Sifting Legacies in Lucille Clifton's "Generations"
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in populated air
our ancestors continue
i have seen them.
i have heard
their shimmering voices
singing.

Lucille Clifton, *Two-Headed Woman*

The past and present wilt—I have fill’d them, emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

On the cusp of a new century, black women’s writing has been preoccupied with the recuperation and representation of the past two hundred years of black people’s lives in the United States and throughout the African diaspora. A confluence of social and historical events enabled the creation of “the community of black women writing” in the United States that Hortense Spillers designated a “vivid new fact of national life” (“Cross-Currents” 245). Those same events, the civil rights movement and the women’s movement chief among them, gave rise to the first generation of African Americans for whom cultural assimilation was a possibility. To a large degree, the urgent preoccupation with history in the writings of black women in the 1970s and 1980s registered alarm at the potential loss of a history that had never been accurately recorded. A striking number of novelists and
poets explore both the significance and the elusiveness of the past by reconstructing family genealogies. Among the authors and titles that come immediately to mind are Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*; Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow*; Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*; Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*; and Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, to cite a few of the best known. Genealogies in these texts are woven together out of individual and collective memory, as encoded in stories, songs, recipes, rituals, photographs, and writing.

If, on the one hand, the construction of these genealogies requires a sifting through familial legacies, their representation requires a sifting through literary legacies. Representing a past that is largely unwritten, caught in photographs, and remembered only in fragments of music and memory demands of writers both a visionary spirit and the capacity for dramatic revisions of form. These writers appropriate what they find useful in multiple literary traditions, from the King James Bible to Anglo-American modernism. But at those moments when the genealogical search is frustrated by gaps in written history and knowledge, the texts they create are likely to assume radically new forms. Despite the preoccupations with the past, these literary projects “proceed to fill [the] next fold of the future.” One of the earliest and least remarked, though most remarkable, of these projects is Lucille Clifton’s *Generations*.

Dedicated to the memory of her father, Lucille Clifton’s 1976 memoir recounts the events surrounding his death and becomes a meditation on the meaning of his life and the lives of the author’s extended family. Published the year before Alex Haley’s *Roots* and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, it anticipates the intensifying desire among African American writers to reconnect with an African past. Clifton’s ancestor figure is her great-great-grandmother, Caroline Donald Sale, who was born in Dahomey. In subject and form, *Generations* marked a departure for Clifton, whose first recognition had come with the publication of *Good Times* (1969), the volume of spare lyrics on the lives and in the voices of contemporary black urban dwellers.

*Generations* is the only memoir and the only extended narrative in an oeuvre that includes eight volumes of poetry and almost twenty children’s books. From the beginning, however, elusive references to family history recur in Clifton’s poetry. The first lines of the second and third poems in *Good Times* begin respectively “my mama moved
among the days” and “my daddy’s fingers move among the couplers.” As later poems confirm, the figures represented in these poems are Clifton’s parents. Born only two generations after slavery, Samuel and Thelma Moore Sayles had heard its terrible stories from those who had lived them. They had themselves migrated from the rural South to the industrialized North. (“Couplers” denotes machines in the steel mills where Samuel labored to support his family.) But unlike millions of African Americans who made similar journeys in the twentieth century, Samuel Sayles carried with him a recollection of a past more distant than slavery. For this family, the heroic memory of the ancestral journey from Dahomey to America, then from New Orleans to Virginia, becomes a talisman for later generations to stave off pain and grief.

In Generations prose and pictures combine to create a singular text. Each section of the text is introduced by a photograph that, like the words that follow, must be “read.” Taken together they constitute the family’s documentation of its history. Family photographs, Susan Sontag asserts, are “a portable kit of images that bears witness to [a family’s] connectedness” (8). Metonymically, photographs are “ghostly traces” that “supply the token presence of dispersed relatives” (9). Often they are all that remain of an extended family. Photography, Sontag concludes, “is an elegiac art” (15).

Handed down through generations of her family, the photographs are both a source that allows Clifton to reconstruct a history from the images her ancestors preserved and a crucial component of the text she creates. Writing of the importance of photographs in the documentation of black life, bell hooks avers, “When the psychohistory of a people is marked by ongoing loss, when entire histories are denied, hidden, erased, documentation may become an obsession” (48). For African Americans, for whom illiteracy was one of slavery’s legacies, photographs became a way to document a history that they could not write down. Preserved not only in photograph albums but displayed on the walls of the most humble homes, these “pictorial genealogies” were one means by which black people “ensured against the losses of the past.” “As children,” hooks writes of herself and of those African Americans who grew up under segregation, “we learned who our ancestors were by endless narratives told to us as we stood in front of pictures” (51).
The interaction between words and images in *Generations* replicates the process hooks describes. The photographs evoke the stories that Clifton has been told and which she distills for her memoir. Capturing what Walter Benjamin described as the aura emanating from “the fleeting expression of a human face” and conveying a “melancholy, incomparable beauty” (226), these photographs participate in the volume’s ritual of remembrance. They evoke the melancholy, incomparable beauty of Clifton’s poetry/prose.

Formally posed and professionally taken, a photograph above the heading “Caroline and son” opens the volume. Two seated figures occupy the foreground. The female figure, an elderly woman wearing a plaid gingham dress and a small hat, holds her left arm at her side; in her right hand, resting on her lap, she grips an object that appears to be either a small purse or a cameo. The younger male figure’s attire is more formal; he wears a jacket with white shirt and tie and broadcloth pants. His left leg is crossed over his right, and his fists are clenched. Their clothing and their postures signify their self-possession.

The epigraph for this section borrows the famous opening lines of “Song of Myself”: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself / And what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” As in Whitman’s poem, the pronoun references are ambiguous; they may refer to the subjects of the photograph, to the narrator of the volume, and/or to the reader. To be sure, the subjects celebrate themselves in the very act of recording their images. As nineteenth-century African Americans, Caroline Sale and her son rejected the degrading images the society defined for them and forged their own self-representation. Their descendant, the narrator,

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1. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin notes that the portrait was the focal point of early photography; but as the art form developed, it lost its ritualistic function (226). The formal portrait of Caroline Sale and her son, taken before her death in 1910, belongs to that early phase. But all of the photographs in *Generations* enact a ritualistic function.

2. In the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman inserted the following lines, stressing his nativist genealogy, just after the opening lines: “My tongue, every atom of blood, form’d from this soil, this air, / Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same.” David S. Reynolds asserts, “In both his life and his writings, Whitman showed a persistent instinct to keep strong [a] ‘succession of links’ with his family’s past” (9).
celebrates them as well. She and they are connected, even if, as seems likely, she does not know which of Caroline's four sons is depicted in the photograph. Connected, too, are the readers who share the national identity Whitman claims in his poem and which Clifton by quoting it here claims here as well. The Sale/Sayles history, fragmented as it is, is ours as "Americans" as well. We are all imbricated in the genealogy represented by this picture.

In keeping with its ritualistic purpose, some of the text's language is created to simulate the language spoken by Clifton's ancestors. Like Morrison, Marshall, and Walker, Clifton explores and preserves the elders' language. In "Coming in from the Cold," Walker reflects that it is "truly astonishing how much of their language is present tense, which seems almost a message to us to remember that the lives they lived are always current, not simply historical" (60). Not only is Caroline's experience alive to the narrator, but by representing her father's voice as the medium through which her ancestors speak, Clifton closes the gap between the past and the present for her reader. As a poet, Clifton creates the effect of orality through repetition, assonance, and rhyme, as well as through direct and indirect discourse.

The language of the text has its own complex genealogy. Two of its roots are signaled by the volume's paired epigraphs. The first is from the King James Bible, the cadences of which inform much African American literature. Taken from Job, the Bible's supreme book of suffering and tribulation, the epigraph recounts Job's response to his friends' charge that he has brought his travails on himself. Job would reason with God, but he will not defend himself to his friends. "Lo, mine eye hath seen all this, mine ear hath heard and understood it. What ye know, the same do I know also; I am not inferior unto you" (Job 13:1–2). For Clifton and her kin, slavery is the original, inexplicable travail. But a scourge of tribulations follows the family's passage to freedom. Generations is a volume that documents without apology what this family has seen, heard, and understood. The second epigraph is attributed to

The woman called Caroline Donald Sale
born free in Afrika in 1822
died free in America in 1910

It commands, "Get what you want, you from Dahomey women." Thus it sets the tone for the volume: while it records the suffering of slavery and beyond, *Generations* resonates with the spirit of resistance and survival. The placement of the epigraphs establishes an equivalence between them: the King James Bible and African American oral tradition are both literary influences and repositories of wisdom. Caroline Sale, no less than Job, is a source of spiritual guidance and inspiration.

Throughout *Generations*, in repeated allusions to Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," Clifton pays homage to her foremost white American literary ancestor. Whitman and Clifton share aesthetic, political, and spiritual affinities. For both, the poetry of the Bible, colloquial speech, and popular music are key poetic referents. Dedicated to producing in *Leaves of Grass* "the idiomatic book of my land," Whitman argued, "Great writers penetrate the idioms of their races, and use them with simplicity and power" (qtd. in Reynolds 129). Clifton has declared her pride in using "a simple language." What Italian opera and Anglo-American folk music are to Whitman, blues and other forms of African American folk music are to Clifton. The influences of speech and music, rather than the conventions of English poetry, led Whitman to write what was symbolically as well as technically "free verse." Sherley Anne Williams points to techniques in Clifton's poetry that "approximate or parallel various blues devices" (83). For Williams, poetry like Clifton's marks "the beginning of a new tradition built on a synthesis of black oral traditions and Western literate forms" (87).

Their politics, like their poetics, demonstrate the democratic convictions that Whitman and Clifton share. The persona of "Song of Myself" declaims that "through me the many long dumb voices / voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves" speak. Such sentiments have inspired many African American poets, in addition to Clifton, to count themselves among Whitman's literary descendants. 4 In fact, although Whitman stood apart from

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4. Donald B. Gibson analyzes Whitman's influence on Langston Hughes in "The Good
most white Americans in his recognition of black people's humanity, his egalitarianism was tinged with the racism endemic to his time.\(^5\) If Whitman's sympathies did not wholly extend to the slaves, however, they were profoundly working class. His affinity for photography reflected an understanding of its democratic potential. Dedicated to the creation of a gallery of American images, Whitman saw in the photographer's art an analogue to his own. The son of a displaced farmer who struggled to support his family as a carpenter, Whitman came by his class consciousness honestly. So does Clifton.

More important, both poets are mystics, whose spiritual beliefs transcend religious orthodoxy. "Song of Myself" embraces all faiths "ancient and modern and all between" (sec. 43). Clifton's oeuvre includes cycles of poems inspired by Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and Kali, the Hindu goddess.\(^6\) Both poets perceive what Clifton deems "the Light" in the miracle of ordinary things and the divinity of ordinary people. Armed with the insights that mysticism provides, both poets adopt personae who transcend time and space. The exuberant "I" of "Song of Myself" declares, "I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents, / I am afoot with my vision" (sec. 33). Linking the acquisition of vision to the process of writing, the "I" of Generations reflects, "I type that and I swear I can see Ca'line standing in the green of Virginia, in the green of Afrika, and I swear she makes no sound but she nods her head and smiles" (79). Clifton's persona becomes the witness who will write/right the story of her ancestors. In letting a quotation from "Song of Myself" stand as the final words of Generations, Clifton seals the bond between her project and Whitman's: "I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait."

Reconstructing family legacies requires another kind of imaginative act. Hortense Spillers argues that the loss of the patronymic to

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\(^5\) Like Abraham Lincoln, Whitman criticized abolitionism and accepted the existence of slavery in those areas of the United States where it was already established. He could not envision a nation in which blacks and whites were equal citizens. See Reynolds 111–53.

\(^6\) Clifton's oeuvre reflects an ongoing engagement with the Bible, from a cycle of poems, "Some Jesus," in which she retells biblical narratives in Good News about the Earth, to lyrics on Old Testament figures and spiritual meditations in The Book of Light, to the cycle "From the Book of David" in The Terrible Stories. The "Kali" poems appeared in An Ordinary Woman. See Hull for a discussion of Clifton's mysticism.
cultural memory is the "ground" on which the captive African is "symbolically broken in two—ruptured along the fault of a 'double consciousness' in which the break with an indigenous African situation is complete, but one's cultural membership in the American one remains inchoate" ("Permanent Obliquity" 129–30). In the prologue to Generations, the narrator's father remembers that Caroline Sale would not divulge her African name, despite his warning that "it'll be forgot." Repeatedly Caroline reassures him: "Don't you worry, mister, don't you worry" (7). Although the text cannot retrieve her African name either, it confirms the ancestor's belief that she will not be forgotten.

What Generations effects is a healing of the rupture Spillers defines by demonstrating African American membership in the web of kin. In Spillers's phrase, the "line of inheritance from a male parent to a female child is not straight" ("Permanent Obliquity" 127). The narrator's father in Generations passes the legacy of memory to his daughter but emphasizes its female progenitor. Belatedly, the narrator inserts her mother into the family genealogy handed down by her father and thus overrides patriarchal concepts of lineage. In the end, she charts familial descent as neither patrilineage nor matrilineage, but a fusion of both.

Stories, not photographs, provide the narrator's link to Dahomey, the ancient African nation fabled for its female warriors. Dahomey in Generations is more dream than destination in this journey to understand the past. In "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," Melvin Dixon observes, "If family disruption and loss of precise genealogy distance black Americans from more solid, or literal, connections to an African identity, they nonetheless increase our predilection for the way figurative connections become charged with increasing symbolic importance" (21–22). Only as she is on the line to Dahomey can the narrator conjure up the relatives she has never known and come to terms with those she has known, but not well enough.

The voice that initiates the action of Generations is the narrator's sister's; but before we learn her identity we read a transcription of her words. Unpunctuated, they run together like a torrent: "he finished his eggs and his bacon and his coffee and said Jo get me one of them True Greens and I got him his cigarette and went upstairs to get a ashtray and when I got back he was laying on the floor and
blood was all on his mouth like when Mama used to have her fits and I hollered Daddy Daddy Daddy” (9). Not only does the representation capture the immediacy of the moment—one sister calls another to report the death of their father—but in its rush of detail it begins to sketch the portrait of the man and the history of the family. The use of the conjunction “and” replicates its use in colloquial speech. The speaker and the auditor share an intimate history which allows them to assume knowledge of facts (the mother’s “fits,” for example) that readers do not share. In the interior monologue that follows this passage, the text begins to convey the aura of the man his daughter Lucille refers to as “Mr. Sayles Lord,” “Old Brother Sayles,” and “the Rock.” When Lucille begins to address the dead father directly, the image of strength is softened by the terms of endearment the father’s memory elicits from his child.

Within the space of four paragraphs, the news is reported, the initial grief recorded, and the narrator’s journey to Buffalo for the burial begun. While making that journey in a car driven by her husband, accompanied by her brother, Lucille remembers the stories her father has told about Caroline, who walked north from New Orleans to Virginia as part of a coffle when she was eight years old. Accounts of the journeys of the bereaved daughter and the motherless slave girl alternate. “Mammy Ca’line” becomes the model for coping with the inconceivable.7

Critic Karla Holloway coins the term “(re)membrance” to denote the cultural inscriptions of memory in texts by women across the African diaspora: “These are works that claim the texts of spoken memory as their source and whose narrative strategy honors the cultural memories within the word” (25). Generations illustrates Holloway’s point; it enacts the process of (re)membrance, as it represents the daughter’s efforts to recall the father’s words and through them the ancestor’s deeds. Repetition for the text’s characters serves as a mnemonic device; it is also a primary structuring tool.

7. “Mammy” is a word that carries a lot of freight. Alice Walker has explained that she hoped to use the word “Mammy” in The Color Purple “as a word used by turn-of-the-century black people, instead of ‘mother,’ though already in a somewhat pejorative way” (60). “Mammy” in Generations works similarly. A white woman in the prologue is the first to refer to “Mammy Caroline,” but Lucille’s father uses the title as well. The narrator Lucille does not.
The phrase that triggers the memory is "'Mammy Ca'line raised me,' Daddy would say." Having established the fact that the father's stories were told and retold, the narrator recalls more of his words. He would describe the woman's physical posture ("tall and skinny and walked straight as a soldier") and her voice (she spoke with "an Oxford accent"). To the father, the different accent and vocabulary—she would chastise him by saying, "stop the bedlam"—are markers of intellectual superiority (11). But by embedding Caroline's criticisms in the father's black American vernacular soundings, the text refuses this reading. It honors the intelligence and strength of the parent as well as the ancestor. The father's precocity and his grounding in an oral tradition preserve the ancestor's legacy:

She was a dark old skinny lady and she raised my Daddy and then raised me, least till I was eight years old when she died. When I was eight years old. I remember everything she ever told me, cause you know when you that age you old enough to remember things. I remember everything she told me, Lue, even though she died when I was eight years old. And then I knewed about what she remembered cause that's how old she was when she got here. Eight years old.

(11–12)

In the tradition of the African griot, Samuel Sayles has preserved the family's history. But the dislocations of slavery disrupt tradition; history becomes what eight-year-old minds can retain. The insistent repetition of the age indicts the system of slavery that robs generations of childhood, even as it honors the spirit that enabled the child Samuel to remember fragments of the past. In another fragment Samuel recites the states through which Caroline walked on her journey from New Orleans, her port of disembarkation in the "New World," to Virginia. Walking the land is the means through which she stakes a claim to it for herself and for her heirs. Intoning the names he recalls of the next generations—Lucy (the narrator is her namesake) and Gene—Samuel begins to chart the family tree. The use of the conjunction "and" in this telling not only replicates patterns of speech; it stresses the links through which a family genealogy is constructed despite the gaps in the line.8

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8. Etheridge Knight's poem "The Idea of Ancestry" provides a compelling counterpoint. Knight's speaker represents his own troubled life as the gap in the family's line.
Readers have learned earlier in the text that Lucy is Caroline's daughter. But Lucy's photograph surprises. It is the most formal portrait in the volume. The drapery and the side chair on which the woman's right arm rests are typical trappings of the nineteenth-century photography studio. The subject's elegant gown completes the bourgeois ambience. As Claudia Tate has reminded us, for African Americans in the late nineteenth century, upward social mobility and political resistance often went hand in hand. If the difference in the way they dress to be photographed suggests a social distance between Lucy and her mother, the erectness of Lucy's carriage substantiates a psychological affinity. Lucy, too, is a Dahomey woman. The accompanying epigraph from "Song of Myself" underscores the spirit of resistance: "I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood, / I see that the elementary laws never apologize." Finally, even if only a result of aging, the lights and shadows of the photograph create the effect of Lucy's standing in a circle of light. The rhetoric of the image and the verbal text combine to suggest the analogy between her and an elemental force.9

9. This discussion is informed by my reading of Roland Barthes's "The Rhetoric of the Image."

Later in her career, Clifton becomes fascinated by the etymology of the name "Lucille," which is derived from the Latin for "bright light." In a poem published in An Ordinary Woman, she honors her foremother and her name:

light
on my mother's tongue
breaks through her soft
extravagant hip
into life.
Lucille
she calls the light,
which was the name
of the grandmother
who waited by the crossroads
in Virginia
and shot the whiteman off his horse,
killing the killer of sons.
light breaks from her life
to her lives . . .

For readers of Generations, the poem's final lines deepen the speaker's identification not only with Lucy, but with Caroline Sale. As if to honor Caroline's decision not to tell
“Photographs are relics of the past,” John Berger has written. Clifton’s volume asks the reader, no less than the writer and her subjects, to participate in the process of making these relics meaningful. As Berger continues, “if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would re-acquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments” (57). The narratives that contextualize the images of Lucy and Gene exemplify the creation of a living context for two who were cut down long before Lucille was born. Reproducing their images invites readers to imagine details of the histories that the memoir can only sketch.

Although the drama of Lucy’s story is as striking as the light in which she is figured, the text defers its telling. Instead, much like nineteenth-century slave narratives, it interpolates narratives of slaves, whose treatment has been more severe than the protagonist’s. Specifically, Generations records stories of slaves who have been bought as gifts for their masters. The first vignette ends with lines that summarize the chapter’s theme: “‘Oh slavery, slavery,’ my Daddy would say. ‘It ain’t something in a book, Lue. Even the good parts was awful’” (22). What is awful in the present narrative is the father’s death and Lue’s grief. She views his corpse, sleeps in the room that was hers as a teenager, and, inevitably, remembers her father’s stories. Lucy was the “[f]irst Black woman legally hanged in the state of Virginia” (27). Her crime was murdering the white father of her son.

As the narrator recites the story, it assumes the quality of a ballad of which Lucy is the heroine. If the words (printed on the page as prose) are arranged into verse form, their balladic effect becomes clear. “Harvey Nichols was a white man,” the song begins, and a story of lost love unfolds:

And this Harvey Nichols saw Lucy and wanted her
and I say she must have wanted him too
because like I told you, Lue,
she was mean and didn’t do nothing
she didn’t want to do . . . .

(33)

Samuel her African name, the speaker of this poem concludes defiantly, “mine already is / an afrikan name” (72). She thereby claims a connection to Africa, while embracing the history of her family in the U.S.
Born under the shadow of slavery, Lucy and Harvey’s son, Gene, is disfigured: “But oh, Lue, he was born with a withered arm / Yes, Lord, he was born with a withered arm.” These lines recur like a refrain. In the section devoted to Gene, it becomes clear that his maiming is psychological as well as physical. Here, however, more emphasis is placed on Lucy’s victory. She was tried for her act and hanged, rather than lynched, a rare example of due process that the narrator attributes to Caroline Sale’s standing in the community. Caroline was a midwife, who earned the respect and gratitude of her black and white patients. The limitations of Caroline’s status become painfully clear (and even the “good parts” of a slave’s life are revealed as “awful”) as the text represents her as a witness to her daughter’s hanging. “And I know she made no sound but her mind closed around the picture like a frame and I know that her child made no sound and I turn in my chair and arch my back and make this sound for my two mothers and for all Dahomey women” (35).

Sounds and pictures and the sounds pictures evoke are precisely the theme this section develops. The photograph of Lucy is the catalyst for the story that is told through the sound of the father’s remembered voice. The effect of the balladlike structure is to heighten the artifice of the tale. Despite the narrator’s profession of knowing, she cannot know the facts of her foreparents’ lives. Lucy remains “a shadow,” which coincidentally was a popular term for photographs in the nineteenth century. In two paragraphs that constitute a coda to Lucy’s story, her great-granddaughter Lucille confronts the question of evidence. Neither her father nor her husband can provide the proof she desires: they tell her in effect what Caroline Sale has told her great-grandson about her missing name: “not to worry.” But Fred Clifton goes farther when he adds “that even the lies are true. In history, even the lies are true” (35). He reiterates the problematic of written and oral texts, history and legend, with which Generations wrestles. Pursuing what Toni Morrison in “Rootedness” calls “another way of knowing” (342), a way that depends on sounds and pictures, Lucille Clifton creates a literary text that recovers what history cannot. If it is no more or no less “true,” it is no more or less a “lie.”

The picture of a handsome, mustachioed black man, wearing a derby, a white shirt with bow tie, and a double-breasted jacket is surrounded by a thick black border. While the torn border is proba-
bly the remnant of a frame pasted in a photo album, it creates the visual effect of a bull’s-eye. The target is Gene, the now grown child of tragedy. “What is a man anyhow? what am I? what are you?” Whitman’s questions call the reader as much as Gene to account. Even more pointedly they echo the volume’s dedication: “for Samuel Louis Sayles, Sr. / Daddy / 1902–1969 / who is Somewhere, / being a Man.” Appropriately, Samuel’s story, including his definition of manhood, opens this section. As the memoir chronicles the lives of the generations the narrator has known firsthand, its gaps and omissions are no less evident but far more troubling. Here the impediment is not what the narrator does not know but what she cannot tell.

“Every man has to do three things in life, he had said, plant a tree, own a house and have a son,” records the pronouncement Samuel makes on the occasion of buying a house (39). Given the volume’s poignant references to the home as it stands at his death, one expects its purchase to add luster to his character. Yet the description of the event renders it more selfishly arrogant than heroic. Without consulting his wife, he purchases a home just as his last daughter, Lucille, is about to leave for college. No one is nearly so well pleased by his act as he is. Earlier revelations about Samuel Sayles had complicated his representation as heroic. For example, within a brief span of time he fathered three daughters by three women who had all been friends. His first wife died shortly after giving birth to Punkin, after which he married Lucille’s mother; six months after Lucille was born, a third woman gave birth to Jo. Moreover, from the evidence of the text, Samuel Sayles failed to shelter the spirits of his children. At the moment he buys his house, Punkin is described as “walking the line” between her two natal families and the one she is procreating; Jo has begun “the slow dance between the streets and the cells” that she “practiced” for many years, and the coveted son had started the “young Black boy’s initiation into wine and worse” (40). Only Lucille seems destined for success, having won a scholarship to Howard University. Almost as soon as this information is disclosed, however, the reader is told that Lucille loses her scholarship after two years and returns home in disgrace. Her father’s stinging judgment of her becomes her judgment of him: her idol has feet of clay.

Nonetheless, his daughter remains reluctant to censure him. Samuel’s weaknesses are clarified when his narrative is placed side
by side with his father's. As Samuel recounts the story of Gene Sayles's life, he emphasizes the penchant for wild living that he attributes in large measure to his good looks (in particular the light brown eyes and cinnamon skin bequeathed Gene by his white father) and his misinterpretation of Caroline's dictum to do whatever he wants since he is from Dahomey women. Samuel will not condemn his father's "craziness" because he recognizes the burden his grandparents' death imposed on his father. Nowhere is the psychological weight of that burden more tellingly betrayed than in the first line of Samuel's remembrance of his father: "'Genie called me Rock,' my Daddy would say" (47). The roles of protector and protected, nurturer and nurtured, parent and child are turned inside out. The son is the rock on whom the father leans. Samuel grows up believing what Caroline has said of the family: it produces strong women and weak men. Nevertheless, Samuel's final statement about Gene radiates compassion: he "didn't hardly get to be a man. He wasn't much past thirty years old when he died" (44).

Samuel, we are told, in the lines that immediately follow these, is thirty-five when Lucille is born. Clearly he is not altogether wrong in asserting that he has broken the mold by becoming a strong man. But the pattern of children assuming adult responsibilities too soon and adults becoming too maimed to discharge their duties to their children leaves its mark on the generations that follow. If children cannot comprehend the lives of fathers like Gene who are defeated, even less can they understand the lives of fathers like Samuel who survive. "Once I asked him," Lucille recollects, "why he was so sure that he was going to heaven. God knows me, he said. God understands a man like me" (45). His daughter muses that her mother certainly had not. Neither does she.

The parents, we are told, do not sleep together for twenty years. At one point the narrator recalls, "We children were not close to Daddy in those days" (40). The nearest the narrative comes to an explanation is "Now, he did some things, he did some things, but he always loved his family" (75). If Generations does not account for the fissures between husband and wife, father and daughter, several of Clifton's later poems explore the legacy of Samuel Sayles as a father who sexually abused his children. For example, the poem "June 20," published in The Book of Light in 1993, begins, "i will be born in one
week / to a frowned forehead of a woman / and a man whose fingers will itch / to enter me” (12).10 The daughter, targeted even before her birth, is destined to suffer her father’s compulsions, while the distraught mother looks on helplessly.

The situation that the poem describes is typical of the family dynamic reported in clinical studies of incest. According to Judith Herman, abused daughters view their fathers “as perfect patriarchs. They [are], without question, the heads of their households. Their authority within the family [is] absolute, often asserted by force. They [are] also the arbiters of the family’s social life and frequently [succeed] in virtually excluding the women in the family.” Yet even if the members of the family fear them, they “[impress] outsiders as sympathetic, even admirable men” (71). Such discrepancy deepens the daughter’s confusion, since she may not only fear and admire the father: she loves him as well. In Herman’s studies, mothers were often ill or incapacitated, and consequently powerless to protect their daughters. “At best, the daughters viewed their mothers ambivalently, excusing their weaknesses as best they could. . . . At worst, the relations between mother and daughter were marked by active hostility” (81). Whether ambivalence or hostility, the rift between mother and daughter cannot be healed, because its cause cannot be admitted. If they are fortunate, daughters become what scholar Sue Blume calls “secret survivors,” whose inability to name the abuse committed against them lingers into adulthood.

The lingering compulsion to keep the family’s secret may well explain the silence surrounding incest in Generations.11 Nonetheless,

10. Once she resolves to explore publicly what it means to be an incest survivor, Clifton returns to the theme repeatedly. See, for example, “Forgiving My Father” in Two-Headed Woman, “To My Friend Jerina” in Quilting, and “Sam” and “My Lost Father” in The Book of Light. Notably, “Daughters,” the poem that follows “June 20” in The Book of Light, charts a matrilineage: “woman, i am / lucille, which stands for light, / daughter of thelma, daughter / of georgia, daughter of / dazzling you” (13).

11. This seems sufficient reason, although the influence of the Black Arts movement with which Clifton was aligned might have reinforced her decision to maintain her silence. To be sure, the seeming exaltation of the father in Generations earned approval for Clifton in some quarters. Black Arts poet and critic Haki Madhubuti praised Clifton for her “unusually significant and sensitive” treatment of black men. He speculated that “part of the reason she treats men fairly and with balance in her work is her relationship with her father, brothers, husband, and sons. Generally, positive relationships produce positive results” (152). Madhubuti contrasts Clifton to unnamed black women writers
one is struck by the similarity between the story Clifton does not tell and those that she does. Incest follows a pattern established in earlier generations of this family where children assumed roles that were rightly their parents'. Of course, the transgression of familial boundaries was one of slavery's gravest crimes. In Spillers's words, "The original captive status of African females and males in the context of American enslavement permitted none of the traditional rights of consanguinity" ("Permanent Obliquity" 129). Slavery undermined "Father's Law," as children legally followed the condition of the mother. At the same time, it rendered the social identities available to women under patriarchy—"mother," "daughter," "sister," "wife"—tenuous for Africans in the Americas. If the incest taboo polices the boundaries between adults and their children in sexual matters, what happens under conditions in which boundaries between adults and children—between the duties of adulthood and the entitlements of childhood—have long been blurred?

Unlike several of her contemporaries, notably Gayl Jones and Toni Morrison, Clifton chooses not to address this question directly. But her understanding of the history that surrounds it may inform the representation of her father in Generations and in subsequent poems. In "Album," dated "12/2/92," she pens a portrait of her father as "this lucky old man." It reveals much more than the photograph of Samuel Sayles in Generations. The first stanza of "Album" pictures him spiffily dressed, "waving and walking away / from damage he has done." Then in an echo of the dedication to the memoir, the poem ends with this stanza of long deferred resolution:

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today
is his birthday somewhere.
he is ninety.
what he has forgotten
is more than i have seen.
what i have forgotten
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whose negative portrayals of black men allegedly won them critical acclaim and commercial success. For an astute critique of Madhubuti's argument and of the negative response of several prominent black male critics to black women's fiction of the 1970s and 1980s, see McDowell.

12. I think of Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Jones's Corregidora. Moreover, Maya Angelou, Morrison, and Alice Walker by stunning coincidence in 1970 all published ground
is more than i can bear.
he is my father,
our father,
and all of us still love him.
i turn the page, marveling,
jesus christ
what a lucky old man!

(Terrible Stories 51)

Samuel Sayles’s photograph in Generations is a snapshot rather than a studio portrait, as befits a subject who could only belong to the twentieth century. Gazing directly into the camera, a hint of a smile creasing his face, Sayles stands erect; but the hand in his pocket suggests a bearing less than military. Suavely dressed, replete with vest, suspenders, tie, and sharply creased trousers, he looks like his father’s son. The layout of the photo marks him as his daughter’s father. Snapped outdoors in early spring, to judge from the budding trees, the photograph poses him equidistantly between two houses. It is impossible to tell to which, if either, he belongs. That he owns himself seems an incontrovertible fact. In retrospect, it confirms Susan Sontag’s observation that “the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses” (23).

The passage from “Song of Myself” which serves as the epigraph to this section does not speak to who Samuel Sayles was—elsewhere he is described as the “[f]irst colored man to own a dining room set in Depew New York” (66)—but to what has become of him: “All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier” (54). What follows is the briefest chapter in the book. Two pages recount the rituals of his funeral and burial and a third charts the genealogy he passed on to Lucille. As the epigraph foretells, the experience of death, incomprehensible as it is, has left Samuel’s spirit intact. His spirit, rather than his misdeeds, is what the poet memorializes. In death he has been lucky indeed.

breaking explorations of sexual abuse within black families, in the autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and the novels The Bluest Eye and The Third Life of Grange Copeland, respectively.
In her memoir, Clifton dramatizes a particular moment wherein her father passes his spirit on to her. Fittingly for a poet, the medium is a letter, which Lucille receives during her first week away at college. What renders the deed wondrous to the poet is that the father is illiterate: he could only write his name. As represented in the text, the letter bears markers of illiteracy: “Dear Lucilleman, I miss you so much but you are there getting what we want you to have be a good girl signed your daddy” (69). A second letter from the mother underlines the effort writing the letter required (“Your daddy has written you a letter and he worked all day”) and the love that it reflects. Interestingly, Samuel’s letter constitutes a direct transcription of speech into writing. But turning speech into poetry is not a matter of mere transcription. Samuel’s letter reminds the reader of how skillfully Clifton has transformed the voices of her people into literary art. Clifton’s craft is indeed, as Alicia Ostriker asserts, “a set of unerring gestures governed by a constraining and shaping discipline, so habitual that it seems effortless” (41). The result in Generations is a careful conjunction of media and a synthesis of formal and vernacular poetic influences. Perhaps it is this same “constraining and shaping discipline” that allows Clifton at once to honor the father’s memory and to challenge it.

The volume’s final section is devoted to Clifton’s mother, Thelma. Twelve years younger than her husband, she died a decade earlier, when she was only forty-four. By that time she had long suffered debilitating illnesses, the exact nature of which were apparently not diagnosed, but which impaired her mentally as well as physically. In several of Clifton’s short lyrics, Thelma Moore Sayles is an elusive figure, a dreamwalker moving through life in her own rhythm: “seemed like what she touched was hers / seemed like what touched her couldn’t hold” (Good Times 2). Her life is described as ineffably sad, yet her spirit is somehow “magical.”

As if to illustrate the elusiveness of her personality, Thelma’s section is introduced by two photographs. The larger one, a snapshot, depicts a brown-skinned woman with a full face and short hair seated next to a window; the top of her head is almost even with the bottom of the window, which is propped open by a book. Through the window, which dominates the photograph, one can detect only shadows, as if the window faced another building. Open venetian
blinds create the effect of bars. The woman is seated left of center (the photograph has been cropped, and one wonders whether another figure had been posed on the other side of the window). She looks away from the camera, and she does not smile. Inset in the left-hand corner is a head shot of what appears to be the same woman when she was younger. It could well be a photo taken in a self-service booth of the kind that was once common in dime stores. Wearing a coat and a felt hat set at an angle over her shoulder-length hair, this woman looks directly into the camera, grinning.13

Whitman’s words here proclaim, “They are alive and well somewhere, / The smallest sprout shows there is really no death” (62). Extending the theme of generativity announced in this epigraph, the section begins with the mother’s birth in Rome, Georgia, in 1914. Her father had migrated north on the same train that carried Samuel Sayles. Both men sought work that the steel mills promised; they were hired as strikebreakers. Although it describes the environment of the small industrial town, populated mainly by Polish immigrants, in which these men and their families settled, it recounts few incidents in Thelma’s life. In part the various stories contained within the section illustrate the speaker’s claim that “the generations of colored folks are families” (64). But they also highlight the extent to which Thelma is absent from the narrative one expects to be devoted to her life.

When she is present at all—in the briefest of anecdotes—Thelma is the figure of the first photograph: a woman whose life is off center and whose spirit is confined. The cost of sustaining the family narrative, for a woman who is not mythically strong, is psychological isolation and sexual deprivation. Thelma escapes into romantic fantasies at the movies, where it is safe to do so. When she attempts to actualize the fantasy by buying herself a wedding ring, for example, she is humiliated. The daughter in the text recounts odd behavior of her own in an apparent attempt both to identify with the

13. In the first edition, this section contains two additional photographs. One depicts two women of similar age seated with one wrapping her arm around the other’s shoulder. The figure on the left is holding a guitar. This photograph is reproduced on the cover of Good Woman. Beneath it in Generations is a wedding photograph. Fading produces the effect of the subjects standing in the clouds.
mother and to make the mother seem less peculiar. But the mother does not seem peculiar: what she seems instead is physically ill and mentally and physically abused by her husband. Despite what it shows, the text tells readers that everybody loved the mother and that she “adored” her husband. To a discomfiting degree, the speaker reenacts the child’s desire, so typical of incest victims, “to make things right” by declaring that the mother was “magic.” In an unremarked irony, the speaker cites as an example Thelma’s ability to jiggle locks loose. Yet death is the only escape she can finagle for herself.

What the text has shown us in both its words and images—and sometimes seemingly despite itself—amplifies the penultimate declaration: “Things don’t fall apart. Things hold. Lines connect in thin ways that last and last and lives become generations made out of pictures and words just kept” (78). Revising Yeats’s dire prophecy, Clifton pronounces a hard-won victory. The worst has already happened: her people have survived the anarchy and the “blood-dimmed tide” that in Yeats’s vision were portents of a twentieth-century apocalypse. No “center” survived the nightmare of slavery, but “things” held. So it is that his sister stands at Samuel Sayles’s grave and addresses Caroline, “Mammy it’s 1969, and we’re still here” (59). “Thin” lines connote the limited documentation that survives of their experiences as well as the fragility of the ties that bind this family together. Yet out of pictures and words, Clifton’s speaker can perceive connections and create a history. Hers is an act of meditation, not documentation. Through contemplating their images and re-creating “their shimmering voices,” the speaker intuits the meaning of her ancestors’ lives. Through this meditative act, she becomes a moral witness who does justice to the memory of her kin and charts a path to the future for her daughters and sons.

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