Balm Yard and Identity: The Power of Place in the Islandscape

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Olive Senior describes the balmist's work in her entry in The Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage. The balmist's power derives from the herbs in his or her yard, the balmyard, that in one instance is a hundred years old. In the literature of the Anglophone Caribbean we see the power of this metaphor at work in the texts of Erna Brodber, Michelle Cliff, and other writers who struggle with postcolonial identity. Mas Cyrus's landscape is at the center of the text in Myal, and Claire Savage struggles to remake Miss Mattie's balmyard in Abeng and No Telephone to Heaven. These Jamaican women writers wrestle with the contours of identity in the New World place and construct new vistas for Caribbean peoples in their texts of revolution. Brodber no less than Cliff joins forces with the balmists to create a place for the postcolonial woman while retaining the flavour of the African homeland. This balance gives power to the Caribbeanscape and sets a wide horizon for the vistas of Caribbean Literature. This paper examines both aspects of the balmyard - identity and the power of vistas - in the work of Erna Brodber and Michelle Cliff.