
The Ruination of Caliban's Daughter: Linguistic Recycling in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*

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Abstract

In 1991 Michelle Cliff, who died this June, wrote an essay for *Frontiers* titled "Caliban's Daughter," in which she posed the question, "When our landscape is so tampered with, how do we locate ourselves?" Cliff was perennially concerned with questions of identity, place, and language in a postcolonial context. More specifically, as a light-skinned Jamaican American lesbian, she centered much of her writing around the problem of how to reinvigorate speech about all three categories after they-and she-had been so "tampered with" by the history of colonialism. The opening chapter of *No Telephone to Heaven* finds her heroine, Clare Savage, riding in a jeep with a band of guerrilla fighters to the site of a former sugar plantation. There they plan to stage a rebellion against a Hollywood film crew, there to shoot a tourism promotion on the beach below. Christopher, the Caliban figure, half-crazed after murdering his employer, is asked by the crew to position himself atop a breadfruit tree and "Howl . . . to wake the dead." The rebels' plot is then foiled by a "quashee," a betrayer, after which helicopters swoop in and fire on the insurgents' hiding place in the bush. The novel ends with the eruption of single syllable sounds, phonemes, which begin by resembling gunfire and become progressively more distinguishable as birdcalls. The final two-word sentence reads "Day broke." In this climactic scene Cliff tries to translate into language the act of "ruination," which she defines in "Caliban's Daughter" as "the reclamation of land": "When a landscape becomes ruinate," she writes, "carefully designed aisles of cane are envined, strangled, the order of empire is replaced by the chaotic forest" (40). Here, Cliff renders an imagistic and linguistic recycling, a reclaiming that remakes the foundational text of *The Tempest* and reinvents readers' sense of postcoloniality and speech itself.

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