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## Life and Laughter on Cloud Nine

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Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, first performed by the Joint Stock Company in 1979, focuses on two crucial moments of British history: the heyday of Victorian imperialism and the late Seventies, when established social and political tenets, founding structures such as marriage and the family, the given state of the relations between the sexes, long-accepted visions of life were relentlessly challenged. This article analyses how these challenges are brought to life by the experimental strategies put into practice by Churchill, and especially by the use of gender and racial cross-dressing to expose the constructed nature of social roles and personal identities. The heightened artificiality of the *dramatis personae* is superimposed on the *mise-en-scène* happening in the theatrical space to create dramatic but also often grotesque situations, commenting with bitter irony on how the characters' discordant bodies show the constructedness of supposedly natural identities, imposed by those who detain power, not just in a material sense, but also the power of signification.

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In a park in London, from a winter afternoon to a late summer day, a small group of people meet, talk, and face significant changes, re-examining their whole lives, their innermost feelings and convictions – not tragically, rather as explorers lightly and almost dazedly making their way in new territories of the mind and of the heart: two young women – one married, one divorced; the former’s husband and the latter’s child; two gay young men; an older woman, mother of one of them and of the married young woman. It is the end of the Seventies, and they live, on page and on stage, in the second act of *Cloud Nine*, a play by Caryl Churchill which premiered in 1979. Contrary to the first act – a hilarious parody of Victorian mores – the setting here is clearly contemporary, just as the characters’ openness to a different self and different relations, and their search for a perhaps unattainable authenticity. “The times they are a-changing”, Bob Dylan sang already in 1964; indeed the second half of the Sixties, and carried on its wave the following decade, were marked by a sense of transformation – with 1968 its high peak of effervescent hopes, “when a ‘democratic opening’ for different oppressed people was thought to be possible” (Aston and Reinelt 2000, 10).

Some trends had already started to emerge, and they would keep developing – somehow they are still developing – in a sort of “stop and go” manner; but whoever happened to be young then must remember that exhilarating, unexpected feeling of discovery, as previously unexplored possibilities opened up in an extra-ordinary way, and the revolution seemed around the corner. Established social and political tenets, founding structures such as marriage and the family, the given state of the relations between the sexes, long-accepted visions of life were relentlessly challenged; and together with a resurgence of the class struggle and of the fight against racism, new oppositional movements took the scene, denouncing other and till then invisible discriminations, linked to the sphere of sexuality and of interpersonal relations.

All over the Western world those years saw the birth, alongside with yet independently from the student movement, of a new feminism which would not have formal equality as its only goal, and of a homosexual self-awareness which refused social marginalisation, openly asserting the beauty of diversity and the right to different kinds of love. While also aiming at specific results, with requests which could be, and were, translated into laws,<sup>1</sup> these movements’ pervasive drive towards change invested deeper and more complex questions, having to do with the field of emotions and desires, with the quest for a subjective though not individualistic sense of identity and belonging, with the multiple and often denied facets of love and sex. This meant accepting a difficult yet gratifying interrogation of one’s ways of being, experimenting with new life styles and analysing one’s past experiences to envisage another self and another world.

That is just what our characters in the second act of *Cloud Nine* are doing; in part, they are the same characters who in act one were living in a British African colony

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<sup>1</sup> A few examples with reference to Great Britain, as *Cloud Nine* is especially to do with its history and its culture: the Abortion Act, legalising abortion (except in Northern Ireland) in case of physical or mental risk to the woman, was passed in 1967; so was the Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalised (only in England and Wales) homosexual acts in private between two men, both over the age of 21; the Divorce Reform Act, which simplified procedures rendering divorce easier, was approved in 1969, while in 1970 the Equal Pay Act forbid any disparity between men and women in terms of pay and conditions of employment. Since then, all these measures have been more than once at the centre of public debates, and the Acts have been re-discussed and variously amended.

about a century earlier, at the high point of Queen Victoria's reign – but they have aged only twenty five years. They find themselves grappling with a different socio-political situation, having to face yet uncharted possibilities, new ideas and unexpected encounters, while at the same time carrying within them the memory and the experience of their previous cultural background. The mismatched time lag structurally ruptures the narrative coherence, also de-naturalizing the (then) contemporary setting and the representation of a changing society at the end of the twentieth century; while the subterranean continuities with, and the permanence of the Victorian tradition are clearly visible, even at a time when its tenets were being fiercely contested.

Churchill came to write *Cloud Nine* after a workshop for and with Joint Stock,<sup>2</sup> and the choice of such a double location and of such an imperfect chronological shift – as well as other features in the completed play – resulted from those three weeks, devoted, as was the company's habit, to a common exploration and discussion. Again in accordance with the "Joint Stock Method", after Churchill had turned in a first draft the script was revised in further meetings during rehearsals, and also after the opening at Dartington College of Arts, up to its going on stage at the Royal Court in London. The subject of the workshop, initially rather general and yet emotionally and intellectually very demanding, was sexual politics, and it came up almost by chance while Churchill and the company's director, Max Stafford-Clark, were talking about a new show:

I remember saying to him if it wasn't Joint Stock what I'd want to do a show about would be sexual politics. But Joint Stock at that time was such a male company, and no one ever seemed to think about issues of that kind at all, that it seemed the last company in which you'd think of doing a show like that. And of course as soon as I had said that we realized that it was a very good reason for in fact doing it. (Churchill in *Omnibus on Caryl Churchill*, 1988)

She was clearly interested in "a play about sexual politics that would *not* just be a woman's thing", whereas it was generally thought – a perception somehow fostered by the only-female consciousness-raising groups – that the problem would and could only be discussed by women. In fact, Stafford-Clark suggested that a female director would be a better choice for a play on this topic: "He didn't see that it was his subject – that it was his subject as well" (Churchill in Thurman 1982, 54). Once he had come to reconsider his position and they had agreed on doing the workshop, the group's composition was decided taking into account not only the participants' acting ability but also the need for a variety of sexual identifications and orientations, comprising in the end "a straight married couple, a straight divorced couple, a gay male couple, a

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<sup>2</sup>Joint Stock (1974-1989) was a theatrical group founded in London by playwright David Hare, director Max Stafford-Clark, and producer David Aukin; one of the most innovative companies of those theatrically innovative years, it mostly staged new plays born through workshops, from which the playwright in charge would garner material for a writing phase, then revising the script again and again in a productive exchange with the actors and director before (and sometimes after) the play opened. David Hare's *Fanshen* (1975), Howard Brenton's *Epsom Downs* (1977), Stephen Lowe's *The Ragged Trousers Philanthropists* (1978) all came to be with the "Joint Stock Method"; before *Cloud Nine*, Churchill had worked with Joint Stock writing *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), and would later collaborate with them again on *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986, co-authored with David Lan) and *Serious Money* (1987). For further information on the company see Ritchie 1987, Roberts and Stafford-Clark 2007; among the many studies on Churchill, most of which examine this important period of her career, see Cousin 1989, Kritzer 1991, Aston 2001, Roberts 2008, Gobert 2014, Luckhurst 2015.

lesbian, two bisexual men and heterosexual men” (Roberts 2008, 72; see also Roberts and Stafford-Clark 2007, 69).

As usual, relevant texts were read and commented collectively, while Churchill set up a series of improvisations to investigate sexual stereotypes, role reversals, attitudes and conflicts related to sexuality. People outside the group were also interviewed, and the play’s title actually comes from the story of the workshop’s premises caretaker, a woman who after a miserable and abusive marriage had found happiness with her new partner, discovering that sex could be enjoyed and not suffered: “Now we have sex sometimes as much as twice a week and I’m on cloud nine” (Roberts and Stafford-Clark 2007, 82). But most important of all was the exploration of the participants’ personal lives and experiences: “the ‘truth sessions’ – sitting in a circle each day, one of us in the middle, telling everything about our lives, our sexuality and our insecurities – trusting a group of near strangers with buried secrets and private fears” (actor Miriam Margolyes in Ritchie 1987, 138).

The open exchange of intimate confessions between people with different backgrounds and experiences, as well as the depth of self-analysis encouraged (not to say required) in that context, were truly demanding, both frightening and illuminating, as they lead to the discovery of hidden attitudes which one consciously thought he/she had overcome. As actor Anthony Sher later commented, through the sessions

the real meaning of sexual politics was becoming clear. Each of us was secure in our own separate territory, male, female, gay, straight, married, single, or whatever, brain-washed by different upbringings and prejudices. However liberal we each previously thought ourselves, we were now face to face with “the others” and so many preconceptions were proving wrong. (Ritchie 1987, 140)

They also talked about their childhoods, about the beliefs held and passed on to them by their parents, whose lives were recalled as well, and “everyone felt that they had received very conventional, almost Victorian expectations” regarding sex and marriage, and that “they had made great changes and discoveries in their lifetimes” (Churchill 1985b, 246).

The same can be said for the characters in the second act of *Cloud Nine*, as they face their need for change in 1979 while they had grown up a century and more earlier, interiorising that very set of “Victorian” beliefs: the naturalness of roles, behaviours and inclinations according to one’s biological sex, a conception of the family as being necessarily founded on the heterosexual couple, the tendency to re-propose a (perhaps subtler) authoritarian attitude in educating one’s children, even though reversing the value system they had refused.

The centrality of the workshop in the making of *Cloud Nine* is unquestionable; the play’s situations and characters are Churchill’s own creation, but she drew on the material collected in those weeks, and “wouldn’t have written the same play without it”; the use of gender and racial cross-casting relates to “an idea that had been touched on briefly in the workshop – the parallel between colonial and sexual oppression, which Genet calls ‘the colonial or feminine mentality of interiorised repression’” (Churchill 1985b, 245), though it was initially dictated by the all-white composition of the actors’ group (see Thurman 1982, 57). One of the Brechtian distancing devices present in this text saturated with artificiality, cross-casting especially characterises act one, marked by the “double strain” so distinctive of Churchill’s work:

on the one hand, a commitment to the apparatus of representation (actor as sign of character; character as sign of a recognizable human fiction) in order to say something about human oppression and pain [...]; on the other hand, a consistent though less obvious attention to theatrical illusion, to modalities within representation that subvert the “aboutness” we normally call the work’s “content.” (Diamond 1997, 83-84)

The act opens on a paradigmatic Family waiting for the sunset around the Union Jack – away from “old England”, in a remote African colony, they sing a proud and nostalgic anthem in praise of the Empire and of its brave sons “who the earth’s wide corners, from veldt to prairie, roam” (Churchill 1985a, 251). Then Clive, a veritable embodiment of the colonial drive and of patriarchal ideology, introduces himself and the other characters; first of all his wife Betty, who immediately echoes him, underlining her total loyalty to men’s wishes; then his faithful native servant Joshua and his son and heir Edward, finally Betty’s mother, Maud, and the children’s governess, Ellen.

**Clive**

This is my family. Though far from home  
We serve the Queen wherever we may roam.  
I am a father to the natives here,  
And father to my family so dear.

[...]

My wife is all I dreamt a wife should be,  
and everything she is she owes to me.

**Betty**

I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life  
Is to be what he looks for in a wife.  
I am a man's creation as you see,  
And what men want is what I want to be.

(Churchill 1985a, 251)

But Betty’s role is incongruously played by an actor in drag, whose clothes and make up must not really disguise that he is a man; Joshua, according to Clive such “a jewel” that one would hardly notice that he is black, is played by a white actor; young Edward – who finds it very difficult to live up to his father's expectations that he grow up to be a real man – is played by a woman. Their discordant bodies exhibit the constructedness of supposedly natural identities, imposed by those who detain power, not just in a material sense, but also the power of signification; for the stage truly is “a proper place [...] to play with, confound, and deconstruct gender categories” – and race categories as well (Dolan 1985, 8).

Betty’s femininity is the sum of the qualities and features attributed to it by patriarchal culture; she is “the Angel in the House” of Coventry Patmore’s poem, and Virginia Woolf’s ironic outline of this figure may well be used to describe her:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty –

her blushes, her great grace. In those days – the last of Queen Victoria – every house had its Angel. (Woolf 1966, 285)

The fact that a man is “wearing” those features just as he is wearing the appropriate clothes, is evidence that gender is indeed “*performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject that it appears to express [...its] performance constitutes the appearance of a ‘subject’ as its effect”; it is “an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 1991, 24 and Butler 1988, 519).<sup>3</sup> Betty is literally “a man’s creation”: a man is bringing her to life on the stage; and “her” male body makes us *see* the measure of appropriation and control exercised by men on a “woman” moulded to answer their desire:

[It] reminds us that while women have never failed to appear within the ideological theatre that stages sexual difference, they have been cast in roles determined by the image-repertoire of masculine fantasy. Woman as Symptom; Woman as Fetish; Woman as Lack; Woman as Object of Desire; Woman as Exotic Other, Woman as, in Clive’s words, “irrational, demanding, inconsistent, treacherous, lustful” (282)—these are only some of the significations inscribed on the text of the female body, significations that foreclose the representational options through which the body could accede to its own specific symbolization. (Silverstein 1994, 10)

A similar process, the interiorisation of the white colonizer’s superiority, is inscribed in the white skin of the actor playing Joshua, and underlined by his first words, when – declaring his will to conform to Clive’s wishes – he apologises for his race: “My skin is black but oh my soul is white” (Churchill 1985a, 251). One cannot but think of Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*,<sup>4</sup> about the divided self of the colonized subject, his “epidermalization” of inferiority (Fanon 1966, 4) as he is deeply undermined in his self-esteem by his dependency from the colonizer, whom he wants to emulate so that he will be accepted as fully human.<sup>5</sup> Joshua does identify with Clive, and in his self-loathing he rejects his people and his family; yet – a significant contradiction – he still remembers the myths of his culture, like the one about creation which he narrates to Edward (only to immediately label it “bad”), and he spontaneously reverts to its customs, putting earth on his head when his parents die (see Churchill 1985a, 279-80 and 284).

Clive – who constantly tends to speak in commonplaces – is fully convinced of his civilizing mission, to him a sacred duty, regardless of the discomforts and anxieties it may entail: “We are not in this country to enjoy ourselves”, he pompously tells Betty (Churchill 1985a, 253). It is his responsibility to “domesticate” the natives, as he has Joshua, but “you can tame a wild animal only so far. They revert to their true nature

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<sup>3</sup> Butler’s reflections on the performativity of gender are often quoted when discussing *Cloud Nine* – not by chance and quite appropriately; but it should be remembered that Churchill’s play antedates them by several years, so that they cannot have been a point of reference for her when she was writing it.

<sup>4</sup> Churchill does not refer to Fanon when talking about the genesis of *Cloud Nine*, but his work has certainly been important to her; she actually made him the protagonist of her play *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* (1972), drawing upon his *The Wretched of the Earth*.

<sup>5</sup> The use of the masculine pronoun is intentional and literal; “Fanon’s use of the word ‘man’ usually connotes a phenomenological quality of humanness, inclusive of man and woman and, for that very reason, ignores the question of gender difference” (Bhabha 1986, xxxvi) – i.e., he partakes of the “universalist” approach which fundamentally refers only to the male subject as the true model of humanity.

and savage your hand. [...] there is something dangerous. Implacable. This whole continent is my enemy” (Churchill 1985a, 277). Using force may become a necessity in order to conquer the inexplicable and powerful Otherness which is Africa, wild and perilous – inevitably somehow associated to the “dark female lust” which always threatens destruction, unless it is contained and sterilised in the self-effacing submission of wifely perfection. “You are dark like this continent. Mysterious. Treacherous”, Clive tells Mrs Saunders, the widowed owner of a nearby farm, who has come to the Family for protection, as there is trouble brewing in the villages; and to Betty: “Women can be treacherous and evil. They are darker and more dangerous than men. The family protects us, you protect me from that. You are not that sort of woman” (Churchill 1985a, 263 and 277).

In Clive’s relationship with Joshua one can see at play “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha 1984, 126); while some traits in Joshua’s behaviour – not as “reformed” as he seems – point to the ambivalence around which the discourse of colonial mimicry is constructed.<sup>6</sup> The rebellion which has inflamed the villages (literally, as they have been put on fire to reestablish order) is smouldering in the house as well, fed on the resentment for a complicity not sufficiently granted; Joshua, who has always spied on the whole household on behalf of Clive, and who in his identification with his master has dared make fun of Betty with his connivance, cannot stand his disbelief and rejection. “Joshua, you go too far. Get out of my sight”, he is told when he reports Ellen’s love for Betty (Churchill 1985a, 285); he cannot stand being “*almost the same, but not quite*”, so that the violence of his enforced subjection emerges, and at the end of act one he points a gun at the master whom he feels has betrayed him.

Needless to say, Clive is also determined to mould his son into a man, imposing on him the norms of a virile conduct: there must be no playing with the doll the young boy likes so much, but he should rather privilege physical activities, such as riding away from the protected domestic space where on the contrary women, constitutionally frail and therefore unfit for such activities, should happily remain. On his return home after a day spent in visiting nearby villages, Clive asks Betty if “today has been all right? No fainting? No hysteria?”, and when she later plays ball with Ellen, the men murmur “*in surprise and congratulations whenever they catch the ball*”, till Edward stops her: “Mama, don’t play. You know you can’t catch a ball” (Churchill 1985a, 265).

In an “invocation of the Name-of-the-Father” whose symbolic power transcends his individual subject position (see Silverstein 1991, 10-11), Clive underlines for his son the centrality and unquestionable authority of the figure of the Father beyond its perhaps fallible incarnations.

You should always respect and love me, Edward, not for myself, I may not deserve it, but as I respected and loved my own father, because he was my father. Through our father we love our Queen and our God, Edward. Do you understand? It is something men understand. (Churchill 1985a, 276)

Clive’s authority comes from his occupying the Father’s position in a symbolic order which metaphorises it and makes it its foundation; he is entitled to love and respect regardless of his actions, nor should they be undermined by his blindness to

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<sup>6</sup> As in the case of Butler on gender performativity, *Cloud Nine* antedates Bhabha’s reflections on colonial mimicry.

what is going on in his corner of the Empire and in his Family, and by his laughable incapacity to keep things under control.

For only Maud, Betty's mother, seems to adhere to the moral principles which she dutifully passes on to her daughter – the separation of the public and private spheres, the docile acceptance of male decisions, an unquestioned deference towards men, who as such are always right: “The men have their duties and we have ours”; “Betty you have to learn to be patient. I am patient. My mama was very patient”; “It is enough for you that Clive knows what is happening. Clive will know what to do. Your father always knew what to do” (Churchill 1985a, 257, 258, 274). Embodied by a woman (a choice also “partly to do with the stage convention of having boys played by women”, as in pantomimes: Churchill 1985b, 245), Edward cannot help his attraction for dolls and jewels, nor can he help his love for “uncle Harry”, who has initiated him to the pleasures of sex. A friend of Clive's, who admires and envies his “man's life” as an explorer travelling out in the jungle, Harry Bagley is idealised by Betty, who is fascinated by his aura of danger and dreams of going away with him; in his turn, he worships her in the “Angel in the House” perspective – “you are safety and light and peace and home” (Churchill 1985a, 261). But he is wary of physical contact, and when she flies his (rather reluctant) advances, he turns to Joshua for more earthy satisfactions – “Shall we go in a barn and fuck? It's not an order” (Churchill 1985a, 262). Feminised in his submission, Joshua agrees – yet, as an adult male mimetically identified with Clive, he thinks he can tease Betty and perhaps lord it a little over Edward. The children's governess Ellen is in love with Betty and tries in vain to seduce her, while Clive himself has an affair with Mrs Saunders, the woman of “amazing spirit” who has ridden alone in the night to ask for shelter.

It's a farcical merry-go-round of lust and repression, portrayed with no pretense to naturalism but rather with an open exhibition of theatricality; all the characters verge on caricatures, and their imperial and patriarchal ideology is lampooned in worn-out clichés, often enhanced by doggerel verse or songs. The credibility of this web of illicit passions is constantly undermined by the pervasive artificiality of its representation, further problematised when on stage the presence of actual male and female bodies paradoxically re-signifies the quality of the characters' sexual relations. As Joanne Klein remarks (1987, 65-66) homosexual attractions are neutralised by being played by different-sex actors (Harry and Edward, Betty and Ellen), while heterosexual affairs are given an unexpected twist in their portrayal by same-sex actors (Clive and Betty, Betty and Harry).<sup>7</sup>

When he discovers Harry's homosexuality, Clive is horrified: “The most revolting perversion. Rome fell, Harry, and this sin can destroy an Empire,” and even more disgusted as an appalling suspicion crosses his mind: “You don't do it with the natives, Harry? My God, what a betrayal of the Queen.” For the corrupting influence of Africa must have been at play – “You have been away from England too long” (Churchill 1985a, 283) – and the only way out is marriage, in Victorian times an accredited “cure” for male homosexuals (as is well known, lesbians went totally unseen, and in fact Clive will refuse to admit Ellen's attraction to Betty). After a failed attempt with Mrs

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<sup>7</sup> For other interpretations of the significance and effects of cross-casting in *Cloud Nine*, see Harding 1998 (who reads a reactionary denial of homoerotic desire in the realization on stage of the characters' sexual encounters), Carney 2013 (for whom there is no Brechtian *Verfremdung*, but a continuance of stage conventions which actually re-enforces stereotypes), and Kruger 1990 (who also emphasises the importance of the British theatrical tradition).

Saunders, who has no intention of giving up her independence, order is re-established with Harry's wedding to Ellen, and amid cheers Clive celebrates this unlikely happy ending:

Harry, my friend. So brave and strong and supple.  
 Ellen, from neath the veil so shyly peeking.  
 I wish you joy. A toast – the happy couple.  
 Dangers are past. Our enemies are killed.  
 – Put your arm round her, Harry, have a kiss –  
 All murmuring of discontent is stilled.  
 Long may you live in peace and joy and bliss.  
 (Churchill 1985a, 288)

Actually, nothing and no one is the way he wants, as he believed when he proudly introduced his Family; “his world, which is starting to crumble at the beginning with murmurings among the natives and Harry’s arrival, is in pieces by the end”, and he is now pretending in desperation, “probably very drunk in the last scene” (Churchill in Roberts 2008, 195).<sup>8</sup> For underneath the comical effects, there is in act one a subtext of defeats and sufferings: in Betty’s and Joshua imperfect but nonetheless painful subjection; in Harry’s very real anguish when his friend unmasks and therefore despises him, and in self-contempt he desperately asks for understanding: “Clive, I am like a man born crippled. Please help me!”; in Ellen’s frustration because Betty can’t and won’t realize the depth of her feelings and in her reluctant, fearful acceptance of marriage.

**Ellen**  
 Betty, what happens with a man? I don’t know what to do.  
**Betty**  
 You just keep still.  
**Ellen**  
 And what does he do?  
**Betty**  
 Harry will know what to do.  
**Ellen**  
 And is it enjoyable?  
**Betty**  
 Ellen, you’re not getting married to enjoy yourself.  
 (Churchill 1985a, 286)

Mrs Saunders is somehow destined to marginalisation because of her “amazing spirit” – she’s too autonomous and intelligent, too “voracious” in enjoying sex and demanding to reach a climax, instead of being content with her place as an instrument of man’s pleasure (see Churchill 1985a, 263-64); and we’ve seen how pathetic Clive himself is in his futile attempts to keep his world together.

The atmosphere is totally different in act two: twenty-five years older, Betty is now living in London, and so are Edward and Victoria, the little daughter who in act one was “a dummy”, a passive object repeatedly tossed around, “sweet little Vicky” whom Clive briefly cuddled as someone else always answered in her stead (see

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<sup>8</sup> The quote is from a long letter Churchill wrote in 1983 to director Richard Seyd, while he was rehearsing *Cloud Nine* for the Eureka Theatre Company in San Francisco, giving him her views on the play and the characters; extensive passages are cited in Roberts 2008, 194-202.

Churchill 1985a, 256). A child and a female, she was not only denied an autonomous subjectivity, but didn't even deserve a human though hetero-signified body. She is now twenty-seven, married and with a little boy, and though a theoretically well-informed feminist, she is still not at ease with herself and confusedly discontented. Meeting Lin, divorced mother of a five years old girl, a declared lesbian with "no analysis" (Churchill 1985a, 303), is a turning point for her, the beginning of a transition from a political awareness "all in books and the head" (Churchill in Roberts 2008, 200) to a real re-examination of her life. She will eventually leave her husband Martin to live with Lin, creating an alternative family with her, their children, and her brother Edward, who has by now accepted his homosexuality. Actually, both he and Lin, happily entering a *ménage-à-trois* with Victoria, move from homosexuality as the alternative in a binary opposition to the possible coexistence of varied sexual impulses, while he also leaves behind his misplaced dream of monogamous domesticity – which his former partner Gerry utterly disliked, being rather inclined to the promiscuous affairs favoured by part of the gay community in those Aids-free years.

For act two, change is the keyword, a change looked for, experimented and fostered especially by those subjects who in act one were socially repressed, women and homosexuals (but – more on this later – the issue of race is left behind, as all the characters are white). In a socio-political situation in which the conceptions of femininity and masculinity are not as rigidly codified as they were a century earlier, and different sexual orientations have become visible and have gained a measure of acceptance, the characters willingly face uncertainty, ready to question their convictions and to reinvent themselves in new relationships – in particular those who carry within them the living memory of having suffered the restrictions of Victorian norms, though Lin, Gerry and Martin also change. Lin stays warm and spontaneous in her no-nonsense working class way, "but she does get a bit of theory from Vic perhaps, and gets less hostile to men" (Churchill in Roberts 2008, 201); Gerry, after he has broken up with Edward, comes to realize that he does truly care for him, and he is unexpectedly tender with Betty when she clumsily tries to pick him up in the park; Martin, who claims to be a feminist but is "all for the sixties when liberation just meant fucking" (Churchill 1985a, 310), learns to talk less and listen more, and is able to accept his wife's decision, giving up the tendency to teach her what her freedom should be.

Betty is the one who has to cope with the greatest changes through the months portrayed in act two in a series of episodes; she leaves Clive to go and live on her own, finds a job and economic independence, comes to understand her children's choices, and in masturbation re-discovers sexual pleasure and a sense of herself as a full person. Punished by her mother when she was a child for touching herself under the kitchen table, she "never did it again till this year" – then to experience both fear and triumph in a liberating orgasm.

Afterwards I thought I had betrayed Clive. My mother would kill me. But I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from them. And I cried because I didn't want to be. But I don't cry about it any more. Sometimes I do it three times in one night and it really is great fun. (Churchill 1985a, 316)

Her husband and her mother come from act one to reproach her and call her to order: "Let Mrs Saunders be a warning to you, Betty", says Maud; "You are not that sort of woman, Betty. I can't believe you are", preaches Clive, also lamenting the end of

the Empire: “And Africa is to be communist I suppose. I used to be proud to be British. There was a high ideal. I came out onto the verandah and looked at the stars” (Churchill 1985a, 316 and 320).

In vain; Betty has found her own way – or one could say that she has found her “clitoral” self,<sup>9</sup> away from the sexually passive stand (“You just have to keep still”) of her married life with Clive, and she can now even make peace with her former self, also coming to meet her from act one. Not being ashamed of her pleasure means being able to accept, even to like herself as a woman who can exist regardless of any defining male gaze; it also means learning to like other women, whom – imbued with patriarchal clichés – she rather used to despise:

They don’t have such interesting conversations as men. There has never been a woman composer of genius. They don’t have a sense of humour. They spoil things for themselves with their emotions. I can’t say I do like women very much, no. (Churchill 1985a, 301-2)

There is no idyllic conclusion, for the past still casts its shadows, as can be seen in the brief reappearances of the characters from act one, and as the drunken chant to the “Goddess of many names”, whom Victoria begs to give women the history they have been denied, also seems to suggest. This all-female deity, goddess of breasts and cunts and fat bellies, is invoked with Lin and Edward in a “sacred rite” portrayed with a tender irony totally different from the rough farcical humour of act one, but the scene suddenly switches to a darker mood when they are joined by Lin’s brother. A soldier killed in Northern Ireland, that last colony maintained with armed repression, he introduces the spectre of an imperial policy which lives on beyond its defeat (see Churchill 1985a, 307-11). Lin would like to bring up her daughter Cathy without imposing on her any restrictive conception of sexual identity, but she nevertheless tries to mould her – for educating one’s children to freedom has not magically become easy, and buying her guns instead of dolls is not enough to make her find her own self.

Not by chance cross-casting is present in act two only for Cathy, played by an adult male “partly as a simple reversal of Edward being played by a woman [...] and partly, as with Edward, to show more clearly the issues involved in learning what is considered the correct behavior” (Churchill 1985b, 246). Essential and to be adhered to as the other gender-age-race cross-castings, it is part of an over-all redistribution of roles which sees the actors playing different parts from those they interpreted in act one; inevitably bringing to memory the “Victorian” characters they portrayed before, this redistribution can create diverse echoes according to the choices of companies and directors, who are free to make any decision they think more appropriate for their production.

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<sup>9</sup> I am referring here to a seminal text of Italian feminism, Carla Lonzi’s *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale*: waging a radical critique of “vaginal” heterosexuality, imposed upon women by patriarchal culture as the one and only natural sexual practice, Lonzi emphasizes the centrality of the clitoris, claiming a free and polymorphous sexuality as the foundation of woman’s autonomy and liberation from patriarchal dominance. “The vaginal woman, while being held captive has been moulded to consent to the patriarch’s pleasure, whereas the clitoral woman has not accepted the enticements of emotional integration with the other – enticements which entrap the passive woman – and has found a sexuality not coincident with coitus” (Lonzi 1974, 83-84). For a brief presentation of Lonzi and of her thought in English see Mariani 2007.

It would be possible now to cast black actors as one or more of the characters present only in act two – Lin, Gerry, Martin, Cathy – thus filling an absence which has been severely criticised for the portrayal of a Britain inhabited only by whites, who alone participate in the socio-political changes of 1979 London; the focus on sexual politics has marginalized that critique to racial oppression and colonialism which in act one – instrumentally, some say – was seen as a parallel to sexual oppression, thus using “colonial and racial difference to produce social and critical authority for westernised notions of gender and sexual difference”, and renouncing “any in-depth or sustained examination of race and colonialism” (Amoko 1999, 45-46).<sup>10</sup>

This might also help re-signify changes and continuities, not only between the Victorian era and late 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain, but between our own times and the end of the Seventies, which have also somehow become history, so that we can perhaps laugh and smile differently at the joys and pitfalls of living on *Cloud Nine*.

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<sup>10</sup> See also Brewer 1999 and 2005, and Godiwala 2003.

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