Interview—Authored

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No. 49

"A Music in Language": A Conversation with Lucille Clifton

Susan B.A. Somers-Willett

Lucille Clifton, author of nine books of poetry, was born in 1936 in Depew, New York, as Lucille Sayles. Although she has written since childhood, Clifton's career as a published poet began in 1968 when she received the YM-YWHA Center Discovery Award. Her books of poetry include *Good Times* (1969), *Good News About the Earth* (1972), *An Ordinary Woman* (1974), *Next: New Poems* (1987), *Quilting: Poems 1978-1990* (1991), and *Book of Light* (1993). *Two-Headed Woman* (1980) and *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir 1969-1980* (1987) were both nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and her most recent book, *The Terrible Stories* (1995), was a finalist in the National Book Award competition. Her accolades include two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and serving as the former Poet Laureate of Maryland. Mother of six children, Clifton is also the author of over sixteen children's books. She is currently a Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary's College of Maryland.

In shifting gears from self-proclaimed housewife and mother to prominent poet and teacher, Clifton's career is most unique. Her assertive voice and short, fist-like lines stand apart from the more lyrical verse of contemporary poets. Common themes in her poetry include family relationships, African-American heritage, the crimes of history and politics, women's history, and spirituality. Although she acknowledges the influence of African American and women's traditions in writing, she maintains that hers is ultimately an American voice.

This interview was conducted in March 1998 at Duke University, where Clifton was the Blackburn Visiting Professor in English.

SSW: Why don't you tell me a little bit about your background and your family?

LC: I was born in a little town called Depew, New York, and my mother was born in Rome, Georgia. My father was born in Virginia. Neither of my parents finished elementary school. My father couldn't write, but he could read, and he was a great reader as was my mother. I grew up around books.

SSW: What kinds of books did they read?

LC: All kinds. My father was very interested in the Bible, so he did a lot of biblical reading, but he also read the news and all kinds of books. My mother had a great interest in China and so she read about it. It's interesting that my mother never saw, to my knowledge, a living Chinese person. This, of course, was before television, and yet she had such an interest in China. She read a lot of Freda Wright and Pearl Buck. She was curious about the world.

SSW: Did you grow up with poetry in the house, too?

LC: My mother used to recite poetry. I remember reading Paul Laurence Dunbar; he was a very traditional kind of African-American poet, born on my birthday in the 1880's. My mother also wrote poetry—very traditional, iambic pentameter verse—and when I would try to write, she would always say, "Oh baby that's not a poem. I'll show you how to write a poem." (Laughter)

SSW: Even though you grew up in New York State, do you feel you had a Southern upbringing?

LC: Without a question, because I had Southern parents—although I had never lived in the Deep South until I was a woman, and then just for short periods. My parents were great storytellers, which was very fortunate because I'm a listener, so I was able to learn much from them. My father especially was a great storyteller.

SSW: Do you feel some of that storytelling translates over to your own work today?

LC: I think yes, because I come both from my parents and the church. I grew up as a Southern Baptist. People have talked about me as a religious poet; yet I'm not religious at all. I have argued with people who insist I am. At a reading, a woman said, "You are Christian, you are!" and I kept saying, "Shouldn't I know this?"

SSW: What, in your mind, is the distinction between a religious poet and a spiritual poet? I ask because in the last two books of your poetry, you invoke biblical figures in several poems.

LC: Well, I think they are wonderful stories. But I don't think I'm religious because that has such a definite meaning among readers: religious will always mean Christian. I am well aware of the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity. Though I was raised as a Southern Baptist, one set of my godchildren is Jewish-Catholic, and the other set is Hindu. I've been to all those places of worship. In my house, I have a Bible, a Bhagavad-Gita, a Torah, and the Bahai book. My husband was a Yogi. I do believe in spirit and the world of spirits, but I don't think of myself as Christian because that word is so laden with baggage. A theologian at St. Mary's College said that I was post-denominational. I said, "Okay, thank you, now I understand."

SSW: Do you see your poems as one of those places of worship? Would you consider it?

LC: That's interesting. Perhaps this is how I worship. Perhaps this is my meditation, my way of exploring the sacred.

SSW: In your work, I see an awareness of spirituality that comes across well when your poems are

read aloud. How do you see your poetry in the context of an oral tradition, particularly an African-American oral tradition?

LC: In many ways I do think I'm a spiritual person and I grew up in an oral tradition, and so I think some of that extends to my work. That is to say, I am very interested in the *sounds* of poetry. There is a music in language, but that is not particularly African-American, nor is it new. It is rather an old tradition: poetry started with bards. It started as something for the ear as well as the eye. And I think within MFA programs, it has become a matter of the eye, quite often, more than the ear. And of course, poetry should balance both of those things.

SSW: Yes, some creative writing programs are criticized for urging students to professionalize their work or tailor voices for publication in certain magazines.

LC: Right, and what does that mean? Poetry as a career. Which is fine, I have made a career in poetry, but poetry is first an art. Poetry is something that speaks to the human condition. Stanley Kunitz once told me that I had a completely unique career, which is true, in that I've never taken creative writing lessons. I've never taken part in summer workshops and things like that except to teach them. I'm not a college graduate, which everybody knows—though I was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa last year.

SSW: Perhaps that's the best way to do it!

LC: I'm really tickled about it. It's a career that is outside of what people now consider the way to have a poetry career. Stanley talks about poetry as not a matter for the intellect, but a matter of telling the story of what it means to be human in this time and this place. I quite agree.

SSW: What kind of relationship do you have with your own children? You're the mother of six children?

LC: I am.

SSW: Tell me a little bit about your relationship with them and how that translates over into your writing; or do you feel that your family life and your writing are two different realms?

LC: Not exactly that. Personal life and public life are not the same, but I write about my personal life fairly often, as folks do. My children have never known me not to be writing, not to be someone who writes poetry. They've been asked on occasion, "How does it feel to have her as your mother?" "Well," they respond, "everybody's mother does something, ours does this." They have, on occasion, teased me about writing poetry and they think there is a particular way I am as a result of poetry. I have no clue; I have always been the way I am. But I also take great joy in my kids; they're in their thirties, my baby is 32 and the oldest just turned 38. They enrich my life, they enrich my understanding, they keep me connected to the world, and I'm very grateful for them. I like being a mother—it has many challenges.

SSW: When your first book of poetry came out, you had six children all under the age of 10, is that correct?

LC: I had four in diapers!

SSW: How did you manage that? (Laughter)

LC: My kids are 6 1/2 years apart in age. Some are the same age; my youngest ones are the same age for a few months. I guess I've never been that concerned about doing social things like joining clubs, and I wasn't the greatest housekeeper in the world. My kids matter to me tremendously, but I think that one does what

one has to do. I'm freer now than I ever was, in that they're all grown-ups. I was published although I didn't send poems out, and I still don't send poems out very much. I heard someone say, "That's what's wrong with her career," but there's nothing wrong with my career.

The way I was first published was quite unusual in that I had had a couple of poems published just obscurely. I've been writing since I was a young girl. I read in *Negro Digest*—it was later called *Black World*, and it no longer is published—about a man named Robert Hayden, a wonderful poet. It said he was part of the National Endowment for the Arts, and I thought, "Wow, he's a black man and he's a poet," because I saw no models, you see, even in the 60's. I had not heard of Gwendolyn Brooks, I didn't know about that tradition, but I thought, "Wow, this is a black guy, I'm going to send him a poem." This was so brave, I absolutely *never* did things like that. I was a housewife with six babies!

SSW: So in a way, seeing an African-American poet recognized for his accomplishments encouraged you in your own literary pursuits.

LC: I had first sent some poems to Langston Hughes, whom I had heard of; he was very kind about them and we corresponded. Then I sent them to Robert Hayden; he was no longer the Chair for National Endowment for the Arts, but he liked them a lot and gave the poems to Carolyn Kizer. She took them to the Poetry Center at the 92nd Street Y. After that, I was told I had won the Discovery Award.

SSW: Someone just entered you?

LC: Yes, I had never heard of the 92nd Street Y, nor the Discovery Award. The prize at that time was a reading at the 92nd Street Y. There were three

winners that year, and my husband and I were so excited because I got a chance to dress up. We drove to New York City and I changed clothes in the car, after I got somebody to babysit my kids.

At the reading, there was an editor from Random House in the audience, Natalie Robbins. She asked if I had a manuscript. That was, I guess, '68, because my first book was published in '69. I had a manuscript because I'm not casual in my work. I'm pretty casual about everything else, but a manuscript is not only word following word, line following line, space after space, but poem following poem. I think I can put a manuscript together fairly well, and so I gave her these poems, which became *Good Times*. Random House offered me a contract. I was shocked—I had no idea that would happen.

SSW: What were your feelings after publishing your first book, and how did you enter into writing children's books?

LC: I didn't know if I'd ever write any more. I mean, you don't "write a book," you write poem after poem until it becomes a book. *Good Times* was on the *New York Times* list of the best books of that year, and I was the first poet to read on the *Today* show. All of this happened, and suddenly I became this poet. I was shocked, absolutely shocked, and didn't know if I was going to do it again. Then the children's editor at Random House wanted to know if I had written for children, since I had so many of them. Probably not a lot of other female writers have had as many kids as I have. I found I could write for kids, so that became a whole different career. I remember when I got the first copy of *Good Times* I was so embarrassed. Yet I discovered that after it

was published, I started writing more.

SSW: Were you afraid to show it to others?

LC: Well, I thought people were going to laugh at it. I had thought of poets as these important people who are, well...

SSW: Are up on the mount?

LC: Right—and I was not on the mount, I knew it. But then I thought, if I'm going to do this again, I'd better get an agent. After I had written the book for children, the agent at Curtis Brown who specialized in children's books took me on for poetry as well. Marilyn Marlow has been my agent since 1969. We've just had a handshake, never a contract. She's very special to me. In fact, the book *The Terrible Stories* is dedicated to her.

SSW: So you just sort of fell into the publishing world by chance.

LC: Yes, but I like to tell people that I was ready. I didn't have to suddenly decide, "How do you put together a manuscript?" I had not been taught—I had learned and paid attention through reading.

SSW: Do you feel like you would have found yourself in this profession if you hadn't gotten that chance? Would you still be a poet and be teaching poetry workshops?

LC: I would have still been a poet, because I would have still written poems. As to whether I would have done the other stuff connected with it, I doubt it. These are not times for poets who have not gone the accepted route and who don't have MFA's. Whitman and Yeats didn't have MFA's, but that doesn't happen much anymore. When *Good Times* was published in 1969, I had been writing for probably fifteen or twenty years with serious intent. And the serious intent did not involve publishing, it involved trying to do this

thing well. I was always taught if your name is attached to something, you want to do the best you can at whatever it is.

I'm really trying to listen to the poem, hear it, try to help the poem become what it wants to be, not what I want it to be. I trust in the poem, so I would have written all my life. I think I started writing because something suggested I had to. There was in me an urgent desire to express that which is probably impossible to express. You know, all poets just come close. I count as good friends a lot of poets and none of us think that we've gotten it yet. That's what keeps us writing.

SSW: How do you come to poems? Do you tend to set aside some time every day to write, or do you write only when inspired?

LC: Well, poems are everywhere, really. I don't worry about things like writer's block, simply because I have come to learn that (I didn't always know this) sometimes you're just taking things in that won't come out. I compose on a typewriter.

SSW: Do you ever use a computer?

LC: Actually, by the time I get to where I'm sitting down to print out on a word processor, I've edited in my head. I work in my head a lot. I can't work with a pen and paper either. I need to see the look of the thing as close to print as I can. I learned to work in my head a lot because I had the kids. I would never put aside kids for a poem. I have many times put aside poems for kids. I'm started by a phrase perhaps, a word, a sound, more than something I'd see.

SSW: So you hear poems first?

LC: Something like that. I don't see that well actually. Sometimes what I see can trigger a poem, but I'm triggered more by sounds. A poem is the

sum of everything we are. It's a balance between intellect and intuition, between sound and sight. You should be able to physically feel a poem. We should respond to as many senses as possible and when I start writing—that is to say, when I sit down to do this—I'll go all day. My kids were very accustomed to that. I will write non-stop, and then when I'm not writing, when I'm taking in, I couldn't write my way out of a paper bag. When someone said to Toni Morrison, "What do you need to be a writer?" she responded, "Patience and a job." And I think that's absolutely true. My style came naturally to me, but the way I started writing was in very strict forms.

SSW: Just as your mother wrote, right?

LC: Yes, I started out writing sonnets like Edna St. Vincent Millay, and I was very interested in Emily Dickinson. I wrote a lot of sonnets when I was a girl—pretty crummy ones, really. But I wrote with the same kind of concern, I even had a lot of biblical references. I explored eroticism and mysticism, but I felt bound by it and I learned how to go beyond it.

SSW: What event or experience has been the most formative for you as a writer? I think specifically of your poem "fury" about your mother burning all of her poems.

fury

—for mama

remember this.
she is standing by
the furnace.
the coals
glisten like rubies.
her hand is crying.
her hand is clutching

a sheaf of papers.
poems.
she gives them up.
they burn
jewels into jewels.
her eyes are animals.
each hank of her hair
is a serpent's obedient
wife.
she will never recover.
remember. there is nothing
you will not bear
for this woman's sake.

LC: I will say this about this "fury": I've been teaching at St. Mary's College for seven or eight years. It was once suggested they endow a poetry chair, and they wanted to name it after me. Well, I didn't like the idea, but when they said, "Why don't we call it the Thelma Sayles Chair"—that's my mother's name—now I'm not going to say no to that.

I can't say whether seeing my mother burn her poems sparked in me the urge to write. Some people would see it and feel nothing, or feel sorry for her, but not be sparked to writing. Somebody told me once that some people are made poets and some people are born poets. I think I was probably a born poet; something in myself caused me to seek expression in this way. I can't explain it another way, and I do wonder about it.

SSW: Some critics have commented on your use of shorter lines and shorter poems; for example, in

many poems you use one-word lines. How does this distinctive attribute of your voice come to you—is that the way it sounds, or do you see this device in reaction to other kinds of poetry?

LC: No, I really don't do things in reaction to other kinds of poetry. Precision in language is always interesting to me. In speech, I couldn't care less, but in writing I try to use each word to its full possibility. I'm interested not only in definition. I'm thinking of the sound of the word, the music of the word, the definition, the history, the resonance, the baggage of the word—because all words have baggage. I'm thinking of all that with each word and so I don't need a lot of words.

I think my work has lots of layers, but it is not seen that way very often. Sometimes poets are interested in showing off, showing how smart they are or showing the wideness of their reading. I am interested primarily in connections between things and how we are connected as humans—how everything is connected and how words are as close as we can come to try to define those connections. I ask my students, "What do you think, what do you feel?" I want both of those things, because I am not writing to be a literary critic or theoretician. I am trying to get as close as I can to what it means to be human, and that closeness is not multi-syllabic.

SSW: So the feeling of your poetry is almost primal?

LC: Feeling matters to me a lot in poems because feeling is a thing that transcends culture, transcends race, transcends nationality, geography, theory. My understanding of the atom and the understanding of somebody in Timbuktu of the atom are very different. Our fears of the atom are close together. I think writers, good writers, understand this, but we get nervous because

everybody is an intellectual.

SSW: What would you say to critics who use the term "simple" to describe your work? The term has been used both praisingly and pejoratively...

LC: Yes it is, and I get annoyed about that, because simple is almost a negative...

SSW: ...at least within a critical language.

LC: Yes, I don't think of myself as simple and I think there is a bit of snobbishness, even a little racism in it. But you can't worry about that or you'd go nuts, you know. The first scholarly look at my work was by Alicia Ostriker. I was really grateful.

SSW: Do you think the fact that you never completed college fits into this?

LC: I think I'm as educated as the next person, especially since I have taught college for 20-something years. Somebody told me once that, "Some people may know a lot of stuff, but you know one good thing." And that might be enough.

SSW: A theme that I've noticed in your poetry is what I term "historical return," which is the re-vision of historical, biblical, or genealogical narratives. What do you think brings you to explore these topics? How do you hear these voices, and what is the urgency that brings you to put them down on the page?

LC: I'm not sure, excepting that I know that history is received and it can contain racist, sexist—by and large fascist tendencies. I know that history is not so, and so maybe I'm trying to balance it. Someone told me that what I do is find a myth in the human and a human in the myth. Biblical stories to me are much more interesting if they have human people. If Mary is a twelve-year-old girl, suddenly she's much more interesting to me. History has been the story of battles, and dates, and wars, and has been told by the winners of

the wars. Even losers will try—for instance, the history of Little Big Horn was told by the losers of the war and makes it sound as though they were winners. I like to explore what really happened; I am very interested in truth.

I tell students I am not particularly interested in fact; although sometimes facts are true, they are not the same thing. I'm very interested in the truth because I don't want to live in a mythology not of my own choosing. What humans do, what humans are capable of, human possibility—all of that is interesting to me. I have no idea why. I think I try to understand what humans naturally react to and apply that understanding to people in history or myth.

SSW: Changing mythos into human stories.

LC: Yes—it makes them more sacred even to me.

SSW: What do you think the ethics are for a poet undertaking a project of historical return in his or her work? Do you "reclaim" the stories through your voice?

LC: Well, it isn't as if the stories that we try to reclaim are told by the people who have lived them, so I don't know if that's the accurate story anyway. I believe that when living, one has the right to tell one's own secrets. I have no right to claim someone else's story, but I have an absolute right to mine. If I am going to tell the truth about whatever I see, I must first be sure that I have told the truth about me. But, it's not as if Eve's story is her true historical account, because I don't even know if there was an Eve. I claim for myself the right to tell what *I* perceive as that story, just as whomever wrote it does.

SSW: So in your mind, is there an overlap between the historical and the autobiographical? Or perhaps is one filtered by the other?

LC: Well, it isn't as if history is what really happened. It's like one myth overlapping another myth. There's a lot of history we're taught every day that's not true, so it isn't as if I'm taking absolute truths and twisting them. It isn't even as if I'm taking facts and twisting them. I am taking one story and suggesting an alternate story. *Suppose* this were it, *suppose* this were part of the story.

SSW: Light is also a common theme in your work—particularly in *Book of Light*—and Lucille, stemming from the Latin root *luc-*, means light. What does this light represent to you personally, and do you see it as merely a self-definition or does it go much beyond that?

LC: First of all, I do a lot of punning. I'm always connected in my head somewhere to Lucifer, the light-giver, and I'm big on the idea that there is in me and every other human the capacity of evil and good. One has to work hard to make sure the good happens. I've also always been able to get a feel for the unseen world and there is a kind of light about that—what mystics talk about when they talk about enlightenment. So it's sort of a play on all of those ideas.

SSW: I definitely see that kind of play in your work, even in form. A poem like "lucy and her girls" works on many different levels because it returns formally back to previous lines and it expresses the turn of generations—how each reflects the other. It's not a linear poem.

lucy and her girls

lucy is the ocean
extended by
her girls
are the river

fed by lucy
is the sun
reflected through
her girls
are the moon
lighted by
lucy
is the history of
her girls
are the place where
lucy
was going

LC: Right, it's almost a round. I have four daughters, and you know it's wonderful to see these grown-up women who are so...possible.

SSW: Your poetry also often speaks about the relationships between mothers and daughters. Do you think that your work could be classified as matrilineal? I've noticed you've done a lot of generational work back from mothers, but also through your father too.

LC: Yes, my father's stories are the stories of my grandmother. But I was very close to my mother—she dropped dead at 44 years old, a month before my oldest child was born almost forty years ago. She's a presence in my life always, I think because she burned her poems. I think I feel a kind of duty about doing what I do. It's a way of keeping her alive. A mother is not just a mother but the line of women who have made us what we are at great cost. I remember when my oldest daughter, when she was 13, asked me, "Mama, are you happy?" And I thought, now there's a question! Because I know the answer you're supposed to give: "Yes!" But I've always told my children the truth. I wanted to give her the answer that was safe, and so I said, "Sometimes I am; I am enough." What really got to me was that I had never asked my mother that. I had assumed, of course, she was happy, she was my mother, what more could any human want?

I think that there is a tendency to accept our mothers as put on earth to be our mothers, and yet we know we are women, we have desires and things apart from our children, apart from our families, apart from all of that. We have individual human desires. It had not occurred to me that that was true of my mother, too. So now I try to claim individuality for the women in my life who have made me what I am.

SSW: What does the wild woman, who often surfaces in your poetry, represent to you? Is this akin to the two-headed woman of your eponymous book?

LC: Zora Neale Hurston talked about the two-headed woman as someone who can see the outer world and the inner world, and I am like that. The wild woman is part of the complexity that makes me who I am. I spent a lot of time being a docile, good girl. But now I like to claim for myself a kind of complexity that others claim for themselves. Part of me is kind of a wild woman—I love adventures, meeting new people, seeing all parts of life. I'm that kind of person, why shouldn't I act like that? Nobody is just one thing.

There is in all cultures the exoteric—that is to say, the thing you see, the one you think you understand—and the esoteric—the shadow which is rarely seen or rarely understood. Often

people ask me questions dealing just with the intellect, as if poetry were an intellectual pas- time. The intellect is tremendously important, but poetry is a matter of humanness. Humans are more than their minds; they are complex. I like Bach and I like Star Trek. Whitman said, "Do I contradict myself, I contain multitudes," and why can't I also? We all do—I just don't mind talking about mine.

SSW: What goes through your head when you give a reading?

LC: I'm not ever nervous at a reading, unless my kids are in the audience. I generally don't have a fixed group of poems that I read. I often know something I'm going to start with and I often want to read something new because people want to hear it. I try to feel out the audience, like entering into a trance with them. Or I read what I want to hear—I have new poems I haven't heard that are rather dark, but I'll read them anyway. In *The Terrible Stories,* I have some poems about cancer. I also have some new poems about kidney failure. I had a transplant and so now I want to read some of those poems.

SSW: What do your battles with breast cancer and kidney failure mean to you as a poet? Have your poems helped you in your recovery processes?

LC: The kidney failure was worse for me than the cancer. The cancer was detected very early, I don't know why I figured I might be all right, but the kidney failure was unexpected and I was afraid of it. My youngest daughter donated her kidney, and I was afraid for her. If this messed up my daughter, could I live with myself? When I recovered—I'm still recovering really, I had the transplant in July 1997—I could see that there was a future ahead of me. I felt that there was a

lot to write, I had things to say.

I also began to wonder about why I survived these things and my friends didn't. Just two weeks before Christmas, I got a letter from Denise Levertov saying, "Lucille, I haven't heard from you and I'm worried, how is your health?" And I, of course, didn't write right back because I was so lazy. Later, my daughter was mailing cards, and said, "Mama, I'm taking out this card to Denise. It's in the paper, she just died." I felt so guilty. Why Denise, who was doing okay, everybody thought? I think about that sort of thing, it's probably why these latest poems are dark, they made me feel and think about the world and my place in it. But I do know I've got things to do, I have poems to write, and I wouldn't want to have gone out with just the poems that are here now. I just attended the 92nd Street Y and they introduced me as a "senior poet," and I thought, "I'm not a senior." I feel like a young poet. I feel like somebody's who's got a lot to do.

SSW: What are your perspectives on African-American women writers, or African-American writers and women writers, if you see them separately? How do you see yourself fitting into these traditions, if at all?

LC: I am, like all of them, an American poet. At the 92nd Street Y, *10th Muse* sponsors a program introducing new poets. I introduced Anne Caston, who is a former student of mine and a dear friend; Lorna Dee Cervantes, who is very well known on the West Coast but not as much in the East; and Cornelius Eady. Here is a white Appalachian woman, a Chicana/Native American woman, and a black man. All of these musics are the same music. This is American poetry in all of

its splendor.

I am not a sub-genre. If the American tradition were only New England white guys, most of them dead, then there's something wrong with that. But that is obviously not so! There are all these strands, all these songs that go into making American poetry. I substituted in a talk for Howard Nemerov when he was Poet Laureate of the United States and his talk was called, "I Hear America Singing." Mine was called, "I Too Sing American." All of these things become what American poetry is. As I am, I come through a woman's tradition and an African-American tradition. But it is all American poetry, a kind of...

SSW: ...a kind of celebration?

LC: I like to think so. I like to hope so. □