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## **Michelle Cliff's Non-Western Figures of Trauma**

### **The Creolization of Trauma Studies**

This paper shows that Michelle Cliff's work puts Western trauma theory through the work of creolization. It critiques the inadequacy of trauma theory *qua* colonial theory in the process of understanding a historical trauma that centers around racial (and partially gender) difference. To do so, we look at Cliff's *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* in order to question certain givens in the field of trauma studies, reconceptualize the problematic theories of this Eurocentric frame of thinking, and promote the revision of the field's intentions in order to become productive in the postcolonial context. The paper also shows that Cliff takes her readers and characters through the difficult work of re-membling Caribbean history, a history erased by colonial fables. The dissemination of historical truths and positive images of prominent black characters which were, in the past, imposing figures of resistance, helps the readers and characters to reflect upon the damage done to the country of maroon warriors in the past and the repercussions of that damage on the present. This is one step in the process of identity recovery for the main character Clare Savage, whose progressive discovery and critique of social discrepancies based on racial difference and eventual struggle enable her to understand the historical trauma of her own people and use that trauma as the root for re-constructing a positive Caribbean identity.

In the introduction to a collection of texts entitled *Caribbean Creolization*, Kathleen Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau define creolization as a "process of transverse dynamics that endlessly reworks and transforms the cultural patterns of varied social and historical experiences and identities."<sup>1</sup> This process counters colonial and neo-colonial desires for the homogenization and sometimes problematic authentication of cultures. Creolization came as a theoretical and practical polemical response to

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1. Kathleen Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau ed., *Caribbean Creolization* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 3.

colonialism in the Caribbean islands and can be linked to postcolonial thinker Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity which counters the "production of discriminatory identities that secure the pure and original identity of authority."<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I intend to creolize trauma studies by defining new figures of trauma, new sites of trauma that have not been considered by traditional conversations around trauma. I want to unveil the unhealthy colonial/patriarchal desire rooted into certain areas and arguments of psychoanalysis, and rethink these arguments through an analysis of the work of Caribbean writer Michelle Cliff in which traditional psychoanalytical concepts about self/identity formation cannot explain the characteristics of the main character's identity crisis or help us imagine its possible resolution.

In this essay, I want to combat imperial practices by denouncing the ways in which the use and manipulation of psychoanalytical concepts have participated in the imperial project of promoting the deployment of Eurocentric values made universal and reproduced so as to erase the colonized and her cultural paradigm. I want to participate in what Ranjana Khanna calls "worlding," that is "a projection into existence of certain elements in the world which now become unconcealed."<sup>3</sup> According to Khanna, "The project of worlding is one of strife between the unconcealed (worlded) and the concealed (earthed)."<sup>4</sup> My work in this essay is the work of unconcealment, of unveiling the ways in which global psychoanalytical conclusions on the characteristics and effects of trauma participate in the colonial project of erasing difference and foreclosing possible productive connections between "enemy" cultures (the ex-empire and its ex-colonies, but also the new empires and their colonial targets) in the post-colonial era.

Khanna defines psychoanalysis as a colonial discipline which has "formalized strategies to normalize a form of civilized being constituted through colonial political dynamics."<sup>5</sup> In my essay, these norms are pitted against non-Eurocentered, post-colonial social and cultural contexts. They are scrutinized and challenged by a Caribbean author who, to use a term coined by Dipesh Chakrabarty, participates in the *provincialization* of this European colonial strategy and unveils "the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force and the tragedies and ironies that attend it."<sup>6</sup>

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2. Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders," in *The Postcolonial Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 29–35, p. 34.

3. Ranjan Khanna, *Dark Continents, Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 4.

4. Khanna, p. 4.

5. Khanna, p. 6.

6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," in *The Postcolonial Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft *et al.* (London: Routledge, 1995), 383–388, p. 383.

In order to transform trauma studies into a productive post-colonial field of study, writers in/about the field have to put it through the work/process of provincialization/creolization. The field of trauma studies has to open itself up to the consideration and analysis of forgotten traumas, and it has to recognize its own delinquencies, its own colonial tradition. Moreover, it should stop pretending to draw universal conclusions as to the “nature” and effects of trauma, and begin dealing with local traumatic events and their specific characteristics and repercussions. Western criticism, which includes the field of trauma studies, should put itself at the service of understanding difference – the different historical and political trajectories of cultures, their specific traumas, their particular evolutions according to locale. Trauma theories should let themselves be transformed and transformed again by the testimonies of those who have lived through trauma. As a matter of fact, rather than looking at a testimony as the (impossible) retelling of a victim’s past (as trauma studies sometimes do), one needs to think of a testimony as “a verbal action of resistance which, as such, is not a simple statement or description of the historical conflict it narrates, but an actual intervention in this conflict.”<sup>7</sup> Through their narratives, the victims and/or witnesses of trauma both resist history as truth and become the agents of history as memory, hence the relevance of genealogical memory in the healing process after trauma. We will see that Michelle Cliff’s main character Clare Savage in *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* is both witness to the erased traumatic part of her Jamaican past (that is her maroon heritage, a heritage denied to her by her “white” father) and victim of that erasure as she is unable to know herself and her history until she begins to recuperate her mother’s and her maroon people’s genealogical memory. In *History and Memory*, Lacapra clearly articulates a useful relationship between history/identity and memory. He relies on Freud’s work on mourning and melancholia which poses melancholia as this ambiguous, even tricky concept: “both a precondition to (or even necessary aspect of) mourning and that which can block processes of mourning insofar as it becomes excessive or functions as an object of fixation.”<sup>8</sup> In an essay entitled “Mourning and Melancholia” published in 1917, Freud stressed the separation between those two processes (despite their similarities in the way they materialize) and the necessary ending of the melancholia period so that mourning can take place. However, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923),

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7. Shoshana Felman and Dauri Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnesses in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 98.

8. Dominick Lacapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 183.

Freud defines melancholia as a step in the process of mourning. According to that new, non-binary equation between mourning and melancholia, the memory of what was lost, instead of being detached from the present and future of the melancholy person or group, can remain for Lacapra a “modality or component of working through problems. Memory in this sense may become a manner of recalling misguided ventures and critically taking leave of less desirable aspects of the past as well as of attempting to honor other aspects or make them the bases of a constructive action in the present and future.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of detaching oneself from the memory of a lost object (a lost past, a lost history), the subject preserves this memory which can, in a positive and performative way, impact present and future. The subject, still impressed by this memory of what is lost, will refuse to give it up for her own benefit (healing) and to substitute this loss with a consolation prize (such as imposed empty narratives of remembering, monuments, or other techniques of memorialization) – hence the possibility for regenerating responses to loss, to death through a preservation of their memory. Hence also a reconceptualization of what it means to recover. Recovery here is not a selfish move towards self-wholeness, but a productive but difficult progression towards a future that does not erase the memory of the past and uses it to think through the possibilities for reconstructing one’s identity (a group’s, a nation’s) while keeping the past, its traumatic aspects, in mind. Clare Savage will go through this process of remembering and using the traumatic memories of her people in order to construct her own identity as a créole woman.

Trauma theories should also recognize the importance of analyzing localized traumas, the shapes they have taken, and the possibilities for new forms of resolution which depend on the traumatized individual or community’s specific needs; they should let themselves be revised, revisited by the very witnesses of trauma. Only through a dialogical relationship between (Western) trauma studies and non-Western cultural histories can trauma studies shed its colonial skin and become a universally meaningful post-colonial field – universally meaningful because concerned with an analysis of localized traumas and their specificity.

The unearthing of the concealed counter-traumatic and counter-colonial potentiality of trauma studies takes place in the work of the writers of difference like Michelle Cliff. Such writers manage to give back trauma studies its revolutionary potential by deterritorializing it, detaching it from its colonial heritage (though always recognizing and foregrounding that heritage), and transforming it into a productive post-colonial practice critical of its origins, its evolution, its violence.

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9. Lacapra, p. 185.

## Recontextualizing Creolization

Creolization/hybridization was and still is a political project that offsets conservative notions of identity and promotes the idea of constant cultural mutation, of cultural sharing. Creolization involves interaction between cultural groups, an interaction which defines the heterogeneous origin of Caribbean identity/ies. This definition is a broad one which is modified according to geographical, regional perspectives. As a matter of fact, the meaning of the term creolization and the term itself will change according to location within this non-homogeneous, linguistically and culturally pluri-dimensional place called “the Caribbean.” This notion of hybridity will, for some writers (e.g., West Indian author V.S. Naipaul), be synonymous to unrecoverable fragmentation and a life lived in the limbo of non-identity. For others (e.g., Barbadian author George Lamming), it will become a place from which to speak against and beyond colonial discourses and institutions that promote cultural essentialism and the hierarchization of cultural groups according to race/social status. Yet others will move away from that problematic binary, from these two mutually exclusive forms of displacement that become problematic either-or ontologies and thus reproduce the homogenizing practice of colonial discourse. Michelle Cliff is one of these “others” who critique the transparency of these two opposite discourses and acknowledge the ambivalence and complexity of the creole/ hybrid position. This position, one of resistance, involves both traumatic fragmentation and the possibility for making one’s voice heard, the two being intricately linked in the process of countering problematic colonial/metropolitan binarisms – binarisms found at the core of trauma studies as we will see in this essay.

Cliff puts trauma studies through the work of creolization – an ambivalent, multiple, complex process that brings forth complicated sites of trauma and figures of trauma that have not been recognized and analyzed by trauma theories. In this essay, I will rely on Michelle Cliff’s two novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone To Heaven*. I see the process of creolization she describes as performative since it participates in the project of re-telling forgotten traumatic stories and modifying a narrow metropolitan, rather static, envisioning of what trauma is and can do to one’s sense of being and belonging.

In the two above-mentioned texts by Cliff, desire for a unitary, non-fragmented self is the very root of trauma, of violence, for the main character of both texts, Clare Savage. Throughout these two texts, Clare wavers between Jamaican stories of origin and both witnesses and works (consciously and unconsciously) against the homogenization and commodification of her own and her people’s cultural identity. She

refuses the authentication of her origin through the construction of strict cultural attachments with the European side of the family, a process largely imposed by her father who is, for Clare, and as Jenny Sharpe would argue, one of the “representative figures that foreground the rhetorical strategies of the dominant discourse from which the truth-claims of [Clare’s] counter-narratives are derived.”<sup>10</sup> Clare will disturb that paternal/patriarchal/colonial imposition in *Abeng* to participate in cultural survival against the traumatic homogenization of her identity, a trauma brought about by the father’s desire to embody, and to see his “light” daughter embody, a purely modern, colonial self.

### Caribbean Traumas

As discussed above, according to very conservative notions of healing after a traumatic experience, one needs to fully overcome trauma in order to recover a well-structured sense of one’s self, one’s identity. What then happens when identity is constructed upon one or a series of traumatic historical moments? How can one overcome trauma when it literally shapes one’s history, one’s cultural identity (or absence thereof)? An archeology of the history of The Caribbean clearly points out the successive violent interventions of colonial outsiders upon the islands and their populations from the part of one or several colonial nations since 1492 – be it the Portuguese, the Spanish, the French, the English. The colonization of the Caribbean islands often involved a succession of colonial interventions, a repetition of violence without a difference except for the language in which imperial discourses and institutions were repeatedly constructed and imposed.

Michelle Cliff, in *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, writes about the trauma of Jamaica. The Arawak Indians from Venezuela and later the Carib Indians from Guinea were the first settlers of the island. Columbus arrived in 1494 followed by Spanish Jaun de Esquivel in 1510 to continue the process of destruction of Jamaican lives and culture started by Columbus. Jamaica for the Spanish was of little importance except as a passageway towards Mexico which the Spanish wanted to conquer. The British arrived in 1655 and put in place the slave economy which lasted until 1834. Jamaica was granted political independence in 1962 through the presence of a governor general, in the same ways as for Barbados, who represents the British Crown on the island. Though the head of the government is an elected Prime Minis-

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10. Jenny Sharpe, “Figures of Colonial Resistance,” in *The Postcolonial Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 99–103, p. 99.

ter, the involvement/acquiescence of the governor general is still required in certain instances. This everlasting presence of the “ghost” of the British Empire is reflected in Cliff’s work as she fictionalizes the near-impossibility for Jamaica in general, and Clare in particular, to escape the island’s oppressive colonial past<sup>11</sup>. However, Clare does manage to deconstruct the imperial and paternal panoptic gaze that holds her and her island still, and she manages to renegotiate her hybrid identity not by overcoming the traumas of the past, but by asserting them, recovering them, and by acknowledging trauma as the very stuff of her identity and history (though Cliff never lets Clare fall into the discursive trap of victimhood). According to rather traditional definitions of trauma, trauma implies a splitting of identity<sup>12</sup>. Recovery implies the mending of the wound. However, in instances that are not taken into account by trauma studies, splitting will be, against all odds, a sign of healing. This process also involves the recognition of new sites, new figures of trauma that are not discussed in psychoanalysis or trauma studies, and a rethinking of traditional psychoanalytical sites/figures of trauma.

### Trauma as Site of Memory and Identity

In *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* by Michelle Cliff, the young light-skinned Jamaican Clare Savage stands at the center of the process of memorial recovery she begins as a child. This process of recuperating the silenced side of her cultural heritage proceeds from Clare’s developing consciousness as to the existence of a gap, a lack that splits her into fragments. On the one hand, Clare is aware of her colonial heritage through her father’s repetitious grounding of his and his daughter’s identity in White colonial history. This grounding takes place through a series of legitimating narratives told by the father and the Jamaican colonial education system. These narratives are sites of indoctrination through myth-making and the totalitarian imposition of these myths upon Clare as she seeks to penetrate her obscured genealogical past. One of those myths appears in the social construction of the family name: “The definition of what a Savage was like was fixed by color, class, and religion, and over the years a carefully contrived mythology was constructed, which they used to pro-

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11. For more information about Caribbean history, see Thomas G. Mathews, *The Caribbean: History, Politics, and Culture*. (Publishing House unknown: Copyright in the United States, 1999). See also Thomas Bremer and Ulrich Fleischmann, *History and Histories in the Caribbean* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2001).

12. Ruth Leys, *Trauma: a Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 125.

tect their identities. When they were poor, and not all of them white, the mythology persisted. They swore by it.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Clare becomes aware of her mother’s difference, her not fitting into the paternal/ colonial stories of origin because of her darker appearance, and her being repeatedly silenced by the father. This silenced difference, Clare realizes, also defines her own identity, and Clare will strive to understand the wordlessness of her mother and make up for it through the recuperation of a rather female-centered Jamaican history of colonial resistance. Trauma as resistance becomes the leitmotiv of both novels and forces readers to analyze the history of Western myth-making (that is Western trauma stories and theories) and complicate that history by acknowledging the need for a disruption of it through a process initiated by Clare in the novels: she struggles against the latency of resistance history through her witnessing, wording, and analysis of Jamaica’s traumatic heritage and the social practices of trauma. To use Cathy Caruth’s argument, Clare’s encounters with her traumatic past lead to the realization that “history is no longer referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference).”<sup>14</sup> Clare-the-young-adult in *No Telephone to Heaven*, sequel to *Abeng*, will eventually consciously participate in the progressive deconstruction of patriarchal/colonial systems of reference in order for the not-known and not-said to irrupt out of the disquieted volcano of the past. However, the first step is for Clare-the-child in *Abeng* to witness the trauma of her “dark” history and perform unconsciously (though the process is made conscious for the reader by the heterodiegetic narrator) “a rethinking of reference . . . aimed at . . . permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not.”<sup>15</sup> This “arising” of history through Clare’s witnessing in *Abeng* is signified by the narrator’s interventions in the consciousness-searching story of Clare. These interventions are in fact pieces of Jamaican resistance history which come to disrupt the narrative of Clare’s life whenever she performs an important act of witnessing.

In *Abeng*, Clare-the-child visits with her father an old Jamaican plantation turned into a tourist attraction where foreigners can come and experience the “atmosphere” of a “long gone” past. There she witnesses the commodification of colonial history, a history which shows itself so tangible on the plantation since if the “white masters” are represented by “white plaster dummies from a factory in New

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13. Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Plume Printing, 1995), p. 29.

14. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 11.

15. Caruth, p. 11.



York City,”<sup>16</sup> Clare notices that “Black Jamaicans, also in period costume but alive, not replicas were paid to stand around with machetes and hoes, and give directions to the parties.”<sup>17</sup> This present witnessing of the performance of pre-abolition racial structures alludes to the colonial system still in place at the time of the narrative (1958) but is disrupted by the narrator’s intervention. As Clare witnesses and assimilates, the narrator intervenes and “permits history to arise” by taking the reader back in history through a narrative of past resistant movements to slavery.

Paradise Plantation is the place where the Savage family, ancestors of her father, used to live as producers of cane and slave owners. The “great house” where the Savage family used to live has remained untouched on the plantation while the rest of it has been turned into a tourist trap. There, foreigners can buy vacation homes the look of which takes them, rather romantically, back in history. Clare’s father wants her to visit the old house since it represents for him the remains of the glorious past of the Savage family. Upon entering, Clare’s eyes focus on the walls of the house and detect “a pattern made of the same picture, of people in a park in a city somewhere in Europe. The women wore long dresses. . . The dresses and parasols were red, the woman white. White children played across the paper, and red dogs jumped at sticks. The scenes were repeated again and again across the wall.”<sup>18</sup> As they both prepare to leave the house, and after a long observation of its insides, Clare “licked her finger and touched it to the wall, then tasted it-it was salt.”<sup>19</sup> The wallpaper which symbolizes the repetitive structure of the colonial system tastes of salt and is in fact completely covered with salt, which was used as compensation to sweating by slaves working in the plantation. Moreover, “‘salt-water’ slaves”<sup>20</sup> was the name given to slaves brought from Africa. This making visible of the slaves’ haunting presence in the master house, of the human sacrifice made in the process of preserving colonial structures and economy, takes place through Clare who becomes a medium between past and present in this newly imagined place, Paradise Plantation, which seeks to erase the violence of history. Her tasting the salt on the wall makes real the trauma of slavery and her involvement in it and feeds her growing desire to redefine herself beyond the boundaries imposed by her father. Antonio Benitez-Rojo writes that the instability of Caribbean identities “is the product of the plantation (the big bang of the Caribbean universe), whose slow explosion throughout modern history threw out

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16. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 37.

17. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 37.

18. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 24.

19. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 25.

20. John Gilmore, *Faces of the Caribbean* (London: Latin American Bureau, 2000), p. 162.

billions and billions of cultural fragments in all directions,”<sup>21</sup> fragments the “coming together and pulling apart”<sup>22</sup> of which create the creole subject. Clare, as the novel moves forward, learns to desire the *creolité*, this unstable cultural interstice her father refuses her.

Though Clare-the-child does not know all the intricacies and details of that erased creole history at the time of witnessing, her seeing and tasting of the past, and her walking around the plantation are acts of memory, acts of return to the not-known, the not-said. They are also acts of departure from the colonial structures, a departure that will become more and more conscious with age. Clare-the-young-adult in *No Telephone to Heaven* will retrospectively re-interpret, replay (thus repeat), these unconscious acts of memory and continue to construct her dispersed identity and her political struggle against colonial structures of power.

### **New Evaluations of Traumatic Return, Departure, and Repetition**

Clare’s return/departure, though unconscious at the time of witnessing, is necessary ground for the narrator’s interventions upon the structures, the references of colonial history and its representations. It is necessary ground for Clare-the-young-adult’s subsequent “’striking’ of the insight”<sup>23</sup> offered to her through the act of witnessing. However, contrary to Caruth’s argument based on her analysis of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, between Clare’s unconscious acts of witnessing/living trauma and her realization that the Jamaican colonial trauma is hers, there is no fall because the act of departure (from the myth of an ideal white colonial past promoted mainly by her “light” father) is immediately counterbalanced by the act of return (of a history of resistance to the myth). This return is not, as explained above, performed by Clare herself but by the narrator who incorporates resistance history into the narrative of Clare’s witnessing. The narrator (this other voice of history) refuses the fall through her interventions and offers Clare a different fate than the one predicted to the traumatized, the victim of history. Clare never falls victim to the unconscious traumatic loss of her colonial historical connections because as this traumatic loss grows, as the acts of witnessing trauma succeed each other, the holes are mended by

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21. Antonio Benitez-Rojo, “Three Words toward Creolization,” in *Caribbean Creolization*, ed. Kathleen Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 53–61, p. 55.

22. Benitez-Rojo, p. 55.

23. Caruth, p. 22.

the constant interventions of the narrator who continues, repeats, her new historical tale. In *Abeng*, this repetitious telling of Jamaican resistance history, the repetition of the names of resistance (Nanny the sorceress and warrior who fought against slave-owners during the Maroon revolt, Kishee her army commander, Mma Alli the obeah woman who taught the young to remember their history, etc.), is not an index of trauma. On the contrary, this narrative “acting out” of trauma through the repetition of ignored resistance stories is part of the slow process of identification Clare will continue to go through in the sequel to *Abeng*. In *Abeng*, repetition denotes Jamaican author’s Michelle Cliff’s desire for a non-resolution, a no-end to the act of witnessing trauma since this witnessing is the very road to freedom for Clare, the very stuff that will make it possible for her to redefine her identity along new historical lines. Clare-the-child’s unconscious loss of markings (markings imposed by the father) in the process of witnessing the traumatic effects of the island’s colonial past, though already disruptive to Clare’s identity, turns out to be covered and healed by the narrator’s counter-traumatic process of recuperating what was “forgotten” by her father Boy in his telling of the island’s history to Clare in *Abeng*. This pattern of recuperation is repeated in *No Telephone to Heaven* as Clare remembers and interprets her acts of witnessing with the knowledge of an adult who understands the implications of what she did witness. What is cathartic for Clare is thus not the transformation of forgetting into memory and self-representation as Freud would have it, but the conversion of the unknown; the unsaid never forgotten, though undecipherable at the time of witnessing; into knowable, utterable, acts of resistance to colonial mythologies about Jamaican self-representation and recollection.

Contrary to Caruth’s positive conclusions about Freud’s departure from the trauma of Nazism, Clare’s departure from the “traumatic” history she was born into according to her father, would be catastrophic, not at all the gift of freedom, which is how Caruth reads departure in the context of Freud’s story. Such a departure for Clare would forbid the proper weighing of returned memories instigated by the narrator of *Abeng* against patriarchal/colonial history. If the recuperation of Maroon history is crucial to Clare’s identity formation, her remaining attached to her father’s mythology of pure white origin is also crucial. Clare has to retain the memory of paternal/colonial desire – the desire to see Clare fall into monolithic categories of subjecthood – and combat this desire by keeping it within hands’ reach. The linear movement of departure, the product of trauma for Caruth and prospect of freedom, becomes for Cliff the agent of Clare’s trauma in the same way as it has been an agent of Jamaica’s historical trauma (Caribbean exiles living in the “motherland” embody

that trauma for V.S. Naipaul), hence the intervention of Cliff's historical returns in *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*.

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the ego is constituted through the very process of alienation. Hence Lacan's conclusion that the ego is in fact an alter ego since identification with the Other takes place in the process of ego formation. The term used by Lacan to refer to that process by which alterity becomes central to subject formation is extimacy.<sup>24</sup> In *Abeng*, Boy the father both symbolic and real, is responsible in part for Clare's disappearance (a disappearance against which she fights), her departure from herself. He is the symbolic Father/Other through whom Clare is expected to constitute her subjectivity. His traumatic ever-present shadow in Clare's life forces her into a process of adaptation to a reality regimented by a patriarchal/colonial symbolic order. This conforming process implies, for Clare, a betrayal of the mother/owner of counter-colonial knowledge, and of herself who is biologically (essentialism comes in but for a good cause) and culturally the heiress of that very knowledge. The omnipresence of the symbolic law of the father forces maternal knowledge and power into absence, but this binary opposition against which Clare struggles as she lives under its aegis is indeed disrupted through Clare's acts of witnessing. Clare's departure from the colonial matrix through her acts of witnessing in *Abeng* is later materialized in *No Telephone to Heaven* by her actual departure from colonial Jamaica to New York in 1960 when Clare is fourteen, and later to London where she lives and studies until she makes her comeback to Jamaica in the 1980s. She will then take the decision to fight on the side of resistance to governmental powers which, though officially independent from the British rule, are still the faithful heirs to colonial governments in the 1980s (and today). This return is, on the one hand, a physical return to and recovery of the native/real mother/land though land and mother were never forgotten, and on the other hand, the beginning of Clare's material involvement in the armed struggles against the remains of the Empire. This physical departure/ return is again, not marked by the curse of trauma since Clare continues, even abroad, as she lives and grows in America and then England, the process of filling in the gaps and holes created by her father's myths. Though Clare will always be bonded genealogically to a violent colonial structure, Clare-the-young-adult rediscovers her mother's erased history and her citizenship in a new nation that strives to preserve its practical bonds to the past and limit the in-

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24. or further development on the concept of extimacy (*extimité*), see Jacques Alain Miller in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, ed. March Bracher et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 75.

fluence of more unpractical ones. Through this process of departure/return, this constant movement of migration, Clare is definitely undone, but this undoing is performative as Clare becomes the meeting place between different pasts, as well as between these pasts and the present of Jamaica in the 1980s. She also becomes a figure of hope for the future, a positive vision of recovery from colonial lies, against cultural disavowal. According to Anne Cvetkovich, "Migration can traumatize national identity, producing dislocation from or loss of an original home or nation. But if one adopts a depathologizing approach to trauma, the trauma of immigration need not be healed by a return to the natural nation of origin or assimilation into a new one."<sup>25</sup> In the context of Clare's story, thanks to her acts of witnessing and her actual physical departure from and return to the island, migration is not traumatic because it implies this double movement of intellectual and physical departure and return, a movement that prevents the traumatic fall. This movement never implies an eventual return to the nation of origin, nor does it involve assimilation into a new one. Clare does return to Jamaica, but a Jamaica quite different from the place defined and described for her by her father. The Jamaica she returns to is the place she has managed to reconstruct through this constant migration process, these theoretical and physical departures/ returns that have helped her come to terms with the absolutism of her father's stories of origin. Clare embodies the successful contestation of cultural hegemony and comes to replace the negative image of the exile in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, for whom both departure and return are unrecoverable traumatic events that forever prevent any kind of identity recovery and negate the possibility for finding a place one could call home.

### **New Figures of Trauma, New Figures of Knowledge**

Theorist Laurie Vickroy recognizes "the mother/daughter relations as an important locus of identity formation."<sup>26</sup> She also describes this relation as a locus where the "perpetuation of traumatic legacies"<sup>27</sup> takes place. In this part of the essay, I want to look at the ways in which Michelle Cliff redefines the mother-daughter relation as a locus of knowledge and resistance, and not simply as a tie that enables the continua-

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25. Anne Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 121.

26. Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p. 10.

27. Vickroy, p. 10.

tion of trauma, though trauma there is. Clare's mother does not only "offer" her daughter a traumatic legacy, on the contrary. Clare is made aware of Jamaica's traumatic past and thus steps into history through the voice of her mother and other women around her. These voices are counter-traumatic since they participate in the events of return in the departure/return process I described earlier. In Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, the concept of the devouring mother<sup>28</sup> in the pre-oedipal child-mother relationship, and his focus on the child's "duty" to detach herself/himself from her in order to enter the social realm in the oedipal phase, puts the mother in a lesser position than the father in her role as parent since she is the one from whom one needs to get away, the one from whom one needs to be "saved," when seeking social acceptance. For Lacan, the father, not the mother, owns the keys to the social realm. In Cliff's *Abeng* and *No Telephone To Heaven*, Clare's mother Kitty is the one who saves her daughter from rejection by the social realm as she erases her own self. Clare's mother keeps her maroon legacy, her non-Western, non-White origins silent so that her light-skinned daughter can find her place in the racist Jamaican social system. Though this "other" origin is obvious from the color of her skin (Clare's mother is "red"; she is of European and Maroon descent), Kitty never clearly acknowledges her maroon heritage in front of her daughter: "Better to have this daughter accept her destiny and not give her any false hope of alliance which she would not be able to honor. Let her passage into that otherworld be as painless as possible."<sup>29</sup> Kitty remains quiet, subdued to her husband's desire to pass Clare as a young white girl and erase Clare's other heritage. The father, Boy Savage, takes over, rejects his wife's and daughter's difference, and imposes upon them the racist myths produced by colonial powers through Jamaican cultural amputation. He embodies a patriarchal/colonial social system of control in which women are objectified and rejected if they are too "dark," and pedestalized if their skin is light. This system is regimented by its Eurocentrism, its racism, its dogmatism, and its lack of ethics. Through his teaching of a dubious version of history, his history, Boy tries to pass onto her daughter the meta-narratives (to use Lyotard's term) constructed by and through colonial institutions. Boy's own indoctrination (as a child) into a realm built and controlled by "a force outside himself which was responsible for all,"<sup>30</sup> a force promoting separation between races through scientific proof and religious

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28. See Lacan's 1956–57 seminar on object relations for further information on the "devouring mother" in *Le Séminaire, Livre IV: La Relation d'Objet et les Structures Freudiennes* (Paris: Seuil, 1994).

29. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 129.

30. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 44.

dogma, led him to believe in the concept of the “elect,” “those whose names were recorded before time. Those who no matter what they did or did not were the only saved souls on earth.”<sup>31</sup> This belief, Boy strives to force it into Clare whom he wants to see continue the White Savage line through the promotion of colonial mythology/ideology. By doing so, Boy serves to secure the repetition of Jamaican history qua trauma. He is the cannibal, the one who devours the child and the mother both so as to perform their personal and historical erasure. As Clare observes both father and mother she becomes conscious of her father’s desire to mold her so as to fit colonial structures of oppression. Clare does take in her father’s teachings and takes advantage, though in a very conscious and often guilty manner, of her “lightness” and her mastery of “proper English.” In an episode where she and her “dark” friend Zoe sunbathe naked near the river on Clare’s grandmother’s property, Clare steps back in the position of privilege she had left aside while playing with Zoe in order to scare away a cane-cutter observing them from a distance: “‘Get away, this is my grandmother’s land.’ She had dropped her patois – was speaking buckra – and relying on the privilege she said she did not have.”<sup>32</sup> This episode follows an earlier conversation between her and Zoe during which Zoe, whose only language is *patois*, points out Clare’s privileged social position and weighs Clare’s past and future against hers. Zoe does not see Clare as one of her people: “Fe wanna people have been here long, long time. Dem own land. Dem have meeting in dem parlor. But fe me people been here long, long time too. We even been slaves.”<sup>33</sup> This originary difference will separate them when they enter womanhood, Zoe foresees. Even if Clare does not want to accept Zoe’s predictions, the cane-cutter episode makes her reflect upon her friend’s words, and Zoe’s intervention becomes for Clare another illuminating moment after which she feels the split between “white and not white, town and country. . . Boy and Kitty”<sup>34</sup> grow wider and deeper.

Despite her occasional safe returns to a position of privilege, Clare does manage to interrupt and counteract her father’s narratives and teachings. Despite the father’s marked influence upon his daughter, Clare, through her acts of witnessing, reads and analyzes her mother’s silences in order to disrupt the world order imposed by the father. Kitty’s silencing, though quasi total in the presence of the father, gets perturbed through the intervention of characters and events that force Kitty’s maroon

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31. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 45.

32. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 122.

33. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 118.

34. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 119.

heritage to come out. Clare is a witness to these “coming outs” and works to weigh them against her father’s imposed knowledge. The mother’s interventions lead to very conscious moments of questioning for Clare who feels split as she witnesses the subtle struggle between her mother’s past and her father’s version of the past. One of these interventions take place as the Savage family passes a mourning march on their way to Kingston. As the mourning party marched on, they were singing in a language “strange, unrecognizable”<sup>35</sup> to Clare. When Clare asked her parents, “what are they saying,” Kitty alone was able to answer, “They are singing in the old language; it is an ancient song, which the slaves carried with them from Africa,”<sup>36</sup> to which the father says, “some sort of pocomania song.”<sup>37</sup> Boy’s disrespect for the cultural heritage brought by Jamaican slaves is contrasted by his wife’s knowledge of that heritage and the language associated with it. This father/mother division reoccurs throughout the novel and infuses in Clare this feeling of a split: she is torn between mother and father, old language and colonial language, plural history and Western colonial knowledge. Another instance of disruption of patriarchal/colonial knowledge erupts when the mother-daughter relation is undisturbed by, separated from, the lucubration of the father. During these very short moments, Kitty partially unveils the extent of her knowledge about Maroon culture. One such moment of unrestrained sharing informs Clare on the medicinal power of the plants that grow in the small town of St. Elizabeth, her home town: “Kitty knew the uses of Madame Fate, a weed that could kill and that could cure. She knew about Sleep-and-Wake. Marjo Bitter. Dumb Cane. . . She knew that if the bark of the [Goodwood] tree came in contact with sweating pores, a human being would die quickly. She taught her daughter about Tung-Tung, Fallback, Lemongrass. . .”<sup>38</sup> Kitty is to some extent the embodiment of the late maroon female healer Mma Alli, a slave on the Savage plantation, who used to “[teach] her children the old ways – the knowledge she brought from Africa – and told them never to forget them and to carry them on.”<sup>39</sup> Though Kitty does not tell her daughter to carry on the knowledge of her ancestors, she is a site of memory for such knowledge, a knowledge Clare welcomes and takes in in the same manner as she takes in her father’s teachings. Such revelations would have been dismissed by Boy who, contrary to Kitty, believes in the benefits of city life, the city Kingston being the locus of production and reproduction of colonial power struc-

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35. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 50.

36. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 50.

37. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 50.

38. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 53.

39. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 34.



tures Boy defends and perpetuates. Kitty, though silenced by her husband, will throw fits of anger during which the voice of the past, which she strives to subdue in order to make life easier for her “light” daughter, will come out. Kitty shares these hysterical outbursts with other female characters in the novel, characters that talk back to and resist the very structures that keep their knowledge and life confined to a set of roles and codes to be respected. They take patriarchal/colonial institutions through a re-mystification as they replace patriarchal/colonial mythology with the myth-making traditions inherited from female Jamaican slaves. They represent a distance from origins, a renouncement of what De Man called “the desire to coincide”<sup>40</sup> with certain given understandings or meanings of social structures. They open the way towards new kinds of reading (and writing) of history, and permit a critique of and flight from the doctrines or set of practices that sustain colonial myths. Their knowledge comes through as mnemonic traces of the past that constantly return and restitute whatever has been concealed by colonial history. They consume this imposed history, these imposed structures, and loudly counter the very institutions that define their female maroon knowledge as ignorance. Kitty feels the weigh of this erasure in Jamaica and reacts to it punctually.

In *No Telephone to Heaven*, the Savage family is forced into a move from Jamaica to America by Boy who seeks economic achievement out of the move. In 1960 racist America, Kitty, forced to work for a laundry business, feels even more heavily her silenced position than on the island. Boy, giving into the capitalistic desire promoted in Jamaica by the influence of Western Europeans and Americans, displaces Kitty from home to a foreign place where nothing at all is familiar. She loses her “place of reference – the place which explained the world to her,”<sup>41</sup> that is the island, and is forced to become a ‘faithful servant’ in a cleaning business. This state of servitude to her husband’s dreams places her in an abusive economic system which employs people like her, people who speak with a strange accent. Her job is to rid garments of their dark stains for a cleaning store called White’s Sanitary Laundry, “White” referring to the name “Mrs. White,” the supposed owner of the place, a constructed character who came out of the imagination of the very real Mr. B. The owner uses the association between white middle-class women and the traditional occupation of cleaning the home to attract businessmen into his store. Paradoxically enough, only colored and “exotic” working class women perform the cleaning tasks in the store.

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40. Paul De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 173–210.

41. Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (New York: Plume Printing, 1996), p. 66.

Thus, to her husband's silencing, Kitty can add a whole country's unwillingness to listen to the unfamiliar: "people are used to certain sounds. . . it confuses them when there are new ones . . . especially from exotic places."<sup>42</sup> Kitty resents this forced silence and will disrupt it punctually through a rewriting of the messages put in the pockets of clients to promote the cleaning store and encourage their return. Instead of simple advertising messages meant to help the store prosper, Kitty writes inflammatory notes about the racial and social inequalities she is able to witness around her: "Ever try to cleansing your mind of hatred? Think of it,"<sup>43</sup> and "We can clean your clothes but not your heart. . . White people can be black-hearted."<sup>44</sup> These little acts of subversion are reinforced by Kitty's betrayal of the cleansing project embodied by the imaginary Ms. White through her adoption of a new female figure as point of reference in her life. After a visit to a New York Cuban store and the encounter with the statue of La Morenita, the black virgin, she decides to return to Jamaica with her second daughter, her 'dark' daughter, and leaves Boy and Clare behind. She does not leave, however, before going back to the cleaning store and write one of her last illuminating messages: "Hello. Mrs. White is dead. My name is Mrs. Black. I killed her."<sup>45</sup> This "hysterical" note of assassination and Kitty's departure mark her recuperation of voice and self. She can redefine herself through her black/maroon heritage, a process which does not have any impact upon the social and cultural structures that promote separation through difference. She can only recuperate her sense of self by departing, escaping from Boy and an oppressive economic system. This self-marginalization, her return to Jamaica, and then soon-to-come death imply a failure which thankfully Clare will know to avoid. However, it is a failure that does not erase Kitty's mad desire to change with the means at hand the fate of her clan. This desire is clearly expressed for the first time to Clare in the last of her letters to her daughter: "I hope someday you make something of yourself, and someday help your people."<sup>46</sup>

In *Abeng*, different historical figures, cultural ancestors of Kitty and Clare, come into the narrative as "hysterical" interruptions that seek to disrupt the structures of colonial power. Nanny, a Jamaican revolutionary figure, "the sorceress, the obeah-woman,"<sup>47</sup> was the leader of the "Windward Maroons" who held out against the

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42. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 74.

43. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 78.

44. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 81.

45. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 83.

46. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 103.

47. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 14.

forces of the white men longer than any rebel troops. They waged war from 1655 to 1740. Nanny was the magician of this revolution: “she used her skill to untie her people and to consecrate their battles.”<sup>48</sup> This historical and hysterical (if we define hysterical knowledge and practices as counter-colonial practices, as going against the dissociation of colonized bodies from her or his history and performing a new dissociation from colonial structures) female warrior and leader of her people is a focal point of the novel. Her ghost seems to haunt Kitty and other female characters of Cliff’s fiction as Nanny reappears throughout the novel when her intervention as counter-traumatic remembering of the past is needed. She is a haunting presence made visible and audible through punctual hysterical calls for rebellion against colonial practices and discourses. One of these calls takes place through Mma Alli who, by lying with a woman, teaches her how to “make her womb move within her.”<sup>49</sup> Mma Alli was a slave on the Savage plantation, and through her relationship with Inez – Clare’s great-grandmother on the side of her father who was raped by Judge Savage – and other women on the Savage plantation, she passed on necessary knowledge and strength so that the slave women could “keep their bodies as their own, even when they were made subject to the whimsical violence of the justice.”<sup>50</sup> The link between Mma Alli’s teachings on the “wondering womb” are intriguing considering very early medical explanations of the “disease” called hysteria as the erratic movement of the womb in the body of the sick woman. The cure to that disease was replacement of the womb in its appropriate place. Here, Mma Alli teaches hysteria in order to counter the traumatic dissociation performed through violent colonial practices. Slave women regain strength through this recalling of obeah practices, the recovery and repetition of slave knowledge which opposes itself to the bodily, cultural, and social paralysis imposed by colonial structures upon colonized women – whether enslaved like Mma Alli or freed like Kitty and Clare. Mma Alli’s cultural counter-practice serves as a point of departure for Inez and her descendants to fight against the colonial myths, the colonial “hallucinations” that promote personal and cultural dissociation from one’s history. Hence, if hysteria produces paralysis, it is on the side of the colonizer that this paralysis is witnessed, and it signifies the recovery of counter-narratives to patriarchal discourses and the uncovering of their hallucinatory nature and their innate violence. Towards the end of the novel, Clare, questioning the worthiness of her father’s teachings, will begin the active process of

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48. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 14.

49. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 35.

50. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 35.

“paralyzing” his discourse as she refuses to go and live with Mrs. Phillips, an old friend of the Savage family who will teach her how to become a “lady.” When Kitty describes Mrs. Phillips to Clare as a nice person, but someone who “is narrow-minded about colored people. You know a little like your father,”<sup>51</sup> Clare responds, “Then what do you want me to learn from her?”<sup>52</sup> Clare’s reaction is proof of her transformation from “daddy’s girl” into “mommy’s defender” as she dismisses her father’s point of view and asserts her desire to stay with her mother whom she wants to learn from. Unfortunately, and despite Kitty’s hysterical tantrums against patriarchal institutions, Clare will be forced by her re-silenced mother to obey her father’s decision. Despite Kitty’s disavowal of her daughter’s racial consciousness, Clare has reached an epiphany towards the end of the novel and can recognize Jamaica as the locus of unfair racial and social (the two being intricately linked) hierarchization. She will continue that metamorphosis in *No Telephone to Heaven*, a metamorphosis which eventually takes Clare black to Jamaica where she will participate in the armed struggle against a corrupted Jamaican government post-colonial only in name.

The women’s “hysterical” resistance in *Abeng* demonstrates that the colonial construction of aboriginal women’s knowledge as ignorance, as a backward reliance on a past dismissed by colonial history, is in fact an index of the empire’s refusal to memorize, to acknowledge history. Thus, hysterical resistance involves a post-colonial reading of negation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses the relationship between knowledge and ignorance in *Tendencies*. She posits ignorance as being inextricably intertwined with knowledges which, in fact, give birth to ignorance: “there exists . . . a plethora of ignorances, and we may begin to ask questions about the labor, erotics, and economics of their human production and distribution. Insofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge. . . these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth. . .”<sup>53</sup> The production of ignorance by the colonial matrix is counterbalanced by women who in *Abeng* impose a re-reading, a revision of history through madness.

Madness is one of the “pathologies” that have been widely described and studied by psychoanalysts. Psychoanalytical theorist Shoshana Felman asserts that today, madness is a commonplace and cannot be imprisoned within the realm of the patho-

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51. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 151.

52. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 151.

53. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 25.

logical anymore. Madness is part of the everyday. The question of the place of madness in the everyday is often combined with that of the status of knowledge. Felman states that what interests us today is not an answer to the question “who knows?” (the master does not matter), but an answer to the question “What is knowledge?”<sup>54</sup> In *Abeng*, Mad Hannah, gone mad after the death of her son Clinton, becomes a site of knowledge through her very madness. Mad Hannah is the product of the inhuman behavior of St. Elizabeth’s community which refuses to help Hanna and “assist her in the rite of laying the duppy at peace”:<sup>55</sup>

No one came to sing the duppy to rest and put bluing on the eyelids of Clinton, nail his shirt cuffs and the heels of his socks to the board of the casket. No one to create the pillow filled with dried gunga peas, Indian corn, coffee beans, or to sprinkle salt into the coffin and make a trail of salt from the house to the grave. . . So Mad Hannah buried her son alone the next morning when it should have been done at midnight. On the third night after the burial she saw his duppy rise from the grave.<sup>56</sup>

The reason behind the community members’ shunning of Mad Hannah lies in their belief in the rumors about her son’s sexual difference. Clinton’s gayness, his “sinful” destabilization of the patriarchal/colonial, strictly gendered structures regimenting St. Elizabeth’s community – structures internalized by its members – requires punishment even after death. Mad Hannah’s wandering around the city looking for her son’s duppy is a reminder of the community’s failure in assisting one of its members, a reminder of their guilt in choosing the values of a system that alienates them from their beliefs and cultural roots. The guilt, however, disappears with Mad Hannah after the Baptist preacher of St. Elizabeth – representative of the very discourse that condemned her son and his like for their “sin” in the eyes of the community – has her arrested and sent to an asylum.

According to Shoshana Felman, cultural history has to open to the presence inside and outside itself, as well as to open the meaning of madness. Felman argues that madness should become a tool in the process of reading and re-reading cultures, nations, or simply texts. Madness involves certain linguistic procedures which transform what appears as logic into a counter-rhetoric that is coherent. Madness and its rhetoric lead towards demystification and thus, calls for different readings, mad

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54. Shoshana Felman, *La Folie et La Chose Littéraire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978), p. 12.

55. Cliff, *Abeng*, p. 63.

56. Cliff, *Abeng*, pp. 63–4.

readings that unveil the arbitrary nature of the sign, the colonial sign in the case of Michelle Cliff's novel *Abeng*. This madness, Clare inherits it from her ancestors and Mad Hannah herself when she decides to go hunt for Massa Cudjoe the wild pig in order to show her opposition to the gendered binaries to which Clinton and her mother fell prey. She fails in this endeavor, and though this desire for resistance to the place assigned to her is eventually restrained by her forced departure for Mrs. Phillips' house, it does not dissolve in thin air. Clare's trajectory throughout *Abeng* leads to the death of another sort of "pig," the symbolic father, and to the birth of a maternal metaphor (as opposed to Lacan's 1957 concept of the paternal metaphor) as Clare progressively replaces the word of the father by that of the mother. In *Abeng* Clare's desire for maternal knowledge induces a re-identification outside the framework of patriarchal/colonial structures, though Clare never negates the role played by these structures. Though politically outside of them, she will perform her role as a "white lady" until adulthood and her involvement in the turmoils of the Jamaican struggle for racial equality.

### **Resistance against Nationalistic, Traumatic Use and Abuse of Creole/Hybrid Rhetoric**

In *Abeng*, Clare strives to reconstruct herself beyond the racial and social boundaries imposed by the colonial system. What she desires to promote is a creolized/hybridized identity which could become a place from which to speak and fight against the oppressive structures of colonial power. *No Telephone to Heaven* begins with a scene that shows post-independence Jamaica at the heart of racial and social tensions. Clare has joined forces with an armed group that seeks to defend the Jamaican population across racial differences, a group which works to fight the remnants of a colonial system the structures of which have been adopted by successive post-independence Jamaican governments. Charles V. Carnegie explains that in post-independence Caribbean nations, "tensions have sometimes arisen between the ideology of the state and that of the majority of the population."<sup>57</sup> Jamaica has been and still is the preferred site for such a tension. As a matter of fact, post-independence Jamaica is, in *No Telephone to Heaven*, a site of racial and social tensions. Carnegie points out the problematic behavior of a "brown middle class (who also hold political office), who are afraid that their historically privileged position

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57. Charles V. Carnegie, *Postnationalism Prefigured, Caribbean Borderlands* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 36.

will be eroded by the aspirations of the nation's black majority."<sup>58</sup> He also points out a contradiction that arose while the Caribbean was still fighting for its independence: "While being cautious not to openly advocate nationalisms based on race, the anticolonial, preindependence movement in the English-speaking Caribbean did appeal to precisely this shared popular understanding in its rhetoric."<sup>59</sup> Jamaica, for example, elevated Marcus Garvey as well as other unmistakably black historical figures to the status of heroes. The independence movement and postindependence political campaigns were definitely founded upon the positive redefinition of blackness and its potential for becoming a powerful political tool in fighting colonial structures. As Carnegie argues, "Successive postcolonial governments in Jamaica have vied each other to gain popular support through their manipulations of symbols of blackness."<sup>60</sup> However, economic power in this country is still in the hands of a local white and "brown" elite and the nationalist promise of "black political and economic sovereignty"<sup>61</sup> remains theoretical. Here the Jamaican government's promise of racial and social equality is in fact a political lie that seeks to protect the economic interests of the nation no matter how detrimental this preservation can be to the Jamaican black population. This false promise of equality and protection, and thus the Jamaican government itself (the very institutions that are there to protect the population) becomes a site of trauma that Cliff seeks to critique in her sequel to *Abeng*.

In *No Telephone to Heaven*, in an independent Jamaica, social separation based on economic status and lightness of skin are as pervasive as they were in *Abeng* under colonial rule. Paul H., a boy whom Clare meets during one of her returns to the motherland as a young adult, embodies, along with the rest of his family the post-colonial social and racial differences reinforced by the "brown middle class." Here, "brownness"/hybridity, becomes, through the racist discourse of the "brown" privileged ones, a discourse nourished by the "underlying" racism of governmental political and economic choices and practices. *No Telephone to Heaven* speaks of the conflicts that spring from such a class and racial division through the character of Christopher who, at the start of the book, appears to be the good, quiet, and obedient gardener of the H. Family. This defined position changes after Christopher asks his "buckra master," Paul's father, for a favor. Christopher, longing for his grand-mother who has been dead for thirteen years, and haunted by her image, decides to look for

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58. Carnegie, p. 37.

59. Carnegie, p. 37.

60. Carnegie, p. 35.

61. Carnegie, p. 38.

her body and give her the funeral she never had thinking that it would put her soul at rest. With that purpose in mind and feeling even more the urgency of such an endeavor after having had a few drinks, he goes to his “master” in the middle of the night and asks him for “one parcel ’pon you propity. Dat all. Fe bury she.”<sup>62</sup> Mr. H responds to Christopher’s demand angrily and with the intent of ridiculing a man who believes that a body can be recovered after 13 years spent in the ground: “Bwai, you is one true jackass. Me nuh know when me ever hear such nonsense. Firs’, she jus’ dus’ by now. Secon’, no way in hell dem can fine she.”<sup>63</sup> The answer to Christopher’s begging for a burial place is thus negative and climaxes into Mr. H’s infantilization and mocking portrayal of Christopher. Mr. H’s lack of understanding and respect for Christopher’s odd beliefs and desire, his cruel treatment of Christopher whom he deems stupid and intrusive, trap Christopher into the web of racist and elitist buckra discourse about black men like him who are the reason why “dis dan country don’t amount to nothing.”<sup>64</sup> This traumatic moment for Christopher forces an apology out of him only to then put him in a state of hysteria as he raises his machete and kills his master before assassinating the rest of the H. family. Mr. H’s refusal to help Christopher in putting his grandmother’s duppy at rest can be compared to Mad Hannah’s loneliness in confronting her son’s death in *Abeng*. Hannah’s roaming around town in search of her son’s duppy and Christopher’s violent elimination of his master are both mad disruptions of the oppressive conditions that regiment their respective lives. They are punished for their disruptive beliefs and mere presence by the colonial system and its spiritual constraints, its definition of ‘civilized’ knowledge, in the case of Hannah; and by the oppressive remains of that system in the case of Christopher.

For them, economically privileged “brown Jamaicans” are not at all the actors of resistance to colonial structures. They are their puppets, their representatives as they keep reproducing the very structures against which they swore to fight before independence. They reject their own complex liminal position and its political implications. They are not agents of change and adopt a homogeneous persona afforded to them by their “lightness” of skin and the social privileges that come with it. For the characters clearly defined as black Jamaicans such as Christopher, hybridity becomes a site of trauma since the term, which appears in nationalistic discourses that promote equality, only comes to mean as the defining trait, the very site, of privilege.

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62. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 46.

63. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 47.

64. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 47.



This envisioning of the hybrid as both site and perpetrator of the colonial trauma is of course veiled by positive discourses of national unification through racial difference. In order to give hybridity back its political potential for resistance and productively counter, though in very punctual ways, the image of the hybrid as traitor to the cause of racial equality, Clare joins the armed forces that seek to protect restless Jamaican underprivileged racial/social groups against the wrath of a government that in fact promotes social separation through racial difference. This process of recuperation of a positive hybridity reaches a climax when Clare learns of her mother's death. This loss makes her more aware of the need to speak up her hybrid origin in her mother's stead. She then brings forth her mother's heritage by reminding her father of the fact that "my mother was a nigger"<sup>65</sup> when he accuses Clare of having "more feelings for niggers than for your own mother" after he realizes Clare is not crying over her mother's death. Rather than cry, which is what Boy does when he learns of his wife's death, Clare takes on the responsibility to continue her mother's hysterical fight against history. Her joining the armed forces against the enemies of independent Jamaica symbolizes her participation in "this new sort of history"<sup>66</sup> that she has taken on, a history at the center of which she stands:

I am in it. It involves me. . . the practice of rubbing lime and salt in the backs of whipped slaves. . . the promised flight of Alexander Bedward in rapture back to Africa. . . cruelty. . . resistance. . . grace. I'm not outside this history – it's a matter of recognition. . . memory. . . emotion.<sup>67</sup>

Clare recognizes her hybrid position as both victimizer and victim in the history of her nation. She proposes to stop denying the presence of that contradiction in the process of her becoming Jamaican, and turns this contradiction into a place from which to denounce the aforementioned political contradiction upon which Jamaica has constructed itself after independence (blackness as both nationalistic rhetorical tool for equality and material site of social and economic distress). Clare redefines *créolité* as the positive, personal and historical counter-traumatic process of unveiling contradictions and restoring agency through a re-imagining of what cultural heterogeneity can bring to history. This re-imagining counters the oppressive presence of Mrs. White (Mr. B's invention for his the laundry store), a false figure of purity which in fact seeks to hide traumatic colonial and neo-colonial structures of

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65. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 104.

66. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 194.

67. Cliff, *No Telephone*, p. 194.

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racial, social, and gendered oppression. Clare's re-imagining involves the unveiling of the traumatic patriarchal/colonial project of forced forgetting of Jamaica's plural, "hysterical" history. It also re-invents creole identity as a complex meta-metropolitan, meta-colonial position. These two adjectives point to a place both inside and outside colonial and post-colonial discourses about otherness, a place that deconstruct the colonial/post-colonial dichotomy and stresses the entanglement of these discursive structures. These two adjectives point to a place of resistance which integrates trauma as this implicit and complicit element of resistance; as this transgressive, complex feature in the process of identity reformation away from the binary opposition of trauma/fragmentation versus healing/unity.