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Postmodern Developments in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*

Roberto Strongman

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The emphasis on chronological, developmental linearity in coming-of-age narratives which results in the narration of coherent personal and national identities is symptomatic of Modernity's configuration of history as a continuous stream of temporal progression. Postmodernist aesthetics emphasizing dislocation, ephemerality and multiplicity, on the other hand, de-center this linearity in favor of a representation of time as a disjointed and highly-fragmented collage of events yielding dispersed identities made up of multiple, often disconnected elements.

It is precisely this breakdown in the linear conceptualization of time, the ways in which it destabilizes narration and the way in which it appears to fragment identities which most concerns me here. This essay looks at two recent Caribbean novels of Postmodernist qualities, Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) and Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), to investigate the processes by which Modernity's construction of linear, continuous time is challenged and substituted by alternative forms of recounting development. In particular I am interested in the ways in which Cliff and Santiago, respectively, make use of the literary devices of flashback and the vignette in order to produce discontinuous personal histories which mirror equally disunified communal identities. As such, this investigation of postmodern chronologies in Caribbean texts enacts an important critique on theorists that privilege the First World as the locus par excellence of the postmodern condition.<sup>1</sup>

Any chronological summary of Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* would render an injustice to the thematic and structural complexity of a story which owes a significant degree of its importance to the subversion of linear time through alternative, "spiral" techniques (Edmonson 186). Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, I will uncoil and arrange in sequential manner the events of two thematic strands whose interweaving carry the principal issues at stake in the text. The first thematic strand is one dealing with the Jamaican struggle for liberation. *No Telephone to Heaven* opens with the image of an open-backed truck ascending through a decrepit, mountainous gravel road in the Jamaican countryside. "Ruininate,"

the Jamaican appellation for the dense bush covering areas which had once been cleared to be used for cultivation, surrounds the vehicle in its arduous climb up the steep path. The truck carries several men and women dressed as soldiers, in khaki pants and shirts, in apparent preparation for a guerrilla attack. Despite the unresolved and vague nature of this initial image, its symbolic quality is a powerful one even at this early point in the text. The contrast between the vehicle and the surrounding nature set the tone for the ongoing critique of progress which Cliff continues in the text. The environmental devastation of the land exemplified in the destruction of primeval forests for agriculture and the subsequent abandonment of these areas point to the "ruinate," catastrophic effects of development on the environment of the Caribbean. This "ruinate" vegetation illustrates how the telos of progress is always decay. As Clare Savage's interviewer tells her before accepting her into their revolutionary group: "If you have been here for the past two years, then you realize that all progress is backwards. . ." (195). Clare Savage's clearing of the ruinate for cultivation can be seen as an attempt to regress the course of progress, at least to certain intermediate steps. Her continuation of her grandmother and mother's tradition of freely distributing the surplus agricultural products of their land to the less wealthy can be seen as yet another attempt to undo progress and return to earlier, more communal ways of living in harmony with fellow humans and nature.

Nevertheless, Cliff's critique of development becomes more complicated as it suggests the utilization of development as an antidote to itself. The problematic nature of this homeopathic solution is evident in the guerrilla activities of the group. The need to end the present economic inequality of the island, its ecological devastation and all the other ills resulting from developmental practices are combated by the guerrilla with the same intense developmental, revolutionary impulse. Their revolutionary drive has Enlightenment philosophical antecedents and a more local lineage in the histories of the maroons. The Cuban revolution, which is a congenerational event with the 1950s and 60s setting of the novel, provides another local source of revolutionary ideals for this Jamaican guerrilla group. The steep ascent up the path carved on the side of the mountain clearly bespeaks the progressive ideologies espoused by the militant group. The impact of human action on nature, the linearity of the path, the representation of liberation as a arduous climb all serve to cement the association of

the insurgents' revolutionary ideologies with progress. Furthermore, the bad condition of the gravel road serves to show the inefficiency of progress to benefit remote areas of the country and the need to re-distribute resources by means of revolutionary activity. Nevertheless, the later revelation that the insurgents plan to attack an American movie-set filming a Hollywoodesque version of Jamaican anti-colonial history against the British is important as it concretizes the need for the oppressed to have control of their own representation and as it highlights the transference of hegemonic power from Europe to North America, even while at the same time maintaining Jamaica in perpetual subjugation to foreigners. The guerrilla's defeat at the end of the text at the hands of the national military signals the need to abandon development as an anti-development weapon and calls for alternative forms of resistance to undo its power. This thematic current of Jamaican liberation, initiated in the opening scene by the description of the movement of guerrilla troops through countryside "ruinate," is particularly significant in its critique of development and of the ways in which it fails Caribbean societies in general.

The second thematic strand narrates the story of Clare Savage, a light-skinned Jamaican woman, through her migration to the United States and England and her eventual return to Jamaica. Allegorically, her name and the names of most of the characters speak to the racial characteristics attributed to them. To call a Jamaican family "the Savages" is an obvious reference to the primitivization of colonized peoples. "Boy," Clare's father is coded as a compliant colored man. Their relations' boss' name, "Mr. Saxon," is clearly utilized as a racial indicator. Also, names of the characters in the text stand for the highly stratified social privilege given to individuals in the Caribbean according to their proportion of European blood. In this sense, Ms. Mattie's shade is marked by her name and so is Clare's. Within the context of the family, Clare's fair complexion unites her to her father and separates her from her darker mother and sister who, unable to tolerate America's racism and the assimilationist tendencies of Boy, split the family when they return to Jamaica. Clare's light skin produces and emblemizes a deep sense of in-betweenness which drive her to seek a more coherent sense of self through an identification with place. The denigrating epithets she endures—"dark chocolate," "white cockroach"—and her British colonial education result in a deep dissatisfaction with the US and drive her to London. Unable to find herself in her flâneries around the colonial center and her

education at the University of London, Clare decides to begin her life in Jamaica after a family tragedy calls her there: "I returned to Jamaica," Clare says, "to mend...to bury...my mother...I returned to this island because there was nowhere else... I could live no longer in borrowed countries, on borrowed time" (193).

The two stories intersect many times throughout the text producing a sense of confusion and the semblance of incoherence. The most significant intersection between the two stories occurs at the end of the text, at which point Clare Savage is revealed as the granddaughter of Miss Mattie, heir to the property which the insurgents utilize as their camp. Having given her property to the guerrilla and having joined their ranks, Clare and her comrades meet their deaths on the field, just as they prepare to fire on the American movie set, as the national army launches a surprise aerial attack on the insurgent group.

The return to the opening guerrilla scene at the end of the text does something more profound than merely establish a certain narrative unity to the novel. Because the guerrilla scene is the chronological closure of the Clare Savage life-story, beginning the narration with an extended narration of its end enacts a disruption of linear time. The realization, at the end of the text, that the opening scene foreshadows the conclusion presents the reader with the opportunity to rethink time in alternative ways. Because the telos of the narration is, in fact, its origin, performs a critique of time as a continuously unfolding stream progressing towards some as-yet-unattained goal and presents the possibility of thinking of past, present and future as simultaneous occurrences. Moreover, the frequent extended flashbacks of the guerrilla scene found throughout the text interrupt the Clare Savage coming-of-age story, splicing development, breaking up its traditional flow, repeatedly announcing its end as a narrative device and as an epistemological function.

Furthermore, the significance of the concluding guerrilla passage rests on the final identification of Clare Savage as an allegory of Jamaica. Her joining the guerrilla group identifies her with the centuries-long struggle of liberation of the island. Also, the revelation that Clare is the one who has given the farm to the guerrillas articulates the idea that Clare herself is "the Land." Further, the guerrilla movement is a direct descendant of the Maroons-colonies of runaway slaves who raided English settlements and thus destabilized colonialism. Keeping in mind this history of resistance, it is not difficult to see Clare Savage as an

incarnation of the figure of Nanny, the legendary female maroon of Jamaica. Furthermore, her martyrdom is symbolic of Jamaica's indomitable spirit in the face of overwhelming oppression. Moreover, Clare's return to Jamaica, after years abroad, speaks to her final identification with her place of birth. Clare's search for identity in the US and in England speaks to the futility of Jamaican reliance on Western models and of the pressing need to find oneself at home. Essentially, if Clare finds herself in Jamaica it is because the two are one and the same. In short, the collusion of the guerrilla and the Clare Savage stories at the end the text enacts a merger between the political and the personal, the national and the subjective which, beyond being responsible for the novel's strong allegorical qualities, speaks to the frustrating course of Jamaican history through the interrupted life-story of Clare Savage.

*No Telephone to Heaven* recognizes the dangers of developmental ideologies and seeks ways to combat them. The defeat of the guerrilla at the end of the text points to the inability of progressive strategies to completely eradicate progress and the need to seek alternative combative methods against this modernist malaise. Therefore, Cliff's text suggests such an alternative method to be a structural re-composition of narrative time through literary devices like the flashback.<sup>2</sup>

Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* enacts a similar critique of developmental, linear time. While Santiago does not utilize flashback and her coming-of-age story remains linear, the course of the plot is marked by wide gaps created by her microscopic description of events in loosely connected vignettes. Her style presents the compilation of scattered memories of her infancy in Puerto Rico and teenage years in New York with her mother, father and six younger siblings during the 1950s and 60s. The finished product therefore bears the semblance of a re-collection of fragments forming a literary mosaic evidencing discontinuities between the different bits and pieces of reminiscences. Even though the separate vignettes are presented in sequential order, Santiago's preference of an intensely focused vision on childhood memories over a strongly-linked narrative chain make her organization more thematic than chronological. The briefness of the vignettes, most only a page or two in length, give the story a very fast paced, jumpy characteristic. For example, on her first day in the US, Santiago's autobiographical character, Negi, observes the intricate moldings in her new room in Brooklyn. "There were angels on the ceiling. Four fat naked cherubs danced

in a circle, their hands holding ivy garlands, their round buttocks half covered by a cloth swirling around their legs" (221). Her extended description, which continues with the intricate decorative details of the iron balcony, the claw-foot bathtub, and the mantel in the apartment are representative of Santiago's microscopic attention to detail. Immediately following this description, there is a vignette describing "La Marketa," the East Harlem Puerto Rican marketplace. This type of narrative jump is a characteristic feature of Santiago's style in *When I Was Puerto Rican*. She rapidly jumps from an extended description of being covered by devouring termites as a child to her mother giving birth at home to the culinary preparations to make morcilla to her parents separation all the while disregarding smooth transitions from one topic to the next. As a result of these loose connections between the vignettes, Santiago's autobiographical act of remembering remains dismembered.

Rather than interpreting Santiago's ephemeral style as a deficiency, it is important to consider the ways in which it reflects and illustrates a postmodernist reconceptualization of time. Santiago's cultivation of the vignette as a structuring device in her text allows her to show history as a series of discontinuous events which are only given coherence through narration. Her effort in this text is to strive for this coherence all the while knowing this coherence to be an artifice and a construction. In a manner similar to Liechtenstein's pop-art silk-screens, Santiago's text is less concerned with producing a seamless representation than to expose the illusion of this representation through its magnification of the gaps between the different elements constituting the whole work. The pre-eminence of the fragment in Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* endow this work with postmodern qualities which enact a powerful critique of linear time. In this work, time is subordinated to memory and chronological time is under the authority of psychological experience. Santiago's Time is a disjointed formation evidencing wide gaps, breaks and discontinuities—a conceptualization which contrasts sharply with Modernity's idea of developmental, linear time.

Rosemary George, in "But that was in another country," sees a certain element of allegory in the trope of travel in *When I Was Puerto Rican* and other coming-of-age novels. She writes:

These narratives both exploit and transform a very rich seam of the Western cultural understanding of itself in relation to the rest of the world

by superimposing travel to the West onto the more familiar narrative of traveling to adulthood. The novels suggest that both journeys—to the United States and to adulthood—are indeed the final and logical destination for young subjects who are deemed worthy of literary or biographical attention. (137)

If traveling to the West and traveling to adulthood are parallel journeys, as George states, then wouldn't it also appear pertinent to say that the end-points of both journeys—adulthood and the West—deserve to be seen as metaphorical of one another and that, by extension, the origins of both journeys—childhood and the Third World—deserve attention as allegorical of one another as well? In fact, the life of the child protagonist of *When I Was Puerto Rican* does mirror that of her Third World island. Not only does the movement from her Puerto Rican ripped-metal-sheet house to acceptance into the prestigious Performing Arts High School in New York parallel the economic development of the island under the United States but the narrative jolts of Santiago's history match Puerto Rico's colonial history. Moreover, the discontinuities in Santiago's coming-of-age narrative find correspondence in the Puerto Rican history her father gives her as she asks him:

"Papi, what is an imperialist?"

"Puerto Rico was a colony of Spain after Columbus landed here," he began, like a schoolteacher.

"I know that."

"Don't interrupt."

"Sorry."

"In 1898, los Estados Unidos invaded Puerto Rico, and we became their colony. A lot of Puerto Ricans don't think that's right. They call Americanos imperialists, which means they want to change our country and our culture to be like theirs." (72)

The historical interventions which Puerto Rico has had to endure through Spanish and US colonization and the difficult attainment of political autonomy as a result of these events are reflected in Esmeralda Santiago's discontinuous, fragmented history towards educational and professional success. Her father's admonition not to interrupt him as he narrates the course of history signal the pain produced by the historical interruptions of colonization and point to Esmeralda Santiago's successful disruption of linearity which is present structurally throughout her text. Esmeralda's childhood under Eisenhower, *Eekeh Aysenhouerr* in the text, and under Luis

Muñoz Marín as governor of Puerto Rico further mark the protagonist as the personification of the Estado Libre Asociado, or the current state of Puerto Rico as a Commonwealth of the United States. Moreover, the narrative of Esmeralda Santiago, a Puerto Rican living in the United States, articulates the dislocation of millions of other Puerto Ricans abroad. The diasporical aspect of *When I Was Puerto Rican* contribute to an extension of the national allegory function and invite an interpretation of the text as a communal allegory.

Because of their diasporic component and, more significantly, their postmodernist treatment of narrative time, Cliff's and Santiago's texts provoke a re-evaluation of allegory in the postcolonial context. "Allegory" and the question of postcoloniality cannot go together in a sentence without reminding the reader of the debate between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad in *Social Text* spurred by Jameson's stating that "all third-world texts are necessarily...allegorical...they are to be read as what I call national allegories (Third-World 69)." As could be expected, Jameson's claims were perceived as essentialistic and presumptuous by postcolonial critics. Among these, Aijaz Ahmad became Jameson's strongest opponent. In his article, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" Ahmad's single most important challenge lies in his calling into question the monolithic notion of the "third world." Interestingly, Ahmad's theoretical engagement with the notion of allegory is largely absent from his text. A large part of his few references to the notion of allegory are to explain its non-existent status in the choice texts of Urdu literature he outlines in his essay. Ahmad's dismissal of the allegorical nature of third-world writing expresses a deep anxiety in which allegory is simultaneously disavowed-through his refusal to consider it as a mode of third-world writing-and avowed-through his perceived need for counter-readings. This anxiety stems, it appears to me, from the association of allegory with "simplicity," in its worse connotations.

Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* complicate the easy notion of allegory discussed by Ahmad and Jameson through a cultivation of a postmodern aesthetic of decenteredness. The notion of their allegories is no longer singular; it is multiple and diasporic. This spatial fragmentation of the homeland is also echoed in the temporal realm through the flashback and the vignette. Jameson and Ahmad do not conceive of allegory beyond simple linear

chronological narratives with stable geographical locations and these two novels extend the critical knowledge of allegory by proving its powers of adaptability and malleability to current discursive modes and, in so doing, strengthen their critique of colonialism.

Western histories have always represented the Caribbean as backwards and regressive in comparison to an "advanced" Europe. The Caribbean need to redress the unfairness of this emplotment meets with the postmodern re-evaluation of developing, unfolding time as a construction of Enlightenment thinking. Esmeralda Santiago and Michelle Cliff have profited from the meeting of these two currents in order to present alternative personal and national histories of themselves and of their Caribbean islands. Michelle Cliff's use of the flashback to break up linear time in narration and Esmeralda Santiago's use of the vignette in order to recount a discontinuous history are important literary expressions of postmodernist cultural practices and of the loss of the traditional idea of developmental time in an age in which the technological and the economic emphasize the ephemeral and the instantaneous.

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## Notes

1. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey attempts to historicize this re-conceptualization by utilizing a Marxist model in which infrastructural shifts in the production of capital effect changes in the superstructural, cultural aspects of first world societies. In this work, Harvey discusses the co-relation between simultaneous philosophical, technological and economic developments from the Enlightenment to the present, paying particular attention to the shift which, at all levels, inaugurates Postmodernism in the second half of the Twentieth Century in industrialized nations.

2. That this postmodernist conception of time is akin to the way in which the schizophrenic experience time has not gone unnoticed by cultural critics such as Deleuze and Guattari, Fredric Jameson and David Harvey. Building upon Deleuze and Guattari's proposition in their book *L'Anti-Oedipe* which views schizophrenia as a product of capitalist practices, Jameson, in "Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism," presents schizophrenia as the most salient paradigmatic condition of experience in Postmodernity. Seeing schizophrenia as a breakdown in the Lacanian signifying chain, Jameson believes that "when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers" (26).