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The Poetics of Self-Writing: Women and the National Body in the Works of Lucille Clifton*

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Abstract

Since the mid-1970s, self-writing, or what Adrienne Rich has called "writing through the body," has become a feminist counter-site for the subversion and resistance of hegemonic forces which seek to create *monovocality* (the expression of one voice or viewpoint that homogeneously speaks for all) out of the American reality of *polyvocality* (or multiple voices that reflect the wide array of ethnic, racial, sexual, gender, religious, cultural and class expressions that characterize the heterogeneous nation). Ethnic identity literature has become an important tool for personal and political expression, especially for feminist African American writers who wish to create alternative visions of what "America" truly represents. For the past three decades, Lucille Clifton (1936–) has been at the forefront of this socio-political movement which not only challenges normative constructions of womanhood and the nation, but also critiques the (white male) literary canon through the power of a distinct (black) female voice. This article will examine the numerous ways Clifton uses her self-writing—specifically her autobiography *Generations* (1976) and her body poetry—to revise the literary canon and rewrite the American "story" to include a black feminist perspective. As Clifton consciously conveys through both genres, the body symbolizes the stage upon which all narratives are written, enacted and revised. Thus for Clifton, the black female body *is* the discursive link between race and identity negotiation in the United States. In both *Generations* and her poetry, Clifton illustrates that without the procreative functions of the female body, we would neither have life, nor by extension, the nation. Moreover, its resiliency is the undercurrent beneath the experiences of black womanhood, and African Americans' place in the national project. As Clifton's works elucidate, the black female body also provides a platform for the rejection of narratives in which one voice speaks for multitudes, and lays the foundation for the writing of an inclusive history which reconciles the brutality of slavery, the marginalization of women of color within the national project, and the reality of a multicultural America. In this context, the black female

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Keywords: Lucille Clifton, poetry, self-writing, autobiography, African American literature, feminist literature

Öz

1970'li yılların ortasından bu yana, otobiyografi veya Adrienne Rich'in tanımladığı şekli ile "vücut dilinin kağıda aktarılması" hegemonik güçlerin yıkımı ve direnci için Amerikan gerçeği olan polivokalitiden (heterejon nitelikteki halkı tanımlamak için kullanılan geniş bir yelpazedeki etnik, ırk, seks, cinsel, din, kültürel ve sınıf tanımlamalarını yansıtan çok seslilik) monovokalitiyi yaratmak için (bir bütün için homojenik olarak konuşma şeklinde tanımlanan tek seslilik veya tek yönlü bakış açısı) feminist metot oluşturmuştur. Etnik kimlik edebiyatı, kişisel ve politik sorunların anlatımında ve özellikle Afrika kökenli Amerikalı kadın yazarlar için Amerika'yı Amerika yapan alternatif vizyonları yaratmak adı altında kullanılmış çok önemli bir araçtır. Geçen otuz yıllık süre boyunca, Lucille Clifton (1936–) sosyo-politik hareketin ön saflarında yer almış, sadece kadınlığın ve ulusal kimliğin normatif ilkelerini tenkit etmekle kalmamış edebi şaheserleri (beyaz erkek) de siyahi feminist bir sesin kendisine özgü gücü ile eleştirmiştir. Bu makale, eski edebi şaheserleri revize etmek ve bir siyahi feministin perspektifinden Amerika hikayesini yeniden yazmak adına Clifton'ın otobiyografisi *Generations* (1976) ve kendi vücudunu anlattığı şiirlerinde kullandığı pek çok farklı metodu detayları ile inceleyecektir. Clifton'ın bilinçli olarak hem otobiyografisinde hem de şiirlerinde anlattığı gibi, vücut bütün hikayelerin yazıldığı, canlandırıldığı ve güncelleştirildiği bir sahneyi sembolize eder. Böylelikle Clifton için siyahi bir kişiye ait feminist vücut, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki ırk ve kimlik tartışmalarına dayalı görüşmeler arasındaki bağı oluşturur. Hem *Generations* hem de şiirlerinde, Clifton kadın vücudunun üretken fonksiyonu olmaksızın hiçbir canlının hayat bulamayacağını ve daha da ötesi ulusların oluşamayacağını ifade eder. Aslında siyahi kadınsallığa ait tecrübelerin altındaki gizli eğilim ve Afrika kökenli Amerikalıların ulusal projesindeki yeri, güçlüklere göğüs gerebilme yeteneğini oluşturur. Clifton'ın çalışmalarının da ifade ettiği üzere, siyahi bir kadın vücudu aynı zamanda tek sesin çoğunluk için konuştuğu hikayelerin reddi için bir platform teşkil eder ve böylelikle içinde esirliğin vahşetini, marjinalize edilmiş kadınların ulus projesi içerisindeki yerini ve çoklu kültüre sahip Amerikan gerçeğini dikkate değer alan tarihin oluşumu için yeni bir temel teşkil edilmiş olur. Bu kapsamda, siyahi kadının doğurgan vücudu kişisel ve politik sorunlar arasında birleştirici bir kuvvet olarak hizmet eder ki bu iki temsil ediliş arasındaki zengin etkileşimi sağlayan bir araçtır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Lucille Clifton, şiir, otobiyografi, siyahi Amerikan edebiyatı, feminist edebiyat

Since the mid-1970s, self-writing, or what Adrienne Rich has called "writing through the body," has become a feminist counter-site for the subversion and resistance of hegemonic forces which seek to create *monovocality* (the expression of one voice or viewpoint that homogeneously speaks for all) out of the American reality of *polyvocality* (or multiple voices that reflect the wide array of ethnic, racial, sexual, gender, religious, cultural and class expressions that characterize the heterogeneous nation) (Rich, 1976). Ethnic identity literature has become an important tool for personal and political expression,

especially for feminist African American writers who wish to create alternative visions of what "America" truly represents. For the past three decades, Lucille Clifton (1936–) has been at the forefront of this socio-political movement which not only challenges normative constructions of womanhood and the nation, but also critiques the (white male) literary canon through the power of a distinct (black) female voice. She has used two genres of literature—autobiography and poetry—as a means of engaging in this process, which for Clifton has taken the form of writing herself, and by extension African American women in general, into the national narrative. This technique has not only allowed Clifton to carve out a space for multicultural self-expression, but has also facilitated the creation of a personal/political agenda through which she has critiqued the American literary canon, representations of enslavement in mainstream culture, and the place of women of color in contemporary US society.

Clifton's autobiography *Generations* (1976), which incidentally was edited by her longtime friend Toni Morrison, signifies a particularly important contribution to the feminist literary canon that emerged out of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s. Not only does it serve as a personal tribute to the United States' only group of *forced* immigrants (i.e., African Americans), but it also simultaneously recuperates their place—and the place of their descendants—in the national narrative. The memoir represents Clifton's personal effort at contextualizing and situating her work, specifically her poetry, within the "mainstream" literary canon as legitimate contributions to the American "story." Throughout the autobiography, she invokes the spirit of fellow poet Walt Whitman by quoting extensively from his body poems, especially "Song of Myself" (*Leaves of Grass,* 1855). By beginning each chapter of *Generations* with lines from "Song of Myself," she is able to fragment Whitman's personal vision of the national body, and create a space for the insertion of her experiences as a descendent of slaves *and* as an African American woman. In doing so, she questions the distinctly white, male project of nation-building, as well as the racial and gender limitations of American social inclusion. Moreover, by positioning herself alongside Whitman, she accomplishes the main objective of black feminist polyvocal writing: the addition of a distinctly female, and distinctly black, voice to the national narrative (Whitley, 2001; Wall, 1999).

This article will examine the numerous ways Clifton uses her self-writing—specifically her autobiography and her body poetry—to revise the literary canon and rewrite the American "story" to include a black feminist perspective. As Clifton consciously conveys through both genres, the body symbolizes the stage upon which all narratives are written, enacted and revised. Thus for Clifton, the black female body *is* the discursive link between race and identity negotiation in the United States. The particular thread that links her very personal—almost confessional—works to the political macrocosm of the nation is *reproduction*. Through both *Generations* and her poetry, Clifton illustrates that without the procreative functions of the female body (i.e., its ability to produce future "generations"), we would neither have life, nor by extension, the nation. Moreover, its resiliency is the undercurrent beneath the experiences of black womanhood, and African Americans' place in the national project. As Clifton's works elucidate, the black female body also provides a platform for the rejection of narratives

in which "one voice [or unum]…speaks for multitudes [or plura]" (Whitley, 2001), and lays the foundation for the writing of an inclusive history which reconciles the brutality of slavery, the marginalization of women of color within the national project, and the reality of a multicultural America. In this context, the black female reproductive body serves as the unifying force between the personal and political—the vehicle that enables a rich interaction between these two levels of representation.

Stealing the Language: Lucille Clifton, Ethnic Feminist Self-Writing, and the Subversion of the Traditional Literary Canon

As French feminist Hélène Cixous maintains, woman "must write herself—must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (1976). For Cixous, this *écriture féminine*, or "gendered women's writing," allows women, especially those who have been historically marginalized, to challenge the white male literary canon by dismantling masculine artistic and linguistic control over women, and the socially-constructed dichotomy which links men to *culture* and women to *nature*. For black feminists in particular, this type of self-writing has become a medium through which to express both personal and political experiences. It is, arguably, the only location that is solely female; the only haven into which women can retreat and into which men cannot, at least spiritually, penetrate. Thus writing that is produced "through the body," as Rich would call it, *is* the most intricate type of women's writing, reflecting not only their past experiences, but also their visions of the future.

Clifton has not only written through her body but, as literary critic Alicia Ostriker has noted, has also used her body and her brand of *écriture noir* to "steal the language" (Ostriker, 1986). Clifton embraces this status as a "voleuse de langue." As she once remarked: "I am a black woman poet, and I sound like one" (Clifton, 1990). Her distinct poetic voice has allowed her to claim the black female body as a site of personal identity, and to position it as a direct political challenge to the patriarchal hegemony of the American nation. Moreover, by incorporating the language, stories and rituals of the black female experience while using the body as the discursive link between race and the nation, Clifton is able to "articulate commonalities…without collapsing into essentialism" (Mance, 2001).

Generations is a particularly significant work within the genre of ethnic autobiography because it simultaneously conveys the importance of "reconnecting with an African past," *and* the difficulty of incorporating the (mostly oral) family histories of marginalized groups into the larger tradition of self-narration—a tradition that in the United States, until the 1960s and 70s, included very few contributions by African American women, with the notable exception of slave narratives (Wall, 1999). As Clifton has stated, *Generations* "brought to American literature a long missing part of itself" (Rowell, 1999; Whitley, 2001). Namely, it retold the African American experience from the black *female* perspective, unearthing the stories of generations of black women separated by time (centuries) and space (continents). Such autobiographies, as Clifton contends, are

crucial because they function as essential pieces of the national narrative. When history is told in a monovocal mode, it shifts from an objective to a subjective struggle, in which those groups with the loudest voices are able to make their stories heard. Polyvocality, however, adds dimension and texture to the national narrative, and ensures its accuracy by promoting multiple perspectives. Thus, as Clifton conveys, it is essential that "all of our stories become 'The Story.' If mine is left out, something's missing. So I hope mine can be read as part of 'The Story,' of what it means to be human in this place at this time. I am a black human being, and that is part of 'The Story'" (Rowell, 1999).

As Clifton elucidates, telling one's history, at least within the American context, usually necessitates some degree of historical revisionism. In Clifton's case, however, this becomes a dual exercise: as an African American woman she carries the burden of re-narrating her racial past and the story of her matriarchs; moreover, as a female poet of color, she has the added responsibility of carving out a niche for black feminist writers within American literary history (i.e., "the canon"). Throughout *Generations*, Clifton employs the discursive strategy of invoking, and then responding to, the poetry of Walt Whitman as a preliminary step towards bridging her two burdens. According to Edward Whitley, for many poets, "Whitman [has] become a site for responding not only to the tradition of male autobiography, but to the whole of American literature, since… at some point in the lives of most twentieth-century American poets…some encounter with Whitman takes place…at some point, most American poets after Whitman have directly taken him on—to argue with him, agree with him, revise, question, reject or accept him" (2001). Although Whitman and Clifton are clearly divided by race, gender, sexuality, class, time and a whole range of other personal and political factors, as Cheryl Wall states, Clifton's "repeated allusions to…'Song of Myself' [is her]…homage to her foremost white American literary ancestor" (1999). It is clear that they not only "share aesthetic, political, and spiritual affinities" (Ibid.), but are also united in their vision of a democratic and egalitarian America—one that, as Whitman describes in "I Sing the Body Electric" (*Leaves of Grass* 1855), includes the "sacred" bodies of men, women, children, sons, daughters, farmers, and even slaves (lines 95–117). Both acknowledge the fact that the American nation was born out of the "Founding Fathers'" conception of democracy (which was decidedly racist) as well as the bodies of female slaves—forgotten women who were raped by their masters and implanted with the seeds of "future generations." As Whitman conveys, bondswomen, just like their free white female counterparts, also shouldered the burden of building the American nation, and are thus part of the national narrative: "A woman's body at auction, / She too is not only herself, she is the teeming mother of mothers, / She is the bearer of them that shall grow and be mates to the mothers" (lines 118–120).

By using Whitman's "Song of Myself" as the poetic framework for *Generations* (she begins each chapter with lines from the poem, and scatters others throughout), Clifton embeds herself within the (white male) American literary canon. This strategy allows her to position herself alongside one of its "masters," thus proclaiming her right, as the descendant of slaves, to claim a voice in the national story, and participate in a "new tradition built on a synthesis of black oral traditions and Western literate forms" (Wall,

1999). She begins her memoir with the first few lines of Whitman's poetic narrative, thereby uniting their bodies and "stories" into a polyvocal stream of American history: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself / And what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Even though Clifton concurs with "the Whitmanian spirit of inclusion and celebration, [she] replaces the [male] autonomous individuality [i.e., monovocality] informing so much of 'Song of Myself' with a collective, generational [female, polyvocal] sense of self based on an expanding African American family" (Whitley, 2001). It is from this perspective that Clifton begins the difficult task—one which has spanned her entire career and has crossed multiple genres—of revising assumptions, reclaiming, celebrating, and singing her past by making it part of the nation, and embracing the atoms that constitute and define her identity as an American woman of African descent.

(Re)Narrating the Black Experience: (Re)Writing Slavery through the Female Body

Unlike most mainstream (white/male) autobiographies which focus on the telling of living stories, *Generations* is primarily invested in exorcizing the demons of the past and renegotiating a new identity which critiques the myth of a united national monovocal "unum." According to Hilary Holladay, it accomplishes this by recuperating "slavery and its seemingly endless impact on American life, [as well as] the all-powerful role of language in determining our knowledge of ourselves and others" (2002). These "stories of the dead" have multiple functions in ethnic autobiographies, often reminding specific racial and ethnic groups never to forget, or forsake, their past, present, or future. Clifton's self-writing, which "harnesses the power [that] comes from the collective memory of deceased generations" (Whitley, 2001), serves as a means of reconciling her matriarchal predecessors with her place on the chronologic continuum. By transforming their life stories from oral legends to written history, Clifton "builds upon the framework of common experience…[using] myth to control and redirect the way that African American subjects become visible" (Mance, 2001). She provides audiences with alternative landscapes for the negotiation of black female identity, rewriting their place within the American nation and filling in the blank spaces of black female subjectivity with voices unrecorded by history.

Before being reclaimed in *Generations*, one such forgotten woman was Clifton's great-grandmother and namesake Lucille Sayles, who was allegedly the "first black woman legally hanged in the state of Virginia" (Clifton, 1976). Her crime was murdering Harvey Nichols, "a white carpetbagger from Connecticut" and the father of her only son, Gene, who in adulthood would become Clifton's paternal grandfather (Holladay, 2002; Wall, 1999; Clifton, 1976). Because Lucille shot Nichols in self-defense and valued "elemental laws" over "made-made" ones, she never apologized or expressed any remorse (Whitley, 2001). This undoubtedly facilitated—both morally and legally—the hanging of a black woman for the murder of a white man. At this juncture in the memoir, Clifton appropriately captures her foremother's resistive spirit through the following lines from

"Song of Myself": "I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood, / I see that the elementary laws never apologize" (Clifton, 1976; *Leaves of Grass*, 1855).

As Clifton illustrates through her memoir, the costly ramifications of racism and sexism are not only apparent in her family history, but also in that of the nation. Thus, it is not surprising that the binaries of violence and peace, and birth and death—especially as manifested through the female body (e.g., through successful and unsuccessful attempts at procreation)—are common motifs in her poetry. In "i am accused of tending to the past" (Clifton, 1991), Clifton conveys her struggle with both her family history, *and* American history, by personifying "History" as "a monstrous unnamed [female] baby," the product of a black uterus, nursed by black breasts, and gaining strength everyday. Despite the fact that she is detached from her heritage by both time and space, she is "accused of tending to the past / as if i made it, / as if i sculpted it /with my own hands. i did not." As an African American woman, she carries the burden of this past, which was "waiting" for her when she was born. Even though she is not personally responsible for what came before her, she nurtures and cultivates it by taking it to *her* breast. Each day, as she explains, the past—her History—becomes "more human…learning language…remembering faces, names and dates." She hopes that one day it will break free of its chains (i.e., the hegemonic discourses of white, monovocal, history-making) and be "strong enough to travel on her own."

Through this poem, as well as her autobiography *Generations*, Clifton calls for the rewriting of a new, polyvocal national history which not only reconciles African Americans' violent past of slavery, rape, and lynching, but also includes a distinctly black *female* perspective. By "mastering the master's [lingual] discourse" (Whitley, 2001) and rejecting traditional forms of punctuation and capitalization in her poetry, Clifton is able to use her position as a black feminist poet to suggest a non-elitist reconfiguration of the mythic national narrative from the margins. However, as Clifton expresses, Americans continue to feel uncomfortable with this past, and accuse her of "tending," or dwelling on, her ancestral history. For Clifton, though, that is precisely the point. Her historical baggage is an indelible part of her fragmented identity and the fragmented identity of the American nation: "That I am *what* I am is *all* of it; *all* of what I am is relevant…one doesn't separate oneself out. It's not either/or; it's both and again. And so if I write, I must write out of the whole of what I am" (Rowell, 1999).

Clifton's poem "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989" (Clifton, 1991) best captures one of the themes conveyed in *Generations*: that language, slavery and women's bodies—specifically her body and the bodies of her foremothers—have a common history of bondage. Moreover, all are united by the fact that they have been "dishonored" by the selective memory, or historical "blanks," of the national narrative. Clifton wrote this poem after touring the southern plantation, astonished by the fact that not even once was slavery mentioned (Clifton, 1995). Confronted with the evasive discourse of American history which often elides violence and injustice in order to perpetuate a synthetic, monovocal, myth of unity, she wrote the poem to call on the sprits of her ancestors, whose silent voices she can feel "among the rocks / at walnut grove" and in her "bones." She begs them to tell her their "bashful," "hidden" and "dishonored"

names so she can articulate their unspoken and forgotten histories for the world to hear ("nobody mentioned slaves / and yet the curious tools / shine with your fingerprints"). She wants to "testify" on their behalf, just as she had done for her great-great grandmother Caroline, a former bondswoman and midwife buried in an unmarked forgotten grave in Bedford, Virginia, but resurrected or "reborn" in *Generations* (Holladay, 2002; Wall, 1999). However, while this poem "records the suffering of slavery and beyond, [it also] resonates with the spirit of resistance and survival" (Wall, 1999). As Clifton notes in the poem, the plantation's inventory listed the names of only ten *male* slaves. Surely, as she conveys, "some of these slaves / were women / some of them did this / honored work." Thus for Clifton, remembering and "hearing" the lost and forgotten voices of her "foremothers and brothers" is not only a source of personal pride, but also an essential element of recuperating a polyvocal (African) American identity. As she has expressed, "if the last person who remembers is gone, what is left?" (Rowell, 1999).

"to ms. anne" (Clifton, 1974) is another poem which is notable for its invocation of the exploitation of enslaved bodies during the process of American nation-building. In this poem, Clifton not only gives a voice to the voiceless, but also questions the tenuous relationship between the bondswoman and plantation mistress. In doing so, she destroys the sanctity of the mythic Old South and reformulates the meaning of cross-racial sisterhood. Even though the plantation mistress stands idly by and observes as her enslaved sister toils in pain, the slave-narrator wields power over the plantation mistress who must live with the guilt and shame of slavery: the bondswoman must "forget [the expression on the mistress'] face" as she "watches [her] breaking / in the fields, / missing [her] children." Moreover, it is the bondswoman who "carries" the plantation master's "stagnant water" (which can either be interpreted as urine, or possibly pregnancy) and is also given the plantation "house" to transform into a "home." Thus, it is the cruelty of the plantation system and misogyny of southern society that binds the bodies of the two women together. Clearly, both sides yearn for consolation ("you never called me sister"); however, only the slave-narrator steps beyond the socially-constructed boundaries of race, class and womanhood to ask for reconciliation. In the end, it is their common history of "remembering" the truth ("it has only been forever and / i will have to forget your face") that serves as a bridge of understanding between the black female slave and her white socially-enslaved counterpart.

A vignette in *Generations* provides further insight into the painful racial baggage that might have inspired this poem. The chapter entitled "Caroline and Son" begins with a phone call between Clifton and a white female descendant of the family who owned Clifton's great-great grandparents when they were enslaved. Even though they share a last name—Clifton's maiden name Sayles or Sale, as it was originally spelled (it was common practice for slaves to adopt their owner's surname)—this white "relation" has no knowledge of Clifton's ancestors: they are not included in the Sale family narrative (and without works such as *Generations*, would not be included in the national narrative either). When Clifton responds "Who remembers the names of the slaves? Only the children of slaves," all she hears on the telephone line is dead silence (Whitley, 2001). Although these two women are united by nationality, sex, their southern heritage and

perhaps even blood, racial difference and its social manifestations prevents them from considering any type of mutual acknowledgement, let alone sisterhood. Again, as in the case with the poem "to ms. anne," the surrogate plantation mistress remains quiet while the black woman seeks reconciliation. In this context, the white woman's silence is indicative of the voicelessness of the African American experience as well as white historical amnesia. However, Clifton's voice is strong enough to resurrect her past. As Whitman's words illuminate in *Generations*, "They are alive and well somewhere, / The smallest sprout shows there is really no death" (Clifton, 1976).

Clifton's most controversial, and incidentally shortest, slavery poem is "why some people be mad at me sometimes" (Clifton, 2000). During the 1980s, Clifton served as the Poet Laureate of the State of Maryland. To commemorate the state's 350th anniversary, she was asked to write a poem about "Our Happy Colonial Days." While Clifton could have used the opportunity to glorify the state's early traditions, she chose to highlight Maryland's troubled and disturbing history of slavery by encouraging introspection on the nation's violent racist past. As she remarked, "people who look like me didn't have a whole lot of happy colonial days…and I think that oftentimes a lot of American memory…is myth…It is very important to face what actually happened, not what we *wish* [happened]" (Rowell, 1999). Her desire to express a multiplicity of selves within the American national project thus resulted in the five-lined, single stanza poem "why some people be mad at me sometimes." With its rejection of the white male oppressor's language though black colloquial speech, "why some people be mad at me sometimes" is a reminder that the United States is comprised of many, often conflicting, histories, and that the history of African Americans in particular is riddled with unspeakable crimes that have been elided and/or erased from the national memory: "they ask me to remember / but they want me to remember / their memories."

For Clifton, this history is an essential part of her identity: "I'm where I am because somebody was before me, and that somebody suffered so that I might get here" (Rowell, 1999). However, as her father reminds her, whatever slavery *was*—for its true horror cannot be transcribed into words—they had, in the words of Whitman (which Clifton cites at this juncture), for better or worse, survived it: "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (Clifton, 1976; *Leaves of Grass,* 1855). Moreover, they had also managed to negotiate for themselves an identity (albeit fragmented) within the American nation: "'Oh slavery, slavery,' my Daddy would say. 'It ain't something in a book, Lue. Even the good parts was awful…[but] we fooled em, Lue, slavery was terrible but we fooled them old people. We come out of it better than they did" (Clifton, 1976). However, while African Americans struggle with the burden of their history ("i keep on remembering [my memories]"), as Clifton has observed, white America continues to resist their attempts at carving out identities that acknowledge their multifaceted heritage and the polyvocality of the national narrative: "I was at a university somewhere… getting an honorary degree, and someone said to me, 'Oh, you said *African American*. Why can't you just be American?' And I said, 'Well, I'd be willing to do it, but you won't let me'" (Rowell, 1999).

(Re)Generation: The Black Female Body as a Locus of Identity Negotiation within the American Nation

While Clifton has written dozens of poems arguing for the writing of a polyvocal national narrative that acknowledges the United States' troubled multicultural history (including poems about abolitionists, civil rights leaders, Native Americans and the anti-Arab hatred that emerged after September 11th), she is probably best known for her frequently-anthologized "confessional" gynocentric body poems "homage to my hair" (Clifton, 1980), "poem to my uterus" (Clifton, 1991), "to my last period" (Clifton, 1991) and "homage to my hips" (Clifton, 1980), as well as her poems on "missing breasts" (e.g., "amazons," "scar," "lumpectomy eve" and "1994," all of which recount her experience with breast cancer), and kidney failure (e.g., "dialysis" and "donor," the latter of which also deals with abortion). The popularity of these poems stems from the fact that Clifton unabashedly uses *her* black female body as a means of negotiating an African American identity which embraces the cultural diversity of the nation. However, while the proud struggle for independence conveyed by these poems should be acknowledged, they should not overshadow other important contributions such as "my dream about being white" (Clifton, 1987b). In this poem, Clifton fanaticizes about what it would be like to own a *white* body (perhaps even Whitman's body, a sentiment which is invoked by her reference to leaves): "me / only white, / hair a flutter of / fall leaves." After considering the possibilities that accompany white aesthetic perfection ("my perfect / line of a nose, / no lips, / no behind"), she rejects this conformist dream ("i'm wearing / white history / but there's no future / in those clothes"), emerging liberated and ready to reconcile her past history and future identity as a black woman: "so i take them off and / wake up / dancing." While this poem is similar to "i am accused of tending to the past" in that it uses the black female body as a stage upon which the rejection of "white history" can be performed, it differs in that it suggests the temporary *consideration* and subsequent *renunciation* of white values. As "my dream about being white" conveys, it is only when African American women accept the duality—or "double consciousness"—of being black *and* female, abandoning the internalized racist notion that white is somehow "superior" and therefore desirable, embracing the aesthetics of the black female body, that they can achieve true liberation from the burden of slavery and the white historical narrative.

Clifton provides an alternative vision of black female identity in the 2007 poem "aunt jemima." In this work, she embraces the black body by recuperating one of the most destructive racist stereotypes in American history: the "mammy." For decades, Aunt Jemima, like the "reliable" bondswomen and mammies of the Old South, has brought pancakes to American breakfast tables, mostly "to feed the white folk." Because she has spent her life in "kitchen cabinets," making "the best / of everything/ pancakes…batter for [white] children," Clifton's Aunt Jemima longs for her own "nephews and nieces," "family," "kitchen" and "home." Her "shelf," which is located between the "flour and cornmeal," is "thick with dreams," syrupy sweet, much like the "dreams deferred" in Langston Hughes' African American Harlem Renaissance poetry. However, rather than drying up "like a raisin in the sun" or "exploding," these dreams form the backbone of America: Clifton acknowledges both the nurturing role that black women's bodies

have played in the raising of white American children, and the reality that all "Aunt Jemimas" were living and breathing women with their own children, kitchens, homes and histories. By redefining the relationship between African American women and American domesticity, she is thus able to resist the hegemonic forces which seek to negate, or render invisible, the black female body, and insert Aunt Jemima's voice into the grand narrative of the nation.

Clearly, Clifton's poetry has used the black female body and its numerous procreative functions as a means of integrating black women into the American national project. However, probably no sub-genre of her work has accomplished this feat more successfully than her "river" poetry. Collectively reminiscent of Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1920), these poems use the metaphors of flowing water and the (non)procreative body to represent the tenuous relationship between black women and the nation (Holladay, 1999; Rowell, 1999). These poems also provide a gynocentric space for the negotiation of African American identity despite racial prejudice, poverty, and the systematic exclusion of blacks from the (white) American dream. Three of Clifton's most widely-read river poems are "poem in praise of menstruation" (Clifton, 1991), "lucy and her girls" (Clifton, 1980), and "the lost baby poem" (Clifton, 1972). In "poem in praise of menstruation," Clifton compares the flow of her menstrual blood from her "delta," "bright as the blood / red edge of the moon," to the flow of America's "beautiful," "faithful" and "brave" rivers, thus positioning the black female body as part of the American landscape (Holladay, 2004). Like her people's ancient past, and women's history as "daughters of eve / mother of cain and of abel," her monthly cycle is a "wild" and "powerful" culmination "of passion, of pain." By positing menstruation as a life source that flows through the flora and fauna of history, Clifton rejects the pathological taboos concerning periodic bleeding and the archaic medical notion that "menstruation is the uterus crying for lack of a baby" (Ganong, 1985). This juxtapositioning of nature, procreation and Biblical references allows Clifton to accentuate the role of black women in general—and her foremothers in particular—in perpetuating both the American nation and human civilization (Lupton, 2006). As she illustrates, without women the universe would cease to exist on both the microscopic and macroscopic levels. "poem in praise of menstruation" thus endows "her body and the bodies of those African American women who populate her surroundings (family, friends, and ancestors) [with] an array of features, talents [and voices], ranging from the mundane to the magical" (Mance, 2001). It also reclaims them as important contributors to the genealogy of America.

In "lucy and her girls," Clifton replaces Eve as the progenitor of the human race, thus positioning herself as the matriarch of both the black family and all of humankind. In doing so, she celebrates the interconnectedness of generations (a consistent theme in "Song of Myself," which catalogues the labor-intensive nation-building activities of men and women) and the notion that America will be perpetuated through the procreative measures taken by black women such as Lucy (short for Lucille) and her daughters: "lucy is the ocean / extended by / her girls / are the river" (Clifton, 1980). Their contribution to the lineage of African American women endows Clifton and her daughters with almost mystical powers: they become the "sun" and the "moon," illuminating each other and the rest of civilization.

Although many of Clifton's river poems use positive imagery to celebrate black women's bodies within the tapestry of the American nation, others critique the *sterility* of being African in a country that continues to marginalize its disenfranchised, impoverished and forgotten citizens. "the lost baby poem," which was originally published in 1972 when non-therapeutic abortions were illegal in the United States, and was inspired by Gwendolyn Brooks' 1945 poem "The Mother," deals with the troubling aspects of a self-induced abortion (Rowell, 1999). Faced with an uncertain future, "in the year of the disconnected gas / and no car," in the depths of the coldness of winter, the narrator (presumably Clifton) terminates her pregnancy and flushes the fetal remains down her bathroom toilet, thus extinguishing the hope that is symbolized through the birth of a new life: "the time i dropped your almost body down / down to meet the waters under the city / and run one with the sewage to the sea" (Clifton, 1972). After the abortion, the narrator feels lost, "drowning" in a sea of sin and guilt—"what did i know about waters rushing back / what did i know about drowning / or being drowned"—just like the "lost baby" whose life she has ended. While she could have given the "lost baby" up for adoption by walking "over the genecy hill into the canada winds" and slipping it "into a stranger's hands," she chooses not to bring another child into the world (Holladay, 2004). She realizes that as long as racial and class inequalities persist in the United States, "unnamed" African Americans will continue to remain estranged both to each other and the rest of the nation. The only way to end the suffering of her black child is to prevent its beginning, and to become "a mountain / for your definite brothers and sisters." Thus as Clifton illustrates through this poem, it is crucial to include all aspects of the ethnic feminist voice—both celebratory and critical—in the process of constructing an accurate national narrative.

As both Clifton's poetry and her autobiography *Generations* suggest, the richness of the American experience derives from the multiple narratives and polyvocality that (should) comprise its history. While large gaps still remain, over the past thirty years, other ethnic writers such as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Amy Tan, Ruthanne Lum McCunn, Maxine Hong Kingston, Shirley Geok Lim, and Louise Erdrich have joined Clifton in filling this narrative void, adding the voices of marginalized groups, including Asian Americans and Native Americans, to the American "story." Although some of these authors have been accused of "embellishing the past" by creating mélanges of fiction and non-fiction that often blur the boundaries of history, historical romance, and imaginative family legacy, their works remain significant contributions to the literary canon because they serve as catalysts for multicultural self-expression and the exploration of other voices. Moreover, they have facilitated the creation of personal/political agendas through which subsequent scholars have been able to critique minority oppression in the United States and the place of women of color in contemporary American society.

The works of such ethnic identity writers are particularly important because many, like those of Clifton, have helped redefine and reshape the American literary canon. While some writers of color (such as June Jordan, who, like Clifton, also acknowledges a debt of gratitude to Whitman) have chosen to insert themselves into the canon, walking alongside white/male self-writers (Wall, 1999), others, such as Chicana lesbian-feminist

writers Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga, have called for the creation of an alternative gynocentric canon (or canons), which would not only present a more direct challenge to the white male perspective, but would also convey a more radical reconfiguration of the relationships between procreation, bodies of color, and the nation. While it is clear that these two epistemological approaches will remain significant discursive subjects for years to come, this debate should not obscure the important reflexive focus and space-time ambiguity that characterize the self-writing of Clifton and her contemporaries, for these are the tools that enable ethnic writers to speak effectively about the ways in which female bodies of color continue to be marginalized in social narratives. As Clifton has elucidated, the personal meaning of African American women's bodies is intimately intertwined with the power-politics of nation-building, historical identity, and procreation. If, as Anne Sexton has stated, "one writes of oneself...in order to invite *in*," then as Lucille Clifton has proven, in the American context one must find her way *out* through multicultural and polyvocal expressions of experience (Gill, 2004). As Clifton has conveyed, "it is better to speak our stories than to keep silent. It is better to try and define ourselves than to remain defined by others" (Rowell, 1999). As she concludes in *Generations*, quoting from "Song of Myself," "I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait."

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