

Erotohistoriography, Identity, and Queer Times and Spaces in Michelle Cliff's Novels

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Abstract | This article presents a discussion on Michelle Cliff's project to unveil the counterhistories of Jamaica, buried, left out, and underrepresented by the colonial project. In the case of *Abeng* (1984) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), an intersection of postcolonial and queer theories facilitates a unique reading of these novels as vehicles in this project to focus on the experiences of the marginalized and disenfranchised. Erotohistoriography is introduced as a concept that helps debunk the linear discourse of Western modernity: pleasurable moments experienced by both normative and non-normative bodies become instrumental in these reconnections between the present and the past, thus enabling the creation of non-official mappings of space and time.

Keywords | Erotohistoriography, Embodied Experience, Non-Normative Bodies, Identity, Resistance, Memory, Logic of Purity, Coloniality of Power, Queer Time, Queer Space, Postcolonial Theory, *Abeng*, *No Telephone to Heaven*, Elizabeth Freeman, Jack Halberstam

In *Abeng* (1984) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), Michelle Cliff intricately weaves themes of identity, memory, and resistance into a narrative that challenges colonial and heteronormative frameworks. The novels' exploration of Clare Savage's journey toward self-discovery and empowerment offers a compelling entry point for examining how histories of race, gender, and sexuality are not only inherited but also reimaged through intimate, embodied experiences. From a postcolonial queer perspective, these novels can be read through the lens of erotohistoriography, a framework that embraces desire and affect as a means of engaging with the past. This erotohistoriographical approach allows readers to see how Cliff reclaims silenced histories and interrogates the lingering effects of the "coloniality of power"¹ (Quijano 533) positioning desire and memory as vital tools of resistance.

By emphasizing Clare Savage's bodily connections to her ancestors, her homeland, and her sexual and cultural identities, erotohistoriography reveals how the novel critiques linear, oppressive understandings of time, instead fostering a sense of continuity that centers marginalized experiences. Critics like Dipesh Chakrabarty have explored the tension between European ideas of linear historical progression and the continuity of lived experiences in postcolonial contexts (70–71). Linearity is a limiting framework because it often upholds dominant historical discourses that present a one-sided narrative of history. Such narratives marginalize the non-dominant perspectives and affective histories that erotohistoriography recovers. Continuity, on the other hand, refers to the affective threads that connect disparate events, characters, or times within a narrative. It does not require adherence to a chronological order but instead focuses on relational or emotional connections. Erotohistoriographical continuity allows for the exploration of affective histories tied to desire, memory, and embodiment that were buried in linear historical accounts. It values the resonances between past and present, linking them through shared feelings, desires, and resistances. Through this lens, these novels become not only a story of personal reclamation, but also a subversive historical narrative that reimagines connections between past and present, positioning desire and memory as vital tools of resistance.

These two novels depict Clare Savage's painful struggle to reconnect with her roots, places, people, multiple heritages, and history she was, in Michelle Cliff's own

¹Anibal Quijano's concept of "coloniality of power" (2000) refers to the enduring structures of domination established during colonialism that persist in modern societies around the world reinforcing Western hegemonies in epistemology, politics, and/or economics. Colonial patterns of economic exploitation, racial hierarchy, and cultural suppression continue to shape power dynamics long after colonialism officially ended.

words, “taught to despise” (*Claiming* 45). They represent Cliff’s overall project to speak to the pain of those “hidden by histories of conquest and the traumas of colonial conditions” (MacDonald, “A Tribute”). In her fiction, essays, and poetry, Cliff explores the legacies of colonialism, and themes of identity, belonging, displacement, race, gender, and sexuality. She relentlessly interrogates the legacies of colonialism in Jamaica while drawing attention to the complexities of female and queer identities. Together, *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* depict Clare Savage’s evolution from a confused, silenced child struggling to come to terms with the legacies of race, privilege, and colonial history to an adult who actively confronts individual and collective oppressions. The daughter of Boy and Kitty Savage, Clare’s identity can be defined as multiracial, multicultural, and multiethnic. Her light skin color, however, takes predominance and initially determines her allegiance to the dominant social class.

As a light-skinned member of Kingston’s privileged class, Clare is apparently successfully integrated into the dominant hierarchy in Jamaican society; however, she chooses to leave the construct after years and years of being forced to silence her Afro-Jamaican identity. Although Clare never fully rejects it, she keeps it silenced but close to her heart throughout most of her life. The damaging effects of this repression persist for years until a visit to Kingston and a renewed friendship lead to a liberatory effort to recover these connections that have been forbidden for years. After years in London pursuing a career in art history, a choice made with “the logic of a Creole”² (*No Telephone* 109), Clare makes the decision to return to Jamaica and join a revolutionary group, a guerilla resisting neocolonial oppression in mid-80’s Jamaica.³ This decision is heavily influenced by her relationship with Harry/Harriet, a complex character that, similar to Clare, belongs to multiple worlds. A transgender individual, Harry/Harriet faces unique struggles related to identity and acceptance within the postcolonial heteronormative societies of the Caribbean. As a friend and a mentor, Harry/Harriet helps Clare explore questions of race, gender, sexuality, and belonging she has been pushing aside for a long time. The time they spend together plays a key role in Clare’s journey of transformation and resistance against imposed social norms. Harry/Harriet’s influence helps Clare break her silence and interrogate how race, class, and gender expectations of the coloniality of power have shaped her life choices.

A postcolonial queer reading of these two novels sheds light on these characters and their efforts to resist these expectations, their embodied non-conformity, the cultural tensions they navigate, and the ways their identities disrupt the lingering binaries left by

²As a Creole, or mixed-race light-skinned Jamaican, Clare is expected to take advantage of the privileges granted by the color of her skin. As one of the “chosen to represent the colonizer’s values, ideas, and notions of what is real, alien, other, normal, supreme” (Cliff, “Caliban’s Daughter” 40). At this point in her life, Clare unquestioningly accepts her father’s authority and silences anything and everything related to the Afro-Jamaican side of her identity.

³In the 1980’s, cultural neocolonialism in Jamaica was marked by the pervasive influence of West, especially American media, consumer culture, and ideological values. While Jamaica was politically independent, its cultural landscape was increasingly shaped by imported music, movies, fashion, and commercial products that promoted Western ideals and lifestyles. This domination had a strong impact on Jamaican youth, affecting local cultural expressions and leading to a perceived devaluation of traditional Jamaican and Afro-Caribbean identities. This cultural shift was not just a matter of media influence; it was deeply tied to economic policies that promoted foreign investment and opened Jamaica’s markets to global corporations (Getachew).

the colonality of power. As will be seen, these disruptions allow for new connections, access to counterhistories, and a new sense of belonging. The necessary reconnection with Jamaica as well as the key role played by Harry/Harriet, are tightly related to recovering a sense of belonging that is associated with alternative (re)constructions of space and time. These play a critical role in challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming identities outside Western colonial and heteronormative frameworks. Traditional colonial discourse, characterized by a "logic of purity,"⁴ often imposes rigid structures of space (such as nation-states, borders, and public vs. private realms) and time (such as linear progress and developmental stages) that marginalize or erase non-Western, non-heteronormative ways of being.

Postcolonial queer theory aims to dismantle these imposed structures and explore more fluid, cyclical, and non-linear understandings of space and time that align more closely with diverse cultural and sexual identities. By reimagining space, postcolonial queer theory opens up possibilities for marginalized communities to reclaim physical, cultural, and ideological spaces that were traditionally denied to them. This involves creating spaces where queer identities are visible, celebrated, and validated. Similarly, reinterpreting time disrupts the linear, progress-driven narrative often associated with Western modernity. Non-linear or cyclical conceptions of time, rooted in indigenous and local cultural understandings, allow for a construction of identities that are not bound by a singular, fixed point of "coming out" or adhering to a progressive life timeline. Instead, these frameworks celebrate fluid identities and multiple pasts, presents, and futures. Clare's and Harry/Harriet's reconstructions take place away from normativity and its constraints, produced by race, class, and gender restrictions that have been imposed on them since very early in their childhood. These two novels can be described as "queer counterhistories of space and time" (Eng 5), since they offer an alternative view of the linear configurations of history offered by "normative" sources: the evolution of Clare Savage towards an open acceptance of her self as an Afro-Jamaican woman becomes a counterhistory of Jamaica, an effort at representing all the stories that have been under- or mis-represented.

Elizabeth Freeman states that postcolonial and queer approaches to literature are very much related ("Time Binds" 57; *Time Binds* XI). One of the points she makes about these connections is the existence of official and non-official mappings of time and space (*Time Binds* 10). The latter offer stories that have been neglected by the former; for

⁴In her groundbreaking *Pilgrimages* (2003), Maria Lugones develops the concept of "logic of purity" to describe how rigid categorizations in postcolonial societies classify people and communities into hierarchical categories based on purity, as opposed to hybridity. Lugones argues that traditional identities often rely on neatly separated categories such as race, gender, and class where these dimensions are treated as discreet and non-overlapping. This logic marginalizes those who exist within multiple or fluid intersections of identities such as those embodying gender non-conformity or *mestiza* identities that resist singular classification.

In postcolonial and queer theories, the *mestiza* symbolizes the complexities of living within and between multiple worlds, often imposed by colonial histories. Gloria Anzaldúa claims the *mestiza* consciousness arises from inhabiting a borderland, both a physical and metaphorical space where cultures clash, blend, and create new identities. This space disrupts colonial binaries such as colonizer/colonized, and highlights the fluid, dynamic processes of identity formation under the legacies of the colonality of power (78–79).

subjects whose lives have been affected by the colonial construction of society and individuals, the events disregarded by official history offer spaces for reconstruction of their identities, not only individual and social, but also sexual. By analyzing these temporal frameworks, Freeman shows that both theoretical approaches seek to destabilize structures that govern identity and history. It is the contention of this paper that an intersection of postcolonial and queer theories facilitates a unique reading of these counterhistories. Central to the main argument of this paper, erotohistoriography identifies bodies and queer relationships as instrumental in the process for individuals and communities to counter the narrow “chronopolitics of Western modernity” (Freeman, “Time Binds” 57). This framing of time as a tool of power creates hierarchies that exclude certain cultural practices or events that do not fit into its ideas of identity and societal order, privileging heteronormative and Eurocentric models of progress while marking non-conforming identities or non-Western practices as “out of time” or irrelevant.

Erotohistoriography, a term coined by Elizabeth Freeman (“Time Binds”), is a method of engaging with history through embodied, affective experiences. This concept emphasizes how bodily pleasures and temporal disruptions—such as nostalgia, memory, and longing—form a counterpoint to normative historical progression. Queer temporalities challenge dominant narratives of time and space by reconfiguring linear histories and normative life trajectories. Bodies become instrumental in this rediscovery/reconnection with the past: “Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it in the present, by treating the present itself as a hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter” (*Time Binds* 95). As will be seen, bodily, pleasurable experiences that resist the fast pace demanded by normative society allow Clare and Harry/Harriet to feel liberated from the constraints of the logic of purity: even small moments of affective intensity, joy, or togetherness can help open up alternative ways of being in the present. These instances of countersociality open up opportunities for the colonized to debunk the linear discourse and insert the experiences of the disenfranchised into it: “erotohistoriography [...] insists that various queer social practices, especially those involving enjoyable bodily sensations, produce form(s) of time consciousness, that can intervene upon the material damage done in the name of development” (“Time Binds” 59). By accessing history through the body and pleasure rather than through disembodied, linear accounts, erotohistoriography offers a way to remember and re-experience pasts that were suppressed, erased, or deemed “deviant” by traditional historical accounts.

For queer, postcolonial, and other marginalized communities, this form of historical engagement can be transformative and reparative. Erotohistoriography becomes a form of reclamation, empowering individuals to re-embody histories that were once denied to them. This embodied approach also fosters intergenerational connections, healing traumas of disconnection by linking present bodies to past lives in meaningful, emotionally resonant ways. Sensual engagements with history challenge the idea that only dates and dominant narratives document history. Instead, they propose that history is also embodied and remembered through affective and sensual experiences. As key mechanisms of erotohistoriography, they recover silenced histories by paying attention to physical and emotional traces left on the body, celebrating the embodied resistances of marginalized communities through pleasurable acts, dance or protest, and building

affective solidarities that create connections across time linking individuals to historical figures or moments based on shared embodied experiences. Through such engagements, individuals can heal from feelings of alienation, and they gain a sense of continuity, presence, and belonging in both personal and collective histories.

Michael Eng describes these disruptions as full of possibilities to allow for the reconstruction of the relationship between individuals and history: "Freeman's crossing of queer studies with post-colonial concerns of individual and group development reformulates certain basic tenets of the field such that queer subjectivity and collectivity demand, and take as their reward, particularly inventive and time-traveling forms of grief and compensation" (5). For Freeman, grief involves not just mourning, but also seeking out and creating alternative narratives and histories that include joy and eroticism, and memories of connection. These time traveling forms of grief enable a reclamation of lost relationships, suggesting that incorporation of these memories can foster healing and collective identity. This time-traveling feature of the combination of queer and postcolonial theories reflects the structure of both novels. Past and present are constantly weaved and intertwined in a manner that clearly highlights the former's influence upon the latter. Away from an official mapping of time, these novels reflect experiences that become, in Freeman's words, "residues of positive affect" (*Time Binds* 120) to offer "alternative narratives of development" (Eng 5). These residues allow for a reimagining of history that emphasizes pleasure, intimacy, and desire as modes of resistance to dominant narratives of oppression and trauma. Besides, they serve as a counterbalance to histories often dominated by narratives of suffering, offering alternative ways to engage with the past.

Freeman lists particular groups among the colonized who were more often than not relegated to the background and whose identities were defined against the modernity the colonizing project provided: "Those forced to wait or startled by violence, whose activities do not show up on the official time line, whose own time lines do not synchronize with it, are variously, and often simultaneously black, female, queer" ("*Time Binds*" 57). Marginalized bodies like Harry/Harriet's and Clare's, and their pleasurable interactions generate alternative rhythms and modes of being that remain as traces that resist normative timelines and expectations of heteronormative life patterns. Kaisa Ilmonen interprets the relationship between postcolonial and queer theories in a similar way: "Eurocentric binary models of identity are not necessarily adequate in different kinds of (post)colonial contexts" (244). Harry/Harriet voices this inadequacy and its dangers: "But we *are* of the past here. [...] A peculiar past. For we have taken the master's past as our own. That is the danger" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 127). Harry/Harriet's view highlights how official mappings of time still persist in contemporary Jamaica; at the same time, these words reinforce the need to create a queer space/time where resistance and memory become a possibility.

Jack Halberstam's concepts of queer time and place prove especially useful in the construction of these counterhistories, since they "open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space" (1–2). Queering time and space means to explore/reclaim new and old spaces where the normativity associated with the behaviors and cultures imposed by the colonizing project can be subverted in favor of unconventional, hidden, despised constructions that were obliterated by the values of the

West: “‘queer’ refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment and activity in space and time” (6). Halberstam’s aim is also to expand the definition to broader aspects of life and construction of identity, and is understood as a way of life that she claims “will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being” (1–2). Queering space and time means not only to oppose the compulsory, even violent heteronormativity of Jamaican society, but also the impositions and misinterpretations of Jamaican society and culture that colonial and neocolonial powers made/are making. Halberstam also links the presentation of queer times and spaces with the subversion of capitalist/globalizing modes of economy and society, and the creation of specific divisions of time (family time, reproductive time) or space (domestic, public) that become “naturalized” for every gender, race and class. This naturalization, also known as the “heterosexual contract” examines how the binary gender system and compulsive heterosexuality are mutually reinforced through repeated social practices (Butler 524). It refers to the implicit societal agreement that naturalizes the alignment of biological sex, gender, identity, and heterosexual desire, effectively enforcing heteronormativity. This contract serves as a normative framework, marginalizing identities and expressions that fall outside conventional gender and sexual norms (524). Halberstam proposes a subversion of these structures by centering the experiences of characters that choose to live outside of heteronormative life/space constructions: “[those] who destabilize the normative values that make everyone else feel safe and secure; but also those people who live [...] outside of the organizations of time and space that have been established for the purposes of protecting the rich from everyone else” (10). Focusing his analysis on subcultural and transgender bodies, Halberstam suggests that characters who opt out of these heteronormative life trajectories represent a form of resistance, creating new spaces and identities beyond traditional social norms. These disruptions in the form of alternative assemblages⁵ or heterogeneous communities allow for new forms of kinship, identity, community, and history that challenge social norms regarding relationships and sexuality, calling for a “kind of shared vision [...] a vision of community, possibility, and redemption through collaboration” (96).

It is the contention of this paper that Michelle Cliff constructs these spaces in her novels around the figures of Clare Savage and Harry/Harriet, whose identity constructions have been damaged by the coloniality of power in one way or another. Moreover, the relationships they are able to build with the different contexts where colonial violence was/is exercised show the possibility to create new relationships and modes of being in and with the world. The novels analyzed here present Clare as a meaningful embodiment of how the personal and the political become one. In the construction of this character and her universe, Cliff seems to have achieved the purpose described by Antonia MacDonald earlier in this analysis: to represent all of those left behind by the violence of the colonizing process. Readers see her grow and become an

⁵Originated in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, assemblage theory explores how heterogenous groups unite to form dynamic, evolving communities that challenge traditional structures or binary models of thinking. Additionally, Buchanan argues alternative assemblages “have the capacity for agency within and beyond the assemblage [...] claim a territory, are dynamic, and constantly in the process of being made and remade” (459)

adult: *Abeng* opens in 1958, when the protagonist is barely twelve years old, and *No Telephone to Heaven* closes when she dies at the age of thirty-six as a member of an anti-colonial guerrilla, a revolutionary group. *Abeng* shows readers the complexity of Clare's upbringing and formal education. As a member of the Savage Freeman family, she is the descendant of enslavers and the enslaved. Clare Savage inhabits, in Cliff's words, at least two worlds, where she experiences moments of privilege or dispossession of her rights depending especially on the location of the different episodes the narrative voice chooses to show. Her sexuality, together with her color, her gender, and her class, place the protagonist in different spaces of discrimination or advantage at various times of her existence, whether at school in Kingston or in her grandmother's farm in the mountains, where she can freely enjoy and learn about the Afro-Jamaican side of her family. However, the chronology in the novel is much more complicated than a linear description of the facts of the life of its protagonist.

In *Abeng*, Cliff deftly combines portions of the unknown events of the history of Jamaica with Clare's family history and her intimate life, establishing a close connection between both country and individual. By constantly switching between different spatial and chronological frameworks, the third person narrative voice immerses readers in Jamaica's violent histories of conquest and domination. The very opening of the novel is evidence of this: the third person narrative voice emphasizes the island's cyclical transformation and the layering of its histories: "The island rose and sank. Twice. This is a book about the time which followed on that time. As the island became a place where people lived. Indians. African. Europeans" (*Abeng* 3). The fragmented structure of the description mirrors the fragmentation caused by colonialism, as the narrative traces the emergence of Jamaica as a contested site of settlement and displacement. Through these narrative devices, Cliff foregrounds the silenced histories of the disenfranchised, exposing the violence and erasure embedded in the island's past.

Cliff constructs Clare Savage as a multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural character who must carefully and painfully navigate at least the two worlds her parents represent. In my previous work, I defined her as an embodiment of Jamaican history, representing dichotomies that remind readers of traumatic histories: colonizer/colonized, or oppressor/oppressed (Vilouta-Vázquez 41). As an adult, she undergoes a process that culminates with her negotiating and reclaiming the losses she suffered throughout her formative years. However, the initial stages of her life, are marked by the limited options related to the privileges attached to her lighter skin and last name, which, on the other hand, limit the opportunities she has to access the maternal side of her family, a cultural heritage and ethnicity she is taught to hide: "But she was a lucky girl—everyone said so—she was light-skinned. She lived in a world where the worst thing to be—especially when you were a girl—was to be dark" (*Abeng* 77). Her constant desire to reconcile both sides is nothing but undermined by her family's insistence on her pursuing the future and the performances expected of a light-skinned Jamaican girl. This long, painful process of reclamation of her Afro-Jamaican identity is not without its obstacles. Her light skin and green eyes make her her father's daughter: Boy Savage constantly encourages Clare to pass as white. Every single time she tries to interrogate the certitudes of the logic of purity, her questions are stifled not only by her teachers but also by her father. Boy Savage's adherence to the logic of purity derives from his staunch reverence of his

family's British cultural heritage and a doctrine of elitism he intends to pass on to his daughter: "She was a true Savage, he assured her. Her fate was sealed" (*Abeng* 45).

In contrast, Clare's mother, Kitty, silently witnesses Boy's powerful influence over their daughter, believing her Afro-Jamaican heritage worthless and an obstacle to the bright future that awaits her light-skinned daughter. Clare, however, perceives this loss as traumatic: she longs to access an identity that is forbidden to her, as she is only considered her father's daughter: "Those mornings with her mother in the bush sometimes made Clare think-wish-that they were on a desert island together-away from her father and his theories and whiteness and her sister and her needs. That they would survive on this island with just the fruit her mother gathered. And she wanted this" (*Abeng* 80). The life of privilege her father plans for her involves rejecting/silencing everything related to her mother's identity and culture, including traditions and knowledge her mother and grandmother have acquired through the years like healing methods, oral stories, music and folk traditions. Clare will not be allowed to know or even acknowledge anything outside of the confines of her grandmother's village in the mountains. On the other hand, Kitty, Clare's mother, uses this argument to persuade Clare to choose the Savage side, as everybody, including her, see only advantages in this. Clare's own sister, Zoey, clarifies their mother's view on the differences between both sisters: "One time she said she feel you would prosper here. She say is because you favour backra, and fe you Daddy" (*Abeng* 105). Her white outlook ("backra") is understood by everyone as a stepping stone to a promising future; this possibility, however, entails that she is forced to make a series of choices and renunciations that affect her future. For Clare, some of the most traumatic ones include not being allowed to return to Jamaica with her mother and sister after a brief period in the United States. Forced to stay behind with her father, Clare decides to move to London to pursue studies in art "with the logic of a Creole" (*No Telephone* 109).

In *No Telephone to Heaven* Cliff chooses to describe Clare Savage's life by constructing a highly effective allegory that highlights some of the most important aspects of her life; at the same time, the passage below advances some of the topics that are central in the development of this paper, including Jamaica's traumatic history, Clare's childhood and her feelings of unbelonging, the traumatic choices she had to make in order to comply with her family's desires, her coping mechanisms (mostly her studies in London), and her final choice to fight for her Afro-Jamaican identity:

The albino gorilla moving through the underbrush. [...] Not feeling much of anything, except a vague dread that she belongs nowhere. She fills her time. In schools, playgrounds, other people's beds. In pursuit of knowledge, grubs, and she thinks, life. [...] Time passes. The longing for tribe surfaces—unmistakable. [...] She cannot shake it off. She remembers the jungle. The contours of wildness. Buried so long, she fears they may have atrophied. Distant treks with her dark-pelted mother. With a solid urgency they may emerge but she must also give herself to the struggle. She belongs in these hills. (*No Telephone* 91)

The albino gorilla allegory deftly describes the different phases Clare has gone through, from her birth and her education as privileged, middle class, light-colored Jamaican girl to her choice to abandon a life in the metropolitan center (London) to join an anti-

neocolonialist guerrilla army, where she re-encounters and embraces the Afro-Jamaican side of her identity, related to her mother, and silenced so that she can have the normative life that corresponds to her status as the light-skinned descendant of a family of white landowners.⁶ Her feelings of unbelonging stem from the uneasiness Clare has felt for almost all her life: despite being integrated into the dominant hierarchy, she's never been happy while being forced to ignore parts of her identity. Different scenes in *Abeng* depict this discomfort: while at school, for example, the realization of the teachers' favoritism towards lighter-skinned students and the discriminatory treatment of darker-skinned students is a source of internal conflict for Clare (96–102). Other instances take place at her grandmother's farm in the mountains, where she becomes aware of the unspoken divisions in society, such as the rejection of certain people based on their background or perceived "inferiority" (54–59). Finally, during her time with Mrs. Phillips at the end of the novel, Clare is confronted with the explicit demands to pass as a white woman. Mrs. Phillips' behavior, as well as the social pressures Clare experiences in this environment reinforce that she must hide or deny her Afro-Jamaican side to succeed in society. This experience deepens her internalized conflict, as Clare is expected to remain silent and conform to narrow, "ladylike" behavior, which involves suppressing any connection to the other side of her identity (152–165). Clare's discomfort with these dynamics is an early sign of her struggles with her identity, as she becomes aware of how race affects her social positioning.

Clare's physical appearance connects her to the Savages, the paternal side of her family. At the same time, however, this causes her to drift further and further away from her maternal side. What causes this alienation from her Afro-Jamaican identity is what is most visible, the lighter skin her father clings to as a reminder of the family's former way of life marked by their power and privilege: "Maybe Kitty thought that Clare would only want this thing, to pass into whiteness, looking as she did, speaking well because of her lessons at St. Catherine's, reading English books and English descriptions of history" (*Abeng* 129). Although this separation affords her a comfortable life, Clare must quell elements of her identity she cherishes. Complying with her father's desire for her to pass as white becomes a double-edged sword: even if she feels protected, she must, at the same time, reject who she is. Kitty and Boy Savage decide that Clare will function better in the world if she becomes a woman without any attachments to her Afro-Jamaican identity. Her father's choice provides a sense of security while simultaneously hindering her ability to think and make independent decisions. Conforming to the gender expectations for a girl belonging to her class and color point to a privileged life as long

⁶In the piece "Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character," Cliff describes Clare's evolution in a manner that stresses the need for reconnection: "She is a light-skinned female who has been removed from her homeland in a variety of ways and whose life is a movement back, ragged, interrupted, uncertain, to that homeland" (265). Cliff's project to debunk official accounts of Jamaican history begins with her choice of last name for her main character: it is in fact the lineage of the colonizers that are deemed as 'savages.' To illustrate this point, the third person narrative voice gives a detailed description of the way in which one of Clare's ancestors ran his plantation, describing acts of violence performed in a random manner: "But they did not pretend that J.E.C. Savage had been a benign slaveholder—they talked of his treatment of runaways, if recaptured, and took some pride that he administered the punishment himself. The recaptured slave was strung up in front of the quarters, where the queen's justice applied the cat-o'-nine tails to his or her back. The number of lashes depended upon the exertion the judge was capable of on a given afternoon, or morning" ("Clare Savage" 30).

as she does not break “the heterosexual contract.” A “performance” as an “Angel of the House” is expected. However, her behavior as a woman traverses boundaries and, as a result, it has to be trained to go back to the heterosexual contract.

Judith Butler has described the time and spatial dimensions of the gender role as having social, cultural, and political meaning: “There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public nature is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame” (526). An incident while hunting—she is punished not only for killing a bull, but also because this activity does not conform to gender expectations for a light-skinned Jamaican girl—expels her from her grandmother’s farm, where she will not be able to go back until twenty years later (*Abeng* 116–119). Killing the bull is a very significant moment that highlights her defiance against the gender norms of her society. This act serves not only as a demonstration of her physical strength and agency but also a rejection of the submissive role typically assigned to women. Her fierce independence challenges the heterosexual contract and the limitations it imposes on her identity. The punishment and marginalization Judith Butler talks about⁷ come in the form of an exile at Mrs. Phillips’ home, a member of society that will teach Clare how to respect the heterosexual contract and act according to the role society expects of her. As they pack Clare’s clothes, Kitty explains to her daughter how only a member of Kingston’s high society can train her to behave properly and according to the heteronormativity of the heterosexual contract: “Child, what you did was a serious thing. [...] You have to learn once and for all just who you are in this world. Mrs. Phillips is a lady, and you are getting to the age when you need to be a lady as well. [...] Go stay with the old lady and learn what you can from her” (*Abeng* 150). Only by respecting the culturally accepted roles expected of a female teenager and replicating the performances that align with this compulsory construct can she be accepted back in “good” society.

The heterosexual contract, together with issues of color and class, drive Clare away from the Afro-Jamaican lineage that is related to her mother and that she will have to reconstruct years later away from the heteronormativity of this contract, with the help of Harry/Harriet and the erotohistoriographical moments where their bodies are used to perform encounters between the past and the present. The relationship with Harry/Harriet provides for Clare these spaces to create a time consciousness she has been fighting to make disappear. Her traveling all around Europe to study the art of the Eurocentric traditions is nothing but a desire to forget her sense of unbelongingness and fill it with the culture that was supposedly hers, as asserted by her father in her childhood years. Through her interactions with Harry/Harriet, Clare is compelled to confront the intersections of personal and collective histories, recognizing how the coloniality of power and the fight for identity have affected her and her community. These moments connect her to the past in sensory, intimate ways allowing her to connect with the

⁷“Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a series of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated” (Butler 528).

histories of her ancestors, the land, and her cultural identity, which colonialism has otherwise fragmented or erased.

Kaisa Ilmonen describes the presence of Harry/Harriet as crucial in the process of recovery of Clare's Afro-Jamaican identity: "As signifiers of ambivalence, these transsexual characters are able to heal the traumas of history caused by Eurocentric binary thinking while re-signifying the fixed gender structures of colonial modernity" (229–230). Clare identifies with Harry/Harriet because they are similar, divided in two: "No, I don't find you strange. No stranger than I find myself. For we are neither one thing nor the other" (131). Her education and training alienate her from part of her family; for Harry/Harriet, it is his sexual identity that places him in a marginalized space, on the negative side of the binary so that heteronormativity can occupy its privileged position: "Then Harry/Harriet, boy-girl, Buster's brother-sister, half brother-sister actually, who was always strange, since childhood, they say, but everyone tolerates him, as if measuring their normalness against their strangeness. He is only one, after all, one that nature did not claim" (*No Telephone* 21). His role in the social group can only be sustained as the source of entertainment, and in his liminal position as the adoptive/biological son of a high-class family, unnatural but accepted. He was born of the relationship of his mother, a maid, with her boss, and adopted by him and his wife. This way, his position in society is guaranteed by his origins, in a society that is especially violent against social/sexual relationships other than the heteronormative. Cecil Gutzmore describes the situation of homophobia in Jamaica as one of the most restrictive and violent in the world. At the same time, this violent feature of Jamaican patriarchal society defines women's role in society restrictively, defining them only as bodies who must help in the preservation and continuation of society:

Disapproval is strategically deployed not only against such traditionally designated social 'perversions' as homosexuality, bisexuality, transvestism, trans-sexuality, and so forth, but also against a number of more 'day-to-day' activities relating to the sexed—especially the female—body, particularly in respect of its un/dress, hairstyling, and the like. [...] patriarchy [...] enforces sociosexual 'normality' as well as the range of identities (individual, group, racial, national, regional, and so on) deemed essential to societal survival. (119)

Faced with the restrictive narrative of what it means to be male or female in Jamaican society, Harry/Harriet's courageous defiance of heteronormativity becomes a beacon, a source of inspiration for Clare to be able to affirm and recognize what she was forced to despise and ignore. Clare's and Harry/Harriet's liminal identities provide spaces of connection to be established between the two: they both live split, and they both will have to make a decision and choose which side to lean to in the search for their identity: "I mean the time will come for both of us to choose. For we will have to make the choice. Cast our lot. Cyaan⁸ live split. Not in this world" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 131). Harry/Harriet is the character that enables Clare to re-establish the lost connections to Afro-Jamaican culture, a process that had been prevented by her Eurocentric education.

⁸The term "cyann" is a Jamaican patois word derived from the English "cannot."

There are several moments when Harry/Harriet becomes the source for the pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfilments that make the reconnection with the past possible. They both share experiences of joy and playfulness, physical connection, cultural reflection, and intimate conversations while revisiting the Jamaican landscape. As claimed by Elizabeth Freeman, “queer practices of pleasure, specifically, the body enjoyments that travel under the sign of queer sex, can be thought of as temporal practices, even as portals to historical thinking” (“Time Binds” 59). Practiced in a context where queer affinity is not criminalized, these forms of intimacy are set to another logic and temporal rhythm. In erotohistoriographical moments history is experienced as a lived, felt presence rather than a distant or objective record. These moments are characterized by their intimacy, desire, and affect, allowing individuals or groups to connect deeply with marginalized or suppressed histories, particularly those disrupted by colonialism, capitalism, or heteronormativity.

The first one of these erotohistoriographical moments takes place in a touristic restaurant where both subvert colonial boundaries by staging a performance with the aim to make fun of the stereotyped racial views of an American tourist. In a setting that reminds them of the Middle Passage, they stage a dialogue full of racial/sexual connotations that startle the tourist to challenge his racist behaviour:

‘I am Prince Badnigga, and this is my consort, Princess Cunnilinga, we are here for the International Festival of Practitioners of Obeah, my dear chap.’ Poor man, did he not see their eyes jump with the joke? Afrekete and Anansi.⁹ But no, the poor fool, now released, took the whole story back to his table to tell his wife he had spoken with Afro royalty, and, oh, dear, they are as we feared. (*No Telephone*, 125–126)

In the way Jack Halberstam describes, Harry/Harriet uses his ambivalent appearance to disrupt the comfortable positions of heteronormative society, destabilizing the the normative values that make everyone else feel safe and secure. He creates his own queer time and space, where Clare is included and together they undermine the codes of those whose vision of the world is reductive, racist, and homophobic: “‘Oh, man, girlfriend, is nuh what dem expect from me? [...] Battyman trash. No harm. Our people kind of narrow, poor souls. Foolish sometimes. Cyaan understand the likes of me’” (*No Telephone* 127). This moment of pleasurable interruption of the colonial patterns of domination helps Clare’s historical consciousness of her identity and her Afro-Jamaican roots resurface. Right after the aforementioned dialogue she feels empowered enough to recover one of the signifiers of the Afro-Jamaican identity she was taught to despise as part of her privileged upbringing. In the middle of this disruption, her accent makes a comeback: “‘Oh, yes, labrish, but also true-true.’ Her twang was coming back, rapidly, in Harry/Harriet’s presence, voice breaking the taboo of speaking bad. Discouraged among

⁹Afrekete and Anansi are the names of two trickster figures of Yoruban origin. For this reason, their subversive activities are associated with the fight for freedom. Kara Provost enumerates some of the features that these trickster figures have, and that describe very accurately their association with Harry/Harriet and Clare at this point: “Both Gates and Lorde emphasize the relationship between the trickster and language, Lorde specifically points out the trickster’s associations with unpredictability, abundant eroticism, and gender ambiguity” (46).

her people" (*No Telephone* 121). It is in these moments when Clare and Harry/Harriet are able to transgress the rigid boundaries imposed by "her people," that is, the Savage side, the colonizer side and its logic of purity that have coerced their behavior for so long.

They travel around Jamaica together on two separate occasions; both have deep significations for the purposes of this analysis. The first time they travel to the Jamaican coast, significantly trespassing the property of an American absentee landlord, and even more significantly spending the day close to cane fields, that make them remember the history of enslavement of the island by the colonizing and neocolonizing powers. The visit to the beach is described by the third person narrative voice with lots of sensorial detail, introducing readers to an erotic scene between Clare and Harry/Harriet: "This was but the beginning. Soon they would be covered with mango juice, salt water, and the spicy oil of the meat. Resting from riding the breakers, warmed by their feast and the sun, they lay side by side under a sky thrilling in its brightness. Touching gently, kissing, tongues entwined, coming to, laughing" (*No Telephone* 130). Again, enjoying the pleasures of food, the sea and sex with Harry/Harriet is linked to a historical consciousness of Jamaica and the experiences of the disenfranchised: "'Were we to sleep on this beach we might hear more than the breeze rattling the stalks, and singing through the blades. We might feel more than its warmth. We might hear more than our people celebrating cropover'" (*No Telephone* 132). The references to the lives of the enslaved and cropover in particular have a highly relevant significance: after the grueling harvesting period, cropover was an opportunity to celebrate survival, express cultural identity, and resist the oppressive realities of plantation life. Through music, dance, and feasting, participants honored their Afro heritage and fostered community bonds (Thompson). In the same way as the scene at the restaurant, the erotohistoriographical moment has its effects on Clare's westernized self: "Clare lay back, shutting her eyelids, against the fire of the sun. She thought she could feel the tint of her skin deepening, melanin rising to the occasion" (*No Telephone* 131). In this case, the disruption provoked by pleasurable bodily moments allows for another transgression related to her privileged upbringing: the lightness of her skin. As a powerful signifier of her belonging to the upper class of Kingston, Clare's skin was revered and was to be preserved with the prospect of a promising future. With Harry/Harriet, Clare feels able to transgress yet another boundary in the process of reclaiming her Afro-Jamaican identity.

Shortly before joining the guerrilla army, Clare goes back to Jamaica and she and Harry/Harriet visit her grandmother's house in the mountains. The trip provides more erotohistoriographical moments for Clare and proves to be decisive in Clare's journey of reclaiming her identity as an Afro-Jamaican woman. At the same time, this setting becomes an example of queer time and space: the development of chronopolitics of colonization disappears, and the land seems to return to a distant past. The farm resembles now a precolonial Jamaica, an era preceding colonization, exploitation, and the violence of the colonizing process: "The building where it was, where she remembered it as being, screened by green. Nothing by the chaos of the green—reaching across space, time too it seemed. When only Arawaks and iguanas and crocodiles and snakes dwelt there. Before landfall, before hardship" (*No Telephone* 172). The third person narrative voice vividly describes the land where Clare's grandmother's farm used to stand as devoid of any human trace. In this return to nature, Cliff evokes a world untouched by the destructive hands of the colonizers. This creates an emotional landscape that draws Clare

and the guerrilla fighters into an intimate relationship with the land and history—one that resists colonial erasure. The scene does not just depict nature reclaiming the land but symbolizes a reconnection with indigenous and precolonial histories.

The practices of pleasure between Harriet and Clare include eating, chatting, remembering their respective childhoods, and a sexual experience that connects Clare to the island in a highly symbolical way: “The importance of this water came back to her. She shut her eyes and let the cool of it wash over her naked body, reaching up into her as she opened her legs. Rebaptism” (*No Telephone* 172). Similar to the previous scene on the beach, these moments help Clare come closer and closer to her Afro-Jamaican identity. Their conversations evoke memories from her childhood in the country, experiences that took place in the same setting. These shared experiences in these familiar settings provide opportunities to reflect on her childhood memories while also forming new, positive associations and connections with her Afro-Jamaican heritage, enabling Clare to feel a sense of belonging. This new sense of inclusion becomes a key element in her decision to join the guerrilla army and fight for the freedom of Jamaica from neocolonial domination:

Each bend in the river came back to her. [...] The five croton trees—dragon’s blood—marking off the burial place of slaves, at the side of the river, on a slight rise. Unquiet ground, that—children feared the anger of the spirits, who did not rest, who had not been sung to their new home. Her mother had told her of the slaves. Her people. Yes. (*No Telephone* 174)

The disenfranchised and her mother become the center of her memories, and the project to recover a relationship with the culture she represented makes a modern maroon of her. The third person narrative voice portrays all the events that end with Clare joining the guerrilla movement using techniques like flashbacks and stream of consciousness. With the use of these, readers gain insight into the motivations and decisions that have led Clare to this situation, where she seeks to distance herself from society and become a modern warrior in the manner of the revered Nanny of the Maroons. The connections with maroon history¹⁰ and the figure of Nanny of the maroons¹¹ provide the counterhistorical space where the reconstruction of both Jamaican history and Clare’s identity can be performed. *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* offer new contexts for

¹⁰The phenomenon of the creation of new communities by escaped fugitives, known as *maroonage*, represented a common reaction to slavery in the Americas. From its beginnings in the sixteenth century, enslaved Africans ran away from the plantations to establish self-governed, independent communities. This topic represents the dreams of self-determination of black people, the desire to develop their own culture without any outer interference, living with their own norms and beliefs. This separatist impulse that may be defined as the basis of maroonage impelled enslaved people to abandon the plantations in search of a new land or some kind of pacific co-existence (Kelley 31).

¹¹Historical maroon leaders as Zumbi from Palmares, or Nanny from Mooretown in Jamaica, have become a source of inspiration for many Afro-Latin-American and Afro-Caribbean movements. In the case of the Anglophone Caribbean, it is Nanny who becomes a symbol of resistance and fight for freedom. Nanny’s figure, and with her the maroonage phenomenon, have become a symbol of active resistance against slavery and against the negation of the humanity of enslaved peoples, of their culture, their language and their African cultural traditions (Mathurin-Mair 36).

recalling, narrating, and interpreting the individual and collective histories of (post)-colonial subjects.

Clare is finally able to reclaim her Afro-Jamaican identity, and returns to the farm her grandmother owned, to establish a new counter-hegemonic community with the rest of the members of the revolutionary group. They form a heterogeneous group composed of members of different ethnicities, races, and genders; an alternative assemblage rooted in the principles of queer time and space, drawing inspiration from the maroon communities that sought isolation to resist colonial domination. By returning to the bush, more specifically to Accompong Town, where Nanny and her soldiers retreated to create an independent community, this modern guerrilla echoes and honors this legacy of resistance. Alongside the other members of the group, Clare and Harry/Harriet establish a queer temporality and spatiality that contest capitalist, heteronormative, and neocolonial oppressions. Interestingly enough, the chapter where the members of the guerrilla army are described is called "*Ruin*." This highly significant title is explained by a footnote in a manner that describes this queer space as not belonging to official chronology anymore, but returning to an achronological one, without any markings in it: "*Ruin*: This distinctive Jamaican term is used to describe lands which were once cleared for agricultural purposes and have now lapsed back into [...] bush" (*No Telephone* 1; italics in original). The same achronological state is emphasized a little later by the third person narrative voice, when describing Clare's grandmother's farm: "The forest had obliterated the family graves, so that the grandmother and her husband, and their son who died before them, were wrapped by wild vines" (*No Telephone* 8). In this setting, dates and linear chronologies disappear, situating this assemblage within Halberstam's definition of queer times and spaces; the bourgeois/capitalist definition of it does not apply to them. Neither does the definition of space: they have chosen to occupy this space away from capitalist/neocolonial society, one that no one can claim, because no one knows, not even their own family members: "Some of them think we are living off the streets of Kingston. Some of them think we have made a better life in America. They might hate us if they knew" (*No Telephone* 10).

For Clare, in particular, the guerrilla community and their project become a queer counterspace, an instance of countersociality where she finally finds a sense of belonging, not only to a community, but also to Jamaica and her roots. The guerrilla constitutes a real effort to build an eccentric community, an egalitarian society that fights against the sweeping influence of American (Usonian) culture in 1970s Jamaica, that continues the misreading and obliteration of Jamaican history, as exemplified by the wrong reading and telling of the story and figure of Nanny, the maroon warrior:

Two figures stood out in the customized group. One, a woman, the actress called in whenever someone was needed to play a Black heroine, whether Sojourner Truth or Bessie Smith, this woman wore a pair of leather breeches and a silk shirt—a designer's notion of the clothes Nanny wore. Dear Nanny, the Coromantee warrior, leader of the Windward Maroons, whom one book described as an old woman naked except for a necklace made from the teeth of whitemen [...]. But such detail was out of the question, given these people even knew the truth. Or cared. (*No Telephone* 206)

Their fight against this cultural/economic invasion leads to Clare's death during an attack of the guerrilla on this Hollywood production. Clare dies in the attempt to destroy the neocolonial influence that was misinterpreting a history that deserves to be unburied, but not commodified in the global market. As Michelle Cliff has asserted, her death has been understood as a sad event, but also as the final reconnection with Jamaica: "soon enough she will be indistinguishable from the ground. Her bones will turn to potash, as did her ancestors' bones" (*No Telephone* 265).

In both *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, the destructive effects of colonial education and the ensuing propagation of heteronormativity as the "desired" social formation make characters such as Clare and Harry/Harriet long for alternative spaces where they can develop their identities fully without and away from the race, class, gender, and sexual identity constructions that thwart their personalities. Clare and Harry/Harriet's journey culminates in a reimagination of their identity as a dynamic process that disrupts the heteronormative constructions of time and space of the coloniality of power. Embracing Afro-Jamaican history and reconstructing connections with Jamaica's revolutionary figures are key steps for these characters to queer the ideal linear narrative of self-discovery. Their identities no longer adhere to the fixed binaries of the logic of purity. Instead, they create a fluid, relational sense of self rooted in a resistance project of communal memory, allowing them to inhabit and shape alternative temporalities and spatialities that challenge dominant narratives.



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