

Michelle Cliff

1946–

A writer of fiction, autobiography, and poetry, MICHELLE CLIFF was born in Kingston, Jamaica, a place she calls “halfway between Africa and England,” to a middle-class family that identified as “red,” a term that “signified a degree of whiteness.” This racially mixed heritage provides the primary subject matter for her writing. Although she lived in a Jamaican immigrant community in New York between the ages of three and ten, Cliff’s earliest memories recall the landscape of her country of origin. She left Jamaica at eighteen to study in London, where she earned an M.Phil. in Italian Renaissance studies from the Warburg Institute. This experience, she claims, “was responsible for giving me an intellectual belief in myself that I had not had before, while at the same time distancing me from who I am, almost rendering me speechless about who I am.” Determined to claim her multiethnic identity, Cliff began writing at age thirty as a means of finding wholeness “while working within fragmentation.” Her affiliation with the women’s movement in the 1970s led her to edit the lesbian-feminist journal *Sinister Wisdom* with ADRIENNE RICH from 1981 to 1983. Cliff is the Allan K. Smith Professor of English Language and Literature at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, where she teaches creative writing and women’s studies. She conducts writing workshops across the United States and lives part-time in Santa Cruz, California.



Her writing is a mix of genres, styles, and tones that reflects her wish to break free of hegemonic language. In an essay entitled “Journey into Speech” she notes that “one of the effects of assimilation, indoctrination, passing into the anglocentrism of British West Indian culture is that you believe absolutely in the hegemony of the King’s English and in the form in which it is meant to be expressed. Or else your writing is not literature; it is folklore, and folklore can never be art.” To escape this double bind, Cliff endorses “speaking in the *patois* forbidden us . . . mixing in the forms taught us by the oppressor, undermining his language and coopting his style.” Cliff’s fiction reflects such an effort. In *Abeng* (1984) an adolescent Jamaican girl, Clare Savage, confronts the power that light skin and economic privilege bring in her relationship with Zoe, whose family is “black” and poor. Yet in her love for Zoe, Clare finds the potential for healing. *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), a sequel to *Abeng*, depicts an older Clare who studies abroad but ultimately returns to Jamaica, joins a black guerrilla movement, and attacks a U.S. film crew to challenge its colonial consciousness. *Free Enterprise* (1993) explores the life of Mary Ellen Pleasant, who funded and helped to organize John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry. Cliff has also published a collection of short stories that is readable as a novel, *Bodies of Water* (1990).

A number of Cliff’s essays explore her identity as a Jamaican woman. *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (1980) affirms the long-denigrated African aspect of the author’s heritage, a reclamation both racial and gendered. Cliff has described this work as “halfway between poetry and prose,” but after writing it she became concerned that readers moved by its lyricism would read it apolitically. Thus her subsequent essays combine the polemic and the lyric more overtly. In “Notes on Speechlessness,” published in *Sinister Wisdom* #5, she discusses her identification with Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron, who was “civilized” into English but never came to speech. “Journey into Speech” depicts her struggle to “find what has been lost to me from the darker side, what may be hidden, to be dredged from memory and dream.” “Object into Subject: Some Thoughts on the Work of Black Women Artists” examines the ways in which black women are working to end their own objectification.

The essay reprinted here, “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire,” was first published in *The Land of Look Behind* (1985). In it Cliff exposes the pernicious Jamaican hierarchy of “colorism,” which rarely allows light and dark people to mingle. As she recounts her childhood memories, Cliff recalls the barriers of racial difference and the malevolent force of British colonialism. Both lyrical and confrontational, this essay represents Cliff’s attempt, in her words, “to depict personal fragmentation and describe political reality, according to the peculiar lens of the colonized.”

✧ If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire ✧

I

We were standing under the waterfall at the top of Orange River. Our chests were just beginning to mound—slight hills on either side. In the center of each were our nipples, which were losing their sideways look and rounding into perceptible buttons of dark flesh. Too fast it seemed. We touched each other, then, quickly and almost simultaneously, raised our arms to examine the hairs growing underneath. Another sign. Mine was wispy and light-brown. My friend Zoe had dark hair curled up tight. In each little patch the riverwater caught the sun so we glistened.

The waterfall had come about when my uncles dammed up the river to bring power to the sugar mill. Usually, when I say “sugar mill” to anyone not familiar with the Jamaican countryside or for that matter my family, I can tell their minds cast an image of tall smokestacks, enormous copper cauldrons, a man in a broad-brimmed hat with a whip, and several dozens of slaves—that is, if they have any idea of how large sugar mills once operated. It’s a grandiose expression—like plantation, verandah, outbuilding. (Try substituting farm, porch, outside toilet.) To some people it even sounds romantic.

Our sugar mill was little more than a round-roofed shed, which contained a wheel and wood fire. We paid an old man to run it, tend the fire, and then either bartered or gave the sugar away, after my grandmother had taken what she needed. Our cane-field was about two acres of flat land next to the river. My grandmother had six acres in all—one donkey, a mule, two cows, some chickens, a few pigs, and stray dogs and cats who had taken up residence in the yard.

Her house had four rooms, no electricity, no running water. The kitchen was a shed in the back with a small pot-bellied stove. Across from the stove was a mahogany counter, which had a white enamel basin set into it. The only light source was a window, a small space covered partly by a wooden shutter. We washed our faces and hands in enamel bowls with cold water carried in kerosene tins from the river and poured from enamel pitchers. Our chamber pots were enamel also, and in the morning we carefully placed them on the steps at the side of the house where my grandmother collected them and disposed of their contents. The outhouse was about thirty yards from the back door—a “closet” as we called it—infested with lizards capable of changing color. When the door was shut it was totally dark, and the lizards made their presence known by the noise of their scurrying through the torn newspaper, or the soft shudder when they dropped from the walls. I remember most clearly the stench of the toilet, which seemed to hang in the air in that climate.

But because every little piece of reality exists in relation to another little piece, our situation was not that simple. It was to our yard that people came with news first. It was in my grandmother's parlor that the *Disciples of Christ* held their meetings.

Zoe lived with her mother and sister on borrowed ground in a place called Breezy Hill. She and I saw each other almost every day on our school vacations over a period of three years. Each morning early—as I sat on the cement porch with my coffee cut with condensed milk—she appeared: in her straw hat, school tunic faded from blue to gray, white blouse, sneakers hanging around her neck. We had coffee together, and a piece of hard-dough bread with butter and cheese, waited a bit and headed for the river. At first we were shy with each other. We did not start from the same place.

There was land. My grandparents' farm. And there was color.

(My family was called *red*. A term which signified a degree of whiteness. "We's just a flock of red people," a cousin of mine said once.) In the hierarchy of shades I was considered among the lightest. The countrywomen who visited my grandmother commented on my "tall" hair—meaning long. Wavy, not curly.

I had spent the years from three to ten in New York and spoke—at first—like an American. I wore American clothes: shorts, slacks, bathing suit. Because of my American past I was looked upon as the creator of games. Cowboys and Indians. Cops and Robbers. Peter Pan.

(While the primary colonial identification for Jamaicans was English, American colonialism was a strong force in my childhood—and of course continues today. We were sent American movies and American music. American aluminum companies had already discovered bauxite on the island and were shipping the ore to their mainland. United Fruit bought our bananas. White Americans came to Montego Bay, Ocho Rios, and Kingston for their vacations and their cruise ships docked in Port Antonio and other places. In some ways America was seen as a better place than England by many Jamaicans. The farm laborers sent to work in American agribusiness came home with dollars and gifts and new clothes; there were few who mentioned American racism. Many of the middle class who emigrated to Brooklyn or Staten Island or Manhattan were able to pass into the white American world—saving their blackness for other Jamaicans or for trips home; in some cases, forgetting it altogether. Those middle-class Jamaicans who could not pass for white managed differently—not unlike the Bajans in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*¹—saving, working, investing, buying property. Completely separate in most cases from Black Americans.)

I was someone who had experience with the place that sent us triple features of B-grade westerns and gangster movies. And I had tall hair and light skin. And I was the granddaughter of my grandmother. So I had power. I was the cowboy, Zoe was my sidekick, the boys we knew were Indians. I was the detective, Zoe was my "girl," the boys were the robbers. I was Peter Pan, Zoe was Wendy Darling, the boys were the lost boys. And the terrain around the river—jungled and dark green—was Tombstone, or Chicago, or Never-Never Land.

1. African-American writer Paule Marshall (born 1929) published her novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* in 1959.

This place and my friendship with Zoe never touched my life in Kingston. We did not correspond with each other when I left my grandmother's home.

I never visited Zoe's home the entire time I knew her. It was a given: never suggested, never raised.

Zoe went to a state school held in a country church in Red Hills. It had been my mother's school. I went to a private all-girls school where I was taught by white Englishwomen and pale Jamaicans. In her school the students were caned as punishment. In mine the harshest punishment I remember was being sent to sit under the *lignum vitae* to "commune with nature." Some of the girls were out-and-out white (English and American), the rest of us were colored—only a few were dark. Our uniforms were blood-red gabardine, heavy and hot. Classes were held in buildings meant to recreate England: damp with stone floors, facing onto a cloister, or quad as they called it. We began each day with the headmistress leading us in English hymns. The entire school stood for an hour in the zinc-roofed gymnasium.

Occasionally a girl fainted, or threw up. Once, a girl had a grand mal seizure. To any such disturbance the response was always "keep singing." While she flailed on the stone floor, I wondered what the mistresses would do. We sang "Faith of Our Fathers," and watched our classmate as her eyes rolled back in her head. I thought of people swallowing their tongues. This student was dark—here on a scholarship—and the only woman who came forward to help her was the gamesmistress, the only dark teacher. She kneeled beside the girl and slid the white web belt from her tennis shorts, clamping it between the girl's teeth. When the seizure was over, she carried the girl to a tumbling mat in a corner of the gym and covered her so she wouldn't get chilled.

Were the other women unable to touch this girl because of her darkness? I think that now. Her darkness and her scholarship. She lived on Windward Road with her grandmother; her mother was a maid. But darkness is usually enough for women like those to hold back. Then, we usually excused that kind of behavior by saying they were "ladies." (We were constantly being told we should be ladies also. One teacher went so far as to tell us many people thought Jamaicans lived in trees and we had to show these people they were mistaken.) In short, we felt insufficient to judge the behavior of these women. The English ones (who had the corner on power in the school) had come all this way to teach us. Shouldn't we treat them as the missionaries they were certain they were? The creole Jamaicans had a different role: they were passing on to those of us who were light-skinned the creole heritage of collaboration, assimilation, loyalty to our betters. We were expected to be willing subjects in this outpost of civilization.

The girl left school that day and never returned.

After prayers we filed into our classrooms. After classes we had games: tennis, field hockey, rounders (what the English call baseball), netball (what the English call basketball). For games we were divided into "houses"—groups named for Joan of Arc,

Edith Cavell, Florence Nightingale, Jane Austen.² Four white heroines. Two martyrs. One saint. Two nurses. (None of us knew then that there were Black women with Nightingale at Scutari.) One novelist. Three involved in whitemen's wars. Two dead in whitemen's wars. *Pride and Prejudice*.

Those of us in Cavell wore red badges and recited her last words before a firing squad in W. W. I: "Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness toward anyone."

Sorry to say I grew up to have exactly that.

Looking back: To try and see when the background changed places with the foreground. To try and locate the vanishing point: where the lines of perspective converge and disappear. Lines of color and class. Lines of history and social context. Lines of denial and rejection. When did we (the light-skinned middle-class Jamaicans) take over for them as oppressors? I need to see when and how this happened. When what should have been reality was overtaken by what was surely unreality. When the house nigger became master.

"What's the matter with you? You think you're white or something?"

"Child, what you want to know 'bout Garvey³ for? The man was nothing but a damn fool."

"They not our kind of people."

Why did we wear wide-brimmed hats and try to get into Oxford? Why did we not return?

*Great Expectations:*⁴ a novel about origins and denial. About the futility and tragedy of that denial. About attempting assimilation. We learned this novel from a light-skinned Jamaican woman—she concentrated on what she called the "love affair" between Pip and Estella.

Looking back: Through the last page of *Sula*.⁵ "And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. 'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something." It was Zoe, and Zoe alone, I thought of. She snapped into my mind and I remembered no one else. Through the greens and blues of the riverbank. The flame of red hibiscus in front of my grandmother's house. The cracked grave of a former landowner. The fruit of the ackee which poisons those who don't know how to prepare it.

"What is to become of us?"

2. Joan of Arc (1412–1431), the Maid of Orleans, was a French national heroine and a female warrior who was burned at the stake after being convicted of heresy. Edith Cavell (1865–1915) founded a Belgian medical institute that became a Red Cross hospital in 1914, she helped English, French, and Belgian soldiers escape during World War I. Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) was a British nurse during the Crimean War and a writer. JANE

AUSTEN (1775–1817) was a British novelist and the author of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

3. Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) was a Jamaican black-nationalist leader.

4. A novel by the English writer Charles Dickens (1812–1870).

5. A novel by the African-American writer TONI MORRISON (born 1931).

We borrowed a baby from a woman and used her as our dolly. Dressed and undressed her. Dipped her in the riverwater. Fed her with the milk her mother had left with us: and giggled because we knew where the milk had come from.

A letter: "I am desperate. I need to get away. I beg you one fifty-dollar."

I send the money because this is what she asks for. I visit her on a trip back home. Her front teeth are gone. Her husband beats her and she suffers blackouts. I sit on her chair. She is given birth control pills which aggravate her "condition." We boil up sorrel and ginger. She is being taught by Peace Corps volunteers to embroider linen mats with little lambs on them and gives me one as a keepsake. We cool off the sorrel with a block of ice brought from the shop nearby. The shopkeeper immediately recognizes me as my grandmother's granddaughter and refuses to sell me cigarettes. (I am twenty-seven.) We sit in the doorway of her house, pushing back the colored plastic strands which form a curtain, and talk about Babylon and Dred. About Manley and what he's doing for Jamaica.⁶ About how hard it is. We walk along the railway tracks—no longer used—to Crooked River and the post office. Her little daughter walks beside us and we recite a poem for her: "Momin' buddy / Me no buddy fe wunna / Who den, den I saw?" and on and on.

I can come and go. And I leave. To complete my education in London.

II

Their goddam kings and their goddam queens. Grandmotherly Victoria spreading herself thin across the globe. Elizabeth II on our TV screens. We stop what we are doing. We quiet down. We pay our respects.

1981: In Massachusetts I get up at 5 a.m. to watch the royal wedding. I tell myself maybe the IRA will intervene. It's got to be better than starving themselves to death. Better to be a kamikaze in St. Paul's Cathedral than a hostage in Ulster. And last week Black and white people smashed storefronts all over the United Kingdom. But I really don't believe we'll see royal blood on TV. I watch because they once ruled us. In the back of the cathedral a Maori woman sings an aria from Handel, and I notice that she is surrounded by the colored subjects.

To those of us in the commonwealth the royal family was the perfect symbol of hegemony. To those of us who were dark in the dark nations, the prime minister, the parliament barely existed. We believed in royalty—we were convinced in this belief. Maybe it played on some ancestral memories of West Africa—where other kings and queens had been. Altars and castles and magic.

The faces of our new rulers were everywhere in my childhood. Calendars, newsreels, magazines. Their presences were often among us. Attending test matches between the West Indians and South Africans. They were our landlords. Not always absentee. And no matter what Black leader we might elect—were we to choose independence—we would be losing something almost holy in our impudence.

6. Robert Manley was the president of Jamaica.

7. A woman of New Zealand's indigenous people.

WE ARE HERE BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE
BLACK PEOPLE AGAINST STATE BRUTALITY
BLACK WOMEN WILL NOT BE INTIMIDATED
WELCOME TO BRITAIN . . . WELCOME TO SECOND-CLASS CITIZENSHIP
(slogans of the Black movement in Britain)

Indian women cleaning the toilets in Heathrow airport. This is the first thing I notice. Dark women in saris trudging buckets back and forth as other dark women in saris—some covered by loosefitting winter coats—form a line to have their passports stamped.

The triangle trade: molasses/rum/slaves. Robinson Crusoe was on a slave-trading journey. Robert Browning was a mulatto.⁸ Holding pens. Jamaica was a seasoning station. Split tongues. Sliced ears. Whipped bodies. The constant pretense of civility against rape. Still. Iron collars. Tinplate masks. The latter a precaution: to stop the slaves from eating the sugar cane.

A pregnant woman is to be whipped—they dig a hole to accommodate her belly and place her face down on the ground. Many of us became light-skinned very fast. Traced ourselves through bastard lines to reach the duke of Devonshire. The earl of Cornwall. The lord of this and the lord of that. Our mothers' rapes were the thing unspoken.

You say: But Britain freed her slaves in 1833. Yes.

Tea plantations in India and Ceylon. Mines in Africa. The Cape-to-Cairo Railroad. Rhodes scholars. Suez Crisis. The whiteman's bloody burden. Boer War.⁹ Bantustans. Sitting in a theatre in London in the seventies. A play called *West of Suez*. A lousy play about British colonials. The finale comes when several well-known white actors are machine-gunned by several lesser-known Black actors. (As Nina Simone¹⁰ says: "This is a show tune but the show hasn't been written for it yet.")

The red empire of geography classes. "The sun never sets on the British empire and you can't trust it in the dark." Or with the dark peoples. "Because of the Industrial Revolution European countries went in search of markets and raw materials." Another geography (or was it a history) lesson.

Their bloody kings and their bloody queens. Their bloody peers. Their bloody generals. Admirals. Explorers. Livingstone. Hillary. Kitchener.¹¹ All the *bwanas*. And all their beaters, porters, sherpas. Who found the source of the Nile. Victoria Falls. The tops of mountains. Their so-called discoveries reek of untruth. How many dark people died so they could misname the physical features in their blasted gazetteer. A statistic we shall never know. Dr. Livingstone, I presume you are here to rape our land and enslave our people.

8. Robinson Crusoe (1719) was a novel by Daniel Defoe (1660–1731); Robert Browning (1812–1889) was a British poet.

9. The Boer War was fought in South Africa from 1899 to 1902 between Great Britain and two Afrikaner republics, the South African Republic (Transvaal) and the Orange Free State, over which white colonial group

would control the country.

10. Nina Simone is an African-American blues singer.

11. David Livingstone (1813–1873) was a Scottish missionary and an explorer in Africa; Sir Edmund Hillary (born 1919) is a New Zealand mountain climber and explorer; Horatio H. Kitchener (1850–1916) was a British field marshal during World War I.

There are statues of these dead white men all over London.

An interesting fact: The swearword "bloody" is a contraction of "by my lady"—a reference to the Virgin Mary. They do tend to use their ladies. Name ages for them. Places for them. Use them as screens, inspirations, symbols. And many of the ladies comply. While the national martyr Edith Cavell was being executed by the Germans in 1915 in Belgium (called "poor little Belgium" by the allies in the war), the Belgians were engaged in the exploitation of the land and peoples of the Congo.

And will we ever know how many dark peoples were "imported" to fight in whitemen's wars. Probably not. Just as we will never know how many hearts were cut from African people so that the Christian doctor might be a success—i.e., extend a whiteman's life. Our Sister Killjoy¹² observes this from her black-eyed squint.

Dr. Schweitzer—humanitarian, authority on Bach, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize—on the people of Africa: "The Negro is a child, and with children nothing can be done without the use of authority. We must, therefore, so arrange the circumstances of our daily life that my authority can find expression. With regard to Negroes, then, I have coined the formula: 'I am your brother, it is true, but your elder brother.'" (*On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*, 1961)¹³

They like to pretend we didn't fight back. We did: with obeah, poison, revolution. It simply was not enough.

"Colonies . . . these places where 'niggers' are cheap and the earth is rich." (W.E.B. DuBois, "The Souls of White Folk")¹⁴

A cousin is visiting me from Cal Tech where he is getting a degree in engineering. I am learning about the Italian Renaissance. My cousin is recognizably Black and speaks with an accent. I am not and I do not—unless I am back home, where the "twang" comes upon me. We sit for some time in a bar in his hotel and are not served. A light-skinned Jamaican comes over to our table. He is an older man—a professor at the University of London. "Don't bother with it, you hear. They don't serve us in this bar." A run-of-the-mill incident for all recognizably Black people in this city. But for me it is not.

Henry's eyes fill up, but he refuses to believe our informant. "No, man, the girl is just busy." (The girl is a fifty-year-old white woman, who may just be following orders. But I do not mention this. I have chosen sides.) All I can manage to say is, "Jesus Christ, I hate the fucking English." Henry looks at me. (In the family I am known as the "lady cousin." It has to do with how I look. And the fact that I am twenty-seven and unmarried—and for all they know, unattached. They do not know that I am really the lesbian cousin.) Our informant says—gently, but with a distinct tone of disappointment—"My dear, is that what you're studying at the university?"

You see—the whole business is very complicated.

12. A character in the novel by the same title, published by the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo in 1981.

13. Dr. Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) was a French

missionary, musician, physician, and Nobel laureate.

14. W.E.B. DuBois (1868–1963) was an African-American writer and educator.

Henry and I leave without drinks and go to meet some of his white colleagues at a restaurant I know near Covent Garden Opera House. The restaurant caters to theater types and so I hope there won't be a repeat of the bar scene—at least they know how to pretend. Besides, I tell myself, the owners are Italian and gay; they *must* be halfway decent. Henry and his colleagues work for an American company which is paying their way through Cal Tech. They mine bauxite from the hills in the middle of the island and send it to the United States. A turnaround occurs at dinner: Henry joins the whitemen in a sustained mockery of the waiters: their accents and the way they walk. He whispers to me: "Why you want to bring us to a battyman's den, lady?" (*Battymen* = *faggot* in Jamaican.) I keep quiet.

We put the whitemen in a taxi and Henry walks me to the underground station. He asks me to sleep with him. (It wouldn't be incest. His mother was a maid in the house of an uncle and Henry has not seen her since his birth. He was taken into the family. She was let go.) I say that I can't. I plead exams. I can't say that I don't want to. Because I remember what happened in the bar. But I can't say that I'm a lesbian either—even though I want to believe his alliance with the whitemen at dinner was forced: not really him. He doesn't buy my excuse. "Come on, lady, let's do it. What's the matter, you 'fraid?" I pretend I am back home and start patois to show him somehow I am not afraid, not English, not white. I tell him he's a married man and he tells me he's a ram goat. I take the train to where I am staying and try to forget the whole thing. But I don't. I remember our different skins and our different experiences within them. And I have a hard time realizing that I am angry with Henry. That to him—no use in pretending—a queer is a queer.

1981: I hear on the radio that Bob Marley¹⁵ is dead and I drive over the Mohawk Trail listening to a program of his music and I cry and cry and cry. Someone says: "It wasn't the ganja that killed him, it was poverty and working in a steel foundry when he was young."

I flash back to my childhood and a young man who worked for an aunt I lived with once. He taught me to smoke ganja behind the house. And to peel an orange with the tip of a machete without cutting through the skin—"Love" it was called: a necklace of orange rind the result. I think about him because I heard he had become a Rastaman. And then I think about Rastas.

We are sitting on the porch of an uncle's house in Kingston—the family and I—and a Rastaman comes to the gate. We have guns but they are locked behind a false closet. We have dogs but they are tied up. We are Jamaicans and know that Rastas mean no harm. We let him in and he sits on the side of the porch and shows us his brooms and brushes. We buy some to take back to New York. "Peace, missis."

There were many Rastas in my childhood. Walking the roadside with their goods. Sitting outside their shacks in the mountains. The outsides painted bright—sometimes with words. Gathering at Palisadoes Airport to greet the Conquering Lion of Judah.

15. Bob Marley was a Jamaican reggae singer and a Rastafarian.

They were considered figures of fun by most middle-class Jamaicans. Harmless—like Marcus Garvey.

Later: white American hippies trying to create the effect of dread in their straight white hair. The ganja joint held between their straight white teeth. "Man, the grass is good." Hanging out by the Sheraton pool. Light-skinned Jamaicans also dreadlocked, also assuming the ganja. Both groups moving to the music but not the words. Harmless. "Peace, brother."

III

My grandmother: "Let us thank God for a fruitful place."

My grandfather: "Let us rescue the perishing world."

This evening on the road in western Massachusetts there are pockets of fog. Then clear spaces. Across from a pond a dog staggers in front of my headlights. I look closer and see that his mouth is foaming. He stumbles to the side of the road—I go to call the police.

I drive back to the house, radio playing "difficult" piano pieces. And I think about how I need to say all this. This is who I am. I am not what you allow me to be. Whatever you decide me to be. In a bookstore in London I show the woman at the counter my book and she stares at me for a minute, then says: "You're a Jamaican." "Yes." "You're not at all like our Jamaicans."

Encountering the void is nothing more nor less than understanding invisibility. Of being fogbound.

Then: It was never a question of passing. It was a question of hiding. Behind Black and white perceptions of who we were—who they thought we were. Tropics. Plantations. Calypso. Cricket. We were the people with the musical voices and the coronation mugs on our parlor tables. I would be whatever figure these foreign imaginations cared for me to be. It would be so simple to let others fill in for me. So easy to startle them with a flash of anger when their visions got out of hand—but never to sustain the anger for myself.

It could become a life lived within myself. A life cut off. I know who I am but you will never know who I am. I may in fact lose touch with who I am.

I hid from my real sources. But my real sources were also hidden from me.

Now: It is not a question of relinquishing privilege. It is a question of grasping more of myself. I have found that in the real sources are concealed my survival. My speech. My voice. To be colonized is to be rendered insensitive. To have those parts necessary to sustain life numbed. And this is in some cases—in my case—perceived as privilege. The test of a colonized person is to walk through a shantytown in Kingston and not bat an eye. This I cannot do. Because part of me lives there—and as I grasp more of this part I realize what needs to be done with the rest of my life.

Sometimes I used to think we were like the **Marranos**—the Sephardic Jews forced to pretend they were Christians. The name was given to them by the Christians, and meant “pigs.” But once out of Spain and Portugal, they became Jews openly again. Some settled in Jamaica. They knew who the enemy was and acted for their own survival. But they remained Jews always.

We also knew who the enemy was—I remember **jokes about the English**. Saying they stank. Saying they were stingy. That they drank too much and couldn’t hold their liquor. That they had bad teeth. Were dirty and dishonest. Were limey bastards. And horse-faced bitches. We said the men only wanted to sleep with Jamaican women. And that the women made pigs of themselves with Jamaican men.

But of course this was seen by us—the **light-skinned middle class**—with a **double vision**. We learned to cherish that part of us that was them—and to deny the part that was not. Believing in some cases that the latter part had ceased to exist.

None of this is as simple as it may sound. We were colorists and we aspired to oppressor status. (Of course, almost any aspiration instilled by Western civilization is to oppressor status: success, for example.) Color was the symbol of our potential: color taking in hair “**quality**,” skin tone, freckles, nose-width, eyes. We did not see that color symbolism was a method of keeping us apart: in the society, in the family, between friends. Those of us who were light-skinned, straight-haired, etc., were given to believe that we could actually attain whiteness—or at least those qualities of the colonizer which made him superior. **We were convinced of white supremacy**. If we failed, we were not really responsible for our failures: We had all the advantages—but it was that one persistent drop of blood, that single rogue gene that made us unable to conceptualize abstract ideas, made us love darkness rather than despise it, which was to be blamed for our failure. Our dark part had taken over: an inherited imbalance in which the doom of the creole was sealed.

I am trying to write this as clearly as possible, but as I write I realize that what I say may sound fabulous, or even mythic. It is. It is insane.

Under this **system of colorism**—the system which prevailed in my childhood in Jamaica, and which has carried over to the present—rarely will dark and light people come together. Rarely will they achieve between themselves an intimacy informed with identity. (I should say here that I am using the categories light and dark both literally and symbolically. There are dark Jamaicans who have achieved lightness and the “advantages” which go with it by their successful pursuit of oppressor status.)

Under this system light and dark people will meet in those ways in which the **light-skinned person imitates the oppressor**. But imitation goes only so far: The light-skinned person **becomes an oppressor** in fact. He/she will have a dark chauffeur, a dark nanny, a dark maid, and a dark gardener. These employees will be **paid badly**. Because of the slave past, because of their dark skin, the servants of the middle class have been used according to the traditions of the slavocracy. They are not seen as workers for their own sake, but for the sake of the family who has employed them. It was not until Michael Manley became prime minister that a minimum wage for houseworkers was enacted—and the indignation of the middle class was profound.

During Manley’s leadership the middle class began to abandon the island in droves. **Toronto. Miami. New York**. Leaving their houses and businesses behind and sewing cash into the tops of suitcases. Today—with a new regime—they are returning: “Come back to the way things used to be” the tourist advertisement on American TV says. “Make it Jamaica again. Make it your own.”

But let me return to the situation of houseservants as I remember it: They will be paid badly, but they will be “given” room and board. However, the key to the larder will be kept by the mistress in her dresser drawer. They will spend Christmas with the family of their employers and be given a length of English wool for trousers or a few yards of cotton for dresses. They will see their children on their days off: their extended family will care for the children the rest of the time. When the employers visit their relations in the country, the servants may be asked along—oftentimes the servants of the middle class come from the same part of the **countryside** their employers have come from. But they will be expected to work while they are there. Back in town, there are parts of the house they are not allowed to move freely around; other parts they are not allowed to enter. When the family watches the TV the servant is allowed to watch also, but only while standing in a doorway. The servant may have a radio in his/her room, also a dresser and a cot. Perhaps a mirror. There will usually be one ceiling light. And one small square louvered window.

A *true story*: One middle-class Jamaican woman ordered a Persian rug from Harrod’s in London. The day it arrived so did her new maid. She was going downtown to have her hair touched up, and told the maid to vacuum the rug. She told the maid she would find the vacuum cleaner in the same shed as the power mower. And when she returned she found that the fine nap of her new rug had been removed.

The reaction of the mistress was to tell her friends that the “girl” was backward. She did not fire her until she found that the maid had scrubbed the Teflon from her new set of pots, saying she thought they were coated with “nastiness.”

The **houseworker/mistress relationship in which one Black woman is the oppressor of another Black woman is a cornerstone of the experience of many Jamaican women.**

I remember another true story: In a middle-class family’s home one Christmas, a relation was visiting from **New York**. This woman had brought gifts for everybody, including the housemaid. The maid had been released from a mental institution recently, where they had “treated” her for depression. This visiting light-skinned woman had brought the dark woman a bright red rayon blouse and presented it to her in the garden one afternoon, while the family was having tea. The maid thanked her softly, and the other woman moved toward her as if to embrace her. Then she stopped, her face suddenly covered with tears, and ran into the house, saying, “My God, I can’t, I can’t.”

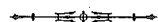
We are women who come from a place almost incredible in its beauty. It is a beauty which can mask a great deal and which has been used in that way. But that the beauty is there is a fact. I remember what I thought the freedom of my childhood, in which the fruitful place was something I took for granted. Just as I took for granted Zoe’s appearance every morning on my school vacations—in the sense that I knew she would be

there. That she would always be the one to visit me. The perishing world of my grandfather's graces at the table, if I ever seriously thought about it, was somewhere else.

Our souls were affected by the beauty of Jamaica, as much as they were affected by our fears of darkness.

There is no ending to this piece of writing. There is no way to end it. As I read back over it, I see that *we/they/I* may become confused in the mind of the reader: but these pronouns have always coexisted in my mind. The Rastas talk of the "I and I"—a pronoun in which they combine themselves with Jah. Jah is a contraction of Jahweh and Jehova, but to me always sounds like the beginning of Jamaica. I and Jamaica is who I am. No matter how far I travel—how deep the ambivalence I feel about ever returning. And Jamaica is a place in which *we/they/I* connect and disconnect—change place.

1985



Trinh T. Minh-ha

1952–

"What I understand of the struggle of women of color . . . is that our voices and silences across difference are so many attempts at articulating this always-emerging-already-distorted place that remains so difficult, on the one hand, for the first world even to recognize, and on the other, for our own communities to accept to venture into," writes Vietnamese theorist TRINH T. MINH-HA. In much of her theoretical writing Trinh rejects the concept of self-enclosed identity in favor of a multicultural notion of difference. A filmmaker, musician, and writer, Trinh teaches cinema at San Francisco State University. Among her prize-winning films, which fuse documentary and fictional techniques, are *Reassemblage* (1982), *Naked Spaces: Living Is Round* (1985), and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), which takes its title from a "recent socialist tradition" in which, when an interested man asks a woman if she is married, she responds, "Yes, his surname is Viet and his given name is Nam." In this "apparently benign reply the nation-gender relationship immediately raises questions," observes Trinh. In a 1990 interview with Judith Mayne, she explains that her films make use of "negative space," the "space that makes both composition and framing possible, that characterizes the way an image breathes"; thus she eschews the "object-oriented camera" in favor of one that obscures far less. A fourth film, *Shoot for the Contents*, was released in 1991.

Trinh Minh-ha has published three works of postcolonial and/or feminist theory, the best known of which is *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989). This book examines what the author calls "postcolonial processes of displacement—cultural hybridization and decentered realities, fragmented selves and multiple identities, marginal voices and languages of rupture." *Woman, Native, Other* is comprised of four sections: "Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box," which explores the multiple and contingent identities of women writers of color; "The Language of Nativism," a critique of the premises of traditional anthropology; "Difference: A Special Third World Women's Issue," which examines the "infinite layers" of what Trinh terms "i am not i can be you and me"; and "Grandma's Story," an analysis of the power of the Great Mother, oral tradition, and storytelling in Asian and African cultures. As Trinh explains in her interview with Mayne, because *Woman, Native, Other* "resists every easy category," the book was rejected by thirty-three presses over ten years before being accepted for publication. "The kind of problems it repeatedly encountered had precisely to do with marketable



categories and disciplinary regulations; in other words, with conformist borders. Not only was the focus on postcolonial positionings and on women of color as a subject and as subjects of little interest to publishers then, but what bothered them most was the writing itself."

Trinh has described her writing as "the mixing of different modes . . . ; the mutual challenge of theoretical and poetical, discursive and nondiscursive languages." Her first theoretical work, *Un art sans oeuvre* (*An Art Without Masterpiece*, 1981), illustrates this mixing; one chapter links writings by the French theorist Jacques Derrida and the playwright Antonin Artaud to those of Zen Buddhist healers such as Krishnamurti. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Culture* (1991) consists of essays on myths of Chinese moon goddesses, the marginality of women of color in the art world, problems with the category "documentary," and the denial of gender in a society that reproduces "male-centered spectacle." Her articles have appeared in *French Review*, *French Forum*, *Sub-stance*, and *Camera Obscura*, and her films have been shown internationally. With Jean-Paul Bourdier she wrote *African Spaces: Designs for Living in Upper Volta* (1985). Her book of poetry, *En miniscules*, appeared in 1987 in France.

Trinh Minh-ha's writing style is strategically enigmatic. Reviewing *When the Moon Waxes Red* and *Woman, Native, Other for American Literary History* in 1993, Linda Alcoff claims that "by maintaining a stylistic complexity and incessantly problematizing all claims to dominance, Trinh's writing instantiates a form of guerrilla theory, powerful in its very elusiveness." Most of Trinh's works of "guerrilla theory" address issues of identity and difference. "The repressed complexities of the politics of identity have been exposed fully" by women of color, she claims. "Identity" has now become more a point of departure than an end point in the struggle. So although we understand the necessity of acknowledging this notion of identity in politicizing the personal, we also don't want to be limited to it." Hence difference, "the necessity of speaking from a hybrid place."

The article included here, "Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference," was published in *Making Face, Making Soul* (1990), edited by Gloria Anzaldúa. To investigate identity, Trinh notes, is to consider the power dynamics of the self/other relationship. Long defined as "an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one's consciousness," identity is almost invariably conceived within a context of domination. If identity connotes sameness, then difference "remains within the boundary of that which distinguishes one identity from another." Yet notions of difference need not be defined by the majority culture, Trinh insists. As feminists we need a critical practice that considers both identity and difference.

≡ Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference ≡

To raise the question of identity is to reopen again the discussion on the self/other relationship in its enactment of power relations. Identity as understood in the context of a certain ideology of dominance has long been a notion that relies on the concept of an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one's consciousness and that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, that is to say, not-I, other. In such a concept the other is almost unavoidably either opposed to the self or submitted to the self's dominance. It is always condemned to remain its shadow while attempting at being its equal. Identity, thus understood, supposes that a clear dividing line can be made between I and not-I, he and she: between depth and surface, or vertical and horizontal identity; between us here and them over there. The further one moves from the core the less likely one is thought to be capable of fulfilling one's role as the real self, the real Black, Indian or Asian, the real woman. The search for an identity is, therefore, usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted or Westernized.