Claiming the Wholeness She Had Always Been Denied

Place and Identity in Michelle Cliff’s Novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*
ABSTRACT

This essay deals with the post-colonial crisis of identity in Michelle Cliff’s novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, more specifically, the perception of “self” experienced by people in, and from, the former British colonies in the West-Indies. The essential aspect in this context is *place*. Place in post-colonial literature does not simply denote a geographical locale. Apart from the physical surroundings, place also represents a non-material environment which comprises, inter alia, sounds and scents, legends and beliefs, manners and customs. In fact, there are places which are only spiritually present in people’s lives. Even so, they have a considerable impact on the individuals’ sense of selfhood.

I argue that *place* acts as a catalyst for the protagonists’ development of self and is central to their search for identity. By exploring the various facets of place, I will show what effects this multi-layered concept in post-colonial literature has on the characters.
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Michelle Cliff was born in Jamaica when the island was still a British colony. Her first two novels, *Abeng* (1985) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), are to some extent autobiographical.¹ Cliff’s intention, however, is not to tell her own story, but, as she mentions in an interview, to “‘re-vision,’ [i]n the sense of re-visioning something, not in the sense of revising as in correcting it, or editing it, but in trying to see something from a different point of view […] a colonized history, a history that's been interpreted from a European perspective only.”² The author’s own experiences of being urged to “pass for white” are reflected in Clare Savage, the protagonist of *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, who feels split between two worlds: a world in which she is privileged because of her light skin, and a world which never wholly accepts her because of her mixed heritage.³ Clare is “composed of fragments” and hopes for “restoration.”⁴ She is partly English, but not English enough to be considered “pure.” She is partly African, yet far too light-skinned to be accepted as Black. She is formed from pieces of English culture and African traditions, but the pieces do not fit together and some pieces seem to be missing. Clare thus feels fragmented, and she dedicates her life to achieving wholeness of self. In her search for identity, *place* has a key role. This rather complex topos in post-colonial literatures will be explained below.

This essay argues that *place* in Michelle Cliff’s novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* acts as a catalyst for the characters’ development of self and is central to their search for identity. By relying on Ashcroft’s, Griffiths’ and Tiffin’s definition of place, I will

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1 The word *abeng* is African and means conch shell. In the West Indies, the abeng was used to call the slaves to the canefields, but also to pass messages between the Maroon armies. (*Abeng*). The Maroons were former slaves of the Spanish who had freed them before they left the island to the British in 1655. [www.jnht.com](http://www.jnht.com) (Jamaican National Heritage Trust).

2 *No Telephone to Heaven* means “No voice to God. A waste to try. Cut off. No way of reaching out or up.” (*No Telephone to Heaven* 16). It is also the inscription on a truck.

3 Michelle Cliff’s family had, as she explains, an “awful color sense which is almost unspoken – the closer you are to white the better things are.” Opal Palmer Adisa, “Journey Into Speech – A Writer Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Michelle Cliff,” *African American Review* 28.2 (1994): 275.

4 Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (New York: Penguin, 1987) 87. All page references are to this edition and hereafter included in the text as *NTH*.
explore the various facets of this concept, such as geographical and social place, and show what effects place has on the characters.

The post-colonial concepts of place and displacement are, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin,\(^5\) crucial for the process of identity formation, since “[i]t is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place.”\(^6\) The reason why this especially applies to colonised peoples is that colonial interference drastically disconnects space from place, thereby disturbing the principal connotation of place. The use of the terms ‘space’ and ‘place’ in post-colonial discourse can be somewhat confusing, not least because occasionally they are used synonymously, while at other times they have distinct meanings. Yet a thorough differentiation between the two terms is essential in order to understand the connotation of ‘displacement’ in a post-colonial context. The following definition of these concepts includes, besides space and place, two further components, namely time and language.

“In pre-modern times,” Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin claim, “space and place are more or less synonymous with one another” (\(KC\) 178). Yet “European ways of measuring a ‘universal’ space and time” bring about “the separation of space from place,” since Western techniques “sever them [i.e. space and time] from any particular location” (\(KC\) 179). By ‘European ways of measuring’ the authors mean firstly, the innovation of the mechanical clock, and secondly, the creation of worldwide maps. Before the introduction of the mechanical clock, they argue, all methods of calculating time required additional markers. To give an example, in pre-modern or pre-colonial times, people did not meet “at 5 p.m.” but “when the shadow of the solitary palm at the beach is twice as long as the length of three men,” or something like that. The mechanical clock, as well as the invention of calendars and

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the introduction of standard time zones, disconnected time from location in that they made any references to landmarks superfluous, thus leading to the phenomenon which Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin describe as the “emptying of time” (KC 178). Time, once concrete since it was related to actual things in the environment, had become abstract.

This emptying of time, they maintain, paved the way for what they term the “emptying of space” (KC 178) which ensued from the making of worldwide maps. What they mean is that it was the ability to tell the exact time independently of the geographical position and the standardisation of time across regions which made navigation possible, so that seafaring nations, such as Britain, could explore previously unknown parts of the world then documented in ever more comprehensive maps. To clarify the notion of “emptying of space,” we have to return to pre-modern times when place and space, as I mentioned above, were almost identical. Space, in those times, was as solid as place, something which could be seen and touched. Yet cartography, which became a discipline when Europeans began to travel around the world in order to discover hitherto undisclosed regions, “established space as a measurable, abstract concept independent of any particular place or region” (KC 178). In the same way, then, as the separation of time from location leads to an ‘emptying of time,’ the detachment of space from location causes an ‘emptying of space.’

A consequence of the disconnection of time and space from place is, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, that place “becomes an anxious and contested site of the link between language and identity,” and even “an issue within language itself” (KC 179). What the authors refer to here is the, in post-colonial discourse, often mentioned “gap […] between the experience of place and the language available to describe it.”\(^7\) This gap arose primarily in settler colonies where the colonisers felt that the language they imported was inadequate to describe the alien land they occupied, and in invaded colonies where the subjugated people

\(^7\) Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 9.
had a foreign language imposed on them, a language which they felt was not suitable to express their culture.\(^8\) In this sense, then, ‘the gap,’ i.e. the lack of agreement between the various aspects of culture, such as language, and place, does not occur in the West Indies. Nevertheless, language is important to my analysis of place, as I will clarify below.

The separation of time and space from location allows modern societies in general, and the former imperial powers in particular, to maintain relationships with absent others, i.e. people with whom we do not share the same landmarks, thus being able to influence places throughout the world. Historically, these influences have always been momentous and often serious for the affected peoples. One example here is the impact which Britain had, and to some extent still has, on its former colonies in the Caribbean.\(^9\) The most effective means by which Britain maintained imperial power over its colonies was hegemony, which can generally be described as a method “of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all” (KC 116). The compulsory reading of English literature – English literature only – in Jamaican schools, for example, not only disseminated the colonisers’ moral and humanistic values, as well as their racial and social prejudices in the colony, but also evoked a desire in the colonised subjects to live up to these values, and to regard the British culture as superior to their own.\(^10\) This “method of communicating the values of Western civilization” (KC 117) and its consequence, namely the colonised subject’s

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\(^8\) Settler colonies are, for example, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Invaded colonies are, for instance, India or Nigeria. This model of post-colonial literature was proposed by D.E.S. Maxwell in 1965. It is, however, limited in so far as it does not reflect the situation in the West Indies. Furthermore, taken to extremes, his model more or less suggests that a language is inherent in a certain place and thus is not applicable to other places, which makes little sense. The reason why I mention the ‘gap’ at all is that it is central to the concepts of place and displacement as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin see it; yet it must be pointed out that they do not take into consideration the differences between settler, invaded and other colonies when they discuss the ‘gap,’ which can be quite confusing.

\(^9\) Today, it is probably the United States which has the greatest economic and cultural influence on Jamaica, not Great Britain.

\(^10\) An example here is William Wordsworth’s poem “Daffodils” which, so it seems, has to be learned by heart by all school-children in British ex-colonies, even though they might never have seen a daffodil in their lives except in books. Mr. Powell, a school-teacher whom we will meet later, receives the following instructions for teaching literature from the Colonial Office: “To see that all in the school memorized the ‘Daffodils’ poem of William Wordsworth, ‘spoken with as little accent as possible; here and elsewhere, the use of pidgin is to be severely discouraged.’” (Abeng 84).
adoption of imperial values, contributed, of course, to the loss of identity experienced by colonised peoples.

Among the former British colonies, the West-Indies holds an exceptional position. In comparison to India, for example, where the population was certainly subjugated under British imperialism, but nonetheless could retain its land and culture, the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean were entirely wiped out. Consequently, everyone now living in the West Indies is displaced, either descended from African slaves or from European colonisers, or from Indians and Chinese who came as indentured labourers after the abolishment of slavery. Jamaica’s indigenous people, the Taínos, a sub-group of the Arawaks, was exterminated by disease, slavery and war shortly after Christopher Columbus had landed on the island in 1494 and claimed it for Spain. Taino, the language first used in Jamaica, died out when the people who spoke it were exterminated. The situation in the West-Indies, then, is a combination of the conditions in settler and invaded colonies, where one of two components, either place or language, was familiar to colonisers and colonised subjects respectively. British people who settled in Australia, for example, had imported their own language, yet the environment was alien to them. Indians, in contrast, stayed in their own country, but had a foreign language imposed on them. In the Caribbean, both the environment and the language available to describe it were alien to the majority of people, i.e. the slaves who, in Jamaica for instance, outnumbered their white masters by 300,000 to 30,000 in

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11 As a people, the Caribs and Arawaks were practically exterminated; a small number of individuals survived.
12 Indenture was a formal contract between an apprentice and his master; this system was the successor of slavery and almost as brutal. The reason why plantation owners, after the abolishment of slavery, hired labourers from other racial groups was that they feared a mass migration of their ex-slaves.
14 Taíno, now extinct, belongs to the Arawakan languages, the largest family of American Indian languages. It is closely related to Goajiro which is still spoken in Colombia and Venezuela. Other languages belonging to the Arawakan family are yet spoken in Peru and Brazil. [http://concise.brittanica.com](http://concise.brittanica.com). Taino words which have been incorporated into the English and Spanish language are for example barbecue, canoe and tobacco. [www.biography.ms/Ta%EDnos.html](http://www.biography.ms/Ta%EDnos.html)
This is true, however, only for those slaves who were born in Africa. The following generations were of course familiar with the environment they were born into. The fact that English remained the dominating language is not astounding considering that in order to prevent rebellions, slaves were isolated from other individuals of their language group. As a consequence, the only language available for them to communicate with each other or with their oppressors was English. In other words, the African slaves who came to the West-Indies found themselves in a strange place without any language to express whatever they felt. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin put it, they experienced “the loss of their own voice [...] in an alien landscape.”

Today, although Jamaican Patois is widely spoken, all Jamaicans are native speakers of English. The distinction to be made here, however, is that between standard British English, in a post-colonial context also labelled ‘proper English,’ and ‘english,’ the ‘impure’ variant. It is the distinction, in Ashcroft’s, Griffiths’ and Tiffin’s words, between “what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world.” It is in this context that language is significant for my analysis of place, more specifically social place. As I will show later, the ability to speak proper English, but also the knowledge of Patois, and above all the feeling for which of the two is suitable in what situation, is one of the factors that determine a person’s place in society.

Hitherto, Michelle Cliff’s work has attracted comparatively little scholarly attention, and most critics base their articles on her short stories and poems rather than her novels. Common themes discussed by critics are gender, ethnicity/race and, more recently,  

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15 Michelle Cliff appears to have the exact figures: “the growth of the slave population from 1,500 in 1655 to 311,070 in 1834 [...] was due only to the importation of more [...] slaves.” (Abeng 19).
16 Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 145.
17 Jamaican Patois is officially labelled as “Jamaican Creole.”
politics/resistance. As the concepts of post-colonial studies are very complex and interrelated, many essays amalgamate two or more topics or theories. Marian Aguiar, for instance, combines linguistics and psychoanalysis when she scrutinises speech and ‘aphasia’, in the sense of ‘prohibition to speech,’ in Cliff’s writing.\textsuperscript{19} In her essay “Decolonizing the Tongue: Reading Speech and Aphasia in the Work of Michelle Cliff,” Aguiar explores what she terms ‘an aphasic gap.’\textsuperscript{20} Cliff’s aphasia, she argues, “articulates the denial of certain bodies from the social-cultural system of speech and refuses dislocation from a body overdetermined by histories of conquest.”\textsuperscript{21} An issue which appears in various combinations is identity. An example here is Kim Robinson-Walcott’s essay “Claiming an Identity we Thought They Despised: Contemporary White West Indian Writers and their Negotiation of Race.”\textsuperscript{22} Robinson-Walcott examines light-skinned Jamaicans’ sense of selfhood by comparing the lives and works of Michelle Cliff and Jamaican writer Honor Ford-Smith. Although the former left the island when she was very small whereas the latter has spent most of her life there, both women experienced “the trauma of a light-skinned person being trained to pass for white,” which is reflected in their fiction.\textsuperscript{23} While Robinson-Walcott looks at the perception of self and identity from an ethnical as well as a political perspective, my focus is on place. Place, I argue, is the catalyst for the characters’ development of self and is central to their search for identity.

In \textit{Abeng} and \textit{No Telephone to Heaven}, Michelle Cliff explores various aspects of place. Place can be roughly divided into geographical and social place, both parts encompassing numerous subsections, all of which are interrelated. Below, I will analyse the

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{19} Medically, aphasia is an impairment of language due to injury to the brain, most commonly from a stroke.
\item\textsuperscript{21} Marian Aguiar 108.
\item\textsuperscript{22} Kim Robinson-Walcott, “Claiming and Identity we Thought They Despised: Contemporary White West Indian Writers and their Negotiation of Race,” \textit{Small Axe}, 7:2 (Sep 2003): 93-110.
\item\textsuperscript{23} Kim Robinson-Walcott 97.
\end{itemize}
multiple facets of geographical location and social place, in particular their importance for the characters’ development of self.

To begin with, I will show the obvious aspects of geographical locale, before I zoom in on the more subtle ones. First, there are of course the places in which Clare Savage, the protagonist of both novels, lives or which she passes through: Jamaica, her land of birth which the family leaves in 1960 when Clare is fourteen years old and to which she finally returns; the South of the United States, where the Savages pass through on their way to New York; New York itself, where Clare lives until she finishes High School; and London, where she goes to university. Especially the United States and England, as we will see in the first part of this essay, are significant to the main characters’ sense of selfhood in that these places either bring about a turning point in their lives or function as an eye-opener. In the second part of my analysis, we will return to Jamaica. The various facets of place on the island are rather subtle. Place in post-colonial literature denotes much more than the land. It does not merely represent a landscape with a particular flora and fauna, but comprises, inter alia, colours, sounds, food, manners, legends, beliefs, superstition, dress and festivals. In fact, there are places which are only mentally present in peoples’ lives. Even so, they have a substantial impact on the characters’ sense of identity.

In a colony or former colony, as Frantz Fanon points out, “[o]ne is white above a certain financial level.”\textsuperscript{24} This is definitely applicable to Jamaica, where a person’s social status rises with thefairness of his or her skin tone. To put it in Fanon’s words:\textsuperscript{25} “[f]rom black to white is the course of mutation. One is white as one is rich as one is beautiful as one is intelligent.”\textsuperscript{26} In the West Indies, then, both money and skin tone determine a person’s social position. The Savages, being comparatively wealthy and very light skinned, especially Clare and her father, Boy, thus enjoy a fairly good status in their homeland. When they come

\textsuperscript{24} Frantz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin White Masks} (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 44.
\textsuperscript{25} Fanon refers to the West Indies in general, not explicitly to Jamaica.
\textsuperscript{26} Fanon 51-52.
to the United States, however, their light skin and Boy’s European plantation-owner ancestors do not suffice to conceal their African roots, which has unpleasant consequences, as we will see now.

On their way to New York, the Savages stop at a motel in Georgia. That specific place becomes a turning point in Boy’s life regarding his development of identity, since it is there and then that he decides to officially transform himself from a mixed-raced Jamaican into a purely white man, “the son of a plantation owner” (*NTH* 75). Considering that as late as the 1960s members of the Ku Klux Klan got away with killing Black citizens, it is not surprising that the motel-keeper is openly racist. The sign-posts behind the counter, saying “RACIAL SELF-RESPECT IS NOT BIGOTRY” and “YOU ARE IN KLAN COUNTRY” (*NTH* 58), communicate outright hostility, and there can be no doubt about the innkeeper’s attitude towards “niggers” (*NTH* 55). “[I]f you’re niggers you can’t stay here. You ain’t welcome” (*NTH* 55), he tells Boy. In a situation where ethnicity is a risk factor for lynching, the ability to pass for white can be a lifesaver. Under these circumstances, Boy makes use of this ability. By doing so, he not simply raises his social status from Black to white, but also alters his identity. In a way, Boy separates his idea of self from his real self, thus creating a displacement of self.

Passing for white is not only a major concern for Michelle Cliff’s protagonists, but also for Cliff herself. As Sophia Lehmann writes, “[t]he danger of succumbing to the pressure to pass, both culturally and physically, and as a result forgetting, is what gives the

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27 On page 100-101 in *No Telephone to Heaven*, Michelle Cliff alludes to a factual incident: “SUNDAY SCHOOL BOMBED […] FOUR CHILDREN DEAD […] the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church […] In addition to the four dead, there are twenty-one injured.” She refers to Robert Chambliss who, on 15th September 1963, had placed a bomb under the steps of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four children and hurting 21 other people of the congregation. On 8th October 1963, he was found not guilty of murder and received a hundred dollar fine and a six-month jail sentence for having the dynamite. [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAkkk.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAkkk.htm).

28 That “white” should be a higher status than “Black” is of course not my opinion but the general opinion of the characters in Cliff’s novels.

29 In an interview with Opal Palmer Adisa, Michelle Cliff speaks of her parents who were “very light skinned and could pass easily [yet] were never comfortable with that kind of thing.” She further explains that “you’re passing not because you want to be white but for self-protection.” Opal Palmer Adisa, “Journey Into Speech – A Writer Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Michelle Cliff,” *African American Review* 28.2 (1994): 275.
urgency to Cliff’s project of writing herself back into her history and culture.”\(^{30}\) Boy serves as an example of someone who gives in to this demand. While he is fully aware that “at least one of the Jesuits’ categories applied to him,” Boy bluntly tells the motel-keeper “‘I am a white man’” (NTH 57).\(^ {31}\) Under these precarious circumstances, his statement might be merely a white lie – but it is not. On the contrary, Boy decides to leave his mixed heritage behind. He is “streamlining himself for America” (NTH 57). He takes “the plunge” (NTH 57). From this moment on, Boy will deny the “other” branch of his heritage, his black grandmother’s side. In an attempt to become as white as possible, he will break the connection to Kitty’s relatives in Queens, he will insist that Kitty should stop visiting the Jamaican shops of Bedford-Stuyvesant, and he will teach his daughters “[s]elf-effacement. Blending in. The uses of camouflage” (NTH 100).

Boy’s aspiration to become as white and as American as possible might be ascribed to the fact that he probably believes that his father was a white American.\(^ {32}\) Furthermore, he was born in New York, which might be a reason for his eagerness to settle in, “making himself at home” (NTH 75). In a sense, then, Boy has a claim on this place, which might lift his social position: he is, after all, a New Yorker. Yet a person’s identity is a whole consisting of many pieces; by rejecting a major part of his heritage, Boy chooses to get rid of his cultural self. A choice like this certainly indicates a distorted sense of selfhood. Feeling more attached to the English side of his family than to the African side would not be unusual as such, especially since it is Boy’s foremost goal to melt into the white community. Yet he does not just neglect his African roots; he denies their very existence.


\(^{31}\) At school, Boy had to memorise 128 race-categories: mulatto, sambo, quadroon, mestee, mestefeena and so on, NTH 56.

\(^{32}\) Boy’s father “actually was an iceman from Sicily.” This, however, was only known to Boy’s mother, Caroline Savage, and the showgirls whom she worked with in New York. For her family back in Jamaica she invented a fiancé who “courted her in tails and with small bouquets of Parma violets,” and who broke his “neck as he raced to his wedding with Caroline.” When Boy was only a few months old, he was sent to Jamaica, where he grew up with his uncle and aunt, never meeting his mother again. Abeng chapter 6.
“The result of passing,” Lehman continues to elucidate Cliff’s thoughts, “is not only forgetting […] but also being cut off from one’s community, the group with which one feels cultural and linguistic affinities.”³³ After Kitty returns to Jamaica, the younger daughter, Jennie, disappears in the gutter, and Clare leaves for London, there is no-one left in Boy’s surroundings to remind him of his cultural or linguistic heritage. Boy Savage has deliberately burned his bridges behind him. In New York, he entirely loses his true identity in favour of one which he believes is more appropriate for his new homeland. Using his ability to pass for white, then, results in a loss of identity rather than an affirmation of his sense of self. Despite his transformation, ironically, Boy never manages to leave the New York underclass, the only stratum accessible for immigrants and likewise underprivileged people. He could as well have remained the “true” Boy Savage, instead of not daring to tell his colleagues about his wife, “[s]ilent in his mestee/sambo/octoroon/quadroon/creole skin” (NTH 75), pretending to be someone else. In New York, his social rank is considerably lower than the position he had in Jamaica. It remains unclear, however, if Boy himself sees this clearly.

When the Savages come to New York, Boy and Clare must learn that the people here are not ‘fooled’ as easily as the motel-keeper in Georgia. Their ability to almost pass for white does not prevent them from being labelled “white chocolate” (NTH 99). It turns out that for New Yorkers everyone coming from the West Indies is some sort of “chocolate,” i.e. black, by ethnicity, no matter how pale his or her complexion might be.³⁴ In other words, the fact that someone looks white does not necessarily mean that he or she is white; a distinction is made between Caucasian whites and African (or West Indian) “whites,” and it is the latter


³⁴ According to the FDA (Food and Drug Administration), however, “white chocolate” is not chocolate at all, since it does not contain chocolate liquor which gives the intense chocolate flavour and colour to dark and milk chocolate. It is Mrs Taylor, the principal of Clare’s school, who classifies Clare and Boy as “white chocolate,” because Boy claims that they are white, whereas she insists that they are not. To her, everyone who is not purely white is “chocolate,” so Boy and Clare may look white but they are nevertheless chocolate – black – more specifically “white chocolate.” She seems, however, to be misinformed about the nature of white chocolate, because actually (according to the FDA that is), by calling them “white chocolate,” she says that they are not chocolate – not black.
group which is pejoratively termed “white chocolate.” The woman who draws this peculiar parallel between people and food is Mrs Taylor, the principal of Clare’s high school, who insists that the Savages are not white, ignoring Boy’s response to her first and, apparently, most important question: “Race?” (NTH 98). Throughout their conversation, she acts “as if she had been hired by the government to track down Savages trying to pass for white […] ‘I am familiar with you island people,’” she explains, and makes clear that “‘we have no room for lies in our system. No place for in-betweens’” (NTH 99). American white supremacists, such as Mrs Taylor, are not interested in the family trees of people with mixed heritage. While in the West Indies skin colour is “a question of degree” (NTH 153), outside the islands every shade of Black is always simply Black.

Race and geographical place, then, are inseparable, and determine a person’s social position which in turn is closely related to his or her sense of selfhood. Being at the bottom of the social ladder, for ethnical or other reasons, generally will not increase a person’s self-confidence. At the same time, low self-confidence certainly has a negative impact on an individual’s sense of selfhood. So in Boy’s case, one would expect that the principal’s words poured cold water on his enthusiasm about his “new identity” which he had assumed only a few weeks previous to this incident. Yet Boy appears to be an exception. We do not learn what he thinks about being called “white chocolate,” but it does not seem to bother him very much since he carries on with his pretentiously “white” behaviour as if the conversation with Mrs Taylor had not taken place. The way he is treated in New York apparently has no influence on Boy’s awareness of self. He is so secure in his “whiteness” that the principal’s assault does not the least affect him. Secretively, Boy has always identified himself as white. Being attracted to Calvinism, in particular “the concept of the Elect,” Boy believes that he is “chosen” for an afterlife “in which all would be […] pure,

35 Boy’s answer is: “White … of course” (NTH 98).
white”. The fact that he is partly African, then, is of no interest to Boy, because he is convinced that he is selected for something pure and white. This is the “status he had been born to” (A 44). Boy knows that his views would collide with most people’s, which is why “[l]ittle of this was articulated by [him] to any but his elder daughter” (A 45). Especially in Jamaica he has to keep his ideas to himself, because there everyone knows that strictly speaking he is mixed. In the United States, however, Boy sees a chance to publicly “change” his identity from Creole to purely white. He must have thought about the possibility of “becoming white” already before the family left Jamaica, otherwise it seems unlikely that he should so readily take this sudden opportunity. Now that Boy has moved not only into a new place, but also into a new identity, his “wish for a new life” (NTH 53), “a new start in a new world” (NTH 54) finally is fulfilled. He is “[a] new man” (NTH 57).

Kitty, in almost all respects the complete opposite of her husband, is deeply rooted in Jamaican traditions. She loves the land, the soil, the flora and fauna of the island to the extent that she considers herself to be a part of it. In contrast to Boy, Kitty is not willing to deny her cultural identity, even though she is “straining to adjust to this place where she seemed to float, never to light, the shopkeepers of Bed-Stuy her only relief” (NTH 75). In New York Kitty is unable to adapt and feels completely out of place. When she realises that her social position here is, and will remain, that of an island mulatto, someone who is considered illiterate because she speaks “in accented language” (NTH 80), and therefore will “labor forever as Mrs. White” (NTH 80), she takes the logical step and returns to Jamaica.

36 Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Penguin, 1984). All page references are to this edition and hereafter included in the text as *A*.
37 Boy does not really practice Calvinism, “that sort of ascetic devotion […] for the unsaved, the unexceptional.” He is only interested in the parts which suit him, such as the “concept of the Elect, […] those who no matter what they did or not did were the only saved souls on earth” (A 44).
38 I will come back to Kitty’s relationship to Jamaica in a later section.
39 To light here means to come to rest on the ground. The word derives from to alight: to come down and settle, as after flight. From Middle English: *alighten*. Thesaurus: www.answers.com.
40 Kitty takes a job in a laundry where she has to put small notes with advice into the laundry parcels. These notes she has to sign in the name of “Mrs. White, the imaginary wife of an imaginary man” (NTH 73), for the authentic touch. Later, she will replace these notes with her own, such as “WE CAN CLEAN YOUR CLOTHES
Kitty seems to know fairly well who she is and where she belongs. She did not have to come to New York to understand that she cannot breathe outside Jamaica, especially not if she is denied by her husband to visit “her home away from home” (*NTH* 75), to eat “food from home” (*NTH* 75), and to share whatever she can find “from home” with her children. Yet she had to live there for a while to comprehend that espousing her cultural heritage is incompatible with a life at Boy’s side. Above all, she had to come to New York to detach herself from her mother “who would not have approved of her – her mother who told her to make the best of it. Whatever it might be” (*NTH* 75). Miss Mattie, her mother, did not support her daughter’s choice of a husband, which I will come back to later. Whenever Kitty complained about Boy, however, her comment was: “You lie wid dog, nuh mus’ get up wid flea?” (*NTH* 75), meaning that once you have made a decision, you have to face the consequences. Leaving one’s husband would have been out of the question for Kitty’s mother. Staying with Boy in New York, on the other hand, would have choked Kitty. New York, then, acts as a catalyst for Kitty’s development of self in so far as it teaches her to break the rules which otherwise would break her.

Clare consciously begins her search for identity in London, hoping that “[h]er place could be here” (*NTH* 109), in the mother country. She chooses England by excluding other alternatives: America, she decides, was merely a “way-station” (*NTH* 109), while Jamaica as an option has not even “occurred to her” (*NTH* 110). She spends a few years observing this city which she has been taught so much about at school. Endeavouring to absorb as much as possible of what she associates with English culture, Clare divides her time between the London museums and the classics of English literature. When she reads *Jane Eyre*, Clare cannot help noticing the parallels between herself and Jane: “Left to wander.

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41 By doing so, Clare unconsciously uses the very method, hegemony, by which she, the colonised subject, is supposed to adopt the coloniser’s moral and humanistic values.
Solitary. Motherless” (*NTH* 116). She almost immediately realises, however, that she cannot be Jane, she cannot be English. Coming to think of her father’s constant yet unfruitful demands that she should tame her hair, Clare suddenly understands why she always had held to her curls, this “[b]eloved racial characteristic” (*NTH* 116). In fact, she is “[w]ild-maned Bertha” rather than the domesticated Jane: “Captive. Ragout. Mixture. Confused. Jamaican. Caliban. Carib. Cannibal. Cimarron. All Bertha. All Clare” (*NTH* 116). She had to discover who she is *not*, in order to recognise who she *is*. She had to come to England to find out that she is not English. England is not her place. Subsequent to this insight, Clare dreams of her dead mother, thus being spiritually reunited with her. By consciously acknowledging her black cultural heritage, Clare makes considerable progress in her development of self. After years spent in a vacuum, she eventually finds the strength to go on with her life.

A turning point in Clare’s life, then, is the moment when she realises that she is, after all, the daughter of her mother, that she has a Jamaican soul. In England, “[t]he country by whose grace her people existed in the first place” (*NTH* 109), her social status will always remain that of the colonised subject, even though “[p]eople admired her mind and implied her good fortune in escaping the brain damage common to creoles” (*NTH* 117). At this point, however, “[t]he word *homeland*” (*NTH* 121) applied to Jamaica still startles Clare.

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42 The Caribs inhabited most of the islands of the Lesser Antilles. They were a warlike people who fiercely resisted European colonisation; eventually, of course, even they were exterminated. The words Caliban and Cannibal actually refer to the same people. This confusion of terms is probably due to the corruption of native words in general during their incorporation first in the Spanish, and later English, French and Dutch vocabulary. The Caribs/Caliban/Cannibal were much feared by the peaceful Arawaks who believed that the former beheaded their enemies and drank their blood, which is why *cannibal* came to mean man-eater. [http://www.kwabs.com/tainos_caribs/html#redirect](http://www.kwabs.com/tainos_caribs/html#redirect). Considering that, in addition to their culinary habits, the Caribs/Caliban/Cannibal were said to have one eye in their foreheads and dog-like snouts (Columbus’ log entry from November 4, 1492; same web-source), the validity of these habits is somewhat questionable. Credible or not, “[f]rom the time of Columbus, ‘cannibal’ became synonymous with the savage, the ‘other’ of Europe, its use a signification of an abased state of being. In this sense the term came to play an important part in the moral justification for imperial rule.” (Ashcroft, *Key Concepts*).

43 The meaning of *cimarrón* is “unruly, runaway.” Originally, the word was applied “to cattle which had taken to the hills.” The name of the Maroons (former slaves of the Spanish who had taken to the hills) derives from *cimarrón* which also means “fierce, wild, unbroken” (*A* 20).

44 Boy has always favoured Clare since she is the lighter one of his two daughters, “a true Savage” (*Abeng* 45). When Kitty leaves New York, she takes “the younger girl [Jennie], the one who favored her, back home” (*NTH* 84). It is not clear from the text whom of her parents Clare favours, but it is very likely that she thinks of herself as her father’s daughter, not least because Kitty “abandoned” her – this will be explained later – until this moment of insight in her London room.
Considerable time will have to pass until she wholeheartedly embraces what she now, being on holiday in Jamaica, sees as a “miserable place” (*NTH* 120). One obstacle here might be her relatives’ attitude towards Boy, “that rascal in America” (*NTH* 118), as they keep calling him. They seem to imply that Clare must choose between father and mother, and that she has to reject the former if she wants to embrace the latter. Yet even though Clare and Boy have furious fights, he “was still her father” (*NTH* 110). He, too, is part of her identity. It will take Clare years to understand that following in her mother’s footsteps does not mean that she has to be disloyal to her father.

So far I have analysed in what sense their residencies in the United States and England are significant to the main characters’ development of self. Let me now return to Jamaica where the more subtle facets of place can be observed. Geographically, the island can be dissected into country and town, and “town” can be further divided into uptown and shantytown. These physical locations are subtly intertwined with two places which are mentally present in all aspects of Jamaican life: England and Africa. At first glance, it might seem that the countryside is dominated by the African spirit, whereas Kingston, for instance, has mainly English features. The issue of place in post-colonial communities, however, is more complex than that. This becomes apparent where the “English” and the “African” clash, more specifically, where individuals from both groups meet.44 Two contrasting pairs in this sense are Boy and Kitty, as well as the twelve-year-old Clare and her childhood friend Zoe. In the following section, I will scrutinize the various facets of place in Jamaica with regard to the characters’ search for identity. In this way I will highlight the interdependence of geographical place on the one hand and social position and sense of selfhood on the other hand.

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44 By the “English” and the “African” I mean everything which can be associated with the English and the African culture in the broadest sense.
Kitty and Boy, as indicated above, are complete opposites in almost all respects. The fact that they fell in love can only be described as an unlucky coincidence. It appears that they married because Kitty became pregnant, and after Clare was born, “Kitty’s life was locked into place” (A 130). In other words, by becoming a wife and mother, her place in society, as a woman, was fixed. Kitty’s people do not approve of this alliance. Her mother is “convinced that Boy was an inheritor of bad traits” (A 130), by which she means character traits that are typical for a “buckra,” i.e. a white or very light skinned person, specifically one representing the ruling class. Even though this essay deals with the effects place has on the characters, the issue of skin colour cannot be ignored in the context of social position and sense of selfhood. The level of importance of skin colour, however, depends on the geographical location. As we have seen, while outside the islands even the lightest shade of Black – so light that it can pass for white – is always only Black, in the West-Indies skin colour is a question of degree. Moreover, in Jamaica it makes a great difference if someone lives in the country or in a town. The countryside is predominantly inhabited by dark, poor and uneducated people, people who live close to nature, close to their African roots, people who embrace their African heritage, even though not necessarily purely out of free choice. In the cities, except for the shantytowns of course, the average skin colour is lighter and people have better chances to get a higher education and good jobs. ‘Whites’ who pass through the countryside may experience the same discrimination there as Blacks who live in areas which are dominated by ‘whites.’

One common prejudice against light-skinned city-people is, that they all have low moral standards. To provide a basis for my further analysis, I will briefly

45 The reason why I put ‘whites’ in quotation marks is that there hardly are any white people, in the sense that their ethnicity is Caucasian, in Jamaica; almost everyone on the island is mixed. Even so, some people consider themselves ‘white.’

46 It can be argued, of course, that this is a common prejudice of country-people against city-people all over the world, regardless of skin colour.
elucidate why Jamaicans are apt to put everyone into categories of buckra, Black, white, and red.  

Miscegenation, i.e. people of different races having children together, has always been a matter of concern in the former colonies. Since almost everyone in Jamaica is of mixed heritage, with ancestors who were both English and African, a supplementary classification is needed to decide who someone is and what he or she stands for. The two main categories, from the point of view of those who are proud of their African roots, are “Black,” which is how they refer to themselves, and “buckra.” As the term buckra is generally pejorative, those who prefer to stress their English heritage do not call themselves buckra but white. It might be argued, however, that “buckra” could also be a term of admiration, as Ashcroft, Griffths and Tiffin point out: “the very process of insisting on racial difference may mask a hidden and opposite fascination” (KC 142). Yet in Abeng and No Telephone to Heaven, as I see it, buckra is exclusively used by people who are proud of their African heritage as an expression of contempt to describe those who mimic “the English.” As Miss Ruthie, Zoe’s mother, summarises Clare’s background: “One big fat buckra papa she have. […] But she mama a decent woman” (94). Ashcroft, Griffths and Tiffin do make a point, however, in reminding the reader that “‘disgust always bears the imprint of desire’” (KC 143). Furthermore, there might be Blacks who are not happy with their African roots, but who are too dark-skinned and too poor to be buckras. Be that as it may, both groups are equally prejudiced against each other. The “pretentiously whitish” (A 127) Jamaicans think that “the others” are savages, “animals” (A 53), which is typical of their disdain for everything that is not “English.” Yet their disrespect does not prevent them from exploiting these “savages”  

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47 Red is a term which, in Jamaica, signifies a degree of whiteness. Someone as light as Michelle Cliff, for instance, is considered “‘local’ white.” Opal Palmer Adisa. 275.

48 From this interest, or rather obsession, derive those “128 differing degrees of pigmentation to distinguish between the children of mixed relations” (KC 142) which Boy had to learn at school, mentioned in note 31.

49 It could be taken as ironical that Boy’s surname is Savage of all names, since this name puts emphasis on his pretentiousness: he who completely denies the fact that some of his ancestors were what he calls “savages,” is
wherever they can, sexually and otherwise. The islanders who define themselves as Blacks, on the other hand, despise “the others” for their pretentiousness and for their betrayal of the African race. What both groups have in common is the conviction that “[o]nly sadness comes from mixture” (A 164). As Miss Mattie puts it: “Buckra man is jus’ no good a-tall, a-tall. De pickney no mus’ tek on de blood” (A 147). Such a categorisation, then, seems necessary in order to distinguish between people who are trustworthy or who are morally “good enough” to socialise with, and the rest who is not. This urge to know what category everyone belongs to seems to be characteristic of colonised peoples and, to use Ashcroft’s words, reflects their “crisis of identity.”

Boy and Kitty, as I will show now, can be seen as representatives of the two major categories, buckra and Black.

The Savages frequently travel between Kingston, where Boy and Kitty work and the girls go to school, and Miss Mattie’s home in St. Elizabeth, a small village in the country. “These two distinct places […] reflected the separate needs and desires of the two parents” (A 49), who in turn represent these two geographically as well as socially contrasting Jamaican locales. Kitty, on the one hand, comes alive in the country and embraces Nature which she believes is female, going barefoot into the bush, touching that beloved soil with her naked feet, believing in trees “which bore the fruit as they, the trees, wished – with no respect for ordained schedules” (A 52), having “studied with the old women around” (A 52), thus knowing everything about herbs which “could kill and […] cure” (A 52), about “Madame Fate,” “Sleep-and-Walk,” “Ramgoat-dash-along,” “Dead-man-get-up” (A 52), all these names evoking a sense of African superstition. Boy, on the other hand, feels visibly out of place and ill at ease in the countryside. He “armed himself against it, carrying newspapers and books called Savage himself. However, as the first Savage who came to Jamaica, Boy’s great-grandfather, burned all his slaves alive, “savage” in the sense of “very cruel” (Longman Dictionary) is not in the least ironical, but terribly accurate.

50 According to African beliefs, babies “conceived in buckra rape […] have no soul” (A 35). In Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved, Sethe’s mother throws all her babies from white men away: “[w]ithout names, she threw them” (Beloved 62).

51 Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back, 8.
and liquor, and a Swiss watch to mark off the time” (A 49), thus mimicking the English coloniser who empties time with his “European ways of measuring a ‘universal’ space and time.” While Kitty probably can tell the time by the sun and the stars, Boy feels vulnerable without his sophisticated gadgets. While for Kitty time and place are inextricably intertwined, Boy separates time from place by measuring time with modern techniques rather than with the help of landmarks. For that reason, Kitty, in contrast to Boy, identifies with the country. She has “a sense of Jamaica that her husband would never have” (A 52). Her sense of selfhood is inseparably linked to the place where she grew up, the forests of the Jamaican countryside. This is also the reason why Kitty, as opposed to Boy, is unable to feel at home in New York, in fact even in Kingston. For her, ‘home’ is indivisibly connected with a specific place and thus cannot be transferred to another location. For Boy, who sees no correlation between place and space, ‘home’ is an empty expression, ‘empty space,’ and therefore attributable to any geographical place. Geographical locale, then, both determines and reflects the social position of the colonised, thereby influencing his or her sense of identity.

In a wider sense, Kitty and Boy not only represent country and town, but also Africa and England. Boy, with a skin so light that he can pass for white, a surname known all over Jamaica as that of an influential plantation owner family, and his contempt of Jamaica’s African heritage, embodies the British Empire. Kitty, with a slightly darker complexion, her knowledge of African beliefs and traditions, her deep love for “her people” (A 52), and a surname, Freeman, which conveys what her ancestors were, namely freed men, former slaves, symbolises Africa.52

As I mentioned above, England and Africa are mentally present in nearly all aspects of Jamaican life. The ubiquity of England in the two novels becomes evident, inter

52 Kitty’s parents have both brown skin and wavy hair. It is noteworthy that she has a white grandmother (i.e. Miss Mattie’s mother was white), which is “not so ordinary as a white grandfather,” as Fanon explains. This might be one contributing reason for Miss Mattie’s high reputation. As it says in Black Skin White Masks: “[i]t is an honor to be the daughter of a white woman. That proves that one was not ‘made in the bushes.’” Fanon, 46. In other words, someone who has a white mother is considered more decent than someone whose father is white.
alia, in figuratively used expressions such as ‘the crown,’ ‘khaki’ or ‘tea and toast,’ representing ‘the monarchy,’ ‘colonialism’ and ‘British lifestyle’ respectively. This use of metonymy, i.e. tropes in which one unit symbolises another associated unit, makes the “social, cultural, and political forces” of the texts visible.\textsuperscript{53} It seems that most Jamaicans, in contrast to the clear, even though quite naïve, picture which they have of England – “England was where Charles Dickens had come from” (\textit{A 36}) – have a rather vague idea of Africa. They do not know, for instance, that many of the words which they use in everyday life derive from African languages, such as the West-Indian word for papaya, ‘pawpaw,’ which “was the name of [it in] one of the languages of Dahomey;” but of course “[t]hey did not know about […] the Kingdom of Dahomey” either (\textit{A 20}).\textsuperscript{54} This is due to Britain’s subtle ways of maintaining imperial power over the colony via hegemony. The people in Jamaica had deliberately been kept in ignorance about their own history, which was quite easy as all teaching material in every school was forwarded and controlled by the Colonial Office in London. Schoolchildren learned primarily the history of the British monarchs; the history of Jamaica was taught only in so far as it put a favourable light on England. Furthermore school boards made Jamaican children read English classics with the aim of turning them into conformist subjects who would adopt English values and make them their own. As a consequence, people did not know much about their past of slavery. They did not know, for instance, “that of all the slave societies in the New World, Jamaica was considered among the most brutal” (\textit{A 18}), or “that the death rate of Africans in Jamaica under slavery exceeded the rate of birth” (\textit{A 19}), since all they had been told was “that their ancestors had been pagan” (\textit{A 18}).

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{The Empire Writes Back} 51. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin refer to Homi Bhabha for whom “it is preferable to read the tropes of the text as metonymy [instead of metaphor], which symptomizes the text, reading through its features the social, cultural, and political forces which traverse it.”

\textsuperscript{54} The Kingdom of Dahomey was a Western African kingdom in what is now central Benin. It was most powerful in the 18\textsuperscript{th} – 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, not least due to the slave trade with Europe. The society of Dahomey was strictly divided into royalty, commoners and slaves. The latter ones were captured during the wars with other nations. Source: \texttt{http://concise.britannica.com}.
Not knowing one’s past means not knowing one’s place in history. In other words, to know one’s place in history, one’s roots, is the essential basis for everyone’s development of self. Being denied this knowledge means being denied an identity. Hegemony, as it was practised by the English, almost erased people’s awareness of Africa as a place present in Jamaica. Hardly anyone in Cliff’s fiction seems to notice that “so many aspects of their lives” merely were “an imitation of England” (A 22). Clare is in her early thirties when, in her search for identity, she finally understands this, and returns to Jamaica, to her roots, in order to connect place and self and thus become whole.

As a twelve-year-old, however, Clare feels “split into two parts – white and not white, town and country […] Boy and Kitty” (A 119). Her childhood is privileged. Although she is dependent on a scholarship, the Savages are wealthier than the vast majority of Jamaicans. Clare’s foremost advantage seems to be her light skin. She is frequently told that she has “a chance to leave that narrow little island behind” (NTH 110), whereby ‘chance’ always implies a chance on account of her light skin. At the same time, it can be argued, this light complexion is the greatest obstacle to Clare’s search for identity, because it encourages her parents to push her into a false identity, an identity which takes her more than thirty years to expose and then reject in favour of one which she can embrace wholeheartedly. Boy drums it into his elder daughter that she comes “from his people – white people” (A 127) and thus denies Clare her African heritage. When she draws the conclusion that she must be coloured, since her mother is coloured, Boy gets angry: “You are my daughter. You’re white” (A 73). Kitty does not care to correct this view. She “abandons” Clare the day she was born, handing her over to Boy in the peculiar assumption “that a light-skinned child was by common law, or traditional practice, the child of the whitest parent. This parent would pass this light-skinned daughter on to a white husband, so she would have lighter and lighter babies – this, after all, was how genetics was supposed to work, moving toward the preservation of whiteness” (A
129). In a way, then, Kitty is as racist as her husband. She, too, denies her elder daughter access to her African traits, thereby concealing from her the history of her people, which is also her history, distorting the truth of her place in history, and as a consequence making Clare’s search for identity more difficult than necessary. However, when Clare becomes interested in the Holocaust and begins to draw parallels between the suffering of the Jews and that of the African slaves who were shipped to Jamaica, she is on the right path. Learning about the life and death of Anne Frank, for instance, is a milestone in Clare’s development of self. Her fascination with the Jewish girl reflects Clare’s desire to discover her own history; it is an indication that she is “reaching [...] for an explanation of her own life” (A 72). Confused by her teachers’ strange statements on the Holocaust, Clare turns to her father. Yet Boy refuses to further discuss the matter when Clare insists that there are similarities between the persecution of the Jews and the treatment of Black people. He seems incapable of defending his ideology against his daughter’s naive, but nevertheless logical, reasoning, and abruptly ends their conversation: “[e]nough ... enough,” Boy exclaims furiously, “I don’t think you should try to understand something which is beyond your comprehension” (A 75).

Both her parents refuse to acknowledge their elder daughter’s cultural heritage. It is Zoe, the black girl with whom she plays during her summer holidays in the countryside, who opens to Clare a world which her mother keeps to herself and father disapproves of. Their play is bounded “[n]ot by school or town,” but “by bush and river and mountain” (A 95). When they play they use “the mud from the roadbed to make dishes and cups for their tea parties” (A 93) and in the next moment “climb a star apple or custard tree,” abandoning “what was really a town pursuit for what the country held for them [...] making secret totems” and “‘deadly poison’” (A 94). City, in other words, turns into wilderness, England into Africa. It is

55 As Fanon describes this common aspiration of West-Indian people: “the race must be whitened [...] Whiten the race, save the race.” 47.
56 One teacher explained, that “the Jews embraced suffering,” and that “[t]he suffering of the Jews was similar [...] to the primitive religiosity of Africans, which had brought Black people into slavery” (A 71).
57 By ‘treatment of Black people’ I mean slavery as well as racial inequity.
Zoe who introduces Clare to her African heritage, her roots which she finally, after years of travelling through the world, returns to.

As I mentioned above, Zoe and Clare are a contrasting pair in many respects. While Clare is privileged, has well-off parents, lives in a posh area in Kingston and attends a fine school, Zoe is disadvantaged, lives with her mother in a one-room cabin on a small piece of land which Miss Mattie puts at their disposal so that they can make a modest living and so Zoe can attend the one-classroom country school of Mr Powell. Their places in society, then, are poles apart. Zoe might enjoy a high reputation within the underprivileged Black community, but Clare is indisputably at the top of the social ladder, whereas Zoe is at the bottom. Another essential difference between the two girls is the fact that Zoe already knows her place in society, whereas Clare still struggles with her identity, being constantly told what her place is by her parents and by her teachers, but not feeling at home there. Even though the two girls are of the same age, Zoe is considerably more mature than Clare. The darker girl understands the social hierarchy in Jamaica, as she tells her friend:

“Wunna is town gal, and wunna papa is buckra […] Dis place no matter a wunna a-tall, a-tall. Dis here is fe me territory. Kingston a fe wunna. Me will be here so all me life – me will be marketwoman like fe me mama. Me will have fe beg land fe me and fe me pickney to live pon. Wunna will go a England […] to university, and when we meet later we will be different smaddy. But we is different smaddy now” (A 118).

This also shows that Zoe realises what her prospects in life are. No matter how well she might perform at school, she will become a market woman just like her mother, she will raise her children on her own, without a husband to give her support; in short she will follow this

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58 This is of course a simplified representation. There are people who are still wealthier than the Savages, and people who suck on “the splintered bones of curried goat which some businessman had at lunch” (NTH 33).
59 You, your
60 Child, children
61 Somebody
pattern which is the norm among the poor in the country. Zoe also grasps that Clare has better prospects and will have the chance to study and to become somebody. Zoe knows that Clare is “a buckra girl” and that she, Zoe, has to keep “to her distance and her own place” (A 132). The geographical place in which she lives clearly determines her social position as well as her sense of selfhood. Her geographical locale is the country; her social place is among the country people. Zoe thus is in harmony with her identity.

Clare does not agree with Zoe regarding her, Clare’s, place. She impulsively expresses her feelings: “[m]e no town gal. And me no buckra” (A 118). Only a few hours later, however, when one of Miss Mattie’s labourers surprises the girls as they sunbathe naked by the river, she automatically drops her patois: “Get away, you hear. This is my grandmother’s land,” thus marking her place in society, “relying on the privilege she said she did not have” (A 122). When Clare claims a ‘black identity’ in this argument with Zoe, it seems as if she spontaneously articulates something which she unconsciously bears within her. At this point, Clare does not really know where she belongs. She feels at home in the country, she feels empathy with the country people, but her parents keep telling her that her place is Kingston, and later England or America. They keep telling her that her place is among white people. They do not approve of her friendship with a Black country girl. As Kitty tells her, “[y]ou have to learn once and for all just who you are in this world” (A 150). Kitty and Boy demand that Clare takes on an identity which they think will be ‘for her own best,’ but which Clare does not feel comfortable with; hence her years of searching for her true identity.

At the age of twelve, Clare is obviously well aware of her African heritage, despite Boy’s lectures on whiteness. She defends her right to love the bushes of Jamaica against Zoe, telling her “dis is as much fe me place as fe wunna. Fe me people been here long, long time too. We even been slaves” (A 118). Some years later, in New York, she will slap it
into her father’s face: “My mother was a nigger [...] And so am I” (*NTH* 104). Yet her expulsion from her grandmother’s land when she accidentally shoots Miss Mattie’s bull, and the process by which she is to be transformed into a ‘lady,’ make her suppress this awareness for quite some time. Clare is sent to live with Miss Beatrice, an elderly relative of Boy, “to learn rules and laws” (*A* 149). The girl is to model herself on the old lady of whom Boy says “she is a decent woman” (*A* 150). As a matter of fact, however, Miss Beatrice is a racist or, to use Kitty’s euphemism: “she is narrow-minded about colored people” (*A* 151). It is noteworthy here that Boy describes his relative as ‘decent,’ with the very same adjective which Miss Ruthie had used as an antonym for ‘buckra.’ This shows just how big the gap is between those Jamaicans who consider themselves white and those who accept that they are mixed: they use the same words yet with different meanings; they speak the same language, English, while at the same time their languages are poles apart. Clare is lost between two worlds: one in which ‘decent’ means that you are proud of what you are, and one in which ‘decent’ means that you despise what you actually are and consequently pretend to be something else, something ‘lighter,’ something ‘better.’ Kitty firmly marks in which world Clare’s place is as opposed to her own, Kitty’s, place: “[t]here are no opportunities for someone like you here [in Jamaica]. I don’t want to leave Jamaica because my place is here” (*A* 150). She makes clear that Clare does not belong to her, Kitty’s, people, but to the “narrow minded people in this world” and therefore has “to learn to live among them” (*A* 151). The direction she gives, however, does not prove to be helpful for the twelve-year-old child. Clare is shown to her place in the ‘white’ society, but feels unable to adjust.

Nevertheless, the old lady’s place is significant to Clare’s development of self in that it serves her as an eye-opener. Miss Beatrice’s ideas about coloured people are not so

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62 Miss Beatrice apparently thinks that she herself is purely white. Yet this seems not very likely considering that the family has been in Jamaica for generations and therefore most probably has mixed with other races at some point. On the other hand, her sister, Miss Winifred, has eyes which are “the deepest blue possible” (*A* 161).

63 Miss Ruthie had said that Clare had a “big fat buckra papa,” but that her mother, in contrast, was “a decent woman” (*A* 94). See page 18.
different from Boy’s views with which Clare of course is familiar since she has been lectured by her father about race for years. Yet Boy, in contrast to his relative, is too educated to show his racism as openly as she does. Boy certainly makes racist comments every now and then, but he would never abuse a Black person as Miss Beatrice does with her servant, Minnie Bogle, whom she regularly slaps with her stick – the old lady seems to have missed that slavery was abolished a long time ago. The turning-point comes when the old lady, after one of her racist outbursts, tells Clare: “[y]ou’re not so pure yourself, you know.” This makes Clare reflect about herself, and she comes to the conclusion that, in fact, “she wasn’t. But at least she didn’t hate.” Her reaction to this insight is immediate, she “looked away from Miss Beatrice – down to her knees, across which she folded her arms” (A 158). She literally shuts herself off from the old lady. Having just been rejected by the African side of her family, Clare realises that the “other” side does not want her either. By shooting Miss Mattie’s bull, Clare proved herself unworthy to be a Freeman. At the same time, she is informed that she is not ‘pure’ enough for a Savage. Kitty had aimed to show the girl to her place, yet it turns out that she pointed to an empty space. Clare is excluded from her grandmother’s land without having a place of refuge. Had she felt split between the different worlds of her parents – town and country, England and Africa – this expulsion tears her apart, uprooting her not only geographically but also socially and mentally, thus causing her crisis of identity.

As we have seen in the first part of the discussion, Clare spends decades searching for her identity. She lives in New York and London and travels for years through several countries until she eventually understands that she must return to Jamaica, to the country, to her grandmother’s land, to achieve the wholeness of self which she so desperately longs for. This last part of my analysis deals with Clare’s attempt to finally connect place and identity.
Clare moves back to her homeland “because there was nowhere else” (*NTH* 193). Again she chooses a geographical locale by excluding other alternatives, in the same way as she once had chosen London. However, while the mother country had been a place where Clare had *hoped* to find her identity, Jamaica is to be her final destination. Jamaica, the very place where she had been rejected from both branches of her family; Jamaica, where she had been sent away from her grandmother’s land and separated from her friends in Kingston; Jamaica, where her twelve year old self had been ripped apart. This choice shows that Clare finally feels disposed to confront her past. As a student in England she had decided to do graduate work on the Renaissance for the only reason that “it did not concern [her]” (*NTH* 194). Now, thirty-three years old, she is ready to relate to her own story, prepared and willing to get involved. Clare now sees that knowing her place in history, her people’s history, is the key to finding her identity, and she grasps that, in order to find this place, she must abandon her position as an outside observer: “I am in it,” she eventually understands, “[i]t involves me” (*NTH* 194). In order to acquire a sound knowledge of the history of Jamaica, she not only consults the university library, but also speaks to old people, listens to myths and legends, and visits places where the past is still alive. This “new sort of history” (*NTH* 194), a history from the colonised subject’s perspective, she teaches to a small group of underprivileged teenagers. Clare understands the value of her teaching, as she says: “It’s the best thing […] the only thing I have done” (*NTH* 194). Yet after two years of useful work, she still feels divided. She reaches the conclusion that, to achieve wholeness, more drastic measures are required than merely educating young Jamaicans about their history.

When she joins a group of terrorists, Clare does not pretend to follow higher purposes but states bluntly what pushes her: “My own needs” (*NTH* 192). She permits the self-appointed revolutionaries to use Miss Mattie’s land as their base. Before they let her into the group, however, Clare has a kind of job-interview with the leader who proves to be an
attentive listener. Clare is asked to tell something about herself, and they have barely exchanged a few words when this woman puts her finger on Clare’s problem: “You stress place” (*NTH* 189), she remarks, thereby suggesting that there is a discord between self and place. The importance which Clare attaches to place becomes even more evident when she clarifies to whom she owes her allegiance: “if anything […] to the place my grandmother made.” In a way then, Clare is still “outside.” While she acknowledges that she is part of something, namely history and place, she seems concerned about keeping her fellow human beings at a distance. Aiming to meet her own needs and not owing her allegiance to anyone leaves her rather detached from the people around her. Clare’s search for wholeness of self, so it seems, is focussed on the significance of place and history only.

Moving to her grandmother’s land which she now realises is her geographical place, however, does not solve Clare’s crisis of identity, nor is it sufficient that she has found her place in history. To connect place and identity, Clare is convinced that she has to “live out” these places. Like her mother who knew of trees “which bore the fruit as they, the trees, wished” (*NTH* 18), Clare believes that place, in particular “the bushes” of Jamaica, is alive, in the sense that it has a soul. She is convinced that Nanny’s spirit is still breathing in the wilderness of Jamaica, and she feels spiritually connected to this place and its history.64 A “fulfilment” of this place, she assumes, can only be achieved by “evoking the name of Nanny,” and in that way “making something new […] making history” (*NTH* 5). This, she believes, is the ultimate key to her restoration. The urge to achieve wholeness has become so

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64 Nanny is a historical figure, known for having united the Maroons across Jamaica. She became their military, cultural and spiritual leader in their resistance against the British. Legend has it that she had super-human powers, as Michelle Cliff writes, she could “catch a bullet between her buttocks” (*A* 19). Yet it seems more probable, as renowned historian Edward Braithwaite suggests, that she caught the bullets with her hands as it was practised in some parts of Africa, and that the buttock story is an offensive variant told by British colonials (not least since the story continues that she *farted* the bullets back; Michelle Cliff does not mention this latter part). Nanny was presumably born in the 1680s in Africa (the Gold Coast, now Ghana), and died in Jamaica between 1758 and 1762. Some sources say that she was of royal African blood and had come to Jamaica as a free woman; she might even have brought slaves of her own. In 1976 she was made a National Heroine of Jamaica. [http://www.jamaicans.com/articles/primearticles/queennanny.shtml](http://www.jamaicans.com/articles/primearticles/queennanny.shtml) and [www.jnht.com/jamaica](http://www.jnht.com/jamaica) (Jamaica National Heritage Trust).
strong that she does not care by what means to attain it, not even when the method includes killing people. In fact, the very murder of the members of a British-American film crew is supposed to become what “she hopes, is her restoration” (*NTH* 87).

The terrorists, among them Clare, are discovered and are killed by the military only minutes before they can perform their attack on the actors who are shooting an episode of Nanny’s life. Like her, they were betrayed. Clare’s search for identity comes to a sudden end before she can connect place and self. Clare thus never achieves the wholeness she was so desperately longing for.

In conclusion, I have argued that place in Michelle Cliff’s novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* has a key role in the characters’ search for identity. By relying on Ashcroft’s, Griffith’s and Tiffin’s definition of place, I have explained this rather complex topos in post-colonial literatures. Then I have explored the various aspects of this concept and shown what effects place has on the protagonists.

As we have seen, a motel in Georgia becomes a turning point in Boy’s life regarding his development of self. He had always secretly considered himself ‘pure,’ but it is not until the family has left Jamaica that he publicly claims to be a white man. Boy takes advantage of the anonymity of the United States to leave his mixed heritage behind. In a place where nobody knows his family background, he decides to get rid of his true cultural identity in favour of one which is better suited to ‘blend in.’ Boy’s sense of selfhood is entirely detached from any geographical locale. Accordingly, he is able to alter his identity as he changes his place.

Kitty, in contrast, is deeply rooted in her African heritage. She is attached to Jamaica, in particular the countryside. For her, place and identity are inseparable. Thus she cannot stay in New York but has to return to her place, Jamaica, to reunite place and self.

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65 Michelle Cliff describes both the historical event (*A* 21) and the movie scene (*NTH* 206).
Even so, the time in New York is significant for Kitty’s development of self in that it teaches her to do what she feels is right, rather than what is expected of her.

A major catalyst for Clare’s development of identity is London where she consciously acknowledges her black cultural heritage for the first time. As a child in Jamaica she had certainly claimed a black identity, yet at the same time marked her place in society as the light-skinned daughter of a plantation owner descendant. As a teenager Clare was torn between what she thought she might be and what knew she was supposed to be. In London she realises what she actually is: Black. Having thus found her cultural identity, she still has to connect self and place in order to become whole. Yet for Clare, in contrast to Kitty, merely returning to Jamaica does not suffice to achieve that wholeness. Kitty, who grew up in the country, had a natural bond to ‘the bushes’ which Clare lacks. Clare has spent a few summer holidays at her grandmother’s place and has some rather vague memories of Kitty and herself exploring the wilderness, but she has no genuine relationship to the land. The ancient knowledge of African tradition and superstition which Kitty had absorbed since she was little, Clare aims to learn with scholarly detachment now that she is a mature woman. Not being able to really feel the spirits of the forests, she joins a group of equally intellectual so-called revolutionaries in an attempt to bring the legends of Nanny to life. In that way she hopes to become a part of the whole, place and spirit, thus connecting place and self. It seems ironic that Clare meets her end in a similar way as Nanny whom she had endeavoured to emulate.

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66 The leader, for instance, has a degree in classics. She is not a Jamaican, probably not even from the West Indies (her father was a goldminer, which points to South America). As to African traditions, she does not even know what duppies are (duppies are ghosts, the spirits of Maroons) (NTH 193-194).
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