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Book Review: If I Could Write this in Fire

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If I Could Write this in Fire. 2009. Michelle Cliff. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 89 pp. \$21.95 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Alexis Pauline Gumbs¹

*Somewhere in the landscape past noon
I shall leave a dark print
of the me that I am
and who I am not*
-Audre Lorde "Prologue" in *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973)

Consider the flame. Flickering. Transformative. Changing shape. That heat. That glow around those of us that, according to every story that keeps this anti-social society together, should be burning in hell. What is your flamboyance? That which keeps your flame alive, that which lives on you, bright through you that power had intended to incinerate. Where on your body, where on your lips, where in your fingertips, where in your hair, does the blackened narrative emerge? What hollowed out remnant do you dance in now and what is the significance of what your longing remembers? Consider the flame. What will not embrace us even when we quiet our deviance? What cannot be forgotten even when it is not known? What will not destroy us even when we are flagrantly ourselves?

Michelle Cliff's 2009 collection of creative nonfiction pieces, *If I Could Write this in Fire*, includes and expands her most remembered non-fiction work and remains concerned with the impact of the writing life in the face of marginalization and under the specter of death. Cliff's groundbreaking piece of experimental non-fiction "If I Could Write This in Fire" made its first impact in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, the very first publication of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press edited by Barbara Smith in 1983. *Home Girls*, a crucial anthology in the emergence of black feminist literature, made an indelible mark on black women's writing, insisting that black feminists *existed*. In 1979, while compiling *Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue*, which would become the basis of *Home Girls*, Barbara and Beverly Smith reminded a black feminist lesbian audience "There is... no guarantee that we or our movement will survive long enough to become safely historical. We must document ourselves now" (Smith and Smith, 1979: 62). Cliff's work in *If I Could Write This in Fire* continues to question the possibility, the meaning and the form of survival under oppressive conditions that often erase the stories of the oppressed.

Cliff's stated intention in this collection is to "depict personal fragmentation and describe political reality through the particular lens of the colonized" (xi). Cliff depicts the fragmentation of the colonized subject while also pushing back against it. By relating scenes from her own travels as a writer and scholar across the American and German landscapes, Cliff reveals and reverses a colonial situation through which her body should be accessible land, blank space for the writing of the dreams of the normative. Cliff's gaze queers the people she meets through her descriptions of and responses to their presumptions that they are normal. From American Studies scholars in Germany who

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fetishize the racialized mystique of the American South while ignoring the history of genocidal violence surrounding the concentration camp in their own cities, to a woman in a diner nurturing a baby doll on the Day of the Dead, Cliff resituates the people she encounters in ways that disrupt the national and reproductive fictions in which they would otherwise be characters. The “queer impact” that I am assigning to Cliff describes an interruption in the social reproduction of the contexts that she interacts with by using the lens of her (usually invisible) black Caribbean lesbian subjectivity to challenge, question or reframe the assumptions of the erstwhile normal population of her non-narrative trajectory.

Cliff is the anti-Kerouac. Cliff tellingly ends *her* road trip piece “Cross Country: A Documentary in 10 Jump Cuts” with the following anecdote:

An old lady sells bunches of pink and purple sweet peas at a farmers’ market in a town on the central coast of California... and tells me she came out here from Arkansas during the dust bowl. All along the route she broadcast the seed for the followers from the open back of a Ford pick-up. “I reckon I’ve left my mark,” she says. (48)

Like Cliff, the woman selling the flowers has a creative and self-conscious relationship to her own displacement. What forms of life, and what possibilities do the displaced leave in their wake? Offering this as the last word in her documentation of her own journey, Cliff allows this woman’s story about scattering seeds all over the American landscape to stand in for her own impact on the places and people that she queers by interacting with them. This concern with leaving one’s “mark” is not merely a question of interaction; it is a meditation on space and mortality. All along her journey Cliff, as narrator, remarks on the legacies of people who become queer ghosts of the west through her understanding of them. She offers the epitaph of Ben Hodges, “Self-styled Desperado, A Colorful Pioneer, 1856-1929,” for our reflection, reframing it with queer potential. These fragments are occasions for Cliff’s own questions. How will I be remembered? What of my life will be visible afterwards? How will the invisible remain? Especially since I cannot write this in fire...

Cliff continues this meditation in “Lynchburg 2003,” reframing her brief stop in Lynchburg South Carolina through the newspaper documentation of Ota Benga, a captured and celebrated pygmy who committed suicide in Lynchburg, imagining the queer and diasporic longing that exceeds his brief appearances in the historical record. In “The Thing Behind the Trees,” she meditates on the actual the mark of a dead body when an insistent cab driver shows her the outline of a dead woman’s body, frozen into the ground behind some trees in rural New England. The driver describes the woman as a “bookkeeper or something,” murdered because she dared to take a walk alone. Employing the alchemical relationship to history that she performs in her historical fiction *Free Enterprise*, Cliff reimagines the dead woman as an artist, explosive, burning herself into the forest floor: “Silhouette of Ashes, scorched, return to earth, release of soul through fire” (77). Again, we are reminded of Cliff’s initial desire to write of *her* life in fire. Cliff’s meditations on the limits of the physical and verbal traces left of individual lives offer a redefinition of the meaning of life through an engagement of the significance of writing in a social context wherein much remains unseen.

Cliff's final meditation, "In My Heart A Darkness," bookends the introduction, "Journey into Speech," recontextualizing the function of written language from the viewpoint of the racialized and deviant subject. The title points to the fact that Cliff's own racialization is often invisible. As a light skinned "Afro-Saxon" (person of British and African ancestry) Cliff is often "read" as a white woman, but like the stories of the queer ancestors Cliff finds throughout her journey, the textual representation leaves much to be desired. There is something more "at the heart" that only fiction and speculation can approach. The unreadable spaces between the lines both undermine and supplement the visuality of the page. Cliff insists that there is always something between the lines, always something unsaid. Appropriately the layout provides generous amounts of space between the words and ideas in this collection. Cliff frames blankness in order to assert that the story between the lines is what will save us. Faith and the creative process of reaching for an unprovable truth are survival skills.

Citing Glenn Ligon at the Carnegie Museum, Cliff points out the racial implications of writing itself: "*We are the ink that gives the white page meaning*" (80). What about the invisible ink, though? The ink that does not show up on the page due to gaps in understanding, due to assumptions about what a particular life means. Cliff, using creative non-fiction to describe her journey, which takes place between the lines of the constant misunderstanding she navigates due to other people's assumptions about her and about life itself, offers an intervention into the relationship between language and survival in an oppressive society. Challenging the function of race as an optical relationship based on visible contrast, Cliff unearths the shadow narratives, the traces, the clues, the spooky outlines that we must fill in ourselves. *If I Could Write This in Fire* is a pedagogical text because it teaches a reading practice. Watching Cliff fill in the missing stories behind, underneath and around the clues she comes upon in her sojourn through space and time, reminds us that the language is actually inadequate for both our survival and our understanding. In order for the dead to survive we must reach for them with the faith of fiction, divining fullness from the arbitrary remnants that our culture reproduces in its social languages, but we cannot control how the future will understand (or misunderstand) us.

Cliff's text actualizes the poetic suggestion of Audre Lorde's poem "Prologue." In fact we could understand Lorde's poem as a prologue to Cliff's work – here the act of writing and publishing burns, printing both truth and fiction onto our lived experiences. I would not simplify Cliff's nuanced meditation into a lesson plan, but I do think it can inspire concrete and useful exercises in creative writings, literature and history classrooms. Following Cliff, students could use historical artifacts, old headlines, grave markers, urban legends and encounters with strangers to perform their own critical readings and imaginative research at the intersection of their own social significance in any landscape and the meaning of the signs around them. And like the classroom, chemistry, like this article, like the practice of knowledge production, the process will be unstable. What traces will the flame of our desire for knowledge leave behind? What will it burn up? Who will read the ashes and how?

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