

Skye Harvey
5-8-06
Eng 255
Midterm #1
Lucille Clifton

Sitting quietly in a bustling room, I watched her approach. She was thick and statuesque, walking slowly with confidence. Her demeanor demanded attention. No one denied it. Everyone applauded while many rose, but I sat quietly and waited for the woman to speak. She answered every proposed question with grace and eloquence, but her speech moved from powerful to arousing when she began to explain why it is that she writes.

“I write to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable,” she said. She went on to explain that it is not her duty to perpetuate the inborn luxury of comfort white men experience from birth. Much to the contrary, her poetry offers a piece of solace or nostalgia to the afflicted and oppressed. In “at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989” Clifton goes so far as to offer a eulogy to forgotten slaves, thus, comforting the unrecognized deceased and mistreated descendants of the deceased. At the same time, her demand for acknowledgment brings to light the plantation owners’ attempt to sweep the past under the rug. In every piece of her work, Clifton remains true to her purpose, but only through understanding the woman, can a reader appreciate the work to its full extent.

When Clifton speaks, she captivates the room. She is a wealth of wisdom and humor, constantly sashaying from one to the other. The audience never misses a beat. So, when she speaks seriously profoundly, her audience listens intently. Straight-faced and gentle-eyed, she explained, “You cannot ask me to disregard my pain to feel yours.” The magnitude of that statement was not fully absorbed until Clifton went on to describe a fraction of her pain.

The woman I watched walk into that room was a pillar of strength. Little did I know she had survived cancer and a kidney transplant, pulling through by the faith that her mother would not let her die. Tragically, that faith was born of another sort of death—not the death of her mother, but the death of her mother, the poet. As a little girl, Clifton sat on the stairs to watch her mother burn every single one of her poems, aiming to appease her husband. The incessant weathering of one hardship after another might have broken the average woman—but not Clifton. Clifton grew stronger with each blow, and the years of wisdom now radiate from within her.

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Emily Stickley
Eng. 255
Midterm
Lucille Clifton

Before attending Lucille Clifton's discussion, I didn't know what to expect. I had never been to a poetry reading before, and I didn't honestly think that it would be that interesting. I do enjoy poetry as long as it is easy to understand, but I was unsure of what to expect at her discussion. I was also afraid that time would pass very slowly, since an hour and a half seemed like a long time to listen to one person discuss poetry. Fortunately I was pleasantly surprised, because I found her to be not only very interesting but funny too! She seemed to be very friendly, and the time seemed to just fly by. When she finished speaking I was actually wishing she had more time to talk! Overall I am very glad I had the opportunity to listen to her speak about her poetry.

Something I found very interesting was how she said that whenever she speaks she does not plan out exactly what she is going to say or read. She said it depends on how "sassy" she is feeling, and the day of her discussion she says she was feeling pretty "sassy". Even though she did not have a plan, her words seem to flow right out and everything she talked about made sense. She seemed so comfortable talking about the things she discussed. She wasn't afraid to say what she thought and felt, and I found that so refreshing.

She talked a lot about race, and her experiences and thoughts about it. I was amazed at how open she was with the things she said. She made some pretty funny

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comments, but the way she said things I found to be in no way offensive. I thought this was so interesting, because it seems that most people today try and avoid the whole race issue, because they don't want to offend anyone. It seemed that Lucille Clifton was not in anyway concerned about that though, because she had no problem expressing her thoughts and views. One story that she shared that I found to be very touching was the story of the black and white student in her class, and after gathering in a circle one day and holding hands. The white student said that it was the first time he had ever touched a black person. The black student then embraces the white student in a hug. I thought this was so touching, and to be honest it almost brought me to tears!

I thought it was also very helpful listening to her speak about her poetry because it gave me such a good insight into why she wrote the poems and what they meant. She explained the book *Blessing The Boats* to be about the different things that come in and out of our lives. This clarified so much for me, and I feel it helped me to understand her poetry within the book so much better. She also said something about how we think that we can plan our lives, but often things happen beyond our control. I totally related to this, because I have learned that this does happen. I have also learned that when it happens you have to just keep moving forward. My favorite quote she said in the discussion was, "The way to the community and home is thru the heart." I love that quote and I also find it to be so true, and I wish that more people felt that way.

I could go on and on about all the interesting things she talked about. Like the cancer and the dialysis she has been through. Or the loss of her children, and the irony in the names we call certain things. I think I learned so much about poetry, life and race

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from her. She was so interesting and I am glad I got to hear her speak, and if I ever got the chance to do it again I would.

Jessica Mason

Validation

It was easy to listen to Lucille Clifton because she was so spirited and as she proclaimed herself to be, spunky. She even says, "That's cool." I was continuously surprised by her bluntness and although I knew she was only joking, by her stereotypical jokes about race, the sexes, and religion. She made comments about how white people do not like to be called white; She pointed out that women think they know men better than men know women; She was surprised to hear that her Chinese friend considered her daughter's marriage to a Japanese man to be interracial, since the rest of us all see Asians as one race; She called Christians morbid because they were all waiting for the end of the earth; She made a comment about how even though she had six children in six and half years, she was not Mormon; Questioning mother Mary's name, she points out the unlikelihood of parents from Israel naming their child Mary.

I think the purpose of such comments was to give examples of perspectives that need to be changed. She made the statement over and over that we need to validate each other's stories, both with their differences and their similarities. She expresses this through her poems in such an honest and frank way, which is why I think that people have told her that she "comforts the afflicted, and afflicts the comfortable."

The second poem she read, "Album," was about the similarities between her and her Chinese friend. They both have the same name, they are of the same age, they both had Shirley Temple cups, they both were forced to cross oceans to America, and they both have daughters around the same age. The significance of that poem was that it showed how two women, of two different races, could share similar stories. In "Aunt Jemima" an older black woman was told by a young white man that she reminded him of home. To him, she was a part of "home" the same way a familiar chair or picture would be. Such a woman, to him, was part of his story. What he never realized was that she had a story of her own. She longed for a home of her own, chairs of her own, pictures of her own. This poem was an example of the necessity of validating each other's stories. She also writes poems for other people with the purpose of validating their stories for them, such as "Jasper Texas 1998," "Alabama 9/15/63," and "The message of Thelma Sayles."

An interesting point about her poems was something Lucille referenced to toward the end of her talk. She found that writing her poems actually validated her own stories within herself.

Brooke Rajcich

1. It was Thursday. I expected to combat a large crowd; I wanted to get there early. I skipped class to hear her speak. I learned about her coming through literature class. I didn't see the posters or hear the announcements promising her arrival—if there were any. On entering the auditorium I was disappointed by the absence of people. There were people yes, but there were also empty chairs. The spaces didn't bother her though. She got up before us and talked about herself, her ideas, and her poems. If the empty seats had been filled they too would have heard what we heard. They too could have listened to Lucille Clifton and heard her take on just about everything from culture to communities, to herself.

The lecture was a blend of serious readings, witty commentary and challenging ideas. Clifton read numerous poems, many from Blessing the Boats. The first Clifton chose to read was “why some people be mad at me sometimes,” following later was “here yet be the dragons,” “dialysis,” “the times,” “album,” and many others. Between readings she would often pause to give the audience insight into what inspired her poetry.

An old map and the idea that languages fade away sometimes inspired “here yet be the dragons.” The poem entitled “why some people be mad at me sometimes” came about with the 350-year commemoration for Maryland. The commemoration was themed *Happy Colonial Days*. Clifton noted that, “people who look like me only had happy colonial days at Christmas, but not before and not after.” The poem is about this, the idea of memories being made by their titles, even if the titles aren't necessarily appropriate. Clifton's best friend inspired the poem entitled “album.” The poem is about them, age, Shirley Temple cups, and daughters.

Clifton would often pause for the laughter after concluding a thought. She made even the uncomfortable poems comfortable afterwards with commentary. The poem “dialysis” she informed us was the product of kidney failure. The poem itself is hard to read without emotion; it tells us about cancer and life. She recalled a time before writing it, a time in the dialysis unit of a hospital. She tells the audience of the introduction spiel the hospital supplied her, which informed her what to do if there were a fire. She would have to disconnect herself from the machine leaving one third of her blood to run outside. With the tone of her voice she asserted how absurd this idea and evoked laughter throughout the crowd.

Not all was laughter. Clifton brought up many ideas which forced the audience to exam their culture and if nothing else themselves. *Why is it that holding hands is such a bad thing in school? Do we really think that the Virgin Mary was named Mary? Does Pocahontas really look like the Disney character? What is the significance in names? Does Jesus look like Jesus? Why are Americans so arrogant?*

She told us of the first time she witnessed a white woman sharing a cup with a black woman. She told us of a white student of hers who said he had never before touched a black man, until holding hands that day in class. She told us about everything. Her stories and ours, the American quilt which wouldn't be complete without her written word. She told us of one of her first critics

who said she would be good, if only she stopped writing about black people. She told us about everything, ideas of beauty, differences we should celebrate, names, community, identities.

Clifton packed so much into the short time she stood before the audience. I would liked to write it all, to explain the ideas, images and thoughts she invoked in to my head, but I can't quite recapture it. The seats, which were filled, understand. But those that were empty truly missed something remarkable—Clifton. The light that was shed on her poems, the ideas she brought forth, and her witty commentary just can't quite be recaptured on paper. Paper doesn't give you the rhythm, the expressions, or the voice. And I can't give you Lucile Clifton.

“Lucille Clifton and Validation that Creates Community”

Keith Monaghan" <kkmonaghan@gmail.com

Lucille Clifton, at a lecture on the Lane Community College campus, talked about her poems and other ideas that were important to her. Her message can be summed up by something she said, “The way toward community is through the heart.” She was very interested in conveying the message that community is important. Another idea she discussed, which goes along with the idea of community, is validation. Her experiences and background gave her sensitivity to communities that were ignored. On a poster advertising her lecture, Clifton was quoted as saying “I’ve always been a person who found more interesting the stories between the stories.” Her conclusion was that these ignored communities lack validation by larger communities. Her message was that we need to be people that validate others.

When Lucille Clifton taught at universities she organized her classes into communities. She wanted her students to become people who “balance[d] intellect and intuition.” She taught her students how to validate each other and in doing so, built little communities. She said something else at the lecture that I can imagine she would tell a class she was frustrated with, “People, try to be human to each other.” She expected her students to engage not only with their minds but also with their hearts.

She talked about how the “University” has become based on intellect and how we have ignored the heart. Her reason was that it is easier to teach people how to think than it is to teach them how to feel. What she says is very true. Besides teaching difficulties, feelings are often messy. We (students and teachers in academics) tend to focus mostly on improving our minds. We often ignore developing our hearts (and our communities). We forget to teach people how to operate in a community. Not simply to communicate with others but to actually live as people—together.

I often reflect on our society, at how selfish we are. I wonder if Lucille Clifton hasn’t also considered selfishness because I think she poses an interesting solution. If we become a community that validates each other we won’t be as inclined to seek affirmation from others. Such self seeking affirmation can be found in statements like: “Look at my new car, isn’t it awesome?” or “Do these clothes look cool?.” Statements like these are inward and selfish. They would become unnecessary if we were proactive at validating each other.

Validation creates community. We develop a heart connection to those people that validate us. These connections are the foundation of every community. She encourages us to consider that our entire world is a community. I believe she would regard discrimination as ridiculous based on a world view that sees the earth as one large community. I would have to agree with her too. If you think about the world as your family it becomes hard to discriminate based on color of skin or origin.

On a different note. Lucille Clifton seems like a great woman. She talked in a conversational tone and was funny, witty, and down to earth. I greatly enjoyed her lecture and found it to be very engaging. It was a pleasure.

Jan Evoniuk
Essay Question #1:
Lucille Clifton

Lucille Clifton is not only an amazing charismatic poet, but she has a great presence about her. When she stood at the podium in the LCC auditorium, she became so real to me. This may be due to the fact that one of the very first things that came from her was a joke. The microphone was in her way and she said, "I am an adult, I know what to do." And, this may have not been so much a joke as a statement, but it made us all laugh. She never said this, but it seems that laughter is important in her life. Clifton read some of her poems and told us little stories and made sure we knew that, "There isn't one huge story and then just little nothings," which I think is great. The little nothings she told us were beautiful things that sometimes inspired a poem from her.

One thing she talked about was her friend Lucille Chan who is an Asian woman, and she thought it was so funny that they both had shirley temple curls. Neither of their hair like shirley temples, their hair even unlike each others, but their mothers both gave them the same hairstyle. I loved this story, because the little nothings are truly important and humanizing. They can be the only good things at times and the fillers between the big things. They do matter. Lucille read her poem for Lucille Chan Hall entitled "album". It is a beautiful poem about something as simple as an African American, and a Chinese American girl having the same hairstyle and then moving to the future with the daughters they have "We think / they will be beautiful. / we think / they will become themselves." (Blessing the boats, p17). What a beautiful dream and circle that their mothers had for them and now they for their own. "it is 1985. / she is./ she is. / they are." (Blessing the Boats, p17). This lovely poem came from one of those little things in life.

There were so many wonderful things that Lucille said. Many of the things stuck with me and still I am thinking of them. It's hard to chose which insight to talk about. Out of all the things she said, one of the more important comes mostly from one of her shorter poems.

why some people be mad at me sometimes

They ask me to remember
but they want me to remember
their memories
and i keep on remembering
mine

This poem came from being asked to make a speech on celebrating colonial times. She didn't include it in her speech, it was just a way for her to let out some feelings. I think it's great that there isn't strong anger but

just straight truth in it. This is how it is. She has a great strength in her truth and straightness. "Where does our arrogance come from, and what will come of it?" This question she raised is great. It goes with this poem beautifully. What will come of these peoples specific arrogance and is this a result of the arrogance of the past? I love the layers it brings forward. Lucille brought up the deeper part of arrogance. How people hate to let it known that they don't know something, and I agree with her when she says that it is so stupid to think this way. No one know everything, so get over it. She seems to have a good grasp on human nature and a great respect for it.

Community was a big topic she brought up. Community can break down arrogance. Her whole speech really, illuminated the importance of community. She told a story about two of her students, a black boy and a white boy. The white boy said that he had never touched a black person before and then the black boy reached his arms out and hugged the him. Lucille said at that moment, she was reminded why she taught. That story shows how important it is to have this sort of closeness without having the ignorance we are taught blocking great connections.

Overall, her strong presence was a great thing to witness. Lucille had wonderful words to say, and I could have listened for a much longer time.

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I went to both of Lucille Clifton's appearances and I have to say that I'm glad that I put the extra effort into attending. She covered a variety of different ideas that day, but one stood out above the rest. It was the idea of validation. I'd like to take you back to that day for just a moment. I remember distinctly, sitting there in that auditorium, hearing the most powerful thing I had heard all that day. The most radical revolutionary words coming from the most unassuming of people, although at the time I wouldn't have gone as far as to say that. Only later did I begin to really appreciate what she had said. She said that, "We must validate each other's stories."

These words hooked my attention; they pulled my imagination in different directions all at once. What did she mean validate stories? Again and again the word popped up as she talked, validate, snapping my attention back to it. Since that day I've thought long and hard about that word, and I think now I understand what she was asking us to do.

What is truth? What is history? Truth and history are only that which has been validated by us, humanity. Found, named, proven, written down, consumed, and digested. What Lucille Clifton, is asking us to do when she says to validate each other's stories, is to search through the darkness of our collective past and bring to the light of our collective understanding the forgotten reality that silently exist there. She is asking us to listen to and give legitimacy and power and validity to, those that are unheard, illegitimate, and powerless, if only just to bear witness to their experience. I also think when she says we must validate each other's stories she is also asking us to test the truthfulness and accuracy of these stories.

What I find interesting is that she didn't say to simply listen to each other's stories, she said validate. Listening, compared to validating, is passive. Validation requires purposeful action. Validation comes from a sense of authority. Legitimacy. Authority either inherently in oneself or authority derived from the "method" with which we validate. Authority is power; validation is powerful. I'm not very sure, but to me it feels like she was trying to motivate us to reach out and grab our fair share of that power. To assert our individual authority over the validation process that moves not-truth's into the realm of truth. That I think is revolutionary.

they ask me to remember

**but they want me to remember
their memories
and i keep on remembering
mine (38)**

This poem is not the only one where I feel there is a theme of validating other people's stories, but it is one that is easier to interpret. In this poem she compares their memories with her memories. She is affirming her right to her own history. She says, "I keep on" she is actively and continually resisting their history being forced onto her. She is taking controlling of history Looking back on that day I'm not really sure that she meant any significant at all when she spoke those words. I'll never get the chance to ask her if anything I've just written is true. But I will continue to think what I think and validate my own experience of that day. Sometimes that all we can do.

Lucille Clifton's Talk didn't really center on any single topic. She brought up everything from Pop-Culture to Personal Health. Her speech was very extemporaneous. She would read a poem and then drift off into various digressions and stories. She came across as a humble grandmother more than an award winning writer. But that's not to say she was boring or uninteresting; she was quite the opposite. She was wise, intelligent, insightful and funny. She's almost seventy years old, yet she's packed full of verve, mettle, and life. She spoke from the heart and shot from the hip. She is both Poet and Sage.

After reading a powerful poem about a slave-owner raping one of his slaves, Clifton stressed the importance of direct and honest language in writing, in history, and in life – of not hiding behind nice euphemisms and/or blatant misnomers. If something is ugly or unpleasant, call it as such. If something is being misrepresented, call it out. She talked about her recent obsession with names, about how she's interested in what, why, and how things get named the things they do. She brought up the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota peoples as an example of this. "We" tend to lump them all under the moniker of, Sioux. The word Sioux is a French word. It was used by French traders because they couldn't (or wouldn't) differentiate between these three Nations of people – and the name is still stuck on them. She also brought up the battle of Little Big Horn, and how it oftentimes gets portrayed as a victory for the U.S. Calvary. I was born and raised in South Dakota, and these particular examples resonated with me.

She emphasized the value of community, of the importance of validating those of us who are the "janitors" of society. She said that a faculty member's story will reveal a lot about what's

going on in a college, but the cafeteria staff tend to know what's up...behind the scenes. Clifton mentioned multiple times that there are multiple paths to knowledge – and then made a comment about Science being the easiest path. Clifton believes in following one's intuition, as well as one's intelligence. She said that the struggle to find a balance between intuition and intelligence is a worthwhile struggle, but when in doubt, err on the side intuition.

Clifton said something about how the universal appeal of Shakespear points to a universal commonality between all of humanity. She spoke of her inclusion within many different tribes throughout the world. She was quick to add that her use of the word tribe, was not meant to connote a primitive thing; she was referring to her multidimensional nature. This led her on the topic of America's fixation with false dichotomies, how our culture always insists on cramming the either/or decision down both/and's throat. Clifton said we all

belong to many different tribes, that we usually aren't born into them, and that most of the time we have to go out and find them.

Clifton said something about truth and fact not always being the same thing. (Faulkner once made a similar statement.) This goes back to her concern with the whitewashing of history. Something can be repeated and recorded as fact, generation after generation, but that doesn't necessarily guarantee its veracity. Also, facts can be bent, reshaped, omitted, and misapplied in order to manufacture a desired "truth." Clifton is conscious of this and she addresses it in her poetry – specifically in the poem: at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989.

In this poem, Clifton recounts a trip she took to an old plantation. When she notices all the old tools laid neatly on a table, and says to herself, "nobody mentioned slaves / and yet the curious tools / shine with your fingerprints. / nobody mentioned slaves / but somebody did this work / who had no guide, no stone, / who moulders under rock." Clifton then realizes that the slave-

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womens' names have been completely omitted from the plantation inventory, "tell me your names / tell me your bashful names / and i will testify. / tell me your dishonored names." Here, we see three common themes from Clifton's talk: Names, forgotten history, and untold stories.

A Poet's Words

Lucille Clifton shares her heart and soul through her poetry. During her poetry reading, she expanded on many things that drive her books of poems. She exhibited optimism when she spoke about the loss of her husband and two of her children. She talked of hope while she told us about her battles with cancer and dialysis. Most importantly, she shared her value of people, their opinions and their feelings. The emphasis she placed on how people feel about the things they encounter and experience is undeniable. Her empathy is showcased in many of the newer poems she read (the ones about Pocahontas and Sally Hemming for example). Mostly, she shared her desire to be true to herself. She wasn't afraid of disturbing people's comfortable lives, or questioning taboo topics. Mrs. Clifton bounced from topic to topic in the short time I had the pleasure of hearing her speak, and I can't imagine how wonderful it would be to have an interactive conversation with her. Listening to what she had to say was amazing and I would not trade the experience for anything.

One of the most memorable things she said was "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted." I think this quote is important to her poetry because I see her do both of these things in her writing. The best example of her "afflicting the comforted" is illustrated in "why some people be so mad at me sometimes." I love that she wrote this poem because it's true of many different groups of people. It surpasses race, class, age, and intellect, and simply says the truth: that people put their beliefs on one another, and when someone doesn't allow another's beliefs to be made theirs, there is tension. I can also see her try to "comfort the afflicted" in "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989." Her call to the "bashful" and "dishonored" names is moving. She spoke her mind about the treatment of these poor souls, but at the same time, she recognized her purpose in writing, the actual people.

Another thing she said that stuck with me was to "balance intellect and intuition. If you fall, fall on intuition." She definitely does this all throughout Blessing the Boats. All the poems have a driving force that is outside the box. Her poetry has an intuitive structure that makes sense to her, and few others. To me her poetry deals with life in general, the good and the bad, the known and the unknown, and intuition is what writes that, not intellect. You have to experience life, not merely learn about it to write poetry that moves the reader as Lucille Clifton does.

Lucille Clifton is an amazing woman. Even though she only spoke for an hour, I felt like I heard her for days. Everything she said seems to have meant something huge. I don't know how realistic it is to think that, but I feel as though she spoke to me personally. I consider myself very lucky to have had the privilege of hearing what she had to say and putting a voice to her poetry.