The poetics of space: a close study of Lucille Clifton's Aesthetic and ethic

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The Poetics of Space: A Close Study of Lucille Clifton’s Aesthetic and Ethic

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Submitted to the Department of Africana Studies
of Smith College
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Lucille Clifton’s rendering of life in poems is exquisite and clear. This study comes to Ms. Clifton first through admiration, for both the poet and the woman. It tries to understand how and why Clifton was and remains one of the most steadfastly beloved poets of the 20th century. What is that stunning kernel threaded through her work? I am looking for how Clifton rendered the seemingly unrenderable, precisely and knowingly.

Clifton’s poems are famous for their legibility and readability. They are as likely to be found in a prestigious anthology as they are on the refrigerator of a reader. It is, in part, this aspect of her work that is of interest. While one might argue that the function of the poem is its portability and its communicability — that a poem must be both a *poem* and something legible, something holdable — Clifton accomplishes both poetic projects powerfully.

Clifton is most often compared to Walt Whitman¹ — both canon-makers, both famous for the tenderness and honesty of their prose. I would argue that Clifton achieved what Whitman achieved in a quarter of the time, and with finer precision. She wrote directly into the heart of the subject at hand, never around it. I mention this comparison in part because it says something about Clifton’s work, but also because of the way the two comparable poets have been studied and remembered; Whitman extensively, and Clifton minimally. Part of the aim of this work is to contribute meaningfully to Clifton’s legacy, and in doing so, help overwrite the racialized,

gendered dismissals that have been so often assigned to her work. While Clifton is not only an autobiographical writer, her experience as a black woman born in 1935 in Depew, New York, is deeply relevant to her poetry. In an interview with Charles Rowell in 1999, Clifton said: “A person can, I hope, enjoy the poetry without knowing that I am black or female. But it adds to their understanding if they do know it — that is, that I am black and female. To me, that I am what I am is all of it; all of what I am is relevant.” One wants to strike a balance between celebrating Clifton’s relevance to her poems as she describes it here, while also celebrating her artistry. Her poetry is so often read as an emblem of her experience that its virtuosity is neglected. In this study, I hope to both honor her presence in her poems and decenter that presence in an effort to privilege her craft.

In this vein, I will begin with accountability to Clifton’s poems. The study will turn to many things, it will look beyond her texts, but it will always come back to the poem. A large part of this work aims to dismantle the dominant readings of Clifton. Clifton wrote through a range of experiences: through love and rage, through memory and humor. She wrote on African-American history, on black womanhood, on her family, on the deaths of those gone too soon, on justice and injustice, on love. She wrote through every temporality, and blurred the lines between the living and the dead. For this reason, she has continually been categorized as a poet with a universal touch, an “unadorned (meaning ‘simple’)” storyteller. While it cannot be argued that her work affects deeply and broadly across all audiences, these readings are fundamentally inept. They fail to honor Clifton’s stark intellect and wit and center her audience over her poems. They organize her as a simple poet, as a natural conduit for the form, rather than a crafter of it,

2 Charles H. Rowell, “An Interview with Lucille Clifton,” (Callaloo 22, No. 1, 1999)
3 Toni Morrison’s introduction to the BOA collected works uses this phrase to describe popular descriptions of Clifton’s poetry.
ultimately disavowing her the capability and intelligence required to write as effectively as she did.

I aim to rescript these popular readings of Clifton by closely studying her structural and spatial choices. This study will better define the Clifton aesthetic, which is rooted both in the canons of short and plainspoken poems. It will center her intellect over less complicated representations, and in doing so, come to a better understanding of Clifton’s style and its implications. I want to answer that original question, what is the kernel, by paying homage to her poetry as a product of hard work and craft. I hope not to dismiss the potency, heart, and breadth of her poetry, but rather to throw it into a larger conversation that centers her capacity and daring intelligence.4 This conversation will acknowledge space as a structural practice that expands upon the idiom of simplicity. In a review of Good News About the Earth (1972), Erica Jong wrote: “The spaces in Clifton’s poems are not just typographical blanks.”5 I aim to deeply explore what those spaces are, if not typographical blanks.

In this undertaking, three particular facets of Clifton’s work will be spotlighted. The first is the literal, physical space on the page: her line breaks, her stanza breaks, the spaces between words, the spaces between syllables. What do these material pauses and breaks accomplish? How do they configure the meaning of the poem? This textual study will be in conversation with theoretical studies of space as a site of negation, possibility, creation, and loss — I want to treat the spatial landscape as a both a reverberation of the text, as well as a new iteration of it. It will

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4 I take the notion of “daring intelligence” again from Toni Morrison’s forward to the BOA Collected Works. I cannot be credited with some of her divine phrasing, which succinctly and fully honors Clifton both as a poet and a woman. It is my aspiration to take that honoring and expand it into a lengthier text — but like Morrison’s praise, the lens through which I view Clifton and her work is one of awe. I come to this firstly and honestly by saying that her work has moved me in ways I cannot fathom — this is an attempt at fathoming.

take up work by Michel de Certeau and Jamaica Kincaid to create a multidimensional approach to spatiality, both as a thematic and a structure. The next part will examine the breadth and potency of myth in Clifton’s poetry, and how myth ultimately acts as a spatial function. Clifton’s poems are loaded with mythical references and creations — we could look alone to her biblical interpretations to make this point. However, I am more interested in drawing attention to a less obvious mythos; what happens to space and temporality when the unreal is threaded indistinguishably through the real? I want to lean into myth as more than a theme, but as a function that can condense and expand space. I will use Patricia Williams book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* to better explore the project of myth-making, and to understand the power of myth as a space-clearing function. The final part of the thesis will focus on Clifton’s characteristic poetic “turn” — the punch at the end of the poem that she uses so masterfully. I aim to closely study the space the poetic turn creates — how does it establish the poem anew? Philosophical understandings of encounter and rebirth coined by the philosopher Martin Buber6 will be useful here to better describe the stunning work the poetic turn accomplishes, and how it exists as the cumulative product of material space studied in the first chapter and myth-making studied in the second.

While the study of these three key facets do not encompass Clifton’s body of work, they aim to do something specific that can be reapplied more broadly. Namely, what does this particular study of space unveil about Clifton’s ethic as a whole? The purpose is not only to highlight her intellect, but to acknowledge her intention, driven by a multiplicity of intelligences and emotions. Clifton had an incredible capacity for knowledge, which included literature,  

history, and philosophy.\textsuperscript{7} This knowledge fits into the ascribed hierarchy of the modern academy. But alongside it, Clifton also had keen vision. She was a deeply spiritually informed seer, who felt only a “sheer curtain” between the living and the dead\textsuperscript{8}. This knowing informed her poetry as much as any academy. It is the marriage of these strains of knowing that made Clifton a poet of such breadth. Her poems, in all their finesse, reached both ends of the knowledgeable world; a world she rewrote and reiterated, in ways that could both speak across the page, could hold the listener’s hand, and could also disrupt, disturb, and rip things in two.

In the vein of divesting from common readings of Clifton, this thesis also aims to correct the language oft applied to her poetry. Using Hilary Holladay’s text, \textit{Wild Blessings} (one of two critical studies of Clifton and her poetry) as a springboard, I want to articulate how readings of Clifton are often skewed to misrepresent her talent as something less than it was. Holladay does hefty work expanding and enhancing upon critical studies of Clifton’s poetry. With a careful admiration, she reads Clifton’s poetry in all its layers and multitudes. And yet even Holladay falls into the trap of limited language, at times referring to Clifton’s poems as “universal” and “prophetic.”\textsuperscript{9, 10} With acknowledgement to the origins of these descriptors (and a nod to the intentional, elegant rescripting Holladay is attempting), I want to push back on their implications. They imagine (and desire) an uncomplicated author to fit their racialized and gendered ideas of what a black woman poet should be writing, and how, even in a text that is trying to repudiate that pattern. For this reason, I want to directly move away from this language. It is difficult

\textsuperscript{7} This biographical fact of Clifton’s life comes from Toni Morrison’s foreword to the BOA Collected Works, from Hilary Holladay’s \textit{Wild Blessings}, and from Clifton’s own memoir, \textit{Generations}.

\textsuperscript{8} Elizabeth Alexander, "Remembering Lucille Clifton" (\textit{New Yorker} 17 Feb, 2010)

\textsuperscript{9} Holladay, 7, 62.

\textsuperscript{10} Despite my criticisms of Holladay’s book, it has been exceptionally useful in my thesis. Holladay does fine readings of Clifton’s poems, and weaves her biography through her poems beautifully. I want to honor Holladay’s work, and also distinguish it from my own.
though, to speak of Clifton’s poems using words distinctly different from terms like these; not because they are not welcome, but because the limitations of language might muddle the nuances between the words I will use in place of the ones I am trying to repudiate.

To distinguish: words like “simple” and “accessible,” while rooted in the truth that Clifton’s poems are short and plainspoken, are really trying to say that she does not use embellished language, that her poems are legible, and that they are available to people who may not be in the practice of reading poetry. Yet to call them merely simple does a huge disservice to Clifton’s abilities. “Simple” ignores her craft, her use of space, her doubled knowing, the expansiveness of her poetry. Key words I will use in its place are: plainspoken, legible, readable, and vernacular. It is no accident that Clifton’s poems can be read easily. They do not require an extensive dictionary, or a larger understanding of poetry or philosophy to be meaningful to a reader. And yet they are no less informed by these disciplines. I aim to honor this reality.

Out of Lucille Clifton’s hundreds of poems, from her thirteen collections and uncollected works, this thesis can only engage a few. Since this project’s design is to honor the breadth of Clifton’s reach, it will focus on her most affecting poems, which are also, by no coincidence, some of her most finely crafted. It will take up the legendary “won’t you celebrate with me,” the quieter “death of fred clifton,” as well as “miss rosie,” “dialysis,” “forgiving my father,” and “turning.” Throughout the study, I will reference other poems. They are all of them remarkable — but I think the ones studied here are particularly poignant. If my goal is to revise common readings of Clifton, then I am also challenged to take up the same work in those studies and readings.

I want to begin this poetic study here, by looking at a poem that articulates Clifton’s knowing as a product of her craft and experience. For Clifton, whose life was studded with
profound loss, of friends, her husband, contemporaries, family, and children, loss was more than a social condition — it was present and persistent. As she writes in the poem “prayer” from her second collection, *Good News About the Earth* (1972):

lighten up

why is your hand
so heavy
on just poor
me?

It is with precaution that I conflate Clifton with the speaker in this poem, a practice which becomes particularly dangerous when discussing the production of a black female author, whose work is looked to as a marker of authenticity and autobiography, rather than a form of artistic production. Despite that trepidation, it can at times be nearly impossible to separate Clifton as poet from Clifton as speaker, like in this poem, “prayer.” The question, posed to God or the universe in this verse stanza is a plea. Not as a victim or a martyr, but as a match for the forces by the imperative “lighten up” and the accusing “your hand.” Yet it is still so human — asking the essential question, why me? Clifton certainly bore an incredible load, and knew it. The poem then answers itself, and reads:

answer

this is the stuff
i made the heroes
out of
all the saints
and prophets and things
had to come by
this

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11 Harryette Mullen, “Poetry and Identity” *The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be.* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press)
In spite of Clifton’s prayer and command, her knowing (that larger knowledge), speaks back and quells her question. “Prayer” is an example of the multiplicity of intelligences that Clifton works through. It affirms her own awareness of self, and then deftly responds. It is also a poem that imagines a reader — but who? Critiques of poetry often infer a reader into the center of the text, rather than as an afterthought, or an onlooker. They imagine the poem to be written for an audience’s benefit or experience. But this inference becomes quickly dangerous when reading a black woman’s text because it largely assumes a white reader who is meant to learn something about their own humanity from the poem. It enables a poor, uncomplicated study, and sets Clifton up as an indicator of an “authentic” representation of what it is to be black and gendered female. In this way, discussions centered around any outside reader are ultimately useless.

That said, every poet writes for a reader. Writing, as praxis, is the act of bridging between the self and the other. The reader is integral to the process of writing, and the “you” to whom a poet speaks is indelibly present. This is where the perfect reader arrives — nonjudgmentally and lovingly. Jamaica Kincaid, the Antiguan-American writer, uses the term “the perfect reader,” in her memoir *My Brother*. In this memoir, Kincaid chronicles the long-drawn illness and death of her baby brother to AIDS. In the final pages of the texts, Kincaid describes her imagined reader, the “perfect reader,” as the recipient of all her texts, as someone who has passed, but who she continues to write for:

For a very long time I had the perfect reader for what I would write and place in the unscathed books; the source of the books has not died, it only comes alive again and

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again in different forms and other segments. The perfect reader has died, but I cannot see any reason not to write for him anyway, for I can sooner get used to never hearing from him — the perfect reader — than to not being able to write for him at all.13

The continuation of the perfect reader implies that he is of her imagination — in essence, he is of herself. I am positing that the perfect reader is always the self — who else can know the body of work, the intention of each poem, or all the facets of a poem better than the writer?

The perfect reader experiences the poem exactly as the author intends. And it is impossible not to discuss Lucille Clifton’s reader. She wrote throughout her work to a particular reader (“won’t you celebrate with me”). Whatever shape her perfect reader takes, it is of Clifton herself. She writes to and for herself. While that may not be the limit of her intentions, it clears the path to discuss the reader without the assumption of the wrong reader. As Harryette Mullen writes: “I try to leave room for unknown readers I can only imagine.”14 While Mullen is namely referring to the unimagined reader as the unborn or illiterate, the condition of imagination is its limitlessness. This study will take up the imagined, perfect reader in moments, but it does not assume me or any outsider besides Clifton herself as that reader. The reader here is the author, and she is the only reader at play. This gives new and potent meaning to what C.D. Wright wrote in her final collection of prose: “The call of the writer is the same as the call of the reader. Take me to other planes of myself.”15 It is my hope in this thesis to observe and uncover how Clifton took herself to new planes.

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13 Kincaid, 198.
14 Harryette Mullen, “Imagining the Unimagined Reader” The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press, 2012)
15 C. D. Wright, The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures, El Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All (Port Townsand: Copper Canyon Press, 2016)
In “Walking in the City” from the book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau lays out the function of walking through urban space as practice – one which cannot be read apart from the construction of the idea of the city, and which both creates and defines a spatial rhetoric. Walking, literally stepping one foot in front of the other, defines the space and sound of the urban landscape. Walkers themselves inhabit this action, and are builders of the world around them – a world in which they are so embedded, they cannot see its whole creation. de Certeau posits that the act of walking is directly comparable to speech. As vernacular, everyday practices, walking and speaking are enacted similarly: walking realizes the possibilities of space as defined by order (organized streets, for example) the same way speaking realizes the possibilities of language and its order (grammar, subject/object, cases, etc.). Through this analogy, de Certeau offers the “the rhetoric of walking,” meaning that to an individual’s walk through the city, there is a distinct style, which cannot be mimicked (or essentialized across all walkers) and which, in response to the totalization of walking (which is defined merely by light or heavy treaded areas, and direction), cannot be quantified because of the nuances of the individual step. While this theory is complex, its comparison to speech and linguistics is apt – where there are indeed the functions and structures of language (grammar, vocabulary, vernacular, inflection, etc.) there is also deeper meaning, which cannot be understood with linguistic or grammatical analyses alone. de Certeau also describes how walkers in the city make space condensable and expandable. If a walker sees the tip of a grassy hill and knows it to be in a large park, the grassy hill stands in for
the large park. In this way, the meaning of space is compacted. Similarly, space becomes expandable when the conjunctions connecting one place to another are blurred by the walker, and the “here to there” becomes an imaginary rather than an experience. These functions create a space that morphs, that leaps and bounds from a given starting point to an end. In this way, de Certeau argues that space takes on a mythical quality, one that is derived from impossibilities of movement, but real experiences nonetheless.

I want to apply de Certeau’s spatial theory to the poetic landscape of Lucille Clifton’s structural and spatial choices, which, like de Certeau’s cityscape, are sites of shrinking and expansion. A perfect example is her poem “donor” from the collection *Blessing the Boats* (2000):

> when they tell me that my body
> might reject
> i think of thirty years ago
> and the hangers i shoved inside
> hard trying to not have you.

> i think of the pills, the everything
> i gathered against your
> inconvenient bulge; and you
> my stubborn baby child,
> hunched there in the dark
> refusing my refusal.

> suppose my body does say no
> to yours. again, again i feel you
> buckled in despite me, lex,
> fastened to life like the frown
> on an angel’s brow.

Space in this poem does incredible work. First, the break between the first and second line separates the verb from the subject, and leaves dangling for a moment “my body.” This separation adds emphasis to the part of the first line “when they tell me” and sets up the distinct
dichotomy between the “they” and the subject of my the body. It gives that “my” weight, as though the speaker is emphasizing the belonging of her body to herself and not to the “they” or even the rejection described after. In the second line, the line break after “reject” is chilling. Without an object attached (what might the body reject?), it leaves this feeling of violent lurching. It is as though the rejection plays itself out with the unpunctuated break. This entire first stanza remains unpunctuated, and becomes one long, pain-filled sentence. The poem broadens in the second stanza, and gains rhythm by the punctuated breaks in the middle of lines. The comma between “the pills” and “the everything,” makes a huge leap, condensing the distance between one action and the enormity of them all. There is beauty, too, of the comma at the end of “my stubborn baby child,” which closes the line and holds it like the baby child. The line “hunched there in the dark” can also be read onto the poem at large which is itself so small, “hunched” into the side of the page, cornered away from the attempted removal.

But the most stunning moment of “donor” is the final stanza, especially its first two lines. “suppose my body does say no/to yours.” For a moment, I want to conflate author and speaker since the poems reflects a biographical fact of Clifton’s life: here, Clifton is speaking to her daughter, Alexia, who will be her kidney donor. “suppose my body does say no/to yours.” She says: I may die. But, the “suppose” says more, something like: I may die — but you, Lex, are okay. A perfect reversal of baby child’s refusal to leave — the body’s refusal to accept. Both could have, and might, kill them. This line invites Clifton’s daughter to imagine the what if of her mother’s death. It is after this sentence that the only unusual spacing occurs in the poem.

    suppose my body does say no
to yours. again, again i feel you
buckled in despite me, lex,
fastened to life like the frown
on an angel’s brow.

That spacing after “yours” allows the heartbreak of the what if to settle, to seep in as a real possibility. It functions as the eye contact between speaker and reader, the head nod and provides the opportunity for acceptance, struck and pain-filled, but knowing — it will be. The line and subsequent space imbue the speaker with power, and indicate that she has reckoned, and come to peace, with the possibility of death. This space is a parental moment. But then, out of the peace in the elongated space, is revived this voice more in awe than knowing: “again, again i feel you.” The repeated “again” is such a phrase of possibility, of youth — it is complete wonderment, the look at this, the “and yet…” This syntax might be one of Clifton’s finest moments. The spatial bridge between “yours” and “again” makes all possible — the reverence, the acceptance, and then the revitalization of awe.

In philosophy, the notion that nonexistence (nothing) affirms existence (everything) is an essential parable — it explicates the origins of the universe, and how life and death exist as functions. This paradox can also be applied to the spatial landscape of “donor,” where absence amplifies and affirms its opposite, allowing for a deeper, more complex processing as the poem is confronted and absorbed in alternative ways. The paradox gives equal agency to space and non-space, and in doing so, affirms space as a site of negotiation and value. The elongated spacing between “yours” and “again” in “donor” proves that the negation posited by Eigen can do important, tangible work of propelling the poem forward. In this way, space in Clifton’s poetry because an apparatus of knowing — another dimension of poetic translation. Across her

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16 Not unlike Harryette Mullen’s notion of the unimagined reader, who exists by their unimagining.
spatial landscapes, which are present not only in physical space, but also in the way she reworks language, the reverberations of her words can be fully realized in all their iterations.

This leaning into space is no stranger to Clifton’s poetry\(^\text{17}\) — it comes up again and again as a site of transformation and reflection. In the poem “forgiving my father” from \textit{two-headed woman} (1980), she uses the third stanza again as a site of spatial play. The poem reads:

\begin{verbatim}
  it is friday.  we have come
to the paying of the bills.
all week you have stood in my dreams
like a ghost, asking for more time
but today is payday, payday old man;
my mother’s hand opens in her early grave
and i hold it out like a good daughter.

  there is no more time for you.  there will
never be time enough daddy daddy old lecher
old liar. i wish you were rich so i could take it all
and give the lady what she was due
but you were the son of a needy father,
the father of a needy son;
you gave her all you had
which was nothing. you have already given her
all you had.

  you are the pocket that was going to open
and come up empty any friday.
you were each other’s bad bargain, not mine.
daddy old pauper  old prisoner,  old dead man
what am i doing here collecting?
you lie side by side in debtors’ boxes
and no accounting will open them up.
\end{verbatim}

This poem, which deftly repurposes Plath’s infamous “daddy,”\(^\text{18}\) relies on the ruptured spacing in both the first line and the final stanza. In the first line, the drama of the period at the end of “it is

\textsuperscript{17} Other poems which notably rely on space are “lane is the pretty one” (\textit{Good Times}, 1969),”the lost baby poem” (\textit{Good News About the Earth}, 1972), “in praise of menstruation” (\textit{Quilting}, 1990), “dialysis” (\textit{Blessing the Boats}, 2000), and “mercy” (\textit{Mercy}, 2004).
“it is friday” declares itself, and announces the poem. It almost functions as an imperative. This is a perfect example of how Clifton writes as the god-speaker who cannot be contested, who assumes total power and creation over the text. The spacing in the fourth line of the third stanza reads: “daddy old pauper    old prisoner,     old dead man” reiterates this god-voice by the declaration of the epithets. The space between each phrase moves the assignations forward, enabling the speaker to take a moment of consideration after “old pauper” and decide, no, better yet “old prisoner,” and even then no: “old dead man.” The movement of those phrases, which would read as a fast, beat-driven list were there no breaks, is made possible by the space between phrases. The comma after “old prisoner,” is particularly interesting as it doubles the drama of the pause, like that first “it is friday” by punctuating the extended space. The moment becomes a reservation, a breath that separates for a moment the speaker from her accusations and serves to question itself. In it lies the forgiveness set up in the title. When followed by a long space, and the rhythmic (and final) “old dead man,” it gains even more potency. What could have been an accusatory “old dead man” is made into a defeated acceptance by the comma and the spacing. Old dead man. That is exactly all he is, it says. The spacing allows for the arrival of this forgiveness and knowing.

18 Critics of Clifton cite Sylvia Plath as a main influence (Hillary Holladay, *Wild Blessings*). Clifton pulled inspiration from a multitude of writers, including Robert Hayden, Anne Sexton, Gwendolyn Brooks, Walt Whitman, and Langston Hughes. Her repurposing of their poetics was largely discrete — she used facets of their styles and made them her own, eventually (as most poets do) blending what she borrowed into her aesthetic (as her contemporaries were doing with her work). What she borrowed from Plath she left blatantly clear; any reader with a knowledge of contemporary poetry reads “daddy” and hears Plath. The beauty of this borrowing is that Clifton didn’t make it clandestine — she literally took Plath’s phrase, and (one might argue) used it better.
While Clifton’s spatial landscapes are evident largely in her use of space on the page, they are not only so. Like de Certeau’s work on the construction of the city by the walkers creating it, Clifton’s poems are built by not only her words, but their echoes and translations in space. Space can be read physically, like in “donor” and “forgiving my father,” and it can also be read thematically. The rest of this chapter aims to explore more thematic understandings of distance created by space in Clifton’s poetry.

One way I want to approach space as a distancing tactic in Clifton’s work is through Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother*, in which Kincaid uses distance as a means of access to her subject. In this memoir Kincaid tries to negotiate and better understand the death of her younger brother to AIDS. The text winds around death, and part of Kincaid’s project is that she can never quite get close to it. When she tries to look directly at it (“it” meaning many things: the death itself; the trauma of loss, the inexplicability of grief), death eludes her. It is when she is looking away, elsewhere, that she comes closest to the experience of death. Near the end of the book, Kincaid, visiting Chicago for a book reading, reflects on the icy, impossible blue of Lake Michigan:

...a blue that is the color of a dress that might cost so much only two or three people in the world can afford to buy it, or like a blue of something that is far away in another part of the universe, such a blue was the frozen water in the lake that time; and it was so cold everybody talked about it. It’s so cold, they said, at first as if it were a surprise and then as if it were a punishment: “It’s so cold!”19

This moment, the seemingly random (and given the rest of the text, truly random) meditation on blue — which goes on for more than a page — becomes, unwittingly the closest proximity to

19 Kincaid, 155.
death in the whole text. In metaphor, it creates a distance from the matter at hand enough so that it can be seen and more fully realized, in a way that a direct addressing of the thing could not accomplish. In “donor,” Clifton does the same distancing work as Kincaid. By manipulating language, Clifton engages in the practice of making space as a way to more honestly access and express her subject.

Clifton exemplifies this in “donor” by uprooting syntax. Returning to the first stanza:

```
when they tell me that my body
might reject
i think of thirty years ago
and the hangers i shoved inside
hard trying to not have you.
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The language here is disrupted. The first notable rupture is “might reject.” As the shortest line in the poem, it holds strength in standing alone. But it is a little jarring without any object following “reject” — it makes the space and line break following resonate with possibility — might reject what? How? This strangeness creates space internally, and is mirrored in the last two lines: “and the hangers i shoved inside/hard trying to not have you.” The predictable syntax would be “trying hard not to have you,” but by the reconfiguration of words, the line takes on different meaning. First, the word “hard” becomes applicable both to the way in which the hangers were used, as well as to effort in trying. “Hard” at the start of the line emphasizes itself, so that it both describes and enacts hardness. The reordering of the syntax in the final line seems like a microcosm for the poem at large; it is a foreshadowing of the juxtaposition between the finality of “suppose my body does say no/to yours” and the possibility of “again, again.” “Hard trying to not have you” magnifies the wrongness of the act — not wrongness as assigned by an outside
reader, but by the speaker’s explicit understanding. In this way, syntactic reordering distances the original act from the description of it, in a way that a new understanding can be imagined.

The spatial fractures in Ms. Clifton’s poetry serve as sites of possibility. Similar to the everything-nothing hypothesis, this means that the very rupture of anything “broken” is also its site of most togetherness. Clifton’s poems can be both disassembled and formed by their space. The void — through which non-space gets filtered, where it dances, unassembles, and reassembles — is home to multitudes. Things (the dead, history, the perfect reader, truth) rise and grow in Clifton’s spatial city. They stand up through the destruction of the world fully and assertively. The “imagine this” creation, the god-poet, are all echoed in Clifton’s poetic space, each site of possibility a potential reinvention of the poem world. This cannot happen quickly, in one place, or all at once. And yet, by the confines of structure, it must. The renewal that occurs in every poem like a birth is necessarily swift, timely, and confined. Clifton allows for both the possibility and impossibility of that creation. She builds the impossible world again and again, poem by poem. This rebuilding is more closely studied in the next chapter, which explores Clifton’s poetic turn as a practice of space-making and world-reordering.
Lucille Clifton’s poetry pushed beyond the temporal world with a knowing that extended past codified knowledge and into the unseen, the felt, and the remembered. Her vast sight is as integral to her poetry as her intentional craft. She rewrote knowledge as something constituted by more than the academy and its hierarchical pedagogy. In this way, Clifton’s poems are written indelibly through myth.

Clifton takes up myth so broadly that it is as essential to her poems as the language and structure — if speech is an idiom for walking in Michel de Certeau’s work, then myth is an idiom for poetry in Clifton’s. Myth is described in Encyclopedia Britannica as:

A symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events and that is especially associated with religious belief... Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience.  

I reference this definition as a way to propel and distinguish my own use of myth in this chapter. Clifton certainly relies on myth in the traditional sense — the “symbolic narrative.” In that way, Clifton’s myth covers vast terrain, from the Hindu goddess Kali, to the comic hero Superman, to

Greek mythology’s Leda. Clifton was especially inspired by Judeo-Christianity — among her biblical muses, Lucifer was her most prominent, occurring across collections with poignancy. And yet Clifton’s myth was not relegated to established anecdotes; it was more expansive. Hers imagined a world that exists beyond the material, one where the veil between the living and the spirit-world is thin, if nonexistent. Her myth also invented a self, one which could not exist in the paradigm of normalcy, and so fit the encyclopedic “existing apart from ordinary human experience.” The “apart” of this phrasing is key to understanding how myth acts as a spatial function. The distance established by myth stretches the text and allows, like the material space of the first chapter, for possibility. Myth acts both as a site of agency, since it relies on a knowing, assertive speaker, and as site of the imaginative unknown, since it engages space. To honor the facets of Clifton’s myth-making, this chapter will look to three poems that exhibit the vastness of her mythos, while more specifically engaging the work it upholds as a spatial function. What is the grammar of myth in Clifton’s poetry?

In storytelling, myth imbues the speaker with agency and will. When it is present, the speaker becomes part of the “anything can happen” imaginary that serves to clear space and usher the narrative in. In doing so, all expectations of normalcy are unhinged. The speaker becomes a part of that magical reality, as both the creator and a vulnerable actor. When the speaker is made subject by the myth and its repercussions, she becomes, alongside all purveyors of the text (other actors, readers, and objects), a casualty of it. In a way, myth forms a dialogue

[21] The notion of “anything can happen” is inspired, in part, by Erykah Badu, whose lyricism and musicality is mythical—her pronouncement of self arrives completely and unhinged in her music. In the song “Certainly (Flipped it)” off Baduizm (an album title which establishes a religion of self) Badu sings: “Who gave u permission to rearrange me/Certainly not me,” and later in the track, “The world is mine/when I wake up/I don’t need nobody telling me the time.” Badu’s establishment of the god-self is a mythical maneuver, and acts as a site of possibility, a site where anything can happen.
across which each person engaging in the story can connect, a camaraderie. In this connection lay the possibility for deeper understanding (like the reverberations in physical poetic space) and for the speaker to birth her work entirely on her own terms. In the disruption of everyday that imaginary ignites lay the possibility for a story’s whole formation.

As a spatial negotiation, myth is evident in Clifton’s structural choices. This is particularly true in the allegorical series on the Hindu goddess Kali from *an ordinary woman* (1974). Clifton writes on Kali, goddess of power, in the poem “she insists on me”:

```
i offer my
little sister up. no,
she says, no i want
you fat poet with
death teeth. she insists
on me. my daughters
promise things, they
pretend to be me but
nothing fools her
nothing moves her and
i end up pleading
woman woman i am trying
to make a living here,
woman woman you are not
welcome in these bones,
woman woman please but she
walks past words and
insists on me.
```

Myth here is innocuous, and difficult to separate from non-myth. The inability to untangle the two is part of what makes it so substantial in this poem. The entwining forces the speaker and reader to confront the notion of “real” because what is described here is most definitely a “real” scenario. Real by the way it recounts a clear interface between speaker and subject: “no,/she says, no i want/you fat poet with/dead teeth.” The scene also recalls actions “i offer my/little sister up” and “i end up pleading.” This is, firstly, an interaction, a real one. But the interaction is
also a myth by the way it calls on the goddess of power, a mythos in and of herself, which one can only know by its placement in the series of Kali poems. If this poem were to be taken on its own, it would still be a myth poem. The spatiality of the first two lines: “i offer my/little sister up. no” establishes that myth. The line break following “i offer my” gives the strangely placed pause — my what? It seems at first that the offering is a willing thing, a gift. But in the second line, the offering is the beloved “little sister,” the action made strenuous by the “up” which is separated from its verb. So the difficulty of the action is delayed, and further punctuated by “no” which in the second line is still speaker-less. There is something absurd about offering a little sister — it’s a sacrifice. And when she is clearly not enough, it becomes evident that the speaker is not working with any ordinary subject—she must be a god. So even without the knowledge that this poem is in direct reference to a Hindu goddess, Clifton establishes myth with craft alone.

But myth goes beyond structural finesse, and into the content of Clifton’s texts themselves. As a thematic function, mythos is particularly relevant when discussing the work of and by black subjects, particularly black female subjects, for whom subjectivity is under perpetual magnified scrutiny. An imaginary can then be a site of agency; it opens into space so that scrutiny is abolished, and the text is born from any starting place — not one of negation, but one of completion. One can notice the way myth works as a starting place by turning to Patricia Williams’ memoir, The Alchemy of Race and Rights. The body of Williams’ text is an autobiographical account of essays that engage what it’s like to be a black woman lawyer

\[22\] In her essay “Poetry and Identity,” Harryette Mullen describes the experience of having her poetry placed into “distinct taxonomies,” which are divided by the way readers perceive her proximity to blackness, feminism, and experimentalism – that at times, she is a writer of “black poetry,” and others, when her work becomes innovative in a different way, she is considered “less black.” Mullen interrogates why this kind of scrutiny is so detrimental and limiting, as it is particularly applied to black female poets.
working in the United States. However, before the first chapter, Williams includes a single-page story of a magical world which begins:

Once upon a time there was a society of priests who built a Celestial City with gates secured by word-combination locks. The priests were masters of the Word and, within the city, ascending levels of power and treasure became accessible to those who could learn ascendingly intricate levels of Word Magic. At the very top level, the priests became gods; and because they then had nothing left to seek, they engaged in games with which to pass the long hours of eternity.23

The plot of this myth goes on to mirror the devastating formation of the modern world — a city built over “dying” and “drowning mortals.” Williams begins her biographical text with a Middle Earth-like fable that appears tangential to what follows. Yet its function is essential. The fable serves as a site of creation, of complete imagination, and in that way, sets up Williams as the total authority. The rewriting of the formation of modernity deactivates any assumptions or histories, and clears space for the complete, unburdened narrative. Instead of beginning from the start of Williams’ own story, the memoir begins at the beginning of the world, overwriting any other point of access. This does not mean that Williams’ reason for including the myth is to set up an outside reader — rather a keener observation would be that the myth serves as her own acknowledgement of self-as-creator. Here is the author speaking to the perfect reader, in all her authorial perfection, saying: “I create the world on a single page. Now, here is my story.” I am arguing for the power of myth, how its malleability and applicability are effective in conveying a story whose authorial power is potent with its own agency, will, and humanness. Following the fable, the first chapter begins with another declaration by the speaker. She says: “Since the subject position is everything in my analysis of the law, you deserve to know that it’s a bad

morning. I am very depressed.”24 One could argue that these sentences in relation to the initial myth create space — they expand upon the established world by asserting a truth (another version of the “here is my story” agency”) and broaden the scope through which the speaker tells the story. By beginning the memoir with the potency of two god-like pronouncements, Williams establishes not only agency, but also agency within a world that is entirely hers.

Clifton in her poetry does something similar to Williams. In order to construct a world that does not begin with negation (the negation inherent to modernity, to the destruction of black people’s lives, to the absence and violence that catalyzed the history of the modern world), Williams starts at the absolute beginning. She overwrites the birth of the world and its inhabitants. Only after having done this, built up and imagined this place, does she begin her memoir, one very rooted in the modern world. She comes to it through magic, through the assertion of wholeness — not from any site of deprivation. This is a Cliftonian maneuver, like in her most famous poem “won’t you celebrate with me” from The Book of Light (1992):

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won’t you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.
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24 Williams, 3.
This poem does everything in the way of myth-making. It spells out and enacts the very same as Williams’ mythical opening. “won’t you celebrate with me” is not only an invitation to the reader (here, the perfect reader) but also an imperative invitation — it does not ask, “do you want to?” or even “come!” It says to the reader: will you not? It demands the attendance and presence of “you.” Immediately, Clifton establishes a “what if” imaginary that enables unlimited possibility. She follows it by literally constructing a myth — “i had no model” is the assertion of the myth, the declaration that whatever she created was an archetype. One could read this poem in relation to Hortense Spillers’ seminal critical essay, Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book, in which Spillers, in part, interrogates how naming has made myth of black womanhood. She writes: “My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.” That line is the echo of Clifton’s “i had no model.” Invention as a site of imagination and possibility is a myth practice, as well as a spatial one.

Beneath the mythical story there is no actual, true story. Rather, that myth is the truth — “won’t you celebrate with me” proves that. Like Jamaica Kincaid’s meditation on blue, the myth becomes the closest site of encounter and approximation of truth. In this way, myth-making becomes a procedure of truth telling. But truth as a subject is a tricky procedure. There is no one truth, only versions of retelling. Conveying any story comes from a single standpoint and memory, which means that any one retelling is exactly that — one retelling. There could be many others. It is impossible then to ever completely recreate a story. Like a door always closing halfway, you can get closer and closer to it, but never recreate it in its entirety. Myth, then, enables the telling of a story because it decidedly turns away from accuracy. In the invention of a new story disparate from the tethers of fact and evidence, truth becomes a given, not something

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to be proved. It is in this fashion that some of the most effective narratives conveying historical or remembered experience are told through mythical lenses.²⁶

Myth as a site of knowing comes to bear in the poem “the death of fred clifton” from Next (1987), a persona poem from the perspective of Ms. Clifton’s beloved husband, Fred:

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11/10/84
age 49

i seemed to be drawn
to the center of myself
leaving the edges of me
in the hands of my wife
and i saw with the most amazing clarity
so that i had not eyes but
sight,
and, rising and turning
through my skin,
there was all around not the
shapes of things
but oh, at last, the things themselves.
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With prophetic tenderness, Clifton reimagines Fred’s death in stunning clarity. She writes a myth poem that is entirely an act of re-imagination, which cannot be sited or sourced. The poem imagines both Fred’s experience, and boldly the experience of death itself. And yet, it seems one of the most accurate depictions of what it might be like to die. Of course, “not the/shapes of things/but oh, at last, the things/themselves.” There is incredible space built into these last three lines. First, the isolated “shapes of things” as a stand-alone line represents literally the shapes of things — the line break following gives way to imagining those vague “things,” which truly

²⁶ I am thinking here of Toni Morrison’s Beloved and her fully reborn ghost, the mythical structure of Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, Toni Cade Bambara’s The Salt Eaters, a myth in entirety, and Randall Kenan’s magical short story collection Let the Dead Bury Their Dead.
could be anything. Clifton’s vagueness here is a mythical maneuver, because it allows the imagining of anything. Then, the statement of awe “oh, at last,” infuses this end with incredible wonderment — not unlike the “again, again” of “donor.” The commas bracketing this phrase are particularly poignant because they force an exhale, beginning with the “oh” and ending with “last,” it is one elongated pause in which the metaphorical final breath is released. The finality of death, after the exhale, occurs on the isolated, grounded “themselves.” A poem in entire myth, “the death of fred clifton” has a knowledge that comes to life in its spatial maneuvering.

Myth has the ability to traverse through and across time in a way that deconstructs space. When present, it can stand in to signify upon other histories and stories. If for example, a poem invokes the Adam and Eve allegory, it does hefty spatial and temporal work. The allegory crosses the bridge of explanation and in a parcel of the size it would take to recount the story, evokes its history. This condensing of space, and even time (considering how many allegories are read as ancient, biblical, or at the very least, old) is a spatial act that imbues the speaker and story with power, almost like an economical tool. In this vein, it serves to ask whether history (like allegory) is itself a form of myth. Clifton’s poetry, which is redolent with history, blurs the line between mythos, history, and memory. If the poetic turn is a site of encounter, which invites the perfect reader to confront herself anew, it might follow to say that Clifton invites history to encounter itself anew. Like in beginning of the poem “the photograph: a lynching” from Blessing the Boats (2000):

> is it the cut glass
> of their eyes

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27 I am referencing Clifton’s biblically inspired poems, namely her “Mary” series from *two-headed woman* (1980), and also the poems in the section “some jesus” from *Good News About the Earth* (1972).
In this imagining, the unnamed “it” is introduced to the text from the outset. What is “it”? That small word holds an incredible capacity for space because, like the “things” in “the death of fred Clifton,” it can imply so much. It is a mythical word in this context. Followed by the personification of the “gnarled branch” which stands in for the murdered man, this entire set-up is mythical, nightmarish. In this way, Clifton’s redirection of the gaze onto the voyeurs instead of the man, and her mysterious use of “it” (which can be both known and unknown), reexamines a historical scene of violence back on itself, in such a way that it becomes a confrontation.

Myth can also be used as a tool of disguise. It has been historically manipulated to subdue the truth. It terrorizes by its obfuscation, and can alter what is real into something unreal. To return to Hortense Spillers and her interrogation of the assignations of black women, a practice that demonstrates the myth’s exact potential for violence, one could look to the first three sentences of the essay:

"Let’s face it. I a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” “Granny,” God’s “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth." ²⁸

Here Spillers lists a multitude of myths, applied to her without her permission. They enter the room before she does. These myths propagate violence in subversive and overt ways. They have power. In this way, myth is inherently powerful — it can destroy. But also at this site of the

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²⁸ Spillers, 1.
possibility of terror, lay the possibility of liberation. Myth, by its covert properties, can deftly redirect, to negative and positive ends. As it can be used to erase, so can it be used to rewrite. Like this, “won’t you celebrate with me” is a poem that rewrites, a poem of reconstruction. It does the space-clearing work, and rebuilds something in its place.

i made it up
   here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,

The “between” of these lines establishes the bridge itself, “between” the magical, formative “starshine and clay.” The structural work of the line break offers a physical space in which building can occur. This is repeated in the comma and line break at the end of “starshine and clay.” Since punctuation is so sparse, this punctual choice carries particular weight. It becomes, in a way, the making up — the creation of the myth. It invites pause, almost like scaffolding for the two building blocks described, during which the making up has space to occur. What follows, “my one hand holding tight/my other hand” becomes then such a strange and stunning iteration of creation. It is the fallout of “i had no model.” Only “myself.” The strangeness, too, creates a mythical distancing — it is an unusual and odd practice to hold one’s own hand, let alone tightly. It is, when literally imagined, a futile process — holding one’s own hand cannot prevent a fall. And yet, by the assertion of speaker as creator, there is no room for that skepticism. It becomes the only way to hold hands; with oneself. A new truth. “Won’t you celebrate with me” serves as a microcosm for Clifton’s poetic. Her poetry is itself a mythos that builds and renews life over and over. It invites the reader to come, to celebrate and to mourn. It announces its authority from the outset. It is the literal incarnation of “I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/And what I assume
you shall assume,/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” It is a distillation of the Clifton aesthetic and ethic.

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30 I quote Whitman here in part because he expresses clearly and beautifully what I am trying to say, and also because Clifton uses this quote as the opening epigraph of her memoir *Generations*. I feel it is an apt translation of “won’t you celebrate with me,” and of Clifton’s poetry at large.
Chapter Three —
turning as a site of encounter

Poetry strives to tell elemental truths.\textsuperscript{31} Whether or not it is written in elaborate or plain language, it works to say something fundamental about human life. Clifton’s poetry often used history, its fallacy and obscurity, to shed light on truths that have otherwise been overlooked.\textsuperscript{32} She spoke the truth in the wake of the unspoken, relying on fact and on mystery to bring stark clarity to the world around her. In lieu of this, Clifton’s poetry exhibits an incredible capacity for empathy — not empathy in the forgiving sense, but in the sense that Clifton was capable of putting her poetic voice into the lives of many (into herself, biblical figures, the fox, Lucifer, her late husband, etc.).\textsuperscript{33} This practice made her attempts at truth-telling exceptionally successful. She used visionary insight to place herself in the voice of another and translate their worlds.

The historicizing and truth-telling that Clifton accomplishes in her poetry can be described by something Langston Hughes wrote in his introduction to \textit{Black Africa}:

Traditionally, poets are lyric historians. From the days of the bards and troubadours, the songs of the poets have been not only songs, but often \textit{records} of the most moving events, the deepest thoughts and most profound emotional currents of their times.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} Alexander, \textit{Remembering Lucille Clifton}.
\textsuperscript{32} I am thinking here particularly on her poem “powell” which is a stark persona poem from the perspective of one of the police officers who attacked Rodney King.
\textsuperscript{33} This thought is inspired by John Murillo’s work on Clifton’s many voices, and her poetry’s capacity for empathy.
\textsuperscript{34} This was quoted by Elizabeth Alexander in her essay “The Black Poet as Canon Maker” from \textit{The Black Interior}. 
Lucille Clifton followed in this tradition of record-keeping with particular poignancy — her work was rooted in history, in the nudging toward truth and rewriting the negligent American textbook, from fact, record, and imagination. But for Clifton, history was not relegated to the outside world; it included her own intimate story, which she wrote on to better understand for her entire poetic career. She became the bard of her own life. Part of how she told these truths with intimacy and precision was in her negotiation of space alongside myth, a duality that manifested in a particularly spatial order with heightened potential. See the poem “dialysis” from *Blessing the Boats* (2000):

after the cancer, the kidneys refused to continue.
they closed their thousand eyes.

blood fountains from the blind man’s arm and decorates the tile today.
somebody mops it up.

the woman who is over ninety cries for her mother. if our dead were here they would save us.

we are not supposed to hate
the dialysis unit. we are not supposed to hate the universe.

this is not supposed to happen to me.
after the cancer the body refused to lose any more. even the poisons were claimed and kept

until they threatened to destroy the heart they loved. in my dream a house is burning.

something crawls out of the fire cleansed and purified.
in my dream i call it light.
after the cancer i was so grateful

to be alive. i am alive and furious.
Blessed be even this?

This poem emulates the horror of cancer, the vulnerability of healing. The exaggerated spacing between “mother” and “if” in the third stanza is a crystalline moment of reckoning. It allows for the imagining of the ninety-year-old woman’s cry and magnifies its invisibility. The silence of the intentional break echoes the impossibility of the cry for the mother — she is never coming. Resolving with the magical word “if” (like “again”) resounds of Clifton; here is another instance of the hopeful born of despair. The same spacing is reiterated in the following stanza:

we are not supposed to hate
the dialysis unit. we are not
supposed to hate the universe.

The setup of this stanza juxtaposes two wildly different objects in such a way that they become comparable. Instead of the hopefulness born from spacing in the former stanza, this one inspires consideration. “we are not supposed to hate the dialysis unit” is a vulnerable statement, and also a fallacy. Of course people hate the dialysis unit — it embodies the terror of illness. The space following this sentence considers that and begs the question, really? And yet, by its authority (it is so clear and sure) it does not invite interrogation. The space says in silence what the next stanza voices: “this is not supposed to happen to me.”

The next line reads: “we are not supposed to hate the universe.” Because this line mirrors the one before it, it follows that it would have a congruent sentiment. And yet it tells something more believable: we are not supposed to hate the universe. The speaker here is self-reprimanding, and made young by the repetition, and the “we.” The lines turns the stanza into a
children’s song. The period, line break, and stanza break following “we are not supposed to hate the universe” allow the hate of the universe to settle — we are not, and yet we do, is what it says. Compounded by the fact that it is written in the subjunctive, this stanza reiterates the “if” possibility. The spacing and beat of repetition allow the “what if” to resonate and be imagined.

In the following stanzas, this spacing is repeated. But what is most interesting is the final stanza of the poem, and most especially the final line:

after the cancer i was so grateful
to be alive. i am alive and furious.
Blessed be even this?

“Blessed be even this?” is a spatial negotiation that takes the poem (the fury, the gratitude) and throws it against a blank backdrop. The line interrogates what the speaker has established as truth (punctuation, grammar, the myth of the kidneys, the dream) by literally calling it into question. Because there is no physical space on the page between the rest of the poem and this final line besides a clean, punctuated line break, the distance it creates is indicated in other ways. Capital ‘B’ is the only capitalization in the whole poem. The syntax is distinctly old fashioned, and disparate from the syntax of the rest of the poem, subtly invoking a whole history by its biblical style. And yet the line is brought directly into the present because it is posed not as an imperative or omniscience (as it might be in the Bible), but as a question. Thus it becomes not an act of summation, but an act of interrogation. Interestingly, the order of the words in this line implore the reader to make ‘Blessed’ a two syllable word. Stress is naturally put on the ‘ed’ ending so that it becomes almost Shakespearean — is this a distancing in itself? The inclination to break ‘Blessed’ into two parts, and to call upon a literary and religious history in doing so, condenses
so much signification and meaning into one moment. ‘Blessed be’ comes to represent much more than its parts.

In this instance, Clifton magnificently employs one of her most famous maneuvers: the poetic “punch,” or, the poetic turn. She takes the last line or few lines and turns the poem upside down. The turn is the mic drop, the most powerful iteration of poet-as-god. It can be found in almost all of Clifton’s well-known poems, due in part to the fact that it is a highly legible poetic function — it stuns every reader it confronts. Who can forget “come celebrate/with me that everyday/something has tried to kill me/and has failed”?

Clifton’s turns can be easily read as closures or summations, which would imply they serve to tie the poem in a bow. However, the turn is largely a practice of questioning — “Blessed be even this?” Rather than a closing, it serves as an opening. “Blessed be” becomes an invitation to prod further. Even the powerhouse “come celebrate with me” is an invitation (as well as a demand). This says something about the function of the turn — it isn’t only a memorable and stunning way to end a poem, but it is also a continuation of it. Moving beyond itself, the turn conjures a slew of questions, imagery, and confrontation.

This is one way the poetic turn is a space-maker. Although it is rarely separated by physical space from the rest of the poem, it still offers a moment for the speaker to reckon with herself in a speaker to perfect reader dialogue. The turn offers ultimate insight. I want to carefully distinguish between the turn and the meaning of the poem — the two are not synonymous. Rather, I want to center the turn as a site of space, and spatial negotiation, because it inherently deviates from the narrative set up by the poem (while at once keeping in line with it). It works as a spatial distancing by establishing possibility — it is structural, and mythical.
Clifton’s poetic turn then becomes a turning inward. What does that mean, when so much of Clifton’s work is autobiographical? It’s dangerous to conflate author with speaker, and yet in Clifton’s body of work, it’s almost impossible not to — so much of it is deeply personal. Is it like what Clifton describes in the poem entitled “turning” from *an ordinary woman* (1974)?

> turning into my own  
> turning on in  
> to my own self  
> at last  
> turning out of the  
> white cage, turning out of the  
> lady cage  
> turning at last  
> on a stem like a black fruit  
> in my own season  
> at last

The poetic turn is similar to what is described here. It jumps just far enough away from the established narrative that it gives objectivity, like the “turning into my own” of this poem. While remaining personal, this objectivity creates space for an encounter between the speaker and the subject of the poem — it allows for the turning in and away from. It is the “Blessed be even this?” orientation. Encounter is being used here to reference the philosophical notion of the word, which can be explained like this: if, along the timeline of a person’s life, one were to mark the pivotal moments at which everything changed (birth, illness, heartbreak, death, a big move, etc.), one might track how the individual’s life accrues experience. A pivotal moment like this forces one to reassess everything that has come before, and indelibly affects everything that comes after. The first falling in love, for example, alters the purpose of everything that led to the

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moment of falling, and consequently informs everything afterward. This is a moment of encounter. It forces the individual to reconfigure everything they know. Like this, the poetic turn offers a site of encounter: it marks the point at which the world is altered. In “dialysis,” the final line resituated the speaker in relation to everything that has come before and gives the opportunity to encounter the poetic subject anew.

The poem “what did she know, when did she know it” from *The Terrible Stories* (1996) uses space as a turning particularly well:

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in the evenings
what it was the soft tap tap
into the room the cold curve
of the sheet arced off
the fingers sliding in
and the hard clench against the wall
before and after
all the cold air cold edges
why the little girl never smiled
they are supposed to know everything
our mothers what did she know
when did she know it
```

Spatiality throughout this piece is key from the outset: the disjointed “what it was the soft tap tap,” a phrase which is legibly resigned (“what it was”), and bleeds directly into “the soft tap tap” without punctuation. It sets the scene as a repeated incident (by the plural “evenings” and “what it was”). The first three lines, and the title, don’t imply that this moment is a violent one. Before the elongated space in the third line, the set-up is innocuous — a room at night, something gentle about “the soft tap tap.” The isolation of space and a line break drive the discomfort of “the cold curve.” The poem continues in its established normalcy (“before and
after”) until the final lines when the story turns in toward itself. “They are supposed to know everything/our mothers” admits the perpetrator (who, reflected by Clifton’s other biographical poems, is her father) and propels the poem into sadness. The speakers in this poem oscillate between an omniscient voice (who refers to the “the little girl”) and the speaker at the end (“they are supposed to know everything/our mothers”), which in its own way opens into space by creating a breadth of voices. The line from the perspective of the second speaker requires both an adult and a child to voice—it asserts a knowing, and a desire still to know. Ignited by this voice, the last lines read: “what did she know/when did she know it” The lack of punctuation makes these lines demands. The speaker, who has remained objective, enters fully, with knowledge and questions. And yet the lines are not from leftfield, or for shock value. They follow with the structural narrative of the poem by the long space before “what did she know.” They are also a repetition of the title, and function as a closing parenthetical to the whole poem—as though it can not exist outside the bookends of these questions. This turn is at once completely unpredictable, and also a natural progression of the poem. Here is a way Clifton’s turn does such structural lifting, and space-making. What happens in the opening built from an ending like this?

Since “what did she know, when did she know it” ends as a question, it breaks the poem open and invites the imagining of what the mother knew. This is both a spatial function (by the physical distancing from the established story) and a mythical one. The myth of the final lines comes from how they create a nowhere place that begs to be filled, hence the questioning (what, when). From that void arises the possibility of everything, left undetermined by the speaker and open to continual renewal and understanding. It embodies the function of encounter because it is endless—the questions reverberate forever in space and time by their un-

36 Spillers, 72.
answerability. Like encounter, the process of being forever renewed and reestablished moment to moment, this poem lives immortally in rebirth.

Similarly, the poem “miss rosie” from *good times* (1969) ends on a mythical turn, but one grounded in space:

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  i stand up  
  through your destruction  
  i stand up
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The final three lines are an early iteration of Clifton’s sonnet-like turn. Part of the reason the ending of “miss rosie” is so effective is the juxtaposition of the lines. The “i stand up” serves as a counter rhythm, and a parenthetical, to “through your destruction.” “I stand up” is monosyllabic and short with strong consonant sounds, while “through your destruction” is a little messier – like literal destruction – with the three-syllable “destruction” and the soft ‘th’ of through. In this way, Clifton turns the poem sonically. She digs into the short “i stand up” and catapults into present active tense. And yet, although this ending serves as a turn, it flows naturally by leaning into the beauty of earlier repetitions. It ends both a new and familiar thing. The second “i stand up” becomes an assertion because it is a repetition. It is also made myth because of this repetition — like an incantation or a prayer (i stand up, i stand up). And again like “what did she know, when did she know it,” the poem ends in such a way that space making informs myth and vice versa. If encounter is the space where anything is possible, than Clifton’s turn is most an encounter function.

It would be untrue to say that all of Clifton’s turns do the same work. Some realign the poem, some put it into context, some, like “what did she know, when did she know it” assert a speaker. What is sure about the poetic turn, and unvarying across poems that utilize it, is that it is
an opening. It steps away from what came before, and reassesses with fresh eyes at the locus where space and myth meet. Because encounter at the turn works as a spatial function, it leans into the multiplicity of imagining made possible by space. Returning to Michel de Certeau, the navigation of space on a given landscape is at least in part a collective practice. It occurs when there are a multitude of walkers defining and constantly redefining space by their traversal across it. The space then becomes defined anew every millisecond, because moment by moment, it is a different configuration. That also means that the qualifiers of space (the objects and places which condense and expand the landscape by the implications of their meanings) are in a constant state of flux. Space is a vernacular practice by the way it is populated and defined by the existence of everything—its creation and perpetual reordering is an opportunity for meditation and reassessment. I want to suggest that encounter at the poetic turn is a way in which the poem meditates, and listens to itself in the process. Lucille Clifton’s poetry speaks, in part, as a practice of listening.
Conclusion —
*the light that came to Lucille Clifton*

It can be difficult to talk about Clifton and acknowledge all her facets, because she was at once many things. Namely, a great poet, working and living through poetry, dedicated to the craft. She explored her own poeticism thoroughly over the course of almost 50 years, borrowing and editing so finely that her style was irreplicable. She wrote through the canon of the short poem and the plainspoken one with acute complexity and precision. But alongside this poetic craft, Clifton was also a visionary who saw and felt beyond the temporal world and into the multiplicities of the unseen. This vision, and belief in possibility,\(^\text{37}\) made Clifton’s poetry magical. She wove together her intellect and craft with her empathy and vision so that her poems were both successful in the poetic project, and essential to the world.

The most striking aspect of Clifton’s aesthetic is her spatial navigation — while this project could only touch on three aspects of that practice and overlooked others like lack of capitalization, title-less poems, and sonic space, it tried to express how Clifton’s space-making is essential to her poetry. Physical space became a way Clifton broke into her poems. It allows the subject itself to live and move in multitudes. Her structural space gives agency to the poem. Following that, her use of myth gives agency to the poet — her mythical landscapes are the space-makers that allow for the complete arrival of her poems. They never come to being piece by piece, but begin, from the outset, as wholes. Myth, created by the poet-god and home to all possibility, is a way for the subject of the poem to move through and about space and time in alternative, imaginative ways. Both these structures are what make Clifton’s poetic turn so

\(^{37}\) Holliday, 187.
possible and effective. The turn is reliant upon space to exist as the new direction it is — it also relies on Clifton’s mythos to live up to all its possibility. The Clifton turn becomes the locus of myth and space, and brings to the foreground the urgency and essence of the poem itself.

Poetry exists for the project—it is smart, intentional, and assessed not by asking “is this good writing?” (many things can be well written and still not be a poem) but by asking “is this a poem?” Poetry is a project of truth-telling, which occurs by negating the extraneous. Negation as a space-maker is a practice of loss. One could argue that space then, as it stands integral to the poem, is a kind of loss vernacular. It becomes the language unavailable in language through which things like death, ghosts, myth, and history can wholly come into existence. Clifton’s poetry is laden with the potential inherent to a loss vernacular. Her navigation through and around space is precise, so that in places like line breaks and punctuation, new imaginings are birthed — out of the vernacular jumps limitless possibility. Something that can be read across Ms. Clifton’s work as a whole is her leaning toward loss as a thematic: as a social function, as a shared experience, as a constant gradient of life. One could do a thorough study of the grammar of loss in her work. This might be better explicated in a beautiful line from Holladay:

Reading her [Clifton’s] elegantly arranged volumes, in which hope just barely outweighs despair, we begin to see the mythic sweep of our own lives, the connections across generations and cultures, and we begin to feel that Clifton, in speaking for herself, is inviting us to listen, very carefully, to ourselves.\(^\text{38}\)

Clifton’s hope, that barely outweighs despair, is integral to her aesthetic of loss. The thin veil between grief and possibility, between nothing and everything, exemplifies her ability to affect

\(^{38}\) Holladay, 9.
every reader. By rendering her humanness, “speaking for herself,” Clifton renders everyone’s, to some degree.

In this way, part of what made Clifton’s canon so essential was that her subject, real or imagined, was always human. She humanized the most inhuman things — from Lucifer, who was forsaken even from the spiritual world, to the returning fox in her backyard, to her closed-eyed kidneys, to the murderous Powell, to her complicated father. She imbued everything with an urgently human voice, and so doing created poems that spoke from wholeness to wholeness. Clifton made herself god, and then made every poetic subject her creation — all actors (speaker, reader, subject) at home at least in their completion, and as disrupted and placated as Clifton decreed. The phrase, although overused, applies to Clifton well: she comforted the afflicted, and afflicted the comfortable.39 As the god of her own story, Clifton did just that.

Perhaps this is part of the reason Clifton is so beloved — as John Murillo said to me once, “Her poems have the ability to hold your hand.” This is certainly true, but needs more — Clifton’s poems are truth tellers. It might be more apt to say that they push you down, then give help you stand up. A poem like “lucifer speaks in his own voice” from Quilting (1987-1990) destroys the world, and in only three lines, rebuilds it. The poem reads:

| sure as i am              |
| of the seraphim          |
| folding wing             |
| so am i certain of a     |
| graceful bed             |
| and a soft caress        |
| along my long belly      |
| at endtime               |
| it was                  |
| to be                   |
| i who was called son     |

39 Clifton uses this phrase to describe her goal as a poet in the Holliday interview from 1997 featured in Wild Blessings.
if only of the morning
saw that some must
walk or all will crawl
so slithered into earth
and seized the serpent in
the animals i became
the lord of snake for
adam and for eve
i the only lucifer
light-bringer
created out of fire
illuminate i could
and so
illuminate i did

Here is Clifton’s turn, coupled with her knowing. The line breaks, the possibility (what if?), the
diction and clarity all come together and, in the act of turning the poem (and the speaker) in on
itself, it expands, infinitely and with nearly tangible power. She writes a world in the poem itself,
and then in its ending, writes it again. This is what sets Clifton up as the myth-maker, as the sole
creator of her own poetic world, and that is exactly what she was; the god of her poems.

Lucille Clifton wrote the truth in a way that could be understood by anyone. She was a
light-bringer, insisting on herself in the world. The final example of her craft is from two-headed
woman (1980), a poem that employs space in punctuation and vowel repetition, and that says
what I am trying to say better than I know how. It reads:

the light that came to lucille clifton
came in a shift of knowing
when even her fondest sureties
faded away. it was the summer
she understood that she had not understood
and was not mistress even
of her own off eye. then
the man escaped throwing away his tie and
the children grew legs and started walking and
she could see the peril of an
unexamined life.
she closed her eyes, afraid to look for her authenticity
but the light insists on itself in the world;
a voice from the nondead past started talking,
she closed her ears and it spelled out in her hand
“you might as well answer the door, my child,
the truth is furiously knocking.”
prayer

lighten up

why is your hand
so heavy
on just poor
me?

answer

this is the stuff
i made the heroes
out of
all the saints
and prophets and things
had to come by
this

(Good News About the Earth, 1972)
donor

(to lex)

when they tell me that my body might reject
i think of thirty years ago
and the hangers i shoved inside
hard trying to not have you.

i think of the pills, the everything
i gathered against your
inconvenient bulge; and you
my stubborn baby child,
hunched there in the dark
refusing my refusal.

suppose my body does say no
to yours. again, again i feel you
buckled in despite me, lex,
fastened to life like the frown
on an angel’s brow.

(Blessing the Boats, 2000)
forgiving my father

it is friday. we have come
to the paying of the bills.
all week you have stood in my dreams
like a ghost, asking for more time
but today is payday, payday old man;
my mother’s hand opens in her early grave
and i hold it out like a good daughter.

there is no more time for you. there will
never be time enough daddy daddy old lecher
old liar. i wish you were rich so i could take it all
and give the lady what she was due
but you were the son of a needy father,
the father of a needy son;
you gave her all you had
which was nothing. you have already given her
all you had.

you are the pocket that was going to open
and come up empty any friday.
you were each other’s bad bargain, not mine.
daddy old pauper old prisoner, old dead man
what am i doing here collecting?
you lie side by side in debtors’ boxes
and no accounting will open them up.

(two-headed woman, 1980)
she insists on me

i offer my
little sister up. no,
she says, no i want
you fat poet with
death teeth. she insists
on me. my daughters
promise things, they
pretend to be me but
nothing fools her
nothing moves her and
i end up pleading
woman woman i am trying
to make a living here,
woman woman you are not
welcome in these bones,
woman woman please but she
walks past words and
insists on me.

(an ordinary woman, 1974)
won’t you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

(The Book of Light, 1992)
the death of fred clifton
11/10/84
age 49

i seemed to be drawn
to the center of myself
leaving the edges of me
in the hands of my wife
and i saw with the most amazing
clarity
so that i had not eyes but
sight,
and, rising and turning
through my skin,
there was all around not the
shapes of things
but oh, at last, the things
themselves.

(Next, 1987)
the photograph: a lynching

is it the cut glass
of their eyes
looking up toward
the new gnarled branch
of the black man
hanging from a tree?

is it the white milk pleated
collar of the woman
smiling toward the camera,
her fingers loose around
a christian cross drooping
against her breast?

is it all of us
captured by history into an
accurate album? will we be
required to view it together
under a gather sky?

(Blessing the Boats, 2000)
dialysis

after the cancer, the kidneys
refused to continue.
they closed their thousand eyes.

blood fountains from the blind man’s
arm and decorates the tile today.
somebody mops it up.

the woman who is over ninety
cries for her mother. if our dead
were here they would save us.

we are not supposed to hate
the dialysis unit. we are not
supposed to hate the universe.

this is not supposed to happen to me.
after the cancer the body refused
to lose any more. even the poisons
were claimed and kept

until they threatened to destroy
the heart they loved. in my dream
a house is burning.

something crawls out of the fire
cleansed and purified.
in my dream i call it light.

after the cancer i was so grateful
to be alive. i am alive and furious.
Blessed be even this?

(Blessing the Boats, 2000)
turning

turning into my own
turning on in
to my own self
at last
turning out of the
white cage, turning out of the
lady cage
turning at last
on a stem like a black fruit
in my own season
at last

(An ordinary woman, 1974)
what did she know, when did she know it

in the evenings
what it was the soft tap tap
into the room the cold curve
of the sheet arced off
the fingers sliding in
and the hard clench against the wall
before and after
all the cold air cold edges
why the little girl never smiled
they are supposed to know everything
our mothers what did she know
when did she know it

(The Terrible Stories, 1996)
miss rosie

when i watch you
wrapped up like garbage
sitting, surrounded by the smell
of too old potato peels
or
when i watch you
in your old man’s shoes
with the little toe cut out
sitting, waiting for your mind
like next week’s grocery
i say
when i watch you
you wet brown bag of a woman
who used to be the best looking gal in georgia
used to be called the Georgia Rose
i stand up
through your destruction
i stand up

(Good Times, 1969)
lucifer speaks in his own voice

sure as i am
of the seraphim
folding wing
so am i certain of a
graceful bed
and a soft caress
along my long belly
at endtime it was
to be
i who was called son
if only of the morning
saw that some must
walk or all will crawl
so slithered into earth
and seized the serpent in
the animals i became
the lord of snake for
adam and for eve
i the only lucifer
light-bringer
created out of fire
illuminate i could
and so
illuminate i did

(Quilting, 1987-1990)
the light that came to lucille clifton
came in a shift of knowing
when even her fondest sureties
faded away. it was the summer
she understood that she had not understood
and was not mistress even
of her own off eye. then
the man escaped throwing away his tie and
the children grew legs and started walking and
she could see the peril of an
unexamined life.
she closed her eyes, afraid to look for her
authenticity
but the light insists on itself in the world;
a voice from the nondead past started talking,
she closed her ears and it spelled out in her hand
“you might as well answer the door, my child,
the truth is furiously knocking.”

(two-headed woman, 1980)
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