

ALL THE PIECES MATTER: FRAGMENTATION-AS-  
AGENCY IN THE NOVELS OF EDWIDGE DANTICAT,  
MICHELLE CLIFF, AND SHANI MOOTOO

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## Introduction

The fragmented bodies and lives of postcolonial Caribbean women examined in Caribbean literature beget struggle and psychological ruin. The characters portrayed in novels by postcolonial Caribbean writers Edwidge Danticat, Michelle Cliff, and Shani Mootoo are marginalized as “Other” by a Western patriarchal discourse that works to silence them because of their gender, color, class, and sexuality. Marginalization participates in the act of fragmentation of these characters because it challenges their sense of identity. Fragmentation means fractured; in terms of these fictive characters, fragmentation results from multiple traumas, each trauma causing another break in their wholeness. Postcolonial scholars have identified the causes and effects of fragmentation on the postcolonial subject, and they argue one’s need to heal because of it. Danticat, Cliff, and Mootoo prove that wholeness is not possible for the postcolonial Caribbean woman, so rather than ruminate on that truth, they examine the journey of the postcolonial Caribbean woman as a way of making meaning of the *pieces* of her life. Thus, I contend that fragmentation – and the *fracture* it produces – does not bind these women to negative existences; in fact, the female subjects of Danticat, Cliff, and Mootoo locate power in their fragmentation. All three authors challenge society’s normative practices, placing gender at the center of their works. Cliff and Mootoo also examine the identity politics of the Queer subject, which I will explore; however, my focus will remain on women. In this project, I will conduct close readings of each novel to allow for individual explorations of each character as well as discuss what connects them. First, I will examine the ways in which Caribbean women have been silenced and marginalized by a colonial patriarchy and/or the residue of that system in a *postcolonial*

society. Second, I will prove that they use their fragmentation in such a society to fight back against their oppressors and create new spaces in which to locate authentic identity.

In order to move forward with my assertions, I must identify those ambiguous terms that warrant explanation: Concepts such as “postcolonialism,” “feminism,” “safe space,” and “diaspora” play critical roles in this project. In literary theory, “postcolonial” references literature written by the colonized, typically in order to expose the patriarchal, European domination of these colonized locations and peoples. Thus, postcolonial theory identifies a binary relationship: the white Westerner (the colonizer) v. “the other,” (the colonized) (Bressler 236). Postcolonial authors “write back” in the sense that they use their words to challenge European representations as universal: they move their characters from the center – where their voice is silenced by Western dominance – to the margin, where they possess the power to question and expose colonial practices, and finally, seek identity in relation to place. Postcolonial theory, then, asserts that the other shares his/her experience from the margin. The margin becomes a point of contention for theorists like Homi K. Bhabha, who argues in *The Location of Culture* that this liminal space actually allows for a merging of cultures and identities; therefore, the margin no longer represents *only* the other but the potential for many others and their cultural experiences. Feminist authors also complicate “postcolonial,” positing that it excludes some of the fundamental realities of colonial power in the Caribbean, particularly in the last half-century. For hundreds of years, Europe (particularly the countries of England, France, and Spain) dominated the island nations of the Caribbean, but foreign control has shifted. As Carole Boyce Davies posits, “...it is the United States of America which is the colonial power, not Europe as a generation of writers had alleged” (*Black Women,*

*Writing and Identity* 25). Furthermore, “postcolonialism” suggests a movement by the colonized to “reshape cultural codes and structures influenced by the colonizer” (Boyce Davies 81), which certainly is valid, but it “assumes that the formerly colonized have no basis for identity outside the colonizers’ definitions” (Boyce Davies 81). And what about the nations who still are struggling with colonial power? In a *postcolonial* world, are they rendered invisible? In order to adequately use this complicated term, it is necessary to find a workable space for it. For the purposes of my thesis, I will use postcolonialism to reference that moment when these Caribbean countries begin to break from colonial archetypes in an effort to become sovereign and work to locate a home history. As Boyce Davies and Monica Jardine advance, “the emancipatory journey must depend on the cultivation of deeper ancestral roots with Africa or India or Native America in order to return home” (“Imperial Geographies” 156). For the postcolonial feminist writer, this moment affords an opportunity to create spaces for the marginalized in society, particularly women.

Colonial patriarchies silenced women by making them insignificant; postcolonial literature challenges Western-as-center by exploring and giving voice to ‘irrelevant’ notions such as feminist thought. In its broadest terms, feminism is a movement advocating social, political, and economical equality of the sexes. Feminist thought, as explored in literature, challenges the Western patriarchal voice as representative of the whole. In “Dancing through the Minefield,” feminist critic Annette Kolodny writes, “What unites and repeatedly invigorates feminist literary criticism...is neither dogma nor method but an acute and impassioned attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance...” (20). In

the 20<sup>th</sup> century, feminist writers planted their feet in literary criticism, arguing that one must actively resist, rather than assent to, Western patriarchal influence. The feminist critic's goal was, “not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read” (Judith Fetterley qtd. by Bressler 168). Their work is critical to the notion of resistance as a means to empower disenfranchised women. But the voices of the feminist movement traditionally have been white, middle-class women; thus, their resistance represents white, middle-class needs. Chandra Talpade Mohanty complicates feminism as a movement that separates the “hegemonic Westerner” from the “Third World feminist” (17). Mohanty asserts that one's conventional understanding of “feminism” has been projected through a Western (and, particularly, a U.S.) lens: “[The] ‘Third World Woman’ – [is] an image that appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse” (19). She presents the absolute need to differentiate the experiences – thus, political, social, and economical needs – of the Caribbean woman. Mohanty's argument guides my thesis in that it orders the “Third World Woman” as a *concept* rather than a human being; therefore, rendering this Caribbean woman silent. Feminism, then, is not a collective crossing. Mohanty makes a salient argument, particularly in terms of the representation of the third world woman *by* the “privileged” group (22), as the privileged group sets the norms for the marginalized, third world group. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert writes on the subject of Caribbean feminism “It is commonplace...to speak of our history, our literature, the quality of our feminism...as if we constituted a homogenous block, an undivided, unfragmented, and unfragmentable entity...” (Paravisini-Gebert 3). In a postcolonial time, it is essential to



explore the distinct, individual experiences of Caribbean women not as a “homogenous” group but with a “true knowledge of the historical and material conditions responsible for women’s choices and strategies in the region” (Paravisini-Gebert). In her work *Framing Silence*, Myriam J.A. Chancy argues that third world feminist literature “*reconceives* approaches to literature arising out of the feminine Caribbean” (6, italics my own). Chancy writes of Haitian women writers specifically, but her assertions are relevant to the Caribbean woman writer anywhere. The feminist literature produced is “revolutionary” (Chancy 6) in that it “contest[s] the regimented view of Haitian history that has denied female existence,” and this literature demands a “radical re-reading of Haitian culture that re-draws the parameters of current post-colonial criticism...in order to forge a distinct space for Haitian women’s voices” (7). Chancy writes that the “re-drawing of parameters” among Caribbean women writers creates the possibility for a different space, not only in literature but in the real world, apart from Western patriarchal force. For these women characters, space is physical and psychological. Her physical space is her current country and the smaller place she occupies within that country. Space, though, does not mean *home*, in that home implies security. When physical space is disrupted, she fractures. Her psychological space requires a real sense of safety, which she does not often have because of her fragmented existence. What seems most important for these women is a sense of space/place *psychologically*. Where do they belong? How do they belong? Their traumas demand a re-thinking of what it means to belong to a safe space, so finding that in their psyche is part of their individual journey. Safe space, then, must become something of their own making. Safe spaces don’t exist for these women in terms of their existences before they begin their journeys. I contend

that a safe space becomes the creation (or attempted creation) by a fragmented woman when she begins acting in response to her fragmentation. To that end, *home* and *safe space* bear the same meaning because the terms require one's sense of security. A safe space directly connects to the female subjects' birthplaces, literally the land itself. Thus, these female subjects' fragmentation presents an opportunity for them to "self-define"

(6). Danticat, Cliff, and Mootoo fight against the traditional, colonial, patriarchal images of third world women by creating characters who seek to construct their own spaces and define their individual experiences relative to their distinct homelands. They work against the idea of the white man as "authoritative," work against the idea of *any* man as authoritative, and examine the ways in which women (and marginalized "others") "self-govern" (Mohanty 59). Self-governing will be explored vis-à-vis these characters' individual acts of resistance against a patriarchal system. Still, a fundamental issue for my research focuses on what comprises a safe space, for self-definition cannot happen when one's security is jeopardized.

Just as "postcolonial" and "feminism" are problematic terms, so is "space," particularly for a marginalized subject. The idea of "space" presupposes a sense of home – the notion of shelter and sanctuary. For the confined subject, "home" is a construct of patriarchal and colonial ideals; therefore, home is nowhere, really. Because the colonial patriarchy determines who is entitled to a central space (the colonial elite) and who must be pushed to the margins (the third world Caribbean subject), the characters examined in this project flee their diasporic birthplace to become part of the extended diaspora. They do this as an act of resistance against the system and also as an act of self-help. I intend to use "diaspora" in the context of displacement but also as a "representative home"

(Walters xvi). In other words, while one's birthplace serves as a place of origin, her "plurilocal, constructed" home (Walters xvi) becomes a space for her journey, allowing for new experiences that strengthen her desire to return to the Caribbean. Such a return, though, means constructing safe spaces according to her own rules. The Caribbean subject returns and refuses to go back to the margin. Instead, as Chancy contends, she constructs a new center that does not participate in a "binary" (18); that is to say, her center does not reside in *either* her homeland *or* the diaspora, subordinate to the rules of a patriarchy. Instead, the marginalized subject forges a *new* central space through which she may explore and accept her *fragmentation* (18) (italics mine). Thus, "place" becomes a construct as much as a physical location. And the notion of fragmentation for the marginalized Caribbean subject is an issue which I posit may be empowering in a post-colonial space.

In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall reinforces the argument that the Caribbean subject's existence is always in flux. He writes, "...we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (234). His argument supports my contention that the marginalized Caribbean woman is *fragmented*; her complicated existence exacts the consideration of many elements – class, race, sexuality, colorism. Her work to construct a safe space – therefore, her own sense of self – is an act of performance. Through the characters presented in Danticat, Cliff, and Mootoo's texts, the Caribbean woman begins to struggle with the notion of marginalized identity in her birthplace. As she grows older – often in these texts, when she enters puberty – her safety is jeopardized. She becomes the potential object of interest and violation for

lurking men. She becomes a sort of cadaver for her mother's hands; she must be "tested" to reassure her mother that she remains pure. Ultimately, she escapes the homeland to enter the diaspora, ostensibly for safer, better opportunities in which to begin to establish who she is. Leaving her birthplace is an act of resistance against the normative practices of the homeland. However, her journey proves to be complicated because she exists in the margins of the diaspora, as well.

The first chapter will examine Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Farming of Bones*. The female characters' journeys in these texts reveal gendered violence, perpetuated by a corrupt political system, indicative of the Haitian woman's experience. Thus, as Haitian-born Chancy argues, "[t]he creation of identity in the face of imperialist and colonial oppression begins with the transmutation of the personal into the creative...Haitian women writers have...created a space within the parameters of the genre that redefines national identity in terms of the personal" (qtd. by Suarez 19). Danticat accomplishes precisely what Chancy contends: she creates identity for the nameless, faceless Haitian women who have silently suffered the same violence as the characters in her texts. Paravisini-Gebert's assertion that oppressed Caribbean women's specific, local realities must be understood will function as a central framework within this chapter, too, so that each character's choices may be understood within the context of her individual experiences. Danticat's female subjects give credence to the struggles of disenfranchised women in Haiti, a place where sexual violence and political corruption, in particular, dwell at its center.

Haiti's complicated and paradoxical existence has created tension for its people. Danticat bears witness to that tension through her characters, and for many of her female

subjects, that force hides deeper truths of sexual violence or the palpable fear of sexual violence (I am referencing, in particular, “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc” Duvalier’s personal police force called the *Tonton Macoutes* that systematically raped poor Haitian women in order to maintain fear and submission as part of their government rule). Oftentimes, Danticat’s characters must begin the process of confronting their pain *away* from the homeland, as evidenced by the migration to New York of Martine Caco who later calls for her twelve-year-old daughter Sophie (in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*) or Amabelle’s escape from the Dominican Republic’s massacre of tens of thousands of Haitians in 1937 (*The Farming of Bones*). Adlai Murdoch writes that this displaced woman “undergoes both physical and mental suffering symbolic of...her affective displacement from her...place of origin” (142). He goes on to ask “whether this is an adequate price to pay for the separation and the prejudices that are part and parcel of exile” (142). I argue that the price is necessary, even inevitable, for the woman in exile. While her fragmentation begins in her homeland, she becomes further fragmented – divided into parts – between her homeland and her adopted land because of the absence of anything familiar in this new place. The fracturing must occur if she is to survive her trauma, conquer its ugliness, and return to her homeland with a re-constructed sense of self and home.

The second chapter focuses on Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* as texts that, like Danticat’s works, show fragmentation as a powerful means to resistance. However, Cliff challenges the normative practices of her Jamaican home by presenting women who work to locate their identity through the strength of other women via lesbian relationships. Moreover, she reveals homosexuals (Mad Hannah’s son) and

transvestites (Harry/Harriet) who suffer in the grip of a homophobic culture. Indeed, Cliff's characters rebel against heteronormative practices, refusing to participate in the "norms of acceptable [Caribbean] literature," which include a "hero [who] should be male, of peasant origins," and a "brave and hardworking woman [who] should be the auxiliary in his struggle for his community" (Maryse Conde qtd. by O'Driscoll 59). Clare Savage, the protagonist of Cliff's works, inherits the "rebel consciousness" (Thorington Springer *A Rebel Consciousness*) of her female ancestors, forces of nature like Nanny the Maroon warrior or Mma Alli the warrior slave and medicine woman. All three characters share a profound connectedness to the land, the pureness of a Jamaica before colonial capture, and this connectedness to the landscape is an issue I want to unravel in this chapter. Clare's return to Jamaica in *No Telephone to Heaven* is a journey back to the land, specifically her grandmother's property. She wants to re-claim it, cultivate it, and return it to the poor and disenfranchised who were its rightful inheritors before colonialism took possession. In other words, she works to "heal" a space wounded first by a colonial patriarchy and then by a relentless tourist industry. The healing sounds hopeful, but with a critical eye, Cliff questions if this is possible in a postcolonial, tourist-queled Jamaica. Clare's hope for the land seems to be an attempt to "set the record straight" (Thorington Springer 91) historically and personally. As Thorington Springer asserts, "It is imperative that [Cliff] deploys women's presence and participation in building Caribbean nations" (91) in order to write them back into a history of which they are an inextricable part. Race and class issues also pervade Cliff's texts. Clare is a bi-racial Jamaican (like Cliff herself); her identity as a young woman seems "in flux," as she tries to negotiate a safe space somewhere between her father's

proud insistence on her whiteness and her mother's passive but powerful reminders of her blackness. Clare's frustrated, fragmented identity signifies the volatile, disunited history of Jamaica, and what is particularly weighty about her journey – which is, then, the journey of her island – is that it ends violently. Unlike Danticat's works, which encourage a sense of hope for the characters and the nation, *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* inculcate a sense of dread. Cliff's point seems clear: with resistance comes violence. As Jamaica becomes a playground for Americans, Cliff reveals a post-colonial space assaulted again by greed. Violence pervades the lives of the female characters, and their actions often are a response to it as a means to locate power, not only for themselves but for Jamaica. Clare's contradictions (she is, for instance, bi-racial), and her acceptance of her fragmentation as a result, are part of her resistance against Jamaica's violent history.

Like Cliff and Danticat, Shani Mootoo exposes the violence that is reality for the marginalized women who exist in the Caribbean, but she creates imaginary spaces to deal with this violence. Consequently, she breaks free from the “safer spaces” of language employed by Danticat, and at times, Cliff. In her essay “Resurgence and Resistance in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” Patricia Donatien-Yssa writes, “Shani Mootoo is one of the most unsettling of the new generation of Caribbean writers” (93). Perhaps it is because of her “unsettling” work that Mootoo positions her characters in the fictitious spaces of Lantanacalara (*Cereus Blooms at Night*) and Guanagaspar (*He Drown She in the Sea*); creating imaginary islands (“safe spaces” from which to propel uncomfortable language) allows Mootoo to expose her island of Trinidad. Like her characters, her stories are fragmented, told by various voices in order to “e[voke]...individual dramas

and... the collective suffering endured by deported labourers during the colonial period of Trinidad” (Donatien-Yssa 94). In this context, the Indo-Caribbean man experiences emasculation; no matter how he tries to mimic his British counterpart, he will never be good enough. Women bear the burden of their men’s frustration, thus, relationships become fractured by violence and overwhelming unhappiness. Mootoo devises two outcomes to this familial dysfunction.

In both novels, Mootoo “penetrate[s] the familial intimacy to treat the collective drama from inside, through individual stories and allegoric projections” (Donatien-Yssa 96). I find this observation particularly constructive for my thesis, as it intimates the image of the female body being “penetrated” by a colonial and post-colonial patriarchy. The silenced Caribbean woman, forced to the periphery by the patriarchy, talks back. Because the story is told “from the inside,” it becomes personal, palpable. One imagines the female body telling her story and her island’s story. Her struggle (Mala in *Cereus* and Rose in *He Drown She*) embodies the struggle of her people who also have been pierced by the system of colonialism. Donatien-Yssa suggests that Mala, in particular, “becomes the body on which pain [historical and familial] is inflicted” (97). Mala’s acts of resistance throughout the text are much more violent than Rose’s, but each woman’s performance “breaks the kumbla” (Donatien-Yssa 97) and refuses silence. In their work *Out of the Kumbla*, Carol Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido identify the broken kumbla (a type of gourd) as a metaphor for the Caribbean woman refusing to be silenced as a means of resistance. In *Cereus*, Mootoo reveals her characters through a narrator totally unlike those in the works of Danticat or Cliff: Tyler, a transvestite nurse, becomes the voice for a seemingly senseless Mala, an old woman who has turned inward and



stopped speaking to survive the horrific sexual trauma in her life. Mootoo clearly challenges the norms of gender. First, she defies the conventionally female role of nurse by assigning it to a man. Then she writes Tyler as a transvestite, ostensibly arguing that the island's *true* story can only be told by a voice that is sexually ambiguous. Thus, Tyler's Queerness represents *his* fragmentation.

*He Drown She in the Sea* emerges as a more "hopeful" text, at least in terms of its protagonists and lovers Rose and Harry. Mootoo represents gender norms and performances here, using the sea as a metaphor for what Diana Brydon deems "disturbance" (105). Because I am focusing on fragmentation as a means of resistance, Mootoo's application of the sea as a way to disrupt normative practices, create fragmentation, even "remap utopian desire for a different kind of world" (Brydon 97) is especially significant. Like *Cereus*, *He Drown She* studies gender practices from the inside out. Brydon observes that "Mootoo seems to imply official and unofficial violence stem from inequalities that can only be addressed from the ground up, through revising male-female relations at the level of the couple" (107). "Breaking out of the kumbla," then, must begin at the level of the individual. My work will examine how these individual women exact that fight in order to create safe physical and psychological spaces.

I have ordered my chapters in an attempt to create a sort of continuum for feminist Caribbean resistance. This is not to say – by any means – that one author's works are less or more forceful than another's in advocating change. There are fundamental similarities and differences among the works, and they warrant analysis. Each author has carved out her own "safe space" in which to write; I contend that

Danticat's space, for instance, obeys parameters that Cliff's does not. Likewise, I argue that Mootoo's safe space challenges boundaries in ways that Cliff's does not. But all three women present fragmentation as reality for the post-colonial female subject. Indeed, fragmentation empowers these characters to fight back and create new, re-visioned spaces for themselves and the generations of women to follow.

**Chapter One: Trauma that Fragments in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Farming of Bones***

the poem at the end of the world  
is the poem the little girl breathes  
into her pillow the one  
she cannot tell the one  
there is no one to hear this poem  
is a political poem is a war poem is a  
universal poem but is not about  
these things this poem  
is about one human heart this poem  
is the poem at the end of the world  
---from Lucille Clifton's "Shapeshifter Poems"

In a lecture at Butler University in February, 2010, Haitian author Edwidge Danticat recounted the devastation of the earthquake that ravaged her home country just weeks earlier. While she was living in Miami when the earthquake hit, she immediately returned to Haiti to help friends and family begin to recover from the devastation. She remarked at how quickly artists began creating (drawings appeared on tents all around) within the makeshift communities that overwhelmed the capital city of Port-au-Prince. There was an urgent need for hope then; that same need for hope drives writers like Danticat who create characters rising from tragedy. The characters' journeys, like the art on the tent communities, are a means of hope. She acknowledged her need to leave her home country because of the traumas that would hold her there otherwise: in considering her choice's deeper meaning, she remarked, "Perhaps as writers we leave to console ourselves." *Leaving* – and returning – shapes my reading of Danticat's texts *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Farming of Bones*. Danticat's home history (thus, her texts' history) belongs "to an immemorial matrifocal tradition of Haitian storytellers- daughters and avatars of the Indian queen-poetess Anacaona – the linchpin of whose praxis is the mother-island Haiti" (Harbawi 38). Harbawi's discussion of these "daughters and avatars

of Anacaona” evokes an image of women survivors who, like Danticat, tell their stories to heal and honor the women who journeyed before them. Through the myth of Anacaona, women become empowered; through the telling of her story, they practice resistance and transcendence. Danticat participates in this rebellious tradition by “testifying,” within her novels, which she explained in her lecture is a “traumatic healing.”

Danticat’s first novel, *Breath Eyes, Memory*, tells the story of a young girl’s immigration from Haiti to New York City. While Sophie’s emotional and physical journey typifies the Haitian immigrant experience in the United States, it also reveals the secrets of a family’s history. Violence – specifically sexual violence – exists at its core and permanently shapes the female characters of the text. Haitian-born writer and professor Myriam J.A. Chancy argues, “[t]he creation of identity in the face of imperialist and colonial oppression begins with the transmutation of the personal into the creative...Haitian women writers have...created...a space within the parameters of the genre that redefines national identity in terms of the personal” (*Framing Silence* 6). Danticat’s story explores one family of women, the Caco’s, whose experiences within turbulent Haiti result in rape, pregnancy, escape, post-traumatic stress, and finally, suicide. While *Breath, Eyes, Memory* often becomes a painful journey for the reader, it is also a personal one, and Danticat accomplishes precisely what Chancy contends: she creates identity for the nameless, faceless Haitian women who have silently suffered the same violence. Through the Caco family story, Danticat works to liberate the psychologically shackled *real life* women who have quietly survived their histories. To understand the history of Haiti and the strength and struggle of its mothers, I will explore

how the characters within the text *contain* the violence they experience and how Danticat interprets her characters' suffering. The implications of their individual journeys reveal a powerful truth: trauma manifests itself in people in profoundly different ways. Likewise, the Caco women confront their fragmented identities differently, and their experiences – traumatic and triumphant – instigate the need to search for one's true self, but finding her often has permanent consequences.

Home and religion reinforce the stringent control of Haitian women's sexuality even as they are often sexually abused. Haiti's history exists in almost perpetual chaos. After the Europeans' decimation of the native Arawak tribe of the island, kidnapped African slaves were brought over to work the land's precious resources. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the slaves rebelled against their European captors and won, becoming the first independent black nation in the world. From that time forward, Haiti has emblemized the power of revolution. While the country's spirit certainly is admirable, its government has been fraught with corruption and violence. With corrupt leaders, military coups, and near-consummate poverty, Haitians do not know safety as a reality. Unfortunately (though not surprisingly), the women of Haiti have borne the burden of a particular savagery, initiated and maintained by men, and largely accepted by the bourgeois culture, of politically-motivated sexual violence. The notorious "Papa Doc" Duvalier, who ruled Haiti from 1957-1971, instituted the *Tonton Macoutes* – a ruthless gang of "secret police" who roamed the streets with their machetes and whose brand of violence included the rapes of countless women – who terrorized the Haitian people for decades. As Danticat reveals,

When they [the *Macoutes*] entered a house, they asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom.

Then all you heard was screams until it was her daughter's turn. If a mother refused, they would make her sleep with her son and brother or even her own father (139).

This brutality has a strategy: to threaten and intimidate any individual or group which fights for the democratic rights of Haitian women. Ultimately, women must confront the fight alone; the government certainly will not protect them. The concept of home, then, is profoundly complex for the women of Danticat's text. Haiti-as-home is a reality denied them because of the government's inveterate sexism. For too many Haitian women, it is a dark and dirty street where, lurking in the shadows, a *Macoute* waits. Yet, Haiti is the nation of their ancestors. Chancy argues that, "The language of the ancestors, which grows increasingly difficult to access, is the key to each woman's freedom" (*Framing Silence* 121). This language dwells in the Vodun goddess *Erzulie*; the force of this female protector ostensibly becomes less relevant to Haiti as a colonial patriarchy, and its Christian tenets, overshadow her existence.

Haiti possesses many contradictions. On the one hand, it is run by men who have perpetuated the idea that women are property, sexual objects to be taken. On the other, it has survived *because* of women, the myriad mothers of the island. This conflict – what *does* Haiti represent? – contributes to the identity crisis of the characters in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. I posit that "home" must represent *security*, physically and metaphorically, for the women in the novel. Myrtho Celestin-Sorel (a minister in Aristide's presidency) has remarked, "What is being a woman in Haiti? We have to be women in a society of deprivation and poverty, of survival and misery, of repression and corruption," (qtd. by Charles). Therefore, if these characters are to locate *home*, they must create a new space.

Resistance often results from a woman's traumatic experience in her homeland; in other words, she *resists* the normative practices of her homeland by leaving it. Martine, the narrator's (Sophie) mother, is one of the Caco women desperately searching for a safe space to shape a new identity. At sixteen, she was raped by a masked man, probably a *Tonton Macoute*, and became pregnant with Sophie. After she gives birth, she immigrates to New York by herself, ostensibly to begin a better life, where her daughter will eventually join her. Martine secures work, becomes involved with Marc Chevalier, a fellow Haitian immigrant who is an attorney, and sends money regularly to her family in their village of Croix-des-Rosets. Then one day, she sends for Sophie. Martine certainly wants to establish a relationship with her daughter; indeed, she has been preparing for it for years. When she first sees Sophie at the airport, she says, "I cannot believe that I am looking at you... You are my little girl. You are here" (Danticat 41). However, what Martine *really* is looking at is not her daughter, but the man who raped her in the cane fields, as witnessed by Sophie during her first night in New York: "Later that night, I heard that... voice screaming as though someone was trying to kill her... I shook her and finally woke her up. When she saw me, she quickly covered her face with her hands and turned away" (Danticat 48). Sophie's face *is* the rapist's face. While rape is a profoundly traumatic experience for any victim, for Haitian women like Martine, there is nowhere to turn for justice. The system silences women with threats of further violence and protects the men who perpetrate the crimes. So, Martine fled the place that meant danger for her. Sophie's arrival in New York *cannot* mean happiness for her mother because she has not begun to heal from her psychological wounds. Suarez posits, "In the United states, Martine lives outside the real world and in the suppressed memory of the

traumatic event” (75). The past controls her present life and invades not only her existence but her daughter’s. Sophie is Martine’s daily reminder of the rape. Likewise, Martine’s trauma has robbed her of any sense of control over her body, so she works to control Sophie’s body instead.

Often, victims become perpetrators, particularly if they have not confronted the trauma of their past. In her text *Framing Silence*, Chancy argues this point: “Danticat demonstrates...the *extent to which the subjugation of women* led to one mother’s sexual oppression of her own daughter” (122). Martine’s suffering is transferred to Sophie when Martine begins “testing” her. While it is difficult to find documentation of this age-old practice of a mother’s confirming her daughter’s virginity by inserting her finger into her daughter’s vagina, Danticat’s characters testify that it is a practice passed through the generations. Prospective Haitian brides are desirable only if their chastity can be proved; the explicit message is that their worth entirely depends upon their virginity, which belongs not to them but to the men who choose them. A woman’s purity is so pivotal an issue that if a man discovers his new bride is *not* a virgin, he can resort to grave actions to avoid the shame. Danticat shares the tale of a man who, after discovering that his new bride is not a virgin because she did not bleed on the sheets, cuts her between her legs to make her bleed. He is able to save himself the embarrassment of not being able to hang out the bloody sheets for his neighbors to see, but the woman’s blood “flowed so much it wouldn’t stop” and she dies (155). In her article “Silences Too Horrific to Disturb,” Donette A. Francis writes, “The emphasis placed on the public display of evidence of a girl’s virginity illustrates the ways in which women’s bodies are used to service male desires” (83). A woman’s chastity, then, is her worth. Martine does to Sophie what was



done to her because Sophie's best hope, from Martine's perspective, is to find a man who can provide a life for her. Just as Martine's mother tested her to ensure her daughter's future, Martine inherits that same obligation. She tells Sophie, "The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure" (60-61). For Martine, the practice of "testing" is the burden she inherits for giving birth to a daughter, and it is the only way she knows to secure a life for her as an adult. Martine's violation of Sophie may also be her subconscious punishment for her daughter – Sophie's face is her daily reminder of her rape. While "testing" is a convenient word for what is really happening – sexual abuse – Martine's traumatic experiences have only ever represented to her that her body belongs to someone else. Therefore, she believes her daughter's body must remain pure until it becomes the property of a man. Neither woman, then, possesses her own self.

As I have contended, "home" is both a literal and metaphorical concept in the text. On the one hand, Martine and Sophie are searching for a physical space to make their own. Particularly because the creation of a "home" is traditionally associated with women, each of these characters internalizes the guilt of being unable to produce such a space. On the other hand, "home" is the symbolic space of a woman herself – a dwelling that is entirely her own. It is her identity. Martine leaves her ancestral home of Croix-des-Rosets to establish a new life in Brooklyn because she believes that physical space constitutes a safer existence. However, her home in Brooklyn is never *really* hers, either. She "simply carries her pain," (Lyons 196) rather than seek help to work through it. Thus, she cannot reclaim her body – her identity – in order to make a physical space for herself and Sophie. Suarez observes that Martine's "abrupt and violent move – from

innocence to responsibility, from childhood to adulthood, from life in her country with her family to life in the diaspora far from her family – shapes every aspect of Martine’s life and her daughter’s,” (75). For Sophie, New York is never home. She is forced to move there when her mother calls for her, and she has little emotional support once she arrives. Yet, Haiti bears its own scars – it is, after all, the site of her mother’s rape and her consequent conception, the site of her mother’s spiritual death. Haiti is the place where Martine gives birth to her and “abruptly moves.” Furthermore, Sophie’s metaphorical home, her body, ceases to belong to her the moment Martine begins “testing.” To cope with the humiliation, she dissociates, and interestingly, so does Martine. Mother tells stories, and as Francis argues, this “doubling” (occupying a physical space but existing in a mental one) likely was her “survival strategy” during her own rape (83). Daughter remembers, “I had learned to *double* while being *tested*. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known” (Danticat 155). For Sophie, this dissociation comes with a price. After she can take no more of her mother’s sexual abuse, she rapes herself with a pestle so that her mother will believe she has slept with a man and stop violating her. Sophie then marries Joseph, her musician boyfriend who certainly is not a dangerous choice, as sometimes victims’ partners are, but her decision is an impulsive one. Just as Martine left Haiti in search of a home, Sophie leaves her mother to find “home” with someone else. Not surprisingly, she does not locate her identity with Joseph. Because of the trauma of her sexual abuse, she dissociates when they are intimate just as she did with Martine. Neither mother nor daughter possesses “a room of her own” because neither woman owns herself.

Danticat's exploration of the effects of sexual violence on women manifests itself in each character's most private space: her body. Neither Martine nor Sophie believes that her body is her own; therefore, each woman begins to abuse her own body as a way to punish it. Francis remarks that,

these acts of resistance [are] 'embodied protest' where a counterproductive action that has no voice manifests itself pathologically on the body. In the case of Martine and Sophie, they recognize that their bodies are the only entities over which they can exercise power. Hence, their forms of protest or resistance, however limited, are enacted on their own bodies (84).

Sophie's "embodied protest" (Bordo 175) begins when she rapes herself with a pestle. It continues as she develops bulimia, bingeing and then purging as a form of self-hate. It seems as if Sophie's bingeing is symbolic of her desire to find and make a space for herself, while her purging represents her guilt for possessing this need. In a poignant scene when Sophie has returned to Haiti with her baby daughter Brigitte, she prepares for a shower and examines herself: "Even though so much time had passed since I'd given birth, I still felt extremely fat. I peeled off Joseph's shirt and scrubbed my flesh with the leaves in the water. The stems left tiny marks on my skin, which reminded me of the giant goose bumps my mother's testing used to leave on my flesh" (Danticat 112). No matter what kind of physical pain she puts her body through (by denying it food or desperately scrubbing to emerge "clean"), her wounds still are raw. Likewise, Martine punishes her body by starving and physically abusing it ("At night, she tore her sheets and bit off pieces of her own flesh when she had nightmares" 139). These are the acts of someone suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, but for Martine, seeking help is impossible. She has been silenced by the rape – "he kept pounding her until she was unable to make a sound" (139) – and though she has been involved with the same man

for ten years, though she successfully has settled in a house and worked to pay her bills and send money to her family, she is utterly isolated. When Marc proposes marriage to Martine, she refuses, even though she eventually becomes pregnant with his child. Her emotional seclusion does not allow her to open up to the man who loves her because he is, first and *always*, a man. As Francis suggests, “Martine’s choice not to marry Marc Chevalier...shows her fear of entering into a patriarchal pact of any kind” (86). The kinds of physical and emotional damage each of these women do to themselves, though, cannot be sustained. I argue that these women eventually refuse to allow these violations, understanding that if they do, they will permanently sacrifice what is left of each of them. However, their decisions to confront their pain are profoundly different.

Sophie faces her pain through therapy. She joins a “sexual phobia group” (201) headed by a Santeria priestess. Unlike her mother, Sophie has not been silenced. In many ways, she has been fighting her demons for a long time, regardless of their consequences. She has rebelled by violating her body, marrying the man of her choice, promising her baby daughter never to hurt her in the way Caco mothers have hurt their daughters for generations. But her bravest act (yet) is telling the truth of her pain, literally using her voice in the way her mother could not, to reveal her history. Many female writers of Haiti and its diaspora deem this act “testifying.” In Beverly Bell’s text *Walking on Fire*, the voices of dozens of Haitian women are chronicled, and their testimonies are an act of healing. As one survivor attests: “Those who can’t speak are those who can’t eat. They can’t live, they can’t drink, they can’t breathe... These are the people I feel it’s necessary to stand with, to work with...help them speak out so they don’t suffocate with what’s inside them” (68).

Martine's trauma manifests itself into paranoia. When she discovers she is pregnant and Sophie asks if she will keep it, she admits, "Marc, he saves my life every night [by helping her through her nightmares], but I am afraid he gave me this baby that's going to take that life away...The nightmares...it's like getting raped every night. I can't keep this baby" (190). Later on she reveals to her daughter that she has begun to see her rapist in every man's face, as if he is a ghost – a *macoute* – lurking in the shadows (199). She finally tells Sophie, "I am going to get it out of me...It spoke to me. It has a man's voice, so now I know it's not a girl. I am going to get it out of me...Everywhere I go, I hear it. I hear him saying things to me...He calls me a filthy whore. I never want to see this child's face" (216-17). For Martine, the sexual trauma of her past, with which she has never dealt, has created a sort of psychological monster inside her body, where she has stored all of her fear and shame. She believes the rapist lives inside of her, haunting her with his words; the only way for her to confront him is to "get rid" of him. In her final desperate act, Martine takes a rusty knife and stabs her stomach seventeen times, killing herself and the monster inside. For her, finding identity means that she will have to become a victim again of the patriarchal system that will not protect her. Instead of sacrificing herself to such an entity, she kills herself. As Sophie remembers, "My mother was like that woman who could never bleed and then could never stop bleeding, the one who gave in to her pain, to live as a butterfly" (234).

Sophie's path to healing seems directed to the places, both literal and metaphorical, where her mother *could not* go. In her article "Memories of Home," Katherine M. Thomas notes, "Sophie can take the first step toward escape from neuroses only when she reclaims her homeland." Thus, she returns to Haiti to bury her mother and

confront the ghosts of her past. The night before the Caco women bury Martine, they gather to sing a wake song: “*Ring sways to Mother. Ring stays with Mother. Pass it. Pass it along. Pass Me. Pass Me Along*” (230). In this moment Sophie realizes what her journey must mean:

Listening to the song, I realized that it was neither my mother nor Tante Atie who had given all the mother-and-daughter motifs to all the stories they told and all the songs they sang. It was something that was essentially Haitian. Somehow, early on, our song makers and the tale weavers had decided that we were all daughters of this land (230).

If indeed Sophie is to become a daughter of Haiti, if she is to confront the trauma of her family’s past and honor her ancestors – the nameless mothers of Haiti – if she is to find a space for herself, she must return to the spot where the pain began. After the family buries Martine, she runs to the cane field, the site of her mother’s rape. Danticat writes:

I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding. The funeral crowd was now standing between the stalks, watching me beat and pound the cane. My grandmother held back priest as he tried to come for me. From where she was standing, my grandmother shouted... “*Ou Libere?*” Are you free? (233).

Sophie’s actions are a fitting response to her mother’s painful experience. In fact, Danticat uses the same language to describe each act: Sophie “pounds” the cane stalks, the keepers of Martine’s trauma, in the same way that her mother was raped. She fights back and bleeds like her mother did. But unlike her mother, who died because she could not beat back her demons, Sophie tears them down. The cane field held the painful secret of her mother’s past, and Sophie confronts it. Her “testimony” is her freedom. When her grandmother shouts, “*Ou Libere?*” (Are you free?), Sophie’s “yes” is the symbolic

reclaiming of her identity (233). Testimony as a means of shattering the silence and healing exists at the center of Danticat's characters' journeys.

### **The Power of Testimony: Witnessing in *The Farming of Bones***

*Bat teneb* – or testifying – is a traditional Haitian practice that means “to beat back the darkness” (Bell xiii); women have performed bat teneb through self-employment, immigration, secret codes of sisterhood, motherhood, artistic expression, education. This act of testifying becomes an essential part of the survivor's process to accept her pain and move forward with it as a part of her fragmentation. Testifying allows the survivor a space to acknowledge that her trauma is real and that it has worth. Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* uses testimony as a means to examine Haiti's historical sacrifice for the Dominican Republic. A continuously impoverished Haiti has been exploited by European powers like France, which required the newly sovereign nation to pay (money it did not have) in order to be recognized as independent. The Dominican Republic has been able to capitalize upon a desperate Haiti by using its citizens to work the cane fields of the DR. A profound color divide also pervades the two nations: The DR's lighter skinned inhabitants look down upon Haiti's (and the DR) darker skinned people. The novel's exploration of the splitting of one land mass (Haiti and the Dominican Republic) as a metaphor for the protagonist Amabelle's fragmented identity is essential to my reading of the text, as well. These concepts contribute to my understanding of Amabelle's search for selfhood and making peace with her fragmented identity.

Like many Haitians, Amabelle spends most of her life in the Dominican Republic, serving those lighter-skinned Dominicans who claim superiority over their darker

neighbors. Her memories of Haiti are slight, as she lost her mother and father – and motherland – as a young child. When she recalls her short childhood in her motherland, she often revisits moments when her parents moved among their fellow Haitians, birthing babies and treating the sick. Amabelle proudly serves the memory of her parents when she helps birth the twins of her mistress Valencia. While Rafi's (the son) birth is difficult – “the baby stopped coming forward and lay at the near end of the birth canal, as though it had suddenly changed its mind and decided not to leave” (8) – Rosalinda's birth almost proves fatal. The umbilical cord remains wrapped around her neck and a caul smothers her face (10-11). Both Amabelle and Rosalinda are connected from this moment; their dark skin (representative of Haiti) and quiet strength emblemize the sacrifice of Haitians for the success of the Dominican Republic. Amabelle (“Haiti”) serves Valencia (“Dominican Republic”) faithfully, helping birth children who will grow to pledge their allegiance to the Generalissimo. Likewise, baby Rosalinda, the darker of the twins (“Haiti”), nearly died at the hands of her light-skinned brother (“Dominican Republic”), while struggling, “as if the other one tried to strangle her” (19). Unlike Rosalinda, though, Amabelle must escape the Dominican Republic in order to survive.

After the births, the doctor remarks to Amabelle, “...sometimes you have two children born at the same time; one is stillborn but the other one alive and healthy because the dead one gave the other a life transfusion in the womb and in essence sacrificed itself” (19). One land that became two serves as the metaphor here: Haiti has “given its life” for the betterment of its twin, the Dominican Republic. So, while Haiti and the Dominican Republic share *one* land mass, the existence of each people proves profoundly different. For many Dominicans, especially those with lighter skin, life does



not present day-to-day struggle. For Haitians, survival is the bottom line. The Dominican Republic's dictator Trujillo's massacre of approximately 15,000 Haitians in 1937 underscores this reality. While no conclusive explanation exists for why the massacre was ordered, in October of 1937, Trujillo's military, armed with machetes, slaughtered ethnic Haitians living and working in the Dominican Republic (Derby and Turits 137). The savagery of the massacre became known as "El Corte," or "the cutting" (Derby and Turits 139). One survivor's account reveals of Trujillo's army: "'They make us stand in lines of six on the edge of a cliff.... Then they come back to the truck to get more. They have six jump over the cliff, then another six, then another six, then another six'" (173). The systematic massacre, the ostensible *order* of these slayings that the survivor recounts, opposes what Amy Novak argues is the "effort to narrate the supposed 'unrepresentability' of trauma" because it "fragments and contorts... contemporary novels of historical trauma" (94) and "challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, *of impossibility*" (Caruth 10). The text itself, like the land mass, is divided into two parts: a sort of linear account of the massacre, told in the first person, and a much more indeterminate narrative (signified by bold print text) which reads like a "traumatic wave," gathering strength and bursting forth and then retreating again. But this is the nature of trauma. It does not recognize order; rather, it emerges in fragments that the survivor must learn to make sense of in order to move forward. In both of Danticat's texts, the woman's body becomes a physical space for the trauma to unravel.

Amabelle's "narrative attests to how trauma is inscribed not only on her body, but also *in* her body, producing a spectral memory that continues to haunt the present.... It is her body that bears the record of the past, and the story it tells is not seamless but

disfigured, flawed, even imperfect” (Novak 102-3). As Novak’s article continues to explore, voicelessness overcomes Amabelle in moments when the physical space of her body bears the brunt of the violence: ““her chipped and cracked teeth kept snapping against the mush of the open flesh inside [her] mouth. All the pain of first being struck came back to [her]”” (Danticat qtd. by Novak 103-4). Amabelle’s trauma fragments into what she feels (on her body) and what she voices (from her memory).

Amabelle ultimately returns to Haiti during the slaughter, but *goes back to* the river that runs between the two nations, goes back to the one place that carries both of her histories: her ancestry and beginnings in Haiti and her formative and young adult years in the Dominican Republic. At the end of the novel, she floats in the Massacre River, a metaphor for her claiming her fragmented identity as a woman of two worlds. The description of her return to the river is ambiguous in that she undresses before getting into the water, perhaps emblematic of a coming into this world naked and leaving it naked. Amabelle’s systematic folding of her dress “piece by piece” and laying it down also suggests a ritual before suicide (Danticat 310). What is certain is that in this act of returning to the site of the trauma, she uses her fragmentation as agency to reclaim the space. Amabelle’s “testimony” on this last page speaks to Danitcat’s own commitment to *bat teneb*. As a writer, she uses her words to resist silence. She continues to speak of the violence in her homeland and the strength of the women who endure it because she knows that testifying as an act of resistance is also a fundamental act of transcendence. The purpose of Sophie and Amabelle’s journeys is *not* to make the fragments whole; as Cliff and Mootoo’s works also will prove, this is not a necessary aim. Rather, their

leaving and returning to the sites of trauma – Sophie to the cane field and Amabelle to the river – signifies the powerful choice each woman makes to re-claim the space.

## Chapter Two: Radical Rebellion in Cliff's *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*

“Migration is a one way trip. There is no ‘home’ to go back to. There  
never was.”  
---Stuart Hall

Traditional Caribbean literature typically examines themes of identity crisis and coming-of-age, and *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* work to unravel these issues too; however, Michelle Cliff offers a new perspective on these issues by writing her women characters at the center of the texts, an unusual space for Caribbean women characters who oftentimes exist on the periphery of male-dominated texts. Caribbean writer Maryse Conde asserts that “norms of acceptable [Caribbean] literature” include a “hero [who] should be the auxiliary in his struggle for his community” (156). If one expects to examine Caribbean literature, then, through that patriarchal lens, Cliff has indeed “dared to transgress to introduce disorder” (Conde 160). In her novels, Cliff creates “chaos” by sharing the stories of women who have suffered at the hands of a colonial and postcolonial patriarchy and dare to seek their own identity; moreover, many of these women have survived their anguish and located their identity through the strength of other women. At the same time, Cliff reveals characters who, through their inaction, work *against* other women. In her nonfiction work *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid argues that Caribbean subjects are “lost in time, weighed down by an event (imperialism, enslavement, colonization) ‘as if it were sitting on top of their heads’” (qtd. by Chancy, “The Challenge to Center,” 330). If this is so, if Caribbean subjects are “lost in time,” how do Caribbean writers work to give these subjects a history? Cliff’s creation of a female “rebel consciousness” (Thorington Springer 43) subverts the postcolonial patriarchy by establishing a community of marginalized women who call on the strength

of their ancestors (like Nanny and Mma Alli) to direct their search for and formation of a safe space which is theirs, absolutely.

Cliff seems to recognize, though, that a safe space – for the protagonist of Clare Savage within her homeland of Jamaica – cannot be carved out entirely successfully. Particularly in *No Telephone to Heaven*, Clare’s journey back to her homeland unravels as an almost ambivalent endeavor, one in which the ending results in an American invasion (via the movie industry), revolution, and bloodshed. Jennifer J. Smith observes of the novel’s end “The lack of a future in the text indicates that the body as the sole means of a connection to the past cannot survive and it cannot suffice” (144). In fact, Jamaica serves a dubious role for Clare, as both “mother and motherlessness, ultimately resisting a stable symbolic role as womb or home” (Walters 218). If Smith’s observations are accurate – that the body cannot be the only connection to one’s past in her homeland – then what can sustain a woman robbed of her homeland, mother/land, sense of safety? In other words, if her body – the one thing she can possess absolutely – does not provide an opportunity to “center,” will she *ever* find a safe space? Cliff’s texts are particularly interesting because they seem to resist the notion that a happy ending is possible. In the opening lines of *Abeng*, she writes “The island rose and sank. During periods in which history was recorded by indentations on rock and shell. This is a book about the time which followed on that time. As the island became a place where people lived. Indians. Africans. Europeans” (3). The presence of punctuation at inopportune times within the text indicates a metaphorical interruption of Jamaica’s growth or moving forward, a stunted history of this place. On this same page, Cliff explores hybridity in the St. Juliennes hanging from “grafted branches of a common mango tree” (3), an image

that explores the present, confused state of Jamaica: an island “rising and sinking” as Indians, Africans, and Europeans make their homes on this land. A sort of chaos erupts within chapter one of *Abeng*, as if Cliff shouts that fragmented identity is inevitable for the Jamaican woman.

While society determines notions of respectability for women (for instance, rules for what is appropriate for “a lady”), Cliff works to create “disorder” by developing female characters who challenge their peripheral existence and seek an emancipated center within a community of other women. In order to carve out their own safe space, then, these women must confront the patriarchal power that silences them. European notions of white superiority pervaded the colonized Caribbean. This conceit perpetuated that the physical features of whites were beautiful while the features of blacks were freakish. More disturbing was that this tenet had a goal to annihilate the self-worth of blacks, particularly women. Cornel West observes of the European principle that white is superior: “White supremacist ideology is based first and foremost on the degradation of black bodies in order to control them. One of the best ways to instill fear in people is to terrorize them. Yet this fear is best sustained by convincing them that their bodies are ugly” (qtd. by Griffin 520). In *The Cotton Kingdom*, Frederick Law Olmstead noted, “[The slave women] were clumsy, awkward, gross, elephantine...I never before witnessed, I thought, anything more revolting than the whole scene” (qtd. by Griffin 520). In order for white colonials to establish power – sexually and psychologically – over the women they owned, they deemed their bodies sub-human and abused them as property. Judge Savage and his great-great grandson Boy Savage, representative patriarchs in the text, exact their “savagery” on Cliff’s women characters. In *Abeng*,

Clare Savage works to define what it means to be female in a colonized Jamaica. This exploration proves challenging especially because a “colonized” Jamaica carries a double meaning for the Caribbean woman. The land itself was taken over by a patriarchal European system; therefore, Jamaica belongs to those other than its rightful inhabitants. But in the context of this research, “colonized” also means that the patriarchal system began to take over the Jamaican woman’s body, as well. Thus, her center – the space that is hers absolutely – no longer belongs to her. Judge Savage, Boy’s father and the patriarch of the white side of Clare’s family, “colonizes” the female body of his forced “mistress” and Miskito Indian Inez through his repeated rapes. A rebel in her own right, Inez dares to challenge the patriarchy by stealing a rifle and ammunition from a plantation (Cliff 34) and is brought up on charges to appear in Judge Savage’s court. Seeing his opportunity to possess this woman, he refuses to sentence her, instead choosing to rape her as punishment (Cliff 34). While Inez’s existence as an Indian woman within a European patriarchy already is marginalized, Judge Savage’s actions reflect that she must remain contained. Like Inez before her, Clare’s journey to locate a safe space (for and within her body) is challenged by the very system that perpetuates this misogyny, in Jamaica and locally, within her own Savage family home. It becomes even more complicated by the racism that she experiences by her own father, Boy.

As a growing girl, Clare contends with her skin color: Is she of her mother – thus, *motherland* of Jamaica and its dark, raw beauty – or is she of her father, the white Savage? This binary opposite is central to the conflict within Cliff’s work and an aspect of Clare’s fragmentation. In a conversation with her father, Clare asks “Then how come you say I’m white?” to which Boy responds, “What the hell has that got to do with

anything? You're white because you're a Savage" (74). She continues "But Mother is colored. Isn't she?" And he repeats "You are my daughter. You're white" (74). But Clare is quite aware of her mother's blackness and Kitty's visceral connection to the rawness of the land: "It seemed to Clare that Kitty came alive only in the bush..." (49). Clare is most satisfied when she is able to follow her mother into the bush, "where they would go barefoot, and hunt for mangoes or avocados out of season" (52). It is important to note that unlike Kitty, Boy despises the rawness of the countryside, "arm[ing] himself against it" (49). Because he emblemizes the misogyny of the European patriarchy, Clare cannot seek identity in the city; rather, she must travel to the country, to the rawness of a matriarchal history, which connects to her mother's family. This internal identity conflict – to be her mother's daughter? her father's daughter? – fragments her sense of self. Furthermore, the issue of "color hierarchies" reveals itself in Cliff's text. Clare's bi-racial heritage means that her skin will be lighter than African descendants, and as Ketu H. Katrak posits, this system emerges as "highly complicated... [because of] (the privileges accorded to the light-skinned middle class in the Caribbean)" (14). Clare's fragmentation seems to suffocate the freedom she wants to experience as a young woman, as a growing child. After all, Boy Savage reminds her that she is "his daughter" because of the whiteness of his family heritage, though she loses herself happily in the bush with her mother. But this fragmentation also compels her to make decisions about her selfhood with profound results.

Cliff presages Clare's experience on "the hunt" with her best friend Zoe via the story of Mma Alli, a warrior slave woman and Inez (the Miskito Indian raped by Judge Savage). When Inez realizes that she is pregnant, she seeks the obeah powers of Mma



Alli who “represented a tradition which was older than the one which had enslaved them” (Cliff 34). Mma Alli mixes the roots and leaves that will abort Inez’s fetus; she also teaches Inez (through lesbian eroticism) how to “keep her body as her own” (Cliff 35). Her actions are a means to locate power in fragmentation. Furthermore, Inez’s action to abort is, itself, a powerful subversion against the patriarchal system because she reclaims her body by freeing it from the shackles of sexual violence. Her choice to seek the power and comfort of another woman also speaks to the notion that female connectedness provides healing:

Cliff’s Mma Alli provides a safe community for women to learn about their bodies and to learn how to claim them through sensual touch. When women become familiar with their bodies, they are able to transform from victims to victors; their bodies are no longer simply sexualized objects to be exploited but become sites of pleasure... Thus, the same bodies that were subjected to abuse and violation will now become rightfully theirs and empower them to resist oppression” (Thorington Springer 49).

Thus, Cliff presents Mma Alli’s lesbianism as a powerful choice, one that allows her to possess her body absolutely, no matter the “whimsical violence” (Cliff 35) of the men who might prey on her. In turn, she shares an intimacy with Inez that represents emancipation. Inez discovers her own warrior spirit, one that will aid in her survival when she returns to the judge’s house, because of the connectedness she shares with Mma Alli, and ostensibly, all the warrior women of her ancestry. “Inez’s sexual encounter with Mma Alli conveys Cliff’s intentional attempt...to give voice to the lesbian experience in Caribbean communities...Cliff, again, (re)configures a Caribbean historical record, which, due to its lack of documentation of homosexual relationships, promotes heterosexuality as the norm” (Thorington Springer 50).

Inez's healing is bolstered by Mma Alli's erotic actions, which reflect a feminist resistance to male subjugation. Mma Alli reclaims her body by *trusting* its erotic power rather than suppressing it. As Audre Lorde contends, "We have been warned against [the erotic] all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears...the possibilities of it within themselves" ("The Erotic as Power" 278). Mma Alli denies that fear. Her presence in the text emblemizes the fragmented woman Cliff later explores through several other characters. Her fragmentation exists, as Cliff writes, "with a right breast that had never grown" (34). In a patriarchal construct, this abnormality would be freakish, ugly, a reason to send her away as an outcast. In an environment of her own making and control, her society revered her: "The women came to her with their troubles, and the men with their pain. She counseled how to escape – and when. She described the places where they had all come from, where one-breasted women were bred to fight" (34). Cliff subverts the patriarchal norm via Mma Alli's disfigurement; rather than represent disease, she embodies strength and daring. Mma Alli's fragmentation creates its own center, away from traditional patriarchy. In her work *Claiming an Identity*, Cliff writes of growing up in Caribbean culture, where she was taught to "Cultivate normalcy. Stress sameness. Blend in. For God's sake, don't pile difference upon difference. It's not safe" (qtd. by Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces* 137). So, with rebellious spirit hearkening, Cliff rejects the promise of safety via heterosexual characters, instead exploring homosexual love and the force it perpetuates. Mma Alli's radical choice of lesbianism ([She] had never lain with a man") (Cliff 35) reflects Cliff's position that female connectedness empowers the participants, allows women to know

their bodies in a space separate from patriarchal rule. And it seems that this eroticism among women in their own community breeds other sorts of power, as Lorde observes: “When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (*Sister Outsider* 55).

Mma Alli’s former, Nanny, the obeah woman of Jamaican folklore who died in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, could “catch a bullet between her buttocks” (Cliff 14) as she fearlessly led her people – the Maroons – to war against the slaveholders of Jamaica. “Cliff’s inclusion of Nanny blatantly validates the resistance of colonized women and offers empowerment to female subjects who may challenge existing colonial cultural narratives by embracing ancestral histories” (Thorington Springer 46). The legend of Nanny’s heroism serves as an indelible link between Jamaica’s slaveholding past and its class-conscious present in that her warrior spirit lives on in the lives of the oppressed people (“Nanny was the magician of [the Maroon] revolution – she used her skill to unite her people and to consecrate their battles. There is absolutely no doubt that she actually existed” 14). In truth, “[t]he narrator’s priority is not to prove that Nanny actually existed, but to show how her presence is negated in official versions of history because she threatens Jamaica’s foundational narrative, which would prefer to trace its sources to Europe rather than Africa” (Gikandi 245). Nanny’s war strategy and success evolved from her instinctive relationship to the land, and this truth sustains the strength that these women (Clare, Mma Alli, Inez) need to seek their own space. African American Studies scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin notes, “If white supremacist and patriarchal discourses

construct black women's bodies as abnormal, diseased, and ugly, black women writers seek to reconstruct these bodies" (521). I posit that their bodies must be allowed to exist in safe spaces; thus, they must be "reconstructed" on different terms and in, perhaps, physical environments of their own choosing. Cliff articulates what it means to survive daily as a woman by liberating her women characters via other women. She turns her back on the traditional Caribbean text by refusing to allow the male to emerge as hero; rather, her women work to save themselves. They do so by rebelling against a heterosexual norm, choosing to reconstitute their bodies with other women. This is not to say that through Mma Alli, Inez expels her trauma – that would undermine the profound capacity of the Caribbean woman taken by force as a "mistress" to endure and survive violence – but Inez's connection to Mma Alli means a sort of *healing*. Griffin notes, "Of course, the body never can return to a pre-scarred state. It is not a matter of getting back to a 'truer' self, but instead of claiming the body, scars and all – in a narrative of love and care. As such, healing does not deny the construction of bodies, but instead suggests that they can be constructed differently, for different ends" (524). I do not suggest that the scarred body is "free" from patriarchal rule, but that a moving forward and away from the violence perpetrated by men allows for rebellion. Nanny fought off slaveholders that would have captured her to make her their subject, and her legend serves as a reminder to the other women characters that female revolutionaries have been subverting the patriarchy for all of Jamaican history. Nanny's resistance surges through her body during warfare, an emblem of the female reclaiming the *power* of her body. As Kathleen J. Renk posits, "The text becomes a written testament of buried voices and oral histories, including those too gruesome to relate, those more easily forgotten, those that were

‘madness to remember’” (72-3). But Nanny also represents the woman’s power as it relates to the earth, as Barbara Eldmair contends, “‘Nanny becomes the intermediary of nature’s treasures, the nurturing and protective mother figure, the healer’” (qtd. by Ilmonen 118). In contrast, Boy Savage, Clare’s father and great-grandson of Judge Savage, typifies the beliefs of a more violent earth: “Mr Savage took his daughter to a mountaintop to prove to her that the island had exploded from the sea...Mr. Savage preferred to believe that Jamaican mountains had been created in cataclysm. All of a sudden” (Cliff 8-9). For men like Judge and Boy Savage, the earth comes from nowhere – outer space, perhaps – so fear of the land replaces wonder (as evidenced by Boy Savage’s near shark-attack in the family’s peaceful Sunday beach spot) and control of the land replaces respect. Unlike the theories thrown around by Boy Savage about Jamaica’s “instant existence,” Nanny’s connection to the land of Jamaica becomes the legacy by which some of Cliff’s women characters work to live their authentic lives. And living authentically, Kaisa Ilmonen writes, means living within and understanding one’s *motherland*: “[F]emale identity is bound very tightly to the Mothers’ Land, to the matrilinear oral traditions and to the women’s heritage. In addition, an Afrocentric mythology and an ethnically Caribbean past are mediated through the female figures. Moreover, this mythological past is essentially female – it is carried by women, it tells stories about their life and its central figures are female heroines...”(117). Like the rebel women before her, Clare inherits Nanny’s history; thus, she seeks to rebel against a patriarchy that would hold her captive.

Clare’s desire to connect with Kitty’s emotional distance is one way in which she experiments with her “rebel consciousness” (Thorington Springer 51), specifically

because her mother represents a love for the Jamaican landscape that her father does not possess. Clare's adventure with her playmate Zoe in the Jamaican bush typifies the rebellious spirit of a woman (or growing woman) to try to determine her own space. At odds with her inherent desire to unloose herself, on her grandmother's, Miss Mattie's, land she is reminded of a lady's "proper place," the condition that confines her in the city, where she is bound by the rules of her patriarchal, colonial education. As her male cousins prepare to cook and eat the genitals of the wild boar they have just slaughtered, Clare hopes to take part. They refuse to allow her a place next to them, claiming, "Dis sint'ing no fe gal dem" (Cliff 57). In other words, their ritual is inappropriate for a girl. Consequently, "Clare's exclusion from this ritual is based solely on gender. This infuriates her and stirs up her rebel spirit" (Thorington Springer 52). She wants to annihilate the whole male moment, to spill their fire and pour water over their delicacy and wreck their feast" (Cliff 58). Instead, as Thorington Springer notes, "she uses her tongue to fight back...and plans her own hunt with intentions of feasting on her kil, the boar, Cudjoe, with her best friend Zoe. Thus she places females at the center of her own ritual" (Thorington Springer 53). Clare's friendship with Zoe indicates Cliff's belief that even young girls may realize liberation within the company of and connection to other girls. However, Cliff also complicates this female bond, placing class at the center of the conflict that will come between Clare and Zoe.

April Conley Kilinski observes that "Clare's understanding of and appreciation for Zoe and the countryside where they play coincides with the development of her and Zoe's bodies" (204). The fact that they still are *developing* young women is critical to my reading of the text. Clare's moments of ambivalence, in terms of race, class, and

gender emerge, I argue, *because of* her young age. Her “rebel consciousness” begins to riot, but it is not without its moments of utter uncertainty. On the one hand, the girls seem mismatched. Clare is a city girl, a Kingston girl who knows certain advantages because of skin privilege and her family’s name. Zoe is a country girl, fatherless and poor. She and her mother Ruth live on Miss Mattie’s land and earn their keep by working for her. The girls attend different schools and only see each other when Clare goes to the country to stay with her grandmother. But the most poignant times of Clare’s life are spent with Zoe in the rawness of Jamaica’s landscape, amidst the *motherland*. It is of the earth, as Cliff reveals: “[T]his friendship also existed...in a place where there were no electric lights, where water was sought from a natural source, where people walked barefoot more often than not. This place where Zoe’s mother worked for her living and Kitty Freeman came alive” (95). This natural environment intimates a different Jamaica, an older Jamaica, where slaves like Nanny refused to be property and escaped from the imprisonment of plantation life to the hills of Maroonage. Cliff links the girls’ friendship with the land that emancipated the women who paved the way for them. And it is on this land that the girls discover the power of their own bodies: “When the wispy hairs began to grow between Clare’s legs and under her arms – slowly, slowly – it was only Zoe she told, only Zoe she showed them to. And Zoe showed her own hairs (Cliff 81). Later on in the text, the girls set out to slaughter Cudjoe, to create their own center by way of female ritual. Cliff illuminates female autonomy through their adventure, but she also complicates it. In this scene, the girls confront the realities of class as they argue about whether to continue or abandon the hunt. While Clare argues that the plan should move forward, Zoe counters, “Wunna mus’ t’ink wunna is African,

gal. Wunna mus' t'ink wunna is Maroon smaddy" (Cliff 117). Zoe continues, "[W]unna is truly a town gal...Gal smaddy...White smaddy. Dis place no matter a wunna a-tall...Dis here is fe me territory...Me will be here so all me life" (117-18). Suddenly their sacred space, their female space, is challenged by the rules established by a class-conscious, colonial patriarchy. Zoe implicitly understands her "acceptable" place in society, as a poor, black, country girl, and she reminds Clare of hers, as a white (therefore, perceived upper-class), town girl. Their separate worlds, outside of the motherland, cannot commingle. It is in this same scene that Cliff further complicates their exploration of identity by constructing an invasion that reminds them "that their bodies might not belong to them" (105).

After a swim in the river, the girls lay upon the rocks, basking naked in the hot sun. Their space seems pure, their bodies their own. Cliff writes of the figurative female space, the vagina: "Under these patches [of pubic hair] were the ways into their own bodies. Their fingers could slide through the hair and deep into the pink and purple flesh and touch a corridor through which men would put their thing. Right now it would belong to them" (120). The girls, like Nanny and Mma Alli before them, possess their bodies as their own, denying the European notion that their blackness is absurd and lascivious, denying that any man has a right to it. As the girls reach out to each other, a hunter surprises them, thus, threatening the safe space which they have created. His predatory response to their nakedness – "He only stared at her – slightly smiling at the sight of the naked and wet girl with a rifle" (122) – informs my argument that women must find themselves, first, among other women. Such a metaphorical space, though, must be respected as sacred by other women; otherwise, their bodies become property,



violated by a woman, as discussed in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, or lusted after and owned by a man. And it is in this sense that Clare and Zoe's bond becomes disrupted. To confront the threat of the hunter's presence, Clare code-switches by dropping her patois and speaking like a buckra (Kilinski 205), calling on her class status to protect them. Her *buckra* talk inadvertently alienates her best friend. As Antonia MacDonald-Smythe observes, "Clare's method of self-empowerment is also shaped by the patriarchal and imperialist inclinations encouraged by her father. Faced with what she presumes to be a challenge to her subjectivity and sexuality, Clare defends her selfhood with brute force, with the power to wield a rifle, the assumption of the authority of the white man. She acts like the *buckra*" (qtd. by Kilinski 205-6). Chaos erupts after Clare addresses the hunter: she accidentally shoots her grandmother's bull, and her action means expulsion from Miss Mattie's home. The scene by the river necessitates several discussions. On one hand, the girls experience a "retreat," one that is "absolutely necessary for the communal project of healing and resistance...these moments...are sometimes individual, but usually they are enacted with another human being. They are almost always erotic moments of touching as well" (Griffin 525). But at this point of resistance, they are also threatened by the presence of a man; furthermore, their defiance, which must be able to rely on a supportive, larger community of women, is *punished* with Clare's expulsion from her grandmother's home. Clare's expulsion makes her "the other" in her homeland, further fragmenting her existence in Jamaica.

Cliff's message is clear: female friendships empower women. So, why don't women seek to nurture such relationships? Had Miss Mattie embraced her granddaughter and forgiven her for her accident, Clare's resistance would have been emboldened. But

she curses Clare for being like the Savage side of the family, “white and godless,” and writes to Kitty to take her away immediately (Cliff 134). Miss Mattie prescribes to the same colonial, patriarchal beliefs as the white characters (a girl should behave like a girl, not a boy); ironically, she blames Clare for this whiteness. The opportunity to accept Clare’s actions – therefore, empower her resistance – falls into Kitty’s hands. But she, too, turns her back on Clare, submitting to Boy’s decision to send her to Miss Beatrice’s to get her “meanness...corrected” (Cliff 148). Mother/daughter dynamics seem particularly problematic in the text. The relationships should be a safe space, one where the mother nurtures her daughter to grow strong and confident. Instead, as illustrated by the Mattie-Kitty and Kitty-Clare relationships, the mothers *hinder* their daughters’ desire to rebel against the system that would hold them. On several occasions in the text, Cliff writes of Kitty’s loneliness and dissatisfaction in her marriage. When she was younger, “she had been known as a girl eager to get ahead, to get herself an education, and she scoffed at marriage. She was determined to become a schoolteacher...where she would teach children...from the manuals she herself would write” (Cliff 129). Her confidence and rebel consciousness beat powerfully just like her daughter’s. But meeting Boy, a *buckra* with bad intentions, snuffed out her dream. One must wonder, “Where was Mattie’s support for her daughter?” Mattie plainly expresses her dislike for Boy, scolding Kitty for, “marr[ying] that man in the first place” (Cliff 147). For becoming pregnant, though, Kitty was expected to participate in the fixed and normative system that bound her to a marriage with Boy. Mattie did not challenge that system, even for her daughter’s sake. Caribbean writer Brinda Mehta suggests, “By regularizing social relations within the familial unit, marriage promotes a certain ordered rationality...”

(*Diasporic (Dis)locations* 201). Mattie and Kitty comply with the system that ultimately negates their desires. I do not propose that Kitty is powerless, though. She is not simply a victim. Cliff reveals the resistant spirits of Nanny, Mma Alli, and Inez to establish a legacy for women like Kitty to draw strength; instead, she succumbs to a patriarchy that ultimately silences her. Her decision to name her first daughter “Clare” (after the girl who protected Kitty when she was gravely ill as a child) is compelling, and in doing so, she ostensibly hopes for other options – a more independent existence – for her daughter. Again, Cliff reminds her reader of the power of female connectedness. Is female identity, then, authenticated by the joining of one woman with another?

The male characters often *prey* on the female body; therefore, Cliff complicates the heterosexual norm that the joining of a man and woman is natural. The violation of several young girls underscores the vulnerability of the female body when men assert their “rights” to it. A gang of boys rape a girl in Zoe’s class, and then she suffers the permanent humiliation of not being able to “hold her water” (Cliff 105) afterwards. Likewise, Mas Freddie, a man in their community, rapes his daughter Rose, and she births his child. Instead of enveloping these girls, creating a safe space for them within a community of women, the town “others” them. And the silence of the women makes them as complicit as the men. Mad Hannah, the town “crazy” whose son was a presumed homosexual, is driven to total isolation, insanity, and placement in an asylum. Where is her community of women to help pick her up? Doreen Paxton, Clare’s classmate who suffers from epilepsy, experiences a seizure in gym, and as Clare recalls, “No one came forward at all. They acted like it wasn’t happening” (Cliff 98). An old woman at the bus stop asks two of Clare’s classmates for the time, and they ignore her because she is

“dark-skinned and shabby-looking” (77). “The girls reject this woman for reasons of color and class that have been culturally imbedded” (Dagbovie 99-100). Their compliance with a patriarchal system that also objectifies *their* female bodies as absurd and hyper-sexed emphasizes Cliff’s contention that it is dangerous for women to turn their backs on other women. None of them will “win” in this system. Ultimately, Mad Hannah, Doreen, and the old woman at the bus stop exist on the margin as the “other”; their center only can be located when other women join with them to assert communal power. If that strength-through-community is denied them, they risk becoming utterly silenced, as evidenced by the character of Winifred.

Miss Winifred, Miss Beatrice’s “crazy” sister, has been locked away at the family house on St. Ann’s Bay, secluded from society. Her actions landed her there, as Beatrice reveals to Clare: “What [Winifred] got out of school – they dismissed her because they could not control her – she was...made to marry...She made the poor man’s life a living hell...So of course he left...Just couldn’t endure a woman who wouldn’t be a woman” (Cliff 159). Winifred, like Nanny and Mma Alli before her, refused the notions of womanhood determined by a patriarchy that hoped to control them. Her denial of an “acceptable femininity” in the hopes of carving a life shaped by her own rules is so subversive that it becomes dangerous; the family rushes her to a convent to make her right. When that fails, her father, surrendering his duty to control his daughter, secures for Winifred a husband to subdue her. But the patriarchal norms just don’t fit her. She is a complicated character, the one with whom Clare shares her last poignant moments in the text. But why does Cliff conclude the novel with Winifred, an exiled white woman who has gone crazy because of her rebellion? I have argued throughout the chapter that

Cliff advocates fragmentation (via fragmented characters like Mma Alli) because of its subversive force against a system that accepts wholeness as “normal.” Winifred *denies* fragmentation. Thus, she remains locked away, isolated from the world and trapped in her own mind. Moreover, because she refuses the notion of mixing (perhaps, to survive her trauma) concluding, “I knew that God meant that coons and buckra people were not meant to mix their blood...Only sadness comes from mixture” (Cliff 164), she determines her own miserable fate. Winifred ultimately submits to the patriarchal position that racial purity promises completeness, and she suffers a metaphorical obstruction because of it: “All the salt in the world cannot draw out the infection I carry in me...the afterbirth is lodged in the woman’s body and will not be expelled” (164-5). She believes her body – the physical representation of female power (i.e. Nanny) – to be clogged, useless. On the other hand, Clare embraces fragmentation, and symbolically expels that which has burdened Winifred. In the final pages of the text, Clare begins menstruation. While the implications of this emergence into womanhood are many, on one level, she liberates herself by announcing, “I am mixed...” (164) and accepting fragmentation. She is able to “rid” herself of the infection – via menstruation – about which Winifred speaks and journey a different road.

Feminist Gloria Anzaldua writes, “[P]erhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react” (“Towards a New Consciousness” 235). While she speaks primarily about the pursuit of the *mestiza*, her arguments are appropriate to *Abeng*. As I have argued, the characters who comply with stringent

normatives accept silence; therefore, they exist peripherally. As Anzaldua posits, “Rigidity means death” (235). Conversely, those characters who dare to resist the patriarchy, who “cross the border,” reclaim the power and occupy a center of their own making: “Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically” (Anzaldua 235). I do not claim, though, that the only way for women to become empowered is to coalesce with other women. Cliff explores lesbianism as a sort of erotic, authentic, reclaiming of the woman’s body as her own. This exploration is one way for women to resist their marginalization and locate power in fragmentation. Clare’s journey is evidence of the possibilities for female resistance and empowerment. But Clare also becomes empowered on her own, apart from *anyone*, particularly in *No Telephone to Heaven*, and she finds empowerment in her friendship with Harry/Harriet along her journey. On the other hand, Clare’s period, which occurs at the end of *Abeng*, complicates her journey: this passage to womanhood intimates the sexual violence young women suffer via other characters in the text. Perhaps this ambiguous ending foreshadows the violence to come in *No Telephone to Heaven*.

### **Resistance in “The Ruinate”: Coming Home in *No Telephone to Heaven***

In the first pages of *Abeng*, Cliff explores the history of Jamaica as a series of metaphorical interruptions, as evidenced by her use of sentence fragments. She begins the story in “[h]igh July – and hot. No rain probably until October – at least no rain of any consequence” (3). The land is dry and parched, but the island still blooms full (“There was a splendid profusion of fruit...Round and pink Bombays seemed to be everywhere...The fruit was all over and each variety was unto itself”) (3). *No Telephone to Heaven* opens just after a torrential rain, where the sun is “unable to dry the roadbed or

the thick foliage along the mountainside” (3). While *Abeng* begins with a sense of growth and connection to the physical landscape, *No Telephone to Heaven* immediately addresses “wombs and graves as interconnected” (Smith 4) with Walcott’s poem “Laventville.” He writes, “Something inside is laid wide like a wound” (*No Telephone to Heaven* epigraph). The land houses the grave just as the womb houses the fetus. Birth and death, then, are inextricably linked, as are the land and its inhabitants. Clare serves as the emblem of this notion: She was born in Jamaica – the land of her mother’s people – so it is fitting that she dies in Jamaica. Kitty’s womb literally held Clare; her grandmother’s land metaphorically houses her mother’s grave, and ultimately, what will become her grave. Cliff’s use of Walcott’s text supports the argument that the violence exacted on Jamaica “reflects a history of violence to the body” (Smith 147). In the opening pages of chapter one, the people of the landscape – its inhabitants who “[evoke] the name of Nanny” (5) and loathe the “nuisance” (6) of its wasteful, ignorant tourists gather together as a community of rebels: the land of Jamaica has been taken hostage by those outsiders who possess no sense of its history. As a child in *Abeng*, Clare begins to fight back by challenging normative practices (i.e. daring to hunt wild boar, a traditionally male activity). As an adult in *No Telephone to Heaven*, Clare fights back by joining a guerilla group to fight for the land to which she viscerally connects, much like her mother Kitty. Indeed, the novel proposes that “Clare and Kitty respond to place” (Smith 147). For Clare and Kitty, “place” though presents many problems because neither woman can comfortably carve out space-as-home – not in Jamaica, United States, or Europe. Clare’s fragmented existence, for example, as activist/student/Jamaican/white/granddaughter/daughter is a legitimate, albeit frustrated,

existence. Cliff's exploration of her fragmentation complicates *and* legitimizes the journey of the post-colonial Caribbean woman. Wendy Walters writes, "...the island of Jamaica stands for both mother and motherlessness, ultimately resisting a stable, symbolic role as womb or home" (218). This concept is important to my research as it disrupts the notion of a need for a stabilized center, particularly in the motherland. And in *No Telephone to Heaven*, Cliff challenges the supposition that the motherland can create a sense of wholeness for her daughters, that a "whole existence" is even possible or necessary. But before her return to Jamaica, Clare's moves to New York and England "other" her in these First World spaces, making it impossible for her to locate "home." Because of her upbringing in which her father instills the importance of whiteness, thus superiority, Clare is not prepared to be an outsider in either place, but she is.

The Savage family moves to New York when Clare is still a young girl. For Kitty Savage, the move is particularly jarring because of her profound connection to the Jamaican landscape, as seen in *Abeng*. The city streets and urban sprawl of New York rob Kitty of lushness of the land where "she comes alive" (*Abeng* 49); ultimately, she takes her younger daughter, Jennie – the darker of the two girls – and returns to her homeland. As Wendy Walters establishes, Kitty's act seems to intimate that light-skinned Clare and Boy are "better suited to the demands of assimilation made by U.S. institutions" (218), and perhaps while their light skin "camouflages" them better for the class-conscious Boy, Clare's education there is not made any easier (*No Telephone to Heaven* 100). When Boy tries to enroll his daughter in high school, he is reminded by the principal that Clare must begin one year behind her peers because she comes from an "underdeveloped country" where their children "develop at a different rate than



American children” (*No Telephone to Heaven* 98). Clare has been abandoned by her mother and has become nearly invisible in the United States. She feels the palpable tensions of a nation on the eve of civil rights, is moved by the news of the church bombings in Alabama that killed four innocent black girls. She is, after all, her mother’s daughter – Jamaican, black – yet also Savage white, and being raised by a father who reminds her that if she doesn’t pass for white, she’ll “labor forever as an outsider” (102). Cliff presents a young woman whose identity will be impossible to establish in a land that her mother left and where her father so desperately wants to belong. Clare is “the other” in America: she reads about what whites do to blacks in her “new home,” what they could do to *her* if her identity was revealed. In a poignant exchange between father and daughter after they have received word that Kitty died suddenly, Boy asks Clare if she has cried for her mother. When she responds that she has not, he remarks, “I suppose you have more feeling for niggers than for your own mother.” Clare shoots back, “My mother was a nigger...And so am I” (104). Though the connection between Kitty and Clare was strained, Clare’s identification with and belonging to Jamaica – thus, Kitty – alienates her from her father and his adopted home. And the “blending in” that Boy insists upon robs Clare of her mother’s lineage, as if the blackness never existed (100). Seeking a better education and identity, Clare seeks opportunity in England.

Her travels from Jamaica to the U.S. to England create a kind of marked path, one that indicates a searching for an identity and safe space of her own. What is problematic about Clare’s travels to England is that it is a metaphorical return of her white lineage to the “mother country,” the place of Boy’s people who would eventually occupy Jamaica and rape the women of Kitty’s land. Her return to the “mother country” may also signify

Clare's need to return to *a* mother, a metaphorical stand-in for the mother that she lost. Cliff complicates the search for self by sending Clare to London; instead of finding herself in this new space, she will fall farther from it. Stuart Hall writes that “[The New World] stands for the endless ways in which Caribbean people have been destined to migrate; it is the signifier of migration itself – of traveling, voyaging and return as fate, as destiny; of the Antillean as the prototype of the modern or postmodern New World nomad, continually moving between centre and periphery” (qtd. by Walters 218-19). In New York, Clare was marginalized as a black islander from an “underdeveloped country,” “white chocolate,” no matter Boy's heritage; the lightness of her skin did not shield her from the prejudices of a nation exploding from racial tensions. In the United States, she lost her mother, first when Kitty returned to Jamaica because she felt so out-of-skin and then when she died; for Clare, America emblemizes the loss of mother and place. In London, she settles more tolerably, if only because her colonial education at St. Catherine's in Jamaica serves as a comfortable familiarity in England: “This was the mother-country. The country by whose grace her people existed in the first place. Her place could be here. America behind her, way-station. This was natural” (*No Telephone to Heaven* 109). But one sees, almost immediately, that Clare will not settle here, either. She suffers profound loneliness, and the pain of losing her mother seems amplified in this place that digs a deeper divide between here (London) and there (Jamaica). Her mother's family argues that her move to England is necessary, that the lightness of her skin will serve her well in the more “civilized” English society. As her uncle insists, “You have a chance to leave that narrow little island behind you – distancing himself in his phrasing from the place in which he wrote. He sounded a familiar refrain; by *chance* he meant

light skin” (110). Instead, Clare’s lightness pushes her away from the English who praise her for “not being like all our Jamaicans” (117). She locates herself consciously in England – as a *Jamaican*. Her mother’s daughter. Her return to Jamaica to celebrate the holiday with her mother’s family, then, is timely; she meets Harry/Harriet, a transsexual who reminds her that Jamaica is “not golden”:

Cyaan live on this island and not understand how it work, how the world work. Cyann pass the Dungle, cyaan smell the Dungle, and not know this island is the real world...in the worst way. Even if you were to live your entire life on this island, and never see nor smell the Dungle, nuh mus’ know it there? It nuh stand as a warning for all a we – no matter how light? how bright? how much of them labrish we master? Nuh mus’ question? (123).

The “Dungle” that Harry/Harriet references is “the dung heap jungle where people squirmed across mountains of garbage. On one mountainside stood their home. The Dungle perimetered by a seven-foot-high fence of uneven and rusty zinc wall, one entry and one exit” (32). The Jamaica that Boy Savage refused to acknowledge as part of his family’s history; the Jamaica that Kitty Savage could not reconcile because of her marriage to Boy. For Clare, the Dungle emblemizes the devastating aftermath of the colonial oppression of her island and destruction of the physical landscape that once bridged her and her mother. What happens to the spaces that sheltered the rebel warriors Nanny and Mma Alli? Clare simply cannot work to affect change or take back this island held captive if she remains a student of the colonial empire. In England, she exists *apart* – from her homeland and people to whom she begins to understand as inextricably part of herself. Back in London, she spots a brooch inscribed with the word “Resistez.” She “did not buy it because she did not want to pay the price...[but] [t]here was something about the brooch which drew her to it, an absoluteness. The sense of cause – clear-cut,

heroic – one she could not join. *I will dare, and dare, and dare, until I die* – she remembered from St. Catherine’s the words of St. Joan...” (112). No, Clare cannot advance the fight to un-silence the Jamaica of her mother’s people while she remains a student of the colonial empire; thus, she returns to her homeland. Her return, though, is not without complications: The island “stands for...motherlessness” to the Clare Savage who was abandoned by Kitty, and then lost her forever when she suddenly died. Moreover, Jamaica is a product of the colonial empire. “Homeland” implies a sense of belonging, but Clare – and so many other disenfranchised citizens – do not belong to this island because the “neocolonial elites (potentially like herself) maintain structures of colonialism that oppress most of the island’s population” (Walters 219).

Upon her return, she discusses with Harry/Harriet her preoccupation with the Wortley Home (a Jamaican orphanage) as “belonging to the past” (127). Clare identifies with these children because of the metaphorical and literal abandonment of her childhood; perhaps her “belonging to the past” traces back much farther than her childhood to Nanny and Mma Alli, rebel women of her heritage. Harry/Harriet responds, “But we *are* of the past here. So much of the past that we punish people by flogging them with cat-o’-nine-tails. We expect people to live on cornmeal and dried fish, which was the diet of the slaves. We name hotels Plantation Inn and Sans Souci...A peculiar past. For we have taken the master’s past as our own. That is the danger” (127). I contend that Clare targets her return to her grandmother’s land – the *ruinate* – to rebel against the “master’s past.” Clare’s sister Jennie remarks that their grandmother’s land is “all overgrown by now...It possess itself” (105). Fitting that her grandmother’s space *possesses* itself. Fitting that its physical landscape overgrows – an emblematic rebellion

against the colonial need for control and order. Cliff has written that her own “ ‘wildness had been tamed...wildness that embraced imagination, emotion...history, memory, revolution...the forest’ ” by a colonial educational system (qtd. by Walters 220). Clare, then, battles against this structure by returning to her grandmother’s land, and as Walters writes, becomes “like a tempest in a teapot...ready to explode” (120). “In colonial discourse, the land was compared to a feminine body, an analogy that rendered both ripe for conquest” (Smith 144). In *Abeng*, the young Clare develops awareness of this subjugation, but in *No Telephone to Heaven*, the adult Clare fights back. Apart from the unrestrained space of her grandmother’s land, Clare sees all around her a land first taken by colonialism and now by American greed (via the film industry). As a woman, Clare is able to make crucial decisions about what she will use to empower her journey. She offers her grandmother’s land to her guerrilla group, a gesture similar to her grandmother’s, who, when the land was viable, fed her neighbors from the crops. The land and women, then, share a profound power to give life, even after they have been victimized. In her article, “Birthed and Buried: Matrilineal History in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*,” Jennifer J. Smith observes that “land and women can potentially protect each other” (144), which is important to my reading of this novel. Clare is able to use her fragmentation as agency by joining this guerrilla group and returning to the land in an effort to take it back.

Clare’s actions, which involve returning to the mountains with the rebels, hearken back to Nanny of the Maroons. Like Nanny, Clare *uses* trauma to propel forward, thus locating power in her fragmentation. Smith argues that postcolonial novels like Cliff’s are “often treated like a wellspring for imagining and reclaiming matrilineal history and

resistance” (142). Certainly, this is true of both Cliff’s novels, but *Abeng* calls on this history with more positive results (Smith 142-3). *No Telephone to Heaven* ends in violent bloodshed after the American film company lays claim to the mountainside for its pathetic and offensive attempt at retelling Nanny’s myth. Clare’s guerrilla rebels attempt to sabotage the set of the movie, but gunshots ring out, and the final scene of the novel suggests that all individuals present, including Clare, die. Now, Cliff problematizes the landscape as communal with woman. It has become a site of violence rather than refuge. Cliff’s text presents a woman character who dares to challenge the normative practices of her upbringing, but she [Cliff] also challenges the notion that female rebellion inevitably ends victorious. Fragmentation is certain for these postcolonial characters, and women like Clare use it as a powerful tool, but they will not necessarily survive outside forces (like the corporate greed of the film company).

**Chapter Three: The Invasion and Re-Claiming of Space in Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *He Drown She in the Sea***

who is there to protect her  
from the hands of the father  
not the windows which see and  
say nothing not the moon  
that awful eye not the woman  
she will become with her  
scarred tongue who who who the owl  
laments into the evening who  
will protect her this prettyslittlegirl  
---from Lucille Clifton's "Shapeshifter Poems"

Like Danticat and Cliff, Shani Mootoo "deconstruct[s] silence" through postcolonial Caribbean settings and characters (Donatien-Yssa 93). Her work is decidedly different in that her stories unravel in *fictional* Caribbean spaces, though they reflect her native Trinidad. Her texts also focus on "ancestral houses where many discussions and crises take place" (Helff 287). The concept of an ancestral home is significant in these texts because it indicates a profound family history; in Asian cultures, particularly, the ancestral home is the place of one's family passed on through generations. Thus, the ancestral home becomes its own story, and perhaps, a clearer glimpse into the un-making and re-making of the individuals who exist within them. Though I will discuss the function of the ancestral house in *He Drown She in the Sea*, its importance also reveals itself in *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Outside of these spaces, Mootoo examines the natural world as it helps to heal/liberate the silenced women (and "othered" men) of her novels. In Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, the narrator Tyler and the protagonist Mala (Pohpoh) connect through a "shared queerness," (Mootoo 48); a space within the periphery of the fictional island of Lantanacamara that allows for their otherness to claim a home. Their shared pain – Tyler's shrouded secret as a

transvestite and Mala's desperate past steeped in sexual violence – allows for a sort of revelation of truths between the two, particularly because they have finally located a safe space in one another's midst. The larger society of Lantanacamarā proves dangerous for both of them, as its Indian and colonial traditions and unwritten laws allow for unchecked misogyny and homophobia to wreck devastation.

The character of Chandin Ramchandin, Mala's father, illustrates the dangers of this kind of society. His abuses against his daughters often warrant the kind of silence that Mootoo works to deconstruct – and they are utterly horrifying – but his childhood experiences as an outsider in a white home seem to have helped shape him into a monster. As a young boy, Ramchandin moves from his Lantanacamaran Indian family to live with the Reverend Thoroughly, a white man who uses his colonial power to teach Ramchandin that European history is the only history worth knowing and Christianity is the only religion to which one should devote oneself. Ramchandin's Indian culture becomes irrelevant. He also is shamed into humiliation for falling in love with his stepsister Lavinia, whom the Thoroughlys would *never* allow to marry a “short and darkly brown Indian-Lantanacamaran” (*Cereus* 34). Because of his loss of identity, he suffers a mental break. In her text *Diasporic (Dis)locations*, Brinda Mehta notes of his coming undone, “The Reverend's chastisement of Chandin for his predilection to indulge in incestuous thoughts and feelings leads to the latter's humiliation and sense of frustration at being publicly exposed for improper behavior” (Mehta 200). Because his stepfather refuses to allow him to marry his stepsister, because the reverend verbalizes (therefore, *makes real*) the “dirtiness” of his desires, Ramchandin confronts the reality



that in this society of light and dark, he will never be good enough for the fair-skinned Lavinia he loves. Damage to his male ego proves frightening.

How, then, does he repair what has been broken? He marries Lavinia's Indian best friend, Sarah, and asserts his masculine control – his rightful authority within the institution of marriage that “legitimizes the imposition of codes of morality, epitomized by virile masculinity at the expense of female marginalization” (Mehta 201). One might be compelled to ask, “Why, then, is marriage preferable?” Tyler answers: “Over the years I pondered the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went with them” (Mootoo 48). Marriage is the duty of a woman, but it does not promise satisfaction. Sarah suffers in her marriage to Chandin and finds solace *outside* of the male sphere. Mootoo contests the established normative codes of behavior, revealing to her readers that heterosexual marriage renders women powerless, sexually and emotionally. The “others” in this novel seek emancipation in the only spaces that make sense – those that provide protection from the violence that erupts in their normative culture. Sarah finds love with her best friend Lavinia and ultimately runs away with her to live a quiet life away from the island that would refuse their lesbianism. She must abandon her children, though, and Mootoo's message is obvious – permanent and devastating sacrifices must be made in order for those who challenge the suffocating rules to live as they choose.

Chandin Ramchandin's rupture after Sarah leaves him for Lavinia demonstrates his “lack of control” in a society that prides itself on the notion that “marriage promotes a certain ordered rationality of control...” (Mehta 201). He has failed as a man; in order to dominate his impotence, he must take back his sexual power. His targets are his

daughters. In the most twisted of ways, in the most despicable of acts, he becomes the man of his house again by repeatedly raping his daughters (Pohpoh suffering the worst of his animal acts). Latanacamara looks on quietly, as domestic affairs – therefore *private family matters* – “provided [Ramchandin] with unrestrained and unaccountable sexual access to women,” and in this case, children (Mehta 199). Ultimately, her sister Asha escapes this cycle of sexual violation, and Pohpoh (who returns to her birth name of “Mala” as the novel progresses), turns inward. How else to survive the violence of her daily life? After a climactic scene of violence where Ramchandin threatens her life and the life of her lover Ambrose with a cleaver, Ramchandin dies, Ambrose reveals his own impotence through his utter inability to help Mala in the attack, and Mala emerges as the island’s “crazy woman,” penning herself up on the family property and refusing to be seen. As Mehta cites, “women mourn this loss of self in terms of a certain manifestation of madness [which is the] impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest...” (208). Madness, then, is the inevitable result of female imprisonment and sexual torture in a society that quietly accepts the misogyny it breeds.

To deal with her trauma alone, Mala turns inward, re-imagines Pohpoh, (the nickname her parents called her in childhood) as a sort of “double” to her devastated other self, and refuses to speak. She moves to the garden and “immures herself alive” because the house is too “intimately related to the violated space of domesticity and to her raped body” (Donatien-Yssa 99). In the familial house, Mala is dead inside, literally and figuratively. The garden, a natural space, exists to allow her to begin to use her fragmentation as a means to survive. Like the *ruinate* of Clare’s grandmother’s land,

Mala's garden subverts colonial patriarchy's need for order and control. In "Moving the Caribbean Landscape," Isabel Hoving contends that the garden is "a woman's safe space, outside of the violent patriarchal sphere. An argument in favor of this interpretation might be found in Mala's retreat from verbal and literary signifiers" (156). Mala cannot summon words for the traumas she has survived – perhaps Mootoo's intent is to suggest that words do not exist for such violence – so she abandons the voice that no one heard. Rather than speak, she creates a messy parallel universe within the garden that allows her to escape the memories of the violent, patriarchal house, but neither Clare's grandmother's land nor Mala's garden grows vegetation that would make the space productive. There is a message here, too: this feminized space cannot simply *heal* a silenced woman. Testifying, or "breaking the kumbla," – a metaphorical comparison to a woman refusing to be silenced (Donatien-Yssa 97) – must occur if power is to be located in fragmentation.

Tyler's function throughout the text is to un-mute Mala (whom he meets when she arrives at the nursing home) by voicing her story. Upon first seeing her, Tyler encounters an old woman who is "the image of historical avoidance, and the symbol of women's psychological mutilation" (Donatien-Yssa 98). The action of Mala's turning inward ostensibly suggests that she avoids the horror of the sexual violence that she endured at the hands of her father; however, Donatien-Yssa argues that her act of refusing to remember is *purposeful*. She suggests that Mala's state of being when Tyler encounters her is a "strategic obliteration of memory [that] can be perceived as [an act] of resistance and means to stay alive" (98). As Donatien-Yssa asserts, unlike her father who was unable to fight back against the oppressive system of colonialism and consequently,

self-destructed, Mala figures out how to survive, even in the most inhuman of circumstances. It makes sense, then, that Mala's strength – on some level, stored up for all these years of her muted existence – ultimately helps Tyler become the person he wants to be. At the end of the novel, Tyler “decided to unabashedly declare [himself]” (247). I contend that his decision to reveal himself as the woman he wants to be manifests because of Mala's profound influence on him. If he can succeed in helping her unearth the horrific memories of her past, he can stop hiding, too. When Tyler enters her room with a full face of makeup and woman's scarf around his neck, Mala “claps her hands” (247). When he changes into the nurse's uniform (that has been hiding behind Mala's dresser), Mala “squeals” (247). She kept the uniform for him just as she kept his secret, and when he was ready to emerge as a woman, she cheered him. His role as a transvestite subverts a traditionally homophobic culture, and his voice – othered, just like Mala's as “mad” – reveals the truths of *Lantanacamara*. His character links undeniably with Harry/Harriet of Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*. Both men rebel, thus are “othered” as nurses, a traditionally female profession for its proclivity to nurture. Both men help to heal the female protagonists whose fragmentation threatens to permanently silence them. Harry/Harriet forces Clare to confront the atrocities happening in Jamaica and *act* in order to affect change. Her action of joining a guerilla group (because of Harry/Harriet's encouragement) functions as a way to tell the story of her people in the same way that Tyler's voice functions as Mala's story. But Tyler finally reveals himself as the woman whom he is most comfortable being, and Mala reconnects with Ambrose through the unspoken understanding that time heals one's wounds, the damage has been done. Mala is the victim of decades of forced isolation and society's criminal silence.

Her sexual oppression, just like her mother's – within the confines of a community whose rules demand that women submit to male desire and control – places her on the periphery, an outsider literally muted by a system that would rather not look upon the victims it produces and abandons. Mootoo shifts the course of events in *He Drown She in the Sea* so that the main characters experience a definitive breaking away from the colonial traditions of an island that work to separate them.

### **Disturbing the Peace: Carving Out a New Space in *He Drown She in the Sea***

As Diana Brydon suggests in her article “A Place on the Map of the World,” Mootoo's characters must “move beyond a fixation of those traumas and beyond the trap of entering into discourses of comparative victimages...” (96). While Danticat and Cliff – and even Mootoo, in *Cereus Blooms at Night* – focus on the characters' journeys as motivated by trauma, Rose Sangha's journey in *He Drown She in the Sea* is one of hope. As a universal symbol, water possesses the power to cleanse, baptize, bury, wash away; in this text, water serves as an emblem of “disturbance” (Brydon 105) to the normative practices of Guanagaspar, particularly in terms of its colonial influences. Mootoo *employs* the sea as a powerful tool to fragment, to “shake up” the quiet lives of the lovers Rose and Harry in order to break them out of their obedient prisons.

The text opens with a dream sequence in which Harry St. George, as a young boy, tries to save his village from an impending tsunami. The villagers ignore him because he is only a child, but they die because of their foolishness. Only Harry and his mother survive, along with their house. The presence of this natural disaster in the opening pages of the text speaks to Mootoo's message that “no place offers even mythical safety of an island refuge from the terrors of the world any longer” (Brydon 101). The journey

of the characters, then, will require them to re-claim spaces that already exist and find a way to live within them according to norms that they have defined for themselves. The image of water pervades the novel; Mootoo's intention seems to be to remind the reader that its power propels the main characters of the novel – as each page turns, as each reference to water unfolds, Rose and Harry move closer together. But until the end of the novel, Rose and Harry exist in entirely different spaces. Rose marries Shem, a “man who comes from the same background as myself” (25) – immigrant Indians of the elite class – and remains on the island of Guanagaspar, where both she and Harry were raised. Born poor and fatherless, Harry leaves Guanagaspar for Canada, where he can re-invent himself, make his own money, escape the barriers of poverty and class stratification. Though Harry's struggles as a lower-class youth desperately in love with his wealthy childhood friend Rose are the most discernible in the text, the relationship between Harry's mother Dolly and Rose's mother Mrs. Sangha predetermine the class tensions, dictated by colonial influence, that their children will feel. While both women suffer the losses of their husbands – Dolly's husband drowns, Mrs. Sangha's husband philanders – they cannot comfort one another as typical friends might because of their societal ranks. The contrary lives of Mrs. Sangha and Dolly reveal themselves most obviously when Dolly reports to the Sangha ancestral house to clean. While Mrs. Sangha allows Rose to play freely with Dolly's Harry, Dolly disapproves of the children's friendliness. She knows “her place,” and she knows her son's place among the wealthy. In an exchange between Rose and Dolly, Rose requests a glass of juice, which Dolly immediately prepares. But as Mootoo reveals, even an ostensibly inconsequential task carries implications: “Dolly eyed a jug of water in the refrigerator. A glass of it would cool her

down good. With one or two ice cubes crackling and splitting in it. But her child was comfortable enough for the two of them in that house. She was not about to take liberties. She would satisfy herself with the water from the stand pipe in the backyard” (115). As a servant, Dolly was expected to distance herself from those “liberties” that distinguished the rich from the poor. Mrs. Sangha, too, concedes these class distinctions. When the war abroad finally touches base in Guanagaspar, the women and their children find themselves stranded in the Sangha home, alone. At first, Mrs. Sangha instructs Dolly and Harry to sleep in the cellar “...with cobwebs, spiders, a thick albino lizard...and boxes of paper from Mr. Sangha’s business” (163). The women and children are alone, without threat of Mr. Sangha’s disapproval, yet the Dolly and Harry must remain “below!” Dolly finally asserts herself in this moment, asking that she and Harry be allowed to sleep upstairs, to which Mrs. Sangha agrees. While Mrs. Sangha remarks on the “loneliness” of the night, even with company in the house (166), once the St. George’s are tucked in safely *upstairs*, a sense of comfort remains. The women seem “equal,” along with their children who sleep soundly in the same bed. This peace is disrupted only with the unexpected return of Mr. Sangha who, upon seeing his daughter sleeping alongside Harry, shouts, “ ‘What in the *arse* is this?’” (172). These unwritten rules of class structure fragment the potential power of a body of women coming together to support one another; they affect the capacity of Caribbean women to carve a space for themselves and each other as respected mothers, wives, and household earners. In adulthood, Rose and her trusted maid Piyari abide by the same acceptance of “place,” as the force of tradition carries on.

Mootoo's placement of objects within the confines of Rose's home construes a world of order and isolation. As Rose narrates the story of her reuniting with Harry to Piyari, objects such as the fish vase paint a profound picture of loneliness and regret. The "fish out of water" (*He Drown She* 8) – perhaps an emblem of Rose, trying to make sense of this newfound desire to free herself – houses "sluggish, guttural" water (9) and dead chrysanthemums. The fish cannot survive or sustain life in this house, the space of Rose's predetermined choices. In this same scene, Rose demands that Piyari throw out the many leftovers in the freezer, to make space "for a fresh start" (9). While Rose seems quite conscious of her present reality – to Piyari, she observes, "...from the day I left my mother's house and got married, nobody has bothered to ask me what I think or what I feel. Nobody in this country can imagine that I might have feelings" (8) – she begins to break from it in order to map out a path entirely of her choosing. In the same conversation with her maid, Rose concludes, "I am not stepping backward – I cannot go back to the way it used to be" (8). The notion that "nobody in this country can imagine" what Rose feels speaks to Brydon's premise that Mootoo is "using this personal story to remap utopian desire for a different kind of world" (97). Guanagaspar represents all the Rose must be willing to abandon in order to move forward. To be sure, her leaving belies decades in the making. Because while Guanagaspar isolates her, that isolation has afforded her a sense of safety, a world where she knows her place, where she abides by the hierarchical class structure that recognizes her as prominent, where she lives her daily life with the comfort of routine. "Mapping a different kind of world" disrupts that existence to the core. Harry challenges the normative practices, too, by refusing to



become the man that a poor, fatherless boy inevitably would grow to become in Guanagaspar. Instead, he leaves the island.

Harry's relocation to Canada signifies a rebellious breaking away from the birthplace that regarded the likes of him as subservient. In Canada, Harry can drive a taxi to earn money to attend school to become a landscape designer; in Guanagaspar, he tells Kay, the free-spirited white woman whom he dates, "'a gardener was a man who came to work barefoot on his bicycle that was held together by string and a prayer, who, before pulling out weeds and shoring up beds, washed his employer's car and after scrubbed the bathroom floor and tiles'" (65). Canada allows Harry the freedom to become his own employer; class stratification dissolves, as evidenced by the purchase of his seaside home from a wealthy couple facing bankruptcy. That opportunity would not have been possible in Guanagaspar. Furthermore, his work in Elderberry, British Columbia beholds him to no one, which offers him a wide freedom underscored by the physical landscape of his surroundings. Mootoo inextricably links Harry to the greenness of his environment, writing of his house as "part of a tight community nestled in a cranny at the foot of a mountain by the sea..." (65), of the "odor of the sea and pine needles and twigs" (20) alongside his home. His home in Elderberry, while part of a "tight community" like the one of his boyhood in Guanagaspar, does not bind him; rather, its proximity to the wide open spaces of the sea and mountains seems to spur him to explore (his relationship with Kay, his re-connection with Rose) while Rose's marital home in Guanagaspar constrains her. Even Harry's work as a landscape designer reflects the significance of the earth in his self-realization and rebellion. He turns the dirt with his hands, plants flowers, pulls weeds – his work signifies hope and an opportunity for new beginnings.

Eventually, Rose participates in the gardening with Harry, and this action also creates meaning. The dirtiness of her hands reveals the expectation of perfection she defies as she re-connects with Harry and, in turn, re-connects to the parts of herself that she quieted for so long. As Rose recounts her love story, Piyari observes, “Madam regularly had her hair set and combed, her nails shaped and painted. One would have thought that it being the festive season and all, Madam would have had herself done up. But it had been over a month now since she had gone to the beauty salon. She distractedly picked remaining bits of color off her nails, amassing a collection of red enamel flakes on the kitchen table” (49). Rose’s neglect of self-maintenance indicates a fundamental shift in her being, in that her physical appearance begins to matter less than her emotional security. For the first time in her life, she rebels against internalized patriarchal ideals of female beauty; she resists by valuing her emotional happiness rather than her physical self. A different nurturing *must* occur if she and Harry disrupt convention. However, the freedom that Harry’s land in Elderberry signifies does not erase its isolation.

Indeed, he lives on the outer margins of British Columbia, which correlates to his marginalization as an immigrant. On his first outing with Kay, Mootoo writes that Harry “knew that in every sense he was in unfamiliar waters” (40). Here, too, he is an outsider, but by choice. His relationship with Kay demands that he look at male/female relationships through a different lens; one that allows the woman to lead as comfortably as the man. “He has just spent the better part of the summer leading, he mused, the Guanagasparian Rose around, showing her his version, a tamer one to be certain, of British Columbia. He hardly did anything he was unsure of. Yet here he was in unfamiliar terrain, about to have a boating adventure, initiated by a woman – cultures

apart from his..." (39). The relationship between Harry and Kay is interesting in that a marginalized heterosexual man, rather than a woman, challenges the normative practices of his colonial upbringing. Brydon posits that these re-constructions of male/female relationships allow Mootoo to explore the possibility that men and women can, indeed, live together happily: "Mootoo seems to imply that both official and unofficial violence stem from inequalities that can only be addressed from the ground up, through revising male-female relations at the level of the couple" (107). Mootoo's premise in *He Drown She in the Sea* breaks from the study of the fragmented woman's journey to make sense of the pieces of her life. While the other novels of this paper examine the relationships that those women have with men, ultimately, their sojourns remain singular. The journey of Rose and Harry, while often singular in terms of physical proximity, always returns to the couple.

Just as the characters in the other novels must not be read as binary, fragmented-versus-whole objects, neither must Rose and Harry. Their couplehood is not Mootoo's way of piecing together their fragmented, individual existences. Rose's familial history, just as Harry's familial history, includes migration from India to the fictional Guanagaspar as "indentured servants" (123). Only "chance" and "circumstance," (123) as Dolly conceives, delivered them to different spaces. Later in the text, Dolly consoles a devastated Harry who has lost his best friend Rose: "They different, son, but they not better than you or me...All we cross Black Water, sometimes six and sometimes seven months side by side in the same stinking boat, to come here. Same-same. All of we...How, child, how out of those beginnings some end up higher and some end up lower, tell me this? They not better than we, and *that* you should remember" (178). As

Kristina Kyser notes, “Throughout the text, the impact of migration on the cultural insider status is constantly in the foreground because virtually every character has been transplanted” (77). Ancestrally, Rose and Harry *permanently* share a commonality that cannot be healed or made whole by love, but again, that is not Mootoo’s intention in finally bringing them together.

Perhaps Harry’s family – his parents and grandparents – speak to the notion that safe spaces in a post-colonial world only can be carved out of foundations solidly *re-built* from “the level of the couple.” For Uncle Mako and Tante Eugenie (Harry’s father’s adoptive parents), Guanagaspar’s class structure and its subsequent rules certainly affect their lives – Uncle Mako is a fisherman, so he and Eugenie exist on the margins, too – but they challenge what it means to be marginalized. As a couple, they demonstrate a sense of security that compels them to break the unwritten rules of the island. Upon finding Seudath (Harry’s father), this African couple readily embraces him, raising him as their own, though his fair skin and soft, curly hair belie his Indian ancestry. In this family structure, the normative practice of separation between African and Indian throughout Guanagaspar plays no role. Like the other characters of this project, they accept their fragmentation and locate power in it. How fitting, then, that Tante Eugenie and Uncle Mako – two characters who defy the rigidity of the island – send off Rose and Harry on their journey to Honduras to begin a life of their own making.

The final dream sequence of the novel, titled “Air,” finds Rose and Harry, having left their homes (and Rose, having left Shem), in the ocean surviving a tidal wave. They confront the danger of the sea together, which emblemizes their confronting the “tragic

story of their past,” but unlike Mala, they *resist* silence (Brydon 109). Instead, Rose and Harry “answer” to their story and determine to write a new one.

## Conclusion

The texts of Danticat, Cliff, and Mootoo examine the ways in which trauma effects the physical and emotional bodies of Caribbean women that have been marginalized by colonial patriarchies. Fragmentation of the body – the ways in which it breaks, grieves, migrates, bears trauma, bears witness – creates meaning for the characters of the novels examined in this thesis. For quite some time, the framework from which I studied these novels required that I appraise the ways that the characters “fix” their fragmentation to make it whole. As Patrick Bellegarde-Smith posits in *Haiti: The Breached Citadel*, “...a breached citadel...is weakened by a lack of cohesion among its systemic parts, because once fragmented, the parts of a culture no longer combine and interact to form an integrated, meaningful cultural” (qtd. by Dash 33). This position is problematic when studied from the perspective of the individual, whose fragmentation may never be made whole, nor is wholeness her goal. And if these fragmented individuals multiply to number a community (certainly, the characters in the novels of this thesis don’t exist in the vacuum of a book), then Bellegarde-Smith’s contention foreshadows a dire end for Caribbean cultures. I argue that it is worth studying the “rebel consciousness” of these women characters in terms of the ways they use their fragmentation as power, thus, denying it as weakness.

In Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Farming of Bones*, the characters of Sophie and Amabelle seek to find meaning in their identities after profound physical and emotional trauma. Particularly through the character of Sophie, Danticat presents a woman who defies the exacting power of sexual violence by returning to the site of the violence to confront the devastation it wrecked on her family:

There is always a place where women live near trees that, blowing in the wind, sound like music. These women tell stories to their children both to frighten and delight them. These women, they are fluttering lanterns on the hills, the fireflies in the night, the faces that loom over you and recreate the same unspeakable acts that they themselves lived through. There is always a place where nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms. Where women like cardinal birds return to look at their own faces in stagnant bodies of water. I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 233-34).

Danticat's diction indicates that trauma is ever present in the lives of mothers and daughters who have survived sexual violence. The notion that "nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms" speaks to my position that wholeness is not a goal because it is not even possible. Thus, Sophie's return to the cane field does not "fix" her fragmentation, nor is she suddenly made whole in these moments. Rather, she *uses* her fragmented body to destroy the cane that hid the secrets of her mother's rape for too long. In *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle's return to the river at the end of the text presents complications, in that a profound foreboding overshadows her act. As previously discussed, her fragmented physical body floats between the border of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. While this act reads as a sort of catharsis for Amabelle, her longing to return to her dead parents and lover Sebastien implies suicide. My focus, then, is problematized, for unlike Sophie, she ostensibly *cannot live* with her fragmentation.

I am interested in Cliff and Mootoo's works as they inextricably connect the rawness of the land to the fragmented female characters. At the end of *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, Clare Savage returns to the Jamaican landscape. In *Abeng*, as an adolescent girl who experiences her first period, Clare leaves the confines of Miss Beatrice's home to "[head] for the stream formed by the cascades of water. She knelt

beside the water and washed herself” (165). Her return to the landscape that both protected her (as she played with Zoe) and betrayed her (the man spying on the girls as they lay naked on the rocks) signals the significance of space that possesses the power to love and harm her. The ritualistic washing of the body represents a cleansing or baptism, and I find this important too, particularly because it occurs outside, among the rawness of the landscape. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, the representation of the Jamaican landscape is less idealistic in that Clare connects with a guerilla group fighting to take back the country of their ancestors. As Wendy Walters notes, “...Jamaica cannot exist as a nostalgic escape for Clare or an idealized womb space, a fantasy homeland. Instead it is a microcosm of the oppression of Third World peoples everywhere” (226). In the last pages of the novel, Clare’s rebel group plans an attack on the American film company that has swooped in to take advantage of the cheap and authentic *ruinate* of the land while at the same time exploiting the Jamaican people. Violence erupts in these last scenes as gunfire engulfs the mountainside. Cliff’s ending is ambiguous, though she seems to imply that all who are present in this scene will die, Clare included. Corporate greed wins. But as Walters notes, “...another way to read Cliff’s ending may retain several meanings. Perhaps it is not only gunfire that overwrites the landscape but the landscape itself. The last lines of the book are all bird and animal noises” (232). As in *Abeng*, a visceral return to the land ends the text, and this is a concept I find intriguing. Mootoo, like Cliff, roots her characters’ actions in deep connection with the land, yet she treats the landscape so differently.

In both *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *He Drown She in the Sea*, Mootoo creates fictional spaces where shocking violence and heartfelt companionship coincide. Unlike



Cliff, Mootoo's characters exist in and out of dream sequences, which contribute to the otherworldliness of her work. The physical landscape, though, is ever present. While Clare finds solace in the landscape, she also experiences profound violence in it, as previously discussed. For Mootoo's characters, the landscape is their haven. Mala, broken by the unspeakable sexual abuse of her childhood, and Rose, broken by a colonial caste system that chooses for its members whom they must marry, the raw land protects them (for Rose, I reference the sea as "raw land"). Even Mala's sister Asha, also a victim of their father's sexual abuse, makes an appearance in *He Drown She in the Sea* as the owner of a small garden shop. Mootoo uses the land as a sort of dreamlike fantasy – decidedly *unlike* Cliff. The natural spaces in Mootoo's texts are less corrupted than the Jamaican landscape, and they provide an opportunity to escape (for Mala) and re-build (for Rose and Harry). The function of the landscape in all six texts would serve a fascinating study, particularly because it helps to mold the characters into functioning *and* fragmented:

Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal, fragmentation as a part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting (hooks 205).

Using this perspective, one's home is never static; rather, it "moves" with her. The characters of this project emblemize the postcolonial ideology that fragmentation is an inevitable – and necessary – result of the relocation of the postcolonial subject. Her home, wherever it is at any moment of her life, continues to evolve and build upon itself as she moves forward. Thus, the homes of her past "do not demand forgetting" because they function as the foundation of her continued experiences. bell hooks's final words

speaking volumes: The fragmentation of the characters examined in this thesis do not demand fixing, as the pieces themselves become essential to the understanding and survival of the individual.

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