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Tracing Africa to Jamaica: Ethnicity,Gender and Postcolonial Identity in *Abeng*

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Resumo

O colonialismo no Caribe tem produzido padrões generalizados de hierarquização étnica e cultural. Este sistema de dominação imperialista também tem criado formas de marginalização cultural e social que tem persistido por tempo prolongado após alcançar seu fim a escravidão. Como o Caribe foi formado por contatos entre povos de África, Sul da Asia e Europa, a raça e a cultura como predicados binários da colonização e da escravidão se transformaram na estrutura primária para a diferenciação social nas colônias. Exemplo disto foi a Jamaica, o orgulho do colonialismo Britânico no Caribe desde seu controle no ano de 1655 até sua independência pouco mais de trezentos anos mais tarde, em 1962. No seu romance, *Abeng*, Michelle Cliff tece uma narrativa diferente de pertencimento, inclusão e parentesco fora da questão da identidade cultural e de gênero por sua jovem protagonista, Clare Savage, numa pré-independente Jamaica. Clare é de procedência biracial de parentes brancos e negros cujas opostas perspectivas sobre a importância do componente africano da sociedade jamaicana leva Clare à busca de uma identidade independente de raça e de gênero, a qual tem um paralelo com o caminho espinhoso da Jamaica até o nacionalismo e a independência. Em um nível mais literal o romance reconta o descobrimento de Clare da mordacidade, dos atos ocultos de violência da história de sua família paterna como brancos proprietários de escravos.

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Porém num nível simbólico, o arco da trajetória de auto descobrimento traça uma ativa apropriação de uma sugestiva rede da interação de influências multiculturais que impacta seu potencial pessoal como agente político. Oprimida entre África e Europa, entre a repressão de sua mãe de sua própria negritude e a repressão indesejável, às vezes com detalhes brutais da história da família branca, valorizada por seu padre, Clare apropria-se seletivamente das histórias raciais e de gênero de outros; de Nanny, a mulher liderança quilombola rebelde, a da jovem heroína judia Anne Frank. Para desenvolver essas intersecções de gênero, etnicidade, história e duplicidade, Clare e sua nova amiga Zoe, penetram na argamassa de seu mutuo auto-descobrimento através de seu próprio ato de violência, para obter a prova de sua igualdade com o gênero outro, mas, paradoxalmente, esse ato revela a ambas a crítica diferença desenhada sobre a violência racial da história colonial e o desafio para forjar uma crítica alternativa para suas pressões legais.

Palabras-chaves: Colonialismo, gênero, etnicidade, identidade

Abstract

While colonialism in the Caribbean produced pervasive patterns of ethnic and cultural hierarchization, this system of imperialist domination also gave rise to forms of social and cultural marginalization that persisted long after slavery itself came to an end. As the Caribbean increasingly became the stage for contacts between peoples from Africa, South Asia, and Europe, the racial and cultural binaries predicated on colonization and slavery became the primary framework for social differentiation in the colonies. Chief among these was Jamaica, the pride of Britain's Caribbean colonial holdings from its capture in 1655 to its independence a little more than three hundred years later, in 1962. In her novel *Abeng*, Michelle Cliff weaves a differential narrative of belonging, inclusion and kinship out of the quest for a gender and cultural identity by her young protagonist, Clare Savage, in a pre-independence Jamaica. Clare is the biracial offspring of white and black parents whose oppositional perspectives on the importance to be accorded to the African component of Jamaican society makes Clare's search for an independent gender and racial identity the symbolic parallel of Jamaica's

thorny path toward nationalism and independence. On a more literal level, the novel recounts Clare's discovery of and coming to terms with the searing, hidden acts of violence that haunt her paternal family's history as white colonial slaveholders. But on the symbolic level, the arc of Clare's trajectory of self-discovery traces an active appropriation of a suggestive web of multicultural influences intersecting with and impacting her potential for personal and political agency. Caught between the opposed claims of Africa and Europe, between her mother's repression of her own blackness, and the repression of the unsavory, even brutal details of the white family history so valorized by her father, Clare must selectively appropriate the histories of her gendered and racialized others; from Nanny, the female rebel maroon leader, to the young Jewish heroine Anne Frank. By developing these intersections of gender, ethnicity, history and doubleness, Clare and her newfound friend Zoe seek to cement their mutual self-discovery through their own act of violence, one meant to prove their equality with the gendered other but which paradoxically reveals both a critical difference drawn on the racial violence of colonial history and a challenge to forge a critical alternative to its pressing legacies.

Keywords: Colonialism, gender, ethnicity, identity

Resumen

Mientras el colonialismo en el Caribe ha producido patrones generalizados de jerarquización étnica y cultural este sistema de dominación imperialista también ha creado formas de marginalización cultural y social que han persistido por tiempo prolongado después de alcanzar su fin la esclavitud. Como el Caribe se formó por contactos entre pueblos de África, Sur de Asia y Europa, la raza y la cultura como predicados binarios de la colonización y la esclavitud se convirtieron en la estructura primaria para la diferenciación social en las colonias. Ejemplo de esto fue Jamaica, el orgullo del colonialismo Británico en el Caribe desde su control en 1655 a su independencia, poco más de trescientos años más tarde, en 1962.En su novela *Abeng*, Michelle Cliff teje una narrativa diferente de pertenecimiento, inclusión y parentesco fuera de la cuestión de la identidad cultural y de género, por su joven protagonista, Clare Savage, en una pre-independiente Jamaica. Clare es de procedencia biracial de parientes blancos y negros cuyas opuestas perpectivas sobre La importancia del

componente africano de la sociedad de Jamaica, lleva a Clare a buscar una identidad independiente racial y de género la cual tiene un paralelo en el camino espinoso de Jamaica hacia el nacionalismo y la independencia..Sobre un nivel más literal la novela recuenta el descubrimiento de Clare de la mordacidad, de los actos ocultos de violencia de la historia de su familia paterna como blancos propietarios de esclavos. Pero en un nivel simbólico, el arco de la trayectoria de auto descubrimiento traza una activa apropiación de una sugestiva red de interacción de influencias multiculturales que impactan su potencial personal como agente político. Oprimida entre África y Europa, entre la represión de su madre de su propia negritud y la represión indeseable, a veces con detalles brutales de historia de la familia blanca, valorizada por su padre, Clare se apropia selectivamente de las historias raciales y de género de otros; de Nanny, la mujer líder cimarrón rebelde, la de la joven heroina judía Anne Frank. Para desarrollar estas intersecciones de género, etnicidad, historia y duplicidad, Clare y su nueva amiga, Zoe penetran el cemento de su mutuo autodescubrimiento a través de su propio acto de violencia, para alcanzar la prueba de su igualdad con el género otro pero, paradójicamente, ese acto revela a ambas la crítica diferencia diseñada sobre la violencia racial de la historia colonial y el desafío para forjar una crítica alternativa para sus presiones legales.

Palabras claves: Colonialismo, género, etnicidad, identidad

While colonialism in the Caribbean certainly produced pervasive patterns of ethnic and cultural hierarchization, this system of imperialist domination also gave rise to forms of social and cultural marginalization that persisted long after slavery itself came to an end. As the Caribbean increasingly became the stage for contacts between peoples from Africa, South Asia, and Europe, longstanding racial and cultural binaries predicated on colonization and slavery became the primary framework for social differentiation in the colonies.

Chief among these was Jamaica, the pride of Britain's Caribbean colonial holdings from its capture in 1655 to its independence a little more than three hundred years later, in 1962.

In her novel *Abeng*, Michelle Cliff weaves a differential narrative of belonging, inclusion and kinship out of the quest for a gender and cultural identity by her young protagonist, Clare Savage, in a pre-independence Jamaica. Through her young protagonist, Cliff weaves a complex, differential narrative of race and rebellion out of the intersections of an occulted familial slave history and its compound social hierarchies to frame a subjective quest for a gender and cultural identity. 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" (1993: 182). These themes are inscribed and highlighted literally even before the novel *per se* opens, emerging clearly in the faux definition on the very first page that forms the novel's epigraph, "*Abeng* is an African word meaning conch shell. The blowing of the conch called the slaves to the canefields in the West Indies. The *abeng* had another use: it was the instrument used by the Maroon armies to pass their messages and reach one another." The novel's discursive and symbolic intersections of subversion and rebellion, slavery and modernity, doubleness and independence are clearly put into place here.

Clare is the biracial offspring of white and black parents whose oppositional perspectives on the importance to be accorded to the African component of Jamaican society makes Clare's search for an independent gender and racial identity the symbolic parallel of Jamaica's thorny path toward nationalism

and independence. On a more literal level, the novel recounts Clare's discovery of and coming to terms with the searing, hidden acts of violence that haunt her paternal family's history as white colonial slaveholders. But on the symbolic level, the arc of Clare's trajectory of self-discovery also traces an active appropriation of a suggestive web of multicultural influences intersecting with and forcefully impacting her potential for personal and political agency. Through her reconfiguration of colonial and Caribbean history, Cliff not only elucidates and emphasizes Caribbean women's active participation in nation-building and identity-formation from the inception of colonization, but also illuminates the myriad ways used by women to resist the patterns of violence through which men sought to inscribe the practice of patriarchy whose 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 black female characters who diachronically interact with and impact Clare through a variety of discourses and in a number of different ways. These range from Nanny, the historical Maroon leader, to the Jewish captive Anne Frank, to Inez, the mistress through kidnapping 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 notion that Caribbean women did not contest slavery, and valorizes their contributions to burgeoning postcolonial communities and identities and to the practice of resistance initially inscribed in a colonial context and now brought to material and fruition on the eve of independence. Just as Clare has not learned that "Nanny was the magician of this revolution, she used her skill to unite her people and to consecrate their battles" (CLIFF, 1984: 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" (CLIFF,1984:14). The devalorization of iconic events and personages of Jamaican history, and their erasure beneath the mantle of British colonial whiteness, is quite visible here, but is also contested by the actions of Inez, the Judge's concubine, who responds to his physical and sexual violence with a literal and symbolic act of rebellion on a major scale. The money she steals from the judge during his absence will purchase land to 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 these 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 the colonial struggle for a free Jamaica, but also on the pervasive, ever-present violence that was both part and parcel of the instigation of colonial domination, and a key tool in the appropriation of an arch-Jamaican space for the articulation of an egalitarian identity-structure. The post-colonial suppression of information regarding key events of revolt and resistance was integral to shoring up the myth of impregnability of the colonial landscape, since teaching materials for every school were generated in and controlled by the metropole. This emphasis on the British experience and its implicit corollary of unassailable domination meant that, as a consequence, colonial populations like that of Jamaica knew very little about their own past. Cliff emphasizes this lack at various points in the text, indicating in the narrative commentary that Jamaicans did not know that "of all the slave societies in the New World, Jamaica was considered among the most brutal" (CLIFF, 1984: 18), or that "the death rate of Africans in Jamaica under slavery exceeded the rate of birth" (CLIFF, 1984: 18). Thus 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" (CLIFF, 1984:20). It can be argued that not 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 both national and cultural identity structures. It is in seeking to re-appropriate

this violence, 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.

Chief among these is that Clare is in fact a mixed-race subject who has been encouraged to bury her blackness and to pass for white, a condition of doubleness that it its turn leads to the simultaneity of her “Third World/First World” identity, a liminal and, ultimately, constructed form of hybridity that ultimately cancels itself out. It might also be claimed that both her parents collude in the effort to mask her blackness, for while her father repeatedly insists that she is the inheritor of unsullied whiteness from his side of the family, her mother denies Clare her Africanness by concealing her own blackness and family history, including her relationship the young servant, Clary, who accompanied a young, ill Kitty to the hospital and –-despite her father’s claim that her name represents his allegiance to his alma mater, Clare College, Cambridge--- after whom Clare is really named. Overall, these 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” (FANON, 1967: 47). Clare’s subsequent actions are meant to enact both a response to these patterns of erasure and to forge 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" (2005, p. 23-4). The pair is a study in contrasts, and is separated by stark differences, in race, class, social standing, and education. Zoe, who is visibly black as well as economically deprived, lives in a one-room shack in the country and attends a one-room country school, in opposition to Clare, who is upper middle class, light-skinned, lives in an expensive suburb and attends an exclusive school. In what is arguably the key event in the novel, Zoe and Clare, armed with the latter's grandmother's shotgun, steal out of the house and set out to shoot a well-known wild boar named Master Cudjoe. However, the roots of this expedition, and of its important implications for the imbrication of violence, gender and identity in the text, are to be found in an earlier incident, one that establishes both the binary inscription and function 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" (CLIFF, 1984:56). As the fire gets going preparatory to cooking the hog, this overt pattern of gender differentiation and exclusion is exacerbated when the boys begin cooking a part of the hog that they refuse to either identify or share with Clare. When, finally, it is explained to her that "Is de hog's sint'ing. His privates"

(CLIFF,1984:58), this implication of an exclusive masculinity has the paradoxical effect of illuminating the unbridgeable divide that separates gender identity and its corollaries of praxis within the Jamaican social continuum. Indeed, this ineluctable realization ironically elicits even more girlish behavior on Clare's part, "She hated to cry and […] she was acting like a girl, in front of two boys who had just shut her out." And indeed, here, the extent of her submission to this dominant discourse is made quite clear, "She felt that keen pain that comes from exclusion" (CLIFF,1984: 58). What I would like to argue in the remainder of this paper, however, is that it is Clare's misapprehension of the contestatory implications of this event that occasions both her subsequent attempt to kill Massa Cudjoe and the derailment and re-siting of this act into a new framework for gender and subjective articulation.

Shooting Massa Cudjoe, who is "the descendant of what had been the predominant form of animal life on the island before the conquerors came" (CLIFF, 1984:112), becomes the object of Clare's dis-placed perspective as she makes good on her vision of self-liberation. Having paused at the river, Clare and Zoe are interrupted while sunning themselves on the riverbank. Clare waves the shotgun to scare off the intruder, "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." But this series of masculinist actions is ultimately nothing but a re-citation of pre-established male behavior patterns, and (re)tracing their hierarchies is an act that remains far from accomplishing or capturing Clare's original intent (CLIFF:1984:122). In this

context, the desire undergirding Clare's act will inevitably be foreclosed, since 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" (PARRY, 2004:28). Thus Clare manages neither to shoot the pig nor to elaborate an alternative inscription of gender difference, but instead takes out her grand-mother's prize bull, Old Joe, with a random, mis-aimed and mis-timed shot, "The bull had been shot in the head by a bullet she had meant for no-one. He was dying," (CLIFF, 1984:123), and in fact the horror of this shooting gone awry is clearly emphasized both to the reader and to the protagonists; Old Joe is described in graphic detail as being "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" (CLIFF, 1984:122). Clearly, the significance of this unintended outcome lies in Clare's misapprehension that the royal road to gender and identity affirmation lay in an imitation of this act of *uber*-masculine destruction.

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" (CLIFF,1984:123).

If this is the return of the repressed, it seems clear that what was indeed repressed was an alternative to an already valorized masculinity, one which demanded a concomitant difference in articulation, forging a path that would bridge discourse and agency to construct a framework for femininity that would neither mimic nor repeat these traces of masculinity. It is the emergence of this repression that now pushes her onto an alternative path.

As punishment, and to learn “just who you are in this world” (ibidem, p. 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 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. Importantly, 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” (CLIFF, 1984:156). Mrs Phillips thinks more of her dogs than of her black servants, and despises all those Jamaicans who are darker-skinned than she is, as well as what they call 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’” (CLIFF,1984:157). 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 social slice of Jamaican whiteness and class privilege. As Mrs Stevens takes her into her confidence, Clare discovers that Mrs Stevens' apparently inexplicable behavior is itself an act of rebellion, her 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" (CLIFF,1984:162). This episode, and its consequences, sum up the risks of difference and its corollaries of social consequence from a myriad of perspectives; the experience of mad Mrs Stevens becomes a lesson for Clare in the price of betraying a corrupt heritage of class, race and gender privilege whose primary goal is self-perpetuation at any cost. 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 a sort of coda to these diachronic inscriptions of violence that have marked Clare's journey to identitarian independence, "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" (CLIFF, 1984:165). But it is the deliberate contextualization of this conflict between the novel's key subjects 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, then Clare's wish here clearly is that the projected events do not occur.

In other words, if Clare's dream regarding Zoe is aimed at accomplishing a conscious resolution of her inner conflict, then, the manifest content, or what is actually seen by the dreamer, masks the path to the identitarian conjoining of Clare and Zoe -—and 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 ending.

In the end, then, the task of dream interpretation is beyond Clare herself, but is left to the reader and pointedly highlighted by the novel's two final sentences, "She was not ready to understand her dream. She had no idea that everyone we dream about we are" (CLIFF,1984:166). In these terms, Clare is always already one with Zoe, and together they become materially and symbolically indissoluble, embodying a dyad of gender and multiraciality that recognizes, resolves and relocates 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 their overdetermination of the unbounded inscription of identity she seeks are effectively effaced and negated in this culminating moment of coming to terms with her blackness and with her femininity.

The trajectory of this narrative and its subjects suggests that it is not simply that which is located within national borders, but our traditional perspectives on and definitions of nationalism and cultural identity and their implicit limits that must undergo revision and amplification. Ultimately, through this conjunction of ethnicity and culture, race, class and history a new framework for

a Caribbean identity and nationality on the verge of independence is engendered, shaped, and valorized; if we accept that, as Stuart Hall puts it, "a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings, *a system of representation* " (HALL, 1988:10-11), then the colonial heritage of violence challenges us to forge a critical alternative to its pressing legacies, fashioning a certain commonality of vision for the island's people through their scattered yet ineluctably conjoined voices.

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