



Bio: **Cheryl Clarke** is a former Dean of Students at Rutgers University and poet. In this short documentary, Clarke discusses her upbringing in Washington, D.C. during the Civil Rights Movement, her passion for writing, and the role of feminism. Clarke is a black lesbian feminist whose poetry, editorial work, and career at Rutgers has had a significant impact on black, lesbian, and women's communities. She is the author of four collections of poetry, often centered around themes of black women's issues and lesbian issues. She served as an editor of the lesbian publication *Conditions* for nine years, and began working at Rutgers University in 1970.

At Rutgers, she served as the founding Director of Diverse Community Affairs and Lesbian/Gay Concerns, which became the Office of Social Justice Education and LBT Communities in 2004. She was the Dean of Students of Livingston Campus between 2009-2013, and retired from Rutgers in 2013 after 41 years of service. Clarke proposes an idea that we, as a society, must be in the "project of transformation" to "create a new humanity" as we reconcile gender and race issues. This film highlights these issues within the frame of Cheryl Clarke's life and career, and is especially relevant given Clarke's being a member of the Rutgers community. This project is a piece of multimedia that includes archival footage, photos, and original video of Cheryl Clarke. The music was purchased from the website [us.audionetwork.com](http://us.audionetwork.com). The Rutgers Library online catalog was utilized in this making of this project to locate periodicals of the feminist magazine *Conditions*, scans of which are found in this documentary. The library was also used to locate and scan photos from a 1974 yearbook of the Livingston Campus that were used in the making of this film.

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An Interview with Cheryl Clarke, December 5, 2012

Conducted by Nia Allen- Lee, Women's and Gender Studies Major, Leadership Scholars Class of 2014, and Katerín Fernández, Linguistics Major  
*Edited by Mariah Eppes*

**Nia Allen-Lee & Katerín Fernández: When and where did you grow up?**

**Cheryl Clarke:** I grew up in Washington, D.C. and I was born in Washington, D.C. I lived there until I graduated from Howard University in 1969 and came to New Jersey.

**NAL & KF: What was it like growing up there?**

**CC:** Well, boy, that was—that's an interesting question, because I look back on it, and I thought growing up there was like growing up in two different worlds. Because Washington, D.C. was a very segregated town, very segregated. Subtle, you didn't have the signs, it wasn't vicious like Mississippi or Alabama. It was genteel, you know. But, two different worlds. I grew up in the world of my family and neighborhood, and that was a black world, and I also grew up in the world of my Catholic school education, which started at grade two and went to grade twelve. And the people I went to school with when I started both schools were white. Like, maybe I was one of four black kids in my class, maybe one of four black kids in the school, I don't remember. But by the time I graduated from both institutions they were predominantly black. But what does that show you, that shows you the tide of white flight from the cities. From the city. So, I grew up in those two worlds, and as a friend of mine used to say, I learned how to talk nice around white folk, and I learned how to fit in with black folk. But I knew I was different. I didn't feel it negatively, but I knew I was different. I knew I was destined to do something different, while my parents were pushing me to do something different. That's why they sent us to Catholic schools. They thought they would be better for us.

**NAL & KF: Do you see that kind of a cult segregation still today? Still in Washington, D.C.?**

**CC:** Yes, it's still very much like that. But white people are beginning to move back into the city now. So if you take a place like U Street in D.C., if you look at U Street now, when I was growing up, you did not see a white breath on U Street. It was totally, it was like 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox Avenue in New York. And now, it's very different. Very diverse. So, yeah, I do still see that in Washington. Segregation or, yes, especially in Southeast. I think many of the black people have been sort of pushed out to Southeast now. But I haven't lived there since 1969. I mean I would go back to visit, but I haven't lived there.

**NAL & KF: I know you said that your parents pushed you, and that's why they put you in a Catholic school because they wanted you to do something different. Do you think that was mostly from your mother, or from both your father and mother? What types of images of women did you see and was your mother the matriarch of the house?**

**CC:** Well let's put it this way. My mother was a manager for thirty-five years. She managed not only on her job, she managed the house. And you did what she said. My father was a different kind of person. I know they both wanted us to go to college. But my mother was pushing that. She pushed for us to be baptized so we could go to Catholic school, because you know, you really couldn't go to Catholic school unless you were Catholic then. You really couldn't. Or you could, but who would want to? So you know, she pushed us to be baptized as Catholic. My father had grown up Catholic, his father was Catholic, my father's mother was a Baptist. They built the first black Catholic church

in Georgetown. Because they didn't want to be segregated, they didn't want to have to worship upstairs so they built their own church. This was like before World War I. No, during. During World War I. My mother pushed my father to get us baptized so we could go to Catholic school, we did that, but it was my mother who managed that upbringing. Even though, they had very reversed roles. He worked at night, which meant that he was home during the day, he did all the housework, he did the cooking, he did the picking us up from school. Before we had a car, he would walk up, and walk us back. He was very well known in the neighborhood, all the children loved him. We had a nickname for him and all the kids in the neighborhood called him that. So, he was a very, very interesting and different kind of man. But he was not aggressive.

**NAL & KF: Do you remember any historical moments and can you share your memories?**

**CC:** Yes. That's a good question too. Because I lived through a very historical time. I was in high school during the mid-60's, and graduated from high school in '65, and the southern movement was going full tilt during that time. There were protests and demonstrations everywhere, and I remember so much from that period being acted out in Washington, D.C. because as I told you, Washington was a very segregated town. And so, during that time, we watched those barriers fall in D.C. If you know New York Avenue in D.C., there used to be a whole lot of movie theaters down there. Black people did not venture beyond New York Avenue. You had to wait until the theaters came to your neighborhood theater to see movies. Ah, I'm wrong. There were three movie theaters black people could go to and they were all on U Street. They were called the Lincoln, the Republic, and the Booker T. And if you wanted to see a first run movie like *The Ten Commandments*, you couldn't go down there to the National, you had to go to the Lincoln or whatever, whatever one was biggest. To see first run movies. So we watched those barriers fall, we watched the barriers [fall] in department stores. There were department stores that black people couldn't really go into, or didn't go into. Because nobody would wait on you. Okay, so those barriers fall, so that's very interesting, but I would say that my most interesting historic time was when I went with my parents to the March on Washington in 1963. It was very interesting to be at that historic event. And the day before, we had to drive down to get some information from the headquarters of the march, for some reason my mother wanted to go down there. And she asked me, you know, children as servants, they send you to do something, Cheryl, go in and get whatever, so I said okay, whatever. And just as I was going across the street, to get whatever it was, Martin Luther King Jr. was walking across the street, to the headquarters. Looked very tired. But Dr. King was unmistakable. And, you know, he just nodded his head to me. But he was with people. He had his entourage. That was very interesting. And so when I got back in, my mother said just leave it to you to have that luck. If I didn't have on my old house dress, I would have got out and shook his hand.

**NAL & KF: Were there any other models or powerful females that you grew up with or that influenced you?**

**CC:** Well, yeah, I could say the nuns that educated us. They were really some 'taking care of business' women. They really were. They taught us. They were rigorous. They were always no nonsense. But you know, some people have, you know, every time I say I went to Catholic school and nuns this and nuns that and they say, did they hit you with rulers? I said no, I never experienced nor did I see a nun hit a child. They would be out there at recess. Boys nuns, girls nuns. And if you got into fights, or if somebody was being bullied, they'd come and they'd say cut it out. They were very brave, and very good, and always prepared for class. Because that's all they had to do. Pray and get ready to teach. So yeah, I admired nuns. I had some very good nuns. Very good teachers. And you know, and they also... they didn't do enough encouraging of us to go to college. So we had to depend on our parents for that. There was still that ambivalence. Do I encourage a black kid to go to college? So they didn't encourage us to go to college. But my mother did. I said to my mother, "I want to be a nurse." And she said, "well, you can be a nurse, but you're going to go to college first." I said "no, no, I won't be doing that." Nuns, uh, my mother's friends who were always over at her house, her women friends. And that was a good example to me, because it said to me don't ever be without close women friends.

**NAL & KF: Why?**

**CC:** Good question. Because for their generation I think you have to be able to talk to somebody about stuff. You have to be able to talk to a peer about stuff. And, I think sometimes women can't talk to men like that. Or they certainly can't talk to their husbands. But you know, will you always want to talk to your husband about what's really close to you? No. Even if he understands it. So you want your close women friends, you know, because women and men are different. I'm not saying one is from Venus and one is from Mars, but we're still different enough to need that. I think, anyway. And I'm not trying to say "oh, I was a lesbian then," no, I'm not trying to say that. But, I think she did give me that model of close women friendships.

**NAL & KF: Can you tell us about an influential person in your life and accompany it with an anecdote to go with this person?**

**CC:** An influential woman in my life was the woman, her name is Eleanor Ross. She died, I'd say, less than ten years ago. She hired me in my first professional job at Rutgers in 1970. She hired me as a teacher of developmental writing, and I would be teaching

black and Latino first generation college students. Now I didn't know anything about teaching, and I certainly didn't know anything about black and Latino first generation college students, even though I could share an experience of disenfranchisement. Well, I muddled through my first couple of years with students, it gave me a chance to teach Afro-American literature, which was good, because it gave me a chance to learn it better. But what I learned from her, I learned to value being smart, as a woman. She was very smart. And not to play it down. But not to be arrogant either. Which was very important; she was not arrogant. Though people thought she was because she said what she thought. And, I learned that when you hire somebody into a job, they don't have to have all the skills they need for the job. They just have to be able, I think, one has to be able to communicate that one is willing to learn it. But you don't have to have all your skills full blown. Now, I've served on many hiring committees at Rutgers, and whenever there is a pool, a diverse pool, the people of color seem always to have to have everything in place for the job. They always have to have everything in place for the job. I think that's why black people say they really have to be overqualified. White person 100%, black person 200%. Or person of color. Or woman of color. So I learned, because I certainly didn't have all my stuff together when she hired me. But she had a sense, and she wanted to open up the academy to nontraditional people. I was definitely nontraditional. So that's what I learned from her. And that's what I always say when I'm on hiring committees. "Why is it that so-and-so over there, you didn't ask so-and-so that question, when the so-and-so of color over here has to have everything full blown? Doesn't anybody learn anything on the job anymore?" Stuff like that.

**NAL & KF: When did you figure out that you wanted to write or that you were an artist or an activist? Was there any defining moment that influenced you?**

**CC:** Well, yes, there were a number of them. I always knew I wanted to write and I always knew I wanted to publish. And I always knew I wanted to meet influential people. And I think I figured that out when I was at Howard my last year. Because I spent a year in a creative writing workshop with a number of other people. And we got to meet some publishers, one of whom was Toni Morrison, she was at Random House then, this was in 1969, this was before she wrote her first book. Paula Giddings was also in that group. She and I graduated from Howard, we were in the same class. We had the same major. We graduated the same year. If you know Cheryl Wall, in the English department, she was a year behind us. She teaches Afro-American women's literature. And she's a [Zora Neale] Hurston specialist. So I knew then I wanted to write and I wanted to publish. I wanted to have an audience. But I also wanted to go to graduate school because I didn't think I could live on my writing. I didn't want to live on it. So when I came up here I got a job as quick as I could, because I was used to working, because I sort of worked my way through college. But I was used to having money so I had to have a job. So I knew I had to have a job, I knew I wanted to write.

**NAL & KF: Was there an ‘a-ha’ moment though? Maybe in your creative writing workshop?**

CC: Well that was a defining time I would say, 1969, that was a defining time. I don't know about the ‘a-ha’ moment, but I knew that it was something I wanted to do and I knew that I had to work at it. And I did work at it, I did write, as much as I could. I read my poetry, I started to publish in 1977, published first in a lesbian journal and then in a book of lesbian poetry. And what happened was I began to develop an audience among lesbians. At that time, lesbian feminists, and feminists in general, were developing the women in print movement. So if you're going to be a movement, a radical movement, you're going to have to seize the means of production, and they definitely seized the means of literary production. So, there were presses, small presses, there were newspapers, there were journals. This was before the time of, obviously, Internet and video. So they had I would say the four major means of literary production. And so, I was a part of that movement. I was also very networked with black feminists in the country, or became very networked with black feminists. And I served as an editor of *Conditions* magazine for nine years. That was '81 to '90, for nine years. And that was a very, talk about ‘a-ha’ moment, that was nine years of ‘a-ha’ moments. Because every time you produce, what we called a book, I mean it was like a book, it was like an anthology. Every time you produce that thing and you get your 1,500 copies of it, it's like ‘a-ha,’ now what do I do with... whatever. So that was a very great time for me but at the same time I was working here [at Rutgers], and I had a job that really enabled me to do that. I was in student activities, and it was sort of germane to what I was doing. And I got to meet a lot of famous people who came to Rutgers, because I did programming. So, I was lucky enough to have a job that allowed me to write and allowed me to travel. Travelled a lot too, during the 80's. So, you ask me about ‘a-ha’ moments. Defining moments. Well, that was a defining decade. And I guess I would say other ones would be when I self-published my first book of poems, *Narratives, Poems, and the Tradition of Black Women*. When I got my doctorate in 2000 at the age of 53, that was a defining moment, because I always wanted a doctorate. I enjoy it sometimes. But I really enjoyed the work behind it. Because I went back to graduate school at a time when it was very comfortable for me to do it. There were other students of color, there were other women, there were people in the department who knew my work. Because in graduate school you have to have somebody that's going to work with you. You can't just be out there wanting to do Afro-American women's poetry and nobody in the department knows anything about it. Which is how it was when I first started in '69. So those are a few defining moments.

**NAL & KF: What are the biggest challenges that you've faced being an activist and organizing people?**

**CC:** I want to say this. I think I'm a leader, and sometimes I think I'm an activist. I know what I've written has made people think differently about race, sexuality, maybe gender... maybe culture, maybe the role of writing. But, you know there are activists and activists. I don't consider myself an armchair activist. But the biggest challenge I've faced organizing people? Well, um, first of all identifying who you want to organize. And why. What are they going to get out of it? And then, you get a group together, I mean it's not so easy to get a group together. Y'all are in organizations, you know how that is. It's the same way everywhere. Keeping people motivated to do what they say they're going to do. I've been on several boards, not that many, I know a lot of people live to be on boards and a lot of people are on really prestigious ones. But I've been on several boards, I would say five, and I've been chairperson of those boards, or co-chairperson. Getting people to do what they say they're going to do. And when they don't do it, trying not to get really pissed off. So that's always my largest challenge. Because when you're organizing people around a certain issue, you're not paying them to be organized. That's why I say, you have to keep before them what they're getting out of it to be involved in this organization or in this organizing project.

**NAL & KF: How would you define women's leadership and do you think it's important?**

**CC:** I think women's leadership is absolutely important. And I think more women, obviously, many, many more women need to be leading. And I would say particularly on the international stage. So that's why you all need to get out there and help Charlotte [Bunch]. Yes, um, what I define woman's leadership? I guess I see women's leadership from feminist perspective and politics. And I think women's leadership keeps women at the center. And if women are the on margins, we either, as feminists, bring them to the center, or go to the margins ourselves. So, I think until women are no longer-- this sounds so general-- women are no longer oppressed in the world, you will need women's leadership. And you'll need it even then. You'll need it, to be vigilant. I don't know if I answered your question, because that's another question like why do you need close women friends. But yes, women at the center. Doesn't mean men can't be there too, but you know, women got to be there.

**NAL & KF: Can you say something that's been hard?**

**CC:** Yes. My nephew died when he was 15 in 1989. He fell from a building. And that has been the hardest thing in my life. Yup, that has been the hardest thing in my life.

**NAL & KF: How do you deal with that? How are you working through it?**

**CC:** Well, its been twenty years, hasn't it? But you just don't forget it. I'm not trying to. In fact, you try to hold on. You try to hold on to the memory. To his being.

**NAL & KF: What keeps you motivated to do the work that you do?**

**CC:** Well, the friends I've made over the years, the audiences I've developed with my work. I guess my own desire to write. And I've met such great people while I've worked here at Rutgers since '69, and of course the students. The undergraduates that I have worked with for so many years. When I did student activities, oh my goodness. You know, clubs and organizations. Oh my goodness, what we had to go through. But you know, it was like leadership. And I learned a lot about leadership from students. Because y'all can anything, you know, can do anything. Because you're in that period of your life when you're not afraid. When you haven't built up defenses. It's like the difference between a person who learns to drive when they're sixteen, and somebody like me, who learns to drive when they're thirty-two. Sixteen, experienced, thirty-two, you never let go of being uptight about driving. Because you've built up so many defenses. So, you know, that has kept me going. And all the LGBT students that I met and worked with during my time doing LGBT stuff. Not that I don't still do it, but you know. So people, people really. People keep me motivated. What I regret not doing is not asking for more money and that's something that women don't do. So always ask for the amount of money with which your skills are commensurate, and if you don't know, you better find out.

**NAL & KF: Why don't you think women do that? Ask for more money?**

**CC:** Because we don't put enough value on our skills and ourselves. That's not something we learn to do. Women don't ask for more money because they don't value their skills. And often, as I said, they don't know what their skills are worth. And they don't find out. So that's why, you know, your male peer, you got to go to him and you got to find out "how much money are you making?" And then when you realize he's making, you know, 20,000 more than you, or however, like that women, what was her name, [Lilly] Ledbetter? You remember the woman. She retires and she-- I don't even want to go into it. Don't be like that. That's what I'm saying.

**NAL & KF: Is there any advice you can give budding feminists and young artists on ways to keep inspired and keep going?**

**CC:** Well, one of the things I thought about saying is try a lot of things in your life. Don't-- I didn't want to be negative-- but don't think you have to stick with one thing all



your life. Be open to changing. Know how to make yourself happy. Always have something to look forward to. Have close women friends. And I think, I guess it takes a long time. We have to be in the project of transformation. And I don't think it's a one time thing, I think it's a process. And I think we have to be in the process of creating different, well, creating a new humanity I guess. And I think we are in the process of that. We have been. But I think it takes a long time. And I think it's a communal effort. I don't think it's an individual effort, which, I don't mean that one person can't make a difference, but I think one of many make a difference. And also I think we have to reexamine what we mean by courage and bravery. And I think like Audre Lorde we have to know the danger and go there anyway. I think. It's not easy. And, you know, I think I've had a really good life. And many things have been easy for me. But I don't think it's easy. So. Don't forget a sense of humor.