

*The Ethical Turn in
Postcolonial Theory and Narrative:
Michelle Cliff's
"No Telephone to Heaven"*

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KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH'S contention (in his essay "Is the Post-in Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonial?") that the distinction between the "post" in postcolonial and the "post" in postmodern lies in the appeal of the former to an ethical universal flags a facet of postcolonial theorizing that has not as yet been adequately addressed. There can be little doubt of the veracity of Appiah's claim about the ethical orientation of postcolonial theory, but as the very title of Appiah's piece implies, the search for an ethical foundation for postcolonial theory appears to be vitiated by its other post-foundational affiliations. In this light, while one may be inclined to agree with the tenor of Satya P. Mohanty's claim that "the most powerful philosophical ally of modern anticolonial struggles of all kinds is [the] universalist view that individual human worth is absolute" (116), it is not at all clear that a universalist ethical framework is not itself fraught with contradictions in a postcolonial context. Homi Bhabha takes a different direction. He turns not to an ethical universal in the way of Mohanty and Appiah, but to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose concept of proximity¹ "refuses" to conceive of cultural difference "on the normalizing grounds of an abstract universality of meaning or on a shared, synchronized temporality of present being" ("Editor's Introduction" 438). Bhabha seeks an ethics that can account for the ambivalence of minority identifications in heterogeneous national societies, which are often simultaneously cathected to "the culture of communal life while being . . . active participants

in the more universalistic, 'enlightened' procedures of political and juridical citizenship" (436). The nation, with its correlative pursuit of a "universality of meaning," is for Bhabha at once inadequate and exclusionary as an ethico-political category.

The increasing preoccupation with the ethical in postcolonial criticism betrays both an anxiety about the political efficacy of postcolonial theory and doubts about anti-imperialist projects of various kinds, including uncertainty about once cherished emancipatory categories such as the nation. Rather than join in these efforts to envision an ethical framework, I wish to pursue an excursus that may prove somewhat less intractable. I aim to sketch, briefly, the genealogy of this ethical turn, and then to read Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* both as a symptom of the same problematic and as a contribution to debates over the ethical role of the (postcolonial) cultural critic.

The terms of Bhabha's embrace of Levinas (himself a member of a diasporic minority) may prove a useful point of departure. Bhabha finds Levinas appealing because, in his reading, Levinas offers an ethical framework that is dependent neither on "an abstract universality" nor on the concept of nation. The misgivings about universalism that characterize much recent theorizing — principally the theories collectively labeled "poststructuralist" (or, more problematically, "postmodern"), but also including much postcolonial theory — make especially noteworthy the turn to an ethical universal in the work of postcolonial critics like Mohanty and Appiah. Much of the discomfort with universalism in postcolonial circles has had to do with the extent to which the postulate of universality appears to have derived its practical authority from the universalizing practices of the modern nation-state, exemplified preeminently in European practices of colonialism. Certainly this consonance between universality and universalizing has been central to many of the recent critiques of nationalism and the nation-state in the work of postcolonialist and Europeanist theorists alike.² The recent ethical turn coincides with efforts to narrate a new historical moment, typically figured in terms of the imminent demise of the nation-state in the current era of globalization

and transnationalism. Donald Pease has described the postnational as "the complex site wherein postcolonialism's resistance to global capital intersects with the questions the global economy addresses to the state concerning the nation's continued role in its management" (3). In other words, precisely when the hinge between universality and universalizing appears to be coming undone through the diminished powers of the nation-state, calls for an ethical universal are being issued. Ironically, there is a universalizing gesture in this definition of the postnational, which would risk homogenizing states as politically and economically divergent as the US and Jamaica, to say nothing of obscuring their unequal neo-imperialist relationship. However, to the extent that the concept of the postnational signals both a discomfort with universalizing impulses and a recognition of a historical-material condition that is global if not homogeneous, the postnational is a potentially useful designation for contemporary efforts to come to grips with the contradictions of transnational lives lived in the context of global capitalism.

While a number of social scientists including Paul Hirst, Grahame Thompson, and Roland Robertson contend that the news of the death of the nation-state has been greatly exaggerated,³ there can be little doubt that transnational cultural practices and organizations, diasporas of various kinds, displacements and deterritorializations — not to mention academic interest in the same — have significantly increased in recent years.⁴ Nonetheless, by no means do all of the critics interested in ethics share Mohanty's conviction in the efficacy of a Kantian universalist framework. Michael J. Shapiro, for instance, argues that the turn to traditions of moral theory (realism, naturalism, utilitarianism, rationalism, and legalism) among scholars interested in constructing an ethics for "the contemporary post-sovereign condition" ends up "reinstalling the nation-state model of space" (480). Part of his reasoning speaks directly to this question of a transnational era. He points out that while "[s]tates manage an ethical as well as a monetary economy[,] they have more control over the ethical because the monetary economy is more heavily influenced by trans- and extra-state

agencies" (495). Thus, for Shapiro, the postulate of universality is not likely to be severed from the universalizing legislation of modern nation-states, even under the influence of increasing transnationalism. Bhabha makes a similar claim about the "embedded national or statist metaphor through which [Charles] Taylor works his evaluative chronotope of cultural judgment in 'The Politics of Recognition'" ("Editor's Introduction" 451). Bhabha argues that Taylor's reliance on an implicit nation-state metaphor precludes recognition of "migrant or diasporic peoples as representative of minority cultures" and compels instead recognition of such peoples only in terms of "their national or atavistic cultural heritages, or as part of a mosaic within the 'homogeneous, empty time' of the nation" (451).

Bhabha's interest in migrant or diasporic peoples is, at once, one of the central tropes of postcolonial critical discourse and a trope that has been central to critiques of postcolonial theory. Zygmunt Bauman has offered the tourist as a metaphor for postmodern life (240-41); Bhabha and others can be seen to make a parallel claim for the migrant as a metaphor for "postcolonial life." Edward Said, for instance, has proposed the figure of the exile or migrant as the embodiment of the postcolonial intellectual and "the model for academic freedom" ("Identity" 17). Rey Chow makes a similar claim for the epistemological value of a "diasporic consciousness,"⁵ which she takes to be "the reality of being intellectual" (*Writing Diaspora* 15). Yet again and quite rightly, one finds misgivings about the sociological underpinnings of this epistemological position. Arif Dirlik's polemical riposte to the question of when the postcolonial begins, "[w]hen Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe" (328), signals the need for attention to the specific institutional support for this discourse. Chow too is critical of the extent to which intellectuals derive power and privilege from inhabiting an "oppositional" point of view (*Diaspora* 17) and argues for an ethics that would situate the cultural presumption of any theoretical position in an effort to combat what she takes to be the tendency to idealize difference and otherness in contemporary post-structuralist theory (*Ethics* xxii). Revathi Krishnaswamy points out that one

of the hazards of the figuration of postcolonial migrancy is the collapse of distinctions between indentured workers and other underclass migrant workers, political refugees, intellectuals forced into political exile, and middle- and upper-class professionals whose "exile" is largely voluntary (128). Although she has often been the target of critiques such as Dirlik's,⁶ Gayatri Spivak consistently has been concerned with the question of the location of the intellectual and her responsibilities when it comes to representing the subaltern.⁷ It is partly because of Spivak's insistence on questions of social injustice that Chow reads Spivak's theoretical oeuvre as offering the sort of "ethics after idealism" that Chow advocates.

These debates about the role and situation of the postcolonial intellectual and the metaphor of migrancy seem to me to be part of the same problematic as the ethical turn, a connection made most explicitly in Chow's recent work. It is not merely coincidental that Ahmad's and Dirlik's claims about the potential complicity between postcolonial theory and the extension of imperialism under the guise of "globalization" have focused on the location of postcolonial intellectuals in "first-world" academic institutions. Dirlik argues that "there is a parallel in the ascendancy in cultural criticism of the idea of postcoloniality and an emergent consciousness of global capitalism" and, more decisively, that "the appeals of the critical themes in postcolonial criticism have much to do with their resonance with the conceptual needs presented by transformations in global relationships caused by changes within the capitalist world economy" (331). For Aijaz Ahmad, the detachment of these intellectuals from filiation, "a sense of place, of belonging, of some stable commitment to one's class or gender or nation [that] may be useful for defining one's politics" (14), leads to an over-emphasis on contingency and a lack of regard for the "structural endurance of histories" (15). Thus, in current discussions of transnationalism, the "universalization" that troubled critics of modernity has metamorphosed into "globalization," and the ambiguities of correspondent cultural narratives remain.

In Pease's formulation, national narratives operated at the "site where the state concealed the sovereign power between itself and the 'national people'" (7). Consequently, "[p]ost-national narrative might . . . be understood either to constitute accommodation to global capital or to narrate forms of resistance" (3). Pease's either-or formulation illustrates quite clearly the site of the ethical turn. What determines whether the postnational narrative accommodates itself to global capital or resists it? In the face of this dilemma, ethics steps into the breach. The shift to another category or mode of thought signalled by the ethical turn may be read as a rejection of the terms of the current discourse, but perhaps also as an effort to found a new discourse, a poetry of the future, the language of which is as yet unknown. That search for a poetry of the future is depicted in Michelle Cliff's novel *No Telephone to Heaven*.

In Cliff's novel, a loss of faith in the institutions of modernity and in the efficacy of master narratives is situated in the context of neocolonial devastation and the apparent failures of the emergent nation-state to contend with colonial legacies and some of the more deleterious effects of transnational capital. Despite Cliff's own pessimism about the possibilities for political change in contemporary Jamaica (see Schwartz 600, 611), she conceives a narrative that affirms resistance and social transformation. The diegetic thread of the novel centres on a small band of revolutionaries on the back of an arms-laden truck that slowly winds its way up a road in the Cockpit Mountains of Jamaica. We glimpse this narrative line only intermittently as the novel progresses, finally determining the nature of the revolutionary act itself in the final chapter. In my reading of the novel, the diegesis is fundamentally about ethico-political action — action undertaken in conditions that might be seen either as vitiating or demanding an ethics. I do not, however, aim to engage in what Fredric Jameson has denominated "ethical criticism"; that is to say, I am not interested in reading the novel against a pre-determined ethical code. To do so would be tantamount to reproducing the universalist impulse of which so much postcolonial theory has been suspicious, for, as Jameson notes, "ethical thought projects as permanent features of hu-

man 'experience' . . . what are in reality the historical and institutional specifics of a determinate type of group solidarity or class cohesion" (59). Rather, in my reading of Cliff's novel, I am asking after "the historical and institutional specifics" of recent efforts in postcolonial theory and narrative to fathom an ethics on which to ground political action. What *No Telephone to Heaven* offers is a self-conscious representation of a turn to revolutionary commitment on the terrain where the national and transnational meet, written by someone who rather neatly fits Appiah's description of postcoloniality: "the condition of what we might ungenerously call a *comprador* intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery" (348). In these respects, the novel's representation of ethical questions can be read as an index of its imbrication in a particular sociohistorical and epistemological matrix, its ethical coding as a trace of the "political unconscious" of the postnational.

If the realist novel is conventionally associated with bourgeois morality and with the construction of an autonomous, self-determining ethical subject, it is appropriate that Cliff's novel should be syncretist in form, combining elements of *Bildungsroman* with multiple narrative fragments, prose poems, and intertextual referents which, as Maria Helena Lima has pointed out, prompt an allegorical reading (36). In Ramchandran Sethuraman's reading, the fragmented generic mix in *No Telephone to Heaven* enables Cliff to subvert "the false claim[s] to consistency and univocal meaning" of the novel and to establish a parallel between the nation-state and the novel form: "The truck emblazoned with the phrase 'No Telephone to Heaven' is a prophetic embodiment of the way the revolutionaries will be excluded from the nation-state as subalterns generally are from the socializing ends of the novel" (252). For Sethuraman, Cliff is successful in subverting the genre most associated with the rise of the nation-state and in narrating the postnational. On Lima's reading of the novel, by contrast, Cliff fails to establish the possibility of revolutionary transformation in her novel and thus, correspondingly, fails to write a "novel of

development" that would be "central to nation-building" (53). In important ways, these readings are consonant with one another; both critics have similar views about Cliff's ambivalent representation of the nation-state. Where they differ is in their estimation of the value of the nation as an emancipatory category. Rather than weigh in on either side of this contest over the novel's ethicopolitical "success," I would like to propose both the national and the transnational as different horizons for reading *No Telephone to Heaven*, and, following Fredric Jameson's contention that "texts emerge in a space in which we may expect them to be crisscrossed and intersected by a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural production all at once" (95), to read the tension between realism and other genres in Cliff's novel as a marker of its imbrication in a contradictory ethicopolitical space that we might call the postnational.

Significant portions of the narrative trace the life journey of a character, Clare Savage, whose fragmented diasporic identity seems the quintessence of hybrid "*post-marked*"⁸ subjectivity. Clare is a light-skinned, middle-class woman, who leaves Jamaica as a child for the US with her family and who subsequently moves to England as a young adult, "[c]hoosing London with the logic of a creole" (109). Until the age of thirty-three, she is only "a visitor to her homeland. Not answerable to her place of birth. Citizen of another, greater, country. Student of the motherland" (87-88). Against the transnational horizon offered by the novel, the search for place on both the personal and social registers that characterizes the *Bildungsroman* is complicated from the outset by Clare's multiple and conflicting allegiances to "homeland," "motherland," and country of citizenship. On a superficial reading of the trajectory followed by this character, one might be tempted to conclude that in returning to Jamaica in the end and joining the band of revolutionaries, she finds her identity and place within the nation. Such a reading, however, overlooks the extent to which the pattern of Clare's development runs counter to the ideology of the *Bildungsroman* and to hegemonic political structures, both national and transnational. Fiona Barnes argues, for instance, that

Cliff transforms the conventional *Bildungsroman* "by transforming the individualistic bourgeois quest plot into a collective struggle for social justice" (23). Since much of Clare's development takes place prior to her joining the guerrillas, however, I focus on the extent to which Clare's heterogeneous affiliations disrupt bourgeois notions of subjectivity.

In representing her protagonist's fragmentation, Cliff works a series of parallels between what might schematically be distinguished as personal or familial elements and broader socio-political structures. Not long after the family leaves Jamaica for New York, Clare's parents separate, and their separation can be taken as symbolic of a number of cleavages that mark Clare and her world. Clare's mother, somewhat darker-skinned than her light-skinned husband, decides to return to Jamaica after a personal rebellion against American-style racism, which rebounds not on her but on two darker African-American women. She takes with her the younger and darker of her two daughters, leaving Clare with her father, who passes for white whenever he can, proclaiming his descent from plantation owners, and who counsels his daughter "on invisibility and secrets. Self-effacement. Blending in. The uses of camouflage" (100). The patriarchal embrace of colonial ancestry, whiteness, and the new imperial power of the US is neatly countered by the maternal preference for African ancestry, blackness, and the new nation-state, Jamaica. I have oversimplified somewhat the colonial allegory underwriting the relationship between Clare's parents, Boy and Kitty Savage, each of whom is also a product of the same colonial history, but the potential for reading Clare's quest for identity in the novel as a postcolonial allegory is indisputable. In the course of the novel, Clare's development takes the form of a movement away from the white, imperial, patriarchal authority her father represents and toward an embrace of the black matrilineal legacy of her mother. The embrace of the matrilineal once again might seem consonant with an emergent nationalism, but in the novel the national frame, which would facilitate this reading is continually cross-cut by the transnational in ways that undermine the coherence of a national allegory.

Clare's development is at odds with the conventional unfolding of the *Bildungsroman*; her eventual construction of a feminist and revolutionary identity necessarily vitiates her quest to find a social place in a world where white imperial patriarchal authority continues to hold sway. Indeed, the conventions of the genre are doubly revised, if one considers that a feminist *Bildungsroman* such as *Jane Eyre* already constitutes a departure from tradition,⁹ and *No Telephone to Heaven* makes explicit both its debt to and its departure from the identity and social role assumed by the protagonist in that novel. While Clare is in England, she reads Charlotte Brontë's novel and temporarily identifies with Jane:

The fiction had tricked her. Drawn her in so that she became Jane. Yes. The parallels were there. Was she not heroic Jane? Betrayed. Left to wander. Solitary. Motherless. Yes, and with no relations to speak of except an uncle across the water. . . . Comforted for a time, she came to. Then, with a sharpness, reprimanded herself. No, she told herself. No, she could not be Jane. Small and pale. English. No, she paused. No, my girl, try Bertha. Wild-maned Bertha. (116)

In *No Telephone to Heaven*, gender cannot be severed from considerations of race and imperialism.¹⁰ The achievement of a feminist identity cannot come at the expense of complicity with imperialism.¹¹ Appropriately then, in the same passage, Clare's identification with "wild-maned" Bertha is associated with a rejection of her father's values:

Clare thought of her father. Forever after her to train her hair. His visions of orderly pageboy. Coming home from work with something called Tame. She refused it; he called her Medusa. Do you intend to turn men to stone, daughter? She held to her curls, which turned kinks in the damp of London. Beloved racial characteristic. . . . Yes, Bertha was closer to the mark. Captive. Ragout. Mixture. Confused. Jamaican. Caliban. Carib. Cannibal. Cimarron. All Bertha. All Clare.

(116)

Yet, if Clare sees herself as Bertha, the narrator makes it clear that her identity is more ambiguously construed in the former seat of empire. On the one hand, it is suggested that she regis-

ter at the School of Oriental and African Studies when she applies to study the Renaissance at the University of London; on the other, immigration officials note with approval, "you're not at all like our Jamaicans, are you" (117), and in a later episode, a friend and fellow student, baffled by Clare's distress over a National Front march, remarks, "you're hardly the sort they were ranting on about" (139), according Clare a special status because of the lightness of her skin, the extent of her education.

Eventually, in an effort to overcome this disjuncture between self-conception and social status, Clare returns to Jamaica, hoping to find a place for herself in the land she associates with her mother and grandmother, hoping perhaps to fulfill her mother's injunction to "make something of [her]self, and someday help [her] people" (103). Here too, however, she struggles against the place class and race privilege would accord her, and this struggle constitutes her ethical turn. Significantly, Clare's ethical struggle is in part figured in relation to a narrative fragment that remains independent of the *Bildungsroman* thread, suggesting once again the limitations of enlightenment conceptions of an autonomous ethical subject. At two important moments in the novel, and without her knowledge, Clare comes into contact with a subaltern figure named Christopher. Raised in a "shantytown near the Esso refinery on the outskirts of town" (131), living alone in the Dungle from the age of eight, Christopher temporarily finds work as a yard boy for a wealthy family, but turns to life on the streets and to madness after erupting into violence at their inability to recognize his humanity. Christopher's act of violence and his subsequent madness seem to define the limits of subaltern revolt, an ethical ground against which Clare's own actions might be considered.¹² Sethuraman argues that this episode, as presented by Cliff, works to tell a "story that would otherwise find no discursive space within the dominant narrative" (280 n7). It is appropriate, then, to counterpoint this subaltern narrative with the narrative of Clare's development, which occupies a more ambivalent discursive space.

Although Christopher never actually meets Clare, we learn of his life intermittently as we learn of hers, and Clare's life is

nonetheless marked by Christopher's. The first indirect encounter between these characters aligns Clare with the privileged off-spring of the family Christopher works for and, in a moment of rage, murders. Yet Clare is not emotionally cathected to Paul H., with whom she is casually intimate and whose death causes her to feel "shock but no real sorrow" (89). Affect ultimately draws Clare toward Christopher's ambit, but without permitting any contact. The second encounter comes at the very end of the novel, appropriately enough after Clare's ethical turn. Christopher has been conscripted to play Sasabonsam, the fire monster, in the film Clare and her comrades plan to sabotage. Yet even here the physical distance separating them can be taken as a metaphor for the socioeconomic factors that ensure Christopher's status as a subaltern, who "had no past . . . no future" (47). His howl serves to camouflage the arrival of the helicopter gun ships and thus ironically serves the interests of the state and transnational capital against the revolutionaries who would ostensibly speak for him. In counterposing Clare's life with Christopher's in this way (Clare and Christopher, both killed in this final scene, are the only characters whose deaths are explicitly recorded), Cliff refuses any easy assimilation of either colonizer or colonized to Clare's ethical subjectivity.

Within the space of the emergent nation-state, Clare's ethical turn proves to be socially unrealizable. Her newly constituted identity leads her to revolutionary social action, an action that in itself is enough to exclude her from the "socializing ends of the novel" as Sethuraman points out. Clare is once again doubly excluded, since her privilege also makes her place among the revolutionaries suspect. The development of an autonomous ethical subject is thus challenged in this reworking of the *Bildungsroman*. Clare's decision to join the guerillas is presented as ethically valid, but their aims are frustrated by the material differences dividing the revolutionaries and by the state's collusion with transnational capital. For Clare, the *Bildungsroman* turns out to be, quite literally, a death trap.

The *Bildungsroman* narrative and implicitly the autonomous, self-determining ethical subject along with it, are fragmented

by the diegetic thread of the novel. Here we shift to the national scene, albeit one indelibly marked by transnationalisms both colonial and neo-colonial. Cliff uses nation-language to represent the underclasses, who experience a different sort of placelessness than Clare, and whose complete disenfranchisement thwarts agency, at least in terms of extant social structures. "NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN," we are told, "No voice to God. A waste to try. Cut off. No way of reaching out or up," and then ominously: "Maybe only one way. Not God's way" (*No Telephone to Heaven* 16). If "God" can be read here as the sign of a Christian ethical foundation and, in the historical context of British colonization, as part of the universalizing authority for the postulate of universality, the loss of faith expressed in this passage seems a clear rejection of that particular ethical framework. A dub-like riff making the link between political and economic disenfranchisement and Christian ethics in a colonial context seems to confirm this reading:

Depression. Downpression. Oppression. Recession. Intercession.
Commission. Omission. Missionaries.

Is nuh dry-jump dis.

All the same t'ing, mi dear. We is in Babylon. Yes, mi dear bredda.

NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN. (17)

Yet the empty spirituality of Babylon does not entail a nihilistic relativism; rather the suspicion is rather that "God" is more partisan than universal and that there is a material foundation for the spiritual decay: "Maybe . . . God can't bodder wid de likes of we. God nuh mus' be Hinglish" (17).

Jamaica's particular struggles to imagine itself as a nation in the wake of independence have been frustrated and faith in civil society has broken down:

In the seventies they entered the territory of the opposition, their own party's line held tight in their heads. They entered the territory of the opposition with guns and rocks and Red Stripe bottles with flaming tops, filled with kerosene. They called themselves po-li-ti-cal men. They said they had mighty leaders they

trusted. One called himself Joshua, who would lead them from the wilderness.

How him could know the wilderness would be so difficult to cross.
(18)

Disaffected and disenchanting, the revolutionaries on the back of the truck have decided to take action in the wake of Manley's failure and the election of Edward Seaga's JLP (Jamaica Labour Party), in 1980:

First we get one call himself Joshua. Now dis one from de other side. Him nuh favour rat? . . . Me say de man is Pharaoh's Rat and him Pharaoh live in one big white house across de water. It nuh time fe us fe light de kerosene? And mek de river run red? (187)

The recognition of Seaga's alliance with neo-imperialist forces prompts what might be read as a national uprising, if the notion of nation-as-ethical-actor had not already been rendered suspect. The revolutionaries' decision to act, moreover, is presented via an invocation of objective operations of power and domination, where inaction means accepting subordination:

At least they were doing something. At least they were not sitting on some mountainside smoking ganja and waiting on Jah. They were not dressed in white shirts and black pants standing at attention on a hotel verandah waiting for some tourist's order. . . . At least they were not dressed in khaki sitting in a small and dark back room . . . waiting for mistress to return home to say what shrubs needed trimming or what flower she want cut fe de table. (19)

To understand the move to revolution as an ethical act entails something like a situational ethics. Under these particular circumstances, where neither the nation-state nor the universalizing mission of Christianity address the needs of vast segments of the population, an alternative ethical frame is in order. The conditions that entail the search for an alternative ethical frame can, once again, usefully be understood in terms of the recent intensification of globalization patterns that have effected what Zygmunt Bauman calls a "re-spacing" between the cognitive, the aesthetic, and the ethical. In these terms we can understand the oft-articulated concern of critics of postmodernity that globalization portends such an elision of space that, in the episte-

mological correlate to transformations of the social, ethics have been replaced by aesthetics. Cliff's novel may be seen likewise to engage in this debate, and even to rewrite the terms of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics.

The objective of the revolutionaries in the novel seems quintessentially postmodern: they plan to sabotage a film. They are not attacking the state nor lobbing bombs at the British embassy or the offices of transnational corporations; their target is a representation. One might even suggest that the struggle is over a "reading" of the history of the Maroons. The revolutionaries are presented as following in the footsteps of the Maroons (the truck struggles up the Cockpits and stops outside Accompong; they are given directions in Coromantee) as they intervene in the production of a film that purports to represent the same history, Hollywood style. The narrator makes it clear that the film will offer little more than a commodification of black bodies and a homogenizing of black identities and histories of resistance. The actress hired to play Nanny is "the actress called in whenever someone was needed to play a Black heroine, any Black heroine, whether Sojourner Truth or Bessie Smith." The actor who is to play Cudjoe, "tiny humpbacked soul," is a "former heavyweight or running back" (206). Lest we conclude from the focus on textual production and interpretation that Cliff is offering us a mere simulacrum of revolution, however, we should note that the consequences of their actions are real enough for the revolutionaries. Their planned attack is betrayed — by a traitor in the group, a "quashee" — and they are ambushed. Bullets rain down from helicopters the Jamaican government has provided for the use of the film-makers, and the guerillas are killed.

Once again form becomes content as Cliff presents this scene under the rubric of *film noir*, the title of the chapter. This popular genre, which emerged in Hollywood cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, is implicitly about morality in its fascination with shady characters leading shady lives and its efforts to draw the viewer into the darkness along with the characters through its use of chiaroscuro. But it is also a genre that implicitly constructs morality along gender and racial lines.¹³ Not only does

classic *noir* tend to trope the foreigner and the ethnic minority as “other” and therefore dangerous and menacing (Martin 39), it also, as Eric Lott argues, “rescues with social idioms the whites whose moral and social boundaries seem in doubt. ‘Black film’ is the refuge of whiteness” (85). To be sure, the Hollywood rendition of Maroon legends described in the novel has little to do with the conventions of *film noir*. Rather, Cliff’s representation of the shady American and British producers of the film may be seen to have more to do with the genre; the process of production itself, Cliff implies, with its dubious moral credentials and its imperialist racial politics can be read through a *film noir* lens.

The epigraph to the chapter provides the first clue. It is an excerpt from Derek Walcott’s poem “Jean Rhys” (an allusion that doubles back to Cliff’s rewriting of the feminist *Bildungsroman*¹⁴), in which a black and white snapshot of colonial planters has, in taking on the sepia tones of old photographs, “colored” its white subjects:

bone-collared gentlemen
with spiked mustaches
and their wives embayed in the wickerwork
armchairs, all looking colored
from the distance of a century (qtd. in Cliff 197)

The *film noir* technique of casting shadows over characters to signify their moral corruption draws, Eric Lott has argued convincingly, on a racial matrix in US popular culture which automatically associates criminality with African-Americans, Latinos, and Jews. In Walcott’s poem, the coloring in the photograph is, in the first instance, suggestive of racial difference. With the passage of time, one might conclude, the distinctions between white creoles and African-descended inhabitants of the Caribbean become muted, in at least two senses: from the point of view of the English, who regarded with suspicion the “racial purity” of creoles, and from the vantage of the present moment when the histories of the colonizers and colonized have merged to create a mulatto culture, albeit one that is still racially stratified. In juxtaposing the epigraph from Walcott

with the title of the chapter, "Film Noir," Cliff alerts us to the potential for play between race and morality in *film noir* as a genre, and, perhaps more importantly, to the ways the actions of the filmmakers in the chapter (read transnational capital) and of the Jamaican government (read the nation-state) at once play out *film noir* scenarios and undermine the genre's easy association of moral corruption with blackness.

Cliff introduces the reader to the film producers with an advertisement taken from the *New York Times*, August 1984, promoting Jamaica as a prime location for American film-makers. The advertisement speaks of "sparkling clear water and foliage you would expect to find on a tropical island . . . wide open areas that resemble the African plain and even arid sections that will pass for desert" (200). Nor is the landscape all that is for sale: "[Jamaica] also has a racially mixed population of many hues and ethnic distinctions, which . . . includes a number of people willing to serve as extras" (200). The commodification of Jamaica and its people is the subject of the film producers' conversation as they sit drinking "too-pink daiquiris" in a rumshop off the tourist track. The American producer offers his analysis of Jamaica's global economic position, which makes it ripe for exploitation: "they need the money . . . real bad. They'll shape up . . . they have to. They're trapped. All tied up by the IMF. All thanks to Manley and his bleeding heart" (201). He brags about the advantage this presents the film makers: "As the saying goes, they need us a helluva lot more than we need them, babe. They'll even give us their fucking army if we need it" (202). In the rather crude parody these clichéd characters act out as they await the arrival of the innocent they will lure into the darkness — the local they plan to hire as an extra — Cliff plays the genre straight, using its conventions to demonstrate the moral bankruptcy of these representatives of transnational capital. Thus, when the guerillas arrive to take up their positions around the movie set, it is nightfall, and the artificial lights used for filming are extinguished when the helicopters arrive, appropriately casting the agents of destruction in darkness. The helicopters themselves shine lights on the guerillas, the innocent martyred to their cause, in imitation of

Hollywood's practice of bathing the morally pristine in light. Where *film noir* uses racial tropes to preserve the moral sanctity of whiteness (Lott 85), Cliff uses its techniques to cast shadows on imperialism, that historic bastion of whiteness, and to undo the association between corruption and blackness by presenting the guerillas as the ethical actors in this moral drama.

The allegorical elements in Cliff's reworking of *film noir*, while acknowledging the material effects of imperialism on the national and subnational scene, nonetheless refuse the value system imperialism imposes. If an allegorical text bears a contingent relation to its historical pretext, two risks attend the use of allegory in a postcolonial context, according to Stephen Slemon. Because imperial history privileges the centre over the periphery, "those not central to an assumed teleology of international advancement" are said to be without history, in Eric Wolf's justly famous formulation. Thus, Slemon warns, "history as such becomes either an 'intolerable pile' or a cultural absence" (158). To formulate these risks more specifically in the terms of Cliff's novel, in presenting the actions of the film-makers and the helicopter gunships as an allegory for the workings of the nation-state in collusion with transnational capital, Cliff might be accused of taking a determinist view of imperialism. Yet, in part through the diegetic emphasis on ethical action and in part through a narrative that establishes a hierarchy of discourses in favour of those voices repressed and forgotten by imperial history, it is possible to argue that *No Telephone to Heaven* uses allegory precisely as a way of "revising, reappropriating, or reinterpreting history as a concept" to recognize "those acts of resistance, those unrealised intentions, and those re-orderings of consciousness that 'history' has rendered silent or invisible" (Slemon 159).

In this way, we can understand the significance of Clare's reaction to the colonial construction of Pocahontas, whose monument she finds marking the burial plot in St. George's churchyard at Gravesend: "Something was wrong. She had no sense of the woman under the weight of all these monuments. She thought of her, her youth, her color, her strangeness, her unbearable loneliness. Where was she now?" (137). The monu-

ment constructs Pocahontas only in relation to the colonial enterprise for which she was sacrificed: "Friend of the earliest struggling colonists, whom she nobly rescued, protected, and helped" (137), reads the pamphlet Clare collects in the church. What is missing from this history is any sense of Pocahontas in her particularity, and, in her dissatisfaction with this version of Pocahontas, Clare is seen to reject the terms of imperial history, which constructs the significance of "the native" only in relation to its own teleology. A similar sort of rejection of the terms of colonial history is to be found in Harry/Harriet's insistence that his rape as a small boy by a white policeman not be read as a replay of the quintessential colonial allegory:

I have been tempted in my life to think *symbol* — that what he did to me is but a symbol for what they did to all of us, always bearing in mind that some of us, many of us, also do it to each other. But that's not right. I only suffered what my mother suffered — no more, no less. Not symbol, not allegory, not something in a story or a dialogue by Plato. No, man, I am merely a person who felt the overgrown cock of a big whiteman pierce the asshole of a liddle Black bwai — there it is. That is all there is to it. (130)

Harry/Harriet acknowledges that his trauma is not unique; it is the experience of many of the powerless, particularly women like his mother. Nonetheless, he can be seen to refuse the determinism of the colonial allegory in "[t]he claim for singularity made in the brutally specific words" (Cartelli 94) he uses to describe the incident, and, in so doing, Harry/Harriet directs the reader's attention to *his* story in lieu of the colonizer's history.

The narrative hierarchy of discourses does not merely refuse a determinist view of imperialism by asserting the primacy of repressed and forgotten voices. The consciously ethical orientation of the novel's diegetic thread is also in tension with generic elements marked by their *unconscious* relationship to dominant socioeconomic formations (Jameson 60). I am inclined to read this conscious/unconscious tension as an assertion of ethico-political will in the (apparent) absence of a viable political solution. The novel, then, represents at once an assessment of a postnational scene and an anxiety about the efficacy of possible responses to the situation. This tension is perhaps

nowhere more clearly delineated than in the protagonist's relation to the more evidently postmodern elements of the novel.

Clare's ethical turn is grounded differently from that of her fellow revolutionaries. Her options do not include waiting on tourists at a hotel or taking orders from mistress about the flowers she wants cut for the table. She chooses to be in a situation she need not be in. Her reasoning is the reasoning of the cultural critic (and, indeed, as someone who has done graduate work in Renaissance art in London, and taken up the study of Afro-Jamaican history on her return "home," Clare Savage is a cultural critic, though this is not one of the identities the narrator assigns her in the novel). Clare chooses, in other words, in spite of her privilege; and the narrator consistently foregrounds both that privilege and the ways it makes Clare's presence among the guerrillas anomalous. In the opening chapter, before we know her name, Clare is singled out from the group on the back of the truck: "A light-skinned woman, daughter of landowners, native-born, slaves, emigrés, Carib, Ashanti, English, has taken her place on this truck, alongside people who easily could have hated her" (5). At the end of the same chapter, she is walking down a country road with a basket containing surplus food grown by the revolutionaries, which she plans to distribute to the surrounding community: "Basket on head, resting on a cotta, bought years ago in Knightsbridge, a gallery specializing in African art, carried as a talisman. Now being put to use, its true properties recognized" (12). When the truck stops outside Accompong and the "soldiers" are given directions in Coromantee, the narrator again interjects: "A tongue [Clare] could not speak. She who was educated in several tongues, the mastery of which should have kept her from that truck and stifled her longing to know Coromantee" (106). These markers of Clare's privilege are also important for what they tell us about ethical acts in a (post)colonial context. Material determinants position Clare simultaneously inside and outside, and that situational ambivalence can lead either toward or away from revolution. Again, ethics moves into the breach, and again the breach itself is figured in material terms, the very same terms that make ethical action difficult, if not impossible.

The revolutionaries as a group embody those material fissures; their unity is constructed, not essential. The first description of the group on the back of the truck emphasizes the materiality of what keeps them apart against the distinctly more tentative coming together:

These people — men and women — were dressed in similar clothes, which became them as uniforms, signifying some agreement, some purpose — that they were in something together — in these clothes, at least, they seemed to blend together. This alikeness was something they needed, which could be important, even vital, to them — for the shades of their skin, places traveled to and from, events experienced, things understood, food taken into their bodies, acts of violence committed, books read, music heard, languages recognized, ones they loved, living family, varied widely, came between them. (4)

The constructedness of their common purpose might even seem to undermine their cause; we learn that the "similar clothes" they wear are khaki uniforms "stolen from white kids high on dope" (6) and bear names reminiscent of characters in B-pictures "like the ones they used to see in the triple features at the open-air Rialto before it was torn down" (7). Another postmodern cast is added to the diegetic thread:

The camouflage jackets, names and all, added a further awareness, a touch of realism, cinematic verité, that anyone who eyed them would believe they were faced with *real* soldiers. True soldiers — though no government had ordered them into battle — far from it. But this is how the camouflage made them feel. As the gold and green and black knitted caps some wore . . . made them feel like real freedom-fighters, like their comrades in the ANC — a cliché, almost screenplayed to death, *Viva Zapata!* and all that-but that is what they were, what they *felt* they were, what they *were* in fact. Their reason emblazoned in the colors of their skulls. *Burn!* (7)

Yet, what we learn in the final chapter is that having borrowed the costumes of the dead generations in an apparent postmodern pastiche does not spell their undoing. Rather, the material differences against which the costumes shield them prove their downfall. On this reading, then, the donning of khaki costumes and caps in ANC colours and the acting out of clichéd revolutionary scripts *are* the ethical turn.

The ethical choice depicted in Michelle Cliff's novel, particularly as it concerns the migrant intellectual, is about the choice of community and, in relation to that community, it is about the assumption of duties or obligations and a commitment to act. The community is not pre-selected on essential or national grounds. Rather, the community itself, as the preceding passage suggests, can be transnational in both its conception and its membership. In this respect, the spatial dynamism of the postmodern condition does indeed entail a refigured ethical framework, and Cliff's novel seems to propose an ethical frame that is simultaneously translocal and nonuniversal. To be sure, the state linked to transnational capital is also ethically committed and acts on that commitment in brutal and decisive ways. The ever-increasing centralization of the powers of capital under globalization, represented in the novel by the politico-economic hegemony of the white house, thus comes to constitute a kind of negative ethical universal. The refusal of the "ludic" politics (see Teresa Ebert) of postmodernity in favour of armed insurrection can perhaps be read as an imaginary resolution of the real contradictions of postnationalism. In this way, the contradictions that beset ethical action and also render it necessary may be taken as the material basis for postcolonial theory and narrative alike.¹⁵

NOTES

- 1 For Levinas, proximity is approaching a neighbour, an Other, in such a way that the "orientation of the subject upon the object" (116) is an ethical orientation. The subject does not subsume the object in consciousness or representation, since Levinas is not interested in an ethics "which would introduce the human subject into a universal order and unite all rational beings, like ideas, in a kingdom of ends" (116). Rather, proximity entails a sensible relationship "in flesh and bone" (118), Husserl's *leibhaft gegeben*, that is in "excess" of consciousness, "anachronous" to consciousness: "consciousness is always late for the rendezvous with the neighbor" (119).
- 2 I am thinking here not only of Homi Bhabha and the other contributors to *Nation and Narration*, but of Paul Gilroy, Donald Pease, Etienne Balibar, Eric Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner.
- 3 See also the collection edited by Robert Boyer and Daniel Drache.
- 4 See Tölölyan; and Appadurai's *Modernity at Large*, especially the chapter titled "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Economy." The journals with which Tölölyan and Appadurai are involved, *Diaspora* and *Public Culture*, respectively, are also markers of both the phenomenon of transnationalism and academic interest in it, as is the newer publication *Suitcase*.

- 5 The term is William Safran's.
- 6 Spivak is a favourite target of Aijaz Ahmad. These issues are also raised in an interview of Spivak by Bhatnagar, Chatterjee, and Rajan ("The Postcolonial Critic"). For a different approach to this question, see Rajan's essay.
- 7 I have in mind of course the essays "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and "Post-structuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value," and her introduction to Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi."
- 8 I am indebted to Bhabha for this coinage.
- 9 It has been argued that novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Vilette* cannot really be classified as *Bildungsroman* because of the ambivalent status of the female protagonist at the end of the novel; other critics make the case for a feminist rewriting of the genre. See Labovitz and Fraiman for different positions on this question. Of interest for my discussion of Cliff's novel is Bannet's discussion of the eighteenth-century female *Bildungsroman*. Bannet argues that the novels are engaged in a rewriting of the social text, a possibility offered by the aim of the eighteenth-century *Bildungsroman* to attend to the *Bildung* of its readers rather more than to its heroine. Also relevant here is Geta Leseur's study of the black *Bildungsroman* which focuses on African-American and Afro-Caribbean novels.
- 10 See Edmondson's essay for a more extended exploration of the relationship between gender and race in Cliff's novels.
- 11 This is the central point of Spivak's essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," in which she champions Jean Rhys's rewriting of *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Thomas Cartelli explicitly reads Cliff's novel as "countercolonizing the established plots of a still dominant . . . imperial master narrative" (89).
- 12 I am grateful to one of *ARIEL*'s anonymous readers of this essay for suggesting this point.
- 13 Among the neo-*noir* films of American cinema in the 1990s are several by African-American filmmakers which explicitly explore race and ethnicity, drawing on the racial tropes of the classic *noir* genre for their own ends (see Diawara). There have been a number of important studies of the construction of gender in *film noir*, among them Caplan's and Maxfield's.
- 14 Edmondson offers a reading of the relationship of Cliff's novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*.
- 15 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the CACLALS Annual Meeting, the University of Ottawa, May of 1998. I want to thank Craig Tapping, Laura Moss and Gary Boire for their comments and Rod Bantjes for the many conversations about ethics and political economy that contributed to the writing of this paper.

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