

The Old Playhouse: Culture, Constrictions, and Subversion in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*

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Abstract

Right from its very inception, both society and culture require man to adhere strictly to a set of norms in order to get accommodated into its protective fold. Such a prerequisite, however, robs man of his freedom of thought, action, and expression. The present paper seeks to re-read famous British playwright Caryl Churchill's much celebrated play *Cloud Nine* (1979) with a view to highlighting how society frustrates man's rights on their own bodies and beings by levelling every act of defiance or deviance as abnormality, sickness, possession and/or corruption. Efforts will also be made to trace how the marginalized characters of the play like Betty, Joshua, Edward, and Victoria break free from the shackles of "normative" and then therefore "normal" existence, and how they brave the dangers inherent in such acts of utter defiance and try to articulate their long-silenced tales of forbidden and potentially disruptive experiences.

Keywords: society, culture, colonialism, patriarchy, hegemony

The socio-cultural history of mankind can roughly be translated into a tale of continuous struggle against different constrictive forces that try to control, censor, and eliminate every single human thought, action, and behavior that deviate from or try to defy what has traditionally been decided to be the expected/accepted codes of conduct. In fact, both society and culture, as meta-institutions, owe their *raison d'être* to the human need for protection, communication, and affiliation. But instead of being affiliative presences, they operate as mechanisms for exercising what Eric R Wolf calls "organizational" and "structural" power whereby individual actions are socially monitored, directed, or circumscribed to conform to a predetermined setting to achieve a preset goal (5). In fact, it is only through surrendering one's essential quiddity (essential quality/whatness) and thereby succumbing to these codes can an individual be accepted in the security and the shelter of the "old playhouse" of society (Das 1). Needless to say, people who fail to conform to these standards are right away excluded from the social fold and are subjected to uneasy/painful consequences.

The present paper seeks to re-read Caryl Churchill's 1979 play *Cloud Nine* with a view to highlighting how society attempts to condition, cajole, and/or coerce individuals to conform to its parameters of normality, morality, and respectability. I shall try to show how the characters of the play become unwitting victims of the cultural hegemony and end up getting transformed into mere puppets at the hands of "those in power" (Das 24). Efforts will also be made to see how some of these characters ultimately attempt to escape from this great old playhouse of cultural stereotyping and thereby try to assert their own individual identity.

Cloud Nine was first performed on February 14, 1979 at Dartington College of Arts by the Joint Stock Theatre Group. The play is divided into two acts: the first is situated in a British colony in Africa in the Victorian age, while the second act takes place in 1979 London. However, what is interesting about such a time frame is that while for the audience the time gap between Acts One and Two is more than a century, for the characters it is only 25 years, as indicated by the playwright



herself in the note to the play (Churchill 45-46). This vast time frame of *Cloud Nine* at once enables Churchill to juxtapose the cultural framework of the Victorian era with that of the post-war period and to show how, in spite of all changes in attitudes and perspectives, culture has remained both ruthless and relentless. As Amelia Howe Kritzer puts it, "Victorianism [in the play] has not been entirely laid to rest, despite all the evidence of sexual liberation" (91).

The play, as Churchill herself states, is the product of a three-week Joint Stock workshop with Max Stafford-Clark (45). This workshop technique worked particularly in favor of Churchill not only because it brought her in direct contact with a series of varied human experiences of socio-cultural marginalization based on issues such as ethnicity, colonialism, gender, and sexual orientation, it also helped her explore these issues from multiple perspectives. As Michelene Wandor notes, "The workshops have two inter-related function: to establish a good working relationship between members of the company and to provide the mass of 'raw materials' which Caryl will draw on to write the play" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 46). The result of this dialogic mode of writing was quite startling, for it at once lent to *Cloud Nine* its unique clarity of vision and provided it with a frank portrayal of the clash between the individual and the collective aspirations. As Max Stafford-Clark comments:

the collection assembled for the workshop includ[ed] 'a straight married couple, a straight divorced couple, a gay male couple, a lesbian, a lesbian-to-be, at least two bisexual men and [...] the usual number of heterosexuals'. (qtd. in Roberts and Stafford-Clark 70)

This, according to Stafford-Clark, provided Churchill with "a varied diet" of both "testimony" and "improvisation" (qtd. in Roberts and Stafford-Clark 69).

As a creative artist essentially interested in asking questions rather than providing answers, Churchill in *Cloud Nine* seeks to explore the various power relations operating within a 19th century hetero-patriarchal British family wherein the male protagonist of the play Clive happens to be the paterfamilias. Clive is out and out a colonial administrator. For him, it is a person's ability to comply with the ideals of white imperial patriotism and heterosexual paternalism that marks his/her naturalness and thereby decides the acceptability quotient of the person concerned both in the society and in the family. Thus, when he leads his family to sing and celebrate the glory of the mother country under the national totem of the Union Jack, "Come gather, sons of England, come gather in your pride," it is as much in praise of the "imperial pride" of being British as in that of being the male heir, that is the "son" (Churchill 251). Thus it is not surprising to notice that the rest of the song presents a proud proclamation of the family members' perfect performance of their roles and duties according to their national, economic, social, familial, and gender status. In the song, Clive is referred to as the "father," his son Edward is visualized as a "real man in the making," Clive's wife Betty is called "a man's creation" and a "dream wife," and the servant of the house Joshua is pictured as "black skinned but white souled" (Churchill 251-252). The only member of Clive's household who remains silent during this celebration is Victoria, for in form she is but a mere doll who can neither speak nor act according to her own wishes:

CLIVE: 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.
- CLIVE: My boy's a jewel. Really he has the knack.
You'd hardly notice that the fellow's black.
- JOSHUA: My skin is black but oh my soul is white.
I hate my tribe. My master is my light.
I only live for him. As you can see,
What white men want is what I want to be.
- CLIVE: My son's young. I'm doing all I can
To teach him to grow up to be a man.
- EDWARD: What father wants I'd dearly like to be.
I find it rather hard as you can see. (Churchill 251-252)

Churchill clarifies in her note to the play that while writing *Cloud Nine* she was highly influenced by Jean Genet's concept of "the parallel between colonial and sexual oppression" (Churchill 245). And it is nowhere better than in this song that this "parallel" is worked out. On the political plain, the imperialist imagination not only perceives the colonized (both territories and communities) as socially, culturally, economically, and intellectually inferior to itself but also substitutes the colonized body for a set of fantasies and beliefs. Within the hetero-patriarchal familial space, the paterfamilias wields a similar sort of power over the other members and thereby exercises perfect control on them as the master superior.

Thus, to the imperial agent in Clive, Africa gets reduced to a dark, mysterious, and hence a potentially subversive land which needs to be enlightened, civilized, and therefore colonized, not so much for its own sake but for the safety and smooth progress of the colonial enterprise: "I am pitching my whole mind and will and reason and spirit against it [Africa] to tame it, and I sometimes feel it will break over me and swallow me up" (Churchill 277). On the sexual level, hegemonic patriarchy works out a similar kind of image for the female; and this gets pronounced by Clive not only when he talks about his wife Betty as "everything she is she owes to me" but also when he tells Mrs. Saunders "Caroline, you smell amazing. You terrify me. You are dark like this continent. Mysterious. Treacherous" (Churchill 263). A similar attitude can be seen when Clive tries to define what femininity actually holds for him: "There is something dark about women that threatens what is best in us. Between men, that light burns brightly [...] Women are irrational, demanding, inconsistent, treacherous, lustful, and they smell different from us" (Churchill 282). Thus in *Cloud Nine*, family becomes a microcosm for the power politics that operates in the macrocosm of colonized Africa.

It is for this reason that Clive takes on himself the responsibility to "father" (govern and protect) not merely the members of his family but also the natives, visualizing his wife Betty as a gender inferior and his servant Joshua as an ethnic inferior. For Clive, there is little difference between his wife and his servant – one gratifying his sexual desires and the other serving his physical needs but both existing merely in relation to him and not as themselves in their own rights. As Awam Amkpa puts it:

The aspirations and subjectivity of the colonial wife and the colonized servant are permissible only within the framework of Clive's absolute suzerainty. Within the overlapping familial realms they occupy – of household, colony, nation, and empire – they are formal citizens, but with minimal subjectivity. (150)

While Betty's access to Clive lies in her ability to perform well as a consort, Joshua can only reach out to his master through their shared masculinity. The close ties that bind Clive with his wife as well as with his servant cannot and do not blur their differences in terms of the power hierarchy.

The song that Clive teaches his family to sing at once highlights and undercuts such hierarchy. On the surface level, Betty's and Joshua's near equivocal comments except for the gender and chromatic signifiers ("men" and "white men") "And what men want is what I want to be" and "What *white* men want is what I want to be" seem to confirm their co-option by the hegemonic/supremacist discourses of patriarchy and ethnocentrism (become what the male or the colonizer wishes the female or the colonized to become respectively) (Churchill 251-252). On a deeper level, however, these comments vocalize the colonized subject's subversive desire first to equal the colonizer (become what the male or the colonizer himself wishes to be) and then to overthrow his authority. Therefore, Churchill's deployment of a male actor to play Betty's role and of a White man to play Joshua's character becomes doubly significant. If on the one hand, such dexterous cross dressing and drag lay bare the only criteria for socio-cultural acceptability, that is, to become a male or, better, a white male, then on the other hand, they highlight a scathing attack on patriarchy and racism which are unable to see through such performances of acceptable identity as potential strategies for disruption.

In fact, in *Cloud Nine*, Churchill often proclaims an ideal only to dismantle it. Through a number of "fast-moving, satirical series of set pieces," as Wandor puts it, Churchill "reveals the complexity of sexual desire festering beneath the neatly pressed exteriors" in a world where "double standard rages," "female and children's sexuality is denied" and "male homosexuality lurks" (173). The first scene of the opening act strategically set in the Victorian era with its pronounced imperialist agenda soon hints at the rather unsound basis of the proverbial white man's burden. The more the putatively inferior characters of the play engage in their day to day activities under the coercive-compulsive stewardship of Clive, the more their deviation from the standard versions of the norm gets pronounced. As Amkpa notes, "Scene after scene depicts the characters' departure from their prescribed roles in ways that shatter the illusion of the completeness of Clive's domination" (151). To put Amkpa's comments into perspective, Clive's hegemonic dominance is perceived to encounter a gradual yet a systematic subversion as over time the internal discrepancies of his code get exposed. Ellen, the "well bred" English governess, reveals her "unnatural" sexual preference as a lesbian thwarting thereby the in-house sexual codes of conduct as laid down by Clive's heterosexuality and as promoted by Betty's conformity (Churchill 271). Similarly, Harry Bagley, the houseguest, betrays a transgressive homosexual/bisexual propensity that is sure to disrupt the same sexual codes for the male (Churchill 270-271).

To continue in the same vein, the mere presence of these disruptive subjectivities within Clive's family meddles with some of the hitherto unquestioned givens. Ellen's growing fondness for Betty poses a serious threat to Clive's sexual authority over the female bodies of his family (Churchill 281). Harry's growing intimacy with Edward coupled with Edward's increasingly "female" knack for playing with dolls challenges Clive's paternal control on his son whom he wants to grow up as a

real “man” replicating thereby the hetero-patriarchal ideals of masculinity (Churchill 270). Though Clive tries to “cure” Ellen’s and Harry’s “abnormal” sexual interests by marrying them off to each other, he himself understands the utter futility of such an effort, for Harry, as Clive comes to know later, is actually a bisexual which ruins his marriage to Ellen and he ends up getting Betty attracted to him. This is further aggravated when Clive becomes attracted to the unresponsive young widow Mrs. Saunders and imposes himself upon her (Churchill 262-264).

At this point, Joshua, the apparently submissive servant, betrays his subversive agency. During the wedding ceremony of Ellen and Harry, Joshua is visibly disturbed to see Clive raise a ceremonial toast not so much to the newlywed couple as to his own ability to control lives around him (Churchill 288). Unable to tolerate Clive’s display of power, Joshua showcases his defiance by shooting Clive (Churchill 288). While critics have seen this act as indicative of a servant’s betrayal of his master, Joshua, it must be remembered, has dropped more than one hint of his subversive nature from the very beginning. His continued sarcasm of Betty’s subservience (Churchill 255, 278), his mockery of Edward’s ineffectual masculinity (Churchill 278-280), and last but not the least, his grand show of allegiance to the White alpha male Clive (Churchill 284) – all now prove to be something more than they initially seemed to mean. Though one may find Joshua’s professed hatred of his own tribe quite problematic to analyze, it has to be understood that this hatred is not due to any perceived lack of his own people, but is a way to express his inner frustration at his own tribe’s inability to resist the colonial encroachment of the West. Thus, Joshua has no other option but to take on himself the duty to perform tasks that his own community has failed to do.

Opening at this stage, the second and the last act of the play takes the story forward by a century but, as has already been said, for the characters it is merely a gap of some twenty-five years (Churchill 289). This temporal shift becomes significant when we remember how drastically the political scenario of the world changed during these intervening hundred years. In fact, the 20th century not only saw the phenomenal rise of America as a new super power, but also witnessed the rapid diminution of the strategic importance of a once mighty Britain into “a third-rate power,” as Inder Kumar Gujral has called it (qtd. in Hewitt and Wickham-Jones 201). If on the one hand Britain lost much of her empire, then, on the other, it became what Philip Larkin has termed the “first slum of Europe” (80). Political unrest, economic crises, and external pressures only exacerbated the situation. Thus when the second act of *Cloud Nine* actually begins, we find the family of Clive already shifted to Britain. Needless to say, this geographical relocation is the result of the failure as much of patriarchy as of imperialism.

If the first act of *Cloud Nine* is a study of the colonizer’s wish to coerce the colonized body into perfect submission counterpointed by active subversion of the same wish by the colonized, then the second act lays bare what Amkpa sees as “the promise of relational identities as a strategy for the politics of coalition-building” (155). According to Andrew Wyllie:

Betty and Clive in Act I are stereotypical products and victims of a system designed to reinforce patriarchal power structures. Their endorsement of the status quo, however, is drastically undermined by Churchill’s farcical treatment of them. Subsequently, in Act II of the play, Churchill presents us with a series of radical alternatives, thus effectively endorsing the attempt to find new and more flexible approaches to gender identity. (17)



While all the main characters other than Clive are present onstage and a few new faces join them, what has changed in the family is its view on the conformation/transgression dialectic. Betty has finally been able to free herself from Clive's highly suffocating wifehood, and, with this, Edward too has been relieved from the hegemonic masculinity that his father wanted to thrust on him. However, it is through the character of Victoria, Betty's daughter, that Churchill highlights how, in spite of all these changes, culture still continues to exert a constrictive influence on individuals.

Victoria is a bisexual young woman in a conventional heterosexual marriage with one Mr. Martin and presumably a mother too of a boy Tommy. Though she seems to have come out of the doll's life (both literal and metaphorical) that she had to endure during the first act of the play, her absentmindedness, brooding nature, and her apparent dissatisfaction with her life reveals that she too is overburdened with the culturally accepted notions of femininity and sexuality. Though her husband Martin is a self-proclaimed "new man" who has no qualms about paying attention to his wife's sexual or psychological needs, Victoria can easily perceive that behind such tall talk about women's liberation movement lies Martin's own wish to justify his extra-marital affairs: "my one goal is to give you rolling orgasms like I do other women" (Churchill 300). Thus when Martin talks about making Victoria "stand" on her "own feet" and thereby letting her be "a whole person," it is not so much Victoria's but his own interest that he seems to mind. This proves how, in spite of the changing times, women are always expected to conform to the idealized versions of femininity as stipulated by patriarchy:

I'm not putting any pressure on you, but I don't think you are being a whole person. God knows I do everything I can to make you stand on your own feet. Just be yourself. You don't seem to realize how insulting it is to me that you can't get yourself together. (Churchill 301)

According to Kate Millet, in a patriarchal setup, the "female is continually obliged to seek survival or advancement through the approval of males as those who hold power" (54). This is precisely the patriarchal strategy of apparent condescension and actual control that Victoria has to contend with in her dealings with Martin. As Millet further states, such a permission to be herself actually has "a devastating effect upon her [the female's] self image"; for this "customarily" deprives the woman of "the most trivial sources of dignity or self respect" (54).

According to Amkpa, "Martin's expression of liberalism is in fact an adept performance of a masculinist insecurity" (157). It is this insecurity and fear of losing his hold on his wife that makes Martin speak in favor of women's liberation and thereby keep up his image of a just man. In fact, just like Clive, Martin too is a born patriarch but with a difference. While Clive's attitude to women was apparent from his words, Martin, as John M. Clum shows us, evolves a roundabout strategy to get things done (109). Instead of establishing his authority over the members of his family through coercive measures, he manipulates them by initially supporting their "deviances" only to cajole them later into perfect compliance with what he considers to be the "rules." Thus, while talking to Victoria, Martin is able to punctuate all his references to women's liberation with the need to stick to patriarchal regime without ever being politically incorrect. Similarly, all his words regarding his eagerness to give Victoria a "proper" orgasm actually highlight her inability to have an orgasm (109).

It is at this juncture that Victoria's friendship with Lin provides her with an opportunity to bring some change in her life (Churchill 290). Lin is virtually an outsider in the conservative British

culture – a single mother and a lesbian working woman – who is completely unattached to and therefore unaffected by familial or moral ties. Through her presence in Victoria’s life, Lin enables the latter to realize what she could have been. However, a stifled existence that she has grown habituated to makes Victoria feel a little disconcerted at Lin’s proposed lesbianism as she becomes worried about the notions of sexual normalcy and marital fidelity: “Does it count as adultery with a woman?” (Churchill 296). However, it is this very “abnormal” relationship that makes her ask a few rather “normal” questions if not to Martin then, and even more profitably so, to herself: “Why does Martin make me tie myself in knots? [...] No, not Martin, why do I make myself tie myself in knots? It’s got to stop [...]” (Churchill 302). Interestingly, the more Victoria questions Martin’s attitude, the more she is able to see in it just another projection of the same ideologies that her father Clive had followed.

This is a liberating moment in *Cloud Nine*. While Victoria gets rid of her dependence on Martin and becomes ready to accept her lesbian inclination, her brother Edward too moves beyond his pronounced homosexuality to accept his transsexual desires:

EDWARD: I like women.
 VICTORIA: That should please mother.
 EDWARD: No listen Vicky. I’d rather be a woman. I wish I had breasts like that, I think they’re beautiful. Can I touch them?
 VICTORIA: What, pretending they’re yours?
 EDWARD: No, I know it’s you.
 VICTORIA: I think I should warn you I’m enjoying this.
 EDWARD: I’m sick of men.
 VICTORIA: I’m sick of men.
 EDWARD: I think I’m a lesbian. (Churchill 307)

That Edward does not merely like women but actually likes himself to be one astonishes Victoria. But her own experiences of life have taught her so much that she is able to accept people not as what they are expected to be but as what they really are. Therefore, whether her brother is gay or transsexual does not matter much to her. It is at this point that Churchill brings in another unnameable desire – another taboo – incest, which is highlighted in Victoria’s caution to her brother that she is actually enjoying him touching her breasts. This is followed by a set of equivocal statements from the siblings – “I’m sick of men.” While Victoria’s disgust with men stem from the gendered subservience which women have been taught to live with, Edward’s sickness is another name for his frustrating experience of playing the gendered superiority of a “male” which men are forced to comply with. Thus Edward’s closing remarks “I think I’m a lesbian” is emblematic of his rejection of the myths not only of femininity and masculinity but also of normative sexuality.

Opening at this crucial point, the third scene of the second act captures Lin, Victoria, and Edward engaged in a ritualistic invocation of the spirits (Churchill 307). As the ghost of Lin’s dead brother Bill starts narrating his tale, Martin breaks into the scene followed by Edward’s lover Gerry. What follows is a series of incoherent references to both real and surreal things. The scene closes with Gerry and Edward professing mutual love and Gerry leading all the other characters to sing the *Cloud Nine* song: “It will be fine when you reach Cloud 9 [...] Upside down when you reach Cloud 9” (Churchill 312). Needless to say, “cloud nine” refers to that ecstatic state of wish fulfillment which man always pines for but never actually achieves.

The final scene of the play brings the falling apart family together once again, and it is during this scene that Betty masters the courage to accept her own sexuality (Churchill 316). Following in the footsteps of Edward, her son, and Victoria, her daughter, both of whom have already embraced their sexual and social alterity, Betty, the mother, talks about how she discovered her own latent sexuality:

I used to think Clive was the one who liked sex. But then I found I missed it. I used to touch myself when I was very little, I thought I'd invented something wonderful. I used to do it to go to sleep with or to cheer myself up, and one day it was raining and I was under the kitchen table, and my mother saw me with my hand under my dress rubbing away, and she dragged me out so quickly I hit my head and it bled and I was sick, and nothing was said, and I never did it again till this year. (Churchill 316)

One of the most debated terms in the history of human sexuality, masturbation, has been subject to numerous religious proscriptions, legal prohibitions, socio-cultural stigma, and medical threats. Since masturbation, as J Laplanche and J Pontalis put it, gets orgasm “delivered” not through the “natural object” (male/female genitalia) but through a “phantasy,” it has been seen as a rather liberating exercise that makes the individual free from his/her dependence on the opposite sex (46). Needless to say, when a woman practices such a liberating taboo, it becomes all the more subversive.

Therefore, when Betty's mother discovered her with her “hand” under her dress accessing and caressing the forbidden part of her own body and thereby “rubbing away” the socio-cultural mandate by actively taking hold of her own sexuality, she immediately coerced Betty to put a stop to it; for such prerogatives lie not with the woman but with the owner of her body, that is, the husband. That after this incident Betty “never did it again till this year” indicates how patriarchy had made her surrender and forget the experiences of clitoral stimulation through active self-eroticism for that of vaginal sexuality through passive femininity. When after so many years Betty touches (comes close to) herself once again and experiences thereby a long forgotten orgasm through masturbation, she realizes how this experience has completely changed her. Forgetting the sense of fear and shame that have been instilled in her by hegemonic patriarchy, she now feels triumphant, “Afterwards, I thought I'd betrayed Clive. My mother would kill me. But I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from them” (Churchill 316). Needless to say, it is this change that shocks Clive when just before the play ends he enters the stage and finds himself at a loss to relate the Betty that he now meets to the Betty he used to be with, “You are not that sort of woman, Betty. I can't believe you are. I can't feel the same about you as I did” (Churchill 320). Though *Cloud Nine* still leaves a number of questions unanswered like Cathy's assault at the hands of some boys who are unable to accept a girl as their playmate [“I can't play. They said I'm a girl” (Churchill 317)], the presence of characters such as Edward, Lin, Victoria, and Betty promise a better tomorrow. This promise is bolstered by the closing image of Betty of the first act embracing Betty of the second act – a gesture that Elaine Aston sees as signifying the union of the “split selves” of the hitherto silenced Betty (37) and Kritzer reads as symbolic of the breaking apart of “the unitary patriarchal construction of women” (127).

According to Michel Foucault, the notion of “culture” can only be discussed as “a number of conditions” that among other things include “coordination, subordination, and hierarchy” (179). In fact, culture always aims at overwriting the individual identity with what John A Loughney calls

“cultural identity” which allows “a person” to achieve “the fullest humanity” but only “within an accepted context of traditional symbols, judgments, values, behaviour, and relationships with specific others who self-consciously think of themselves as a community” (185). To resist such an appropriation of one’s selfhood what an individual can do is either to hazard a head on collision with the conditioning forces of culture or to mislead it by playing the submissive one while retaining under its façade the potent fragments of one’s identity. If, on the one hand, countering the constrictive bulwark of culture may immediately bring the individual under the social panopticon and mark him/her as a potentially disruptive entity, then, on the other hand, performing as the submissive may help the individual to go unnoticed as insignificant and therefore harmless. In *Cloud Nine*, characters such as Betty, Joshua, Edward, and Victoria are all initially made to adhere to rules that the White patriarch Clive or his next generation dummy Martin, as guardians and representatives of the cultural framework, stipulates for them. But when these marginalized ones ultimately come out of their silenced avatars and start clamoring for their rights on their bodies and beings, it gives voice to the thousand muted cries that often lie buried under the authorized versions of history. Betty’s discovery of her latent sexuality, Victoria’s constant self-questioning, Edward’s wish to become a “lesbian,” and Joshua’s decision to take arms against his master Clive – all are, beyond any doubt, acts of resistance and subversion whereby these characters break free from the shackles of a highly hegemonized constrictive socio-cultural bulwark they were so long made to inhabit and embrace.

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