

# TELLING A 'NATIVIST' STORY: PATRICIA GLINTON-MEICHOLAS'S *A SHIFT IN THE LIGHT*

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## ABSTRACT

*Part of the investigation of the decolonizing project undertaken by a variety of women writers from The Bahamas and the larger Caribbean, this paper reads Patricia Glinton-Meicholas's *A Shift in the Light* in the context of women's writing of nation. The paper examines Glinton-Meicholas's novel as instantiating the modulation from an unqualified assertion of nation to a more complex representation and interrogation of nation and nationalism. It focuses specifically on the employment of nativism in the furtherance of cultural nationalism and the (re-)formation of the Bahamian nation.*

A bildungsroman, Patricia Glinton-Meicholas's *A Shift in the Light* narrates in chronological fashion a Bahamian family and socio-political history spanning the years from the middle of the twentieth century and pre-independence to political independence in the seventies and the present.<sup>1</sup> The story is told in the first person by Euterpe, "the one commissioned to remember" (p.14), whose feat in describing the pantheon of characters that comprises the extended family attests to the suitability of her name, as does her incorporation of those historical events indicative of a burgeoning nationalist sensibility.<sup>2</sup> The domestic history enfolded in the novel assumes the quality of a social history as it delineates the period of change, the gradual disappearance of the old Bahamian white oligarchic order and its racist practices, and the parallel passing of political power into the hands of the black majority. We read therefore not only of black Bahamian achievement overseas, for example Hubert Farrington's dancing at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1956, but of a petition proposed by Etienne Dupuch in the same year to end racial discrimination in public places: "Not that we wanted to sit in the Savoy for any length of time, Daddy said. He was not one to waste too much time at the pictures, but

he and others should have the right to do so if they wished, and in any cinema they chose" (p. 45).<sup>3</sup> Further instances of racist venalities are adumbrated: Collins Wall, the forerunner of today's gated communities (p. 49); the limited educational (p. 52) and employment opportunities for the black population (pp. 90-1); and the demarcation of racial borders in stores, "shops like J.P. Sands' dry goods where girls with names like 'Sands', 'Russell' and 'Albury' served white people on one side with courtesy and coquettish smiles, and hurried black people disdainfully from the store, but not before they had made their purchases from their very own counter" (p. 51).<sup>4</sup> Race and class discrimination are thus made manifest, their roots in historical fact undeniable, their presences impacting both domestic and national history.

The novel further delineates the development of nationalist sentiment through narrative episodes in which Euterpe's parents and grandparents verbalize the injustices meted out to the black Bahamian and the inexorable and incremental process of change. Papa gives vent to the history of oppression: "It's not the life of an Out Island teacher and farmer that I mind, and it has nothing to do with knowing that I could never aspire to be Inspector of schools, sweetheart. I mind that my grandchildren may have to live beneath the same low ceiling when they grow up. It's contempt like this that galls a man's spirit" (p. 178), and succinctly states the moral argument for change: "Change simply had to come, he said. A man should not have to choose between feeding his children and his beliefs and dignity" (p. 179). With the advent of universal adult suffrage, bitterly contested by the Bahamian white merchant elite as Papa's conversations with his family illustrate, political power finally coalesces in black majority rule in 1967. Crucially, while the novel carefully interjects the history of the development and transformation of nationalist sentiment into its political actualization, it privileges nationalist consciousness, to use Franz Fanon's phrase (1963), in the form of cultural nationalism. R. Radhakrishan's words (1992) are apposite: "the 'imagined community' of nationalism [meaning political nationalism] is not authorized as the most authentic unit or form of collectivity" (p. 78).

The privileging of cultural over political nationalism speaks to the transformative quality of postcolonial literature. Glinton-Meicholas's text does not exemplify the literature of recrimination or revenge of which Derek Walcott speaks in "The muse of history" and in its election of cultural as opposed to political nationalism, it differs from the postcolonial interrogations and representations that underpin the oeuvres of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid, albeit to varying degrees. Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* demonstrates disillusionment with the reification of nationalist consciousness in political nationalism and posits the need for revolutionary action. It condemns political nationalism for its failure to engage with all members of the nation, and its betrayal of those ideals propounded by the nationalists. Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother and My Brother* similarly reflect a disenchantment with nationalism, one, however, that does not advocate political action but rather produces an unyielding nihilism. Glinton-Meicholas's text, however, employs a different strategy. It shares with Cliff's and Kincaid's texts the work of postcolonial demystification or demythologizing of received colonial history and historiography; it also shares with Cliff's Jamaican novels the recuperation of African ancestral legacies. But the cultural and political are not, I suggest, represented as being in tension to the extent they are represented in Cliff's texts, a tension resolved in *Cliff's No Telephone's* advocacy, while problematic, of violent

revolution. Glinton-Meicholas's text, while it records the journey to black majority rule and political independence, affirms ubiquitously and privileges a Bahamian nationalist consciousness rooted in African Bahamian culture. In this manner it actualizes the two functions of literary work as defined by Edouard Glissant (1989): "the first is that of demythification, of desecration, of intellectual analysis, whose purpose is to dismantle the internal mechanism of a given system, to expose the hidden workings, to demystify [and the second] the hallowing purpose [of] reuniting the community around its myths, its beliefs, its imagination or its ideology" (pp. 99-100). Glinton-Meicholas's *A Shift in the Light* thus works to counter the history and colonial(-ist) historiography of The Bahamas through the dual media of demystification of British colonial legacies and re-presentation of African based Bahamian culture.

The novel rejects the deterministic nature of colonial history and its agent, colonial education, which as a plenitude of Caribbean texts affirm is based on myth or falsehoods. Colonial education purported through the dissemination of British values and mores to civilize the other and endow him/her with those (British) qualities of character and reverence for the (British) work ethic prized and vaunted by the metropolitan and colonial masters. It dangled before the eye of the colonized the tempting lure of social advancement but recalling Homi Bhabha's "almost the same but not quite" construction, it worked to confine the colonized to the margins.<sup>5</sup> It maintained rigid control of the social spaces deemed the property or right of the Bahamian white. It advocated, for example, the value of skill and knowledge acquisition but perpetuated hierarchy: "Everyone said Papa was an excellent farmer. He and several other teachers had been sent before the War for a special programme in agriculture and animal husbandry at Tuskegee in the 1930s. The government of the day planned that they would come back to preach the gospel of the goodness of planting and raising sheep and goats to young out islanders" (p. 87). Simon Gikandi (1992) puts it thus: "A colonial education was promoted as the point of entry into the dominant political economy and culture; on the other hand, the colonial situation was inherently and immutably what Fanon would call a Manichean world with compartmentalized social spaces unbridgeable by wealth, culture, or education" (p. 37). Fanon's metaphor of compartmentalization illuminates the chasm between the myth inherent to colonial education and the reality it strove assiduously to conceal, the ever present obsessive need for hegemonic control. It is this need to which the family chronicle points in its delineation of frustrated ambitions:

We only seem to be able to move from one master or mistress to another. In the house on Cable Beach, the mistress used to tell her not to bleach her silks, as if she needed telling. Now the chef at the new Emerald Beach Hotel is telling her how to section grapefruit in the daytime, and, at night, the Senior Operator at Telecoms is telling her that Paris is the capital of France, as if she needed telling. If you need more proof that something is out of order, check your newspapers—the only people like us you see in the pictures are doing straw work, working on a construction site, wearing a police or prison uniform or playing a musical instrument in a club featuring fake coconut palms or pirates—Take your pick! (p. 107)

The duplicity of the colonial myth is rendered transparent. "The mythology of empire, especially the belief that colonized and colonizer share the same iden-

tity” (Gikandi, pp. 56-7) is in Papa’s condemnatory words vigorously opposed. The discourse of decolonization instantiated in the removal of colonial education from its privileged position in systems of domination further represents the disjunction between colonial signifiers of identity and the subjectivities of the colonized. Euterpe and her sister Calliope, as with the other students in the colonial educational system, are dispossessed racially and culturally for the literary and historical canonical texts to which they are compulsorily exposed are “disguised as universal text[s] even as [they] serve the interests of empire” (Gikandi, p.42); they blazon abroad British history, literature, and whiteness. Such texts construct the British epic peopled with heroes fair, luring the yet unaware children, Euterpe and Calliope, to delight in fantasies shaped by their immersion in British lore. At their site of play ironically textualized as the empty structure of the Deveaux House “surrounded by ruins of the many outbuildings that usually defined the environs of a plantation great house” (p. 136) they indulge in imaginings which encode the psychological and psychical effects of imperialism in the sisters’ racial and cultural dislocations: “We became nineteenth century ladies, talking excitedly about their next trip to the pleasures of Nassau or New York, or dancing a waltz in the arms of a dashing officer of the British West India Regiment, or simply turning our eyes seaward to catch sight of passing ships” (p. 137).<sup>6</sup> But the novel’s counterdiscourse undercuts the seemingly innocent assimilation of the British narrative by challenging and destabilizing its cultural authority.

The discourse of decolonization seeks therefore to devalue the colonial narrative as told in British linear history, historiography and literature. Its intent is to correct the authority of the colonial text, to revise and devalorize it, and it achieves this not in the manner of Cliff or Kincaid whose writings such as *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Annie John* respectively are suffused in varying degrees with anger and bitterness, but with an irony and humor which gently yet powerfully deflate the British colonial presumptions of racial and cultural superiority. The narrator Euterpe first presents metonymically the schoolroom as the space of British imperial indoctrination:

When we entered the schoolroom, we moved from an isolated Bahamian island to Britain. This was remarkable for the fact that we had never seen Britain, and only ever seen our beautiful young queen in newspaper pictures, on postage stamps in the post office, and on the few coins that came our way. Moreover, we had never seen a British grenadier or treacle pudding, yet we read, spoke, and wrote of, and believed in them as much as children living in Birmingham might. (p. 156)

But the narrator’s voice immediately belies the children’s unreflective assimilation and internalization of the British economy of knowledge. Having recorded the daily practices of prayer and singing of the national anthem, Euterpe ponders the reason underlying the “petition to God to save our Queen. ‘Papa, what’s wrong with her? She sick bad, eh Papa or a big giant stole her away from her castle, eh Papa?’” (p. 156). The questions, seemingly naive, foreground the preponderance of colonial and Western mythologies in the commingling of the royalty trope and the fairy tale; they are disruptive, intervening in the dissemination of colonialist fictions. Thus, while they comprise the preface to the chronological narration of British history which ensues, they anticipate the systematic recitation in mimic mode of that history:

We always moved next to the reciting the names of the kings and queens of England. . . . We got lost in the House of Wessex from king number two through five. Their names all began with 'Aethel', but the trouble came in distinguishing among 'wulf', 'bald', 'bert' or 'red'. We hit hard on the 'Aethel', mumbled the rest, hoping Papa would not get close while we circled in the murky haze of early English history. Alfred the Great was breathed out on a sign of relief, and so were Aethelstan, Edward the Elder, Aethelstan and Edmund the Magnificent. Then just as we thought we were about to stumble into good, healthy Bahamian sunlight, we fell into the deep pit of Eadred, Eadwig, Edgar and Edward. (p. 157)

The excerpt points to the historical experience of colonialist imprinting. It recalls Bhabha's theorizing of colonial discourse and the ambivalence peculiar to it. His elaboration of mimicry as "the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" bears repetition: "mimicry" he states, "is...the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which... poses an imminent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers" (1994, p. 86). He adds further, "What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a writing, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable. Mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*" (pp. 87-8). The children's recitation of British history signifies that "difference" or "recalcitrance" implied in the disaffection for the strategy of regulation and discipline symbolized by the enforced reiteration of royal lineages. As text, the parodic representation of the history lesson makes manifest the interventionist and deconstructive strategies deployed in the postcolonial project of dismantling the authority of British historical texts.

Like history, literature constitutes one of the most important signifiers of British cultural hegemony, a component of inestimable efficacy in the imperial civilizing project. Christine Prentice (2000) states that "colonial education sought to produce allegorized subjects—subjects interpellated by western geography and history, and by the texts which transmitted colonial authority; the Bible for Christianized subjects of morals and values, and literature for the literate subject of 'taste'" (p. 205). Literature consequently figures large in the space of the colonial schoolroom, a space in which as Stephen Slemon (1990) remarks, the "pedagogy of the book play[ed] a necessary and material role in the strategic production of willing subjects of empire" (p. 286). Shakespeare, not surprisingly, surfaces—the students are to perform *The Merchant of Venice* in honor of the official visits at Easter—as do other texts which exemplify the perspective and praxis of literature as "colonialist cultural control" (Slemon, p. 286). Interestingly, while all the texts incorporated into the syllabi devised not by local but metropolitan authorities testify to the transmission of the concept of British superiority, their authority is seriously eroded by their constitution as narratives of imperial conquest achieved by containment and/or erasure.

Euterpe delights in English traditional songs and ballads: she "bleated happily through the ballads of Robert Burns, through the streets broad and narrow of the Irish city with sweet Molly Malone, into the gloaming...and onto the seashore to call out to persons unknown to bring my bonny back" (p. 161). Of particularly strong appeal is the 'Men of Harlech', a song which made Euterpe "want to be Welsh" (p. 161). The realization that she "did not know what their

falchions were that gleamed, or what were the pennons that streamed” (p. 161) is of no moment as she luxuriates in romantic visioning of “gallant men with swords and eyes flashing” (p. 161). But Glinton-Meicholas disrupts and undercuts the endorsement of empire and British heroic history memorialized in the texts, employing a variety of strategy. The deliberate selection of text thematizes the historical realities of racial and cultural dispossession and subjugation of the other--the Moor, the Jew, the Scottish, Irish and Welsh. Additionally, it demythologizes British narratives of history; Euterpe “was nursing young poet soldiers in the Crimea, passing among them with [her] lamp, gently laying a cool palm against a fevered brow. . . . [also] allowing [herself] to stand nobly and silent at the gallows to save the life of Bonny Prince Charlie” (pp. 161-62). The reproduction of British historiography illuminates the omissions from the official versions: the Crimean War, like the Jacobite rebellion, attested to the British (or in the latter instance), the English drive to hegemonic supremacy and its ignoble reification. The deliberate authorial invisibility of Mary Seacole in Euterpe’s fanciful illusions contrasts, for example, with the visibility of Florence Nightingale, the disjunction illustrating the history of “textual capture and containment” to which Helen Tiffin (1987) refers (p. 22). Further, the strategies of thematization and demystification applied in the deconstruction of colonialist romances are instantiated in the slow and relentless divestment of the Victoriana in Mother Ethel’s house and Papa’s preference for works by early writers who, while European, nevertheless “had a sense of sin and contrition that would have been completely foreign to the Moderns” (p. 152).<sup>7</sup> But the penultimate strategy in Glinton-Meicholas’s project of decolonization lies in its work of writing another text, one which attempts to fulfill that other purpose of literature defined by Glissant, the “hallowing purpose [of] reuniting the community around its myths, its beliefs, its imaginations or its ideology” (p. 100). It is this text that Glinton-Meicholas privileges as she posits answers to Euterpe’s and Papa’s vexed ponderings:

There were a few thorns in this imaginary bed of roses in which I had become hopelessly entangled, a fly in the ointment of my British aspirations—all the reams that were devoted to eyes the colour of crocuses, hair the colour of ripened wheat and skin like peach blossoms. How could I tell what my heroes and heroines looked like, if I had no visual files in my brain for crocuses, ripened wheat or peach blossoms. This troubled Papa in some way. Were there, he would ask, no gallant soldiers, no ministering angels, no obedient children, no saints with skin the colour of honey, Haitian mangoes, or mahogany or black coffee? Were there among them no eyes as beautiful as tamarind or sugar apple seeds? (p. 162)

The interrogation of the colonial classroom as a space of acculturation enabled in large measure by the reading of British canonical texts may suggest what Prentice terms “the imprisonment of postcolonial textuality by the authority of European master texts, where even rebellious ‘writings back’ serve merely as filial confirmations of the dynastic continuity of European textual authority” (p. 209). However, Glinton-Meicholas’s novel does not offer a ‘writing back’ in the re-visioning/re-writing of the master text; neither does it comprise a narrative of decolonization in the revolutionary mode. Rather it is, in the term used by Peter Hulme (1994), a “*petit recif*” (p. 73). It actualizes the need for what Hulme terms “smaller narratives...with attention paid to local topography, so that maps can become fuller.” It reifies Hulme’s definition of

'local' knowledge as "situated, particular, 'native,'" and as such it comprises one of the "local sentences in the chapter of the postcolonial world" (pp. 73-4). Like the works of Cliff and Kincaid, Ginton-Meicholas's novel engages in the dismantling of the assumptions underlying colonial(-ist) discourse transmitted through the apparatus of colonial education; like them it engages in the disarticulation of colonial authority. But it differs from them in its rigorous positioning in the center of that 'local' knowledge as defined by Hulme. In a sense it eschews the Western-formulated and arbitrary division of 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' as it narrates a folk history and culture which lie outside those temporal boundaries imposed by imperialism.

The official history Papa imparts to his students accords with the requirements of the syllabus. Choice is obviated by its dictates, hence the preeminence, as has been noted, of royal personages in the transmission of British historical knowledge. Euterpe's questions which continually disrupt and so challenge that knowledge's totalizing truths elicit from her grandfather a telling comment: "Anyhow child, we learn the names because we are subjects of the Empire, and the English rule the Empire. Our lessons are British, child, and that's validity enough, *so they tell me*" (italics added, pp. 158-89). Like Euterpe's seemingly innocent questions, Papa's qualification functions as a disclaimer. It works to destabilize the certainties of institutionalized history and historiography, certainties which are subsequently ruptured by his teaching a history of another sort. He accompanies his grandchildren to the ironically named Golden Grove where plantation ruins still stood and relates their history. He tells them "the story of the plantations" (p. 174): the crops grown, including cotton, and the slave insurrection which ended with a trial and the sentencing to death by hanging for six of the slaves (p. 174).<sup>8</sup> Relevantly this history lesson subverts the denial of significance attached by colonialism to the experience of slavery. It counters the erasure of black Bahamian history while simultaneously undercutting the Western/British myth of progressivist modernity. Gikandi elaborates the strategy underlying the manipulation of colonial and slave history represented in Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*:

The function of colonial history as a self-serving fabrication is apparent here: the Battle of Hastings is brought closer in time (so that it can function as history) while the experience of slavery (less than a hundred years old in actuality) is banished from time and memory. For the colonial school, the event that launches the Caribbean's perverse modernity is left in temporal suspense and then condemned to silence. (p. 79).

This colonial strategy, equally reproduced in Ginton-Meicholas's novel, affixes slave history to the blank pages of colonial history which occupy, as it were, a nowhere space. Papa's history lesson, however, elucidates the fact of an alternative history emblemized by the plantation ruins and narrated in story. It is the necessity of telling and re-telling this history which Papa affirms in his admonitions to the children, and the memory of the ancestors which obtains:

They brought the stories of their people, and told them to their children and their children's children—us. That's why your mama and I tell them to you. They were our people.  
 "You, child," he said pointing to me, "you're the lucky one. You remem-

ber things. Memory is the only history we have. If you remember and you tell the story, you don't really lose anybody or anything." (p. 175)

The Smith (extended) family history is the history primarily of Cat Island and its black Bahamian inhabitants.<sup>9</sup> It constitutes less a remapping of the colonial space of childhood—for the colonial space does not penetrate beyond the schoolroom—than a re-presentation of ancestral roots and cultural legacies. Arguably it is not an act of cultural recuperation for the Cat Islander, for the culture of the people of the island was not lost; the world of officialdom, colonial and postcolonial, may have treated it with disdain or indifference, but the culture is not dislodged in Cat Island.<sup>10</sup> Rather Cat Island comprises the site in which colonial meanings and identities are rendered ineffectual, and ancestral traditions privileged; there, the aspects which Nana Wilson-Tagoe (1998) states are “usually submerged in academic considerations of history” (p. 234) are valorized. And it is these aspects nurtured and sustained in Cat Island which Ginton-Meicholas foregrounds as foundational to Bahamian identity or Bahamianness.

The novel privileges and validates the black world, the folk world.<sup>11</sup> The homogenous community of Cat Island is one rooted in the soil, oral-centered, and in the main woman-centered. The community is represented as immutably linked to the land, for it is the land from which the islanders extract their livelihood, hence the plethora of detail of crops grown and harvested, the “bountiful gifts of the earth” (p. 85) which in Sis’s capable hands are transformed into delectable offerings: “coconut pineapple tarts, cornbread, potato and cassava bread, . . . stewed tomatoes and okras, . . . beans and peas of all descriptions, and highly prized cornflour and yellow ‘island’ grits” (p. 85).<sup>12</sup> While the emphasis on gastronomic delights illustrates the quantity and quality of foods available and the care lavished upon them, it amplifies the interconnection of land and people, and the co-operative character of work. Hog killing from which girls, unlike Clare Savage in Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng*, are not barred (pp. 180-183), salt raking (pp. 183-184), straw work (p. 210) and harvesting (pp. 168-170) are communal activities. Harvesting, for example, figured as a collective enterprise, depicts the homeward journey as one in which “most of the grownups walked a hand akimbo, which could be seen now and again pressing the small of the owner’s back” (p. 168). The representation of collectivity thus echoes the work pattern of plantation societies which “differentiated little between men and women in their definition of gender roles, and [in which] it was possible for a certain kind of equality . . . to exist between slave men and women” (Wilson-Tagoe, p. 238). It points to the continuation of this ancestral practice in the refusal here of an absolute demarcation of male and female space and function.

The privileging of ancestral practice or tradition situates the islanders in a world of orality. Papa tells stories drawn “from his reading and personal experience” (p. 150), and while recounted in Standard English they frequently encompass the rationally inexplicable, one such tale centering on two great white horses which entered his field of corn, raced through it yet did not trample it (pp. 154-55). He states his realization that the horses “could not have been of this earth” (p. 155), a belief supported by his learning later of the death on that same night of an old schoolmate. Disavowed as a dream, the tale constitutes part of Papa’s personal history and locates him in a space separate from the rational sphere claimed as a property of the Western world.

It opposes therefore the idea of European modernist history as the triumph of reason in its assertion of the truth of other modes of perceiving and interpreting reality. The Western desire for rationalization is thus gainsaid, as are the Western foci on narrative realism and closure.

The novel encodes its valorization of the oral-centered world largely in what Wilson-Tagoe terms “those images and sounds of women’s expressivity which [are] the actual foundations of consciousness and the source of renewal in the West Indian world” (p. 233). Women’s voices are not excised from this history; rather they effect the transmission of African Bahamian folk culture in the figuring of Miss Lilly, one of the pipe-smoking women of Port Howe (p. 133), Miss Pinny, herbalist and midwife who offers Euterpe and Calliope the “pharmacopoeia and medical lore of an island granny” (p. 192), and the indomitable Sister, whose wisdom “was drawn from the lore of our people” (p. 150). But it is the voice of Miss Roselda, the pipe-smoking griot and practitioner of the Krik? Krak! narrative or a variant thereof, which rivals Sister’s in the teaching and celebration of ancestral tradition as she spins her story in a session “that had [its] beginnings around compound fires in a West Africa of centuries ago, a custom learned there by some of our ancestors before the foreign ships came to drag them unceremoniously into the unknown” (p. 187).

Antonia MacDonald-Smythe (2001) notes that “Krik? Krak! narratives performances involve the raconteuse; the protagonist; and the audience, a community of listeners whose presence allows the folk tale to come into being” (p. 3). She observes further that “the power of the Krik? Krak! narrative depends on all three constituents [and that] throughout the storytelling process, the audience colludes with the narrator in the activity of bringing the story to light. . . ; it willingly suspend[s] belief” (p. 3). Miss Roselda’s tale does not prompt the “various forms of running commentary as encouragement and proof of interest” (p. 3) which MacDonald-Smythe perceives as an integral part of the Krik? Krak! narrative, but in its language and structure it positions itself unequivocally within the folkloric tradition. Narrated in Bahamian Creole and infused with the cadence of Cat Island speech, the tale of two beautiful sisters and their hapless mother Miss Lady begins with the traditional “Once upon a time was a very good time/ Monkey chew tobaker and spit white lime/Bullfrog jump from limb ta limb/And Mosquiter keep up de time” (p. 187). The tale, fantastical and improbable, is characteristically folk both in its moral import and the typical twist and disclaimer with which it ends: “She was swingin’ one o’ her grandchillun round one day laughin her head off, when de chile shoe kick me ‘side muh head and lick me right here ta tell yinna dis big lie. So biddy bo’ ben’, my story is en’ ” (pp. 190-91). The tale forms part of the folk archive of the islanders, part of the tradition of storytelling transmitted by generation to generation: “Well, my gran’ma tell me, and her gran’ma, de ol Africa woman tell her, that de woman never even stop to change outta her fiel clothes” (p. 188). Conjoined with the representation of Papa’s ‘dream,’<sup>13</sup> the folktale may be interpreted as instantiating the decentering of “the Western narrative and colonial history from its dominant position in the Caribbean mind” (Gikandi, p. 223). It evokes an alternative African Bahamian historiography rooted in orality, one imbued with a continuity of African tradition which the text suggests needs to be brought into greater national awareness.

The valorization of the African Bahamian culture affirms creole as the language of the folk; it neither eschews creole as “vulgar noise”<sup>14</sup> nor posi-

tions the women of the community on what Sylvia Wynter (1990) calls “the silenced ground” (p. 355)—the place where women’s native speech is stifled. The presence of a father or patriarchal langue is a reality—Papa being the sole male adherent—but the text inscribes through the use of creole the symbiotic relation of oral and maternal tradition. Sister, the grandmother, functions as the maternal nurturer of grand/daughters but the text also locates her in the center of a practical and womanist world, one in which women work and render help and comfort to each other. Reports of marital infidelity elicit the proverbial saying, “we [women] suck plenty sour in this life” (p. 199) immediately followed by the stricture to refuse “what life hand you if it ain’t to your likin” (p. 200). The boastfulness of the newly married widower who fully expects his new young wife to bear him yet more children provokes Sister’s tart remark that she hoped that Matilda “gat [a good saddle], one don’t chafe the back” (p. 194). The vernacular comprises the medium through which the accumulated wisdom of the grandmother and her community is dispersed; it is the grandmother’s speech that connects the rhythms of a domestic life to folk ways of being: “She would maintain a running commentary, teaching us about the ways of our people, often telling us about her life and things the ‘old people’ said” (p. 197). And it is this language that underscores the value of heritage and self-knowledge: “Why everytime some o’ yinna touch foreign soil you shame o’ where you come from? Thank God is a sure thing I ga die black, an’ I sure as hell go make sure I die Bahamian” (p. 197).

Glinton-Meicholas’s family history represents the beliefs, rituals and intimacies of a woman-centered world which function as alternative avenues to knowledge. It posits what Sandra Pouchet Paquet (1992) terms in the Foreword to George Lamming’s *The Pleasures of Exile* “an alternative hierarchy of values” (p. viii). Further, in its mythologizing and teaching, it reifies Glissant’s “hallowing purpose” of national literature, specifically of “reuniting the community around its myths, beliefs, its imagination or its ideology” (p. 100). The history, however, is nativist and essentialist and so is liable to criticism. Benita Parry (1994) notes that nativism has been censured for “its complicity with the terms of colonialism’s discourse, with its claims to ancestral purity and inscriptions of monolithic notions of identity cited as evidence of the failure to divest itself of the specific institutional determinations of the west” (p. 177). She refers specifically to Anthony Appiah’s critique (1988) in which he states that “in their nationalist inscriptions the cultural nationalists remain in a position of counteridentification...which is to continue to participate in an institutional configuration...Time and time again, cultural nationalism has followed the route of alternate genealogizing” (p. 168, 170). The effect of such criticism, according to Parry, is “to homogenize the varieties of nationalism and to deny both originality and effectivity to its reverse-discourse” (p. 178). Importantly, while Parry acknowledges the problematic nature of nativism and “its essentialist politics” as in, for example, Aime Cesaire’s and Frantz Fanon’s affirmation of “the invention of an insurgent, unified black self” (p. 179) her argument points to a defence or valorization of nativism which pertains to the reading of Glinton-Meicholas’s text as a narrative of cultural nationalist recuperation and nation formation. The world represented in *A Shift in the Light* is black Bahamian; any white presence that intrudes upon the interconnected stories of the black Bahamian and Cat Island does so infrequently and tangentially. What obtains, as Stuart Hall (1993) argues, is the role played by a “conception of ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’...which people with a shared history and

ancestry hold in common” (393). It is this role which Glington-Meicholas’s text privileges as it reifies, through the representation of black Bahamian cultural identity instantiated in the foregrounding of ancestral practice and imaging of a community rooted in the soil, the hallowing purpose of national literature propounded by Glissant. He states (1989) that “it must signal the self-assertion of new peoples, which one calls their rootedness, and which is today their struggle” (p. 101). Thus, while Glington-Meicholas’s text may be interpreted as re-creating in romanticized mode black Bahamian history, its representation of what Radhakrishnan terms “essentialist indigeneity” (p. 85) is neither repressive nor reactionary. Rather it affirms the importance of the act of rediscovery and imbricated in that is the production of identity. Glington-Meicholas’s text thus specifically valorizes the recuperation of black Bahamian history as the vehicle for the interrogation and definition of collective or national Bahamian identity. It espouses a Bahamian cultural nationalism as more properly the medium for the assertion of a Bahamian national consciousness.

In its postcolonial questionings of Bahamian identity and nation formation, the text posits what Hall (1988) terms an “ethnic identitarianism” (p. 29); it asserts the re-presentation of a shared heritage of past values and ancestral traditions and knowledges. The text’s validation of cultural recuperation, specifically its role in the construction of nation and national identity, is underscored, however, by the vexed figuring of political nationalism and its corollaries, the modernizing preoccupations of the contemporary Bahamas. According to Radhakrishnan, Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid both excoriate the postcolonial and nationalist tendency to internalize “the Western blueprint in the name of progress, modernization...and internationalism” (p. 86). They problematize this in their representation of the failures of the modern nation-state to actualize the promise of modernity; progress, their writings argue, signifies the perpetuation of colonialist institutions and ideologies, their translation into derivative forms. And as in Cliff’s and Kincaid’s texts, Glington-Meicholas’s work of postcolonial refashioning also critiques political nationalism for its too facile assimilation of and uncritical subscription to the myths of modernity.<sup>15</sup> Papa, imaged as possessed of a strong sense of self and unafraid to perform tasks traditionally deemed feminine—“Papa would often quietly accept to carry out any of the tasks of which the women of the household usually took charge. He would bathe us, dress us and braid our hair, though he could not be depended on for any recognizable style” (153)—is transformed from a man who nurtured Euterpe and Calliope, “enfolding [them] lovingly” (p. 209) in his embrace, into a hollow shell. His school closed and abandoned to the elements, Papa relocates to the capital, Nassau, his island usefulnesses deemed at an end and his name consigned to oblivion. His efforts to remain a productive member of society fail, for “there is a wider swath between Papa and his fellow workers than the verges to be cleaned—half a century of civility and ethics” (p. 273). The narrative of modernity is demythologized, the idea of progress debunked as political nationalism extends and reinstates the hierarchies and divisions constituted by imperialism. The nation as a political construct, Glington-Meicholas suggests, rehearses imperialistic practice in its othering of its own people: “I realize in a flash of intuition that we are suffering because we have broken the links between us and the land, which gave us life, and out of which came our system of beliefs, and gave us our certainty” (p. 315). This “certainty,” this unswerving belief in knowing what ‘Bahamian’ signifies emanates not from the acquisition of political independence but from the rediscovery and re-valuation of black Bahamian cultural legacies and

folk traditions. It is this knowledge that the text contends the new nation and its subjects must recover, not repress, as a means of transforming what was colonial space. And it is this knowledge that the text also offers as a necessary corrective to the imposed homogeneity of Western culture and ideology underpinned by “Western blueprints of reason, progress and enlightenment” (Radhakrishnan, p. 85).

## NOTES

- 1 Patricia Ginton-Meicholas. (2001) *A shift in the light*. Nassau: Guanima Press All citations are from this edition. In reference to the use of the bildungsroman in contemporary Caribbean women's literature, Antonia MacDonald-Smythe writes (2001): "Reviewed, recast, and rendered more applicable to the discursive formulation of the marginal subject, the *Bildungsroman* in the twentieth century contextualized the journey of the voice of the Caribbean protagonist into adulthood, framing a development of voice and agency within an experience of conquest and domination. Nevertheless, the *Bildungsroman* has a utility greater than the examination of the process of 'soul-making of the individual.' Accommodating more than the contested progress of the protagonist into maturation, it became a literary form useful to the depiction of political self-representation in colonial and modernist texts..." (p 29) While genre is not the focus of my dissertation, Ginton-Meicholas's use of the bildungsroman offers another instance of connections among Bahamian and Caribbean women writers.
- 2 Euterpe's mother has a penchant for bestowing Greek names on her children. Euterpe and her sister Calliope bear the names of two of the Muses, the daughters of Zeus and the Titan Mnemosyne (memory). Nine in number, the Muses were goddesses of the fine arts, music and literature. Euterpe was the Muse of lyric poetry and music, and patron of joy and flute players. Calliope was the Muse of epic poetry. As with the other Muses they prompted the memory.
- 3 Craton and Saunders (1998) note that Etienne Dupuch, newspaper editor and a "near-white Bahamian" was a member of the Bahamas Democratic League formed by moderates "concerned about the racial polarization threatened by developments within the PLP (progressive Liberal Party) as they were of the dangers of Bay Street extremism" [Bay Street was the literal space of white dominion and control]. Dupuch presented a petition against discrimination in public places which was successful early in 1956; however, he was criticized by the PLP "for not pressing for a commission and binding anti-discriminatory legislation" (p. 309)
- 4 The Collins Wall is named for the bootlegging millionaire Ralph G. Collins who employed hundreds of workers ("most of them semistarving Out Island migrants") to build an unbroken two-mile, ten-foot wall around his huge property. Craton and Saunders comment that while his motives "were mainly commercial and not necessarily racist . . . [the wall constituted] a visible class and subethnic barrier built by the duped black underclass itself" (1998, pp. 267-68). Craton and Saunders further note that the

- first petition of the Bahamian Democratic League against the restrictive Collins Wall was a failure; it "was not breached until 1959" (p 309).
- 5 In the essay "Of Mimicry and Men" Bhabha writes. "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite" (86). Bhabha argues that colonial discourse is characterized by ambivalence for while the imperial power mandates the acculturation of the colonial subject, it simultaneously mandates the retention of that degree of difference necessary to its supposed cultural and racial superiority. Thus, while British colonialists, for example, proclaimed over centuries their civilizing intent, in actuality they wished only to civilize up to a point.
  - 6 The plantation house was built by Andrew Deveaux Sr., a Loyalist who, having forfeited all his lands in Southern Carolina, transferred most of his slaves and stock to southern Cat Island. The ruins can still be seen in the settlement of Port Howe (named after the British commander-in-chief in North America). Deveaux Sr. outlived all four of his sons, including Andrew Jr. whose "coup" in wresting Nassau from Spanish forces in 1783 has been "traditionally regarded as a heroic reconquest and a kind of 'foundation charter' for the Bahamian Loyalists as a whole" and nearly all the other Loyalist planters. He died December 23, 1814 in Cat Island (Craton and Saunders, 1992, pp. 169-71)
  - 7 The description of Mother Ethel's house points to the fashioning of the colonial subject: "Every surface in Mother's house was covered. Tabletops were buried under cloth topped by crocheted and tatted doilies, in turn hidden by row upon row of large and small picture frames; men, perhaps brothers, uncles, cousins, fellow evangelists, dressed in the high-waistjackets and rolled brim hats of the Edwardians, and the florid baggy trousers and the long chains and elaborate fobs of the Contract nabobs, women both deep-bosomed and spare, and children impossibly beruffled...The chairs were. . covered under at least three generations of antimacassars of lace and crochet" (Glinton-Meicholas, p 143).
  - 8 The rebellion occurred on the Hunter estate on Cat Island in December 1831. It was, according to Craton and Saunders (1992), "provoked by bad treatment and a rumor (so similar to those circulating in the sugar colonies around that time) that the slaves had been freed but their freedom withheld by the local white regime. A refusal to work and rioting climaxed in the firing of a gun at the Honourable Joseph Hunter, the owner. After troops were sent to restore order, seven men and two women slaves were tried by the general court. All the men were condemned to death by hanging, but only Black Dick, the driver, was actually executed" (p 387).
  - 9 Janet Donnelly (1992) writes that Cat Island was originally called "Wanima" by the Lucayans, and "Guanima according to the Spanish orthography" See The lucayan legacy, *At Random* 3, p, 16. The name "Guanima" evokes the aboriginal history of Cat Island which is largely lost, retrievable only in limited archaeological and linguistic excavation. The name "Cat Island" similarly requires an unearthing of origins since no history of its naming appears to exist.

- 10 In his discussion of contemporary Bahamian literature, specifically its inclusion of places outside of The Bahamas, Anthony Dahl (1995) affirms the necessity and inevitability of the centrality of The Bahamas in the construction of a literature "whose main purpose is to produce a national culture, ie. a culture that reflects principally a black heritage and tradition" He states further that this literature "would [ineluctably] pay close attention to the Family Islands and particularly to New Providence, the seat of economic, social, political and ideological power and change, and the place where the majority of black Bahamians live" (p 191) Glinton-Meicholas inverts the hierarchy of cultural space established by Dahl, suggesting therefore that national culture is more properly located in the islands than in the metropolitan center.
- 11 The folk world is an established theme of Caribbean literature. See, for example, George Lamming's "The Occasion for Speaking" in *The pleasures at exile*, pp 38-39
- 12 The text also references crabs as offering a multiplicity of culinary possibility: crab and dough, crab and rice, crab soup frequently augmented by "dried or fresh conch, mutton ribs, thing rounds of okra, sections of green corn, cassava, sweet potato, plantain, tomatoes, onions and herbs, all slowly simmered to a thick brown stew" (p 185). The emphasis on crops and animal foods recalls Clare Savage's grandmother and Annie John's mother, women linked to the land
- 13 Papa's dream conceivably alludes to Pa's dream in Lamming's *In the castle at my skin*.
- 14 MacDonald-Smythe notes (2001) that both Cliff and Kincaid "have fretted against words being put in their mouths" and resented the "eschewing [of] dialect as vulgar noise" (p 111)
- 15 Glinton-Meicholas's poem, "The Politician's Smile," also criticizes the mouthings of the politician "In the politician's smile/ teeth seem to multiply/ like the vista of tombstones/ in a military graveyard-/ polished, precise positioning. See *No Vacancy in Paradise*, p 31.

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