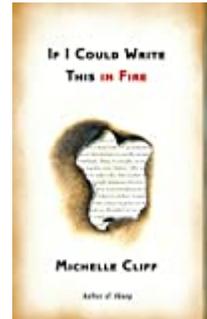




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## “Split Consciousness” and the Matrix of Identity in Michelle Cliff’s Nonfiction

*If I Could Write This in Fire* is the much-awaited collection of Jamaican American author Michelle Cliff’s non-fictional essays, at least three of which are among the most widely cited nonfiction pieces in Caribbean studies. Part autobiography, part social and political analysis, and part poetry, “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire,” (1982) “Journey into Speech,” (1994), and “What Would It Be Like” (2004) were indeed, in their earlier manifestations, indispensable points of reference for anyone interested in discussing issues of identity and cultural fragmentation in Caribbean and postcolonial studies. Long before postmodernism turned the question of the splitting of identities into what now appears to be an academic pastime, Cliff was exposing the supposed fixity of categories of social belonging and theorizing in her own unique amalgam of styles the heterogeneity of Caribbean culture.

In “Journey into Speech,” an essay that she revised as the preface to this collection, Cliff traces the process of cultural alienation through which light-skinned Jamaicans, like herself, internalized and reproduced the

Anglocentrism of their British colonizers (we learned to cherish that part of us that was them—and to deny the part that was not. Believing in some cases that the latter part had ceased to exist [pp. 26-27]). Yet, even as the past [was thus] bleached from our minds, the sense that a darker side coexisted with the Anglo-Saxon indoctrination to which she was subjected sustained the author and eventually allowed her to reclaim the African part of her heritage (p. ix). The “split consciousness” or “double vision” with which she grew up, Cliff explains, was precisely what she aimed to showcase in her second novel *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), for instance (pp. ix, 26). In this novel, characters who grew up speaking *patois* are shown to be both constructed in and split by the hegemony of the “King’s English” under British rule. Cliff concludes by repeatedly expressing her “rage” and “fury,” feelings that may startle since they are directed at the very British culture that partly constitutes her. Yet, Cliff’s passionate fury is also one of the most gripping aspects of her writing, since it epitomizes her unflinching and uncompromising resolve to speak up against and (lit-

erally) curse the very forms of social and racial privilege from which she benefited as a light-skinned Jamaican growing up in a hierarchy of shades (p. 11). She thus offers a map outlining a way out of a system of colorism from which one may originate but which need not determine one's allegiances (p. 27).

"What Would It Be Like," the poem in six parts that opens the collection extends her plea for decolonization in the form of an elegy and intense reflection on the loss of the idyllic terrain of [her] girlhood (p. 1). The speaker tries to imagine what it would be like had she grown up unimpeded by the repressive mechanisms that would come to define the racial, social, and sexual relations of her native Jamaica (p. 1). Images of lush and colorful flora and fauna abound at the beginning of the poem, vividly embodying the warmth and richness of a Caribbean the speaker traces back to a pre-Columbian and precontact space. Soon, however, references to the mangoes, papayas, hibiscus, jasmine, and Edenic underbrush of the past are replaced with references to the "impossible green ... impossible blue ... impossible light" and "impossible sun" of the Caribbean space for which there is no map (pp. 2, 3, 6, 5). A colonialist and Anglocentric frame of reference has taken over which cannot make any sense of the intensity of the colors it encounters in the Caribbean landscape or of the scentless bougainvillea that necessarily disappoints (p. 3). Racist and heterosexist ideologies are shown to collide and collude even as they constitute, in their various articulations, a site of both oppression and privilege for the light-skinned Cliff. The poem thus offers an outline of the very ideas and motifs that are further elaborated in essay form in the rest of the collection.

"If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire" develops the theme of the politics of race- and class-based privilege that Cliff addressed both in the preface and opening poem (they were passing on to those of us who were light-skinned the creole heritage of collaboration, assimilation, loyalty to our betters [p. 14]). She illustrates the impossibility of any egalitarian relationship between light-skinned and black Jamaicans by tracing the widening distance between her younger self, a girl with red skin and tall hair, and her impoverished black childhood friend, Zoe (rarely will dark and light people co-mingle [p. 27]) (p. 11). Whereas Cliff's family sends her to England to pursue an education, the class and color tensions in her friend's background conspire to hold her back. Zoe gets married, finds herself in a domestic violence situation from which she cannot extricate herself, and writes her friend to beg her for a one fifty

dollar (p. 17). Zoe is taught by the Peace Corps volunteers to embroider linen mats with little lambs, while Cliff can come and go and leaves to complete my education in London (p. 17).

Nevertheless, Cliff's transatlantic journey from Jamaica to England and later to the United States is not a straightforward narrative of social mobility or teleological betterment, since, as a lesbian living in the heteronormative culture of racism and imperialism that characterizes the West, she, too, is subjected to prejudices that will shape her life. When her dark-skinned cousin visits her in London, Cliff allies herself with him when a racist barmaid refuses to serve him drinks, but their kinship is soon undermined by his homophobia. Cliff thus highlights the constantly shifting alliances and misalliances she must negotiate because of her conflicted colonial and colonized identities. She unearths the paradoxes of privilege and oppression that constitute her life and which she has to traverse in order to attempt decolonization. It is indeed and paradoxically through the recognition and writing of her self as split that she seeks to attain wholeness and an integrated, albeit always-in-process, sense of identity.

What makes Cliff's narrative so powerful is that she traces the matrix of her identity without obscuring the contexts in which her racial and ethnic identity entails privilege, the contexts in which she too is oppressed, and last but not least, those in which alliances are possible and misalliances occur. As race, gender, sexuality, and nationality collide and interact with one another, new sites of oppression and solidarity are formed and undone in a context not always of her own making. References to Jamaican history and imperial rule are interspersed throughout her personal account to remind us of the shifting dimensions of power that define the contexts she inhabits. They illustrate the inseparability of identity and memory from history in her and Zoe's divergent life courses. In this sense, the collage-like nature of her writing is crucial since it embodies the fragmented nature of identity her writing as a whole reveals.

"Cross-Country: A Documentary in Ten Jump-Cuts" relies on a similar syncopated and nonlinear form to convey the surprising incongruity and unpredictability of the various cultures Cliff inhabits. The snapshot of a woman entering a restaurant pushing a stroller from which she removes a life-size baby doll, which she feeds, changes, rocks, and signs to sleep inevitably evokes Cliff's earlier childhood memory in "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire," in which Zoe and Cliff borrowed a baby from a woman and used her as

our dolly. Dressed and undressed her. Dipped her in the riverwater. Fed her with the milk her mother had left with us: and giggled because we knew where the milk had come from" (pp. 46, 16). Seen from the other culture's perspective, both scenes feel unreal and defamiliarize everyday maternal gestures that are either directed toward the wrong object, a doll, or performed by the wrong subjects, teen girls. Just like jump-cuts in film editing, whereby changing or removing one element in a similar scene highlights discontinuity, such vignettes represent not a naturalized reality but the ways in which reality is given meanings that are arbitrarily naturalized. Similarly, far from appearing as a linear progression, Cliff's journey through the U.S. aims at making visible the hidden assumptions that lurk behind the most natural or benign aspects of her existence and that startle her (and us) when we least expect it. The most seemingly innocuous places through which she passes during her cross-country trip are exposed as sites of a racism and colonialism that are perpetuated unintentionally or worse, casually. The doctoral student who escorts her at the University of Virginia informs her that Thomas Jefferson didn't own slaves.... 'Villagers'—as they are affectionately known—built the university.... They liked him so much they just pitched in, after their own chores were done.... History as fiction" (pp. 39-40). Alternatively, in *Sites of Memory*, it is fiction as her story to which she is

confronted as her students are determined to read her fiction and Caribbean novels in general as autobiography, diluting and undermining the politics of the narrative. They want to reduce the collective to the individual" (pp. 57-58). Whether it is in Germany or the United States, in other words, it is the same lack of accountability toward history and its legacies that the author encounters over and over again, the adamant notion that ... the past is the past, the domain of but a few thugs" (p. 60).

Cliff's condemnation of white culture remains unflinching throughout the collection. She remains brutally honest, deeply personal, and uncompromisingly political. Yet, she also concludes the book on a more positive and hopeful note. In her final essay, *In My Heart, A Darkness*, "darkness" refers to the sadness and resentment she feels toward white people, most of whom have internalized supremacist values, take their skin privilege for granted" (p. 81). It also refers, however, to the darkness within her which she has reclaimed and embraced as a source of strength and solidarity (the most important interracial relationship I have is within myself [p. 79]). Still, it is with the remarkable interracial friendship of people, such as John Brown and Mary Ellen Peasant, that she concludes the volume, because, as she so eloquently puts it, such friendship is a triumph of imagination on every level an act of liberation" (p. 89).

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