poised and ready, over the head of the creature it *can* kill, at any moment, which is to say at every moment. In whatever aspect, its effect is the same: it turns [a human being] into a stone. From its first property (the ability to turn a human being into a thing by the simple method of killing him) flows another, quite prodigious too in its own way, the ability to *turn* a human being into a thing while [that human being] is still alive.”

(Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, 1940-45, tr. Mary McCarthy)

I was born into paradise. Into a large house on the edge of the Caribbean Sea. Into a household of extended family and servants.

From *Into the Interior*:

I [had] a wetnurse, a goat named Magdalena, who was tied in front of our house at the edge of the Caribbean Sea. Winona [my nursemaid] brought her from her country when my mother's milk failed. For company Magdalena had Winona and me, some chickens who roosted among the mangroves, and a pair of hawksbill turtles, for whom our front yard had been a breeding ground and who stayed on.

There's a family photograph of me sucking the milk straight from her teats like a wolf-child. Romulus or Remus. She was light brown, hairy as her namesake [Mary Magdalene] in the wilderness, with a black ridge along her back, running into her tail. Her eyes were goat-gold. Her teat was rough against my tongue, and her milk was thin and tasted salt like the sea....

Of course the photograph had been staged, an imperial allusiveness to the unlettered tropics. Sent round as a postcard. Did I mention the she-goat was tied to a coconut palm, that I was naked, brown, the littlest savage tonguing her wildness, that there was a full moon lighting the sea, that Winona in her white uniform was standing just outside the frame, waiting?

I begin with the personal. My father's five finger tattoo across my prepubescent, then adolescent face whenever I say something he judges impertinent, smart, wrong. My determination not to cry in front of him, even as the tears well up in my eyes, from the force of his blow. My mother's response is always something like "don't provoke your father." She is never hit; neither is his rage visited on my sister. His threatening behavior continues well into my young adulthood.

There is a violence beyond the physical, of course. When I was about thirteen I started keeping a journal – which my father, with my mother’s complicity, invaded – and read aloud to an audience of extended family – on a verandah overlooking the turquoise sea, beyond a grove of coconut palms – idyllic setting.

There is no map

only the most ragged path back to

my love so much so

she ended up in the bush

at a school where such things were

taken very seriously severely

and

I was left missing her never ceasing

and

she was watched for signs

and

I was left alone missing her never ceasing

and

she was not allowed to write at least she never did

and

I walked the length and breadth of the playing fields

I have never felt so lost

not like that

and
I wanted to be dead that's all
finally
the headmistress and head girl found me
in the stacks
weeping
violently
against spines of biology
running into history
I can see myself in the lapsed documentary of memory
curled up against books, shelves
salting the sea island cotton of my blouse
wanting to lose my
self water tearing down my face, school badge
with cross & crown and Latin motto
my parents were summoned
the word was not spoken
I was told to forget everything
I would never see her again I would never see her again
except with my mind's eye and to this day
golden
they rifled my hiding place
ransacked my words read me aloud on the

verandah

under the impossible sun

my father uttering

“When you’re twenty we’ll laugh about this.”

that I remember

they took me, on the advice of the doctor who delivered
me

to Doctor’s Cave

which is a beach, not Prospero’s vault,

for weeks

I swam

like Caliban

her feathered legs opening under water salt rushing in me

I was exhausted, they said

excitable

I wanted to be a wild colonial girl

And for a time, I was.

(From *Sites of Memory*, University of Minnesota Press, Fall 2008)

That sort of invasion is itself an act of violence – it is the culmination of a pattern of abuse. Its effect for quite some time was to silence me. I became voiceless, adrift from language. I was in a sense a colonized child. It would take years to find my tongue. In the words of Marlene Nourbese Philip: “She tries her tongue/ Her silence softly breaks.”

As a young woman I experienced my father’s violence immediately, both physical and emotional forms. From that personal ordeal I moved outward,

gazed into the culture into which I was born, which was my heritage: The colonized island of Jamaica, the history which was hidden: the genocide against the native Arawak, the decimation of the Carib – the “tears of the Indians” – the slave past, the “blood-cloth” put over the wounds of the whipped slave, but also the refusal of female slaves to reproduce – using potions, inducing abortion, reasoning a human being did not receive its soul until nine days old, they also practiced infanticide. Indeed resistance, as well as silencing, disempowerment, can be a reaction to violence, of the violence formed in the system of white supremacy, colonialism, Eurocentrism. Part of the hidden history that I discovered included movements for liberation. Further disempowerment is achieved through the violence of historical erasure, so that those in the present believe they come out of an acquiescent past. Some of the great revolutionary leaders of the Caribbean were women.

The heart of Jamaica is made of stone – literally. As a girl, and into my young adulthood, I observed Jamaica’s metaphorical heart of stone in the commonplace cruelties human beings dealt each other. My need to understand the origins and effects of this reality became a recurring theme in my writing.

I observed cruelty close to home, as well as within my home. I observed it in my girls’ school where dark-skinned girls, scholarship girls were singled out for humiliation or punishment. Violence could be the outcome of these cruelties – not in the sense of organized resistance, rather in the act of an individual whose mind becomes disordered because of a lifetime of cruelties visited upon him – a belief in his own inhumanness. I explore this in *No Telephone to Heaven* in the character of Christopher, whose name means the “bearer of Christ.” More about this later.

From “Transactions”

“The waters of the Bath rise through the karst, the heart of stone. The

ultimate source of the Bath is an underground saline spring, which might suggest a relationship with the sea. The relationship with the sea is suggested everywhere; the limestone that composes more of the land than any other substance is nothing but the skeletons of sea creatures.”

From *Abeng*

“The island rose and sank. Twice. During periods in which history was recorded by indentations on rock and shell.”

“This is a book about the time which followed on that time. As the island became a place where people lived Indians. Africans. Europeans.”

In *Abeng* I begin with the island and the sea around it, and the secrets, the history that each hold. The novel is a journey through this landscape, a journey through the stone heart created, molded, and nourished – if a stone heart can be nourished – by colonialism.

The theft of history, the loss of knowledge of resistance is a terrible thing. A continuum which might lead to liberation has been ruptured.

One of the leaders of slave resistance in Jamaica was Nanny, also known as Grandy Nanny, which name I presume refers to her as a grandmother of the people. A “science-woman”. Nanny was known for her positive magic:

“For instance, when *bakra* [white landowners; referring to condition of the whipped slave – back raw] destroyed the provision ground of the Maroons [referring to the resistance: from the Spanish *cimarrón*, unruly, runaway], forcing them to the brink of starvation, it was Nanny who received a message from the spirit world urging her not to give up the fight; along with the message, she received a handful of seeds, with instruction to plant them. In less than a day these supernaturally-endowed seeds brought

forth a lavish crop of full grown pumpkins”.

“[The Maroons] are composed of a number of matrilineal clans which are in turn divided up into matrilineages ... [The] presence of matrilineal descent ... does often correspond to a higher status for women ... and a positive evaluation of women....”

(Steady and Bilby, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*)

Contrast this with what becomes the official version regarding the Maroons, written by Bryan Edwards, planter-historian, pro-slavery, author of a history of the British colonies in the West Indies, published in 1796:

“ ... the Maroons, like all other savage nations, regarded their wives as so many beasts of burden; and felt no more concern at the loss of one of them, than a white planter would have felt at the loss of a bullock ... [This] spirit of brutality which the Maroons always displayed towards their wives, extended in some degree to their children. The paternal authority was at all times harshly exerted”

This is simply nonsense. But a serious racist nonsense used to justify slavery, condemn resistance, hang a drop cloth over history. To lay a foundation for violent repression of a people. As with the “bit”, the iron device fitted into the mouth of the recalcitrant slave, rendering that slave speechless, a silence descends on history, replaced by the colonizer’s version.

In the Maroon woman the identities of warrior/mother become inextricable. This warrior/mother is apotheosized in Nanny. In the novels *Abeng*, *No Telephone to Heaven*, and *Free Enterprise* I am concerned with recovering a history centered in the rebel spirit, she, and he, who resist, motivated by a love of their people [ref. Che], by revulsion to the violence visited upon them, by the absolute knowledge that this is unjust and deserves only resistance.

In No Telephone to Heaven I respond to the infamous alms-house (poorhouse) fire of the mid-nineteen-eighties set by some thugs in the

pay of one of the political parties of Jamaica to discredit another. In this fire almost two hundred old women perished. I was struck by the self-destructiveness of such an act. These old women were once science-women, warrior/mothers, members of matrilineal societies, until Eurovision obscured the history of the island. They were sources of power, but their Africanness, the source of their power was demonized, renamed “savage”. In the following passage from *No Telephone to Heaven* I attempt to restore to these old women what was once theirs, and to describe what they have become. [identity eidon, fufu, patoo, obeah, myal, gunga, second sight, magnanimous warrior title taken from Aimé Césaire poem to one of the leaders of the Haitian revolution].

“Magnanimous Warrior!”

She in whom the spirits come quick and hard. Hunting mother. She who forages. Who knows the ground. Where the hills of fufu are concealed. Mother who brews the most beautiful tea from the ugliest bush. Warrior who sheds her skin like a snake and travels into the darkness a fireball. Mother who catches the eidon and sees them to their rest. Warrior who labors in the spirit. She who plants gunga on the graves of the restless. Mother who carves the power-stone, center of the world. Warrior who places the blood-cloth on the back of the whipped slave. She who turns her attention to the evildoer. Mother who binds the female drumhead with parchment from a goat. Warrior who gathers grave-dirt in her pocket. Pieces of chalk. Packs of cards. Bits of looking-glass. Beaks. Feet. Bones of patoo. Teeth of dogs and alligators. Glass eyes. Sulfur. Camphor. Myrrh. Asafoetida. Frankincense. Curious shells. China dolls. Wooden images. She writes in her own blood across the drumhead. Obeah-woman. Myal-woman. She can cure. She can kill. She can give jobs. She is foy-eyed. The bearer of second sight. Mother who goes forth emitting flames from

her eyes. Nose. Mouth. Vulva. Anus. She bites the evildoers that they become full of sores. She treats cholera with bitterbush. She burns the canefields. She is River Mother. Sky Mother. Old Hige. The Moon. Old Suck.

Rambling mother. Mother who trumps and wheels counterclockwise around the power-stone, the center of the world. Into whose cauldron the Red Coats vanished.

What has become of this warrior? Now that we need her more than ever. She has been burned up in an alms-house fire in Kingston. She has starved to death. She wanders the roads of the country with swollen feet. She has cancer. Her children have left her. Her powers are known no longer. They are called by other names. She is not respected. She lies on an iron bedstead in a shack in Trench Town. She begs outside a rumshop in Spanish Town. She cleans the yard of a woman younger than she. She lies on a bed in a public hospital with sores across her buttocks. No one swabs her wounds. Flies gather. No one turns her in the bed. The pain makes her light-headed. They tell her she is senile. They have taken away her bag of magic. Her teeth. Her goat's horn. We have forgotten her. Now that we need her more than ever. The nurses ignore her. The doctors make game of her. The priest tries to take her soul.

Can you remember how to love her?

I return to the personal: When I was a girl in Jamaica one of my classmates at the girls' school I attended was absent one Monday morning. The schoolmistresses gathered us in the chapel and told us that this classmate and her family, with the exception of her elder brother, had been slaughtered by a "casual laborer". We accepted this man as menace,

monster. The incident, the beginning of a series of incidents, was all over the newspapers and on the radio – we did not have tv. I pushed this knowledge, this loss, the sense of “it could have been me”, down down down. Years later, a young woman, I was with a male cousin in a bar in one of Kingston’s hotels. He introduced me to a young man he knew and the young man and I went dancing the next evening. During the course of the evening, in the manner of someone who must speak of events lest they be forgotten, he revealed that he was the brother of my classmate – murdered with their mother and father and the woman who worked in their home those years ago. Again I pushed this knowledge, his loss, down and down and down and thought I had forgotten all about it. I left Jamaica and returned to London, where I was in graduate school. But this history would not die. Although I thought I had forgotten it, it had entered into my body.

There are three central characters in *No Telephone to Heaven*: Christopher, Clare, and Harriet. These characters inhabit the theatre of violence which is the Jamaica they know. Each has experienced violence, directly or indirectly. A theatre of violence behind a curtain of paradise.

I use the novel and these characters to explore the origins of this violence, horizontal and otherwise, and its effects as they become actors in their lives.

“The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say ... ‘What are you going through?’” (Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*).

This question lies behind and underneath most of my writing.

When I took on the character of Christopher I realized I had to explore what lay behind his explosive fury on that one night when he slaughtered a family and the woman who worked for them.

Christopher’s fury is the apotheosis of a life lived under the weight of cruelty. There are many images of cruelty in the novel. Of lives distorted by violence, behind the curtain of paradise.

How different is Christopher's response to seeing boys diving for coins alongside the cruise ships in Kingston Harbor from that of the tourists who toss coins over the side of the ship and gaze down at the boys. The tourist as audience, the native as entertainer – always. Skinny, brownskinned boys diving into the turquoise depths where slave ships were once anchored, ancestors brought ashore. The trick is to catch the coin before it descends into those depths, joining with links of chain.

When I began to write the murder scene in *No Telephone to Heaven* I wasn't thinking of the murder of my classmate and her family. But as I wrote that scene the floodgates of my memory opened and everything came rushing back at me: the headmistress's comments, the newspaper accounts, later meeting my classmate's brother. These memories were stored inside of me. I broke into a sweat as I wrote. I wept. Murders were not uncommon in the Jamaica of my growing-up; nor are they uncommon today. Paradise is drenched in blood. Especially blood spilled horizontally – bar fights, domestic abuse, gay-bashing, political assassination, as in the stoning to death of the poet Mikey Smith. "I am the stone that kills me", the poet Edward Brathwaite writes, in a lament in Mikey Smith's voice, imagining his final moments on Stony Hill.

But those long-ago murders touched me because I knew one of the victims, because she easily could have been me.

I needed to try to understand the wellspring of this violence and so I wrote backwards, using the lives of boys like Christopher I had known. I needed to remove beast and monster as his name and to humanize him. I needed to do for him what Aimé Césaire does for Caliban in his version of *The Tempest*, *Une Tempête*. When Prospero claims the death of Sycorax, Caliban's mother, Caliban explodes – as Christopher explodes when he is ridiculed in his attempt to bury the remains of his grandmother. But Caliban does not murder, his explosion is insightful eloquent. Christopher is speechless; he embodies silence.

Caliban: "... you only think she's dead because you think the earth itself is dead. ... It's so much simpler that way! Dead you can walk upon it, pollute it, you can tread upon it with the steps of a conqueror. I respect the earth because I know it is alive, and I know that Sycorax is alive".

The Dungle, the garbage dump, the concrete jungle, an actual place, is the place of Christopher's upbringing. A dead landscape if ever there was one, except for the human beings scurrying over its ridges. An extremely far remove from the alive and magical landscape of Caliban's mother, Sycorax, of Nanny and the Maroons. Nanny is an empowered grandmother of the people, whereas Christopher's grandmother, like the women burned to death in the alms-house fire is a radically disempowered one.

After the murders, which are never solved, Christopher, the bearer of Christ into the New World, is left to wander. From *No Telephone to Heaven*:

Christopher slept in Maypen Cemetery until they dug it up to pour foundation for more concrete jungle. Glass cities rose around him. The country fell around him even more. He spent his days and nights getting old on the street, retreating from New Kingston to the shanties, shacks, back-o'-wall parts of town he knew, gray boards cotched against each other. His teeth went. Old women offered him tins of watery coffee. He stared at their generosity. ... Christopher walked on. His clothes turned from khaki to crocus sack. His buttocks were visible through a split in the cloth. At the back of a Chinese shop he sucked sugar from a discarded sweetie wrapper. A man drove him off with a firecracker. His hair snaked. ... He leaned on a staff, a length of pipe he found ... in an alley. Some men in knitted caps saying they knew Bob gave him smoke. Eyes red, exploding. His mouth pulled on the spliff, smoke wreathed him. People say him favor mad. Him favor prophet. He talked

when his eyes spun. ... I am Neger Jesus. I am Neger Christ. Shadow-catcher. Duppy-conqueror. I am the beginning and the end. The bright and morning star. ...

And then came a night when old women burned. [Christopher] promenaded, legend now, song now, recognized by spectators drawn by the light and the heat and the terrible smell. Back and forth he walked in front of the fire, old women falling, alive, aflame, into the street. He howled, ran toward the fire, face lit by the heat. Their wisps of hair, thin dresses burned as wicks in the night. He howled. "Dis not de fiah bawn of mi powah!"

Indeed it is not. A grotesque display of horizontal violence, this inferno was set by one political party to discredit another.

Christopher and Clare lead parallel lives in the novel. Their lives collide twice – in both instances through acts of violence: the murders; and at the end of the novel, the fantastic slaughter which takes place in the hills above an American movie set. "Everyone we dream about we are", I wrote at the end of my novel *Abeng*. I am part Clare and part Christopher. I wanted to rescue each from the excesses of the violent society in which they found themselves but in the end that was impossible. Whether actual or potential, violence sears the individual, harms his and her soul.

Mary Wollstonecraft was an influence on my thinking, writing, before I

had ever heard of Grandy Nanny. I had to excavate for knowledge of Nanny but Wollstonecraft I found in the library of my girls' school. Her title, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, captured me. Wollstonecraft was drawn to her subject by firsthand knowledge of domestic violence. She moved as did I from the personal into the political. Wollstonecraft as a very young woman blocked the entrance to the room where her mother slept to keep her safe from the rages of her husband, Wollstonecraft's father. I end my novel *Into the Interior* with a magically realistic encounter – the unnamed narrator and Mary Wollstonecraft, passing into another realm.

[MW ref. suicide attempt. VW. Storni. stones –]

[Frankenstein/Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley] [Golden Guinea]

From *Into the Interior*:

I was staying at my great-aunt's hotel surrounded by water. The sea in front, the falls behind the converted great house. The wooden jalousies were turned down against the heat of the day, and the ceiling fan in the bar slowly stirred the air. Crawford, the barman, was polishing glasses. All was apparently tranquil.

I was walking on the white glass sands, looking down. A piece of blue glass, sharpness smoothed by the action of the sea, lay at my feet. I picked it up. The word *nuit* was etched into it. I fingered the letters.

I put the piece of glass in my pocket.

She slipped a membrane and slid into the interior. She was on a street that stretched grey alongside the River Thames. It seemed to her the past had no color: But then she's been used to looking at paintings struck with crimson and lapis and gold. And she'd spent a lot of time at the movies where the

past was writ fifty feet high and garish in the extreme. Played by Errol Flynn, witness at her christening, again.

This was something else. She thought not a dream because she could touch the cold iron of a balustrade in front of a townhouse.

In front of me a woman was walking, her skirts brushing the cobblestone street. She was walking and muttering. Her head was down. A chill rain was falling. This is not a dream, I thought, as the cold and wet hit my face. I shivered. The rain was gaining strength. I thought I would follow the woman in front of me, who seemed not to know she was not alone.

She herself was an opportunistic nomad, the scientist's term (but which branch?) for an omnivorous traveler, rootless. She collects terms like these, with which she will try to define herself. Poor thing, she chips away, trying to find the form inside the stone. Haven't the past months proved this? The woman she was following seemed to have direction. The rain was becoming downpour and the fog was thickening. Suddenly the woman in front of her came to a stop.

We were at Battersea next to the river. I glanced up the street to see if I could find the Russian restaurant. Of course it wasn't there. The woman in front of me lifted her skirts and began to walk down the bank into the waters of the river. But there were thick marshes between the bank and the riverflow and she could not get very far.

All of a sudden she turned around. The rain shone on her face.

"Will you come with me as far as Putney Bridge? It is not possible here."

"Of course," I said.

"Wait a moment," she said, "I'll find a ferryman."

And soon she was back with a man who said his boat was moored about a hundred yards away. He asked for payment in advance, which she gave him. Above his protests she convinced him she would command the boat to and from Putney Bridge. We got in. She sat at the tiller facing me and I took the oars.

The rain beat at us and the Thames was rough.

She wore a sort of top hat and a heavy dark cloak over her dress. Her boots and the hem of her clothes were muddy and bits of marsh clung to them.

“What do you mean to do?” I asked as if I knew her.

But she was intent on the horizon and gave no answer as I rowed us upriver.

After a while she spoke. “Where do you come from?” she asked me.

“I was born on an island in the Caribbean.”

“Saint Domingue? Of course not; then we would be speaking French.”

I knew the place as Haiti, but said nothing.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“I really don’t know.”

“Killing time, I suppose.”

“Something like that.”

“I’ve been in Paris the past few years. Because of the Revolution. These are tremendously exciting times, and no less because of Saint Domingue. Do you know it?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“You really should, you know. You should see it for yourself. To see what might happen. What might spread.”

This must be a dream. But then I felt the blue glass of *nuit* in my jeans pocket, felt again the coldness of the rain against my face.

“Are you my mother?” I asked

“Oh, no,” she laughed. “You have no mother save for language. Besides, I am far too young to mother you.”

And so she was.

“But everything is of a piece,” she said.

I could see that we were drawing close to the bridge.

“The women of Saint Domingue wear spirit levels on chains around their necks, signifying equality. The idea of seizing it for yourself, you see.”

She had me wait in the boat when we got to the bridge. She began to walk across the bridge, then mounted a railing and jumped, feet first, into the black waters. Her wet clothes, her boots, the weight of her pulled her down, and she sank out of sight.

I stood up and pulling off my turtleneck and slipping out of my jeans dove over the side of the boat. It was terrible and cold. I went under the black surface, down and down and down. The golden guinea [the coin minted fresh for the slave trade] slid off my neck and was carried out to sea.

It gave me heart when I found that mirages could be photographed, that they resulted from the bending of light and were imaginary only insofar as every real thing was imaginary.

The Fata Morgana was one of these, the work of the witch Morgan le Fay.

I wanted to find the island on the map that was not there.

So I followed her under the water.

And this time she was not rescued to die of childbed fever, her daughter releasing her from the stone.

This time we were greeted by the mermaids of the unfathomable deep, those responsible for language.

When I came to I was washed ashore.

The two women exit the theatre. They enter another paradise.

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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. (4, 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 wunna 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.

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

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 reimagined. 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 tropicity, 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.

**Upon Considering the Possibility
of Friendship Between Tia and Antoinette**

In the late 1990's and over the course of three issues of the journal *Wasafiri* (20, 22 & 23) there transpired a debate between Peter Hulme, cultural critic, and the poet scholar Kamau Brathwaite, the subject matter of which was Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and more particularly the childhood friendship between Antoinette, the white Creole protagonist, and Tia, an African Caribbean girl who lived on a plantation formerly owned by Antoinette's family. In the novel the friendship between the two girls comes to an end when Tia throws a stone at Antoinette, an act which reverberates down through the years and gives rise to several questions. Did that act end the friendship, or was the friendship fated to end from its inception, given the class and races positions of the girls in question?

In the ensuing debate between Hulme and Brathwaite, the former takes issue with comments made in a 1974 essay, "Contradictory Omens", written by the latter: "Brathwaite casts doubt upon the close but fraught relationship between Antoinette and Tia, whose name Antoinette calls out in her dream just before she jumps to her death: 'Tia was not and never could have been her friend. No matter what Jean Rhys might have made Antoinette think. Tia was historically separated from her...'" (36).

Brathwaite responds: "Nobody is denying that Antoinette and Tia had a 'childhood friendship'; what I'm saying is that it cd never have gone BEYOND that; so that although for A this friendship might have remained memory – & FIGMENT – it could never become FUTURE"

The following poem is my intervention in this historical stone-throwing incident which I believe continues to resonate to this day within the Caribbean and its diaspora.

Upon Considering the Possibility of Friendship Between Tia and Antoinette

a cheek split
in two wrongs can't
make it right
between history and
a hair-splitting
cheek-splitting
truth

"the cheek of her
taking my dress!"

undressing the theft
the take and took
in history

can't draw blood from
a stone
or a tear
spill the causes
of a cheek

white

split

by the hard in stone
the me and she
in black words
on a white page
where a stone lands

on a cheek
split by the

hurl

pelt

the fling in stone
in history

heals

not the heart
smashed ground
in the between of past
and future

grindstones

exacting a finely
powdered present
to scatter wide

to the winds

Friends, you say?
Only a stone's throw away

Bearing Witness:
De/Cultivating Violence in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

In *The Farming of Bones* Edwidge Danticat approximates the biblical conflict between the Ephraimites and Gileadites to shed light on the historic tensions between the twin-islands, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.¹ The epigraph in which she quotes Judges 12:4-6 sets the stage for the ensuing conflict, that of ethnic and linguistic difference. Ephraimites who attempted to cross the Jordan River back to their home territory were put to a test by the Gileadites, to pronounce “shibboleth”, a Hebrew word that literally translates as the part of a plant containing grains, such as an ear of corn.² Unable to correctly pronounce the word as a result of a phonetic difference in their language that lacked the “sh” sound, the Ephraimites were put to death. The massacre left forty-two thousand Ephraimites dead. This phonetic variance served as reinforcement to the distinguishing feature of ethnic difference, a fact that Danticat reiterates by readily admitting that language “was definitely a differentiating factor ... that has been used to tell people apart”.³ Along these lines, language is posited as the marker of one’s identity, one’s passport, so to speak, to being and belonging. Paralleling the biblical narrative, Haitians who were unable to pronounce the “r” in the Spanish word “perejil” that translates as parsley were put to death. This “linguistic” cum ethnic cleansing was carried out by the despotic Dominican dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina. In 1937 Trujillo ordered the mass murders of approximately thirty-thousand Haitian citizens living near the border between the two countries. This manifest violence is articulated in Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*.

Even though the novel recounts the massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic in 1937, the present enduring conflict between the two nation-states in many ways frighteningly mirrors the past. As Haitians continue to cross the border to find gainful employment, they are met with ridicule and disdain that ultimately escalate into acts of violence. Ginger Thompson’s *New York Times* article, “Immigrant Laborers from Haiti are Paid with Abuse in the Dominican Republic”, chronicles the “Dominican Republic’s systematic abuse of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent”.⁴ Shedding light on this systematic violence, the article substantiates that despite their legal guest worker status, Haitians continue to experience mass expulsion and are “rarely given a fair opportunity to challenge their expulsion during these wholesale sweeps”.⁵ The widespread violence is so rampant that Thompson equates it to lynching. Furthermore, illuminating government complicity in these raids, Thompson expresses

¹ Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998). Hereafter references in the text as *FB*.

² “Shibboleth” in Hebrew also means a stream. Both definitions are germane to this discussion. Similar to the slaying of the Ephraimites, the massacre of Haitians took place at a stream/river. The grains of the plant are equivalent to the leaves of the parsley plants that Haitians are forced to swallow. <<http://www.balashon.com/2010/01/shiboleth.html>>, 10 May 2010.

³ Renee H. Shea, “The Hunger to Tell: Edwidge Danticat and the *Farming of Bones*”, *MaComère*, 2 (1999), 17.

⁴ Ginger Thompson, “Immigrant Laborers from Haiti are Paid with Abuse in the Dominican Republic”, *New York Times*, 20 November 2005.

⁵ *Ibid.*

that despite promises by successive Dominican governments to provide Haitians with basic protection, Haitians continue to be the subjects of violence, exploitation, and racial discrimination. Offering a poignant analysis of the plight of Haitians, Peter Grill unapologetically calls their exploitation “modern day slavery”, underscoring that the “workers have been recruited under circumstances ranging from dishonest to coercive”, and that they are “brought into the Dominican Republic with knowledge, and in some cases, support of the government and military”.⁶ Lending validity to this argument, Danticat demonstrates that the United States’ support facilitated the Dominican government’s continued discrimination of Haitians: “Right now there are American military on the border between the countries, training Dominican soldiers to stop Haitian migrants from crossing over”.⁷ This racial profiling of Haitians necessitates Danticat’s fierce interrogation of U.S policy: “Why aren’t Haitians soldiers also being trained to stop drug flow from across the border”.⁸ The continued mass expulsion of Haitians from the Dominican Republic serves as a reminder of the 1937 massacre, as Danticat is quick to point out that the massacre remains part of the Dominican and Haitian consciousness. According to Danticat, Trujillo’s “policies and antagonism to Haiti went on and on” during his protracted dictatorship and the subsequent (mirrored) leadership of his vice president, leaving an indelible imprint on the minds and imaginations of Haitians.⁹

A narrative of incomprehensible ethnic hatred and violence and unbearable loss is put alongside the narrative of unfaltering love between the novel’s female protagonist, Amabelle Desir, and her lover, Sebastien Onius. In spite of the interdependency and interconnectedness between the “twin-islands” to which the tale within the tale (double narrative) alludes, unspeakable violence prevails. The numerous absences and deaths that enter the first pages of the novel presage the ensuing genocide. While *The Farming of Bones* chronicles the slaughter of Haitians, underscoring their continued vulnerability as they navigate the border, it equally testifies to the strength and resilience of a people.

Amabelle whose personal narrative of pain and loss is weaved alongside the narrative of Dominican nationalism embodies resilience. As the sole surviving member of her family, having lost her parents to drowning in a hurricane as they attempted to navigate the troubled waters of the infamous Massacre River,¹⁰ Amabelle also witnesses, as she herself barely escapes the slaughter, the mass murders of fellow Haitians, including Sebastien and close friends of both Haitian and Dominican descent. Furthermore, Danticat’s politicization of Amabelle’s personal story is no mere coincidence for she admits that Amabelle is modeled after the female heroine of journalist Albert Hicks’ *Blood in the Street*. Assigned the story in 1937, Hicks narrated the massacre with an immediacy that caught Danticat’s attention.¹¹ Intersecting on several levels – most notably, they both worked as domestic

⁶ Peter Grill, “Suffering Modern Day Slavery: Haitians Cane Cutters in Dominican Republic Trapped and Isolated”, *Catholic New Times*, 19 March 2006.

⁷ Bonnie Lyons, “An Interview with Edwidge Danticat”, *Contemporary Literature*, 44.2 (Summer 2003), 183-98, 192-93.

⁸ Ibid, 192.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ This river, also known as the River of Blood that both separates and unites the two island nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, acquired the name because of the blood shed between the French and Spanish colonizers, who were engaged in a protracted battle for the possession of Hispaniola.

¹¹ Lyons, “An Interview with Edwidge Danticat”, 191.

¹² Sebastien and Amabelle's personal relationship, characterized by love, commitment, and loyalty, that weathers the storm, starkly contrasts the political upheaval between the nation-states.

¹³ Marlene Nourbese Philip, *she tries her tongue: her silence softly breaks* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1993), 56.

¹⁴ Marlene Nourbese Philip, ed., *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1997), 129.

¹⁵ Ibid., 59.

¹⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹⁷ Thompson, "Immigrant Laborers".

servants for a Dominican military family – Amabelle's life story departs from Hicks' character in that she not only bears witness to the slaughter, but that she also survives the massacre, living to tell the horrors. Despite Danticat's admission that her novel is as much about women as it is about men, I argue that the centering of this female narrative of pain and suffering (and the attendant resistance and resilience) is symbolic. It not only validates women's role in nation-making and -building, but it also de-centers and disrupts the neat narrative of nationalism.¹² By the same token, the language of nationalism exemplified in the masculinist discourse marginalizes women, scripting them as subalterns and therefore unworthy citizens.

As follows, Trujillo's discriminatory employment of language that functions as his platform for the dissemination of his racist and nationalist politics, results in what Marlene Nourbese Philip refers to as "a foreign anguish".¹³ At the same time it creates dissent and distrust among Dominicans and Haitians, this imposition of a "foreign tongue" qualifies as a violent act. As Philip reminds us, "language comes tainted with a certain history of colonialism and imperialism"; hence its evolution from a mother tongue to a father tongue.¹⁴ Along these lines, Trujillo's goal was to impose an imperial colonized (white) language on the Haitians as he sought to whiten his population, ridding the country of its black citizens. To this end, Philip argues that if one is engaged with the project of language then one has to be concerned with power. Calling attention to patriarchal power and paternalistic practices, Philip skillfully likens the tongue (language) to the male organ, the penis. One would be remiss to overlook the image of penetration in this analogy, which is an allusion to rape. Following this line of reasoning, Trujillo performed linguistic rape on the Haitian populace spreading terror and asserting control. This reign of male power manifests further in Philip identifying the tongue as "the principal organ of oppression and exploitation".¹⁵ The following proclamation encapsulates this exploitative and oppressive force: "The word claims and maims and claims again".¹⁶

Furthermore, Haitians' 'foreignness' is not only defined linguistically but also physiognomically. Human rights groups substantiate this claim. Ascertaining that racism fuels the anti-immigrant sentiment, they determine that since "Haitians tend to have darker skin than Dominicans, [they] are therefore often assumed to hold a lower social status".¹⁷ To reinforce this racist, classist assumption, language is reappropriated, or more pointedly manipulated, to establish belonging and to legitimize one's citizenship. Thus, identitarian politics is used as a tool of discriminate against Haitians.

Assessing the rights and qualification of citizenship, Suad Joseph writes that "one must belong to a nation-state to have a political identity, to have mobility, and to have rights to resources, services, and protection vis-à-vis international relations". She further adds:

If citizenship in a nation-state has become the venue defining membership in the world community, then the manner in which nation-states define citizenship and structure membership in their political communities becomes crucial for understanding women's positions globally. Citizenship defines identity — who you are, where you belong, where you come from, and how you understand yourself in the world.¹⁸

While Joseph has continued the discourse on women's citizenship that has consumed many feminist scholars over the past decade, it remains a contested concept. As Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner remind us, women's difference becomes paramount in the discourse of citizenship. However, the stark reality was that many women found themselves excluded from the national discourse despite the rise of nationalism. Their denial first and foremost manifested in the masculinist language used to script the nationalist discourse. It therefore should come as no surprise that Yuval-Davis and Werbner are staunch advocates of this emerging discourse on women's citizenship because it "privileges difference and stresses the dialogical and global dimensions of citizenship".¹⁹ In essence, the denial of women's citizenship manifests in the disavowal of basic human rights. In this regard, by using language as a determining factor in acquiring citizenship, Trujillo installs a gatekeeping mechanism that prevents Haitians from accessing their rights. Addressing the inherent contradiction of women's citizenship, Ronit Lentin argues that "though often symbolising a collectivity's unity, honour and *raison d'être*, [women] are often excluded from the collective 'we' or the body politic, and in this sense the construction of womanhood has a property of 'otherness'".²⁰

The inability to pronounce 'parsley' functions precisely as a symbol of 'otherness', a marker of ethnic difference. As follows, Amabelle is doubly dispossessed. In spite of having lived most of her life in the Dominican Republic she "had no papers to show that [she] belonged either here or in Haiti where [she] was born" (*FB*, 70). This disinheritance caused Amabelle to ponder who "had [her family] house now and if [she] could still claim the land as [her] inheritance" (*FB*, 184). It becomes clear that women's disenfranchisement has dire consequences for successive generations. Addressing how denial of citizen rights – particularly in relation to the lack of or limited education – has impacted negatively on their children, a group of women articulates their frustration.²¹ The caustic language they used to express the discrimination they experience is equivalent to the mundane violence they suffer:

I pushed my son out of my body here, in this country ... My mother too pushed me out of her body here. Not me, not my son, not one of us has ever seen the other side of the border. Still they won't put our birth papers in our palms so my son can have knowledge placed into his head by a proper educator in a proper school ... To them we are always foreigners, even if our granmèss'

¹⁸ Suad Joseph, "Women Between Nation and State in Lebanon", in Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón and Mino Moallem, eds., *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 162.

¹⁹ Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner, eds., *Women, Citizenship and Difference* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), 1.

²⁰ Ronit Lentin, "Constitutionally Excluded: Citizenship and (Some) Irish Women", in *ibid.*, 132.

²¹ Haitian children's lack is starkly contrasted with Rosalinda's, Señora Valencia's daughter, life of privilege. Not only does she fulfill her dreams of marrying young, but she is pursuing a medical degree in Santo Domingo, where she resides with her husband.

granmèms were born in this country This makes it easier for them to *push us out* when they want to. (FB, 69; emphasis mine).

By juxtaposing birth, “*I pushed my son out*”, with their expulsion, “easier for them to *push us out*”, the women call attention to common pain. At the same time, the analogy induces the birth-death cycle. Whereas the former use of “push” captures the birthing process as a new life comes into existence, the latter “push” evokes trauma occasioned by the termination of a life and symptomatic of an induced abortion. The violent expulsion of Haitians from the mother (country) effectively exemplifies the abortive procedure precipitated by Trujillo’s unleashing of state terror in the name of national unity.²²

²² Mother (country) here refers to the island of Hispaniola before the formation of the sovereign states of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The same nation-state from which the women demand their autonomy constructs them primarily as mother and wives, heavily dependent on the state first and foremost, and second on their husbands. As the women seek to establish their maternal rights, (state) paternity is denied by the withholding of the birth certificates of their children. As a result, the child is not only rendered illegitimate, but s/he is also undocumented and therefore non-existent to the state. This tenuous nature of citizenship epitomizes the fragile existence of Haitians, a fact that Odette, one of the novel’s female characters, reinforces: “We’ve never lived lives of certainty” (FB, 197). By the same token, by insisting that Haitians pronounce “parsley”, Trujillo attempts to articulate their non-being.

The articulation of Haitians’ non-existence plays out in a scene between Amabelle and Señora Valencia. Amabelle voices the angst she experienced as Señora Valencia mistook her for an impostor. Referring to Señora Valencia’s lapse in memory as “rejection” (FB, 296), Amabelle remarks: “That she did not recognize me made me feel that I had come back to Alegría and found it had never existed at all. Now it was as if we were doing battle and I knew I must win; she had to recognize me...” (FB, 294, 295). The need to be recognized or to be remembered takes on special urgency. It is a known fact that the goal of the 1937 massacre that resulted in the slaughter of thousands of Haitians was to annihilate, to dismember Haitians. For Alegría to have never existed signals not only the denial of the massacre, a denial that exculpates the state, but it also intimates Haitians’ insignificance and invisibility. Paradoxically, relying on her memory to convince Señora Valencia that she is not an impersonator, Amabelle recounts the birth of Señora Valencia’s twins and references the names of fellow Haitians who also worked for Señora Valencia. All the same, Amabelle quizzically ponders the ease and detached aura that Señora Valencia had assumed: “Was I that much older, stouter? Had my face changed so much? How could she not *know my voice*, which, like hers, might have slowed and become more abrupt with age but *was still my own*?” (FB, 295; emphasis

mine). Significantly, the narrative that Amabelle recalls that finally convinced Señora Valencia of her identity is one of self-ownership. Orphaned and homeless after the death of her parents, Amabelle was discovered at the side of the Massacre River by Señor Ignacio, Señora Valencia's father. When he questioned to whom she belonged, she responded: "I belonged to myself" (*FB*, 296). Furthermore, by claiming her own voice, Amabelle rejects the superimposed voice – the mandatory litmus test that required the pronouncing of "parsley" – of the nation-state.

Ascertaining her autonomy, Amabelle clearly recognizes the distinction between physical and material possessions: "Nearly everything I had was something Señora Valencia *had once owned and no longer wanted*. Everything except Sebastien" (*FB*, 45; emphasis added). Notwithstanding, this distinction is blurred, even violated by the nation-state as Haitians are considered propertied possession. Along these lines, Sebastien is in essence state property, claimed by the nation's cane mills that occasioned his symbolic death, and subsequently through physical death as he becomes one of many victims of the massacre. This blurring of the physical and material is rendered most palpable by Señora Valencia's acquisition of a newly-constructed luxury home and a surrogate helper, Sylvie, who Amabelle surmises "must have been just a child when the señora borrowed her from the slaughter" (*FB*, 304). Sylvie's presence both reinforces the Haitian subject as propertied possession and accentuates Haitians' expendability; and particularly Amabelle's. Their parallel history validates this observation: "With a distant gaze, Sylvie stood devotedly at [Señora Valencia's] side. And in Sylvie's eyes was a longing I knew very well, from the memory of it as it was once carved into my younger face" (*FB*, 306).

Another example where the material is accorded more value than the physical manifests in the luxury home that Señora Valencia inhabits that reinforces Haitians' asphyxiation engendered by the swallowing of parsley. The site on which the luxury homes are built doubled as tombs for many Haitians whose life ended in the very stream/waterfall that now distinguishes the homes as waterfront property. This expensive real estate investment brings to mind the commodification of Haitians. In a similar manner, the conflation of the homes and tombs blurs the distinction between life and death, calling attention to the death-like existence of Haitians.

The estrangement between Amabelle and Señora Valencia is not only politically charged, but it has also manifested bodily. Assessing Señora Valencia's and her divergent paths, Amabelle recounts: "She looked down at her hands. They were spotless, perfect and soft looking. I too looked down at my own hands, cut and scarred with scissors and needle marks" (*FB*, 296). Interestingly, Amabelle, a survivor of the massacre, does not reference the unspeakable violence engendered by the slaughter of Haitians,

but instead focuses on female to female oppression as another form of violence. Unquestionably, the scars and cuts left by scissors and needle marks were not imprinted on Amabelle's hands by the massacre. Rather, they were the result of the domestic services she performed for Señora Valencia. Appropriating the domestic space, often constructed as free from patriarchal mandates, as violent, Amabelle engages in subversion cum violation of her own that challenges the nation-state's violation of Haitian subjects. The message here is that the domestic and the political are strange bedfellows, a fact aptly exemplified by the union of Señora Valencia and her husband, Señor Pico.²³ This coalition in turn widens the gulf of separation between Amabelle (and by default other Haitians) and Señora Valencia:

²³ In her attempt to compensate Kongo for the loss of his son, who was run over by Señor Pico, Señora Valencia hosted the Haitian cane workers, offering them coffee in her "best European red orchid-patterned tea set". Upon discovering that she had used the imported tea set, Señor Pico "shattered the cups and saucers, one by one" (116).

All the time I had known her, we had always been dangling between being strangers and being friends. Now we were neither strangers nor friends. We were like two people passing each other on the street, exchanging a lengthy meaningless greeting. And at last I wanted it to end (*FB*, 300).

Furthermore, Señora Valencia's and Amabelle's difference is magnified tenfold in their varied responses to the massacre. While Señora Valencia refers to the genocide as *El Corte*, as it had become known in the Dominican Republic, Amabelle is quick to notice the unemotional ease and detachment with which she pronounced the words. Countering this inadequate allusion to the heinous crimes committed, Amabelle renders her own testimony of the massacre: "[O]n *our side* of the river many called it a *kout kouto*, a stabbing, like a single knife wound" (*FB*, 299; emphasis mine). Michele Wucker argues that *El Corte*, the cutting, alludes "to the machetes the Dominican soldiers used so they could say the carnage was the work of the peasants defending themselves, and also suggested to the Haitians' work of harvesting sugar cane".²⁴ Operating within the framework of linguistic difference, I would like to offer an alternative interpretation of the disparate accounts of the massacre. *El Corte*, the cutting, alludes to the act, diminishing the heinous crimes committed, and furthermore minimizing blame of the nation-state. In other words, the use of *El Corte* is "language-destroying" to borrow Elaine Scarry's coinage.²⁵ In the given scenario, the language employed serves to neutralize the violence as it silences the victims' voice. By the same token, Amabelle's return to *Alegría*, a misnomer notwithstanding, is not occasioned by happiness as the town's title intimates. By contrast, "*kout kouto*" encapsulates both the instrument of torture – "*kouto a*" is translated as knife – and the wounding, thereby offering a verbal/visual manifestation of the violent acts, while simultaneously rendering visible the object, the instrument of torture. By employing a language of their own to lend voice to the genocide, Haitians effectively register their defiance and resistance to "Dominicization".

²⁴ Michele Wucker, "The River Massacre: The Real and Imagined Border of Hispaniola", <<http://haitiforever.com/windowsonhaiti/wucker1.shtml>>, 2 May 2010.

²⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 19.

Señora Valencia's continued defense of her husband, Señor Pico, ascertains her loyalty, but more importantly her complicity with patriarchy. Attempting to provide Amabelle with a valid explanation of her blind allegiance to the dictatorial Trujillo regime, she expresses:

Amabelle, I live here still. If I denounce this country, I denounce myself. I would have had to leave the country if I'd forsaken my husband. Not that I ever asked questions. Not trusting him would have been like declaring that I was against him (*FB*, 299).

Whereas Señora Valencia allows her husband's actions to go unchecked, Beatriz, Señor Pico's former love interest, fiercely interrogates his patriotism. She explicitly and without inhibition articulates her distrust of him to Señora Valencia: "There is a side to Pico that I never liked. He's always dreamt that one day he would be president of this country, and it seems to me he would move more than mountains to make it so" (*FB*, 150).²⁶ Even Señor Ignacio appears to have doubts about Señor Pico's patriotism: "[Pico] believes that everything he is doing, he's doing for his country. At least that is what he must tell himself" (*FB*, 138).

Señor Pico on the other hand represents the "violence embodied in militant masculinity". Maja Korac establishes that,

violence-oriented masculinity becomes the main means of recruiting individuals who are capable of committing insane atrocities because their masculine militant collectivity is the ultimate determinant of good and evil.²⁷

As a staunch supporter and purveyor of Trujillo's racist politics, Señor Pico aptly fits this description as he is Trujillo's "right-hand man" so to speak, being assigned the leadership of a "group that would ensure the Generalissimo's safety" and also being in charge of "a new border operation" (*FB*, 42). This "covert" operation resulted in the slaughter of innocent Haitians. Moreover, Korac reminds us that,

violence-oriented masculinity does not victimize women alone. It implies forms of victimization of men too, from killing to torture and mutilation. Women, instead, are commonly victimized through rape, expulsion and forced migration.²⁸

By default, Beatriz's criticism of Señor Pico is a verbal indictment of Señora Valencia, the critical role she played in the massacre of Haitian citizens that is tantamount to betrayal. In other words, her display of "good citizenship" is in keeping with the regime's racist politics, a fact that Korac validates in stating that "a counterbalance to such violent-oriented masculinity is an emotional, committed, supportive but passive femininity".²⁹ Furthermore, Señora Valencia's refusal to defend the Haitian women in her service not only substantiates her passivity, but it also

²⁶ Prior to his marriage to Señora Valencia, Señor Pico had requested Beatriz's hand in marriage. She rejected his proposal which is symptomatic of her rejection of his divisive and racist politics and her denunciation of the Trujillo dictatorship. At the same time, she refuses the role of supporting wife.

²⁷ Maja Korac, "Refugee Women in Serbia: Their Experiences of War, Nationalism and State Building", in Yuval-Davis and Werbner, *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, 194.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 195.

reveals her complicity with patriarchy. Korac explains that this complicit behavior manifests more strongly during the time of conflict: “women who are seen traditionally as caretakers, guardians of their children, men and homes, and hence as pillars of a society in a ‘time called peace’, represent these roles even more starkly in a time of war”.³⁰ Willfully assuming this submissive position, playing the traditional role of wife and benefactor of her husband, Señora Valencia’s role as agent of oppression is crystallized.

Even as she inhabits the role of gatekeeper of patriarchal law and order, Señora Valencia’s (brand of) patriotism is subject to fierce scrutiny. This challenge manifests in Man Rapadou’s, Sebastien and Amabelle’s friend Yves’ mother, selfless demonstration of patriotism. Narrating to Amabelle how the Yankis had carried out their own brand of genocide on Haitians, “poison[ing] Yves’ father’s mind when he was in their prisons”, Man Rapadou recounts his betrayal of fellow Haitians to the Yankis. Aware that his betrayal – spying on fellow Haitians for monetary compensation – will have dire consequences, for “many people who were against the Yankis being here were going to die because of his betrayal”, Man Rapadou made the ultimate self-sacrifice:

And so I cooked his favorite foods for him and filled them with flour-fine glass and rat poison. I poisoned him ... Greater than my love for this man was love for my country. I could not let him trade us all, sell us to the Yankis (*FB*, 277).

Calling attention to the perceived expendability of Haitian subjects, Man Rapadou’s personal sacrifice ironically challenges this perception as she rejects the consumption and commodification of Haitians. Furthermore, her action that was occasioned by love, duty and honor misappropriates the role of women vis-à-vis the family and the state.

In like manner, Amabelle’s plea for the end to injustice is politically charged. Envisioning her personal relationship with Señora Valencia as a battle cry for justice and equality for Haitians irrespective of class, ethnicity, color or creed, Amabelle’s fervent appeal impresses upon her readers:

I will bear anything, carry any load, suffer any shame, walk with my eyes to the ground, if only for the very small chance that one day our fate might come to being somewhat closer and I would be granted for all my years of travail and duty an honestly gained life that in some extremely modest way would begin to resemble hers (*FB*, 306).

As intimated earlier, Amabelle’s (Danticat’s) appeal to bring to a halt the discriminatory practices against Haitians is representative of a larger contemporary political issue: the routinized and systematic expulsion of Haitians and dark-complected Dominicans from the Dominican Republic.

Parsley, distinguished for its principal domestic usage, is used to promote further marginalization and ultimately expulsion. Along these lines, the

domestic (space) is highly politicized, becoming a battle ground of citizen rights. Pondering on the mysterious use of parsley as a tool of discrimination, Amabelle quizzically muses:

But parsley? Was it because it was so used, so commonplace, so abundantly at hand that everyone who desired a sprig could find one? We used parsley for our food, our teas, baths, to cleanse our insides as well as our outsides. Perhaps the Generalissimo in some larger order was trying to do the same for his country (*FB*, 203).

Paradoxically, the easy access and accessibility to parsley becomes a marker of inaccessibility or unbelonging. By this account, parsley's use as a cleansing agent has been reappropriated, or more pointedly misappropriated as it now functions as a device of ethnic cleansing. Nevertheless, the term undergoes further "linguistic" reappropriation. In this instance however, it is transformed into a tool of resistance and female agency. Another female victim of the massacre, Odette,

With her parting breath [she] mouthed in Kreyòl 'pèsi,' not calmly and slowly as if she were asking for it at a roadside garden or open market, not questioning as if demanding of the face of Heaven the greater meaning of senseless acts, no effort to say 'perejil' as if pleading for her life (*FB*, *ibid.*).

Amabelle details Odette's defiance and its impact at length:

If [the Generalissimo] had heard Odette's 'pèsi' it might have startled him, not the tears and supplications he would have expected, no shriek from unbound fear, but a provocation, a challenge, a dare. To the devil with your world, your grass, your wind, your water, your air, your words. You ask for perejil, I give you more (*FB*, *ibid.*).

Odette's verbal challenge registers rejection of female domestication cum subordination. By violently resisting pronouncing "perejil", Odette escapes linguistic strangulation. Notably, prior to articulating resistance "she spat up the chest full of water she had collected in the river" (*FB*, 203). Paradoxically, the language that was intended to reinforce Dominican exclusionism is employed subversively to ascertain Haitian nationalism. Rejecting the master tongue, Odette fully engages her mother tongue, Kreyòl. Assessing the linguistic silencing of slaves, Nourbese Philip expresses that the slave master, in an effort to foil slave rebellions and revolutions, insisted (through separation) that slaves did not share a common tongue. As a result, Philip reminds us of the severe consequence of engaging the mother tongue: "Every slave caught speaking his native language shall be severely punished".³¹ Initiating a "rebellion", Odette subverts the master (tongue), refusing to be "dumb-tongued", transforming what Philip refers to as "a genealogy of silence" into "a genealogy of

³¹ Philip, *she tries her tongue*, 58.

³² Philip, *A Genealogy*, 13.

³³ Philip, *she tries her tongue*, 58.

³⁴ Like Amabelle who is on a mission to find Sebastien, Doloritas is searching for Ilestbien, who has perceivably become a victim of the massacre. She relies on the hope embedded in his name that translates as “all is well” in finding him.

³⁵ Suffice to say that this silence bears the imprint of emasculation. Señor Pico acknowledged his son’s presence into the world by inspecting his male organ, by peeking “beneath his diaper to check the boy’s testicles”.

resistance in which [she] speak[s]. In a certain manner”.³² Therefore, her tongue becomes “the offending organ” that resists, defies, and defiles.³³

In a subversive twist, Kreyòl becomes the language of access and belonging (it is no mere coincidence that Danticat uses the Kreyòl spelling of the word). Dominican sisters, Dolores and Doloritas, express their desire to assimilate through language acquisition. In conversation with Amabelle, Odette, Wilner and Tibon, Dolores in a reconciliatory tone confesses: “We have yet to learn your language” (*FB*, 176). We come to find out that the larger incentive for Kreyòl acquisition is Doloritas’ romantic involvement with her Haitian lover, Ilestbien: “We are together six months, me and my man. I told him I would learn Kreyòl for when we visit his family in Haiti” (*FB*, 177). This impending union between Doloritas and Ilestbien that necessitates literal (physical) and linguistic bordercrossings is demonstrative of a need for global citizenship, but more importantly, it is a call for unity between the two people, the two nation-states.³⁴ This plea for new beginnings was manifested earlier with the birth of a boy-girl set of twins to Señora Valencia. Significantly, the girl, Rosalinda, much smaller in stature and of darker hue; born with a veil over her face and the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, survives her brother, Rafi – named after the Generalissimo – in spite of his acclaimed strength and pronounced European features. Rafi’s death silences the patriarchy, rendering it ineffective and impotent.³⁵ By the same token, Rosalinda’s survival serves as a deterrent to Trujillo’s mission to whiten or Europeanize the Dominican state. This linguistic, ethnic, and cultural intermixing, accentuated by the amalgamation of the French words *il est bien* in Ilestbien’s name, sets the stage for debunking the myth of racial purity.

Amabelle and Doloritas are united in their suffering, their loss of Haitian men to the massacre. Thus, their common language is that of loss and female oppression. In yet another skillful demonstration of linguistic ingenuity, Danticat envisions loss and oppression as visible markers on female bodies. For example, Haitian women are buried under the identifiable markers of class and ethnic difference: “Among the oldest women, one was missing an ear. Two had lost fingers. One had her right cheekbone cracked in half, the result of a runaway machete in the fields. Felice, a young housemaid, had a beet-colored birthmark like a mustache over her lip” (*FB*, 61). This violence that is inscribed upon the female body is revealed in an earlier scene in which Amabelle compares Señora Valencia’s spotless hands to her own scarred ones, emphasizing Señora Valencia’s charmed life and her own impoverished state. In like fashion, suffering becomes manifest in the Dominican sisters’ names, Dolores and Doloritas, meaning pain or sorrow. Dolores intimates that the language of pain is rooted in the motherline wherein suffering and pain precipitated their entrance into the world: “Our mother suffered much when each one

of us was being born so gave us these grave names we have" (*FB*, 176). At the same time, pain fortifies the mother-daughter bond and the female bond in general. It is an interesting twist of fate that while birth (rights) does not automatically guarantee female subjects citizenship, it paradoxically approximates their preordained subordination in the nation-state.

Whereas Wilner's attempt to expunge the Dominican sisters from their midst so as to avoid persecution arguably stems from legitimate fear, at the same time it calls attention to reverse discrimination and female subjugation. Invoking a politics of national (un)belonging as a means to justify his abandonment of the two sisters, Wilner nonetheless refuses to address them directly: "I will not be roasted like lechón for them. This is their country. Let them find the border themselves. They can go to any village in these mountains, and the people will welcome them" (*FB*, 183). Wilner's declaration that further ruptures the divide between the two nations plays into the politics of fear-mongering, similar to that as espoused by both Dominican and Haitian governments to maintain control over its citizens. Likewise, he engages the masculinist narrative of nationalism for personal gain. Even so, his allegation of unanimity among Dominicans implies that there is no racial, gender, or class division within the nation-state, and therefore women are treated fairly under the law. Wilner is fully aware that birth right does not guarantee an individual full protection under the law; he serves as living testimony to this fact. Effectively, Wilner adopts a gender blind theorization of citizenship wherein Dolores' and Doloritas' exclusion bears the imprint of state expulsion, amounting to denial of citizenship. Finding themselves in a precarious position, their desire for union with Haiti puts them at great odds with the Dominican state, especially considering the 'conspiratorial' nature of their act, treason, their statelessness is illuminated further in their choice of Haiti as a place of refuge. In addition to the political and economic turmoil that has come to define the island, successive Haitian governments have contributed to the instability that continues to plague the island nation and its people. One such injustice manifests in Haitian citizens being sentenced to a life of servitude in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic.³⁶ Tibon underscores the Haitian government's complicity in their expulsion: "Poor people are sold to work in the cane fields so our own country can be free of them" (*FB*, 178). In this regard, Haitians are doubly orphaned by the host and the home country.

Orphaned from their once treasured and celebrated past, Haitian citizens have devised a coping mechanism to survive their nation's betrayal. They induce national nostalgia:

We had respect. When Dessalines, Toussaint, Henry, when those men walked the earth, we were a strong nation. Those men would go to war to defend our

³⁶ Refer to Peter Grill's newspaper article, "Suffering Modern Day Slavery" in which he discusses the continued exploitation of Haitians.

blood. In all this, our so-called president says nothing, our Papa Vincent – our poet – he says nothing at all to this affront to the children of Dessalines, the children of Toussaint, the children of Henry; he shouts nothing across this river of our blood (*FB*, 212).

Engendering a politics of national unity and solidarity by calling on the “old dead fathers of independence”, disenfranchised Haitians acquire a sense of belonging, albeit via memory (*FB*, 212). To echo Danticat, they “can be mausoleums, [they themselves] are the museums, [they] are [their] own testaments”.³⁷

³⁷ Shea, “The Hunger to Tell”, 12-22, 21.

Furthermore, in response to Wilner’s gender blind theorization of citizen rights, Tibon references class dynamic that played a pivotal role in the slaughter of Haitians. Underscoring the inherent stigma of poverty, of belonging to the lower working class, he poignantly asserts: “The ruin of the poor is their poverty. The poor man, *no matter who he is*, is always despised by his neighbors. When you stay too long at a neighbor’s house, it’s only natural that he become weary of you and hate you” (*FB*, 178; emphasis mine). While the discrimination meted out to Haitians engendered Tibon’s pronouncement, he nevertheless accurately surmises that poverty does not discriminate; it is a global phenomenon. In the aforementioned analogy about “stay[ing] too long at a neighbor’s house”, his use of “house” connotes Haitians’ presence, albeit unwelcome, even as it reaffirms their absence, their homelessness. Along similar lines, Tibon demonstrates how homelessness, namely not possessing a sense of self, can create anguish. Recounting a personal childhood narrative, Tibon reveals how he almost killed a Dominican boy: “I see him coming along the road in front of the mill one day and I decide to beat him to make him say that even if he’s living in a big house and I’m living in the mill, he’s no better than me” (*FB*, 182). Despite the daily scheduled beatings, the Dominican boy refused to give in to Tibon’s demands: “He won’t say what I want him to say, that we’re the same, me and him, flesh like flesh, blood like blood” (*FB*, 182). By directing the violence unto the Dominican body, Tibon destabilizes the Haitian body as the “natural vessel for the pain inflicted by [Trujillo’s] authoritarian government”.³⁸ Hence, the guaranteed safety that Trujillo’s violent raids on Haitians promised is threatened. By the same token, Tibon’s attack of the Dominican boy brings to the forefront the “structural connection between the violence of genocide and the violence of poverty, oppression, and the colonial legacy”.³⁹ Ultimately, Tibon’s action is occasioned by his need to engage identity politics that primarily lends itself to acknowledging the common humanity of both Haitians and Dominicans. This acknowledgement in turn allows for equal protection under the law, previously underscored by Amabelle who hopes that one day not only will “[Dominicans and Haitians] fates come to being somewhat closer”,

³⁸ Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, *Beyond Terror: Gender, Narrative, Human Rights* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 58.

³⁹ Ibid, 160.

but also that Haitians will be granted “an honestly gained life for all their years of travail and duty” (*FB*, 306).

It is this recognition of a common humanity that results in Tibon candidly voicing his objection to abandoning the Dominican sisters. Furthering this act of solidarity, the Dominican sisters crossing the troubled waters to the other side of the border advances the reconciliation process. In the same breath, it challenges the politics of denial. In analyzing how the “twin” countries choose to memorialize (or forget) their past, Lucía M. Suárez points out that “[I]n contrast to a Haitian tradition of disclosure of misery and violence, the politics of silence – or rather denial – have been dominant in Dominican memory”.⁴⁰ This politics of denial is challenged by both Amabelle and Doloritas who become living testimony to the widespread violence having lost their men to the massacre. Furthermore, the bordercrossing is equally an acknowledgment of mutual pain that requires individual identification with it in order to relieve national pain and suffering. Nevertheless, this fervent hope for a bright and peaceful future on the island of Haiti is epitomized in Ilesbien’s name, where the “ilè” will guarantee necessary safety and freedom not only to Haitians, but will also renew the promise of freedom to “any who set foot on her soil”.⁴¹

Championing the need to begin the healing process, Amabelle reminiscing on her life concludes: “[I]t was all the past. Now we all had to try and find the future” (184). Amabelle’s role as midwife is pivotal in ensuring the birth of the future (nation).⁴² The final scene with her lying naked on her back in the shallow water of the Massacre River lends itself to renewal and change. Simultaneously, the river doubles as a site of life and death.

By the same token, Amabelle identifies the need to memorialize the past: “The slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on. All I want to do is find a place to lay it down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds, nor remain forever buried beneath the sod” (*FB*, 266). Karla Holloway eloquently articulates how memorializing the dead or the past can sustain the community: “Even if the story is grief-stricken, the act of memorializing retains a particular aspect of a culture’s narrative, and for blacks in the Americas, some notion of racial memory and racial realization is mediated through the veil of death”.⁴³ Silence is tantamount to erasure, to death. Amabelle, on the other hand, knowing the true value of investing in memory and remembering “is concerned especially about providing testimony, of a written record of her ordeal, leaving evidence for posterity”.⁴⁴ Completing the iconic image of ordained “mother”, Amabelle is bestowed the title of Man, as in Man Amabelle, “belonging to an elder” (*FB*, 269).

⁴⁰ Lucía M. Suárez, *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 7.

⁴¹ See John Maxwell’s “Haiti’s Great White Hope? Common Sense” in which he documents that Haiti, in her heyday, was not only instrumental in engineering and supporting global struggles for freedom, but she also granted freedom to any captive that set foot on her soil. *Jamaica Observer* (24 May 2009), <http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/columns/html/20090523T170000-0500_152049_OBS_HAITI_S_GREAT_WHITE_HOPE_.asp>, 2 May 2010.

⁴² Amabelle birthed Señora Valencia’s twins. Her midwifery talent was most likely inherited from her mother who was a midwife.

⁴³ Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.

⁴⁴ Renée Larrier, “‘Girl by the Shore’: Gender and Testimony in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*”, *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 7.2 (Fall 2001), 50-62, 51.

Paradise Deferred: Utopia, Eutopia and Dystopia
in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*

A story of a journey across the Atlantic, a broken mirror and a dog-eared diary – Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* juxtaposes familiar symbols of quest and fragmentation with symbols of failed self-expression and western hegemony in an excavation that ultimately exposes the weaknesses of western epistemologies through its exploration of the cultural identity of Guadeloupean women.¹ By highlighting western means of self-discovery and undermining their efficacy for those whose past is fragmented by conquest and departmentalization, the author heeds bell hooks' call "to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew" as she re-presents and then deconstructs the master's tools.² Simultaneously, where scholars including Chandra Mohanty and Trinh Minh-ha have sought to re-present the subjectivity of women of developing nations in a manner that reveals their autonomy from traditions both western and male, Warner-Vieyra reifies their scholarly quest through her characters. For *Juletane*, even her attempts to escape the violent history of conquest reveal her complete dependence on western thought: the only means through which she knows to seek freedom are western, and as a result, they fail her. But in H  l  ne, her counterpart, the author personifies the possibility of transcending what Stuart Hall has called the "two axes" of Afro-Caribbean cultural identity, namely, the axis of continuity and the axis of fragmentation.³

Guadeloupe's history, fragmented by conquest, informs *Juletane*. The island's history longs to be re-membered, uncovered and deciphered, but *Juletane*'s journey to Europe and Africa ultimately mirrors the same loss, alienation and destruction that the Arawaks and Caribs experienced in the sixteenth century and that the imported slaves experienced during the Middle Passage to the Caribbean. Unlike Columbus's mercantile adventure across the Atlantic, *Juletane*'s ocean-crossing "takes the form of a journey-as-alienation", a journey to what, without the accidental interference of a fellow emigrant, would be oblivion.⁴ The main text, an old and half-forgotten diary, is literally the sole relic of *Juletane*'s life, randomly uncovered by H  l  ne, a social worker who was asked to speak with *Juletane* before she died in a psychiatric hospital. If H  l  ne, the first reader of *Juletane*'s diary, is forced to reconsider her own migration from Guadeloupe to Africa as a result of her confrontation with the text, then we, the second readers, are forced to consider the relationship between *Juletane*, who recapitulates onto herself the violation which Guadeloupe has suffered, and H  l  ne, who is poised to re-evaluate her heritage and assume a position of agency.

¹ Myriam Warner-Vieyra, *Juletane*, trans. by Betty Wilson (Portsmouth: Heinemann, [1982] 1987). Hereafter references in the text as *J.*

² bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 28.

³ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in Padmini Mongia, ed., *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), 43.

⁴ Elizabeth Wilson, "Le voyage et l'espace clos: Island and Journey as Metaphor: Aspects of Woman's Experience in the Works of Francophone Caribbean Novelists", in Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds., *Out of the Kumbula* (Trenton: African World Press, 1990), 47.

Not only does the island's history turn Juletane's journey-as-discovery into a journey-as-alienation as she completes a passage to West Africa, but the avenue, namely writing, that she employs in her efforts to liberate herself from the past and its colonial legacy adds yet another layer to her orphanage and subjugation. Like her journey, writing only affirms the legacies of colonization, ultimately turning her life into an artifact of Guadeloupe's forgotten past. Writing and journey-as-discovery, then, become the two means through which Juletane fails to recreate herself but through which she bequeaths to H         the possibility of self-recovery. In fact, the non-western pattern of the narrative structure, specifically the dialogic structure established through repeated interruptions by H        , offers the novel's only hope that the artifact Juletane leaves might possibly turn a history of alienation into a future of self-discovery.⁵ Though problematically, a French European education and the financial means it yields offer H         the hope of finding and sustaining what Juletane fails to find: a combined understanding of the past with the possibility of an active revolt against its determinism and a recovery of self.

Initially, Juletane holds onto the hope that writing will anchor and sustain her, but it is the first avenue of her failure to find and assert her own sense of self. As she confesses, she hopes that "Writing will shorten my long history of discouragement, will be something for me to cling to"; however, she immediately adds that her "rebellious soul wears itself out in useless attempts to revolt, which leave me even more broken, more defeated than ever" (*J*, 5). Here, Warner-Vieyra establishes the leitmotif of shattering that pervades the account and mirrors its narrative structure, that of a journal, broken into a number of daily, even hourly, entries that leave the remaining hours of Juletane's unknowable. If she believes that this diary offers a possible means "to remember a past more filled with sorrows than with joys", she is mistaken, for her past, like Guadeloupe's, cannot be re-membered or pieced back together so easily (*J*, 25). In fact, her own inability to recover "things about the past which escape" her will undermines her efforts to leave to her African husband, Mamadou, a "legacy" to replace the children she could not bear him (*J*, 51, 72); she will leave him nothing, for her failure to piece together a history of her own will set off a chain of events that leads to his death, as well as hers. H        , instead, will pursue the task of re-membering history as if to implement Mohanty's insistence that her readers not reproduce hegemonic epistemologies and hooks' call to women of color to "reunite fragments of being" (*J*, 31).

Where Bella Brodzki feels that Juletane's diary testifies to her mastery over her life and her mastery over French, "the language of her exclusion",⁶ Fran           contends that the process of writing only reinforces the heroine's loss of self.⁷ In employing that same avenue of discovery and

⁵ Of course, non-linear or dialogic structures are not exclusively non-western, but double-voiced discourse and a-chronological structures are patterns common among non-western authors who are often invoking ancient oral traditions. N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Nora Okja Keller, Erna Brodber, and Diamela Eltit are just a few examples of authors who employ non-linear structures.

⁶ Bella Brodzki, "Reading/Writing Women in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*", *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 17 (1993), 72.

⁷ Fran          , "Geographies of Pain: Captive Bodies and Violent Acts in the Fictions of Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Gayl Jones, and Bessie Head", *Callaloo*, 16 (1992), 140.

reflection used by European explorers, Juletane is not turning her antagonist's weapon against him; instead, she is recapitulating Columbus's conquest-by-proclamation and, as a result, falls victim to the tyranny of the written word. In effect, by writing her story, Juletane reiterates her island's history of violation by attempting to inscribe meaning on her life through a typically western means of self-discovery, consequently transforming herself from an orphan of western occupation to a relic of its conquests. Paradoxically, at the same time that Juletane herself attempts to dominate others by writing their history for them and to manipulate Mamadou by leaving him this explanation of her actions, she forces herself into a powerless, fossilized state. Juletane is not using writing to gain voice and affirm her agency; instead, she is literally writing herself into a state of ostracism, insanity and death.

Juletane's diary not only isolates her from herself, but also keeps her from making significant connections with others around her. In fact, it is due to her writing that Juletane is initially viewed as suspect by the women in the African mental asylum where she ends her life. As one inmate tells her dismissively, "[writing] is a waste of time, white people's business" (J, 77). In her study of writing and exile, Yanick Lahens provides a framework for this African woman's response and Juletane's isolation:

[Writing] comes to upset the immutable order of traditional society where knowledge is still accumulated in the form of collective wisdom ... The interruption of the peculiar figure of the writer threatens the relative immunity of the society with the uniqueness of his individual word ... The writer in the context of our traditional society appears then as a strange, misunderstood, useless and even dangerous figure.⁸

⁸ Yanick Lahens, "Exile between Writing and Place", *Callaloo*, 15 (1990), 741-2.

Further illuminating the strange and dangerous figure of the individual writer, Brodzki has noted that literacy in Senegal is below ten per cent, lower for women.⁹ Thus, the act of writing connects Juletane to the western world just as it reinforces her isolation within her immediate environment of women who probably cannot read. Her defiant act of individualism – choosing contemplative withdrawal – is antithetical to the needs of traditional African society where the contributions of a collective are valued above all else. Consequently, writing can only be perceived by her milieu as an act of hostility, self-indulgence or sloth, and Juletane exacerbates her alienation through the act she hopes will restore her relation to Mamadou and assuage her own pain.

⁹ Brodzki, "Reading/Writing Women", 74-5.

Instead of serving as a catalyst for the protagonist's healing, writing keeps Juletane from starting her life anew, not only in the time she spends writing – alone – but also in her intent to change Mamadou's growing indifference to guilt. "I must finish my journal", she declares, for "it is the only legacy I am leaving to Mamadou. I hope he will read it and will

understand how far from my dream he was" (J, 72). Even Juletane's last attempt to reach her husband turns out to be an empty, dramatic gesture when he dies in a car accident before reading it. Her diary, descending from a long Christian/Catholic tradition which she will also invoke in her trials, cannot succeed as Saint Augustine's *Confessions* or Cardinal John Henry Newman's *Apologia pro vita sua* did: her confessions, unlike theirs, are orphaned artifacts of a history she knows only in pieces, a history that has left *her* in pieces.

Not only does Juletane's history mirror a shattered history of conquest and violation, but her choice to pursue a western means of self-therapy and apology has turned her efforts at revolt and re-membling into a relic unintelligible to her immediate African community. When she writes, "Thanks to my diary, I discover that my life is not in pieces", she is mistaken (J, 30). Indeed, her memories are not "[coming] back in huge raging waves" (J, *ibid.*); her Caribbean past is mentioned only five times in her journal and only briefly each time (J, 2, 10, 29, 49, 60). And like her distant past, her more recent past reveals itself to be undecipherable, in her words, "useless" (J, 76). Juletane has suffered a miscarriage, murdered Mamadou's first wife's children, disfigured the wife he took after learning that Juletane could bear no more children, and learned that her husband was killed in an accident after bringing her to the hospital. She had "wanted to see him suffer" but admits that her vengeance has been as fruitless as her efforts to piece together her own life in the form of a diary (J, 78). It is not, as Juliette Rogers has claimed, that Juletane's writing is an act of recovery; instead, her memories remain as fragmented and opaque as the diary itself, as "useless" (to the intended audience) and dismembered as this relic of her own subjugation to western ideals and history, including the mythic history of journey-as-discovery.¹⁰

With her Caribbean history essentially lost to Juletane, journey-as-discovery becomes the second means through which she is failed by western ideals and epistemologies. Twice, Juletane relates what little she knows of her own origins, both times emphasizing the fact that she was accidentally "conceived one night in Lent, a period of fast and abstinence", attributes which will define her isolation in Africa and which recall the hardships of slavery (J, 2, 60). Juletane herself associates the privation of Lent with the "three centuries of our people's history which my frail shoulders were to inherit" (J, 2). After she has been re-christened the madwoman, she, like many of her enslaved ancestors, is orphaned, having no parents and no name. And if the narrative structure of the journal entries emphasizes this fracturing of the past, then Juletane's own life mirrors the legacies of colonialism: "I knew nothing about my own homeland", having left at the age of ten when her father died (J, 10). Her ignorance reverberates with the history of an island robbed of

¹⁰ Juliette M. Rogers, "Reading, Writing, and Recovering: Creating a Women's Creole Identity in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*", *The French Review*, 69 (1996), 595-604. Like Rogers, Brodzki also defends the "therapeutic and cognitive benefits" of writing ("Reading/Writing Women", 72), but Lionnet acknowledges that "the loss of self experienced by Juletane is reinforced by the writing of the diary", "Geographies of Pain", 140.

¹¹ As Elizabeth Ann Willey explains, “In accepting the paradigm of the linear voyage and the linear narrative, Juletane denies herself the possibility of writing the non-linear, circular narrative that other women in this novel share”, “Madness and the Middle Passage: Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane* as a Paradigm for Writing Caribbean Women’s Identities”, *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 21 (1997), 460.

¹² Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 34.

¹³ Glissant writes, “Within departmentalization, economic dependency is acute; political impotence is increased through a tertiarization of the economy and the power of the prefect; social imbalances are produced... and cultural dislocation is induced by an artificial affluence and a new consumer culture. The end result is mental alienation”, *Caribbean Discourse*, xix.

¹⁴ In 1516 Thomas More called his imaginary world Utopia, after the Greek for no-place, punning on Eutopia, an ideal place.

¹⁵ Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993), 32.

its indigenous people and forcibly repopulated with her African ancestors. Specifically, a teleologically-driven journey-as-discovery (and a linear narrative describing it) is a quintessentially western paradigm.¹¹ In utilizing the tool of the conquerors to pursue self-discovery and liberation, then, Antillean authors, as Edouard Glissant has explained, are seeking “to be reunited at a profound level with what we are”.¹² However, in the case of Juletane, the history of violation precludes such a reunion: Juletane’s journey to Paris and then to Senegal only repeats the history of violence dating back to Columbus’s landing and to the slave trade and heightens the sense of alienation that haunts Guadeloupeans collectively and the heroine personally.¹³

Where Columbus sought the Orient and claimed to have found an exotic environment of waterfalls and bloody cannibals, Juletane does the opposite: she seeks a mythic land and finds a foreign one, thus finding herself victimized, erased and paralyzed by what she perceives as a cultural vacuum. In effect, like so many travelers before her, by dreaming “about streams and waterfalls” (*J*, 29), she seeks a eutopia, an ideal place, and instead finds a utopia, no-place.¹⁴ Moreover, as Ann Elizabeth Willey has shown, Juletane will re-experience the mortifying effects of the Middle Passage by migrating from the Caribbean across the Atlantic after her father’s death, completing the backwards journey to Africa after her godmother’s death leaves her orphaned once again. Only as long as she remains in Paris and her husband-to-be remains shrouded in the mythic allure of his homeland, can Africa remain a eutopia. Mamadou, in fact, is a metonymy for all Africa offers, but only as long as the continent is as unfamiliar to Juletane as the island of Utopia is to Thomas More’s narrator. As soon as she reaches it, eutopia transforms into utopia when she discovers that she has entered into a polygamous marriage. Upon this discovery, Juletane’s quest to find herself and relocate her past is revealed to be just another recapitulation of her heritage. If the heroine feels she has been “erased from the register of time”, her voyage has fulfilled the west’s erasure of Guadeloupe’s history and of her ancestors’ African heritage (*J*, 2). To borrow Jamaica Kincaid’s words in *A Small Place*, Juletane is left with “no motherland or fatherland, no gods, no mounds of earth for holy ground”.¹⁵

Having completed the Middle Passage in reverse, Juletane seems to escape the “damp, dark” room she occupies after her godmother’s death only to find herself trapped, this time, in an African community so alien to her Franco-Catholic upbringing that she cannot adapt (*J*, 7). She compares the polygamous family she has unknowingly entered to living in “another planet,” and even more forcefully, confides: “This homecoming to Africa, ... had become a nightmare” (*J*, 23, 15). While Mamadou is transformed into a “deplorable coward” for keeping the truth from her, she finds herself

orphaned, once again, a stranger, an intruder (*J*, 15).¹⁶ From the small, dark room of her Paris apartment, Juletane enters “a room of five paces by four” in Senegal (*J*, 26). Eventually, she will lock herself into the room, welcoming the tomb-like spaces which have oppressed her ancestors. She will even dream of her room as a grave-like pit and see her body “crawling with worms” (*J*, 60). For Juletane, no-place becomes a torturous prison for one who, as Glissant and others have argued, cannot overcome the legacy of the Middle Passage simply by retracing it, literally or in writing.¹⁷ Thus, her sense of alienation intensifies as her subjugation to Guadeloupe’s colonial history evolves into a profound sense of entrapment in an African void, a place that, for Juletane, is not a place, or, is a place so alien to her francophone education and her identification with the Antilles that she cannot recover its meaning to her or recover her own meaning within it.¹⁸

It is, then, withdrawal and self-abnegation, not “revolt”, that characterize Juletane’s experiences in Africa, beginning and ending in her namelessness, or more precisely, in her acquiescence to the violation of being un-named (*J*, 5). In her first journal entry, she confesses, “I have Not even a name anymore... Here, they call me ‘the mad woman’” (*J*, 2). Although Jonathan Ngate feels that in “‘accepting’ the label of madwoman, Juletane is, in effect”, turning madness into “a vehicle for self-revelation”,¹⁹ her efforts at self-revelation fail: first, when she concludes that her namelessness “is not important” (*J*, 2), she once again allows her own undoing in a manner which recalls the violence done unto her ancestors, when, as Jacques Derrida has shown, writing is the “arche-violence”, the denial of presence, of agency.²⁰ Second, if her name, derived from her father’s name, Jules, is merely a “distant memory” to her and if Mamadou will never read her diary, then her efforts to understand herself and her efforts to explain herself have been fruitless (*J*, 63). Indeed, her desire to “wake up in another world where mad people are not mad but wise and just” reveals that she has not come to know herself or to confront her conquerors (*J*, 78). After all, there is little difference between her previous dreams of finding a “home” in Africa and her final wish for a “long, restful night” in the afterlife – which is itself another eutopia (*J*, 13, 78). Self-knowledge, family, community, and finally, peace evade her at every turn because she seeks to re-member what cannot be re-membered, a past before her orphanage, a past before Guadeloupe’s colonization or her ancestors’ enslavement. The fact that the novel ends, for Juletane, where it begins – with her eternal namelessness as she dreams of her own unmarked grave – bears witness to the failure of her quest.

Juletane, a synecdoche for the island home she barely knows, embraces the history of violation infecting her spirit: certainly, Africa is an alien world to her, but reciprocally, she insists on viewing her environment

¹⁶ The issue of polygamy in *Juletane* links the text to several francophone West African texts, including Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* (1989) and *Le chant écarlate* (1981), as well as Aminata Maïga Ka’s *Voie de salut* (1985).

¹⁷ Willey, “Madness and the Middle Passage”, 453.

¹⁸ As Willey has noted, Juletane identifies her blackness primarily with slaves of the mainland, with the “‘hopeless revolts ... of the Americans’” not with Africa, “Madness and the Middle Passage” 458, quoting *J*, 43.

¹⁹ Jonathan Ngate, “Reading Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane*”, *Callaloo*, 29 (1986), 556.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 112.

through her personal lens of alienation, absence and loss. While the reader is given several clues that the unnamed country in the text is Senegal – the national language in question, Wolof, and the rice and fish Juletane consumes, *tieboudienne*, the national dish – the narrator generally suppresses these markers, signaling the protagonist's lack of interest in her surroundings. Further fostering her own alienation, Juletane turns an invective eye on her African milieu. Having been raised in the company of her conservative, Catholic godmother, she cannot accept the mores of the Senegalese extended family system. She feels oppressed by “the numerous visits from aunts, uncles, cousins, on all sides” (J, 33). In addition, she berates Mamadou for giving money to his relatives, especially to his uncle whom she perceives as financially comfortable and healthy. Most significantly, Juletane is filled with anguish by the continued weekly visits of Mamadou to his first wife, Awa. Juletane then retreats to a small room, adopting a stance of indifference, accepting a state of passivity: “I withdrew completely into my sorrow, spending days and days without going out, without eating, turning over and over the same thoughts, harking back to the same old story I no longer opened my door to visitors” (J, 36). Juletane has failed to recognize Audre Lorde's warning that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house”, and as a result, she relives the enslavement of her ancestors.²¹

²¹ Cit. in hooks, *Talking Back*, 36.

Finally, after having sacrificed her name and her community, Juletane even loses her ethnicity, which was a source of pride for her as a child. Her civil death, which began (long before meeting Mamadou) with her exile from Guadeloupe, is complete. Forecasting the diary's end, when she is accused by the fellow inmate of wasting her time with “white people's business”, namely, writing; Ndeye, Mamadou's third wife, calls the heroine a “*toubabesse*”, a term which designates a foreigner in Wolof, but also a white woman (J, 42). Initially enraged by what she considers as a brutal assault on her *identité nègre*, Juletane vows to seek retribution for this sin against her. Ndeye, she explains, “was quite simply identifying me with the white wives of the colonials, she was even stripping me of my identity as a black woman”, in other words, erasing her identity once again as early colonists conquered what they assured themselves was *terra nullius* (J, 106). In a sense, and ironically for Juletane, in view of her own means of attempting to discover her identity (her quest and her journal-writing) and in view of her emphasis on individuality as opposed to collective identity, she has earned the appellation: Ndeye can hardly see her in any other way than as a product, if not a re-producer, of colonialism. And yet, as Lionnet explains, from Juletane's perspective, Ndeye is robbing her of the one identity she has “come to Africa to claim: that of a black woman” (J, 139). Finally, it is not in her name-calling alone that Ndeye strips the protagonist of the identity she seeks, for Mamadou hopes that his third wife will give him what Juletane could not – children.²²

²² As Irène Assiba D'Almeida has remarked in her study of *Francophone African Women's Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994) for “an African woman, children are not only the reward of life, but life itself. To have children is seen as a woman's primary function, her *raison d'être*, and as a result a woman who has no children does not really exist”, 87.

In her own last, futile effort at revolt, Juletane meets a final subjection to the western traditions that have failed her. She has gone so far as to replicate Christ's own broken flesh by starving herself and throwing herself against the wall, causing a wound to her forehead. Her emaciated and wounded body is symbolically transformed into an object of sacrifice. However, contrary to the medieval mystics whose efforts to emulate Christ's humility Juletane's sufferings recall, her self-mortification is not intended to achieve union with God, but to evoke the sympathy and remorse of Mamadou and to regain his love, and if not, avenge his indifference. In fact, in punishing herself without a spiritual motivation, Juletane invokes her homeland's loss of identity and the suffering and malnutrition endured by Africans during the Middle Passage more than she reifies a religious tradition. Thus, once again, her fate echoes with the forces that have shaped her history. Invoking the dehumanizing Middle Passage specifically through her marine imagery, Juletane likens herself to "a rudderless boat adrift in time and space" (*J*, 60). She welcomes the "silence and the emptiness" around her and concludes, "I have already ceased to exist", except as a sign, a relic (*J*, 60-1).

As Ndeye has already revealed in her denial of Juletane's blackness, the heroine has become a representative "member of the Caribbean diaspora, an exile from the African present".²³ Again, as a synecdoche for her homeland's history both in her role as victim and in her role as violator, Juletane experiences a fit of delirium, a profound loss of self and self-awareness, and poisons Awa's children. Reliving her own loss in the miscarriage at the same time as she is perpetuating a cycle of violence, Juletane embodies the multiple layers of suffering, haunting and abuse that infect the paradise she seeks, thereby turning Africa into a dystopia for herself and for her family. When she then disfigures Ndeye by pouring hot oil onto her face, both Ndeye's blindness and Juletane's own comments expose the reflexive nature of her violence and the pervasive nature of its disabling effects. Juletane, after all, is blind regarding her own future, and when she admits, after the event, "I was the victim of a fate over which I had no control", it is clear that she does not feel like an agent (*J*, 73). In effect, she becomes a monstrosity, a name she once applied to Mamadou for his cowardice, but in her case, a name signifying her profound alienation from this time and this place, one rooted in Guadeloupe's history and reaffirmed by her own efforts to magnify her otherness and distance herself from this world. In writing the story of her own death, she accepts victimization, mirroring the historical past of which she knows so little. Like Awa, she is childless and, essentially, dead: she has no feelings of love or hate and fears she has no soul. In her last journal entry, she speaks of herself in the past tense, wondering "Had my life been worth living? What had I contributed, what had I given?" (*J*, 78). Like Ndeye, she is blind, disfigured and undecipherable, even to herself.

²³ Brodzki, "Reading/Writing Women", 70.

²⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51.

²⁵ Willey, "Madness and the Middle Passage", 453-4.

²⁶ Ibid., 454.

²⁷ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 14.

Juletane cannot transcend her history of violence and find her own sense of self; however, she may succeed in bequeathing the power of recreation to H  l  ne. Applying Mohanty's terms, while H  l  ne is 'deconstructing' Juletane's past, she builds for herself and her readers the hope of 'constructing' a future that is not, as Juletane's life is, a reproduction of western hegemony.²⁴ This reconstruction begins in Senegal when H  l  ne rescues Juletane's diary from a stack of papers and sits down to read this relic of a psychiatric case. With H  l  ne's discovery, Juletane's life is given meaning, for her fate challenges H  l  ne's decision to marry an African and revives in her an acknowledgment of the women's shared liminality as Caribbeans of African descent. Before she has even finished reading the diary, H  l  ne is "ready to avenge [Juletane]" (J, 46), willing "to think of her life in terms of the circular and communal stories of women that Juletane neglects" in Africa by refusing the kindness of Awa and other women in her community.²⁵ The narrative progress that Juletane's shattered existence makes toward self-annihilation, then, is interrupted by and mediated through H  l  ne's empathy for this woman who refused to see her while hospitalized. H  l  ne, the reader who can and does provide a context and a history to the otherwise undecipherable relic Juletane has left, "shows us the possibility of creating an identity that is rational and cyclical, that constructs meaning through repetition and contingency, not on progression and arrival as Juletane tries to".²⁶ H  l  ne, in other words, can deconstruct and expose the truths of Juletane's life in order to define, or at least forecast, tools to dismantle old meanings and make new ones.

Where Juletane embraces her descent into non-existence by failing to recognize that the means through which she seeks understanding are bound to oppress her, H  l  ne may successfully revolt against western hegemony and its values and epistemologies. She may, in other words, find a new mode of meaning-making, one expressive of the realities of Afro-Caribbean women. H  l  ne has taken the same journey as Juletane, yet she is poised to reverse it. She has received even more French education than Juletane, yet she does not write her story; she is self-destructive yet she resists self-annihilation. H  l  ne succeeds where Juletane does not: through her journey into Juletane's diary, she recognizes history instead of mirroring it and offers an alternative to Juletane's fate by resisting petrification and becoming the potential heir to Juletane's creative fertility. If H  l  ne's fate is unknown at the novel's end, it is a testimony to her victory over what Glissant calls the "static time" in which anthropologists fossilize otherness.²⁷ The lack of closure is an assertion of her agency, at least potentially and symbolically. In fact, the deferral of her action, to borrow Derrida's terminology, though clearly complicating her role as a foil to Juletane, can be seen as an opposition to the western paradigm that Juletane has embraced: unlike her counterpart, H  l  ne cannot be objectified

or fossilized by language because her choice remains unrecorded. In her acts of empathy and mourning, she is poised to re-construct what has been deconstructed and offer an alternative to readers who have seen the failure of the western traditions embraced by Juletane.

While Hélène's empathy for Juletane provides an alternative to the western tropes of self-discovery that fail the latter, the former's presence is just as riddled with Guadeloupe's past as Juletane's, so that this double to the protagonist exists not as an uncomplicated panacea to Juletane's illness but as a true heir to their collective potential to enable rebirth and recovery. After all, it is her education and the opportunities it has brought her that could enable her transcendence over the legacies of the past, since she enjoys the economic means and the freedom to return to Guadeloupe, should she wish, or to remain single.²⁸ Beyond this fundamental complexity, one which forebodingly parallels Juletane's insistence on western forms of self-discovery, various elements of fiction work to challenge the reader's perspective on Hélène's future and on her relationship with the past, as personified in Juletane. On the one hand, Hélène's ability to translate the hieroglyph Juletane has left, the interruptions her voice provides and her apparent decision not to marry would indicate that her character does provide hope that Juletane's alienation will nurture a future of self-discovery. But on the other hand, Hélène's voice, by page-count, is weaker than Juletane's, it is mediated by the past tense and the third person, and as Rogers has noted, it is "the weakest and most mediated voice" (*J*, 61) in the text, forming a relationship with the reader which seems to invoke a Derridean violence or denial of agency.²⁹ As mentioned above, the novel's ending offers a possibility, not a promise, of change – a narrative tactic that could signify either potential failure or a refusal to comply with western expectations. Yet, despite the ambiguity of her position, Hélène's internal journey of discovery clearly serves as an alternative to Juletane's physical journey.³⁰

As an affirming counter-balance to Juletane, Hélène transforms what would otherwise be a relic from an unknowable woman into a meaningful message from the recent past. Simply, she affords verisimilitude to Juletane's account, which is often confused by her madness. Hélène, for instance, identifies the journal's author as a patient in a psychiatric hospital, a patient without an immediate family (*J*, 43). More importantly, for Juletane's accounts of her own violence are unreliable, Hélène verifies the deaths of Awa's three children, recalling that she read about them in the local newspaper. Without her mediation, Juletane's story might never have been unearthed and, had it been, its historical context would have remained obscure and its verisimilitude in doubt. Hélène, in short, gives Juletane a voice. And in doing so, she not only provides a model to other women of the developing world; she becomes an agent of change, a maker of meaning, the author of her own sense of self.

²⁸ Following a national plebiscite, in 1946 Guadeloupeans gained full citizenship as a French *département*, but departmentalization, continued to threaten local history and cultural identity by bringing European economy and politics and French schooling, turning the Guadeloupean imagination toward France, and, conversely, toward Africa as "the mythic signifier", Brodzki, "Reading/Writing Women", 64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁰ Lulamea Fragd, "Reading Your Self Home: Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*", *CLA Journal*, 45 (2002), 490.

Because her interruptions ultimately clarify and reconstruct Juletane's story and because they transform what would otherwise be a typically western journey described in a diary – not unlike Columbus's log – into a typically non-western dialogue, Hélène's presence suggests alternative possibilities to Juletane's adoption of the western tropes which fail her. In Hall's narrative terms, the axes of Afro-Caribbean identity – continuity and fragmentation – are potentially bridged or transcended as the double's voice punctuates the diary with her interrogations of her own life. She enters into a dialogue with a woman whose powerlessness motivates her to reflect on her own "marginal existence", but Hélène recognizes "that her life was very empty" as she prepares to marry a man she does not love so that she can have a child, a child who, like Juletane's, would have given her life immediate "purpose" in Africa (*J*, 56-7). If Juletane fears she is becoming a "being without a soul", withdrawing from life and mortifying her flesh, then her counterpart sees in Juletane her own refection as she punishes herself with too much scotch, smokes until her throat is dry, and passively allows herself to be "swallowed up" and "carried away" by the diary she reads overnight (*J*, 57-8). But, unlike Juletane, who embraces self-mortification and passivity to the point of death, Hélène is prepared to change, to act, to refuse to marry Ousmane, a man who, like Mamadou, represents both the African utopia and a complete divorce from her Caribbean past. Hélène, a woman who has vaccinated herself against love and armed herself against pity, now weeps, "for the first time in almost twenty years" (*J*, 79). The dialogue, with its ability to hold unity and multiplicity at once, has brought her out of the numbness she formerly embraced, the numbness that Juletane welcomes. Through mourning, and perhaps more importantly through her identification with another woman of Guadeloupean descent, Hélène enjoys the potential to reconstruct her homeland's shattered past and the dystopic visions it has bequeathed to Juletane, and in the process, her own future.

Indeed, Hélène provides what Juletane cannot: a re-membrance of colonial and personal history and a reconstruction of their interrelation. Catholic school and the sugar cane are not the only reminders of the island's past, for Hélène later recalls her first fiancé's betrayal – his leaving her and marrying instead a white woman. If this relationship was once "a real vaccination, which protected her perfectly against falling in love" (*J*, 27), Juletane's diary, as Willey explains, has re-infected her with emotion and empathy (*J*, 463). "The more Hélène read the more she felt drawn towards this woman," who, at first, seems so unlike her (*J*, 27). But by the end of the diary, Hélène is unsure: "Was she right to be getting married? Ousmane, of course, was nothing like Mamadou and she was the exact opposite of Juletane, but still..." (*J*, 79). "But still" – the doubt is clear as Hélène wonders whether she, like Juletane, will recapitulate the history of

their homeland, whether she will remain an orphan, whether she will define herself solely through the African emphasis on motherhood, or whether she instead will embrace the past and refashion a colonial history and an African heritage into something uniquely Caribbean, something other than a linear journey and a life frozen in a diary, something other than the “radical subjectivity” of western prose, the voice that Mohanty and Minh-ha seek to describe.³¹

But still – at least for now – Hélène’s relationship with her homeland, though fuller than Juletane’s, remains scattered and painful. If Hélène is to find the voice of the Afro-Caribbean woman, she must reject words and values which tyrannize, fossilize and objectify and embrace a means of communication and a way of life which include, liberate and empower. For the moment, she admits that she “never took the time to dream or even to just think about the past” (*J*, 18). She lives in exile, and because she does, her relation with Guadeloupe remains problematic, not only because she seldom returns, but because the painful memories are complicated by the benefits she has reaped from the francophone education she received there. In fact, without a more concrete presence and a definitive meaning, her homeland continues to be the *terra nullius* Columbus encountered five-hundred years ago, and as long as it appears to be a geographical and historical *tabula rasa*, lacking *self*-determination, it will be ripe for possession, objectification or erasure. As testimony, the island’s relics, Juletane’s diary and even Hélène’s records, have been transported to Africa, where they depend, precariously, on interpreters to recover them. The novel’s concentric rings of truth-seeking – Juletane’s, Hélène’s and the reader’s – contain both a warning to those who think they can use the master’s tools to unearth the past and a forecast of the tools Hélène uses to liberate it.

³¹ Sara Suleri, “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition”, in Padmini Mongia, ed., *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), 339.

Ravaged Bodies, Ravaged World

More than ever before, the issue of violence has become a major challenge for social commentators and has raised questions regarding both its significance and applications.¹ While scholars have focused on its anthropological, phenomenological, historical/political, and symbolic aspects,² quite recently two important gender theorists and philosophers – both influenced by Hanna Arendt's pathbreaking meditations on the subject – have cogently probed into the ethical and political implications of the modern and contemporary manifestations of war and conflict. In *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*,³ Judith Butler provocatively wonders if it is possible to find a ground for community starting from the condition of vulnerability which is inherent in natality when, in being born, one is exposed to the *vulnus* which the other can inflict.⁴ In her view, this condition of being given over, this openness – either to 'the wound' or to sustenance – entails violence. Violence is "a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another".⁵

Butler further elucidates this notion by pointing out that the commonality of this primary condition is differentiated according to the various circumstances that mark human life:

In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability This violence, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited.... It would be difficult to understand how humans suffer from oppression without seeing how this primary condition is exploited and exploitable, thwarted and denied.⁶

In *Orrorismo. Ovvero della violenza sull'inerme*,⁷ the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero explicitly refers to Butler's *Precarious Life* and expands on its suggestions. She argues that not only is vulnerability inherent in natality, but that at birth there is a conflation of vulnerability and helplessness. She agrees with Butler that in the course of one's life the tension between the wound and sustenance entails violence. However, she further specifies that while violence is always contingent, helplessness is no longer a condition but depends on one's circumstances. Cavarero defines contemporary horrorism – which she discusses after tracing its etymological, mythical, and historical models – as the act of offending

¹ Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, *Violence: Theory and Ethnography* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 1-14.

² Ingo W. Schröder and Bettina E. Schmidt, "Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices", in Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schröder, eds., *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 1-24.

³ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004).

⁴ In this case, Butler is elaborating upon Hanna Arendt's thought, specifically her philosophical and political exploration of natality as the time and place of the appearance of a unique, embodied and relational singularity.

⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 29.

⁶ Ibid., 29-31.

⁷ Adriana Cavarero, *Orrorismo. Ovvero della violenza sull'inerme* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2004).

those who are vulnerable insofar as the latter are incidentally helpless and, as such, become the exemplary victims of an indiscriminate, global violence.

The concurrence of violence, vulnerability, helplessness, and power – as analyzed by these two thinkers – is more specifically sounded and creatively contested in the recent works of Andrea Levy and Dionne Brand, two contemporary diasporic women writers, both of Caribbean origin. As we will see, Levy and Brand – who deal with different spatial and temporal scenarios – transcend the scope and legacy of violence in the Caribbean. In doing so, they expose the extra-territorial entanglements and disruptions which have marked old and new empires and question their claims to legitimacy as well as their claim to forge a (new) world order. As a whole, then, the voices of these women – no matter how varied the range of their disciplinary concerns and their different cultural/personal backgrounds – significantly interact, casting a disquieting light on the nature and use of violence, on its alarming capacity of reproduction and metamorphosis and its ability and will to decide life and death. Indeed, in the case of ‘traditional’ warfare this form of power has proved to be the ultimate, spectacular expression of sovereignty.⁸ But today, as a result of globalization and global terrorism, its implications, ramifications, and collateral effects have become not only more and more pervasive, but also more and more complex and hard to extricate. Therefore, it is the continuities and transformations of violent imaginaries, strategies and practices, the impact of their short-term effects and long-term legacies, of their tangible destructiveness and the interstitial, shifting modalities of their location that Butler, Cavarero, Levy, and Brand demand that we confront and, even more importantly, historicize the various contexts in which they manifest themselves.

Pitiable whimpering, speechless horror

The plot of *Small Island*,⁹ a novel written by Andrea Levy, a black British author born to Jamaican parents who emigrated to London after World War II, pivots around that watershed event in the history of England. The ‘now’ of the story occurs in 1948, but several sections of the book deal with previous events. In one of these sections racist and bigot Bernard Bligh, a British citizen who had enrolled as a volunteer to defend his country and the world from the Nazis, is sent to India as an aircraft hand (or, in his comrades’ jargon, “erk”). Being a member of the ground crew, he does not have the chance to engage actively in the fight; but when the war ends his squadron, instead of being sent back home, is sent to Calcutta where a riot between Hindus and Muslims is taking place. Although Levy is not explicit about it, the riot in question clearly refers to what has been

⁸ Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, “Introduction”, in T. B. Hansen and F. Stepputat, eds., *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1.

⁹ Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2004). Hereafter references in the text as *SI*.

called “the great Calcutta killing” or “the great Calcutta blood bath”, which occurred in August 1946 and was unprecedented – in the history of communal violence and secessionist politics in South Asia – in terms of the sheer number of lives lost and the savagery with which thousands were killed in the course of five days.¹⁰ Evidently, the scene Bernard and his ‘chaps’ have to face is appalling: burnt shops, flurries of ash, deserted streets, and the corpses of the dead scattered down every road they travel. Bernard’s mates agree that “this was as savage as anything witnessed during the war” (*SI*, 369). Here, of course, the reluctant witnesses of this racial strife, as Bernard intimates, do not feel responsible for what they consider ‘internal’ rioting between Hindus and Muslims. As Bernard notes: “I’ve no idea what started it. But nothing to do with us, we all silently agreed. The natives rioting. Bloody coolies at each other’s throats for something. Hindu against Muslim. Muslim against Hindu. Everything soon became clear. The truckloads of cheerless RAF erks were there to keep them apart” (*SI*, 369).

The ‘erks’ came to India to fight against the Japanese, or the Japs, the “slit-eyed bastards” (*SI*, 349) – as they are called – who represent the external and easily identifiable enemy, the *hostis*. It is against the Japanese, moreover, that an internationally sanctioned war, framed by legitimate or legitimized rules of behavior and resulting from a process of escalation, was being waged. In this case, however, even if their task is quite ‘clear’, the conflict that the perplexed erks are facing is hard to decipher. In effect, the reasons for these mass killings are opaque (“bloody coolies at each other’s throats for something”), and the British do not appear to be implicated.¹¹ Besides, as Bernard remarks, “How those coolies recognized one another as an enemy was a mystery to all. After two years in India, they all looked the same to me” (*SI*, 371).

Levy has Bernard not only be a witness to the riot but she also has him retrospectively narrate those events in first person. In doing so, she wants to highlight the impact of the chaotic strangeness (strangeness?) of the shrinking empire on a scrupulous representative of Englishness, one who is imbued with contempt for the ‘inferior’ races, “proud to represent decency” (*SI*, 379) and Western civilization. “Had a job to do. Just quietly get on with it. Considered myself a civilizing influence” (*SI*, 376). Moreover, by deploying Bernard’s perspective and way of speaking, the author irreverently and ironically shows that ‘Britishness’ and ‘Englishness’ have never really coincided, that the empire was what it was within the boundaries of Britishness and outside the territory of Englishness, and that the ethnically or religiously indistinguishable natives might well be English subjects but they were indeed totally “other”.¹² In short, these others are ambiguously or symbolically close to that internal enemy (the *inimicus* of classical tradition) that might be exterminated, repressed, or

¹⁰ Durajan Das and others have emphasized the extent of preplanning and the direct and indirect involvement of politicians in fomenting the so-called Partitions Riots. See Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2003), 417 note 35.

¹¹ The debate on the causes of communalism is quite controversial, but according to the so-called Cambridge School, in particular, the role of the colonial regime was crucial in its rise, introducing a new class relation to land in Bengal while dispossessing the older classes.

¹² Ian Baucom, *Out of Place. Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6-10.

deprived of full recognition and representation. Later on, in fact, when Bernard understands that “these blood-thirsty little men” who are “butchering” each other are actually “fighting for who should have power when a new independent India comes”, he just smiles at the idea of “that ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country. The British out of India? Only British troops could keep those coolies under control” (*SI*, 375).

As the ‘savage’ scene mentioned above unfolds, it becomes more and more gruesome. Dogs are attracted to the bloody clothing of the dead, flocks of vultures feed off their bodies, and an unbearable stench fills the air around them. Death has suddenly and variously deprived those once living bodies of their singular humanity and their ontological dignity:¹³ “Some might have been taken for bundles of rags – or discarded rubbish. Others were unmistakable. Caught in a silly pose. An arm up, a leg raised. Most carried a look of astonishment. Mouths agape. But all stiff with sudden death” (*SI*, 369).

¹³ Cavarero, *Orrorismo*, 15.

Even more trenchantly, the depersonalizing and dehumanizing effects of violence are broached again a little later, when we find that one of these bodies prevents a truck filled with British military personnel from proceeding. The NCO (non commissioned officer) orders two men to pick it up, but they refuse to do so. “There’s hundreds of bodies – why are we picking up this one?” one of them asks; and to further prove his point, he insists, “What is special about this one ... Sergeant?” (*SI*, 370). When the sergeant finally points to Bernard, he promptly obeys, given his strict sense of discipline. Here is Bernard’s reaction:

The body was warm The throat was slit. Neck open in a scabby second grin. Stiff as an ironing-board. Stench thick enough to chew. The truck had cracked its arm into zigzagging pieces. An ear was dangling. Came off in my hand. I held it in my palm. Flimsy as a flap of leather from a shoe. ‘Just chuck it, Pop’, Maxi shouted.
I turned away from the truck. Had to vomit. (*SI*, 371-2)

Here the tangible signs of the injury inflicted on the victims (who, however, cannot be distinguished from the perpetrators) exceed the fact of death itself and definitely prove that the practice of violence “does not depend on specialized equipment, but only on the use of the body to harm others”.¹⁴ Furthermore, the violation which the truck adds to that specific body brutally produces a level of horror which Cavarero traces back to the paradigmatic figure of Medusa: a level which is reached through dismemberment and defacing. The face, in fact, constitutes our most individualizing feature (*SI*, 14-17). In spite of Maxi’s blunt suggestion, it comes as no surprise that Bernard cannot ‘face’ such a revolting offence if not to the ‘specialness’ of a fellow human being then at least to its corporeal

¹⁴ Stewart and Strathern, *Violence*, 8.

unity. What's more, and Levy proves really implacable in her understated critique, a sudden order interrupts the attempt to lift the mangled corpse, which, after being inadvertently singled out in its individual disfigurement, is therefore returned to the undifferentiated and discarded human rubbish to which it originally belonged.

The reason for this turnabout is that a "horde of men" are coming for the poorly equipped British crew: "All brandished something – a fist, a stick, the blink of a blade Hundreds of scruffy black-eyed coolies – may be thousands" (*SI*, 372). Luckily, a police truck intervenes and disperses them:

The rabble scattered like rodents, scurrying off down side-streets Chased by the ping of real gunfire. One dropped over here, another couple over there, tripping, grabbing at a wound, while some of the fallen were hurriedly pulled away. Chaps cheered, watching them go down. Slapping to the ground like a duck shoot at a fair.

"Wait a minute. Were they Hindu or Muslim?" one joker asked.

Breathing relief, quite a few yelled back, "Who the bloody hell cares?". (*SI*, 373-4)

The crew's cheerful relief at the sight of this massacre seems to have a logic of its own. Made one by their vulnerability and their random exposure to a form of violence which could indifferently be inflicted on any one of them, those dropping bodies have become sheer targets divested of their previous, avowed affiliations, their identifying specialness. At the same time, the felling of individual members of the crowd disintegrates the menacing compactness of this ferocious and depersonalized entity – the hordes, the rabble – which the British squadron had previously feared. In one way or another, the injury which made them fall one by one like ducks at a fair is also – as Elaine Scarry would say – "disowned", "relocated to a place ... where it is no longer recognizable or interpretable".¹⁵

No doubt, Levy's presentation of the 'savage' outcome of the Calcutta riot expresses her urge to expose its ontological and brutal affront to the dignity of being human. However, she sets this affront in the entangled context of Indian communal strife and colonial policy, and, in doing so, she queries the material and discursive violence through which integral identities are contingently both constructed as an exclusive, preeminent factor of self-definition and deconstructed. She also questions the legitimacy and instrumentality of an intricate and imperial staging of power and cultural representation which enacts – as Clausewitz put it with regard to war – the continuation of politics by other means. Furthermore, she highlights how, in deadly forms of conflict, the issue of violence turns on the question of whose perception of order and vulnerability is at stake, as well as on the contingent and shifting relationality of performers, victims and witnesses.¹⁶

¹⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 64, 71.

¹⁶ Stewart and Strathern, *Violence*, 3.

This last aspect is further explored in another episode of the novel, when Levy's proud representative of England's "civilizing influence" happens to be the very perpetrator of a form of violence which poignantly tests his sense of decency and honor. In this instance, the wide-angled colonial Indian scenario is scaled down to a personal, intimate level, and proves as never before to constitute that locus of the "occult instability" of Englishness – that lingering zone of imperial confusion – which Ian Baucom has so cogently investigated in his book *Out of Place*.¹⁷ Prompted by a comrade's sneering comments, Bernard ends up in a brothel where he brutally sodomizes a prostitute. Only after the fact does he realize that she is "nothing but a girl ... Fourteen or even twelve" (*SI*, 413). Devastated by the discovery of his act of "defiling someone's daughter", he recognizes that "the fear in her black eyes – harmless as a baby's – was denouncing me as depraved. What was I doing? This war hadn't made me a hero" (*SI*, 414). He asks her for forgiveness and to corroborate his trustworthiness, he confesses that he is a married man, "An Englishman... me Englishman...". In concomitance with this (not so) odd appeal (or desire to cling) to his national identity as a self-absolving form of defense, "a sob fierce as a child's" erupts from his body after "a long, breathless pause", and transforms itself into "an anguished howl", leaving him gasping for more breath, "which came in short bursts of pitiable whimpering". The girl is moved to compassion by this certainly unexpected manifestation of vulnerability and shame and she wipes a tear from his face with a tenderness that "stings" (*SI*, 414). This seemingly intimate, epiphanic moment of pity, pardon, and reconciliation, is brought about by the participants' reciprocal recognition of a common humanity; but it is abruptly interrupted when, unaware of the implications of what she is saying, the girl compassionately addresses Bernard with what was probably the name of her previous client, Johnny. This name (or act of naming) unfortunately turns into an offense that immediately reestablishes their alterity because it reminds Bernard of the nickname used by the 'Japs' to provoke the British.

The victim's unintended linguistic injury, then, stings more than her tenderness: "Nothing for it. I just threw the money at the wretched whore, then left" (*SI*, 415). Associated with the *hostis*, the harmless baby is inherently exposable and exposed to her brutalizer's wound. In her turn, she is linguistically interpellated, but only to be conceptually relocated into a disparagingly discriminatory category ("wretched whore") which allows the violator to shrug off his shame and sense of responsibility for her ontological integrity. What Cavarero would call the warrior's perspective bluntly reshuffles and blurs the borders between linguistic and physical injury,¹⁸ external and internal enemy, legitimate and illegitimate acts, rational and irrational behavior, pity and self-pity, violation and self-defense. And yet, a 'stinging' sense of shame will continue to haunt Bernard the warrior's

¹⁷ Baucom, *Out of Place*, 4.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 4.

amour propre even when he has returned to England, where, afraid of having contracted syphilis, he decides not to go home until a doctor, two years later, reassures him that indeed he is okay. Only now, then, can Bernard be fully released from the memory of what has conveniently become a “silly error” – “that little madness in India” (*SI*, 427) – and have his life back.

Bernard’s military experience of war has been displaced overseas, in the unknown and disquietingly foreign reaches of Britishness. To this Levy counterpoises his wife’s encounter with its effects on the civilians in London – the familiar but now imperiled imperial city. Here the violence of warfare as “a reciprocal injuring where the goal is to out-injure the opponent”¹⁹ is transposed from the field of battle to an urban stage which bleakly reveals the enemy’s purpose not only “to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue”, but also “to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves”.²⁰ London, as a matter of fact, has turned into an “upside-down world” where it is no longer possible to find one’s bearings: “Roads that should have been familiar turned to wastelands strewn with mountains of wreckage, the displaced intestines of buildings spewing everywhere One morning, looking up a road near home, I recognized nothing, I was a foreigner to this newly modeled place” (*SI*, 281). The ‘model’ which hauntingly reconfigures the landscape of the metropolis is, of course, that of total war, a category implemented during World War I and then fully realized during World War II, which marked the unstoppable march of “rationalized slaughter”.²¹ But there is another, fundamental aspect of this model that Levy wants to highlight. As a consequence of its implementation, Cavarero explains, the civilians were considered combatants. With this asymmetrical strategy of attack, the unarmed and harmless became the modern victims of legitimate, ‘organized’ interstate violence.²²

Queenie, whose fancy name suggests the appeal the Empire exerted on her mother, works at a rest center which takes care of the “bombed-out who’d had the cheek to live through the calamity of a world blown to bits” (*SI*, 278). As she recounts years later, these people who came in “as a crowd like you’d wade through on the Underground or elbow during a department-store sale”, were called “population”, so that the semantic permutation enforced by the depersonalizing language of bureaucracy deletes the incontestable singularity of their “body in pain”:²³ “Not mothers called Mavis who, stunned speechless, clutched two small children Not a ten-year-old son called Ralph, trousers soggy with wee Not a husband called Sid, whose bloodstained arms held each one of his family in turn Not a young woman called Christine Just population” (*SI*, 278-279). Queenie’s task is “to find out who they had once been and where they had once lived straining to hear those weary fragile voices”

¹⁹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

²¹ See Daniel Pick, *War Machine. The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

²² Cavarero, *Horrorismo*, 84-87.

²³ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 62.

(*SI*, 279). Their bereavement is the collateral effect of a so-called just war, waged to save Europe from the Nazis. As she points out, “I would never forgive Hitler for turning human beings into that” (*SI*, 279). Indeed, stripped of their possessions, their bearings and their dignity, the people who apply to the rest center for assistance tragically confirm that bombings destroy not only “objects, gestures, and thoughts that are culturally stipulated but objects, gestures, thoughts that are human”.²⁴

²⁴ Ibid., 61.

And yet, the human beings reduced to Queenie’s “that” are still alive. Her personal encounter with violence and death occurs, instead, when she is the accidental victim of a doodlebug (a flying bomb) aimed at the defenseless and unarmed civilian population. No doubt, the effects of the rationalized slaughter implemented by the modern, technologically advanced war machine on people’s bodies prove more devastating than those provoked by the rudimentary weapons employed in the course of the Calcutta riot. Here Levy offers an even cruder description of this transformative shift. When Queenie, who has survived the explosion, is taken to the ambulance, she steps into “the upturned palm of a hand wearing a gold ring, clothed in a blue woollen sleeve, but lying there attached to no one”. Her foot, she recalls, “was being cradled by a severed arm that merely ended in a bloodsoaked fraying” (*SI*, 306-7). The retrospective narration of the episode closes on this appalling image of human dismemberment which, once again, grounds modern horror in its mythological models. Before reaching this point, however, the author has staged a less gruesome but nonetheless trenchant representation of the violence of war, which is worth considering.

Suddenly caught by the explosion, Quennie feels lifted off the ground and at the same time starts registering the slow, almost oneiric motion of the dumb show in which she is participating: “I wasn’t the only one flying. Over there a woman, a bundle of rags, was rolling over – a cardigan, a skirt, twisting and flapping A silent ballet so beautiful my eyes were sucked from their sockets with the sight” (*SI*, 303-4). After ‘landing’ and evidently losing consciousness, she wakes up wondering if she is dead. She is, in effect, unable to move, with one of her shoes gone, her coat ripped, her skirt up round her waist, “knickers on view for anyone who wanted a look” (*SI*, 304). And she is so enthralled by the enticing spectacle which is taking place around her that she mentally scales down the *violentia* (in its etymological sense of violation)²⁵ that has been perpetrated – as Scarry reminds us – on people’s bodies, objects and space. She follows the movement of “[a] doll falling slowly from the sky towards a tree: a branch stripped of all its leaves caught the doll in its black spikes”. She notices that “[a] house had had its front sliced off as sure as if it had been opened on a hinge. A doll’s house with all the rooms on show ...” (*SI*, 304).

²⁵ As explained by Glenn Bowman, “The Violence in Identity”, in Schmidt and Schröder, *Anthropology*, 26.

Indeed, the miniaturized gutted house, with all its rooms exposed to view (like Queenie's body), discloses the intimacy and coziness of a lived space; an intimacy that, as the following scene demonstrates, has been abruptly broken into and has consequently become disturbingly uncanny: "And in a bathroom – standing by the side of a bath, caught by the curtain going up too soon on a performance – a totally naked woman" (SI, 304). This scene of violence, which has just occurred, freezes the victim in a "silly poise" and at the same time seems to convey the suggestion that – in the warrior's perspective – men and women are reduced to naked life and, as such, are exempted from a consideration of inalienable rights. The other passers-by, however, are horrified – rather than stunned – by what is happening. What they perceive is not the uncanny, suspended temporality of the performance but the ineluctable and feral factuality of the injury which has been inflicted; so that the doll, "now dangling limp and filthy in a little pink hat", comes to embody not the spectacle but the unnerving spectrality of death.

This sight provokes the unvoiced, "noiseless scream" of a woman. Indeed, as Hanna Arendt has powerfully contended, speechless horror at what humans are capable of, not beauty or pleasure, marks the contemporary experience of wonder.²⁶ Now Queenie herself wakes up from her stupor and realizes that she too has become "population", that is to say, "one of the bombed" (SI, 305). In other words, she becomes, as it were, present to herself at the very moment in which she becomes present to the other,²⁷ and by recognizing her communality – and her distance – with the other victims, she inwardly assumes her responsibility as witness, as conscious observer rather than enchanted onlooker. From this newly acquired wakefulness,²⁸ she tries mentally to reconstruct what the "bleak landscape" of wreckage in front of her had looked like before the bombing, and she wonders where the people who had lived in those streets, involved in their everyday life, had gone (SI, 305).

That ravaged world is here

By focusing on World War II Levy's novel unmasks the variable forms of affront and destructiveness which marked a world 'blown to bits' but still governed by an interstate model of warfare. On the other hand, Dionne Brand's long poem *Inventory*²⁹ addresses more contemporary and elusive manifestations of conflict and violence – terrorism and environmental devastation included – linked to the contradictory aspects, both unifying and fragmentary, of globalization. Here the task of seeing and witnessing (which Levy delegated to one of her fictional characters) is associated – as Brand's title clearly suggests – to the responsibility of taking stock of the present. In addition, this task is directly assumed by the poet herself, who

²⁶ Peg Birmingham, *Hanna Arendt and Human Rights* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 105.

²⁷ The notion of presence to oneself and to the other as fundamental to witnessing is developed by Jacques Derrida in his *Poétique et politique du témoignage* (Paris: Editions de L'Herne, 2005). It implies, however, the presence of an addressee, which in this case is missing.

²⁸ Veena Daas, "Violence and the Work of Time", in Anthony P. Cohen, ed., *Signifying Identities. Anthropological Perspectives on Boundaries and Contested Values* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 59-73.

²⁹ Dionne Brand, *Inventory* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006). Hereafter cited in text as *I*.

sets out to produce an inventory in the Gramscian sense of “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process.³⁰ And history, as perceived and portrayed in Brand’s polyhedric writing (poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction) is inevitably marked by violence. No wonder, then, that in the light of the contemporary “incendiary circumstances”, as Amitav Gosh has defined them,³¹ she now defies, more straightforwardly and scathingly than Levy, the notion of modernity itself and its civilizational assumptions, denouncing western mythologies and alibis and the entanglement of old and new empires which form and deform the present ‘world order’.

Inventory starts with a critique directly addressed to the United States and carried on in the form of a collective accounting (the subject is ‘we’) which contests the way in which they ideologically and culturally seduce all those (“we poor, we weak, we dying”, *I*, 5) who supinely accept their construction of history and “the science fiction tales of democracy” (*I*, 8). The poem also denounces the fact that western democracy has been seriously imperiled by centuries of slavery, the detention policies at Guantanamo, and the reactivation of “palimpsests of old borders” in American airports, where “blenching queues” are forced “to be all the same, to mince biographies / to some exact phrases, some / exact and toxic genealogy” (*I*, 17). Further on, it condemns the contradictory interdependencies of a world where “wealth multiplies in the garbage dumps” (*I*, 40); where the ‘rabble’ whom Levy’s Bernard had to face in the British imperial margins are now perceived by the West as ‘hordes’ haunting the centre itself; where indifferent hedonisms and empty electronic messages replace the will to connect and/or partake in the public sphere; where various forms of “sick tribalism” (*I*, 71) and fundamentalisms (“the discredited physics of Christianity and Islam”, *I*, 70) menace the autonomy of human beings or substitute the “theory of nothing” (*I*, 48) for the revolutionary impulse.

In the present scenario, terror itself has become an exchange of goods involving consumption and even profit (“a new industry for the stock exchange”, *I*, 44), while nature and its resources are in peril and reduced to a battlefield. Most importantly, the multiple forms of violence and death which are being enacted daily have now been normalized, “neutralized” by the media which insert them in a closed system of recognition that blurs the boundaries between image and reality. Or alternatively, they are substituted by paranoid alerts announcing “imagined disturbances” which reveal the peculiar fragility of power (*I*, 25).

This is in effect a scenery of planetary devastation and, actually, of the world’s absence – in the Arendtian sense of that space which arises among persons, and where everything which individuals carry with them becomes visible and audible.³² History and its traces loom as everybody’s burden because the globe is haunted by the ghost of the past as well as a spatially

³⁰ See Diana Brydon, “Dionne Brand’s Global Intimacies”, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 76.3 (Summer 2007), 994.

³¹ See Amitav Gosh, *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

³² Hannah Arendt, *L’umanità in tempi bui*, intr. and trans. by Laura Boella (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2006), 54.

overabundant present. Thus Brand's inventory of the contemporary condition becomes the structural, rhetorical, and hermeneutic means through which she not only deconstructs the myth of the triumphant progress of modernization but also identifies the subjectivity of violence as a category of action. And in doing so, she radically exposes the ambiguities of the present debate on war and terrorism. Indeed, she suggests that traditional categories such as war, terrorism, enemy, and, we might add, innocence, are no longer tenable. In its planetary aggressiveness, terrorism makes an exemplary victim of the casual, helpless human being whom Cavarero and Butler also evoke; pre-emptive, legitimized warfare kills civilians 'by mistake'.

In the past, Brand has shown a strong concern with colonial, neo-colonial and patriarchal structures in the Caribbean and the Third World at large. She has also embraced Maurice Bishop's New Jewel Movement in Grenada. Subsequently, she has grieved over the wounds of its failure. Mourning and grief for the death of her political creed, for battles lost and the extinguished "blood-red flame of a revolution",³³ now turn into mourning and grief for the many victims of the decentralized and deterritorialized manifestations of contemporary warfare; they also turn into rage against the perpetrators of a global destructiveness which manifests itself as a historically situated practice, never completely idiosyncratic or dissociated from instrumental rationality.³⁴

Brand's poetic persona ambiguously declares its own and our complicity and pushes to its limits this perspective of never-ending devastation and resigned compliance: "let us forget all that, let us not act surprised, / or make coy distinctions among mass / murderers, why ration nuclear weapons, / let us all celebrate death" (*I*, 35). Death is truly the foundation or the unavoidable collateral effect of contemporary politics, to the extent that political accountability and responsibility are foreclosed: "they declare themselves innocent of all events / those that have happened and those to come, / everything / they examine the evidence against themselves / and suggest the victims cunning / they found themselves good, / down to the last general and secretary / of state" (*I*, 73).

In addition, 'they' blatantly display the tendency to contemplate as inevitable the existence of wasted, superfluous bodies³⁵ that represent the economic casualties of what Stuart Hall has trenchantly defined "a global market which we call 'modernity'".³⁶ Hence, as a consequence of the unequal integration of the world-system, vulnerability – as Butler also contends – is allocated differently across the globe (31):

there's laughter on some street in the world, and a baby,
crying same as any street, anywhere, and some say
the world is not the same, but it is you know

³³ See Dionne Brand, *Land to Light on* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997), 6.

³⁴ Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction", 2.

³⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives. Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004).

³⁶ Stuart Hall, "Closing Remarks", in "Reinventing Britain: A Forum", *Wasafiri*, 29 (Spring 1999), 43.

now, same as anywhere, still, a baby crying here
may not be about hunger, not that kind of hunger

eating years into the cheeks, making puffed bellows
of the abdomen, ah why invoke that, we know about it

we don't care beyond pity, so the thing is straight and simple,
the suburbs, the outskirts are inevitable. (*I*, 47)

In order to expose and contest this bleak scenario of self-righteous, self-absolving reasoning and perduring – albeit reconfigured – imperial geographies, Brand's poetic persona resorts to several discursive and rhetorical strategies. On a conceptual level, her persona presents a series of permutations of the notion of "another life"³⁷ which is repeatedly evoked, as a wish or a hope, either in relation to ancient, shattered genealogies or to another dimension of time, space, and history. This is, indeed, wish-fulfillment, which is repeatedly countered by the awareness that things have gone too far, that it is 'too late' for envisioning another way of being in the world.

More significantly, in the course of the poem the narrating 'I' rhetorically displaces itself to various locations that erode the deictic determinations of place; it fragments and disarticulates itself in multiple pronominal subjects, identifies and disidentifies itself, voices and keeps itself at a distance, mimics the speech of the powerful, and also ambiguously camouflages itself as one of the weak. This continual shifting not only compromises the very accountability of the 'I', as we have already seen, but by blurring or making slippery the boundaries between 'I', 'she', 'you', 'we', and 'they', Brand's persona seems to propose de-personalization as a way to reach all those lives that are wasted – by different practices of violence – in different parts of the world. Indeed, such is the urge to reach outwards that the 'I' goes as far as to posit – while denying its feasibility – the disintegration of that 'we' that had inaugurated the poem: "'we', / there is no 'we' / let us separate ourselves now, / though perhaps we can't, still and again / too late for that, / nothing but to continue" (*I*, 42). By admitting and at the same time refusing to reduce itself to a generalized will in order to "damage" and "mean each other / harm" (*I*, 42), it opens up to a form of relationality, as Butler would say, in which the others "haunt the way I am, as it were periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded".³⁸

Hence, in one section devoted to the women of the world, the third person subject affirms that "she'll gather the passions of women" (*I*, 30), and then commits herself to the task of storing "the nerves' endings in glass / ... for divine fierce years to come / when the planet is ruined" (*I*, 31), while the listing of small everyday acts, the banal needs of the quotidian, brings forth those "triumphant details" (*I*, 28) which escape the brutal

³⁷ Which might remind us of Derek Walcott's *Another Life*, a collection of poems published in 1973. In more than one occasion, Brand has 'written back' to Walcott.

³⁸ Butler, *Prekarious Life*, 28.

³⁹ Vigdis Broch-Due, "Violence and Belonging. Analytical Reflections", in V. Broch-Due, ed., *Violence and Belonging. The Quest for Identity in Post-colonial Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.

⁴⁰ Cavarero, *Orrorismo*, 104.

⁴¹ Marina Garcés, "The Inquiry after a Shared World", in Valentin Roma, ed., *The Unavowable Community* (Barcelona: Institut Ramon Llull and Actar, 2009), 141.

⁴² See Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 36.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁴ Garcés, "The Inquiry", 149. The author is here referring to Merleau-Ponty's definition of anonymity. She also explains that in his view anonymity stands for a "truth-to-be-made" (148), and an "awakening in the bonds" (150) that one can only attain with others.

leveling of violence and the serial nature of macrohistory. And yet the space and time of the quotidian *is* invaded by violence, which "infiltrates not just public, political arenas but the most intimate spaces of the personal also"³⁹ and becomes the everyday's 'normal' order.⁴⁰ In another section 'she' imagines she is writing a letter to an unknown addressee, as "an account of her silence / its destination all the streets / beginning with Al Kifah, Al Rashid / ... Mansur" (*I*, 34); and while thus evoking places and people connected to Al Qaeda, she directly addresses this 'you', wondering "What door are you looking through now / ... what sound does the world make there", with a final (and provocative) invitation to join her: "know that I am your spy here, your terrorist / find me" (*I*, 37). The 'you', then, comes before the 'we', when "everything is touched" (*I*, 41) and that 'we' has been emptied of its original emancipatory power.⁴¹ No account of oneself, no knowing thyself, can take place outside of this ethical structure of address.⁴²

Ultimately, in embracing and letting itself be embraced by such a boundless, relational ethics (perhaps a new form of politics) of accountability and caring ("there are atomic openings in my chest / to hold the wounded", *I*, 100), the self translates its grief into an inventory of the dead. An inventory which is in part drawn from the Iraq Body Count project, in part provided by the poet's personal recording of the number of bodies (children, men, women) that succumb every day under the bombs of democracy and terror. The hammering mass-media accounts of the victims interfere with the 'I's everyday life, intersect the time and space of love and friendship, and pursue it as it travels to various parts of the world. At the same time, having been appropriated as a conscious, relentless task of counting, recounting and adding up, and as a testimony of wakefulness to the perpetration of violence ("this vigil for broken things", *I*, 42), these accounts turn into an obituary meant to make grievable those lives that would otherwise be unmarked because unmarkable or unqualified for recognition, as Butler suggests.⁴³

Consequently, they foreground how the abstract concreteness of the numbers, with their "seduction of infinity" (*I*, 26), replaces the violent erasure both of those unqualified lives and the "givenness" – in Arendt's words – of those bodies and their historical immanence. Thus, while underlining the process of disintegration to which these embodied singularities have been (and are being) submitted, Brand's persona also reflects on the obliteration of their social significance ("consider then the sudden lack of, say, cosmeticians / or mechanics" *I*, 78) and their identifying marks ("tenacious too the absence and impossibility of names" *ibid.*). She proposes, then, voluntary de-nominalization ("let us all deny our useless names in solidarity" *ibid.*) as a way of putting the 'I' into the plural,⁴⁴ or, rather, a way of revitalizing the space of that 'we' which has

been either seduced by identitarian communitarianism or invaded and reshuffled by someone else's history and myths.⁴⁵

In the last analysis, the red thread which links the theoretical and creative explorations of Cavarero, Butler, Levy and Brand is their intellectual and emotional testing and rearticulation of the Arendtian notion of "dark times". Like her, they question the extent to which humanity, human rights, and agency can be preserved in the midst of violent practices. Like her, they ponder the way in which these practices can provide a base for a being-with that is able to transcend both the defensive and offensive boundaries of the 'we'. In Cavarero's view, it is only by adopting the perspective of the helpless, rather than that of the warrior, that we can possibly cope with contemporary horrorism. According to Butler, the question is whether, given the present scenarios of violence, grief and mourning can be made into a resource for politics. By grief and mourning Butler means the slow process by which we apprehend a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who "I" am⁴⁶ and develop a point of identification with suffering itself.⁴⁷ In her latest book *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?*⁴⁸ she further elaborates her reflections on the notions of grievability, vulnerability, affective responsiveness, and precariousness specifically in relation to the violence unleashed in the war against Iraq, in the Abu Ghraib prison and Guantanamo. She argues that moral theory must indeed become social critique and calls for a rethinking of global responsibility and progressive politics with a renewed focus on the social ontology of the body. She then goes on to distinguish the "more or less existential conception of 'precariousness'" from "a more specifically political notion of 'precarity'"⁴⁹ and pointedly stigmatizes the nation-state and its strategic deployment of exclusionary representational regimes or "frames" as essential to the conduct of war.

In Levy's and Brand's case, these critical issues are historicized and investigated in light of a postcolonial concern with deconstructing past and present imperial assumptions. In Levy, Bernard thinks that "Britain required a new backbone. Men to reconstruct the ravaged land back into something worthy of the British Empire" (*SI*, 365). This view is soon impaired when he has to confront what he perceives as his own displacement in a post-war, desolate England which has taken in as 'guests' the 'colored' British citizens of the Caribbean. Indeed, it is by constantly playing on the ambiguities of hospitality and by alternating the experiences and the voices of Bernard and Queenie with those of their two Caribbean tenants, Gilbert and Hortense, that Levy is able to disseminate throughout her text an ironically incisive critique of "radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty", showcasing how they are "disrupted by the larger global processes of which they are a part".⁵⁰ More than that, the unexpected final twist of the plot which brings Queenie, the white, English

⁴⁵ As the poetic persona maintains with regard to the United States: "so hard now to separate what was them / from what we were / how imprisoned we are in their ghosts", *Inventory*, 8-9.

⁴⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁸ See Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), especially the introduction and chapter one.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii-xiii.

⁵¹ See, for example, how the listing of the victims is at a certain point momentarily suspended by a disquieting alliteration which seems to originate from an intrinsic ‘budding’ quality of the consonants: “... child on bicycle by bomb / in Baquba / why does that alliterate on its own, why / does she observe the budding of that consonant” (38).

⁵² Thus: “then she may stop this vigil for broken things” (42); “at least someone should stay awake, she thinks” (26); “she has to keep watch at the window / of the television” (28).

host, to entrust her bastard, half-breed new-born baby to her Afro-Jamaican guests, dramatizes both the (racial) vulnerability of natality and the potential gift of interracial friendship.

Brand’s *Inventory* destabilizes both the discourse of the world and that of nature and problematizes the poetic word itself.⁵¹ In addition, her relentless counting, recounting, and adding up of the (casual and not so casual) victims of a contemporary violence which ‘makes’ and ‘unmakes’ the world scathingly dissects the new geography of centrality and marginality of our global modernity. Brand’s persona reminds the reader that “nothing personal is recorded here, / you must know that” (*I*, 22). And yet ‘here’ and ‘there’ overlap in her vigilant, wakeful, and watchful⁵² consciousness: “what sound does the world make there” (*I*, 34); “that ravaged world is here” (*I*, 47). It is precisely by being heard and translated to *here*, in this deeply felt, historically (up)rooted, and embodied space of radical proximity and implication (poetic, ethical, and political) that the “whole immaculate language of the ravaged world” (*I*, 11) ultimately condemns and defies the violence which is devastating the bodies Brand is mourning for.

'Eroto-histories' and counter-memories of violence in contemporary Caribbean women writers

Towards an eroto-historiography

In Dionne Brand's last novel, *What We All Long For*, a young Vietnamese woman living in Canada as an artist is intent on creating an ambitious installation which in the process of creation comes to embody a *lubaio*, a large structure in the significant shape of a female figure.¹ It is made up of different materials, a collection of the discarded remains that had lain dead on the beach like "tree stumps, twigs and rope, debris" (WWL, 14), and lumber and railway ties found on the streets of Toronto. On the whole structure there are figures, signposts, directions, charts. The statue's arms bear rolls of cloth and fragments of paper on which the city's longings and desires are written in different languages. Each longing hung on it tells an unarticulated story about "bodies hurt or torn apart or bludgeoned" (WWL, 158), bodies hovering between the present and the past, bodies waiting to live. The *lubaio* represents a sort of relic, a memento, a trace, and at the same time an 'exquisite corpse', that is, a surrealist work of art composed of unpredictable images and words logically interrelated, governed by irrational principles. In other words, the *lubaio* represents repressed stories, memories of loss and pain, but it also shows a passage towards alternative and unforeseen realities, towards unexplored routes and directions.

The creative texts of Caribbean women writers like Michelle Cliff, Dionne Brand, Shani Mootoo and Patricia Powell investigate on the one hand the idea of the recovery of the trace, the witness of the unsaid, an anti-normative genealogy, and on the other they explore the possibility of desire, of moving toward unpredictable places. The very etymology of the term desire – from Latin *de-sideris* – refers to the ability to read the constellations in order to draw a direction. These authors rewrite the historical experiences of abuse, loss, and violence through a highly erotic and drifting form of writing which traces the fluctuations of new psychic and critical constellations which destabilize the dominant topography of History and question institutionalized epistemologies. As some scholars have pointed out, "to think outside narrative history requires reworking linear temporality. It requires 'the rewiring of the senses'"² in order to apprehend multiple temporalities experienced as cyclical, interrupted, multilayered. Indeed, these Caribbean women writers share "a queer desire for history", a desire for a different kind of past. By proposing alternative space-time narrative

¹ Dionne Brand, *What We All Long For* (Toronto: Knopf, 2005). Hereafter references in the text as WWL.

² Carolyn Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities. A Roundtable Discussion", *GLQ* 13.2-3 (2007), 177-95, 185, 187; see also M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 308.

models opposed to the teleological ones of official historiography, their works seem to suggest a reflection on what Elizabeth Freeman has called an “erotohistoriography”: a space-time model based on the conception of a deeply embodied, discontinuous and unpredictable temporality produced by pleasurable relations between bodies which exceed the present and recover the past through skin memories – “the body’s recollection of pleasure”. “Against pain and loss”, as Freeman asserts, “erotohistoriography posits the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times”. Moreover, “we might imagine ourselves haunted by ecstasy and not just by loss; residues of positive affect (erotic scenes, utopias, memories of touch) might be available for queer counter-historiographies”, and “historicity itself might appear as a structure of tactile feeling, a mode of touch, even a sexual practice”.³

Freeman’s engagement in this new historiographical project is an attempt at countering those unqueer stances which have often cast eroticism and materialist history, pleasure and the dialectic, as theoretical foils.⁴ Actually, her thought is very much indebted to that of African American feminist author Audre Lorde (1934-1992) whose work has dealt with the importance of the power of the erotic within women’s cultural and political commitment. In her famous essay “Uses of the Erotic”, Lorde defines the erotic as an empowering creative force halfway between self-consciousness and the “the chaos” of the strongest feelings which proves to be a practical and intellectual tool allowing women to contest systems of oppression within the context of patriarchal and heterosexist models of power-knowledge:

The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.⁵

The claim to the use of the erotic in the spheres of language, bodies and history is central to the erotohistoriographical project which names a practice of tracing histories written on queer bodies, a need to understand “time as fully incorporated, as nowhere existing outside of bodies and their pleasures”.⁶ Time is also understood in terms of “binding” which invokes a sense of connectivity, a mode of travel across time and space. As Freeman points out: “‘Binds’ also suggests the bonds of love, not only attachments in the here and now but also those forged across both spatial and temporal barriers: to be ‘bound’ is to be going somewhere”.⁷

A suggestive example of the kind of erotohistoriography Freeman argues for is offered by Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982),

³ Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography”, *Social Text*, 23.3-4 (Winter 2005), 53-68; 59; 66.

⁴ In this essay Freeman argues that “was it not the distinctly unqueer Frederic Jameson who wrote, albeit in a very different context, that history ‘is what hurts. It is what refuses desire?’”, *ibid.*, 59.

⁵ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 53-59, 55.

⁶ Freeman, “Time Binds”, 58.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸ Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1982). Hereafter references in the text as *Z*.

considered by the writer herself as a “biomythography”, a synthesis of history, biography, and mythology.⁸ It is a lyrical compendium of the author’s life experiences spanning from her vivid childhood memories in Harlem in the early 1930s to her adulthood in the late 1950s spent travelling around New York and Mexico. As the daughter of Caribbean immigrants to the United States, Lorde bears witness to the history of a “racist, patriarchal and anti-erotic society” through her skin memories, namely, through her black lesbian body’s recollection of pain and grief as well as pleasure and enjoyment. Doubly dislocated, from her African roots and from the cultural heritage of her parents’ Caribbean origins, Lorde retells her own history by charting a matrilineage both personal and mythical. Indeed, Lorde revises the traditional structure of family trees based on patriarchal filiation in favor of a queer genealogy defined, instead, in terms of female affiliation: “I felt the age-old triangle of mother father child, with the ‘I’ at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing either or both directions as needed” (*Z*, 7). That ‘I’ can reclaim a home and a plural identity only by virtue of her connection to her maternal ancestry which proves to be queer as it envisages emotional bondings between women regardless of sexual intimacy: “*Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty*” (*Z*, 14; italics in the text). The narrative exemplifies the idea of a “corporealized historiography” as it explores the way in which the protagonist’s life is shaped and affected by the emotional and physical relationships with other women across time as well as space: “Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home” (*Z*, 3). History/biography and myth merge throughout the novel insofar as the legendary figures of African mythology (MawuLisa, Afrekete), as well as the protagonist’s Caribbean female ancestors (Ma-Liz, Aunt Anni, Linda) uncannily live on in the women she meets throughout her lifetime. This ‘temporal drag’ – the pull of the past on the present – produced by pleasurable relations among queer bodies is highlighted by the cyclical narrative structure of the novel which opens with a sort of prophetic invocation, “*To the journeywoman pieces of myself. Becoming. Afrekete*” (*Z*, 5), and ends with an unforeseen fulfillment: “*And I remember Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me ... Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman’s power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters*” (*Z*, 249, 252; italics in the text). Afrekete is the mythic name given to Kitty, Lorde’s lover who becomes a bridge to distant times and places. Indeed, their erotic encounter invokes at once the real New York City of the narrative’s present identified by its multiethnic rhythms

and scents; the maternal Caribbean island, Carriacou, both real and mythic, conjured up by images of sea shores, exotic spices and fragrances, which Lorde can only imagine from her mother's recollections; and finally the legendary, atypical and timeless Africa embodied by Kitty/Afrekete, "*the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become*" (Z, 255). By claiming a "new spelling" for her name – "*Zami: a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers*" – the poet assumes a collective identity which reconnects her with her lost past and future projections. Indeed, the appropriation of these 'queered' legendary figures allows Lorde to cross centuries as well as continents in order to envisage and inhabit a symbolic diasporic space for her erotic community.

Audre Lorde proves to be the direct literary ancestor of Michelle Cliff, Dionne Brand, Shani Mootoo and Patricia Powell for whom the writing of history becomes a sensory and erotic practice, a kind of 'historicist *jouissance*'. From this perspective, their works display at once the search for 'queer' genealogies and a genealogical revision of history through fragmentary, discontinuous, circular narratives which represent a sense of transgressive characters, rebel women, transgenders, lesbian revolutionaries, libidinous women who counter traumatic events by exploring the experience of pleasure.

Sexuality in the field of history

The writings of these contemporary Caribbean women offer a queer erotized version of diaspora, narrated until then exclusively from a male or heteronormative perspective, by proposing liminal constructions of gender, sexuality and race which redefine the borders of nation and community. Buried and forgotten 'queer genealogies' are unearthed in their texts from a local and subaltern viewpoint. As Caribbean Canadian writer Nourbese Philip points out, "Genealogy is 'an account of descent from ancestors by enumeration of intermediate persons' from two Greek words meaning 'descent' and 'one who speaks in a certain manner'".⁹ It means therefore speaking in an unofficial language which challenges colonial historiography. As Jamaican-born Michelle Cliff declares:

To write as a complete Caribbean woman demands of us retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. On a past bleached from our minds. It means finding the artforms of these of our ancestors and speaking in the *patois* forbidden to us. It means realizing our knowledge will always be wanting.¹⁰

In her literary production Michelle Cliff rewrites Caribbean history through a 'creolized' narration which unmask the cultural violence

⁹ Marlene Nourbese Philip, *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997), 11.

¹⁰ Michelle Cliff, *The Land of Look Behind* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1985), 14.

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

produced by patriarchal colonialism, class privilege, racism and homophobia. As Cliff argues in her literary production, in a violently homophobic and racist society like Jamaica, passing straight and white is what allows public recognition and access to speech; yet, a paradox is implicit in the concept of passing as it represents at once the overcoming of silence and also its very assumption: “passing demands quiet. And from that quiet – silence”.¹¹ Cliff begins her “journey into speech” by “claiming an identity they taught [her] to despise”, namely, her homosexuality as well as her blackness uprooted from her white Creole identity. The (semi)autobiographical narratives of *Abeng* and its sequel *No Telephone to Heaven* evolve around the story of Clare Savage, a Jamaican light-skinned girl who is forced to face racial and sexual prejudices since childhood. In *Abeng* the strange death of two characters defined as “battyman”, “funny” and “queer” provides Clare with an implicit warning against the risk of transgressing sexual norms. In one of the most suggestive scenes of the novel, Clare explores her sexuality through an increasing emotional relationship with her playmate Zoe, a dark-skinned girl with whom she enjoys an erotic bodily contact while they are having a swim in the river:

Zoe’s naked body was lean and muscled. Her hips were narrow and her thighs long. The patch of tight curly hair between her legs glistened in the river water and the sun. Clare’s own body was also long. The gold of her legs and arms met the brown of Zoe as the water cascaded between them ... Lying beside Zoe on the rock. She had felt warm. Safe. Secluded. She felt that this was something she had wanted all along ... she had wanted to lean across Zoe’s breasts and kiss her.¹²

¹² Michelle Cliff, *Abeng*
(New York: Plume, 1984),
120, 124.

Issues of gender and sexuality are strictly intersected with those of race and class in the novel; indeed, the pleasurable encounter between the girls is marked by the discovery of the multiple differences written on their bodies: the gold of Clare’s light skin contrasting with Zoe’s dark skin makes Clare reflect upon her privileged social position as the daughter of a descendant of English slave-owners in Caribbean plantations opposed to Zoe’s disadvantaged status as working class and black.

Clare’s uneasiness in perceiving her identity as fractured goes back to the history of her family. Indeed, identifying with his white ancestors, Boy Savage has taught his light-skinned daughter Clare to pass for white and forget thereby the African roots of her dark-skinned mother. Yet, like Audre Lorde, Cliff offers an erotohistoriographical counter-memory through the recovery of revolutionary and legendary female ancestors erased by patriarchal family trees which not only reconnect Clare with her matrilineal genealogy but also make her acknowledge the existence of queer sexualities in Caribbean cultural traditions. In *Abeng* it is the figure of Mma Alli which gives historical intelligibility to non-eteronormative sexualities. She is a warrior and obeah woman who invokes the historical figure of Nanny, the Jamaican Maroon leader who fought against slavery.

Mma Alli was a one-breasted warrior woman and represented a tradition which was older than the one which had enslaved them ... Mma Alli had never lain with a man. The other slaves said she loved only women in that way, but that she was a true sister to the men – the Black men: her brothers. They said that by being with her in bed, women learned all manner of the magic of passion. How to become wet again and again all through the night. How to soothe and excite at the same time. How to touch a woman in her deep-inside and make her womb move within her.¹³

¹³ Ibid., 35.

Mma Alli also helps Inez, a captive woman who was repeatedly raped by slave owner Judge Savage, to reclaim her body and discover her lesbian sexuality. By revising her remembrance Clare learns the secrets of *jouissance*, the power of the erotic, and therefore the way to experience agency.

In *No Telephone to Heaven* the literary heir of Mma Alli is Harry/Harriet, a transgendered transvestite described as “Mawu-Lisa, moon and sun, female-male deity of some of their ancestors”.¹⁴ His/her presence in the novel bears witness to a history of colonial violence and oppression as his/her body is abused and raped by a British officer and scorned and despised by the homophobic Jamaican community. S/he struggles to come to terms with her/his ambiguous gender and sexual identity whose complexity is highlighted by Cliff herself: “Harry/Harriet is the novel’s lesbian in a sense; he’s a man who wants to be a woman, and he loves women, which is complicated”.¹⁵ Between him/her and a grown-up Clare develops a close friendship which resonates with homoerotic tones as shown in some scenes recalling Clare and Zoe’s naked bodies on the river shore: “They could swim as girlfriends ... warmed by their feast and the sun, they lay side by side under a sky thrilling in its brightness. Touching gently, kissing, tongues entwined, coming to, laughing” (*NTH*, 130).

¹⁴ Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone To Heaven* (New York: Plume, 1989), 171. Hereafter references in the text as *NTH*.

¹⁵ Meryl F. Schwartz, “An interview with Michelle Cliff”, *Contemporary Literature*, 3.4 (1993), 596.

After migrating from Jamaica to the United States and subsequently to England, Clare eventually travels back to her ‘grandmother’s land’ under Harry/Harriet suggestion where in the end they both join a guerrilla group fighting against Anglo-American neo-colonial oppression, Clare as a warrior and Harry/Harriet as a nurse. Thus, once again, two female historical figures are invoked through their bodies identified respectively with Maroon Nanny and Mary Seacole, a nineteenth century Jamaican heroine who overcoming gender and race prejudice pioneered the nursing profession travelling around Europe and the colonies during the Crimean war.

Actually Harry/Harriet plays a central role in the novel insofar as s/he helps Clare to recover her past, her cultural roots, and a deeper sense of self which enables her to identify with her blackness and queerness. Cliff’s narrative performs the last act of counter-memory by showing Clare dying in a revolutionary attack.

O je t’adore, O je t’adore, O je t’adore
...

Kitty-woo, Kitty-woo, Kitty-woo
Whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip
Back-raw, back-raw, back-raw, back-raw, back-raw

She remembered language.
Then it was gone.

cutacoo, cutacoo, cutacoo
coo, cu, cu, coo
coo, cu, cu, coo
piju, piju, piju
cuk, cuk, cuk, cuk
... (NTH, 208)

The last words she pronounces conjure a passage towards an unpredictable pre-language space where her dead body has become one with the earth, her mother-land, and with the bones of her maternal ancestors.

The conclusion of Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone To Heaven* strikingly echoes the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* by Trinidadian Canadian writer Dionne Brand.¹⁶ The process of 'diasporization,' founded on colonial slavery, the Middle Passage, and the subsequent postcolonial migrations from the Caribbean, is represented in the novel through a poetic fluidity between time and space and a non-linear narrative divided between the perspectives of two black immigrant lesbian protagonists, whose voices are registered by the distinctive rhythms of their speech, from Elizete's potent demotic to Verlia's terse idiom. The novel begins with the words "GRACE. IS GRACE, YES. And I take it, quite, quite, like thieving sugar" (APNH, 5). The word grace seems to connote an exclusively female sensuality and pleasure similar to Cixous' *jouissance*, but also a release from strife and sexual subordination, a moment of sight. Indeed, the metaphor of "thieving sugar" reveals a strategic re-appropriation of the Creole language 'stolen' from the sugarcane fields. Its erotic connotation refers to the idea of stealing language as well as pleasure from the economy of the colonial system. Political commitment and sexual pleasure are deeply connected in the image of the two protagonists of the novel Verlia and Elizete – rebel women fighting against the US military invasion of Grenada in 1983. Echoing Clare Savage who dies in a guerrilla attack against the American imperialist politics in Jamaica, the final scene of the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* depicts the image of Verlia, leaping from a cliff:

She is flying out to sea and in the emerald she sees the sea, its eyes translucent, its back solid going to some place so old there's no memory of it ... Her body has fallen away, is just a line, an electric current, the sigh of lighting left after lighting, a faultless arc to the deep turquoise deep. She doesn't need air. She's in some other place already, less tortuous, less fleshy (APNH, 246-247).

¹⁶ Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here* (Toronto: Vintage, 1996). Hereafter references in the text as APNH.

The ocean, the site of an ineffable trauma, becomes a psychic territory, a passage towards an imagined elsewhere.

Brand's 'desiring writing' throughout her literary production can be understood as a deeply embodied language that 'performs' a textual/sexual eroticism and at the same time a drifting writing that traces literary trajectories going beyond normative limits towards other places, other ways of inhabiting the world. The very title of the novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*, poses crucial questions about the imaginable existence of this 'elsewhere' for queer diasporic subjectivities. It could be guessed that it is certainly a place of imagined pasts, but also of projected futures and unrestrained desires, an elsewhere discovered maybe for only brief, but intense moments, in the pleasure and sensuality of the black female body.

The collection of poems *No Language is Neutral* (1990), instead, represents Brand's first attempt to theorize the body, sexuality, and belonging beyond the confines and limits of a discursive space which, far from being neutral, is ideologically gendered and raced.¹⁷ As in Cliff, Brand's poetic language oscillates between two languages, standard English and Caribbean Creole toward the creation of 'another tense', another language with which to express the fluidity of an identity in a constant process of becoming. Brand searches for a language that can express the ephemeral boundaries between bodies and subjectivities, that can give voice to the body and the self in an alternative socio-sexual economy. She finds that language in, and through, the desiring black lesbian body.

¹⁷ Dionne Brand, *No Language is Neutral* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990). Hereafter references in the text as *NLN*.

I want to wrap myself around you here in this line so
that you will know something This
grace, you see, come as a surprise and nothing till
now nock on my teeming skull, then, these warm
watery syllables, a woman's tongue so like a culture ...
language not yet made I want to kiss you deeply,
smell, taste the warm water of your mouth as warm as
your hands. I lucky is grace that gather me up (*NLN*, 36).

Brand strives to write a 'herstory' for the black lesbian body, a body which is not only inscribed and positioned in different spaces – Trinidad, Toronto – but also marked and written upon by particular regimes of discursive power – colonial and neo-colonial. She moves a critique to identity politics which relies upon stable and fixed definitions of subject positions in order to make subjectivities and abject bodies intelligible. The poet traces an imagined genealogy of lesbian identity, giving a queer description of that ancestry in a culture where established lineage holds considerable significance: "there are saints of this ancestry / too who laugh like jamettes in the / pleasure of their legs and caress their sex in mirrors" (*NLN*, 51). These lines point to the always already existence of women loving women, as well as their cultural and linguistic value in

history. These “saints” are “like jamettes”, loose women who are not afraid of expressing their sexuality and eroticism openly, representing, thereby, a threat to dominant order and authority. The very notion of jamette – from Trinidadian Creole: under the diameter of respectability, belonging to the lowest social classes – reveals the idea of a transgressive identity and space, a “taking space” which also means a “making space” through the subversion of patriarchal and heterosexist norms.¹⁸ Dionne Brand abandons the idea of a geographically defined homeland, and searches for her own provisionally imagined “terra”, her own land to light on, an elsewhere. Hence the ‘nowhere’ becomes the ‘nowHere’, the here and now of the body which turns into a discursive site of belonging and identity. As the following lines suggest: “your planet is your hands, your house behind your eyebrows”,¹⁹ it is precisely the erotic autonomy of the lesbian body that allows for the creation of this inhabitable space.

¹⁸ See Carol Boyce Davies, “Carnivalised Caribbean Female Bodies: Taking Space/Making Space”, *Thamyris*, 5.2 (1998), 333-346.

¹⁹ Dionne Brand, *Land To Light On* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997), 44.

A woman who looks
at a woman and says, here, I have found you,
in this I am blackening in my way. You ripped the world
raw. It was as if another life exploded in my
face, brightening, so easily the brow of a wing
touching the surf, so easily I saw my own body, that
is my eyes followed me to myself, touched myself
as a place, another life, *terra*. They say this place
does not exist, then, my tongue is mythic. I was here
before (*NLN*, 50).

In the erotic energy of the excess produced by two female desiring bodies looking at each other, the poet is released to another space. She becomes other than herself, (in) another place, “another life” where she can speak her own language, “grace”. She represents herself as place, a place which has always existed, and is now reconfigured by redesigning its own ideology, history, and language so as to reflect what it has excluded. Brand upsets the dialectical relation between ‘beauty’ and ‘nowhere’ by reversing the island/ocean metaphor: the Caribbean sea becomes the no-place that needs to be re-presented and conjured up in order to make sense of.

The ontological and existential space for the descendants of the African diaspora therefore can be envisioned neither here nor there, but only in the liminality of the ocean in-between. The image of this no-place is what Brand calls the “Door of No Return”, metaphor for the African doorways from which millions of slaves were thrown adrift into the unknown.²⁰ As Brand writes: “imagining our ancestors stepping these portals one senses people stepping out into nothing, one senses a surreal space, an inexplicable space”.²¹ This painful and uncanny experience is reflected in the suspension of identities in those “few feet in between. The frame of the doorway is

²⁰ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return. Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage, 2001).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

the only space of our true existence”.²² Brand realises that this laceration of history, this wound, this ‘absent presence’ needs a new kind of narration which redefines the concepts of belonging, identity, and genealogy.

Her second novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999) tries to narrate a new tale by offering counter-visions of the diaspora.²³ Time, space and language function to reject and erode dominant paradigms of reality. The idea of cyclical time suggested from the beginning by the title is pursued through a non-linear, fragmented prose and a constant narrative instability between imagination and syncretic real events, past and present, and multiple and dislocated narrators. The novel represents the traumatic experience of colonial slavery and spans the time and geography of the African diaspora itself, from the early nineteenth century to late twentieth century, from the sugar cane plantations of Trinidad to the urban streets of Toronto, New York and Amsterdam. It begins with the story of Marie Ursule, a 19th-century Trinidadian slave whose passionate act of rebellion – organizing a mass suicide – has the desired effect of wrecking a plantation’s economy. She sends her young daughter, Bola, off to safety in a remote place, Culebra Bay, where she begets numerous offspring who subsequently scattered throughout the world will be haunted by a legacy of passion and oppression. Bola is described as a child who was born as “balled into a moon”, with the sea mirrored in her eyes, reflecting future projections.

This is what Marie Ursule had seen in her child’s eyes, the sea, and a journey to be made that melts the body. She has seen the child in the sea ... there in the sea, in the middle of Bola’s eyes, Marie Ursule saw skyscrapers and trains and machines and streets ... her heart came like water in her hand and her face splintered in faces of coming faces, and she knew that if it was the future she was looking at, then she was keeping this crazy child from it if she took her along (*FCM*, 44-45).

The representation of Bola seems to evoke the ancestral female figure echoed in the potentially subversive figuration of “tidalectics” coined by Kamau Brathwaite, of which he writes:

Why is our psychology not dialectical – successfully dialectical – in the way that Western philosophy has assumed people’s lives should be, but tidalectic, like our grandmother’s – our nanna’s – action, like the movement of the ocean she’s walking on, coming from one continent / continuum, touching another, and then receding (‘reading’) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future²⁴

Brand’s vision of the diaspora engenders a rhizomatic matriarchal genealogy originating in Bola’s womb, a transgressive and non-heteronormative womb as it is not regulated and naturalized by the social prescriptions of the colonial system. Brand queers Brathwaite’s ancestral

²² Ibid.

²³ Dionne Brand, *At The Full and Change of the Moon* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1999). Hereafter references in the text as *FCM*.

²⁴ Kamau Brathwaite, *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (New York: We Press, 1999), 34.

figure by inscribing on Bola's body a sensual pleasure, a desiring excess. Her body in fact lusts for everything she sees and touches, for her own flesh.

What her eyes touched she craved, craving raw like a tongue, and pinned to one look, one shadow, one movement of an almond leaf, one wave, one man, one woman with a fish basket, one moment. And soon forgotten. She moved to the next lust ... lust for everything she saw ... and lust for her own flesh. She would knead her soft thighs and smooth them in her fingers for hours ... she only took note of her senses (*FCM*, 67).

This freedom to enjoy the body for itself is handed down to two of Bola's descendants a century later: a fifty year old woman who is overtaken by a "sudden and big lust", and Maya who appears in a window in Amsterdam, a window that cannot contain the liquidity of her body, the energy flowing like blood from her sex. Erotic desire revises the heterosexist and patriarchal paradigms of the diaspora, evoking thereby Audre Lorde's theorizations of the power of the erotic, the erotic as power. Sexuality in Brand's writing is assertively inscribed in the narratives of Caribbean transnationalism.

Brand's characters continually cross national, temporal and sexual borders, torn between the spectre of the traumatic past and the anxieties and confusion of the present. Bola's dislocation in that remote place far from the conditions of slavery is embodied by many of her descendants including her great-great-granddaughter Bola (the second Bola), who chooses to live in isolation in an abandoned family home in Trinidad where she gets rid of memories and language. Her only companion is the ghost of her foremother whom she used to visit at the country cemetery metaphorically named "Paradise":

I would stay all night with our mother and the morning would find us looking at the sun coming over the Paradise hill ... It was beautiful to watch us, I'm sure, sitting side by side. Two figures sitting bent over in thought, our mother's blue dress with lace and I in my new crisp uniform ... just a woman and a girl laughing and talking at a gravestone, the beautiful afternoons when the sun would purple and rise to the west of the cemetery and our slender figures would part clouds in the seams of the strafed clouds and our laughter and my mother's thoughts filling the cemetery and my voice answering hers (*FCM*, 269-70).

It is significant that it is Bola's forgetfulness and reverie that enable her to recover the fractured remains of a lost cultural history. On the value of forgetfulness Brand writes: "In another century without knowing her, because centuries are forgetful places, Marie Ursule's great-great-grandchildren would face the world too. But even that forgetfulness Marie Ursule had accounted for. Forgetfulness is true speech if anyone listens" (*FCM*, 18).

Violence in Paradise

New erotized versions of submerged violent histories are displayed by Indo-Trinidadian Canadian Shani Mootoo and Jamaican American Patricia Powell whose works bear witness to the memory of “other Middle Passages” involving the diasporic crossings of indentured Indian and Chinese immigrants to the Caribbean.²⁵ Accounting for an undocumented past, *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Mootoo and *The Pagoda* by Powell tell stories of personal and collective traumas resulting from the effects of colonialism and hetero-patriarchy on constructions of family ties and individual identities. Both texts explore how to revise official histories to include the experiences of women and other forgotten and denied subjectivities. Indeed, they portray transgressive in-between characters who defy rigid categorizations of gender, sexuality, race and class. With reference to this, Johanna Garvey points out that “a narrative fashioned from a non-normative perspective – a queered position located in the spaces between or outside the binarisms – may be the most effective challenge to the violence those norms unleash and a crucial antidote to the repeated traumas of Caribbean history”.²⁶ Strikingly, both novels display similar ‘confessional’ narrative strategies which resort to the device of the writing of a letter by a witness-narrator as a means to disentangle and disclose hidden secrets and mysteries.

Cereus Blooms at Night deploys a sophisticated narrative framework composed of un-chronological fragments, digressions, changes in point of view. Set on the island of Lantanacamera, in the small town of “Paradise” – once again, a fictional evocation of Trinidad – sometime in the early 1900s the narration evolves around the story of Mala Ramchandin, a mad old woman retired in a nursing home.²⁷ Her story is told by Tyler, a male-to-female transgender nurse and her caretaker in the Alms House who sends out the recording of Miss Ramchandin’s story like an open letter to her lost younger sister Asha in Canada. Bound by “a shared queerness”, Tyler feels inexplicably drawn to the strange woman, and begins to sift through the mass of gossip about the nature of Mala’s presumed patricide and to piece together the tragedy of her life. The narrative goes back three generations as it explores Mala’s childhood, the life of her parents Chandin and Sarah Ramchandin, back to the history of her grandfather who came from India as an indentured laborer on the Caribbean sugarcane. The core of the plot contains submerged traumatic memories and ‘public secrets’ – the lesbian relationship between Mala’s mother Sara and her aunt Lavinia with their subsequent elopement to Canada, the ensuing incestuous relationship between Mala and her father, Mala’s alleged madness, the transgender identity of Tyler and Otoh – which must remain officially invisible as they prove to be incommensurable within the colonial

²⁵ In the second half of the nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery contributed to a mass influx of indentured labourers from China and India in order to supply cheap labour for the sugar plantations – immigrants submitted to conditions that amounted to a state of servitude while undermining wages for black workers.

²⁶ Johanna K. Garvey, “Complicating Categories: ‘Race’ and Sexuality in Caribbean Women’s Fiction”, *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, 10.1 (2003), 94-120, 106.

²⁷ Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (New York: Avon Books, 1996). Hereafter references in the text as *CBN*.

structures of intelligibility that support the hetero-naturalisation of kinship, gender and sexuality. Mootoo's poetics shows the opacity of the Caribbean space which cannot be experienced through the conventional parameters of knowledge based on vision and language. Rather, it requires alternative epistemologies that bear witness to the unspeakable, since "words alone cannot describe" (CBN, 19).

Inhabiting the liminal edge of social acceptability and rejection, Mala 'reterritorializes' that very patriarchal house which had been a theatre of colonial violence and sexual abuse into an inhospitable and anti-domestic space where the confines between human and non-human, life and death are blurred. Indeed, she experiences an ecological as well as a synaesthetic approach to the surrounding world:

Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words. The wings of a gull flapping through the air titillated her soul and awakened her toes and knobby knees, the palms of her withered hands, deep inside her womb, her vagina, lungs, stomach and heart. Every muscle of her body swelled, tingled, cringed or went numb in response to her surroundings – every fibre was sensitised in a way that words were unable to match or enhance. Mala responded to those receptors, flowing with them effortlessly, like water making its way along a path (CBN, 126-7).

Mala's non-verbal language is deeply embodied, governed by the pleasurable anarchy of her senses; her body, suggestively, becomes a "vibrant network of synaesthesia" (CBN, 121) open to symbiotic becoming. Not by chance, her sensorial perception goes beyond visual episteme: since "her eyes were of little use" she feels, hears, smells her surroundings by "becoming one with the trees, shrubs, weeds, fences, thorns, water, and mossy ground" which makes "her heart drum with excitement" (CBN, 151). From this perspective, Mootoo's writing reveals a new field of perception, a sort of oceanic sensorial expansion flowing into an empathic *jouissance*.

Another privileged epistemological form that challenges the transparency of language proves to be the act of listening, a form of ethical communication which tries to grasp the secret that fails to get across.²⁸ Tyler, who strikingly evokes Cliff's character Harry/Harriet, is the only character able to perceive that Mala's behaviour is not an expression of madness but rather an effect of trauma which requires an alternative account. By becoming her witness – by "listening and sifting, cutting and sewing the lot" – Tyler tries to disclose a buried archive of precarious family ties and incest which unveils the traumatic experience of indentureship and its effects as homophobic and gender violence. He explicitly counters the heteronormative force of the patriarchal impulse that claimed to judge both his story and Mala's as too perverse and too unpleasant to be worthy of preservation. In *Cereus* the act of storytelling is significantly related to an ethical assumption; indeed, the very inter-

²⁸ Sarah Ahmed, *Strange Encounters. Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 137-160.

subjective narrative structure of the novel offers the possibility of “giving an account of oneself” only by virtue of a full exposure to the vulnerability of the other. In Butler’s words, “one can only tell an autobiography, and one can only reference an ‘I’ in relation to a ‘you’: without the ‘you’ my own story becomes impossible”.²⁹ Actually thanks to Mala, Tyler can give an account of himself and tell the exciting possibilities of his “becoming-woman”, as well as his sexual relationship with Otoh, a female-to-male transgender who eventually falls in love with him/her.

History writing, story-telling and cross-dressing are also at the core of Patricia Powell’s novel *The Pagoda* which unfolds a powerful imaginative exploration of the emotional and psychological dimensions of the indentured Chinese experience in the Caribbean.³⁰ Set in rural Jamaica in 1893, *The Pagoda* tells the story of Lau-A-yin, a Chinese immigrant woman who passes most of her life for a man identified as Mr Lowe. Yet, unlike Harry/Harriet and Tyler for whom cross-dressing is a personal choice, or unlike Otoh who undergoes an extraordinary and unexpected “transformation”, Lowe is coerced into a transgender identity; her masquerade is in fact a means of survival, a matter born out of necessity. Her disguises function as a way of coping with the multiple traumas suffered since her childhood, when she is forced to flee from China to escape an arranged marriage at the hands of her violent father and travel aboard a ship of kidnapped Chinese to work the plantations in Jamaica. To escape the travel restrictions imposed on women in China, Lau-A-yin dresses as a man and becomes a concubine to Cecil, the white slave trader who repeatedly rapes her. As a result of the sexual abuse she suffers during the long passage, she gives birth to a daughter, Elizabeth. In Jamaica she lives for thirty-five years as Mr Lowe, a shopkeeper. But his arranged marriage to a lesbian “octoroon” eventually turns into a love relationship and the two of them have to face the secrets of their past. As in Mootoo’s novel, in *The Pagoda* a fire symbolically destroys both the site where the victim has tried to create a shelter against violence and the body of the oppressor; and again, ineffable traumas require the necessary acts of writing and telling. Indeed, after the ensuing burning of the shop and the death of Cecil, Lowe decides to rejoin her lost daughter and eventually succeeds in writing her a letter recounting the hidden origins of their family.

Issues of gender are closely interrelated to sexuality – as the novel is mainly concerned with the unfolding of unconscious desires and fantasies – but also to bodily yearnings and cravings. Lowe ponders over the complexity of her confused identity: “and how you to love some other person when the body you inhabit has more to do with somebody else’s fantasy. The fantasy of somebody you love” (*P*, 221). Also, in the novel sexual desire and intimacy are mingled with the remembered traumas of the past; Lowe’s response to her wife’s lovemaking is, in fact, always

²⁹ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself: A Critique of Ethical Violence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 24.

³⁰ Patricia Powell, *The Pagoda* (New York: Harvest Books, 1998). Hereafter references in the text as *P*.

fraught with the memories of her rape by Cecil, a body memory which haunts her physical and intimate attachments to others.

The Pagoda, therefore, reveals the complexity of homoerotic desire which Lowe must negotiate through her close relationships with her abuser Cecil, her wife Miss Sylvie, and her estranged daughter Elizabeth. The narrative shows an intricate web of precarious family plots evolving around cross-dressing; actually, Lowe must take, out of necessity, the roles of man, husband and father while desiring those of woman and mother. Like Mootoo, Powell represents a subjectivity irreducible to any identity categorization: neither male nor female, neither heterosexual nor homosexual. The cross-dressed body becomes the space of desire and at once the locus for the negotiation of power. In Powell's words, the transvestite self has to do "with characters' bottomless longings, their insatiable cravings and fears, their feelings of helplessness, and power and powerlessness, their desires spurred on by their fantasies and dreams".³¹

³¹ Patricia Powell, "The Dynamics of Power and Desire in *The Pagoda*", in Adele S. Newson and Linda Strong-Leek, eds., *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 196.

Lowe's is a body that transgresses space, "a body full of psychic and psychical wounds, a body tingling with memories, a body on which desires and fantasies are negotiated, a foreign body trying to create a wholesome self".³² This metaphorical transvestite body locates personal crises of identification within sites of historical and cultural significations that allegorize the instability of the colonial state. Through the representation of illegitimate children, incestuous relationships, disowned ties of blood and family bonds based on affiliation, the novel unveils a counter-memory which destabilizes the institutional foundations of colonial bio-power.

³² Ibid., 192.

Envisioning floating gender and sexual boundaries and shifting cultural and ethnic borders, Shani Mootoo and Patricia Powell's narratives grant cultural authority to the discursive space for queer diasporic subjectivities, a space which, nevertheless, is far from being depicted as idyllic. Indeed, the Alms House of Paradise where Mala and Tyler live and the pagoda that Lowe wants to build as a means to reclaim her culture and heritage prove to be (het)eroto(pic) spaces in both the Foucauldian sense as other spaces or "counter-sites, a kind of effectively realized utopias in which ... all the other real sites are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted",³³ and also in Lorde's terms of an erotic community founded on the full recognition of deeply embodied desires and pleasures.

³³ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, 16 (Spring 1986), 22-27.

The writings of Cliff, Brand, Mootoo and Powell reveal the weaving of erotic and sensual bodies, gendered, sexualized and racialized bodies, which are temporarily positioned, continually adrift and out-of-place. Their texts become counter-memories as they look to past and present experiences for the hidden histories of those excluded from dominant narratives, breaking the silences of (hetero)normative history and producing 'eroto-stories': female narrations which translate the traumas of diaspora, migration, and denied sexualities into an empathic *jouissance*.

Violence and Its Unmaking

Several years ago I went back to school to become a healer; I wanted to heal myself. My mother, perhaps a little alarmed, was quick to point out that only Jesus can do these things. These are drastic times, I reminded her, for which drastic measures are needed! I'd been in and out of talk therapy for years, starting when I was fourteen and still living in Jamaica. And though I knew my issues up and down, I still could not shake them. It was still hard to love in a healthy way. It was still hard to trust. Relationships were a paradox. At thirty, I decided to try another paradigm. It was clear to me that the trauma was in my cells, in my bones, it was in places that words, language could not access. I needed to find someone who would go to the deepest, most intricate parts of me, someone who would change the brain circuitry, who'd reconfigure the DNA strands – I was asking for a lot I know. For a year I worked with a Jin Shin Jytsui practitioner, and after I saw the enormous shifts, I decided to enroll in a four year training program, curious to find out what exactly was this energy healing and could I do it myself. And of course, there was also the hope that this new exploration would become fodder for a new manuscript.

Even though I don't go back to Jamaica very often, maybe a total of only eight times since I left 28 years ago, it's as if a part of me still resides there. I think about Jamaica constantly. I think of her lush green mountains and valleys, that beautiful sea. I think of people's laughter, their stunning faces, their gorgeous, gorgeous teeth, their sublime gestures as their bodies move into prayer, into song. I think too of the land ravaged by so many years of bloodshed and violence, starting first with the decimation of the Indians, and then the brutality of slavery that lasted all those years, then indentureship. I think about the land locked now in poverty and hard life, the land still carrying all that grief, all that anguish, the dead still in shock, the dead grieving still. I think about our lives inextricably bound up with that land and I often find myself wondering – if the land is still in pain, wouldn't we too be in pain, since we live on that land, we eat off the land, the land is in us. I wanted to help the land. I thought that if I could learn to heal myself, what would stop me from also healing the land.

I remember reading an interview with the Japanese novelist, Kenzaburo Oe who said that it was the birth of his first son with brain damage that has been the central theme of his work throughout his career. I was 27 years old when my son was born, he said, and when I was 28, I became a writer. He said that after his son was born he went to Hiroshima, the place where the atomic bomb had been dropped and he went to the

hospitals where the survivors were staying and he began talking to them. And this is what changed his life, he said, it was something about the interplay between his personal pain and its connection to the suffering of others. “There is pathos in this dual concern for self and for others,” he said, “in the very act of expressing oneself, there is a healing power, a power to mend the heart. And not only is the artist’s work enriched, but its benefits are shared by others”.

After I read that interview, I began thinking about my writing differently. I began thinking about audience and about my intention as a writer. I began asking different questions about my work. With every print run of a book I have access to at least 6,000 readers, what will I say to my readers that is worthy, useful? Can my stories actually change lives; can they save lives? Can my stories raise large social and political questions and provoke thought, challenge beliefs, help people deal with the complexities of their lives, help people through devastation, helping people heal?

Writing has always been for me a way of explaining the world to myself, of making sense of the inexplicable, especially when the world sometimes feels like a very harsh and confusing place. Writing has been a way to investigate, to learn, to discover things I didn’t even know I knew, to embody an experience, to close my eyes and walk slowly and quietly through that experience, dwelling on it so it can be seen for what it is: a thing of beauty, something inexplicable, something significant. *A Small Gathering of Bones* for example was an attempt to try and understand a mother who could not love her gay son that was sick with AIDS and dying. *The Pagoda* was an exploration of what it means to belong, what it means to be at home in the world and in the body, what it means to be present with the self no matter what else is happening, what it means to be at home in the body when sexual violations make the body an uninhabitable place.

But as I think more critically and consciously about my work, I no longer want to simply make sense of the inexplicable, which sometimes seems to me like a naïve attempt to control what feels so impossibly unmanageable. I want the journey I undergo through writing to bring back a potent wisdom that is transformative.

When I started to write *The Fullness of Everything*, I wanted it to be a novel about violence and a novel too about how to heal violence. I wanted to write about characters in pain and I also wanted to write about a possible antidote to that pain. I wanted to know what that need was inside the characters that the violence was filling, and I wanted to see if the need could be filled up in ways that were not violent. What was it they needed that they could not ask for? What was the cause of their unfulfillment, their frustrations? What were they truly seeking that was

constantly eluding them? And once they could identify these desires, could they fill them themselves? Was the violence a way of saying, help me, help me, I am in pain and I cannot find the serum to soothe myself, I cannot even find the words to express what is ailing me, all I know is that whatever ails me is beyond terrible, it is so unbearable that I must strike out, I must thrust this pain away from me? I wanted to see what it might look like when one person in a family that has been plagued by violence decides to stop that violence not only in the family, but also in himself.

The novel took nearly a decade to write. This element of not knowing, of going blindly along, of waiting for the work to unfold is not unusual in writing, with this book however, that search, that uncertainty, that constant wonder, what is happening, was all there was for years and years. This was incredibly frustrating. But there were elements of the book I could not write until I had experienced them myself. There was an emotional truth I was seeking, and I could not write it until I was willing to know it for myself.

I think often of Nadine Gordimer who said, we don't choose a theme or a situation or a story, the theme chooses us and our goal as a writer is to prepare ourselves so that the theme unfolds through us.

I don't often read stories of men dealing with domestic violence in a meaningful way; but in this novel, I wanted to begin that exploration, for they too are affected, they too are deeply wounded. When the novel opens, Winston who lives in North America and who has not been in contact with his family in twenty-five years decides to return home after he receives a telegram that his father is dying. This father is the man Winston has been running from all his life. He is a man who loves life, who loves women, who loves the sense of power that his virility brings; a man who has strong notions of what masculinity should look like; a man who made himself from nothing, from scraps; a man strong and upright and valued in his community; a man who is not comfortable with what he perceives as weakness in other men; a man generous to his neighbors, an important man in his community; a man quick to anger; a man quick to lashing out. Confronting their father, this great chaplain of violence is no easy thing for Winston nor for Septimus his brother who lives in Jamaica still, and at first these men begin in the typical ways that many people, men and women alike, deal with fear: they look away, they think that if they don't look then it will go away, but to keep up this masquerade they have to close down their hearts, they have to harden themselves on the inside, eventually they lose touch with themselves and with their loved ones, they act out in inappropriate ways, they act out sexually, they misuse substances, they get sick, they function well in their careers, but at home they are lousy husbands and fathers and lovers. They are unaware of the help available to them, or they outright refuse it. In this novel however, I

wanted these brothers to make a different choice. I wanted them to face the difficulties at home and in themselves and to express their feelings; I wanted them to find ways to stop the atrocities and to begin to free themselves.

This return, this journey home, is a transformational moment for Winston, it offers him a chance to re-member, and for a man who has spent nearly quarter century of his life trying to forget, this is dangerous and frightening terrain. He doesn't know what awaits him and he naively thinks he will just go home and bury his father and return to the U.S. unscathed. But the minute he arrives on the island and sets foot in the house he grew up in as a boy, everything comes rushing back: all the secrets, all the lies, all the shame, all the dysfunctional patterns he'd tried so hard to escape, all the violence. But this time he is older and stronger, not necessarily wiser, but certainly braver. This time what he sees played out around him is no longer acceptable. And his determination to create change brings about the most vehement crisis in the family as frozen habits break loose and things fall apart, lives are uprooted and displaced, a death occurs, feelings of anger and betrayal run rampant, and there is heart break, heart break everywhere as upheaval and insecurity and disillusion reign.

Still, confronting the violence in his family is only part of the solution, because if the source is not found then the violence will only flourish again. What did the father long for all his life and did not get, could not find? Was he trying to find a way to grieve his dead child, or was it the brother that left for Panama when he was a boy? Was there a great loss in his life that he couldn't quite quell and did this dis-ease make him unkind to the very people who loved him the most? Did loving them mean that he'd have to open his heart, which probably also meant that he'd have to feel the unbearable grief of losing his child when he was the kind of man who did not want to go anywhere near bad feelings, for they were just way too intolerable for him to handle?

What did the mother want? Why was she willing to stay with that man who disrespected her again and again, why would she turn a blind eye to how he was treating her children? Why was she holding on to him? Was it the promise of love? Was it the strength in him she admired so much, his so-called power? Did she admire him because she did not have these qualities in her own self, and therefore wanted them, this feeling of internal strength, internal power? By wanting so desperately this promise of love, it seems she was willing to take anything, anything he handed out, even abuse, and she would forsake her children too, just for this promise of love.

And Winston who ran away for years and years, was he looking to find courage, to find strength? Was that the desire hounding him? And Septimus, who gave and gave, just so these women would love him, who did

somersaults, who betrayed himself again and again so they would stay with him, and still they left, still they sought out other men, what did he need so he wouldn't keep lashing out at them, pushing them away?

Sometimes I think if there were enough resources, if the economy were only stronger, and everyone had a job, everyone had something to do that fulfilled them, then there would be less violence, the murder rate would not be as high, everyone would be happier. But I also live in one of the richest countries in the world and money still doesn't seem to be able to stop greed, it doesn't stop white-collar crime, it doesn't stop domestic violence. What is it inside us that we need to quell in order to stop once and for all our violent acting out? What is it that will bring us peace, bring us a sense of well-being?

I don't know if the novel adequately answers these questions, but these were the themes I wanted to explore while writing. How can we self-soothe instead of lashing out? How can we self-soothe instead of shutting down? How can we find ease?

**Unchaining the Unconscious
An Interview with Patricia Powell**

IF: Do you see yourself as part of a common Caribbean literature? Which Caribbean writers were you familiar with when you began to write?

PP: I grew up listening to Miss Lou on the radio and also to a radio play that came on in the evenings called *Dulcemeena*. My family also ran a shop which was the center of our little village and people would come, men mostly, and they would drink and smoke and burst open their wounds right there at the counter – they talked and argued vehemently about everything, about love, about politics, about God. Even before I could read and write, radio plays and these scenarios enacted by these men night after night were my first introduction to human drama. Later on I would see them written out as stories. We used a *West Indian Reader* in my English class at high school and I remember reading Naipaul and Salkey and Selvon and others. Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* which was also a favorite of mine, especially when I thought I wanted to be a preacher.

IF: Do you feel a tension between Jamaican Creole and Standard English when you write?

PP: It's a beautiful tension that I've had to negotiate in different ways with each book. *Me Dying Trial* for example poured out of me in Creole and could not be 'tamed' into Standard English, no matter how much I tried, the language remained stiff, the characters would not come alive and sing, the story was as flat as a board. With *A Small Gathering of Bones*, I was trying to find a hybrid language, one that was palatable to both my North American and Jamaican audiences. It was important to me that the book felt Jamaican, it was a gay Jamaican story after all and I wanted to capture that sense of place with the language. In the case of *The Pagoda*, Lowe's language would've been a Cantonese inflected nineteenth century Jamaican English. But I was already writing across race, trying to mimic language felt like an even more dangerous act of transgression. With that novel I used Standard English for the narration, but when the characters lapsed into dialogue, Lowe included, and all the Indian and Chinese immigrants as well, everyone spoke the contemporary Creole. In this most recent work, *The Fullness of Everything*, I switch back and forth, using Creole in the dialogue for the Jamaican speakers.

IF: There is a Chinese woman as a stowaway in *The Pagoda*. Is this historically accurate? Chinese women were not recruited to go to the Caribbean? In the case of East Indians, the records show that quite a few women come to the Caribbean.

PP: While I was doing the research in Kingston for *The Pagoda*, I did not find records of women who had come to Jamaica as stowaways. In fact what I found was an official notice saying that Chinese laws did not permit women to leave China, only men could leave. Maxine Hong Kingston's, *China Men*, has a woman who is a stowaway so that was very helpful to me. It meant that it wasn't impossible. And there are some films too that I found. What was interesting, though, is that as I traveled with the novel, people would tell me that their female ancestors had come to Jamaica as stowaways. I don't think it was very common, but it certainly happened. And then a few weeks ago I received a note from Professor Belinda Edmonson that said she'd found actual evidence in her own research that some Chinese women did come to Jamaica as stowaways. I was happy about that – Lowe wasn't alone in her adventures.

IF: Did you feel that it was important that cross-dressing be addressed in Caribbean literature? Have there been other West Indian writers who have treated the subject?

PP: Michele Cliff's Harry/Harriet in *No Telephone to Heaven* is a bit of a cross-dresser I suppose. But no, when I initially conceived of *The Pagoda* I had no intention of writing about a cross-dresser. I stumbled into that decision by accident. I had been for several days doing research in Kingston and had pretty much mapped out the book in a vague kind of way, it would be a story about a woman who leaves China and goes to Jamaica to live. But then when I discovered that Chinese women weren't allowed to leave China, I was pretty disappointed because I'd just written a novel peopled by men (*A Small Gathering of Bones*) and I wanted to work with a female protagonist this time. After thinking long and hard about this I decided that the only way to get around this problem was to have her cross-dress. And after I made that decision I had to go and do further reading because I really didn't know anything about cross-dressing or passing. But that decision really was the best decision because it not only opened up the novel in new and fascinating ways for me as a writer – the novel for example became a kind of a mystery – but it also gave me this really great way of thinking about how we negotiate shifting identities and how we are always changing ourselves to fit into different situations and how after a while whatever sense we'd had of an authentic self simply dissolves.

IF: Michelle Cliff has denounced the homophobia of Jamaican society and has declared that she does not go back to the island. Do you visit Jamaica?

PP: From time to time I would go back to Jamaica, but it wasn't often – maybe every five or seven years. I think I was a little anxious about how people would respond to my work. But then last year I went back for a month and I fell in love with her all over again. It was very strange. I used to think it was because of the violence and homophobia why I didn't return. And then I used to think it was because of my family who I felt didn't understand me. During all this time of course, I dreamt about Jamaica just about every night and story after story was set there as if I'd never left. And in a way it feels as if I reside there still, well, my unconscious resides there still, and sometimes I feel as if my unconscious rules my life with great tyranny which is not a very good thing. But then last year I went back for a month, and I fell in love completely with the place and I can't even say what it was exactly – I mean what is it that you really fall in love with when you fall in love with a place or with a person? And so it's hard for me to say what it was about Jamaica. And maybe it wasn't even one thing, but an entire host. Maybe it wasn't even Jamaica itself I'd fallen in love with, but with young, small pieces of myself I'd left there that were just now returning to me and attaching themselves. Whatever that was inside this love made everything glow. The place was beautiful to me in a way I'd never seen it before. It was a trip perfect in every way. And now that I've had that experience, I'm hoping my unconscious will unchain me.

IF: How were your novels received in Jamaica? Especially *A Small Gathering of Bones* with its explicit sex scenes between two men, two men dreaming of having a family, the strong mother-son scene etc.

PP: I don't really know how the novels are received in Jamaica. I think they are read and studied at the University. I've read some of the essays written by scholars there. They've all been pretty positive and I learn a lot when I read them.

IF: In *A Small Gathering of Bones*, you describe a homosexual man teaching the Bible study class. This juxtaposition works well in the novel, but does this also mean that homophobia in Jamaica depends on the religious culture of the country?

PP: When I was growing up in Jamaica all the gay people I knew were deep in the church. We attended young people's meetings on Friday evenings, Sunday school Sunday mornings, and stayed on for mid-day

service which lasted until 2 p.m. We sang in the choir, we took up collection, we preached at the pulpit and led bible study, we visited the sick and prayed at the bedside of the dying, we offered communion. The more worried we became of our budding desires the more staunchly religious we'd become. I don't think it was God we feared so much; it was our very own church people who would persecute us. After I came out, the first fight I had with my mother wasn't about being a lesbian; it was because I no longer wanted to go to church. I was sixteen. And I did not return to church for twenty years. There was so much untangling to do, especially the self-hate, and the belief I had that I was bad and that God had no use for me. I think homophobia strives because people are afraid to speak up, gay and straight alike; I think we are afraid of the violence. The pressure to conform is great. I wonder why that is. Sometimes I think if we started talking about homosexuality, we'd have to start talking about heterosexuality as well. And if we started talking about heterosexuality we have to talk honestly about how we treat each other in the name of love, and how we violate each other sexually and physically, we would have to talk about the way we feel about our bodies and how our bodies are treated by men and women alike, and we would have to talk about love. I think we'd have a lot of talking to do.

IF: The theme of violence is ever present in your novels, and permeates your latest novel, *The Fullness of Everything*. Do you view violence as an inescapable aspect of Caribbean history and society at large?

PP: I think often of how that land has been ravished by pain and violence, starting with the Spaniards who slaughtered the natives, and then all those years of slavery and indentureship. I think often of that land and whether it has ever healed, that land that has held so much suffering, and I wonder if we, its inhabitants, are immune to that suffering or if we are tainted too. In this novel I tried to envision what it might look like if one person in a family that is plagued by violence tries to stop that violence. And then I even went one step further. I tried to imagine what was the source of violence for the characters, what was it in them, in the environment, that made them want to lash out? What is it we are truly, desperately seeking but can't seem to find? What is the source of our un-fulfillment, our frustration, and if we can locate it, and fill ourselves, will that stop us from lashing out at ourselves and each other?

IF: With the exception of your semi-autobiographical novel, *Me Dying Trial*, the main characters of your novels thus far are men, is there a connection between men and violence, do you find male characters more compelling to write?

PP: Sometimes I need the distance to be able to see things a little bit more clearly, and writing from the point of view of a man has given me that distance. Women are too close to me, and I often feel as if I can see them as clearly or as critically. I experience a similar dilemma with non-fiction. I find that I can be more honest, more truthful in fiction, I can expose more, but with non-fiction all I feel is a great inhibition. In the case of *The Fullness of Everything*, I definitely wanted to write about men dealing with sexual abuse. Often times I hear men say, about sexual abuse, Oh, that is woman things! And then they stop talking about it, which doesn't necessarily mean they're not troubled by it, but nothing gets done. It's the women who have to speak up. So I wanted to look at how it affects men, especially given the fact that they are so often the perpetrators. I wanted to look at how they experience and deal with it in their own lives, in their own families. Finally, I just want to add that when I write a male character, or a female character for that matter, I'm not necessarily thinking of them as either male or female. At a certain point in the writing, gender falls away, and only the essence of the character comes through, and it is from that pure place that the information comes.

IF: What is your emotional attachment to the Caribbean at the same time your physical distance from it, especially since you moved to the San Francisco Bay area a few years ago?

PP: I lived in Boston for 26 years and during the last seven I tried desperately to leave and somehow couldn't. I think it has to do with how difficult leaving Jamaica was for me. When I moved to Boston from Jamaica it was to live with my birth mother for the very first time in my life. And within a year after I left Jamaica my great aunt who had raised me from the time I was three months old died. I think once I landed in Boston, a part of me couldn't bear the thought of uprooting again to go anywhere. I love the Bay. I have to say that outside of Jamaica it's the most beautiful place ever. I live near the sea in a village of only 7,000 people. There are mountains and forests around, and there are these slender, elegant eucalyptus trees which I love and also these great mammoth grandfather trees called the red woods which are incredible. But even though I'm even farther away, Jamaica is still very present, in my stories of course, in my dreams, in my longings for certain foods, certain sounds, light at a particular time of day.

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.

Melanie A. Murray, *Island Paradise: The Myth*
(New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 226 pp.

Reviewed by **Enrica Picarelli**

In Derek Walcott's poem "Names" (*Collected Poems*, 1986, 307) the narrator witnesses the genesis of the Caribbean archipelago as it is linguistically appropriated by European colonizers.

Listen, my children say:
moubain: the hogplum,
cerise: the wild cherry,
baie-la: the bay,
with the fresh green voices
they were once themselves
in the way the wind bends
our natural inflections.

Recalling how the history and culture of the Caribbean originated in the mutual relationship between sea and land established by willful seafarers, Walcott invites the reader to embark on a journey through an uncharted territory spreading over an elusive horizon. In this epiphanic moment, the deceptiveness of the geo-pelagic chronotope prevents the compass from drawing a map and naming the seascape, delivering in its place an experience of unmediated intimacy that the grammar of conquest reproduces but never fully masters. The constitutive untraceability of this floating origin informs Walcott's depiction of a race that "began as the sea began/with no nouns and no horizon ... with a different fix on the stars" (*ibid.*, 305) while the articulation of naming, renaming and remembering voiced by the poem's characters exposes the discursive nature of colonialism. An element of amnesia and symbolic appropriation, as well as the hint of a different cartography governed by the unmeasurable absolutes of Ocean and Universe animates Walcott's picture of the Caribbean. It turns the archipelago into a metonym of the British empire, founded and managed through uprootedness, dispossession and creolization.

Although Walcott is only briefly mentioned in Melanie Murray's *Island Paradise: The Myth*, the idea of a mobile history where culture and identity are born at sea surfaces in the volume. The diasporic experiences of Jamaica Kincaid, Lawrence Scott, Romesh Gunsekera and Jane Arasanayagam inform her exploration of island representations of these four contemporary authors from the former British colonies of the Caribbean and Sri Lanka.

Murray's aim is to provide a "study of identity in island space" (192) through the motifs of the garden and the house as they become symbols of colonial power and "new metaphors for the imagination" (197). Research carried out by Diane Loxley, J. Michael Dash e Dorothy Lane provide the background for Murray's ecocritical reading of tropical nature as it affects and is affected by historical and social processes of appropriation. Instead, Avtar Brah's studies on diaspora and Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity introduce issues of migration and cross-cultural relation.

An introductory overview precedes three case studies distributed in four thematic and monographic chapters. These relate to the novels of Kincaid, born in Antigua and living in Vermont; Scott, a Trinidadian of European descent based in London; Gunsekera, who left Sri Lanka for England, and Arasanayagam, a Sri Lankan artist who chose to stay in her native land despite a civil war and her position as a Dutch Burger married to a Tamil. Intertwining analyses of the entrenched notion of islands as paradise with reflections on the personal experiences of migration of the authors, Murray examines the relationship between landscape and identity in terms of unsettlement and inauthenticity.

The book is a meditation on impermanence as it emerges in the writers' relations with a shape-shifting nature spanning the Sri Lankan jungle, the coastal and maritime environment of the Caribbean archipelago, the sheltered ecology of a greenhouse in Vermont and the alpine landscapes of China and Nepal. Murray focuses on the negotiation of a "multilocal" sense of self (95) in the face of colonial and Western concepts of tropical islands which privilege European authenticity and purity.

Among the defining features of insularity the author highlights the tension between confinement and limitlessness that colonial imagination has associated with island space and nature, a tension that hunts postcolonial subjects away from their native lands. Resisting the idea of islands as depopulated utopias emerging in the middle of nowhere, between past and future, primitivism and progress, Kincaid, Scott, Gunsekera and Arasanayagam unveil the fabricated nature of aestheticized notions of authenticity. They expose the authentic as a fictional construct resisted through literary attempts that acknowledge how "'paradise' pleasure and privilege depend on the labour ... of someone else" (90). For example, Kincaid's essay *A Small Place* (1988), analyzed in chapter two, dismantles the myth of the passive tropics to make room for a problematic reading of nature as a space where different material and 'psychic' dimensions come together. Kincaid refuses the assumptions of an edenic Antigua in favor of an approach to nature that "links colonialism, slavery, and contemporary multinational capital" (82). At the same time as she denounces the neocolonialism of international tourism, her writing returns to the place of her birth, presenting a double perspective that entangles the colonial

experience of her childhood and the present neocolonial situation of the island to negotiate “the straddling [of] two cultures” (81). According to Murray, Kincaid’s gardening in Vermont reflects a diasporic experience that emerges through the creation of a different relationship between human culture and the material world of nature. In her North American garden Kincaid plants seeds collected all over the world as a strategy to assert a mobile identity and to reflect on the power relations that inform dominant fantasies of paradisaal islands.

Informing the monographic chapters is Murray’s overview of European representations of islands which shows how the colonial idea of ‘Englishness’ was established in relation to the exploitation of nature and culture in the Caribbean and Sri Lanka. The author argues that during the colonial period the landscapes and seascapes of the Caribbean and Sri Lanka were subject to the romanticized approaches that Western culture reserved to imaginary places. Like the fabled *Antillia* of Portuguese legend or the paradisaal kingdom of Prester John mentioned by Sir John Mandeville and Marco Polo, the Caribbean and Sri Lanka appear in the colonial imagination as remote, virgin and ahistorical blank spaces open to exploitation. Such representations of islands as passive *terrae nullius* awaiting “discovery” still informs a Eurocentric view of the world, combining fact and fiction to offer an epistemological paradigm that justifies domination.

In a passage evocative of Edward Said’s critique of colonial representations, Murray notes that the myth of the island paradise is based on the consolidation of a system of power-knowledge that incorporates the motifs of the sea voyage, the shipwreck and the encounter with “savages” to motivate strategies of land management and social control. The treatment of Robinsonades (the literary genre inspired by Daniel DeFoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe*) as “truth discourses” (xvii) in English school syllabi in the nineteenth century reveals how the ideological codes of “progress, economics and ‘improvement’” (20) expressed by DeFoe framed imperial culture, imbuing the imagination of colonized subjects with notions of local inferiority and inadequateness. Such literary works normalized the discursive construction of far away lands as detached havens where the enterprising European male proved his worth by taming the (human and natural) wilderness. They also posed the islands in a dialectical relationship with Europe as they became “shadows” of England, subject to the superior maritime, military and agrarian technology of the colonizers. Although Murray does not refer to them, it could be added that the multiplication of cultural representations inspired by the mythology of fantasy islands in U.S. media, as exemplified by the TV series *Lost* (ABC 2004 – 2010), the reality show *Survivor* (CBS 2000 – present), and Robert Zemeckis’ movie *Cast Away* (2000), testify to the entrenched nature of the

trope of the entrepreneurial Western self struggling to prevail over an anonymous yet threatening island wilderness.

The trope of appropriation and botanical management of unknown territories recurs in *Island Paradise: the Myth*, placing the lush vegetation of Sri Lanka and the Caribbean in opposition to the disciplined fields and gardens of the metropole and making it instrumental to discourses of colonial authority. The focus on control helps Murray to explore how the utopias associated with tropical islands relied on spatial coordinates based on the dichotomy between garden and jungle, especially evident in the British interventions on Sri Lankan landscape, that betrayed a panoptical and all-encompassing approach to unknown space. These oppositions resurface in Kincaid, Scott, Gunesequera and Arasanayagam's depictions of nature, communicating contrasting feelings of security and confinement. With reference to Scott and Arasanayagam's works, Murray writes that such binarisms return as a reflection on the centralizing and ideological bias of colonial geography where home and elsewhere become synonyms of presence and absence/lack.

This analysis suggests that such cognitive mapping informed a uniform reading of islands as ideological and social templates, a point made by all those postcolonial and eco- critics who have stressed the universality of colonial representations. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007, 9) has written, the "discourse of islands repeated itself rhizomatically, along a westward trajectory". Regarding islands as edenic realms, the hierarchical gaze places them outside time and space as anonymous backdrops that the West encounters *in medias res* on its march towards self-fulfillment. It is the universal "system of 'islandism'" (ibid., 10) created by the thrust of European expansion that allows Murray to bring together the Caribbean archipelago and the island of Sri Lanka under a coherent analytical framework, regardless of their differences.

Island Paradise: the Myth detects a continuity in the erratic trajectory of the contemporary writers' lives, linked to their shared need to engage with tropical nature and architecture to re-imagine their experience of displacement. Their writings bring together the northern and southern hemispheres, metropolitan and indigenous cultures in a movement that has no fixed trajectory, crossing borders between traditions and cultures to create what Murray defines a "syncretic whole" (185). Referring to Gunesequera's novel *Reef* (1994), Murray argues that the author's search for origins is frustrated by an experience of displacement that locates home in writing: the creative act foregrounds routes in place of roots. She writes: "Gunesequera claims that his work places emphasis on people and not on place; hence, 'home' is created in the language through imagination" (101). This author's migration, like that experienced by Kincaid, Scott and Arasanayagam, the latter forced to relocate in a refugee camp during the

anti-Tamil riots in 1983, follows a fractal pattern that de-centers the linear trajectories of Western cartography. Scott's novel *Witchbroom* (1992), for instance, that makes use of magical realism to review the European colonization of the Caribbean, incorporates childhood recollections, fantasies, nightmares and the imaginary tales of colonial education to map the unforeseeable pauses, jolts and interruptions of memory and time. In this novel the longitudinal and latitudinal rules of colonial maps are overturned by a re-visioning that speaks of an illusory sense of place. This argument returns in Arasanayagam's experience whose decision to reside in Sri Lanka does not prevent her from feeling alienated in her own motherland. The tension between homing and dispersal expressed in her novels and poetry inspires the "search for the 'innocent' garden of ... colonial childhood" (195) that she invokes as a sanctuary of peace in torn Sri Lanka. By acknowledging the fictional nature of this imaginary place, Arasanayagam voices a need to establish a sense of place where no stability is guaranteed. Her experience of marginalization and retreat into fantasy and hopes articulates the ambiguous nature of islands as both a troubled space and a safe haven, concurring to give birth to the imaginary homelands of diasporic subjects.

Focusing on the "double relation" that the writers entertain with the locations they have chosen as home, Murray thus establishes an implicit dialogue with Walcott's narrator in "Names" whose invocation of water and remote constellations symbolizes the impossible task of looking for the origins of peoples whose "history folds over a fishline". By focusing instead on the creative act of imagination and on the subversive power of representation, *Island Paradise: The Myth* traces a rhizomatic cartography that sets the regenerative power of tidal movement against the centralizing and pre-determined paradigms that govern terrestrial geography. Its value lies in providing an interesting point of view to analyze how nature informs culture and to what extent they interact to give life to the diasporic experiences of contemporary authors from Sri Lanka and the Caribbean.

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