Fully Realized: Identity Formation in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*

A common theme of postcolonial literature is hybridity, which “refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 108). Hybridity can be in “linguistic, cultural, political, [and] racial” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 108) forms, but this paper will focus primarily on racial hybridity. Hybrid people are part colonizer and part colonized; this hybridity is often the basis of an identity crisis as the hybrid struggles to belong in either category while being rejected by both. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, Michelle Cliff explores the issue of hybridity through the racial, sexual, and gender identities of her characters in order to find a way for hybrids to exist successfully. Through Cliff’s exploration of the identity crisis that hybrids in a postcolonial nation face, she promotes self-definition and duality as solutions to accepting one’s identity as a hybridity. By offering a hopeful model for accepting one’s hybridity, Cliff challenges the negative models of hybridity found in novels such as Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, and Peter Carey’s *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*.

It is important to first note Cliff’s own identity. As critic Sally O’Driscoll explains, “The authority of identity is a central issue for a writer who straddles first world and third world, colonizer and colonized” (56). Michelle Cliff is a hybrid woman from Jamaica; O’Driscoll describes her as “a very light-skinned woman who identifies herself as black” (56). In this sense, Clare Savage is based upon Cliff’s identity and Cliff has an inherent interest in proving that hybrids can and should name their identities. O’Driscoll argues that Cliff’s main goal is to “examine the possibility of claiming an identity” (61); this claim is well supported by the themes in *No Telephone to Heaven*. O’Driscoll claims that there are parts of one’s identity that are felt “emotionally” (66) and Cliff shows how this is possible by exploring several characters’ struggles
with identity.

In *No Telephone to Heaven*, it is mentioned that there are “128 categories” (Cliff 56) that define race in Jamaica, but none of these are as important to one’s identity as one’s skin color. Skin color dictates the opportunities that each character has to succeed in life. Clare Savage, the novel’s main character, is introduced as “a light-skinned woman” (Cliff 5) first and is described by her ancestry, “Carib, Ashanti, English” (Cliff 5) second. As critic Belinda Edmondson explains, Clare’s light skin “guarantee[s] a position of relative power and privilege” (180); it is this guarantee and the expectation that Clare will use it that tears apart the Savage family. Boy Savage demonstrates the advantages of being light skinned by using his “apricot color” (Cliff 55) to pass as a white man when the Savage family attempts to get a motel room in Georgia. Boy leaves “his slightly darker wife” (Cliff 55) and their daughters in a car “parked out of sight” (Cliff 55) to ensure that the illusion of his whiteness is not shattered. The importance of passing is emphasized again by Clare’s relatives, Winston and Grace, who urge the Savage family to “pass if you can” (Cliff 61) to avoid “unnecessary struggle” (Cliff 61). Boy defines passing as a practical matter” (Cliff 62), and commits to it wholeheartedly with stories of his descent “from plantation owners” (Cliff 62) and by distancing the Savage family from Kitty’s darker relatives.

Kitty maintains that her “point of reference- the place which explained the world to her- would always be her island” (Cliff 66) and is unable to adjust to the demands of passing as white. Kitty finds herself stuck in the common dilemma of being a hybrid: she is too black to be accepted by whites, and too white to be accepted by blacks. Kitty experiences one side of this as she interviews for better jobs in America; time after time, “her musical voice, her golden skin, had become the center of conversation and the reason for refusal” (Cliff 78). The other side comes across at work, where “two middle-aged Black women” (Cliff 72) reject Kitty by “chatting softly,
laughing” (Cliff 77) between the two of them, but falling silent when Kitty is around. Kitty’s inability to belong is amplified by her silence. She is “unable to speak to [her coworkers]” (Cliff 77) to explain her blackness to them and she “maintained silence, calling it dignity” (Cliff 77) as employers refused her based on her race. Kitty makes the mistake of allowing those around her to define her, rather than defining her identity for herself.

Cliff explores the fluidity of identity through her character’s sexual orientations as well. Although the majority of the characters are portrayed as heterosexual, there are a few instances in which sexuality is more fluid. Most obviously, there is Harry/Harriet who Cliff characterizes as “a man who wants to be a woman and he loves women” (qtd in Elia 352). On a biological level, Harry/Harriet might be defined as a heterosexual man, but Harry/Harriet’s choice to be defined as a woman makes the term lesbian more accurate. Clare’s sexuality is also called into question. When Harry/Harriet asks Clare if she has “ever been tempted” (Cliff 121) by women, Clare becomes “uncomfortable” (Cliff 122) and snaps at Harry/Harriet before answering that she doesn’t “think [she has] been tempted” (Cliff 122). Clare’s defensiveness implies that her sexuality may not be as simple as she claims it is. Later, Clare and Harry/Harriet go to a beach where “they could swim as girlfriends” (Cliff 130). Afterwards, they “lay side by side … touching gently, kissing, tongues entwined” (Cliff 130). Although Harry/Harriet is physically male, he has been dressing and presenting himself primarily as a woman and Clare is not bothered by this. Their interaction further challenges Clare’s earlier denial of any sexual fluidity. The conflict between being defined as homosexual or heterosexual echoes Clare’s struggle to define herself as black or white (or both).

Harry/Harriet’s gender identity also plays an important role in *No Telephone to Heaven*. The critic Nada Elia argues that Harry’s decision to transition from Harry/Harriet to only Harriet is one of the most significant points in the novel because it proves that Harry/Harriet has the power to
“create new divisions and definitions as s/he chooses her/his new identity” (352). Cliff introduces Harry/Harriet as a “boy-girl” (21) who “puts on a bikini-bra stretched across his hairy, delicately mounded chest, panties cradling his cock and balls” (21). It is clear that Harry/Harriet is physically male and at this point, he is only cross-dressing. Harry/Harriet challenges traditional gender norms by representing femininity while still presenting visibly male sex organs. This emphasizes the concept that physical attributes do not dictate identity and connects to the idea that skin color is not necessarily representative of a person’s race. Harry/Harriet emphasizes his/her duality by signing letters “H/H” (Cliff 160), but this changes after Harry/Harriet declares that “Harriet live and Harry be no more” (Cliff 168). For the rest of the novel, Harry/Harriet is simply Harriet. Cliff’s decision to stop referring to Harriet as “Harry/Harriet” throughout the end of the novel reinforces the idea that it is the individual’s right to define oneself.

Because of Harry/Harriet’s ability to resolve her gender identity, Nada Elia characterizes Harry/Harriet as a “model of synthesis and wholeness” (363). Elia also asserts that Clare’s quest toward “homeland and wholeness is facilitated through her friendship with Harry/Harriet” (355). Harry/Harriet serves as an ideal model of hybridity because he/she uses his/her agency to become Harriet. In the same way that race in Jamaica is defined by physical characteristics (skin color), Clare attempts to define Harry/Harriet’s gender in physical terms. When Harry/Harriet declares herself to be Harriet, Clare first asks, “‘then you have it done?’” (Cliff 168). The “it” Clare refers to is a sex change operation, and Harriet explains that she has not undergone any surgery, but that “the choice is [hers]” (Cliff 168) either way. This is an empowering decision for Harriet and it suggests that hybrids can resolve their identity crisis by no longer dichotomizing their identity into black/white. Instead, one can become whole “by being ever dual” (Elia 363); one can opt to be physically black or white, but then choose one identity socially.
While critic Rosamond S. King agrees that Harry/Harriet serves as a “moral [center] of the novel” (595), King rejects the idea that Cliff intentionally used Harry/Harriet’s status as a transgender character to represent a model of hybridity. King argues that it is common in Caribbean fiction for transgender characters to help deliver other “characters to safety, to a better understanding of themselves, and to their “true” destinies, feelings, or histories” (583). King argues that transgender characters are put in “subservient, marginal roles” (584). Despite King’s claims, Harry/Harriet is not marginalized in the novel, although she does facilitate the resolution of Clare’s identity crisis. Harry/Harriet is given, as Elia asserted, the power of choice. Also, Cliff describes the revolutionary group that Clare joins as sharing camouflage jackets “in a strict rotation, with only the medical officer [Harriet], formerly a nurse at Kingston Hospital, owning one to herself” (7). The significance of this is that Harriet is the only member of the group who has obtained a stable identity. Her sense of ownership of both the jacket and her identity implies a level of power that has been bestowed upon Harriet, but not upon the other members of the group.

Before explaining how Clare ultimately resolves her identity crisis and discussing how Cliff’s model of hybridity is mostly positive, it is necessary to examine other models of hybridity found in postcolonial literature. In Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, the reader is left with the discouraging message that hybrids cannot reconcile the parts of themselves; hybrids must embrace one side and reject the other. Initially, Ondaatje presents each character as a type of hybrid whose nationalism is suspended for the sake of war. Through Kip’s experiences, Ondaatje makes it clear that hybridity cannot be sustained. Kip is Indian, but has been serving in the English army. When Hiroshima and Nagasaki are bombed, Kip is pulled to identify with “the brown races of the world” (Ondaatje 286). He is reminded of the English mission to colonize and control nations as they had done to Kip’s nation. Kip pulls away from the white characters of the novel and
puts them in “their world” (Ondaatje 286), in which he is now unable to belong. Kip comes to the conclusion that he is no longer “Kip,” which was a nickname given to him by a white man, and reclaims his Indian name “Kirpal Singh” (Ondaatje 287). The only character in *The English Patient* who is given a definitely happy ending is Kip; he has settled in India and has a family. This ending suggests that the best solution for hybrids is to identify with the colonized and then commit to that.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy also presents hybridity in a negative light. The only hybrid character is Sophie Mol; she has an Indian father and an English mother. Sophie Mol has been living in England all of her life, but she and her mother come to visit the rest of the family in India. When Sophie Mol’s cousins, Estha and Rahel, come up with a plan to run away from home, Sophie Mol joins them. The three take a boat out on the river, but the boat “tipped over” (Roy 276). Estha and Rahel are familiar with this situation because “it had happened to them often enough on previous expeditions across the river” (Roy 276). They have the advantage of being from India and having grown up along the river; Sophie Mol lacks this. Rahel and Estha are able to get to the shore, but Sophie Mol was “carried away on the muffled highway” (Roy 277) of the river. Rivers are often a source of life, but in this case, the river takes Sophie Mol’s life. The implication of this is that a nation will actively reject hybrids because they are not completely part of the nation. Sophie Mol’s death is an example of the impossibility of thriving as a hybrid.

Peter Carey’s novel *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* immediately suggests that hybrids are inherently damaged. The title character, Tristan Smith, is the child of a Voorstand woman and an Efican man. From birth, this hybrid character is “a gruesome little thing” (Carey 31) and his mother’s doctor recommends that the best course of action is to kill Tristan. Tristan’s mother’s refusal to have Tristan killed shows hope that hybrids can survive, but Tristan’s physical
disfigurements make life difficult. The dangers of being a hybrid are always visible in Tristan’s mouth with “no lips, but a gap in the skin” (Carey 32) and his “shrunken twisted legs” (Carey 32). He has limited mobility because his feet are clubbed; he has to walk using his ankles, but it’s a method that tends to “put strain on the knees and the hips that could cause [him] pain for weeks” (Carey 71). Tristan’s lack of mobility and later dependence upon a string of nurses implies that hybrids cannot move fluidly in the world.

Cliff’s model of hybridity does not denounce hybridity as impossible, but Cliff does recognize the difficulty of life as a hybrid. Cliff illustrates this through Clare, who spends the majority of her life struggling with her identity. Clare’s identity crisis begins with the expectation that she will pass as a white woman and therefore be forced to deny her black ancestry. As previously explained, Clare’s mother, Kitty, had difficulty passing as white because her skin was darker and her accent was noticeable. When Kitty returns to Jamaica, she takes her youngest daughter, “the one who favored her,” (Cliff 84) but leaves Clare, with her skin light enough to pass as white, with Boy. The implication is that Clare can pass, therefore she should pass. Edmondson suggests that the decision to identify as black rather than white is considered “absurd in the American or European context” (181) because whiteness is a source of privilege and power. Critic Shirley Toland-Dix argues that “in all of [Clare’s] environments, [there] is the valorizing, even fetishizing, of white and/or near-white skin” (39). Toland-Dix’s assertion is correct and it is because of this valorization of whiteness that Clare’s family and peers assume that Clare will want to be white. Clare’s father, Boy, has come to believe that white superiority is true and he attempts to teach Clare the same lesson. Elia asserts that Boy’s type of passing requires him to deny “the African blood in his genes” (358) and represents “an acquiescence to, and reinforcement of, the dominant discourse of white supremacy” (358). Boy is so capable of separating himself from his
African blood that, in an argument with Clare, he refers to other black people as “niggers” (Cliff 104). Clare aligns herself with her African ancestry in her response to Boy by identifying that her “mother was a nigger” (Cliff 104), and therefore, so is she.

Clare continues to struggle with the two sides of her ancestry when she goes to school in London. While Clare sits in class, a protest occurs outside that screams to “keep Britain white” (Cliff 137) and tells multiple groups of people (with the use of racial slurs) to get out of Britain. The protest strikes a nerve in Clare, but her fellow students seem oblivious to it. When Clare attempts to explain that the protest upset her and “felt dangerous” (Cliff 139), her friend dismisses her by saying not to “take it personally” (Cliff 139) because Clare is not “the sort [the protestors] were ranting about’ (Cliff 139). To the people around Clare, Clare’s “blood has thinned” (Cliff 139) and she is too white to be considered the target of racial slurs. This explanation is not enough for Clare, because Clare still feels the sting of those slurs. Those words are meaningful to her because she sees herself as explicitly not white. Toland-Dix notes that “Cliff emphasizes both how fluid racial categories can be for a biracial person like Clare, and at the same time, how deadly serious they are” (38-9). Both of these points are evident in the protest incident. Clare’s racial identity is fluid in that her fellow students view her as white, while she feels black; the distinction is significant to Clare even when it is dismissed by her peers.

Clare’s interactions with other people are not the only aggravators of her identity crisis. Clare seems to possess a constant sense that she is divided between black and white. As a child, Clare reads a story from the newspaper about the 1963 “Sixteenth-Street Baptist Church” (Cliff 101) bombing. Clare silently identifies with the four black children who are killed by the bomb and she carries a picture of one of the girls in the “celluloid pocket in her wallet- to glance at it” (Cliff 102). Later, as an adult, Clare reads Jane Eyre and allows the book to draw “her in so that she
became Jane” (Cliff 116). This feeling is short-lived though, because Clare quickly reminds herself that she cannot be Jane; Jane is “small and pale” (Cliff 116) and most importantly, “English” (Cliff 116). Clare tells herself that her true identity is “wild-maned Bertha” (Cliff 116). Clare feels that her true identity is: “Captive. Ragout. Mixture. Confused. Jamaican. Caliban. Carib. Cannibal. Cimarron. All Bertha. All Clare.” (Cliff 116). Clare has a deep-rooted sense of herself as someone with African descent, not English, and she clings to it even when this also earns her the title of “confused.” Clare eventually begins to reconcile the conflicting parts of her identity with the help of Harry/Harriet. Before Harry/Harriet decides to become just Harriet, Clare compares their situations as hybrids by saying that they “are neither one thing nor the other” (Cliff 131). Harry/Harriet corrects Clare by asserting that they can’t “live split” (Cliff 131) and that one day, they “will have to make the choice” (Cliff 131). Clare is consistently reminded of the impending choice through letters from Harry/Harriet in which Harry/Harriet confides that he/she finds him/herself “closer to [his/her] choice” (Cliff 140). As Harry/Harriet becomes confident in his/her choice, Clare has to reflect upon her own identity and how she will reach wholeness.

Although Harry/Harriet echoes the messages about hybridity that Ondaatje and Roy offer by claiming that it is impossible to live split in this world, Cliff allows Harry/Harriet to do exactly that. Harry/Harriet becomes Harriet without a sex change operation, so he/she exists as a physical male, but becomes known as Harriet. This suggests that hybridity can thrive through the process of self-definition. Harry/Harriet’s choice to become Harriet does not mean that Harriet ceases to be a hybrid; it simply means that Harriet no longer struggles to identify who she is. Elia argues that this reconciliation is achieved “by ever being dual- physically a male, socially a woman” (363). To be one thing physically, but then be another socially requires one to officially declare what one is. This bestows the power of identity formation upon the individual and takes it
away from other people who may wish to define a person. Clare mirrors this process by accepting that although she looks white, she belongs to her matrilineal (black) ancestry and must return to Jamaica to join the revolutionaries. At the end of the novel, Clare’s identity crisis is fully resolved as Clare dies. She “remembered language” (Cliff 208) in the forms of European languages (French and Spanish) and in terms of slavery with the “whip-whip-whip” (Cliff 208) and “back-raw, back-raw, back-raw” (Cliff 208). Then, Clare lets go of these languages and reverts to sounds that are reminiscent of bird calls, such as “cutacoo, cutacoo, cutacoo” (Cliff 208) and “cwa cwa cwa cwaah cwaah cwaah” (Cliff 208). This final passage represents Clare’s attempts to understand herself through education in America and London and her final decision to return to her roots in Jamaica. The way that the sounds become similar to bird calls suggests that Clare has found freedom.

Cliff comments that Clare “is able to hold two things in her head at the same time” (101); this statement appears to summarize Cliff’s message on how to deal with hybridity. One must be able to recognize dual (and dueling) parts of oneself and then decide which parts will be dominant. The point Cliff makes is that the choice belongs to the individual and one’s identity can shift over time. Cliff provides hybrids a sense of empowerment and fluidity that postcolonial authors such as Ondaatje, Roy, and Carey seem to find unlikely. Harriet does not allow herself to be defined by her reproductive organs and the gender that society would attach to them; she chooses to be Harriet regardless. Similarly, Clare is not defined by her skin color. Although Clare’s family tries to make the decision for her by encouraging her to pass as white, and Clare’s peers reinforce this by considering Clare to be white, it is ultimately Clare’s choice to decide who she is. On a larger scale, Cliff is suggesting that there is not a need for the “128 categories” (Cliff 56) that Boy Savage holds onto to define both race and people by their degrees of whiteness; Jamaica must stop
categorizing its people by skin color. Cliff ultimately argues that the postcolonial hybrid can become powerful by accepting duality and claiming the right to name oneself.
Works Cited


