

Michelle Cliff's Art of Subversion

Ilmonen, Kaisa *Queer Rebellion in the Novels of Michelle Cliff: Intersectionality and Sexual Modernity*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2017 (272 pages)

IN AN INFLUENTIAL anthology of Caribbean women writers, Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (1990, 59) observed that “the reality of gender presents, perhaps, the crucial difference between this group of writers and the preceding generation.” In the book under review here, *Queer Rebellion in the Novels of Michelle Cliff: Intersectionality and Sexual Modernity* (2017), Kaisa Ilmonen takes Michelle Cliff’s oeuvre as evidence that while that “reality” is a factor to be reckoned with, it is not as stable or unified a category as Davies and Fido seemed to hold. Ilmonen studies Cliff’s three novels – *Abeng* (1985), *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), and *Free Enterprise* (1993) – as not only feminist, and not only anti-imperialist, but as a textual project that is constantly fighting one single battle on many fronts: a “liberatory poetics” that render “the multiple intersecting forms of subordination visible” (Ilmonen 2017, 4). This is a clear and persuasive statement, and it is in the details of working out that poetics and construing it as a “queer rebellion” that the study merits reading.

It must be said at once that this perception of Cliff’s work is not unfamiliar: a host of critics have focused on Cliff’s novels and essays as embodying an emancipatory assault on structures and agents of oppression. That scholarly host is scrupulously mustered and inspected by Ilmonen.

The result is a book that could be given to someone who has an interest in, but only superficial knowledge of, Michelle Cliff's novels, in the confidence that after reading it they would know almost everything there is to know about the field of scholarship. In a time when academic writers often focus on a selection of landmark texts in order to make their own arguments, this is an achievement to be applauded. The account given of the findings made by other scholars is generous, nuanced, and as far as I can tell (the range of reading extends beyond my own purview), accurate.

In five substantial chapters making up the body of the book, Ilmonen presents a comprehensive view of Cliff's three novels, analyzing them from different thematic perspectives. A general overview of the scholarly background, the conceptual apparatus, and Cliff's oeuvre in chapter two is followed by a chapter focusing on the particular forms of Cliff's quarrel with colonial history and her construction of counter-histories in the three novels. That history is the object of the next chapter as well, but now in the more abstract form of what Ilmonen calls "the imperial mythos of modernity." With respect to "empiricist knowledge," "white mythology" (Robert Young), and "pedagogical discourse" (Homi Bhabha), Cliff's novels are read as providing counter-narratives and linguistic interventions, the "verbal marronage" that unsettles the language of Western modernity and its myths. Similar textual acts of hybridizing, creolizing and marooning are analyzed in chapter four, but now with a greater emphasis on the alternative myths that the novels present, such as the important figure of Nanny, the legendary maroon leader. Such grandmother or "othermother" figures become central in the next chapter which charts a matrilineal genealogy at work in all three novels, with the daughter's *Bildung* relying on a connection that bypasses the colonized mother generation. In the final chapter, many of the earlier themes reappear, but now with an emphasis on the queer turn each is given.

For a reader with some knowledge of the scholarship on Caribbean fiction, Ilmonen's study unfolds as an inventory of the topoi of anti-colonial, postcolonial, and feminist criticism, with rich illustrations from Cliff's novels and strong support from existing scholarship. Early queer readings

of Cliff were made by Nada Elia and Judith Raiskin, while Ilmonen has been writing alongside others who have recently been developing this approach, among them Antonia MacDonald-Smythe and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley. Important titles in this area have been published so recently that they have not made their way into Ilmonen's bibliography, showing the topicality of the study. However, that continued interest also implies that a synthesis at this point is premature; accordingly, a greater demand is placed on the individual contribution. Apart from the synthesis, how does the study break new ground or shift our perspectives?

The final chapter is the one that carries the greatest weight as a scholarly contribution, convincingly mapping a movement from a particular configuration of the relation between identity, history, and narrative form in *Abeng* to different configurations in *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Free Enterprise*: roughly, from identity politics and lesbian feminism to a postmodern deconstruction of identity categories and finally a formation of queered, transnational intersectionality. Moreover, the pattern of those shifting configurations are shown to be tellingly similar to the theoretical broadening and complication that can be traced in feminist, queer and intersectional approaches in the same period. Ilmonen's astute limning of the continuities, expansions, and reconfigurations of these problematics in Cliff's novels is a compelling if not entirely new demonstration of a developing artistic and intellectual expressivity responding to the ideas of its time and place.

Reflecting on that analysis, Ilmonen worries about its "unintended" resemblance to a developmental narrative. The tension revealed here is one that is never faced head on: the largely poststructuralist, discourse-oriented approach favored by Ilmonen sits uneasily side by side with occasional attempts to include a more materialist and historical perspective. Unsurprisingly, signifiers triumph over historical specificity, while race and sexuality leave little room for class in this intersectional perspective. Similarly, diasporic identities are endlessly complex, while entities such as the West, Europe, colonialism, and imperialism are all single and homogeneous. Such assumptions indicate the theoretical conflict, which remains unresolved in this study.

Before concluding this review, a remark must be made about what I take to be the absence of serious editorial work on this volume: the typos and misquotes are distracting and sometimes embarrassing (as when Judith Butler's "embarrassed etc" becomes "embarrassed ect" not once, but twice); more importantly, a good publisher would have sought ways to alleviate the larger problem of repetitions and overlaps in this form of study that returns to the same motifs and often the same passages in the three novels to make different theoretical points.

What is at stake in current scholarship on Cliff and the writers with whom she is often associated by critics and academics (Dionne Brand, Patricia Powell, Shani Mootoo, and Jamaica Kincaid) is to see whether something significant can be added to the widely spread reading of them as subversive in relation to a shorter or longer list of oppressive discourses. At the level of the individual authorship, it is also to trace the different aesthetic strategies with which this subversion has been undertaken. Ilmonen's book is a rich summary of the entire critical enterprise that has held up the subversive qualities of Michelle Cliff's novels, focused largely on the issue of identity. Implicit in its very form, it makes the perfectly valid point that such a synthetic grasp is by its very nature intersectional. It is not, however, a clear demonstration that intersectionality in itself generates new readings that depart significantly from what has already been argued from well-established perspectives. Nor does its intersectionality extend far into the areas of class and status. Cliff's "textual rebellion" does not quite emerge as a distinct quality from Ilmonen's analysis, except insofar as it resides in the sheer multiplicity of Cliff's strategies. As Isabel Hoving (2011, 32) recently noted, the "critical response to Cliff's work is far from exhausted." This study is ambiguous evidence to the truth of this claim. It is recommended to readers interested in the state of the art regarding scholarship on Michelle Cliff's novels and the possibilities and problems of queer intersectional approaches to Caribbean literature.

BO G. EKELUND
STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY

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