

## **Walking the Museum with two Novelists: Narrative Decolonisation of the Museum**

### ***Entering the museum space***

The question of how to decolonise the museum has in recent years become prominent for many countries dealing with a colonial past. However, the problem of representation remains a pressing issue within this debate. The question of who is allowed and able to speak for whom scratches the wounds of many museums. This urgent question addresses the need for a decolonisation that reaches further than a diversity program and the representation of artists of colour. One that asks for the revision of past narratives and the imagining of alternative futures for cultural production at large (ter Borg "Nederlandse Kunstmusea").

Epistemic Justice, the term the philosopher Miranda Fricker coined, addresses the practice of someone's (or a group's) claim to agency over describing and presenting their own lives and history, when this agency was historically lost (Fricker 1-8). This essay follows two female writers who take their readers into spaces of cultural production in order to reflect on the role of these spaces, particularly in the postcolonial context, in perpetuating epistemic violence. Michelle Cliff and Grace Nichol are two Caribbean writers whose work engages with the need to revise and question historical narratives. Specifically, the works discussed in this essay use different narrative and aesthetic strategies to challenge canonical art and its historical positioning. In so doing, they offer means of imagining otherwise through narrative; of beginning to enact epistemic justice towards the canons we are presumptively subjected to.

### ***Taking a look behind the canvas***

In most of her works, the Jamaican-British novelist Michelle Cliff chronicles the experiences of a young Jamaican immigrant and her struggles for identity and geography. In her semi-autobiographical novel *Into the Interior* (2010) the unnamed narrator decides to leave her home country Jamaica to study Art History in London. She is motivated by the metropolis' potential to convert her into a cosmopolitan citizen, free from designation, discrimination and history, and so to be liberated from her patriarchal and homophobic upbringing. Art, in her assumption, is the ultimate escape into unreserved self-discovery and frank sexual exploration. She says,

I hid away in an institute of advanced learning whose specialty is the visual arts, awash in nudes and ambiguity. "We study the dreams of the past," the director tells me... Everything red and gold and lapis. So comforting, all this color, evidence of grandeur. So much easier on the eyes than a black-and-white photograph of Patrice Lumumba rotting in a fetal position in the trunk of a black sedan. (29)

The director's view on her studies echoes her own (contemporary) dreams, for the narrator to seek grandeur and violence-free representation. Immediately after describing her studies in this

way, the illusion is shattered: these “dreams of the past” turn out to be empirical dreams founded on colonial perspectives. The first chapter revolves around the narrator’s confrontation with the reality of her studies, as they are not only framing what is supposedly beautiful, but also present a one-sided, European and patriarchal, view of the landscape of her youth, Jamaica, and her place in this landscape. The narrator’s former hope of her studies as the ultimate liberation is replaced by an awareness of its superficiality, which she recognises as, “We study beauty here and are not encouraged to look behind the canvas” (Cliff 30).

The novel’s continuous implementations of spatial metaphors, such as a canvas, glass divide, or a facade, touches upon the political philosophical concept of the “veil of ignorance,” imagined by the philosopher John Rawls in his work *Theory of Justice* (1971). Behind this veil, individuals (are able to) free themselves from their socio-economic positioning, which would lead to a fair society (Mills 14-23). In a contrasting movement to Rawls, following Charles Mill’s critique on the veil, *Into the Interior*’s project seems to uncover London’s institutions of culture by entering them. Cliff lets her narrator move into the interior of the institutions she studies art at, the British Museum and the BBC, in order to take a “closer look” into their depths, and to demonstrate that behind their facades hides a nearly caricature-like portrait of historical excess, patriarchy and commercial greed (Cliff 88).

In both content and style, the novel’s vignette-like set-up presents windows through which a theater of the absurd is performing self-interest. As a resolution from such confrontations, the novel emphasizes the poetic and nurturing potentiality of language. The narrator’s search for a mother, biologically and geographically, ends in the conclusion that language functions as her only mother. This search highlights the novel’s position as seeing narration as an act of construction. The text is yet another glass divide through which its reader is confronted with the unveiling of (their) ignorance. As a solution to what may be missing in these institutions, Michelle Cliff’s *Into the Interior* could be considered as a curatorial project. With its subtle integration of many emancipatory voices from the English-speaking literary field, particularly from the UK and the Caribbean, and many references to visual art and theater, the novel functions as a platform for a multitude of cultural works. Together they demonstrate not only a complex history of Cliff’s birth country Jamaica, in opposition to the one-sided view the narrator discovers in her studies, but also for new ways of being and interacting. Because these different voices are authorless, they speak through the namelessness of the narrator. Not being named, not performing agency and not recognising her memories in the representations of Jamaica in the museum, the novel reflects on the absence of subjectivity for the many unheard voices of history. Cliff’s attribution of passivity on her narrator contrasts strongly to the quest of agency in Grace Nichols’ work in the next section.

### ***Listening to the whispers of a Cubist Dolorosa***

Language as a tool for challenging the visual also comes forth in the works of the Guyanan-British poet and novelist Grace Nichols. For example, in her long poem “Picasso, I Want My Face Back” (2009), Nichols puts her reader in the position of a painter’s muse, hanging on the museum wall. The voice in the poem is the artist Dora Maar, speaking through the open mouth of the colourful Cubist depiction of her in Pablo Picasso’s painting *Weeping Woman* (1937), which was made in addition to his *Guernica* (1937). Inspired by the icon of sorrow, the *Mater Dolorosa*, Dora Maar is cut into Cubist forms and looks at the viewer with a mouth ready to scream, holding a handkerchief for her tears.

Nichols' poem dissociates Dora Maar's own (artistic) history from her historical positioning as Picasso's lover and model, by giving her agency with a voice in the first-person singular. In the poem we lend an ear to the musings, feelings and observations of the painted Parisian artist, who is not insensitive to the museum visitors' looks and comments. The title speaks powerfully to the damage done by the historical representation of Dora Maar as crying and fragmented. She served not only as a model but is also spoken of by Picasso, his biographers and retrospectives as essentially a "suffering machine" (Kandel, "Picasso and the Weeping Women"). Through the act of ventriloquism, Nichols projects onto the painting the need for Dora Maar's reparation into the dignified portrait of the artist that Maar once was: "Picasso, I want my face back/the unbroken photography of it" (Nichols 16).

Nichols' project, however, seems not only to voice Dora Maar as a unique victim of a man with "an ego as big as a barn" (9), but refers to a wider critique on the perpetuation of patriarchal ideation and geographically one-sided cultural production—a critique also seen in Cliff. This is apparent in the parallel the poem draws between the colonisation of land and its inhabitants and of the female body, which is then compared to the painter's privilege over representation of bodies:

7  
Conquistador  
Of the flesh  
My stallion  
My bull  
My Cortez  
Invade me now  
With the sperm  
Of your colours  
Let your blue periods  
And pink periods  
Find my deepest red –  
Conquistador  
Of the flesh  
I am your  
New World  
Your Malinche  
Assisting you in  
Your conquest  
(12)

However, the La Malinche reference complicates Dora Maar's victimhood<sup>1</sup>. Most, although not all of Nichols' protagonists, offer an insight into the experiences of Black women and their struggle for identity and representation in a predominantly White society. In Nichols' own words this means above all that the women in her poetry resist representations that enframe and define them as victims, quote:

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<sup>1</sup>The position of La Malinche as perpetrator or as victim is under much academic debate. See Julee Tate's "La Malinche: The Shifting Legacy of a Transcultural Icon."

There is a danger of reducing the black woman's condition to that of 'sufferer,' whether at the hands of white society or at the hands of black men. (Cudjoe 284)

As a result, the poem lets Dora Maar herself perform control over the metaphors and frames that represent her. In her poem Nichols proves the transformative power of description and takes up action to find empowerment through metaphor. Throughout the poem Dora Maar transforms herself from a "flapping" duck into a "flying" bird or angel. She liberates herself from the imprisoning cocoon, made from the silk of her spirit. Equipped with lexical tools, she develops wings that, instead of mere "flapping" within a dominant frame, are able to let her fly out of the frame of representation:

[...]  
I am no longer framed  
Imprisoned in that cocoon  
That winds up  
The silk of my spirit  
I'm beginning to feel  
Dora Maar is beginning to feel –  
Her new incipient  
Still imperfect wings  
(17)

The ekphrastic method with which Nichols employs a revision of the Cubist painting, seems here to serve not only to politicise modernist aesthetics, but also to address the automatic mimetic relation of fragmentation with the crisis of a self, rather than a self that is complex and wandering. I argue that also in style, as Nichols' poem refers to modernist aesthetics, her quest for agency is to revise aesthetics associated with operations of victimisation (Craps 40-43).

Her critique of the complicity of cultural production in such operations, lies perhaps in the appearance of Maar's name, suddenly shifting from a first-person lyrical voice to a narrator's voice that depicts her in the third person. For this, there are two possible interpretations. On the one hand it demonstrates a form of illeism, the act of referring to oneself in the third person. Dora Maar adopts a distanced view on herself in order to observe her own change. On the other hand, if we consider it a new level of fiction within the poem, the shift from the first to the third person results in the confrontational break with the lyrical pureness of the first person singular. If we take into consideration the text as a textual construct, this sudden break of the first person singular, moving to a narrator's voice, reminds the reader that Dora Maar is being spoken for and does not truly speak herself. The reader is here confronted with Dora Maar as a textual construct. This results in the irony that Dora Maar is never truly able to fly out of the frame of representation, and states that this is only hypothetical.

### ***Imagining future spaces***

This tension –the quest for individual voice, and the inability to truly escape representations - is the ultimate topic of both works. It is also in this moment of reflection, perhaps, that Grace Nichols reclaims her voice that speaks in the name of Dora Maar. The act of ventriloquism, where the object/painting speaks with a voice that claims to originally belong to the painting's spirit, does not simply give voice, but has an underlying message. The poem's self-reflective moment reminds

the reader that this is not Dora Maar speaking, but that it is Grace Nichols' who 'throws her voice' to question Dora Maar's positionality in History. A self-referential moment like this also shows up in Michelle Cliff's *Into the Interior*: There are two moments where the text becomes self-reflective. The narrator informs her reader that there is "[n]ot a reliable narrator in the crew," and that "[y]ou'll have to take my word that some of these things happened" (103). The works not only create windows into the imperial structures of cultural production, but also state that the works, as spaces and objects of cultural production themselves, propose viewpoints from where inclusivity can be imagined.

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