“Out of Many, One People” : A Comparative Analysis of Short Fiction by Michelle Cliff

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"Out of Many, One People": A Comparative Analysis of Short Fiction by Michelle Cliff

by

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"OUT OF MANY, ONE PEOPLE": A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SHORT FICTION
BY MICHELLE CLIFF

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JENNIFER NICOLE LASTER

A THESIS
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a comparative analysis of six of Michelle Cliff’s short stories where I discuss the aspects of class, race, and self-alienation present in her work. In formulating and gathering the appropriate research for this project, I discovered that like most short fiction, Cliff’s has not received criticism equal in comparison to her full-length novels. Therefore, the aim of this project is to present an in-depth critique of Cliff’s short fiction using black feminist, post-colonial, and queer theory approaches to produce close readings her work to reaffirm her importance as a contemporary Caribbean author.

Chapter One juxtaposes the theme of social hierarchy as it relates to the forbidden friendship between the protagonist who is visiting Jamaica, and the child-servant of the aunt who the narrator is staying with. “Monster” and “Columba” are paired together because they are set in Jamaica and narrated by young female protagonists where both works depict a fictional portrayal of the stratification of Jamaican society. The dialogue between her characters is spoken in either Jamaican patois or in Standard English and the juxtaposition of the two facilitates cultural critiques using post-colonial and Caribbean literary theories to discuss the division inherent in class structure.

Chapter Two analyzes the short stories “Ecce Homo” and “A Woman Who Plays the Trumpet is Deported.” This chapter serves as Cliff’s depiction of the Holocaust to focus on the erasure of the gay and black experiences in documented accounts of history. Cliff’s fiction addresses concerns that specifically the gay, lesbian, and black women’s experiences are either homogenized or negated in relation to the overall history of oppressed groups. By incorporating critical theory to my comparative analysis, I intend
to show how the critic’s evaluation coincides with Cliff’s characterization of her protagonist’s experiences during the Holocaust. “A Woman Who Plays Trumpet is Deported” is narrated from the perspective of famed black American jazz musician Valaida Snow whose life story has been negated in the history of both the Holocaust, and the history of jazz. “Ecce Homo” traces the fictional narration of a black gay man living and working in Europe during World War II, who is captured and escapes from a Nazi concentration camp.

Chapter Three will investigate the pairing of “Transactions” and “Screen Memory” to examine the protagonists’ feelings of self-alienation through their romanticized perspectives of personal fulfillment. “Transactions” chronicles the desire of a white American salesman in Jamaica to find a child who he can call his own while “Screen Memory” contemplates childhood through the recollections of a racially mixed alcoholic actress who slips in and out of a dream-like state. This chapter provides a post-colonial and gendered reading of the texts analyzing the author’s rendering of a white Jamaican figure’s metaphoric colonization of a child and the conflict of racial and sexual passing by a woman plagued by alcoholism and mental illness.
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CHAPTER ONE

Seeking Wholeness within Fragmentation: A Comparative Reading of "Columba" and "Monster"

We are a fragmented people. My experience as a writer coming from a culture of colonialism, a culture of Black people riven from each other, my struggle to get wholeness from fragmentation while working within fragmentation, producing work which may find its strength in its depiction of fragmentation, through form as well as content, is similar to the experience of other writers whose origins are in countries defined by colonialism.

Michelle Cliff, "A Journey into Speech" (14-15)

“Columba” and “Monster,” analyze the intersection of class via Cliff’s fictional rendition of a Jamaican homecoming for two young female protagonists. The possession of a fragmented selfhood Cliff explains as having an understanding of the impact of colonialism on one’s psyche. Thusly, fragmentation for her characters means recognizing their connection to the former colony of Jamaica, while indentifying with their American identities and how the two conflate with one another. When given the opportunity to interact with the island’s citizens, both characters face their fragmented sense of self which is divided between their American and Jamaican identities providing them with the opportunity to see how class privilege functions in Jamaican society.

“Columba” takes place in Jamaica’s capital city of Kingston, where a young unnamed narrator is visiting a friend of the family referred to as her “Aunt” Charlotte. During the protagonist’s stay with her aunt, the protagonist forms a relationship with her aunt’s live-in child servant, Columba. Charlotte is a hypochondriac whose delusional
mindset goes beyond her fears: she sees herself as a woman of extravagant beauty, yet is described as grossly unattractive and a parody of English womanhood. Her home, mentioned as “a cliché of colonialism,” is small and unkempt yet occupies a large plot of land (15). Owning this land and once resembling silent film star Louise Brooks, Charlotte associates herself among Jamaica’s elite and values anything imported and representative of English culture. Charlotte’s estate mirrors the former relationship between Jamaica and England. By choosing to identify herself as white, and assigning identities to her boarders based on their ethnicities, Charlotte continues the system of oppression once imposed on the island by recreating it within her own home. Cliff alludes to her failed recreation of Englishness: Charlotte, an individual of European heritage, heads the household; her boarder from Cuba, Juan Antonio Corona y Mestee, can be associated with the brown or middle class; and her live-in child servant, Columba, represents the black lower class. Literary critic Sally O’Driscoll comments on Cliff’s identity politics and notes that: “The authority of identity is a central issue for a writer who straddles first and third world, colonizer and colonized, the postmodern and the postcolonial” (56). The politics of identity is a major theme in Cliff’s writing as it relates to her theory of fragmentation. By straddling first and third worlds, and also being able to transcend racial and cultural boundaries, Cliff’s authorship is able to encompass multiple subject positions. In “Columba,” Charlotte’s character serves as a metaphor of colonialism and analogously depicts Jamaica’s former colonial and colorist hierarchical society. Returning to O’Driscoll’s argument, the first and the third world clash here in the imitation of a colonial system and, in doing so, Charlotte perpetuates the behaviors of the country’s former oppressor.
Cliff’s depiction of Charlotte’s wealth juxtaposes the economic status of the other Jamaican characters who live in poverty. Columba, the title character, comes to Charlotte’s home by the desperation of his mother, Winsome, who offers her son for “a case of condensed milk, two dozen tins of sardines, five pounds of flour, several bottles of cooking oil, permission to squat on Charlotte’s cane-piece – fair exchange” (16-17). The exchange of her son for food and a place to stay shows Columba’s mother was not able to provide the basic necessities for him and may have seen this as an opportunity for him to have a better life. Because of his mother’s poverty, Columba was introduced to a life of servitude. Columba’s father was not an active figure in his life. His father, Father Pierre, was a self-proclaimed evangelist who preached his sermon by “dredging his memory for every tale he had been told. This was enough for these people. They probably couldn’t tell a confessor from a convict – which Father Pierre was [...] Even after the Gleaner had broadcast the real story, the congregation stood fast: he was white, he knew God – they reasoned. Poor devils” (17). The desperation evoked by Cliff’s characters goes beyond economics; they experience a spiritual hunger as well which Father Pierre takes advantage of. Father Pierre infiltrates the Jamaican society and establishes himself as a man of wisdom because the Jamaican citizens were seeking salvation from their present situations and welcomed anyone providing a solution.

Like Charlotte, Father Pierre believed heavily in his declaratory greatness so much so that his arrogance affects the perception of his son. In the same manner which he appointed himself “Father,” the priest sought to place a title of importance on his son who had been without a name for ten years and had been called simply “Junior.” When Father Pierre finally decides to name his son he asks, “Why honor an un-named sire?
Father Pierre spoke to Winsome. ‘Children,’ the priest intoned, ‘the children become their names’” (17). Father Pierre’s question of honor is contradicted by his use of the word “sire” when referring to his child. The term sire is used to describe a male parent of an animal. Father Pierre does not consider himself an animal however; Columba is born of mixed parentage: his mother black Jamaican and his father is white, from French Guiana. When revisiting the master/slave narrative of the story, history reveals a child from a white mother or father was still considered less than a person and of the slave class because the child had “black blood.” In addition, the boy going so long without a name demonstrates that his father was not active in his life. Though Father Pierre’s opinion of his son is not expressed in the story his new name takes on an unintended characterization of a popularized television character.

Columba’s name is taken out of context from its intended meaning then further misread and replaced by Lassie, who, although the star of a long-running television program, simply became “one damn dog” to some. A major theme in Cliff’s writing is naming, because to provide a name, means to provide ownership. The young man goes through a series of names in an attempt to find one that suits him. Father Pierre did not want the boy to be confused with explorer Christopher Columbus however; “what Father Pierre failed to reckon with was the unfamiliar nature of the boy’s new name; Columba was ‘Collie’ to some, ‘Like one damn dawg.’ His mother said [...] Collie soon turned to Lassie and he was shamed” (18). The misreading shows a rejection of the series’ overall message: the dog was a hero for its intended audience. To take the name “Lassie” and compare it to the boy would be what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls “signifying.” Gates explores black vernacular coding and suggests: “In black discourse ‘signifying’ means
modes of figuration itself [...] The black rhetorical tropes subsumed under signifying would include ‘marking,’ ‘loud-talking,’ ‘specifying,’ ‘testifying,’ ‘calling out’ (of one’s name), ‘sounding,’ ‘rapping’ and ‘playing the dozens’” (687). In black vernacular, there is word play and symbolism not used in Standard English. As with the dialect of *patois* in Jamaica, the characters “call Columba out of his name” using the same linguistic tropes in black American English elaborated by Gates. Here, Cliff’s characters degrade the young man by referring to him as a dog. The language codification in both dialects expresses an additional meaning to a subject whether positive or negative as a result of the play-of-words, Columba’s name was not well-received. The reduction to the *Lassie* character to that of a pet speaks to the way the title character of this story is looked at by others—as having a master, which alludes to class hierarchy within the culture.

Cultural nuances that may not have been directly intended for that particular audience provide alternative readings of the show *Lassie*. The Jamaican characters’ reaction to Columba’s name evokes feelings of resistance to what they have seen when interpreting the *Lassie* series on television. Negative audience response has been studied in film theory discussions regarding race and spectatorship in order to gain a greater understanding of viewing practices outside of the intended targeted market. Film theorist Manthia Diawara uses spectator resistance to argue its relation to race speaking to filmic rejection from a black male centered perspective. Diawara makes a general assertion that “aspects of dominant film can be read differently once the alternative readings of (Afro-American) spectators are taken into account, as the Black spectator’s reluctance to identify with the dominant readings” (212). The Jamaican characters had an undoubtedly different adaptation as their experiences and interpretation differ when viewing the show.
giving an alternative reading to the show. Likewise, issues of gender and class will also produce varied critiques of viewing and interpretation. The audience’s reading of the Lassie character was obscured by the differences in culture and value: a dog in Jamaican culture is a pet, not a counterpart as in U.S. culture. As a domesticated figure, Lassie had to have a master, thereby giving Charlotte the entitlement of owning Columba.

The critique of viewing practices has been further analyzed by black feminist theorist bell hooks who interprets spectatorship, naming, and “looking” relations between the (black) spectator and their subject. What hooks attempts to prove is that through looking, one can either form or reject an identity whereas Cliff uses the paralleling of Columba and Lassie as a form of resistance. hooks gives an example of (dis)association:

Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another naming what we see. The ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relation of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that ‘looks’ to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ politicizes ‘looking’ relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist. (116; emphasis mine)

hooks’ “spaces of agency” exists in relation to an assertion of power. The gaze is exemplified in the characters’ interpretation of the television show where the Jamaican characters are essentially “looking back” and reconfiguring the initial meaning behind the
television series and reducing it. Those who place an oppositional gaze on a subject are now in a position to assign a name and meaning, the irony in this is that the subject may not have the same value as originally intended. Readers later find that under Charlotte’s rule Columba “became ‘Colin,’ because she insisted on Anglicization. It was for his own good, she added for emphasis, and so he would recognize her kindness. His name as-is was foolish and feminine” (18). Since Charlotte treasured any and all things from England, renaming Columba, Colin, was what she believed would be more appropriate. We learn from Cliff by her use of children in her stories may be used to show an unbiased viewpoint of society as the adult figures teach social difference to their children.

At the story’s climax, the reader learns the narrator breaks Charlotte’s orders and initiates a friendship with Columba although she has been told only to speak to him regarding his domestic duties. Charlotte has attempted to divide the children based on their social standings. The story reaches its high point when the narrator and Columba sneak off into the overgrown forest on Charlotte’s property. Columba has something he only wants the protagonist to see so he leads her to an abandoned car deep in the bush. The wreck—now a dovecote—is teaming with life. Curious of his treasure, the protagonist asks, “‘Where did you find them?’ Columba is pleased, proud too, I think. ‘Nuh find dem nestin’ all over de place? I mek dem a home, give dem name […] I thank him for showing them to me, promising on my honor not to tell” (20). In this passage we see Cliff using the theme of ownership by Columba providing the birds a home and assigning them names, however; Columba’s position of ownership is usurped by Charlotte’s orders. Columba’s subject position shifts from a position of authority, back to a position of servitude when Juan Antonio accidently stumbles upon the dovecote.
Juan Antonio immediately informs Charlotte of his find and she then orders Columba to kill all of the birds and pluck them to be frozen. The story closes with the boy performing his duty in tears. Cliff uses the story of Columba to demonstrate the polarity of the lives of the two children. The recognition of their difference allows the narrator to see the difference of their social class when to her, it was never an issue.

Cliff’s child protagonists’ examine themselves and their surroundings when placed in unfamiliar settings. The “fragmented sense of self” noted in the epigraph, is acknowledged when the characters evaluate and critique their care-takers treatment of others because they relate more to those their parental figures chastise then to their parents themselves. The second half of my analysis examines another story told by a young narrator taken from Cliff’s collection The Store of a Million Items. “Monster” is the protagonist, Rachel’s, story about her family’s trip to their grandmother’s home in Jamaica. “Monster” serves as an analogy for Cliff’s portrayal of social class.

The story opens with the juxtapositions of the grandmother’s house, its past, and its present inhabitants to set the tone. Inside, the house is decorated with photographs of her sons “each combed and slicked to resemble a forties movie star. […] Pictures taken in a studio in downtown Kingston where touched-up brides (lightened to reflect the island obsession) grace the window” (20-21). The author notes that a lighter complexion is more favorable in Jamaican culture, and similar to Charlotte in “Columba,” Cliff again notes the character’s desire to resemble a film star. I am not going to deviate from my intended topic to discuss the filmic and textual comparisons in Cliff’s work; film functions in “Monster” to depict the indoctrination of colonial ideologies in post-colonial society. Here, the desire to mimic Western television and film stars appeals to the overall
monstrousness Cliff conveys in the story’s title. Returning to her essay, “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire,” Cliff is essentially “writing back” to her experiences of life and culture growing up and living in Jamaica, the United States, and England. She makes a very poignant statement about the colorist mentality held within Jamaican society when she writes:

Under this system, light and dark skin people will meet in those ways in which the light-skinned person imitates the oppressor. But imitation goes only so far: the light-skinned person becomes an oppressor in fact. He/she will have a dark chauffer, a dark nanny, a dark maid, and a dark gardener. These employees will be paid badly. Because of the slave past, because of their dark skin, the servants of the middle class have been used according to the traditions of the slavocracy. (73)

Similar to Charlotte’s treatment of Columba, Rachel’s father returns to Jamaica with elitist ideologies. The monster, who is in fact Rachel’s father, pursued a new life in America. Drawing on his upbringing, Rachel begins to define her monster by remarking: “My grandmother’s faith is severe and forbids graven images (she makes an exception for her sons) […] Graven images include motion pictures, of course. Although she has never seen a movie, she has seen advertisements for them in the Daily Gleaner, right next to the race results. Nasty things. Like most evil, brought from somewhere else” (21). The grandmother’s staunch faith and national pride contends with the life her son has created for himself and his family. This passage suggests that, according to the grandmother, acculturation occurs when an individual transforms him or herself into an oppressive colonialist figure—the father/monster figure in “Monster” and Charlotte’s
character in "Columba" respectively. The European and American influences on the island are represented as evil, which presents the father as the monster in the story.

The narrator's of "Columba" and "Monster" do not hold the same elitist attitudes of their caretakers and because of this, attempt to identify with Jamaican society even though they feel apart from it. The two protagonists also analyze their residencies on the island. In women's writing, the motif of the "house" is used as a symbolic reference to homeland or "women's space." Rachel describes her grandmother's house in "Monster" as "Small. In the middle of nowhere. The heart of the country, as she is the heart of the country. Mountainous, dark, fertile. One starting point" (20). The home of the grandmother can be read as a locale for an authenticated representation of "home" in Jamaica. This starting point can be read as her family's lineage; a way for Rachel to trace her roots. Carole Boyce Davies, a scholar of Caribbean women's literature, argues that "The symbolization of the house as source of self-definition that is common in Caribbean literature is also prominent in Afro-Caribbean women's literature. The house and its specific rooms become metaphors for self and loci of self-definition" (67). Davies' reference to the house and self-definition applies to the grandmother and to her belief that "evil is brought from somewhere else" and is not native to her home/homeland. Also, for Rachel's family, returning home is a way for them to reconnect to the land and the people they have left behind. In "Columba" this location functions as a metaphor of colonization when the narrator sees and is expected to participate in the division of social class.

The family in "Monster" distinguishes themselves from those who do not have the luxury of being able to leave Jamaica because they have the privilege of belonging to
three islands (Jamaica, England, and Manhattan). What also sets Rachel and her family apart on the island is their mixed racial ancestry. In America, they pass for white, denouncing their black Jamaican identity. Upon their return to Jamaica, Rachel describes the differences the family encounters and says, “We live in America, as we will always call it, but are children of the empire [...] We are triangular people, our feet on three islands” (22). Literary critic Suzanne Bost points out that: “those with traces of both white and black racial origins also have the privilege to come and go between Jamaica, England, and the United States replicating the triangular trade and reflecting the triangular patterns of cultural and economic neo-imperialism that exist in Jamaica today” (681). The family points out that they belong to all three places, yet, as such, are emulating the triangular slave trade between Africa, America, and the Caribbean. They come from America with Eurocentric values and bring them to Jamaica. Referring to herself as a child of the “empire,” Rachel also suggests her understanding of colonialism in Jamaica and how she and her family are participants in its present existence owing to their behavior both abroad and at home in America. Rachel realizes the social impact that the denial of their heritage has on the way her family sees themselves and others.

Cliff’s way of alluding to the figurative monstrosity of the difference of racial and social stratification between the family (specifically the father) and the island’s inhabitants is by using “Monster” as the title of the story. At the story’s climax, the grandmother allows the son to create a make-shift theatre using a projector, a sheet, and her verandah to show one of the film reels he has brought from America. The monster allusion represents an imperialist mindset adopted by the father, as Rachel notes:
My father has planned the evening carefully. He is ringmaster, magician, the author of adventure. He is eager, nervous. He is to reveal the world beyond their world-of red dirt which sticks in every human crevice; teeth darkened by cane, loosened in the dark; eye-whites reddened by smoke, rum. He wants to become crucial to them.

(25)

Like Father Pierre in "Columba," there is a level of trust seen in those bringing foreign influence to Jamaica: "The people in the surrounding area look to her [the grandmother] for judgment, guidance, the food she generously gives them, and if she has let her big, strong, American-sounding son-in-law bring a movie to them, how can it be wrong?" (25). The language used to describe Rachel’s father illustrates the difference that he assigns to himself and his audience. References to him as a "ringmaster" and "magician" resonate with a tone of superiority and an imperialist mindset as if he is performing in front of an audience of children, entertaining those that can be easily persuaded by showy acts of illusion. As a "ringmaster," the father is the head of his own circus where he can appear as the authority. In addition, by referring to "their world" as a place of dirt and excess, he is further setting himself apart from the crowd, yet wanting to become an integral part of their lives. Bringing a movie from the United States demonstrates the father’s desire to appeal to the residents of Jamaica by showing them a popular film that might not have been available for them to see at the time. Yet, it also is a way for him to distinguish himself from those living on the island as having resources that they have not been able to attain.
The film the protagonist’s father decides to show is an adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). The story has been interpreted by scholarly critics as a story about parenting and femininity. Black feminist theorist and scholar Barbara Johnson gives a post-colonial and feminist reading stating that: “Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is an even more elaborate and unsettling formulation of the relation between parenthood and monstrousness [...] the novel is among other things, a study of the impossibility of finding an adequate model for what a parent should be” (241-2). This interpretation resembles Cliff’s namely, the relationship between the father and daughter. Monstrousness represents a parent or parenting figure in Shelley’s work, whereas it applies to patriarchal/colonial ideologies in Cliff’s. The parenting figures in “Columba” –Charlotte and Father Pierre, and the father in “Monster”– operate under the guises of both oppressor and patriarchal figure. By identifying the monster as imperialism, the narrators of both stories see the embodiment of colonialism negatively. This identification appears in Cliff’s other works as well, where her characters question themselves and their relation to the “empire.”

There is a girl in the audience wearing a dress handed down from Rachel who she notices during the movie. Cliff uses the dress as a symbol depicting the difference in class between the two girls. Rachel, having received the dress to wear for only one occasion, is able to give it away to someone else who now wears it regularly. Recognizing the dress as once her own, she notes:

What was once polished cotton, [...] Colors faded to paleness by now, from sun, river water, the battery of women against rock. I remember trying it on in Lord & Taylor [...] Now it reappears on the body of the
daughter of the butcher’s wife, apart from the group. Reddish skin.

Almond-shaped green eyes. Her eyes could make me her sister. (28)

The water from the river, intense sun for drying, and scrubbing against rocks most likely was not the way the dress was intended to be cared for. However, seeing it as such, the narrator then recognizes the hardships faced by those people her father aims to influence. Rachel is able to give the dress away after one occasion and seeing it on someone else softens her opinion of Jamaican people. Rachel notices that her self-critical gaze refutes her own monstrosity because she sees herself in the girl in the crowd.

Ironically, there is another parallel of the character’s gaze at the end of the story. During the film, a firecracker is ignited, setting the roof of the grandmother’s house on fire; at the same time the townspeople in the film are pursuing the monster with torches. As the fire grows, Rachel is ordered not to stop playing the film, “No one moves. This is not their house. No one stops watching” (29). Reading the father as the monstrous being, no one helps him and everyone still sits and watches the movie amid the sparks and flames. Rachel’s father springs wildly into action, trying to put out the fire as if the “mob” has now led him into it and the story closes with him trying to extinguish the fire with his “tenderized American feet” (29). Recall that the home is a symbol of self-realization in Caribbean women’s writing; the father attempts to save a part of his Jamaican heritage with his “American feet” indicating the connection he has to both nations. Cliff illustrates how he takes on the character of the monster but attempts to salvage he and his daughter’s heritage from the house fire.
“Monster” and “Columba” demonstrate Cliff’s displacement of the dominance of colonial ideology. Both short stories share the “wholeness from fragmentation while working within fragmentation” quoted in this chapter’s epigraph by the protagonist’s self-reflexive view of themselves in comparison to their Jamaican peers. Overall, Cliff’s writing to and about Jamaica through the perspective of a child does not simplify her authorship or its subject matter; instead, it reveals the ingrained demarcation of class that her characters recognize from a very early age. Cliff shows how this understanding affects all aspects of post-colonial nations as fragmented by racial and social hierarchies and how those within its fragmentation function, and recognize its boundaries. Cliff narrates the theme of displacement through the characters migration to other countries. As discussed in depth later, all of her characters — no matter their age, race, or gender — are somehow displaced.
CHAPTER TWO

Restoring the Erasure: Revisiting the Holocaust in “A Woman Who Plays Trumpet is Deported” and “Ecce Homo”

She is writing a history of incarceration. Here is where black women congregate—against granite. This is their headquarters; where they write history. Around tables they exchange facts—details of the unwritten past. Like the women who came before them—the women they are restoring to their work/space—the historians are skilled at unraveling lies; are adept at detecting the reality beneath erasure.

Michelle Cliff, “Against Granite” (33)

Restoring the erasure of blacks from history has been a challenge for historians and writers alike. This chapter examines the short stories “A Woman Who Plays Trumpet is Deported” and “Ecce Homo” in order to demonstrate Cliff’s fictive portrayal of the Holocaust in conjunction with historical perspectives during the 1940’s. This chapter differs from the last in that the challenges of race expand beyond the black community. Here, gender issues and sexuality will be discussed in relation to historical documentation and how Cliff inscribes otherwise silenced voices into history. The importance of her revalidation of the past is that it acknowledges two groups of the Holocaust that are typically not recognized as targeted victims: black women and gay men. Cliff uses the characterizations of a successful black female musician and an accredited gay black male linguist to deepen the reader’s knowledge of the Holocaust along the lines of gender, race, and sexuality.

“A Woman Who Plays Trumpet is Deported” gives an imagined account of real-life musician Valaida Snow and her journey to Europe during the 1930s. The narrative
opens with Snow’s reflection of a dream establishing the racial climate of the story: “I remember once Billie Holiday was lying in a field of clover. Just resting. And a breeze came and the pollen from the clover blew all over her and the police came out of nowhere and arrested her for possession.’ ‘And the stuff was red . . . it wasn’t even white’” (55). The “stuff” Holiday was arrested for the police believed to be narcotics. Although the famed musician did struggle with substance abuse throughout her lifetime, the interpretive analysis Cliff provides allows the reader to imagine how such an incident compares to the treatment of blacks in Europe versus America during that time. The reference to Holiday’s experience serves as a metaphor for Snow’s own trials as a musician overseas where the symbolism of the police apprehending Holiday is analogous to Snow’s treatment later in the story. Like Holiday, Snow was a professional performer and, although their meeting was just a dream, Holiday states, “Girl, you have no idea how tough it was” as a warning to Snow that racial tension was an unavoidable circumstance in Europe as well (55). Cliff is using Holiday’s experience to juxtapose the tribulations both musicians faced during a time when many black artists traveled to Europe to escape the racial segregation and discrimination in America.

Snow was a performer of tremendous talents: her creative genius was almost unheard of for the time as she unsettled the gender politics of the music scene. Cliff aims to revive her legacy through her fiction to give “the details of the unwritten past” as mentioned in the epigraph, because male jazz historians and critics fail to regard women’s contributions (33). Similar to Cliff, black feminist theorist Mae Gwendolyn Henderson addresses her understanding of the erasure of black women’s voices stating that: “it is not that black women, in the past have had nothing to say, but rather that they
have had no say. The absence of black female voices has allowed others to inscribe, or
write, and ascribe to, or read them” (24). Henderson goes on to say there is a dismissal of
black women’s voices because their accounts have been muted and absorbed by black
male historians. Snow’s “discovery” as a musician made her an anomaly “a black
woman musician who plays trumpet. A bitch who blows. A lady trumpet-player. A
woman with chops. It is the thirties. She has been fairly successful. For a woman,
black, with an instrument not made of her. Not made of flesh but of metal” (55). The
description of the instrument not being her actual physical body suggests the exploitation
of women’s sexuality in the field of entertainment. Josephine Baker, another famous
entertainer during the 1930’s, had a career in Paris however, unlike Snow, her career was
founded on her highly sexualized image. Black women were not encouraged to take on
such roles as trumpet players especially if they did not vocalize or dance. The
juxtaposition of Snow’s femininity in dual terms as a “lady” and a “bitch” suggests that
her image as a musician could be seen both positively and negatively. Cliff’s statement
that a “lady” would play while a “bitch” blows gives the passage a sexualized motif. The
author may have intended the passage to be interpreted as such given the theme of the
story. Women were not encouraged to be instrumental musicians at the time. And, if
they were, their gender would stigmatize them. Literary theorist Sherrie Tucker provides
an insightful look into the history of black women performers as they appear in literature
and on stage. Tucker provides interviews with pioneering black female musicians and
compares their narratives to the history and criticism of jazz music and black women’s
exclusion from its legacy. Tucker begins her essay by asking:
Who among us has not figured out that history and criticism are at least as fallible as other forms of memory, that they censor even as they record? Take the history and criticism of jazz, for example, the majority penned by white men who generally recall a gender-specific, male art form (sometimes acknowledged to be Black) while forgetting America’s classical music. Black male writers while doing much to elucidate the cultural and political base of jazz expression have also tended to forget Black women as cultural producers (except as singers). (26)

As Tucker explains, black women’s contribution as musicians to the legacy of jazz has been excluded by scholars and critics who recognize them only as vocalists. This censoring of memory limits the history of jazz to be a male-dominated genre of music which only permits one side of its legacy to be recorded. Be that as it may, women played as soloists and band members next to their male counterparts. Both white and black male jazz critics fail to acknowledge these women’s contributions. Although a band performs together to produce a unified sound, each member, regardless of their race or gender, adds to the music being played. If there were an individualized approach to jazz criticism, it would be possible that its racial and gendered minorities would have received more acknowledgements in its written history. Tucker’s essay and Cliffs’ fictional work function to restore the erasure of black female musicians who would otherwise be obscured from the history of jazz.

To restore Snow’s place in history, Cliffs’ fiction serves as a memoir of the musician’s life and times and through this reflection, the author demonstrates how Snow is claiming her independence as both black and a female jazz artist. Snow was a marvel
in the United States as she was abroad, taking on a musical genre dominated mostly by men while simultaneously defining herself as an independent artist. Although Cliff’s story is a fictive portrayal of Snow, jazz was a pop-culture phenomenon during the time, and its emigration to Europe opened doors for many black artists to take their sound abroad. Europe welcomed not only black musicians but black scholars, authors, and artists. During the historical movements of Negritude in Francophone Caribbean and African nations, and the Harlem Renaissance in the United States, a migration such as Snow’s was not uncommon. When Cliff’s protagonist decides to leave the U.S., the narrator remarks, “This woman flees to Europe. No, flee is not the word. Escape? Not quite right. She wants to be let alone. She wants them to stop asking for vocals in the middle of a riff […] She wants a place to practice her horn, to blow. To blow rings around herself. So she blows the USA and heads out. On a ship” (56). The narrator searches for and defines the proper term to give meaning to her travels while simultaneously claiming her identity as an African American female traveling abroad.

While justifying her decision to go, Snow also states, “this is not one of those I’m travelin’-light-because-my-man-has-gone situations” noting her decision is completely her own (56). Snow is not escaping because of a poor relationship with her spouse, she believes she can find fulfillment as an artist by leaving the United States and embarking on a journey to France.

On her trans-Atlantic journey to Paris, Snow is assigned a Senegalese steward who the author uses to display a diasporic bond between the two. The steward notices her trumpet and shows her that he, too, is a musician—a drummer. Using their interest in music, they communicate through their instruments: “The horn is brass. The drum,
silver. Metal beaten into memory, history. [...] Think of it as a reverse middle passage.

Who is to say he is not of her people” (57). By referring to their trip as a “reverse middle passage,” Snow acknowledges the African heritage that would make him “her people,” while the juxtaposition of cultures and events provokes critical thought for the reader given the commonalities between different groups within the African diaspora. Samir Dayal disputes that not all diasporic individuals possess this type of recognition between cultures:

> It would be fatuous to suggest that all diasporics are automatically in possession of double consciousness, that they are fully self reflexive ‘ambivalent’ and cosmopolitan nomads ‘riding’ cultural difference. [...] Not all migrants are exilic or nomadic; some are refugees, some merely following the money. (49-50)

Although Dayal argues against diasporic connections, Cliff’s story represents powerful linkages to this theory. The racial similarities between the steward and Snow unite them, but, their language barrier and social status separate them (he in a position of servitude while she is a professional entertainer). Upon closer examination, there is a parallel between nations using the brass and silver instruments. The harmony of both instruments creates a sound that brings the characters together where they can communicate without necessarily using language. Snow possesses a double consciousness through her recognition of racial similarity with the steward and their communicating through instrumentation. Although they are able to identify with one another albeit their difference of cultures, their connections are complicated because of their class and migration status. Feminist theorist Caren Kaplan contends that the ability to write and
possess double consciousness is a reality for most authors composing literature from a culture outside of their own. Kaplan refers to Cliff as being, “radically deterritorialized from a Caribbean culture and a race,” but it is this separation that the author uses to express unity that crosses cultural boundaries (195). By paralleling African and African American cultures and having them come together through music, Cliff sets up a sense of familiarity between the two characters on the ship which later contrasts with the interpersonal experiences Snow faces upon her arrival to Paris.

Snow, a black American female during WWII, is able to escape some of the racial injustices she faced in the U.S., yet, her material status does not exclude her from prejudice and subjugation in Europe. Snow narrates her travels from an oppositional space and suggests that, although having left America, some of the same racial attitudes are present in France: “Of course, people stare occasionally, those whom she is unfamiliar […] But no one calls her nigger. Or asks her to leave” (58). Although the racism in France is not as blatant as it is for her in America, it is still evident. Nonetheless, Snow takes back her autonomy by doing things she as a member of the black race was unable to do in America. The protagonist revels in the fact that “they pay her to play. She stays in their hotel. Eats their food in a clean, well-lighted place. Pisses in their toilet. No strange fruit hanging in Tuileries” (58). Again, Cliff references Billie Holiday, this time, her song “Strange Fruit” a ballad dedicated to the fight against racism. Snow however is misled. Her utopian vision of Paris is soon disrupted as she finds Europe has its own was of ousting Others.

Cliff’s depiction of Nazi-occupied Europe provides a comparison between the Jewish women who were detained and their experiences, and Snow’s fictional account
during her capture in the Holocaust. The reader learns that France’s national security shifts dramatically and many people begin to evacuate. The nightclub Snow plays in gets shut down without notice. The narrator relocates again, this time to Copenhagen, Denmark, to stand-in for an entertainer who has fled the country. The narrator seems unaware of the violent changes in Europe. While in Denmark, she notes that “everyone wore the yellow star there – for a time” (59). Her observation of the yellow patches soon finds its meaning when she is picked up by armed Nazis. She ponders, “So this is how it’s done. She found herself in a line of women. And girls. [...] Not at all spoke. Some absolutely silent” (59). Snow is taken away with those who have been identified as being Jewish by the Nazi troops even though she was not wearing the patch. The desire for a homogeneous nation in Nazi governed European countries targeted immigrants and religious/ethnic minorities for expulsion and extermination. This chapter does not seek to suggest that in the history of genocides all victims share similar experiences. Rather, what it proposes is that both Snow and the women beside her in the camps are not of the dominant culture and, therefore, they are punished equally. In the written history of the Holocaust however, women’s experiences have typically been omitted. Historian Joan Ringelheim uses first-hand interviews from Jewish female survivors in her work. Similar to Sherrie Tucker’s findings about women’s perspectives in history, Ringelheim’s work highlights how women’s voices are often overlooked within Holocaust studies. She argues that:

Even a cursory look at studies about the Holocaust would indicate that the experiences and perceptions of Jewish women have been obscured or absorbed into the descriptions of men’s lives. The similarity among
Jewish victims of the Nazi policy of destruction has been considered more important than any differentiation, including or especially that of gender.

(741)

Ringelheim’s subjects give varying accounts of the separation and violence taken out against women during their encampment. The formerly detained women discuss how during their stay in sex-segregated areas in the concentration camps women formed allegiances with one another; they offered security and nurturing by staying in groups. Ringelheim suggests there was a camaraderie created among the majority of imprisoned women. In Cliff’s story she does not mention any relationships between Snow and those imprisoned but, according to Ringelheim’s research, it is not impossible to assume that one existed.

Cliff’s protagonists in this chapter are placed within the Holocaust in order to juxtapose the tragedies faced by the victims as a way of describing how both are subjugated to similar fates as outsiders within the standards set by the Nazis. The black experience of enslavement in the United States has been labeled by some critics as “The Black Holocaust,” though this term has been disputed as inaccurate since both are separate experiences. Critic Wendy Zierler asks, “What is to be gained by drawing literary comparisons between the African Diaspora experience of slavery and the Jewish experience of the Holocaust? Can such comparisons be made without distorting the historical record” (46). In light of Snow’s experiences, a comparison does not threaten to dismiss either account as inaccurate. Cliff’s writing disrupts the assumed understanding of the Holocaust as a horror faced only by Jewish men and women in Europe, and also brings light through her fiction to experiences of individuals who may have been
forgotten. The story concludes with Snow evaluating her situation “Fool of a girl, she
told herself. To have thought she had seen it all. Left it – the worst piece of it – behind
her. The body burning – ignited by the tar. The laughter and the fire. And her inheriting
the horn” (60). The fate of Snow is not provided to the reader. Cliff may have ended the
story as such so that more writing and research could be done on the late musician. And
although Cliff has written a fictional short story, her characters function to provide
voiceless perspectives in history allowing additional research and alternative readings
about the Holocaust.

The second half of this chapter analyzes Cliff’s “Ecce Homo” (meaning, “Behold
the Man”) dealing with themes of race and sexuality as told by a black gay male
protagonist. The narrator, referred to as “the linguist,” lives as a professional interpreter
from the United States in Italy. Ironically, Cliff composes a story of the oppressed giving
a voice to the oppressed during WWII. Though war is not the theme of the story, it is
significant as it sets the tone for a discussion of race and gender. A close reading of the
text inspires questions surrounding how the gay community was affected and depicted if
at all during the Holocaust. Paradoxically, during a time of racial segregation in his own
country, the protagonist is able to go overseas and help others become citizens of
America, which does not acknowledge him as an equal. The linguist helps others gain
refuge abroad: “He translates for Italians who clamor for visas. Jews among others. His
is a low-level position for a man of his qualifications” (237). Voice and voicelessness are
common threads throughout Cliff’s body of work and, translating for Italians and “Jews
among others,” the linguist can provide access to freedoms they may not have had in
Italy. Throughout the story, he is limited to his title; he is never given a name, or
directly addressed by one by other characters in the story. It is not clear why Cliff does not give her character a name, but his occupation is symbolic in its characterization as it sets him apart from others based on his social standing. It is possible (as seen with Snow’s character) that he, as an individual of great talents, was discriminated against in his homeland and went overseas to find a better opportunity. Additionally, the linguist being gay was an obstacle in obtaining this sort of status as a government employee in a homophobic culture. Working as a linguist, the protagonist is giving others a chance to be heard when their language barrier would have kept them in a marginalized and silenced position in society. This example of silence parallels his own as a sexual and racial minority.

The protagonist’s profession as a linguist suggests that he moves between languages, meaning he is not entrenched in one vocabulary, this movement also serves as a metaphor for his sexuality. As a black gay man living in Fascist Italy during WWII, the linguist is labeled as “the Negro who speaks in tongues […] Now his tongue is the most skilled part of him. He works with his tongue. He makes love with his tongue. He knows when to hold his tongue” (238). This passage indicates his tongue is “the most skilled part of him” while providing his livelihood in Italy, he also uses it to silence his sexual orientation when needed. The protagonist does note however, that he uses his tongue to “make love” but then uses the same sensuous organ on the job where he cannot express his sexuality. Cliff paints a metaphor of gender identity in this passage. The narrator knows when he can be open with his sexual orientation and when he cannot. The linguist’s position allows him to speak to and for others whereas in the black heterosexual community his voice would be silenced.
“Ecce Homo” works for Cliff as a way to discuss the Holocaust as told by a black gay character as the voice of a group that has had little written history about this time of genocide. Queer theorist Dwight McBride, discusses the concern of telling the history of the black experience in relation to the black community itself. McBride focuses on the lack of representation of gay and lesbian voices in relation to major historical movements similar to the exclusion of women’s perspectives such as the example of black women’s legacy in jazz. He feels the gay and lesbian voice has been homogenized into the overall black experience. McBride argues that: “At the present, the phrase ‘the black community’ functions as a shifter or floating signifier [...] There are many visions and versions of ‘the black community’ that get posited in scholarly discourse, popular cultural forms and political discourse. Rarely do any of these visions include lesbians and gay men, except perhaps as an afterthought” (366). McBride’s work is centered on the turmoil within the black community and its interpretation by historians. Even within a community, the marginalized perspective is often omitted, providing a selective rendering of history as told by the dominant patriarchal voice.

In the field of Holocaust Studies there is an absence of diverse accounts from survivors. To accommodate for missing information, scholars and critics use first-hand accounts from survivor interviews, but in doing so, homogenize the overall experience. Finding specific information on gay holocaust survivors has been a challenge for historians. Holocaust theorist Kai Hammermeister investigates why gay narratives have been ignored and the recovery of the gay perspective stating that “this shameful lack of knowledge about the Nazi period and its victims is not that very surprising, for the memory of victims and their persecution seems to depend largely on stories, on
individual narratives, on names and faces we know from books or movies. And in the
case of homosexual Holocaust victims, we simply do not have these historical stories”
(19). Hammermeister goes on to say: “it is easy to see why the gay survivors of the
camps did not speak up. It is precisely because articulating their status as victims would
have put them into the position of victims again, this time under a different government,
but the same discriminatory paragraph” (20). Hammermeister suggests that one of the
reasons for this void in historical perspectives is that the difference within the community
of gay and lesbian survivors may have been undesirable as they would have been
persecuted not only for being gay, but also for having been a selected victim of religious
genocide – neither of which a personal choice. In response, “Ecce Homo” gives a fictive
account from a perspective of the gay voice rarely heard in black or Holocaust literature.
Unknowingly, like Valaida Snow’s character experiences, the country which the linguist
resides changes, “Americans have to leave. The linguist – like it or not – is a naturalized
American. As such he must go” (238). However, he refuses to leave without his lover
“And that – the storyteller says – is the beginning of the end” (238). The so-called “end”
as Cliff remarks, is actually insightful to the reader’s image of the protagonist’s
entrapment in the Holocaust. Although fiction, Cliff’s rendering is important to
Holocaust studies as it provokes thought for its audience to see the different
interpretations of history.

The story reaches its climax when the linguist tries to get a passport for both
himself and his Italian lover to flee Italy but, before he is able to do so, they are
apprehended by fascists and imprisoned where they have to hide not only their gay
identities, but also their relationship. The linguist understands silence in the gay
community and recalls an event from his past that conjures a painful memory of the possible consequences of public displays of affection. Even though his homosexuality is seemingly not a concern to the Romans, it is still frowned upon by some of the residents and the fear of being captured in a foreign country, reminds him of his childhood in the Caribbean. As they are captured the narrator recalls an earlier time in his life: “When he was a boy, before the family left for America, he read in a newspaper about two men apprehended because they were found together [...] They were discovered in ‘an obscene condition’—a child, he did not know what this meant. [...] Later the two were given twelve strokes of the Cat and five years hard labor” (28). The linguist is paralleling the plight of the two men who are captured and punished, and foreshadows he and his lover’s predicament. The “obscene condition” that the two men were found in was considered a punishable offense, so much so, that not only were the men beaten, their story was told in the newspaper as a warning to others about what would become of them if they were caught engaging in homosexual acts. Homophobic attitudes often results in negative or fatal backlash from the dominant culture. Timothy S. Chin points out in his reading of Caribbean literature that: “Cliff exposes the homophobia that results in the marginalization and persecution of lesbians and gay men within contemporary Jamaican culture. These deeply-ingrained homophobic attitudes—which reflect a fear of ‘difference’—represent one of the primary means by which a normative heterosexuality is consolidated and indeed, enforced” (137). Because of such ingrained homophobic attitudes, gay and lesbian relationships are seen as taboo in West Indian culture—a culture the linguist previously belonged to. A way of maintaining normative heterosexuality by the dominant culture is often the violent punishment of offenders. Via
the linguist’s flashback, Cliff suggests that even outside of his country homophobia of others deeply haunts the linguist.

If proven to be gay while imprisoned, both the linguist and his lover may face a fate similar to what he witnessed as a child. The silencing (or closeting) of the gay and lesbian community corresponds to the silencing of black women’s voices in my comparative analysis. Black feminist theorist Audre Lorde speaks to the ways individuals can be subjugated by fear asserting that, “in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection” (533). Lorde further goes to say that the dominant culture must be in place in order to make one group feel isolated and keep them oppressed. In comparison to the treatment of the racially subjugated in the United States, gays and lesbians face similar injustices regarding unequal rights and violence taken out against them to “punish” or “correct” their way of life. Queer theorist Richard D. Mohr investigates this phenomenon and asserts: “The most extreme form of anti-gay violence is queerbashing […] Such seemingly random but in reality socially encouraged violence has the same social origin and function as lynching of blacks—to keep a whole stigmatized group in line” (462). According to Mohr, such behavior is encouraged and therefore validated as acceptable behavior because the offenders are punishing those they feel are committing a crime against nature. When fascist police raid the room of the linguist and his lover, the two are taken captive and sent to a concentration camp because of their sexuality. Cliff then tells us that, “the two men arrive at camp together. Thank God they have not been separated. But they will do well to ignore one another. To ignore one
another by looking out for the other—that is their task” (239). The pair realize they cannot be open with their sexuality while being detained at the concentration camp yet, the linguist is aware that others know about their sexual preference, “The two men are mocked, called names only the linguist understands” (239). The name calling may have been a precursor to the violence that could have erupted in the camp, and adopting normative heterosexual manners was necessary to avoid the possibility of such violence. This will not be the last time the linguist has to hide his sexuality while in Italy.

Cliff’s “Ecce Homo” is a forbidden love story between two men during a time and place where there was little tolerance and acceptance of gay male relationships. While at the camp, the narrator informs us that the two manage to escape during the night and find shelter, “They live in the heart of the woods in the heat of war as lovers [...] And the storyteller knows this is romantic, but let’s let them have it” (239). Although there is the threat of violence all around them, the two are able to share a long awaited moment of tenderness. By the narrator allowing the men to have their romantic escape shows the reader the great extent the two went through to suppress their desire for one another. Their passion however is short lived because the sound of gunfire begins closing in on them. The linguist and his lover’s main objective is to now flee the country.

Like Snow’s character, the two embark on a journey to find safety in war-torn Europe. They decide on Switzerland, which was neutral during World War II, and was also spared by the Nazi invasion. Cliff remarks, “Suddenly luck finds them. They stumble upon a company of American troops – Negro soldiers encamped nearby. The linguist explains – omitting the triangle – now but a ghost on his chest” (240). In his explanation, the linguist leaves out a crucial detail of their capture, that he and his partner
were marked with a pink triangular patch. The linguist, again, is hiding his sexuality for protection. The Nazi’s used a pink triangular patch to label gay men. The triangle however, has been taken back by the gay and lesbian community as a symbol of pride. The linguist understands the bias he may face if he indicates this detail of their capture so instead, he leaves it out. The linguist considers them to be lucky that they are apprehended by black American soldiers because he and his lover are taken in by them. However, when the soldiers receive orders to continue moving north, they must leave the two at a safe haven for displaced victims of war. After the two are checked in, they are then separated and consequently: “The linguist is returned to America while his lover is forced to stay as a prisoner of war. The linguist promises ‘when this is all over I will send for you.’ This is a slender thread. In the end, it is no use. The beloved hangs himself shortly after he is taken prisoner” (240). We are made to believe that the linguist’s lover was not able to live without his partner and was not able to keep up the façade of living as a straight man in his absence. The linguist, on the other hand, gets a job translating for a Hungarian chef in New York City, but when he learns of the fate of his beloved, has a mental breakdown and is admitted to a mental hospital, where he stays until his death.

Cliff’s story closes with the emotionally disturbed linguist at the asylum reflecting on his time spent in the Holocaust. He envisions a lush rainforest on the barren property and parallels his hallucination with the woods he and his lover once hid in: “They face the Green impenetrable, listen to its suddenness of sound: shrieks, howls, echoes from within brick walls. The constrictors would tie with the man in mad dress for silence. He holds his tongue” (240). He compares his stay at the mental hospital to being in a jungle. The
linguist at this point has lost his sanity and creates a contest between himself and the forest (which represents the inmates of the mental institution) to see who can be silent the longest. The story ends similarly to the ending of “A Woman Who Plays Trumpet is Deported,” in that both characters are left with the one thing that made them successful in the midst of the chaos that surrounds them – Valaida Snow with her trumpet, and the linguist holding his tongue. Cliff’s imagery here works to suggest that both characters come to a stand-still when faced with the horror of the Holocaust. The author’s stories depict an alternate reading of history through fiction and allow for more writing and research to be conducted on the fates of racial and sexual minorities during Europe’s genocide.

Ecce Homo” and “A Woman Who Plays Trumpet is Deported” bring together views of the Holocaust and queer, African, and Caribbean American literary experiences to expand the history of incarceration. This is a powerful and needed intervention in “detecting the reality beneath the erasure” as stated in the epigraph, because the two stories work to restore the black voice during the Holocaust but from the perspective of a gay man and a woman – typically two sides that would be absorbed in the telling of the black experience (33). Despite the story’s abrupt close, its condensed format provides a thoughtful look at history and, as Cliff asserts in both stories, the Holocaust as not being limited to violence solely against Jews. Her stories show that racial and sexual minorities regardless of class were also captured as a tool to create unified and homogeneous European nations under Nazi power. Restoring untold perspectives of the Holocaust through fiction allows marginalized accounts of the past to be reconsidered and further studied, as Cliff’s works demonstrate. Investigating alternative readings of history
through literature can provide a greater understanding of the overall impact of an event so
as to not have it limited to a singular homogenous experience. Cliff's attention to race,
gender and sexuality takes the fragmented subjectivity of her characters and creates a
common shared experience of marginality. The final chapter will explore how this
isolated perspective causes her characters to reach out for, and find inside of themselves,
what they believe will make them complete in a society where they are ostracized.
CHAPTER 3

Self-alienation and Imagination from the Perspectives of the Ostracized Individual in “Transactions” and “Screen Memory”

Looking back: To try and see when the background changed places with the foreground. To try and locate the vanishing point: where the lines of perspective converge and disappear. Lines of color and class. Lines of history and social context. Lines of denial and rejection.

_Michelle Cliff, “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire” (62)_

Cliff’s stories “Transactions” and “Screen Memory,” offers a continuing analysis of fragmented and displaced characters incorporating methodology from black feminist, queer, and post-colonial theories. This chapter examines Cliff’s portrayal of individuals torn between their own romanticized images of themselves and their realities, and how these imagined perspectives affects their present circumstances by warping their existences. “Transactions” is a post-colonial critique which explores the metaphoric colonization of a young German girl who is adopted by a white American salesman as a validation of his authority. “Screen Memory” follows the flashbacks of an alcoholic actress whose story moves between her present institutionalized state, and her painful memories of her struggles with her identity under the rule of her black elitist grandmother. This chapter offers a unique perspective of Cliff’s redefinition of “family” as it interrogates gender roles and race. Pairing the two stories allows us to examine the commonly expressed feelings of isolation and displacement in Cliff’s work while analyzing race, gender and sexuality.

Set in Jamaica, “Transactions” follows the life of a white, unnamed, traveling salesman who delivers products to the shopkeepers and residents of the island’s interior. The salesman yearns for a child of his own because his wife is incapable of conception,
but he also desires his child to be white although his wife is black. The protagonist’s
services are greatly anticipated by the residents of the inland region who crave products
and news from “the outside.” The story begins with the description of a child the
salesman finds on his way to make a delivery: “A blond, blue-eyed child, about three
years old – no one will know her exact age, ever – is sitting in the clay of a country road as
if she and the clay are one, as if she is the first human, but she is not” (3). The child
sitting on the road appears to be abandoned and neglected by her caretakers; a familiar
plot with the children in Cliff’s stories (such as “Columba”). This child, however, has
blond hair and blue eyes – the desired characteristics in American and European cultures
– yet is covered in dirt darkening her appearance. Being one with the clay is analogous to
her appearing primordial “as if she is the first human” (3). This possible allusion to the
biblical story of Eve as the first female is complicated by the darkened—one might say
“blackface”—appearance of the girl-child. The girl’s appearance poses as a metaphor of
civility and savagery because she is white but, being coated in dirt, makes her appear
“wild” and, therefore, uncivilized. This metaphor can suggest the child possesses
multiple subjectivities. The girl has a dual personage the salesman takes interest in
because she has the European features that he is attracted to, and also because he
imagines her as needing his salvation, marking her as a colonized subject. And because
of his focus on the symbolic colonization she is presumed to endure, the salesman, living
in a post-colonial nation, deliberately ignores its colonized subjects and aims to devout
his energy to aid a child who is a reflection of his race. Literary critic Mary Lou suggests
readers should question:
the relationship between women colonized by virtue of the material forces of colonial domination and women whom feminist critics perhaps all too often refer to as metaphorically colonized. Conflation of the two subject positions results in an erasure of the differences between actually colonized women and those of European or English ancestry oppressed and exploited through domestic patriarchal and capitalist systems of dominance and subjugation. (266)

The metaphor of colonization can overshadow the material and lived experiences of colonized women. The salesman feels it is his duty to save the girl from what he believes to be unsuitable living conditions for a child of her European racial ancestry and therefore embarks on a plot to take the girl to live with him.

The salesman is identified as the colonizer in the story because his character is an embodiment of patriarchal imperialism and representative of the imperialist exploitation of Jamaica’s culture. His job replicates the influx of outside goods and their impact on Jamaica, and also simulates the imbalance of influence that he has as an American. Similar to the linguist in “Ecce Homo,” the salesman is unnamed and identified only by his occupation: yet, like Father Pierre in “Columba,” he brings services to those in need. Cliff suggests that his American goods infatuate the people of Jamaica, but also provide him with tangible comforts from home. Having only their professions in lieu of names focuses the reader’s attention on the seeming importance of their jobs. In “Monster,” this theme of importance was embodied by the father figure who wanted to be “crucial” to his audience. The father in “Monster,” the linguist, and here, the salesman, are all outcasts, but as a way to enter the masses, they have had to find a way to be needed by those who
ousted them. The salesman, however, does not attempt to assimilate into the Jamaican culture; although he speaks patois occasionally, he does not fully immerse himself into the culture where he lives and works. He holds on to ideology and customs from the United States in his personal and professional interactions with the story's Jamaican characters. During his deliveries, the narrator notes, “Many of the shopkeepers are Chinese, but like him, like everyone it seems, are in love with American things” (4). Importation deeply affects the economy of the country because its economic dependence relies so heavily on outside sources and not its own which outsource native merchants. Yet, even though the salesman brings in many outside goods, he still yearns for anything that can bring him a greater sense of “home” which he imagines the girl to bring him.

Cliff uses the salesman to critique class and race by his want of a white child. The girl the salesman has found however, does not have the esteemed social status on the island her whiteness affords her and is representative of a child from the black lower class. The girl-child having these characteristics sets up a dichotomy between the relationship of the white male colonist, and the metaphorically black figure. Given this interpretation of the narrative, Belinda Edmonson remarks that, “whiteness, as a masculinized epistemology, and femaleness, which is aligned with blackness and historylessness, cannot be assimilated to each other” (184). Edmondson’s critique of whiteness as a masculinized epistemology is reflective of post-colonial theorization whereas, a person of white racial identity colonizes non-white individuals. The polarization of the two suggests that although having a white racial identity, the child is metaphorically “black” (minority/female) given her impoverished circumstance while additionally, her appearance is a form of “blackface” being covered in clay.
Edmondson’s critique also points to how this representation disrupts the racial power imbalance on the island as the white child should not be poor or abandoned on the roadside.

The salesman uses his “masculine epistemology” to script the girl-child into a role he’s imagined for her thus completely erasing her agency and subjectivity. Although he has a wife and a satisfying occupation, Cliff reveals that the salesman is lonely. He imagines his loneliness can be solved by projecting his love for his homeland onto the little girl: “The salesman has always wanted a child. His wife says she never has. ‘Too many pickney in the world already,’ she says, then kisses her teeth [...] The little girl sitting on the road could be his, but the environment in his wife’s vagina is acid. And then there is her brownness” (4-5). The protagonist’s desire for a child leads him to pursue the girl because of her whiteness. The salesman’s wife’s “brownness” and infertility forbid them to have a baby that would resemble him (5). Given the example of Father Pierre and his son in “Columba,” having a child of mixed race would not grant the child the same upper class status that their fathers have. The salesman desires a child that he can share his affluence with on the island and that can only be with a white child in his eyes. Since the salesman’s wife does not want children, he justifies his need by secretly purchasing the girl. The roadside child serves as an ideal target because of her social position in Jamaica, and their presumed shared ethnicity.

The critique of white class privilege is exemplified in the actual “transaction” for the child by the salesman. During his acquisition of the girl-child, the salesman approaches her, and when he asks about her residence, she points to a make-shift home in the woods. A woman he assumes is the girl’s mother walks toward him and, despite a
lack of interaction between them, the narrator tells us that, “the salesman realizes he’s stumbled on the descendents of a shipload of Germans, sent here as convicts or cheap labor” (6). Here, the role of the colonized subject has shifted as socio-economic conditions separate the Germans from the salesman. Although both are white, factors such as poverty, cultural history and language differences separate them. Had the German family assimilated into the Jamaican culture, they would have been amongst the upper echelon of Jamaican society. By not assimilating, the Germans were not able to capitalize on their privilege of being white in Jamaican society, and in doing so, they remain isolated and neglected in the island’s interior. The salesman takes full advantage of the German’s disposition, and without much negotiation with the child’s mother, “he offers twenty American dollars, just like that, counting out the single notes, and promises the little girl will have the best of everything, always” (6). The salesman’s purchase of the girl-child is symbolic of capitalist privilege with her representing the colonized and commoditized subject. The protagonist’s promise is a loose one because he does not share any information about himself or the home the girl will be staying in, nor does he show an interest in the girl’s family or ask any questions concerning her overall well-being as a parent looking to adopt a child would.

By the salesman taking on the role of “mother” to the child, a queer reading of the text explores his need to adopt her. Because the salesman is insistent on having a child who resembles himself, he would be the “real mother” of the child since his wife’s womb is acrid, thus part of a “defective” body. Literary theorist Shelly M. Park views adoption as a queer practice by individuals who, for physical or biological reasons, cannot have children Park states that “there is something queer about any adoptive maternal body –a
body that poses as, yet is not a ‘real’ mother; a body that presupposes, yet is defined in opposition to, procreative activity; a body that is marked as defective, yet is chosen as capable” (202). By taking on the role of the mother, the salesman essentially gives up his masculinist privilege. When the salesman takes the child from her mother Cliff remarks, “his heart is full” (9). In the salesman’s haste, he questions, “Is this how women feel” but before presenting the girl-child to his wife the salesman wonders, “What has he done? She is his treasure, his newfound thing and he never even asked her name” (9 emphasis mine). Referring to the child as a “treasure” and a “thing,” Cliff symbolizes the girl as a commodity. But, the adoption process is also circumvented as is the salesman’s positioning within the maternal when the adoption becomes just another colonialist act of consumption—of human exploitation—based on his race and social standing.

After acquiring the girl, the salesman solidifies his role as colonizer and tries to impart yet another form of control over her – religion. In comparison, we see Cliff using a similar narrative in “Columba” with Father Pierre, who uses religion to appoint himself a role of authority over others. The salesman attempts a similar method of indoctrination to make the girl follow his religious beliefs. The story reaches its climax when the salesman takes the little girl as his own and he begins to see that she is not the child he presumed her to be. The protagonist tries to reassure himself that she belongs to him, “Now she is yours. He must have her baptized. Catholic or Anglican, he will decide” (9). His objective is to take her to a mineral spring, a popular destination for tourists to Jamaica, before presenting her to his wife. Deciding to have the child baptized and assign her a religion reverberates with the colonialist mindset that the only effective way to serve God was to follow the colonizer’s religion, thus the natives had to be converted.
He never asks the child’s mother or the child about their religious practices in Germany or Jamaica: he only seeks to change her. The salesman never expresses an interest in who the child was before their meeting, only that she has the potential to resemble him. The salesman feels that imparting organized religion on the girl will make her more “civilized,” and therefore, give him complete authority over her.

The salesman acknowledges that he is a racial minority on the island and his obsession with maintaining the white race drives him to save the child simply because she is Caucasian. While he negotiates his stay at the bathhouse with its owner, in return for *Jet* magazines from the United States, the salesman anticipates bringing the little girl home to his wife because she will ask why he chose her over the racially black impoverished children he passes daily: “He will say he had no choice […] Everybody wants a child that favors them, that’s all […] Like is drawn to like” (10). The protagonist’s loneliness drives him to assume responsibility for the roadside child whom he reads as being like himself, displaced. Literary critic Kim Robinson-Walcott argues that the white Jamaican is a lonely figure who is stigmatized in society. Robinson-Walcott states that “undeniably, history has burdened the white West Indian with his own peculiar set of baggage: as past oppressor and present threatened minority, saddled with collective guilt but still holding the reins of power, resented but envied by the black majority, rejected but still elevated and aspired toward by that same majority, visible but invisible” (96). Although the salesman himself is not a citizen of Jamaica, he is a permanent resident on the island and shares a similar discomfort with the island’s white inhabitants. As a “past oppressor and present threatened minority” the salesman attempts to continue the privilege being white affords him on the island and hopes to introduce the
young girl to those same values and rewards. According to Robinson-Walcott, she also notes that whites in Jamaica are "visible but invisible" thusly, the girl-child was invisible while living in poverty in the island's interior, but the salesman hopes he will elevate her white social status to a position of greater power and visibility by bringing her into his world. The salesman imagines having the girl as his daughter will be a remedy for his feelings of displacement because he has rescued her from her racially and economically bereft position, and now has a child like him. Yet, he is blinded by his white male privilege.

The story refuses any easy depiction of the narrative of salvation. Cliff is rewriting a slavery narrative into one about human trafficking. The salesman's purchase of the girl is a direct violation of her human rights. Cliff uses children as a metaphor of the narrative of slavery to depict the resistance of colonized individuals to their oppressor. We see a similar plot in "Columba," where Charlotte purchases the boy for food and land from his desperate mother. In "Transactions," the slavery narrative is undercut by the salesman's rhetoric of salvation because he is met with a refusal of being subjugated as the reader finds out in the conclusion of the story. The salesman may have considered it his duty to relieve the girl from what he imagined to be unfitting circumstances for a child of her race, but he intentionally isolates the girl from the protection of her German family. The salesman attempts to remove the girl from all that was familiar to her in order to make her reliant on him: therefore, appointing dominance over the child. Once he and the little girl have been accommodated by the staff at the bathhouse, she is lowered into the healing waters and, "an unholy noise bounded
across the room [...] ‘Nein! Nein!’ the little girl screamed over and over again” (16). As a savior, one might ask what he was saving the child from. The salesman’s plans for the baptism are shattered by the “unholy” shrieks of protest from the girl. “Nein,” meaning “no” in German, shows that she still kept her native language; when the protagonist tries to console her, she says nothing. It is possible that she may not have understood English, contributing to the voicelessness of the colonized subject. The salesman says: “he felt like a thief, not the savior he preferred” (16). The passage has revealed the emptiness and violence of the salvation narrative felt by the salesman through Cliff’s rewriting of the narrative of slavery.

The salesman’s fantasy of the girl-child as his ideal image of a daughter dramatically shifts at the story’s end. While preparing the girl for bed after her tantrum at the bathhouse, the protagonist tries to console her, but she bites him sharply on the cheek causing him to bleed. The girl cannot use her mouth for formal language, or at least not for one which others outside of her subculture will readily understand. But she does not internalize his teachings; instead she attempts to “eat” him thereby asserting her autonomy by resisting the colonizer. The child uses her mouth to refuse the salesman by saying “no,” and she also uses it as a weapon of resistance by biting him. Cliff juxtaposes this scene with one where a tour guide leads a group of bathers to watch crocodiles in the river. By paralleling the two scenes, Cliff depicts an almost cannibalistic quality in the child: “‘Are they man-eaters? Are they dangerous?’ one tourist inquired. ‘They are more afraid of you than you could possibly be of them’ Hamlet told her” (18).
The juxtaposition of the girl and the crocodile functions as a parallel of the threat the child makes against the salesman to that of an animal, and in doing so, the author is dictating the child’s resistance to his objectification of her. The theme of the savage (or cannibalistic) child is explored in other works by Cliff as she remarks:

There are several versions of the colonized child, several versions of silence, voicelessness. There is the child who is chosen, as was I, to represent the colonizer’s world, peddle the colonizer’s values, ideas, notions of what is real, alien, other, normal, supreme. Male and female. To apotheosize his success as civilizer, enabling the chosen (wild) child to speak albeit in a tongue she/he does not even own. (40)

The impact of equating the girl-child with the crocodile shows the extremes of colonial ideology, and its excessiveness when it reads humans as “man-eaters.” Cliff remarks that children can be chosen to embody the colonizer’s culture which is how the salesman intended to celebrate his whiteness by selecting a child that he could convince others was his own. This passage also suggests that children are chosen, similar to the salesman’s purchase of the girl, to be representative of the civilizer’s, or the master’s, world. The colonized child has to be without a voice, and the girl-child communicating in only German to one who does not understand, suggests voicelessness. The salesman’s vision is to Americanize the girl, convert her to his chosen religion, and live life as his ideal Caucasian
daughter is derailed when the child does not give in to the salesman's desire and ideology of salvation.

The girl-child as the colonized figure rejects the salesman's Western and masculinist privilege by fighting back and taking on a monstrous persona. If it were up to him, she would accept his invitation into his world and live as his daughter without any conflict. The story ends with the narrator re-evaluating his purchase because he never took the time to find out who or what the child was. The "wild" child bites him in the face after being towed off her bath to which he asks, "Is vampire you vampire, sweetheart" (18). According to folklore, vampires feed on the blood of humans by biting them and drawing their blood thusly, he recognizes her as such. The girl embodies the exact opposite of the child he envisioned by taking on a monster-like quality. The child's subject position shifts from one of a victim to one of power as she bites the salesman in the face. After the incident, he puts the child to bed only to awaken finding his vision blurred and his face swollen from the bite. The salesman's now physical disfigurement echoes his distorted image of motherhood. Robinson-Walcott observes that, "warped motives have warped consequences: the child turns out to be a vampire, sucking the life out of him—perhaps just as his warped values have previously drained him of an ability to find fulfillment" (98). The "warped values" she argues are the salesman's misdirected solution of what he envisioned to be a way to eliminate the solitude he felt in Jamaica and ameliorate the emptiness in his relationship with his wife. Taking the child and justifying her salvation had a disappointing outcome. The young girl escapes during the night, leaving him alone again, but this time with a painful reminder of his failure at finding what he believed would be fulfillment. The salesman's
feelings of isolation have led him to imagine the girl as a solution to his problem. However, even with his white male privilege, he is not able to satisfy his needs revealing that by the end of the story, his empowerment over the girl was futile and the girl-child was able to successfully overcome her oppressor.

Cliff’s character’s shortcomings offer the reader a chance to analyze why and how they fail at attaining personal fulfillment. Continuing my analysis of the ostracized characters in Cliff’s work, “Screen Memory” illustrates an imaginative perspective of another self-alienated character. The author focuses on such individuals to provide a critique of society from the point of view of those who are often stigmatized within it. The racially mixed unnamed female protagonist narrates her story from a hospital bed where she is recovering from alcohol abuse. Growing up under the unyielding parenting of her adoptive black elitist grandmother, she gains success as an actress later in life, but paradoxically becomes an unstable alcoholic whose past intrudes her present space. These intrusions create a disjointed dream-like perspective in the narrative. The narrator reflects on her childhood recalling the pain she has encountered and created for herself while trying to pass as white and to evade the possibility of her lesbian desire. Unlike the salesman, this character is not attempting to save someone else from an unpleasant upbringing; her memories of childhood unfold to reveal the trauma of her racial and sexual passing. What connects the narrator of “Screen Memory” with the salesman is how Cliff interrogates dominant ideologies of gender, race, class, and sexuality and ultimately reveals their
ideological and psychological violence on individuals who try to use them to their benefit.

The title, “Screen Memory,” is itself a term used in psychoanalytic theory when a childhood memory is recalled in order to mask an issue affecting an individual in adulthood. As in her previous short stories, Cliff stages a bifurcation of identities. “Screen Memory” opens with the narrator recalling children playing jump rope on a summer’s evening. Besides herself, another player stands out: the “tomboy” who, although participating in the group, is made to feel alienated (90). The other children involved in the game note the girl’s difference. The narrator remembers, “They are out for her. A voice sings out, above the others, and a word, strange and harsh to the observer’s ears, sounds over the pound of feet, over the slap of rope. Bulldagger! Bulldagger! Bulldagger” (90). Here, the protagonist is recognizing as a child racial and sexual politics. The term “Bulldagger” as Timothy S. Chin remarks, is a derogatory word used in Caribbean culture specifically for a black woman accused of being lesbian. The narrator describes herself as “bright-skinned” and “ladylike” distancing herself from the so-called tomboy and defines herself in terms that link whiteness to femininity: yet, at the same time, she is intrigued by the tomboy’s color and gender expression (90). Beyond their physical differences, the protagonist feels a connection to the girl accused of being a “bulldagger” and wonders, “Where does she begin and the tomboy end” (90). The narrator sees the tomboy in herself and identifies the tomboy as a lesbian. Here, Cliff establishes the lesbian sub-plot in the story that resurfaces later in the narrator’s life. The narrator sees race playing an integral
part in her self-alienation. When she realizes that by having a white racial identity she cannot be a “bulldagger,” she recognizes that she can escape into whiteness and away from her sexual identity. Whiteness acts as a form of self rescue. And yet escaping into whiteness, she becomes more introverted when faced with matters of racial and sexual politics.

In “Screen Memory,” the reader sees how memory is recalled in order to mask an issue surrounding an individual in adulthood. At another fracturing point during the beginning of the story, the text shifts to the present with the narrator’s waking from a headache after recalling her feelings during the game of jump rope. The protagonist’s memory evokes thoughts of coming of age under the rule of her grandmother after being abandoned by her own mother who was thought to be too wild and rebellious. In a review of “Screen Memory” from the collection Bodies of Water, Judy Scales-Trent analyzes the commonalities among Cliff’s characters’ childhood experiences:

For these stories are about children who are left, who are abandoned – children whose safe childhood home was either destroyed or never existed. What we see in these stories are the different ways they struggle with that loss –through a search for connection with others, through rage, through escape into fantasy, through self destruction. (15)

Scales-Trent’s analysis of Cliff’s childhood characters suggests that they all make an attempt to find salvation from their circumstances. There is an underlying theme of escapism with all of the young characters in Cliff’s writings where they
find a way to dispel their fears and insecurities about isolation and alienation. As a child, the protagonist yearns for knowledge outside of her grandmother’s set ways; yet, later when she can’t attain that sense of security, she drinks, reaffirming Scales-Trent’s point of self destruction. The adoption of the girl into her grandmother’s household was strenuous for both characters because the narrator finds it difficult to live with the grandmother’s rules. Cliff depicts that outside of the grandmother’s home society viewed a black woman raising a child who was identified as white as being denied the privilege they were born into.

As seen in “Transactions” and also “Columba,” Cliff shows the hypocrisy behind the so-called salvation narrative enacted by white patriarchal figures. I am not suggesting that all of her characters embody this particular ideology; I would argue here that Cliff is using racial privilege as a demarcation of class within a community, whereas if a child of European descent does not have the best of everything, then that child is somehow being deprived. In “Screen Memory,” the adoption of the girl by her grandmother follows a point in the story where she explains a time when she, like the girl-child in “Transactions,” was kidnapped. The narrator recalls when she and her grandmother fled from their home out of fear. She describes a scene where she was forcefully taken away from her grandmother she remembers “a flock of white ladies had descended on the grandmother, declaring she had no right to raise a white child and they would take the girl and place her within a ‘decent’ family. She explained that the girl was her granddaughter –sometimes it’s like that. They did not hear” (92). The narrator is viewed by the women as not having the absolute best care that her race affords
her being in the care of her black grandmother. By analyzing this passage, the reader sees how the women’s forceful attempt at salvation hinges on white supremacist thinking. bell hooks offers a critique of actual “whiteness” in relation to the black imagination. Although past histories have been tense, hooks argues that “to name that whiteness in the black imagination is often an expression of terror” (172). The terror that hooks expresses comes from a past of enslavement, colonization and violence between the two groups. Also, hooks’ argument suggests that naming whiteness in the black imagination gives whiteness a sense of power. From Cliff’s passage, we hear echoes of terror as the “flock of white ladies had descended” as if they were birds of prey. Therefore, like the salesman, the women see themselves as the girl’s savior taking it upon themselves to rescue her from her black maternal figure. Again, Cliff stages an abduction of a child possessing a white racial identity to benefit someone of that same race. The protagonist is taken by the women to live with a family who lost their daughter to diphtheria. Shortly after her capture, the girl flees from the home and returns to her grandmother, similar to the escape of the German girl in “Transactions,” whom the reader is made to believe reaches her mother. Cliff’s demonstration of racial terror in the flight of the children suggests they are actually fleeing the terror of whiteness as embodied by particular purveyors of a racialized elitist ideology. However, as we see, this protagonist leaves one form of racialized elitism to live under another.

The grandmother’s reading of Africa unsettles the usual equivalency of Africa with the uncivilized; the savage needing salvation by the imperial power.
The grandmother's pride in Africa is instilled in the protagonist through a series of at-home lessons. The primary lesson the grandmother enforces is the piano, and with it, she relates lessons about values and a sense of self. The grandmother believes the piano's parts, which came from Africa, make it a possession of the highest value. The narrator notes, "the precious African thing—for to the grandmother the piano is African, civilized" (92). The "civility" in the grandmother's lessons comes from the pride she upholds in her black culture. As she raises the protagonist, she imparts her beliefs in conjunction with the skill to play the instrument: "'Hastiness, carelessness, will never lead you to any real feeling, or' she pauses, 'any lasting accomplishment. You have to go deep inside yourself—to the best part.' The black part, she thinks, for if anything can cloud your senses it's that white blood" (92). The grandmother's mistrust of whites is deeply ingrained. Although the granddaughter is of mixed race, the grandmother's aim is to instill a sense of Afro-Caribbean pride and recognition in the girl. The narrator tells us that "the best part" of the young woman—her black roots—is emphasized by the grandmother as a counterweight to the white salvation story. In teaching the girl about pride in herself, the grandmother's methodology, however, is limiting.

The girl doesn't accept her grandmother's singular importance of Afro-Caribbean culture or her elitist mentality. The protagonist realizes that she cannot share all of her feelings with the grandmother because of the older woman's singular vision of race and sexuality. The grandmother believes only in black heterosexual relationships while anything outside of that model, she cannot
accept. This causes an internal conflict for the protagonist because she recognizes how racism and homophobia influence others. The granddaughter’s yearning for outside teachings other than her grandmother’s becomes apparent when she asks for a radio: “Tell me, why do you want this infernal thing?” ‘Teacher says it’s educational.’ Escape. I want to know about the outside” (96). The narrator’s need to escape allows her to create an alternative reality outside of the grandmother’s rule. The girl meets resistance by the grandmother who does not believe in the radio or the protagonist’s proposal as to how to raise money for it. The narrator offers to work for her teacher Mrs. Baker, who is a newly widowed mother since the grandmother refuses to purchase a radio. By supporting Mrs. Baker, and Mrs. Baker’s wanting to help her, the girl rejects the teachings of the grandmother and becomes more independent while simultaneously finding out more about herself.

“Screen Memory” is also a story about the narrator’s personal conflict with the possibility of lesbian desire. The narrator forms a very close relationship with Mrs. Baker, one she does not tell her grandmother about. The protagonist’s relationship with Mrs. Baker reveals feelings of lesbianism that she does not express, but understands. The young narrator’s visits with Mrs. Baker, “fill her with a warmth she is sure is wrong. She loves this woman, who is soft, who drops the lace front of her camisole to feed her baby […]. The girl sees the woman in her dreams” (99). Cliff is suggesting the protagonist’s adoration for her teacher woman is blossoming into feelings of same sex desire. However, by feeling guilty about these longings, the protagonist recognizes that she cannot express
herself or her emotions so she suppresses her identity and her desire. The narrator escapes into her alternative space of desire by “learning about secrecy” while passing as straight (98). This world of secrecy that the protagonist creates allows her to fantasize without exposing herself to her grandmother or others, not even to Mrs. Baker. She must create an alternate reality while she remains in the grandmother’s house.

The narrative strategy of memory creates a new inclusive space for black lesbian desire and identity. Cliff’s configuration of lesbianism resists falling into a gendered heteronormative model in the relationship between Mrs. Baker and her housemate, Velma “Jack” Johnson. When Ms. Jackson moves to the town, the grandmother intones, “‘There must be something about that woman and uniforms’” (100). The grandmother relies so heavily on heterosexuality that she cannot accept, and therefore criticizes, Mrs. Baker and Johnson’s relationship which she knows nothing about. In doing so, the grandmother stereotypes Jack’s identity by suggesting Mrs. Baker is close with her because she wears a military uniform akin to Mrs. Baker’s deceased husband. Cliff deploys the two as models of resistance to the grandmother’s homophobia. To the narrator, Jack and Mrs. Baker’s relationship is relevant to her healing as she recalls her past and imagines herself in the place of the tomboy. By mirroring herself with the girl, the protagonist now sees that the feelings that she had as a child can be expressed rather than suppressed when reminiscing about her two friends Jack and Mrs. Baker. By having the granddaughter interact with the pair, Cliff’s narrative
suggests that the girl’s resistance to her grandmother’s teaching and homophobic attitudes allows her to find her own alternate sexual space.

The grandmother’s assumption that Mrs. Baker seeks to be only with uniformed individuals speaks to her mistrust of the gay and lesbian community and also to her reliance on the male/female gender binary. The grandmother believes that only heterosexual relationships can function as the norm. Jamaican writer Makeda Silvera bases her work on her personal experiences growing up in the Caribbean and gives examples of accounts of women involved in same-sex relationships: “The act of loving someone of the same sex was sinful, abnormal – something to hide [...] It’s inconceivable that women can have intimate relationships that are whole, that are not lacking because of the absence of a man. It’s assumed that women in such relationships must be imitating men” (523). The grandmother believes that Mrs. Baker uses Jack as a substitute for her lost husband and that Jack is posing as the male in their relationship. In her examination of Cliff’s writing queer theorist Nada Elia states:

Thus while queers will name but not ‘define’ themselves, because no definition can encompass the multiplicity of queer experiences and practices, they nevertheless transcend “the hegemonic binarism of ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘homosexuality’” [...] Thus [...] queerness is a manifestation of the move beyond sexual binarisms, into multisexualities. (353)
If we apply Elia’s “multisexualities” to the characters in “Screen Memory,” we come to understand how Elia’s argument is also relevant to the paralleling of Jack with Mrs. Baker’s deceased husband. Jack pays homage to her former days of service by wearing her army uniform regularly. It is not made clear what type of gender specific uniform she wears, but the grandmother’s opinion of Jack suggests by her wearing any type of uniform is imitating Mrs. Baker’s late husband. Cliff mentions that Jack’s appearance “in her crisp khakis, with her deep brown skin, she contrasted well with the light-brown pasteled Mrs. Baker” (100). The male/female gender dichotomy is challenged in this example as Jack’s self-presentation is interpreted as taking on a masculinized image. Jack served also as a portrait photographer to the neighborhood she provided: “a vital service to the community, like the hairdresser and the undertaker […] They needed Jack so the talk died down. Died down until another photographer came along” (100). Jack’s contribution to the community was much needed however, her self-image and relationship with Mrs. Baker was tolerated when she was the only photographer in the small town. After a new photographer was able to provide the same services, the people of the community began to express the same feelings of bias that the grandmother held against Jack. Jack however, does not conform to the gender role that society thought she should have and therefore, continues to wear the uniform. Elia’s multisexualities also relates to the narrator who sees in herself a reflection of the tomboy figure who also chooses to define her identity by dressing opposite of the other girls whom she plays with. Mrs.
Baker and Jack admit to being a lesbian couple and work against the heterosexual model of relationships creating identities all their own.

The protagonist’s self-alienation comes about because of her internalized racism and homophobia. But through her memories, she sees her failings as an adult. Her encounters with racism early on instill a sense of self-doubt: “She has heard their ‘white nigger’ hisses often enough, as if her skin, her hair signify only shame, a crime against nature” (93). The protagonist being called a “white nigger,” understands that her appearance allows her to pass as white: yet, while doing so, she rejects her black cultural heritage. This rejection causes her internal conflict. When the narrator is convinced by Mrs. Baker to enter her portrait in a contest, she ends up winning and has to leave the small town. When the protagonist asks Mrs. Baker and Jack to come with her, Mrs. Baker refuses because she’s made plans to move to Philadelphia with Jack and her baby because “It will be easier for us there” (101). Mrs. Baker’s response suggests that she and Jack have to create an alternate space to live comfortably as black lesbians. At this point, the narrator realizes that she can use her white physical appearance as a form of escapism. She has seen how black lesbians are treated in the community given the example of the tomboy and the criticism of her friends Mrs. Baker and Jack. The narrator identifies whiteness as a form of self rescue where she can pass as a straight white female while suppressing her black and proto-lesbian identity. This space of agency that the narrator creates for herself causes her trauma as an adult because her memories disrupt her philosophy of passing. As she becomes more successful and recognizable as an actress, “her parts become
lighter, brighter than before” (102). The protagonist gains more success in her career when she takes on roles where she portrays white female characters. By attaining these roles, the narrator’s escape into whiteness is confirmed but it does not offer her closure or happiness.

Cliff’s characters create an alternative space in which they perceive the world around them as an escape mechanism from their realities. The salesman and the unnamed protagonist of “Screen Memory” live in a microcosm of their troubled existence and feel the world around them seeks to define how they should live. The epigraph to this chapter reaffirms this idea: “the lines of perspective converge and disappear” (62). This passage suggests that although there can be an imagined perspective to one’s life, eventually reality sets in. In “Screen Memory,” the protagonist faces opposition with the “lines of perspective” more so when the narrator’s mental condition causes her to mix her childhood experiences of racial, cultural and sexual politics with her present state. Throughout the story the reader is continually interrupted by the narrator’s disjointed memories but at the story’s closing, her stories come to an end when we find the protagonist as she awakens institutionalized in a hospital in Boston. The protagonist’s story becomes more erratic as she mixes the past with the present and combines her memories with some of the roles she has played on screen. This fragmentation between histories is similar to the narrative structure critic Susan Bost discusses: “Much like postmodern literature, Cliff’s narratives combine multiple histories and places in order to imagine an alternative space which different worlds coexist” (680). In all of the six stories analyzed in this
thesis, Cliff's characters have created the "alternative space" that Bost refers to. "Screen Memory" is an amalgamation of past and present, race, and sexuality to ameliorate one character's experience of loneliness. The story concludes with the protagonist of "Screen Memory" also fleeing from her problems in search of new meaning: "What will become of her? […] She does her time. Fills her suitcase with her dietary needs: Milky Ways, carton of Winston's, golden tequila, boards a plane at Idlewild" (104). The protagonist's self-revelation frightens her however, without a plan, she appears hopeless since she still has unresolved issues from her past from which she cannot escape.

The characters in "Screen Memory" and "Transactions," do not fulfill their desires, and their complexities go beyond the world they imagined. Both stories' protagonists deal with personal shortcomings and focus much of their energies trying to resolve their internal conflicts. Having isolated themselves in their own particular "worlds," both characters seem to miss the greater understanding of themselves and society. Their attempts at attaining satisfaction have not been met. Both stories conclude with the protagonists finding themselves alone once again. While the main characters remain isolated, the narrative trajectories of both stories push us to see the limitations of hierarchical and binary ideologies. Where the first story concludes with an act of physical resistance to the rescue narrative, the second story suggests an alternative space to a strictly bifurcated sense of racial and sexual subjectivity and expression. It seems that especially in "Screen Memory," the "lines of denial and rejection" have merged so that the narrative provides a converging perspective where sexual
desire and race can no longer be pulled apart or closeted off from one another. When read together, these two stories push the audience to new readings of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Cliff’s characters embody multiple spaces of agency thereby complicating exclusionary depictions of racial and sexual politics.
CONCLUSION

To write as a complete Caribbean woman, or man for that matter, demands of us retracting the African part of ourselves reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. On a past bleached from our minds. It means finding the artforms of these of our ancestors and speaking the patois forbidden us. It means realizing our knowledge will always be wanting. It means also, I think, mixing the forms taught us by the oppressor, undermining his language and co-opting his style, and turning it to our purpose.

Michelle Cliff, “A Journey into Speech”(14)

The aim of my thesis is not to demonstrate a utopian view of Cliff’s work. Having a broad cast of characters, the study of Cliff’s work cannot be analyzed by any one specific theoretical genre. All of her stories go beyond the obvious to allow the reader to be inspired and investigative about the narrative themes used in her work. I wanted to be able to present a diverse range of subjectivities and subject matter in the stories that I selected. When reading Cliff, one must understand that her characters challenge our understanding of identity politics and the roles they play in society.

Claiming or reclaiming an identity for both Cliff as an individual and for her characters continues to be a topic of discussion in literary criticism. My thesis interrogates the ways the identities of her characters have been challenged within and outside of their culture. As a Jamaican author, many Caribbean literary scholars have criticized Cliff and her writing stating that it goes beyond the aesthetic of contemporary West Indian literature. Francophone author, Maryse Condé, exemplifies Caribbean writing suggesting that:
West Indian society was not studied *per se*, as an autonomous object. It was always seen as a result of the slave trade, slavery, and colonial oppression. This past was the cause of every social feature and thus explained everything: the relationship between men and women, the family system, as well as oral traditions or popular music. It is impossible to deny that the West Indian past weighs heavily on the present. (154)

Caribbean women’s writing engages a dialogue of historical, sexual, political, class, and race issues; such complexities challenge authors to create characters that embody these circumstances. Conde’s argument and Cliff’s writing encapsulate the relationship of oppression to the development of the Caribbean aesthetic. When reading Cliff, she touches on the impact and influence of the past to allow her audience to see how history impacts the way we read and understand the present.

Cliff demonstrates in her writing that although cultures from the African diaspora differ, there is still a shared struggle due to the affects of slavery and social class. Cliff’s writing has been critiqued by Belinda Edmonson who states in her cultural analysis of Caribbean and black aesthetics that: “The codification of black reality is not confined to the Caribbean alone. Both Caribbean and African-American aesthetics are based on the presumption of an African aesthetic, to be uncovered whole under layers of hegemonic European culture” (79). Edmondson’s assertion affirms that there is commonality when discussing works by authors from the African diaspora which Cliff’s short fiction proves. However, this is not an idyllic approach to postcolonial theory as the cultures of African, African-American, and Caribbean are all uniquely different.
Analyzing these six different stories offers ways to open discussion of Cliff's short fiction in relation to current literary criticism. Not only does this project make connections between her numerous works, but it also offers a critical look at Cliff's short fiction continually keeping her writing relevant to literary studies at large. Literary critic Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter writes to Cliff's ability to create works (such as, "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire") that speak towards and against social injustice. Aegerter notes that when discussing the author's work, often a "dismissal of Cliff suggests a superficial and cursory reading [of the essays], and a particularly ahistorical understanding of the complexities of the colonial equation and the ambivalences it produces in colonized subjects" (899). In a review of Cliff's short fiction, Adrian Oktenburg would also agree that "Cliff has not been taken as seriously as she should be" (30). Cliff's contribution to academia should be explored more in-depth as both a learning tool and as an essential part of post-colonial literature. Cliff's fiction, along with our knowledge of contemporary literary theory, can continue to keep her writing relevant to ongoing scholarly debates. By comparing stories set in the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States, this thesis will analyze the scope of Cliff's writing from three perspectives of the African diaspora allowing the reader to appreciate her cohesive body of work.

Overall, this thesis has offered an in-depth view into a representative sample of Cliff's short stories. I've validated the importance of her work to the ongoing discussions of post-colonial, gender and race-related fiction and scholarship of Caribbean literature. Her writing reveals the cohesiveness among her characters and their social constructs. The binary archetypes of white/black, male/female, straight/gay, and rich/poor are
complicated by Cliff’s authorship which is a form of resistance to these models. She complicates the bifurcation of social norms and provides a way to demonstrate how the convergence (as opposed to the separation) of aspects of identity and socio-cultural categories. In a summation of her writing, Cliff expresses that her identity and her work is authentically Jamaican and declares that:

There is no ending to this piece of writing. There is no way to end it. As I read back over it, I see that we/they/I may become confused in the mind of the reader: but these pronouns have always co-existed in my mind. The Rastas talk of the “I and I” –a pronoun which they combine themselves with Jah. Jah is a contraction of Jahweh and Jehova, but to me always sounds like the beginning of Jamaica. I and Jamaica is who I am. No matter how far I travel –how deep the ambivalence I feel about ever returning. And Jamaica is a place in which we/they/I connect and disconnect –change place. (75-76)
I chose to name my thesis "'Out of Many, One People': A Comparative Critique of the Short Fiction of Michelle Cliff," because "Out of Many, One People" is Jamaica’s national motto. Jamaica’s national motto is important to me because it re-emphasizes the multi-national background of the country itself as well as Cliff’s "fragmented" selfhood and multi-ethnic background. I wanted to be able to present my work as a way of exploring some of the issues that she, as an author, has expressed in her more personal essays and interviews, and how I used these same constructs to interpret her characters. My introduction to Cliff came from reading No Telephone to Heaven (1987) as part of my undergraduate studies, which in turn led me to pursue more of her work in conjunction with my growing understanding of theoretical criticism. As a lesbian author, Cliff also lectures on the unfavorable experiences she has had in and outside of her culture, speaking to heterosexism and sexuality in a patriarchal society. Her narratives piece together many of the conflicts involved in identity politics. Cliff’s contribution to literary scholarship is so diverse yet so complicated and overlooked which is why I chose to dedicate my thesis to her work.
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