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Inscribing African American Women into the National Narrative: Lucille Clifton's *Generations* as a Work of Life Writing Within the Black Arts Movement

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Abstract

Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) was a key figure of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. By dedicating her poems to her body parts and her personal experiences at different stages of her life, she has not only brought her African American attributes from the margins, but also used her private female body to make political claims, shedding light on the points where racial and gendered experiences overlap and intersect. However, while her poetry has been celebrated and studied, her autobiography, which is a unique example of life writing within the Black Arts Movement, has been overlooked. This article aims to take a close look at *Generations* (1976) to understand how life writing could be a platform upon which Black Arts Movement and feminist writing can intersect to reveal that the rediscovery of African American women's histories is crucial to the goal of locating African American community in a historical chain.

Keywords: Black Arts Movement, African American Literature, Feminism, life writing, Lucille Clifton

Afrikalı Amerikalı Kadınları Ulus Anlatısına Dahil Etmek: Lucille Clifton'ın *Generations* Eserine Siyah Sanatlar Hareketi Bağlamında Bir Yaşam Yazını Olarak Bakış

Öz

Lucille Clifton, (1936-2010) 1960'lar ve 1970'lerin Siyah Sanatlar Hareketi'nin anahtar figürlerinden biridir. Şiirlerini vücut parçalarına ve hayatının farklı aşamalarındaki kişisel deneyimlerine ithaf ederek sadece Afrikalı Amerikalı özelliklerini ortaya koymakla kalmayıp, aynı zamanda kendi özel kadın vücudunu politik taleplerde bulunmak için kullanarak, ırk ve cinsiyetin kesiştiği noktalara da ışık tutmuştur. Fakat her ne kadar şiirleri ünlenmiş ve çalışılmış olsa da Siyahi Sanatlar Hareketi bağlamında özel bir yaşam anlatısı örneği olan otobiyografisi gözden kaçmıştır. Bu çalışma *Generations*'a (1976) yakından bakarak, yaşam anlatılarının Siyahi Sanatlar Hareketi'nin ve feminist edebiyatın kesişebileceği bir platform olduğu ve bu kesişmenin bir sonucu olarak tekrar keşfedilen Afrikalı Amerikalı kadınların tarihinin, Afrikalı Amerikalı topluluğunu tarihsel bağlamda değerlendirebilmek için ne kadar önemli olduğu sonucuna varır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyahi Sanatlar Hareketi, Afrikalı Amerikalı Edebiyatı, Feminizm, hayat anlatıları, Lucille Clifton

In the 1970s, seeing personal issues, histories and identities as parts of a bigger, political picture became an important feminist tool. By examining and discussing the everyday aspects of women's lives, feminists have been able to uncover the political forces that aimed to keep them socially and culturally marginalized. During this period, Black Arts Movement also provided African American feminists with a platform to represent the everyday experiences of black women within their marginalized communities and bring these issues to the center. This effort emphasized the need to embed their realities and struggles into the privileged, mainstream world, in which the white male experience is overly represented. Through writing about black women's experiences, they not only made connections between the personal and the political, but also stressed the multicultural reality of the American experience against the forces that create the myth of unity, which indicates an erasure of identity.

Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) was a key figure of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. By dedicating her poems to her body parts and her personal experiences at different stages of her life, she has not only brought her African American attributes from the margins, but also used her private female body to make political claims, shedding light on the points where racial and gendered experiences overlap and intersect. Through using her gendered, racial body to make political statements, she has produced her poems within the tradition of feminist thought which insisted "that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change" (Collins 504). Moreover, by writing with a distinctly Black female voice on the black female body, she critiqued the dominantly white male literary canon, and pushed for a multiplicity of diverse experiences representing the American story (Tunç "The Poetics" 189). However, while her poetry has been celebrated and studied, her autobiography, which is a unique example of life writing within the Black Arts Movement, has been overlooked.

In her memoir *Generations* (1976), Clifton recovers the stories of her ancestors, reevaluates oral tradition and old photographs not only for self-realization and to find her personal place within the historical chain, but also to restore African American women's histories and intellectuality within history of the United States. During the process of this restoration, she critiques the history of domination and struggle that has profoundly influenced African American community's view and access to history (Watson n.p.). Through revaluating the oral stories of her family, and creating a work of literature out of her ancestors' voices, Clifton aims to challenge both the white male thought that constitutes the national narrative, and sexism and misogyny existing within the Black Power and Black Arts Movement. In accomplishing this, she creates spaces in which African American women's experiences, histories and ways of knowing are elevated. This article aims to take a close look at *Generations* to understand how life writing could be a platform upon which Black Arts Movement and Feminist writing can intersect to emphasize the rediscovery of African American women's histories and intergenerational knowledge and to locate not only her own self but the African American community at large, in a historical chain.

Undoing the White Space: Exploring Ancestry as a Challenge to the Myth of Unity

Famously claimed to be the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept," by the African-American critic and playwright Larry Neal, Black Arts Movement was characterized by its belief that political activism was the primary responsibility of black artists (29). Consequently, following the ethos of the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts ideology had a separatist stance and rejected the integrationist rhetoric that was predominant in the 1950s (Nash 1). While the Black Power Movement demanded a social, economic and political separation from the ideals of self-sufficiency by the creation of cultural and political institutions for African Americans, the Black Arts Movement demanded a separation from the framework of the predominantly white male literary canon to the African American and Third World centric view. This meant overthrowing white aesthetic standards and replacing them with "creative values arising from the black community" (Nash 1). In order the catalyze "the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world," Black Arts Movement sought to create a distinctly black voice in poetry and performance art that drew on everything that distinctly belonged to the African American Culture, such as African American vernacular, hair, soul music, soul food, to everyday objects such as quilts, baskets, ceramic vessels and handmade music instruments (Neal 30). The emphasis on the everyday common objects, and objects that are remains of the slave life, stressed the underrepresentation of the African American experience in the writing of the history of the United States and the fact that African American culture has been undermined and trivialized by hegemonic forces.

However, the effort of restoring underrepresented and trivialized experiences and histories in order to fill in the gaps of an evasive national narrative also evokes Helene Cixous' notion of *écriture féminine*, which advocates that through writing with an explicitly female voice with the centering of female body and experiences, authors will be able to "bring women into writing," which stands for embedding women's intellectuality and ways of knowing into the predominantly white male literary canon (875). For Cixous, this method "allows women, especially those who have been historically marginalized, to challenge the white male literary canon by dismantling masculine artistic and linguistic control over women" (Tunç "The Poetics" 190).

Clifton's response to this notion as an African American woman is gathering spoken words and oral stories of her female ancestors and documenting them in western literate forms. Through writing with a black voice, within black female traditions, she creates her brand of "*écriture noir*" (Tunç "The Poetics" 190). Clifton's statement "I write out of the whole that I am" refers to this unique style of writing (Clifton "An Interview" 61). This whole that she is, which sustains her brand, is the intergenerational knowledge summoned by the sounds of layered voices of her ancestors, emphasizing "her belief that only through the collective stories of her peoples from one generation to the next can she, a black woman and mother living in the present, exist at all" (Lupton 61). As Braxton observes, this is a common theme seen in the life writing of African American women, "for black women there is a veil within a veil, a realm of shared knowledge communicated from generation to generation both through literature and the oral tradition" (4).

Distrust of history writing of the United States has been central to Clifton's works, which revealed how history writing is shaped by hegemonic forces to create monovocality through obscuring and erasing the histories of minority groups, especially the exclusion and oppression that constitute much of their American experience. As the poet Laureate of Maryland, when Clifton was asked to write a poem in celebration of the 350th anniversary of the State Maryland with the theme of "Happy Colonial Days," she retaliated by stating "well, people who look like me didn't have a whole lot of happy colonial days," and as an author, she rejected to participate in this mythical notion of history through writing a poem that exclaimed how she was asked to remember white Americans' memories, but she kept on remembering hers ("An Interview" 57).

Clifton's poem "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989" best exemplifies how she rejected to be a bystander to the omission of brutality experienced by African Americans under slavery, and their, especially African American women's, contribution to the nation building through their relentless work as expressed in these lines "nobody mentioned slaves / but somebody did this work" (Clifton "at the cemetery" 331). Through this poem, she is expressing the outrage she feels towards the nameless stones placed as tombstones in the cemetery in which slaves were buried. As an African American author, who has mastered the western literate forms, she feels compelled to recover and document their names, especially

slave women's names as "*the inventory lists ten slaves / but only men were recognized*" (Clifton "at the cemetery" 331). At the end of the poem, she leaves white blanks in which the slaves' names were to be announced, which pushes the reader to look behind these white spaces and think about the political inclinations of whose story gets to be told. This poem is closely linked with *Generations*, since Clifton's great great grandmother Caroline, the main matriarch of her memoir, also has a grave in Bedford that is left unmarked (Holladay 122). These histories inform her sense of the self in the present as she shares a common bondage with her slave ancestor Caroline as a result of the fact that "they [both] have been 'dishonored' by the selective memory, or historical 'blanks,' of the national narrative" (Tunç "The Poetics of Self-Writing" 193).

Clifton's rejection of this white space, which functions as a white out over which white Americans' cultural treasures are written, and her persistence on restoring what lies hidden underneath it, is a direct challenge to the myth of unity in the United States and the monovocal writing of history in which "cultural distinctions are ignored and where one voice can presume to speak for multitudes" (Whitley 237). In *Generations*, through tracing her genealogy back to Caroline, a Dahomey woman who arrived in the United States to become a slave, Clifton actively underscores the different experiences of different ethnicities in the US, and how power dynamics has shaped the way we remember the past. According to Julia Watson, this is a common theme in the life writing of minority groups, who were denied the access to the documentation of their historical backgrounds. As Watson explains, "Genealogy's emphasis on fixity of 'descent' contradicts the democratic and egalitarian 'melting pot' as a figure for erasing originary differences in a culture of 'consent'" ("Ordering the Family" n.p.). Centering her first slave ancestor in her autobiography, Clifton calls for literary and historical reconsideration of the African American experience. Clifton expresses this experience in her own words: "a lot of American memory, I think, is myth. It seems to me very important for someone who is interested in facing one's true past and all of that which has gone into making this place, these people, and me-what I am now" ("An Interview" 57). *Generations* then is a journey to the past for Clifton to document not only her personal history, but the history of a nation which has discredited the African American Community's contributions to the American project.

Accounting for the Past: Reevaluation of African American Oral Tradition

Since she cannot rely on documents or textbooks to learn about her slave ancestors, in her journey to the past, Clifton has to reevaluate oral stories of her family. However, her application of African American oral traditions to her memoir as a narrative tool, is a direct nod to the Black Arts Movement. The artists of the Black Arts Movement turned to poetry and performance art not only as a statement on class, for publishing and circulating prose would require larger resources, but also they could be dramatically performed and reenacted in the streets to be politically galvanizing. The importance given on performance and spoken word was also in tandem with Black Arts mission on drawing artistic inspiration from African traditions as it drastically contrasted with Western emphasis on literate forms.

How would performance and oral tradition then apply to Clifton's *Generations*, a work of life writing within the Black Arts Movement? According to Watson, oral tradition is a crucial element of African American life writing through which the subjects emerge into an "ancestrally located self-consciousness" ("Ordering the Family" n.p.). What constitutes Clifton's autobiography is the words of Caroline, the oldest descendant she can recover and the matriarch of the family, her great grandmother Lucille, her father Samuel, her mother Thelma, and all these voices provide her life writing with transpersonal quality. The verb "to say" is frequently used, catalyzing the text itself as "the major verb" (Lupton 61). In fact, Toni Morrison, the editor of *Generations* has told Clifton to tell her stories orally to a tape recorder and start the writing process from there, a suggestion Clifton particularly found helpful (Clifton, "An Interview" 56).

In *Generations*, Clifton's father Samuel Sayles is the medium through whom she reaches the knowledge of her ancestors. Her father is the keeper of the stories of her genealogy, and he introduces the experiences of Caroline, his grandmother Lucille and his father Gene before Clifton takes on the narration and evaluates for herself. Although he cannot write, for Clifton, this does not take away from his legitimacy as a historian. This praise of the oral tradition is enhanced by a quotation from *The Bible* in the first page of the book: "Lo, mine eye hath seen all this, mine ear hath heard and understood it. What ye

know, the same do I know also; I am not inferior unto you" (Job 13:1). According to Lupton, this quote is Clifton's way of asserting Samuel's essential strength against any enemies who consider him to be inferior (63). In one instance, Clifton herself doubts her father, asking "Where are the records Daddy?" to which she later answers "in history, even the lies are true," concluding that her father's oral stories are no less credible than the elusive Western tradition of recording history (*Generations* 35).

It is Samuel's death that catalyzes the journey of writing the *Generations*, and the plot of the autobiography keeps coming back to the event of Clifton's father's passing away. During his burial, Clifton recalls how his father Gene called him a "rock," emphasizing his importance at the root of the family (47). As his coffin is lowered to the ground, two generations of Sayles women hold hands, and Clifton's aunt and namesake Lucille speaks directly to the matriarch Caroline, declaring that Dahomey women are still here, that her line is enduring, and thus Clifton evokes the image of Samuel bumping onto the surface of the earth like a rock (59). This scene conveys Samuel's place at the heart of *Generations*, as he is like the rock that creates movement and ripples in the silence preserved by the monovocal writing of the history and allows the waves of generations, who are simultaneously informing the contemporary African American experience, to come into the surface. To contextualize this scene, Clifton choses to begin this section by quoting "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses / And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier" from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*. According to Whitley, while a reading of the Whitman would lead us to interpret this as the transcendence and expansion of the self, Clifton rewrites Whitman to convey, through his lines, "the generations of a growing and expanding family" (Whitley 54).

However, it is up to Clifton, now that Samuel has passed away, to preserve the stories of her ancestors through documenting them for the future generations. Her sense of duty towards Samuel and the ancestors before him is expressed in the memoir through her fear of Samuel "haunting" her after his death (10). This fear of being haunted by him is the same with the way the nameless stones at the cemetery in the Walnut Grove Plantation implores her, as expressed in the lines "your silence drumming / in my bones," to recover their names and experiences and testify for them (Clifton "at the cemetery" 331). As Clifton conveys in her own words: "poet, it seems to me, or the teller,

you know, has the obligation not to run away from the stories that she or he knows" ("An interview" 60). Samuel's gift of storytelling relies on Clifton's ability to write for a degraded part of the history to be inscribed into the privileged world. Through inscribing these stories out of photographs, Clifton becomes "a moral witness who does justice to the memory of her kin and charts a path to the future for her daughters and sons" (Wall 572).

In a very symbolic act, Samuel, although he does not know how to write, works the whole day to put together a sentence to send a letter to Clifton, who at that time was away at the Howard University (Clifton *Generations* 69). Through this act, he is expressing Clifton's duty and importance as the conduit between personal histories and memories of a family and the larger, predominantly white intellectual world that needs to be informed by African American community's, especially black women's, experiences, since their contributions to the nation building has been the one that is most overlooked. Clifton emphasizes the importance of her documentation of her foremothers as she writes "I turn in my chair and arch my back and make this sound for my two mothers and for all Dahomey women" (*Generations* 35). Even as Clifton translates these oral stories to forms of Western literature, she does so in a way that puts musicality, and the instantaneity of sounds and voices into the hearth of her writing. She creates a "new tradition built on a synthesis of black oral traditions and Western literate forms" (Wall 557).

Clifton's African American way of recording her lineage is drastically contrasted with the Western way of recording with the inclusion of her white sister in *Generations*. A member of the slave holding Sayle family, her white sister, who is also an avid collector of the Sayle family records, almost acts like a foil to Clifton herself. Although Clifton, as the descendant of degraded slaves, has to go through the challenge of documenting the history of her family through old photographs and what his father could recover from Caroline as an eight year old boy, her ancestors simultaneously speak, empower her and sing and celebrate her and their lineage throughout her memoir. While her white sister, who has all the legal records, can easily access the documentation of her family, is old, weak, and as the last of her line, signals the end of this slave holding family (Clifton 7). Her family does not sing and inform her like Clifton's ancestors, but are reduced to mere letters on papers.

According to Smethurst, this is the way Black Arts Movement highlights the difference between what he calls "these dead white forms and, in contrast a living African art (60). It marks itself as completely different to "the notion of a Western fetishization of the object, or the product over process" (60). This notion is further emphasized through Samuel's words: "We fooled em, Lue, slavery was terrible but we fooled them old people. We come out of it better than they did" (Clifton 58). White slave holders ended up with objects: records that are to be preserved and stored away, while the descendants of slaves ended up with stories infused with a strong, ancestral sense of self and survival tactics that can be revoked anytime to be applied to everyday life. According to Samuel, that is much more valuable.

Liberating the Past, the Present and the Future: Recovering African American Women's Intergenerational Knowledge

Just like how the use of African American oral tradition heightens the sense of action and performance in *Generations,* the constant mention of migration and travelling also adds dynamism and movement to the memoir. Traveling and mobility comes to symbolize a process of liberation. Clifton's journey northward in 1976 from Baltimore to Buffalo to attend to the funeral of Samuel Sayles mimics Caroline's journey. The West African matriarch sailed to the United states in the 1980s, and walked north from New Orleans to Virginia into slavery, catalyzing a journey that is still carried out by Clifton in her memoir. Through moving northward, Clifton is repeating Caroline's steps and is facing the brutal past in atonement. The recollection of Caroline's actions and memories by Clifton is meant to honor the matriarch's and consequently Clifton's own journey, to liberate them from the remains of slavery that kept Clifton away from her past. Her journey northward starts with a metaphor of breaking out of the city "like out of chains," asserting that *Generations* is a process of partially undoing the historical degradation and erasure of African American experience through her own family's historical background (Clifton *Generations* 13). Clifton even makes use of chiasmus when reminiscing about her father, stating that "his life had been full of days, and his days had been full of life" (*Generations* 30). Her usage of chiasmus is an allusion to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in which he famously

used a chiasmus to express that a slave was made a slave by being denied to be educated in the master's written language and rhetoric, and how in turn a slave could gain agency and an opportunity to become an equal by mastering the skill of writing (Lupton 61). By recovering Caroline's journey and her voice that endured through generations and that defined a family, Clifton is both liberating her by bringing her back to life from the death of being forgotten and empowering herself by achieving an ancestrally and historically conscious sense of place in the contemporary United States, and consequently liberating the future generations.

Caroline becomes the matriarch that brings the strength of this ancestral power of Dahomey women that are soldiers. She endures slavery "standing straight" like a soldier, and outlives it (Clifton *Generations* 31). During her free days in the segregated South, she gains respect and agency through her knowledge of the reproductive female body as a midwife, which highlights the African American reproductive contribution to the nation building (Clifton *Generations* 6). Through her power and her ancestral knowledge of herself as a Dahomey woman, her children and grandchildren can obtain a relative agency and freedom in the racist, violent, and oppressive American South. When Caroline repeatedly states, "get what you want, you from Dahomey women," she implores her descendants to exercise this ancestral strength (Clifton *Generations* 14). In accordance with this, almost all the Sayles members push the limits of a restrictive society. Clifton's grandfather Gene throws bricks at store windows during the holidays, and even the town sheriff is powerless to restrain or prevent him out of respect for Caroline (Clifton *Generations* 44). Caroline's daughter and Clifton's name sake Lucille, shoots and kills Harvey Nichols, a white man, and again because of Caroline's agency, she is not lynched but hanged after a trial (Clifton *Generations* 34). Through these stories, Caroline's strength also empowers and implores Clifton in the contemporary United States to reject and challenge predominantly white male literary canon as a feminist African American author. By starting her memoir with Caroline's words "Get what you want, you from Dahomey women," Clifton is channeling an intergenerational black female empowerment through *Generations* to stake for herself, a claim in the national literally cannon as an author.

Clifton repeatedly highlights that Dahomey women were the fierce warriors of their community. According to Smethurst, the

African warrior was a popular theme in The Black Arts Movement, which signified "an essential African identity to which African Americans should aspire, representing a reconstruction of an integral wholeness shattered by slavery, racism, and colonialism" (81). However, it is important to note that "this Black Arts warrior is both implicitly and explicitly male" (Smethurst 81). With Caroline as the ultimate matriarch, and the primary fighter who ensured the survival of her lineage, Clifton actively challenges that liberation lies in "the Black Arts warrior" as a man who should regain his power over women to protect them. Rather, she invites her readers and the artists within the movement to rediscover the rich history and reality of African American women.

Another figure that she recovers through her memoir that equips Clifton with the creative skills to produce *Generations*, and acts as an artistic role model, is her own mother Thelma. Clifton brings Thelma's story to light to go beyond her father's concluding remark that "she's crazy" and shows the harsh realities of African American women's lives (*Generations* 77). Unlike Caroline, and Clifton herself, who strive for mobility, all her life Thelma is stuck at home, caring for her brothers and sisters. She only gets out of her childhood house when she is twenty-one through her marriage to Samuel, the only man she ever knew (Clifton *Generations* 76). She then takes on her role as a mother and the subservient wife in her new home, as she haves Clifton and her brother and endures Samuel's physical and emotional abuse. Thelma doesn't have the drive to walk away from her marriage as Clifton explains "but she loved him. She cleaned his mess and fed him and took his abuse and called him 'your crazy Daddy'" (*Generations* 45). Moreover, she has epileptic seizures that became more frequent as she gets older and finally concludes her life. All of these factors combine and render her to be an absent, delusional and unreliable mother that is the stark opposite of Caroline who protected her family and provided for them (*Generations* 74).

However, according to Clifton, these are unique artistic qualities and "she was a magic woman" (*Generations* 73). Yet, Clifton honors Thelma's stagnant qualities just like she honors Caroline's mobility. Through remembering Thelma, Clifton is able to look into the muted ways Thelma was still able to express her creativity and apply it to her everyday life. Clifton recalls and emphasizes that "If there were locks that were locked tight, she could get a little thing and

open them. She could take old bent hangers and rags and make curtains and hang drapes. She ironed on chairs and made cakes every week and everybody loved her" (*Generations* 73). According to Alice Walker, contemporary African American authors inherited their talents from these unappreciated, trivialized works of their mothers, which constitute "often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day" (238). Through declaring Thelma's talents, Clifton restores "this ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, [which] is [what] black women have done for a very long time" to the American experience both for herself and for future generations of African Americans (Walker 242).

According to Joanne M. Baxton, in Autobiographies of African American women, inspiring female ancestors appear frequently, and they took on the roles of "carriers of tradition, and values of care, concern, nurturance and most important, the survival of the race" (4). This grounding of her work in the experiences and strength and talents of her female ancestors allows Clifton to "implicitly adhere to an Afrocentric feminist epistemology" (Collins 505). Through producing *Generations* within this tradition of Afrocentric feminist epistemology, she is challenging the suppression and erasure of African American feminist thought which is crucial to the African American community's resistance to resist domination (Collins 507). Her primary informants for her identity are her warrior great great grandmother and her artistic and caring mother, which shows that women can inspire both masculine and feminine traits within a community. Through these two characters, Clifton honors and celebrates both the women in the African American community who strived for liberation through upward mobility, and actively participated in the Black Liberation Movement and the women, who in their double oppression as black women, were confined to their homes, yet contributed to their community through nurturance and "magic."

Reevaluating the African American Family: Turning Away from White Patriarchs

Bringing Caroline forward as the matriarch of the family that sustains and empowers the family for multiple generations both materially and spiritually, Clifton challenges the traditional notion of

the patriarchal American family. In accordance to this, Samuel recalls: "'Strong women and weak men,' is what [Caroline] said, 'sister, we be strong women and weak men'" (*Generations* 29) Through this quote, Clifton elucidates that upon coming to the United States, African American families formed their own structures of family for survival as an alternative to the white, mainstream notion of the family. As June Jordan supports, "Black lives have never been standard or predictable or stabilized in a benign national environment. We have been flexible, ingenious, and innovative or we have perished. And we have not perished" (263). In *Generations*, Clifton exemplifies the effects of white male patriarchy on the African American families through her own family. This retelling of her family critiques the myth of the African matriarch, which portrays strong black women as emasculating forces to the African American men, and consequently the causes of oppression of the African American community. Largely perpetuated by *The Moynihan Report* in 1965, the myth of the matriarch supported that for the betterment of the African American community's living conditions, the community should take the white family as a model with the father as the patriarch, and this ideology had been largely embraced in the Black Power and the Black Arts Movements.

Throughout his life, Samuel had to come into terms with the matriarchal reality of his family that is sustained by the strong soldier Dahomey women in contrast to the romanticized, patriarchal ideals of the United States he grows up in. Samuel's father Genie is symbolically emasculated as he was born with a "withered arm," and is unfit for the role of the patriarchal leader as the man of the family (Clifton *Generations* 43). Samuel conveys this unfulfilled promise of a man as he says, "No, he didn't hardly get to be a man. He wasn't much past thirty years old when he died" (Clifton *Generations* 43). This unfulfilled promise comes to define Samuel's ambition to become a "man," as it has passed down onto him from Genie. "Genie called me Rock," Samuel claims to explain that Genie depended on Samuel to take on this role of the mythical, strong patriarch of the family in his place (Clifton *Generations* 47). Therefore, the chapter dedicated to Genie comes to stand for Clifton's observations on black manhood as it starts with not Genie's story, but Samuel's definition of manhood: "Every man has to do three things in life, he had said, plant a tree, own a house and have a son, and by God I've done two of them now" (Clifton *Generations* 39).

Samuel constantly imitates white ideals of the patriarchal male who exerts power over women and people of color through economic means. However, as Clifton shows, this effort neither liberates him nor his family. By the time he has the house, Clifton's sister Punkin is the sole caretaker of the family and is "quiet and withdrawn," while her sister Jo is doing "the slow dance between the streets and the cells that she practiced and practiced" and her brother Sammy "had begun the young Black boy's initiation into wine and worse" (Clifton *Generations* 40). Clifton's emphasis on the situation of her family during the time Samuel buys a house without consulting anyone renders the act "more selfishly arrogant than heroic" (Wall 565). In another instance, Samuel walks to Buffalo to become the "first colored man in Depew to have a dining room set" (Clifton *Generations* 65). However, he can only buy the dining room set through "colored people credit," in which someone from the store, like a tax collector would come to their house and collect money (Clifton *Generations* 65). The tax collector coming to their house every week intimidates Clifton and her brother, which again shows that Samuel tends to disregard the safety of his family while he chases after his capitalistic goals. Moreover, while trying to rise to the position of the middle class white patriarchal father, Samuel also becomes more racially oppressed as an indebted black man to a white man. Like a sharecropper, he keeps paying for the dining room all his life as Clifton explains; "My Daddy paid something to the Peoples' man for as long as I can remember" (*Generations* 65).

The racial divide between Samuel and the white collector is loud and clear. Despite being namesakes, the collector calls Samuel "Sam," and Samuel calls him "Mr. Pitterman," yet, Samuel looks forward to the arrival of the tax collector to "talk over old days" with him (Clifton *Generations* 65). This talk over old days refers to a yearning for imagined times in which men could have easier access to economic resources and could effortlessly exert power over women and children. Through their commitment to patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity, these two men can establish a hierarchical solidarity. With this incident, Clifton is criticizing the sexism in the black liberation movement of the 1960s, and The Black Arts Movement, in which African American activists also overtly announced their support of patriarchy and established a bond with white patriarchs through their commitment to it while reacting against racism. (Hooks 98). However, as Clifton shows in her memoir, this imitation of white male patriarchy

through oppressing African American women does not empower African Americans, rather it divides them and causes more sufferings to their family and to the overall community and how it weakens the liberation movement. In *Generations*, the more Samuel tries to adapt to the masculine role of the oppressive white male capitalist patriarch, the more damage his family receives, and the more indebted he becomes.

Clifton is elusive in the way she describes her father's abuse on the family. Without explicitly telling the events, she brushes upon the evident abuse with explanations such as "Mama didn't really understand such a man. But she loved him. She cleaned his mess and fed him and took his abuse and called him 'your crazy Daddy'" (*Generations* 45). Clifton's poem "june 20," reveals more about the abuse she and her siblings might have undergone alongside her mother, with lines such as "i will be born in one week / to a frowned forehead of a woman / and a man whose fingers will itch / to enter me" ("june 20" 414). According to critic Cheryl Wall, this elusiveness of Clifton is due to the inability to name the crime that was done to her even in her adulthood (567). However, according to Sidonie Smith, in life writing, "these omissions create a gap between the narrating 'I' and the narrated 'I,' giving [the] work a transpersonal significance as the work emphasizes the relationship of an individual to the collectivity" (238). According to this reading, Clifton's omissions then are a political effort to link her family's struggles with the struggles of many African American families alive.

Nevertheless, the effects of this abuse are apparent in the family. As Clifton explains, "Punkin she has a hard time living in the world and so does my brother and Jo has a hard time and gives one too. And a lot of all that is his fault, has something to do with him" (*Generations* 75). Even though Samuel claims "we always been strong women and weak men, Lue, up till me," Samuel's family members suffer due to his failure to empower and guide them like Caroline was able to do (Clifton *Generations* 48). In a way that resembles Genie's withered arm, Samuel's leg toward the end of his life shrivels up and turns black, emasculating Samuel and linking him to his disabled father in his failure to assume the position of the patriarch (Clifton *Generations* 48).

Despite all his abuse, Clifton is sympathetic to her father's struggles as an African American man as she states "Now, he did some things, he did some things, but he always loved his family" (*Generations*

75). Her sympathy is not blindness caused by her love for her father, but it represents her ability to see the bigger picture. She highlights that sexism robs black men of the ability to form meaningful connections with African American women and with their families (Lorde 64). As Hooks explains, "patriarchy forces fathers to act as monsters, encourages husbands and lovers to be rapists . . . and denies all men the emotional life that would act as a humanizing, self-affirming force in their lives" (114). With this retelling of her story, Clifton shows that African American men should not turn away from black women's liberation, for sexism divides the community, undermines their resistance to racism and diminishes all black people. Clifton recovers the stories of the matriarch Caroline, Lucille, the first black woman to be legally hanged in Virginia, her mother Thelma, who, despite the abuse and her disease was able to create magic in her everyday life, to ask the African American community to remember the black modes of family which benefits from creative, powerful, enduring women. Because when African American men turn away from these women, and imitate white patriarchal families, they lose "the unarguable truth of [their] own miraculous, hard-won history" (Jordan 262).

However, it should be noted that despite its initial embracing of the white male patriarchal model, and hegemonic ideals, Black Arts Movement also provided for many female African American artists a platform to criticize the movement within the movement. The movement's infrastructure was heavily shaped by women such as Sonia Sanchez, Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, Barbara Ann Teer, and many others. Clifton's works together with other authors' works have been influential in changing the minds of the influential male artists of the movement so much so that even Maulana Karenga, who came up with the prominent Kawaida philosophy, which advocated that "that black women should be 'complementary' to, rather than equal with men . . ., later renounced this masculinism, saying that he was influenced by a sexism that was rampant in all sectors of the United States" (Smethurst 85). Albeit largely being known as a sexist movement, the Black Arts Movement actively listened to its women artists and gave them a platform to popularize African American women's histories to challenge the patriarchal family model.

Translating *Generations* into the National Canon: Creating New Traditions for Polyvocality

After she recovers black women's history to the African American community, Clifton's second objective is to implement them into the national narrative. Her application of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, as a "poetic framework" for *Generations* is another way she aspires to restore her history to the national cannon (Tunç "The Poetics" 191). Listing the names of widely acknowledged American authors and quoting from them can be commonly seen in the works of African American artists. When this is observed in life writing, it opens the important discussions of power and hierarchy to claim credibility and importance. Sidonie Smith theorizes this subject as follows:

> Not all "experience" is accorded social and cultural recognition or legitimacy. Whereas the names of the celebrities cited above bestow the "authority" of experience on the narrator, in other narratives the authority to narrate is hard-won in a constant engagement with readers posited as skeptical, unbelieving, resistant and even hostile. Thus, the instability of something called the authority of experience suggests how the category of experience itself is socially, culturally, historically and politically negotiated. (36)

Clifton's incorporation of lines from *Song of Myself* into the beginning of each chapter expresses her acceptance and celebration of Whitman as one of her ancestors. Just like the way the members of Sayles family, he is also constantly singing and informing Clifton's consciousness, and just like the rest of her family, he is also celebrated with each chapter of Clifton's memoir. Through establishing this affiliation, she is claiming a place for herself in Whitman's song of America. Through quoting lines that poetically coincide with the stories and words of family members, "she is able to fragment Whitman's personal vision of the national body, and create a space for the insertion of her experiences as a descendent of slaves and as an African American woman" (Tunç "The Poetics" 189).

Clifton is united with Whitman in a common vision of inclusivity and a song that was weaved out monovocality that represents the American reality. Whitman, as the father of the American verse, envisioned a song that transcended binary oppositions, and celebrated

and testified for African American women's contribution to the American project by "concluding that all bodies, whether they be male or female, slave or free, perfect or flawed, are equally valuable to the American project of democracy and freedom" (Tunç "Rivers of" 116). However, Clifton also contextualizes Whitman in *Generations* to challenge and replace "the autonomous individuality informing so much of 'Song of Myself' with a collective generational sense of self based around an expanding African American family" (Whitley 26). Clifton's inclusion of a community contrasts with Whitman's individuality, highlighting how life writing within the Black Arts Movement differs from its "Anglo counterpart which [is] more individualistic" (Smith 225).

The inclusion of Whitman in her memoir also symbolizes how different categories, traditions, experiences, and identities intersect and overlap in Clifton's life as a female African American author. However, when given the option to pick a side, Clifton always acts as a unitor. She lets both the Western literary traditions and African oral traditions inspire her memoir, she is inspired both by Black Power Movement and the Feminist liberation movements, she includes both men and women in her community as individuals with their own voice, she writes the words of both her own father, and Whitman's as the father of American verse. As she explains in her own words, "either/or is not an African tradition. Both/and is tradition. I don't believe in either/or. I believe in both/ and" ("An Interview" 56). According to Patricia Hill Collins, African American female authors have mastered the predominantly white male cannon, it is this "both/and" status of African American female authors that provides them with necessary tools to resist "the hegemonic nature of these patterns of thought in order to see, value and use existing alternative Afrocentric feminist ways of knowing" (505).

Legacy of Clifton: Creating a Language for *Generations* to Come

In conclusion, *Generations* signifies an important contribution to the Black Arts Movement as a work of life writing. Through retelling her family's history, Clifton makes political claims on the realities of the African American experience. This employment of the 1960s and the 1970s feminist tool of linking the personal and the political allows her to show how the Black Arts Movement and feminist liberation movement intersect. Through the unique application of the Black Arts Movement's performance and spoken word aspects to her life writing,

she highlights the polyvocal reality of the American experience, and reevaluates African American ways of remembering. With the discovery of her female ancestors' stories and her objective to debunk the myth of the African matriarch, she criticizes the Black Arts Movement sexist and romantic ideals, and offers a more realistic approach to the community's history. Lastly, with accepting Walt Whitman as a literary ancestor, she frames African American histories and epistemologies as forces that can actively shape the national literary canon and compel it to be more inclusive and more representative of the multicultural reality of the United States.

Today, America's perceptions of what should constitute a national canon has largely shifted from the rigid frame it sustained in 1976, the year when Clifton's memoir was published, with the contributions of women authors, especially women authors of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds with diverse sexualities and bodily experiences. Although the national narrative as well as the history of the United States is still dominated by white male hegemonic intellectuality, Clifton's vision and legacy endure today through generations of ethnic feminist writers who learn from her work and take on from what she left. Her generation of feminist authors of color have managed to catalyze a perpetual state of undoing the white space by inviting a wide spectrum of stories to quilt themselves into the national narrative as lines that "connect in thin ways that last and last and lives become generations made out of pictures and words just kept" (Clifton *Generations* 78). The tragedy of slavery, living in the segregated south and losing her daughter enabled Clifton's foremother Caroline to foresee a process of liberation that will take place generations after her with the publication of *Generations,* which was expressed through her words "Don't you worry, mister, don't you worry" (Clifton *Generations* 7). Just like Caroline, after restoring the brutal past of slavery, Clifton is optimistic towards a future that will be built upon a polyvocal representation through the foundations and framework she has established with her work. As Clifton elucidates: "When things sometimes feel as if they're not going to get any better, writing offers a way of trying to connect with something beyond that obvious feeling . . . And the writing may be sending tentacles out to see if there is a response to that" (Clifton "I'd like" 311). *Generations* is Clifton's way of moving beyond her individual experience and the confines of her contemporary times to reach out to future generations of ethnic writers to collaborate with them on a more inclusive national story.

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