

## The Autobiographical Genre and the contact zone: the Challenge of *No Telephone to Heaven*

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**Abstract:** *Clare is born in Jamaica, later she emigrates to the United States and finally England. In these countries, she experiences racism in three different forms. The British racism; specifically, brings out internal conflicts and Clare, in search of identity/ identification, compares her trajectory with that of two characters in Charlotte Brontë's novel Jane Eyre. Through her reflections, the rational and stable I present in classical autobiographies appears fragmented and unstable in No Telephone to Heaven. As a result, the trajectory of this heroine comes to defy the classic style of these narratives while proposing a review of stylistic and identitarian concepts.*

**Keywords:** Fragmented self. Autobiography. Racism.

### 1 Introduction

The novel *No Telephone to Heaven* (CLIFF, 1987) delivers to us Clare's identitarian quest. Her light skin grants her the possibility of being perceived as black or white. The dilemmas brought up by this situation are the main theme of this novel. The controversies found in the narratives of race she comes across; such as the American and Jamaican racism and the consequent assimilated father, turn her journey into a learning journey. This journey presents diverse events and facets, but in this study a specific moment will be analyzed. Clare is born in Jamaica, migrates to the USA as a teenager and later on travels to England alone. It is in this moment in which she experiences a cultural shock by gradually realizing that her beliefs regarding the mother-country and herself are misplaced. She reflects upon her life and compares herself initially with Jane Eyre to conclude Bertha explains better her being. With Jane Eyre, we realize Clare's desire of belonging to the stable universe these stories inspire as well as the contradictions they represent in her life. With the Jamaican white Creole Bertha, we realize with Clare that stability is overcome by fragmentation. Through Clare's experience, *No Telephone to Heaven* presents a fragmented and unstable individual.

Through Clare's comparison with Jane Eyre and Bertha, the narrative points clearly to *No Telephone to Heaven's* challenge. According to Sidonie Smith, the novel proposes to disrupt classical autobiographical narratives of the self by defying not only the narrative mode but also the conception of identity posed as referential and indivisible. This provocation appears in Cliff's narrative through the dismantling of "the universal subject of bourgeois individualism, the traditional autobiographical 'I'". This feat is achieved not through "the psychologization of memory" as seen "in certain modes of autobiography". In Clare's trajectory, *experience* predominates over the idea of 'personal progress' and that becomes salient in the narrative "because remembering the past is not merely personal but consequentially social and political" (Smith 1998, 58).

Through Clare's questionings regarding her subject-position we realize the influence of master narratives in the construal of the self, but also the limits of this influence. In this tug-of-war, the impossibility of one's subjectivity becoming whole, as informed by classical autobiographies, for instance, is laid bare in front of our eyes. The arbitrary and thus reductive closure reached by Jane Eyre—her conquest of a 'happily ever after'—is questioned through the impossibility of Clare's closure.

### 2 Some Concepts

To understand the several meanings enclosed in the moment Clare compares herself with Jane Eyre's character, some concepts have to be discussed. The first one is the notion of passing for white. This concept, in its turn, is intimately tied to the one drop rule. In the American soil, this rule has predominated as a system of racial classification. It states that if an individual has any black ancestry, then this person is Black, regardless of his/her skin color. This system creates room for its own breach: individuals who are apparently white (like Clare) can, therefore, *pass* as such. Initially, however, she sees herself engulfed by the dominant narrative of racial purity, and believes she must associate with one of the races of the binary system—in this case, the black race<sup>1</sup>. Not doing so might count as *passing for white* and leading a double life.

This view, nonetheless, is disputed by Julie Cary Nerad. She disqualifies the view that characters in such a situation are passing. For her, to consider that these individuals are passing reinforces a binary view of race. That is, “[n]o characters are simply ‘white’ or simply ‘Black’” (2001, 370) and this fact alone should prevent an essentialist reading of the self. Passing in this context thus endorses the racist discourses offered by society regarding race.

The second concept to be discussed is that of autobiography. According to Smith, autobiographies are intrinsically related to “western romance[s] of individualism” (1998: 37). She concludes with the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* that:

[i]n the master narratives of modernity, the autobiographical ‘I’ has functioned as a culturally forceful enunciatory site of the autonomous, free, rational, unified individual or ‘self’. This ‘self’ assumes itself as universal human subject, a subject of undividedness (SMITH, 1998. p. 37-8).

Besides the notion of individualism, another feature proposed by Michael Sheringham establishes the genre of autobiography as particularly fruitful for postcolonial writing. He declares that the “autobiographer necessarily engages not only with the self, but also with the other in various forms, and raises at the same time the question of the heterogeneous, hybrid form of autobiography” (in Kelly 2005: 11). Taking this statement for granted, autobiography becomes the hybrid genre par excellence. The logic of the argument resides in one of the main features of the genre. By dealing with the self, it has to/proposes to establish the limit of the **I** and the **Others**. This proposition has certainly found more stable and unstable identities—the European notion of the self on the one side and the postcolonial self, on the other (for instance)—and then produced much of the variations found in the genre. By dealing so closely with subjectivities, the genre exposes, again, the issue of identity. Identity inevitably becomes visible in the genre and imprints it with its fragmentation. The genre itself becomes a site of struggle, of determination of prevalent subjectivities.

The argument that autobiography deals with the self and the **Other** advances the revolutionary quality of the genre: “autobiography has also been called a tool for ‘decolonising the mind’ within the colonial and postcolonial context” (Kelly 2005: 12). The process of decolonizing

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<sup>1</sup> Even though it has been proved that the construct ‘race’ does not exist in biological terms, the concept and its implications in culture have been overtly debated (Appiah, Hall, Fanon among others). Stuart Hall and Kwame Anthony Appiah argue that, in spite of the ‘fictional’ account of it, the disqualification of the concept may demean its implications. Appiah points out that every identity is construed: “[i]nvented histories, invented biologies, invented cultural affinities come with every identity; each is a kind of role that has to be scripted, structured by conventions of narrative to which the world never quite manages to *conform*” (Appiah 1992, 174 my emphasis). This *unconformity* in relation to race points to the sometimes usefulness of the concept in political terms (for instance, when the notion of unity may help reach heights that would be otherwise inaccessible to dispersed groups (Appiah)). Nevertheless, the notion of race is at the same time disabling since its prerogative is that of ‘racial camaraderie’ which “without effort; [. . .] leaves us unprepared, therefore, to handle the “intraracial” conflicts that arise from the very different situations of black (and white and yellow) people in different parts of the economy and of the world” (Appiah 1992, 176).

the mind comes true through the observation of the **Other**. It is only through this observation that relations of power can become visible. This is one of the features that stand out in the autobiographical mode. This form of writing “constantly reinvents itself and [its] basic premise is that of self-questioning, not only of the subjectivity under investigation, but in the very forms in which that investigation may take place” (Kelly 2005: 32). Through this questioning, power is challenged at the level of the language.

The battle regarding the power of the postcolonial experience to change literature starts when cultural critics come to the conclusion that any type of narrative has, undoubtedly, to concur with dominant forms of discourse. This view denies the possibility of agency of the individual and considers any attempt at disrupting the *status quo* as fruitless. Smith, nevertheless, while talking specifically about autobiographies, soon disqualifies this position: “Autobiographical practices can be taken up as occasions to critique dominant discourses of identity and truth-telling by rendering the ‘I’ unstable, shifting, provisional, troubled by and in its identifications” (1998: 40). The post-identity take on autobiography contributes to the postcolonial project. By appropriating standard forms of narrative such as an autobiography, she continues, the author can destabilize the genre and inflict new forms and ideas upon the mode. According to Smith (1998: 58), this is what *No Telephone to Heaven* proposes.

Autobiographical aspects appear in Brontë’s and Cliff’s narratives. Their novels are not autobiographies, *stricto sensu*; and they, in fact, may be associated to the genre due to very different characteristics. The autobiographical aspect of *Jane Eyre* resides in the depiction of a sovereign self who, facing the hardships of the world, becomes capable of occupying a stable position in hegemonic society. Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*, on the other hand, challenges this type of narrative. Instead, as Smith argues, the latter novel’s autobiographical aspect is related not only to authorship but also, and subversively, to the search of a personal development which struggles with autobiography’s very notion of finding, within master narratives of resolution, a final closure as enacted within *Jane Eyre*’s narrative (Smith 1998).

### 3 The problem and discussion

Taking the notion of autobiography as a site of representational subversion where personal development is irreducible to closure—I follow Smith’s argument that *No Telephone to Heaven* expands the genre by challenging its supposedly stable identity as construed in opposition to experience (Smith 1998, 59). From this starting position, the question that comes up when analyzing NTH’s narrative, then, regards Clare’s identity construal. The novel proposes a narrative of betterment: the heroine faces several situations that lead her to develop a greater awareness of her subject-positions in the world. The development of the narrative, nevertheless, does not culminate in a resolution and the strengthening of an autonomous and unified ‘I’, as expected in classical autobiographies. It, in fact, points to fragmentation and the questioning of narratives of closure as *Jane Eyre*’s as an impossible stability. The result is a narrative in which the intricateness of the construal of one’s subjectivity questions the very notion that the self can be reduced to an ideal completeness. This difficulty points to the ideological making of the concept of stable identity.

Clare’s narrative leads her to different countries and different encounters with herself. Through her experiences and reflections, we glimpse at the fragmented makings of her subjectivity. Clare seeks a new life, out of these paradigms, and this includes being away from her parents and the American racism. Being away from her parents and in London helps her reflect. Under her father’s influence, Clare has been taught to pass for white. Nevertheless, this lesson is not so simple for Clare. Even though her father’s skin hints at acts of miscegenation, he is able to pass for white whenever he needs. Her mother, on the other hand, is undoubtedly black. Led by current discourses of allegiance to the black race and by the unconditional love for her mother (who has suffered

American racism) Clare oscillates between being what she actually is—an individual in-between—, accepting her father’s idea of passing, or embracing the drop of black blood that runs through her veins. Clare’s primary *choice* is to accept the invisibility of her biological inheritance over her skin and observe the cultural clashes happening around her. It is in these moments of incoherence that she starts wondering about who she really is.

Clare travels to London and she finds herself completely alone. In England, the situations that strike her the most are those that reinforce the social differences between those **tainted with black blood** and the whites. She has just arrived in London expecting it to be her new home: “Her place could be here. America behind her, way-station. This was natural”. The narrative continues nevertheless: “She was not prepared for the dark women in saris cleaning the toilets at Heathrow” (Cliff 1987: 109).

Interesting in this citation is the fact that the women she sees are not Jamaican or even American people of color. They are Indian women who, according to narratives of whiteness, belong to a major and oppositional group to that of the whites: the *non-white*. Clare has absorbed this information and is also aware that this group of women is, supposedly, part of the Commonwealth, as she studied in the Jamaican school. She understands the binary system of race and her position in it. She, along with the women in saris, is part of those excluded. She immediately tries to replace this image. For this she recalls the lessons at school back in Jamaica:

She tried to put them from her mind. Replacing them with lessons from St. Catherine’s School for Girls, coming back at her, the expatriate women and light natives trying their best to civilize her and other girls like her. Trained to possess them at impressionable ages. Come out of the trees, girls, take those bones out of your hair. Poor teachers. Had they done wrong? (CLIFF, 1987, p. 109)

Among the things that call our attention in this citation are the words *civilize* and *possess*. Two sides of the same coin unveiled simultaneously. On the one hand, the feeling Clare experiences of being *civilized*, taught the values of the Empire and, on the other, the implications of this act. That is, power among different peoples (in this case, peoples from the former Empire and the colony) establishes whose values are to be replaced by whose.

Another hint into the effect of Imperial discourse is given by Clare’s last name. It is not by chance that her surname is Savage. In the logic of the Empire, *Savages* are those belittled by the dominant power. Nevertheless, it is this definition that Clare seems to acknowledge when she wonders about the success of her teachers in civilizing her and her colleagues; that is, in promoting them to a higher *stage* of civilization. This task of the civilizing mission is implicit in the act of passing that is expected from Clare on the colony, in Jamaica, in the U.S. and in England. The school seems to have had an important role in this task and the former passage reveals that Clare is becoming widely aware of it. Her awareness pops out in the words and expressions she uses to refer to her education back in the colony: *trained, impressionable ages, poor teachers*.

Here, then, we realize with Clare that the skin color that she decides to assume does not regard only a personal feature. According to master narratives, by assuming a white skin, she is not only passing for white. She is also passing for civilized, belonging to the First World and all the privileges associated to this position. Racialized subjects are the mark of the so-called Third World, a mark of social, economic and intellectual inferiority. By denying the race attributed to her, Clare would also be denying her origins and all the negative meanings connected to her personal history.

By the same token, this passage reveals Clare’s dis-identification with eurocentrism and whiteness. Her conjecture: “Poor teachers. Had they done wrong?” (above) implicates her feeling of dislocation. For the first time in the country “she had been taught to call Mother” (Cliff 1987: 111) she realizes she might not be one of them. This passage then, not only shows the imperialist position/vocabulary she has learned to describe her situation but it also shows her uneasiness regarding these facts. This moment, therefore, reveals a fracture, a breach in Clare’s convictions.

In London Clare spends most of her time alone “in observance of this country” (Cliff 1987: 111). The impressions this city leaves on her leads her to compare her life with that of Jane Eyre. Smith notes that with Jane, Clare seeks to identify with the individuality and unity this character reaches at the end of her tale (1998: 53). Nevertheless, this identification seems, at first sight, odd enough to raise several questions. What kind of connection does a Third World woman who is said to be black find in a First World white woman? To understand this connection, the *facts* of this identification have to be closely examined.

Thomas Cartelli writes: “Cliff’s protagonist, Clare Savage, encounters Jane at a moment of weakness when the temptation to merge her subjectivity with Jane’s is strong” (Cartelli 1995: 90). It is; in fact, a brief moment of weakness in which the built up ideology of the Empire that had thought the subjects of the colonies they were all Englishmen, gives its last breath. Even though this moment is brief in the narrative, it reveals a long process of indoctrination that deserves to be carefully looked at.

The fictions that tricked her are several but among them we find universalizing narratives. These narratives tricked her into believing she is/has to be one of *them*. The master narrative affirms that her conflicting Caribbean and British experiences of personal development should coalesce or assimilate under a single, imperial, lineage. Hence the voice that wants such closure is the one that learned to call England mother. Possessed by the *civilizing mission*, Clare feels that she should achieve an assimilated identity—just as Jane had, before her. She realizes that, under the Empire aegis, Jane’s narrative of personal development is legitimate. It coincides with the state notion of progress and closure, while Clare’s misplaced desire/understanding of being a British citizen makes her narrative illegitimate and marginal.

Contradiction is unavoidable in these discourses and the inconsistencies of what she had learned in the Caribbean English School become evident to her. These inconsistencies are revealed in the content of her early education in Jamaica that had included England’s history, geography and literature. Clare recalls it while trying to sleep:

She still could conjure the monarchs in consecutive order, faces and names, consorts and regents, offspring and still birth [. . .] If reciting the monarchs failed to bring sleep, she would draw the world map in her brain, drenching those sections in red which contained the Empire, now Commonwealth. Or recite the text of Tennyson’s ‘Lady of Shalott’ (CLIFF, 1987, p. 110).

The performative force of these lessons is to convince her of her *Englishness*, a solace that might free her from her awareness of conflict and allow her to sleep. This anxiety becomes even more visible when Clare recognizes that recollecting this brings her comfort: “There was comfort in these acts of memory. *Familiarity. Connection*” (Cliff 1987: 110, *my emphasis*). Familiarity and connection to the Empire: a far away imaginary that has been her companion since a very early age. As we can see in the above citation, what she learned back in school was not Jamaican history, not Jamaican geography and not Jamaican literature. Her ‘knowledge’ is directed to the mother-country’s culture, one of the main contradictions of her education in the former colony. The school again, appears as a fecund reproducer of the *status quo*.

These memories work to the effect of throwing her out of reality. Later on in her life, in London, she studies the European culture again and she admits: “This suited her for a time. Study. Dreams and images. Refuge. Rivalry of nature. Balance. Harmony. None enter here unless he is a geometer. Mnemonics. *Order from chaos*. [. . .] She needed this—yes. Her head filled” (Cliff 1987: 117, *my emphasis*). The Promised Land is here again: that there is a final order, that through hard work, wisdom and, understanding will eventually lead to some kind of greater logic. The plausible effect is to point out to Clare that this logic escapes her. As a consequence, it indicates that it is **her** inability to reach it that might produce the chaos in her life.

Subsequently, she produces a list of pieces of art/artists/culture she has studied: Zeus,

Apelles, tombs, Christ's agony, Aphrodite, philosopher's stone, Ovid, Titian, Michelangelo, Aristotle. None of them is Jamaican or American—it is the European achievements (and civilization) that, literally, gets into her brain. This knowledge is legitimated by European narratives of superiority that say that this is *Art*. The implied notion it propagates is that other types of knowledge are, understandably, inferior. In the case of Clare, we have the knowledge and education she received from her parents disqualified. In this understanding, her studying the **high art** represents an escape from herself. She does not fall back on Jamaican myths and art; instead she looks for something that is foreign for her.

This acceptance was construed back in the Jamaican schools that privileged European history/literature/art. The contradictions of this discourse are in these lessons and the (implied?) statement that Jamaicans are part of the Commonwealth. She was, after all, studying the History of her People—the Empire history and culture. Nevertheless, Clare realizes that this is true only while she is in Jamaica whereas when in England she becomes a Jamaican, a Third World citizen, a daughter of discontinuous narratives. In this moment Clare understands that she is not only passing as white, she is also passing as civilized, possessed by the 'mother-country'. These contradictions have blurred the perception of her racial affiliation as well. Thought previously by her father to perform whiteness, the understanding of her historical condition as an unprivileged being, makes her more aware of her blackness.

Another fiction that has tricked her is that of the literature produced in the mother country. The strength of modern states, such as England, was built upon narratives of development and progress. These narratives were extended to the individual who was believed to be capable of determining his/her own story. The novels of the eighteenth century reinforced this notion of stability by seeking to present a satisfactory closure to their narratives. No crises could be left without a proper answer. This is the case of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Disturbed by the conflicting information she is granted by her observance of the country, Clare remembers Jane and tries to find connections between this character and herself. Smith states that "Jane's personalism, her intimate address to the reader, seduces Clare into identification with the romance of (female) individualism". This identification, nevertheless "forces a particular kind of remembering in Clare Savage, a remembering through which she conforms her experiential history to the individualist tropes of the 'mother country' and sutures the differences" (1998: 52).

Clare's identification with Jane Eyre's autobiographical narrative reveals a desire for the individuality that might be afforded by passing for white. The constant pressure to become part of a *community* project; that is, to be defined by the drop of black blood in her veins and, consequently, by some supposedly essential connection to *her people*, is fought against. It is through this identification that Clare follows Jane in her attempts to "constitute[s] herself as a free, unified, rational, self-regulating subject, the bourgeois individual" (Smith 1998: 53). That is, by becoming *white* she would be free from the restraints imposed upon her origins and race. Clare finds in this moment that only then would she be able to disconnect from the unwanted legacies of her African heritage.

Nevertheless, Clare realizes she cannot be Jane. Her observance of England shows her the contradictions of her education. Through the understanding of Jane Eyre's narrative as the construal of a self grounded in the imperialist notion of subjectivity, Clare realizes that passing for white/First world citizen is found within the narratives that try to define her. The question of passing loses importance in this new perspective in which she realizes more and more that she can make her own narrative outside these constraints. She knows that it is not **just** a matter of choice and that these narratives circulate and have real effects in her life, but she also has learned that they are a construction of reality and not reality itself. This primary identification with Jane, nevertheless, is soon denied by Clare when she realizes that Jane's character cannot account for the situation of oppression she is put into. She soon realizes her mistake: "The fiction had tricked her. Drawn her in so that she became Jane" (Cliff 1987: 116). And she ponders:

No, she told herself. No, she could not be Jane. Small and pale. English. No, she paused. No, my girl, try Bertha. Wild-maned Bertha. [. . .] Yes, Bertha was closer the mark. Captive. Ragout. Mixture. Confused. Jamaican. Caliban. Carib. Cannibal. Cimarron. All Bertha. All Clare. (CLIFF, 1987, p. 116)

This second identification follows her process of trying to understand who she is. Clare realizes that she is not a unified subject and, therefore, cannot be Jane. Bertha, with a fragmented narrative through which her past is denied to the reader, Bertha with her uncanny presence and (in)explicable madness—this is the character with whom Clare ends up identifying.

Like Bertha's madness, Clare's blackness/difference works as a threat to others. In this view, race and madness intersect and point to the making of the colonized as a threat. Through the understanding of Bertha's figure as an effect of imperial domination Clare slowly comes to understand that her life also reflects the effect of this domination. Through this understanding, Clare "resists the self-suturing of 'English' autobiographical paradigms" (Smith 1998: 53). This is why, according to Smith, the novel construes a narrative of understanding of Clare's position in the world. On the other hand, Clare's realization that she cannot be Jane, leads her to the figure of Bertha that comes to "function(s) as a mnemonic device for remembering [. . .] the axiomatic of the civilizing mission" (Smith 1998: 54).

It is important to notice that, as Alfred Hornung (1998) pointed out, Cliff's reading of Bertha is clearly inspired by another reading of the same character—one who, unlike Jane, resists passing. This other reading of the same character is performative of the politics of appropriation. That is of Jean Rhys's prequel to *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Caroline Rody has pointed out that this novel has disrupted Charlotte Brontë's narrative through the establishment of a "revisionary paradigm" (1993: 303). This paradigm is the implicit proposal of *Wide Sargasso Sea* to return to Brontë's original work in order to decipher hidden postcolonial meanings.

In this prequel to *Jane Eyre*, even though Bertha is given voice, the slow but progressive domination she is put into ends up destroying her capacity to resist. Bertha's only escape is to get *mad*—whether understood as mad as in *crazy* or mad as in *angry*. In any case, her potential agency becomes reduced to outbursts of violence that are classified by the Englishmen as madness. This state of affairs shows that the subject is not free 'to be whoever she wants' within the constraints of dominant ideology. The madder she gets, the madder the ideology imposed on her as madwoman.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha's position as the colonial other is further exploited and among the possible reasons for her madness is her construal as inferior and racialized. This portrayal is given not only through her association with the former slaves but also with her 'unfortunate' birth in a colony. Bertha (born Antoinette) is the daughter of an Englishman and a Dominican Creole. This position in-between turns her into an incognita for her husband who, in an attempt to make her fit one of the sides of the Imperial system, classifies her as black. Bertha's madness comes, then, a result of such narratives. Engulfed by narratives that attempt to define her, her resistance to labeling becomes **madness**. She is not—and cannot be—neither the Englishwoman her husband expects her to be nor the colonial other that she finally becomes in Rochester's reductionist reading of her. Bertha refuses this label. Bertha and her refusal/inability to incorporate dominant ideologies of the colonial self reveal a character who is not able to 'pass'. She does not manage to pass as an Englishwoman and the white other. Her difficult position is what ends up construing the image of a mad woman. In this sense, her madness is closely tied to her identity—or, in this case, the inability she finds to absorb the defining identities she is given.

Similarly, Clare's autobiography reveals this character's resistance to being pre-defined by master narratives. Clare cannot absorb the dominant ideology and become what is said to her. Her autobiographical quest cannot, therefore, find closure, as *Jane Eyre* has found. Similarly to Bertha's narrative, Clare's autobiography becomes fragmented and unsolvable. There is no solution because the narratives of identity of the post-colonial subject present this entity as lack of Europeaness, the same constructs Clare has just disregarded by accepting *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s Bertha as one of the

sides of her subjectivity. Identitarian narratives of her being (a black postcolonial individual) works as a strait-jacket from which she can only escape through the understanding of its imposing force. Clare understands that, similarly to Bertha as portrayed in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, these forces can be maddening. She is aware of the limitations of her response to these narratives. Her position in the world is pre-determined by them and this includes the possible answer she can give to the injustice she comes across. Narratives of whiteness tell her she has to choose a side: either be it Jane or Bertha. Nevertheless, she knows she cannot be Jane, whose narrative complies with master narratives of progress and stability. However, Clare cannot be Bertha, not yet. For she is not ready to fully embrace the classification of this character as a racialized Third World subject. Even though she is confused, she knows that neither character can fully explain her in-betweenness. Clare understands the position given to her by the Empire and this understanding allows her to make a conscious choice. She can respond positively to the interpellation that is imposed on her or she can construct an identity of agency. Clare seems to acknowledge the full extent of this realization and she chooses, in this moment, to go on with her life without any drastic change.

In search of something to define her, it is unclear whether Clare is passing and what for; what is clear is that she is dealing with the conflicting narratives she has come across. After all, what does it mean to be Jane or Bertha besides subscribing to discourses which try to put everyone in their so-called correct place? This moment, she becomes Bertha but it is only later that she realizes that it is only through the embrace of narratives of **Othering** that she can advocate a narrative of her own. That is, Clare's experience brings to life Pamela Caughie's statement: "while the *concept* of passing is understood within a binary logic of identity, the *practice* actually functions in terms of a double logic: it is both the problem and the solution (1999: 22).

Clare's identification shift from Jane to Bertha's autobiography is an association with the weaker side of the link. In this regard, it may be said that she was **passing** while she identified with Jane but, when she recognizes that that is not possible, she has engaged her irreducible identity. As stated before, the reading of Clare as passing (in this case 'passing for Jane') includes several layers of signifiers such as the embrace of a white and First World narrative of the self. This reading, nevertheless, also points to the predominance of narratives of whiteness which, in an attempt to maintain its integrity, appeal to the value of purity. Clare is not 'pure' in this sense: she is not completely white and she is not heir of a European tradition (whatever that might mean). This reading construes Clare as a usurper and, by the same token, implies the high value of the elements she would be trying to steal for herself.

As we can see, this is only one side of the narrative and it is impregnated with a dominant point of view of humanity that seeks to maintain borders among peoples. The existence of in-betweens, nonetheless, shows that this border has been breached. This breach has produced scars on both sides: on the dominant side, it is its cultural values that are being questioned (hence the sometimes violent reaction in an attempt at maintaining it), on the weak side, the individual is directly affected while construed as inferior and when approaching these structures, as one that has abandoned his authenticity in the name of being someone else. The lie of this interpretation is in the denial of cultural and social exchange as an integrative part of a globalized society as well as the lack of biological evidence towards the existence of 'race'. To endorse Clare's understanding that she is actually 'passing', then, leads to a false conclusion. It becomes more consistent, then, to follow Nerad's position and "[r]eject[ing] the assumption that such characters are passing" (Nerad 2003: 818). Clare is, in fact, dealing with narratives she comes across and attempting to make sense of them. The notion of betrayal and deception, initially associated with passing, is thus again rendered obsolete and in compliance with dominating narratives of whiteness, according to which the individual would be denying an essence based on his/her skin color.

In this point of the narrative, Clare is more and more aware of the concrete effect of ideologies of race. Her final resolution, nevertheless, is to join her Jamaican peers. This ending requires analysis but, apart from the conclusions we might draw then, this analysis had made it clear that the strength of Clare's narrative is not in her final answer to these personal conflicts, but,



instead, in her trajectory. Clare's narrative resists interpellation by reversing it, undermining the normativity of whiteness by foregrounding its arbitrariness. Clare's narrative ends up allowing to "[r]econceiv[e] the social practice of passing as strategic intervention rather than as self-denial" (Caughie 1999: 22).

#### 4 Final remarks

Her questioning of established *Truths* disrupts traditional characteristics of the autobiographical genre and, by extension, questions the very pillar of modern state as capable of unquestionable progress and complete solution for all the problems it comes across. Postcolonial narratives of identity such as Clare's have appropriated a European genre—i.e., autobiography—and revealed its limitations by unveiling the ideological construct implicit in the categorical stability given to identity. Classical autobiographies and the stable **I** they advocate are revealed as ideological discourses that, indirectly, have created the notion of passing. That is, one can only pass if identities are stable enough to draw boundaries between them. Following Nerad's conclusion that these characters are not passing but dealing with ideological construal of the notion of identity, classical autobiographies become highly authorized vehicles of promotion of a type of identity that cannot exist. It is not only the black, female, Third World citizen who cannot 'Be' what these master narratives propose. Nobody can be a *living ideology* except if we consider that human beings can be reduced to the will of robots.

In this brief analysis of a small fragment of the novel, Clare's experience and articulation of hybridity starts to be glimpsed at. Indeed, Clare's white skin complexion allows her the privilege of passing—i.e., convincing the others she is white—without conscious effort but it also denies her the possibility of promptly caring for her oppressed identity. This in-betweenness allows her to question the politics of domination and to engage in a slow process of personal discovery and healing which continues with the character's journey of self-construction.

Through Clare's identitary questioning, the ideological construal perpetuated by classical autobiographies is revealed. English, however, with a capital E, proliferates also an image of literature and experiences worth of being portrayed. This model has excluded the experience of the post-colonial as inauthentic. When engaged in writing, "the post-colonial writer is consigned to a world of mimicry and imitation, since he is forced to write about material which lies at one remove from the significant experiences of the post-colonial world" (Aschroft et al. 1989, 87). This is where *No Telephone to Heaven* and the several problems found in its autobiographical mode seek to dismantle the European self.

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