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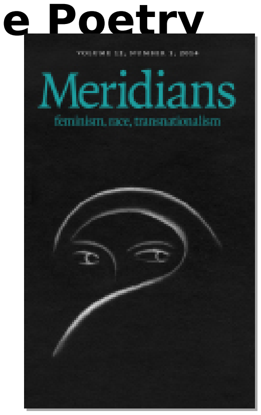

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Authority, History, and Everyday Mysticism in the Poetry of Lucille Clifton:

A Womanist View

Abstract

Lucille Clifton, a northern-born woman with Southern roots, was a writer of profound illumination and plain speaking. This combination in her work—spare elegance of tone and deep practical wisdom—is often remarked upon by literary critics and admirers. Those who know Clifton's work well also note key elements of her poetic voice in which she honors the everyday mysticism of African American experience, a firm claim to agency and creativity in the face of terror, and an insistence on telling the truths of history—the joyful truths as well as the hidden and hurtful ones. In all of these elements, black women and our ways of knowing are privileged in Clifton's writing. There is a strong measure in which the poet's oeuvre and sensibility may be described as "womanist" in the broadest sense of the term developed by Alice Walker (1983). Using a framework informed by Walker's womanism, African American literary studies, and the history of Afro-Atlantic religions, this essay explores connections among these signal components of Clifton's work: namely, the poet's sense of agency and authority; the power of personal and collective history; and a nonsensational mystic spirituality linked to broader diasporic understandings of the sacred.

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I. Introduction

Lucille Clifton, a northern-born woman with Southern roots, was a writer of profound illumination and plain speaking. This combination in her work—spare elegance of tone and deep practical wisdom—is often remarked upon by literary critics and admirers. Those who know Clifton's work well also note key elements of her poetic voice in which she honors the everyday mysticism of African American experience, a firm claim to agency and creativity in the face of terror, and an insistence on telling the truths of history—the joyful truths as well as the hidden and hurtful ones. In all of these elements, black women and our ways of knowing are privileged in Clifton's writing. There is a strong measure in which the poet's oeuvre and sensibility may be described as "womanist" in the broadest sense of the term developed by Alice Walker.[1]

Clifton was born in 1936 and died in 2010. In 2012, her longtime publisher, Boa Editions, issued the poet's collected poems (Young and Glaser 2012). Beyond that important compendium, two books have been published examining Clifton's life and literary production. As literary criticism, those texts (and the handful of other scholarly essays related to Clifton's writing) are valuable, but they only begin to scratch the surface of the religious and epistemological meanings inherent in the poet's work—meanings that have deep affinities with womanist wisdom. Using a framework informed by Walker's womanism, African American literary studies, and the history of Afro-Atlantic religions, this essay explores connections among these signal components of Clifton's work: namely, the poet's sense of agency and authority; the power of personal and collective history; and a nonsensational mystic spirituality linked to broader diasporic understandings of the sacred.

In her 1983 collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Alice Walker develops a four-part definition of "womanist" that grounds the term in southern African American female language and intergenerational relations; in women's love, culture, agency, and commitment to the well-being of all the people, male and female; in the ludic (the joyful, the celebratory), the natural, the Spirit, and the Self; and in relationship to feminism. A womanist, for Walker, "is a black feminist or feminist of color" (Walker 1983, xi).

Clifton's poetry strongly resonates with all of these aspects of Walker's vision of "womanism," but perhaps most obviously so in the consistent authority within the voice of the poems. For Clifton, the generations of slavery, marginalization, violence, and the ongoing disenfranchisement black people suffer are not something for African Americans to be ashamed of or diminished by; rather, they are sources of powerful traditions of cultural resistance that have benefited the whole society, traditions that Clifton locates both in her own family history as well as in the larger collective story of the people. As Clifton says in one of her earliest published poems, "i got a long memory/ and i come from a line/ of black and going on women / who got used to making it through murdered sons . . ." (Clifton 1987a, 32). The authority emerges distinctly from Clifton's social position as a female and as an African American, a woman of color. It is a moral and an artistic authority, both of which are related to Clifton's understanding of the value of her place in the world, her insights, her wisdom, her history.

II. Black and Going on Women: Authorities of Lineage and Spirit

Growing up in Depew and Buffalo, New York, Clifton was a daughter of migrants from the South; her father and his people were from Virginia and her mother's side from Georgia. The family had come north, like many others, in search of improved economic fortunes and in an effort to escape some of the worst of American legal apartheid. Clifton began writing as a young girl, and came to understand poetry as "a way of walking in the world, a way of seeing the world, a way of understanding the world in one's life. . . ." In a 1999 interview with critic and editor Charles Rowell, she says poetry was, for her, "a way of not just accepting the taught, passed-on information, but trying to get more than that. That comes from being a little Black girl in Buffalo, New York and understanding that what people were going to teach me might not be all that I need to know, and so choosing, at some point to learn, not just be taught" (Rowell 1999, 63). This determined attitude meshes seamlessly with the first part of Walker's definition, in which "womanist" is described as deriving from the black folk term "womanish"—a vernacular expression suggesting the "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior" of girls "wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered good for one" (Walker 1983, xi). Clifton attributes her sense of agency to the fact that as an

African American person, and as a black woman, she existed outside of the "boundaries of definition." Because "no one thought I was going to be a poet anyway," she had, paradoxically, more room to decide for herself what she would make of her life. "As a rule in this culture, those boundaries about what one is supposed to be as a visible human being didn't include people of African descent. So I ignored them" (Grubin and Moyers, 1995).

Clifton's great-great-grandmother was an African woman, captured in Dahomey and enslaved in Louisiana, who, when still a child, walked from New Orleans to Virginia in a slave coffle (Clifton 1976, 10, 14, 17). Much of the authority in Clifton's poetry is visible in poems about her family lineage, especially the female ancestors. A story handed down to Clifton tells of the Dahomey woman's daughter, Lucy, who defiantly shot a white lover at a Virginia crossroads and was subsequently hanged. Lucy's defiance, more than her torturous death, became additional evidence in the family lore of the audacious power of the women. Clifton's father repeated to her what he himself had been told—"Get what you want. You from Dahomey women" (Clifton 1976, 14). This hanged great-grandmother, Lucy, is the one for whom Clifton was named. Clifton's groundedness in the history of tenacity and resistance of her own family, and of African American people more generally, presumes a connection to African origins yet refuses to discount the value of the indigenous experience of blackness on this side of the Atlantic. Of this earlier Lucille, a slave, who was also the descendant of a captured and enslaved woman, Clifton says, "mine already is/ an afrikan name" (Clifton 1987a, 148).

But the authority the poet claims is not only familial or even historical; it is also spiritual. Magnificently creative interpretations of religious themes and images are replete in her work. Raised in the ritual and cultural ethos of black Christianity, and an avid reader of the Bible, Clifton was very familiar with the many stories of the Old and New Testaments, and was already predisposed to view them from the liberationist perspective of the black church. But from her first published collection of poems, Clifton's work has been characterized by a versatility and permeability of Spirit. That is to say, stories of Biblical figures comfortably share pages with the Hindu goddess of destruction, renewal, and eternal energy, Kali; the West African goddess of the ocean and divine mothering Ye Ma Jah; and with southern African American mystic traditions of attention to signs, dreams, and the insistently intimate embrace of the holy (Clifton 1969). Like her mother before her, and her eldest daughter after, Clifton was born with six fingers on each hand. The twelve digits appear in several of her poems over the course of her writing career as a symbol of gift, "the wild blessing" as she names it, a symbol of a mystic/poetic sensibility that is sometimes also a burdensome responsibility.[2]

With her consummately skilled poetic voice and her mystic inheritance, Clifton gives us a new experience of the story of Moses and the Burning Bush, of Mary's encounter with an impregnating God, and of Jesus' Easter ascension—showing us what we *think* we know in sublime and disconcerting ways. She elucidates connections between human beings and the natural world from an extraordinary sense of empathy and shared experience of marginalization. The poem "to a dark moses" is a meditation on the encounter of the prophet with the burning bush speaking its piece. In Clifton's poem, the language of the event is as much of sexual attraction as it is of the mutual challenge of powers—"you are the one/ i am lit for./come with your rod/ that twists/ and is a serpent./ . . . i am not consumed" (Clifton 1987a, 127).

Some of Clifton's most striking poems in terms of the clarity and specificity of her authoritative voice are those about the natural world. She begins a poem about ecological sustainability with the lines "being property once myself/ i have a feeling for it . . ." (Clifton 1987a, 58). In another case, the darkness of greens—collards and kale (traditional African American foods)—becomes a relative of blackness, in both hue and the anticipation of cutting under knives. Clifton says here, "i taste in my natural appetite/ the bond of live things everywhere" (Clifton 1987a, 149). Later, in "the earth is a living thing," the poet describes the earth's power, its beauty, its aliveness, in terms of blackness: black animals, black fish, black children, nappy black hair. It is a lovely and arresting poem, not only for its structure and language, but for the way in which it causes readers to examine the assumptions we have learned about the relative meanings of "white" and "black" as linguistic and conceptual frameworks (Clifton 1993, 34). In these poems, as in others, Clifton understands a connection to the natural world *via* the experience of blackness. Clifton's work is deeply informed by the specificity of her female life and the authority of a poetic voice that aligns itself unapologetically and profoundly with the dispossessed, what she calls "the dark side" (Clifton 1991, 18).

III. The Dark Side: An-Other Meaning of Blackness

Clifton's sympathy with the dispossessed finds significant correspondence in the historical and theological leanings of African American Christianity, which developed from the experience of slavery and resistance to its ordeals. Black religion, in both its churched and extra-church forms, has been not only a freedom exegesis but a protected space for the cultivation of an alternative orientation: what historian of religion Charles Long calls "an-other" understanding of self/community/blackness that exists in contradiction to the derision and constriction imputed to African Americans by the mainstream. In an essay published in 1997, Long writes of the creative process undertaken by enslaved Africans and their descendants in order to avert complete consumption in the worldview and suppositions of those who held black people captive. He says:

> The slave had to come to terms with the opaqueness of his condition and at the same time oppose it. He had to experience the truth of his negativity and at the same time transform and create *an-other* reality. Given the limitations imposed upon him, he created on the level of his religious consciousness. Not only did this transformation produce new cultural forms, but its significance must be understood from the point of view of the creativity of the transforming process itself. (Long 1997, 27)

Clifton's writing is in accord with this sense of an alternative orientation: the historical necessity among African Americans, as an oppressed people, to create and sustain "an-other" way of understanding their place in the world. This "other" way of knowing becomes a key resource in Clifton's work, which she describes, in part, as an ability to approach poetry from a perspective that is not an exclusively intellectual or academic exercise. "Poetry is about more than logic," she says. "Poetry . . . comes from both intellect and intuition . . . it has to come from not just my head, but from everything that I am" (Rowell 1999, 610). In "hands," Clifton writes again of the twelve fingers as metaphors for her openness to another way of understanding her life and the life of the society in which she lives. The lost fingers are the "invisible" parts of Clifton's self pointing her away from assumptions of her racial and gender inferiority as well as away from a solely materialistic meaning of the world around her. They are the insistent "totems" of her tribe, icons returning her attention to "the light flaring/ behind what has been called/ the world" (Clifton 2004, 36).

In an interview published in 2000, Clifton talks about this "other thing" she knows of life and its connection to an essential hopefulness. Writing, for Clifton, is a tool for remembering hope, in fact, for actively *choosing* it, in the face of hardship and repression. The interviewer, Michael Glaser, asks Clifton about a statement by Guyanese writer Fred D'Aguiar, who suggests that due to race (and racism) "as soon as he opens his front door he is received in a particular way—he is part of a history, something bigger than he is, something which is theorized and to which he knows he must listen" (Glaser and Clifton 2000, 328).[3] Whereas Glaser appears to understand the statement in terms of the limitations affecting D'Aguiar as a writer of color, Clifton adamantly insists on another interpretation: something akin to Long's "an-other reality," an approach to life that recognizes the truth of an oppressive history but that also sees there is something much deeper and older and stronger to which a black writer has recourse and may actively choose as an alternative to constriction. "And think about it," she says to Glaser, "Would I choose that history? Would I choose that fear that I can see sometimes in eyes? Would I choose the anger that it fostered? No!! I do not choose to be victimized by my own life and by my own experiences" (Glaser and Clifton 2000, 328).

This insistence on choosing life, choosing hope, choosing love, in Clifton's work, is in no sense Pollyanna optimism. Rather it is the result of a deeply honest, often bitingly candid, appraisal of the meannesses and failings of human beings (in particular, of the deficiencies of a society with racism at its roots), and the recognition that *in spite* of all that, there is something holy and wonderful and capable of healing in all of us. She says to Glaser that although some people may insist that they have seen the signs that "everything is going to hell," she herself has seen "something other, and if that first message is out there, then the other message should be out there too" (Glaser and Clifton 2000, 311).

In the last fifteen years of Clifton's life, as she struggled with increasingly serious illness, she wrote with an absence of sentimentality, but with sympathy and curiosity, about cancer and mortality. She also wrote about the liminal experience that can sometimes emerge from such unforgiving traumas—another understanding of "the dark side." These poems, the ones of illness and death, particularly, blend the pragmatic and poetic, the practical and the spiritual. Among these poems, there is one Clifton calls "hag riding." The *hag* of the poem, is, of course, its common meaning of the old, decrepit woman. But she is also the insistent feminine of southern black storytelling traditions—a kind of African American *la llorona*—the woman who lives in the boundary between life and death, the one who is sent to frighten us, who holds fiercely and won't let go. In Clifton's poem, the hag is all of that *and* persistent hope.

> maybe it is the afrikan in me
> still trying to get home . . .
> i lob my fierce thigh high
> over the rump of the day and honey
> i ride   i ride (Clifton 1996, 26)

IV. Feminine Archetypes of the Divine

Like Walker's, Clifton's understanding of spirit moves her comfortably into an engagement with archetypes of the sacred (especially with feminine energy as a source of divinity) in ways that include, but are not limited to Christian symbols and stories. The religious understandings and inclinations expressed in Clifton's poems stretch well beyond christocentric restraints and reach into deeper, mythic, and metaphoric ways of knowing in the world—ways that consistently link the humanity and sacrality of women.

Often in her work Clifton offers a female perspective on Biblical stories and world mythologies, astonishing in its distinctiveness and lack of romanticism. In one case, Clifton reexamines the Greek story of Leda, the goddess, ravaged by Zeus who comes for her in the form of a giant swan. Both Yeats and Clifton identify Leda in poems as unwilling quarry for the god's sexual predations, exploring the encounter between a woman and a daunting divine masculine force. But where Yeats's verses appear to rest solidly in the narrative frame of the original Greek myth, Clifton's Leda poems make allusions to Biblical stories, especially as they parallel her writing on the visitation and impregnation of Mary by Almighty God. Yeats seems to ask if, somehow, Zeus's strength is transferred to his victim in the midst of the sexual act, whereas Clifton's Leda ultimately challenges and satirizes the swan-formed deity's presumed vitality and power, as if it were mere preening: “You want what a man wants,” her Leda says, “next time come as a man/ or don’t come” (Clifton 1993, 59–61; Yeats 1997, 89).

Across the range of Clifton’s writing, there are many references to *femaleness*, women’s ways of knowing, and the feminine principle as source—source of the poet’s authority and direction as a writer, and of life in the universe. In “the making of poems” the feminine energy at the origins of the world asserts, “i am adam and his mother” (Clifton 1980, 24). In a poem like “what the grass knew,” the narrative of the poem and its denouement represent a subtle, ancient, profoundly empathetic feminine energy in creation, in the holy. In the poem, “the grass” knows even beyond God’s pronouncements and the heavy, single-minded, masculine pacing of His feet. In Clifton’s poetic vision, there is a female essence about the world that knows further than God’s thoughts. This character of Clifton’s work is reminiscent of the orixá Nanã Buruku, the primordial energy of creation who, in the myths of Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, is said to be “older than God.” In some ways, the fullness of Clifton’s project as a poet can be understood as essentially womanist: to reveal and share the strengths of women’s ways of knowing the world, on behalf of women, men, and children. As she writes, in the collection *Next*:

> this is the tale
> i keep on telling
> trying to get it right;
> the feast of women,
> the feeding and
> being fed. (Clifton 1987b, 35)

In all of her poems about the feminine divine, there is a real sense of the “humanity” of sainted women. Their desires, personalities, angers, and sorrows, their sexuality, their disappointments and frustrations, their struggles and joys, are all implicit in their holiness. Poems about Mary and Anna, the mother and grandmother of Jesus, are particularly apt examples of this: the women are ambivalent about the great disruption of their lives that will be Jesus’ birth. Various poems written in their voices express both the transcendent joy and the more mundane uncertainties and annoyances of being “chosen.”[4]

For Clifton, the power of her female ancestors, the power of her own black-womanness in the world, and the power of the divine are linked. In "the mother's story," the poet writes that shortly after her own birth, her mother, Thelma Sayles, was visited by female spirits ("a line of women") who gave the baby girl the gift of poetry. In "the message of thelma sayles" Clifton is instructed by her mother to take the traumas of both their lives and turn them into poems. Women's fury and dissatisfaction are thus also part of the feminine source of Clifton's voice. Sayles's poetry was thwarted—she burned her poems at her husband's demand and died an early death—but her daughter, Lucille, became the intellectual and creative bearer of those songs (Clifton 1987b, 53; Clifton 1991, 61).

V. History and the Prophetic

In her writing, Clifton understands and approaches history with intimacy. The history about which she writes *belongs* to her, whether family stories of Dahomey women and slavery, the Biblical accounts of prophets and holy women, or unnamed African and Native American predecessors whose presence remains palpable in the late twentieth-century landscapes where Clifton lived. As a citizen of the Americas, as a daughter of the diaspora, as an African American woman, Clifton claims all of these stories. The *belonging* is not so much in the sense of "possession" but more as a spiritual inheritance. She feels a responsibility for carrying on the story, for telling more of the truth. The writer states clearly this intention of her work as she describes the task of the poet as historian. The poet, she says, "has the obligation not to run away from the stories that she or he knows . . . [i]f I, for instance, write about something and I don't include the whole experience or all of our experiences—many of which have been awful, you know, or seemed awful at the time—then I am turning away from what is my task" (Rowell 1999, 60).

The stories of people of color and marginalized peoples generally, worldwide, also *belong* to Clifton. In *Quilting*, for example, in a poem called "the killing of trees," the poet describes the experience of moving into a housing development built on what had been, certainly, Native land. As she watches a bulldozer knocking over trees to make room for an additional subdivision, Clifton sees Native American history through an African American lens, via her "other" eye, the "good" one—recognizing both her complicity and her role as witness (Clifton 1991, 39–40). Similarly, in "entering the south," the poet uses her own experience as a black woman as a tool to understand the phenomenon of Confederate pride. Clifton writes about wearing her mother's fur coat, conscious of the animals whose lives and blood made the coat possible. The coat in the poem becomes an analogy to the racism carried by descendants of the Confederacy, who "will wear it" because their forefathers and mothers "loved it" even though "the blood from it pools/ on my shoulders/ heavy and dark and alive" (Clifton 1996, 36).

Reading Clifton well requires a certain knowledge of the ground from which she writes—what scholar VèVè Clark calls *diaspora literacy*.[5] Like master painter and muralist John Biggers, Clifton employs titles, phrasing, and meanings steeped in African American religious and historical sources. For the fullest engagement of her work, readers must be familiar with elements of culture deeply ensconced in the experience of black people in this country. For example, in "if he ask you was i laughing," we see an extraordinary concentration of cultural/religious sources, knowledge, and references—that belies the poem's brevity and simple, straightforward language. In a poem of nine short lines, there are at least three significant African American cultural/historical references (Clifton 1987a, 34). First, the overall narrative of the poem is easily that of an enslaved woman escaping with her infant son and wondering after the mother and daughter she has had to leave behind. In the penultimate line of the poem, the narrator prays "that the Lord spare hagar" who is the woman's own abandoned daughter, but who is also black women's theological (womanist) connection to the story of the slavewoman in the Old Testament who, with God's protection and the strength of her own faith, is able to survive great despair and suffering and ultimately save her child. The title of the poem is a line from a work song whose roots are in slavery and southern prison camps, telling the story of a man who, as he prepares to escape, leaves a message for the captain (overseer).[6] *Tell him I'm gone. Tell him I'm gone.*

Clifton insists on telling uncomfortable truths. She was poet laureate of Maryland when the state celebrated the 350th anniversary of its founding as a colony. Asked to write a poem commemorating the occasion, Clifton's effort was complicated by the fact that her sense of what was important for citizens of the state to recall about their history conflicted with the desires of those who commissioned the work. Some time after the commemoration, Clifton crafted the short poem "why some people be mad at me sometime":

> they ask me to remember
> but they want me to remember
> their memories
> and I keep on remembering mine. (Rowell 1999, 57)

Her voice belongs to the underside of history, to those whose memories are buried. She establishes a connection to land, animals, plants, and the forces of nature in recognition of their similar marginalization by the modern world. Although nature may be marginalized, Clifton knows it to be an illusory condition, because, in fact, these things are central to the continuity of life—a centrality Clifton sees in her own being as a woman, and as a woman of color.

Many of Clifton's poems set in specific locations are much less focused on the description of landscapes and are more attuned to the meanings of places and their histories, in terms of the regional and cultural continuities that emerge from a certain kind of relationship to land. An example of this is "memphis" in which the poet reflects on the troubled and violent history of the south via the Mississippi River and considers, particularly, what meaning the region has for her as an African American born elsewhere (Clifton 1996, 41–42). Clifton wrote a number of poems set on former plantations in Maryland and Virginia that evoke the unrecognized humanity of people who lived, worked, and died in those places.[7] The poet's work explores the way a community's relationship to physical spaces is indicative of its social location. In the poem "libation," the narrator pours spirits on the ground in North Carolina in honor of an unknown/unnamed man who lived in that state during slavery. Clifton seems ever in communion with the histories of the locations in which she finds herself—especially, in communion with the people and the interpretations that have suffered on those lands. Her connection/concern is not abstract. It is both practical and mystic, historical and compassionate; and she asks, always, *in the face of this trauma, this history, this suffering, what can I do now? What can I do with this poem, with my words, with my life to bring some acknowledgment or repair?*

Speaking from and for "the dark side," Clifton assumes a kind of prophetic position in her work. And by prophetic here, I mean not predictive, but the sense in which Cornel West uses the term to imply "bearing witness to suffering" (Wells 2010).[8] It is important to understand that for Clifton, the "dark side" is not only the side of blackness, the side of unremembered history, the side of social and political critique, it is also the side of the mystic: the mystery that both appeals and accompanies. Ironically, the mystery is also what Clifton calls "the light."

VI. "Ordinary Women" and Womanist Theology

For Walker, *loving the Spirit* is an essential element in the definition of womanist (Walker 1983, xii). In fact, African American women religious scholars were among the earliest and most prolific in the academy who recognized the usefulness of Walker's definition to theoretical work. Theologians and ethicists such as Katie Geneva Cannon, Delores Williams, Emilie Townes, Stephanie Mitchem, Angela Sims, and others have, over the past quarter century, created a new discipline and an array of theoretical tools within theological studies. These tools, which make up womanist theology, are based on African American women's lived experiences with the sacred in rich, dialogical relationship with Biblical studies, literature, visual art, social and political activism, and personal and collective history. The work of womanist scholars has been essential to creating a space within the academic sphere for discussing the religious and spiritual lives of women of color, and as ethicist Melanie L. Harris writes, "making black women's experiences central to the telling and shaping of a theological lens" (Harris 2010, 44). Theological womanist work has been engaged and enlarged by Asian American, Latina, Native American, Middle Eastern, and African women scholars attempting to situate the experiences, and uncover the agency, of their own communities vis-à-vis studies of gender and religion.

Many in the first generation of African American womanists presumed Christianity (albeit "Black Christianity") as the spiritual/religious base of African American women's experience. In recent years, some younger colleagues have opened up helpful conversations with, and critiques of, the foundational work of early womanist theologians—recognizing the groundbreaking wisdom that grew from an explicitly Christian exploration, but at the same time urging theological womanism toward broader self-definition.[9] Whether employed explicitly in the area of religion, or in disciplines as diverse as literature, education, architecture, semiotics, and social work, it is womanism's conscious and insistent spiritual attentiveness that most clearly distinguishes this theoretical approach from other perspectives on the interstices of race, gender, and class in the lives of women. "For womanists," Layli Phillip writes, the spiritual realm "is actual and palpable, and the relationship between it and humans is neither abstract nor insignificant to politics" (Phillips 2006, xxvi).

Everyday mysticism in Clifton's work is an understanding of the mystic as the "ordinary woman." Spirit and spirituality are, for the poet, among the most basic underlayers of culture. The foundation. The kitchen. The women.

Clifton wrote often in her own kitchen at the table. "The kitchen table," as a womanist metaphor, represents a welcoming, woman-centered space of informal, inclusive dialogue. The kitchen is the heart of the home and the table is where the work of that heart—whether snapping beans and chopping onions, or hearing counsel and sharing laughter—gets done (Clifton 1984, 138; Phillips 2006, xxvii). Thus the kitchen, as a writing space for Clifton, is linked to the carefully crafted, but everyday, language of her poetry—the deliberateness with which she embraces and celebrates the wisdom in the ordinary words, in the ordinary women.

Clifton's work joins, expands, and troubles the waters of the womanism of African American theologians. Although deeply influenced by Biblical stories and tropes, Clifton's voice pushes "Christian" stories and Biblical figures into territory that is more deeply aligned with indigenous/Afro-Atlantic meanings of religion than with Western Christian doctrine and practice. As a historian of Afro-Atlantic religions, I notice the persistence of Clifton's relationship to the mystic, to mystery, to what she frequently calls "the light." On one hand it appears in everyday places: the poet's home; in her relationships with her children, especially her daughters; in her memories of her mother and the stories of women of her family; and in her husband's dying. It is also in the mundaneness of the earth—of trees threatened with logging, of crabs explaining to themselves the trawling ways of humans, and in the night visits of a fox. Yet in the midst of the mundane there is the trembling, often even the adamance, of another kind of presence.

VII. “Furiously Knocking”: Everyday Mysticism and Diasporic Connections

In “the light that came to lucille clifton” the poet describes an impelling force for writing and truth-telling that knocks “furiously” at her door (Clifton 1980, 47). This impulse in Clifton’s poetry is strongly reminiscent of the way intimacy with spirit (that is, the very personal awareness of the ongoing accompaniment of spirit in the everyday lives of people) pervades the experience of devotees of Afro-Atlantic religions such as Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Santeria, and Haitian Vodun. For Clifton, as for the adepts “called” to the service of the African deities, Spirit both attends and demands; and the physical experience of both is a shudder in the world.

Over the course of several books, Clifton wrote poems of Kali’s persistent mystic call—“i offer my/ little sister up. no/ she says/ no, i want you . . .” (Clifton 1987a, 136). The images and language of the demands of the goddess parallel the unyielding of the orishas, lwas, and nkisis of the diaspora—forces of nature who equally guide and insist and who populate Afro-Latin American religious traditions.[10] The poems about Kali edge into others about the female body, its blood, scars, and breaking, as if to suggest the holiness in the wounds. (Perhaps too, the holiness as a consequence of the wounds.) This is reflected in another of Clifton’s poems about Mary, compelling readers to understand both the magnificence and the transgression of holiness.

> mary mary astonished by God
> . . . holy woman split by sanctified seed
> into mother and Mother for ever and ever
> we pray for you sister woman shook by the
> awe full affection of the Saints. (Clifton 1980, 41)

In this poem, Mary is both blessed and rent by the measureless power of the Divine. There is subtle implication of a certain violence in the woman’s encounter with God. For Clifton, seeing always the human in the sacred and the sacred in the human, there is no way to avoid some sense of coercion or obduracy in the story. In the resolute demand of “the Saints,” the poem reflects well the experiences of women (and men) who are the vessels of spirit in Afro-Atlantic religious traditions.

In Bahian Candomblé, where women are overwhelmingly those who receive the divine energy of the orixás as physical presence in their bodies, there is a sense of "calling" similar to that which Clifton depicts in this poem. The idea that one can be "called" to one's life task, particularly to the task of sacred work, is critical in Afro-Atlantic religious experience, particularly in initiatory traditions. In Candomblé, for example, the responsibility to put one's life and capacities at the service of the divine (the orixás/nkisis/voduns) is understood as an inherited duty, a hereditary trait, something in the family line that is passed down over generations, manifesting, now and again, in certain individuals who are spiritually and genetically predisposed to do such work (Harding 2006).

Candomblé adepts often recognize the call in terms of being "grabbed" (*pegou*) by the orixá in the physical experience of possession; being shown their relationship to the orixás via dreams and visions; or being forced to give attention to spiritual responsibility via persistent and unexplained sicknesses or misfortunes. The notion of being called to divine service through physical or psychic intervention would not be unfamiliar to African American Christians, whose experience of religion has traditionally involved an intimacy with the sacred that bears similarities to other Afro-Atlantic religious practices. Clifton describes being aware of vibration/energy in her arms and hands at certain moments: alerts to the need to sit and write, to capture and translate whatever of the holiness is calling for her notice at the time (Hull 1994, 108).[11] What she refers to as "spiritually-based attentiveness"—a keening of her poetic awareness, a call to "pay attention to something"—is akin to the energetic acuity experienced by *filhos* and *filhas de santo* (initiates) of Candomblé who are ritually trained and practiced in being open to "the mystery" (Hull 1994, 115).

A broad, rich subsection of Clifton's work is composed of poems about "light." For Clifton, "light" means Spirit, God, the Universe. Light is also the literal meaning of the poet's first name, *Lucille*—and, Clifton later discovered, it is the meaning of her sister's name, *Elaine*, too (Hull 1994, 115; Hill 2005, 20–21). Light appears in Clifton's poems as both an abstract, supportive presence, and as a very specific experience of brightness, revelation, and connection to the deepest meanings of the human experience. It is a component of the dreams and visions that instruct the poet in important ways. Indeed, *light* becomes a key element of the poet's identity; a link to the intangible but authoritative ancestral forces (especially the women) that precede and guide her, as well as a connection to the divine energies infusing the world around her. Clifton writes, for example, of her mother's memory of baby Lucille's birth—a memory that includes the appearance of wise and powerful women who each gift the child with "one fierce word," implying that these were to be tools of the newborn child's mission in life. The last of the natal visitors, the mother said, "filled your ear with light" (Clifton 1991, 61).

Clifton's sensitivity to "light" is perhaps responsible for the compelling and sympathetic interpretation of Lucifer (whose name shares the same root meaning as *Lucille*) in a number of her poems. In the sequences "tree of life" and "brothers," Lucifer's recollections are not those of the "devil," rather they are reminiscent of a prodigal son or younger brother of the creator God. As in her explorations of the Biblical stories of Mary, Anna, Sarah, and Naomi, Clifton pulls back the accustomed Christian layers to reveal other ways of knowing underneath. In the seventh section of "brothers," Lucifer suggests that after all that has happened (in and to the world) in the relationship between himself and God, there is still a universe of "mercy and grace" in which the forces of independence, temptation, and sensual pleasure must ultimately find a place in the being of God, as all other divine energies do. Clifton's Lucifer curls up beside God to rest, "at Your feet, perhaps," he says, "but, amen, Yours" (Clifton 1993, 69–76).[12]

Light is a concept for Clifton very much akin to truth-telling. As the poet explains, "it is making clear what has not been clear, being able to see what has not been seen" (Hull 1994, 115). In the poems "i'm going back to my true identity" and "the death of fred clifton," Lucille Clifton assumes the voice of her husband and writes of the ultimate clarity that comes at the end of material life: "not the/ shapes of things/ but oh, at last, the things/ themselves" (Clifton 1980, 64–65). Clifton's fourth published collection, *Two-Headed Woman*, includes an untitled poem about a woman who, at the instruction of Light, turns outward with one face and inward with another. It is a poem about self-examination and self-reflection, what poet Alicia Ostriker describes as the discovery within of a women's epistemology (Ostriker 1993, 43). But it is also about a certain spiritual sensitivity. The term "two-headed" traditionally refers to African American conjurers—"hoodoo men and women (those with one head in this world and one in the next)," medicine people and others who inhabit and manipulate the world of the spirits, most often for the benefit of their community members (Gomez 1998, 286). Like the conjurers, Clifton hones a particular, creative intelligence from the twin resources of her social location and her openness to spirit. Although the poet's approach to spirituality is decidedly unsensational, it is also one that honors and recognizes a significant meaning in things unseen, things experienced through mystic means. "My family tends to be a spiritual and even perhaps mystical one. That certainly informs my life and work," Clifton wrote. "It's nothing special" (Clifton 1984, 183). Clifton is one of an increasing number of African American women writers who unashamedly draw inspiration from "nonrational, non-Western modes of apprehending reality," modes that have historically been important sources of cultural and spiritual grounding of the black experience in North America (Hull 1994, 98).

Clifton describes herself as having a "call" to poetry, a "vocation" to be a writer, similar to a nun's "vocation" (Rowell 1999, 72). As in the work of the women religious in Catholicism and Candomblé, Clifton's "call" does not, somehow, suggest an absence of effort. In fact, the recognition of a calling implies the opposite: intense initiative and labor in service. Underlying the simple elegance and force of her words is Clifton's understanding that her work as a poet is "service" to the poems themselves as well as service to the community of readers. Although her writing sometimes reveals an ambiguity about her capacity to carry out all that is required of one who is "called" in this way, poems like "it was a dream" from *The Book of Light*, suggest that Clifton recognizes and feels her responsibility to speak and write out of the understanding she has gathered, the understanding that has come to her about the world—in both mundane and mystic ways. The poet's "greater self" pushes her forward in the poem, past her own assumptions of insufficiency, and demands Clifton's best efforts as one who would serve such a mystery, on behalf of others, insisting that the uncertain poet is capable of more than she perhaps imagines and commanding that she do "This. This. This" (Clifton 1993, 29).

This resonates with the concept of the Candomblé initiate as one who works on behalf of the orixá, on behalf of the larger fellowship of humanity, and for the balance and well-being of the universal forces. It is an understanding of the relationship of adept to Spirit that prevails in many parts of the Afro-Atlantic world. The language of Haitian Vodou speaks perhaps most explicitly to this idea, in that the ones who carry the sacred energies of the lwa in their bodies and serve them most visibly in the world are known as *serviteurs* (servants) of the gods.

VIII. Conclusion: *Plenty Good Room*

Echoing the poetic-theoretical framework of womanism, Clifton's self-consciousness as an African American woman forms the essential ground of her writing. In particular, Clifton's intimacy with the repressed voices of American history; the presence of an ordinary, nonsensational, mystic attention in her life; and the authority she claims from the audacity in her family lineage (as well as from larger African American cultural traditions) combine powerfully as *an-other* source of strength and direction in her work.

This direction points both to the specific historical experience of African Americans and to what critic Hilary Holladay describes as the expansive "room" in Clifton's poetry. Holladay writes, "Clifton is a strong presence in her poems, just as she is a strong presence in person. But her poems, even the ones containing intimate details of her life, make room for everyone's sorrows, every survivor's noble plight" (Holladay 2004, 4). What Clifton seems to understand, as well or better than any other modern American poet, is the role of the poet in reminding us of our profoundly connected humanity.

Ultimately, in Clifton's oeuvre one sees the blend of mystical and practical knowledge, the combination of attentions she pays to the world. This is what makes her work so compelling. The universalism, the willingness and effort to write out of a sense of connection to others—to their pains, their longings, and their human mercies—is another of the places where a womanist vision meshes firmly with Clifton's work. It is a universalism that stems not from a "least common denominator" search for what will not offend, nor from romantic visions of who we are as a nation, but from telling the God's honest truth, with compassion. Her friend and contemporary, poet Sonia Sanchez, says, "The thing about Lucille's work that you constantly see is, always, the subtext is love" (Davis 2002, 1066). The inclusiveness, the "plenty good room" of Clifton's writing, is a primary characteristic of womanism. For Clifton, that which is marginalized or unacknowledged (that is, the feminine, the blackness, the insistence and mystery of Spirit) is what is most important to her poetic voice and to the power of her writing. It is also the place of resonant connection to readers of all kinds.

Notes:

1. Although Walker did not "invent" womanism as a worldview, she was one of the first artists/scholars to create a label for an essentially female-centered, indigenous mode of being in the world that holds the welfare of all community members as a key value and recognizes the ludic-prophetic power of women's culture. Walker's womanist vision emerged from the lived experience of African American women and was first used as a theoretical framework in literary studies. However, it has resonances across the experiences of many communities of marginalized women and has been embraced by thinkers in disciplines as varied as theology, education, sociology, psychology, architecture, and history.
2. See, for example, Clifton's poems, "i was born with twelve fingers" and "mother i am mad" in Clifton 1980; "if our grandchild be a girl," in Clifton 1987b; and "wild blessings" in Clifton 1991, among others. Clifton's small, "extra" digits were surgically removed.
3. Both Charles Rowell and Etheridge Knight refer to Gwendolyn Brooks as having similarly stated that walking out of her house as a black person is a political act. See Rowell 1996 and 1999.
4. See, for example, "anna speaks of the childhood of mary her daughter," "island mary," and "mary mary astonished by God" in Clifton 1980.
5. *Diaspora literacy* is the capacity to understand texts "from indigenous, cultural perspectives beyond the field of Western or westernized signification" (Clark 2009).
6. The song from which Clifton's title is taken is variously called "The Hammer Song" or "Take this Hammer" and was recorded by folk singer Ella Jenkins and blues legend Lead Belly, among others.
7. See, for example, "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989," "slave cabin, sotterly plantation, maryland, 1989" (Clifton 1991, 12–13); and "monticello" (Clifton 1987a, 126).
8. This meaning of "prophetic," deeply imbedded in the liberationist tradition of the Black Church, is signal to Cornel West's work. See, for example, his essay and dialogue in Butler et al. 2011, excerpted at www.cupblog.org/?p=3305 (accessed September 18, 2011): "For prophetic religion the condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak. . . . But in talking about prophetic religion, we're talking about something that is engaging, that is risk-taking, and it has everything to do with enabling virtue, which is courage—the courage to expand empathy, expand imagination, think critically, organize, mobilize, and maybe, like Brother Martin Luther King, Jr. pay the ultimate price. But it's all in bearing witness" (West 2011).

9. In particular, Melanie Harris, Arisika Razak, Monica Coleman, and Traci C. West suggest that key elements of Walker's inclusive, indigenous vision are minimized in some understandings of theological womanism as an ethical framework. ee, for example, Coleman et al. 2006; Razak 2009; and Harris 2010.
10. *Orisha* (alternately, *orixá*), *lwa*, *nkisi*, and *vodun* are terms used in various Caribbean and Afro-Latin religions to denote the sacred principles, forces of nature, and divinized ancestors who guide and influence life in the world. Like the avatars of Hindu tradition, they are specific manifestations of indivisible divinity.
11. Here Clifton describes the feeling as "like an electric current running down my arm." Hull says Clifton learned "to take notice, get a pen or whatever, because something wanted her attention."
12. That this oft-demonized, exiled angel shares with Clifton the characteristic "wild blessing" of the six-fingered hand is another of the resonances the poet discovers and offers to readers as an interpretive tool in the Lucifer poems.

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