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The Island and the Creation of (Hi)Story in the Writings of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid

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The works of both Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid are often studied for their relationship to history. History is indeed a recurrent theme in their writings, not only in novels or essays, but also in interviews or short articles.¹ Usually labeled “political” because of their directed comments which include pointed criticism of postcolonial times, both *No Telephone to Heaven* (Michelle Cliff) and *A Small Place* (Jamaica Kincaid) stand out by the representation they give of the Caribbean island. The two narratives are striking at first because of their difference in form: *No Telephone to Heaven* is a novel while *A Small Place* is an essay, catalogued by the Library of Congress in the “Description and Travel” section. One is over two hundred pages long, introduces a variety of fictional characters and leads the reader through a multiplicity of countries and continents while the other goes barely past eighty pages, focuses on a narrative voice forcing the reader to identify with a “you” (tourist/ white/ colonizer) or a “they” (native/ black/ slave) and evolves within the boundaries of one specific island: Antigua. These seemingly stark differences fade as commonalities appear. Both introduce a narrative told in a variety of voices or from multiple perspectives; they offer texts that flow seamlessly through time from a period of mythical origins through neocolonial times. Finally, and most importantly for this article, they were both published at the end of the 1980s (1987 and 1988 respectively), and, I believe, can be read together: each enlightening the other, both echoing similar concerns, or simply answering to each other.²

Most scholars agree that the history of formerly colonized territory has been distorted by the colonizer, replaced with the colonizer’s history, and, in the case of the Caribbean, “any attempt to uncover the past meant dealing not only with the noise of conflicting memories, but with silence” (Boehmer 197). In this paper, I would like to show that, because of the silencing of history—strongly expressed by Cliff and Kincaid themselves—we can talk about the “creation” of history at the dawn of decolonization in the work of these two writers.

Michelle Cliff is often referred to as a writer who unearths history, “revises” it (Raiskin 71), or even “revision[s]” it (Chancy, “Exile and Resistance” 278). Her work is indeed a series of painstaking efforts to tell the untold while depicting the complexity of Caribbean people’s identity. I would like to show that, in *No Telephone to Heaven*, she does more than simply retell history: rather she uses time in a fluid way and lets postcolonial realities be informed by colonial events. In this way, she is truly “creating” a new history, which includes “revised” colonial events *and* postcolonial happenings. As for Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, it “marks a radical departure from *At the Bottom [of the River]* and *Annie John* [her earlier works]” (Ferguson 78), as it constitutes a postcolonial analysis of the island of Antigua, thus “creating” postcolonial history as it turns into written word. Moreover, unwilling to replace the colonizer in the role of official historian, both authors lay the stress on personal stories, thus creating narratives that blend colonial history, postcolonial realities and personal stories. It is this smooth combination that is reflected in what I call postcolonial (hi)stories.

I will first focus on the narratives, and show how postcolonial (hi)story is created through the use of specific narrative techniques including: the use of a multiplicity of voices, the

relationship to and use of time, and the interweaving of “official” colonial, postcolonial or neocolonial history, if only to be put forward in order to be deconstructed. Second, I will use the trope of the tourist introduced by both authors in order to illuminate the intersection of history creation and island representation. I will argue that just as the tourist becomes a symbol for conflicts of power and culture in the narratives, so too does the island become a site for conflicts based on colonial history and attitude. Third, I will include with the previous readings, writings by Jamaica Kincaid on gardening, *My Favorite Plant* (1998) and *My Garden* (1999), and focus on the island as a physical setting and show that it is not only used in the narratives as a geographical reality—indicating grounding, exile or return—but that it also suggests the existence of a fictional imaginary space, giving the notion of home/land creative meanings.

Creation of (Hi)Story Through Narrative Techniques

No Telephone to Heaven is a novel divided into eleven chapters of unequal length, and it exposes the stories of five specific characters told from an indirect point of view. Keeping Jamaica as its center, the different stories depict characters struggling with a hybrid identity. The various narratives can be read separately, but they also intersect as the characters influence each other’s stories. The light-skinned Clare Savage for example tries to define who she is as she struggles between contradictory role models (her father, Boy Savage, who passes for white and her mother, Kitty Savage, who continues to claim her Jamaican heritage), and exile (whether in America or England). Paul, a well-off light-skinned Jamaican with whom Clare has a sexual encounter, finds his entire family murdered before being killed by Christopher, a yard boy. Finally, Harry/Harriet struggles both with gender issues and political involvement. He/she joins the revolutionary fight with Clare once he/she has made the choice to become a woman. Not only do the characters’ stories intermingle, but also the use of the free indirect discourse in the narrative reinforces the break down of single voices and brings multiple voices together.

In her writing, Cliff insists on the resemblance that lies in the marginal aspect of her characters’ identities: they struggle with their gender or sexuality because it is repressed or condemned by the community in which they live (such as Clare and Harry/Harriet), or they fight the social and racial status qualifications imposed on them by the society (such as Kitty and Christopher for example). At the same time, Cliff contrasts the difference of their personal stories with the commonality of their history through the telling of their colonial past. The story of each character is thus placed in the larger reality of history told from the postcolonial perspective of the native. In fact, rather than simply (re)telling history including personal stories, she shifts the point of view as she includes the postcolonial realities of the independent island of Jamaica. This creation of (hi)story, where contemporary history is mixed with personal stories, is reinforced by the narrative voice which moves from general descriptions to specific fictional events (*No Telephone* 16-20) or stays in the general (*No Telephone* Chapter VII), giving the reader a multiplicity of perspectives that is usually lacking in official historical accounts.

In contrast, *A Small Place* is a short text divided in four chapters where the narrative voice comes from an unclear location (Scott 981). In her book, Jamaica Kincaid imagines the internal thoughts of a tourist coming to Antigua for a vacation. She contrasts these with imagined thoughts from the perspective of Antiguan. As she unfolds her narrative, she gives an account of the island's colonial and postcolonial history highlighting the abuse by the British during the colonial period and the rampant corruption of the Antiguan government in postcolonial times. Kincaid clearly addresses the reader while giving her discourse a dual perspective. The use of “you”—“tourist,” “North American or European” and “white” (*Place* 3 and 4)—versus “they”—which alludes to the native and black Antiguan—reinforces the need for the reader to identify with one or the other group, and as Rhonda Frederick suggests, “prevents readers from distancing themselves from the text and [Kincaid’s] criticisms” (Frederick 5). In fact, one could argue that such a reduction of perspectives forces Kincaid to use what Frederick calls a “shifting subject position” (Frederick 5), as she can simultaneously be an insider (Antiguan) and an outsider (Antiguan-American) (Frederick 12).

Whether the technique of the multiplicity of voices or of shifting subject position is employed, they both have the common aim of opening new perspectives and thus creating a new narrative—one that defies narrative linearity as well as a reductive binarity. Such writing techniques open up the possibility of narrative perverting a timeline, which otherwise could only be understood chronologically (from past to future or future to past) and highlights instead the links between the narrative’s past and present, or a historical past and present. Kincaid uses several examples to do this, focusing first on the sea as a dump for the overflowing sewage of the tourist and also as a shapeless body that ingests slaves (*Place* 14). She then reflects on the state of the library, expressing nostalgia for the well-run library of the past, “the beauty of us sitting there like communicants at an altar” (*Place* 42), and distress at its postcolonial state, “the dung heap that now passes for a library in Antigua” (*Place* 43). She uses this inter-linearity to point to the irony of a people with a colonial past thanking a (British) God every year, so proud they are to have obtained their independence (*Place* 9).

The most striking example stressing the links, which cross over time, is seen in Kincaid’s description of the Barclays Bank. In explaining that the Barclays brothers used to be slave-traders who turned to banking after slavery was outlawed, thus “borrowing from (through their savings) the descendants of the slaves and then lending back to them” (*Place* 26), Kincaid creates a new kind of narrative. She is not simply giving another perspective to a historical fact, she is weaving a new tale, one that juxtaposes past events with present realities, giving them the critical look of the postcolonial subject who understands the echoes of history.

Along the same lines, Michelle Cliff’s novel presents the reader with a non-chronological narrative, with chapters that vacillate between past and present within themselves. This shift is emphasized by the use of verb tenses (such as the passage between present and past in chapter four), the character’s story offering flash backs (such as Clare’s story in chapter four or the narrative including Paul and Christopher in chapter two), and the perspective from which the

story is told (as the narrator's internal point of view changes from one character to the other such as the passage between Paul's and Christopher's story in chapter two). As in the case of Kincaid, in using such writing techniques Cliff invents a new kind of narrative. By placing the character's story in a historical background, she creates (hi)story blending post/colonial history and personal stories. Indeed, as Cliff writes, she takes ownership of her character's story and then symbolically inscribes his/her story in history. The example of Kitty in chapter three ("Mrs. White") seems the most telling from this perspective. As she works in a laundry shop in New York, Jamaican native Kitty feels silenced both by her husband who is trying to assimilate into American society and life while negating his roots, and by the people she works with who seem to ignore her. When she places in the clean laundry sheets of paper advertising specials through the fictional character of "Mrs. White" (a marketing construction made up by the owner), she slowly creates her own language, inscribing it in balloons drawn out of the mouth of Mrs. White. From simple questions: "Ever tried cleansing your mind of hatred? Think of it" (*No Telephone* 78) to affirmations discouraging answers: "We clean your clothes but not your heart. America is cruel. Consider kindness for a change. White people can be black-hearted [...] Marcus Garvey was right," to violent revolution and change: "Hello. Mrs. White is dead. My name is Mrs. Black. I killed her" (*No Telephone* 81 and 83). Kitty asserts herself while evolving in the narrative during the period of the Civil Rights movement in America. It is the blend of Kitty's fictitious story with the period of the Civil Rights Movement that gives birth to a newly created narrative. Its resonance is amplified and it takes on a new meaning as part of a narrative that focuses on Jamaican identity. Indeed, just as Kincaid makes links by juxtaposing past events with new realities, Cliff creates similar links thus inscribing postcolonial (hi)story.

Another narrative technique that plays an important part in the creation of postcolonial (hi)story is the constant paralleling, or link, to a more official—that is to say a more accepted or acceptable—version of history. The fictional story, or the story of the people, gives shape to a new (hi)story, postcolonial in content because it contradicts the discourse of the colonizer, and promotes new values. When Boy Savage tries to present America as "the greatest country in the world" (*Telephone* 54) to his daughters, his wife Kitty's voice shoots back, if only in a whisper: "A man was lynched yesterday, [the sign] said. 'Hello America,' Kitty muttered to herself, *after repeating the words on the sign for her family*" (*No Telephone* 54, my emphasis). The words on the sign, which are part of official history, take on a new meaning when read by Kitty who is black and suggest the possibility for a new narrative to be written. Finally, when Clare travels from America to England and back to Jamaica, her trip symbolizes the reversal of the slave trade narrative (Edmondson 185), and in outlining her identity "in reverse," she creates a new narrative for Jamaica.³

Just as Michelle Cliff refocuses her characters' speech (on race or roots for example), Jamaica Kincaid, for example, reduces colonization to a case of bad manners: "Let me just show you how you looked to us. You came. You took things that were not yours, and you did not even, for appearances' sake, ask first" (*Place* 35). Her narrative embodies an understanding of colonial

and postcolonial realities (the colonial history told by the decolonized native), and is all the more effective that it places on the same level the horrors of slavery and a trivial instance of bad manners where it would have seemingly been appropriate to ask for permission. Kincaid is mixing her story as an Antiguan national and history, and she is twisting them in order to reverse the original power relations: rather than the servant/ slave being slapped or chided by the British master for being impolite or showing bad manners, it is the postcolonial Antiguan subject who scolds the former master: “You took things that were not yours” implying that they should have asked first. In creating a new narrative telling of postcolonial (hi)story, both Cliff and Kincaid expose conflicts. These conflicts of power tied to economic gain or to cultural imperialism in which former colonies and neocolonial actors play a role. Rather than remaining in a global magma however, these conflicts gravitate around the Caribbean island marking it as a site for conflicts.

The Trope of the Modern Tourist⁴

While the tourist is a main “protagonist” in Kincaid’s narrative, he appears only once in Cliff’s novel and is otherwise indirectly referred to in the rest of the novel. He is very much present in both books however, and is mostly associated with power, be it financial or cultural. In Kincaid’s narrative, the tourist is “rated” less according to a specific system of values than to his history of negative influence on the island. From Kincaid’s writing, it is understood that all tourists can be depicted in a less than positive way; some however are worse than others when these negative qualities are explained by a colonial past: “[...] you are a tourist, a North American [...] or, worse, Europe[an]” (*Place* 4-5). The negative image of the tourist is then amplified as the tourist is described physically, “to be frank, white” (*Place* 4) and “incredibly unattractive, fat, pastrylike-fleshed” (*Place* 13).⁵ In fact, according to Helen Tiffin, “the tourist-reader’s flattering self-image [is] challenged directly by the speaker and indirectly through the mirror image” (Tiffin 35). In many ways, Kincaid is using the trope of the modern tourist to create a new history, one that “confronts [the reader-tourist] not just with past and present exploitation, but also with their responsibility for current government exploitation in Antigua” (Tiffin 35). In fact, it is the relation of power governing the behavior of the tourist that becomes the focus of the narrative, and is also used to explain many of the ills happening to the island.

In this regard, both Cliff’s and Kincaid’s narratives echo each other. In some instances for example, they are telling parallel stories of prices at first seemingly low to the tourist and then suspiciously high as it is made clear that they are quoted in U.S. currency (*Place* 5 and *No Telephone* 204). In other instances, they are offering mirror stories told from different perspectives. If Kincaid describes the self-righteousness of the tourist: “They are not responsible for what you have; you owe them nothing; in fact, you did them a big favour, and you can provide one hundred examples” (*Place* 10), Cliff empowers the young black Jamaican

Christopher with the same self-righteousness to justify his killing of an exploitative Jamaican family:

“All me did ask was a lickle piece of lan’.” He did not tell her the purpose of his request.

“What right wanna t’ink wanna have fe ask fe lan’?”

“Me people no wo’k fe dem long time? Dem no owe we sinting?” (*No Telephone* 48)

In both narratives, the self-righteousness is displaced as it is told and becomes a new narrative: it moves from the colonizer to the tourist (Kincaid) and from the oppressor to the oppressed (Cliff).⁶

Cliff never gives the internal point of view of the tourist, and chooses instead to use her Jamaican characters to show the effects of tourism on the island. As she describes Christopher’s mother looking for food in the trash cans of hotels, she juxtaposes the piles of food “prepared for the visitors, flown in, packed in ice on silver jets, unfamiliar” (*No Telephone* 33) with the destitution of the natives. On the same topic, Kincaid goes from the internal point of view of the tourist: “You long to refresh yourself; you long to eat some nice lobster, some nice local food” (*Place* 12) to the realities of the global economy which have influenced modern power relations: “When you sit down to eat your delicious meal, it’s better that you don’t know that most of what you are eating came off a plane from Miami” (*Place* 14).

Indeed, the realities of the new global economy are very present in both narratives, suggesting a new kind of colonization as is expressed by local Jamaican people in *No Telephone to Heaven*: “People said the IMF might repossess the country” (*No Telephone* 187). With the arrival of the tourist, colonialism has shifted only to become neocolonialism: “It was a time of more hideaways for the rich—the expansion of the sandbox. ‘Make it your own,’ the tourist board told the visitors” (*No Telephone* 187). The island becomes (once again?) a site for conflicts of power, divided between the “whorism” of “tourism” (*No Telephone* 22) and the revolutionary fight for true independence, both strangely reminiscent of the colonial era where the slave had to obey the master or decide to live as a maroon.

While both narratives recreate postcolonial (hi)story through a careful and detailed exposition of power relations, they keep the Caribbean island at their center. This obsession with a “lieu,” which is not simply what Pierre Nora calls a “lieu de mémoire” but expands to become a reference point and an imaginary space for the exile, is interesting especially as it comes from the pen of authors who are both writing about the Caribbean from abroad. While Cliff’s descriptions of the island allude to a mythical female past, Kincaid’s continue to evolve especially through her latest writings on gardening.

Images of the Island

For both authors, the image of the island comes across through the senses, and especially through the perception and the description of the maternal garden. Kincaid evokes the grandmother as being instrumental in the making of a creative identity:

Of all the benefits that come from having endured childhood [...] certainly among them will be the garden and the desire to be involved with gardening. A gardener's grandmother will have grown such and such a rose, and the smell of that rose at dusk [...], when the gardener was a child and walking in that grandmother's footsteps as she went about her business in her garden—the memory of that smell of the rose combined with the memory of that smell of the grandmother's skirt will forever inform and influence the life of the gardener itself. (*Plant* xv-xvi)

In this description, we go from the smell of the rose to the smell of the grandmother's skirt, while at the same time feeling with the author the feet in the mark left by the footsteps, and imagining being brushed by the flowing skirt. The grandmother's skirt, a sign of protection and the site for creative space, reminds us of Reine Sans Nom's skirt in Simone Schwarz-Bart's *The Bridge of Beyond*. For Kincaid however, the creative space can be found in nature, and the maternal link becomes rather metaphorical as she describes her native island of Antigua. Just as the smell of the rose faintly evokes images of the grandmother's garden, images of Antigua evoke the unreality of the island in its extreme natural beauty and poverty (*Place* 77), while letting the mother figure “preside over the yard” (*Garden* 44), telling the story of the island as untamed while the enclosed space of the garden is. The grandmother figure is also chosen by Cliff as the owner and creator of her garden, a garden that is found by Clare overrun by the bush (*No Telephone* 8-9).

Much has already been written on identity search and the double link to the biological mother and the motherland,⁷ but it is important to mention it here again as the female subject is not only pursuing a quest but also “try[ing] to recover that something—the lost mother/stolen land—as a reaction to the homelessness imposed both by patriarchy and colonization” (Lima 863). This attempt at recovering what was stolen is very present in the descriptions of the island, suggesting, as does Michelle Cliff for example, the dilemma of the dispossessed who first turns—albeit unsuccessfully—to other places or mother figures before being able to come to terms with the maternal (mother)land. Clare thus returns to Jamaica after having lived in what has retrospectively become “borrowed countries” (*No Telephone* 193), and the link both to colonization and to the mother is made through the grandmother's land as Clare explains that she spent time getting to know it with her mother: “She felt about this place ... it was where she was alive, came alive, I think. She knew every bush ... its danger and its cure” (*No Telephone* 173). Here Cliff's writing echoes Kincaid's who, when talking of the botany of Antigua, says that it “exists in medicinal folklore” (*Garden* 137) rather than in the arrangement of beautiful

gardens—which come from the British colonization. Both texts thus insist on the importance of the Caribbean landscape for the livelihood of the community.

Kincaid's and Cliff's writings echo each other again later as Cliff describes Clare's difficult adjustment to reclaiming her (mother)land: "I [Clare] was fortunate I knew her [Clare's mother] here.' She heard her voice, clipped, distant—suddenly—as if she were describing a third-form teacher who had taught her Linnaean classification" (*No Telephone* 173, my emphasis). In her famous piece, "In History," Kincaid focuses on the origins of the Linnaean classification while describing and defining the colonization of the Caribbean. Centering on the power of naming (whether places for Christopher Columbus or plants for Carolus Linnaeus), Kincaid brings the pertinence of colonial history into the postcolonial history of the Caribbean islands and into the stories of the Caribbean people (*Garden* 166). At first, when Clare remembers her mother, she does not truly reconcile the mother and the land as her cold and matter-of-fact voice suggests. In fact, the description of the voice of a teacher teaching Linnaean classification creates a link to the colonizer, suggesting that Clare's mother is still at this point a colonized object. Clare's "double consciousness" however,⁸ is expressed here as she hears her voice (*No Telephone* 173) and finds the need to correct herself, thus creating a postcolonial account linking the story of her mother to the history of the (is)land while claiming a position for herself in this new agency: "No, she said to herself. I was blessed to have her here. Her passion of place. Her sense of the people. Here is her; leave it at that" (*No Telephone* 173-174). From a land that makes the female subject feel alive, we then have a land which mixes place and people to reflect the identity of that female subject, shifting the focus from a physical space only to a physical space which includes the community, just as the known road outside of Clare's grandmother's property is described as a "relief map" (*No Telephone* 183) as it leads through a neighborhood identified by people's names (*No Telephone* 183-184).

While the connection to the land and the mother shapes identity formation, the disconnection of the Caribbean subject, first from the community, and second from the mother, seems to bring an altogether different (hi)story of the island. While some scholars have elaborated at length on the difficult mother-daughter relationship between Jamaica Kincaid and her mother, trying to explain the critical approach Kincaid can have to Antigua in some of her writings,⁹ Michelle Cliff creates wandering characters because they do not know where their mothers are buried. Christopher for example kills the entire family he was working for because he is not given the plot of land he was asking for in order to bury his mother whose soul he feels wandering through the island; as for Clare, even though her mother has been buried, she has never been to her mother's tomb, which prompts her to say: "As time passes my mother becomes harder and harder to bring back" (*No Telephone* 152). The inability to associate the mother's body with a geographical space impairs the subject's memories of any time they may have spent together.

This disconnection is amplified by the more affluent class of Jamaicans; themselves removed from the postcolonial realities of the island as they wish to continue the colonial order

with the only difference that they would replace the British colonizers. Clare's aunt and uncle for example talk about Clare's "chance to leave" the "narrow little island" (*No Telephone* 110), while Harry/ Harriet refers to them leaving for Miami as "rats [...] deserting the ship" (*No Telephone* 145). The disconnection between the people and the land is reinforced through the history of the landscape and the colonial image of Wordsworth's daffodil placated on the Caribbean landscape, symbolizing not only the taking over of one's history but also the robbing of one's story which never gets told. In his excellent article on Wordsworth's poem "Daffodils" and the writings of Jamaica Kincaid, Ian Smith points to the fact that colonial literature can be used to separate colonized people from the realities of their own colonized world:

What happens when Wordsworth is exported to the tropics? Romantic poetry with the evocation of the beauty of nature is a perfect tool of empire; if the colonized people can be made to celebrate nature in a totally de-contextualized way, rapt in poetry's rhythmic cadences, treasuring its signs as free-floating signifiers waiting to be assigned content through colonial replacement therapy, they can be distracted from seeing the history of nature conquered, appropriated and made the sign of forced labor. (Smith 817)

For Kincaid, this intellectual colonization is undoubtedly reinforced by a colonization of the plants in the Antiguan landscape. In *My Garden*, she suggests that the history of plants in Antigua, just as the history of the natives has been erased:

What did the botanical life of Antigua consist of at the time another famous adventurer (Christopher Columbus) first saw it? To see a garden in Antigua now will not supply a clue. (*Garden* 135)

She goes on naming plants and flowers commonly found in Antigua and explains that they all come from other colonies before making the point that native plants were used for medicinal purposes and were not organized in beautiful gardens. With such a comment, she suggests that the beauty of the landscape resided in the fact that it was untouched by man while known by the natives.

Michelle Cliff, for her part, uses the landscape of the island as a metaphor for the changes it is going through. In clearing the land of Clare's grandmother, the revolutionaries are also shaping it up to their needs. Symbolically, and from the time of Clare's grandmother, the land was reclaimed by the people of the island from the colonizer, and it has been passed down through the hands of women: first, from the grandmother, then to Clare's mother and to Clare, and finally, to the woman warrior in charge of the revolutionaries.

Cliff also uses the landscape to highlight the changes of the island through time, recording the history of the island as the story of the inhabitants makes an imprint on it. The grandmother's garden is in a state of disarray or "ruination" (*No Telephone* 8), but shows a hybrid state rather than a complete change:

Where the grandmother had grafted the citrus—bitter Seville giving way to sweet Valencia—the graft remained staunch. But higher up the tree, in pursuit of light, the fruit returned to what it was, and sweetness was caught between the bitter and the long-lived. (*No Telephone* 9)

The history of colonization can still be seen through the lemon tree—which name is reminiscent of Spain—but the origins of the island, the pre-colonial history is mixed on the same tree. Ironically, the postcolonial (hi)story of the island is also told here as the narrative takes place in the postcolonial present of the narrative. In other instances, the (hi)story recorded in the landscape is also linked to the marginal and usually untold:

The pool named for a man who suffered from fits. The pool named for a girl made pregnant by an uncle. The dam made by a man who kept hogs. The five croton trees—dragon’s blood—marking the burial place of slaves, at the side of the river, on a slight rise. (*No Telephone* 174)

Here again, by the simple act of recording such markings, Cliff creates the postcolonial (hi)story of the island, not simply unearthing past events, but also placing in her novel characters that belong to the postcolonial present of the narrative. The future is also hinted at through the contamination of the water and the health dangers it has on the inhabitants (*No Telephone* 195), suggesting that (hi)story is in the making.

Finally, and through the character of Clare, Michelle Cliff opens up to the existence of an imaginary space, an imaginary landscape which becomes home and is “something in [her] head” (*No Telephone* 153) rather than grounded in a physical location because she was uprooted as a child from her mother’s land and has been evolving in “borrowed countries” (*No Telephone* 193) ever since. Both authors live in the United States—away from their native land and the land of the colonizer (England)—and they have left their island of origins for different reasons but do not envision their permanent return. As a lesbian, Cliff has met a strong hatred for homosexuals in Jamaica (Raiskin 69) while Kincaid feels like she has evolved differently from the Antiguan with her many years abroad and does not see herself willing to fit in the society she left (*My Garden* 45).

In a former study of female characters’ identity in the Caribbean, I had developed the idea that a number of francophone novels showed a similar pattern where female characters tried to reconnect to their mother through their native land. I had shown however that this link to the land seemed to grow from a physical link to a creative and imaginary one developed and kept alive in the character’s psyche, often because of a history of exile (Jurney, *Voix/es libres* Chapitre 3). In studying Cliff and Kincaid’s writings, another picture stands out, and it appears mainly through the descriptions of the islands as postcolonial (hi)stories are created and inscribed on the page. Moreover, the fact that both Antigua and Jamaica are now independent invites the creation of a postcolonial history, that is to say, a departure from the official colonial

historical accounts and a shift to a postcolonial narrative to which personal stories can be added. For Angelina Poon, Kincaid does just that, as she “opposes this official History [colonial history] by writing *her* memory of Antigua” (Poon 26): *A Small Place* becomes “Kincaid’s personal cultural map of Antigua” (Poon 27). Even though Kincaid’s essay is tinted with a certain nostalgia of the past—her disarray at the state of the current library is telling—it brings at the same time the critical distance of a Caribbean intellectual educated in post/colonial theories. According to Lima’s analysis, Kincaid uses her art as a home and makes her homeland in the written word (Lima 863). Even though this is an attractive idea, Kincaid’s latest readings prevent us from giving such an interpretation. In a recent interview with Kathleen Balutansky, she reiterates the idea expressed in *My Garden*, that is, the creative space of the garden allows her to create her vision of the Caribbean:

It was while I was in my own garden [in Vermont], thinking all sorts of things, in this *making*, that I realized that what I was doing was making my own garden out of the geography lessons I had as a child. None of the beds you see here existed when we came here. I made them. Every time I would tell somebody helping me in the garden what I wanted them to do in the garden they would get very upset because you can see the shapes I wanted are odd. The landscape looks like a map. I’ve made a map: this is an isthmus, this is a peninsula, this is an island, and this is a continent. If you look at it, it’s strange. This bed, I call Hispaniola: part is Haiti, part is the Dominican Republic. (Balutansky 792-793)

This love of plants enables her to tackle her subject with a new fervor and she creates “the history of an empire through plants” (Balutansky 793). Just as the passing of time had enabled Michelle Cliff to describe the grandmother’s garden in *No Telephone to Heaven* as a hybrid space, witness of the superposition of events, so is Kincaid’s garden, keeping—even if only in very subtle ways—the imprint of the previous landowners (Balutansky 795) and showing to the world the creation of what *she* calls “home.”

As female authors, Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid talk about the reality of power relations and possession in their writing. A colonial reality, the possession of the island becomes a postcolonial reality as Ian Strachan underlines well in his study on tourism in the Anglophone Caribbean: the island itself is what needs to be possessed,¹⁰ echoing a female author like Cliff who evokes the raping of women in her literature (*No Telephone* 173). Both women point to the cultural rape of the colonizer on the mind of the Caribbean people (*Place* 36) and their inscribing it on the page of a book enables them to create the (hi)story of such a possession (and possibly Kincaid’s Antiguan library with books that do not perpetuate the cultural colonization started by the British). What makes this creation of (hi)story postcolonial however is the shift that occurs as these authors write. Indeed, we go beyond the colonizer/colonized dichotomy to enter the realm of neocolonialism and power struggles according to skin colors within the Caribbean community (*No Telephone* 153). Of the two others, Cliff is the one who adds a clear gender statement to her postcolonial narrative.¹¹ As Clare has a sexual adventure with Paul, the well-off lighter skinned

Jamaican mentioned earlier, she remains in control deciding just how much to give him and when to leave (*No Telephone* 88), creating the narrative of the postcolonial woman. Later, as she has a sexual encounter with Harry/ Harriet, the narrative is written in the feminine mode as both “women” live the intimacy and the understanding of two “girlfriends” (*No Telephone* 130-132) thus including the homosexual paradigm in the postcolonial (hi)story of the island, and suggesting a definition of “home” that would include sexual diversity.

While both Kincaid and Cliff use a variety of narrative techniques to outline a postcolonial narrative mixing the history of their islands and the story of the people who inhabit them, they use the trope of the modern tourist in different ways to shift the focus from a simple rewriting of history where colonial history is put into question to a new narrative told by the decolonized other: Cliff creates characters who move in and outside of the island—to the risk of having some of them (like Clare for example) become, for a while, tourists in their own country; as for Kincaid, she remains within the boundaries of Antigua but uses the voice of the exiled other to tell her tale. Their different positions, personal situations, and narrative techniques enable them to create varied expressions of the notion of home, finding even geographical delimitations for it, like Kincaid who sees her Caribbean flowerbeds reborn through the melting snow of Vermont every spring.

Notes

¹For an overview of Jamaica Kincaid's work, see Moira Ferguson's study. Ferguson retraces Kincaid's trajectory from *At the Bottom of the River* to "Ovando" and the author's need to "represent herself as a historical subject" throughout the years (Ferguson 3). For Michelle Cliff on history, colonialism and neocolonialism see in particular her interviews by Judith Raiskin, Meryl Schwartz, and Renée Shea.

²The two books have yet another thing in common since the making of *Life and Debt*, as Kincaid's essay and the example of Jamaica are mixed in a new way. The 2001 documentary, which is based on Kincaid's *Small Place*, "examin[es] how IMF and World Bank policies [...] impact on poor developing countries." It takes the case of Jamaica "as [the] typical example of a small developing country that has taken the IMF medicine" (Johnson, "Jamaica Uncovered").

³It might be useful to note here that Clare does not return to Africa where the slave trade originated. The questions about her identity thus include her oscillating between the colonial motherland—that is to say England—and her native island of Jamaica. Even though Africa is never part of her personal journey, her choices hint at the impossibility of a return to Africa. On the question of why it is impossible for Caribbean people to return to Africa, see Glissant (Discours 44-48).

⁴While I focus here only on the image of the tourist, other scholars have argued that "the creation of the trope of the tropics [was] Europe's antidote to its own sense of loss" (Arnold 19) (see James Arnold in "Perilous Symmetry" 19 quoting Michael Dash, and Ian Strachan in *Paradise and Plantation* 91 quoting Chris Bongie).

⁵Thanks to a very close and useful reading of Kincaid's essay, Frederick notes that tourists are described in the following terms throughout the book: "'white,' 'ugly,' 'stupid,' 'fat,' and 'rubbish'" (Frederick 7).

⁶I am careful to use "tourist" in my analysis of Kincaid's text even though she means "white" tourist in her narrative. In doing so, I would like to suggest, as Ian Strachan has shown in his perceptive study, that African-American tourists are as likely to use their money as an oppressive tool on Caribbean people as white American tourists when they become consumers (Strachan 13).

⁷See in particular Nasta's *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia*, Alexander's *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*, and Journey's *Voix/es libres: Maternité et identité féminine dans la littérature antillaise*.

⁸On the notion of the "double consciousness" of Cliff who uses the passage from Standard English to Creole speech as an expression of her own multiple identity, see Françoise Lionnet ("Of Mangoes" 324).

⁹See Poon 28 and Ferguson's *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meet the Body*.

¹⁰In *Paradise and Plantation*, Strachan describes countless advertisements and postcards of the "feminized" Caribbean landscape with half naked women lying on beaches, "a sign that she is willing to be sexually penetrated." He later analyzes the image of a woman lying on a beach and wrapped in the Bahamian flag as saying: "The land, the woman, and the nation, then, are all awaiting penetration and possession" (Strachan 30-31).

¹¹Giovanna Covi proposes a reading of Kincaid's essay in which she says: "Kincaid's texts provide a devastating subversion of Columbian hermeneutics not simply by reversing Columbus's gender-specific view, and not even by opposing the voice of the colonies to that of the empire. Unquestionably, her voice is anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal, but more precisely and incisively, I contend, hers is a voice that corrodes Columbian discourse because it situates her anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal stance within a radical critique of binary logocentrism which also constitutes the grounding of the concept gender" (Covi 77). While I agree that such a reading offers a very valid interpretation of Kincaid's text, I do not believe that Kincaid makes as clear and conscious a gender statement as Cliff in her text.

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