Locating the Other/Self: Memory and Place in Michelle Cliffs *Abeng*

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> I must make myself visible against my habitat. But there exists a certain danger in peeling back. The diamondback without her mottled skin loses a level of defense.[1]

To make something visible means to differentiate it from its surroundings and to highlight its characteristics so that it stands out against its background. In this poem, significantly named "Passing", the lyric speaker feels the necessity to make herself visible and to stand out against the habitat, i.e. the norms and values that prevail in society.[2] To claim visibility against the imposed standards of the dominant society, to claim a place for oneself and to inscribe one's own story into it can be dangerous as well, and consequently the poem's speaker notes that "the diamondback without her mottled skin loses a level of defense" (P, 3). The skin's camouflage provides protection whereas visibility means exposure and vulnerability. Passing, blending in might thus be a less dangerous option, yet it requires denial and suppression of those parts of oneself that are different from one's 'habitat'. The lyric speaker admits:

> To this day camouflage terrorizes me.
> The pattern of skin which makes a being invisible
> against its habitat.
> And - yes - this camouflage exists for its protection.
> I am not what I seem to be. (P, 3)

Camouflage is both, protection and destruction - "I am not what I seem to be". Moreover, it is part of a colonizing mechanism that upholds a binary,

1 This excerpt is taken from the prose poem "Passing" by Michelle Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1980), 3-7, 3. Further references to this poem will be included in the text (abbreviated as 'P').

2 The poem's title alludes to a whole tradition of (African) American writing, the most obvious text being Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). Thus, drawing on an American literary tradition and its texts, the poem takes part in an international discourse about issues like slavery, racism, and their consequences. Cf. also Suzanne Bost, "Fluidity without Postmodernism: Michelle Cliff and the Tragic Mulatta' Tradition", *African American Review* 32.4 (Winter 1998), 673-89, who discusses the use of the motif of passing and the figure of the "tragic mulatta" in Cliff's work. Bost concludes that Cliff uses the 'tragic mulatta' to force us "to rethink the history of cultural domination" since u[t]he foreignness within problematizes the attempt to exclude 'foreigners'" (686).

hierarchical categorization of the world into same and other and hence denies heterogeneity and diversity by imposing a 'standard', a sameness or 'identity' that is to be considered superior.[3] To profit from this system, one has to pass and to be indistinguishable from one's habitat, to lead a "ghostlife" (P, 5) in the words of the lyric self as "[p]assing demands quiet. And from that quiet - silence" (P, 6). In turn, to stand out means the loss of protection and the privileges that come with passing. Nevertheless, the lyric self insists "I must make myself visible" in order to disrupt the silence and the denial that surround a belonging to the standard, i.e. an enforced 'sameness'.

"I must make myself visible" - this statement, highlighted by alliteration, foregrounds one of the central concerns in Michelle Cliff's work. Cliff writes against a neat categorization of the world into binary oppositions which upholds a standard - the self - and regards all deviations from it - the other - as inferior. Descending from both slave-owners and slaves, Cliff nevertheless grew up in an environment that favored the 'light side' over the 'dark side', i.e. she continuously received "the message of anglocentrism, of white supremacy", which she internalized thoroughly.[4] Consequently, all traces of 'the other' were to be eliminated and denied, silenced and made invisible, regardless of the connections and interweavings with what was considered the (true) self.[5] Camouflage - passing - required to be 'the same' and to hide any 'otherness'. One important part of the camouflage was memory, the construction of a family history that corresponded to the self-constructed identity of belonging to society's light side. Again, silence and denial played important parts in this one-sided construction of (family) history.

It is against this silence and silencing that Michelle Cliff writes, her "purpose as a writer of the Afro-Caribbean - Indian (Arawak and Carib), African, European - experience and heritage, and western experience and education, has been to reject speechlessness" and to make visible that which

3 The notion of camouflage echoes Homi Bhabha's exploration of the concept of 'mimicry', which constructs the colonial other as "a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite" (86) and ultimately as "the same but not white" (89), so that the colonized other emerges as a "'partial' presence", who is in a sense "both 'incomplete' and 'virtual'" (86), always characterized by a lack: "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 85-92.

4 Cliff, "Preface: A Journey into Speech", *The Land of Look Behind* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1985), 11-17, 13.

5 For (auto)biographical information on Cliff and her family, cf. for example Cliff's "A Journey Into Speech"; her essay "Caliban's Daughter: The Tempest and the Teapot", *Frontiers* 12.2 (1991), 36-51; and the interview with her conducted by Judith Raiskin, "The Art of History: an Interview with Michelle Cliff", *The Kenyon Review* 15.1 (Winter 1993), 57-71.

has been denied existence and meaning.[6] Cliff has extended this personal project of tracing the invisible and the suppressed to include (Caribbean) society at large. As many publications on Cliff's work show, one of her main interests has been the areas of history and historiography and their function as important mechanisms of (neo)colonial forces at play in the Caribbean and elsewhere.[7] As official histories have frequently been constructed in ways that ignore the participation and sometimes even the presence of those who are colonized ('the other'), Cliff explores functions and mechanisms of (western) historiography and evokes alternative histories in her writings. One strategy that is important in this reconsideration of official history is the tracing of alternative accounts of the past, such as personal memories, oral storytelling and the like. Moreover, closely connected to such a re-making and re-telling of the past are the constructions of place that become visible in Cliff's writings. As official histories tend to ignore the voices and viewpoints of those dominated, official constructions and descriptions of (colonized) space likewise disregard the presence of people other than the colonizer.[8]

In the following I will explore the connections between the constructions of history, memory, and place that become visible in Cliff's work and show that she writes against a strict separation of what is commonly posited as 'self and 'other'. The intricate interrelations between self and other, the continuity between these constructed oppositions of what 'belongs' and that which does not, becomes most apparent in Cliff's spatial constructions, which are always closely intertwined with their histories and the memories of their inhabitants. The author emphasizes spatial diversity and shows places to be constructed by different voices, stories, and histories. In her writings, places - especially the

6 Cliff, "Caliban's Daughter", 40.

7 Analyses of Cliff's project of rewriting history can be found, for instance, in Noraida Agosto, *Michelle Cliff's Novels: Piecing the Tapestry of Memory and History* (New York: Lang, 1999); Barbara Edlmair, *Rewriting History: Alternative Versions of the Caribbean Past in Michelle Cliff, Rosario Ferré, Jamaica Kincaid and Daniel Maximin* (Wien: Braumüller, 1999); and Belinda Edmondson, "Race, Privilege, and the Politics of (Re)Writing History: An Analysis of the Novels of Michelle Cliff", *Callaloo* 16.1 (1993), 180-191.

8 Cf. for example the seminal text by Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992) or her "Transculturation and Autoethnography: Peru, 1615/1980" in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Ibsen (eds.), *Colonial Discourse/ Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 24-46. Pratt shows that place descriptions by European invaders frequently depicted the landscape as empty and uninhabited. This 'absence' of any indigenous people was taken as a justification for the often brutal and violent colonization. The official histories that describe the colonization of these places undoubtedly also try to erase any traces of indigenous peoples and their claim to the land.

Caribbean - emerge as historical witnesses speaking of diversity, rather than sameness. Cliff destroys the camouflage of colonized space and makes its various layers and its heterogeneity visible. The silenced histories of 'the other', the colonized, emerge as a vital part of colonized space. In this way, Cliffs places float halfway between official history and individual memory - the colonizer's depiction of Jamaica and its past grapples with the colonized people's memories and perceptions. These different voices turn out to be interconnected rather than sharply separated. Hence, Cliff's multidimensional spatial constructions become what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire,* sites of memory.[9]

In my discussion, I will focus on the construction of one specific location in Cliffs first novel *Abeng* (1984), which is exemplary for her use and treatment of space.[10] Within the novel, the author depicts a variety of places and the ways in which the various characters, most importantly the main character Clare Savage, locate themselves in these places geographically, historically, and socially.[11] The novel constructs places as 'layered', multi-faceted, and hybrid, and the way in which these places are constructed does not allow for camouflage - they are shown to be places in which the dominant culture ('same') and its supposed 'other' cannot be neatly separated but are intricately intertwined. 'Passing' is made impossible in the sense that, no matter how one disguises oneself, one will always stand out against some aspect of the place - in other words, Cliffs places are not homogeneous bearers of just one discourse, one history or background (e.g. that of the colonizer) but they are heterogeneous, invested with different memories, contested histories.

9 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*" in Geneviève Fabre, Robert O'Meally (eds.), *Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 284-300. Cf. Noraida Agosto, who points to Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* as central to Cliffs project of rewriting (Caribbean) history. According to Agosto, Cliff engages in "an archaeology of 'sites of memory'", revising "the official accounts of the 'discovery* and colonization of the 'New World'" (*Michelle Cliff's Novels*, 5). In the following I will take up this idea of "an archaeology of 'sites of memory'" and extend its importance to the geographic places found in *Abeng,* Thus, I will go beyond the temporal aspects of Agosto's discussion and connect it to the dimension of space and its construction to be found in Cliffs work.

10 Michelle Cliff, *Abeng*. [1984]. (New York: Plume Books, 1995). Further references will be included in the text (abbreviated as 'A').

11 Other places in the novel that are significant for the construction of history, memory, and self are for example Clare's school, St. Catherine's School for Girls, her grandmother Miss Mattie's place in the bush, and the two places that belong to Mrs. Beatrice Phillips, her townhouse and her weekend house in St. Ann's Bay, where Clare is sent at the end of the novel as a punishment for stepping "out of line" (A, 149f).

Therefore, Jamaica is full of traces that speak of alternative memories and alternative ways of recording history as the novel's very first sentences show: "The island rose and sank. Twice. During periods in which history was recorded by indentations on rock and shell" (A, 3). Barbara Edlmair has observed that "the narrative makes a point of rejecting the traditional vision of Columbus' arrival as the starting point for Caribbean history" and "announces its intention of using historical sources, such as rocks and shells, rather than the traditional documents" in the reconstruction of the island's past.[12] Consequently, its places are created through a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. Hence, we always have 'other' voices and their memories entangled with our own so that the opposition of 'self and 'other' does not apply. 'Otherness' is always part of oneself just as other places and their histories are always part of the seifs own space.

The novel's title, *Abeng*, signifies what Françoise Lionnet calls the 'double-voiced' and 'duplicitous' nature of the novel, i.e. its evocation of an opposition that cannot be definitely solved.[13] "Abeng", the author explains in the book's preface, is a conch shell with which the slaves were called to work in the canefields. However, it was also used by rebellious ex-slaves, the Maroon armies, to communicate among each other. Hence, the abeng signifies the system of slavery as well as resistance against it. In this way, it is a "culturally polysémie object", a means of communication with which several contradictory messages can be revealed at the same time.[14] In this way, the title is representative of the whole novel: a single, definite, and unambiguous view on Jamaica, its history, its places, and its people is made impossible.

12 Edlmair, *Rewriting History*, 33. Cf. Agosto, who highlights the importance of people's 'bones' as historic documents in this context (*Michelle Cliff's Novels*, 38).

13 Françoise Lionnet, "Of Mangoes and Maroons: Language, History, and the Multicultural Subject of Michelle Cliffs *Abeng*" in Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson (eds.), *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 321-345, 323.

14 Lionnet, "Of Mangoes and Maroons", 323. Lionnet transfers this idea of double communication to the novel as a whole, which speaks to different readers in different languages. According to Lionnet, for every reader the communication with the novel is accompanied by the reception of 'noise' alongside the message that we think the text is sending us. For instance, the use of patois might be 'noise' to those readers who do not understand it, disrupting the 'clear' message given in 'Standard' English. Yet, the book contains a glossary, with which we are enabled to 'decipher' this noise. In this way, the novel is 'double-voiced' and disrupts every attempt of a single-voiced, straight communication. Moreover, Cliff shows "how authority is a construction of language" (329) and within her narration, "the various cultural strands that make up Creole culture" become visible.

Abeng communicates with its readers in a variety of voices and languages and from a variety of viewpoints, creating a fragmented and contradictory space, which can be read in multiple ways.[15]

Similar to the abeng, the character Clare Savage personifies these multiple discourses since she embodies the different heritages, traditions, and histories of her father's and mother's families. Her name can also be read in contradictory ways as a sign of the colonizer as well as the colonized other. While Clare's father thinks he has named his daughter after Cambridge's Clare College, the epitome of British culture and education, which one of his ancestors attended, the novel reveals that Clare's true namesake is one of her mother's people, the country girl Clarinda. Clary, as she is called, is one of Kitty's people, a patois-speaking, poor country girl, who accompanied the four-year-old Kitty through the bush to the next hospital and took great care that she was treated and healed. The surname "Savage" functions similarly. It seems to be the mark of the colonizer's 'other', the uncivilized and supposedly barbaric country people. However, it is the name that Clare's paternal ancestors bear, ancestors who are proud to be descended from the British invader. Ironically, the characterization as 'savage' is reversed here. In yet another reading, however, the surname is "intended to invoke the wildness which has been bleached from her skin - understanding that my use of the word *wildness* is ironic, mocking the master's meaning, evoking pre-colonial values, which are empowering and essential to survival, and wholeness."[16] In this reading a 'savage' is untamed and uncolonized, someone who has retained those values and characteristics (of self-assertion, resistance etc.) that the colonizer has tried to wipe out. As her name shows, Clare Savage is a signifier for numerous conflicting discourses. Moreover, a range of places, evoked by her name, intersects in and through her person, from the 'motherland' and its educational institutions to Jamaica's countryside and its deep bush, which is devoid of any traces of the colonizer.[17]

15 This opposition and fragmentation is taken up in the poem that prefaces the novel, a poem by the Jamaican writer Basil McFarlane. The poem insists on the intertwinement of various oppositions (birth-death, light-dark, past-future) and shows the necessity of being in more than just one place (namely in one's world and out of it), a necessity that allows for a double or multiple discourse, a communication as it is symbolized in the abeng.

16 Cliff, "Caliban's Daughter", 44f.

17 In *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), which can be considered *Abeng*"s sequel, these spatial intersections become more visible as Clare travels in a kind of reverse middle passage to different places in Europe, America, and, finally, back to the Caribbean.

The whole Savage family is characterized by this intersection and opposition of various places. The family is 'split' by a basic opposition between the father Boy, proud to be descended from the British colonizers, and the mother Kitty, among whose ancestors are slaves and Jamaica's indigenous people. This split, the separation along the lines of light and dark, colonizer and colonized, slave-owners and slaves, is expressed in the family's movement between different places:

> [T]he family traveled between St. Elizabeth and Kingston, bringing back to town things from country, and bringing to country things from town. These two distinct places created the background for the whole of their existence. And the places reflected the separate needs and desires of the two parents. It seemed to Clare that Kitty came alive only in the bush, while Boy armed himself against it, carrying newspapers and books and liquor, and a Swiss watch to mark off the time. Town was evil, Kitty held - people taken from country couldn't survive there. The tin-and-cloth shanties were proof of this. (A, 49)

Clare's being is influenced by these two so different parents - moreover, she is travelling (literally and metaphorically) between the places her parents adhere to: "The daughters' lives were bound, as are the lives of most children, by the personalities of their parents, and the events of their lives, *the way the car took* as they drove between country and town, were dictated by the needs and desires of these two people" (A, 49, emphasis mine). The Savage family constructs the world into binary oppositions and their spatial movements between country and town, between the father's places and those which the mother prefers reinforce an opposition between the colonizer, the self, and the colonized, the other.

Clare's father especially tries to uphold such an absolute opposition. This becomes obvious not only in his spatial preferences and his attempts to restrict his family's movements to those places that are safely colonized but also in the way he views and constructs specific places.[18] A striking case in point is the former Savage plantation at Runaway Bay, a place that is very significant for the family. This plantation used to belong to Boy's great-grandfather James Edward Constable Savage, a puisne judge from Great Britain, but subsequent

18 When Clare accidentally shoots her grandmother's bull in an unsuccessful attempt to assert a position of power, she is severely punished. In handling and using a weapon, she transgresses the strict confinements which restrict her as a girl, and thus, Boy literally puts her into her place. Significantly, Clare's punishment consists in a displacement as her father makes her stay with Mrs. Beatrice Phillips, an elderly and racist lady whose norms and values go back to the times of slavery.

family generations lost it due to financial troubles. Hence, while the plantation serves as a symbol of the colonizers, their power, and their grandeur, it is also a sign of a failure, as the family has lost this property. For Boy, though, it is still an embodiment of a family tradition, the cornerstones of which are British culture and education.

When Boy and his daughter Clare drive there (in 1958), the former plantation is being turned into American vacation homes. British colonialism, symbolized by elm trees with which Judge Savage marked his property and which he imported from Sussex, Britain, has been replaced by American neo-colonialism for the space is remodeled by an American company in order to attract affluent (American) buyers. Significantly, the elm trees have died, as they were not able to cope with the Jamaican climate. Instead the land has been marked with a large sign saying "PARADISE PLANTATION" (A, 24), which indicates the replacement of British colonial rule by that of American capitalism. This change of power is accompanied by a change in the place's narrative construction. While "plantation" still evokes British colonial rule and its system of slavery, the adding of "paradise" to the name is not only an insult to the former slaves but also a blunt ignorance of their gruesome fates on the plantation - not for nothing is this location called "Runaway Bay", a name which speaks of the numerous desperate attempts to escape the horrible fate of slavery. Moreover, as the Judge's former great house is run down, it is to be renovated "to convince prospective clients they could buy into the past. Capture history in their summer homes" (A, 24). The history of the colonized people, their enslavement, exploitation, and displacement is erased in the renovation of the place. In a process that Noraida Agosto calls the "commodification of the history of slavery" the slaves' fate is replaced by a vision of the colonizer's grandeur and wealth, captured in the luxury of a summer home.[19] The slaves' numerous viewpoints and voices, which are part of this place, are ignored and the plantation and its history are reconstructed in order to fit the romantic view of the 'good old days'. In a staging of the past, colonialism's hierarchic order is accordingly re-inscribed on the place: "One larger-than-life white dummy was dressed like an overseer, with a cat-o'-nine tails in one plaster fist" and "Black Jamaicans, also in period costume - but alive, not replicas - were paid to stand around with machetes and hoes" (A, 37).

19 Agosto, *Michelle Cliff's Novels*, 32.

This opposition between the romantic surface and what lies beneath comes up repeatedly during Clare and Boy's visit to this place. When father and daughter enter the house, we see it through their eyes:

> Inside the house was dark, and Mr. Savage went back to the car to get a flashlight. His beam scanned the walls and Clare could make out scenes on paper which once had been colored bright red against a white background, now faded pale and darkened by an accumulation of dust. She went closer, and detected that this was a picture - a pattern made of the same picture - of people in a park in a city somewhere in Europe. The women wore long dresses and strolled with their thin-handled parasols unfurled to protect them from the sun. The dresses and parasols were red, the women white. White children played across the paper, and red dogs jumped at sticks. The scene was repeated again and again across the wall. [...] The pattern on the wallpaper was only a small glimpse of the background against which this part of her family had once existed. [...] The danger to Clare was that the background could slide so easily into the foreground. (A, 24f.)

In this entry scene, Clare views the house's inside through the eyes of her father and "literally in the light of his flashlight" as Barbara Edlmair points out.[20] Through time, the images on the wallpaper have faded and are now partly covered by dust, an erosion which is reminiscent of the fading of memory. Yet, as Clare moves closer to those images and in a sense emancipates herself from her father's flashlight as much as possible, she can detect a pattern.[21] Significantly enough, this pattern shows people in a park spending their leisure time in a European city. Instead of an island scene, a reality or rather an image of reality is inscribed into the wall that is far away from the realities of Jamaica. Moreover, we have a pattern that consists of the colours red and white. Knowing that Kitty and her family consider themselves to be 'red' people, people descending from African slaves and indigenous people, adds a lot of significance to this pattern. The women, who stroll

20 Edlmair, *Rewriting History*, 41.

21 The wallpaper pattern, in which both the foreground and the background move, echoes Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and its moving wallpaper pattern of trapped women. While in the short story the women from the paper cross into the protagonist's life, in *Abeng* Clare "began to contuse the ladies on the paper with the women in her past" (A, 33). In both cases, a strict separation of the (fictional) images of the wallpaper and the reality of the protagonist is undermined. However, whereas in "The Yellow Wallpaper" the protagonist is able to "read" the pattern against the dominant discourse, Clare - at least in this scene - is not able to emancipate herself from her father's reading of the wall as mere decoration. I am grateful to Monika Gomille for pointing out this connection to me.

leisurely through a European park scene, are white, whereas the dresses and the parasols - their decoration and protection - are red. Figuratively, this can be read as signifying the relation between the 'white' slaveholders and the 'red' slaves, a relation in which the whites pursue leisure activities while the slaves work to provide the necessary material resources. Another part of this wallpaper pattern merely echoes this inequality: while the white children play, the red dogs jump at sticks - an image of the dehumanized slaves who have to obey their masters' wishes.

Such a reading, however, eludes Clare; she is not able to decode the images in this way. Besides, time and dust have made the pattern fade and historic awareness for the island's complicated history is not what Boy has taught his daughter - neither has she learned that in school. To Clare, the pattern is merely decorative. The reader, however, whether or not she or he is familiar with Jamaican history, is guided to read the multiple messages hidden in the walls. Like the abeng, which is a sign for both the system of slavery as well as resistance against it, the place communicates multiple messages to those who can read the signs properly.[22] The narrator comments that what the wallpaper superficially shows - the leisurely strolling women in the European park landscape - is but a small glimpse of Clare's background. There is another story that is important, the history of the slaves, which is completely left out. As the narrator points out, the 'white' background pattern of the wallpaper slides too easily into the foreground and covers the red pattern, the story of the red people, whose voices remain unheard in this place.

The juxtaposition of Boy's reading of the place, which he imposes on his daughter, and an alternative one, which is evoked by the narrator, is perpetuated. Referring to the novel in its entirety, Antonia MacDonald-Smythe maintains that "[f]or every tale of conquest that Boy narrates, there exists a postscript of the constant subversive presence of resistors to parody his imperial text".[23] Within the framework of my analysis this means that in every place that Boy uses to construct a version of himself and his history another

22 To adopt Françoise Lionnet's idea that in *Abeng* every communication is accompanied by "noise" since the recipient will never be able to decode a given message completely, one could say that in the attempt of reading the novel's places, the reader likewise has to deal with such "noise". In the case of deciphering a place, this noise literally takes up the form of litter or debris since signs that cannot be read and understood are - if at all - perceived to be "out of place".

23 Antonia MacDonald-Smythe, *Making Homes in the West/Indies: Constructions of Subjectivity in the Writings of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2001), 51.

history is inscribed. Thus, when Clare and her father move outside the house, Boy keeps pointing out the family's (former) grandeur and power while the narrator continues to read the place against Boy's version. What appears to be debris at first glance becomes meaningful in the narrator's reading:

> And so father and daughter walked through what was once a great house, and they came out into the backyard, where the only signs of a former life were the foundation stones of some of the outbuildings, and faint gullies marking the earth where others had been. These buildings out back, only a few yards from the great house, had once contained molasses and rum and slaves - the points of conjunction of the system known as the Triangle Trade. They contained these things and they contained the paraphernalia of day-to-day existence on a sugar plantation. [...] The traces in the earth which Clare could now see indicated where the slave cabins had been. Little more than huts, really, twenty to twenty-five feet long and twelve feet wide, made of wattle and plaster, with dirt floors and palm-thatched roofs. Inside, the ceiling was low - usually brushing the forehead, so the inhabitants, if they were any height at all, had to walk stooped forward. As they stooped to hoe; stooped to stir. There were no windows in any of these huts. [...] From the backyard, in which she now stood, noting the existence of the foundation stones and the gullies in the earth, but not knowing the former life they represented, Clare could see in the distance long funnels of smoke and an occasional tongue of flame. The Paradise Plantation was burning the cane-fields to clear the land and begin construction of the vacation homes. (A, 25-27)

To anyone familiar with Jamaica's history, it is not difficult to 'read' the surroundings of the great house. The signs of slavery and its humiliating and degrading treatment of human beings are clearly and quite literally written into the ground. To Clare, though, they remain hidden. She does not know about the existence of slave cabins, let alone their interior architecture. Her father leaves her in the dark about this part of the family's heritage. She cannot connect the grandeur and wealth of the "great house" to the existence of an exploitative system of unpaid slave labour. And even more significantly, at the end of this scene, she notes the burning of the canefields but - again - does not see its connection to the place's history. This burning echoes another burning that took place on the land. On the brink of the slaves' emancipation, Judge Savage burned 'his' slaves in a fit of rage to prevent their freedom. Now, the burning 'clears' the land of every sign of former slave labor - history as it was etched into the ground is erased to be replaced by a version that suits the dominant discourse. The great house will be renovated and refurnished with 'imitated' furniture ironically made in America while the

canefield, once a symbol of slave labour, is turned into a vacation place. Carefully, a new history is inscribed on the land.

Despite this erasure of an alternative version of history, the place of the former plantation is still shown to be a contested one. As concrete signs and documents of the past are being destroyed, oral narratives are revalued as a source of historic knowledge. The narrator interrupts Clare and Boy's view of the place and comments on what they see. Long passages are inserted, in which the narrator has us look back into the past and she literally unearths what has been hidden in the ground. To the reader, the signs in the ground and on the wall do not remain empty or meaningless. They become testimonies to alternative, other memories of this place. And just as Boy Savage fills the house with life for his daughter, the narrator fills the place with (a different) life for us. Hence, we have place descriptions that grapple with and oppose each other and the plantation emerges as a contested space:

> [Clare] licked her finger and touched it to the wall, then tasted - it was salt. "You know, your great-great-grandfather imported all his furnishings from abroad. Settees and tables. Bric-a-brac. Crystal. China. From England and Ireland mostly. Staffordshire, Wedgwood. Waterford. Royal Doulton. Sometimes he brought things out from France and Switzerland. I think this wallpaper must have come from France and the chairs from Switzerland. The rugs came originally from Persia. Fine, fine oriental carpets." Boy Savage was describing, filling in the room for his daughter. (A, 25)

A few pages later, the narrator fills in the same parlour room for us, as we watch Inez, an enslaved woman whom the Judge forces to be his 'mistress':

> It was night in the parlor. The moon came through the windows which she kept open to catch the salt breeze - when the judge returned, he would latch them again, saying that the air would damage his wallpaper and his furniture. [...] Inez sat with the moonlight behind her and a lighted candle shaded at her side. The sofa was made of heavy tufted cloth, designed with gold threads which crossed over each other; the justice had ordered it from Geneva, he said. She sat there with a book in her hand - the poetry of Lord Byron - she was teaching herself to read while the judge was away. On the floor a Persian carpet was laid, a thick weave on which bright royal blue peacocks strutted across the parlor. (A, 33)

The two apparently different scenes, set in the same place but in different times, echo each other. In both scenes, the wealth and grandeur that Boy tries to conjure up for his daughter become apparent. According to Boy, this room in the Caribbean was furnished with things from all over the world. The furniture and the wallpaper do not only bespeak the Judge's wealth, attained

through the system of slavery, but also the routes between various places and continents that made up slavery's triangle trade. Yet, this is something that Clare's father leaves out as he fills in the empty room: "The only objects to be seen were a few broken-down chairs stacked in one corner, and these were uninformative as to origin" (A, 25). He fills the room with images that he thinks appropriate to signify his family's past, images of wealth and splendour that speak only indirectly of the atrocities of slavery. Like on a palimpsest, Boy writes his story over another one, partly erasing the other 'text' that was inscribed there earlier.

The second scene, however, reveals the aspects that Boy leaves out. In the midst of this beautifully furnished room, we see the enslaved Inez, who contradicts Boy's insistence on the splendour of the old days. She personifies another story, the history of the slaves and their fate in this house, whose owner was not a "benign slaveholder" (A, 30). At the same time, Inez is a symbol of the slaves' resistance against the suppressive system: she teaches herself to read and thus takes the master's exclusive claim and access to "the authoritative word", the written language, away from him. In order to oppress their slaves further and in the hope of gaining their 'consent' to subordination more easily, slaveholders frequently denied their slaves any access to education. Learning to read, for instance, was forbidden and any disregard of this regulation was met with heavy punishment. Nevertheless, Inez teaches herself to read and does so with the poetry of Lord Byron of all things.[24] Moreover, by positioning herself in the midst of her master's splendour, she replaces him during his absence.

As can be seen in the juxtaposition of these two scenes, various voices grapple with each other and tell very different stories about the plantation at Runaway Bay. We see the place through Boy's eyes, we perceive how Clare sees the plantation grounds, we are made to listen to Inez' indirect voice, and we constantly have the narrator, who interrupts the narrative to jump back and forth in time, to counter certain views, and to comment on Boy's descriptions. We see glimpses of official history, mainly in Boy's narration, and we see various unofficial memories, provided by Inez and the narrator. The scene in which we see how Inez occupies the same space that Boy has constructed a few pages earlier, is an example of how the creation of a homogeneous and

24 Inez's reading of Byron's poetry can be seen as an appropriation of Romanticism's discourse on human values. In a sense, she rewrites Byron's poetic hero in her defiance of society's rules and sets herself in his place.

straight history of the plantation place is prevented in the novel. Boy's attempt to leave out the viewpoint of 'the other', to ignore the part that slaves have played in the (family's) history, is countered by the narrator and ultimately also by the reader, who is guided to construct a different past of this place.

Both scenes recreate the plantation place in different ways. Thus, it becomes ambiguous, a site where histories and memories meet and in which contradictions and discrepancies come to the fore. In this way, it mirrors other places in *Abeng,* which can be understood as *lieux de mémoire*. According to Pierre Nora, such sites of memory are material, functional, and symbolic at the same time and they are created at the intersection of unifying history and individual memory. Sites of memory show the complicated interaction of history, as the dominant, official and supposedly objective "reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer", and memory, which is by nature multiple, personal, "in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting".[25] In other words, they show the entanglements as well as the contradictions that connect history and memory. Boy's attempt to narrate the place and its history is xenophobic in that he tries to exclude any traces of what he perceives to be different, pertaining to a constructed 'other' that functions as an inferior opposition to himself and his history. He is a representative of the 'universal authority' of the official historiography of colonialism and its attempt to 'suppress and destroy' the memory of the colonized other.[26] *Abeng*'s narrator constantly challenges this attempt to erase the memory of the colonized and invests the novel's places with alternative stories, digging up traces of what official history is constructed to suppress and forget. In this way, places emerge as important sites in the construction of history - they can be seen as 'archives', holding traces and tracks of multiple histories and memories. For Cliff, places emerge as important 'tools' in her attempt to rewrite history and to construct alternative versions of identity.

Moreover, as I have shown above, the plantation is a 'textual space', which contains signs and discourses that need to be deciphered. At the same time, it is viewed as an empty and emptied space by its inhabitants, who inscribe themselves into it. Although some people see the plantation as a quite romantic and unproblematic place (e.g. Boy or the American developers who try to sell the place), the narrator shows it to be a multifaceted, layered one. The plantation becomes a palimpsest, a (textual) space in which various stories

25 Nora, "Between Memory and History", 285.
26 Nora, "Between Memory and History", 286.

are written over and across each other. These stories can erase as well as complete each other, questioning the assumption of a homogeneous space. The narrator insists on seeing the interconnections and fragmentations of these voices and stories and she tells us that "it is important to take it all in, the disconnections and the connections" (A, 28). Under the guidance of the narrator, the reader is enabled to decipher the meaning of the different layers and to connect the histories and memories that become apparent. Nevertheless, it is of course impossible to construct a coherent and straight history, but what is possible is to dig beneath the surface level of official history. The places in *Abeng* are thus vital in Cliff's project of rewriting history and they highlight the stories, the memories and the histories of those who are usually left out in the colonizer's account of the Caribbean past. Like Clare Savage's name, the novel's places contain traces and signs of both the colonizer and the colonized and which story is told depends on who is 'reading' the place for what purpose.

Consequently, the places in the novel are 'narrated into existence' - they are multi-dimensional places, in which binary oppositions like slave-owner and slave, dominant colonizer and colonized other cannot be upheld so easily. To the reader, the places do not remain as simple and unambiguous as they might seem to Clare.[27] The narrator interrupts one-dimensional, coherent accounts of a place - such as Boy's reminiscences - and counters them with 'other stories'. Yet, the different stories are always connected to each other and a place comes to life only in the space that is opened up by the different voices. In this sense, places can become sites of memory, sites that speak not only of the dominant, official history, but also of the suppressed and hidden layers of the past. It becomes clear that places are never fixed, unchanging and definite. Rather, they are constantly being constructed, reinterpreted, and reinvested with meaning. And in this sense, the various people traveling through or inhabiting these places have to locate, relocate, and dislocate them- selves constantly in their interaction with the places and their own memories.

27 Even during the visit of the plantation house discussed above, Clare shows signs of emancipation. For instance, it is important that in the examination of the house's wall she ignores the father's flashlight and relies on herself and her senses to "read" the wall's signs. Significantly, she "tastes" the wall and detects its salt taste, which is a result of one of Inez's acts of resistance against the Judge. Against his will, Inez left the window open to let the Caribbean climate into the Judge's house, to let in "the salt breeze" that "would damage his wallpaper and his furniture" (A, 33). In this way, a direct connection, however slight, is forged between Clare and Inez and Clare literally tastes the woman's act of resistance even if she is not able to decipher this sign.

The ‘otherness’ that is so often carefully constructed in colonial accounts of the past only to be silenced and left out, is shown to be always already part of a place and its histories. Cliffs places, her sites of memory are enclaves in which specific memories are preserved against a universalizing, objectifying history, revoking any strict and rigid opposition of the self and its other.