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SOUNDS AND SILENCES IN THE JAMAICAN HOUSEHOLD MICHELLE CLIFF'S "COLUMBA"

The story "Columba" is primarily related through the perspective of a twelve-year-old girl. This American-based narrator, whose name is never given, currently resides in Jamaica, her birthplace, in the house of an old family friend, Charlotte. Juan Antonio Corona y Mestee, Charlotte's Cuban companion, also lives there. In attendance to these three is fourteen-year-old Columba, who has been "bartered" away from his family by Charlotte.

As the narrator dryly observes, Columba was "learning to expand his skills" under Charlotte's tutelage; skills which translated into "cleaning the house, feeding the animals, filling the carafes and emptying the chamber pots, cooking the meals and doing the laundry" (16).

My interpretation of this Jamaican household – and servant Columba's position in it – is achieved by decoding certain elements in the story as signifiers. Some of these signifiers are strictly related to language (words/accents/silences), some are not (noises/skin color). To provide these signifiers with a critical context, I use M. M. Bakhtin's related concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism. My intent is to identify the contextual elements that shape and determine the voices present in the story. Once the respective contexts are elucidated, I hope to reveal in the dialogic space of the text its dynamics of power.

My reading of these dynamics will follow what may be referred to as a regressive movement in language. In other words, from linguistic utterance the analysis will move to noises and finally to silence. It is in the silences of the story where I can see a promise of at least a kind of empowerment of marginal discourses.

In order to understand the environment of class and race relations in Jamaica – and consequently, power positions based on their conjunction – let us examine this microcosm of Jamaican society in the year 1960. Two concepts formulated by Bakhtin are helpful in identifying the relationships at work in the household. First is his notion of heteroglossia:

The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time,

in any given place, there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions... (Bakhtin 1981: 428)

In other words, an utterance is read within a set of contextual conditions. The same words may be uttered again, but the matrix within which it is read cannot be exactly the same. Dialogism is as follows:

...the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. (Bakhtin 1981: 426)

Let us begin by listening to each character. While most of the speech in the story is reported, we do hear directly from each of the household members. Charlotte speaks in Standard English; her extensive vocabulary indicates a high level of formal education. She uses the term “pedophile” to describe Father Pierre, the priest who had changed the boy’s name from “Junior” to “Columba.” The historical circumstances of British rule in Jamaica are reflected in Charlotte’s insistence on the Anglicization of the boy’s name, thus transforming “Columba” to “Colin,” adding that “it was for his own good” (18).

Charlotte’s use of Standard English tells us that she is in the upper class of Jamaican society; she has had access to formal education in at least a specialized secondary or postsecondary situation. Juan Antonio’s speech reflects fluency in two languages; his English is in fact accomplished – he understands Charlotte’s label, “pedophile,” and translates it into a related, colloquial term in Spanish – “Mariposa” and then, to answer the narrator’s inquiry, back into English – “butterfly” (18). The ease with which Juan Antonio manipulates certain signifiers may reflect an advanced level of formal education. He currently lives an upper-class existence in Charlotte’s company.

The narrator speaks Standard English with an American accent. This situates her as a child engaged in the formal education process, schooling available to those children living in situations which allow for the bus fares, the book costs, the school fees. The narrator has lived outside of the country, and for some length of time since she has developed a noticeable American accent. Words spoken with an American accent in the country of Jamaica show the narrator to be a “crossroads character, with her feet (and head) in (at least) two worlds” (Cliff 1990a: 265). While this description has been offered by Michelle Cliff in regard to another of her characters – Clare Savage – it is also a sure fit here. Still, while we may begin with the name of the main character in *No Telephone to Heaven* for contextualization, in “Columba,” we may begin with the unnamed narrator’s speech.

When the narrator speaks, she reveals connections between Jamaica, where she was born and where she temporarily resides, and the United States, a world

power and an ideological and economic influence on Jamaica. The narrator's heteroglossia, that is, the contextual elements in which her discourse is inscribed (i.e. Jamaica/USA) manifests itself in different levels; accent is one of them. Her discourse, once juxtaposed to the many voices that make up the dialogical surface of the text, will trigger a whole range of responses from the other characters of "Columba." For instance, the narrator's accent will remind Charlotte and Juan Antonio of her privileged visitor status in Charlotte's house; it will signal access to knowledge about the American entertainment world to Columba; and, finally, it will summon ridicule from her Jamaican classmates.

While the speech of Charlotte, Juan Antonio, and the narrator contributes to our understanding of their educations and therefore, to our understanding of their class level, another crucial signifier contextualizes their positions in Jamaican society: skin color. Skin color, like words, can be read. In the context of our story, light skin is the privileged color in society. Charlotte is described by the narrator as "pink."

Charlotte and the narrator, then, possess a much greater chance for social mobility in Jamaica than do Juan Antonio and Columba. Juan Antonio lives an uneasy existence in this regard; he is described by the narrator as a "displaced, white hunter," implying that he seeks to possess a lighter skin color; he hunts for whiteness (15). The narrator goes on to reveal the inadequacy of some of Juan Antonio's weapons and the ultimate futility of his search, explaining that "he wasn't white, a fact that no amount of relaxers, or wide-brimmed hats could mask" (15).

Columba's use exclusively of Jamaican language points to a lack of formal education (Alleyne 1988: 131). As one marker of context, I provide an excerpt from a 1960 *Gleaner* newspaper article by Dawn Elvis entitled "Teaching English to the 7 Year Old":

If the aim of the system is to educate rural children just sufficiently to enable them to run subsistent farms in the countryside and become domestic servants or to hold any other position at this level of achievement, then the child obviously will have no need for English in the life ahead of him... (5)

Clearly, Columba is in a position with little room for upward mobility within Jamaican society at that time. Aside from language abilities, Columba's color – he is described by Charlotte as a "black boy," – would signify inferiority to many readers of his skin (18). Columba's options are limited, for, in the words of Frantz Fanon, Columba is "over determined from without" (Fanon 1976: 116).

I would like to apply Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia to another set of references in the story: the noises. As utterances are contextualized by their social and historical conditions, so too are noises. Columba's situation is defined through the noises of the household, beginning with Charlotte's bodily functions. A hypochondriac, Charlotte spends a great deal of time in bed. Columba's job is to fill the carafes of water which Charlotte frequently empties, and to empty the

chamberpots which Charlotte frequently fills. No part of the house, nor any time of the day or night is free from the sounds of Charlotte.

Neither Juan Antonio nor the narrator escape Charlotte's presence. The narrator and Juan Antonio listen to his ham radio in the evenings. Frequently their attention is distracted by the "sharp PING! of Charlotte's water" (14). One evening, unhappy with her current living situation, the narrator tries to imagine herself away from the estate, whether "in the bush awaiting capture, or rescue," as she visualizes, is not important (14). In any case a "sustained SPLASH! followed Charlotte's PING!" intrudes upon the narrator's fantasies and also upon the report that a young man had thrown himself overboard from a cruise ship sailing near Tobago (14). Even as the narrator thinks about the escape of another, she is made aware of her own confines and the mistress in charge.

Let us consider for a moment the dialogic tensions in the household. While the "PING!" and "SPLASH!" from Charlotte are understood by the narrator and Juan Antonio as statements of territoriality, the noises are received by Columba as commands. Scatologically speaking, the "PING!" signifies Charlotte's power and Columba's near powerlessness; he exists to remove her excrement.

Another noise which fills out a portrait of Charlotte and her power position in the house is her evening activity: after dinner she stands on the verandah and fires over and over into the night in the belief that she is keeping trespassers at bay. Trespassers both real and imagined are Charlotte's "passion." Through this action, we can see how intimately linked are the retention of power and the regular exercise of it. Whether or not trespassers hear the report of Charlotte's rifle, its regular rattle reminds the occupants of the house of who owns the estate.

One additional noise leads to a heartrending episode at the end of the story. During one of Charlotte's infrequent trips to inspect her other properties, her Austin develops a "knock." Dialogically, Charlotte interprets the sound as a sign of impending disaster: lessened mobility to and from her domain. Her remedy, a fantastic example of fear and impracticality and announced in the form of a command, is that Juan Antonio chop his way through the bush to Charlotte's former car, a thirty-year-old Rover. "Surely it could be of use" observes Charlotte (21).

Juan Antonio, under protest, fights his way through the bush and discovers the car-turned-dovecote fostered in secret by Columba. Avoiding reprimand related to the impossibility of salvaging parts from the Rover, Juan Antonio triumphantly announces his unexpected discovery to Charlotte. Together, they order Columba to kill the doves and prepare a few for dinner.

We have discovered a great deal about the lives and interactions among the inhabitants of the Kingston estate by tracking their speech and even their noises. Let us move now to the most extreme reference points from which we may gain additional understandings: silences. Two instances of silence in particular exemplify the power structures in the Jamaican household and to a degree those in the United States.

Often, while Charlotte slept and Juan Antonio traveled downtown, the narrator and Columba sat under a guava tree and "Compared lives. Exchanged histories"

(18–19). The narrator and Columba have only each other to fight the loneliness of the situation into which each has been thrust. They are drawn together by talking about the world of American entertainment. The narrator has continued to watch American movies, regular fare in Jamaica, when she routinely skips school. Columba manages to go to the cinema on his weekly night off; furthermore, he listens to Rediffusion played at low volumes while he washes the dishes.

Columba's need to know about America in general and its stars and legends is unquenchable. The narrator explains that Columba "wanted to know every detail about Duke Ellington, Marilyn Monroe, Stagger Lee, Jackie Wilson, Ava Gardner, Billy the Kid, Dinah Washington, Tony Curtis, Spartacus, John Wayne" (19). The eclectic list includes musicians, singers, actors and actresses, and badmen as well as heroes.

Columba's insatiable thirst brings us to the first significant silence in the story: He asks the narrator, "[W]hat [is] life like for a black man in America? An ordinary black man, not a star?" (19). The narrator is startled, stunned. She has been raised in New Jersey, in the midst of people who "did not business" with outsiders to the community (19). This question widens the social distance which the children have managed to lessen through their shared life histories and stories of stars. Suddenly, the unfriendly, unchosen environment is back, triggered by silence in response to a specific question. The question and the silence in place of an answer highlight the degrees of difference, the degrees of need between the narrator and Columba.

Columba knows what life is like for an ordinary black man in Jamaica. Furthermore, he has received some powerful impressions of what life is like for some blacks in America, yet his most immediate resource, the narrator, is unable to flesh out the picture. By her silence, it appears that the narrator doesn't know much about the lives of Americans outside of her protected community in New Jersey.

Earlier in the story, the narrator had expressed discomfort at being attended to by Columba, who, in the narrator's eyes, is a child who has been given the workload of two or three adults. And, the narrator had commented to herself, "I was, after all, an American now, ...", implying that Americans were self-sufficient, with no need for servants (18). Underlying this remark lies Michelle Cliff's ironic comment: many Americans were indeed servants, either literally or at the class level.

The narrator is a child; naturally, her frame of reference is somewhat limited. Still she is a "crossroads" child, with some awareness of her dual heritage. She is in the process of learning or re-learning about her birthplace (we don't know when she originally left Jamaica). And, maybe most surprising to herself, she will have to learn more about her adopted country as well.

The glittery surface of American entertainment has exported a number of appealing images, one of which is what appears to be a country where equitable existences abound. While America as represented by cinema, for example, has provided a desirable haven for the narrator, certainly, and for Columba, perhaps to

an extent, both children are beginning to see that a complete picture has not been made available. Herein lies the potential for reflection and questioning which may begin to further educate the narrator and Columba.

The second silence of the story occurs at its end, when the dovecote, fostered by Columba and proudly shared with the narrator, is discovered by Juan Antonio. After the discovery, the narrator walks “recklessly” into the bush after her companion. When the narrator finds Columba, he is dutifully wringing the life out of each bird, softly apologizing to the doves and weeping all the while. The narrator is without words; she sits beside him “in silence,” arm around his waist. “This was not done.” reads the final sentence of the story (22).

What can the narrator say to comfort him? Can she tell him that things will be better? No. She sustains herself with the knowledge that one day she will leave Charlotte’s domain. The narrator is forced to examine the reality of Columba’s situation. Just as she was forced to acknowledge that she knew very little about ways of life for people other than those with light skins or with celebrity status in her adopted country, so she must face her ignorance in regard to life for blacks in Jamaica. She has an experiential understanding now, but she is unsure of the underlying causes of Columba’s powerlessness and her own more privileged position. The narrator doesn’t have a lot of answers, but she now owns many questions.

Both the narrator and Columba have defied their appointed caretakers from the beginning of their stays: the narrator has skipped school, Columba has fostered a dovecote. Most significantly, they have deliberately spent time together. Both are beginning to define themselves through their acts of rebellion, though the narrator’s have been, in fact, less risk-filled.

Yet in the final words of the story we find evidence that the narrator may be on the verge of subversive speech born from the heated pools of silence. “This was not done” provides the information that light-skinned, upper class persons did not touch or identify with dark-skinned, lower class persons and so we see the gesture of comfort as a gesture of defiance as well. Additionally, the final phrase indicates that the reverberations of the dove-killing incident are to sound for some time to come, set off by the narrator herself.

Let us examine for a moment the dialogic tensions within the name-changing process that Columba undergoes. Columba has been named by each person as a direct result of the particular heteroglossia of each: his mother, unwilling to honor “an un-named sire,” called him “Junior” (17); Father Pierre, ostensibly a man of the church, named him “Columba” after a saint; and Charlotte, from the upper classes, gave him the socially acceptable appendage of “Colin.” No one considered the appropriateness of the name for the individual himself. The dialogue here is one-way and points to one of the main features of colonization: re-naming in terms of the namer’s heteroglossia, that is, re-naming for the purposes of the colonizer.

If we turn from the reasons offered within the story for the naming of the boy to some of our own associations, we may consider the etymological origin of “Columba,” which is “dovecote,” or “dove” (Guralnik 1976: 291). Surely, then,

the act of killing the doves is symbolic: servant Columba is killing himself. Finally, Cliff's choice of "Columba" as a title for the entire piece provides us with a grand contextualization: Christopher Columbus. The dialogism presented here reads as follows: What are the effects of colonization – in 1960? And now? The story "Columba" exists as part of the answer.

Columba's passionate curiosity for existences other than his own allows him to envision – and perhaps in time to build – a life over which he has greater control. The narrator is undergoing an awakening in regard to her dual heritages. And both the narrator and Columba, through their relationship with each other, have resisted the dominant discourses of class and color in the household.

Jamaica will enter into independence and much of its population will benefit from the increased consciousness of the Black Power movement of the sixties. With the dawn of the Civil Rights movement, the information the children glean about life in the US, especially in regard to life for the average black person, will be of a decidedly different character than that of the entertainment world they currently understand.

It is against these backdrops of the future that the stories of the narrator and Columba will unfold. Beyond the entrapment outlined in this tale, observed through utterance, noise and silence, lies a potential for liberation at least at the level of self and of self in relation to the constructs of society. When we encounter the narrator and Columba in the future, we may very well hear them introduce themselves by different names.

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