"Claiming an Identity They Taught me to Despise" — Alienation and the Caribbean Woman: from Mayotte Capecia to Michelle Cliff.

In a lecture at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies, the Cuban poet Nancy Morejon, speaking on Literature and a National Caribbean Identity, remarked that in the Caribbean it is impossible to talk about identity without mentioning a whole host of things: slavery, the slave-trade, the plantation, Maroons, migration, resistance, rebellion, marronnage, metissage, among others. To these one might also add that one cannot talk about identity, more so in a so-called "post-colonial" context, without considering language, race, class, colour, gender, oppression, dominant vs suppressed culture, etc, etc, and without seeing these as interlocking variables. Indeed all these questions enter into Caribbean texts, so for purposes of this discussion I have tried, in so far as this is possible, to limit the scope and to treat specific aspects of these interlocking variables, first, the question of language, in particular the use of creole, the significance of the name, and the importance of the mother/daughter relationship in the formation of female identity. The paper looks in particular at the works of two Caribbean writers, Mayotte Capecia and Michele Cliff, from different generations and from different cultures, one anglophone, the other French, and refers to the work of a third writer, Michele Lacrosil, from Guadeloupe, who wrote in the sixties.

Mayotte Capecia is an early francophone Caribbean writer. Very little is known about her. If the scanty information we have is correct, she was born in Martinique about 1928 and died in 1953 or 1955.1 She wrote two novels, both published in France, where she lived "in later years" as the Herdeck Bibliography puts it. These "later years" only take her into her 20s however, as she died at about 25 or 27. Her first novel, Je suis Martiniquaise, (I am Martinican/a Martinican woman), published in Paris in 1948, won the Grand Prix des Antilles for that year. She would have been barely twenty. Her second novel, La Negresse blanche, (The White Negress), the one which will mainly concern us here, was published in 1950. These two works then are the work of an
immature talent and, as it turns out, reflect what is an extremely ingenuel, naive consciousness. Capecia achieved a measure of notoriety because Frantz Fanon cites her work as an example of extreme alienation in his Black Skin White Masks. Her novels have not been translated into English and even among French-speakers most Caribbean scholars know her work only by (ill) repute. The pioneer black American scholar Mercer Cook however, considers her work important as a "revealing study of race relations in the French West Indies". In fact her novels are among the few works to deal with this theme in the French West Indies in the 40s, during the time of the blockade in the Second World War, when the French navy was anchored off Martinique.

Michelle Cliff is, and considers herself, a contemporary Caribbean writer. The dust cover of her book No Telephone To Heaven, the first British edition, calls her a "brilliant Jamaican-American" writer and she writes out of a deep sense of that "hyphenated condition". The book deals with themes central to Caribbean literature, including the "dividedness of a person neither white nor black", a main theme in La Negresse blanche, and in particular "the need to become whole, and the decisions and the courage demanded to achieve that wholeness." This search for wholeness is, and has been, a recurring theme in Caribbean fiction, evidenced by the epigraph to Cliff’s novel, from Derek Walcott’s poem "Laventille":

Something inside is laid wide like a wound,

some open passage that has cleft the brain,
some deep, amnesiac blow. We left
somewhere a life we never found,

customs and gods that are not born again,
some crib, some grill of light
clanged shut on us in bondage, and withheld

us from that world below us and beyond,
and in its swaddling cerements we’re still bound.

and more recently, it forms the subject of Erna Brodber’s two novels, Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home, and Myal, for example.

Cliff is well known in the United States, and her work has been acclaimed by critics and by writers like Toni Morrison, who wrote one of the appreciations on the cover of No Telephone to Heaven. Toni Morrison has this to say about the novel: "The beauty and authority of her writing is coupled in a rare way with profound insight ... it’s a deeply attractive work. Full of razors and blossoms and clarity." Cliff has been less enthusiastically received by the Caribbean public however. In the West Indies, her work is still not very well known, and those critics and readers who know her work tend to be somewhat negative. So we are
dealing with two writers who could be termed "problematic", albeit in different ways: Capecia evoked the wrath of her contemporaries, especially as, following Fanon's lead, they ascribed the attitudes and bigotry of the characters en masse to their author; whereas Cliff is largely ignored and so far has not been studied seriously or extensively as a West Indian writer. One reason for this neglect is that many Caribbean readers are uncomfortable with the rendering of the "dialect" or creole voice, but also to a certain extent, because of the themes, sometimes considered "sensational". In this regard, and in the case of both writers, what Henry Louis Gates called the "problem of distance" comes into play (Gates, xvi). In the case of a Caribbean audience reading a Caribbean writer, it is an important consideration, and one not un-related to the wider question of alienation and identity. Although these two writers then, are generations apart, one is struck by certain coincidences, certain common threads in their personal histories and in their works which are revealing to explore in terms of alienation and identity. Cliff especially merits wider critical attention than she has so far been accorded by Caribbean readers and scholars.

Capecia and Cliff both left their island places early for the metropole, France and the U.S. respectively, however both continued to consider themselves Caribbean persons. Capecia's first novel, Je suis Martiniquaise, proclaims her Martinican identity, as well as her gender. (In French it is impossible for a woman to say "I am Martinican" without at the same time acknowledging her sex). Written at a time when, as a young woman living in France, she experienced great isolation, the work expresses deep alienation and a yearning to belong somewhere. It is considered largely autobiographical, the protagonist's life history mirrors Mayotte Capecia's in many ways. In fact she is called Mayotte, but that of course could simply be a masking device. The most interesting features are the contradictions inherent in the text: the nostalgia with which Mayotte views her island yet her sense of isolation, of "unbelonging" there, and her frank confession of shame at her mixed blood, which she says excludes her from both black and white communities; her yearning to belong to the white (French) world even as she declares that she is a Martinican woman.

In Capecia's second novel the Afro-Caribbean characters are more finely drawn and the narrator (author?) shows a marked evolution in race/gender/self awareness. Although the protagonist is still deeply divided and aspires towards acceptance in the world of the bekes or creole whites, as a woman of colour she is very conscious of the restrictions she suffers because of race and gender and she puts the case of the oppressed, poor, black, Martinican, male and female. This theme however is submerged in the novel, which is largely concerned with the protagonist's shame at her black heritage and her struggles to liberate herself economically and socially, by association with those she considers her superiors, especially white males. One of the ways in which the narrator marks this superiority/inferiority is by the use made of the creole, quite opposite to the positive, re-
claiming, re-visionary, affirming way in which the creole voice is used for example by Simone Schwarz-Bart twenty years later, or by Jean Rhys (an Anglo-Caribbean writer of the same generation), or by Michele Cliff.

Mayotte Capecia uses what Jack Corzani calls "petit-negre" (pidgin French) to indicate that the speech of a character is uneducated, uncouth. For example she consistently omits all the "r"s, as Jack Corzani remarks with reference to Capecia's racial attitudes: "Plus gravement les personnages s'expriment volontiers en petit-negre et Mayotte Capecia s'ingenie a transcrire leur langage ampute de tous ces "R" que les Noirs sont, paraît-il, incapable de prononcer! ...Cette facilité trahit en fait un etat d'esprit bien particulier." (Corzani, Vol. IV: 200) Indeed Capecia's use of this device not only serves to emphasize "l'incapacite supposee du Negre a prononcer cette consonne [qui] est constante dans le roman" (the apparent inability of the black to pronounce this consonant [which] is constant in the novel, (Corzani, Litterature antillaise:135) but betrays an alienated and alienating, patronising, attitude to creole, and to the Martinican whose speech, thus transcribed, seems impaired or characterised by a childish lisp. Capecia, unwittingly perhaps, highlights the alienating role of education, in this case French, Christian schooling, and her mother's training, and its disastrous effects on the child's self-image and attitude to her own "home" culture and mother/mother's tongue. Ironically it is often the black mother (as is the case with Isaure's mother in La Negresse blanche) who plays the greatest part in inculcating alienating values, what Fanon terms the desire for "lactification", just as it is Clare's absent mother, Kitty, in Cliff's novel, whose remembered rebellion lingers and residually influences her daughter. Kitty struggles in vain against the dominant prejudices of her class and of her crude, brash, self-deluding husband, but although she is finally forced to relinquish her daughter to him and to the U.S., her efforts cannot be erased.

Capecia's protagonist, Isaure, declares that it is her mother who has passed on to her "ce respect des Blancs" which inhibits, cripples, and is responsible for her inability to value her own race. Paradoxically Isaure's mother has also taught her daughter the intricacies of "quimbois", in which Isaure believes implicitly, and which she is not ashamed to practise. "Quimbois" represents the sub-culture, which works for West Indians, but which arouses suspicion, distrust and fear in Europeans. So Isaure's lover cruelly and violently destroys the "quimbois" by which she hopes to secure his love. This network of secret or hidden beliefs is also obvious in No Telephone to Heaven. It is significant then that the naive protagonist in La Negresse blanche has been conditioned in her negative attitudes to "non-standard" French, but freely admits to her faith in quimbois, a belief-system, always articulated in creole, deeply ingrained and largely inaccessible to the European, which cannot be denigrated as easily as the creole.
Mayotte Capecia’s rendering of the creole and of creole-speaking characters distances her narrator from her creole heritage, her language and her skin, of which she is ashamed, whereas Cliff’s "Clare Savage" uses creole to re-appropriate her lost heritage, her mother’s language, which the daughter "raised in capivity", struggling "within her city skin, birthright gone paler" seeks and longs to recover. Kitty is portrayed as a sensitive, "aware" woman who cannot come to terms with the pretense and ambiguities of "passing" (for white). It is a complex and sympathetic depiction of a mother figure who abandons her daughter physically, but whose daughter ultimately returns to her mother’s source, and history, only to find "The ties had been broken. The land was ruinate." (No Telephone, 103)

"I came here because I could not go elsewhere." (No Telephone, 195)

The title of this paper is taken from the title of one of Michele Cliff’s works: Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise. In the black literary tradition Gates refers to "a signifying structure, a structure of intertextual revisions" as a text which "revises key tropes and rhetorical strategies received from precursory texts" and states:

It is clear that black writers read and critique other black texts as an act of rhetorical self-definition. Our literary tradition exists because of these precisely chartable formal literary relationships. (Gates: 242)

Cliff’s text "signifies" and it almost seems as if she could be "signifying", in particular on Mayotte Capecia, but also on Michele Lacrosil, Jean Rhys and those works of Caribbean literature which treat what has been called the "tragic metisse" or mulatto. Cliff adds a new dimension to the problem: Whereas for Mayotte, "la negresse blanche", her duality was seen as irreconcilable, perhaps understandably so in the context of the time, it is a much more "problematic condition" for Cliff’s protagonist, who accepts her metissage, but finds, as the end of the text suggests, that she has no place. This is particularly pertinent in an age when, because of history and social factors like migrations, metissage, psychic, cultural and intellectual, is increasingly a norm which we must live and live with, and indeed, must seek to exploit positively. This is already being worked out at the level of narrative/rhetorical strategies, in Cliff’s own work and in the works of other West Indian writers. (The beginning of Erna Brodber’s Myal for example is a wonderful example of linguistic and cultural metissage, "creole culture". Brodber’s narrative, which is deeply rooted in "folk" culture, and celebrates that culture, opens with a series of metaphors from music, which are purely "Western", again in quotes.)
Terms that designate miscegenation or intermingling have generally been used negatively: mongrel, bastard, half-breed, half-caste, (except increasingly in the re-vision of Caribbean, African and other Third World writers). "Mongrels" in the Caribbean are believed to be strong, resilient, etc, but "mixtures" have always been seen as devalued by the dominant culture. The idea of devaluation has been imposed by an aristocratic, patriarchal system which values pedigree and "pure" bloodlines. Correspondingly, women of mixed blood were considered exotic and desirable, but only as sexual objects, in the eyes of the master, the powerful Other.

"Crois-tu qu'un autre prenom me definirait mieux, moi qui ne suis personne?" (Michele Lacrosil, Sapotille). "Do you think any other name would define me better, I who am no-one?"

For Sapotille, Michele Lacrosil’s heroine, obsessed with skin-colour, her name is her identity, summed up and limited to her naseberry/sapodilla-coloured skin.

In Cliff’s No Telephone to Heaven the protagonist’s name is at once subject to multiple glosses Clare Savage: a light-skinned (but?) untamed girl; an innocent, pure or clear-sighted person in a state of nature; an uncivilized or cruel white, etc, etc. How Clare does in fact choose to define herself is only in part elucidated by the text. What emerges is a complex network of ambiguities especially at the level of the narrative strategies, some of which remain unresolved, both unintentionally and by design. The language for one remains an indicator of the ambivalence and lack of belonging of both the narrator and the protagonist. A brief indication: at times the creole voice (which is called on intermittently throughout the text in various contexts to different ends) fits easily and naturally, at times it is strained and draws attention self-consciously to itself. At times it actually impedes, or distorts, the message it is intended to carry. A detailed analysis of the language/discourse is beyond the scope and competence of this paper, however I will venture some comment on aspects of the narrative strategies which are provocative.

The albino gorilla moving through the underbush. Hiding from the poachers who would claim her and crush her in a packing crate against the darker ones offended by her pelt. Make ashtrays of her hands, and a trophy of her head. She cowers in the bush fearing capture. Waiting for someone to come. Crouching. Not speaking for years. 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. Her loss remains hidden - over time a fine moss covers her skin. She does not speak of it. She does not gather branches to braid into a nest. She moves. Emigrated, lone travel, the zoologist would have
recorded. Time passes. The longing for tribe surfaces—unmistakable. To create if not to find. She cannot shake it off. She remembers the jungle. The contours of wildness. The skills are deep within her. 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. And she knows this choice is irrevocable and she will never be the same. (No Telephone, 91)

This passage, highly evocative and lyrical, describes a point in the text where the young protagonist is particularly vulnerable. Alone in an alien and hostile environment, deserted by her mother, neglected by her father "She buried herself in books. "(No Telephone, 90) Clare begins to see herself as the characters in a fantasy world, fed by painting and literature, European modes of feeling and experiencing, acquired through her education. She rejects this colonial legacy and struggles to reclaim her original nature, "her grandmother’s land", beyond her mother’s heritage:

She thought not of these disintegrated people behind her, former members of a shattered little entity. She thought of her mother’s side, staunch to the island then, big fish in a small pond, her father would have said. Was their world about to come to an end? The pond scum vaporized by blue vitriol, cleansing the waters once and for all? (No Telephone, 90)

But even as Clare identifies with "her mother’s side" and distances herself from her father, her language betrays a view of herself which is telling. The albino gorilla seeks its natural habitat, longs for the "jungle", the "tribe", the primordial instinct asserts itself. Clare "belongs in these hills. And she knows this choice is irrevocable and she will never be the same." The crucial point is whether Clare is unwittingly subscribing to the white man’s version of her "nature"/psyche or intentionally turning it on its head. The strong male "safari" sensibility, the pseudo-scientific mock-anthropologist’s language, the mention of the "zoologist’s" observations, all seem to suggest the latter. Yet at the same time there is a "female" voice; the hunted delicate albino, nature’s innocent freak, the animal persona, is so sympathetically evoked that it is difficult to resist believing that the girl does not at least in part identify that way. Clare cannot help her dividedness. "Her story is a long story. How she came to be here. For she had once witnessed for Babylon. Had been ignorant of the Maroons. There are many bits and pieces to her, for she is composed of fragments. "No Telephone, 87). The temporary solidarity Clare finds in a shared ideology, in an idealistic search to overthrow the entrenched and corrupt regime and to establish a more just society is short-lived. Clare’s "homecoming" will (can?) only be complete in death, the final resolution of conflict.
Historically, the mulatto woman of Isaure's time, possessing her drive and determination, was often financially and socially among the most emancipated women in her society. In Capecia's novel Isaure's values are alienating and destructive. Ultimately the position of the parvenue negresse blanche who is determined to make it in white society comes across an untenable, frustrating and reprehensible, in spite of the woman's avowed aims (liberation, advancement, etc). Yet in terms of her aggressive independent spirit and her ambition, Isaure is a more hopeful character than her 1980s counterpart. She is misguided and ignorant, vain, superstitious and silly, but she does try to disentangle herself from relationships which hinder her self-actualization, on her terms. She seems ultimately recuperable. Clare on the other hand has chosen to reject the shallow materialism of her class, the privilege to which her landowning ancestors entitle her and she embraces the shame that gives rise to "passing", yet she finds that her crisis of awareness does not lead to commitment, acceptance or peace. Her abortive attempt at political action is depicted as a futile gesture: played out against the background of a movie-set where a stereotypical "B" movie is being shot on location, complete with local "actors", where reality and cinematic fiction become blurred and difficult to separate. The narrative is powerful, its flaws notwithstanding, sincere in its honest attempt at confronting the thorny questions of privilege and responsibility, political power, corruption and poverty, moving in its depiction of the dilemmas of race, gender, culture and belonging. And at the level of the protagonist, profoundly pessimistic, in a way that the earlier novel with its naive racial attitudes and prejudices and limited artistic merit, escapes. One can dismiss Capecia, or argue that Isaure, after an awakening of awareness could turn her life around, whereas for Clare, ironically, the ambiguities remain and things are much less simple. In the case of both Clare and Isaure the relationship with the mother is significant to an understanding of identity. The mother is key to the crucial questions of self-image, self-worth, the guide to the group and values against which the daughter comes to define herself.

Erikson defines identity as "a sense of psychosocial well-being; a feeling of being at home in one's body; a sense of knowing where one is going; an inner openness of anticipated recognition from those who count." (Erikson:15) Capecia's women are never able to achieve this. For Clare Savage, deprived her of her mother at a relatively early age, the struggle to be "at home in her body" and to find her way is a long and difficult one, but ultimately, supported by her friendship with Harriet, who has managed to come to terms with his/her own ambiguities and functions as a sort of mentor/guide in the novel, she seemed on the brink of success. In defiance of her father she assumes her blackness:
Clare breathed deep, looked full in his furious face. 'My mother was a nigger'—speaking the word at him. His five long fingers came at her, as she had expected, marking her cheekbone, making her weep in shock. 'And so am I,' she added softly. (*No Telephone*, 104)

Her "homecoming" represented the end of a journey, the prospect of being reconciled and healed at last, but the absence of a caring community at the end of the road frustrates the possibility of the "anticipated recognition". Her "wholeness", psychological reintegration, is linked to reintegration to the community. When the community has been destroyed, and the land is "ruinate", the route to personal healing is blocked: "There was no forgiveness in this disorder."

Cliff sees herself as part of a Caribbean tradition and explicitly wants to define herself in and against that tradition, in which she desires to achieve validity. "Signifying" on pre-texts by her Caribbean sisters, she subverts and inverts, questions and complicates.
Notes


2. See Herdeck, p. 318

3. See also Rochester and Antionette in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea, and incidents of quimbois in many Caribbean novels, which tend to be secret and reluctantly admitted.

Bibliography


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