

Rediscovering the Repressed: The Search for the M/Other in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*

by Christine Cloud

According to Hélén Cixous, there is a voice deep inside every woman; this voice sings clearly and consistently. This voice, which "springs from the echo of the primeval song she once heard," is the "first voice of love which all women preserve alive" (172). It is in short, the Voice of the Mother, that omnipotent figure that dominates the fantasies of the pre-Oedipal baby: "The voice, a song before the Law, before the breath was split by the symbolic, reappropriated into language under the authority that separates" (172). However, in the majority of women, rather in the majority of people, this voice goes unheard. It has been hushed by the booming voice of the Father. It has been suppressed by the Symbolic Order—by language. Replaced outside the realm of representation, the Space of the Mother, the Space of Difference, has been regulated to the extreme margins of "civilized" society. However, it has not been completely silenced. Waiting in the wings, beyond the phallic order, the voice of the mother waits to be discovered in all of us (even men).

This voice represents more than just our "feminine side;" it is ourselves as we were before we were marked, defined, and regulated to the margins. It is the person we were before we conformed and accepted our place within the Symbolic. Yet it is up to us to rediscover the m/otherness in ourselves; we must embark on a quest for its recuperation and articulation. This is exactly what Michelle Cliff, author of the autobiographical novel *Abeng*, attempts to do. Speaking for and through the people of Jamaica—especially through Clare Savage who in many ways functions as their symbolic representation—and utilizing a combination of memory and history (both official and unofficial), Cliff tries to re-inscribe the space of the mother into the past, present and future of the colonized island. Her story—Clare's story, and ultimately the people of Jamaica's story—represents a collective search for the voice of the M/other; one that must be carried out in order for the "sad little island" to free itself from colonialism and subordination.

The suppression of the Mother, of the pre-oedipal, one of the most fundamental characteristics of Western society, in many ways was the foundation on which the colonization of Jamaica—as well as the rest of the colonized world—rested upon. The colonizers took over and maintained power over the Native peoples—and later the Africans in Jamaica—by defining them as "Other." Teaching only about England, reading only about the history of the British monarchy, and reciting only the poems of Wordsworth, Tennyson and Coleridge, the colonizers were successful in establishing Western European civilization—in other words, maleness and whiteness, as the center. Everyone and everything else was relegated to the margins—to the feminine. Like the M/other, the "othered" peoples of Jamaica, who symbolically trace their origins in a matriarchal lineage all the way to the "Dark Continent of Africa," exist outside of representation.

Considered uncivilized, almost animal, they are banished to the hidden recesses of the island. They can return only by identifying, and internalizing white male, "civilized" norms; because in patriarchal culture the feminine, the M/Other, or that which exists outside of representation as such is repressed; it returns only in its acceptable form as man's specularized other (Moi 132). Thus, the Jamaican people must emphasize their maleness and Whiteness over their femaleness and Blackness, speak "correct English" instead of Patois, memorize the English kings instead of the Ashanti queens, and recite "Daffodils" instead of singing traditional African songs. The repression of the Space of the M/Other in Jamaica demonstrates the "members of the colonizing class's need to insist on their radical difference from the colonized, (their need to establish a notion of the savage as Other, the antithesis of civilized value), as a way of legitimating their own position in the colonial community" (Spurr 7). At the same time, however, the suppression of the M/Other in favor of the Father shows that their power depends on their insistence of the colonized people's essential identify with them "both as preparation for the domestication of the colonized and as a moral and philosophical precondition for the civilizing mission" (Spurr 7). Therefore, although "in the beginning there had been two sisters—Nanny and Sekesu;" two African women, of who "it was believed that all island children were descended" most of the islanders tried to perpetuate the myth of their "Whiteness" (Cliff 18).

However, the voice of the mother, although repressed, has not been completely silenced within Jamaica. It exists on the margins of official history. It continues to sing in myth and storytelling. Although silent in Kingston, its song can be heard in the Bush. Originating from Nanny Town, passing through the old plantations and the slave quarters, and ending up in the voices of the women at the Tabernacle of the Almighty on Mountainview Road, the Song of the Mother echoes throughout Jamaica.

Most, however, choose to ignore its rhythms. The Savages for example, try every way conceivable to keep the Song of the Mother//The Rhythms of Africa from re-insinuating itself into their lives. Through elaborate storytelling they have created a family history/fiction that is based on their complete separateness from anything different or African: "The definition of what a Savage was like was fixed by color, class, and religion, and over the years a carefully contrived mythology was constructed, which they used to protect their identities. When they were poor and not all of them white, the mythology persisted. They swore by it . . . They wanted to forget about Africa" (ibid. 29—30).

Thus,

If the conversation turned to the knotty hair of a first cousin, it would be switched to the Savage ancestor who had been the first person to publicly praise Parodies Lost. If the two dark skin of a newborn baby was in question, it would be countered with the life of a Savage who had done his duty onboard the H.M.S. Victory with Nelson at Trafalgar. If someone spoke about cousin so-in-so being

mistaken for a "colored" someone else would bring out the snuff box carved from the Rock of Gibraltar, given to a titled Savage—a lady in waiting at Queen Victoria's court. (ibid. 29)

Although women were rarely brought from Europe, the Savages attempt to define their women as "purely white." Like the unmovable European ladies in finery and parasols that graced the walls of their plantation, they are expected to be demure, passive, fixed entities that reflect back the white man's image of himself. Consequently the Savage women work hard to erase their relationship with the one-breasted Ashanti warrior women. This way, the Savages are able to repress their "Other" side; this way they are able to differentiate themselves from the other islanders and in the process maintain their position of power within the Symbolic Order. Yet their very last name—the principle marker of their collective identity—Savage forever reconnects them with a past ancestry that they would much prefer to forget.

Born with green eyes and pale skin and hair, Clare knows that her duty is to perpetuate the family myth. Because her F/father has defined her as "White," she must repress the wild, Black, and uncivilized side of her.

Boy taught his eldest daughter that she came from his people—white people he stressed and he expected Clare to preserve his green eyes and light skin—and she had a duty to turn his green eyes blue, once and for all—and make the skin, now gold, become pale and subject to visible sunburn. These two things she should pursue (Cliff 119).

However, although she benefits from her place within the Symbolic, Clare does not wish to choose "Whiteness" (the Symbolic) over "Blackness" (the Pre-oedipal/the M/other). Because although "her father told her she was white...she knew she was not. She was of both dark and light. Pale and deeply colored" (36). Hearing the M/other's song pulsating within her, she wants to rediscover her "Other" sides. She looks to her mother, who she knows is in touch with the Bush—the Space of the Other—to interpret the words of the Song to her. She wants Kitty, her "colored" mother to help her reclaim her female/African lineage. She wants to be close to her M/mother; to bask in her milk: "At twelve Clare wanted to suck her mother's breasts again and again—to close her eyes in the sunlight and have Kitty close her eyes also and together they would enter some dream Clare imagined that mothers and children shared" (54). Kitty, however, is silent. Although she loves her "people" she has repressed her M/otherness for so long that, although she can hear the Voice of the Mother and understand the Song she sings; she is incapable of sharing it with her daughter. She cannot let Clare partake of her milk; although perhaps she will be able to let her younger, "darker" daughter do so. "And she (Clare) never knew if her mother had not done this with her because of Kitty's own way of being, or because she had applied

Boy's sense of what was right—hardening what might have been softness. Becoming less animal in the process" (54).

Thus, Clare looks elsewhere for the Space of the Mother. She looks to the country, to her grandmother, and to her friend Zoe. While bathing in refreshing water, and sitting on a rock far away from the "civilized" world, she thinks that she has finally rediscovered this part of herself. After all, her friendship with Zoe "existed close to the Earth, in a place where there are no electric lights, where water was sought from a natural source—where people walked barefoot more often than not" (ibid. 95). However, due to the gaze of a man, the roar of the shotgun and the shooting of a bull, she is forced back to the realm of the Symbolic. Her father, who thinks that she is becoming "Black," decides to send her off to be a lady. Her mother silently assents to her husband's decision; in her mind it would be "better to have this ["white"] daughter accept her destiny than give her any false notion of an alliance which she would not be able to honor. Let her passage into the other world be as painless as possible" (ibid. 129). In the home of Beatrice Phillips—where the windows were always kept tightly sealed—it was hoped that Clare would no longer hear the Voice of the Mother. It was hoped that she would become demure and accept, even embrace, her role as perpetrator of "Whiteness." However, the Song has a way of making itself heard. Just as the Maroon's appropriated the abeng to communicate with each other, the "M/Others" appropriated language, and continued to sing. Michelle Cliff listened to the song of her mothers and then let it guide her as she told the autobiography of the repressed, but not erased hybrid people of Jamaica. Thus, within *Abeng*, Cliff directs a textual choir comprised of polyphony of multiple voices. As she does so she enables the countless previously voiceless Jamaicans to speak truth to power and in the process take back, and then subsequently reconfigure, re-invent and ultimately re-valorize identities previously constructed as not worthy of even being heard, much less really and truly listened to.

Works Cited

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