


2007

Language, Gender and Identity in the Works of Louise Bennett and Michelle Cliff

Nicole Branca

Rhode Island College, dancer62885@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/honors_projects

 Part of the [Linguistic Anthropology Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Other History Commons](#), [Personality and Social Contexts Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Branca, Nicole, "Language, Gender and Identity in the Works of Louise Bennett and Michelle Cliff" (2007). *Honors Projects Overview*. 15.
https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/honors_projects/15

This Honors is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Projects at Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects Overview by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ric.edu.

LANGUAGE, GENDER AND IDENTITY
IN THE WORKS OF LOUISE BENNETT
AND MICHELLE CLIFF

By

Nicole Branca

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Honors

In

The Department of English

The School of Arts and Sciences

Rhode Island College

2007

This paper examines the writings of two female Jamaican authors: Louise Bennett and Michelle Cliff. Bennett emerged as a writer during the process of de-colonization and independence for Jamaica, while Cliff gained prominence as a writer after Jamaican independence. Both writers play an important role in helping Jamaicans establish a national identity by focusing on multiple dimensions of what it means to be Jamaican, including issues of language, identity, gender and race.

Bennett was writing during a time when it was important to establish a clear definition of what it meant to be Jamaican. Her goal was to create a variety of characters that each focused on a specific element of what it meant to be Jamaican. This allowed her readers to find aspects in her characters to which they could relate.

Cliff is writing once Jamaica is used to an indeterminable identity. She creates characters who question what it means to be Jamaican. These characters feel composed of fragments, because there are multiple aspects of being Jamaican. Her writing allows readers to also question their own identity and where they fit in the picture of Jamaica.

By researching the works of these authors, I have hopefully introduced readers to two important writers in Jamaican history with whom they may not have previously been familiar. Louise Bennett was a driving force in reintroducing Jamaicans to their oral traditions. She also encouraged Jamaicans to speak in dialect, and made it acceptable to do so by performing and writing solely in dialect. Her influences can still be seen in Jamaican culture in certain kinds of music. Cliff is instrumental in showcasing the struggles Jamaica is still dealing with and working through. Her work highlights the advances Jamaica has made, but also the difficulties it still has to overcome.

By completing this project, I have showcased the struggle Jamaica has faced in establishing an identity. Louise Bennett was filled with optimism as Jamaica acquired independence and faced a future where it could establish its own identity outside of colonial rule. Her work reflects this optimism by portraying the strengths that she sees in the people. In contrast, Michelle Cliff grew up during the struggle of Jamaica trying to establish an identity. Her work reflects this struggle by highlighting the differences that exist between Jamaicans, such as the differences between the wealthy and the poor, and the light-skinned and the dark-skinned. After examining both authors' works, it becomes apparent that, although both Bennett and Cliff provide guideposts for what it means to be Jamaican, the country still has to define a solid identity.

Language, Gender, and Identity in the Works of Louise Bennett and Michelle Cliff

Through their writings, both Louise Bennett and Michelle Cliff have played important roles in helping Jamaica establish a national identity. However, by studying the work of the two, it becomes clear that it is difficult to pinpoint one complete, all-inclusive definition of what it means for someone to be Jamaican. Both writers focus on multiple aspects of what it means to be Jamaican, including language, skin color, gender, and race. Both take different approaches in how they define someone as “Jamaican.” Bennett chooses to focus on individual personas that each represent a variety of elements in Jamaican society. By doing so, she maintains an ironic, comical distance from her characters. On the other hand, Cliff creates one character, Clare Savage, and uses her to work through the multiple aspects of defining someone as Jamaican. Her work is also much more personal and her own experiences greatly influence her writing. Although the two writers take different approaches in defining someone as Jamaican, they also share a number of themes that can be compared. By focusing on three main elements, Jamaican national identity, cunning, crafty women, and immigration/diaspora, one is able to see how Bennett’s and Cliff’s experiences of living during these time periods are expressed in their writing and how they focus on language, gender, and identity to trace to the growing awareness of the many components that influence Jamaican culture.

It is important to look at the time periods in which these two women are writing in order to understand the influences on their work. Louise Bennett (1919-2006) grew up during colonialism and writes during the period of de-colonization and independence in Jamaica. A generation younger, Michelle Cliff (1946-) grew up during the process of

de-colonization but writes primarily during the post-colonial period. Jamaica gained independence on August 6, 1962. The period from 1950 to 1965, the time Louise Bennett was writing and Michelle Cliff was growing up, is a very dynamic one in terms of the growth of national awareness and development of cultural resistance in Jamaica. Jamaica was at a crossroad during this time with the definition of what it meant to be Jamaican being influenced by the British colonial power, American cultural influences, and the history of the slave trade. The influences of this time period play a role in the writings of both women. Both are addressing the needs and concerns of the country in their writing. However, their goals and aims in their writing are different because of the influences of the periods in which they write.

Bennett was writing during a time when it was important for Jamaica to define a new identity to match their new independence. One of the results of colonialism is a loss of identity for natives. No longer under colonial rule, Jamaicans could decide how they wanted to define themselves and how they wanted others to see them. Just because Jamaica experienced independence does not mean that there is a standard of what it means to be “Jamaican.” Being an important writer of the time, Bennett had a big stake in helping to give Jamaica a concrete definition of how they were going to define themselves. People could look to her poetry to see what she was saying about what it means to be Jamaican and use this to define their own ideas of Jamaican identity.

Indeed, Bennett is writing at a crucial time for Jamaica. She is a key player in the process that Benedict Anderson calls the “construction of an imagined community.” According to Anderson, such a construction was a key part in creating a national identity. Through her writing, Bennett could literally help shape the new nation and give it its

identity. This is why some of her poetry is political in nature. For example, she writes poems about how to vote and the importance of voting. The right to vote would give Jamaica a chance to choose leaders who would fight for and consolidate independence.

Cliff is writing when Jamaica is more used to an interminable identity. Unlike Bennett, who was writing at a formative time for Jamaica, in regards to coming up with a concrete idea of what it means to be Jamaican, Cliff does not have as much at stake in trying to create a coherent identity for Jamaica. In contrast to Bennett, Cliff's goal is not to determine what is or what is not Jamaican. Instead, just as the nation itself is wondering what it means to be Jamaican and trying on different identities, Cliff is asking questions about what it means to be Jamaican through her writing. Cliff offers many different perspectives of what it means to be Jamaican and does not settle on one as being "the" correct answer. Through Clare Savage, Cliff presents a character that tries on different elements of what it means to be Jamaican, questions how these elements fit with her, and changes these elements as she continues to change her perception of herself.

Another important influence shaping both Bennett and Cliff are the revolutions occurring in Jamaica as they were writing. As already discussed, Bennett was writing during decolonization and independence. This influenced her subject matter with regard to determining what it meant to be Jamaican after years and years of following British colonial rule and customs. Part of this revolution involves what customs and influences of Britain Jamaicans should keep, and which of their old traditions that were pushed aside during colonization should be reinstated. One of the main issues was language, but there were also issues about traditional African customs, such as obeah (witchcraft). Thirty-four years later, there were still debates over some of these issues that arose with

independence. Cliff experienced the class/political revolution of 1996, also known as the “reggae revolution,” which led to a color and class struggle, involving language and social class, over who had the power and authority. If one did not speak Standard British English, s/he was thought of as lower-class, which was considered a put-down. The revolution was about whether only those who spoke Standard English should be allowed to have power. People who spoke with a Jamaican dialect questioned and protested why they should be considered less of a citizen just because of the way they spoke. Even after years of independence, Jamaicans were still questioning what it meant to be Jamaican, and this is why Cliff’s writing reflects this questioning.

The population of Jamaica is primarily made up of people who have African or mixed African-European origins, descendents of slaves brought to the island between the 17th and 19th centuries (Bram 384). Established minorities on the island include Europeans, East Indians, and Chinese. Of course, such diversity means people and their traditions have mixed, which has shaped peoples’ definitions of their identities. Indeed, the poet and philosopher Edward Kamau Brathwaite has remarked that the “single most important factor in the development of Jamaican society was...a cultural action...based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their environment and --as white/black, culturally discrete groups-- to each other” (Brathwaite 202). Also, speaking of the histories of the West Indies, author Jamaica Kincaid remarks, “I can never believe that the history of the West Indies happened the way it did... [T]he wreck and the ruin and the greed. It’s almost on a monumental scale. It’s worse than Africa, really. The truth about it is that it erased actual groups of people-- groups of people vanished, just vanished” (Cudjoe 224). It is in this atmosphere of cultural mixture that Bennett and

Cliff write.

Jamaica was under colonial rule for hundreds of years, starting in 1509 with the Spanish, transferring to England in 1670, and finally gaining independence in 1962. This long history of British rule is reflected in both Jamaica's language and customs. With language being a main focus of what it means to be Jamaican, I will be able to examine how Bennett and Cliff transformed the debate about whether the national language should be Standard English, Jamaican dialect, or a mixture of both. They each explore the role language plays in shaping one's identity. In the colonial and postcolonial societies in which they lived, language carried a powerful political and cultural value.

According to Frantz Fanon, it is just a question of with which national identity Jamaicans want to associate themselves. He states that "a national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (Fanon 155). In short, culture is the foundation of historical and personal identity. Clearly, Bennett and Cliff are deeply involved in this process.

In History of the Voice, Edward Kamau Brathwaite writes,

I'd like to describe for you some of the characteristics of our nation language. First of all, it is from, as I've said, an oral tradition. The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would *think* of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning. (Cooper 1)

After independence, Jamaica had to rebuild its national identity and one way it did this was through its literature, story telling, and oral culture. In regards to the process of reintroducing storytelling into culture, Fanon writes that, “the oral tradition--stories, epics, and songs of the people--which formerly were filed away as set pieces are now beginning to change. The storytellers who used to relate inert episodes now bring them alive and introduce into them modifications which are increasingly fundamental” (Fanon 155). Louise Bennett played an instrumental role in reintroducing Jamaicans to their oral culture. However, the reintroduction of these stories is not as easy as it sounds.

One reason is that the tradition of story telling and oral culture were not considered acceptable vehicles for literature. In Noises in the Blood, Carolyn Cooper describes the view of oral story telling during the time of decolonization and independence. The popular view was that “in all domains, the ‘vulgar’ is that which can be traced to “Africa”; the ‘refined’ is that which can be traced to “Europe”...In the domain of language and verbal creativity...oral texts are ‘vulgar’; written texts are ‘refined’” (Cooper 8). While this idea was later proved incorrect, at one point it was a popular one, and Bennett had a lot working against her when it came to her being considered a writer of true value and importance.

Louise Bennett: The Quest for a Jamaican Identity

For many, Bennett was considered more of an artist and performer than a writer. She did perform her poems, but to not classify her as a writer is to take away the important role her writing plays in Jamaican literature. In an interview Bennett says, “I have been set apart by other creative writers a long time ago because of the language I

speak and work in. From the beginning nobody ever recognized me as a writer. ‘Well, she is “doing” dialect;’ it wasn’t even writing you know. Up to now a lot of people don’t even think I write. They say “Oh, you just stand up and say these things!” (Scott 98).

This also introduces the second problem Bennett faced when writing, which is the way dialect was looked down upon, not only by other writers, but by almost all Jamaicans of higher social classes. During the period of colonization, Jamaicans were told that their language was “bad.” When students went to school, they were taught to speak Standard British English. As a result, Jamaicans forgot about their traditional story-telling as a means of expression. Even after decolonization and independence, when Jamaicans had the opportunity to reclaim what they lost during colonization, there was still the belief that dialect was “bad” English and Standard British English was “good.” Donna Southwood-Smith remarks that linguistic tension existed between the elite and the peasantry, resulting in “conflicted attitudes towards speech in the middle and rising classes” (Southwood-Smith 1). Whereas the lower-classes may have been ready to reclaim their old language, the problem was that everyone had been taught for so long that their language is “bad” and only Standard English is “good.” The result is that Jamaicans do not know whether they should be embracing their culture or retaining British culture.

Bennett works to disprove this idea that dialect is “bad” and “vulgar” by writing solely in dialect. She played a pivotal role in re-introducing Jamaicans to their oral-language history. She “challenges the position that the national language is inferior to English because both, she contends, ‘are derivatives of other languages’” (Southwood-Smith 5). Bennett was not afraid to write in Creole, because she wanted to represent the

people of Jamaica, especially the “everyday” citizen. She shifts the view that “bad” speaking is speaking anything other than Standard English. Because everything she wrote was in Creole, many people credit her with the rediscovery of Creole as an accepted language and art form. Speaking of Bennett, Paula Burnett remarks that “it is largely thanks to one woman’s warmth that the prejudice against dialect has gradually melted away, and that a climate has been established in which a whole new generation of creative users of the vernacular could flourish” (deCaires Narain 51). Also, J. Edward Chamberlin notes that “more than any other single writer, Louise Bennett brought local language into the foreground of West Indian cultural life” (deCaires Narain 51).

Bennett says through one of her personas, Aunty Roachy, “shi no know we mek dem no call di English language ‘corruption’ a di Norman French an di Greek an di Latin we dem se English ‘derived from’. Unu hear di wod? English ‘derive’ but Jamaica ‘corrupt’. No massa, noting no go so. We not ‘corrupt’, an dem ‘derive.’ We derive to. Jamaica derive” (Cooper 40). Translated, this means that Aunty Roachy does not understand why English languages can claim to be derived from another language, which makes it acceptable, whereas Jamaican is considered corrupt, even though it is also derived from other languages. However, because the languages Jamaican is derived from are not English-based, others have this negative view of them.

Most of Bennett’s poems follow a traditional British form, the ballad from romantic poetry. Ballads were originally in oral form. Therefore, Bennett is both borrowing this form of writing from the colonizers as well as changing it. Moreover, she is bringing the ballad back to its original form, which was oral. Such an appropriation is part of her effort to both legitimize her poetry and give it a distinctly Jamaican flavor.

Through her writing in dialect, Bennett is telling Jamaicans that it is acceptable to speak this way. Not only does Bennett make the point that dialect is not ‘vulgar’ through the artistry that she produced in writing in this style, but she also directly addressed the issue of language and how Jamaicans should speak as the topic of some of her poems. For example, “Dry-Foot Bwoy” shows the importance Bennett places on dialect and speaking in one's natural language by dramatizing the story of a boy returning from overseas. The speaker in this poem is shocked that since this young man has gone overseas, he has lost his Jamaican dialect and his accent.

Wha wrong wid Mary dry-foot bwoy?
 Dem gal got him fi mock,
 An when me meet him tarra night
 De bwoy gi me a shock!...

Me start fi feel so sorry fi
 De po bad-lucky soul,
 Me tink him come a foreign lan
 Come ketch bad foreign cole!

Me tink him got a bad sore-troat,
 But as him chat-chat gwan
 Me fine out seh is foreign twang
 De bwoy wasa put awn!

For me notice dat him answer
 To nearly all me seh
 Was ‘Actually’, ‘What’, ‘Oh deah!’
 An all dem sinting deh...

Same time me laas me temper, an
 Me holler, ‘Bwoy, kirout!
 No chat to me wid no hot pittata
 Eena yuh mout!’

Him tan up like him stunted, den
 Hear him no, ‘How silley!
 I don't think that I really
 Understand you, actually.’

Me seh, 'Yuh understan me, yaw!
 No yuh name Cudjoe Scoop?
 Always visit Nana kitchen an
 Gi laugh fi gungoo soup! (Selected Poems 1-2)

The speaker also questions whether he is really the boy she used to know. When he was younger, he used to visit “Nana’s kitchen” and eat “gungoo soup” (Selected Poems 2). Since he has returned from overseas, the boy is acting like a foreigner. The speaker feels the boy is putting on airs, trying to sound smarter than he really is. The boy should not have so quickly forgotten where he was from. His dialect was part of what made him unique, and now it is gone.

'An now all yuh can seh is “actually”?
 Bwoy, but tap!
 Wha happen to dem sweet Jamaica
 Joke yuh use fi pop?’...

An from dat night till tedeh, mah,
 Dem all got him fi mock.
 Miss Mary dry-foot bwoy!
 Cyaan get over de shock! (Selected Poems 1-2)

Bennett also starts one of her collections of poetry, Selected Poems, with this poem. Right away, Bennett is telling her readers that dialect is important to her. She does not understand why people would want to get rid of their dialect. For Bennett, “As it is used by the people to express their feelings, the dialect is very adaptable. You can twist it, you can express yourself so much more strongly and vividly than in Standard English” (Scott 97).

Another poem that shows the importance Bennett places on dialect is “Bans a Killin.” In this one, a man has told the speaker that he plans on killing all dialects. However, the man is a little confused on how many different dialects there are and what languages use dialect, so the speaker sets out to set him straight. If the man is going to

kill Jamaican dialect, he will have to kill all dialect, including those with an English history. Even some of how he speaks is dialect, so the speaker jokes the man might have to kill himself!

So yuh a de man me hear bout!
 Ah yuh dem seh dah teck
 Whole heap a English oat seh dat
 Yuh gwine kill dialec!

Meck me get it straight, Mas Charlie,
 For me no quite understand-
 Yuh gwine kill all English dialec
 Or just Jamaica one?...

Dah language weh yuh proud a,
 Weh yuh honour an respect-
 Po Mas Charlie, yuh no know seh
 Dat it spring from dialec!

Dat dem start fi try tun language
 From de fourteen century-
 Five hundred years gawn an dem got
 More dialec dan we!

English has been around for so many hundreds of years that they have even more dialects in their language than languages such as Jamaican. Some of the greatest writers will have to be forgotten because they spoke or wrote in dialect. Many famous English authors' works, such as Chaucer, Burns, Lady Grizelle, and even Shakespeare, will have to be destroyed if this man is serious about eliminating all forms of dialect. Whereas most people would consider these writers among the most prolific and illustrious in the English language, according to the speaker, all of their works will have to be eliminated because they contain dialect.

Yuh wi haffi kill de Lancashire,
 De Yorkshire, de Cockney,
 De broad Scotch and de Irish brogue
 Before yuh start kill me!...

An mine how yuh dah read dem English
 Book deh pony uh shelf,
 For ef yuh drop a 'h' yuh mighta
 Haffi kill yuhself! (Selected Poems 4-5)

The speaker also claims that killing dialect will result in killing wit, humor, variety, and finally, originality. If everyone has to express themselves in the same way, the speaker of this poem argues that there would be no point in even talking because everything would sound the same. People would not be able to express themselves as they wanted. Instead, they would have to conform to this notion of what is the “right” way to speak.

Another comment that this poem makes is that the man who wants to kill dialect does not stop to consider his own language. Dialect is only something “others” do, not something that British do. The “others” are lesser citizens because of the way they speak, and they are not on the same level as those who speak without a dialect, even though this poem shows how just about all languages have some words that are dialectical in origin. This dichotomy of the “civilized” looking down upon the “other” was common in colonialism. However, the speaker of this poem makes the point that, because both the Jamaican language and forms of English use dialect, Jamaicans are either as “civilized” as Westerners, or Westerners are as “uncivilized” as the “other.”

The issue of skin color is another topic that Bennett comments on when determining what it means to be Jamaican. The question becomes, does skin color determine whether one is considered Jamaican or not, and how much so? The issue is especially important when Jamaicans go to America and are able to “pass” for white. The personas Bennett creates do not understand why someone would want to pretend

they were white and American, rather than be proud of their Jamaican background. This is again an issue of being proud of where one comes from. By pretending to be American, it implies that there is something negative associated with being Jamaican.

“Pass fi White”

Miss Jane jus hear from Merica--
Her daughter proudly write
Fi she she fail her exam, but
She passin dere fi white!

She she fi tell de trute she know
Her brain part not so bright—
She couldn pass tru college
So she try fi pass fi white...

But sometime she get fretful and
Her heart start gallop fas
An she bruck out eena cole-sweat
Jussa wonder ef she pass! (Selected Poems 101)

Not only is the girl the speaker in this poem is talking about proud that she is passing for white, but she worries about the consequences if someone were to find out the truth about her.

In another poem, “Colour Bar,” the speaker addresses how in Jamaica there is a “big ‘colour-war’” (Jamaican Labrish 211). “This is a comment on the sensitivity of Jamaicans to different shades of skin-color and the stratification of society based partly on these difference—what the sociologists call the ‘white bias’ mentality” (Jamaican Labrish 211).

Some o’ de red-kin nayga feel
Soh bex dat dem noh w’ite
Dat dem start fe cuss black nayga,
An soh dem ketch a fight

Wen red-kin hitch too much pon w’ite
W’ite people tun dem back,
An dem fraid fe talk to black people

Less people tink dem black.

Me sorry fe po' red-kin, for
 Dem don' know wey dem stan'
 One granpa w'ite, an t'oder grampa
 Big, black, African. (Jamaican Labrish 211)

The “red-kin”, or red-skinned, are those who have both white and African ancestors. The “white-bias” mentality can be seen in the fact that those with mixed blood tend to want to forget about their African heritage and just focus on their white heritage. This is why they are so “bex dat dem no w'ite” (line10). Their black blood is not allowing them to experience all of the privileges and benefits that are associated with being light-skinned. Jamaicans know that the lighter the skin, the easier it is to “pass for white.”

The problem is that those of mixed race do not know where they belong. “Dem sey dat dem noh nayga/ Nayga sey dat dem noh w'ite” (Jamaican Labrish 211). They do not want to associate themselves with blacks because they do have white blood in them and want to experience the advantages the white blood gives them in life. However, both blacks and whites do not accept those with mixed blood as part of their race. Whites do not fully accept them as white, because of the black blood, and blacks do not fully accept them as black, because of the white blood.

This issue of whether one should associate with his/her white heritage or black heritage is an issue for Jamaicans of all ages, including babies, as can be seen in “White Pickney.”

Dem half a dis an half a dat,
 Dem neider dose nor dese-
 So since dem half-an-half, dem chice
 Whatever side dem please.

Ef dem-deh baby mumma call
 Dem 'black' den is awright,
 Since him puppa is white man,
 Fi call fi-yuh pickney 'white'. (Selected Poems 98)

If given the choice, mothers would rather their children associate with their white heritage, even if this means ignoring that the child's mother is black.

As can be seen in these examples, the idea of being proud of where one is from is another important idea in her poetry. Bennett continually tells readers through her poetry that they should be proud of their heritage, even though others may want to change their customs and culture. Going back to "Dry Foot Bwoy," Bennett is telling readers to be proud of their language because it is part of what makes them who they are.

"Nayga Yard" also boldly and directly celebrates cultural Jamaican pride.

Who is de greates barrister?
 A Jew? A Syrian?
 Him white? Is Chiney? Coolie? No.
 Him is a nayga man!

Call fi Jamaica faste sprinters,
 Gal or bwoy, an den
 De foremost artis, doctor, scholar--
 Nayga reign again!

Go eena every school, as fi
 De brightes chile dem got--
 An nineteen out a twenty time
 A nayga deh pon spot!...

So, nayga, people, carry awn;
 Leggo yah talents broad.
 Mmeber de place a fi-yuh—
 Jamaica is nayga yard. (Selected Poems 103-104)

This poem shows that Jamaicans should be proud of themselves because they are among the most prolific in their country. They are the better race in terms of artists, doctors, and scholars. Whereas the belief may have been that it was whites who were the

best in these professions because of their skin color, Bennett tells Jamaicans that they should be proud of the works they do and their own accomplishments. They are just as good as lighter-skinned Jamaicans and the British.

If Jamaicans continue to be ashamed of themselves and their skin color, there will be a “Problem.”

Is no use, when stranger come,
 Fi sen yuh black gramma go hide,
 An show-off all yuh white granpuppa
 Photograph wid pride!

For de ole oman cyaan hide weh;
 An, no matter what yuh do,
 Dem woan see her eena parlour
 But dem see her eena yuh!

Yuh no see is time we stop fool up
 Weself, stop ‘save we face’,
 Stop neglec we problem-dem so till
 Dem tun eena disgrace (Selected Poems 93-94).

Jamaicans can not keep ignoring the “problem,” in this case the differences in skin color, because this will just cause it to become bigger and create even greater divides among those with different skin colors, such as the color wars already discussed. If this issue is ignored, it will then turn into a disgrace for all of Jamaica. Given that Bennett wants to create a unified image of what it means to be Jamaican, this disgrace would not help Jamaica in creating this image. This is why Bennett goes on to write:

Wash yuh dutty clothes, no hide dem!
 No despise from weh yuh come,
 Tackle yuh Jamaica problem-dem
 An stop beat up yuh gum! (Selected Poems 93-94).

Bennett questions whether Jamaicans have a sense of insecurity so that they feel they have to pass for white when they are overseas. Jamaicans may feel it easier to

pretend to be something they are not when they are overseas, rather than acknowledge the diversity and many components that make up who they really are.

This idea of not being proud of where one comes from and trying to be something one is not can be summed up in the poem “A Merica”, in which the speaker questions

Ah wonder is what fault dem fine
Wid po li Jamaica
Meck everybody dah lif-up
An go a Merica?...

Me ask meself warra matter
Me ask meself wha meck:
Is tidal wave or earthquake or
Is storm dem dah expec? (Selected Poems 109)

Bennett also makes a statement in her poetry through her subject matter. As she says, “I think I speak to all Jamaica...a large cross section of the community from the Governor-General to the man in the street can react to the lines and situations I present” (Scott 100). Bennett chooses a wide range of subjects to comment on in her poetry. There is something for everyone to relate to or see themselves in. “Her inspiration came...from the everyday happenings around her” (Jamaican Labrish 23). She “never doubted the power of the language she uses to express the essential passions of her people’s hearts” (Jamaican Labrish 23).

Also important in Bennett’s writing is the crafty, cunning women, which is a way for women to get their way in life. According to Carolyn Cooper, the

Cunning Jamaican woman, celebrated and satirized with equal gusto in Louise Bennett’s ample corpus, is a composite character— an aggregation of the multiple *personae* employed by Bennett, the ventriloquist, to voice the lives of representative Jamaican women of all social classes. This

multifarious heroine-victim of Bennett's comic/satirical sketches presents us with a diversity of social class values and behaviours that attests to the verisimilitude of Bennett's detailed portraiture. (Cooper 47)

This means that Bennett represents the multiple aspects of women. Just as there are many different types of women in real life, Bennett represents many different types of women in her poetry. For Bennett, not only are all women different, but individual women are multi-dimensional. Rather than just portray women in the stereotypical nanny role, Bennett shows women in all different positions and roles of power. For example, in one poem Bennett may represent women by saying how all they do is stay in their yards and gossip, but in another poem, she can discuss the importance of women in shaping and making Jamaica a strong independent nation. This goes back to how she specifically chooses subject matter that people can relate to and characters that people can see aspects of themselves in.

She not only wants to show women as they really are, but show women in power and give Jamaican women something to look up to and something to aim for. In this sense, she is empowering all women. Just as she empowered all Jamaicans to be proud of their language and dialect, she is empowering women to be proud of who they are and to play a role in shaping this new Jamaica.

De ooman dem tun out fe her
How Federaion gwan.
Me never se such diffrent grade an
Kine o' ooman from me bawn.

Full dress, half dress, tidy-- so-so
From bare y'eye to square-cut glass,
High an low, miggles, suspended,
Every diffrent kine o' class. (Jamaican Labrish 41).

“In ‘Bans O Oman!’, the female persona recreates the spontaneous excitement of the launching of the Jamaica Federation of Women designed to bring together women ‘high an low, miggie, suspended,/ Every different kine o’ class’” (Cooper 52). It will take all different kinds of women to make the federation grow and prosper. No matter the social class, the speaker wants all women to have a role in determining what the newly independent Jamaica will be like. The women rejoice over this achievement and “wid joy fe sey, ‘At las’ we get we chance’” (Jamaican Labrish 41). Now that all women have this chance, the speaker feels that the

Federation boun to flourish,
 For dem gots bans [lots] o' nice plan,
 An now dem got de heart an soul
 Of true Jamaica ooman (Jamaican Labrish 41).

It is women that will make Jamaica flourish. Strong women will make a strong Jamaica.

The poem “Bans O Oman!” relates to the poem “Jamaica Oman” in showing the power and important roles that women have in shaping Jamaica. The speaker of this poem takes a different stance by saying that women have always had power, but will have even more due to liberation. Now that Jamaica is independent, the amount of power women hold will be even clearer. In “Jamaica Oman,” Bennett writes,

Neck an neck an foot an foot wid man
 She buckle hole her own;...

An long before Oman Lib bruck out
 Over foreign lan
 Jamaica female wasa work
 Her liberated plan!

Jamaica oman know she strong,
 She know she tallawah [sturdy],...

So de cunny Jamma oman
 Gwan like pats-suit is a style,

An Jamaica man no know she wear
De trousiz all de while! (Selected Poems 22)

The speaker of this poem argues that Jamaican women have always had power; men just never realized it before. The reason is that “cunning, rather than overt male/female confrontation is the preferred strategy for maintaining domestic harmony” (Cooper 48). The woman has always had the power because she is the one who has the sense and puts sense into men’s heads. However, women are “cunny” because they do not allow men to know they have this power. As the poem says, “While man a call her ‘so-so rib’/ Oman a tun [become] backbone!” (Selected Poems 22). Whereas men think women are subordinate to men, women are really the backbone of the household. “Out of the compost heap of history the cunny Jamma oman...must root up for herself the prophetic certainty that ‘oman luck mus come!’” (Cooper 66).

The final aspect of how Bennett defines Jamaica is through immigration/diaspora, which is a life split between two countries. Bennett herself lived in Jamaica, America, and Britain, all of which influence how she views herself. The same is true for Jamaicans who split their lives between countries. Many go to Britain or America in search of a better life and more opportunities. Once in the foreign country, each individual has to decide how much of his/her heritage s/he is going to keep, and how much s/he is willing to be influenced by this new culture.

“Back to Africa”
Back to Africa, Miss Mattie?
Yuh no know what yuh dah she?
Yuh haffi come from somewhe fus
Before yuh go back deh!

Miss Mattie wants to return to her home country, which is Africa, but the speaker says she has to come from somewhere before she can return there. The speaker is arguing that

she can not “go back home” because she never actually came from Africa. Miss Mattie was born in Jamaica. Even though her “great great great” (Selected Poems 104) Grandmother was African, her “great great great” (Selected Poems 104) Grandfather was an English man. If everyone were to return to their land of their great grandparents, then “all dem blue-yeye/ White American/ Who- for great granpa was Englishman/ Mus go back to England!” (Selected Poems 104).

Ef a hard time yuh dah run from
 Teck yuh chance! But Mattie, do,
 Sure a whey uh come from so yuh got
 Somewhe fi come back to! (Selected Poems 104).

The poem “Colonization in Reverse” also emphasizes the idea of leaving one's home country to start a new life somewhere else. Moving to Britain will provide Jamaicans with opportunities that they would not be afforded in Jamaica. However, if many Jamaicans leave the island and move to Britain, which is their motherland, the speaker argues it would be an experience similar to the British colonizing Jamaica.

What a joyful news, Miss Mattie;
 Ah feel like me heart gwine burs—
 Jamaica people colonizin
 Englan in reverse.

By de hundred, by de tousan,
 From country an from town,
 By de ship-load, by de plane-load,
 Jamaica is Englan boun.

Dem a pour out a Jamaica;
 Everybody future plan
 Is fi get a big-time job
 An settle in de motherland.

What an island! What a people!
 Man an woman, ole an young
 Jussa pack dem bag and baggage
 An tun history upside dung!...

What a devilment a Englan!
 Dem face war an brave de worse;
 But ah wonderin how dem gwine stan
 Colonizin in reverse. (Selected Poems 106-107)

The British have won many battles, including wars, but the speaker wonders how they will handle all the Jamaicans going to their motherland. Now that the roles are reversed and Jamaicans are becoming the colonizers by going to England and living and working there, the speaker wonders how Britain will react and respond.

Bennett also wrote a poem to sum up how she feels about Jamaican independence, aptly titled “Independance.” Bennett compares the newly independent Jamaica to an adolescent becoming a man. Jamaica will be going through a lot of “growing changes.” Bennett makes a comparison to an adolescent growing a beard being equivalent to Jamaica growing up into its own nation. She hopes Jamaica will be able to handle the strain of its new-found independence.

Independance with a vengeance!
 Independance raisin Cain!
 Jamaica start grow bear, ah hope
 We chin can stan de strain!...

Jamaica people need a
 Independance formula!

No easy-come-by freeness tings,
 Nuff labour, some privation,
 Not much of dis an less of dat
 An plenty studiration

Independence wid a vengeance!
 Wonder how we gwine to cope?
 Jamaica start smoke pipe, ah hope
 We got nuff jackass rope! (Selected Poems 117-119)

It will not be easy for Jamaica just because it is now independent. She hopes Jamaicans have a plan that will lead them on the right path, a formula to follow.

Bennett was only too right when she realized it would be difficult for Jamaica.

The many aspects she discusses indicate that Jamaica's population has a lot of elements to work through in determining what it means to be Jamaican; there may be no easy way to determine what it means to be "Jamaican."

The Evolution from Bennett to Cliff

The main evolution between Bennett's and Cliff's work is in the methodology of how they answer the question of what it means to be Jamaican. Whereas both are attempting to answer the same questions, they each have a unique way of doing so. Bennett shows a multiplicity of what it means to be Jamaican in the number of characters she creates. Each character only represents *one* element of what it means to be Jamaican by clearly defining a certain aspect of "Jamaican." Cliff, on the other hand, shows mixture and overlapping identities in one character who faces the many issues Bennett has multiple characters grappling with. Rather than create multiple characters, Cliff creates Clare Savage, who must navigate the many aspects of what it means to be Jamaican. One reason for this difference is that Bennett was full of optimism at Jamaica's new independence in her attempt to build national unity. By the time Cliff is writing, Jamaicans have realized it is more complicated to determine a national identity than Bennett originally thought. Many paradoxical aspects make up what it means to be Jamaican, and Cliff focuses on these multiple aspects.

As can be seen by examining Bennett's work, she focuses on one element at a time of what it means to be Jamaican. For example, if a poem is discussing language, it does not also discuss skin color or gender. In this way, Bennett paints vignettes and

individual portraits of what it means to be Jamaican. There is no mixing of elements for her. Because it is so crucial for her to define what it means to be Jamaican, she wants it to be clear to her readers. She portrays characters as if they are in photographs; the reader does not see the character change or evolve.

This relates back to the idea that Bennett was a writer Jamaicans were going to look to for help in determining what their new identity should be after independence. Although Bennett discusses multiple aspects of what it means to be Jamaican, she is sure to keep them clear and specific. This is why her characters do not really question what it means to be Jamaican. In this sense, Bennett's characters do not question the status quo and mainly accept their positions in life. She portrays characters as she wants people in Jamaica to be.

In contrast, Michelle Cliff combines different characteristics of what makes someone Jamaican into one person. She overlaps topics and mixes together different elements into her complex characters that are grappling with many aspects of what it means to be Jamaican. Clare Savage, the main character in Cliff's novels Abeng and No Telephone to Heaven, is also a questioner, unlike most of Bennett's characters.

Cliff represents people in motion. Whereas Bennett does not show change, Cliff creates characters that are changing and can be viewed as if they were characters in a movie. Cliff's characters question what it means to be Jamaican. They do not accept the status quo, but are rather constantly grappling with different identities for themselves and where they fit in the wide spectrum of what it means to be Jamaican.

Bennett's writing as a whole is social, political, and national in nature. She is creating a national picture of what it means to be Jamaican, rather than creating a view of

how she feels people should act. Everyone should be able to see a piece of themselves in the personas she creates. All Jamaicans can take her ideas of what it means to be Jamaican and adapt them to their current lifestyles.

Michelle Cliff: Claiming an Identity she was Taught to Despise

Cliff's writing is very individual and personal in nature when it comes to defining what it means to be Jamaican. By having her characters question what it means to be Jamaican, Cliff is also trying to answer these questions about herself. As a light-skinned, feminist, lesbian, Cliff has a complex, hybrid Jamaican identity. There are many different elements in which she can identify herself. Does she see herself as Jamaican or American? Middle-class or upper-class? White or black? As Cliff says, "The question of my identity is partly a question of color: of my right to name myself. That is what I have felt—all along" (Claiming an Identity they Taught me to Despise 8). Growing up, she was not accepted by either her white friends, or her dark-skinned friends. "You not us," they tell her, but "you not them either" (Claiming an Identity they Taught me to Despise 46). Because Cliff is questioning her own identity, this uncertainty of what it means to be Jamaican comes across in her writing. She uses many of her own experiences in her writing as she has her characters working through the same identity questions she worked through herself.

Just as the elements of language, skin color, race, and class are important for all Jamaicans in determining their identities, these elements are also important for the Savage family and are the issues that the characters are working through in the two novels.

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...If the conversation turned to the knotty hair of a first cousin, it would be switched to the Savage ancestor who had been the first person to publically praise *Paradise Lost*. If the too-dark skin of a newborn baby was in question, it would be countered with the life of the Savage ancestor who had 'done his duty' onboard the *H.M.S. Victory* with Nelson at Trafalgar. If someone spoke about cousin so-and-so being mistaken for a 'colored,' someone else would bring out the snuffbox carved from the Rock of Gibraltar, given to a titled Savage...In this way, the Savages were hard put to explain the changes in their complexions, eyes, hair, and why so many of them had freckles. (Abeng 29)

The Savages choose to ignore certain aspects of their heritage and focus only on those that portray themselves in a positive light. Their identity consists of a combination of myth and reality that they have used to shape themselves.

This denial of certain aspects of one's life, though, is an important concept for Clare Savage. She does not readily accept the tradition of ignoring those parts of one's past that do not look favorable. She takes all parts of her life, both what are considered good and what are not, and uses them to form her own identity. In this sense, she is breaking away from her family tradition and forging her own identity.

This questioning of her identity also causes Clare to see her father, Boy, and his

point of view in contrast to her mother, Kitty, and her point of view. Clare is torn between her parents in multiple regards. First, her father is light-skinned, wishes he were 100% white and wants to live in America. Her mother is darker-skinned, and much more connected to her Jamaican heritage and Jamaican people. Second, her father favors Clare over her younger sister because she looks like her father, whereas her sister has darker skin, although by no means the darkest skin possible for Jamaicans. Boy assumes Clare's sister will be closer with her mother because their skin color is similar. The way Clare feels about this situation is similar to the way Cliff herself felt while growing up. "In the family I was called 'fair'—a hard term. My sister was darker, younger. We were split: along lines of color and order of birth...This kind of splitting causes insanity" (Claiming an Identity they Taught me to Despise 11).

"In one scene, Clare asks her father how she can be 'white' if her mother is 'colored,' and she tries to read answers to these and similar characteristics of her own flesh" (Walters 49). Clare frames the question of her race by asking her father what would happen if she married a Jewish man. She says,

"Suppose he was only half-Jewish."

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

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

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

"But Mother is colored. Isn't she?"

"Yes."

"If she is colored and you are white, doesn't that make me colored?"

“No. You are my daughter. You’re white.”

Very simple... (Abeng 73)

Clare’s father does not understand Clare’s comparison that if a person who is half Jewish is still considered Jewish, then Clare should be considered colored because she is half colored. After this conversation, Clare looked down at the “brownness of her legs...[and] wondered how she could be white with a colored mother, brown legs, and ashy knees” (Abeng 73).

Clare not only questions how she can be considered white, but also questions why being born light-skinned, something that was out of her control, has given her advantages that others do not have. She is always questioning herself and how her light-skin and light eyes affect the way people look at her and judge her. She wonders if she receives privileges she would not otherwise receive if it were not for her skin color.

Boy, on the other hand, wants to erase all knowledge of any African blood he has in himself. He makes everyone aware of the fact that one of his ancestors’, Justice J.E.C. Savage, was a former slave-owner, which, in Boy’s mind, proves he must be white. However, he does not tell the part of the story where J.E.C. Savage set fire to “a hundred of his slaves a month before emancipation” (Walters 41). Clare questions how she and her family can be both slave-owners and slaves themselves.

Boy also feels at home in America because he is able to relate solely to his white background and forget about his Jamaican blood. The following quote from an essay Cliff wrote could be Clare’s father speaking:

Isolate yourself. If they find out about you it’s all over. Forget about your great-grandfather with the darkest skin—until you’re back “home” where

they joke about how he climbed a coconut tree when he was eighty. Go to college. Go to England to study. Learn about the Italian Renaissance and forget that they kept slaves...If anyone asks you talk about sugar plantations and the Maroons—not the landscape of downtown Kingston or the children at the roadside. Be selective. Cultivate normalcy. *Stress sameness. Blend in.* (Claiming an Identity they Taught me to Despise 7, italics added)

Once one gets to the United States or Britain, one should forget about his/her Jamaican past. Rather, it is much easier to just blend in and pretend to be someone else. As the end of this selection says, “don’t pile difference upon difference. It’s not safe” (Claiming an Identity they Taught me to Despise 7).

The contrast between a light-skinned and dark-skinned Jamaican was monumental. Being light-skinned offered privileges similar to those afforded whites. On the other hand, dark skinned males “were servants to light-skinned or white families; waiters at South Camp, Myrtle Bank, or Courtleigh Manor; porters at Palisadoes Airport. They pumped gas at Texaco or Esso stations. They swept sidewalks. They carried garbage. They cut grass and trimmed hedges. Killed rats. Fed dogs...They were paid with a small brown envelope of cash. They lived from week to week” (Abeng 16). Women “also served. Cleaned. Mopped. Cooked. Cared for babies lighter than their own. Did other people’s laundry. Bought other people’s goods in the markets at Crossroads and Constant Spring” (Abeng 17).

Even though colonialism and slavery are over, Cliff is illustrating how skin-color still determines one’s outcome in life. If one does not have the “right” color skin, one

must work and serve those who do. According to those around Clare, “she was a lucky girl [because] she was light skinned...She lived in a world where the worst thing to be—especially if you were a girl—was to be dark. The only thing worse than that was to be dead” (Abeng 77).

Though Clare was aware of the importance of skin color her whole life because of her father, there was one moment in her life when she truly realized the consequences of having darker skin. Clare was in school when a fellow classmate, who happened to be dark-skinned, had a seizure. None of the white, British teachers came forward to help her, but had the students carry on with their singing. Only a darker skinned, Jamaican teacher came forward to help. A similar incident happened in Cliff’s own life. This shows how her life is her inspiration.

Another example of the role skin color plays in Clare’s life is when she sees two of her darker-skinned classmates taunting a “dark-skinned and shabby looking” old woman (Abeng 77). The old woman asks Clare’s classmates for the time, and they respond by telling her to “mind her own business. Clare watched this and went over to the old lady, gave her the time, and the threepence busfare she begged, and turned to hiss a question to her classmates: ‘How could you be so inhuman?’” (Abeng 77).

Clare’s ability to define her classmates as inhuman, while it protects the humanity of the sufferer, is also a power based in her relative class privilege and skin color, perhaps not unconnected to her own ancestor’s claiming the right to judge. How would the scene be read if Clare were dark skinned and her classmates light skinned? (Walters 45)

Wendy Walters is arguing that Clare called her classmates inhuman not only because of

the way they treated this old woman, but also because she feels she is above them due to both her skin color and her class. This implies that Clare looks down upon those who are darker-skinned than herself and considers it acceptable to call other people inhuman.

For Michelle Cliff, the difference in skin color and race is the difference between the haves and the have-nots. It is these differences that cause strain amongst people. This relates back to the class revolution that Cliff experienced as she was writing. Light-skinned Jamaicans were given the same privileges as whites, whereas darker-skinned Jamaicans were treated like second-class citizens.

One of the most noticeable examples of the difference between the haves and have-nots can be seen in No Telephone to Heaven with the character of Christopher. Christopher kills Paul H., his friend from childhood, and Paul's family because of what they have versus what he lacks. Paul "has never been concerned about a mess in his life. He and his surroundings have been tidied by darker people. He gets into his Porsche and drives farther up into the hills. He lives with his family, as most well-off Jamaicans do until they get married, or leave the island" (No Telephone to Heaven 22). On the other hand, Christopher "lived in a lickle shack in a shantytown near the Esso refinery on the outskirts of Kingston. A town of structures built by women and children. Structures made from packing crates which once housed Vauxhalls, Morris Minors, Renaults, Kelvinators, Frigidaires, Maytag washer-dryers" (No Telephone to Heaven 31). These boxes were discarded by those living in Kingston. The people who lived here literally made their homes from the discarded garbage of those above them socially. "This was the Dungle. Here was the dung-heap jungle where people squirmed across mountains of garbage" (No Telephone to Heaven 32).

Christopher was distraught over the death of his grandmother, who was the only family member he had and who had raised him from when he was a little boy. He went to Paul's father to ask for a small piece of land to bury his grandmother. When Paul's father refused, Christopher could not understand how people with so much could be so selfish and refuse what, in his mind, was a small favor.

Christopher is a symbol for a divided Jamaica. Cliff uses this story to show just how divided Jamaica is between the poor and the wealthy. Not only that, but deaths such as these were a common occurrence in Jamaica. When Paul first comes home and sees his family dead, he does not even report this to the authorities because he knows they will not be able to do anything. At the end of No Telephone to Heaven, Christopher returns as "De Watchman," looking out over all that is going on in Jamaica. He is there to judge those around him, especially those who continue to divide Jamaica over issues of race, class, and skin color.

While Cliff does not write in dialect, the example with Paul and Christopher demonstrates how Cliff does use language. The aspect of good and bad speech in reference to Standard British English and dialect still play a role in her writing. Speech is another way to determine those who have and those who have not. Language is also a way for people to show social class. When describing where Paul H. lives, Cliff uses Standard English because he is wealthy and of a high social class. When describing the Dungle where Christopher lives, Cliff uses dialect. This is where the poor people live, and writing this way reflects the way these people actually speak.

Language is also an issue for Clare Savage, who changes her speech based on whom she is around. When she is with her parents, she speaks Standard English, which

is what she has been taught in school. When she speaks Standard English, she is not only showing respect for her elders, but also showing her high social class and that she is well educated. On the other hand, when Clare is with her friend, whose mother works for Clare's grandmother and has darker skin, Clare changes her speech to talk like her. This change in speech allows Clare to alter one aspect of herself that impacts how people view her, whereas she cannot alter her skin color. She is able to make herself an equal to her friend by changing her speech, and therefore changing her social status.

For example, Clare changes her speech when she sees some people using the river that is on her grandmother's property. She had been with her friend speaking in dialect, but as soon as she sees these people on her property, she changes her speech to Standard English to show that she is above them and that she is of a higher social class than they are. Clare knows the change in her speech will indicate a change in her position, and those using the river without permission will have to look up to her and respect her because of her speech.

The role of crafty, cunning women is also important in Cliff's writing. Just as Bennett does, Cliff shows women in a variety of roles. She is not afraid to show women of all different positions and social classes, including strong, independent women.

Part of the way Cliff portrays women may stem from a trip to a museum she took with her mother, in which she saw a display portraying women in various situations. In one,

Women topple—fooled into imbalance. But look again: It is the women—alone who fall—at the left, serenely upright, a woman walks supported by a man; at the right a deliveryman hurries, a gigantic package carried on his

head.

Together my mother and I remember women with filled market baskets; women who carry a week's wet laundry from the washing place; a woman we know who bears water on her head—each day for half a mile. And briefly—recalling the women of our common ground—we meet.

(Claiming an Identity they Taught me to Despise 35).

Unlike this display, which shows women only able to walk upright if they are supported by men, Cliff and her mother remember all the strong, independent women they used to know in Jamaica. Cliff portrays these strong women in her novels.

Clare's mother is one example. When she moves to America and realizes she cannot survive there because she has lost the connection with her people, language, and customs, she has the strength and the courage to leave her husband and move back to Jamaica with her younger daughter. Back in Jamaica, she feels whole again because she feels she belongs. "Kitty Savage, who aligns her sympathies with the dark-skinned people of the island, speaks with reverence of the traditional African practices retained by 'country people,' while her 'whiter' husband, who claims to be the descendant primarily of slaveowners, deprecated the language as nonsensical" (Walters 38).

An interesting character that Cliff creates is Harry/Harriet, who was born a man but relates more to women and dresses as a woman. Cliff has called Harry/Harriet the sanest character in No Telephone to Heaven. Whereas other characters are questioning their identities and where they belong in the world, Harry/Harriet is completely comfortable with him/herself. S/he has accepted the fact that s/he was born as the wrong gender and has done something about it. S/he knows who s/he is, and is not ashamed of

him/herself. S/he also does not feel s/he has to justify him/herself to other people who may question his/her choices in life.

Harry/Harriet is a guiding force for Clare, who herself feels as if she is composed of fragments. Clare looks to Harry/Harriet for advice in guiding her life and determining who she should be. Unlike Harry/Harriet, Clare is trying to figure out who she is with all these contradictions and different influences pulling on her. Everywhere she goes, she questions her identity. She does not feel she belongs in Jamaica, yet when she moves with her family to America, she does not feel she belongs there either. She moves to Britain on her own, but still does not feel she has found a place where she belongs and decides to move back to Jamaica. “She knew that Kingston was the place of her existence. [However,] she felt split into two parts—white and not white, town and country, scholarship and privilege, Boy and Kitty” (Abeng 119).

The idea that Clare does not know where she belongs in life is related to the theme of immigration/ diaspora. The fact that Abeng “does not end with Clare’s stable location in one particular race, gender role, or social class” (Walters 55) shows how Clare never felt as if she actually belonged anywhere. This is why in No Telephone to Heaven, the sequel to Abeng, Clare travels from Jamaica, to America, to Britain, and back to Jamaica. With each stop, Clare take pieces from each place and folds them into her concept of her identity. In this sense, she really is a mixture on more than one level because she not only is both light-skinned and dark-skinned, but also partly Jamaica, American, and British.

Cliff herself moved among the same three countries as Clare and writes about her experiences in her essays. Although her novels are based on many of her own

experiences, such as the black student who had a seizure in school, Cliff's essays allow readers an even more in-depth look into the influences shaping how she views herself as Jamaican. In one essay, "Passing," Cliff writes how she is scared of camouflage because it allows one to blend into the background too easily. She relates to this ability to pass for white, of which she is also afraid.

To this day camouflage scares me.

The pattern of skin which makes a being invisible against its habitat.

And—yes—this camouflage exists for its protection. I am not what I seem to be.

I must make myself visible against my habitat. But there exists a certain danger in peeling back. The diamondback without her mottled skin loses a level of defense. (Claiming an Identity they Taught me to Despise 3)

Although there are advantages to being light-skinned, there are also the disadvantages of people looking at and treating her differently. Though she knows she should reveal who she truly is, there are disadvantages to this as well; she feels she will lose her protection. In this sense, she does not know whether to reveal her true identity and be free, or keep it hidden and be safe. As she goes on to write, "Passing demands a desire to become invisible. A ghost-life. An ignorance of connections...Passing demands quiet. And from that quiet-silence...Passing demands that you keep that knowledge to yourself [a knowledge of history and spirit]" (Claiming an Identity they Taught me to Despise 5-6). Although it may be safer for Cliff to pass for white than reveal her true identity, she knows that she will be lying and keeping parts of herself hidden.

Conclusion:

Both Cliff's and Clare's questioning of their own identities represents the questioning going on by all Jamaicans. Both while Clare was growing up and presently, Jamaica can be described as being in a liminal state, which means it is in a state of ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. Both people and places are in transition. In a state of liminality, one's sense of identity tends to dissolve, which may cause confusion for the person. Cliff explores the concept of liminality in her writing. "By focusing on liminal states between childhood and adulthood, white and black, colonizer and colonized, Cliff accomplishes complex analyses of language, history, race and identity" (Walters 28).

The period of adolescence is often associated with liminality because of the questioning about one's identity and where one fits in the world. Jamaican identity can be compared to that of an adolescent—changing, developing, and trying to figure out what and who it is. Both Bennett and Cliff discuss Jamaica in terms of adolescence. Bennett compared a newly independent Jamaica to an adolescent man just beginning to grow a beard. She hoped both the young man and the country could "stan de strain" (Selected Poems 117) that was associated with the task.

By the time Cliff is writing, Bennett was probably hoping that the adolescent Jamaica had developed into a mature, adult Jamaica. As can be seen from examining Cliff's work, though, this is not the case. Clare's journey through adolescence and into adulthood parallels Jamaica's journey as an independent country. Clare desires stability in her life by trying to find herself among the many fragments of what it means to be Jamaican, just as Jamaicans are looking for stability in what it means to be Jamaican.

Clare's "adolescent inquiries seek meaning and rationalization and are frustrated by the multiplicity of contradictions present" (Walters 45-46). Just as Clare is at war with herself and trying to create unity in her life by questioning who she is, the same is true of Jamaica. Jamaicans are still questioning, over forty years after independence, who they are and where they fit in. Clare is an embodiment of the struggles Jamaica was, and still is, going through.

The problems that Louise Bennett discussed in some of her poems are still present when Michelle Cliff is writing. Just as Bennett warned that these problems might turn into a disgrace for Jamaica, Cliff shows how this is the case. Bennett hoped Jamaica had a "formula" to follow once it came to having a successful independence. She was optimistic that she would be able to provide her countrymen with a clear definition of what it meant to be Jamaican. Over time, though, it becomes obvious that there is no easy, clear-cut way to define "Jamaican" as Bennett hoped would be the case. Cliff's writing shows how defining what it means to be Jamaican is a much longer and larger process than Bennett was expecting. Cliff's writing illustrates that Jamaica is still trying to find itself.

Cliff uses her novels, and therefore Clare, to show how embattled and at war Jamaica is with itself. No Telephone to Heaven offers no hope at the end for Clare, and in turn, no hope for Jamaica itself. Christopher, "De Watchman," is standing watch over Jamaica at the end of No Telephone to Heaven to remind everyone of the great disparity that still exists between the haves and the have-nots. Cliff's novels show just how much Jamaica is still struggling with issues such as the division between the wealthy and the poor and the light-skinned and the dark-skinned.

Although Bennett may not have been successful in her goal of creating a solidified and unified version of what it means to be Jamaican, her writing still has an influence on Jamaicans today. She was successful in reintroducing Jamaicans to their oral, story-telling history. People are still experimenting with dialect in such forms as dub poetry and dance hall music. This is largely due to Bennett making it acceptable to speak in dialect again after years of Jamaicans being told it was the bad and vulgar way to speak. Her storytelling and writing allowed Jamaicans to be proud of their language, and this was one defining element Jamaicans kept with them.

Cliff's writing is still influential in Jamaica because she writes about characters trying to find themselves, just as Jamaica is still trying to find itself. By creating characters who question their identity and where they fit in the broad scheme of what it means to be Jamaicans, Cliff is showing all Jamaicans that it is acceptable for them to question their identities. As she is questioning her own identity, she realizes there is no easy way to define being Jamaican. Although Jamaica is still going through the stages of determining its own identity, both Louise Bennett and Michelle Cliff provide Jamaicans with guides to help them along the way.

Works Cited

- Bennett, Louise. Jamaica Labrish. Kingston: Sangster's, 1983.
- . Selected Poems. Kingston: Sangster's, 1983.
- Bram, Leon L. and Norma H. Dickey (eds.) Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia Volume 14. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Corporation, 1993.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. "Creolization in Jamaica." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1999. 202-205.
- Cliff, Michelle. Abeng. New York: Plume, 1995.
- . Claiming an Identity They Taught me to Despise. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1980.
- . No Telephone to Heaven. New York: Plume, 1996.
- Cooper, Carolyn. Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Cudjoe, Selwyn R. "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview." Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference. Ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe. Wellesley, MA: Calaloux Publications, 1990.
- deCaires Narain, Denise. Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Fanon, Frantz. "National Culture." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Scott, Dennis. "Bennett on Bennett: An Interview." Caribbean Quarterly 14 March-June 1968: 97-101.
- Southwood-Smith, Donna. *Language as a Vehicle for National Themes*. American University. 10 May 2006
<<http://www.american.edu/tesol/wpSouth-woodSmith.pdf>>.
- Walters, Wendy W. At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Bibliography

- Agosto, Noraida. Michelle Cliff's Novels: Piecing the Tapestry of Memory and History. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000.
- Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London: Verso, 1991.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria (ed.). "Object into Subject: Some Thoughts on the Work of Black Women's Artists." Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990. 271-290.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. In My Father's House. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.) The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. London: Routledge, 1995.
- . The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Bailey, Lilieth Lejo. *We Are all Contributing to Life: A Chat with Louise Bennett*. 1992. The Caribbean Writer. 23 May 2006
<www.fb10.unibremen.de/anglistik/kerkhoff/DubPoetry/Bennett/Bailey.htm>.
- Benitez-Rojo, Antonio. The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 206-209.
- Biddle, Arthur W. (ed.) Global Voices: Contemporary Literature from the Non-Western World. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Blair Press Books, 1995.
- Bennett, Louise. Anancy and Miss Lou. Kingston: Sangster's, 1979.
- . Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse. Kingston: Pioneer Press, 1973.
- . Aunty Roachy seh. Kingston: Sangster's, 1993.
- . Children's Jamaican Songs and Games. [Sound recording] Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2001.

- . Jamaica Labrish. Kingston: Sangster's, 1983.
- . Selected Poems. Kingston: Sangster's, 1983.
- Bram, Leon L. and Norma H. Dickey (eds.) Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia Volume 14. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Corporation, 1993.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. "Creolization in Jamaica." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 202-205.
- Caribbean Themes: Binary Oppositions and their Deconstruction*. 14 March. 2002.
3 March 2006
<<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/caribbean/themesov.html>>.
- Cliff, Michelle. Abeng. New York: The Crossing Press, 1984.
- . Bodies of Water. New York: Plume Books, 1995.
- . Claiming an Identity they Taught Me to Despise. London: Persephone Books, 1980.
- . Free Enterprise. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2004.
- . "If I Could Write This in Fire, I would Write this in Fire." The Graywolf Annual Five: Multi-cultural Literacy. Ed. Rick Simonson and Scott Walker. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1988.
- . The Land of Look Behind. New York: Firebrand Books, 1985.
- . No Telephone to Heaven. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987.
- . The Store of a Million Items. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998.
- Cooper, Carolyn. Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Creolization and Diaspora: Historical, Ethnographic, and Theoretical Approaches*. 28 June. 2002. Economic and Social Research Council. 28 February 2006
<<http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/events/Creolization.htm>>.
- Cudjoe, Selwyn R. Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference. Wellesley, MA: Calaloux Publications, 1990.
- . *Identity and Caribbean Literature*. 24 June. 2001. Trinicenter.com. 25 July 2006
<<http://www.trinicenter.com/Cudjoe/2001/June/24062001b.htm>>.

- . "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview." Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference. Ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe. Wellesley, MA: Calaloux Publications, 1990.
- Davidson, Marcia. *Jamacians.com Exclusive Interview with Miss Lou*. 2003. Jamacians.com. 25 July 2006
<<http://www.jamaicans.com/culture/people/misslouinterview.htm>>.
- deCaires Narain, Denise. Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Diedrich, Lisa. *Michelle Cliff*. Fall 1996. Post Colonial Studies at Emory University. 19 March 2006
<<http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Cliff.html>>.
- Donnell, Alison and Sarah Lawson Welsh (eds.) The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature. London: Routledge, 1996. 145-150, 498-500.
- Edric Connor, Louise Bennett & Jamaican Folk Music*. 11 March. 2006. Jamusica. 25 July 2006
<<http://www.mentomusic.com/edricConner.htm>>.
- Fanon, Frantz. "National Culture." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 153- 157.
- . Black Skin, White Masks. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967.
- . The Wretched of the Earth. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963.
- Gikandi, Simon. Writing in Limbo. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Gilroy, Paul. Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Culture. London: Serpent's Tale, 1993.
- Hall, Stuart. Resistance Through Rituals. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Harris, Joseph E. Africans and Their History. New York: Meridian Books, 1998.
- Hebdige, Dick. Cut 'N' Mix: Culture, Identity, and Caribbean Music. London: Routledge, 1987.
- Hulme, Peter. Colonial Encounters. London: Routledge, 1986.
- James, Louis. Caribbean Literature in English. London: Longman, 1999.

- Jekyll, Walter. Jamaican Songs and Stories: Annancy Stories, Digging Sings, Ring Tunes and Dancing Tunes. New York: Dover Publications, 2005.
- Koebner, Richard. Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964.
- Mannoni, O. Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization. London: Praegar, 1964.
- Memmi, Albert. The Colonizer and the Colonized. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.
- Michelle Cliff. 2006. The University of Minnesota. 19 March 2006
<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/cliff_michelle.html>.
- Nkrumah, Kwame. Towards Colonial Freedom: Africa in the Struggle Against World Imperialism. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1962.
- Nunez, Elizabeth and Jennifer Sparrow (eds.). Stories from Blue Latitudes: Caribbean Women Writers at Home and Abroad. Emeryville, CA.: Seal Press, 2006.
- Ramazani, Jahan. The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Said, Edward. Culture and Imperialism. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Schumpeter, Joseph. The Sociology of Imperialism. New York: Meridian Books, 1955.
- Scott, Dennis. "Bennett on Bennett: An Interview." Caribbean Quarterly 14 March-June 1968: 97-101.
- Southwood-Smith, Donna. *Language as a Vehicle for National Themes*. American University. 10 May 2006
<<http://www.american.edu/tesol/wpSouth-woodSmith.pdf>>.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. In Other Words. New York: Routledge, 1987.
- . The Postcolonial Critic. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. Decolonising the Mind. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986.
- Walcott, Derek. "The Muse of History." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 370-374.
- Walters, Wendy W. At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.