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The Importance of the Physical

Lucille Clifton's Poetry About Bodies

Kaitlin Hoelzer

In a 2010 article remembering Lucille Clifton, Toi Derricotte tells the story of a time when Lucille had gone to do a reading at an elementary school. "She [Lucille] asked the librarian if they had any of her Everett Anderson books. The librarian answered that, unfortunately, they didn't have any of those books in the library because there were no black children in the school. Lucille replied, 'Well you don't have any bunnies in this school either, but you have books about bunnies'" (375). Clifton viewed her black skin as an essential part of her identity, and sought through her poetry to affirm black identity as well as to celebrate triumph over life's challenges, from the most petty to the most overwhelming. Clifton's choice of subjects, ranging from her uterus and children to sex, God, and foxes, illustrate her most personal moments, while allowing others to identify with and partake in her personal struggle.

In doing this, many of Clifton's poems specifically affirm physical bodies. Clifton's body is a connection with her mother and ancestors, a tool to control her space, and a site of celebrations as well as struggle. In this radical acceptance and celebration, Clifton is able to create a space where bodies, especially those of black women, are valued in their natural form, and furthermore, are celebrated for their personhood rather than solely for

physical appearance. In her poetry, Clifton connects aspects of her physical body to positive qualities she possesses, elucidating the tie between body and identity. Additionally, she takes ownership of her physical body and of the space around her, forcing us to see that while the physical is part of identity, it does not change someone's value as a person.

Clifton's poetry is deeply informed by her black, female identity. Because these themes underlie each poem, particularly those that focus on the body, bodies in all forms are affirmed as valid. Derricotte argues that "Lucille Clifton gives permission to be ourselves, to trust ourselves"(377). This permission is evident in the lighthearted nature of "homage to my hips" as well as the transcendent tone of "[won't you celebrate with me]." The poem "homage to my hips" emphasizes Clifton's pride in her body, a body that, in some circles, would be looked down upon for failing to conform to a narrow beauty standard. The first line of the poem asserts, "these hips are big hips," which is in direct defiance to the modern rules of beauty. However, as Clifton describes her hips—"big," "free," "mighty," and "magic"—she connects them with the positive characteristics she wishes to embody. Her hips "have never been enslaved" and "go where they want to go / ... do what they want to do." Alicia Ostriker wrote, "I've seen . . . a whole classroom of white undergraduates break into smiles when I've read 'homage to my hips,' not because these girls had big hips themselves, but because Clifton's self-affirmation was contagious" (41). Clifton is not arguing that one must have big hips in order to have freedom; what she is doing is implicitly showing the reader that the freedoms of personhood do not require a certain body.

Clifton's "[won't you celebrate with me]" continues this argument in a more serious tone. Clifton emphasizes her connection to and reliance on her hands; she writes "my one hand holding tight / my other hand" (10–11), showing how she both physically and mentally relies on herself alone, as she "had no model" for what to do (3). Additionally, lines 2–3, "what i have shaped into / a kind of life," bring to mind images of Clifton physically forming a life, molding and carving the "starshine and clay" into a shape she is satisfied with (9). In her call for celebration of this accomplishment, Clifton demonstrates her pride in the feats she has achieved with her physical body as well as her mental acuity. This reaffirms Clifton's message of total acceptance of the self, both physical and mental, for it is her *self* that built her life.

In affirming the physical body, Clifton also connects to individual body parts as essential rather than ancillary to identity. In her essay “Fat Liberation in the First World,” Sylvia Henneberg discusses the way that “the European paradigms of the normal, beautiful, moral, and superior” are established and repeated from colonial times and continue today. She argues that because of a focus on a northern European ideal, black women are either “horridly objectified” by “the cumulative oppressive forces of misogyny [and] racism” or “render[ed] . . . invisible altogether” (62). According to Henneberg, “Lucille Clifton has been a steady, if often unacknowledged, champion of the New Body, proudly showcasing in her poetry the fat black body as a force of resistance against the oppressive effects of racism [and] sexism” as she “claims the right to exist in whatever shape, color, and age” (63). This has implications beyond promoting body positivity; it further connects a person’s physical body to their identity as she proves the integral role bodies play in a person’s sense of self. Clifton’s poem “to my last period” is an excellent example of this, as is “poem to my uterus.”

In “to my last period,” Clifton mourns the loss of something that is universally acknowledged as uncomfortable, but is also tied to her identity as a woman in an intimate way. Clifton writes, “well, girl, goodbye, / after thirty-eight years,” (1-2) acknowledging the immense amount of her life in which her period—a physical representation of her womanhood—has been present. She continues, “you / never arrived / splendid in your red dress / without trouble for me” (3-6), which emphasizes the dual nature of her period: both “splendid” and “trouble.” A short, bittersweet poem, “to my last period” finishes with Clifton reaching a place of strange mourning for this often-painful part of being a woman, feeling a desire to “sit holding her photograph / and sighing, *wasn’t she / beautiful? wasn’t she beautiful?*” (12-14). Clifton’s loss at the end of her period illustrates the important role her physical body plays in her sense of self; though menstruation is almost never a pleasant experience, it becomes a monthly physical representation of womanhood and of identity in general, a reminder of vitality in the face of struggle.

Clifton’s “poem to my uterus,” which mourns her uterus as she mourned her period, further explains the way Clifton connected her body parts with her sense of self. Her uterus had held children, “dead and living” (5), but now held cancerous tumors, and doctors had advised a hysterectomy. This poem displays her serious attachment to her body parts. Clifton had cancer, but still did not want to part with this organ that is essential to her identity. Her uterus

is metaphorically and quite literally a piece of her; to part with it seems to be leaving a constant, faithful companion behind. Clifton calls her uterus “old girl” (10) as well as other playful nicknames such as “bloody print,” “estrogen kitchen,” and “black bag of desire” (13–15). That Clifton refers to both her period and her uterus as a personified, feminine entity suggests a deep connection, and the friendly epithet “old girl” brings to mind a comfortable camaraderie. In the beginning of the poem, Clifton asks “where am i going / where am i going / old girl / without you” (9–11), and later repeats this sentiment as she expresses her bereavement in the final lines of the poem: “where can i go / barefoot / without you” (16–18). Without her uterus, Clifton feels unprepared, “barefoot,” without direction.

The poem also demonstrates a significant sense of ownership over her body parts, as Clifton describes her uterus as “*my* bloody print,” “*my* estrogen kitchen,” “*my* black bag of desire” (13–15, emphasis added). Her choice to use these personal pronouns rather than talking about uteruses in general demonstrates Clifton’s feeling that her uterus is truly hers, part of her essential identity. The poem “[if i stand in my window]” also focuses on Clifton taking control over her body; furthermore, it expands this control to the space around her.

Clifton, standing standing naked in a window, could seem sexualized; however, as in “poem to my uterus,” the poem emphasizes ownership. In “[if i stand in my window],” the sense of ownership is in connection with her nakedness rather than an individual body part: “*my* window,” “*my* own house,” “*my* breasts,” “*my* black body,” and so on (1–3, 14, emphasis added). This ownership shows Clifton identifying her personhood with her body exactly as it is rather than in an ideal form. Additionally, the man in this poem finds new knowledge from the sight of Clifton’s naked body. That he would “discover self” (16) and “run naked through the streets / crying / praying in tongues” (17–19) as a result of this experience speaks to the power that Clifton vests in her own body. In Clifton’s poetry, celebration of bodies is not contingent on size or skin color, which gives permission for women to accept and affirm their physical attributes. This celebration, important in and of itself, also serves to galvanize female ownership of their bodies as part of their personality and power.

In her open and honest treatment of bodies, including her own, that do not fit the first- world paradigm, Clifton “creates a space for black womanhood;” however, her poems often mix this focus on the physical body with other

subjects unrelated to body shape or size, which communicates that “it is entirely possible to achieve self-efficacy and empowered personhood in a fat black female body” (Henneberg 64). Clifton therefore brings personhood to the foreground while also emphasizing physical characteristics. “[if i stand in my window]” depicts this seeming paradox that allows the body to simply be while also linking the physical attributes to the ethereal but essential characteristics of personality.

The poem starts by focusing on Clifton’s body, then shifts to depict the more abstract reality of the mind behind the physical body. This mixture of subjects, which both emphasizes the connection to physical body humans have and teaches that the characteristics of that body do not determine personhood, is also prevalent in Clifton’s poem “what the mirror said,” which parallels the fairy tale “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves” in its request for affirmation from a mirror. The poem is the mirror’s response to Clifton’s request; it begins, “listen / you a wonder. / you a city / of a woman” (1–4) and continues, “you got a geography / of your own. / . . . you not noplac” (5–6, 14). The woman in Clifton’s poem, who is seeking validation from the mirror, is the same as the queen in “Snow White;” however, as Scarlett Cunningham writes in her article “Writing the Aging Woman’s Body,” “Snow White” centers on jealousy of pale skin and youth, whereas “in Clifton’s revision pale skin does not determine beauty, nor does youth determine value . . . In Clifton’s version of the woman’s encounter with the mirror a black woman’s size and character confirm her worth” (38). The mirror’s assertion that Clifton is a “city” with “a geography / of [her] own” (3, 5–6) makes it clear that Clifton’s size does not preclude her from beauty. Rather than rejecting the queen for aging and sizing out of a beauty determined by youth and thinness, Clifton’s mirror “speaks affirmations” that “worth is not limited to physical beauty alone” (Cunningham 38).

However, “what the mirror said” is not a poem that is predominantly about beauty. While beauty in connection with Clifton’s physical body parts is an important part of the poem, more important is the shift from body to identity that, similar to “[if i stand in my window],” suggests that while physical characteristics are connected with identity, there are much more important factors. The poem continues, “listen, / somebody need a map / to understand you. / somebody need directions / to move around you” (7–11). The mirror’s validation is emphasizing Clifton’s intelligence—her mind—much more than her physical body—her brain—which allows the reader to move beyond a focus solely on an expanded definition of physical beauty and remember the

other facets of worth inherent in humanity. Cunningham notes, “needing a map to be understood connotes complication in character, intellect and personality” (38). As the mirror affirms Clifton’s beauty as both inherent in her size and connected with her mental capacity, it also reminds Clifton of her control over her body. As “a city / of a woman” in which others “need directions / to move around” (3–4, 10–11), her body is something over which Clifton has complete jurisdiction. Thus, with this poem, Clifton illustrates her personhood much more than her physical characteristics.

Clifton’s poetry about bodies accomplishes considerable feats, particularly in striking a balance between affirming the physical body as essential to identity while also proving that physical characteristics do not affect the inherent value of personhood. This is particularly important for black women, who have been oppressed for both their race and their gender for centuries. Tiffany Eberle Kriner writes about this problem, arguing that this oppression means that “recovery of a whole self” is vital to forward movement, especially when a “sub-human self or non-existent self [has been] handed down by oppressors” (194). Kriner, along with many other scholars and Lucille Clifton herself, locates the body as “the site where gains in self-creation and voice are to be made” (195), which adds additional impetus on Clifton’s poetry about bodies. Her poetry about bodies is no longer just an artistic pursuit or a career; rather, it becomes an exploration of the very place where we develop a sense of self and a voice with which to express that self. In this way, Clifton focuses on the future, “conjur[ing] in the reader [an] awareness of the multiplicity of possibilities and futures within any moment” (Kriner 204). Clifton’s poetry presents a “fully embodied and whole black womanhood” (Kriner 195), which leads the way for readers to both validate their own connection with their physical bodies and separate their physical attributes from their personhood, allowing women, particularly black women, emotional and physical freedom to take ownership of their reality.

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