

*Revolutionary Developments:  
Michelle Cliff's  
"No Telephone to Heaven"  
and Merle Collins's "Angel"*<sup>1</sup>

MARIA HELENA LIMA

"Armed with our education, it's the beginning of the road."

MERLE COLLINS, *Angel* (169)

For as people seize a gun and a plough and the other means of production to liberate themselves, they must also seize the *word*—spoken, written, printed, chanted, sung. What kind of language do they need to develop?

CHRIS SEARLE, *Words Unchained* (xxii)

MICHELLE CLIFF'S *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) and Merle Collins's *Angel* (1987), like many other postcolonial novels, indirectly parallel the formation of the young self to that of the developing nation.<sup>2</sup> *No Telephone to Heaven*, the story of Clare Savage's development into revolutionary consciousness and her involvement in a symbolic act of revolution in Michael Manley's Jamaica, and *Angel*, a novel about a girl growing up during the people's revolutionary government of Grenada,<sup>3</sup> share a similar authorial project—the possibility of revolutionary social transformation. When Cliff and Collins attempt to figure this transformation through the reconceptualization of the established genre of the *Bildungsroman*, however, they textualize their projects in significantly different ways.<sup>4</sup> Through playing off the conventions of the novel against those of several other genres—history, the epistolary, allegory, autobiography, *testimonio*—Cliff and Collins expose the complexity of the contradictions within generic conventions.

The history of the *Bildungsroman*, from its beginnings in Germany to its development in England and adoption by commonwealth and, more recently, by postcolonial writers, has been one of adaptation and change, initially in thematic and then in formal terms. While genre does not in itself determine that a text must be read in a certain way, it brings with it a history of reading, a set of conventions and of specific aesthetic ideologies. The expectations engendered by the genre, as Catherine Belsey writes, can enter into a relation of tension and opposition with the project of the text: "The unconscious of the work (*not*, it must be noted, of the author) is constructed in the moment of its entry into literary form, in the gap between the ideological project and the specifically literary form" (108). While contemporary postcolonial *Bildungsromane* do not break the conventions outright—they continue to ask the genre's old questions surrounding the relationship between experience, subjectivity, and social structures—they explore its possibilities, thereby expanding the genre. The novel of *Bildung* has been "chosen" in virtually all countries undergoing decolonization because it is the Western form of discourse that constitutes identity in terms of a relation to origin.<sup>5</sup> The genre's survival might in itself mark the victory of the colonizer but its transformation in countries attempting decolonization offers provisional rewritings of origin and identity, rhetorical configurations that will undergo further change as the process of recovery continues.

Precisely because *Angel* and *No Telephone to Heaven* are written for different audiences, from distinct class perspectives and historical contexts, they tell very different stories about the possibility of real social transformation. Cliff's text is predominantly allegorical<sup>6</sup> while Collins structures her novel on a predominantly historical figuration.<sup>7</sup>

Postcolonial allegorical writing is engaged, according to Stephen Slemon, in a process of destabilizing and transforming fixed ideas of history.<sup>8</sup> When history and literature come together, collectivity becomes the subject of narrative. As Edouard Glissant notes, the European novel's individualism is not for the Caribbean. Instead, he posits the "collective novel," the novel of the relationship of individual to collectivity, of individual to the

Other, to help create a new nation and a new people, “liberated from the absolute demands of writing and in touch with a new audience of the spoken word” (108).<sup>9</sup>

The issue of language choice is thus central to postcolonial reconceptualizations and to any attempt at identifying an implied audience in the Caribbean context. What initially characterizes writing in the Caribbean is what George Steiner calls being “linguistically unhoused” (14) for the writer must mediate between a “metropolitan” standard and the creole languages of her childhood and environment. Cliff’s decision, then, to rely primarily on standard English and only cursorily to employ patois, not only marks the class/culture division between her narrator and the Jamaican characters who populate her fiction, but also signals the primary audience for whom the novel is written.<sup>10</sup> Collins’s choice of Grenadian créole, the language of the “subaltern” class, as the novel’s language may also signify, among other purposes, her concern that the novel be accessible to those of that class who can read.

*Angel*, moreover, foregrounds the cautionary element inscribed in the original *Bildungsroman*, an aspect of the genre that is almost totally lost in the symbolism of *No Telephone to Heaven*. While *Angel* ultimately consists of a call to arms, *No Telephone to Heaven*, despite its critique of the People’s National Party (PNP), does not want to bring Jamaicans together for another experiment in democratic socialism. In many ways my reading of Cliff’s novel resonates with existing evaluations of Manley’s government. Fitzroy Ambursley, one of Manley’s critics, emphasizes the symbolism in the political philosophy of Jamaica’s prime minister (82).<sup>11</sup> While the first two years of the PNP government brought a general liberalization as well as some reforms—free secondary education, a literacy campaign, a partial land reform—the urban middle-class origins of the PNP became once again visible as most of the state institutions were placed under the control of representatives of the island’s capitalist class.

When contrasted with *Angel*, Cliff’s novel can be said to figure precisely this class privilege by reinforcing the split in the linguistic practices which separate the “educated” from the “less cul-

tured" classes. If the language choice Cliff makes signals her intended audience, then, we might say that she addresses very educated Caribbeans, at home or in exile (like herself) and a North-American readership.

Cliff's implied audience is also familiar with the European tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, for Clare, like Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John, exists in dialogue with *Jane Eyre*. Like Jane Eyre, Clare is motherless; she is solitary and left to wander, having "no relations to speak of except [like Jane Eyre] an uncle across the water" (116). Cliff, however, goes a step further than Kincaid and incorporates Bertha Mason into Clare's intertextual identity: "Captive. Ragout. Mixture. Confused. Jamaican. Caliban. Carib. Cannibal. Cimarron. All Bertha. All Clare" (116).

Clare feels closer to "wild-maned Bertha." She remembers how her father was forever trying to tame her hair: "she refused it; he called her Medusa. Do you intend to turn men to stone, daughter?" (116) Centred on the figure of Medusa is the disclosure of Clare's internalization of sexual and racial oppression, the extent to which she has been forced to deny both her (homo)sexuality and her Africanness. As Susan Bowers points out, Medusa's mythical image has functioned like a magnifying mirror to reflect and focus Western thought as it relates to women, including how women think about themselves (217). Rediscovering and remembering the vitality and dark power of the mythological figure of Medusa, that primary trope of female sexuality, is as important for Cliff as Jamaica's revolutionary project itself. Attempting to trace the unconscious of the text, we might actually see these projects as related. By reworking the narratives that connect and separate mothers from daughters, moreover, Cliff's novel goes as far as to suggest that a return to a pre-oedipal, pre-verbal moment of origin can provide an instrument for binding the fragments of self.

Cliff posits Clare's urge to return to the island in essentialist terms, representing her homeland, the landscape of her identity, as female. The land is infused with the spirit and passion of Clare's grandmother and mother in a deeply personal, almost biological connection. In one of her mother's letters to her father, Kitty adds a postscript for Clare in which she expresses her

hopes that someday Clare will make something of herself and be able to help her people. Kitty wants Clare never to forget who her people are: "Your responsibilities lie beyond me, beyond yourself. There is a space between who you are and who you will become. Fill it" (103).

Clare's separation from her mother signals the rupture from the "African" and the collective in her, since Boy, Clare's father, counsels his daughter on invisibility and secrets and has "no visible problems with declaring himself white": "Self-effacement. Blending in. The uses of camouflage" (100).<sup>12</sup> Kitty leaves her daughter and her husband in the U.S. because she feels she *has* to return to her island, her "point of reference—the place which explained the world to her" (66). Clare's loss of both mother and island clearly structure the novel, which is ultimately about her futile attempt at return and wholeness. There are many bits and pieces to Clare, Cliff writes: she is composed of fragments. Clare's journey back to Jamaica, she hopes, will be her restoration (87).

As soon as Clare finishes school in the U.S., she leaves for England, "with the logic of a creole. This was the mother-country. The country by whose grace her people existed in the first place" (109). Her uncle writes to Clare to remind her that she has a chance to leave that narrow little island behind her. By "chance," Clare knows he means light skin (110). The fragmentation and isolation of the immigrant community in London, however, help shatter Clare's illusion of a shared heritage with the mother country. Yet, feeling only a little guilt, Clare uses her privilege to stay in Europe writing to her aunt and uncle, then living in Miami, that she is doing work for her degree on the continent, describing briefly the beauty of churches, managing to get more money from them in the process, as well as a letter extolling the tranquility of the mainland after the turbulence of the island, caught as it was in riot, fire, burn (155).

Clare's inscription as Jamaican comes from an awareness of place that she initially tries to rationalize with her analysis of Aristotle's definition of *place* in the *Physics*, for which she is praised at the University: "Each thing exists in place. Each thing is described by place" (117). She immediately connects her feelings about place to her mother, who ties her loss of voice to the

loss of home. The images Cliff creates to trace Clare's movement back to her homeland, however, are quite disturbing:

The albino gorilla moving through the underbrush. Hiding from the poachers who would claim her and crush her in a packing crate against the darker ones . . . Make ashtrays of her hands, and a trophy of her head. She cowers in the bush fearing capture. . . . Not feeling much of anything, except a vague dread that she belongs nowhere. . . . She does not gather branches to braid into a nest. She moves. Emigrated, lone travel . . . Time passes. The longing for tribe surfaces—unmistakable. She is the woman who had reclaimed her grandmother's land. (91)

Feelings of displacement characterize not only the exile but the postcolonial condition whose homelessness Cliff figures with images of absence of colour (the albino gorilla) instead of conferring her character a mestiza identity (and colour). "Gorilla" and "longing for tribe" convey the primitivism often associated with "African" and evoked in her own name. Clare's return to Jamaica also follows an almost biological urge: the island is female and the "albino" child is finally reunited with the lost mother. From a post-structuralist cultural feminist perspective, Cliff reifies "African," "female experience," and "woman." It is this essentialism which makes her project, the possibility of revolutionary social transformation, and its figuration ultimately incompatible.

As a crossroads character, Clare belongs at least in two worlds. Her first name, Cliff tells us, "stands for privilege, civilization, erasure, forgetting. She is not meant to curse, or rave, or be a critic of imperialism. She is meant to speak softly and keep her place" ("Clare Savage" 265). Her surname evokes the wildness that has been bleached from her skin. Cliff emphasizes how she uses the word *savage* to mock the master's meaning, "turning instead to a sense of non-Western values which are empowering and essential to survival and wholeness" ("Clare Savage" 265). As a colonized child, Clare understands that it is her bleached skin which is the source of her privilege and her power. A knowledge of her history, the past of her people, however, has been bleached from Clare's mind (the history Cliff attempts to recover with *Abeng*).

Whereas Walter Benjamin and Georg Lukács refer to the link between allegory and the annihilation of history, in *Cliff*, the allegorical serves to inscribe an alternative history as she makes clear how this female power originates in Nanny, the African warrior and Maroon leader who has been left out of most textbooks.<sup>13</sup> At her most powerful, *Cliff* writes, the grandmother is the source of knowledge, magic, ancestors, stories, healing practices, and food. She assists at rites of passage, protects, and teaches (267).

When Clare recognizes, in a church graveyard in the town of Gravesend, yet another grandmother figure in Pocahontas, the daughter of Powhatan who was kidnapped by colonists, held against her will, forced to abandon the belief system of her people, and then taken to England in 1616 where she was displayed as a tame Indian, she begins a series of choices which will take her from England, the mother country, back to the country of her grandmothers: "She thought of her, her youth, her colour, her strangeness, her unbearable loneliness" (137). The letters Clare receives from Harry/Harriet<sup>14</sup> make her decide to return: "Jamaica needs her children . . . Manley is doing his best but people are leaving in droves—those who can" (140). In another letter, Harry/Harriet tells her they "are supposed to be remembering the grandmothers of our people. We are supposed to be remembering, through our hypocrisy, the 167 old women who burned up in a fire started by some bastard" (160), a reference to the destitute women inmates who died in the Kingston Almshouse Fire.

The figure of the Maroon leader Nanny is also behind both Miss Mattie, Clare's grandmother, and the grandmother of Christopher, who inhabits the Dungle [the Kingston slums], and whose only power is the power to judge the worthiness or unworthiness of others. Against an identified "yard novel" tradition that represents what gives the community its identity, *Cliff's* Dungle does not draw people together, like the community in Orlando Patterson's *Children of Sisyphus* (1964), a novel that, according to Dell Lewis, inscribes a "psychological boundary: it is [the people's] beliefs which keep them together as a group to await something; and it also shows the element of hope they

have" (qtd. in Brathwaite, "The Love Axe/1" 184). Lewis's idea of using the yard as a critical/aesthetic model relates directly to Africa (the transplant of the African compound to West Indian ground) and to Caribbean critics' "total roots-directed (re-)definition of ourselves" (Brathwaite 186). Cliff's novel figures the total breakdown of compound transplantation: we read *No Telephone to Heaven* as a tragically individualist tale whose protagonist does end her life "burned into the landscape of Jamaica, by gunfire," (Cliff, "Clare Savage" 265). Through the character of Christopher, however, we can trace a counter-narrative of resistance that ultimately limits the significance of the comments, at the novel's closing, of the two whitemen, one British and one American:

'Jamaicans will do anything for a buck. . . . That brief shit with Manley was the exception. Oh, the poor followed him; the poor occasionally protest about prices, shortages, that kind of thing—' . . . 'Anyway, babe, about your fear, about revolution . . . the class system wouldn't permit. I mean, they're more English than the English in that regard. At least, the ones on top are. The ones who call the shots.' (202-03)

Although Cliff's revolutionary Jamaica falls short of a real "war zone," it is potentially more than the "stage set" Harry/Harriet believes the country to be (151). The truly revolutionary gesture lies in Christopher's "revenge" against Paul H.'s family, and the cautionary tale that it embodies if we read Christopher as Clare's alter ego. His childhood and "development" are marked by poverty and destitution. With the death of his grandmother, he "wandered the streets of the city, begging the tourists a few pence" (40). As he grows up, Christopher's connections to other people, like his labour, are casual. In his loneliness, "he longed for his grandmother" (44). It is when he asks his "master" for a little plot of land to give his grandmother a decent burial, and receives scorn instead, that something inside of him snaps.

Christopher remembers when Brother Josephus blessed him as "Christ-bearer" and told him of Toussaint, "dis Black man who carry Christ amongst de Black people of Haiti" (38). Cliff's title, *No Telephone to Heaven*, suggests that Jamaicans should stop praying for those who have persecuted them: "Depression. Downpression. Oppression. Recession. Intercession. Commission.



Omission. Missionaires. . . . Per'aps the line to heaven is one party line. But how could Massa God be their enemy? (17)" They must "turn the damn thing upside down. Fight fire with fire" (50). Christopher's killings have the force of a ritual. The narrator conveys an unstoppable urge in the character's movements and syncretic search:

Cyaan tu'n back now. Capture the I in I. Then say Bless me Jah/Shango/Yemanja/Jehovah/Oshun/Jesus/Nanny/Marcus/Oshun. I am about to kill one of your creatures. Some of your children. (50)

Whereas in *No Telephone to Heaven* the need for change is figured in the allegorical transformation of the island's terrain as "bush" takes over "garden" in Clare's grandmother's land, in *Angel* it is history itself that constitutes the novel's terrain. Collins's novel depicts the history of Grenada against and through the lives of her characters. The testimony of Collins's fiction is one of transformation in attitudes, ideas, and language. Her work is concerned with change—what enables it, what prevents it, why it is necessary.

Although some may perceive Collins's novel as old-fashioned realism, it is revolutionary in bringing together conventionally male and female spheres — public and private, personal and political — to chronicle the history of her country in the spectrum of creole languages available to her, and thus inscribes a "new" kind of self in her reconceptualization of the *Bildungsroman*.

To the individual novel of formation, Collins adds the collectivity of the *testimonio*, a literature of personal witness and involvement designed, according to John Beverly, to make the cause of these movements known to the outside world, to attract recruits, to reflect on the successes and/or failures of the struggle (14). Because *testimonio* is not so much concerned with the life of a "problematic hero" as with a problematic collective social situation, the narrator in *testimonio* speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group. In keeping with the predominant focus on the collective life of the community, characterization typically exemplifies modes of interdependence among community members. Concerned with continuity, *Angel* seeks to represent

what gives the community its identity, what enables it to remain itself. Each individual *testimonio* then evokes an absent poliphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences. A common formal variation on the classic first-person singular *testimonio* is the polyphonic *testimonio* made up of accounts by different participants in the same event (Beverly 16). As a literary simulacrum of oral narrative, *testimonio* represents an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle. Beverly dismissively contends that if it loses this connection, it ceases to be *testimonio* and becomes autobiography, that is, a “sort of documentary bildungsroman” (23).

Collins transforms the *Bildungsroman* by incorporating into her novel elements of a polyphonic *testimonio*, to produce what could indeed be termed a documentary *Bildungsroman*. Rene Jara has discussed *testimonio*'s influence on other literary forms that become impregnated with what he considers a new combativity, “al mismo tiempo, acusacion y desafio” (5), but he holds on to what ultimately is a false distinction: that between the novel and *testimonio*. For Jara, *testimonio*'s subject, more than in other discursive forms, must be historical reality itself. The difference Jara sees between the novel and *testimonio* is that while the novel's configuration implies an ending, *testimonios* are evidence for a history that still goes on.

Collins's *Angel* bridges some of the differences between the novel and *testimonio* through its powerful oral quality, for it achieves the effect of an ongoing conversation among characters. Collins creates a Grenadian creole which is ritualistic, proverbial, and metaphoric, embedding songs, poems, and proverbs which give the narrative a people's (not an individual's) perspective on events and communicate the complexity of their traditions. More important, like a *testimonio*, Collins's novel represents an affirmation of individual growth and transformation in connection with a group or class situation marked by struggle. The unifying feature of a testimony novel is its consciousness of a collective objective beyond the individual person (Pereira 68). Collins becomes the living witness to a historical process,

faithfully recreating both characters and society in a state of becoming.

The novel also achieves its documentary quality through its multiple narrative centres which convey sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflictual versions of self and history. *Angel* points to a social model of self, a self that exists in relationships, a self that is a product of all the discourses that the growing child incorporates as she develops. It is a more complex, less teleological model than the ideal of the European *Bildungsroman*, for there is no possibility (or desire) for an organic development. Collins's *Angel* focuses on the growth to political consciousness of three generations of Grenadian women and ultimately points to the children as the hope for change. Like Cliff, Collins implies that an understanding of her mother and grandmother is necessary for an understanding of her protagonist's development, which suggests interconnected rather than individual development.

With *Angel*, moreover, Collins reverses the erasure of the mother, and the daughterly act of "speaking for her," as Marianne Hirsch characterizes it, and enables both mother and daughter to speak for themselves as well as for and with one another (16). In the novels that Hirsch reads in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, it is the woman as *daughter* who occupies the centre of the reconstructed subjectivity while the woman as *mother* remains in the position of *other* (Hirsch 136). Collins writes in the voices of mothers as well as daughters (161) by constructing *Angel* as a novel of *Bildung* for mother, for daughter, and for nation. The first section of the novel focuses more on Doodsie and her circle of family and friends, since Collins indeed adapts the conventions of individual development—of great expectations and lost illusions—to a communal model.

In *Angel*, three generations of women experience the changes that Grenada undergoes under Gairy's regime and the New Jewel Movement. "The Revolution has given me a theme," Collins tells us, "and has also developed a greater awareness of self and pride of being" (qtd. in Searle 144). The Revolution was also instrumental in validating the Creole language and affirming its power through popular culture. It effected a re-evaluation of the language and a reconceptualization of the curriculum which

Grenadians initially resisted, as we see in the chapter that deals with the elections for the teachers' union, with secret campaigns "to ensure that Angel and those who shared her views did not get on to the executive" (241).

Collins's novel explores the function of education, reading, and writing in nation-formation and decolonization. The Caribbean child's encounter with language through the colonial school drove a wedge between the "real" world she saw about her and the world of the school and its curriculum. While the reality of the colonizers' books is made to supplant the reality of the island, Collins traces the evolution of Angel's consciousness until she ultimately rejects the world the colonial school has created. Like Annie John, Angel devours Enid Blyton's adventures and the love stories her friends bring in. Angel's name is with time perceived as inadequate as she becomes darker, for in all books the children read "angels [are] white" (113).<sup>15</sup> Rather than concentrating on Sunday service, Angel thinks up all sorts of stories about faraway places: "In her mind, she went off sometimes by boat, sometimes by plane. . . . She never arrived anywhere in these daydreams; but she was often travelling" (112).<sup>16</sup> In Angel's case, however, the Revolution creates a discursive space in which she can posit herself as a subject in the new Grenada, and she is able to see through the "mist."<sup>17</sup>

Only when she is very young does Angel feel sorry for herself and ashamed of her "unglamorous mother . . . who looked nothing like those of the pretty mothers in all the books, who never wore one of those frilly white aprons which made kitchen work look so inviting, whose kitchen looked nothing like the beautiful ones in books" (114). Although initially Angel wishes herself transformed into one of the ladies in some of the love stories she reads—"long blonde hair flying in the unruly wind, blue eyes sparkling, laughing up at some dark-haired young man of indeterminate colour" (113)—she grows to love black as beautiful and stops dreaming that "she was in fact really the child of some queen in a distant country, that she had been given a drug to change the colour of her skin" (113). We see signs of future strength in the growing child when, for example, Angel wants to wake up her brother to help with the housework, but Doodsie

tells her to let him sleep longer because he is a “man” whereas she is a “little girl” (97).<sup>18</sup> From Angel’s feminist point of view, Doodsie submits too much to a patriarchal system of domination represented by her submission to her husband, whose betrayals she accepts.

We also perceive the changes in Angel, as she develops, in her reaction to the figures on her mother’s wall. An image of Christ is initially in the family’s living room but both Angel and her brother Simon want the Jesus pictures removed to the bedrooms. Auntie Ezra gives Doodsie an outline of the map of Grenada framed in mahogany that is placed next to the glass-covered words proclaiming Christ the Head of the House (123). Later on, however, when Angel thinks of the picture of “a white man wid a globe floatin aroun somewhere inside me,” she feels sick (174). Angel’s reaction to Leader’s picture is almost as intense: “It upsetting enough having the man ruling the country and so many asses supportin him! But how you could have his picture up on the wall in you house?” (188) When Angel returns from college in Jamaica, she brings a picture of a little rasta boy to put in her room, which her father objects to but does not say anything until Angel removes Leader’s picture from the living-room.<sup>19</sup> What gets figured through these changes in the images is the evolution in Angel’s consciousness, from passively conforming to Christian values and wanting to be the “angel” in a Christmas play to rejecting this indoctrination with an iconography of revolution embodied in the rasta child.

The many different ways in which Collins conveys the evolution of both Angel’s and Grenada’s consciousness help create the documentary effect of the narrative—we get the truth from many angles of vision and through different channels—which makes the novel not only less teleological but more politically effective. Another evolutionary movement is figured in both the content and the form of the letters that the characters exchange throughout the novel. The epistolary validates creole as a written language, and the letters ultimately serve to represent the unity of the Caribbean peoples in diaspora. As they trace the characters’ movement among islands and to the U.S., in search of better economic conditions, they ultimately help the reader to perceive

them not only as an extended family, but as constituting a Caribbean community. The letters also allow Collins to articulate in the voice of the people the significance of the events that are occurring in the society: their own writing and interpretation of history, as in the first letter Doodsie writes to Ezra in Aruba, where she emphasizes their need for "a change but not in this way" (7). Allan's letter to his friend Martin in St. Lucia shows Allan's and the Grenadian people's initial enthusiasm about Leader (Eric Gairy): "We want we own people to lead us. You should see him, black as me you know and talking big with the best in the land" (44). Doodsie, however, cannot be fooled, and in more than one letter to Ezra she points out how "Leader just want everything for himself" (52). In another letter, Doodsie complains that "The country is in a total mess," and Independence means only flag and anthem (206). Allan's letters from Wisconsin and Florida show the nature of migrant work and also point to other people from the Caribbean who are working in the States (47). We learn that Maurice Bishop is in power through Angel's letter to Simon in New York, where she tells him of "a revolution directed by radio" (232), asking him to come home since "We need you for nation-building" (234). Angel's former classmate from Jamaica writes to her to inquire whether she is "finding the answers we felt had to be found? Is it rewarding? Is it going somewhere?" (252).

When Angel goes to the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, she is exposed to ideas such as Walter Rodney's call for Black Power and for a black class struggle, and she joins with other students to take an active role in the political transformation of the region. Collins fictionalizes the "Africa Night" held at Mary Seacole Hall (Mona Campus), in November, 1968, the first time that students were exposed in any serious way to African art, music, dress, poetry.<sup>20</sup> The rhetoric of Black Power was appropriate to the Caribbean to the extent that it responded to a popular discontent with those black people who had managed to acquire economic resources or political power and had become, in Collins's figuration of Fanon's "black skin, white mask," like "roast breadfruit," (157) black on the outside, but white on the inside.

Collins depicts the University, however, as a privileged space, an island which isolates the intellectual from the reality of most

of the people living in Jamaica. The students start a group called "Search" to improve their "knowledge concerning the surrounding communities" (154). Angel, Collins writes, maintained a "sort of detached interest," but gradually she remembers the knowledge of injustice that her grandmother and her mother passed on to her, and she is able to hear what Edward has to say:

We have to live in the society and we live in a capitalist society. But we know it don benefit de majority and that we're on our way to reaping benefits that the women who come in to eat our left-overs are not likely to see. . . . It is because we see the unfairness that we would want to be involved in trying to change that even while we know it would mean individual losses for us . . . at least initially (155).

Collins challenges received images of history by telling it from multiple points of view. Her nested reconstruction of history can be found in inserted texts, like Sister Miona Spencer's poem (247). A member of the Literacy Programme, the Sister opens a zonal council meeting with a poem that recovers Grenada's history until that moment to celebrate the benefits that the Horizon government has brought to the people, and the year she refers to is 1951, the date Eric Gairy called for a general strike. Leader's rise to power comes at a time in Grenada when people came together yet one more time to try to stop being exploited by the big landowners:

From all over the island, people walked, drove, rode to the city.  
Shouted. Laughed. Pulled one another along.  
"Make it! Make it, Papay-o! Is we day dat come!" (23)

The novel actually opens with the burning of the De Lisle estate, an event which seems to be approved by all spectators. Maisie's humorous description of the burning cocoa as ungrateful children who do not acknowledge their own mother fore-shadows, according to Carolyn Cooper, the theme of generational conflict that the novel develops later. The analogy also suggests the distortion of the organic relationship between the worker and the products of her labour. Because she is alienated from the fruits of her labour, the worker is forced to rebel:

The lan coun'dn't be mine because I too black for one, an is white people that own lan because is them that did have slave in this country. If I was high brown I might ah have white background dat

leave lan give me or I might ah be able to get big job, but it din work out so. (28)

It is not only the call to Black Power, as Patrick Taylor notes, that ultimately underlies the revolutionary trajectory in the novel (15). The rhetoric of Black Nationalism gives way to the discourse of revolution as Horizon, which takes control of the state with the full support of the majority of the Grenadian population. The New Jewel Movement (an acronym for Joint Endeavor for Welfare, Education and Liberation) brings to light “the kind of talent that was there hidin all de time” (249). The Party negotiates a socialism with an open plan until the crisis of October 1983 reveals that “truth” has solidified—that a universalized and closed narrative (encoded as Marxist-Leninism) has been imposed on the Party and the nation. The New Jewel Movement (Horizon) in Collins’s textualization of history turns Marxism-Leninism against itself and the people.

The novel is so constructed that the line of the Party, assumed by Angel, is subverted by the interwoven comments of the family members who confront her. Faithful to the Party, Angel will not reveal what she knows about the crisis within. The Party will find its own solutions she repeats over and over. But from the community’s point of view, the revolution is theirs, not that of the Party leaders. Carl, Angel’s brother, accuses her of belonging to a “secret society” (256). Rupert, once close to the Party, attacks its “ivory tower” elitism (269). He also tells Angel that “any Party dat in Mars while people on earth is not no party we want to know about anyway! Let it stay to ass in Mars!” (270). This mode of representation foregrounds the fact that both fiction and history are discursive practices, subject to questions of authorship and authority: *whose* version of history ultimately prevails does make a difference.

The American myth of a liberated Grenada is another obvious target for demystification in the novel: “Is our country still, Carl. We wrong. We do real stupidness. But nobody don have a right to invade. We doesn invade dem when dey killin black people in their country” (274). The American soldiers who invade the island act on the basis of a particular ideological conception which constructs the “other” as the communist enemy, black



men as "boys," and women as "babes" (Collins 280). Once the U.S. invasion occurs, a new contradiction appears: traumatized by the Party's dashing of her hopes, Doodsie thanks God for the intervention of the Americans thus succumbing to the new regime of terror. Angel, in contrast, picks up a gun to defend herself and her nation when the American troops land. As Angel's brother Rupert states, "people jump off one dream to go for a ride on another" (280). There is no irony in Collins representation of the tragedy of the Revolution. Though "truth" is turned on its head, social transformation remains a historical possibility, a possibility underscored by the voices of the exploited black women.

Providing a site of resistance to narrative closure, the female voices in the novel have their own genealogy in relation to the independence movement and the critical response to that movement articulated in the Black Power and socialist movements. But Angel's vision is not enough to maintain a critical distance from Party doctrine, whereas Doodsie knows better: "when ting just start all of us been speaking with one voice . . . Now mos people on same side again, saying leggo Chief, but now some of allyou who fight wid us self sayin is because we stupid and we caan see de truth! . . . If a few of you see it an de res of us don see it, what you go do, tie us down? Is not so it is, Angel. Dat is not what we fight for. We moving together or if not, we jus not moving, ah suppose" (267). If the novel presents unity from a woman's perspective, it does not exclude men. The words and actions of Angel's brothers help us see that it is not only from a female perspective that totalitarian structures can be recognized. It is in the very paradox of unity and fragmentation that the novel reaches history, as Taylor suggests, neither as utopia, nor as tragic failure, but as the hope and possibility of a new future (16).

*Angel* ends allegorically, with Doodsie warning her fowl to stay together so that the chicken-hawk cannot get any of them. Through the chicken-hawk metaphor a female authorial voice draws a moral from history: unity makes survival possible. Collins reiterates the idea of strength in people coming together that is first introduced with the hurricane: "Look how dis ting make us one, eh!" (40). Later, she says: "We caan let one another sink. Is

you, is me. We ha to hol one another up!" (78) For Grenadians, Collins is saying, internal division allowed the U.S. invasion to temporarily end their revolution. Now it is time for the children "to fix that coop an keep the chickens inside" (289). It is time for renewal (which the rain symbolizes), for Grenadian people to "fix" their country, to get rid of the "dirt" and to start again. The land, Collins tells us, "remains washed and waiting" (289).

It is also significant that Angel returns to Grenada to perform a ritual wake. Although she feels "a little bit stupid" about what she is going to do, to light a candle and sing the song they always sang at wakes, with her good eye, in "her mind's eye," Angel sees that the spirits are sympathetic (291). As a communal form, the wake is a way for the living people to deal with the reality of death and the loss of a loved one. Angel sees the "figures circling the room," and she tells her Sunday school teacher, who has been dead for ten years, that the spirits are "either gone, or they sympathetic" (291). The wake at the end of the novel functions as a symbol of past traditions which Angel must retain if she is to have an awareness of her community and her heritage.<sup>21</sup> Angel is lighting a candle not only for the part of her self that was lost with the blinding of her left eye—the Angel that got carried away with party arrogance and detachment from the people they were supposed to be accountable to—but to all Grenadians who lost their lives trying to keep the Revolution alive.

In contrast to Cliff's apparent rendering of social transformation as a tragic impossibility, Collins's novel suggests that it is possible for Grenadians to come together again. Collins's historical novel recovers the discontinuities that Walter Benjamin refers to in his "Theses," allowing the oppressed to correct the distortions of official history. Cliff's more allegorical figuration of history, on the other hand, converts images of time into images of place, creating a dehumanized, almost paradoxically ahistorical space which ultimately removes the possibility of human agency. Although both writers are pursuing a common goal, to proceed beyond a deterministic view of history, their commitment to an emancipatory project cannot offer any guarantee that their narratives will indeed be liberatory. Collins's novel more than Michelle Cliff's functions as a call to arms because she emphasizes

the notion that people are the agents of history through recreating their many voices. Both novels are intent on the destruction of boundaries and inventive in new ways of seeing. These novels of development are indeed central to nation-building since one of the functions of postcolonial writing is to turn a population characterized by differences of language, ethnicity, and religion, into a national unit to achieve some form of wholeness out of fragmentation.

## NOTES

- 1 This essay could not have been written without the help of the following community: Robert Carr, Susan Lanser, Kevin Meehan, Carla Peterson, and Marian Urquilla.
- 2 As a novel which recounts the youth of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to understand the nature of the world and his place in it, the *Bildungsroman* focuses on the development of a single individual within a particular social world. In the traditional (male) *Bildungsroman* the hero rejects the constraints of home, sets out on a journey through the world, and meets with many setbacks before choosing his future.
- 3 Jamaica, under Prime Minister Michael Manley, and Grenada, under Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, are the only two Caribbean countries that have attempted to integrate women into the reconceptualization of both nations under socialism and national development.
- 4 Many postcolonial authors, in an attempt to bring a "new" self into being, have paradoxically chosen the *Bildungsroman*, a genre which embodies rigid presuppositions about when and how people mature and in turn encourages its readers to see this maturation in novelistic terms (Dubrow 4). This is only a partial list of Caribbean *Bildungsromane*. H. G. de Lisser, *Jane's Career* (Jamaica, 1914); Alfred H. Mendes, *Pitch Lake* (Trinidad, 1934); George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (Barbados, 1953); Geoffrey Drayton, *Christopher* (Barbados, 1959); V. S. Naipaul, *Miguel Street* (Trinidad, 1959); Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (Barbados/New York, 1959), *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and *Daughters* (1991); Peter Kempadoo (Lauchmonen), *Guiana Boy* (1960); Michele Lacroisil, *Sapouille and the Clay Canary* (Guadeloupe, 1960); Michael Anthony, *The Year in San Fernando* (Trinidad, 1965) and *Green Days by the River* (1967); Austin Clarke, *Amongst Thistles and Thorns* (Barbados/Canada 1965); Joseph Zobel, *Black Shack Alley* (Martinique, 1974); Merle Hodge, *Crick Crack, Monkey* (Trinidad, 1970); Myriam Warner-Vieyra, *As the Sorcerer Said* (Guadeloupe, 1980) and *Juletane* (Guadeloupe/Senegal, 1982); Zee Edgell, *Beka Lamb* (Belize, 1982); Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (Jamaica/US, 1984); Merle Collins, *Angel* (Grenada/London, 1987); Beryl Gilroy, *Boy-Sandwich* (Guyana/London, 1989). Writers from different countries in Africa have also chosen the *Bildungsroman*: Camara Laye, *The African Child* (Guinea, 1954); Mongo Beti, *Mission terminée* (Cameroon, 1957); Nafissatou Diallo, *A Dakar Childhood* (London, 1982); Djanet Lachmet, *Le Cowboy* (Algeria, 1983); Tsitsi Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* (Zimbabwe, 1989).
- 5 In "Decolonizing Genre: Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and the *Bildungsroman*," I relate the appearance of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* to the colonized subject's historical loss of a "unity of being" after the arrival of the European. This pre-colonial "totality" is of course as imaginary as the Greek cosmos of Lukács' creation, but it serves to mark that process of loss and progressive alienation.

While for Lukács the novel “seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life,” the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, I believe, paradoxically attempts both to represent the movement from fragmentation and loss toward wholeness and homeland, and to deny the possibility of such recovery.

- 6 The concept of allegory (literally, other speaking) leads to the interpretation of a text on the basis of the meaning which lies *potentially* in it. In allegorical structures, one text is read through another, however fragmentary their relationship. The paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest.
- 7 Figuration is something rather more than representation, Pierre Macherey writes, since it is a question of devising, or at least collecting, the visible signs in which something can be read (175). I am aware that the distinction between the allegorical and the historical is ultimately artificial since they overlap in both novels, but it becomes necessary in my attempt to understand the differences I perceive in the novels' effectiveness.
- 8 Slemon notes significant discrepancies between the various theories of allegory now in critical currency and the kind of allegorical writing and reading that is currently practiced in postcolonial contexts. While some post-structuralist critics read allegorical expression as a willful act of annihilating the past (Smith 119), others see it as bound up with the question of the authority of the past (Said 10). For Slemon, the point for postcolonial allegory is that historical material must be *read*, and read in *adjacency* to a fictional re-enactment of it (160). Postcolonial allegorical writing builds the provisional, discursive nature of history into the structure and narrative mode of the text so that history becomes approachable only in an act of reading that foregrounds its secondary or conditional nature, its link to fictionality (Slemon 160).
- 9 *Angel*, I want to suggest, is the “collective novel” that Glissant almost believed could not be written.
- 10 Like *Abeng*, *No Telephone to Heaven* stays within standard English, privileging the written versus the oral, and limiting the Jamaican patois to local color exchanges. Patois is the language of an economic strata that maintains in the face of extreme poverty indigenous cultural forms, concepts, assumptions, and strategies for survival in an oppressed and oppressive society.
- 11 The PNP lost, according to Ambursley, because despite its rhetoric, it failed to unite and mobilize the small peasants, farm workers, urban wage earners and casual laborers who comprise the overwhelming social and political majority of Jamaican society (72). Moreover, Manley's project of Democratic Socialism, as Robert Carr writes, was seen by U.S. State officials as inaugurating the fourth country in the Caribbean to move to the left (With Cuba, Grenada, and Guyana), and—perhaps more important—to call for organizations that would unite the region and give it greater power in relations with “developed” countries and corporations. To prevent this process of decolonization, the U.S. State Department used its power to block USAID loans to Jamaica, and the IMF contributed to devaluations, wage freezes in spite of spiralling inflation, and massive budget cuts.
- 12 Boy told people he was descended from plantation owners, which was partially true. With each fiction, Cliff writes, his “new self became more complete” (62).
- 13 All legends and documents refer to Nanny of the First Maroon War (from 1720-39) as the most outstanding woman in the eighteenth century, leading her people with courage and inspiring them to maintain that spirit of freedom, a symbol of unity and strength for her people during times of crisis.
- 14 Harry/Harriet is Cliff's way of constituting homosexuality in the novel. Himself a product and the object of rape, “mi mumma was a maid, and my father, her employer” (124), Harry/Harriet sees his life symbolically reproducing that of his mother since both were raped by white men (129). Because Clare feels drawn to

- him, "at home with you" (131), Cliff also implies in the split of his nature, that time will come "for both of us to choose. . . . Cyann live split" (131). In Harry/Harriet I also find figured the rape of the colonized by the colonizer, and the split consciousness that it generates.
- 15 It is significant that Collins's middle name is Angela: like other *Bildungsromane*, *Angel* is heavily autobiographical.
  - 16 This passage conveys the same "mist-like" feeling that we find in Jamaica Kincaid's "Somewhere Belgium," which I have characterized as the "I growing up" inevitably "growing away" with the lure of the West.
  - 17 Before she understands Black Nationalism and the pride in her African heritage, Angel fails West Indian history. Collins tells us that those long "slave reports were boring" (121), which may point to the pedagogy in that colonial classroom that valued conquest and royalty and was unable to recover a history of resistance.
  - 18 It is important not to forget that Angel is the oldest child. Simon has only to sweep the yard when he wakes up (98).
  - 19 Allan really believes Leader is for poor people: "You know, some people jus don like to see black people strive. For so much years, eh, it was de white man on top; dem votin, dem passin rules, dem deciding who to pay an who not to pay, who mus work an who mus not work. Now ting change an we have we own leader, you know it even have black people self that cursin im an doh want to see im dey!" (83).
  - 20 See more on this event in Brathwaite's "The Love Axe/1."
  - 21 Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* explores the function of the wake as a way of contrasting traditional versus imported knowledge and values; it not only provides a forum for discussing and passing on history, but it is a way to bring the community together, for those who have some wealth to share it with others.

## WORKS CITED

- Ambursley, Fitzroy. "Jamaica: from Michael Manley to Edward Seaga." *Crisis in the Caribbean*. Ed. F. A. and Robin Cohen. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983.
- Belsey, Catherine. *Critical Practice*. London: New Accents, 1980.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses of the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 253-64.
- Beverly, John. "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 35.1 (1989): 11-28.
- . "Through All Things Modern": Second Thoughts on *Testimonio*" *boundary 2* 18.2 (1991): 1-21.
- Bowers, Susan R. "Medusa and the Female Gaze." *NWSA Journal* 2.2 (1990): 217-35.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. "The Love Axe/1: Developing a Caribbean Aesthetic 1962-1974." *BIM* 16.61 (1977): 53-65.
- Carr, Robert. "Veteran by Veteran: Sistren and the Struggle for Justice under Democratic Socialism." Manuscript.
- Cliff, Michelle. *Abeng*. New York: Dutton, 1984.
- . *No Telephone to Heaven*. New York: Dutton, 1987.
- . "Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character." *Caribbean Women Writers*. Ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe. Wellesley, MA: Calaloux Publications, 1990. 263-68.
- Collins, Merle. *Angel*. London: The Women's Press, 1987.
- Cooper, Carolyn. "The Preconditions of Revolution: Merle Collins' *Angel*." Paper presented at the Caribbean Studies Association Conference, Grenada, June 1992.

- Dubrow, Heather. *Genre*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse. Selected Essays*. Trans Michael Dash. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1989.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.
- Jara, Rene. "Prologo." *Testimonio y Literatura*. Ed. Rene Jara and Hernan Vidal. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Society for the Study of Contemporary Hispanic and Lusophone Revolutionary Literature, 1986.
- Lima, Maria Helena. "Decolonizing Genre: Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and the *Bildungsroman*." (Forthcoming in a special issue of *Genre* on the *Bildungsroman*.)
- Lukács, Georg. *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle*. Trans. John and Necke Mander. New York: Harper, 1962.
- Macherey, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production*. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Pereira, J. R. "Towards a Theory of Literature in Revolutionary Cuba." *Caribbean Quarterly* 21.1-2 (1975): 62-73.
- Said, Edward. *Beginnings*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.
- Searle, Chris. *Words Unchained: Language & Revolution in Grenada*. London: Zed Books, 1984.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. 33.1 (1988): 157-68.
- Smith, Paul. "The Will to Allegory in Postmodernism." *Dalhousie Review*. 62.1 (1982): 105-22.
- Steiner, George. *Extraterritorial*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
- Taylor, Patrick. "Deconstruction and Revolution: Merle Collins's *Angel*." *The CLR James Journal* (January 1991): 12-17.