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# Imperial Illness: Considering the Trope of Madness in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

IMPERIAL ILLNESS: CONSIDERING THE TROPE OF MADNESS IN MICHELLE CLIFF'S  
NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

James McCrink

2017

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by James McCrink, and entitled, Imperial Illness: Considering the Trope of Madness in Michelle Cliff's No Telephone to Heaven, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Ana Luszczynska

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Donna Weir-Soley

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Heather Russell, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 30, 2017

The thesis of James McCrink is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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Andres G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Ita, Christina, Maggie, Gerson, and Carmen.

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I wish to thank my thesis committee, Dr. Heather Russell, Dr. Ana Luszczynska, and Dr. Donna Weir-Soley for their time, encouragement, and support.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

IMPERIAL ILLNESS: CONSIDERING THE TROPE OF MADNESS IN MICHELLE CLIFF'S

NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN

by

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Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

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The purpose of this thesis is to examine Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1996), and to scrutinize, through Christopher's mental illness, the couched, unspoken, and deeply embedded presence of imperial hegemony in the Caribbean. I shall argue that Christopher's mental illness is not, as one might have it, an inexplicable lapse into insanity, but both a fitting, polyrhythmic expression of longstanding postcolonial/neocolonial abuse, and a dynamic form of counterhegemonic resistance. Thus, my use of the term, imperial illness, refers to colonial impacts on the Caribbean, and how those impacts continue to play a significant role in postcolonial/neocolonial societies and, concurrently, the strategies imagined by postcolonial subjects to resist. Christopher's mental illness, then, is the result of sustained imperial socio-psychological torment, which produces, quite ironically, the conditions that make possible his acts of resistance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
CHAPTER I. IMPERIAL ILLNESS: CONSIDERING THE TROPE OF MADNESS IN MICHELLE CLIFF'S NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN.....	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	28

CHAPTER I. IMPERIAL ILLNESS: CONSIDERING THE TROPE OF MADNESS IN  
MICHELLE CLIFF'S *NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN*

“*And still today they are organizing this dehumanization rationally...*”  
- Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*

“*The sea. The sea is history.*” - Derek Walcott

Mental illness, a significant trope in postcolonial theory and in Caribbean literature, has arguably not received the full weight of literary analyses that it deserves. When one is yoking together mental illness and the postcolonial condition, however, the Martiniquean psychiatrist and theorist Frantz Fanon must be invoked. Fanon (1925–1961) was trained in psychiatry in Lyon, France, and worked mainly in colonial North Africa, between 1953 and 1957. He was one of the first psychiatrists to postulate that the experience of discrimination in a colonial environment carries with it the potential to produce mental illness in colonized black subjects. Fanon concludes that mental illness and racial discrimination are forms of alienation from society, both deeply dehumanizing and shameful. In his seminal work, *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), Fanon argues that colonization feasibly triggers mental pathology, which in its severest form, leads to violent expression. Fanon, thus, is one of the early thinkers to consider the interrelationship between colonial oppression and mental illness.

In a similar vein, the novel by the Dominican author Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), treats the interrelationship between the colonial condition, mental illness, and gender. A radical postcolonial feminist revisioning of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, which features a character from the Caribbean, “Bertha Mason” as the proverbial “madwoman in the attic,” Rhys’ novel imagines a prequel to Bertha’s story, thematizing the link between British colonialism, racism, sexism, and mental illness. At the same time, Rhys’s “Antoinette Cosway/Bertha Mason” is a white creole and, arguably, not fully constitutive of the deeply traumatized Fanonian racialized subject. Antoinette/Bertha does, however, burn down the English manor in which she



has been imprisoned as her last act of subversion and resistance against the signifying authority of Edward Rochester, who stands in for British colonial patriarchy. Both Fanon and Rhys, thus, are progenitors for thinking through in theory and in literature the ways in which illness may be employed as I intend to argue here, to reimagine the legacies of imperialism in the Caribbean. In the pages that follow, I read mental illness, then, as a metaphor for rebellion against the longstanding, parasitic presence of the diseased colonial “machine,” which I define as the tacit, growing, and malignant “infection” that has ravaged, and which continues to ravage, Caribbean identities. Postcolonial mental illness, in my theoretical formulation, works to subvert and therefore stands in juxtaposition to imperialism, colonization, racism, and subjugation.

The term, *imperial illness*, then, *both* refers to colonial impacts on the Caribbean, and how those impacts continue to play a significant role in postcolonial/neocolonial societies *and* to the strategies imagined by postcolonial subjects to resist and rebel. Imperial illness embodies the metanarratives that have been written to justify the colonial project *and* the ruptures constructed to dismantle them. Moving from theoretical abstraction to textual materiality, what can we do with the trope of mental illness in Caribbean writing, with characters in Caribbean works that are represented as mentally ill? Can we, as I shall argue here, rediagnose their mental illnesses as symptomatic of imperial hegemony and at the same time providing an imaginative space of counterhegemonic resistance? What do we make, for instance, of the trope of madness in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* (1996), emblemized by the author’s representation of Christopher? How do we read Christopher’s murders of Mas’ Charles, Miss Evelyn, their daughter, their housekeeper Mavis, their son Paul—a childhood friend of Christopher’s—and their dog? Their throats cut, their bodies mutilated. What do we make of Christopher’s retreat into “the Dungle”? His gradual and growing unwillingness or, his inability, to speak? His howls? His machete, which strikes not only at his victims, but also at the imperial Christian God, which has forsaken him? Are we to diagnose Christopher’s mental illness as an inexplicable lapse into

insanity or, as I shall contend, as the result of sustained imperial socio-psychological torment, which produces the conditions that make possible his acts of resistance? What narrative form/s do such acts of resistance take in the novel? In other words, what are the necessary forms in which, mental illness as subversion of imperial disease, are imagined? What shape/s do they take? I wish to suggest, then, that imperial disease is codified as ordered, bounded, singular, suppressive, European. On the other hand, mental illness is codified as possibility, fluidity, plurality, freedom, Caribbean. Mental illness, thus, is powerfully dialectical, embodying *both* an articulation of imperial hegemony *and* a counterhegemonic resistance to prescriptive imperial authority. To make this case, however, it is useful to begin with outlining the terms by which imperial disease are construed.

The binary of the imperial colonizer and the colonized “other” is a polarity reinforced within imperial contexts. Within these contexts, Euro-American colonial practices, and peoples and nations—the “other” or, the “otherness”—of other regions, are defined by, and viewed as, opposing forces. These oppositions carry with them a collection of destructive binary principles: superiority/imperial/white, as opposed to inferiority/colonized/black. These metanarratives illustrate the damaging connotations that come to define one side of the dichotomy in opposition to its counterpart, and the dangerous implications that go along with such thinking: such thinking that is not polyrhythmic but, quite the contrary, constricted, linear, totalizing, binarized, and governed by hierarchal, fundamentally imperial, ideologies.

A “single History,” according to Glissant, is a history that has been shaped by imperial logocentricity: the linear formulation of history that has systematically generated the ideological and epistemological structures of western thinking. That the voice of African Atlantic struggle has found in the late-twentieth and early twentieth-first centuries firm footing in challenging imperial history is, though impactful, of little relief, as imperial accounts of the past, strengthened by the purpose of its mission—the “colonizing mission,” to be sure—continue to be a suppressive

force. Imperial history articulates power, conquest, and control in a concerted, premeditated effort to assert its supremacy; its whip lashings are, regardless of modernity, no less destructive, simply better hidden, as time presses forward, and the enslaved, their descendants, their histories are, as Derek Walcott's poem reminds us, buried more deeply in the sea. What can we make of History when many accounts have been erased or falsified? What of alternative accounts of "what happened?": the "why?", the "where?," the "by whom?," the "to whom?" Why the tendency towards constructing such totalizing hegemonic narratives?

The basis of the opposition between the imperial colonizer, and its binary opposition, the colonized, may be understood by considering the distinction between the "city of health" and the "fields of disease," a distinction rooted in Greek orientations that came to separate the city's "healthy" from those that were believed by the social majority to threaten them. The regions in which the "diseased" lived came to be viewed as a collective illness that would infect the city's well-being, upsetting the stability of public, cultural, and social harmony, thereby reinforcing the dangers and the uncleanness of "otherness": ultimately, a threat against civil uniformity, growth, and prosperity. Inside the city of health, "we find the citizens aligned hierarchically, according to the value of their contributions" and, in opposition to this organized city, we find the "chaos of disease that always threatens from without" (Wallen 1). Just as "[...] the healthy city is intended as the analogy of the just, or healthy, individual," the description of the fields outside the city is intended as an analogy of otherness, a "disease [that] lies beyond" (1). It is here that I wish to concentrate my efforts next, namely, how imperial thinking has long occupied the so-called city of health, and how it has classified the "other" throughout modern history as the infection that threatens its mission, its health, its legitimacy.

The dichotomous figuration of health/illness led to a recognition of the city of health as a space of ethical and moral integrity, in opposition to the fields of disease, which house infections that threaten to contaminate the integrity and moral righteousness of the city's inhabitants. The

“ethical construct of individuals,” Wallen explains, “sought to unify themselves into a coherent and meaningful identity” (2). Consequently, those who were not a part of this identity were alienated. As a result of these growing tensions, “health acquired moral quality,” and disease acquired the forceful quality that stood against it. Disease here “constitutes any threat to [the city’s] integrity, and is symptomized by ethical chaos and the dissolution of identity” (2). The dichotomy of health/illness, moreover, is at the root of all other dichotomies, including those that experienced dramatic reconfigurations in the late eighteenth century with the increasing emphasis on the medicalization of the body: “this dichotomy [health/illness] is even more pervasive than such framed oppositions as organic-mechanic, nature-artifice, or imagination-reason; for the categories of health and disease direct the valuations of all these other oppositions” (5). At the foundation of binary thinking, health/illness comes to define the ways in which complements categorize opposing signifiers. Within these oppositions, we begin to see how dangerous, and how deeply engrained, these binaries are and how, as a result, they appear to contain, yet entirely lack, essential meaning.

One must question, consequently: what is health and what is illness, if not the negation of one to describe the other, as in “I am ill because I am not healthy,” or “I am healthy because I am not ill”? Try to define illness and, as Virginia Woolf writes in “On Being Ill” (1926), “language at once runs dry” (7). To talk about health and illness, we may have only, and sparingly, at our disposal a language that depends on binary oppositions, some of which are seemingly ordered; however, Wallen explains, “health serves as an ideal standard that is always threatened: we measure it mostly by the absence of its opposite, but even then without much specificity [...] Nor is it any easier to define disease without reference to its opposite, well-being” (1). The dichotomy between health and illness leaves much room for examination; the ability to reframe imperial thought, using this ubiquitous dichotomy—though embedded in our discursive and rhetorical frameworks—reveals a number of meaningful reinterpretations, particularly within Caribbean

contexts. Particular to the colonizer/colonized binary, we observe a dangerous friction between the healthy city of imperial thinking and the “otherness” of Caribbean peoples. But what if we were to subvert this false dichotomy? In other words, can we reimagine imperial thinking as occupying the fields of disease, rather than the city of health? If so, and I argue we must, imperial thinking is placed justly into its rightful zone: a transgressive, harmful, and damaging space, a disease that continues to infect Caribbean identities and freedoms.

Conversely, the fields of disease, because they came to identify a sort of “chaotic motility,” and a crowd-pleasing hunger that would not be stripped of its appetite for freedom is, I would suggest further, akin to the polyrhythmic nature of the Caribbean, a freedom that runs contrary to the inertia and stagnation of the city of health. To be clear, then, I am suggesting that we might read the Caribbean as a site infected by imperial disease, which resists the totalizing imperatives of the idealistic city of health through the ways in which it imagines illness as potentially counterhegemonic. Illness itself, in fact, is a useful tool in reexamining imperial hegemony, as—for our purposes, mental illness—is difficult to define beyond metaphor and, as an abstract concept, it allows us to explore several meanings within Caribbean writing.

One attempt that I have found in which the fundamental meaning of illness is productively challenged for our purposes is in Virginia Woolf’s “On Being Ill.” The essay, I claim, avoids defining health and illness with the use of binaries; it succeeds in avoiding question-begging that comes from reinforcing the polarities between them, as imperial-centered dichotomies will do. Woolf understands illness as having its own qualities, its own character, its own possibilities. I examine “On Being Ill,” then, as a way to examine an attempt to reformulate illness, thereby avoiding, to my mind, imperial definition and inaugurating a conversation about thinking about illness alongside postcolonial forms of resistance.

“On Being Ill”<sup>1</sup> questions why illness, such a common occurrence in one’s daily life, scarcely appears as a “prime theme” in literature. Woolf begins:

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist’s arm-chair and confuse his “Rinse the mouth—rinse the mouth” with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us—when we think of this, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. (3-4)

After Woolf questions the absence of illness as trope in literature, she notes that illness enhances perception and mental acuity, suggesting that illness carries with it transformative powers, which alters one’s understanding of the world, and oneself. The invalid, Woolf argues, is empowered by illness, experiencing liberating awareness and an unencumbered willingness to speak truly: “the great confessional,” which includes “a childish outspokenness ... things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals” (11). Illness helps to break down the self-conscious, social constructs that those in good health struggle against, and through which

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<sup>1</sup> After being published in T.S. Eliot’s *The New Criterion*, “On Being Ill,” with revisions, was printed in the American magazine *Forum* (edited by Henry Goddard Leach) in the April 1926 issue under the title, “Illness—An Unexploited Mine.” In 1930, Woolf and her husband Leonard published “On Being Ill” (the essay’s original title, of course) in their Hogarth Press. Leonard insisted on intermittent publications of the essay in the decades that followed, before and after Woolf’s death in March 1941. “On Being Ill” was reprinted in *The Moment and other Essays* (1947) and again in the fourth volume of *Collected Essays* (1967).

they interpret the world around them. Illness, in Woolf's view, is what the Greek city of health aims to create in its citizens.

Woolf acknowledges, as I mentioned before, that in speaking of illness, one will "suffer from a poverty of language" (7). The author identifies, moreover, a sort of ambivalent, if not absent, position the ill body will take in the canon. Having recognized the constraints of language in describing illness, Woolf concludes that to write about illness—"a slight attack of influenza" or a "little rise in temperature," for instance—a "more primitive, more sensual, more obscene language" is required (7). Will Woolf, in attempting to prescribe agency to illness, succeed in framing a language of illness that falls outside binary, and by implication, imperial thinking? In other words, what are the discursive possibilities inherent in Woolf's push to make illness legible?

However limited the language of illness may be, it is, Woolf argues, an important subject, one that she suggests should replace various prominent themes in literature: "Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache" (4). But the impenetrable nature of illness, it appears, prohibits a concrete understanding of it, and we reside, at least conceptually, in a space of abstraction. To my mind, this is fitting, if not poetic: illness, for Woolf, it seems to me, understands the body in two particular ways: firstly, illness poses an immediate threat, of course, to health (Woolf will not deny the impact of illness on one's health). Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, illness brings with it various mental and spiritual benefits and reconfigurations. Woolf has recognized, then, the rhetorical flexibility that illness offers her. Perhaps the rhetorical basis on which illness can be structured transcends prescribed hegemonic language, just as illness transcends, it goes beyond, rather than standing in opposition to, health.

The body, Woolf argues, is the vehicle through which lived experience takes place. The mind, a device in this vehicle, will think, observe, and examine the material world, but only

through the body. Once the body becomes ill, it will become, we learn in “On Being Ill” increasingly vibrant. Woolf questions, thus, why, if we all experience physical illness—either briefly or for an extended period—do we ignore the body? Clearly, Woolf destabilizes the mind/body split we observe in Cartesian dualism, how the very basis on which the mind and body are believed to be discrete is complicated when considering postcolonial subjects. Caribbean identity and resistance are symbiotic bodies that cannot be divided, but rather function as a whole.

Woolf maintains, moreover, an enthusiastic and positive understanding of illness and the illness experience. The author writes that her encounters with illness were “partly mystical. Something happens in my mind” (287). She insists in a letter to Vita Sackville-West, for instance, that illness allows people to “express their affections,” that “the best of these illnesses is that they loosen the earth about the roots. They make changes”<sup>2</sup>, echoing here the first sentence in “On Being Ill,” that of “the ancient and obdurate oaks that are uprooted in us by the act of sickness” (3). “On Being Ill” is, therefore, at once a work on illness, which deeply affected Woolf’s personal and literary existence, and also the work of a determined, creative, and seasoned essayist who seeks to revise the assumptions that underscore the meaning of illness. In particular, I want to focus on two concepts Woolf articulates in the aforementioned that seem particularly suggestive when read alongside the work of Caribbean writers and postcolonial theorists.

When Woolf writes that, “the best of these illnesses is that *they loosen the earth about the roots,*” and highlights “the ancient and *obdurate oaks that are uprooted in us* by the act of sickness” she is speaking here of shifting epistemological ground. Turning towards the Caribbean, in literature and in literary theory, the sea and chaos are two recurrent metaphors that have been employed to characterize the Caribbean and Caribbean writing. Neither is rooted. Neither can be described as “obdurate.” In fact, both the sea and chaos stand in direct contradistinction to fixity, to rootedness, to obdurateness: they are freedom and flexibility. They

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<sup>2</sup> Woolf, *Diary*, 27 November 1925, III, p. 47.



are, in fact, “polyrhythmic.” The sea and chaos destabilize the notion that imperial discourses rightfully, and justly, drive contemporary western outlooks. Such use of polyrhythmic metaphors—of the sea and chaos—help to confound obscure, bewildering, and puzzling imperial-centered dichotomies, such as *presence* (as opposed to absence), *purity* (as opposed to impurity), *civility* (as opposed to savagery), *reason* (as opposed to superstition), *unity* (as opposed to fragmentation), and *white* (as opposed to black) and, I would add, *healthy* (as opposed to ill). Binary structures exemplify the “linear nature of narrative and the linear form of chronology [in which] man, the chosen one, knows himself and knows the world, not because he is part of it, but because he establishes a sequence and measures it according to his own time scale...” (Glissant 73). Dichotomies, moreover, reinforce the sort of imperial thinking that will create distinctions between the “good” and the “bad,” truth and falsehood, innocence and guilt, the colonizer and the colonized, the healthy and the ill. With relation to time, linearity, and causation, Caribbean polyrhythmic identities are devoid of these restricting, ideological binaries, conceptual and ultimately fruitless premises that neatly and safely classify, discern, and shape notions of Truth. They are the antithesis of obdurate rootedness.

Derek Walcott reminds us that “the sea is history;” however, commodification of the Caribbean, which includes, Mimi Sheller writes, “some of the deepest ethical dilemmas associated with capitalist modernity,” denies accountability on the basis of western economic theories that aim at “driving the global economy” (13). The “obsessively present” chains of western history and the “universal transcendence of the sublime” that imperial thinking embodies (like “the city of health”), denies the sea as history, as the sea neither torments nor restricts; the sea, and the history it contains—African Atlantic history—, reignites the “creative energy of a dialectic between nature and culture in the Caribbean” (67; 65). Such a dialectic, I would argue, shares with the dialectic between health and disease out of which illness might be read as a space of creative address.

The submarine origin of the Caribbean, for Braithwaite, and the “shared process of cultural mutation,” for Glissant, free us from [the] uniformity of imperial cultural, political, and economic frameworks. Imperial thinking, which has long determined Truth, History, and Health is consequently problematized. Those who “*sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence*,” intellectually, spiritually, and culturally bound by the ships that discarded them, begin to be set free (67). The sea, the metaphoric site of cultural interdependency in the Caribbean, in its confrontation with, and in its opposition to, imperial history is neither militaristic nor suppressive, which are those constituent elements to be found in imperial thinking. The sea is, conversely, an unpredictable, imprecise, and uncanny space that converges, imploding the generally accepted dialectics of historical dogmas that drive imperial claims, perceptions, and justifications. However, the sea—the polyrhythmic sea—of the Caribbean, is a liminal body, rather than a permanent and organized colonial body, which “looks forward to everything that repeats, reproduces, unfolds, flows, spins, vibrates, seethes ...” (Benitez-Rojo 3).

Glissant’s use of the sea is similar to Benitez-Rojo’s use of chaos, which attends to “... processes, dynamics, and rhythms that show themselves within the marginal, the regional, the incoherent, the heterogeneous, or, if you like, the unpredictable that coexists with us in our everyday world” (3). Chaos, he continues, “unfold[s] and bifurcate[es] until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth, while at the same time it inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs” (3). But how can the metaphor of chaos factor into the Caribbean? Does the sea, and its relationship to the polyrhythmic character of the Caribbean, withstand the provocative image of chaos? In a similar vein, is chaos a reliable metaphor that helps to problematize imperial claims of linear and colonial history, or is it merely an image that will fall under the very classifications that deride Caribbean primacies?

To answer this, we consider Benitez-Rojo’s convincing use of the Caribbean landscape as a “discontinuous conjunction of ... unstable condensations, turbulences, [and] whirlpools.”

Reminiscent of Woolf's description of illness, his use of chaos is understood most prudently as "a transformative voice, [an] indistinguishable spirit [whose] flux, whose noise, whose presence covers the map of world history's contingencies, through the great changes in economic discourse to the vast collisions of races and cultures that humankind has seen" (10; 5). Chaos is, thus, an apt metaphor that withstands imperial essentialism. Just as the Caribbean's "vagina was stretched between continental clamps, between the *encomienda* of Indians and the slaveholding plantation, between the servitude of the coolie and the discrimination toward the *criollo*," its discourse neither ignores nor denies its "unpredictable flux of transformative plasma that spins calmly in our globe's firmament, that sketches in an "other" shape that keeps changing, with some objects born to light while others disappear into the womb of darkness..." (4). The Caribbean, then, chaotically neither center nor boundary, resists not its history, but rather the assumptions germane to imperial classifications and categorizations of History: a narrative of blind obedience to the colonial vitalities that underscore imperial contentions of Truth. For instance, illness is often construed in apocalyptic terms. In conventional imperial terms, illness portends death. It captures the dreaded fear of contamination, the threat to the ideal city of health, whose cataclysmic climax is death. In imperial thinking, the apocalypse represents the chaotic downfall of humanity. In stark contrast, Benitez-Rojo writes that the concept of the end of the world in Caribbean thinking is:

Not important within the culture of the Caribbean. The choices of all or nothing, for or against, honor or blood have little to do with the culture of the Caribbean. These are ideological propositions articulated in Europe which the Caribbean shares only in declamatory terms, or, better, in terms of a first reading. In Chicago a beaten soul says: "I can't take it any more," and gives himself up to drugs or to the most desperate violence. In Havana, he would say: "The thing to do is not die," or perhaps: "Here I am, fucked but happy." (10)

Distinctions in cultural, social, and economic outlook mark this compelling passage. Physical, psychological, and perhaps even spiritual downfall is a convincing portrait of the consequences of the imperial mindset, that is, the demoralizing pressures that lead to social, political, and economic affliction in the Caribbean. Benitez-Rojo, moreover, writes that the Caribbean is not “terrestrial but aquatic (thus paralleling Glissant’s use of the sea), a sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar” (11). The Caribbean, he continues:

is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity ... It is, in the final analysis, a culture of the meta-archipelago: a chaos that returns, a detour without a purpose, a continual flow of paradoxes; it is a feed-back machine with asymmetrical workings, like the sea, the wind, the clouds, the uncanny novel, the food chain, the music of Malaya, Godel’s theorem, and fractal mathematics. (11)

Thus, the connection between the sea and chaos and Caribbean writing juxtaposes the polyrhythmic character of the Caribbean and its opposition to imperial historical claims.

Fluidity and, perhaps more significantly, uncertainty, identify the polyrhythmic outlook of the Caribbean. The foundations of western history should not be threatened by Caribbean discourse, however: the Caribbean, we learn, does not operate in this way. It would be detrimental to overlook, however, the subterranean realities that the Caribbean is capable of enacting: a multilayered, and by implication, forceful account of rhythmic histories that challenge strictly dichotomous imperial sensibilities and which, Glissant writes, “relieves us of the linear, hierarchal vision of a single history that would run its unique course” (66). The sea and the “submarine” origin of the Caribbean are “not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches” (67). Its rhizomatic structure, recalling Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the term, facilitates by necessity alternative

versions of history: a potent tension against the stringency of imperial hegemony.

I want to suggest, then, that the metaphor of the sea is the antidote, if you will, for Woolf's contention that "language at once runs dry." Such Caribbean thought works to give us a language with which to question the hierarchal binaries that have come to define patriarchal, colonial attempts to prioritize the colonizer's version of history over all other accounts. Its watery images satiate, replacing the impetus to dominate, historical truth with wide-ranging and alternative—polyrhythmic—possibilities. And it is perhaps in this space that "illness" finds its place in literature.

We find in Caribbean writing a powerful literary insurgency, an army of capable works, which challenge imperial historical claims, claims which have long infected our history books, books "administered by those who wield power over the production and mass dissemination of discourse" (Russell 2). On the other hand, we are reminded of "[c]ounterhistorical versions produced by those subjected to the violence of Euro-American imperial and racist behaviors and the linear, progressive, chronological discourses that support them ..." (2). But what if the language of mental illness in Caribbean works gave voice to these counterhistorical versions by laying claim to new discursive formulations and textual enterprises that defy imperial-centered, historical fixity and linearity, traditional structures, which are to be found in the Euro-American canon? The use of mental illness in Caribbean writing challenges imperial history by creating a uniquely self-conscious and stylistic discourse, one that does not settle neatly into specific categories of what constitutes, or what "should" constitute, literature, but is, rather, formed by shape-changing or, as I shall explore next, "polyrhythmic" outlooks.

Embracing a polyrhythmic identity, the Caribbean, in an effort to reimagine, defy, and reframe its social, economic, political, and spiritual identity, embodies fluid, dynamic, and vibrant works in which "the people of the Caribbean have taken remnants of rhythms of the past—African influences in drumming and storytelling ... and synthesized them, added to them, in order

to create a distinctly Caribbean, polyrhythmic society, in which the roots of history, though twisted and amplified, shine through” (Lichtenstein “Polyrhythm and the Caribbean”). The Caribbean is, Lichtenstein concludes, “a harmony wide enough to encompass distinctly conflicting rhythms, but harmony nonetheless” (“Polyrhythm and the Caribbean”). Caribbean writing includes, then, a corpus of complex, important, and paradoxical works, which challenge the imperial frameworks that sustain and reinforce hegemonic systems of writing. Caribbean writing deliberately destabilizes imperial literary formulations, substituting them with polyrhythmic arrangements that undermine western constructions.

The Caribbean, a polyrhythmic body, does not simply question history; it unearths, redefines, and rebuilds the very basis on which imperial history has long operated. Caribbean writing, moreover, steeped in a “diasporic consciousness that acknowledges the radical contingencies of meaning,” reformulates epistemologies, which resist manufactured Euro-American workings of history (Russell 3). As this “repeating island”, echoing Benitez-Rojo’s phrase, continues to “experience neo-colonial silencing and domination,” it is engrossed simultaneously in, and it establishes itself against, a world “of wars and conflicts on the bases of race, class, gender, religion, education, and politics” (Deena 5-6). “Literary analysts,” moreover, “often regard stylistic or formal elements as mere functional extensions of an aesthetic or narrative text’s thematic concerns,” concluding that “[b]reaking such traditional or canonical social contracts becomes integral to the liberating, revolutionary poetics of form engendered by African Atlantic narratology” (Russell 1). Caribbean writing or, what Russell calls “black narratology,” challenges these “seemingly ordained movement[s] from proverbial darkness to transcendent light, from unknowingness to certain knowledge, from formlessness to perfect form,” thus collapsing imperial endeavors that aim to provide structured, coordinated, and organized renderings of historical meaning, value, and supremacy. (2).

The term, “meta-archipelago,” is a watershed term coined by Antonio Benitez-Rojo to describe the Caribbean as an “island that proliferates endlessly”—a polyrhythmic island—which is not, he concludes, “an apocalyptic world; it is not a phallic world in pursuit of the vertical desires of ejaculation and castration” (9-10). The Caribbean is, rather, recalling Braithwaite, a “submarine” space of “cross-cultural relationships,” relationships that are malleable and flexible (66). Caribbean writing, then, aside from the reassessment, reconfiguration, and reformulation of its complicated history—vulnerable always to imperial appropriation and the guise of historical veracity—accepts as its task the complete dismantling of the “very logocentricity of these systems...” (Russell 3). In challenging imperial history at its core, “there is a concomitant commitment to decentering discursive hegemony—such as the idea of ‘a Single History,’” a concept, which may in fact be history’s greatest fiction. Caribbean writing, however, permeates such logocentricity, creating ruptures in which “the dimension of the unexplorable at the edge of where we wander, our eyes wide open” become viable ambitions that defy (66). This is perhaps the space in which illness might be deployed even more productively.

If we examine health and illness as two opposing systems, we see that illness, as a distortion of health, embodies a unique character that cannot be categorized, and placed within, strict and clear opposition. Illness, as a distortion of health, similar to the polyrhythmic Caribbean, sheds light on the constraints of imperial-based dichotomies that reinforce hierarchal and patriarchal binaries, and which favor inevitably the position of the superior—imperial History and systems, to be sure—over its opposing complement, the “other.” Illness, then, may serve two primary functions: to, firstly, oppose the uniformity of health, which, as we saw above, is defined as the orderly, ethical, and moral elements that are ascribed to imperial hegemony and, secondly, to articulate the disease of imperial harm.

Illness, similar to the polyrhythms of the Caribbean, distorts the linear formulations of the imagination and, consequently, produces a unique, polyrhythmic sensory perception, a perception

that destabilizes imperial rigidity and imperial design. Illness engenders, as the Caribbean engenders, a vocabulary that defies the restraints of imperial thinking, and thus its claims over History. The language of illness, just as in the polyrhythmic vocabulary of the Caribbean, resists imperial structures that are, by their very construction, predictable and formulaic, as both illness and the Caribbean fall outside, at times forcefully undermining, these constraints. How then might mental illness be reimagined within Caribbean contexts? I would argue that by working with Christopher's mental illness as depicted in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, we are able to subvert the dichotomy of health and illness, focus on how imperial legacies in the Caribbean embody historical disease, and imagine how illness is deployed as a trope of postcolonial resistance, voice and, ultimately, candid identity.

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Michelle Cliff was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1946. Her writing engages, among other topics related to identity, issues of history, revolution, and political upheaval. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, through her depictions of both the novel's protagonist, Clare Savage, and Christopher, Cliff focuses on the tensions between "the struggles of colonial cultures to define their culture, and individuals within these cultures struggling for an identity or sense of belonging" (umich.edu). The novel is rich in metaphor and explores the tensions between imperial hegemony and Caribbean resistance through its portrayals of Clare and Christopher, who react to imperial oppression with violence.<sup>3</sup> In the search for her identity, Clare rediscovers her roots in Jamaica after having migrated to the United States and to England, where she has been living the conventional exilic experience. She returns to, and immerses herself in, Jamaican history and

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<sup>3</sup> Here we recall Fanon's call for arm-struggle and violence in achieving African autonomy: "The naked truth of decolonisation evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists. That affirmed intention to place the last at the head of things, and to make them climb at a pace (too quickly, some say) the well-known steps which characterize an organized society, can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence" (1963: 37).



culture, eventually joining a revolutionary group that is determined to fight against neocolonial forces in the country. Their mission is to disrupt the filming of a movie about Jamaica's only female national hero, Nanny, an anti-colonial freedom fighter. Clare dies at the hands of military forces perched to suppress the rebellion.

We first meet Christopher in chapter two of *No Telephone to Heaven*. A yard worker in Mas' Charles's employ, Christopher speaks with Paul H., who asks him to help him bury the bodies of his mother, Miss Evelyn, his father, Charles, his sister, his "maid," Mavis, whose death Paul H. considers an "inconvenience," and the dog, all of whom have been murdered: "His [Mas' Charles'] throat was cut like the dog's throat was cut, and his penis was severed, so that it hung from his crotch as if on a thin string, dangling into the place between his open legs" (Cliff 26). Christopher, the perpetrator of these murders only a short while before, agrees to help Paul H., who is unaware that Christopher is the person who killed his family while he was away at a party, heavily intoxicated. Christopher murders Paul. H. shortly after, decapitating him.

Through a brief flashback, before Christopher murders Paul H.'s family and Paul H., we learn that Christopher had visited Mavis, the housecleaner, earlier that morning, asking for food and telling Mavis that he would soon wake Mas' Charles to speak with him. Before we witness the conversation between Christopher and Mas' Charles, Cliff shifts the narrative once again, to reveal a great deal of Christopher's history. The section emphasizes Christopher's relationship with his grandmother, a loving and nurturing relationship. But Christopher's life, as loved as he was by his grandmother, was not an easy one; he was stricken by immense poverty and suffering. We read, for instance, that:

The two of them had lived in a lickle shack in a shantytown near the Esso refinery on the outskirts of Kingston. A town of structures built by women and children ... Structures crowned with sheets of zinc, the places where the zinc rusted filled with cardboard or newspaper or left to gape ... Women and children jammed together with other women

and children, and a few old men, discarded elders ... This was the Dungle. Here was the dung-heap jungle where people squirmed across mountains of garbage (31-32)

Cliff explains that Christopher lived in the Dungle with his grandmother until he was eight; she died at this point, and he continued living in the Dungle for an additional two years. For two years, this child is homeless and living in squalor by himself. Years later, Christopher has a vision of his grandmother, in which she tells him that her spirit is not at rest, as she had not been buried in the culturally appropriate way. Naturally, Christopher feels compelled to heed the wishes of the only person who cared for him; he decides to find her body, and put her to rest.

Shifting in the narrative once again, we bear witness to Christopher's conversation with Mas' Charles from whom he has requested a small piece of land in which to bury his grandmother. The irony of course is that such a feat would have proven impossible, as Christopher is unaware of the location of her remains, and many years have passed since her death. Mas' Charles, angered when awakened by a drunken Christopher, rather than recognizing his trauma and acting in a compassionate way towards him, ridicules him for contemplating such an idea. After he is insulted and told to leave, Christopher, we read, "let go. A force passed through him. He had no past. He had no future. He was phosphorous. Light-bearing. He was light igniting the air around him [...] and his blade quivered with his ignited fury" (47). Cliff's use of the transcendence of time and the light in describing Christopher during his killings, characteristics we generally attribute to Christian salvation, asks us to question the author's use of language—transcendent, polyrhythmic language—in portraying the murders. It asks us also to question Christopher's rebellion against imperial-based Christian notions of redemption, as the Christian God in Cliff's novel is nothing short of a colonial tool of oppression and a way in which to further alienate Caribbean peoples from their own sense of identity, mystical traditions, and rituals. Cliff reveals, through Christopher's killing spree, how the Caribbean "suffers most uniquely from colonial exploitation, oppression, and marginalization," systematic and methodical

forms of hegemonic conquest and destruction (Deena 1). The “European’s entrance and presence in the Caribbean,” Deena writes, which “forced a massive and most cruel genocide of the natives” is at the root of Caribbean history, the *obdurate oaks* of its repressed identity (1). Though at its root, Caribbean history is not a passive or assimilated byproduct of colonial pressures; these pressures have not destroyed the polyrhythmic landscape of the Caribbean—paradoxically, the Caribbean strengthens—but one cannot ignore the cruelty, the disease, with which the island, with its origin and its history in the sea, has suffered, and continues to suffer under imperial presences. Christopher’s machete brings to light these truths, and his illness, we find, is having been infected by imperial disease.

We encounter Christopher again in chapter nine. By this point in the narrative, he has spent years wandering, having never been caught for the murders of Paul H. and his family, and he has slowly transformed into the town’s “watchman.” He wanders the streets, alone at night, having not spoken for years and, when he chooses to utter a sound, he howls. Later, in the final chapter of the novel, Christopher is hired by an Englishman and an American to play the role of the forest god Sassabonsam in a film, the same film that Clare and her fellow revolutionaries attempt to sabotage, an act that will eventually lead to, as I mentioned above, many of their deaths, including Clare’s. In one striking conversation between the filmmakers, awaiting Christopher, we become witness to the language of imperial illness, a vernacular of oppression that has long infected Caribbean sublimity:

Jamaicans will do anything for a buck ... Look around you ... the hotels ... the private resorts where you have to get an invite ... the reggae festivals for white kids ... Jesus! The cancer spas for rich people. Everyone from the hookers to the prime minister, babe. These people are used to selling themselves. I don’t think they know from revolution.

(202)

Shortly after, Christopher arrives and, treated poorly, he is told that his only job on the film is to “just sit in a tree and howl” (205). Christopher agrees. Cliff briefly details Clare’s group of revolutionaries arriving at the film’s location. The author then describes Christopher’s costume: “His human body covered in a suit of long red hair, fiery, thick. Lord Jesus he was hot. Sweat making the costume stick to his naked skin” (207). A short while after this troubling description, Christopher receives direction: “Howl! Howl! Remember, you’re not human” (207). The height of dehumanization in the final chapter of the novel is clearly evidenced by Christopher’s compliance with the director’s commands. However, I would argue, Christopher’s howls transcend imperial disease; his howls express resistance, bellows against the torment and the infection of imperial disease, bellows that resist the ravaging of his mind and the dulling of his spirit: “[...] the air of the valley was split with his huge wails. Clare imagined she could feel them through her belly, resting on the earth ... He became the focus” (207). As the ambush occurs, Christopher, we read, “fell, silent. Spraying across the bushes,” his final act of resistance the howls that covered the land before the bullets pierce his skin and the skin of the revolutionaries. What could be termed more oppressive than bullets entering into the skin of the innocent, bullets, phallic, linear, circumscribed, unyielding, bullets—the disease of oppressive imperial hegemonies—that seek only to penetrate the polyrhythmic health of Caribbean peoples, principles, and histories?

To read Christopher’s mental illness as symptomatic of imperial oppression is to acknowledge the basis on which his descent into madness originated, the cause of his infection. More significant than Christopher himself is the utility of his mental illness as an important literary trope, an illness that allows us to expose the false dichotomy between supposed imperial health and the illness of “otherness,” namely, Caribbean otherness. Christopher, serving both functions that I have highlighted above, opposes, firstly, the uniformity of imperialism that has

ravaged his mental health and, secondly, his mental illness—and his killings—give voice to the underlying cause of his infection, namely, imperial legacies that have diseased his mind.

Through Christopher's mental illness, Cliff takes to task the social, political, and economic implications of imperial impacts on, and presences in, the Caribbean. His mental illness allows us to scrutinize the patriarchal and colonizing pressures that surround him, which render him invisible because he is black and poor. His story is necessarily told within a larger context of a Jamaican society that is ravaged by the colonial legacies of Anglo-European supremacy. He is Fanon's colonized subject. Thus, Christopher's very presence in the novel helps to shed light on what it means to be under the control of a foreign and alien power, and how this power is at the heart of imperial illness. Christopher, then, perhaps even more so than Clare, is an able articulation of the madness of imperial hegemony, and his howls speak to mental illness as a site for Caribbean resistance, such a capable expression of resistance, as it transcends, thereby going against, the language of imperialism, the disease of codified suppression.

By the novel's end, Coleman writes, "he [Christopher] is as close as a human can get to not being human anymore," as he has, by this point, retreated into the jungle and has not spoken for some time (103). His voicelessness, akin to his loss of Jamaican identity, is the result of, among other traumas, having murdered his employer, his family, their housecleaner, and their dog. The murders, all of which are committed with the use of a machete, are the result of the sort of imperial harms that devastate the native peoples of Jamaica and, overall, the Caribbean region. The machete itself, as I imagine it, is an anthropomorphic tool of polyrhythmic opposition and defiance, liberation, and selfhood, a machete that has breached the walls of the imperial city of health, and has infected this health with the poison of its own making, namely, hegemonic abuses, imperial authority, and its insatiable appetite to oppress, to demean, to disgrace.

Christopher's psychosis is not, as one might have it, then, inexplicable, nor is it without the symptomatic manifestation of, imperial illness. Cliff makes use of Christopher's mental

illness as a device to frame these inheritances. However, the author neither pathologizes colonized subjects, nor does she victimize them; rather, Cliff employs Christopher's madness to uncover imperial presences and abuses. Cliff's use of madness is, as a result, a vibrant literary instrument that portrays profound counterhegemonic—polyrhythmic—resistance against longstanding colonial impacts. In other words, Christopher's mental illness in *No Telephone to Heaven* embodies a symbolic return to pre-colonial individualism (even if such is only a romanticized notion) and, by extension, a selfhood—a chaotic, polyrhythmic, and fluid selfhood—marked by genuine identity, one that strives to rid from its region—to cure it of—the malignant infection of imperial structures and actions.

Just as Christopher's past saturates the present, Cliff illustrates through Christopher that the past, though often hidden from the colonized, is undeniably present. The author fosters this poetic, tragic, and fleeting hybridity in Christopher, as she conflates, for instance, the wilderness of the Dungle and the embodiment of his Jamaican homeland. In light of this, Christopher's mental illness and his decimated body typify the reality behind imperial degradation and abuse. The murder scene is not only necessary in articulating Caribbean strength and rebellion, but also a poetic manifesto of Caribbean retribution: the British crown, and not the enslaved African, is brought to its knees. Thus, Christopher's killing spree is an act of self-governance, motivated by imperial impulses and, consequently, the decay of his generation and those before him: symptoms of a broader cultural paradox in postcolonial Jamaica. Christopher is a product of social, cultural, and political repression. He embodies true "Caribbeanness"—a constituent part, rather than an imperial whole, stained by the denial of land and freedom and, simultaneously, a burgeoning of polyrhythmic spirit. His madness is, it turns out, a secondary concern; the blade against his oppressors, the act of "sever[ing] their ties to this life [to] find their way to the next," is Cliff's articulation of justice (48). Christopher kills imperial ridicule, a role central to his significance, and the interpretations we bring to him must follow suit. The murders are polyrhythmic interludes,

then: the irreconcilable space between the colonizer and the colonized, the master and the enslaved, land and landlessness, fiction and reality, history and legitimacy. For true legitimacy, if indeed we are to operate within imperial language, lies outside hegemonic claims and justifications.

Thwarted by the abuse he has long endured, Christopher reminds us of the complicated passage from enslavement to a country that skirts the beginnings of cultural, political, and economic autonomy. Cliff aptly depicts the anxieties of the nation by revealing through Christopher's history of poverty the latent and openly hostile reactions of a pained native, who wishes to place his grandmother in the very earth that he will never be able to claim as his own:

When he was eight, Christopher's grandmother died. What she thought was a touch of dropsy was in fact something else, and her belly swell up and she gone. Him grandmother dead when him eight but him stay on in de shack. De government men tek her body away fe bury dem say and leave dere, never once asking if him have smaddy fe care fe him. (40)

Cliff identifies here the falsehood of freedom when in the clutches of a dysfunctional and harmful imperial reality. The murder motif in the novel is, thus, a cogent one: it allows Cliff to voice her resistance to imperial control. In other words, the author does not offer a loose meditation on a difficult period in Jamaican history; though Christopher is clearly frail and feeble, Cliff portrays through his mental illness a healthy uncomplicatedness. But however uncomplicated Christopher may be, both before and after the murders, his freedom can never come, as he finds, as we find, that he is not, nor has he ever been, a participant in his own existence, or visible in his own nation: People he worked for spoke to him only when they wanted something done, when they complained that he had not scythed the grass close enough, when they told him he drank his tin of tea too slowly. The bus conductors asked only for his fare. The shopkeepers only sought payment ... The men at the gate collecting for the sound system only wanted

his ticket. The men at the political rallies he wandered into now and then told him where to fix his *x* and that they would change his life. (44)

Christopher's silence and his howls, the author's "powerfully evocative prose-poetic form that captures in stark, visceral terms the socioeconomic, political, historical, and cultural challenges that frame contemporary Jamaica," and the novel's nonlinear and cyclical structure, facilitates a deeply embedded past/present dichotomy that pervades Christopher's departure from, and return to, his African Atlantic identity, a return to health (Russell 81). Though wrought with ineffable pain, Christopher is not mentally ill, at least not in imperial terms. The real illness is found in, as I have argued, the disease that imperialism alone is able to inflict, namely, the deeply entrenched presence of its enduring legacy in the Caribbean region, and among Caribbean peoples seeking unencumbered identity.

Christopher's sanity, a recurrent struggle for him, places into context the absence of Jamaican, and by extension, African Atlantic identity, which has been destroyed by imperial systems that threaten to reify its structures of dominance over the region. His childhood in Jamaica is inextricably linked to his place in the Dungle, as a crew films a howling "watchman" in the fruit tree, and as Clare "lay[s] in preparation for their act, hidden by dark and green, separate, silent—as silent as the Maroons" (211). Through Christopher's mental illness, Cliff fashions a meaningful subversion to imperial dictate, "bring[ing] disorder to conventional literary renditions of the nation, history, subjectivity, and discourse itself" (Russell 82). Christopher's howls, moreover, at the novel's end are not representative of a return from insanity. His howls are, on the contrary, both articulations of terror, sadness, and a restless grandmother—and perhaps even Jamaica—who is unable to find peace in a postcolonial world, and an expression of resistance to imperial degradation. Christopher's mind does not function properly in his Jamaican homeland, as such a homeland is suffering tremendous imperial infection. Thus, Christopher's ultimate representation, because he regains his voice, through his howls and through his death,



may indeed be reclamation: his request for land, however small the piece of land he requests, brings to mind the larger concern of the importance of land in a postcolonial world.

The murders of Paul H., his family, Mavis, and the dog, is a just and logical conclusion to Christopher's oppression, his physical and spiritual illness. The pattern of neglect and garbage (quite literally), the inaccessibility to education (a British, postcolonial curriculum, even), the blended image of Lickle Jesus, the untimely death of his grandmother, and the denial of a plot of land smaller in size than the very shack in which he and his grandmother lived, leads to a portrait of postcolonial existence, with a particular emphasis on the poorest of peoples. To recognize Christopher's mental illness as the result of imperial impacts is to accurately identify his acts, and his entire state of being, as the terrifying product of colonial hegemony. Christopher, ostensibly cruel, but fundamentally innocent, is, then, Cliff's model of postcolonial consequence. He is nothing short of the engineered victim of international disparagement and neglect. Christopher is the Jamaican homeland stripped of its freedom and identity:

Children with swirls of whiteringworm interrupting their brown skin, raised lines moving outward into circles, exploding here and there, spreading. Inside these same children worms attached themselves with hooks, thin pale ribbons sending segments of themselves outside the child, to be found squirming in the cracked white chamberpots, where the dogs drank, or among the gray acacia shrubs, where the children squatted ... The bones of [the] children, their legs and arms, bent into bows, and could not grow easily. (32)

Cliff chronicles, as I mentioned above, Christopher's childhood. Such an account in which "children ... watched after their mothers' other babies while the women walked the city looking for food or begging for work" is not done without specific maneuvering. Christopher's desire for land, however, beyond the suffering we witness, draws attention to the implications of the unattainability of land, and the unsympathetic powers that be. Cliff confronts historical invisibility; she calls attention to the disease of historical revisionism signaled by the plan to

pervert Nanny's history, and she does so vividly, through Christopher's mental illness. It is important to maintain, however, that the past in Christopher does not denote erasure, nor does it indicate remedy. The past, in Christopher, is an evolving, strengthening, and motivating instrument, a sharpened, rusty plow to the ruinate—a cultivator of the land savaged by the pretenses of British control; he threatens entrenched imperial structures, its persistent blades, retracting after reaching a certain length, much like the children's backs in the Dungle and among the ruinate. Imperial presences in the Caribbean weaponize Christopher, as do they obliterate—and simultaneously strengthen—his mind; a brutalized Jamaican nation becomes the wielding of his bloodstained machete, and his mental illness is the articulation of this wielding. Christopher upsets the fixed preoccupations of an imperial-centered world; his madness is undeniable, certainly, but his madness is the sort of madness that we can only imagine belongs in a city of health, so long as this city places into context the disease of imperial hegemony.

Cliff invites the reader, through Christopher's madness, his silence, and his howls to remain, perhaps unexpectedly, hopeful: "his bellows carrying into the darkness of the country" (207). I do not believe, as Coleman claims, that Christopher "is as close as a human can get to not being human anymore" when he begins to howl. Christopher is, in fact, his most human, his healthiest, the moment he breaks his silence, as in doing so, we hear Jamaica breaking its silence, crying resistance, as the military helicopters kill Clare and her fellow revolutionaries in the very jungle that he has occupied for years, the jungle of his mind, perhaps, which articulates the disease of imperial silencing and legacies that continue to infect the polyrhythmic Caribbean.

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