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## The Complexities of Identity: Teaching Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* to High School Students

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When I decided to return to the role of student in order to obtain my graduate degree, my hope was I could bury myself within two genres of literature: adolescent and multicultural. Now, a year later, I have read several books in both genres and consistently find myself grappling with a single theme: identity. This may be due to the fact that both adolescent literature and multicultural literature readily lend themselves to the investigation of this theme, but I believe my fascination with it also stems from my experience as a high school English teacher. So far, much of my teaching career has been spent in classrooms filled with seventh, eighth, and ninth graders, and I have witnessed the struggle of these students to define themselves on a daily basis. Sometimes, it even seems like these students change their identities by the hour.

While changes in identity manifest themselves in students of all cultures, such changes are most easily observed in students who want to belong to two cultural groups at once. In particular, I am reminded of a Muslim student at the school where I teach who comes to school dances in traditional Muslim garb and

who subsequently changes into pants as soon as possible after arriving in order to integrate herself into the dominant culture of the American teenager. As if the struggle to define one's identity during adolescence is not challenging enough, this student must also create an identity for herself while straddling two cultures.

Being more than familiar with the struggle to find one's identity, I was immediately drawn to the plight of Clare, the biracial protagonist in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*. After being introduced to this novel in one of my graduate courses, I decided to further explore Cliff's assertion that the survival of a biracial person is dependent upon whether or not this person is able to create an identity for himself/herself. To do this, I investigate the current research on biracial children, the historical context of the novel, and the influences on Clare's identity. Then, I use the novel itself to suggest biracial people must develop identities for themselves if they are to continue living. Finally, I conclude by discussing the pedagogical implications of studying identity in *Abeng* and in multicultural literature in general.

Although this comes as no surprise to teachers who are witnessing shifts in the racial and ethnic composition of their classes, Barbara Tizard and Ann Phoenix in their book *Black, White or Mixed Race?* state that current data indicates "there are a growing number of people in racially mixed relationships and marked increases in the number of people of mixed parentage" (25). As children with mixed parentages become more common, one must question the impact this will have on their identities. Will such children classify themselves as black, white, or biracial? How will society define them? How will society's definition of them affect their lives socially, economically, and emotionally? In the past, it was believed people of mixed-race would suffer from an identity crisis. This sentiment is echoed in *Black, White, or Mixed Race?* when the authors assert: "The prevailing view of mixed children is that they have identity problems because of their ambiguous social position...the stereotype of the tortured misfit" (39).

However, recent research suggests this notion of mixed-raced children suffering from an identity crisis is fictitious. As Tizard

and Phoenix state, “It is now much more commonly recognized than previously that people of ‘mixed parentage’ largely do not suffer from racialised identity problems [. . .]” (54). As evidence of this conclusion, Tizard and Phoenix cite a study which suggests “that up to the age of 9, at any rate, the majority of mixed-parentage children did not suffer from identity problems; she [the researcher] found them to be happy and secure with an intermediate identity” (48).

Yet, this conclusion seems premature when one considers the works of authors with mixed-race parentage, such as Michelle Cliff. In fact, Cliff undermines recent research’s assertions that biracial children will not fall victim to identity crises when she comments in interviews on the similarities between herself and *Abeng*’s protagonist Clare. She is quoted as saying, “I was a girl similar to Clare and have spent most of my life and most of my work exploring my identity as a light-skinned Jamaican, the privilege and damage that comes from that identity” (Dagbovie 96). Obviously, Cliff, like Clare, struggles, or struggled, to define herself.

However, before one can understand the challenge both author and character face in defining themselves, one must first understand the history of mixed race in the novel’s setting: Jamaica. According to Tizard and Phoenix:

In the West Indies, a three-caste system operated. Because there were very few white women available, settled concubinage between white planters and black slaves was an open and common practice. Their offspring constituted a separate caste, with a status intermediate between black and white. They were usually free, often well educated, and worked as overseers, teachers, clerks, skilled tradesmen, or even slave-holding planters. From the 1730s the Jamaican legislature passed numerous private acts conferring on the ‘mulatto’ offspring of individual planters the rights and privileges of white people, including the right to inherit. [. . .] However, as a group they had few civil rights, and were despised by many white people al-

though often envied by black people. (26)

In short Tizard and Phoenix demonstrate that because people of mixed heritage in the West Indies are treated better than those who are black, the whiter a person’s skin is, the better life will be for him/her. This same idea is echoed by Kim Robinson-Walcott in her article “Claiming an Identity We Thought They Despised.” She states, “[. . .], the whiter the skin, the more one’s options are expanded” (96).

As if these scholars’ works are not proof enough of the divide between black and white, the narrator in *Abeng* frequently refers to it as well: “Africans were mixed with Sephardic Jews, Chinese, Syrians, Lebanese, East Indians—but the large working class, and class of poor people, was Black” (Cliff 5). It stands to reason that if a majority of the working class and the poor consists of black people, then white skin is cherished. Furthermore, it seems the status gap between white and black is large enough that those who can pass for white will do so and will go to great lengths to protect their identities.

This is true for Clare’s family, the Savages: “The definition of what a Savage was like was fixed by color, class, and religion, and over the years a carefully contrived mythology was constructed, which they used to protect their identities. When they were poor, and not all of them white, the mythology persisted” (30). As the Savages engaged in interracial relationships, bore mulatto offspring, and lost their wealth, creating stories which preserved their whiteness was their only method of maintaining a heightened social status. In fact, “if the too-dark skin of a newborn baby was in question, it would be countered with the life of a Savage who had ‘done his duty’ onboard the *H.M.S. Victory* with Nelson at Trafalgar” (30). Even when a member of the Savage family is too dark to pass as white, the Savages find a way through their “contrived mythology” to justify the action which led to this person’s existence. Simply put, the Savages feel passing as white is important enough that they are willing to deny dark family members the truth of their past in favor of maintaining social status.

Although *Black, White, or Mixed Race?* and *Abeng* accurately

describe the caste system in the West Indies, neither demonstrate the depth with which this system infiltrates West Indian society as Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* does. Thus, it is important to shift focus from *Abeng* to *The Farming of Bones* momentarily. Amabelle, the protagonist in this novel, is a dark-skinned Haitian who grows up with the white Senora Valencia in the Dominican Republic after Amabelle is orphaned. After the two have grown, Amabelle becomes a servant to Senora Valencia's family; however, an element of friendship still exists between the two women. Nonetheless, after her dark skinned daughter is born, Senora Valencia asks, "Amabelle, do you think my daughter will always be the color she is now? [ . . . ]. My poor love, what if she's mistaken for one of your people?" (Danticat 12). As this quotation demonstrates, even though Senora Valencia cares for Amabelle, Senora Valencia does not want her daughter to be dark skinned. She understands that doors will be closed to her daughter simply because of her skin color and indicates this by employing the word "poor" to describe Amabelle.

Moreover, the best example in this novel of the caste system's influence is found when Doctor Javier arrives to examine Senora Valencia's newborn twins. After learning the baby girl's umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck, Doctor Javier states, "Badly placed, around her neck? It's as if the other one tried to strangle her" (19). A reader can interpret this quotation in one of two ways. First, one may believe the white boy attempted to strangle his dark, twin sister out of mercy, knowing that his sister's life would be less privileged because of her skin color. On the other hand, one can interpret this event as the white boy murdering the dark girl because her skin color makes her inferior. Either way, babies are a symbol of innocence, and the fact that one baby tries to strangle the other while still in the womb, regardless of the reason for doing so, illustrates the dominance of the caste system in West Indian society, including Jamaica.

Unfortunately for Clare, it is in this society of white and black described above that she must find her identity. This becomes clear to the reader early in the novel when the narrator

indicates that Clare, in creating her identity, will have to choose between her white heritage and her black heritage: "The Black or the white? A choice would be expected of her, she thought" (Cliff 37). Society supports this supposition by denying Clare the opportunity to learn about her black heritage. One way in which society does this is through education, or at least, the pretense of education.

In school they were told that their ancestors had been pagan. That there had been slaves in Africa, where Black people had put each other in chains. They were given the impression that the whites who brought them here from the Gold Coast and the Slave Coast were only copying a West African custom. As though the whites had not named the Slave Coast themselves. (18)

As this quotation demonstrates, the curriculum which Clare is exposed to upholds white supremacy. First, it paints white people in a positive light by arguing that they did not create slavery; they just participated in a previously developed institution. In addition, this curriculum places the blame on black people for their fates as slaves. The line "that there had been slaves in Africa, where Black people had put each other in chains" implies black people allowed slavery to exist by permitting others of their color to enslave them. Again, the curriculum ignores the fact that if black people were first enslaved by other black people, those who were enslaved had as little choice in the matter as black people enslaved by white people.

A second outcome of Jamaica's educational system is that Clare does not learn about her ancestors' pasts as slaves. For example, the quotation below demonstrates how the educational system fails to teach Clare and her classmates about black ancestry in Jamaica.

They did not know that the death rate of Africans in Jamaica under slavery exceeded the rate of birth [ . . . ]. They did not know that some slaves worked with their faces locked in masks of tin, so they would not eat the sugar cane as they cut. Or that there were few white women on the island during slavery, and so the grand-

mothers of these people sitting in a church on a Sunday evening during mango season, had been violated again and again by the very men who whipped them. (19)

In not being taught this information, Clare does not learn about half of her past, namely her black past. Referring to this idea in her thesis "Claiming the Wholeness She Had Always Been Denied," Anke Johannmeyer asserts Clare's lack of knowledge about her black past complicates the discovery of her identity: "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" (22). Essentially, Johannmeyer argues that, unless one is aware of one's past, one cannot create an identity for herself. In the end then, society, through not allowing Clare to be educated about her black past, pushes Clare to identify herself as solely white.

Another manner in which society persuades Clare to identify herself as white is by praising her physical attributes. In describing Clare's appearance, the narrator states:

She was tall for her age, lanky, and as her father had noted, golden. Her wavy chestnut hair fell to her shoulders without any extraordinary means. On this island of Black and Brown, she had inherited her father's green eyes-which all agreed were her 'finest feature.' Visibly, she was the family's crowning achievement, combining the best of both sides, and favoring one rather than the other. (Cliff 61)

This passage reveals Clare is praised most for those traits which label her as white, such as her green eyes. However, in only complimenting Clare's white traits, society asserts its preference for whiteness. It also reveals that whiteness is based solely on skin color or "superficial image" and that the "complex identities" of biracial people can and should be forgotten if they can pass for white (Degbovie 98). Thus, the positive attention Clare's white features attract may influence her to develop an identity based on skin color rather than cultural heritage. In the end, society's admiration of Clare's white characteristics as

well as its positive portrayal of white people in school curricula insinuates Clare should develop an identity based solely upon her whiteness and not her blackness.

As if the weight of society is not enough pressure, Clare's identity crisis is further complicated by the mixed messages of her family and her family's friends concerning race and its connection with identity. In commenting on this correlation between others' ideas concerning race and one's own identity, Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David L. Brunnsma state, "What occurs within those [social] networks and the types of interactions that individuals have within those settings affects their choice of racial identity" (339). If this is true, one character who greatly influences Clare is her black, maternal grandmother Miss Mattie. Each summer Clare visits Miss Mattie, and it is here that Clare is exposed to the negative attitudes of black people toward white people. The reader, for example, learns Miss Mattie is not pleased about the fact that her daughter married a white man: "Her mother [Miss Mattie] had tried to stop the marriage, convinced that Boy was an inheritor of bad traits and a liking for rum" (Cliff 130). While this assertion by the narrator makes it appear as though Miss Mattie does not approve of Boy due to character flaws rather than skin color, Johannmeyer asserts the words "inheritor of bad traits" symbolize "character traits that are typical for a 'buckra,' i.e. a white or very light skinned person, specifically one representing the ruling class" (17). If Johannmeyer is correct, then skin color is the cause of Miss Mattie's feelings.

While this conclusion is significant in its own right, it becomes even more so when viewed through the lens of Tizard and Phoenix's work. They report that "studies of 'mixed relationships' and 'mixed parentage' generally find that many of the white families into which children are born are hostile, or at least anxious about their white relatives having children of mixed parentage" (41). The fact that Miss Mattie's feelings stem from skin color demonstrates the results of the aforementioned study can occur with black relatives as well. Unfortunately, the reader discovers this to be true later in the novel when Miss

Mattie states, “You know, you should never have married that man in the first place. Buckra [white] man is jus’ no good a-tall, a-tall” (Cliff 148). As one can see, Miss Mattie does not hold white people in high esteem. This includes her granddaughter too. When Clare misbehaves and kills Miss Mattie’s cow, Miss Mattie blames the behavior on Clare’s whiteness, not her blackness. “Miss Mattie had made a judgment—that Clare was only what she appeared to be; not of Miss Mattie at all, but of Boy’s side of the family” (145). This judgment, along with her reproachful comments about Boy, exposes Clare to the idea that blackness is superior to whiteness.

Contrasting Miss Mattie and her viewpoint that black is better than white is Miss Beatrice, a white and distinguished family friend Clare lives with after being banished from Miss Mattie’s home. For instance, when Clare suggests that she and Miss Beatrice attend an opera and Miss Beatrice mistakenly comes to believe the singer is black, she asserts, “In my day a colored woman would not have dared. Would not have been allowed...” (158). This comment exposes Clare to the societal criticism she will receive if she chooses a black identity instead of a white one. Furthermore, the reader comes to suspect there is an ulterior motive for sending Clare to Miss Beatrice’s home. In explaining to Clare why Boy has decided that she must stay with Miss Beatrice, Clare’s mother states, “Mrs. Phillips is a lady, and you are getting to the age when you will need to be a lady as well. She is from one of the oldest families in Jamaica. She has a good education. Good manners” (150).

While the meaning of Kitty’s language in this passage seems straightforward, it contains a hidden message: be white. This message is exposed when Kitty asserts Miss Beatrice “has a good education” and “good manners” as these characteristics are only associated with white people in the novel. In naming only these attributes, Kitty indirectly states Miss Beatrice will teach Clare how to be white. It seems as though Clare’s family, or most likely her father, hopes her stay with Miss Beatrice will teach Clare how to be white while also instilling in her a hatred for her blackness. Thus, in the end, Miss Beatrice and Miss Mattie

complicate Clare’s discovery of identity as they expose her to contradictory opinions concerning the superiority of whiteness and blackness.

To make matters worse, Clare’s own parents disagree on which heritage her identity should be based upon. In the fashion of Savage mythology, Clare’s father Boy views his daughter as white and nothing else. One day, in an attempt to create her identity, Clare asks her father, “If she [mother] is colored and you are white, doesn’t that make me colored?” (73). Boy’s response to this question is “No. You are my daughter. You’re white” (73). This quotation demonstrates Boy’s belief that because he is white, his daughter is white, and this fact is not open to negotiation or interpretation. Clare, despite having a black mother, is white. As Johannmeyer states, “Boy drums it into his elder daughter that she comes ‘from his people – white people’” (22). Really, Boy makes it clear to both Clare and the reader that the identity Clare chooses for herself must be based on her whiteness.

Contrasting the bullish nature of Clare’s father is the complacent nature of Clare’s mother Kitty. At times it appears Kitty does not want to be part of Clare’s life. To begin with, she is not affectionate toward her daughter: “If her daughter had to pick out a fault in her mother it would be her sense that Kitty held herself back from any contact which was intimate [ . . . ]” (Cliff 50-51). Besides not showing any affection, Kitty is also not involved when decisions concerning Clare are made: “As far as her daughters were concerned, Kitty Freeman Savage usually complied with her husband’s judgment” (76). This causes one to conclude, as Dagbovie does, that “Clare is never really her mother’s daughter; even her maternal grandmother, Miss Mattie, always considers her to be her father’s child” (94). The narrator in *Abeng* gives the reader this same information in no uncertain terms stating, “[ . . . ], she [Clare] had been handed over to Boy the day she was born” (Cliff 128).

As one can see, Kitty is detached from her daughter, and according to Gomez, this stems from her uneasiness with her own mixed race:

She knows the African ways of her people and refuses to bury their value beneath disdain. She has learned to articulate her racial pride from an elementary school teacher who was a Garveyite in New York, but the confusion of allegiance (to black/white, colonialist/enslaved) leaves Kitty emotionally distant from her concern for social ills and her fair-skinned daughter. While she intimately knows the hymns and herbs of the descendants of former slaves she cannot totally deny the privilege her skin color provides for her. Her connection to the other island blacks remains confined to her disbursement of second-hand clothes to the needy and an occasional burst of anger at her husband's belittling remarks about blacks around them. (6)

This quotation shows that Kitty herself has not yet come to terms with her mixed-race identity. She knows a great deal about the culture of her black ancestors, yet her whiteness prevents her from becoming involved or immersed in the black community. For instance, "she would not have swabbed the cut foot of an old man, or assisted at the birth of a baby, [ . . . ]" (Cliff 52). She, like Clare, is a victim of identity crisis and perhaps her silence regarding Clare is meant to push Clare towards her father. In effect, this may force Clare to develop a strong relationship with her father, one of the few people who can assist her in creating a white identity. Essentially, driving Clare in the direction of her father gives her the opportunity to lead a successful life, and Kitty wants this for her daughter. She best demonstrates this in the scene after her daughter kills Miss Mattie's cow when she thinks, "That the thing had to be stopped here. That Clare could go to a university and take on a profession. That Clare would most likely marry a white man and move into a life which would make life easier" (149). Obviously, Kitty does not want Clare to lead the same life she has.

The problem then becomes that Kitty sends Clare mixed messages as to whether whiteness or blackness is more desirable. While Kitty's silence and passivity toward Clare may suggest to Clare that her identity should be based upon her white heritage,

Kitty inadvertently implies their black heritage is important as well. For starters, Kitty "saved most of her tenderness for people she barely knew" (52). Although the narrator does not specifically state these people are black, one concludes this based upon the fact this quotation is in a paragraph which also describes Kitty's relationships with black people. Since Clare rarely views her mother's passion, this display of "tenderness" must hint to Clare that black people are important or else Kitty would not display such emotion. Furthermore, Kitty exhibits respect and admiration for the culture of black people and the land they inhabit: "Kitty knew the uses of Madam Fate, a weed that could kill and that could cure. [ . . . ] As a girl she had studied with the old women around and they had taught her songs like the one the funeral procession had sung. She was moved that such things had survived" (53). To see her mother attach emotion to something must indicate the importance of that item to Clare, and once again, the item Kitty is assigning value to is linked with blackness. Most importantly, the only time in which Clare feels a connection to her mother is when they are exploring the land. The following passage demonstrates this: "The occasional trips Clare took with Kitty into the bush were burned into the girl's memory – they were among the best memories she would ever have, even if she lived to be a hundred" (128). These trips and these memories contain sentimental value for Clare, and since they are connected with the land, which is the domain of black people, the value Clare places on these memories will transfer to her black heritage as well. This alone may entice Clare to base her identity solely upon her blackness. Thus, Kitty and Boy with their mixed messages only add to Clare's identity crisis.

When it comes down to it, the influences of society and of the people around Clare cause her to be "a fragmented character" (Schwartz and Cliff 600). In the article "Postcoloniality and The Boundaries of Identity," R. Radhakrishanan argues "authentic identity is a matter of choice, relevance, and a feeling of rightness" (755). However, Clare does not feel as if she has a choice. Instead, she feels "split into two parts – white and not white, town and country, scholarship and privilege, Boy and

Kitty” (Cliff 118). As previously stated, trying to find one’s identity when one is an adolescent is difficult enough, but Clare’s struggle is amplified by the fact that society and the people in her life make her believe that she must choose between her whiteness and blackness. In Clare’s eyes, this means she must choose between her father and her mother.

The problem is Clare does not know which parent to turn to in the first place. She illustrates this when she ponders, “To whom would she turn if she needed assistance? From who would she expect it? Her mother or her father – it came down to that sometimes. Would her alliances shift at any given time” (37). Further exacerbating these complex issues is the fact Clare believes once she has chosen an identity for herself, she is unable to change it. At one point she even asks herself, “Why did everything seem so fixed? So unchangeable” (118). For Clare, defining her identity means forever choosing between her mother and her father; her blackness and her whiteness.

Moreover, Clare’s struggle with her mixed-race is internal as well. On the one hand, it appears Clare is not fond of her whiteness. While staying with Miss Mattie, Clare was opposed to attending her grandmother’s church service because she did not want “to have to answer questions and have her hair stroked while the women wondered at her” (61).

At times, like the one mentioned in this passage, Clare finds the beauty of her whiteness to be more burdensome than anything else. On the other hand, Clare utilizes the power with which her whiteness provides her. For instance, when a man spies her and Zoe sunbathing naked, Clare commands of him: ““Get away, you hear. This is my grandmother’s land”” (122). In the end, Clare is well aware of the advantages and disadvantages of both her races, making it hard to choose an identity based on skin color as all the characters and society want her to.

Nonetheless, it is imperative that Clare sort through all these ideas of who she should be and create an identity for herself; for if she does not, she will cease to exist emotionally and/or physically. This is illustrated by Miss Beatrice’s sister Miss Winifred. When she was young, Miss Winifred had a baby with

a black man to whom she was not married. Her baby was taken from her, and she was placed in a convent. The pain of this experience has made her “mad,” as Miss Beatrice puts it (160). For example, Miss Winifred “believes that if water touches her she will die instantly” (160). For this character, the pain of having her identity intertwined with blackness and whiteness is too much for her. Unfortunately, Miss Winifred is symbolic of Clare’s fate if she is unable to create an identity. Simply put, she will not survive whether it is through actually dying or failing to live a meaningful life.

As portrayed above, *Abeng* by Michelle Cliff is a novel which advances the idea that people of mixed races must discover their identities or they will not survive whether it be emotionally and/or physically. While current research suggests this is not necessarily true, Clare proves otherwise. Plus, Tizard and Phoenix admit “there is still a great need for larger scale, in-depth studies of samples that come from a wide strata of society [ . . . ]” (54). They are right. As technology makes traveling around the world much easier, cultures and ethnicities will mingle and offspring of mixed heritages will be born.

While this will impact the world, it will also impact education. Thus, the study of *Abeng* and its theme of identity results in several pedagogical implications. The most important one is that we English teachers must find a place for multicultural literature in our classrooms. First, it introduces students to the cultures of other people and prepares them to interact with people who differ from them. This is a much needed skill in today’s global world. Furthermore, it provides students who are not Caucasian with the opportunity to read literature that relates to them. For some students, the experiences of the white men who wrote the traditional canon are no longer applicable to their own lives. Yes, the canonical works contain universal themes, but there is nothing as enlightening or as comforting when it comes to literature as reading a work which mirrors the reader’s own emotions and experiences. For some students, a connection such as this with literature will be generated only through reading multicultural literature and the works of authors like Michelle

Cliff.

Am I suggesting that Michelle Cliff be used in classrooms then? Not necessarily. While *Abeng* could be used with juniors or seniors, it carries some content issues in it, such as Clare's wavering sexual orientation, that will make obtaining permission to use this text difficult. What I am suggesting though is that multicultural literature has a place in the classroom whether it is read by individuals, by literary circles, or by all students.

Proof of this came to me from my own experience with a seventh grader who is also Latino. This boy did not read any of the books or short stories I assigned for the entire class, but the minute I handed him Francisco Jiménez's *The Circuit*, I did not see his nose again until he finished the book. To me, this incident exemplifies the power of multicultural literature.

Finally, it is important to consider the implications of not incorporating multicultural literature into the classroom. As demonstrated by my tale of the seventh grade boy above, we may fail to introduce students to the materials that might make them readers if we ignore multicultural literature. Also, if we do not incorporate this genre of literature into our classrooms, are we not analogous to the educational system and the characters in *Abeng* who exert influence over Clare's identity? Do we not also inadvertently suggest that the only identity a person should have is a white one? As teachers we cannot allow this to occur because children like Clare possess the right to have an identity. They do not deserve to experience the same identity crisis as she does. They should not have to discover "how much of the past was kept from" them like Michelle Cliff did (Adisa 276). And they should most definitely not have to share Miss Winifred's sentiment that "only sadness comes from mixture" (Cliff 164).

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