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Reclamation of History in Lucille Clifton's "i am accused" and Augusto Monterroso's "The Eclipse"

From my membership in all of these groups I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of differences come in all shapes and sizes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression.

-Audre Lorde, "There is no Hierarchy of Oppression"

The Postmodern Age, beginning in the mid-twentieth century is recognizable for the age's respect for considering various perspectives of history, eliminating the problematic hierarchies within narrative systems. Audre Lorde's "There is No Hierarchy in Oppression" represents the significance in addressing the issues of hierarchy, especially when concerning the social and political identities of people. African-American poet, educator, and Maryland's former Poet Laureate, Lucille Clifton (1936-2010), sets one precedent for reclaiming her own voice. In "i am accused," the poem is written in a plain style with little imagery, holding a firm, unwavering tone. Clifton's work embodies womanhood and blackness, containing a resonating voice, which holds firm for succeeding generations. Central-American Augusto Monterroso (1921-2003) was displaced from his birth country Honduras, which led him to migrate into Guatemala, where he was then exiled for openly condemning the nation's dictator. After being exiled, Monterroso lived in Mexico from 1944 until his death (Hecke 613). In Mexico, Monterroso wrote in brevity, creating short-stories full of irony and satire, creating a recognizable mark on his work. In his satirical piece "The Eclipse," Monterroso reclaims the collective voice of the indigenous people of Guatemala, outlining some Mayan traditions. Lucille Clifton and Augusto Monterroso reclaim their ancestral past, asserting not only their agency, but exerting authority over the construction

of their identity, history, and heritage. The presence of Lucille Clifton as an African-American woman and Augusto Monterroso as a Latin American amid Western-European and United Statesian canons of literature and history, forms a resilience against the dismissal of their own, respective histories, which are often overlooked among the oppressors' telling of history. Clifton's poem "i am accused" takes a hold of her black body from the sexist and racist past, using the image of a nurturing mother, who retakes, retells, and reclaims "History." In Clifton's poem, "History" is personified, embodying the characteristics of a growing woman, who refuses to be diminished. In Monterroso's "The Eclipse," the narrator places his audience in the Guatemalan jungle during the colonization of the land. Instead of illustrating a Western trope of indigenous people, Monterroso asserts the intellect and rational of the Mayans. Together, Clifton and Monterroso bear agency over their own ancestral past, constructing a reality where readers can take a different account of history, which works to dismantle the hierarchal lens over history.

To begin, Lucille Clifton's poem "i am accused" requires a contextual understanding in Clifton's identity as a black woman. Since womanhood and blackness are central to Clifton's identity, which Clifton molds into the context of her poem, it is reasonable to examine "i am accused" from a personal and sociopolitical standpoint. Clifton's "i am accused" is short and direct, yet Clifton gives her reader no reason to underestimate the importance of her minimalist poem:

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.
 this past was waiting for me
 when i came,
 a monstrous unnamed baby,
 and i with my mother's itch
 took it to breast
 and named it

History.
 she is more human now,
 learning languages every day,
 remembering faces, names, and dates.
 when she is strong enough to travel
 on her own, beware, she will. (Clifton 1991).

Clifton removes self-indication by lower-casing the “i” in her statements, giving a stronger focus on the only capitalized word in the poem, “History.” The sole capitalization of “History” points a core-focus to the poem’s subject, revealing the significance of Clifton’s reclamation over the past that forms her identity. The relationship between oppressor and oppressed is made clear in the beginning line, where the oppressed recognizes the accusation from the oppressor: “i am accused of tending to the past” (ll. 1). Clifton’s poem does not address anyone, but assures herself that she did not “make” or “sculpt” the “past.” She states, “this past was waiting for me,” indicating the past exists in the minds of all people, since the repercussions of history effect the present (ll. 5). In Rachel Elizabeth Harding’s “Authority, History, and Everyday Mysticism in the Poetry of Lucille Clifton: A Womanist View,” Harding highlights major moments in Clifton’s life, using Clifton’s personal life to reflect on the significance, purpose, and effect Clifton’s poetry produces. Harding naturalizes Alice Walker’s language from Walker’s 1983 collection *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, utilizing the term “womanist,” to establish the values of black women who agree with Clifton’s beliefs: “the term in Southern African American female language and intergenerational relations; in women’s love, culture, agency, and commitment to the well-being of all the people” (37-38). Clifton’s poetry is significant for her legacy in cultural resistance. In being able to reclaim and attain her own past, Clifton is shaping the present into a new history, where women, particularly black women, can tell their own stories without the authority of their voice being diminished by a sexist and racist society.

Furthermore, the resistance Clifton poses in “i am accused” finds linguistic features to manipulate literary conventions, demonstrating the depth of colonization. For instance, Clifton replicates tension through the sonic characteristics of language, where the use of the dental “d” and plosive “t” consonance in the first ten lines demonstrate a physical tension in the reader’s mouth. Clifton’s language builds suspense, forcing her readers to exercise their tongues and teeth when reading the poem aloud. The act of reading Clifton’s poetry is like biting down in anticipation for the celebration of her reclaiming her own identity. Moreover, Harding traces back to Clifton’s great-great grandmother, Lucy, a woman enslaved in Louisiana, hung in Virginia for killing her white lover (39). Harding elicits Clifton’s past to establish an ancestral lineage of opposition within Clifton’s past. Clifton’s great-great grandmother embodies a physical manifestation of resistance, while Clifton continues the rebellion against her hostile oppressors through language. In Rob Pope’s *Studying English Literature and Language: An Introduction and Companion*, Pope defines the so-called “standard English,” which takes precedent in the way English-speakers decide to speak English: “the most notable and powerful old ‘new’ English is none other than American English, which has its roots deep in colonial history” (184). Clifton’s free-verse form denies the conventions of a closed-form, freeing herself from the grammatical conventions of “standard English.” In further defying the use of “standard English,” Clifton’s lack of capitalization in the beginning of sentences and in the use of “i,” indicates her opposition to a language embroiled in “American English,” which as Pope states, “has its roots deep in colonial history,” or slavery—the anti-thesis of blackness. Her fluidity in form and language liberates her from the normative ‘American-English,’ allowing for an alternative to the way narrative is narrated. Her defiance reflects the reclamation of voice for black people, whose history is often dismissed for the too-often celebrated Anglo-male.

In addition to Clifton asserting the rights of black bodies, she asserts her right as a black woman, defining herself in a history which erases her. Clifton's intersectionality is inseparable. The speaker molds herself into the role of a nurturing mother when she takes the "monstrous unnamed baby," comforts the child with her "mother's itch," "[takes] it to breast" and confidently "[names] it / History" (ll. 7-11). The imagery of the nurturing mother enforces an archetype of womanhood, communicating that only a woman can keep a child from becoming a violent by-product from violence. In taking a step back to the practice of Clifton's poetics, Clifton shifts from the use of dental and plosive sounds, to the alternating alliterative and consonant nasal "m" sound, reinforcing compassion and comfort from the nurturing mother. Further, the image of a black woman embodying history and taking a new recourse, reinforces Harding's use of Walker's term "womanist," which claims cultural agency, as well as the consequential effect of a woman's love. Harding also recalls an interview from 1999 with editor Charles Rowell, who notes Clifton's thoughts on formal education, quoting her, "as a rule in this culture, those boundaries about what one is supposed to be as a visible human being didn't include people of African descent. So I ignored them" (39). Harding employs Walker's "black root word," and "womanish," defining a young, bold, black woman with a desire to know more than expected of her (38). Clifton's last four lines reverberate her stance on black womanhood: "she is more human now," signaling the humanist version of the "monstrous baby," who Clifton's speaker nurtures. Ultimately, Clifton's voice asserts a new history that recognizes black women as "human" and existing. Clifton adds to "History's" humanity, who is "learning languages every day, / remembering faces, names, and dates" (ll. 13-14). Clifton's historical narrative indicates a personal and global, particularly with the indication of 'languages,' The plural use of "languages" signals the recognition of blackness and womanhood beyond her own

African-American roots. Clifton's ending resonates deeply with her reclamation of history from the Anglo and Eurocentric grasp: "when she is strong enough to travel / on her own, beware, she will." Clifton delivers a powerful verse through the enjambment after the word 'travel,' forcing the reader to read into the next line, and come to a pause after "her own." The medial pause in the last line keeps the reader alert of the word "beware," privileging the word for its subtle ambiguity, which communicates strength when looking at the line from a perspective of a woman coming into her authority. Harding further notes challenges that arose in Clifton's literary career, where her role as Poet Laureate of Maryland asked her to pay homage to the founding colony's 350th anniversary: "'they want me to remember / their memories / and I keep remembering mine'" (46-47). Maryland's distasteful request asks the Poet Laureate to dismiss her own black womanhood to honor an American colony built on the backs of slaves. The request perpetuates the oppression of African-Americans, which asks a black woman to give priority to the Anglo-American side of history in the United States. Clifton's response to Maryland, as well as her poem "i am accused," stands to correct the dismissal of voice, representation, and narrative, reordering the reclamation of history for black women in the United States, and around the world.

Similarly, Augusto Monterroso's *cuento* of "The Eclipse," legitimizes the historical narrative of indigenous bodies, reclaiming their voice and existence among Eurocentric narratives, which often place the stories of indigenous bodies in the background of history. Monterroso utilizes irony and satire to destabilize the environment of his European character, flipping the script on the conqueror, and presenting strength within the indigenous, Mayan society represented in "The Eclipse." In An Van Hecke's "La Parodia en Augusto Monterroso: Una Revision De La Conquista De América," Hecke explains the effect of irony and satire,

defining irony “*como el pastiche*,” an artistic imitation of life, not a reproduction of the text, “*sino un género*,” while satire “*ataca el mundo extraliterario, social y moral*” (614).

Monterroso’s brevity quickly demonstrates the effect in employing irony and satire to his *cuento*:

When Friar Bartolomé Arrazola felt he was lost, he accepted the fact that nothing could save him. The overwhelming Guatemalan jungle had entrapped him, irrevocably, absolutely. Faced with his ignorance of the topography, he sat down with tranquility to await his death. He was determined to die there, hopeless, isolated, with his memories of distant Spain, and, particularly, of the monastery of Los Abrojos where Charles V had once deigned to step down from his eminence in order to tell him that he trusted the religious zeal of his work for the salvation of souls (para. 1).

The characterization of Bartolomé Arrazola is an allusion to Barolomé XVI, a missionary sent to the ‘New World,’ “*elegido por Dios para salvar los indigenes paganos*,” (Hecke 615). His displacement in the Guatemalan jungle is purposeful, which Monterroso hints the reader of through his choice of diction: “lost,” “nothing could save him,” “entrapped,” “irrevocably,” “ignorance,” “death,” “die,” “hopeless,” “isolated,” “memories,” and “distant.” Hecke explains the characterization of a displaced European Friar, demonstrating Monterroso’s use of irony, and the Friar’s desire to save souls, as it is his moral, Christianit duty (615). Interestingly, the Friar’s Christian duty privileges the Western European religion, but only by killing aspects of the indigenous Mayan religion. Monterroso shows the hypocrisy in the Christian’s forced assimilation. Although the damage is irrevocable, the irony establishes European arrogance that attempts to consume Monterroso’s *cuento*. Moving from Bartelomé’s slumber, to waking up on “an altar that seemed to Bartolomé like a featherbed in which he could rest,” only furthers the ironic arrogance that consumes the Friar’s displacement (para. 2). Irony creates a distasteful

character, fueling the climatic end, and which satirizes the Friar's death, offering an alternative, respectful representation of Mayan traditions.

Looking further into Monterroso's "The Eclipse," the Friar wakes up to the indigenous people carrying him on a featherbed, making him falsely think he is being worshipped by the indigenous people: "idea worthy of his talent, of his international sect, of his passionate knowledge of Aristotle" (para. 4). Monterroso's choice in diction, using "international" to characterize the Friar's 'talents', contradicts the displacement of the Guatemala Jungle from the opening paragraph, separating the reality the narrator offers, and the illusion the Friar believes. The narrator's language satirizes the Friar's intelligence, following the Friar's belief in thinking he is able to "deceive his oppressors," indicating the Friar's belief in thinking his intelligence is above the indigenous Mayans (para. 4). Monterroso's use of situational irony is only possible because of the circumstances of how history turns out, and the reader's hindsight, knowing the real "oppressor" is the people who look like the Friar. Monterroso retells the story of the Mayans surviving the Guatemalan jungle, without the use of Bartolomé's God or Aristotle's rational thinking, reclaiming their existence and narrative before the colonization of their bodies and burdening of their voices. When Bartelomé threatens: "'If you kill me... I will make the sun disappear from the sky,'" the reader knows that Bartelomé only knows to rely on his arrogance to survive. Hecke dives into the characterization of Bartelomé, stating, "*conocedor de la cultura clásica, confiaba en la aparición de un 'deus ex máchina,' que lo salvara de tan penosa situación*" (616). Ironically, the Friar's reliance on Aristotle disassembles his authority, since the Mayans know how to rationalize without the philosophical writings of a Western scholar. The humility that engulfs Bartelomé, signals the dismissal of Eurocentric values, beliefs, and historical victory, saving the integrity of the indigenous Mayan people.

In a swift augustness, Monterroso relishes the indigenous bodies in dignity and integrity, representative of the reclamation his *cuento* sets-out to attain:

Two hours later, the bleeding heart of Friar Bartolomé Arrazola gushed violently over the sacrificial stone (which shone brilliantly under the dim light of the eclipsed sun), while an [indigenous voice] recited, one by one, without any tonal inflection and without any hurry, the countless dates on which there would be solar eclipses and lunar eclipses, dates which Mayan astronomers had themselves predicted and documented without any of the valuable assistance of Aristotle (para. 7).

Bartolomé's inability to comprehend the Mayan traditions or assess the situation, dismantles his reasoning for being in the Guatemalan jungle, and represents the Eurocentric influence present in Central America in the twentieth-first century. His heart gushing over the altar signifies the disassembly of historical hierarchies, where the indigenous voices will rise, "without any tonal inflection" (para. 7). Monterroso erases the notion that rationality, astronomy, empirical proofs, and intellect are due to the Classical Western Hemisphere, denying the intellectual insight present in the Mayan traditions and culture. Hecke provides context for Monterroso's use of irony and satire, and reason for flipping the script on the colonizer, stating, "*la derrota de los indígenas se debe a la convicción de que habían sido abandonados por sus dioses y a su actitud resignada al dares cuenta de que sus dioses ya no les hablaban,*" so Monterroso's resolution aims to deconstruct the notion behind the indigenous' loss of their land (616). The notion aims to Christianize the world, stating the old gods of the 'New World' no longer listen to their people, forcefully converting their faith to the conqueror's faith, yet Monterroso pivots the conviction onto Bartolomé, creating a character abandoned by his God, fooled by his faith, and betrayed by his arrogance. Monterroso reclaims the voices of indigenous bodies using irony, a comedic

means to deconstruct the European character's arrogance in an unknown world, and satire, using the arrogance of the European character to show his downfall, no fault to the traditions of the Mayan culture, which Bartolomé attempts to demean.

Lucille Clifton asserts her authority over retaking and retelling her story as a black woman in "i am accused," reclaiming her ancestral past for herself, blackness and womanhood. Even after her passing, her voice continues to resonate, reverberating through the ears of her oppressors, shacking the foundation of the hierarchical Anglo-American and Eurocentric historical narrative. Augusto Monterroso recovers the marginalized narrative of the indigenous people from Central America. Specifically, those of Mayan ancestry, to retell *un cuento* before the colonization of the Americas, establishing intellect before the introduction of Western philosophy, which perpetuates the lack of insight and knowledge in the Americas before the conquerors forced their telling of history. Clifton and Monterroso simultaneously reclaim their voices and narratives, establishing no hierarchy between their histories. The reclamation of history is built in fragments, seen in lineage, heritage, and culture, all embodiments of one's identity. The marginalization, dismissal, and oppression of one's historical narrative means to demean and weaken a person's construction of reality. The reclamation of history liberates and sophisticates the oppressed and oppressor, working to eliminate the gap of authoritative ranking.

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