MICHELLE CLIFF
b. 1942

In Michelle Cliff's work—the stories, poems, and essays that she has been publishing since the late 1970s—race, sexuality, and the tensions experienced both in the United States and in Britain by its Caribbean immigrants come together with particular force.

Born on November 2, 1946, in Kingston, Jamaica, Cliff emigrated to the United States when she was three years old. Until she was ten, she lived in New York City with her mother and sister, then returned to Jamaica, where, fair-skinned enough to pass for white herself, she was shocked by the island's attention to color, especially prominent in the private girls' school that she attended. In the mid-1960s she left to continue her education in London, receiving an A.B. from Wagner College in 1969, and in 1974 an M.Phil. in comparative literature from the Warburg Institute, with a thesis on the historical study of the Renaissance.

Despite the academic start to her career, Cliff sees her essay Notes on Speechlessness, published in the lesbian-feminist magazine Conditions II in 1977, as her first real piece of writing. In Notes on Speechlessness Cliff identifies with Victor, the Wild Boy of Avernon, who, "after his rescue from the forest and wilderness by a well-meaning doctor of Enlightenment Europe, became 'civilized' but never came to speech." Certainly this is a surprising identification, especially for a woman who had worked as a journalist, researcher, editor, teacher, and historian, all jobs requiring excellent written or verbal skills. Ultimately, it points to one of Cliff's main concerns, that is with "speech," by which she means not outward oral expression but instead the complex surfacing of material hidden from both the self and others.

A second major concern of Cliff's is her return to Jamaica, whose dispersed images she must reclaim, almost as if she were part of the diaspora brought about by slavery. Having lived in both the United States and the Caribbean, and in England, the country responsible for Jamaica's colonial past, Cliff turns constantly from one cultural identification to another, trying to sort them out, an activity that is central to her first novel, Abeng (1984), and to No Telephone to Heaven (1987). These same concerns surface in the short story Columbus, from her 1990 collection Bodies of Water, in which the narrator, a twelve-year-old girl just returned to Jamaica from New York, experiences the sensory power of the tropical world at the same time that she apprehends its colonial scars and its domestic mysteries.

Michelle Cliff has received both a Macdowell fellowship and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She has taught at the New School, Hampshire College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Vista College, and Trinity College. Her most recent novel, Free Enterprise, was published in 1993.

Within the Veil

Color ain't no faucet
You can't turn it off and on
I say, color ain't no faucet
You can't turn it off and on
Tell the world who you are
Or you might as well be gone.

Now, the whiteman makes the rules
But we got to learn to turn them down
Yes, baby, the whiteman makes the rules
But we got to learn to turn them down
Can't abide this shit no longer
We got to swing the thing around.

You can pass 1 in many ways, mama
This is one thing that I know
I say, you can pass in many ways, mama
This is one thing that I know
Unless you quit your passing, honey
You only gonna come to woe.

Oh, we can call them offay. 2
By that we mean the foe
Yes, sisters, we can call them offay
By that we mean the foe
But that's only half the battle
You lie if you tell me you don't know.

Now Zora 3 was a genius
But there were some did call her fool
I say, Zora was a genius
But there were some did call her fool
Now, you consider mules and men 4
And how many times she broke the whiteman's rule.

Some of us come from islands
And some of us born in the U.S.A.
Some of us come from islands
And some of us born in the U.S.A.
There are those of us who marry
And others who will always be gay.

No two people are the same
It's what gives life a thrilling twist
No two people are the same, children

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1. i.e., pass for white.
2. Derogatory term for a white person (see in Pig Latin).
4. Reference to Hurston's book Mules and Men (1935), a class of African American ethnography, in which Hurston documented the oral folklore traditions of southern blacks as well as some of their musical and religious practices.
That's what gives life a thrilling twist
How dare anyone object
Tell me I had better not exist.

Some of us use the hot comb
And some of us have natural hair
Yes, sisters, some of us use the hot comb
And some of us have natural hair
You should ponder Madame C. J. Walker
Before you suck your teeth and stare.

Sister Lorraine talked revolution
Talked of "the beauty of things Black"
Yes, Lorraine talked revolution, baby
Talked of "the beauty of things Black"
And then she was killed by cancer
Just like a well-aimed shot in her strong brown back.

Your best friend's a bulldagger
That is very plain to see
I say, your best friend's a bulldagger
That is very plain to see
Now that you been told it
Can you tell them you love me?

We got to love each other
That is what is known as the bottom line
I say, we got to love each other
That is what they call the bottom line
Can't say to each other
To hell with you, this piece of the world is mine.

Some of us part Indian
And some of us part white
Yes, sisters, some of us part Indian
And some of us part white
But we still will call you sisters
Even if you judge our skin too light.

Gold chains are love-symbols
You tell me where they are found
Yes, gold chains are love-symbols
You tell me where gold is found
There are deep mines in South Africa
Where our brothers sweat their lives underground.

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5. Presumably refers to cooking, or using heated live to straighten hair.
6. Highly successful businesswoman (1867-1919), developer of cosmetic and hair preparations for African American women.
7. Female homosexual who takes the masculine role in a lesbian relationship; a variation of butch dyke.
8. Elijah Pate was gunned down
9. Soweto is a township in South Africa; the site of much poverty and unrest.