



The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

After "The Tempest:" Shakespeare, Postcoloniality, and Michelle Cliff's New, New World
Miranda

Author(s): Thomas Cartelli

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 82-102

Published by: [University of Wisconsin Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208955>

Accessed: 18/09/2012 09:57

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Wisconsin Press and The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Contemporary Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THOMAS CARTELLI

After *The Tempest*: Shakespeare,
Postcoloniality, and Michelle Cliff's New,
New World Miranda

The Merchant-Ivory film *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965) records the demise of an aging, out-of-date troupe of primarily English Shakespearean actors in postindependence India. Written by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, herself a citizen of two worlds, the film functions both as an affectionate elegy for a time when the troupe played for "the most wonderful audiences in the world" and as testimony to the failure of British culture to sustain its hold on the increasingly decolonized imaginations of those audiences. In a particularly telling moment, the leader of the company, named Mr. Buckingham no less, ventures a piece of clever small talk with the headmaster of a school that is no longer interested in commissioning performances. When the headmaster refers to a recent speech given by India's minister of mining and fuel, Buckingham archly adds, "full of misquotations from Shakespeare no doubt," only to be corrected by the rejoinder, "No, from our ancient Sanskrit authors."

The moment is a small one in the film, but it is symptomatic of a transitional stage in some postcolonial cultures when an identification with the colonizing power is displaced by the espousal of indigenous cultural icons that underwrite nationalist aspirations. In the film, Shakespeare still functions as a source of universal wisdom for the nabob who quotes self-dramatizing passages from his plays, but the plays no longer serve as a dependable, or commercially viable, item of cross-cultural exchange. The Shakespeare *wallah* can no longer market plays whose ideological supports have been pulled out from under him, first, by the withdrawal of British political con-

trol over India and, second, by the erosion of cultural authority which that withdrawal has encouraged. Like the British raj whose power and authority it has been made to serve, Shakespearean drama seems a worn, outdated thing, incapable of rising to the occasion of a newly independent India intent on divorcing itself from England's overextended hold on its past.¹

Shakespeare Wallah's approach to this transitional stage of postcoloniality is a good deal more conclusive than that of most literary works produced in the wake of the empire's dissolution, both in India and elsewhere. Instead of dismissing Shakespeare as a residual irrelevance of the colonial period, many of these works employ Shakespeare as a politically charged site around which the counterdiscursive work of independence needs to be conducted. The practice of postcolonial writers to "write back" to the center has by now been exhaustively documented, especially with respect to *The Tempest*, whose appropriators made a common practice of responding to, and rewriting, the Prospero-Caliban configuration during the first stage of postcoloniality, a period Anthony Appiah associates with nationalistic African novels of the 1950s and 1960s but that also embraces other examples of postcolonial writing (Appiah 348–49). Sustained encounters with *The Tempest* are recorded in a host of imaginative and theoretical texts of this period, beginning with Octave Mannoni's *Psychology of Colonization* (1950) and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), and notably including George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) and *Water with Berries* (1971), Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* (1969), Roberto Fernández Retamar's *Caliban* (1971), and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), among other works, by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.² A secondary industry, rooted in

1. Shakespeare maintains a more privileged position in postindependence India than *Shakespeare Wallah* would indicate. As Jyotsna Singh notes, "All of Delhi University's approximately 140,000 students must study English literature for at least one year, among whom around 20,000 may read Shakespeare" (456). For a trenchant discussion of this subject, which also takes account of the demise of Shakespeareana, the acting troupe on which the fictional Buckingham Company is modeled, see Loomba (28–31). See Viswanathan for a study of the relationship between Indian English studies and British rule in India.

2. See the chapter entitled "Colonial Metaphors" in Vaughan and Vaughan (144–71) for a more comprehensive inventory of postcolonial responses to and appropriations of *The Tempest*.

the institutionalization of Commonwealth studies in the 1970s and 1980s, has derived from such works critical paradigms that it liberally applies to other texts that either repeat the appropriative gesture or make only passing reference to Shakespeare or *The Tempest*. The names Prospero, Caliban, Ariel, and Miranda now operate as interpretive touchstones for critics who search out their permutations in writing as far afield as the poetry of Ireland's Seamus Heaney and the novels of the Canadian Margaret Atwood, the Australian David Malouf, and the South African Nadine Gordimer.³ In the process, Caliban has become the aggressively defiant muse of both West Indian espousers of a militant "nation language" and French-language writers of Quebec; the paternally victimized and silenced Miranda has become the oft-cited surrogate of Canadian writers still responsive to Britain's imperial influence; and Ariel has been reconstituted as the name of an influential journal of post-colonial writing.

However questionable the critical practice of applying *Tempest* paradigms to postcolonial literature may be, writing back to the center has clearly been constructive for some postcolonial writers. As Chantal Zabus writes: "The adaptation and re-interpretation of the earlier Old World literature of colonization, i.e., *The Tempest*, as literature of decolonization is, at its worst, sheer parasitism but, at its best, superior in effectiveness to an anti-colonial polemic. As an articulate literary riposte, it constitutes one of the most cogent strategies of decolonization in literature" (49).⁴ Produced at comparatively early moments in the evolving European imperial enterprise, works like *The Tempest* and *Robinson Crusoe* render the relationship

3. The operation of these touchstones is exemplified in recent essays by Diana Brydon, Laura Donaldson, Helen Gilbert, Susan M. Greenstein, Lisa Laframboise, Louise Yelin, and Chantal Zabus. The critical practice of speaking through the medium of Shakespearean analogy clearly bears more than a trace of the neocolonialist gesture, as works from an alleged periphery are reconstituted to fit the established canon's need for growth and replenishment. I would prefer to mark it as a stage in a process of critical reorientation to which scholars like myself—rooted in a value system in which Shakespeare "serve[s] as something like the gold standard of literature" (Nixon 560)—are trying to contribute.

4. Rob Nixon, Susan Willis, and I have made much the same point in recent essays that focus on Caribbean and African appropriations of *The Tempest*.

of colonizer and colonized in fixed, oppositional terms which remain influential long after the interpretive gulfs between cultures have narrowed. Caught up in a situation in which a polarizing discourse operates at an evolutionary remove from prevailing political conditions but maintains its affective and institutional hold on both sides of the colonial encounter, the postcolonial writer often must fight his or her first battle at the level of discourse, and consequently must attempt to appropriate, alter, or redirect the master or seed texts in which the writer has already been inscribed.

This is a particularly formidable task when the writer operates within the language, style, and favored formats of the receding colonial power and proceeds as if he or she—Caliban-like—had no prior language at all in which a markedly different literature could be written. One means of coping with this dilemma has been to reject the European language, if not the format, in which what has heretofore counted as literature has been inscribed.⁵ Left with only residual contact with a precolonial language they might claim as their own, some West Indian writers have espoused writing in the dialect or “nation language” of their officially English-speaking homelands.⁶ Even as committed an English-language writer as Salman Rushdie—whose earlier work parodically refers to Rudyard Kipling, E. M. Forster, and Edward Fitzgerald, among others—has lately deferred to his non-Western religious and cultural background in choosing to employ the Koran as the primary seed text of *The Satanic Verses*. In this context of cultivated difference and indifference, we may imagine Shakespeare being replaced by stories, myths, and other literary practices that both have an older pedigree and exist in a more strategic relationship to contemporary social and political imperatives.

Although Shakespeare and other influential canonical figures of

5. Ngūgĩ's career provides an exemplary case of a writer working through this problem. In 1977, after what he terms “seventeen years of involvement in Afro-European literature” (*Decolonising* 27), Ngūgĩ began to do all his imaginative writing in Gikūyū, reserving English for his more “explanatory” works.

6. See Brathwaite on “nation language”; also see Wilentz, who notes that “the nation languages, emergent in the Caribbean, have been perceived solely as bastardized forms of English, not only by those who imposed their culture, but also by the colonial subjects who have been instructed by them” (263).

the English literary tradition have clearly lost much of their relevance to the present generation of postcolonial writers—whose immediate predecessors regularly mined the pages of Yeats, Eliot, Conrad, and Forster for titles, epigraphs, and general grist for their counterdiscursive mills—they have not been entirely superseded.⁷ Nor can they avoid being addressed, contested, or otherwise remarked as long as writers and their critics continue to speak of, or out of, a state of mind or being defined by the condition of postcoloniality.⁸ As the Jamaican writer John Hearne notes in a review of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a classic example of a novel that “depends on a *book* from elsewhere, not on a basic, assumed life”: “is this not a superb and audacious metaphor of so much of West Indian life? Are we not still, in so many of our responses, creatures of books and inventions fashioned by others who used us as mere producers, as figments of their imagination; and who regarded the territory as ground over which the inadmissible or forgotten forces of the psyche could run free for a while before being written off or suppressed?” (188; qtd. in Slemon 10). Hearne's remark implies that for West Indians at least there is no significant distinction between lived experience and textuality. In their efforts to represent West Indian experience, West Indian writers inevitably reinscribe

7. In discussing “how the ghosts of writers like Kipling and Forster still haunt the contemporary Indian novel in English,” Sara Suleri notes, “Kipling's powerful trans-cultural fetish plays a secret role in the energies of Rushdie's abundant idiom, suggesting an ironic relation that deserves more careful reading.” She adds, “In place of the remorseless postcolonial paradigm of Prospero and Caliban, a new equation suggests itself: the complicity of comedy and shame that the postcolonial narrative must experience, when it acknowledges that it indeed descends from the jaunty adolescence of *Kim*” (178).

8. Appiah describes postcoloniality as the condition of “a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa” (348). Appiah also notes that although all African cultures “have been influenced, often powerfully, by the transition of African societies *through* colonialism, . . . they are not all in the relevant sense *post*colonial. For the *post-* in postcolonial . . . is the *post-* of the space-clearing gesture . . . , and many areas of contemporary African cultural life . . . are not in this way concerned with transcending, with going beyond, coloniality” (348). The “postcolonial,” as both term and gesture, is also rigorously problematized in a recent essay by Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge.

themselves in the textual constructions of colonialism.⁹ Access to precolonial habits of mind and feeling, stories, and beliefs is either mediated or blocked by a history that has been thoroughly colonized and that leaves in its wake only a residue of African words and rituals that survived the Middle Passage. And since expressive access to postcolonial experience is, as Stephen Slemon writes, “overshadowed by a discourse of Empire, . . . a measure of determinism continues to mark the literary production[s]” (13) of writers otherwise committed to the work of decolonization.

Houston Baker contends that an analogous determinism marks the efforts of revisionist critics engaged, like the writers themselves, in what Baker terms a “hermeneutics of overthrow.” As Baker writes, these critics “attempt—by bringing to bear all the canny presentational dynamics of the [established, first world] overseers—to prove that ‘A’ is *as good as* ‘B’ and to induce shame in defenders of ‘B’ who have made other axiological choices” (388). Employing the specific example of Gayatri Spivak’s contention (in a discussion of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*) that “the suppressed ‘native’ woman [Bertha] is as important as . . . Jane Eyre,” Baker concludes that “as long as [Spivak] preserves the middle ground of ‘as good as,’ the primary text of ‘B’ (*Jane Eyre*) will be timelessly taken up” (388). By reenacting on the level of criticism what writers like Rhys and Césaire allegedly enact in fiction, Spivak and other well-intentioned revisionists relegitimate master texts that were presumably in the process of being subverted or demystified. And as Lemuel Johnson observes, “readings which (merely) re-invent sub/versions of master plots can only work out a dangerously ‘true,’ because indeed quite circular hermeneutic” (118).

Although each of these arguments is persuasive, I don’t finally think that any of them can, or should, be applied indiscriminately to all postcolonial literatures, to all forms of contemporary West Indian writing, or, for that matter, to revisionist criticism of the same. Like Arun Mukherjee, I find particularly problematic “the collapsing of [the] separate histories [of postcolonial cultures] in the name

9. As Stephen Slemon observes, “Hearne’s point here is . . . that colonial discourse . . . has ‘preconstituted’ social existence in the marginalised territories of Empire” (10). I owe my knowledge of the Hearne review to Slemon.

of a 'shared' . . . post-colonial experience" (5). Mukherjee specifically takes issue with the "binary framework" of prevailing postcolonial theory that rather imperially reduces all postcolonial experience to a center-versus-margin paradigm. As Mukherjee observes: "the theory insists that the subjectivity of the post-colonial cultures is inextricably tied to their erstwhile occupiers. . . . It claims that 'the empire writes back to the centre' . . . implying that we do not write out of our own needs but rather out of our obsession with an absent other" (6). Mukherjee arguably sounds naive in insisting on the freedom of her own subjectivity in the context of Hearne's and Slemon's certainties. I would, however, submit that the points she makes are not only applicable to much contemporary Indian writing (particularly to works written in the indigenous languages of the subcontinent), but also to other examples of "second-stage" postcolonial writing that self-consciously attempt to construct alternatives to political and cultural dependency by resisting the authority of colonialist paradigms, by appropriating for their own purposes the traces of colonialist discourse, and by establishing the authority of their own discursive constructions.

Such writing has, to a certain extent, been relieved of the liability of mimicry by the efforts of transitional figures like Rhys, Césaire, Lamming, and others whose reworking of colonialist texts has superimposed new meanings and applications on those texts and whose own work has often superseded them, contributing to the establishment of a postcolonial literary canon that operates as an alternative to the established canon of English-language literature, not as its disposable supplement or appendage. Having laid the counterdiscursive groundwork for a second generation's more sweeping "space-clearing gestures" (Appiah's term), and having been seconded in their efforts by critics like Spivak, "first-stage" postcolonial writers have set into motion a process of decentering that often makes avowedly central texts like *The Tempest*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Robinson Crusoe* seem marginal, or merely historically prior, in the context of their successive rewritings. Although Baker is probably correct in noting that these procedures produce the unintended effect that such texts will be "timelessly taken up," they also indicate that works like *The Tempest* will seldom any longer be taken

up in isolation from what postcolonial writers and critics have made of them in their efforts at appropriation and transformation.¹⁰

No Telephone to Heaven (1987), a novel by the Jamaican-American writer Michelle Cliff, represents perhaps the most ambitious recent attempt by a contemporary West Indian to work through and master the impulse to write back to the center. Rather than choose to ignore the circumstances of interdependency and belatedness that condition West Indian textuality, Cliff turns them to the advantage of an emergent creolized sensibility, countercolonizing the established plots of a still dominant, but imaginatively exhausted, imperial master narrative. Cliff's novel speaks in many voices—literary English, colloquial “American,” Jamaican patois—and positions them in a manner that requires its “centered” Western readers to assemble a mental glossary of names and definitions that the printed glossary at the back of the book only partially satisfies.¹¹ By speaking casually and knowingly of familiar Jamaican places, people, and events, Cliff challenges the Western reader's confidence in his or her ability to map West Indian experience, placing that reader in the position of a disoriented tourist reliant on a guidebook that

10. These efforts, abetted by ongoing reforms in college and university curricula, have radically reoriented the ways in which many “first-world” readers receive and interpret such landmarks of the high colonial past. Tutored by writers like Césaire and Lamming, Ngũgĩ and Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott and J. M. Coetzee to question the previously inviolate authority of these canonically (and politically) privileged texts, contemporary students of postcolonial writing are often discouraged from granting them the interpretive priority that their canonicity would appear to assure them. The canonical implications of this kind of contextual or contestatory reading are explored by Derek Attridge in an essay on *Foe* and the politics of the canon, and by Helen Tiffin in an essay on postcolonial counterdiscourse that also focuses on *Foe*.

11. Maria Helena Lima states that “Cliff's decision . . . to rely primarily on standard English and only cursorily to employ patois, not only marks the class/culture division between her narrator and the Jamaican characters who populate her fiction, but also signals the primary audience for whom the novel is written” (37). However, Lima fails to register the defamiliarizing effect that even the occasional use of patois probably has on the non-Jamaican reader. As Isabel Fonseca observes, the novel's employment of patois “suggests that the key to any language (and by extension its culture and its people) lies in its untranslatable words; inaccessibility not only dictates texture, but is a central theme” (364).

speaks too inwardly and elliptically to be easily apprehended, much less mastered. Cliff's novel is also one of the few postcolonial works to claim an epigraphic authority for other postcolonial writers and for the traces of precolonial cultures. Her chapter headings are studded with quotations from fellow West Indians like Derek Walcott and Aimé Césaire, from Yoruba hymns and Jamaican proverbs. And her text often alludes to the work of Jean Rhys, C. L. R. James, and the dub-poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, among others.

Canonical Western writing, however, maintains a hold on the novel from beginning to end, most obviously in its protagonist's pivotal encounter with Jane Eyre. Cliff's protagonist, Clare Savage, encounters Jane at a moment of weakness when the temptation to merge her subjectivity with Jane's is strong. Alone in London, where she "passes" as white in a deeply polarized society, Clare finds that "The fiction had tricked her. Drawn her in so that she became Jane" (116). This at least is her first response. Her second response is more complex:

Comforted for a time, she came to. Then, with a sharpness, reprimanded herself. No, she told herself. No, she could not be Jane. Small and pale. English. . . . No, my girl, try Bertha. Wild-maned Bertha. . . . Yes, Bertha was closer the mark. Captive. Ragout. Mixture. Confused. Jamaican. Caliban. Carib. Cannibal. Cimarron. All Bertha. All Clare.

(116)

What Clare "comes to" here is a more densely textualized and historicized identification with Jane Eyre's West Indian other. Clare's identification with Bertha is clearly negotiated by Cliff's own reading of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a book that both encourages and enables the West Indian reader to appropriate as central what is arguably marginal to the novel *Jane Eyre*. But it is also negotiated, at least within the confines of the novel itself, by Clare's readiness to accept what has been rendered marginal by others as central to her own experience. What Cliff seems to be after, both here and elsewhere in her novel, is to have Clare act out, in the life of her fiction, what Rhys has previously enacted on the level of textuality. Cliff effectively attempts to take charge of the process that has made West Indians "creatures of books and inventions fashioned by others" by demonstrating how a newly emergent postcolonial textual-

ity may help to engender new subject positions for West Indians to inhabit.¹²

Much the same effort appears to motivate Clare's associative identification with Caliban. This is the first and only time that the novel makes the characteristic postcolonial move of explicitly identifying Caliban with past and present inhabitants of the West Indies. But it provides a key that opens up the novel's less explicit, but more sustained, appropriation and rewriting of *The Tempest*. Cliff herself has remarked that Caliban's famous response to Prospero—"You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse"—"immediately brings to my mind the character of Bertha Rochester, wild and raving ragout, as Charlotte Brontë describes her, cursing and railing, more beast than human" ("Clare Savage" 264).¹³ In the same essay, Cliff also speaks of herself as "a writer of Afro-Caribbean (Indian, African, and white) experience and heritage and Western experience and education (indoctrination)," who attempts, "by inventing my own peculiar speech, . . . to draw together everything I am and have been, both Caliban and Ariel and a liberated and synthesized version of each" (264). Cliff, however, fails to remark that although her investment in Caliban and Ariel makes its presence felt in the course of her novel, it is Miranda—like Cliff herself a product of Western experience, education, and indoctrination—who plays a more prominent role in underwriting Clare Savage's subjective development and evolution into an agent of social and political change.

Unlike the majority of those of her silent or silenced postcolonial sisters who have been identified as socially or politically updated versions of *The Tempest's* Miranda, Clare Savage is presented as the self-determining agent of her own education who refuses to use the

12. Belinda Edmondson contends that the *Jane Eyre* passage "engenders within the reader a full realization that the site of dialogue is not simply with an ambivalent white creole tradition but also with the European literary canon itself, which freezes the colonized subject in an eternal relation of subject/object" (184). In a similarly incisive essay, Fiona Barnes argues that in her "portrayal of Clare's rebellion, Cliff resists the domination of the 'master codes' of literary genres and/or historical narratives, and constructs new narrative paradigms for post-colonial subjects" (28).

13. Edmondson notes that the *Jane Eyre* passage "is particularly important for the link it provides between Caliban and Bertha, the two gendered symbols of Caribbean independence and invisibility," both of whom "inhere within the identity of Clare" (184).

advantages of pale skin and privileged class-standing either to “pass” or to deny the Caliban within. Abandoned by her defiantly Jamaican mother, raised in exile in New York by her Americanized father (who is perhaps too coyly named Boy Savage and functions, both here and in Cliff’s earlier novel, *Abeng*, as a deeply flawed Prospero figure), tutored in Renaissance studies at a university in London, this New World Miranda rejects father and London alike in order to return to Jamaica, where she attempts to redeem her grandmother’s homestead and, with it, a sense of “basic, assumed life.”¹⁴ In the process of her transit between New York, Europe, and Jamaica, she has casual sex with Paul H., a spoiled prince of the Jamaican economic aristocracy; enters into a consciously restorative relationship with a physically and psychically maimed Caliban, a black American veteran of Vietnam who has had his childhood dreams of “catching shrimp with [his] mother . . . gathering okra, and dodging the snakes” (158) permanently invaded by nightmares of dismemberment; and allies herself in “sisterhood” with an androgynous Ariel who doubles as a Jamaican nationalist. Her New World consciousness raised by a chance discovery of the grave of Pocahontas in England, Clare/Miranda eventually turns her inherited land over to the cause of nationalist rebels and dies with them, victim of an airborne tempest conjured up by the new, New World magic of American money.

As formulaic as my synopsis makes it sound, the novel seamlessly incorporates and, more to the point, extends the New World typologies of earlier rewritings of *The Tempest*. It does so most distinctly with respect to Clare’s sexually and politically collaborative contact with its American Caliban and Jamaican Ariel figures; rejection of her father and the Euro-American structures of respectability to which he would have her aspire; and decisive return to her native land. The novel also extends its *Tempest* applications to an early scene of mass murder perpetrated by Christopher, a native-born Caliban, against the family of Paul H.—which rather degradingly fulfills the potential of Caliban’s foiled attempt to despoil Prospero

14. Lima cogently observes that “Cliff posits Clare’s urge to return to the island in essentialist terms, representing her homeland, the landscape of her identity, as female. The land is infused with the spirit and passion of Clare’s grandmother and mother in a deeply personal, almost biological connection” (38).

and Miranda in *The Tempest*—and a description by Harry/Harriet, the androgyne Ariel, of his sodomy-rape at the hands of a white colonial policeman. Deformed by a malnourished childhood lived in the heart of the “dungle,” Kingston’s slum of cardboard shacks, Christopher is presented without glamour or approval (though with a good deal of sympathetic understanding) as the denatured product of independent Jamaica’s reproduction of colonial inequity. Like *Jane Eyre’s* Bertha, Christopher roars and bellows, haunted, Caliban-like, by “duppies,” and seeks to bury his demons in the bellies and genitals of people with lighter skin who live in houses where he is set to work.¹⁵

A homosexual who can “pass” as man or woman, Harry/Harriet initially frames his boyhood violation in the broader context of the colonialist violation of Jamaica. But as the novel’s most insistent advocate of social and political change, he notably resists clothing himself in a language of colonial signifiers that has kept Jamaica in unacknowledged bondage to the past. As he states:

we are of the past here. So much of the past that we punish people by flogging them with cat-o’-nine-tails. We expect people to live on cornmeal and dried fish, which was the diet of the slaves. We name hotels Plantation Inn and Sans Souci. . . . A peculiar past. For we have taken the master’s past as our own. That is the danger.

(127)

Cliff arguably courts the same danger in allowing her narrative to be overrun by a promiscuous intertextuality that threatens to reestablish her writing’s dependence on the master narrative of colonialism. But like Harry/Harriet, Cliff also resists the impulse to represent Jamaican experience in a strictly deterministic manner. She does so, in this instance, through her character’s insistence on both the singularity and collectivity of his personal history:

15. According to Lima, “The truly revolutionary gesture [in *No Telephone to Heaven*] lies in Christopher’s ‘revenge’ against Paul H.’s family, and the cautionary tale that it embodies if we read Christopher as Clare’s alter ego” (42). Rather than serving as Clare’s alter ego, Christopher seems instead the sad, deracinated embodiment of neo-colonial self-hatred. Cliff herself indicates as much in a recent interview with Meryl Schwartz, stating that Christopher’s “violent act is based in his self-loathing” (“Interview” 613).

I have been tempted in my life to think *symbol*—that what he did to me is but a symbol for what they did to all of us, always bearing in mind that some of us, many of us, also do it to each other. But that's not right. I only suffered what my mother suffered—no more, no less. Not symbol, not allegory, not something in a story or a dialogue by Plato. No, man, I am merely a person who felt the overgrown cock of a big whiteman pierce the asshole of a lickle Black bwai—there it is. That is all there is to it.

(129–30)

The claim for singularity is made in the brutally specific words Cliff chooses to isolate the act suffered by her character from a more rhetorically (and politically) expansive interpretation. The claim for collectivity is made in Harry/Harriet's association of the material circumstances of his rape with his mother's sufferance of economic violations that Jamaica's postcolonial status has done nothing to diminish. Of course, the phallic language and Jamaican diminutives—"lickle Black bwai"—also enhance our sense of the uncontestable power of the "big whiteman" who continues to tower, literally and symbolically, over the narrative and both sponsors and stages the destructive conflagration with which the novel—and the fictional lives of its *Tempest* surrogates—ends.

Each of these sequences indicates the restrictive hold that the neocolonial present maintains even over what may be ventured on the level of postcolonial narrative. It is in this respect, among others, that Cliff's attempt to master the impulse to write back to the center should, perhaps, be considered only a qualified success. But by extending the range and resonance of her appropriations of *The Tempest* into the province of contemporary social history, especially with respect to such concerns as underclass deracination, dissident sexualities, and feminist self-assertion, Cliff's rewritings of the roles of Caliban, Ariel, and Miranda move beyond the meanings of both Shakespeare's *Tempest* and the often predictable, and arguably circular, rewritings of *Retamar*, *Lamming*, and *Césaire*.

One of the obvious ironies of the postcolonial fascination with *The Tempest* has been its acceptance of the play's limited cast of characters as representative of enduring colonial(ist) configurations, as if Shakespeare had immutably fixed the only available attitudes of master, servant, and rebel at a comparatively early and ill-defined moment in the imperial enterprise. Even in the act of

critique and appropriation, writers like Retamar and Césaire accept positional stereotypes whose only real claim to legitimacy is their continued circulation. There are, of course, moments in each writer's work that move beyond the host plot of *The Tempest*, that introduce variations on, and complications of, the originary configurations. The dialogue between Ariel and Caliban in 2.1 of Césaire's *A Tempest*, for example, stages at least the possibility of a future alliance between opportunistic and defiant participants in the colonialist configuration, one that is literally "colored" by later stages of political development and, hence, may be said to historicize the relationship of differently unequal parties to colonialist exploitation. This scene, however, remains locked in a parasitic relationship to Shakespeare's play, which itself can claim only the most negligible application to the wildly variegated nature of colonial experience in the Caribbean.

What is needed to break the spell of *The Tempest* on West Indian writing that chooses to confront it is a narrative that disenchants *The Tempest's* monopoly on the available forms of postcolonial identity by reconfiguring the fixed subject positions established by both the play itself and its appropriators. The fact that *The Tempest* operates less as a plot than as a residual presence in *No Telephone to Heaven* allows both new plots and new subject positions to emerge in the novel. Cliff is particularly successful in moving her work a stage beyond that of those of her West Indian predecessors whose "subject," as George Lamming writes, was "the migration of the West Indian writer, as colonial and exile, from his native kingdom, once inhabited by Caliban, to the tempestuous island of Prospero's and his language" (*Pleasures* 13).

For Lamming, the absence of an "extraordinary departure which explodes all of Prospero's premises" implicitly cedes possession of "Caliban and his future" to Prospero (109). Although no revolutionary change is imminent even in her novel's construction of history, Cliff's decision to have her potentially mobile protagonists reject migration and exile in an effort to regenerate a sense of "basic, assumed life" in Jamaica leaves them largely unsubjected both to Prospero's symbolic authority and to the need to contest that authority which is usually associated with Caliban. In effecting the release both of her characters and the language she constructs for

them from what Lamming terms “the prison of Prospero’s gift” (109), Cliff engages in exactly the kind of “revisionist metaphoric activity” that Gay Wilentz considers necessary to heal the “isolating and subjugating” rupture “in the correlation of language and accepted reality” that Hearne describes and that characterizes Caliban’s possession (Wilentz 266).¹⁶

Nor is this the only “extraordinary departure” from “Prospero’s premises” recorded in the novel. The patriarchal authority exercised by Prospero yields, in *No Telephone to Heaven*, to the attempt by the children of postcoloniality to negotiate an authority of their own, grounded in the recovery of what has survived the sustained tempest of colonialism and colonial self-hatred. The parables of escape, denial, and determinacy that the novel’s native-born Prosperos tell these children are countered not only by the predictable rage of a servant-monster who inscribes his frustration on the bodies of his patrician masters, but by Clare’s mother-centered recovery of her cultural and racial identity, and by Harry/Harriet’s rejection of the authority of symbols in the process of his regendering. Indeed, what most distinguishes the novel from both its colonial and postcolonial forebears is its own fairly wholesale rejection and denial of the very notion of patriarchal authority embodied either in Prospero or in a successfully mated and politically redeemed Caliban figure.

In this novel, patriarchal power and authority operate effectively only in a violently displaced, corporate manner, as an army bought and paid for by an American film company ultimately has its way with Clare and her confederates, summarily erasing the latest attempted intervention in Jamaica’s ongoing (neo)colonization. In the end, the magical power of American money even has its way with language—as articulate speech dissolves under the joint onslaught of artillery and animal sounds—but not before an alternative his-

16. Unlike Lamming, who responds to Prospero’s gift of speech with an answering lyricism capable of charming Prospero himself, Cliff revels in the unpedigreed sounds of a language too inward to be entirely “overshadowed by a discourse of Empire.” What Lamming aspires to in his groundbreaking work—that is, the decolonization of Caribbean “cultural history by replacing an imposed with an endemic line of thought and action” (Nixon 569)—Cliff comes close to realizing in “a heteroglossic Caribbean narrative” that “both enacts and describes the multiple struggles against cultural cannibalism and for decolonization on literary and geographical terrain” (Barnes 23).

tory of rebellion and resistance has been reconstructed and re-evoked in the fictional present by characters who have either been exiled from, or have exiled, their fathers.

The weakness, recessiveness, or dispersion of paternal authority into corporate engines of power in *No Telephone to Heaven* is countered by the strength, persistence, and clearly defined commitments of the novel's female characters, most notably Clare and her mother. Yet neither of these women qualifies, or consents, to play the role that constitutes, in Sylvia Wynter's terms, "the most significant absence of all" in Shakespeare's play, namely, that of "Caliban's Woman" (360). Wynter conspicuously rejects the possibility of a West Indian appropriation of Miranda as one of its own, identifying her solely in terms of her relationship to Prospero, with whom she forms a racially based and morally valorized "population-group" (361–63). According to Wynter, Miranda serves as "both a co-participant, if to a lesser *derived* extent, in the power and privileges generated by the empirical supremacy of her own population; and as well, the beneficiary of a mode of privilege unique to her, that of being the metaphysically invested and 'idealized' object of desire of all classes (Stephano and Trinculo) and all population-groups (Caliban)" (363). As such, Miranda shuts off the possibility of Caliban's mate appearing "as an alternative sexual-erotic model of desire; as an alternative source of an alternative system of meanings" (360).

Wynter's intervention in what could be called the technology of *Tempest* appropriations would appear to require a critical reexamination of my reading of Miranda into and out of *No Telephone to Heaven*, in addition to indicating why *The Tempest's* Miranda cannot, without substantial transformation of the play itself, sustain the interpretive effort to mate her with Caliban. In *The Tempest*, of course, Miranda is already (happily) betrothed to Ferdinand—her "brave new world" has only people like him in it—and operates within the same cultural field that frames Peter Greenaway's unrelievedly Eurocentric construction of the play in his recent film *Prospero's Books*.¹⁷ In order to divorce Miranda from Ferdinand and satisfacto-

17. As the printed version of Greenaway's film indicates, *Prospero's Books* is thoroughly colonial in its postmodernism, modeling its representation of *The Tempest* exclusively on the visual and textual productions of the European Renaissance. The closest

rily remate her with Caliban, one would have to dispense with *The Tempest* entirely or, as in the case of Césaire's *A Tempest*, enlist a vigorously revised version of the play in the cause of a racialized conception of West Indian nationalisms. To satisfy Wynter's objections, a revised *Tempest* might also require the continued consignment of Miranda to a subordinate position in a postcolonial power complex dominated by Caliban and an ethic of male sexual possessiveness signaled by the phrase "Caliban's Woman."

Cliff, however, is committed to a process of creolization in the racially mixed construction of her Miranda figure, as well as to a reconfiguring of both power and gender relations in the social economy of her novel. She also appears to recognize, as Laura Donaldson has argued, that "Miranda—the Anglo-European daughter—offers us a feminine trope of colonialism, for her textual and psychological selflessness in *The Tempest* exposes the particular oppression of women under the rule of their biological and cultural Fathers" (Donaldson 68). Moreover, as if in answer to Wynter's objections, Cliff has her Miranda consciously reject her capacity to "pass" as the "metaphysically invested and 'idealized' object of desire of all classes" in favor of serving "as an alternative source of an alternative system of meanings." Cliff specifically has Clare reject her role as a coparticipant in a Prospero-Miranda racial complex by having her choose to "become" black after her father chooses to become white. Clare's consciously crafted divorce from her father is effected so that she might establish a similarly deliberative (if clearly belated) relationship with another figure who is conspicuously absent in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, namely, Miranda's mother, Prospero's wife.¹⁸ And although Cliff in her own words, as in the words she delegates to Clare, rhetorically affiliates herself with Caliban, she

Greenaway gets to integrating New World imagery into his Mediterranean fantasy world is to have "four naked young women and a small, naked three-year-old female child—a group of the island's 'John White' Indians—look out from their shelter under a clipped box-hedge" (65). It is also worth noting that while the figure of the film's Miranda was modeled on that of Botticelli's image of Spring (91), Greenaway's efforts to imagine what Sycorax looked like "when she was powerful in Argiers" were inspired by "Felicien Rops' Pornocrates" (83). See cited pages for respective images and captions.

18. See Stephen Orgel's suggestive meditation on "the absent, the unspoken, that seems . . . the most powerful and problematic presence in *The Tempest*," figured in the conspicuous absence from the play of Prospero's wife (50).

also adds a significantly feminist twist to the transaction by reconfiguring a *Tempest* in which Miranda chooses not to mate at all.

In his own essay on appropriations of *The Tempest*, Rob Nixon describes the alleged fading out of "*The Tempest's* value for African and Caribbean intellectuals" in the 1970s and attributes it to the play's lack of "a sixth act which might have been enlisted for representing relations among Caliban, Ariel, and Prospero once they entered a postcolonial era" (576). He adds, "The play's declining pertinence to contemporary Africa and the Caribbean has been exacerbated by the difficulty of wresting from it any role for female defiance or leadership in a period when protest is coming increasingly from that quarter" (577). But it is precisely the awakened defiance of the dramatically silenced Miranda that Cliff wrests from *The Tempest* at an even later moment in the "play's declining pertinence" to postcolonial writers. Instead of writing a sixth act for a postcolonial *Tempest* that will, once and for all, separate the boys from the man, she writes a thoroughly creolized and womanized novel in which the new, New World Miranda effectively replaces both Prospero and Caliban as an agent of self-determination and cultural change. In the process, Cliff may be said to have engendered a second life for *The Tempest* at a stage of postcoloniality when, as *Shakespeare Wallah* suggests, "every third thought" is Prospero's grave.

Muhlenberg College

W o r k s C i t e d

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Is the Post-in Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 336–57.
- Attridge, Derek. "Oppressive Silence: J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of the Canon." *Lawrence* 212–38.
- Baker, Houston A., Jr. "Caliban's Triple Play." *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 381–95.
- Barnes, Fiona R. "Resisting Cultural Cannibalism: Oppositional Narratives in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*." *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 25.1 (1992): 23–31.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. "English in the Caribbean: Notes on Nation Language and Poetry." *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon*. Ed. Leslie A. Fiedler and Houston A. Baker, Jr. Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979, ns 4. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981. 15–53.

- Brydon, Diana. "Re-Writing *The Tempest*." *World Literature Written in English* 23 (1984): 75–88.
- Cartelli, Thomas. "Prospero in Africa: *The Tempest* as Colonialist Text and Pre-text." *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*. Ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor. London: Methuen, 1987. 99–115.
- Césaire, Aimé. *A Tempest*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Ubu Repertory Theater, 1986. Trans. of *La Tempête*. 1969.
- Cliff, Michelle. *Abeng*. New York: Penguin, 1984.
- . "Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character." *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*. Ed. Selwyn Cudjoe. Wellesley, MA: Calaloux, 1990. 263–68.
- . "An Interview with Michelle Cliff." By Meryl F. Schwartz. *Contemporary Literature* 34 (1993): 595–619.
- . *No Telephone to Heaven*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Donaldson, Laura E. "The Miranda Complex: Colonialism and the Question of Feminist Reading." *Diacritics* 18.3 (1988): 65–77.
- Edmondson, Belinda. "Race, Writing, and the Politics of (Re)Writing History: An Analysis of the Novels of Michelle Cliff." *Callaloo* 16.1 (1993): 180–91.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove, 1967. Trans. of *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*. 1952.
- Fonseca, Isabel. Rev. of *No Telephone to Heaven*, by Michelle Cliff. *Times Literary Supplement* 1 Apr. 1988: 364.
- Gilbert, Helen. "The Boomerang Effect: Canonical Counter-Discourse and David Malouf's *Blood Relations* as an Oppositional Reworking of *The Tempest*." *World Literature Written in English* 31.2 (1991): 50–64.
- Greenaway, Peter. *Prospero's Books*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1991.
- Greenstein, Susan M. "Miranda's Story: Nadine Gordimer and the Literature of Empire." *Novel* 18 (1984–85): 227–42.
- Hearne, John. "The Wide Sargasso Sea: A West Indian Reflection." *Critical Perspectives on Jean Rhys*. Ed. Pierette M. Frickey. Washington, DC: Three Continents, 1990. 186–93.
- Johnson, Lemuel A. "A-beng: (Re)Calling the Body in (to) Question." *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido. Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1990. 111–42.
- Laframboise, Lisa. "'Maiden and Monster': The Female Caliban in Canadian Tempests." *World Literature Written in English* 31.2 (1991): 36–49.
- Lamming, George. *The Pleasures of Exile*. 1960. London: Allison and Busby, 1984.
- . *Water with Berries*. 1971. New York: Holt, 1972.
- Lawrence, Karen R., ed. *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century "British" Literary Canons*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1992.
- Lima, Maria Helena. "Revolutionary Developments: Michelle Cliff's 'No Telephone to Heaven' and Merle Collins's 'Angel.'" *Ariel* 24.1 (1993): 35–56.

- Loomba, Ania. *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Mannoni, Octave. *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*. Trans. Pamela Powesland. New York: Prager, 1964. Trans. of *Psychologie de Colonisation*. 1950.
- Mishra, Vijay, and Bob Hodge. "What Is Post(-)colonialism?" *Textual Practice* 5 (1991): 399–414.
- Mukherjee, Arun P. "Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?" *World Literature Written in English* 30.2 (1990): 1–9.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986.
- . *A Grain of Wheat*. London: Heinemann, 1967.
- Nixon, Rob. "Caribbean and African Appropriations of *The Tempest*." *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1987): 557–78.
- Orgel, Stephen. "Prospero's Wife." *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 50–64.
- Prospero's Books*. Dir. Peter Greenaway. Prod. Kees Kasander. With John Gielgud, Michael Clark, Isabelle Pasco. Allarts, 1991.
- Retamar, Roberto Fernández. *Caliban and Other Essays*. Trans. Edward Baker. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. Trans. of *Caliban*. 1971.
- Shakespeare Wallah*. Dir. James Ivory. Prod. Ismail Merchant. With Shashi Kapoor, Felicity Kendal, Madhur Jaffrey. Merchant Ivory Productions, 1965.
- Singh, Jyotsna. "Different Shakespeares: The Bard in Colonial/Postcolonial India." *Theatre Journal* 41 (1989): 445–58.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing." *Kunapipi* 9.3 (1987): 1–16.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 262–80.
- Suleri, Sara. *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Tiffin, Helen. "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse." *Kunapipi* 9.3 (1987): 17–34.
- Vaughan, Alden T., and Virginia Mason Vaughan. *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- Wilentz, Gay. "English Is a Foreign Anguish: Caribbean Writers and the Disruption of the Colonial Canon." *Lawrence* 261–78.
- Willis, Susan. "Caliban as Poet: Reversing the Maps of Domination." *Reinventing the Americas: Comparative Studies of Literature of the United States and Spanish America*. Ed. Bell Gale Chevigny and Gari Laguardia. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986. 92–105.

- Wynter, Sylvia. "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" Afterword. *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido. Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1990. 355-72.
- Yelin, Louise. "Decolonizing the Novel: Nadine Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature* and British Literary Traditions." *Lawrence* 191-211.
- Zabus, Chantal. "A Calibanic Tempest in Anglophone and Francophone New World Writing." *Canadian Literature* 104 (1985): 35-50.