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Dismembering the Master Narrative: Michelle Cliff's Attempt to Rewrite Jamaican History in Abeng

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

Abeng by Michelle Cliff is a coming-of-age novel set in colonial Jamaica. The heroine, Clare, struggles with defining herself across the lines of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Intertwined with Clare's journey to find herself is a large discussion of Jamaica's history as a colonial territory as well as the permanent effects of English colonization on the island. Cliff recognizes that the typical European history of Jamaica is told through the eyes of superior white male colonizers and it most commonly shows that all things native and/or black are perceived as bad. Cliff challenges the master narrative and tries to rewrite Jamaica's colonial history with the untold stories of the island's past. Through discussion of mixed race heritage, female leadership, and resistance, Cliff tries to rewrite Jamaica's past to embrace the forgotten stories that are full of pride and strength, which gives the colonized subjects a voice in their own history. She uses Clare Savage as a metaphor for the island, her resistance as a representation of Jamaica's new history. Cliff recognizes that the past cannot be erased, however, she believes that history can be retold to more fully explain the strength, resilience, and power within the Jamaican community. Her ultimate goal is to tell a powerful story of Jamaica's history, a new history that has been untold and kept secret for many years. Clare's resistance is the catalyst of change in Cliff's retelling of Jamaica's past, and she helps to create a sense of hope that the stories that have been hidden for so long will be unveiled and celebrated by the Jamaican people.

Disciplines

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Comments

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Dismembering the Master Narrative: Michelle Cliff's Attempt to Rewrite Jamaican
History in *Abeng*

Abeng by Michelle Cliff is a coming-of-age novel set in colonial Jamaica. The heroine, Clare, struggles with defining herself across the lines of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Intertwined with Clare's journey to find herself is a large discussion of Jamaica's history as a colonial territory as well as the permanent effects of English colonization on the island. Cliff recognizes that the typical European history of Jamaica is told through the eyes of superior white male colonizers and it most commonly shows that all things native and/or black are perceived as *bad*. Cliff challenges the master narrative and tries to rewrite Jamaica's colonial history with the untold stories of the island's past. Through discussion of mixed race heritage, female leadership, and resistance, Cliff tries to rewrite Jamaica's past to embrace the forgotten stories that are full of pride and strength, which gives the colonized subjects a voice in their own history. She uses Clare Savage as a metaphor for the island, her resistance as a representation of Jamaica's new history. Cliff recognizes that the past cannot be erased, however, she believes that history can be retold to more fully explain the strength, resilience, and power within the Jamaican community. Her ultimate goal is to tell a powerful story of Jamaica's history, a new history that has been untold and kept secret for many years. Clare's resistance is the catalyst of change in Cliff's retelling of Jamaica's past, and she helps to create a sense of hope that the stories that have been hidden for so long will be unveiled and celebrated by the Jamaican people.

Cliff addresses her purpose for rewriting Jamaican history in the opening lines of her novel. She writes, “The island rose and sank. Twice. During periods in which history was recorded by indentations on rock and shell. This is a book about the time which followed on that time. As the island became a place where people lived. Indians. Africans. Europeans” (3). Cliff understands that the past cannot be erased. She recognizes its permanency by saying that it was recorded by indentations on rock and shell, meaning that literally and figuratively, the presence of the master narrative has shaped the Jamaican people. She offers a telling of the classic master narrative, which people often interpret as *truth*, and then reinvents Jamaica’s history by speaking about the time after history was recorded by indentation on rock and shell. *Abeng* is a retelling of historical narratives that have been undiscovered because of the prevalence of the master narrative that told its own story of the island. Cliff shares the untold stories of the island in attempts to help the Jamaican people discover their own identity, including Clare.

When considering post-colonial theory, a master narrative is that which tells the *historical* account of a place through the perspective of the colonizer. While the master narrative is based on actual experiences, one often does not fully grasp the true history of a time or place because the predominance of the master narrative was overly accepted. Cliff is attempting to rewrite Jamaica’s history to reveal the suppressed stories of the colonized due to the fact they have been largely untold. In “Representation of History in Michelle Cliff’s and Patrick Chamoiseau’s Novels” by Veronique Maisier, it is argued that “It has now become commonly accepted that the imposition of European iconic references created an official historiography that distorted the past and specificities of Caribbean histories” (52). European colonization played an instrumental role in shaping

the history of the Caribbean, unfortunately this meant that the people in places like Jamaica had to suffer the consequences of misunderstanding, or being ignorant about their past (53). Maiser's argument is correct in stating the claim that "The European hijacking of the Caribbean histories promoted the native populations' misinformation, ignorance, indifference or amnesia about their past" (52). The people of Jamaica were blind to their own history because of the misinformation they were fed due to the master narrative.

Cliff resists the typical master narrative by having Clare take pride, and accept her mixed race heritage, as well as tells stories of Jamaican resistance, strength, and power. Clare comes from a complex familial bloodline, which makes understanding her own identity all the more complicated, and her situation is not an isolated one among the Jamaican people by any means. Clare is a descendent of the Maroons, who were rebel slaves when the English had control of the island. However, her great grandfather, on her father's side of the family, was a wealthy and dominate English figure. He viciously burned and murdered hundreds of slaves on the night before their emancipation. Not only does Clare live with this contradictory familial history, but she struggles with her racial identity because of the pressure her parents put on her as well. Clare is the product of a biracial marriage, and both her parents are of mixed race. Clare's father, Boy Savage, wants Clare to completely ignore her black roots as he does, and tries to manipulate her based on his colonial and Eurocentric reading of the island's history (Ilmonen 116). Meanwhile, Clare's mother, Kitty, embraces her authentic "Jamaicaness" and attempts to keep her past alive through the naming of her eldest daughter, Clare, whom she names after a poor black woman. Clare somehow has to fuse these differing views about racial

identity, and her family's past, to define herself. Unlike many mixed race people on the island, such as her own father, she refuses to fall passive to the racially restricting world that is meant to force her into choosing between black or white, something that she is unwilling to do. Clare's strength, resistance, and awareness help to support Cliff's attempts at rewriting a new history for Jamaica.

To understand the boundaries and social codes based on race that are meant to establish Clare's own racial identity, it is essential to examine Jamaica's colonial history, along with aspects of the master narrative that Cliff addresses in her novel. The colonial history of the island has shaped and altered the Savage's perception of race and their own familial identity. Jamaica was originally inhabited by the Tainos of Arawak descent; they existed there for approximately eight hundred years before the Europeans set foot on the island. In 1494 Columbus traveled to the island in search of gold. Because of Columbus's exploration of Jamaica, it soon became a military outpost for the Spanish (Campbell 3). The British captured Jamaica from the Spaniards in 1655, and soon thereafter, the Tainos population was decimated because of foreign diseases (Campbell 14).

After the Tainos population was essentially wiped out, the African population quickly grew as slaves became the largest source of labor on the island. In "A Legacy of Trauma: Caribbean Slavery, Race, Class, and Contemporary Identity in *Abeng*" by Adlai Murdoch, it is said that the slave trade took between ten and twenty million Africans from their homeland, and it is estimated that six hundred thousand of those Africans were brought to Jamaica. The slaves were brought to the island because of the sugar industry that the English established there (Murdoch 72). The population of Jamaica became split by the year 1611; it was essentially comprised of half Africans and half Europeans (West-

Duran 114). Cliff discusses the impact the increase of slavery had on the island in *Abeng*. When referring to a group of Jamaicans at a service in the Tabernacle, she writes “ They did not know that the death rate of Africans in Jamaica under slavery exceeded the rate of birth, and that the growth of the slave population from 1,500 in 1655 to 311,070 in 1834, the year of freedom, was due *only* to the importation of more people, more slaves” (19). The chilling aspect of Cliff’s interpretation of the master narrative is that she says the Jamaicans did not know any of this. This seemingly common concept surrounding slavery on the island was unknown to the people who were so drastically affected by it because these cruel realities were left unmentioned in the master narrative.

The divided population of Africans and Europeans was the reason why mixed race populations began to increase on the island. It was not uncommon practice for European owners to rape their female slaves and impregnate them. This practice is discussed in Cliff’s telling of the master narrative in *Abeng*. Cliff ‘s continuation of the story of the aforementioned service in the Tabernacle bring more concealed practices to light:

No one had told the people...that of all the slave societies in the New World, Jamaica was considered among the most brutal...Or that there were few white women on the island during the time of slavery, and so the grandmothers of these people sitting in church on a Sunday evening ...had been violated again and again by the very men who whipped them. (19)

Again, Cliff notes that the people sitting in the Tabernacle do not know about this part of their history. The master narrative does not often note the brutal treatment slave owners made their slaves endure. Furthermore, the classic narrative does not address that women

were raped by the very men who gave them beatings and whipped them in the fields, hence violating them physically, mentally, and emotionally. The people sitting in the service were misinformed about their history, and even if it was assumed that white slave owners raped their black slaves, that story was not a reality in the lives of Jamaicans because history was written to clearly understand the colonizer's purpose. Because of this, it excluded horrific stories such as these because they would have brought sympathy to the colonized (Ilmonen 112). In turn, this would have lessened the colonial power's legitimacy.

Like many colonial territories, there was severe discontent among large numbers of people, the people who were unwilling to accept the ways of the colonizers, and in turn challenged the master narrative; in Jamaica this group was known as the Maroons. The book *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration, and Betrayal* by Mavis Campbell, discusses how resistance became an important part of Caribbean slave culture. Mavis states "perhaps the most vexing of the slaves' resistance techniques to the owners was the act of running away to establish their own habitations... these were autonomous communities existing outside the purlieu of the territorial unties of slave plantations" (Campbell 1). The Maroons set a *bad* example for estate slaves who were compliant, but also served as a constant reminder of the rebel slaves' rejection to conformity because they would not live the lifestyles their masters created for them (1). The English feared the Maroons because they could not control them as they could their slaves. There was concern that the example they were setting would cause an uprising of plantation slaves across the island.

The Maroon societies gathered in the mountainous areas on the island, “they were adept at turning the harsh environment to their advantage, carving tidy villages and farms out of steep mountainous areas...[the Maroons were] a feature of the island’s dangerous flora and fauna” (Wilson 65). The Maroons were seen as a permanent part of the Jamaican landscape, but unlike many things that resided on the island, they were dangerous. They were so driven to protect and defend their purpose and territories that they utilized gruesome guerilla warfare to protect themselves from the English. Maroon men and women would steal slaves, livestock, and ammunition during their assaults on English plantations, and leave their communities ransacked with burning sugar mills and fields that were set on fire, as well as slaughtered cattle and pigs that were killed to diminish the English food supply (Wilson 57). Open warfare took place between the English and the Maroons for more than forty years. The warfare was so disruptive that the Jamaica assembly passed forty-four acts and spent over two hundred and forty thousand euro in attempts to suppress it (Cudjoe 9). British accounts expressed their fearfulness of the threat the Maroons possessed, stating things such as, “wee are not in a condition to defend ourselves, the terror of them [the Maroons] spreads itself everywhere” and “all the regular troops in Europe, could not have conquered the wild Negroes, by force of arms” (Wilson 56-57). The Maroons were a powerful and feared group. They threatened the English colonizers, and Michelle Cliff uses the historical foundation of the Maroons to help support her own rewriting of Jamaica’s history because she tells the reader what the Maroons were fighting for. The Maroons recognized the injustices of slavery and rebelled against it:

They were given the impression that the whites who brought them here from the Gold Coast and the Slave Coast were only copying a West African custom. As though the whites had not named the Slave Coast themselves...The congregation did not know that African slaves in Africa had been primarily household servants...They were not worked in the canefields...There was in fact no comparison between the two states of servitude. (18)

Throughout the novel, Cliff makes the point that through the master narrative Maroons are seen as savage rebels who were a threat to the English. While they were a historical threat due to their use of guerilla warfare, they were fighting for justice and freedom. However, the history that was told by the colonizers was a much different story, and the people on the island assumed that their past stemmed from a tradition of West African slavery.

Cliff dedicates much of the opening of her novel to enhancing the understanding of the master narrative, and how it affected the people of Jamaica. Her ultimate goal is to transform much of the misinformation presented in the narrative, and give the Jamaican people a voice of their own. In "Rethinking the Past, Rewriting the History: Counter-Narratives in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*", Ilmonen argues that Cliff reveals the universal claims that the supposed *official* history of the island offers (115). Cliff is trying to give the Jamaican people a place in their own history, and by doing so she represents them through stories of resistance and strength, not through the typical oppressed stories of the past (Ilmonen 115). Cliff uses Clare Savage to metaphorically represent the new history of Jamaica because she is seen as countering the master narrative in numerous instances.

Before Cliff focuses too heavily on Clare Savage and her own journey to discover herself, she continues to reveal stories from Jamaica's past that counter those told through the perspective of the colonizers, such as the story of Mma Alli and Inez. She rewrites this aspect of Jamaican history to show a positive example of female leadership, one in which helped save women on the island. Inez is of mixed race just as the heroine of the novel, Clare. Her mother was a half-blood Miskito Indian, and her father was a Maroon (33). Inez is a character that is disconnected from Clare's narrative in the sense that it is unclear if Clare ever knows about Inez and her story, and yet her role as a female struggling to find her identity is crucial to Cliff's purpose. Inez clearly experiences a very traumatic event that makes her feel objectified, and lose ownership over her own body. She was not a slave, but rather she was brought to court because of theft charges. Cliff writes that in the courtroom "where she would have had her hands cut off at the wrists, or been given a hundred strokes of the cat...the judge intervened and took her home, where he raped her" (34). Rather than being a slave, Inez is forced to serve as Judge Savage's mistress, and her personal sense of self is completely stripped from her as the judge rapes her, which arguably could have been a worse punishment than getting her hands cut off at the wrists or being whipped. A man who felt he had complete ownership of her invaded the most private part of her life, which would be her physical body, and she lost who she was through the traumatic experience.

One relationship that Inez develops while on the plantation saves her, and helps her to redefine who she is. Mma Alli is an older woman who is highly regarded and respected on the plantation because she teaches women how to love themselves and be in

touch with their own bodies. Cliff writes that women benefitted from the relationships they built by sleeping with Mma Alli:

They said that by being with her in bed, women learned all manner of the magic of passion. How to become wet again and again all through the night. How to soothe and excite at the same time. How to touch a woman in her deep-inside and make her womb move within her. She taught many of the women on the plantation about this passion and how to take strength from it. To keep their bodies as their own, even as they were made subject to the whimsical violence of the justice and his slave drivers, who were for the most part creole or quashee. (35)

This passage depicts the strength that Mma Alli offers women through their sexual relationships. Mma Alli teaches women how to exist in a patriarchal society by loving and appreciating themselves, and their bodies. She sleeps with women to show them that they can take control of their bodies physically and emotionally after having to deal with traumatic ordeals such as rape, which completely dismantles their sense of self. Mma Alli hopes to give women strength by having sex with them, and giving them something passionate and real to show them that someone does care about them, and that they are not worthless.

The highly sexual language in the above passage is also crucial to the understanding of the empowerment the women received from having these sexual relationships with Mma Alli. In the passage, passion is described as being magic. This meaning that passion is a new experience for the women who sleep with Mma Alli, it is something they have never experienced before, something magical that is new, exciting,

and pleasurable. It is also said that Mma Alli can touch a women deep inside of her, and make her womb move within her, which is empowering. The womb is a representation of new life, and only women have the power to develop this new life within them. Mma Alli also teaches women to keep their bodies as their own, even when they are forced to fall to the patriarchal world they live in. Cliff refers to this idea of patriarchal power as “whimsical violence”, which is an interesting phrase. Whimsical meaning by chance or on a whim rather than by reason, therefore implying that women are always to be submissive toward the men in their life, and deal with the violence as it happens. Cliff uses this story to show how a painful experience can be transformed into a positive and healing one, allowing women to awaken and actually appreciate themselves. Cliff uses an example of female leadership to not only challenge the master narrative, in which women were beat and raped by slave owners, but to also challenge patriarchy. She uses this example to show the important roles women played in shaping Jamaica’s history.

Cliff furthers her rewriting of Jamaican history by metaphorically representing the people of the island as mangoes to address the identity crisis among the large mixed race population. Jamaica is known for its export of mangoes because “they are a staple fruit in all the Caribbean islands. Mangoes—often are the only native foods that tourists to the Caribbean ever taste” (Owen 20). It seems fitting that Cliff symbolically represents the people of Jamaica with the mango because historically it was a native fruit. Cliff wants to put the Jamaican people back into their own history because they are misrepresented in the master narrative; the mango is the ideal symbol for the Jamaican people because it is so much a part of the island culture. While Cliff shows the natural and untouched fruit in its purest and wildest of states, she also shows the island fruit being manipulated for sale,

becoming *mixed* like the people on the island. Cliff uses the island fruit to better show the complex mixed race identities that have been established due largely to colonization.

The opening scene of Cliff's novel is a description of the height of mango growing season. She describes the fruit as being:

All over and each variety was unto itself- with its own occasion and use.

In the yards around town and on the hills in the country, spots of yellow, pink, red, orange, black, and green appeared between the almost-blue elongated leaves of the fat and laden tress- and created a confusion underneath. (4)

While this selection seems to depict the island at the height of its growing season, the description can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the Jamaican people. Cliff writes that the fruit is everywhere "and each variety was unto itself", the people of the island were of many *varieties* as well (4). Due to colonization people from all over the world were forcefully sent to the island as slaves, or brought there to work as paid laborers. The slaves and laborers of all different races and ethnicities began to mix over time, creating variety. Many Europeans also settled in Jamaica. They worked in government offices, boarding schools, and more well sought after positions. Cliff further adds that the mangos are all different colors, "spots of yellow, pink, red, orange, black, and green" (4). The people of Jamaica are often the product of biracial relationships because of the mixing of race and culture during the island's colonization. Therefore, people of Jamaica are all different colors, just like the mangoes. While some of the colors may not necessarily describe that of a person, such as green, it shows that there was no skin color that was unimaginable on the island.

The mango was something that was meant to be private to Jamaica and its people. It was believed that “the mango was to be kept secret” (4). It was not meant to be shared with outsiders of the culture. The mango was something pure and natural to the people, often hidden in the bush. While the mango is pure and natural, it also becomes more relatable to the Jamaican people symbolically when considering the manipulation of the fruit.

There were efforts to make the mango breeds mixed in Jamaica, just like the people of the island. The mango trees could be manipulated to make an ever better, more marketable fruit for industry. Cliff writes:

They did not cultivate the mango, but they made occasional efforts to change the course of its development...a branch from a St. Julienne- the former could withstand all manner of disease or weather; the latter was fragile. (4-5)

This simply shows that mangos could be of mixed backgrounds as well, manipulated, just as the colonized were. The fruit could come from a combination of two different plants, one being sturdy and strong, and the other weak. The same could be said for Jamaican people who were products of biracial relationships, and were uninformed about their past. One race was often seen as weaker and fragile, while the other was more dominant and prevailing, which also shows the affects colonization had on the people of the island and their perception of race. Cliff uses the words “to change the course of its development” to describe the changes in the fruit, but to also symbolize the development of the island and its people, this can be seen through Clare’s acceptance of her own mixed racial identity.

The final lines to Cliff's opening scene give a sense of beauty and mystery that is hidden deep in the untamed land of the island. She writes "it was a surprising fruit-sometimes remaining hidden for years behind vines and underbrush-saving its sweetness for wild pigs and wild birds" (5). The mangos grow so wildly across the terrain they often stay hidden forever, tucked under brush and wildly growing plants, their true identity never being revealed. The conditions of their environment force them to stay hidden. Likewise, the history of Jamaica is forced to "stay hidden" because the implications of the master narrative. Many Jamaicans are unable to ever uncover their own sense of self. They are forced to hide or deny a part of their race. This is especially true for the main character's parents in *Abeng*. Cliff presents a rather simplistic dichotomy in her rewriting of Jamaica's history through her characterization of Clare Savage's parents, Boy and Kitty. They represent black and white, as well as the colonial and Eurocentric reading of history versus the authentic and powerful stories of the island hidden beneath the master narrative.

In *Abeng*, Kitty Savage represents the part of Jamaica's history that cannot be erased; she symbolically represents the authentic Jamaican, very much like the mango. Kitty's mother is described as being both black and white, and her father's mixed race origins are said to be unknown, however there are undertones throughout the novel that arguably reveal that he is part African American. However, he perceives himself to be white. Cliff writes "but both had brown skin and a wave to their hair" to point out their mixed race as well as the African American characteristic they both have, that being their hair (54). Kitty's people were called "red", and they were an old family to the island, just

as the Savages were. Kitty Freeman and her family were not ashamed of their “redness”, in fact they did everything they could to preserve it.

Kitty is said to “have a sense of Jamaica that her husband would never have” (52). Clare believed that her mother came alive in the bush; whereas her father did everything he could to not be associated with that part of Jamaica. Cliff writes “Town was evil, Kitty held—people taken from country couldn’t survive there” (49). She appreciates the Jamaica that her people are familiar with; she relates to the bush like many of the old families of Jamaica. She does not feel a connection to the town where things are superficial and progressive, but rather she appreciates the island’s natural and real beauty in the poorest and most secluded of areas.

Clare often speaks of her mother’s distance and the lack of physical attention that she offers to her, but says “The country people of Jamaica touched her in a deep place—these were her people, and she never questioned her devotion to them” (52). In many ways Kitty connects and relates to the country people of the island because she was one of them; she lived in a small four-room house, and her clothes were made from scraps of material. Kitty was never ashamed of who she was, she was not brought up to hide her redness. Clare’s mother holds onto traditions and stories of the past because they have shaped her life.

Kitty’s pride and appreciation for the island and its people are seen through her choice of name for her eldest daughter. The namesake of Clare Savage becomes an essential aspect to Cliff’s rewriting of Jamaican history. Jamaicans were proud of their English cognomens they were given. An article published in the November 6, 1898 New York Tribune discussed the sense of ownership that Jamaicans felt over their typically

shortened or changed names. In the newspaper article an ex-Jamaican said, “One thing that makes a marked difference between the Jamaican negro and his cogener in this country is the Jamaican’s pride of name. The same thing may exist among the colored people elsewhere, but I have never noticed it” (27). When slaves were brought to the island their owners gave them surnames. The surnames usually were the last name of the owning family, hence they sounded like typical English names.

Like the Jamaicans described in this particular newspaper article, Cliff uses the story behind Clare Savage’s name to challenge the master narrative as well as rewrite the island’s history. In the novel, the narrator describes the telling story of Kitty’s near death experience. Kitty’s neighbor is assigned the task of getting her to the health clinic on the other side of the island. Clarinda is described as being “not quite right in the head. A little slow. What they used to call dull” (138). While this is the typical depiction of Clary among the townspeople, the narrator refers to her as the “sweetest girl anywhere, and she was faithful to any task assigned to her, as long as it was carefully explained. She had never been known to veer from her instructions” (138). Clary saves Kitty’s life, and after that experience, the hospital nor Clary was ever mentioned again by Kitty or her mother, Miss Mattie. However, Kitty never was able to forget Clary’s strength and dedication in saving her life.

Clary has such an impact on Kitty’s life that she names her eldest daughter after her, Cliff writes “Kitty told Boy he could name their eldest daughter after the college his grandfather attended at Cambridge University—when in fact she was naming her first-born after Clary” (141). The fact that Kitty did not reveal the true meaning of Clare’s name shows that she is determined to keep that sacred part of her own history preserved

forever. The name Clare, which is an English name, hence Boy's attraction to it, has a much deeper and personal meaning behind it. Kitty recognizes that Boy would most likely not accept the name Clare if he knew the true meaning of it, which could also explain Kitty's secrecy. It is stated "Kitty never told this to Clare—that her namesake was a living woman, a part of her mother's life, rather than a group of buildings erected sometime during the Middle Ages for the education of white gentlemen. Clare never knew whom she was called after—whom she honored" (141). Kitty gives Clare a name with meaning and a living memory; it is a name of honor and strength. She refuses to let her daughter's name represent a building that educated the white men that destroyed the place and the people that she so deeply loves and cares for.

Cliff's decision to use the name Clare challenges the master narrative in that a typically English name now is derived from Jamaica; to Kitty, the name Clare does not represent pride in English history and culture, but rather Jamaica's. Kitty gives her daughter a name of power and resistance, one after a woman who means so much to her. Belinda Edmondson makes a compelling argument in her article "Race, Privilege, and the Politics of (Re) Writing History: An Analysis of the Novels of Michelle Cliff" that "Clare' represents, obviously, the 'light' of European ancestry, and yet Clare is named after a black woman who saves her mother's life—the sign of good therefore is black" (182). Therefore, while Boy thinks he is naming his daughter Clare so that she may inherit his cultural and racial whiteness, she is in fact being named after a poor, black, and possibly disabled woman. However, Kitty looks past those cultural hindrances and sees a strong and courageous Jamaican woman who saved her life. Cliff implores Clare Savage to resist the typical view of Jamaican history, while Cliff does this through her

choice of namesake; it is largely through Clare's refusal to accept her father's colonial reading of history as well as their family mythology.

Boy Savage's reading of history is very Eurocentric, and he wishes to be in complete control of the past. His altered sense of the past and how it affects reality is seen through his own account of history. The narrator retells Boy's understanding of history, at least what he wanted Clare to know of it, as they stood on a mountaintop one day together:

Mr. Savage was fascinated by myth and natural disaster. He collected books on Stonehenge, the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China—he knew the details of each structure and was convinced that all were connected to some magical source—some “divine plan”...Nothing was an achievement of human labor...Mr. Savage was a believer in extraterrestrial life...Most people thought him focused out. (Cliff 9)

It is interesting to note that as Boy tells Clare his stories about history, he speaks to her about the Roman Empire, the pyramids in Egypt, and the classic structure of Stonehenge (Ilmonen 116). As Ilmonen argues, Boy is telling Clare the white Eurocentric version of world history because he tries to hold on to conservative European values (116). The narrator states that people knew Boy's conceptualization of the past was strange. One would argue that he loses his sense of reliability when he tells Clare that beings from another planet are watching them at all times. However, his distorted sense of history allows him to be in control of his own past, as well as Clare's. He is able to believe what he wants to. Boy desperately wants his daughter to believe his reading of history. He tells Clare “you would have been a choice for sacrifice—you know the Aztecs slaughtered

their most beautiful virgins and drank their blood” (Cliff 10). Clare did not know any better, in some ways she began to believe and internalize the things she was being told by her father. She did not question his reading of history right away because she did not have a basis of comparison. What other history did she know? As ridiculous as it may seem, she did not question his worldview in which he was telling his daughter she would be sacrificed because she simply did not know anything else (Cliff 10).

Boy Savage even goes as far as to create his own family history, one in which hides the pain of the past, and ultimately allows him to control and manipulate his family. The narrator says that Boy has created a family mythology that allows him to control how the world perceives the Savage family. Cliff writes:

According to their arrogance, the Savages saw themselves as blameless for any downward turn in their fortunes. They managed to relinquish responsibility for their lives...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 protect their identities. When they were poor, and not all of them white, the mythology persisted. They swore by it. (29-30)

Cliff makes the point clear that the Savage's, specifically Boy, constructed their own identity with the bits and pieces that they saw most fit to protect themselves from judgment and ridicule. Cliff uses the word *fixed* as something seemingly permanent, as though they are trapped in these identities that Boy conceived for them. However, *fixed* in the sense of a lie as well. Boy has created a lie about his family; he forces them to pretend to be something they are not. In the article “A Legacy of Trauma: Caribbean Slavery,

Race, Class, and Contemporary Identity in *Abeng*”, Murdoch writes “Boy insists on maintaining the myth of the family whiteness, attempting to drill a similar sense of white superiority into Clare as his only heir” (77). No matter what the situation is they have to stand by their myth. Boy Savage wants his family to be seen as white, even if they are not. He does this in part because he is embarrassed and bitter about the historical past that he feels destroyed the Savage family legacy.

As the novel progresses Clare Savage begins to recognize that her history is much more complex than the hegemonic and Eurocentric reading that her father has been feeding to her. Clare begins to question her father’s reading of the past and his views on the world, hence imploring Cliff’s ultimate goal of telling a rewritten version of the history of the island, and she is able to use Clare as a metaphor for this new history. Clare begins to recognize she is caught between her parents, who serve as Cliff’s dichotomy in her telling of history. She recognizes that she is of mixed race and at times she feels as though her parents want her to choose between black and white. However, Clare recognizes that she is not simply “white” like her father tells her. Cliff writes:

Her father told her she was white. But she knew that her mother was not...She was of both dark and light. Pale and deeply colored. To whom would she turn is she needed assistance? From who would she expect it? Her mother or her father- it came down to that sometimes. Would her alliances shift at any given time. (37)

Clare does not want to be forced to choose a side. As a young woman she is torn between her parents. She recognizes that she is both black and white and accepts her biracialness, but she feels as though her parents would force her to choose. This point is addressed in

Sika Dagbovie's article entitled "Fading to White, Fading Away: Biracial Bodies in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*". In the article it is stated "she would feel split between her mother and her father, pressed to choose a side" (95). Dagbovie feels as though Clare does not take a side, but rather "tries to maintain a balance within herself" (95). This balance is seen through her various conversations with her father where she probes at him for information about race and racial identity.

Clare questions race and racial identity in a very meaningful way when talking with her father. She wants Boy's opinion more so than Kitty's because she does not understand why he tells her she is white. Clare becomes compelled by the story of Anne Frank through her own inquiries and discoveries concerning world history, and questions Boy about it. She asks:

"What if I married a Jew?"

"Then you would be an outcast also." Mr. Savage said these words clearly...

"But what if I loved him?"

"That does not matter one iota."

"It doesn't matter. A Jew is a Jew."

"Then how come you say I'm white?"

"What the hell has that got to do with anything? You're white because you're a Savage." (73)

In many ways, Boy is defensive because he knows the paradox that Clare draws is correct. Clare's argument is that if a Jewish person is Jewish no matter what percentage they are, then how is she white when she knows she is black too? She finds the fault in

her father's argument through her questioning. The only response that he can give her is that being Jewish has nothing to do with her being white. He sticks to his family mythology and tells her that she is white because she is a Savage, more or less concluding that she is an exception to his own argument. For Clare to recognize this double standard at such a young age shows her ability to resist the family mythology that Boy has created for the Savage family, due to his own beliefs aligned with the master narrative.

Clare becomes very in touch with herself and her inner strength throughout the continuation of the novel. In fact, she feels so strong that she steals her grandmother's gun and goes on a hunting trip with her best friend Zoe to kill Massa Cudjoe, the hog. The hunt for Massa Cudjoe seems as if it is the epitome of the sense of empowerment Clare has found within herself through her identity struggles. She thinks by killing the hog she will gain a better understanding of her own strength and resistance, and perhaps overcome the power that Boy uses to control Clare and the rest of his family. Cliff writes "she was a girl, she had taken a gun and ammunition; perhaps that was forbidden enough. She had stepped far out of place" (114). It is suggested that by taking the gun and planning to kill the hog, Clare is plotting a rebellion against the lies she has been living. It is evident that Clare is stepping far outside her boundaries as a girl, and trying to fulfill the duties of a man, which is Cliff's attempt at including female leadership and strength into Jamaica's history once again. Clare feels so empowered by her new found self, and the power of her own body, that she feels as though she can kill Massa Cudjoe, who even men on the island fear to kill. She thinks that by killing the one thing men fear, she will

then become powerful and strong. While her intentions are good, she accidentally kills the family bull and is reprimanded for her actions.

Clare is punished and sent away to Mrs. Phillip's home; she is said to be able to transform Clare into a lady. However, in the article "Reconfigurations of Caribbean History: Michelle Cliff's Rebel Women", Springer argues that her rebel spirit is already instilled inside of her. When Clare arrives, she immediately feels a sense of comfort with Miss Winifred, Mrs. Phillips's sister. The two discuss things such as race, and Clare is able to vocalize a sense of the rebel spirit she has gained. Miss Winifred tells Clare of her tragic story of having to give her mixed race child away, and she tell Clare "Only sadness comes from mixture" (164). Clare replies, "there's all kinds of mixture in Jamaica. Everybody mixes it seems to me. I am mixed too. My mother is red" (164). Clare seems to be justifying the mixed races of the Jamaican people; she more or less validates it. Dagbovie argues that Clare's point advances a mixed race identity common among black Jamaicans (95). The author further argues that Cliff uses Clare's resistance to point out that the difficulty with being light skinned is that the majority will assume these individuals perceive themselves as "white" simply because they are light skinned, such as Boy.

The final scene in which Clare is shown accepting her mixed racial identity, something that she was once uncomfortable with, does in fact show that Cliff successfully challenged the master narrative. Cliff explores the stories told within the classic narrative seen from the perspective of white Europeans, and she counters the colonizer's story of the past with her own tales of Jamaica. Cliff sheds light on the subject of identity crisis and how the Jamaican people do not know who they are or

where they come from. The history of the island is rewritten by Cliff to show examples of resistance, power, female leadership, and strength. Cliff's history finds a place for the Jamaican people to be the subject of the story of their own past. Clare is able to break through the Savage family mythology and the master narrative to become accepting of mixed race as well as a more diversified version of world history. Through Clare, Cliff is able to give the Jamaican community hope that their untold stories will be unveiled for all to see and understand, so the people of the island are finally able to know the true story of their past.

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