Ruinate Landscape and Anti-anthropomorphism in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*

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**Introduction**

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said characterizes the scheme of colonialist enterprises as follows: “To think about distant places, to colonize them, to populate or depopulate them: all of this occurs on, about, or because of land. The actual geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about” (78). Said considers “geographical sense” to be the basis upon which various types of projections, whether military, economic, historical, or, more generally, cultural, can be constructed. He then suggests that such projections constitute what Marxist geographer Neil Smith calls “second nature,” a peculiar mode of nature permeated with exchange-value (N. Smith 66–69). Accordingly, when he adumbrates projects of anticolonial imagination, Said discerns the urge to

seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover a *third* nature, not pristine and prehistorical (‘Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,’ says Yeats) but deriving from the deprivations of the present. The impulse is cartographic, and among its most striking examples are Yeats’s early poems collected in ‘The Rose,’ Neruda’s various poems charting the Chilean landscape, Cesaire on the Antilles, Faiz on Pakistan, and Darwish on Palestine. (226, emphasis original)
Since a retreat into the primordial geography immune to deprivations of colonialism is not feasible for the colonized, a quest for a “third nature” turns out to be progressive rather than regressive. As John Bellamy Foster remarks, the creation of a third nature “would both restore (in part) what had existed before and would transform the human relation to nature into something new” (53). The potential scope of this endeavor is thus far-reaching; not only does it draw a critical map of the lingering effects of colonialism and devastating impacts of neocolonialism, but it also reappropriates social, cultural, and environmental space of the (former) colony to advance a reorientation of human relations with nature. Said’s formulation of third nature, although insufficiently developed in his own work, has broad implications for the emerging dialog between postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism(3).

The rather abstract formulation outlined above finds concrete relevance in the context of the Caribbean, where the tourism industry deprives the region of spatial uniqueness and turns it into a place for recreation and leisure. It is into the milieu of such insidious neocolonialism, arguably an extension of outright colonialism, that Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987; hereinafter *No Telephone*), the object of the present paper, aspires to intervene. *No Telephone* is a developmental story of Clare Savage, a creole woman from Jamaica who struggles to find a place of her own over the course of her trans-Atlantic immigration. In particular, for our purposes, the novel has thematic concerns for spatial configurations. In what follows, I first track the ways in which Clare’s immigration across the Atlantic challenges her to revise her sense of location in the postcolonial world. Second, I investigate the methods through which contemporary Jamaican land is commodified and exploited by the tourism industry. Finally, I discuss Clare’s attempts to reconstitute a relationship with her native land. The final challenge is burdened by a deep contradiction as any human projections toward nature run the risk of anthropomorphizing the nonhuman world. However, the novel’s desire for an alternate relationship with nature is such that, although the protagonist attempts to evoke historical interactions with the natural world, it ultimately seeks to defy anthropomorphism inherent in linguistic representation(4). The novel’s ending resolves the dilemma of the linguistic unrepre-
sentability of the natural world by transforming it into a momentary synthesis between human projection and nature’s vitality, positing it as an expression of the novel’s aspiration for a renewed relationship with nature.

Ruinate Landscape and Matrilineal Ancestry

In previous studies on Michelle Cliff’s semi-autobiographical novels, matriliny has often been held as a central factor. Jennifer J. Smith finds the “recuperation of a matrilineal ancestry” to be a defining characteristic of Cliff’s writing (141). Another line of criticism notes the significance of the protagonist’s reclamation of Jamaican native land. Yi-Peng Lai’s ecocritical reading suggests that “Cliff demonstrates the land’s ecological power, rather than colonial, neocolonial or post-neocolonial powers, with which a neighborhood reconstructs itself as the primitivity of Third World national consciousness” (51). These two divergent aspects are crystalized in the term “ruinate,” a keyword that appears sporadically throughout No Telephone. Cliff’s authorial comment encapsulates the essence of this peculiar term:

*Ruinate*, the adjective, and *ruination*, the noun, are Jamaican inventions. Each word signifies the reclamation of land, of cultivation, civilization, by the uncontrolled, uncontrollable forest. When a landscape becomes ruinate, carefully designed aisles of cane are envined, strangled, the order of empire is replaced by the chaotic forest. The word *ruination* (especially) signifies this immediately; it contains both the word *ruin*, and *nation*. A landscape in ruination means one in which the imposed nation is overcome by the naturalness of ruin. (“Caliban’s Daughter” 40, emphasis original)

Cliff invests ruination with uncontrollable ecological power that exceeds political imposition. The motif of ruinate landscape is seemingly associated with matrilineal ancestry. Observing that the figure of a grandmother repeatedly appears in her novels, Cliff elsewhere remarks that “Hers [the grandmother’s] is a power directly related
to landscape” (“Clare Savage” 266). Ruinate landscape for Cliff is also an unstable and shifting signifier permeated with historicity. In Abeng, the prequel to No Telephone, young Clare imagines the unspoken history of slavery to be buried in rich forests: “The bones of dead slaves made the land at Runaway Bay rich and green” (41). Clare’s nascent imagination figuratively “unearths” the history of slavery that is actively dismissed by formal education. Moreover, historical knowledge gained from reading Anne Frank’s The Diary of a Young Girl prompts her to parallel the suffering of Jewish people with her neighboring geography: “And while she limited the Holocaust to Europe in her mind, her mind cast its environment in places that she knew of sight” (76). Historical issues of a distant era and place are here supplemented by the protagonist’s meditative imagination. Cliff puts spatial imagination in a dialectical relationship with historical recognition.

The dialectic finds a particular embodiment in the protagonist’s development, as meticulously depicted in No Telephone. Clare’s imagination for space and history is vitalized through her experience of trans-Atlantic migration. As a teenager, she accompanies her parents to the U.S. in pursuit of a better life as a “passed” white. After some years at school in Brooklyn and the death of her beloved mother, Clare moves to England for further education. This seemingly personal choice is nevertheless informed by geopolitical and racial dynamics originating in colonial modernity; she was “choosing London with the logic of a creole. This was the mother-country. The country by whose grace her people existed in the first place. Her place could be here” (109). Her racial status as a creole guides her to the capital of her “mother-country” as a potential site of belonging. However, the ascension of the educational hierarchy also accompanies the transformation in her spatial comprehension. While suffering from sleeplessness in her new dwelling, she finds herself drawing “the world map in her brain, drenching those sections in red which contained the Empire, now Commonwealth” (110). The objectification of the Commonwealth in cartographical imagery seems to prepare her to appropriate a sense of place propagated by Western knowledge. Later, in graduate school, “She was praised for the way she analyzed Aristotle’s definition of place in the Physics. Each thing exists in place. Each thing is
described by place. Would this knowledge have pleased her mother?” (117). Clare’s renewed interest in the abstract notion of place immediately redirects her to the concrete memory of her lost mother with whom she is beginning to identify. England as a symbolical “mother-country,” mentioned only a few pages earlier, is now superseded by her actual mother, which prepares her to approach her darker matrilineal ancestry.

As seen in the nexus between spatial cognition and maternal memory, the matrilineal ancestry inextricably tied to slave history stimulates Clare to reconceptualize Jamaican land. This stimulation first occurs in the process of Clare’s reflection on what she learns in London. While she reads Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Clare tries to associate her current solitude with that of Jane, only to recognize that Bertha is more identifiable: “No, she could not be Jane. Small and pale. English. No, she paused. No, my girl, try Bertha. Wild-maned Bertha... Yes, Bertha was closer the mark. Captive. Ragout. Mixture. Confused. Jamaican. Caliban. Carib. Cannibal. Cimarron. All Bertha. All Clare” (116). Her identification with Bertha as an icon of her Caribbean ancestry seems to stem from a longing for her dead mother. Soon after this, Clare imagines that “Her mother was standing next to the bed, looking down at her daughter. Making as if to speak. Then drawing her hand across her mouth as if to wipe away her words” (116). The unspoken language of her ghostly mother drives Clare to seek a relocation of her place in the world. The search for an appropriate place to locate herself proves to be imminent: “She thought of her, her youth, her color, her strangeness, her unbearable loneliness. Where was she now?” (137). Although Clare reads Enoch Powell’s infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech at an earlier age with no apparent emotional disturbance (“She read the pronounce-ments of Enoch Powell, classics scholar” [114]), later in the narrative, she is deeply upset by The National Front’s racist demonstrations in the streets of London. When her college friend tells her not to “take it personally,” Clare hesitantly replies: “Some of my ancestors were Caribs … cannibals” (139). Her emergent identification with Caribbean ancestry seems to be prefigured by her mother’s last message, another strong medium between Clare and her matrilineal lineage. Shortly before her death,
she writes to Clare: “I hope someday you make something of yourself, and someday help your people.’ A reminder, daughter—never forget who your people are. Your responsibilities lie beyond me, beyond yourself. There is a space between who you are and who you will become. Fill it” (103). The word “space” here has both literal and metaphorical implications. On one level, it refers to the real geographical space of the Atlantic that Clare crossed in her youth; on another level, it figuratively points to the temporal and cognitive gap between Clare’s present self and her future life, presumably engaged with the underprivileged masses of Jamaica, whose history is deeply shadowed by colonial slavery. The responsibility “beyond” Clare and her mother is something that transcends their finite individual lives. Her dead mother’s imperative thus reorients Clare’s development and prompts her to move beyond her personal interests and connect herself with Jamaican land and people in a predicament.

The Predicament under the Tourism Industry

Clare’s growing imagination for space motivates her to move herself toward a closer relationship with the land of her birth. Nevertheless, Clare’s return to Jamaica, actualized under the guidance of her friend Harry/Harriet, is by no means a happy reunification with an uncontaminated homeland. Contemporary Jamaican society, characterized by poverty and material scarcity, suffers a chronic inability to take hold of its economy and development. As the local postmistress Miss Cherry tells Clare: “There was new government. One party. And shortages—severe. Petrol at ten dollars a gallon—like salt, on the rise. And the dollar falling fast. People said the IMF [International Monetary Fund] might repossess the country. It was a time of more hideaways for the rich—the expansion of the sandbox” (187). Jamaica’s passive incorporation into the global economy accompany a set of peculiar spatial attributions, as implied in such words as “hideaways” and “sandbox.” These terms indicate how the space of Jamaica is rendered devoid of any vestiges of indigenous history and turned into an artificial playground for tourists. The ultimate but logical consequence of the homogenizing procedure is the fabrication of interchangeability between the local
land and other irrelevant locations. When a British film director searching for a suitable location for filming roams around, for example, he can make an easy comparison between the landscape of the South of France and that of Jamaica: “I found a location looks just like the fucking South of France, except for all the black bums on the beach” (203). The exchangeability between the two locales indicates that, for Western tourists, the value of Jamaican land lies solely in its delightful appearance. Similarly, a fictive advertisement from the New York Times that Clare finds in her grandmother’s house testifies to the same quality imposed on the country: “[Jamaica] has mountains that rise to more than 7,000 feet, waterfalls, caves, wide open areas that resemble the African plain and even arid sections that will pass for desert” (200). Deprived of any trace of unique historicity and spatial distinctiveness, the Jamaican landscape is turned into a kind of “natural resource” for tourism and the entertainment industry, a variant of “second nature” as exploitative as plantation economy. Harry/Harriet’s concise remark epitomizes this quality of contemporary Jamaican land: “Our homeland is turned to stage set too much” (121).

The homogenization and commodification of the local space give rise to historical stasis. In his general critique of “historicism” that posits Europe as the singular source of modernity, Dipesh Chakrabarty observes that the colonial world is locked in a contradictory position which he calls “an imaginary waiting room of history”, a peculiar temporal structure in which inhabitants of the (former) colony persistently spend “a period of preparation and waiting before they could be recognized as full participants in political modernity” (8–9). Chakrabarty’s point is suggestive as it indicates that former colonies (such as Jamaica) suffer the unending deterrence of an entry into sovereignty and autonomy that modernity ostensibly promises. Even more daunting in the Jamaican context is how the tourism industry, with its hunger for exoticism, forces the country to constantly replicate particular images emanating from plantation colonialism. Harry/Harriet observes this with lucidity: “But we are of the past here… We expect people to live on cornmeal and dried fish, which was the diet of the slaves. We name hotels Plantation Inn and Sans Souk… A peculiar past. For we have taken our master’s past as our own” (127). Her observation sug-
gests that even the cruelty of plantation economy is exploited and commodified by
the tourism industry. It is with a keen recognition of such backwardness that
Harry/Harriet invites Clare to join their fight to reclaim genuine historicity: “Come
back to us, once your studies are finished. Could help bring us into the present” (127). The historical backwardness is captured by the more urgent tone of an anon-
ymous guerrilla leader who interviews Clare: “If you have been here for the past two
years, then you realize all progress is backward, and the gaps become wider. People
are left for dead—more than ever” (195).

In stark contrast to tourism’s rendering of Jamaican land as static, ahistorical,
and exchangeable, Clare’s conception of her homeland is marked by its absolute sin-
gularity: “I returned to this island to mend… to bury… my mother… I returned to
this island because there was nowhere else… I could live no longer in borrowed
countries, on borrowed time” (192–3). How, then, does the novel envisage the
Jamaican land that deviates from the tourism industry’s reductionist representation?
Building on Henri Lefebvre’s paradigm of abstract space produced by the capital and
subversive potentials of concrete space of everyday life against abstraction, Janie Beri-
ault insightfully argues that the novel’s disclosure of “local social practices” and “the
lived dimensions of Jamaica” undermines the erasure of local history and brings
about “the readers’ understanding of Jamaican space beyond the constructions offered
by the tourism industry” (669). Although descriptive accounts of everyday lives
upholding the sanitized paradise of Jamaica from the underside may well be disturb-
ing to the eyes of Western tourists, this view should still be supplemented by a close
analysis of landscape that is richly presented throughout the novel. What is pertinent
to our reading of *No Telephone*, particularly in light of our exploration of “third
nature,” is the ways in which the novel treats ruinate landscape as a dynamic locus
that urges the redefinition of human relationships with nature. Instead of Lefebvre’s
insight into the potentiality of everyday life, I would draw on Anthony Vital’s eco-
critical interpretive scheme that acknowledges the “historicity of ecology” and “the
complex interplay of social history with the natural world” (90). This approach,
Vital suggests, recognizes that “language cannot deliver the material world (‘nature’)
free of linguistic, cultural, or social mediation,” and critical attention is thus paid to “histories of change, social and environmental, for indication of the situations through which language has evolved” (90). Vital’s history-oriented ecocritical scheme is valuable when reading the landscape in *No Telephone* as it allows for a focus not only on dynamic interactions between nature and humans but also on the constructed character of linguistic representations of the natural world. Although the manner in which the landscape is historicized is an act of resistance against capital’s commodification, the novel’s final aspiration is directed toward conceiving the ruinate landscape as an uncontrollable locus.

**Beyond Anthropomorphism**

Clare embarks on the reconstitution of a singular relationship with the land by gleaning fragmented pieces of history. As in projections of the Holocaust onto the Jamaican landscape in *Abeng*, historical sense assists Clare in creatively reimagining the present landscape. Although slavery is one of the most significant aspects that characterizes Caribbean history, it remains obscure owing to the ambiguities presented through formal education. However, the memory of her mother helps Clare compensate for the epistemological lack of slave history: “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” (174). Supported by maternal memory, Clare’s imagination allows her to perceive the ghostly presence of unquiet spirits and locate herself within the untold tragic history of slavery.

Nonetheless, Clare’s atavistic impulse is problematic because of its approximation to a conventional nationalist discourse that posits women as the authentic body of ancestral tradition. The transposition of symbolic maternity from the imperial center to her own ancestry not so much challenges as supplements the linearity of modern historical time which has its theoretical roots in Western nationalism. However, a closer investigation would reveal that the novel’s evocation of local histo-
ricity through ruinate landscapes proves to be far more expansive than Clare initially anticipates. As we have seen, Cliff posits the ruinate landscape not only as a mere backdrop but also as an active intruder into human life. The intrusion turns out to be a dynamic and enduring process that spans both the colonial and precolonial periods. For instance, when Clare revisits the land of her grandmother's estate, the land’s reforestation evokes ecological power lasting from the precolonial age: “The house could not be seen at all. The house so hidden so it seemed to exist no longer. Once the center of their life in this place… Nothing but the chaos of the green—reaching across space, time too it seemed. When only Arawaks and iguanas and birds and crocodiles and snakes dwelt there” (172). Reaching into the precolonial past and encroaching on the present, “the chaos of the green” expresses its own rhythm and vitality. The ecological sphere’s spatial and temporal expanse feels unsettling to Clare as her grandmother’s memory inscribed on the land is never immune to the invasive power of reforestation: “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 which tangled the mango trees shading their plots, linking them further to the wild trees, anchoring their duppies to the ground” (8). Although Cliff is, as Izabella Penier asserts, at times inclined to take a path toward “the anachronistic tradition of essentialism” (165) by idealizing mythic maternal figures, this inclination toward atavism is counterpoised by the recognition of the land’s uncontrollable vegetation, which human projections can never contain. The otherness of the nonhuman environment is all the more evident in a rare scene in which natural creatures appear to signify something. As anonymous guerillas head to Clare’s grandmother’s estate, they hear “the harsh metallic voices of cling-cling blackbirds, questioning, it seemed, who those people were and asking what was their purpose here” (4); similarly, other animals “wondered who these people were and what was their purpose in this place. The animals knew this only as a wild, unhumaned place” (9). Although the indigenous animals are ventriloquized by the narrator’s mediation (particularly through the insertion of the clause “it seemed”), their very voices question the guerrillas’ legitimacy in the land.
Clare’s attempt to reestablish a singular relation with Jamaican land is troubled by a dilemma: while the protagonist seeks to attain a reunification with the land by reconstituting ancestral memory, the land is in a position to relativize any human projections on nature. If, as Lawrence Buell remarks, an environmental text is distinguished by the quality that “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (7), the same feature is observable in Cliff’s text. Clare’s identification with her native land accompanies this fundamental tension between human history and natural history. Nevertheless, this dilemma is, I argue, precisely what enhances the novel’s compulsion to advance a reorientation of human relationships with nature. The tension culminates at the end of the novel when Clare and her fellow guerilla fighters die in their desperate attack on a film crew that attempts a further commodification of Jamaican local scenery. After a brief exchange of gunfire, Clare seems to lose consciousness and any meaningful sense of language:

She remembered language.
Then it was gone.

cutacoo, cutacoo, cutacoo
coo, cu, cu, coo
coo, cu, cu, coo
piju, piju, piju
cuk, cuk, cuk, cuk,
tuc-tuc-tuc-tuc-tuc
[...]
Day broke. (208)

After Clare’s language is “gone,” the narrative is dominated by the indecipherable onomatopoes of birdsongs and animal cries. It is as if the narrator, who thus far followed Clare’s perspective with such closeness, surrenders narrative authority to the
nonhuman, natural world altogether. Nature now speaks not through anthropomorphic ventriloquism but through its own voices. Nevertheless, the last sentence reintroduces a certain meaningful language, implying a rhythm of natural cycle that endures despite the protagonist’s apparent death. This impersonal voice seems to be at the threshold between the human and nonhuman. The synthesis between the two different spheres is certainly momentary, but it can be deemed as the novel’s aspiration to reestablish an alternate relationship with the natural environment in a manner that defies anthropomorphism.

Thus, the novel’s presentation of ruinate landscape is twofold. First, it excavates the colonial history hidden beneath landscape, which has been rendered all the more obscure by the tourism industry’s commodification of the land. The excavation is made possible through the dialectic between spatial imagination and historical cognition, which unfolds along with the protagonist’s development. The text may thus be regarded as implementing what Rob Nixon terms “postcolonial pastoral,” a type of double-consciousness that bears witness both to the idealization of the landscape and the history of colonial devastations that lie beneath it (245). The novel subsequently sets out to establish a renewed relationship with the nonhuman environment by evoking the unique vitality of the natural world, which extends well beyond human history. This accompanies the exposure of vulnerability of human projections onto the nonhuman world. Instead of providing a clear depiction of the nature of such a relationship, the novel delineates an aspiration to move beyond anthropomorphism, expressing it in the form of a momentary synthesis between the human and the nonhuman. Although the alterity of the natural world is, as Buell theorizes in the American context, a prevalent theme in environmental texts, the novel departs from the sort of parochialism discernible in American environmentalism that tends to privilege unspoiled wilderness. Insofar as the urge to transcend anthropomorphic projection is prompted by the critical observation of colonial slavery and ongoing neocolonialist dispossession, No Téléphone can be aligned with a range of anticolonial writers who share the impulse to reimagine their native lands and invent a “third nature.”
Notes

(1) For further discussions on the relevance of Said as a geocritic, see Tally. See also Deloughrey and Handley for the ways in which Said’s attention to the geographical dimension of colonialism may be linked to the problematic of ecocriticism.

(2) Frantz Fanon, Said’s favorite referent in the book, also emphasizes the crucial value of land for the colonized: “For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity” (9).

(3) For a detailed account regarding the intersection between the two divergent critical traditions, see Huggan 64–90. In her recent Edward Said London Lecture, Naomi Klein attempts to link Said’s wide-ranging critique of “othering” with the current crisis under global climate change.

(4) For an extensive argument on anthropomorphism and literature’s implicit tendency to subvert anthropomorphic description, see Noda.

(5) Aimé Césaire expounds on the underlying linkage between Nazism and colonization, suggesting that both are expressions of barbarity of Western civilization (“Discourse” 36–46). For further discussions on the treatment of Holocaust history in Cliff’s works, see Casteel.

(6) Cliff admits that this is an allusion to Jean Rhys’ rewriting of Bertha as a critic of imperialism in Wide Sargasso Sea (“Clare Savage” 264–65). For a comparative reading of Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea, see Spivak.

(7) Scholarship on Caribbean tourism has emphasized a certain type of continuity between plantation colonialism and contemporary tourism. Ian Gregory Strachan observes that “as an institution of colonization, the plantation established a political and economic dependency on the metropolitan centers that tourism merely extends” (9). See Sheller for a similar argument.

(8) Anne McClintock observes that the view of women as atavistic figures is shared by British nationalism and colonialism: “Britain’s emerging national narrative gendered time by figuring women (like the colonized and the working class) as inherently atavistic—the conservative repository of the national archaic. Women were not seen as inhabiting history proper but existing, like colonized peoples, in a permanently anterior time within the modern nation” (359).
(9) For a comprehensive critique of parochialism observable in American environmentalism (often rephrased as “deep ecology”) and its inappropriateness to the Third World, see Guha.

Works Cited


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