

“come into the / black / and live”: Poetry and the Dream of Black Liberation

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the news

everything changes the old  
songs click like light bulbs  
going off the faces  
of men dying scar the air  
the moon becomes the mountain  
who would have thought  
who would believe  
dead things could stumble back  
and kill us<sup>1</sup>

~Lucille Clifton

“The poetry sustains,” said Lucille Clifton in conversation with Sonia Sanchez at The New School in New York City during the first of the now well-known Cave Canem reading series (1070). During the reading, which occurred shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Clifton, within a matter of ten minutes or so, read several poems that demonstrated the scope and range of her writing and engagement with era-shifting and history-making moments, whether they be personal or public. She began with a poem written about her sister, moved through poems that bore witness to racist violence against Black and indigenous people, and connected that reality to a continental Black struggle. Her short reading closed with new poems, as she noted, written after the tragedies of that moment. One opened a space that acknowledged that the collective trauma the nation felt was something not unfamiliar to Black folks in the United States. Worth quoting fully here, the poem “Friday nine fourteen” presents as analogous to the U.S. American crimes against Black and brown folks and the “villainy” of that moment in 2001:

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<sup>1</sup> From Clifton’s *Good News about the Earth: New Poems*, Random House, 1972.

Some of us know  
we have never felt safe  
all of us  
Americans weeping as some  
have wept before  
Is it treason to remember?  
What have we done  
to deserve such villainy?  
Nothing  
we reassure ourselves  
Nothing.

The nuance here is not to be missed, however, as she further indicts the United States and questions its culpability. The line breaks in this short poem signal that there are multiple audiences and multiple speakers within the collective “we” of the poem. Indeed, as she begins, “Some of us know / we have never felt safe / all of us / Americans weeping as some / have wept before” (1045). A student of Sterling A. Brown and Owen Dodson, Clifton, in the vast body of her work, which is at once artful and instructive, has a poem for every day and every moment. In Toni Morrison’s foreword to *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2000*, she noted that Clifton was most often praised for her “moving declarations of racial pride, courage, steadfastness [and] eloquent elegies for the vulnerable and the prematurely dead” (xxviii). However, she cautions us not to miss the “astute, profound intellect” and “the range and complexity of the emotions she forces us to confront” (xxx-xxxi).

Particularly in this moment, we must return to Clifton, reaching for not only the inspiring and loving words within, but seeking the insight that she offers through an imagination that calls us to participate in our own visioning of a future. Writing in a literary tradition that long declared the need for political art, Clifton remembers the experiences of people in the Diaspora and roots our liberation in the spirit of African identity as she declares “the news” of the time, offers the answers to our cries, and situates them within the realm of history and a past rooted in a Black radical tradition. Writing then, Clifton was even preparing

for the now, and she has left us a body of work to help us reflect and guide us to the life of freedom we have always desired—a life we must continue to imagine. It is this moment of creating, too, which sustains. Not only is the content of Clifton’s poetry sustaining but also the context to which it speaks and the revisioning and imagining that moment engenders. In her poem “after Kent State,” which opens the collection *Good News about the Earth*, we are warned about the unbridled possibility of white violence. The poem reads, “only to keep / his little fear / he kills his cities / and his trees / even his children oh / people / white ways are / the way of death / come into the / black / and live.” Referring to the May 4, 1970, massacre in Kent, Ohio, where student protestors were killed by the National Guard, the poem urges us to find and root ourselves in a Black consciousness that promises life. Indeed, in this time when we find ourselves declaring Black Lives Matter—a matter of fact that needed no such announcement in our own spaces—it is critical that we return to a poet who has witnessed and written about struggle and has dreamt of another way of being in the world.

In the preface to his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D.G. Kelley speaks of “alternate visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change” (iv). Later, he emphasizes the need for imagination or what he calls “poetic knowledge,”<sup>2</sup> wherein “social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression. Rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society” (9). Lucille Clifton has done all those things and more. The poetry, as Eleanor W. Traylor has said of Clifton and her peers (Mari Evans and Nikki Giovanni) whose works were honored at Howard University’s 2007 Heart’s Day event, “launched a groundswelling intervention in the reading and writing of poetry. That intervention directed an understanding of a poem as a contextual event in which cultural identity and cultural value are crucial markers of meaning” (3). These “crucial markers,” tools of Black freedom struggles, instruct us to remember ourselves outside and beyond U.S. America’s definition. Clifton’s poem “africa” reads, “home / oh / home / the soul of your / variety / all of my bones / remember” and calls us to remember that our sense of self and knowledge of freedom exist beyond the constraints of a white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalist society (93). Clifton reminds us that mourning is necessary and important in times of struggle. Her elegy for Malcolm X resonates because we “will always mourn Malcolm” as Sister Sonia Sanchez has said, but also because we are regularly and intimately familiar with the sustained mourning of our murdered. The poem “malcolm” declares, “nobody mentioned war / but doors were closed / black women shaved their heads / black men rustled

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<sup>2</sup> Kelley notes that he draws this concept from Aimé Césaire’s 1945 essay “Poetry and Knowledge.”

in the alleys like leaves / prophets were ambushed as they spoke / and from their holes black eagles flew / screaming through the streets” (100). The anxiety and despair we feel during the COVID-19 pandemic is but a fragment of the anguish we endure as Black folks in this land, and the urgency we feel sends us “screaming through the streets.” Clifton’s poetry is a sustaining force as we traverse this long and sinuous path to freedom, and she instructs us to gather knowledge, to acquaint ourselves with what has come before in thought and action. The poem, which begins, “i am accused of tending to the past / as if i made it, / as if i sculpted it / with my own hands. / i did not,” acknowledges that a complex legacy has been left for us. It continues, “this past was waiting for me when i came, / monstrous unnamed baby, / and i with my mother’s itch / took it to breast / and named it / History. / she is more human now, / learning language everyday, / remembering faces, names and dates. / when she is strong enough to travel / on her own / beware, she will” (327). Flowing with metaphors and symbols, the poem, at once, directs us to nurture ourselves boldly even as we claim, reshape, and nurture something we are bequeathed; it encourages us to make what we have produced—be it knowledge or action or some other necessary work—travel. Go beyond. This poem exemplifies the poetic knowledge of which Kelley speaks and echoes his reflections in *Freedom Dreams* (a dream “poised for action” also in the wake of September 11, 2001) where he asks, “What shall we build on the ashes of a nightmare?” and answers “now is the time to think like poets, to envision and make visible a new society, a peaceful, cooperative, loving world without poverty and oppression, limited only by our imaginations” (196). Clifton, in her 2008 collection *Voices*, offers us a possibility with the poem “the dead do dream” as the first stanza reads “scattered they dream of gathering / each perfect ash to each / so that where there was blindness / there is sight / and all the awkward bits / discarded” (662). Toni Morrison has said that Clifton is “comfortable and knowing about the dead” as evinced in this poem as it reminds us that our ancestors, the cloud of witnesses, can offer us a kind of sight. But Clifton’s poetry grounds us in the possibility of birth as well, and one could argue that, in the corpus of her work, the past, present, and future live at once, and we are reminded to be rooted to it to nurture it. Her poem “birth-day” tells us:

today we are possible.

the morning, green and laundry-sweet,  
opens itself and we enter  
blind and mewling.

everything waits for us:

the snow kingdom

sparkling and silent  
in its glacial cap,

the cane fields  
shining and sweet  
in the sun-drenched south.

as the day arrives  
with all its clumsy blessings

what we will become  
waits in us like an ache.

Lucille Clifton’s poetry helps us to remember, reflect, and dream; and in that dreaming we must imagine the possibility of a future we can bring forth—a freedom we can birth—a child called liberation emerging after the pain and strife of this moment. Indeed, there is a sustenance in that future, and already we carry it—this art that lives in us like an ache.

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