# On Coming to Clifton

By Crystal Williams

Published in *Efforts &Affections: Women Poets on Mentorship*, University of Iowa Press, 2009

I had heard tell that like her poems, Lucille Clifton is warm, generous, deceptively easy going. But in all the years I'd been around poetry and its myriad groupings of folk, I hadn't met her, was forced to rely on rumors, innuendo, the knowing nods of the lucky ones. Meanwhile, understand: I'm not often rendered goofy when faced with well known or respected artists. Danny Glover. Bah. Oprah. Bah. Impressive but just folk. But, Lucille, well, Lucille Clifton is Lucille Clifton: the ultimate enigma, a truly great artist. Certainly she is a woman with a life full of triumphs and tragedies, she is a poet who has, for upwards of thirty years, beat her own drum and written powerful, important poems. So, it was not surprising that when I finally met her at a writer's conference, the most I could do was blather, stick my face too close to hers as if performing some sort of inspection, thank her for her work, offer her my chair, and ask if she needed water. I wonder how many fools she had to suffer that day and hope she doesn't remember this one.

The thing is: Lucille Clifton's is the rare body of work to which I return, over and over again; the poems of which I never tire, the ones that provide a roadmap: *This is how to be a poet, Child*, they seem to say, *this is what it should be.*

When I was young, in high school, and just beginning to poke my snot-nose into poetry, I fancied Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Langston Hughes for their directness, their political content, for giving a brown girl like me a voice. Later, having given up on what was to be my theater career and moving instead into writing, I was intrigued by the storytellers, poets like Whitman and Frost. Also, I was in awe of Ntozake Shange, who, it seemed, had done with "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem"

something just short of miraculous. (Even now it is hard for me to conceptualize the mechanics of such a work, how such disparate voices and movements, the interior workings of the piece, meld together to form a choreopoem. I mean: what is a *choreopoem*?! How does a body come up with the idea to write one?) Anyway, my poetic meanderings, the excursions taken from the moment I wrote that first poem until now, were all leading me to Lucille, the poet who for me does it all, gives us brown girls fierce, undaunting voices. She is an astute social commentator, tells enormous stories in small, confined spaces, and is inspired in such a way that she seems like some oracle, some soothsayer, or, yes, a for real and sure enough poet.

I started writing when I was fourteen. Mrs. Arthuree Leach, my high school English teacher, had demanded that we each write a poem. "The exotic beauty my darkness beholds..." was my poem's unfortunate first line. Nevertheless, she thought something of the thing, read it aloud and squawked about talent. That's really all it took. From then on I was writing horrible little poems on everything I could, hoarding them through my high school and early college years, had the nerve to compile a sheaf of them and send the pitiful things to the Library of Congress in case someone might want to "steal" them from me. Please.

At that time I was still working on becoming a great actress. This was in Washington, DC. I was broke and so when a friend started holding talent shows that boasted a one hundred dollar first prize, I began writing dramatic monologues in order to compete. Later, after moving to New York—watch out Dorothy Dandridge (??!!)—I found my way to the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, that now infamous caldron of Lower East Side angst and the depot from which many a talented artist has since emerged. Suffice it to say: I ain't no Dorothy and didn't fancy myself a "great character actress," which is what I was told by a well known acting coach who had agreed to take me as a student. I was young, stupid; "great character actress" sounded lame. I soon found that with a little tweaking, the dramatic monologues easily turned into Spoken Word poetry. Spoken Word became my life.

The great thing about Spoken Word is that it demands that you A) be able to tell a compelling story, B) engage your audience emotionally (and you will know because they *are* in your face, and *will* turn their heads and continue a conversation if what you've got to say isn't important), C) be a fairly astute social commentator or have a view so outrageous that it merits skeptical consideration, and D) be funny or at least understand the function of humor. (I've since come to know that these factors are equally important for "page poets," too.) In the early 90s the Nuyorican was home to an extraordinary array of fine writers and artists who have since gone on to publish, produce, perform, and win myriad awards: Carl Hancock Rux, Dael Orlandersmith, Paul Beatty, Ava Chin, MuMs, Tracie Morris, Willie Perdomo, Sarah Jones, Hal Sirowitz, Regie Cabico, Saul Williams, among others. They were the proverbial good times. But, after three years of hanging out and cutting my poetic teeth at the Nuyorican, I found myself writing shorter, quieter poems and became less interested in performing them on stage. I was finishing my undergraduate degree in Creative Writing and found myself studying with poets Ruth Danon and Karen Volkman whose primary concern was the written word, not the oral one. My work shifted accordingly. I started focusing on line breaks, how metaphors were working within the poem, how imagery was functioning. I was becoming more sophisticated (I hope) which was both a function of moving beyond my comfort zone and getting older and more interested in the craft of my chosen genre.

Soon enough I figured out that working a day job and prowling poetry at night could and probably, for my sanity, should be integrated. So, I set about getting an MFA and began pursuing a substantially different career path: professordom. That's when I really discovered Lucille. And thank God.

You see, soon after that MFA honeymoon period in which we were each desperately in love with the work of the our peers, I found myself being accused of many things by some, not all, of my peers. "Coding" was perhaps the most devious one of them because the accusation was in fact itself a code used to obscure what was really being said: I was thought to be writing "black" poems—poems written by a black person for consumption by other black folks, and

only black folks. Further, my understanding of and dedication to writing poems most everyone could get a hold of—Eliot's concentric circles be damned—directly conflicted, at least in the eyes of some of my peers, with what "real poetry" is and should be. They thought that writing cryptic, indefinite poems, poems mired in obscurity, poems that would flummox, or, if you rather, "challenge" their readers signaled success. I believed that the challenge should be in what I say, not in how I say it. Of course, it was James Baldwin who said something like, "...if you've got something important to say, you find a way to say it to as many people as possible," which, had I known it then, I would have been screaming through the corridors of Ezra Cornell's Goldwin Smith Hall.

Instead, my use of colloquial language and slang was labeled "code," while their use of Greek mythological references was accepted as capital "N" Normal. And yet, in my head, if poetry is largely the contextual study of the human through concise use of language, then our language, the symbolism we use to express ourselves is in itself most important. How, then, can slang be considered a "code" by fellow Americans who pull from largely the same cultural iconography? Isn't Detroit in America? Who doesn't know what "ain't" means? It's a simple conjunction. How is commenting on how groups of people make language come alive, make language jump and hop and through language, make people laugh, cry, how is that not the norm? How is Zeus the norm? In Detroit, Zeus is the name of many a dog, most of them Pitbulls. Everyone understands "ain't," as in "ain't no Zeus 'round these parts, Man." Code.

So there I was, the girl who'd cut her teeth on Giovanni and Hughes, being told that my kind of work wasn't their kind of work, that what I was writing wasn't as meritous and was not, therefore, to be taken as seriously. Although I am quite sure my peers at Cornell would vigorously deny such accusations and claim that I am being too sensitive. The fact, however, is that they did not value the work of black writers in the same way they valued the work of white writers. Quantify valuable to a writer: who do you read and return to?

They didn't read the work of young black poets (or even non-prize winning established black poets) as they read the work of young and/or established white poets. They were

disinterested unless someone in authority had said, "this is a poet worth your attention" (read: this is a winner of a national or international prize). This point can only really be talked about comparatively: my poetry peers who are black are among the most widely and well-read people I know—they read across race, class, gender—all the time. They want to know who's doing what, when, where, why, how. You might say they're nosy. My peers who are white on the other hand, well, they largely read other white poets. This is nothing less than cultural elitism and is, I think, directly related to their status as members of the dominate culture. Dominate cultures tend to be less interested in what other folks are doing—they don't have to know who's doing what, when, where. And, I certainly don't mean to insinuate that all white poets diminish the value and importance of work produced by ethnic minorities. That's clearly not the case. Still, my graduate school experience, I suspect, is not singular. And how sad, really, because there I was, a lover of poetry, being accused, albeit often silently, of being a danger to "real poetry" by the simple fact that I was a brown girl, writing poems in a brown girl voice, asserting not only that I have a place in the pantheon of American literature but a right to be there and a duty to be there in whatever manner I saw fit. And, in the beginning of that fight against that particular set of wacky beliefs, I found Lucille.

I am sure there are people who can much more eloquently speak to the breadth and scope of Clifton's work, to the general tenor and importance of it in the scheme of American letters. I will leave that to them. What I can say is that when I seriously began to study her work I was astonished and deeply saddened that she seems, still, to be widely considered a secondary player. She is, to my knowledge, the only writer to have had two books (*Next* and *Good Woman*) considered for a Pulitzer prize in the same year—and rightly so. Let me be clear. Secondary ain't obscure. She is not that. But, to my mind, Clifton is a major American writer and should be known like Hughes and Morrison, across cultures, geography, taught in all schools, to all ages.

And she, by the way, is one of a very few writers who *could* be taught in all schools, to all ages. That in itself is phenomenal.

Clifton's ability to examine and write about faith as more than a series of external events (replete with religious iconography and traditions) into which the mind/body are inserted (ie: going to church, being a choir boy, going to temple, fasting, etc...), her belief that faith is a fundamental element of humanity and is a vehicle *through* which the mind and body more fully and gracefully emerge, is one example of her brilliance. To create a body of work that among other things argues that our perceptions of and experiences with each other are all to do with our Belief is atypical and is an incredibly powerful lens. This strain runs so long and deep through her corpus that is one cannot fully consider her poetry without addressing faith. In fact, it is precisely this embedded worldview that lends to Clifton's work an ever deepening sense of generosity, exquisite understanding, wisdom. To be reminded that we are beings of faith, not of faith's trappings, is powerful.

That her poems routinely address difficult issues—abuse, racism, poverty, and spirituality—is further proof, to my mind's eye, of her greatness. Furthermore, I think everyone who reads her work agrees that it is deceptively crafted. In fact, when I teach Clifton poems, and I always do, some student inevitably asserts "well, *this* poet didn't revise," or some such nonsense. I love these students, am waiting, really, for their assertions because therein lies the lesson: Lucille Clifton poems are so exquisitely crafted that their mechanics are invisible. Ironically, I wonder if it is this very fact that has thus far kept her out of the canonical circle: Clifton poems may be too good, too well crafted, too "simple." She does not, as has become terrifically popular to do these days, use abstraction to code her poems as being "complex." But then, Langston Hughes' career was similar in that his work was also defined as easy, and only with time and context have people come to see the deep, deep complexity and importance of his body of work.

Clifton's praise songs/poems are organically generous. We are complicated animals, she seems to say, but ultimately, given the proper nourishment/attention, we will thrive, work beyond our current constraints, get better, be bigger spirits than we once thought possible. She often says this with humor and deference to ancestors, which seem to always be calling out

from her poems. When I read her work I believe, no matter how difficult the subject matter, that Clifton herself has hope and faith, that she believes generosity is an attainable attribute. Of course, I am prone to believing this anyway. Nevertheless, Lucille Clifton's work changed my life as a poet because her constant assertions, as I interpret them, gave me voice and space to make my own assertions.

Really, this is all my way of saying that for me Lucille Clifton's work has become a model of what kind of work there is to produce: poetry that is at once thematically complex and stylistically accessible, poetry that allows me to move in and out of the duality that is the language/space I inhabit, poetry that believes, as she asserts in Bill Moyer's *The Language is Life*, "Poetry began when somebody walked off a savanna or out of a cave and looked up at the sky with wonder and said, 'Ah-h-h!'" and that the 'Ah-h-h,' is for everyone—equally, undeniably.