

*Angela Davis*

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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*First Edition*

*I go into genesis' landscape  
of rumblings, collisions, and waters . . .*

FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA

PART THREE

*Waters*

SEPTEMBER 1961

**P**erched on an enormous boulder protruding from a grassy knoll on the outskirts of Waltham, Massachusetts, is a brass sculpture of Justice Louis Brandeis, his arms outstretched, winglelike, as if he were about to take flight—as if there were nowhere else to go.

I had come to assume that in order to safeguard its unorthodoxy, Elisabeth Irwin had spun a cocoon around itself. During those two years in New York I never quite overcame the sense of being out of place, of being an outsider who had penetrated that cocoon by accident. Nevertheless, I confronted it head on. And when the atmosphere became too close, too oppressive, I could always tear away a piece of the wall and slip out to other worlds—my childhood friends, Margaret and Claudia, Mary Lou Patterson, Phyllis Strong; politi-

cal work in Advance; my Black and Puerto Rican friends at the Youth Center run by Mrs. Melish in Brooklyn.

Brandeis University was different. There were no roads leading outside.

Its physical and spiritual isolation were mutually reinforcing. There was nothing in Waltham but a clock factory, and Cambridge and Boston were unreachable for those of us who couldn't afford a car.

I searched the crowds of freshmen for others who were Black. Just knowing they were there would have made me feel a little more comfortable. But the full scholarship Brandeis had bestowed upon me was apparently a guilt-motivated attempt to increase their Black freshman population of two. We three were all female. I was glad that one of them, Alice, lived on the same floor as I.

Although Alice and I struck up a friendship immediately, it did not essentially alter my attitude toward the college. I felt alienated, angry, alone and would have left the campus if I had had the courage and had known where to go. Since I was there—to stay, it seemed—I lived with this alienation and began to cultivate it in a romantic sort of way. If I felt alone, I refused to feel sorry for myself and refused to fight it by actively seeking friends; I would *be* alone, aloof, and would appear to enjoy it. It didn't help the situation that I had gotten very much involved in the writings of the so-called Existentialists. Camus. Sartre. I retreated into myself and rejected practically everything outside.

Only in the artificial surroundings of an isolated, virtually all-white college campus could I have allowed myself to cultivate this nihilistic attitude. It was as if in order to fight off the unreal quality of my environment, I leaped desperately into another equally unreal mode of living.

During that first semester, I didn't study very much. I told myself that the courses I was compelled to take were irrelevant anyway. I stayed out of the social life of the school, or would wander into a formal dance in the blue jeans I wore

all the time—just for the sake of making a point. I called myself a communist, but refused to be drawn into the small campus movement because I felt that the politicians had approached me in an obviously patronizing manner. It seemed as if they were determined to help the “poor, wretched Negroes” become equal to them, and I simply didn’t think they were worth becoming equal to.

The one thing that did excite me during that freshman year was the news that James Baldwin was scheduled to deliver a series of lectures on literature. Since I had first discovered *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, I read all of Baldwin’s writings I could find. When he came to Brandeis, I made sure I captured a front seat. But he had hardly gotten into his lecturing when the news broke that the world was teetering on the edge of the abyss of World War III. The Cuban Missile Crisis had erupted.

James Baldwin announced that he could not continue his lectures without contradicting his moral conscience and abdicating his political responsibilities. In the meantime, a campus-wide rally was being pulled together, while students roamed the campus, either in a silent daze or else screaming out their fear that the world was about to be consumed in a nuclear holocaust.

Some of them got into cars and took off in a panic, saying they were on their way to Canada. What was so striking about the students’ response to the crisis was its strongly selfish quality. They were not interested in the fact that the people of Cuba were in terrible jeopardy—or even that millions of innocent people elsewhere might be destroyed if a nuclear conflict broke out. They were interested in themselves, in saving their own lives. Girl friends and boyfriends went off together to get in their last little bit of love.

By the time the rally took place, large numbers of students had gone off by themselves and they were not able to hear the powerful speeches given by James Baldwin, Herbert Marcuse (this was the first time I heard him) and several other professors and graduate students. The point of their

speeches was not to be frightened, not to despair, but to put pressure on the government to withdraw its threat.

It was good to feel part of a movement and once again be participating in rallies, teach-ins, demonstrations. But when the crisis was over, things settled back into their old grooves. During the brief period of protest, I was drawn toward the people with whom I felt I had most in common—the foreign students. I became friends with an Indian man, who was very gentle and had a keen sense of what was happening around us. It was my friendship with Lalit more than anything else, I suppose, that helped me understand concretely the interconnectedness of the freedom struggles of peoples throughout the world. I was profoundly moved when he talked about the incredible misery of his people in India. As he spoke I found myself constantly thinking about my people in Birmingham, my people in Harlem.

I also became friends with Melanie, a young woman from the Philippines, and Mac, a South Vietnamese woman about to be deported because she was opposed to Diem. Around the same time, I entered into a close friendship with Lani, probably because we both felt so outside things at Brandeis.

Flo Mason, one of my friends from Elisabeth Irwin, and I corresponded regularly. I don't remember who initially conceived the idea, but we both decided to attend the Eighth World Festival for Youth and Students in Helsinki, Finland, the following summer. I was eager to meet revolutionary youth from other parts of the world, but my decision to make this trip was also motivated by a simple desire to leave the country in order to get a better perspective on things. It seemed that the farther I became removed from my home, my roots, the more restricted I felt and the farther I wanted to go.

The rest of the year I worked to earn money for the trip. I refilled books in the library stacks, filed cards in the Biology Department, and worked in Chomondeleys, the campus coffee shop. And I found a job in a two-bit soda parlor in Waltham. Having gotten back into the habit of studying, between my

jobs and my books I didn't have very much time to do anything else. Even my social life—I was seeing a German student, Manfred Clemenz, around this time—consisted mostly of coffee in the cafeteria after an evening of studying.

Then it was June. My festival scholarship called for doing some volunteer work at the Festival Committee Headquarters in New York: typing, mimeographing, mailings. The Brandeis charter plane took us to London, where I wandered alone about the city for a day or two before my train left for Paris. My friend Harriet Jackson was going to meet me at the Gare du Nord, but a strike threw all the schedules awry, and there I was in Paris alone, knowing no one and without the slightest idea of how to find Harriet.

After a few days in a dirty hotel in the Latin Quarter exploring the city, and reading with horror the racist slogans scratched on walls throughout the city threatening death to the Algerians, I finally made contact with my friend. She had left a note at American Express in hopes that I would think of going there. By the time Flo arrived, we had moved into a tiny room on the top floor of an apartment building in the Sixteenth Arrondissement so close to the Eiffel Tower that from the one-foot-square window pane, you could see the elevator rising and falling. The *chambre de bonne* had been rented by one of Harriet's friends who was studying in Paris and had agreed to let us use it while she was away.

One of ten such rooms, it could only be reached by climbing six flights of a rusty fire-escape type stairway. Like all the others, it had no plumbing, only a filthy toilet bowl and a cold-water hydrant at the end of the corridor. There was just enough space for a bed, a small closet, a table, and floor room for an air mattress and a pallet. Flo, Harriet and I took turns sleeping on the bed, the air mattress and the floor. We thought it was crowded in our room until we became acquainted with the people across the hall—a frail woman from Martinique trying to live in the same amount of space with her four robust daughters, ranging in age from about fourteen to twenty. Having just arrived from the Caribbean, they all

left each day in search of work. Each evening they returned with nothing to show for their day but tired bodies, a little less money and, frequently, horror stories of being mistaken for Algerian women.

The three of us rushed around Paris being tourists, doing the things that cost the least and gave discounts to students: the Louvre, the Rodin Museum, Molière at La Comédie Française (which cost one franc for students). Hanging around the crowded cafés along the Boulevard St. Michel, we met people with interesting and exciting stories to tell—especially when it came to their distaste for the French. They were Africans, Haitians, other Antillais and Algerians. We were introduced to working-class Algerian eating places, hidden in the network of back streets in the Latin Quarter.

To be an Algerian living in Paris in 1962 was to be a hunted human being. While the Algerians were fighting the French army in their mountains and in the Europeanized cities of Algiers and Oran, paramilitary terrorist groups were falling indiscriminately upon men and women in the colonialist capital because they were, or looked like, Algerians.

In Paris, bombs were exploding in cafés frequented by North Africans, bloody bodies were discovered in dark side streets and anti-Algerian graffiti marred the sides of buildings and the walls of métro stations. One afternoon I attended a demonstration for the Algerian people in the square in front of the Sorbonne. When the *flics* broke it up with their high-power water hoses, they were as vicious as the redneck cops in Birmingham who met the Freedom Riders with their dogs and hoses.

The new places, the new experiences I had expected to discover through travel turned out to be the same old places, the same old experiences with a common message of struggle.

After Harriet left for the Soviet Union, Flo and I decided spontaneously to board a train for Geneva, but ended up trying to hitch-hike with a Swiss student just back from the University of Wisconsin. It was typical of our luck that it happened to be July 14—anniversary of the storming of the

Bastille—and thus virtually impossible to catch a ride. We got as far as Orly Airport, just on the outskirts of the city, pitched the Swiss student's tent in a field, ate dinner at the airport and bedded down for the night, with him outside guarding the tent. Not doing very much better the next morning, we caught buses and trains till we reached Lausanne, where the student's mother put us up for a few days.

With its quaint little houses built on ascending levels on the slopes of hills, Lausanne was the cleanest, most beautiful city I had seen. Now I understood why the wealthy sent their children to Switzerland.

From Lausanne, it was Geneva, back to Paris and on to Finland for the festival. The drab, monotonous postwar architecture of Helsinki concealed the tremendous vibrancy of the youth who were gathering there from all over the world.

In the brief two weeks of the festival, there were spectacular cultural programs, mass political rallies and countless seminars on the struggle in Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East. The most exciting dimension of the festival, in my own opinion, came from the bilateral delegation meetings, because they were occasions for more intimate contact with the youth of other lands.

The cultural presentation given by the Cuban delegation was the most impressive event of the festival. Not that they performed in the most polished, sophisticated manner, but because their performance conveyed a fiercely compelling spirit of revolution. They were the youth of a revolution that was not yet three years old. With the U.S. delegation as audience, the Cubans satirized the way wealthy American capitalists had invaded their country and robbed them of all traces of sovereignty. They presented their attack on the invaders in plays, songs and dances. During those days, long before women's liberation had been placed on the agenda, we watched the Cuban militia women zealously defending their people's victory.

It is not easy to describe the strength and enthusiasm of the Cubans. One event however illustrates their infectious

dynamism and the impact they had on us all. At the end of their show, the Cubans did not simply let the curtain fall. Their "performance," after all, had been much more than a mere show. It had been life and reality. Had they drawn the curtain and bowed to applause, it would have been as if their commitment was simply "art." The Cubans continued their dancing, doing a spirited conga right off the stage and into the audience. Those of us openly enthralled by the Cubans, their revolution and the triumphant beat of the drums rose spontaneously to join their conga line. And the rest—the timid ones, perhaps even the agents—were pulled bodily by the Cubans into the dance. Before we knew it we were doing this dance—a dance brought into Cuban culture by slaves dancing in a line of chains—all through the building and on into the streets. Puzzled Finns looked on in disbelief at hundreds of young people of all colors, oblivious to traffic, flowing down the streets of Helsinki.

Though it was the dominant theme, camaraderie was not the whole story of the festival. In keeping with the dictates of the Cold War, the CIA had planted its agents and informers in all the strategic areas of the festival, including the delegation from the United States. (A fact later admitted by the Agency). Provocations were frequent and assumed varied forms. Members of the delegation from the German Democratic Republic were kidnapped, for example, tear-gas bombs were set off in crowds during mass events and Hell's-Angels types picked fistfights with delegates in the streets of downtown Helsinki.

After saying good-bye to my new friends, and spending some time visiting my German friend, Manfred, I returned to the States to find an FBI investigator awaiting me.

"What were you doing at that Communist Youth Festival this summer?" the agent wanted to know. "Don't you know how we feel about Communists? Don't you know what we do to Communists?"

The experiences of the summer still very much alive, I felt older and more confident as I entered my second year at Brandeis. Meeting people from all over the world had taught me how important it was to be able to tear down the superficial barriers which separated us. Language was one of those barriers which could be removed easily. I decided to major in French. That year I immersed myself totally in my work: Flaubert, Balzac, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and the thousands of pages of Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. My interest in Sartre was still quite keen—every spare moment I could find, I worked my way through his writings: *La Nausée*, *Les Mains Sales*, *Les Séquestres d'Altona*, and the rest of the earlier and later plays, and the novels comprising the sequence *Les Chemins de la Liberté*. I read some of his philosophical and political essays and even tried my hand at *L'Être et le Néant*. Since I had to contend with the isolation of the campus in one way or another, I decided to make constructive use of it by spending most of my waking hours in the library or in some hidden place with my books.

At first I roomed with Lani, but since we both preferred to live alone, she moved into a single when one became available. Tina, a Swedish friend, who wanted to live off-campus with a friend, pretended to move into my room, thus leaving me with the privacy I desired.

Gwen and Woody, graduate students at the university, were in charge of the Ridgewood men's dormitories. The fact that we were Black and had common friends in Birmingham made us feel close even before we got to know each other. If they wanted to go out on evenings and weekends, they could always count on me to stay with their baby boy while I studied. And whenever I felt like talking, they were ready to listen and give advice.

It was a quiet, subdued year on the campus—until the smug sense of comfort which reigned over this white liberal college was abruptly shattered by the appearance of Malcolm X. In the largest auditorium on campus, Gwen, Woody and I sat one-third of the way back, engulfed, it seemed, by the

white crowd waiting breathlessly to hear this man who was the spokesman for the prophet Elijah Mohammed. Elijah Mohammed called himself the messenger of the Islamic God, Allah, chosen to reveal Allah's message to Black people in the United States.

Years before, at Parker High School, one of our classmates had been arrested for selling a "Black Muslim" newspaper. He was a gentle-looking, soft-spoken boy who kept to himself. Several times I had tried unsuccessfully to talk to him. On the day following his arrest, I learned for the first time that there was a nationwide organization of "Black Muslims" and, not questioning the prevailing propaganda, I thought they were a strange sect of people ranting and raving about Allah's future destruction of all white people—a group essentially unable to help solve the problem of racism. For a long time it bothered me that this classmate of mine was a member of the Muslims. I could not reconcile my own stereotyped notion of the Muslims with his sensitivity. I waited for him to get out of jail and return to school so I could ask him who the Muslims really were. But I never saw him again.

Finally Malcolm strode in, immaculately dressed, encircled by conservatively dressed, clean-shaven men, and women in long flowing robes. From their manner of carrying themselves I could feel the pride emanating from them. Quietly they took their seats in the first three rows. Malcolm, accompanied by several of the men, walked onstage.

Malcolm X began his speech with a subdued eloquence, telling about the religion of Islam and its relevance to Black people in the United States. I was fascinated by his description of the way Black people had internalized the racial inferiority thrust upon us by a white supremacist society. Mesmerized by his words, I was shocked to hear him say, speaking directly to his audience, "I'm talking about you! You!! You and your ancestors, for centuries, have raped and murdered my people!" He was addressing himself to an all-white crowd and I wondered whether Gwen, Woody and the four or five other Black people in the audience felt, from that moment on, as

outrageously misplaced as I did. Malcolm was addressing himself to white people, chastising them, informing them of their sins, warning them of the Armageddon to come, in which they would all be destroyed. Although I experienced a kind of morbid satisfaction listening to Malcolm reduce white people to virtually nothing, not being a Muslim, it was impossible for me to identify with his religious perspective. I kept thinking that it must be a tremendous experience to hear him speaking to a Black audience. For the white people, listening to Malcolm had been disorienting and disturbing. It was interesting that most of them were so bent on defending themselves and on distinguishing themselves from the slave master and the Southern segregationist it never struck them that they themselves could begin to do something concrete to fight racism.

Earlier in the year I had applied for a place in the Hamilton College Junior Year in France Program. After receiving the news of my acceptance, I fought hard with the Brandeis scholarship office, until they finally agreed to do the unprecedented by extending my regular scholarship to cover my third-year studies in France.

By the time the two busloads of us arrived from Paris, the resort of Biarritz, on the Bay of Biscay, near the border of Spain, had already been abandoned by the wealthy tourists. This was where we were to have our preparatory language courses. Deserted, the gaudy beachside casinos seemed even more decadent than if they had been teeming with voracious vacationing gamblers. The countless trinket shops lining the arcade-covered streets had a ravaged appearance that was exaggerated by the absence of customers. The shopkeepers looked desperate, as if they were wondering how to survive the next months without the tourists' money, and at the same time relieved that they had managed to survive the summer onslaught.

Walking through the streets of Biarritz, I felt like someone wandering into a place where a long drunken party had

just broken up. The last staggering guests had already gone home, but no one had gotten around to cleaning up the mess. The traces of the summer orgy were embarrassing—like dirty underwear inadvertently left behind—and at the same time infuriating. I could see them squandering enormous wealth without the vaguest feeling of compassion for those whose slavery had created that wealth.

Not long after our arrival, a curious thing happened in the abandoned city: there was a sudden, massive flea invasion, the likes of which the working people of Biarritz had never seen before. For days, it was impossible to find a single patch of land or air uninfested by fleas. In our classrooms, the teacher could hardly be heard over the constant scratching. People scratched in cafés, movie theaters, bookstores, and they scratched just walking down the street. People with sensitive skin were beginning to look like lepers, their arms and legs covered with infected bites. Like everyone else's, my sheet was covered with little spots of blood.

If Ingmar Bergman had done a movie on the oppressive, parasitical tourists who come to Biarritz, and had included the flea invasion in his script, critics would have written that his symbolism was too blatant. In this city in its odd position of trying to recuperate from tourists and fleas—in this group of typically American students which without my presence would have been lily-white—my old familiar feelings of disorientation were rekindled.

SEPTEMBER 16, 1963

After class I asked the three or four students with whom I was walking to wait a moment while I bought a *Herald Tribune*. My attention divided between walking and listening to the conversation, just skimming the paper, I saw a headline about four girls and a church bombing. At first I was only vaguely aware of the words. Then it hit me! It came crashing down all around me. Birmingham. 16th Street Baptist Church.

The names. I closed my eyes, squeezing my lids into wrinkles as if I could squeeze what I had just read out of my head. When I opened my eyes again, the words were still there, the names traced out in stark black print.

"Carole," I said, "Cynthia. They killed them."

My companions were looking at me with puzzled expressions. Unable to say anything more, I pointed to the article and gave the newspaper to an outstretched hand.

"I know them. They're my friends . . ." I was spluttering.

As if she were repeating lines she had rehearsed, one of them said, "I'm sorry. It's too bad that it had to happen."

Before she spoke I was on the verge of pouring out all the feelings that had been unleashed in me by the news of the bomb which had ripped through four young Black girls in my hometown. But the faces around me were closed. They knew nothing of racism and the only way they knew how to relate to me at that moment was to console me as if friends had just been killed in a plane crash.

"What a terrible thing," one of them said. I left them abruptly, unwilling to let them have anything to do with my grief.

I kept staring at the names. Carole Robertson. Cynthia Wesley. Addie Mae Collins. Denise McNair. Carole—her family and my family had been close as long as I could remember. Carole, plump, with long wavy braids and a sweet face, was one of my sister's best friends. She and Fania were about the same age. They had played together, gone to dancing lessons together, attended little parties together. Carole's older sister and I had constantly had to deal with our younger sisters' wanting to tag along when we went places with our friends. Mother told me later that when Mrs. Robertson heard that the church had been bombed, she called to ask Mother to drive her downtown to pick up Carole. She didn't find out, Mother said, until they saw pieces of her body scattered about.

The Wesleys had been among the Black people to move to the west side of Center Street. Our house was on Eleventh

Court; theirs was on Eleventh Avenue. From our back door to their back door was just a few hundred feet across a gravel driveway that cut the block in two. The Wesleys were childless, and from the way they played with us it was obvious that they loved children. I remembered when Cynthia, just a few years old, first came to stay with the Wesleys. Cynthia's own family was large and suffered from the worst poverty. Cynthia would stay with the Wesleys for a while, then return to her family—this went on until the stretches of time she spent with the Wesleys grew longer and her stays at home grew shorter. Finally, with the approval of her family, the Wesleys officially adopted her. She was always immaculate, her face had a freshly scrubbed look about it, her dresses were always starched and her little pocketbook always matched her newly shined shoes. When my sister Fania came into the house looking grubby and bedraggled, my mother would often ask her why she couldn't keep herself clean like Cynthia. She was a thin, very sensitive child and even though I was five years older, I thought she had an understanding of things that was far more mature than mine. When she came to the house, she seemed to enjoy talking to my mother more than playing with Fania.

Denise McNair. Addie Mae Collins. My mother had taught Denise when she was in first grade and Addie Mae, although we didn't know her personally, could have been any Black child in my neighborhood.

When the lives of these four girls were so ruthlessly wiped out, my pain was deeply personal. But when the initial hurt and rage had subsided enough for me to think a little more clearly, I was struck by the objective significance of these murders.

This act was not an aberration. It was not something sparked by a few extremists gone mad. On the contrary, it was logical, inevitable. The people who planted the bomb in the girls' restroom in the basement of 16th Street Baptist Church were not pathological, but rather the normal products of their surroundings. And it was this spectacular, violent event, the

savage dismembering of four little girls, which had burst out of the daily, sometimes even dull, routine of racist oppression.

No matter how much I talked, the people around me were simply incapable of grasping it. They could not understand why the whole society was guilty of this murder—why their beloved Kennedy was also to blame, why the whole ruling stratum in their country, by being guilty of racism, was also guilty of this murder.

Those bomb-wielding racists, of course, did not plan specifically the deaths of Carole, Cynthia, Addie Mae and Denise. They may not have even consciously taken into account the possibility of someone's death. They wanted to terrorize Birmingham's Black population, which had been stirred out of its slumber into active involvement in the struggle for Black liberation. They wanted to destroy this movement before it became too deeply rooted in our minds and our lives. This is what they wanted to do and they didn't care if someone happened to get killed. It didn't matter to them one way or the other. The broken bodies of Cynthia, Carole, Addie Mae and Denise were incidental to the main thing—which was precisely why the murders were even more abominable than if they had been deliberately planned.

In November our group moved to Paris. I was assigned to the Lamotte family at 13 bis rue Duret, a little ways from the Arc de Triomphe. Two other women from the Hamilton program lived there too. Jane was on the third floor with M. and Mme. Lamotte and their three children. Christie and I shared one of the two bedrooms in the smaller second-floor apartment of M. Lamotte's mother. Each morning she brought us a big wooden tray with two large bowls of café au lait, pieces of a freshly baked *baguette*, and two hunks of butter. In the evening we had dinner with the family upstairs. We walked through the old cobblestone courtyard to the métro station around the corner, and traveled underground on the old red trains to the Latin Quarter to attend our classes. Most of mine

were at the section of the Sorbonne called the Institut de Préparation et de Perfectionnement de Professeurs de Français à L'Étranger.

In the Sorbonne, I always felt as if I were in church—it was centuries old, with tremendous pillars holding up uncommonly high ceilings which displayed faded old paintings. The sacredness exuded by the place forced thousands of students inside to observe the silence. My business there seemed incongruous with the surroundings. My studies were devoted almost entirely to contemporary literature—one course on contemporary French novels, another on plays, one on poetry and one on Ideas. The only other course I took was organized by the Hamilton program itself and required attending the theater each week and discussing and writing about the plays we had seen. By the time the year was up, I had the feeling I had seen most of what was interesting on the stage in Paris—including the Peking Opera and the Ballet Africaine from Guinea.

When the news broke in Paris that Kennedy had been shot, everyone rushed down to the U.S. Embassy. Kennedy's assassination was certainly no source of joy to me. Though his hands were far from clean (I kept remembering the Bay of Pigs), killing him was not going to solve any problems. Besides, the Vice President from Texas and his cronies in the oil monopolies would probably only make things worse for my people. Nevertheless, I felt out of place at the Embassy, surrounded by crowds of "Americans in Paris" and it was difficult to identify with their weeping. I wondered how many of them had shed tears—or had truly felt saddened—when they read the *Herald Tribune* story about the murders of Carole, Cynthia, Addie Mae and Denise.

Later on in the year, I accompanied a friend who had been invited to attend the Vietnamese Tet celebration. That night, two New Year's programs were taking place—one organized and attended by the South Vietnamese who remained loyal to Diem and the other organized and attended by the North Vietnamese, together with the socialist and other op-

position forces in the South. We attended the North Vietnamese celebration. Held in a gigantic stadium in a working-class district of Paris, it was a grand seven-hour spectacle consisting of songs, comedy acts, acrobatic numbers and skits, all full of the vigor of their struggle and conveying a message that did not require an understanding of Vietnamese. Like the thousands of Vietnamese sitting around the stadium, I was enchanted. But I was shocked back to the brutal realities of their experiences by the recurring satires directed against the U.S. government and its military. The longest and most vehement applause and laughter were always at the appearance of an actor dressed up like a U.S. GI, who was the butt of jokes or, in more serious episodes, fell in defeat.

Although I was on the verge of receiving a degree in French Literature, what I really wanted to study was philosophy. I was interested in Marx, his predecessors and his successors. Over the last years, whenever I could find the time, I read philosophy on the side. I didn't really know what I was doing, except that it gave me a feeling of security and comfort to read what people had to say about such formidable things as the universe, history, human beings, knowledge.

During my second year at Brandeis, I had picked up *Eros and Civilization* by Herbert Marcuse and had struggled with it from beginning to end. That year he was teaching at the Sorbonne. When I arrived in Paris the following year, he was already back at Brandeis, but people were still raving about his fantastic courses. When I returned to Brandeis, the first semester of my senior year was so crowded with required French courses that I could not officially enroll in Marcuse's lecture series on European political thought since the French Revolution. Nevertheless, I attended each session, rushing in to capture a seat in the front of the hall. Arranged around the room on progressively higher levels, the desks were in the style of the UN General Assembly room. When Marcuse walked onto the platform, situated at the lowest level of the hall, his

presence dominated everything. There was something imposing about him which evoked total silence and attention when he appeared, without his having to pronounce a single word. The students had a rare respect for him. Their concentration was not only total during the entire hour as he paced back and forth while he lectured, but if at the sound of the bell Marcuse had not finished, the rattling of papers would not begin until he had formally closed the lecture.

One day, shortly after the semester began, I mustered up enough courage to put in a request for an interview with Marcuse. I had decided to ask him to help me draw up a bibliography on basic works in philosophy. Having assumed I would have to wait for weeks to see him, I was surprised when I was told he would be free that very afternoon.

From afar, Marcuse seemed unapproachable. I imagine the combination of his stature, his white hair, the heavy accent, his extraordinary air of confidence, and his wealth of knowledge made him seem ageless and the epitome of a philosopher. Up close, he was a man with inquisitive sparkling eyes and a fresh, very down-to-earth smile.

Trying to explain my reasons for the appointment, I told him that I intended to study philosophy in graduate school, perhaps at the university in Frankfurt, but that my independent reading in philosophy had been unsystematic—without regard for any national or historical relations. What I wanted from him—if it was not too much of an imposition—was a list of works in the sequence in which I ought to read them. And if he gave me permission, I wanted to enroll in his graduate seminar on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

"Do you really want to study philosophy?" Professor Marcuse asked, slowly and placing emphasis on each word. He made it sound so serious and so profound—like an initiation into some secret society which, once you join, you can never leave. I was afraid that a mere "yes" would ring hollow and inane.

"At least, I want to see if I am able," was about the only thing I could think of to answer.

"Then you should begin with the Pre-Socratics, then Plato and Aristotle. Come back again next week and we will discuss the Pre-Socratics."

I had no idea that my little request would develop into stimulating weekly discussions on the philosophers he suggested, discussions which gave me a far more exciting and vivid picture of the history of philosophy than would have emerged from a dry introduction-to-philosophy course.

Shortly after the Nazi seizure of power in Germany, Marcuse had emigrated to the United States, along with a group of intellectuals who had established the Institut für Sozialforschung. Among them were Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. They had continued their work for a number of years in this country, but after the defeat of the fascists, they reestablished the Institute as a part of the regular university in Frankfurt. I had first become acquainted with the work of the Institute through Manfred Clemenz, the German student I had met my first year at Brandeis. During the summer after my studies in France, I had spent several weeks in Frankfurt attending a few of Adorno's lectures, and getting to know some of the students there. At that time, my knowledge of German was minimal, but the people around me translated the essential points of the lectures into English or French. Later I read all of Adorno's and Horkheimer's works that had been translated into English or French, in addition to Marcuse's writings. In this way I had acquainted myself with their thought, which was collectively known as Critical Theory.

During that last year at Brandeis, I made up my mind to apply for a scholarship to study philosophy at the university in Frankfurt. Marcuse confirmed my conviction that this was the best place to study, given my interest in Kant, Hegel and Marx. The remaining months of the school year were consumed by intensive preparation in philosophy, German language and the final requirements for my B.A. degree, including a year-long honors project on the Phenomenological Attitude, which I thought I had discovered in the works of the contemporary French novelist Robbe-Grillet. The most chal-

lenging and fulfilling course was the graduate seminar that Marcuse conducted on the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Poring over a seemingly incomprehensible passage for hours, then suddenly grasping its meaning gave me a sense of satisfaction I had never experienced before.

My parents were not overjoyed at the idea of my leaving the country again, particularly since I had not yet decided how long I wanted to remain in Germany. Nevertheless, they were extremely proud to attend the graduation ceremony, where they heard my name called among the Phi Beta Kappas and magna cum laudes. I gave my mother the diplomas, certificates and medals and we packed up the things I had accumulated over the last four years, dropped off my friend Celeste in Providence and headed down the highway for Birmingham.

Along the way, we stopped at a liquor store where my father bought several bottles of bourbon to take home with him—in Alabama's state-controlled liquor stores, the only brands available were the ones approved by the government. (We always thought that one of Wallace's relatives must be the owner of the factory producing all the off-the-wall brands of alcohol, which you never saw anyplace except in Alabama.) We crossed over into Tennessee very late that night, and because we knew that we'd never find a motel run by Black people where we could spend the night, we decided to drive straight through to Birmingham.

In one of those towns along the highway in Tennessee, around two in the morning, we heard a siren screaming behind us. The fat, tobacco-chewing cop, letting his white Tennessee drawl tumble out of a grotesque smile, said to my father, "Y'all know y'all's driving too fast. Git out of the car." All the time he was fingering the holster strapped to his waist. I thought about the stories I had heard about Black people or Northern whites disappearing for weeks, sometimes forever, in these small-town jails. The cop searched the front of the car and told my father to open the trunk. When he saw all the

suitcases, he seemed startled and immediately asked where we were coming from. After my father said that he had just attended his daughter's college graduation, the cop assumed a less slovenly posture and became more official. But when he saw the bourbon, his eyes lit up.

"This is a dry county, y'all know. No liquor allowed nowhere in the jurisdiction."

"The bottles are unopened and we're only passing through," my father insisted.

"Don't make no difference. The county is dry and ain't no liquor allowed no kind of way. Y'all can do thirty days in jail for this. And the judge ain't even in town—won't be back till next week. Look like y'all gone have to stay in jail till he get back."

When my father talked about getting in touch with his lawyer, the cop said, "I tell you what. I'm gon do you a favor. Treat ya like I treat my boys around here. Git back in the car and follow me into town." He took the whiskey to the patrol car.

Thinking we were headed for the police station, and knowing that it would be fatal to try to get away, we followed the police car through the dark streets. When it came to a halt, there was nothing around which bore the faintest resemblance to a police station. We were in an unpaved alley and the cop was opening a garage door. Although this wasn't the first time we had been trapped into a situation like this, we were all silently nervous.

"Davis," my mother said, "I don't think you should go in there. There's no telling what he might try to do." But there wasn't the slightest trace of fear in my father—in fact, I have never seen him afraid of anything. He went on in while we waited on tenterhooks in the car. After what seemed like hours he came out with a wry smile on his face. Starting up the car, he told us, chuckling, "All the man wanted was the liquor and twenty dollars." It was a small-time racket which he probably pulled whenever he caught up with Black people driving

through the town. The alternative to giving him the twenty dollars would probably have been much more terrible than the thirty days in jail.

When I boarded the boat sailing for Germany, Watts was burning. I felt again the tension of the Janus head—leaving the country at that time was hard for me. But in a little more than a week, I was on the other side of the ocean.

My stipend consisted of the boat fare and a hundred dollars a month—for rent, food, tram fare to and from the university, books, and whatever else I needed. As I searched the city for a room, the agencies kept telling me, "*Es tut uns leid, aber wir haben keine Zimmer für Ausländer.*" "Sorry but we don't have rooms for foreigners," their attitude clearly implying, "Our rooms are only for good Aryans."

In historical time, twenty years is not very long—half the people I saw on the streets, and practically all the adults, had gone through the experience of Hitler. And in West Germany, unlike the German Democratic Republic, there had been no determined campaign to attack the fascist and racist attitudes which had become so deeply embedded.

Eventually, after days of reading the fine print of the *Frankfurter Allgemeiner*, I found a little room near the zoo, on the top floor of a postwar apartment building—like the *chambre de bonne* I had lived in in Paris. The family to whose apartment the room was attached seemed to be exceptional, as far as the masses of West Germans were concerned. They were curious and concerned about the condition of Black people in the United States and they never failed to draw the appropriate parallels between the Nazi oppression of the Jews in their country and the repression of my people in the United States. They repeatedly invited me to their apartment for dinner and discussions. In the beginning when my German was not very polished, these discussions helped me orient myself to the language.

During the first few weeks, I didn't understand a word of what Adorno was saying. Not only were the concepts difficult to grasp, but he spoke his own special aphoristic variety of German. It was a consolation to discover that most German students attending his lectures for the first time were having almost as much trouble understanding Adorno as I.

I saw old friends from previous trips to Europe, and entered into new friendships as well. It was a great relief to find that not too far from me lived a young Black man from Indiana who had been stationed in Frankfurt as a GI and had decided to stay on to pursue his studies in literature at the university. We were good friends throughout my stay in Germany. I was friendly with a group of Haitian students, a Black South African and two couples who, like myself, had come from the United States to study with Adorno.

I was paying eighty marks a month for my room—practically a quarter of the hundred dollars I had to live on. Almost inevitably, when the end of the month approached, I was eating nothing but *Quark* (something between yogurt and cottage cheese), and writing my parents for a few dollars to tide me over until the next check came in. I was very relieved to find a room on Adalbertstrasse, near the university, which cost only a few marks a month. It was in a massive old building of crumbling red brick, an abandoned factory which the owner rented out I imagine in order to avoid paying a watchman.

The three floors of one side were occupied by a sculptor who fashioned huge abstract metal forms which he kept in the courtyard. The side I moved into had been taken over by a group of students, all as poor as I. The entire place cost us seventy-five marks (less than twenty dollars) a month, and it could comfortably accommodate up to five people in the little nooks that had served as offices when the factory was in operation.

It was a dilapidated old abandoned building with dirty cement floors, no showers—not even hot water—and no cen-

tral heating, only potbellied coal stoves. But paying only about five dollars a month for rent and a few more dollars for coal during the winter months, I could afford to eat a little better—even buying meat a couple of days a week—and was able to buy more books and a new blouse once in a while. As throughout Europe, cultural events could always be attended by students at a great discount, so for about fifty cents, I could see a movie or go to the theater, the opera, the ballet or a museum.

During the spring of my first year there, all the students who had received scholarships from the exchange program were given a trip to Berlin from whatever section of Germany they happened to be living in. Anxious to see Socialist Germany, I spent most of the time in Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic. Each day, I walked across at Checkpoint Charlie—the border point for people with passports from capitalist countries. Crowds of white tourists from the United States would be standing in line, probably waiting to cross the border in order to tell people they had seen the other side of the “wall”—so they could say, in Kennedy’s war-filled words, “*Ich bin ein Berliner*,” that is, I am ready to fight communism. The tourists were always complaining about the wait. But I never had any trouble—each time I went across, I would receive the signal to go on only a few moments after I had shown my passport. This was their way of showing their solidarity with Black people.

Claudia and Margaret Burnham’s stepbrother Bob had recently come through Frankfurt, stayed a while at the “factory” and then gone on to study at the Brecht Theater in Berlin. Through him, I was introduced to several people in the GDR who showed me around the city. Living in Bob’s apartment building was a group of Cubans—the national director of the ballet and several of his assistants. I was amazed at their youth—the director was in his early twenties and the rest around the same age. They talked about their efforts to more fully integrate the African element of Cuban culture into their classical dances and described the way in which they were

developing the old Yoruba dances which, before the revolution, had been restricted to the remote areas of the country where Black people still retained African customs.

Esther and James Jackson, old friends of my parents from Birmingham, were in Berlin at the time. Jim, the International Affairs Director of the Communist Party, U.S.A., was representing the party at the May Day celebration. I spent an evening with them. We talked about the old days when Jim had been underground, and how puzzled I had been as a child, seeing those sinister white men following us all over New York looking for him; Jim was one of the lucky ones whom the FBI never succeeded in tracking down. We discussed the socialist transformation of the GDR and its active campaign against the remnants of fascism in the mentality of the people. The next day I watched the parade, participated in the May Day Festivities and then went on back through Checkpoint Charlie to catch my plane for Frankfurt.

When the West German police said they were going to detain me at the airport, I was certain they were going to accuse me of being too friendly with the people in the GDR—and, of course, they would have been correct. But, according to them, the reason they wouldn't let me board the plane had to do with my failure to check out with the Frankfurt police when I had moved, some months before, out of the room near the zoo, and had not registered with the police station near the factory. I could never get used to the incredible bureaucracy in which one must become embroiled merely as a prerequisite for living an ordinary life. Everyone, citizen or foreigner, not registered at the nearest police station—and there was no lack of them—was technically liable to arrest, including those visiting with friends for only a few days. Although I had registered when I moved into the first place (the process is called *Anmeldung*—announcing one's arrival), it had not crossed my mind to tell them I was leaving (called *Ausmeldung*) and to go through the *Anmeldung* at the Adalbertstrasse police station. The West Berlin police were serious: they were talking about deporting me. It took several hours before I could per-

suade them that my failure to register had been an innocent omission. After it was all over and they had left the threat of deportation hanging over me unless I cleared myself the next day with the Frankfurt police, I was still positive that the harassment was a little retaliatory action for my trip to the GDR.

Frankfurt was a very intensive learning experience. Stimulating lectures and seminars conducted by Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermass, Professor Haag, Alfred Schmidt, Oscar Negt. Tackling formidable works, such as all three of Kant's Critiques and the works of Hegel and Marx as well (in one seminar, we spent an entire semester analyzing about twenty pages of Hegel's *Logic*).

Most of the students living in the factory studied either philosophy or sociology. Many were members of S.D.S.—*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*, the German Socialist Student League. And they were very seriously striving to arrive at some form of practical resistance capable of ultimately overturning the enemy system. Aside from the concern with the social contradictions inside their own country, they consistently tried to force an internationalist awareness among their members. I participated in rallies and demonstrations directed against U.S. aggression in Vietnam. Those of us who were not citizens had to be especially careful because an arrest would mean a sure deportation. One demonstration, which took place outside the U.S. Embassy, was particularly dangerous. Chanting "*U.S. raus, U.S. raus, U.S. raus aus Vietnam!*" and "*Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh!*" the crowds of demonstrators were attacked almost immediately by mounted police. One young woman was trampled under the hooves of the horses. Since it had been decided beforehand that we would resist this expected attack, the agreed upon hit-and-run, disruptive tactics were put into operation. The idea was to move along the main street leading to the center of the city, disrupting the functioning of the tramway. As the crowds of demonstrators

marched down the main street on the sidewalks on both sides of the street, some would periodically separate from the group and sit down on the tramway tracks. Watching the approach of the police, they waited until the very last moment to run into the refuge of the crowd. Not all of us made it. When it was my turn to do the sitting and running, I had to make sure I was fast enough to reach the safety of the crowd, not wanting to have a case foisted upon me by the West German courts. After several hours of sitting and running, and a sizeable number of arrests, we made it to the Hauptwache, the center of the city, and listened to an arousing speech by Rudi Dutsche, the Chairman of S.D.S., who was later shot in the head by a would-be assassin who said he was inspired by the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Toward the end of my second year, a mass student demonstration, organized by S.D.S. in Berlin protesting the visit by the Shah of Iran, was attacked by the Shah's security, aided by the West Berlin police, with such terrible force that it ended in the death of a student—Ben Ohnesorge, who was attending his first political protest. The response throughout West Germany was swift and intense. In Frankfurt, there were mass gatherings, demonstrations and teach-ins.

I was most impressed by the consciousness of the student movement when I heard about the Berlin campaign led by S.D.S. against the movie *Africa Adio*, directed by two Roman playboy-types, dealing with the ousting of the colonialists from Africa. Not only was this movie thoroughly racist in that it depicted the African Liberation Fighters as aggressors against the pure, educated, civilized whites, but the directors went so far as to stage actual killings in order to do on-the-spot documentary coverage of Africa. S.D.S. members in Berlin tore up a theater which refused to boycott the film.

Students and workers were being drawn en masse into the arena of political protest in Germany. At the same time, great upheavals were taking place in the States.

My decision to study in Frankfurt had been made in 1964, against the backdrop of relative political tranquillity. But

by the time I left in the summer of 1965, thousands of sisters and brothers were screaming in the streets of Los Angeles that they had observed the rules of the game long enough, too long.

Watts was exploding; furiously burning. And out of the ashes of Watts, Phoenix-like, a new Black militancy was being born.

While I was hidden away in West Germany the Black Liberation Movement was undergoing decisive metamorphoses. The slogan "Black Power" sprang out of a march in Mississippi. Organizations were being transfigured—The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, a leading civil rights organization, was becoming the foremost advocate of "Black Power." The Congress on Racial Equality was undergoing similar transformations. In Newark, a national Black Power Conference had been organized. In political groups, labor unions, churches and other organizations, Black caucuses were being formed to defend the special interests of Black people. Everywhere there were upheavals.

While I was reading philosophy in Frankfurt, and participating in the rearguard of S.D.S., there were young Black men in Oakland, California, who had decided that they had to wield arms in order to protect the residents of Oakland's Black community from the indiscriminate police brutality ravaging the area. Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, li'l Bobby Hutton—those were some of the names that reached me. One day in Frankfurt I read about their entrance into the California Legislature in Sacramento with their weapons in order to safeguard their right (a right given to all whites) to carry them as instruments of self-defense. The name of this organization was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

The more the struggles at home accelerated, the more frustrated I felt at being forced to experience it all vicariously. I was advancing my studies, deepening my understanding of philosophy, but I felt more and more isolated. I was so far away from the terrain of the fight that I could not even analyze the episodes of the struggle. I did not even have the

knowledge or understanding to judge which currents of the movement were progressive and genuine and which were not. It was a difficult balance I was trying to maintain, and it was increasingly hard to feel a part of the collective coming to consciousness of my people.

I am certain that what I was feeling was a variation and reflection of the same feelings that were overwhelming larger and larger numbers of Black people abroad. Many others of us must have felt pained, when reading about some new crisis in the struggle at home, to be hearing about it secondhand.

I had thought mine was the perfect dilemma: the struggle at home versus the need to remain in Frankfurt until the completion of my doctorate, for I was certain that Frankfurt was far more conducive to philosophical studies than any other place. But each day it was becoming clearer to me that my ability to accomplish anything was directly dependent on my ability to contribute something concrete to the struggle.

Adorno had readily agreed to direct my work on a doctoral dissertation. But now I felt it would be impossible for me to stay in Germany any longer. Two years was enough. I arranged for an appointment with Adorno at the Institute and explained to him that I had to go home. In my correspondence with Marcuse, he had already agreed to work with me at the University of California in San Diego, where he had accepted a position after having been practically pushed out of Brandeis for political reasons. I wanted to continue my academic work, but I knew I could not do it unless I was politically involved. The struggle was a life-nerve; our only hope for survival. I made up my mind. The journey was on.

*My... journey...  
Berkeley CA 1950*