

INTERSECTIONAL CULTURAL MEMORY AS MEMORY ACTIVISM IN MICHELLE CLIFF'S *FREE ENTERPRISE*

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ABSTRACT: Cultural memory concerns the question of how we remember, and cultural memory studies examines the collective frames and cultural narratives that shape our individual remembering. This article examines the potential of intersectionality as a mode of cultural and collective remembering in Michelle Cliff's novel *Free Enterprise* (1993) and suggests that the novel is an attempt to rewrite US cultural memory, and particularly the history of the US Civil War, from a memory activist perspective. This article argues that Cliff's novel presents a narrative process that complements documented and foundational US cultural memory frames. While intersectionality has been gainful in the exploration of identities and social structures, this article specifically seeks the analytic potentiality of the application of intersectional cultural memory studies at a symbolic level. *Free Enterprise* offers an intersectional rewriting of the history of slavery and the US Civil War by centering the powerful activism of women, people of color, disabled people, and queer people, turning the reimagining of US cultural memory into memory activism.

Keywords: intersectionality; the Caribbean; women's writing; cultural memory; queer; the Civil War; memory activism

Our sense of the past, the way we remember, is not just based on our individual memory. Cultural memory studies, arising from the long tradition of Jewish Studies and the research field concerning nation formation, examines collective frames and cultural narratives that shape our individual remembering. In this article I take a novel approach in combining intersectionality with cultural memory studies, which has not previously been done in literary studies. For Astrid Erll, the term *cultural memory* names “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (“Cultural” 2). Erll, for one, reminds us that the matter of remembering is never just an individual and cognitive function: memory is shaped by social and collective frames. She illustrates her understanding of cultural memory by dividing it into dimensions, levels, and modes (“Cultural”). Cultural memory concerns the *dimensions* of historical events (which, as culturally defined ways of thinking, may be social, material, or mental); their *levels* (which can be either cultural and collective or embodied and individual); and the *modes* of how we remember (such as trauma, political history, myth, or family history) (“Cultural” 3–7).

In this article I will examine the “how” of cultural memory by interpreting Michelle Cliff’s novel *Free Enterprise: A Novel of Mary Ellen Pleasant* (1993) as an attempt to rewrite US cultural memory, and particularly the Civil War, in intersectional and activist terms. *Free Enterprise* (re)imagines an intersectional mode of cultural memory and intersectional memory activism. I suggest that her revision of US memory politics and rhetoric is done with a textual commitment to the plight of minorities and in an intersectional manner that can be read as memory activism. Cliff (1947–2016) was a US author of Jamaican origins best known for her novels *Abeng* (1983) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), both of which depict light-skinned Creole girl Clare Savage’s migrant identity as she journeys

between her Caribbean home island, the US, and the UK. Cliff’s third novel, *Free Enterprise*, depicts multiple storylines both historical and fictional around the Abolitionist Movement in the United States during the nineteenth century, as well as the US Civil War, the Underground Railroad,¹ and John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry.² The novel comments particularly on the ways those nation-constitutive events are currently commemorated. John Brown’s legacy on its own is immense in the US: numerous movies, plays, books, statues, paintings, and other cultural artefacts have been based on and/or dedicated to him.

I argue that *Free Enterprise* can be read as an instance of *memory activism*, which, according to Aleida Assmann, reacts against “repressive structures of silence and injustice, recuperating events of the past for the sake of restorative justice and social inclusion” (3). In their articulation of memory activism, Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg connect it to strategic commemoration of the past to challenge the dominant views, and to remember “a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels” (5). Below, I will connect these ideas of memory activism to Michel Rothberg’s idea of “multidirectional memory,” turning these concepts from memory studies toward intersectional memory activism. Such a cross-reading of the novel incorporates alternative perspectives, from queer remembering to documentary archives and memories associated with national commemoration. While Cliff’s radical literary practice has been involved with revising and reimagining the past, this radicality must be read and interpreted *as activism* in order to be memory activism. Activist interpretation means reading *for* something, in this case for multiplying the representations of US history, as memory activism takes place in the dialogue between the text and the reader’s interpretation.³

Cultural memories concerning US abolitionist efforts are often described through white male heroes such as Brown, and are presented through a racial lens as a struggle between the anti-slavery North and pro-slavery South. By reading *Free Enterprise* intersectionally, this article demonstrates how the institutional and collective narratives of US abolitionism of the nineteenth century are woven together with feminist, gendered, queer, postcolonial, class-related, and disabled narratives of history. Cliff's novel provides intersectional versions of institutional narratives about the Civil War and other foundational US events, tuning intersectionality into a mode of US cultural memory. While existing studies on Cliff's novels have concentrated on postcolonial power structures, queer studies, or cultural, mixed, and ambiguous identities, my reading here acknowledges her radicalism in cultural-memory-writing, not only in relation to Caribbean studies, but also in the wider context of the Americas.

Stuart Hall argues that cultural identities are historically constituted, and that they depend on the versions of history we narrate. For Hall, cultural identities are produced by the retelling of past events and "the different ways we are positioned by . . . the narratives of the past" (225). Revisiting foundational memories that constitute US culture through intersectional remembering provides a new memory activist framework for exploring alternative cultural identities. *Free Enterprise's* intersectional mode in retelling the past highlights the various subaltern forms of involvement in US nation building and the Civil War, whether by Jews, Native Americans, African Americans, Creole Caribbeans, women, queer people, or dis/abled people (sections of the novel are set at the Carville leper colony located in Louisiana⁴). Thus the novel makes the reader particularly aware of multiple systems of oppression, intersectional solidarities, and the involvement of marginalized people forgotten in institutional versions of the past.

Intersectional Memory in *Free Enterprise*

First articulated in a scholarly setting by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality originated from the long tradition of Black feminist social movements and literature. Intersectionality today is a research tool that conceptualizes multiple relational and complex workings of power connected to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ability, age, cultural location, religion, or any such factor that is relevant to our social experience.⁵ As Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix argue, "intersectionality focuses on effects which arise when multiple axes of difference—economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective, and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts and in culturally specific locations" (76). Nira Yuval-Davis emphasizes that intersectionality does not merely consider identities or subject constitution, but analyzes how social divisions are created and take effect on the organizational (institutional), intersubjective, experiential, as well as representational levels simultaneously (199). The focus here is on the "representational" or symbolic level of cultural memory, which also positions and organizes our collective and cultural identities.

In subsequent writings, Astrid Erll revisits her understanding of cultural memory by defining it as a form of "travelling memory" that shifts the focus of "the stage of national memory studies" of the 1990s to a new understanding of cultural memory as a combination of cultural transactions, cultural exchanges, diasporas, globalization, world cultures, and global multicultural ("Travelling" 6–9). She emphasizes that cultures are no longer seen as single monads or separate entities, but as "translocal, creolized, global, or cosmopolitan" (9). Red Chidgey has previously connected intersectionality to activist memory studies, both being social justice paradigms that are tied to questions of "embodiment, recognition, visibility and erasure" (66). For Chidgey, intersectional memory praxis invites practitioners

to refine their relation to ongoing memory politics through a nuanced understanding of co-connected power structures (67). Cliff's *Free Enterprise* offers an intersectional approach toward foundational narratives that define US culture as it challenges ongoing memory politics. I argue that memory activist practice here is a twofold phenomenon highlighting both the radical textuality of the novel and the act of reading it as a reimagination of the Civil War in terms of gender, sexuality, class, and disability in a trans-American space.

For Vivian May intersectionality is also "a form of resistant imagery" (53) providing means for historical intervention. *Free Enterprise* makes its historical intervention by retelling various smaller histories that frame the institutional story of John Brown's famous raid at Harpers Ferry. The raid, which took place on October 16, 1859, in Virginia, is said to have been funded by Mary Ellen Pleasant, a hotel owner and woman of color from San Francisco, who is one of the historical characters of *Free Enterprise*. Mary Ellen's character in the novel is presented as a rich hotel owner, a millionaire of her time. She is involved in abolitionist struggles: her hotels are used as safe houses for Southern slaves seeking refuge, and the Underground Railroad makes use of them. In history books she is often remembered as "Mammy Pleasant," who was suspected of owning brothels. Shortly before her death, she is said to have dictated her biography and confessed to giving 30,000 dollars to John Brown for the purchase of weapons. In Cliff's novel, Mary Ellen Pleasant is one of the few who could free herself from the public expectations set upon women of color (see Ilmonen, *Intersectionality* 70; MacDonald-Smythe 158–59).

While the documented and official readings of history may emphasize only single-axis cultural memories (e.g., that the Civil War as a war to end slavery), Cliff's intersectional remembering unravels its layers through an intersectional

matrix. Patricia Hill Collins has highlighted the roles of relationality and co-formation in intersectionality (225–52). Collins utilizes metaphors such as live jazz performance and the spider web-like Native American Okanagan cosmology to describe the interconnectedness of life—as "alternative ways of imagining social structure and our experiences with it" (247). Cliff's narration weaves the spider web around the history of John Brown and Mary Ellen Pleasant by creating fictional stories about Pleasant's parents and comrades, all of whom are rebellious in different ways.

In *Free Enterprise*, Mary Ellen's mother is a Native American blacksmith named Quasheba, known for her skills in "forging gunmetal" (129). Quasheba teaches her daughter ancient African rites and shares her knowledge as a gunsmith with Maroon communities hiding in the US.⁶ Mary Ellen's father is Captain Parsons, who once smuggled Caribbean runaway slaves to the Northern States, and thus to freedom, in his ship the *Daedalus*.⁷ Later in the story he falls in love with a native Carib man. Their memory fuels Mary Ellen's resistance. Mary Ellen's comrade and sister-in-arms, Annie Christmas—who is from "an island in the Caribbean" (24)—becomes the other protagonist of the novel. Annie is a very light-skinned Caribbean Creole, a displaced immigrant girl who drifts to America, and who is simultaneously privileged by her middle-class background and oppressed because of her ambiguous skin color. Annie does not accept her mother's values and dreams of passing as a privileged upper-class white woman, so she escapes to the US and changes her name from the original Regina to Annie. Mary Ellen recruits Annie to John Brown's raid (see Potocki 70–72; Ilmonen, *Intersectionality* 67–72.)

Free Enterprise chronicles the forgotten achievements of abolitionist women, trans* people, queer people, disabled people, indigenous Americans, and other members of different

kinds of minorities, building an intersectional archive for those who suffered and rebelled in the shadows of the icons of national cultural memory. Nada Elia remarks that the novel uses archives that are deemed as “fiction” by historians—“walks through gardens they planted, lingering memories of lullabies they sang to their grandchildren, bank accounts in their names, stamps in their passports” (73). These smaller stories compose intersectional activist archives that have the ability to multiply the reader’s sense of the past as they practice memory politics. In terms of cultural memory, Erll writes that “from the people we live with and from the media we use, we acquire schemata which help us recall the past and encode new experiences” (“Cultural” 5). *Free Enterprise* provides a “schema” for intersectional cultural memory by composing a resistant imaginary and historical intervention for people belonging to minorities.

From Multidirectionality to Intersectionality

In defining his much-cited concept of “multidirectional memory,” Michael Rothberg refers to Cliff’s novels, among others (27). He describes multidirectionality as the “interaction of different historical memories,” which illustrates “the productive, intercultural dynamic” between memories of the Holocaust and slavery (3). Rothberg highlights that these memories do not compete over the scarce resources of the public sphere—in which collective memories are articulated—but have the potential to “create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice” (5). The crucial point in Rothberg’s multidirectional memory is that it acknowledges how remembrance both “cuts across” and “binds together” diverse cultural and temporal sites, creating new forms of solidarity (11) between those suffering from the legacy of the Holocaust or the history of slavery. However, Rothberg concentrates on solidarity between ethnic traumatic legacies. An

intersectional reading extends this multidirectionality toward other legacies of cultural trauma, concerning, for example, able-bodiedness, gender, and class (see Ilmonen, “Intersectionality”). The intersectional understanding of multidirectional memory should not be only a two-way street, but a multi-level intersection.

Free Enterprise begins from the end of the story with the depiction of the aging Annie’s lonely life in the Mississippi Delta area. Her friendship with Mary Ellen and her youthful years, with the participation in John Brown’s raid, are presented to the reader in flashbacks. She has retreated to her little cottage after the traumatizing imprisonment and escape following the failed raid at Harpers Ferry. Annie’s only human contacts are lepers isolated in the neighboring leper colony of Carville. The lepers are the most marginalized people, hidden from the eyes of others. In this concentration camp-like colony, the patients are deprived of their names, becoming only numbers. The stories told in the Carville leper colony comprise the most multidirectional and polyvocal part of the novel. In Carville, Annie participates in storytelling sessions with the lepers, who come from all kinds of backgrounds, who gather together to remember their own lives, names, and roots. They rebel against the memory politics practiced by the US Health Department. There Annie also shares her experiences following the raid. The lepers embody a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and during their storytellings they share not only their own tales, but also those of their people (Ilmonen, *Intersectionality* 163–72). These storytellings create a resistant and relational web of intersectional cultural memory. The legacy of John Brown is extended by memories of people of different races and ethnicities, disabled people, women, and queer people. The storytellings resemble the embodied memory work that Vivian May describes as “interventions in historical memory” when she argues that “history cannot be told in

the singular voice or via the lone iconic figure” (54).

Besides memory work, I suggest that the idea of the Carville leper colony highlights the ideological intersections of power in organizing marginalized bodies, especially the racist logic involved in displacing diseased bodies. The narrator of *Free Enterprise* tells the reader that Carville is a place where unwanted or abject bodies can be hidden “so as not to endanger the clean, as opposed to unclean, individual. Colonies were founded for this purpose” (38), and Annie is told that leprosy “flourished among the darker races” (40).⁸ The memory of concentrating the lepers in camps also acknowledges the trauma of the Holocaust: by complicating temporality, the narrator elicits solidarity in commemorating violent pasts.⁹ Carville’s leper colony epitomizes Rothberg’s multidirectionality by making the reader aware of the dark ideology of pseudo-scientific racism inherent in pathologizing sicknesses. In Carville, the disabled and sick body is categorized through racialized logic. Thus intersectional scrutiny reveals how different kinds of oppressive logics are enmeshed to pathologize otherness.

In the leper colony, Annie also meets Rachel de Souza, who becomes her best friend in old age. Rachel is a Marrano Jew¹⁰ who helps Annie to overcome the traumas of earlier imprisonment. Annie confesses that “sometimes . . . too much of the time, I think all we have are these stories, and they are endangered. In years to come, will anyone have heard them—our voices?” (59), underlining the dominance of single-voiced history. The healing partnership of Annie and Rachel highlights the multidirectional solidarity not only between the Caribbean and the Jewish, but also female friendships in the novel. Finally, the road to Annie’s healing takes shape as she confesses to Mary Ellen the violence she had to endure during her imprisonment after the unsuccessful raid at Harpers Ferry. The story of

Carville’s leper colony in the novel acknowledges—multidirectionally, yet in the intersectional mode—the memory of female resistance through the histories of disability, colonialism, the Holocaust, and pathological racism.

The history of the Marranos is further developed when *Free Enterprise’s* narrator turns the culturally foundational myth of “discovering” America into intersectional, multidirectional, and traveling memory. Rachel tells a Jewish version of Columbus according to which Marranos were following Columbus “at a discreet distance” in order to seek asylum for themselves (60). Besides the revised myth of Columbus, the narrator tells a story about a leper locked in an iron mask who is washed ashore in Mississippi:

But what if this hypothetical, hungry, thirsty, being-driven-crazy man made landfall at the mouth of the Mississippi, or washed ashore like Robinson Crusoe, or Prospero, and began walking across the landscape of the United States of America in search of a blacksmith, leaving a trail of fingers and toes in his wake? (37)

As Udo Hebel claims, renditions of “landing scenes” have a special “ideological position as commemorative construction of pivotal moments of origin, foundation, and identity formation” in US literature and culture (51). The resistant memory of “discovery” does not commemorate Eurocentric Enlightenment, but is a crusade of sickness and contamination. By countering the myths of Columbus, Prospero, and Crusoe through a person with a disabled body, the narrator activistly aims their multidirectional gaze toward intersectional layers.

In Carville new solidarities are also forged through the intersectionality of cultural memory. A sense of solidarity-in-resistance becomes more graspable as a white leper woman residing in Carville describes the people she

once knew. They were marooned, outlawed people living in Ultima Thule (paradoxically, an Ultimate Border), which is an old mammoth cave:

You could say these people were “in the silence”. I don’t think folks realize just how many settlements like this there were. Mostly in caves and swamps, both of which this country has in abundance. Unknown but known. I don’t think any official records were kept. Maybe there were songs or something. Africans mixed with Indians, Cherokee and Creek and all kinds, half-breeds, quarter-breeds, whatever. . . . They called themselves Maroons. (63)

These people “in silence” do not reach the pages of documents alongside Brown, but their rewritten histories create an intersectional cultural memory of solidarity in oppression. As Isabel Hoving puts it, Cliff’s tradition of resistance always privileges “affinities over differences” (29).

Queerly Intersectional Archives of Cultural Memory

Ann Cvetkovich follows the “ephemeral” and “unusual” traces of cultural memory that are absent from institutionalized documentation or opposite to official histories (8). For Cvetkovich, these ephemeral archives might be found if we turn to sexuality and intimacy, forms of privacy, and invisibility (8). Cvetkovich cites Lauren Berlant, for whom the public sphere, or the nation as a space, is “violently separated by racial, sexual, and economic inequalities that cut across every imaginable kind of social location” (qtd. in Cvetkovich 16). This public sphere also stages schemata for cultural memory. In the following, I will focus on Cliff’s way of initiating ephemeral archives—in her case, queer and intersectional archives—that challenge the conventional understanding of the US Civil War. Cliff reframes national war memory through fragmented

pieces of queer intimacy that render the mode of memory in her novel intersectional, as queerness, in her narration, is always co-constituted with race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

The narrative structure of *Free Enterprise* is fragmented by queerly intersectional archives of memory: as Annie’s youth begins to take shape through the memories she tells in Carville, her storyline is interrupted by the sections depicting Mary Ellen’s life after the raid, followed by her parents’ histories, Captain Parsons’s gay (his)story and Quasheba’s Native American story. After that, the reader gets acquainted with stories told by lepers in Carville. Next, the reader encounters the story of two upper-class, white, female cousins in Boston, Alice and Clover Hooper, who are acquaintances of Mary Ellen’s—and desperately in love with one another. In their story, the reader encounters the workings of class, and particularly the restricting nature of their upper-class status.

During the Civil War, Clover, who is a photographer, travels with Alice documenting the events of the war. Clover Hooper is also one of the historical characters of the novel, although her story is told anew. Marian “Clover” Adams (née Hooper) was the third daughter of a rich upper-class family from Boston’s high society, and later the wife of Henry Adams, known in American history as a writer and member of the Adams political family. Marian also became the first noted female photographer in America. However, after her father’s death in 1885, she slid into depression and committed suicide later that year. The story of Marian and Henry Adams has inspired many books and stories despite the fact that Henry Adams destroyed all the letters he had ever received from Marian. For example, it is said that Marian inspired Henry James’s novel *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) (see *History of American Women*). Nowadays she is mostly known by the famous Adams Memorial at her grave, a mysterious and allegorical sculpture

commissioned by Henry Adams (see Ilmonen, *Intersectionality* 80n37). In *Free Enterprise* Cliff creates queerly intersectional memory archives beyond Henry Adams's story.

In the novel the passionate love between Alice and Clover crumbles because of the demands of their social roles: they are imprisoned by the social expectations imposed upon white womanhood. As Clover ponders her role as a privileged, educated, and wealthy woman, she is painfully aware that certain social arrangements pertain to her. She feels unable to fulfil her role:

Accommodations would be made. She might even be kept at home. In a room where she would be forced to approximate a rounded, female figure. Maternal, feminine. Soft. She was not and it frightened her.

She was too angular, everyone had noticed. Her breasts were boyish. Her hips unconvincing. And she was possessed of artistic pretensions. No woman she. (158–59)

The womanhood Clover thinks about is the particular kind of upper-class, Victorian, white femininity of her era. Both her race and her class standing affect her gendered identity. Clover's story foregrounds not the war as an object of documentation, but the *mode of documenting*, i.e., how and by whom the war is documented.

Even though both Alice and Clover are paralyzed by their white class status (the cause of Clover's death is metaphorically stated to be a "paralysis of the heart"), *Free Enterprise* also envisions queerly intersectional versions of the foundational US cultural memory of homesteading. Alice entrusts Clover with her dream of going out West, as she has read that many women have actually taken this path:

She'd read of female couples, the most daring of pairs, dashing in their wide-brimmed hats, friends or cousins, traveling with the wagon trains. Women homesteading in the middle of nowhere, say prairie in Nebraska, no beginning and no end in sight, building from the ground up. Planting a cornfield. Raising a milk cow. Gathering eggs and slaughtering hogs. Shooting the eyes out of a rattlesnake. (97)

The traditional frontier romance hides female sexual experiences, as well as the abuse of women. The narrator documents the flipside of the masculine frontier romance by demanding a monument for those prostitutes who worked in the western saloons:

All these gals deserve a monument. To their enterprising ways. To commemorate the diaphragms they crafted from eelskin (learned from their Indian sisters?), to the douches they brewed from alum, pearlash, white oak bark, red rose leaves, nut galls, the bitter-tasting teas expelling the child with ease.

HERE'S TO THE WOMEN WHO SERVICED
THE MEN WHO OPENED THE FRONTIER.
(102; capitalization in the original)

As Agosto notes, Cliff's representations of women's bodies "as a type of historical document" (8) turns the generic frontier romance, and national way of remembering, intersectional. Thus *Free Enterprise's* plotline becomes a choir of "othered" voices that reach beyond the single-axis version of US cultural memory: it is told in the *intersectional mode of memory*. Both Alice and Clover have tragic fates in the end. Clover commits suicide by drinking the liquids she uses to develop her photographs, and Alice retires from the world into her bedroom in the attic.¹¹ They are not able to see alternatives beyond the white, upper-class Victorian hetero-patriarchy that organizes their sexuality.

Erica L. Johnson calls Cliff's technique of complementing historical archives with voices of marginalized subjects "ghostwriting." Ghostwriting names the haunting stories of historical figures lost from archives and documents, but who are not for that reason nonexistent. Johnson explains that the ghostwriting genre represents "the past in the present, . . . creating a fiction founded upon historical fact" taking place "at an axis of history and fiction that can be understood as a journey in witnessing" (117). The ghostly presence of Carib people, the indigenous Caribbeans, is also queerly rewritten in *Free Enterprise*. This alternative archive of intimacy concentrates on the relationship between two men, one of whom is a native Carib and the other a free Black man. This relationship takes place in Montego Bay, where Mary Ellen's father, Captain Parsons, arrives in his ship. Parsons encounters the Carib in a tavern. At the same time, however, the Redcoats, British soldiers, rush in:

The pictures on the red-gold skin moved as the Carib gestured. Their black eyes met, and they touched hands. And into this intimacy the Red Coats [*sic*] strolled, casually storming the room, interrupting two men falling into love, and before Captain Parsons could say good-bye, the moving pictures were still, and he was clapped into irons. (118)

* * *

He pictured the Carib blood running into the rum on the tavern floor. Just like that. Just like that a man with pictures on his skin had his heart explode. Captain Parsons could not weep for him in front of these men. (115)

The soldiers end up shooting the Carib through the heart and imprisoning Parsons, who is devastated that he cannot mourn his lover. The scene metaphorizes the imperialist chain of events as the native man does not survive and

the Black man is clapped into irons. Radically enough, this metaphor remembering the encounters of the Americas is presented through queer intimacy and the foundational cultural memory is ghostwritten as intersectional.

The ghostwriting present in *Free Enterprise* is resistant and transnational in nature (Potocki; Johnson). Cliff's confluence of voices comprises several kinds of difference: her resistant cultural memory includes voices belonging to gendered, queer, disabled, ethnic, racialized, poor, and isolated people. The composition of these voices remembers the past in a fundamentally intersectional mode—as the touch of hands by a Carib man and Captain Parsons displays. US cultural history and the history of the Civil War become redolent with intersectional harmonies; as Hoving claims, Cliff is always searching for "the unheard music" (27).

Intersectionalizing Documented Histories and the Ethics of Aesthetic Representation

The narration of *Free Enterprise* develops its ethos of intersectionalizing the archives further by introducing the story of Mary Shadd Carey (1823–93), another of the historical characters in the novel. Carey was an abolitionist and is known as the first female publisher of color in the Northern states. Her family worked for the Underground Railroad and she was a supporter of John Brown's abolitionist struggles, as well as of full racial integration, and worked as a Civil War activist, recruiting volunteers for the Union army. She was also the first woman of color to study law and had her own newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, and she founded schools for children of color. In the novel, she is a schoolteacher whom Mary Ellen meets. Her teaching is based on the appreciation of speech:

Miss Carey, the schoolmistress, had each of her students memorize, for recitation on command, a narrative in its entirety.

"Books are fragile things," she explained. "What they contain can easily be lost. We must become talking books; talk it on, like Africans, children. Talk it on." (211)

Carey's character underlines the narrator's doubts about written history by reinforcing the themes of storytelling, oral histories, and complementary, ephemeral archives. Phrases such as "books are fragile things" and "we must become talking books" (211) conceptualize the coalition of dissenting voices inherent in Cliff's writing.

Ephemeral archives are also instigated in *Free Enterprise* to supplement the documented version of Lincoln's murder by John Wilkes Booth in Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865. War photographer Clover Hooper wants to take a picture of an ex-slave woman she finds living in the streets. The woman refuses the portrait but instead, for a silver dollar, tells her story (86–95). Aptly, this ex-slave woman is named Scheherezade, referring to the *Thousand and One Nights*. She calls herself "a spoil of war" like, among other knickknacks, "the kente cloth swiped by an Amazon of Dahomey"¹² (90) that the Union army brought back.

It turns out it is Scheherezade who "held the reins for a man she later learned was Booth" (86). While Lincoln's assassination is the ultimate moment in US cultural memory and has been documented in numerous ways—Lawrence A. Kreiser states that "more books have been written about Abraham Lincoln than any other figure in world history, with the exception of Jesus Christ" (1)—in *Free Enterprise* the story is told by an ex-slave woman paralleled with her namesake, a storyteller capable of manipulating the powerful patriarch. Scheherezade confesses to Alice and Clover that "as long as I [was] his [her

slave-owner father's] bright little monkey, I will be spared my mother's life" (93). Scheherezade's witnessing of Booth's action—and her testimony to a lesbian couple in a back alley with references to Amazons of Dahomey—fundamentally intersectionalizes the cultural memory of the Lincoln assassination.

The memory activism depicted by Cliff becomes "the historiography of adjacencies," to quote Johnson (126), as the novel listens to the choir of background voices from the past. These voices belong to the most marginalized figures behind Lincoln, Brown, and the semi-mythical General George Armstrong Custer, who, in *Free Enterprise*, is queerly depicted as "a rider with streams of golden curls" galloping through the crowds in Washington; "but no one felt truly endangered, such was the rider's beauty" (85). The adjacent or intersectional sense of the past is further highlighted in the queer story of Dr. Walker, one of the many minor characters in the novel. Mary Walker is a white female doctor whom Alice calls "the strangest creature" (172). Walker, who passes for male when cross-dressing, participates in the war as a surgeon at the front, specializing in amputations.

Cliff also highlights the wartime endeavors of women, which are often left unacknowledged. It is estimated that almost four hundred cross-dressed women participated in the US Civil War, with Mary Walker being one of them (Agosto 180n13). *Free Enterprise* thus gives historical credit to those ignored by American history, illuminating the blind spots of historical stages, as the official version has been made easy and entertaining by including only white values:

The official version has been printed, bound, and gagged, resides in schools, libraries, the majority unconscious. Serves the common good. . . . The official version is presented to the people. With friezes of heroes, statues free-standing in vest-

pocket parks, in full costume on Main Street, on auditorium stages in elementary schools. . . . The official version entertains. Illuminates the Great White Way. (16–17)

The politics of intersectionalizing cultural memory in Cliff's novel thus consists not only in the logic of adjacencies, but also in practicing memory activism by challenging "the Great White Way," the national mode of commemorating.

Besides the "Great White Way," the memory of earth, nature and environment is one of Cliff's many forms of confronting the documented archives. *Free Enterprise* includes a section called "Turtle Crawle," written in a mythical and poetic way and including both a female turtle's and a cayman's points of view:

Cinnamon women dug pens where the river entered the sea. In these they domesticated great green turtles. White beach on either side of the crawle, where the turtles buried their eggs. The cayman slid around the crawle wondering why he too was not penned. He was not egg-bearing. He caught an arrow in the back of his throat, and the women dried his flesh over a fire and dried his skin in the sun. (121)

The cinnamon women are Caribs who "spoke only Arawak, a custom which began as an act of defiance. Many Carib women became Carib as a result of raids on Arawak settlements" (122).¹³ The novel includes the history of nature and the animals, the Arawaks, the carvings in bone, and the salt caking the shores "when the world was soft and the people could leave hand and foot prints on the rock" (123). This is the history of "rock and shell"¹⁴ present in the always intersectional web of cultural memory in Cliff's novels, echoing around and beyond written history. The narrator is left without sentences and grammar

when she remembers what still remains of the Arawaks:

pot**A**to
hu**R**ricane
tob**A**cco
W
b**A**rbecue
hammock**K**
a
n
o
e (124)

We still have concepts such as the hammock, where the cultural memory of the Arawaks remains.

Besides documented history, art and aesthetic modes of commemoration are also rendered intersectional in *Free Enterprise*. The narrator questions whether slavery can be a subject of art, and as such considered beautiful. The novel considers capitalism, and slavocracy, to be intertwined in many ways with the modes of cultural memory framing our collective memory politics. Later in life, Mary Ellen meets Alice Hooper, at that time a rich lady and a hostess of elite society. Alice has acquired a painting by J. M. W. Turner called "Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—a Typhoon Coming On" (1840). In the novel, Mary Ellen is invited to comment on the painting, which literally depicts how the slavers throw overboard the bodies of enslaved people as the typhoon rises. The stormy sea in front of the ship is filled with body parts, framed by a fiery red sky. The bodies are thrown overboard before the storm, in anticipation of insurance money. Mary Ellen feels sickened as she thinks about the companies that granted this insurance money (73), noting that neither New

England nor the Northern states are innocent in the matter of slavery: "Too many New England fortunes . . . rest in the enterprise of slavery, in one way or another" (77). When one of the guests starts marveling at the colors of the painting, Mary Ellen has to leave. Later, Alice, feeling guilty after having invested money in something drawing on the violence of slavery, asks Mary Ellen: "Did the money, my money, paid to the art dealer on my behalf for the Turner constitute the dealer's profiting off the trade? . . . Am I also, given the painting is an investment, guilty?" (77–78).¹⁵ The narrator of *Free Enterprise* demands that the reader reflect on racial and ethical questions at the intersection of the collective and representational levels of memory including how the institution of art, artistic representations, and the idea of the "fine arts" may also be intertwined with questions of class, race, gender, and other systems of social injustice. In this chapter of the novel, the narration is suddenly ruptured as the narrator turns to address the reader directly and states sarcastically that the Turner painting hangs in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The narrator remarks, "[g]o see it. Take the kids" (180), commenting on "the Great White Way" conveyed by US commemorative sites including memory tourism and historical (national) didacticism (Hebel).

Free Enterprise seeks to examine the ethics of commemoration in many ways. Before her suicide, Clover Hooper seems like an outsider in her own life as an elite wife and fills her inner void with her photographs. With Alice's help, she had photographed different kinds of marginal(ized) people during the Civil War, such as members of the "Buffalo Soldiers" regiment.¹⁶ Later, these pictures are sent to the noted sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens on behalf of the all-Black 54th Massachusetts regiment led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Saint-Gaudens has been commissioned to create a monument depicting the African American recruits, but he ends up commemorating their white leader.¹⁷ Clover's

pictures get lost and the artist does not consider them worth the effort of searching. Moreover, Saint-Gaudens refuses the help of an African American Sergeant, Lewis Douglass, one of the survivors of the 54th regiment and a son of the African American intellectual and abolitionist Frederick Douglass (162–63). Lewis's plea to Saint-Gaudens is that "[i]t is important to me that my comrades be depicted to a man, individually, and not as background to our beloved colonel" (162). It becomes clear to the reader that Saint-Gaudens has no intentions to honor this plea.

The sculptor is also provided with the late Colonel Shaw's saddle as a model for his memorial. While Clover is devastated by the loss of her pictures, calling them the "only memento of that time" with Alice (164), Saint-Gaudens takes the "utmost" care of the saddle, soaping and rubbing it "religiously" (171). When his design of the memorial is ready, Saint-Gaudens describes it as follows:

I have limited the design of the piece of portraits of sixteen soldiers, Negroes all, of course, in low relief, bayonets pointing up, marching in front and behind the Colonel, in much higher relief, on horseback. (171)

Free Enterprise highlights that national commemorative art is often unable to remember the actions of the Other. By reimagining the story behind Saint-Gaudens's Civil War Memorial, the novel practices activist memory politics: the legacies of both the Buffalo Soldiers and the feminist photographer Marian "Clover" Adams intersectionalize the institutionalized remembrance of the Civil War.

Conclusion: An Intersectional Sense of the Past as Memory Activism

Free Enterprise offers an intersectional rewriting of the history of slavery and the US Civil War by

highlighting the rebellious acts of people belonging to minorities behind and around the stories of figures such as John Brown, General Custer, and Colonel Shaw. Oral histories, letters, and re-told founding narratives such as the “landing scene” highlight the co-existence of different versions of cultural memory. The novel’s memory activism “resists the historical amnesia” of subaltern subjects (Rich 136) and offers a basis for a sense of community to those oppressed in different ways. The novel can be read as an instance of intersectional memory activism, inviting readers, as Red Chidgey argues, “to question to the historical roots on which identity and recognition claims are being made” (68)—a task more important than ever in the current cultural and political field of the United States.

As the narrator of *Free Enterprise* concludes, “when the smoke cleared the name officially attached to the deed was John Brown. Who has ever heard of Annie Christmas, Mary Shadd Carey, Mary Ellen Pleasant?” (16). Later, Annie compares an intersectional sense of history to a large tapestry:

Our historical moment was lost, so our tapestry is dissembled. Oh, it exists piece by piece. Some pieces have been buried with those who have passed on. Some are forgotten, misplaced. Some may line jewelry boxes, gather dust in attics, be used as shoeshine rags. Who knows? (192)

Cliff’s novel initiates a process of memory activism that challenges institutionalized US cultural memory. Returning to Stuart Hall’s argument concerning cultural identities as products of the different ways we are positioned by the narratives of the past, I suggest that the novel’s intersectional retelling enables, for its part, more diverse cultural identities. In the novel silenced, othered historical actions are reimagined in order to be re-membered: John Brown’s raid is funded by Mary Ellen, and Augustus Saint-

Gaudens’s war memorial is based on Clover’s pictures. The people in Carville form a transnational community, Rachel lives with the Maroons, Clover gets acquainted with the Buffalo Soldiers, an ex-slave woman witnesses Lincoln’s assassination, the Native American Quasheba provides guns for fugitives, and the queer Captain Parsons smuggles Caribbean runaway slaves. The narration practices activist memory politics by rewriting US history in an intersectional mode.

Notes

1. Both John Brown and Mary Ellen Pleasant are historically known as operators of the Underground Railroad. It is suspected that Mary Ellen's hotel was a secret safe house in the railroad system. For more on Pleasant's biography, see Johnson.

2. John Brown (1800–59) was an American abolitionist who committed himself to ending slavery. He attempted to lead a raid on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, to arm slaves. The raid, however, was unsuccessful, and several pro-slavery southerners were killed. Brown was captured and executed by hanging on December 2, 1859. It is commonly agreed that the events at Harpers Ferry escalated the conflicts that later led to the secession that started the Civil War.

3. Merrill and Rigney define the interplay between 1. memory activism, 2. memory of activism, and 3. memory in activism. For them, the first instance means "the struggle to produce cultural memory and steer future remembrance" (998). To apply their definition, the first instance is Cliff's own radical writing, while the second instance, *memory of activism*, constitutes the narratives in the novel, and the third instance, memory in activism is the reader's interpretation for activist purposes.

4. Carville, Louisiana, was one of the two facilities treating Hansen's disease in the US from 1894 onwards. Much important medical research was conducted there, contributing to the understanding and identification of leprosy. However, the leper colony of Carville also employed some unethical practices, which are dealt with in the novel. The Carville facility was not closed until 1999. Today the facility is a museum.

5. For more on intersectionality's provenance, see Collins and Bilge; May; and Ilmonen, "Feminist."

6. According to Sheller, "the feisty female slave was commonly caricatured in Jamaican publications in the early nineteenth century with a character named 'Quasheba' who was known as an independent and outspoken trouble-maker" (91). Sheller argues that even though Quasheba's caricature

includes aspects of racist parody, her character has also been a symbol of resistance for women of color.

7. According to classical mythology, the skilled craftsman Daedalus fabricated wings for himself and his son Icarus so that they could flee from imprisonment on Crete Island, where they were held by King Minos. Insightfully, Bénédicte Lédent connects the ship to James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and its protagonist Stephen Dedalus, who declares on the last page of the novel, "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (87n5). Cliff's intertexts and subtexts, too, are transnational and multi-voiced, highlighting that the novel's structure itself can be intersectional. For more on intersectionality in the novel's structure, see Ilmonen, *Intersectionality*.

8. Many studies of African American literature have addressed the tradition of racism in the history of Western medicine drawing on nineteenth-century "scientific" categorizations of race (see e.g., Gilman). White skin signified health, hygiene, and sanity while darker skin referred to sickness, dirt, and irrationality.

9. Alliances exceed chronology as Cliff's narration recomposes time in her rewritten cultural memory. For example, Mary Ellen meets a mysterious "holo-grammatical man" whose "unborn eyes" have "herself reflected in them" (76). It turns out that this man is Malcolm X, a famous civil rights activist of the 1960s. Moreover, Annie, whose connections to Jewish culture are clear, refers to the motto *Arbeit macht frei*, which, decades later, came to symbolize the Holocaust (202).

10. Marranos are Sephardic Jews from the Iberian area (also known as "hidden Jews"), who were forced to hide their ethnicity and convert to Christianity while secretly preserving their own faith. Some Marranos are known to have travelled to the New World. The diaspora of Jews is often juxtaposed with the Caribbean diaspora in Cliff's fiction. For more on Judaism in Cliff's fiction, see Phillips Casteel.

11. In feminist studies of literature, the trope of a woman kept in an attic has become a metaphor of mental unbalance. The metaphor often includes the

idea of denying one's true identity or the distortion of one's identity process. For more on the "mad woman in the attic," see Gilbert and Gubar.

12. The kingdom of Dahomey ruled in modern-day Benin for about three hundred years from the seventeenth century onwards. The kingdom was known for its all-female army of Amazons.

13. Both Caribs (Kalinas) and Arawaks (Tainos) are considered Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean area.

14. This phrase comes from Barbara Edlmair, who uses it to refer Cliff's way of complementing written history with nature's archaeological history. For more on Cliff's way of dialogizing between several modes of history, see Ilmonen, *Intersectionality* 43–82.

15. For more on capitalism and the representation of art in *Free Enterprise*, see Ilmonen, *Intersectionality* 76–82.

16. The nickname given to Native American troops fighting in the Civil War. Later it became a name for all-Black regiments in the US army. The name is sometimes used as a generic term for all African American soldiers.

17. Both Saint-Gaudens and the memorial known as the Shaw Memorial are among the novel's historical facts.

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