

Alicante Journal of English Studies 27(2014): 163-178

Postcolonial Nation and Matrilineal Myth: Social Construction of Maternity in Michelle Cliff's "Clare Savage" Novels

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ABSTRACT

The aim of my essay is to show how the Afro-American writer Michelle Cliff uses the concept of matriliney in the process of the feminist recovery of the history of Jamaica. I will argue that Michelle Cliff is a writer that honors the anachronistic tradition of essentialism that is based on the notion that cultures and identities have certain innate qualities immutable irrespective of time and place. I will contend that this essentialist worldview, skews the fictive world of Cliff's much celebrated "Clare Savage novels": *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* by reducing it to facile, Manichean oppositions between the colonizer and the colonized, white and black culture. My essay will particularly focus on how Cliff's project of the affirmation of matriliney is undermined by her deep ambivalence about the institution of motherhood, which in times of slavery and decolonization was implicated in various discourses inimical to the well-being of black women.

Keywords: Black matrilineage, matriliney, female bonding, postcolonial and feminist revision of history, essentialism

Matriliney has been one of the most contentious issues in feminist discourse. The second wave of feminism with its celebration of literary foremothers gave the concept of matriliney a positive valence and a wide currency. Matrilineal narratives, that is, narratives showing how the female protagonist's identity is shaped by her foremothers,

have become a very popular means of feminist expression. In postcolonial criticism and literature, matrilineage and motherhood have been particularly charged concepts. Postcolonial matrilineal narratives have been read through the lenses of both feminist psychoanalysis and postcolonial theories that further complicated the meaning of mother-daughter bonding. Some of these narratives are allegories of decolonization, in which a postcolonial daughter emancipates herself from her mother's colonial mindset. In others, conversely, the recuperation of matrilineal ancestry teaches the uprooted, often diasporic daughter how to embrace her cultural female heritage through her mother, who often remains the daughter's only connection to her homeland. Thus in postcolonial cultures, affected by ruptures of history, forceful dislocation and erasure of collective memory, matrilineal narratives have become one of the most popular methods of reclaiming and reimagining the past. They have helped to create a new communal mythology that, in the words of Edouard Glissant (1999: 70), provides "frames of reference of the collective relationship of men with their environment" and satisfies the uprooted peoples' desire for "the primordial source . . . the explanation of origins, the echo of genesis, that which reorients the evolution of the collective drama" (Glissant, 1999: 79). To put it another way, matrilineal narratives are instrumental in establishing cultural identities based on new "frames of reference" (Glissant, 1999: 79) that can produce a sense of continuity and stability in order to compensate for vicissitudes of the actual history.

The aim of my essay is to show the pitfalls of such an "ethnographic approach" (Glissant, 1999: 14) to historical revisionism; an approach which flies in the face of the recent valorization of hybridity and creolization in both postcolonial and cultural studies. I will focus on the literary output of Michelle Cliff, the African American writer of Caribbean pedigree, who has received significant critical attention for her efforts to establish a female plot of national genesis and recover matrilineal histories of Jamaica. Her two novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* focus on the burgeoning political consciousness of the main character Clare, who struggles to come to terms with the complex history of her family and island. Her narratives were praised by both postcolonial/Caribbean critics for their "lyrical reenactment of lives banished from history books" (*Voice Literary Supplement*) and by feminist critics for their attempt to "re-inscribe the space of the mother into the past, present and future of the colonized island" (Cloud, 2009: 9). In the words of Jennifer J. Smith, in these critiques, "Clare is often posited as an ideal nuanced subject," and as static and exemplary figure, who "is celebrated as Bertha fully realized and Antoinette fully conscious" (2009: 150). To put it another way, Cliff's work appeals to feminist and postcolonial critics—her "Clare Savage" novels are postcolonial counter-discourses that reconfigure the history of the island from the perspective of the colonized, and, the same time, they are manifestoes that "offer feminist modes of political and social action" (Smith, 2009: 142). This explains why most of criticism of Cliff's prose is, as Jennifer J. Smith claims, "unabashedly celebratory" (2009: 142).

Smith is one of very few critics to notice that reading Cliff through the lenses of time-honored discursive moves such as postcolonial feminist revisionism does not

always resolve some inherent contradictions of the novels' plot and characterization. Unlike earlier critics, Smith observes that "Clare's growth remains incomplete and her methods futile" (2009: 150). Rather than read the novels as recuperation of lost matrilineal histories, Smith's essay "Birthed and Buried: Matrilineal History in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*" theorizes them as postmodern "signifyin'" on two myths: the colonial "feminization of the land"—a myth that links the colonial space with the body of the native female, and the postcolonial conflation of woman, particularly mother, with the newly-born nation. According to Smith, Clare Savage novels subvert both myths, showing in the process the "limitations of a feminist recovery of history and tradition that depends on the maternal body" (2009: 150). In other words, Clare's project of feminist recovery of history is a failed one, argues Smith, because Cliff wanted to show the reader that identification of the colonized land with the female body and treating maternity as a site of resistance and empowerment for Black women is no longer a viable strategy. In Smith's view, all the readings of Cliff that uncritically espouse the notion that building matrilineal lineages can be the best hope for resisting oppression impoverish the concept of these texts.

Admittedly Smith's polemical interpretation, which heeds and elaborates on inconsistencies in Cliff's handling of her matrilineal narratives, does Cliff more justice than the earlier rave reviews. However, this study will present another (and not so flattering for Cliff) explanation of the texts' complexities and contradictions. In my opinion Michelle Cliff is a writer that honors the anachronistic tradition of essentialism that is based on the notion that cultures and identities have certain innate qualities immutable irrespective of time and place. In the essentialist worldview, national and gender identities have intrinsic qualities which are natural, permanent and unchangeable and which are passed from one generation to another. I will contend that Cliff's narratives are flawed because of her championing of essentialized female identities. Consequently the fictive world of Cliff's novels is reduced to facile, Manichean oppositions between the colonizer and the colonized, white and black culture, good mothers who pass on the values of their African heritage and bad mothers, who take on corrupted values of European civilization. The novels not only enhance pretty hackneyed clichés and binary oppositions about the colonial encounter and its legacy but also lead to bewildering and paradoxical conjectures about Jamaican culture and the national identity of Jamaican women. My reading is informed by a contending theoretical framework of constructionism, according to which cultures and identities do not have any innate qualities. They are not static and fixed essences to be passed through generations but dynamic social constructs that come from complex interactions among various traditions of a given society and from the society's surroundings. Therefore this article sets to challenge the essentialist premises which Cliff's novels are based on—it offers an ideological and political, rather than textual analysis of the construction of national identification of Cliff's female protagonists, and it investigates Cliff's difficulties with using the concept of matrilineality as an identificatory tool for postcolonial Jamaican subjects.

In what follows, I will argue that Cliff tries to reconcile in her writing a valorization of female lineage with her deep ambivalence about “the institution of motherhood,” which in times of colonialism and slavery was implicated in “the successful perpetuation of colonizing forces” (Birkle, 1998: 74). Cliff’s “Clare Savage novels,” *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, seem to rest upon an unresolved contradiction—the affirmation of matriliney, which is typical for female authors of African descent, and the not-so-typical elision of motherhood. Whereas matrilineage is seen as a possibility for links between generations, motherhood is rejected as a source of women’s vulnerability, subjection and degeneration. Drawing on Belinda Edmondson’s reading of Cliff’s novels, I will show that Cliff tries to come to terms with her ambivalence about Caribbean matrilineage through a juxtaposition of two models of womanhood: “the invisible image of black woman’s as collaborator underwrites the visible image of the black woman warrior” (Edmondson, 1998: 83). Furthermore I will contend that the figure of the childless female revolutionary not only redeems the figure of the collaborationist mother, but also serves another more complex purpose. The figure of a woman warrior not only reverses the image of the black mother as a collaborator, as Edmondson claims, but also provides an anchor for female bonding that is established not as a biological line of descent, but as a woman’s heritage through other symbolic or mythical mothers. Consequently, by forging an alliance with these other culture-bearing mothers, Cliff hopes to achieve a reconciliation with the maternal figure, who, in spite of her betrayals, remains the only connection to the place of her birth, the island, which in Caribbean discourse is often pictured as the ur-mother of all.

A part of Cliff’s difficulties with restoring Jamaican matrilineal histories comes from her own personal history, which is relevant in any discussion of Cliff’s writing because of her overtly autobiographical writing. Cliff’s scholars, such as Belinda Edmondson, maintain that Clare Savage—the protagonist of *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* bears many resemblances to Cliff and can be thus regarded as Cliff’s alter ego (1998: 78). This impression is reinforced by Cliff’s own comments on her fiction expressed in such autobiographical collections of essays as, for instance, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, where she elaborates on Clare’s situation by drawing comparisons with her own life. What is more, Cliff’s omniscient third-person narrators of *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* put across similar views and ideas as those in *Claiming an Identity*, and their ideological and moral judgments resonate with Cliff’s views. In consequence, one can argue that Cliff wholeheartedly identifies with her protagonist Clare Savage and that her all-knowing and authoritative narrators express a point of view that is in line with Cliff’s way of thinking.

Indeed a sound knowledge Cliff’s biography and her autobiographical essays can help to elucidate some of the paradoxes of her novels, such as the mentioned earlier conflicting relationship between matriliney and motherhood. Cliff defines herself as an “Afro-Saxon,” that is, a descendant of the privileged mulatto elite of the Jamaican “pigmentocracy.” Cliff calls this elite “white negroes” because they “absorbed the white oppressor’s status” (Hornung, 1998: 87). As Cliff (1990a: 265) explains in her essay “Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character,” even in independent Jamaica light skin

meant "privilege, civilization, erasure, forgetting." Therefore, as a middle class, light-skinned child, Cliff "received the message of anglocentrism, of white supremacy, and [she] internalized it" (Hornung, 1998: 88). Anglocentrism means striving to "pass for white" and to "attain whiteness or at least those qualities of the colonizer which made him superior" (Cliff, 1985: 72). In Cliff's family it was her mother, who enforced on her "the kumbla of passing" (Hoving, 2001: 252), whereas Cliff was the resistant daughter who tried to forge an affinity with the denigrated black culture of Jamaican peasants—the descendants of African slaves. For that reason Cliff's relationship with her mother was very strained, as the writer frequently and freely admits. Since Cliff has turned her back on her mother, in her fiction she has tried to imagine a mythical maternal figure to provide a connection to the land of her birth and to take root in black maternal culture she reveres so much. As a result, Cliff invents for Clare a matrilineal line that connects her to the spiritual authority of the grandmother, an heir to wise African *griots*, bypassing her compromised biological mother and, in this way, she heals Clare's, as well as her own, antagonistic relationship to the past.

The second source of Cliff's difficulty is that her desire to forge an alliance between her racially mixed female protagonist, Clare Savage and Jamaica's Black heroic foremothers is partially thwarted by the complex legacy of colonialism and national identity formation in the Caribbean. This legacy includes a continued presence of a set of myths that have shaped (or rather warped) the social construction of maternity and the archetype of the Caribbean mother. As Caroline Rody explains, the maternal figure in Caribbean literature and culture is not a monolithic creation, as it can stand for many conflicting cultural affiliations: from the "mother country" England in colonial times, through mother-Africa in the *Negritude* movement, to the mother-island in postcolonial Jamaica. Moreover, when anti-colonialist nationalism appropriated the archetype of the Caribbean mother, the mother figure was conflated with the nation, and she began to be seen as the origin of historical memory and the foundation of the national culture.

The Caribbean nationalist literature from the 1950s to 1970s was dominated by male writers who had a considerable maternal fixation. The work by C.L.R. James, H.G. de Lisser, Roger Mais, Samuel Selvon, Kamau Brathwaite, Earl Lovelace and George Lamming gave birth to many contradictory clichés of Caribbean mothers. In the literature of the three decades of nationalist ascendancy, female characters were either fetishised mothers or prostitutes and shrews. If the nation was imagined as a mother giving birth to a language, a culture and a collective memory, the male texts presented the female character as a strong, self-reliant and nurturing matriarch. If the focus was not on the archetypal mother-nation, female characters were often pictured as un-nurturing and insufficiently loving mothers. These deficient mothers were often accused of complicity with the colonial culture and depicted either as eager slave breeders or mulattoes desiring whiteness through sexual relations with white men. The most famous and controversial account of the black woman's desire for a white lover was provided by Frantz Fanon in his influential and widely-read study *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Fanon takes to task the autobiography of Mayotte Capécia, a Martinican woman who seeks the love of a white man. His discussion of the novel drew angry responses

from feminist critics, who accused Fanon of misogyny, arguing that his unsympathetic account of Capécia is evidence that he holds black women responsible for the devaluing of blackness. As Hortense Spillers argues, such a portrayal of racial and gender relations by male writers and critics explicitly suggested that black mothers should be solely blamed for “the fundamental degradation of an identity inheritance that comes through the female line instead of the male” (qtd. in Edmondson, 1998: 81). Cliff’s matrifocal fiction taps into a similar (con)fusion of love and repulsion towards maternity. Speaking to the mother-island of Jamaica in an essay tellingly titled “Love in the Third World,” Cliff states: “this is a killing ambivalence. I bear in mind that you with all your cruelties are the source of me, and like even the most angry mother draw me back” (Cliff, 1992: 103).

Cliff’s efforts at reconciliation with that Jamaican mother are dramatized in both *Abeng* and its sequel *No Telephone to Heaven*. According to Simon Gikandi, Clare, the protagonist of both novels, is “a schizophrenic and divided subject” (1992: 244) torn between the conflicting worlds of her racially-mixed family, which can be seen as a microcosm of Jamaica’s colonized society. *Abeng* is set in the 1950s on the eve of emancipation, and Clare is twelve years old and on the verge of womanhood. *No Telephone to Heaven* traces Clare’s development through the post-independence period, during which Clare is mostly displaced in various foreign lands, seeking a substitute mother for her biological mother, who abandoned her. First, she sets off from Jamaica to an adoptive mother country—the United States, then to the imperial motherland, England—only to finally return to her homeland, where she embraces her African heritage and dies as a revolutionary.

Clare’s quest for an identity can be seen as an allegory of the process of decolonization. All the characters in the novel are first and foremost products of the colonial society, while Clare is the supreme symbol of the so-called “mulatto angst,” that is an anxiety experienced by colored people and created by “the suspension of the white and black traditions that have socially determined them, but they cannot wholly embrace” (Gikandi, 1992: 238). Clare is suspended between the warring worldviews of her racially-mixed parents. On the one end of the spectrum is Clare’s white-skinned father, Boy, who sees himself as a descendant of an infamous slave-owner, Judge Savage, who burnt his slaves before emancipation lest he should be forced to set them free. Boy stands for colonial and patriarchal authority. Though he is not completely white, he does his best to pass for white, and he unabashedly preaches the ideology of “white supremacy.” Clare’s darker mother, Kitty, is at the other end of the spectrum. She sees herself as a descendant of slaves; she cherishes her black lineage and represents Clare’s matrilineal legacy, which is denigrated by Kitty’s overtly racist husband. Kitty epitomizes all the paradoxes inherent in the African Caribbean motherhood. Though she loves the Jamaican black peasant culture, she assumes Clare will be perceived as white and will stand a better chance in life if she is associated with her privileged paternal lineage. That is why Kitty easily gives in to her husband’s wish to teach Clare to act white and does not even try to deliver to Clare her share in her

black maternal traditions. Therefore Kitty can be seen as a deficient and insufficiently loving mother who is responsible for the rupture of the Afro-Caribbean matrilineal line.

Clare, who has inherited her father's looks and her mother's affection for the Jamaican rural culture, is an allegorical figure *par excellence*—she is a daughter caught between the disparate and conflicting identities of her parents. This internal conflict is encapsulated in her very name, as Cliff herself explains in "Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character". Her first name "Clare" connotes the privilege connected with her white skin, whereas her surname "Savage" is suggestive of the wildness and blackness she has been taught to "bleach out." As Cliff explicates, Clare's story is about "blackening" of what has been bleached out: "A knowledge of history, the past, has been bleached out from her mind, just as the rapes of her grandmothers are bleached out from her skin, and this bleached skin is the source of her privilege and her power too, so she thinks, for she is a colonized child" (1990a: 264-265). Clare's allegorical quest takes her from the values of her father's "inauthentic whiteness" to her mother's undervalued but more "authentic blackness and femaleness" (Edmondson, 1998: 79), which Cliff and her narrators obviously favor. Thus, Clare's quest for a black female identity is inscribed, as in other female-authored Caribbean novels, in terms of female bonding and a maternal allegory, which in this particular instance exposes the crippling impact of the insufficiently nurturing mother on the daughter's burgeoning political consciousness. The daughter is torn by her conflicting emotions for the mother, whose cultural reticence and withdrawal hinder the daughter's self-awareness, but thanks to other surrogate mythical mothers, she finally develops a coherent African-based identity. In other words, Clare exchanges an essentialized white identity for an equally essentialized black identity, thus going against the grain of the postcolonial celebration of creolized identities, which is considered a defining feature of Caribbean literature and cultural theory.

To explain Kitty's defection and betrayal, Cliff's narrators recount the mythical history of the island. They introduce a number of maternal figures: grandmothers and mythical mothers who occupy different ideological positions, indicated by their relation to the meaning of motherhood. The most prominent of them are two mythical sisters who are positioned as the foremothers of the Jamaican nation. The omniscient narrator of *Abeng* informs the reader that: "in the beginning there had been two sisters, Nanny and Sekesu. Sekesu remained a slave. Some say this was the difference between sisters. It was believed that all the island's children descended from one or the other" (Cliff, 1995: 18). Nanny, a half-mythical and half-historical figure, was a leader of the Maroons, runaway slaves living in the inaccessible Jamaican mountains. In Cliff's novels she is often evoked as the quintessentially African *griot*: she is an Ashanti warrior and sorceress from the Gold Coast of Africa. Her name means "wet nurse," and she does not have any children of her own—she is the symbolic mother of that part of the nation that puts up heroic resistance against oppression and assimilation. She is the "magnanimous warrior . . . hunting mother . . . mother who brews the most beautiful tea" (Cliff, 1996: 163). Sekesu, on the other hand, stands for bondage, defeat and resignation. She is a passive victim of slavery, who gives in to the colonial culture that

sees black women as slave breeders, whose motherhood is forcefully imposed on them by the colonizer. Her continuing complicity with the oppressive white world is symbolized by “the foul afterbirth” that “is lodged in the woman’s body and will not be expelled . . .” It is a signifier of female betrayal and reproductive loss, “the waste of birth,” which evokes nothing but repulsion, as it is “foul smelling and past its use” (Cliff, 1995: 165).

Cliff’s morally righteous, all-knowing narrators make it clear which of these two mothers Jamaica’s children should love and respect. The narrators put down Sekesu and her female descendants as breeding machines and vessels for reproduction of the colonial mindset. They are bearers of degraded female identity; they compromise their maternal duties through their failure to transmit the genuine black, Jamaican female history and culture. As with Pocahontas, who is briefly mentioned in *No Telephone to Heaven*, they are women who, through motherhood, perpetuated what many have seen as treason. Thus Sekesu’s name, like Pocahontas’s name, is a synonym for traitor, “a consort of the enemy, a woman who let herself be used, intellectually, sexually against her people” (Birkle, 1998: 72). In contrast, the novels condone “the adamant refusal of slave women to reproduce” (Cliff, 1996: 93) through abortion, contraception and infanticide. The women engaged in such acts of resistance are pictured as heroic reincarnations of the formidable Nanny. Mma Alli, a slave woman from Judge Savage’s plantation, is one of such fetishized icons. She is “a strange woman with a right breast that had never grown. She said she was a one-breasted warrior woman and represented a tradition which was older than the one that enslaved [Africans]” (Cliff, 1995: 34). Like Nanny, she is an heir to cherished African traditions, which she passes on to the next generation: “she taught the children the old ways—the knowledge she brought from Africa—and told them never to forget them. She described the places they had all come from, where one-breasted women were bred to fight” (Cliff, 1995: 34). Mma Alli refuses to surrender to any form of power, including patriarchy, so she “refuses the womb, with all it signifies, like heterosexuality and motherhood” (Hoving, 2001: 265). As a powerful Obeah woman, she uses her knowledge to help other slave women, such as Inez, who is repeatedly raped by Judge Savage, to abort their “mixed-up” unborn “children” conceived in “buckra [white] rape,” in a belief that such a child “would have no soul” (Cliff, 1995: 35). In short Mma Alli and Inez’s lesbianism and refusal of motherhood are hailed as a form of revolt against slavery and colonialism.

But “the colonized child” Clare is oblivious of the island’s history of female resistance and betrayal. As the narrative voice of *Abeng* clarifies, she lives “within certain parameters—which [cloud] her judgment” (Cliff, 1995: 77). Nanny, Mma Alli and Inez are held as exemplars, but their stamina and resilience are completely forgotten by young Afro-Caribbean women. Jamaica is an “island which did not know its history” (Cliff, 1995: 96). Jamaicans “had . . . heard of Maroons,” but they “did not know of the wars [Maroons] fought” (Cliff, 1995: 91). They live in “the world of make-believe” (Cliff: 1995, 96) obscured by the official version of history that has erased any mention of revolt or resistance, they “have taken the masters’ past as [their] own” (Cliff, 1996: 127). The history of Nanny and other heroic women could have been “kept alive on

tongues, through speech and in song," (Cliff, 1995: 128) but, as it turns out, only the old women still hold on to that memory. The children of Jamaica, laments the narrator of *No Telephone to Heaven*, "have left her. Her powers are known no longer. They are called by other names. She is not respected . . . They have taken away her bag of magic . . . We have forgotten her. Now that we need her more than ever" (1996: 164). The contemporary Jamaican Obeah women are treated with disrespect. They are considered to be "damned witche[s]" (Cliff, 1995: 87) and their ancient knowledge "naïve science, bunga [African] nonsense" (Cliff, 1995: 69). The power is wielded by Jamaican men, who, as the novels suggest, are aligned with the forces of modernity. They would like to rob the women of their exceptional power, which, as the narrators suggest, is granted by Nature, which is "female and the ruler of all" (Cliff, 1995: 53). Mr. Powell, the deceptively well-meaning and benign teacher from a country school in *Abeng*, is an example of the misguided attempts to uproot his own people with Western notions of progress. According to him, ancient African beliefs are "barbarian things" that "should be made of as little as possible . . . These people [Jamaican peasants] had to be taught to rise above their past and forget all the nonsense of Obeah or they would never amount to anything" (Cliff, 1995: 87). He repeatedly warns his pupils against the "false" African knowledge, "which was held in the minds and memories of old women" (Cliff, 1995: 69). Consequently, in contemporary Jamaica old women are confined in almshouses for the mad. The burning of an almshouse in *No Telephone to Heaven* is a symbolic immolation of the ancient African knowledge, as the old women are literally consumed by fire. A sense of recoverable loss pervades the pages of both novels, which at times reverberate as an elegy to these great African matriarchs—the good, nurturing and resisting mothers, whose defamed knowledge had the potential of becoming the site of an oppositional and subversive culture.

Some vestiges of the forces held by the powerful Obeah women of the past reside in Clare's self-reliant maternal grandmother, Miss Mattie. But Miss Mattie is a controversial maternal figure, who brings into focus Cliff's difficulties in embracing her essentialized Caribbean matrilineage. In Miss Mattie, the images of good and bad, beloved and problematic mothers come to a head-on clash; Miss Mattie's charismatic public appearance is at variance with her personal coldness that poisons the life of her only daughter, Kitty. There are two antagonistic aspects of Miss Mattie that make her portrayal completely implausible. As a grandmother she is revered as a repository of an ancient African worldview shared by other wise old women and, to use an expression of Afro-Canadian poet Dionne Brand's, she is "the site of identification." But as a mother, she is as anti-maternal and un-nurturing as all of Cliff's biological mothers. Cliff, who elaborates on her use of the trope of powerful grandmother in her essay "Clare Savage as a Crossroad Character," states that "the powerful aspect of the grandmother originates in Nanny." She adds:

at her most powerful, the grandmother is the source of knowledge, magic ancestors, stories, healing practices and food. She assists at rites of passage, protects and teaches. She is an inheritor of African belief systems, African languages. She may be informed with ashe, the power to make things happen, the justice (1990a: 267).

Cliff is at pains to show Miss Mattie as a person endowed with Nanny's spiritual authority. Miss Mattie is an imposing figure who establishes and presides over her own church. She is described as a "sorceress" who through her charitable acts performs for the poor "the miracle of loves and fishes" (Cliff, 1995: 5), reminiscent of Nanny's feats. Thanks to her efforts, St. Elizabeth, where she lives and where Clare spends her holidays, is a female environment saturated with an indigenous African culture, in which women—not men—are political and spiritual leaders. However, Miss Mattie's sagacity is a bit undermined by Cliff's desire to show that even this feminized landscape is vulnerable to colonial influences. Therefore this environment is not completely idealized, as it is divided along lines of class and private property. Miss Mattie's family, the Freemans, are landowning peasants who fit themselves into the colonial hierarchies of class and possession without challenging them. Among the women who attend Miss Mattie's church are those who own farms—their social status is indicated by their jewelry and by the fact that they are admitted to Miss Mattie's house. At the bottom of the social ladder are the poor, unadorned women squatting at Ms Mattie's estate, who are recipients of Miss Mattie's bounty but are never allowed to enter her house. Furthermore, though Miss Mattie does not assimilate into the dominant colonial culture, she conforms and passes on to her offspring a selective knowledge of her African culture. Kitty learns from Miss Mattie her knowledge of Obeah, but not about Nanny or Mma Alli.

Miss Mattie's relationship to Kitty also dramatizes the emotional costs of the stigma of motherhood, which Cliff's novels inadvertently advocate. The lesson Kitty receives from her mother is one of coldness and emotional withdrawal, as Miss Mattie does not lavish much affection on her children. Kitty's first moment of intimacy with her mother takes place when Kitty prepares her mother's body for burial, and it is only then that Kitty catches the one and only glimpse of black motherhood as a lived experience: "From somewhere came an image of a slave woman pacing aisles of cane, breast hung over her shoulder to suckle the baby carried on her back" (Cliff, 1996: 71). Kitty never breastfeeds her daughters herself because, applying "Boy's sense of what was right," she thinks that this is "something only animals do" (Cliff, 1995: 53-54). But Clare's biggest desire at the age of twelve is to close her eyes and "suck her mother's breasts again and again" so that "together they would enter some dream Clare imagined mothers and children shared" (Cliff, 1995: 54).

It appears that Cliff's maternal characters, such as Miss Mattie and Kitty, are not only guilty of the breach of matrilineal memory, but, first and foremost, of withholding their affection. Cliff's depiction of the relationships between Miss Mattie and Kitty, and also between Kitty and Clare, reveals the author's deep ambivalence towards motherhood, not only as an institution compromised in times of slavery, but also as a personal experience. The images of emotionally rigid, schizophrenic mothers suffering from dangerous schisms between their "public" and "private" lives, quarrel with images of rebellious but childless national mothers rooted in Jamaica's folkloric history. And while Cliff and her narrators renounce motherhood as a compromised institution, her novels seem to cry out for true and nurturing maternal warmth. The motherless and

childless Clare betrays a deep and unfulfilled yearning for maternal love and is not entirely free of conventional feminine myths that occasionally leave her flooded with "thoughts of missed motherhood" (Cliff, 1996: 191).

Superficial racial divisions separate Jamaican daughters from their mothers and prevent them from claiming the presumably sustaining maternal identity, its cultural codes and histories of resistance. The novels show that identities of Jamaican women are firmly rooted in either white or black tradition, but true "Jamaicanness" can only stem from one principal origin—the African past. Moreover, it is irrevocably connected with the skin color that can effectively bar a person from participating in the life of this genuine African-derived culture. Just as Miss Mattie is "removed from her white mother" (Cliff, 1995: 134) whom she does not love, Kitty cannot love her white daughter Clare, who "would never get admission to [Kitty's] private world" and "the darkness locked inside" (Cliff, 1995: 128). Kitty thinks it is "better to have this daughter accept her destiny and not give her any false notion of alliance which she [Kitty] would not be able to honor" (Cliff, 1995: 129). Although Clare loves St. Elizabeth, the countryside and her grandmother in whose house she goes through all the formative experiences of her life, because of her light skin she is never granted complete admittance or acceptance. In St. Elizabeth, Clare often feels "locked off" (Cliff, 1996: 154); she is not allowed to work, participate in the rituals of her grandmother's church or socialize with the country women. She cannot play with boys and is gradually more and more aware of the unbridgeable gulf that separates her from her only playmate, Zoe, who, unlike Clare, is a daughter of a dark skinned landless proletarian mother. Eventually, she is banished from this rural feminine world, when she breaks gender codes by accidentally shooting Miss Mattie's bull.

Kitty's cultural reticence, her refusal to counter Clare's father's aggressive autobiographical narrative, is the most conspicuous maternal betrayal in the two novels. As Smith argues:

while [Clare's] Afro-Saxon father extols the history and virtues of the English and participates in the denigration of the African cultural heritage and the people who are darker of body, her mother, even as she identifies emotionally with the poor and dark of body, represents them as victims, powerless ones who require feeding and sympathy, the helping hands of the privileged class. (1998: 48)

Therefore, Kitty's "mistake" is not only in "casting her people in the position of victims, so that her love of darkness became a love conceived in grief" (Cliff, 1996: 128), but also, as Agosto aptly remarks, Kitty's "generosity for the poor . . . her charity [are] an alibi for not making any serious attempt to change the politics that keep the poor disempowered" (1999: 107). Consequently, and in spite of her "private tears" (Cliff, 1995: 137) for the submerged population of Jamaica, she "identifies with the poor from a distance" (Agosto, 1999: 110).

Kitty's lack of resistance and her betrayal are attributed to her own loss of a sense of history and cultural amnesia. The narrator of *Abeng* contends that:

Kitty should have been the daughter of Inez and Mma Ali and Nanny too—and had she known about the existence of these women, she might have shared her knowledge, her extraordinary passion, using its strength, rather than protecting what she felt was its fragility. The fragility of her people, on this island intent on erasing the past. (1995, 128)

Kitty had wished to be “a Maroon girl,” and a teacher, teaching from “manuals she herself wrote” and going “beyond Mr. Powell in her lessons—that was her plan” (Cliff, 1995: 129). But the plan fell through because, to quote one of Cliff’s wise grandmothers out of context, Kitty chose to become a “breeder” instead of a “reader” (Cliff, 1990b: 95). In this way, Kitty comes across as a schizophrenic mother, split between her public practice of conforming and passing and her private ritual of supporting Jamaica’s poor blacks.

Kitty can also be read as a collaborationist mother, who goes along with the Jamaican custom of “lightening up” (Cliff, 1996: 169). According to it, a white girl is passed into the hands of her whiter parent and then, as the narrator of *Abeng* wryly comments, this parent “would pass his light-skinned daughter to a white husband, so she would have lighter and lighter babies—this after all was how genetics was supposed to work, moving towards preservation of whiteness and obliteration of blackness” (1995: 129). Like her mother Miss Mattie, Kitty is a figure of contradictions whose characterization lacks psychological credibility. Kitty’s love for black people is at odds with her loyalty to her “pretentiously whitish husband” (Cliff, 1995: 127), and her marriage to Boy is rather unconvincingly presented as “an attempt to contain colonialism in her own home” (Cliff, 1995: 128). In fact, Kitty advances whiteness by marrying Boy and reproducing him in Clare. As Fanon might put it, she marries white and augments the white family lineage. Thus, as Belinda Edmondson maintains in her essay “The Black Mother and Michelle Cliff’s Project of Racial Recovery”: “female bloodlines are envisioned as dangerous carriers of infection . . . Menstruation, the onset of womanhood, and the ability to bear children is also the commencement of the history of betrayals” (1998: 77).

It comes then as no surprise that in *Abeng* Clare’s menstruation provides a narrative closure to her *Bildungsroman*. Clare thinks of it as “the culmination of a process” (106-107), but Clare still does not know what “it would mean in her life” (Cliff, 1995: 107). In *No Telephone to Heaven*, Clare considers adoption, is made pregnant by a black veteran of the Vietnam War, but due to a miscarriage becomes sterile. This “reprieve from womanhood” (Cliff, 1996: 157) sets her on the course of becoming a revolutionary. In this way, Clare’s removal from motherhood becomes a prerequisite for her “restoration,” (Cliff, 1996: 93) and, as the logic of the novel points out, Clare would not join the guerillas if she were a mother.

If female possibility has been massacred on the site of motherhood, as Adrienne Rich provocatively argues in her famous study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Clare’s refusal of motherhood creates new possibilities for her. Thanks to her decision not to pursue motherhood, at the end of *No Telephone to Heaven* Clare becomes an incarnation of the ideal self-sacrificing mother Nanny. Clare aligns herself with, what bell hooks calls the radical female tradition of refusal to bear

children—it is the tradition of Nanny the warrior and Mma Alli, the healer and abortionist. Her radical rejection of the motherhood and its historical betrayals started by Sekesu, reconnects Clare to her true mythical mother Nanny and to Jamaica, which is “female as womb, [and has] the contours of [the] female body” (Cliff, 1990a: 266). Cliff’s texts at the same time recuperate and pass judgment on matrilineal ancestry. They explore the ways in which matrilineal history can empower Caribbean women and swing them to action, but they also show the traps inherent in maternal traditions. Whereas the earlier novel retains a degree of optimism for the possibilities in matrilineal identification, *No Telephone to Heaven* complicates this gesture by foregrounding (inadvertently, in my opinion), the limits of female activism grounded in the myth of the revolutionary Nanny. Though Clare reclaims “her grandmother’s land” and restores “ties [that] had been broken” (Cliff, 1996: 91, 103) by becoming a revolutionary like her great mythical foremother Nanny, her activism ends in defeat and failure. Clare is killed during a guerrilla assault whose aim is to sabotage the shooting of an American film that purports to appropriate, distort and banalize the history of the great mother Nanny. She dies in the struggle over “a reading of the history of Maroons,” and to prevent “a commodification of black bodies and a homogenizing of black identities and histories of resistance” (Moynagh, 1999: 123). Clare, as Cliff puts it in her essay “Caliban’s Daughter,” is literally “burned into the landscape” (1991: 45) by a barrage of bullets from the Jamaican army intent on protecting the American filmmakers.

Clare’s death at the end of the novel provides a troubling closure to this maternal allegory. It unintentionally seems to suggest that the model of resistance relying on the formula of maternal nationalism and militancy is no longer entirely viable. Though Cliff is at pains to convince the reader that, despite Clare’s death, the end of Clare’s *bildung* is actually quite optimistic, many critics, even those writing accolades for Cliff’s novels, find it difficult to accept. Tolan-Dix, for example, argues that the ending seems fatalistic because “the only way Clare can connect with her black matrilineage is by joining her bones with their bodies in the Jamaican soil. Only when color is no longer distinguishable does it become irrelevant” (2004: 35). Therefore one might be tempted to say that in the case of Clare’s quest for “blackness,” “blackening” of “what has been bleached out” does not seem entirely successful. Then, Toland-Dix goes on to argue that the damage done to Clare, “who has been rejected, abandoned and dismissed by the matrilineage by which she so longs to be acknowledged” (2004: 21) seems to be irreparable: “She does not reclaim the spiritual power that had led Miss Mattie to create her own church and become a spiritual force of her community” (2004: 24). Her death changes absolutely nothing; one might even argue that the ending shows Jamaica overwhelmed by neo-colonial forces. To my mind, that inconclusive ending, can be seen as another drawback of the novel.

Cliff’s novels reflect her desire to “identify herself through her female line” (Cliff, 1996: 185). Just as Cliff’s alter ego Clare aligns herself with her black matrilineage so Cliff herself longs to be associated with the land and with the dispossessed African culture of working-class black Jamaican society. She rejects the colonial indoctrination

that repeatedly taught her the advantages of passing to reach for what has been “bleached out” from her history. But, as the Clare Savage novels demonstrate, for Cliff “claiming the identity she was taught to despise” is a torturous process that depends on restoring an essentialized concept of identity and culture. In Cliff’s opinion, being a Creole means “being neither one or the other,” (Adisa, 1994: 275) that is neither black or white. Thus, Creolness is a state of being that Cliff, her narrators and the protagonist Claire ultimately reject. Being truly Jamaican means choosing an African-derived identity and that is a political choice because, as the logic of the novel suggests, one can hold on to the black essence irrespective of the color of the skin, even though the majority of Jamaican society seem to wrongly assume that blackness is determined fundamental phenotype characteristics of race.

All in all, I think that Clare Savage novels do not succeed in resolving the predicament of Jamaican Creole women, such as Clare or Cliff, who wish to find a truly black identity through female bonding with fictive and mythical mother figures. Cliff’s narrators lament the failure of most biological mothers to provide such an identification and they are scathing about emotional coldness of these insufficiently loving mothers. On the one hand, they seem to advocate overcoming racial divisions that separate mothers and daughters on the score of their race, on the other hand, however, they make new divisions by essentializing black and white cultures and picturing them as two warring camps. The two novels not only rest on much too frequent and obvious Manichean oppositions between two cultures, which reinforce social hierarchies, rather that tear them down, but also are fraught with glaring contradictions: why “Black” Kitty married her “white oppressor” Boy? Why wise Miss Mattie has not passed her black heritage to her black daughter Kitty? How can the reader reconcile Kitty’s love for blackness with her decision to make her daughter pass for white? The most controversial aspect of Cliff’s Clare Savage novels is that they seem to introduce a reductive and simplistic division of Jamaican women into either heroic childless warriors or collaborating breeders of slaves. The narrator’s claim that Afro-Caribbean women who were forcibly enforced and sexually abused can be “traitors” is one of the most off-putting paradoxes of these novels. As many critics would undoubtedly agree, these women’s loss of roots, myths and collective memories makes them victims of oppression, not its perpetrators. The betrayal is on the part of those responsible for the slave trade and slavery, and maybe also those who ignore, like Cliff, the potential of hybrid identities and cultures, insisting on looking back on an essentialized African past.

Cliff’s texts strive to outline a possibility for the recuperation of a matrilineal African ancestry but not through the stigmatized institution of motherhood. They might be considered examples of radical feminist texts that have displaced “motherhood as [the] central signifier for female being” (bell hooks qtd. in Agosto, 1999: 168). It seems that Cliff, like Clare, rejects motherhood and chooses, to misquote Adrienne Rich, to be a daughter—therefore a free spirit—rather mother, who is an eternal giver. Maryse Condé rightly remarks that such an adamant refusal of childbearing should be first and foremost seen as a kind narcissism. Condé accuses female writers who reject

motherhood of an anxiety about the future and an inability to find a solution to problems that currently plague their lives. Indeed, there is something deeply disconcerting about Cliff's historical revisionism and her rendition of the relationship between Caribbean mothers and daughters. The world of Jamaica, as Cliff paints it in *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, is tragically flawed by the withdrawal of maternal affection and Jamaican children's unfulfilled and unreciprocated longing for their mothers. Full of "light, quiet, clean children *unwanted*" (Cliff, 1996: 126 emphasis mine), Cliff's Jamaica is, as Clare once unintentionally admits, "one of the saddest places of the world" (Cliff, 1996: 89).

Notes

1. These analogies are to the protagonist of Jean Rhys's famous novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*.
2. "Signifyin'" is a theory launched by Henry Louis Gates Jr. It is a strategy of subversion of the dominant culture with the use of irony and indirection to express opposing ideas and opinions. Smith does not use this term in her essay.
3. In Caribbean literary criticism "*kumbla*" means passing for white and assimilation into the dominant colonizer's culture.
4. A *griot* is a wise woman, sorceress, or a storyteller.
5. *Obeah* is one of African-based Caribbean religions.

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