

# Introduction

In his 1988 book *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970*, novelist and critic Charles R. Johnson presents a new definition of African American literature. Unlike the cultural, intellectual, and political rhetoric of racial uplift in previous eras of US history, contemporary African American literature represents “a fiction of increasing artistic and intellectual growth, one that enables us as a people – as a culture – to move from narrow complaint to broad celebration.” This movement from “narrow complaint to broad celebration” corresponds with the broader cultural shift in the post-Civil Rights era in the United States from overt protests (such as the antiwar, feminist, and gay liberation movements) to pluralistic consensus. Declarations of “postracialism,” emerging especially during Barack Obama’s election to United States President in 2008, coincide with intellectual questions about the nature and function of African American literature in an age when the categories of race and ethnicity, in particular, are no longer immutable and absolute – when, as Johnson puts it, the focus on achievement has overtaken the need for protest during the contemporary turn of American literature and culture.

The economic and political changes that have occurred across the United States and the world since the 1970s partially explain this recent turn. In various ways, the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s, the “culture wars” of the 1990s, and the “War on Terror” following the September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, all abetted a partisan movement to the political right. Conservative culture warriors in the 1980s and 1990s employed 1960s-style public, grassroots protest to bemoan the evils of what they believed to be permissive liberalism and advocate particular social and political changes to suit their interests.

If multiculturalism and diversity became lightning rods of an increasing, almost insurmountable, partisan divide, the doctrines also reflect the cultural reality of the United States at the turn of the new millennium. By 2010, Hispanic Americans had surpassed African Americans as the largest non-white population in the country. Latin Americans and Asian Americans emerged as the fastest growing non-white groups in the country. These statistics arrive half a century after the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, which overturned discriminatory immigration policy. With the onset of globalization, the final decades of the twentieth century also saw an upsurge in immigration. For the first time in the country’s history, the 2000 Census allowed Americans to self-report their multiracial ancestry. But diversity had not been limited to race. Pluralism came to include sexual preference and gender definition, aspects of identities punctuated by the Stonewall Riots of 1969, which ushered in the modern Gay Liberation Movement, and the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic, which highlighted the deep-seated homophobia even among those seeking to understand the disease. By 2004, when Massachusetts became the first state to legalize gay marriage, a reinvigorated gay rights movement was forcing US

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citizens to acknowledge the several personal and institutional barriers to full legal equality. The political militancy of the 1960s and 1970s as well as the subsequent pushback against it both laid the groundwork for the subsequent controversies over conservatism and liberalism.

In early 1981, when Ronald Reagan entered office as United States President, he was riding a wave of conservative disenchantment with the civil rights, radical protest, and liberalism that had been fermenting since the late 1960s. Previously, as Governor of California, he had experienced this disenchantment firsthand. He entered this office amid student protest at the University of California system and the rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland. The Goldwater Republicans (named after Barry Goldwater, a charismatic US Senator from Arizona who epitomized conservatism) watched with exasperation as President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society Programs expanded federal support for welfare, education, and civil rights. But they felt vindicated as a stalled economy, an energy crisis, and deindustrialization marked the 1970s as the first time since the 1930s that Americans ended a decade poorer than when they entered it. Consequently, for the first time since 1952, the Republican Party gained control of both the Presidency and the Senate in 1980. The Reagan Revolution consisted of a coalition of cultural and fiscal conservatives and working-class white Americans angered by a decade of falling incomes and rising prices. The coalition promised "Morning in America," as Reagan put it, through tax cuts and military spending. Even though two-thirds of white, theologically conservative evangelical Christians had voted in 1976 for Jimmy Carter (a born-again Christian who had pledged a foreign policy based on human rights and engineered the historic Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt in 1979), four years later they voted overwhelmingly for Reagan, a shift largely due to the political mobilization of evangelical Christians in the name of Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority."

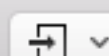
Evangelicals and traditional fiscal conservatives were not the only groups essential to the Reagan movement. Disillusioned Democrats, many of whom had been conservative opponents of the party's more radical wing during the late 1960s, embraced the former actor's dynamic yet genial style and his promise of economic recovery. Thus a conservative inclination was far from partisan. Reagan's Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, which instituted across-the-board tax cuts as well as over \$30 billion in cuts to food stamps, public service jobs, student loans, and welfare payments, had bipartisan support, even in the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives. Critics on the left, such as one-time presidential hopeful Jesse Jackson, criticized Reagan's laissez-faire and often racialized rhetoric (which demonized Cadillac-driving "welfare queens"). But popular culture generally accepted the notion that the deterioration of the inner city, along with the increasing gap between rich and poor, resulted from personal failings rather than institutional dysfunction. Deindustrialization began in the 1970s, shifting the nation from a manufacturing and industrial economy toward a service- and information-based one. A general decline in real income between the 1970s and the late 1980s further helped to create a shrinking middle class and an expansion of the working poor. Even as deadly urban riots exploded in 1992 after the acquittal of white Los Angeles Police Department officers for the beating of African American motorist Rodney King, most Americans continued to believe that personal weaknesses created a

permanent underclass of African American, Latino, and poor whites unable to compete in an increasingly globalized economy.

Politicized conflict in the 1990s largely moved from economic to cultural terrain. In many respects, the years of President Bill Clinton marked a decade of prosperity. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990 and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union ended the Cold War. US global hegemony – in some ways, swiftly demonstrated in George H.W. Bush's Persian Gulf War, also in 1990 – was confirmed. The massive technological boom thereafter in electronics and dot-com companies kept the markets humming. And while Clinton's presidency was littered with scandals, they were primarily moral rather than ideological, more indictments of alleged affairs and cover-ups than resistance to his fiscal conservatism. To an extent, the controversies mirrored the culture at large. Economic and political stability was taken for granted, and debates persisted over sexual and identity politics and cultural standards. Raging in political and cultural discourse, the culture wars were particularly contentious in the academy. Pluralism and relativism were either embraced as pedagogically essential or demonized as intellectually bankrupt. If nothing else, the presidential tenure of George W. Bush from 2000 to 2008 – rife with controversial, if not unsuccessful, foreign policies, military declarations of war and peace, and economic philosophies and practices – worked, at times, to turn the gaze of Americans from internal ideological conflicts to the urgent realities of the global economy and international relations. Obama's 2008 election and 2012 reelection, then, were remarkable not only because he was the first African American ever to be elected and reelected President, but because the Age of Obama illustrates the electoral resonance of arguments about diversity and multiculturalism in conjunction with the popular backlash against Bush's policies, even as the electorate, as a whole, has gradually moved to the political right.

American literature published after 1975 reflects the increasing cultural, racial, sexual, and ethnic diversity of its writers and readership, even if, at times, the political implications or consequences of this diversity have been understated or muted in the literature itself. Postmodern inclinations continued in the sprawling fiction of Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace, or the metafiction of Tim O'Brien and Paul Auster. Historical fiction and realism likewise proved durable in the Depression-era and Cold War chronicles of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Jeffrey Eugenides *Middlesex* (2002), Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004), or Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000). Asian American, Latin American, and gay and lesbian writers also emerged with texts no longer primarily defined by their "otherness." Chinese American writer Amy Tan and Native American writer Louise Erdrich reached wide audiences with their respective novels *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *Love Medicine* (1984). Even though American literature continues to be packaged and marketed according to ethnic categories and identity politics, these factors are not as politicized, in the sense of agitation or protest, as they were decades ago, such as during the 1960s. Recent works by Ha Jin and Jhumpa Lahiri indeed are less "Asian American fiction" than sophisticated and insightful interrogations of the human condition.

African Americans have faced similar cultural and commercial conditions as those experienced by fellow ethnic



American writers, although they at times uniquely responded to the political conservatism of the 1970s and 1980s and the countervailing shift toward multicultural pluralism. The politics of African American literature has been alternately explicit and implicit. An irony of Reagan-era racism is that the image of the African American welfare queen emerged at the same time that a revolution in the practice and study of African American women's writing was taking place in the US academy. Authors from Phillis Wheatley to Pauline Hopkins and Lorraine Hansberry had already established a political and literary identity independent of their male counterparts, just as Anna Julia Cooper's notion that African American women had a central role in racial uplift or activism had long shaped, and still shapes, African American culture. The Black Power and feminist movements of the 1970s further provided space for African American women both within the literary establishment and at its margins.

In 1968, Toni Morrison became a senior editor at Random House, with the specific task of working with African American writers who were suddenly popular, given the radicalism of the era. There, she helped publish works by such African American women as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones, even as she had an eye toward writing and publishing her own novels. By 1990, African American women had produced a diverse collection of literature – including poetry and plays – that explored feminism, family violence, motherhood, and postcolonialism in African American culture. But the development of African American women's literature, along with the rise in African American Women's Studies, encountered a backlash in the culture wars and the allegation that these literary and scholarly disciplines were threats to the American canon. But the canon's move to include strongly feminist African American literature continued through the early 1990s and only enhanced its stature. Indeed, Toni Morrison received the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Nobel Prize for Literature, and Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Rita Dove, and Audre Lorde likewise all earned critical, academic, and popular acclaim as American writers while they worked, in particular, to undermine or complicate the mythical images of African American women.

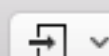
Contemporary African American writers have also been drawn toward popular genres of "serious" fiction. Writers like Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler have turned to the genre of speculative fiction to interrogate and deconstruct identity, and to do so unbound by the conventions of racial representation in canonical African American literature. Charles R. Johnson and Walter Mosley have toyed with genres and poststructuralist techniques in their critiques of racial and cultural tropes in our increasingly global and multiracial world. The culture wars have largely been decided in favor of diversity and multiculturalism, to be sure – not only in human identity but also in literary forms. The "broad celebration" potentially defining African American literature at the dawn of the new millennium continues, even as the election and reelection of the nation's first African American President intensified the partisanship of cultural and political debate over the past, present, and future of the United States.

# Samuel Delany (b. 1942)

In a career that has explored multiple genres, the work of Samuel R. Delany is an iconic prelude to the so-called postracialism of the twenty-first century. He wrote his first novel at 19, and, by the 1960s, became an innovator of alternative fiction and dabbled in avant-garde filmmaking and radio broadcasting. He was an extremely gifted child of a distinguished African American family with roots in Reconstruction-era North Carolina and New Negro Harlem. By his early thirties, he was a best-selling author of science fiction and a professor. But his works never quite resembled the overt racial protests of fellow East Villagers Amiri Baraka or Larry Neal. Rather, Delany's brilliance has been his ability to write about humanity, inequality, and conflict on his own terms, indeed by reinventing the language and imagery in which such monumental themes are conventionally discussed. Science fiction and fantasy writing, as he once stated, have become "a way of reading, a way of making certain texts make sense."

Samuel Ray "Chip" Delany, Jr was born in Harlem in 1942 to a well-established African American family. His grandfather, Henry Beard Delany, was Vice Principal of St Augustine's College in North Carolina. Visitors to the school, where Henry Beard became the first African American bishop in the Episcopal Church, included Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and Ralph Bunche. Samuel Ray Delany, Sr ran the famous Levy & Delany Funeral Home on Harlem's Seventh Avenue, while his wife, Margaret Delany, worked at the New York Public Library. For Delany, Jr, African American history was not an abstraction, but rather something in which his family members were active participants. His paternal aunts Sadie and Bessie Delany were the subject of a *New York Times* best-selling biography, *Having Our Say* (1993), in which they described their lives as civil rights activists and innovators. Sadie was the first African American woman to teach high school-level domestic science in the New York public schools; while Bessie earned a doctorate in dental surgery from Columbia University in 1923, and became only the second African American woman licensed to practice dentistry in New York State. In the 1995 novella *Atlantis: Model 1924*, Samuel Delany, Jr used his aunts as the basis for the characters Elsie and Corry.

Despite being surrounded by a nurturing community of African American professionals and civil rights leaders, Delany's childhood was not easy. Although his precocious intellect encouraged his mother to enroll him at Vassar College's Summer Institute for Gifted Youth when he was four, his worried parents hired psychologists and tutors to help him with his undiagnosed dyslexia. He was a gifted violinist and guitar player, spent part of his high school years teaching remedial reading to Puerto Rican young men, and wrote novels in his spare time. His talents in science and art were further nurtured at the Dalton School in Manhattan and the Bronx High School of Science, where he met Marilyn Hacker, the daughter of Jewish immigrants who entered New York University at 15. The two married in Detroit in 1961



because Michigan was one of only a handful of states where interracial marriage was legal. Although the couple separated in 1975 and divorced in 1980, their work often complements one another, with Hacker describing aspects of their relationship in her own award-winning poetry.

By the time Delany was 20 years old, he was a published novelist. Hacker, an assistant editor at Ace Books, encouraged him to publish *The Jewels of Apor* in 1962. As urban riots exploded in Newark, New Jersey, in Detroit, and in his own Harlem neighborhood, the “boy wonder” began his prolific production of science fiction, publishing *The Fall of the Towers* trilogy and *The Ballad of Beta-2* in the next three years. Delany was briefly hospitalized in 1965 after suffering a nervous breakdown, but went on to publish more novels by 1968: *Babel-17* (1966) and *The Einstein Intersection* (1967) both won the Nebula Award from the Science Fiction Writers of America, and both were nominated (along with the 1968 novel *Nova*) for the Hugo Award.

Shortly thereafter, Delany’s focus shifted from traditional science fiction toward an exploration of the complex sexuality that infuses much of his literary work. In 1969, just days before the Stonewall Riots exploded in New York City, Delany completed his most controversial work: *Hogg*, a pornographic tale of pedophilia, sadomasochism, and rape that was not published until 1995. In a later interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Delany placed *Hogg* in its historical and cultural context, and in terms of his own individual development as a gay man. “It’s the last pre-Stonewall gay novel written in America,” he said. “It’s very much a book that comes out of the anger of a gay man who wants to tear the whole thing down. Once Stonewall comes, once there was a concerted gay-liberation movement and there was a way for these disruptive energies to channel in more constructive ways, I don’t think I could have thought *Hogg* at all.” For much of the 1970s, Delany lived in the Heavenly Breakfast commune in New York City, where he played in a band, and published *Tides of Lust* in 1973, another science fiction novel widely deemed pornographic.

Just two years later, Delany entered a new echelon of worldwide fame as a science fiction author with *Dhalgren* (1975). Based in the fictional American Midwest town of Bellona that is cut off from the rest of the world by an unnamed catastrophe, *Dhalgren* sold over a million copies and garnered critical acclaim. The novel’s labyrinthine, even schizophrenic, plotting and style polarized critics. Umberto Eco and others called it brilliant. Many science fiction writers, including Philip K. Dick, on the other hand, complained that it was unwieldy, incomprehensible, and poorly - written. The phenomenal success of the book nonetheless augured a special phase in Delany’s career. *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (originally published as *Triton* in 1976) was nominated for a Nebula Award and dealt with similar themes as Delany’s earlier work, but the rest of the decade found Delany working on his provocative *Return to Nevèrjón* series. In a series of 11 stories published in four books between 1979 and 1987, Delany describes a civilization before the dawn of history: men and women with brown to dark skin confront barbarian tribes with pale skin, yellow hair, and light eyes. Unlike *The Fall of the Towers* and *Dhalgren*, the *Nevèrjón* series was based in sword and sorcery fantasy rather than science fiction, and further expanded Delany’s significance as a highly innovative contributor to late-twentieth-century speculative fiction.

In the more recent phase of his career, Delany has turned to mainstream non-fiction, particularly literary criticism and memoirs. His Hugo Award-winning memoir, *The Motion of Life in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* (1988), unapologetically and movingly describes his sexuality, his interracial marriage, and the alternative culture of the 1960s. Likewise, much of his recent writing expands on the explorations of sexuality and race that have made his novels, short stories, and novellas so compelling to millions of readers.

Delany has enjoyed an esteemed academic career as a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1988–1999); at State University of New York at Buffalo (1999–2000); and, most recently, at Temple University, where he also directs the Graduate Creative Writing Program. He was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2002.

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# *Extract from Aye, and Gomorrah and Other Stories*

## **Omegahelm<sup>1</sup>**

*In a period when cleanliness and straight edges were close to the godliness of success, Hesse still associated concreteness with touch. She would mold the forms she sought by a personal tactile confrontation. ... "At times I've thought 'the more thought the greater the art,'" she said in 1970. "But I do have to admit there is a lot that I'll just let happen. ..." She wanted to make an art that could surprise, and she was canny enough to know that if it looks beautiful at first glance, a second glance may not be necessary.*

Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*

Bloody lace lazied on the bay.

Pink clouds filigreed the sky.

The great red sun, at the world's rim, worked its changes on the green sea below her, the coppery east beyond her, the marbled rocks she climbed on.

Squinting, she turned to face it.

Model her flat, sunlit features in dark terra-cotta around eyes green as that sea. Dry. Then, with a ball-peen hammer, shatter it from behind – only the instant between impact and the first cracks erupting through, catch a picture from the front.

There was that about her face.

Her hands seemed to have too many knuckles, on forearms corded with too many small muscles, too many big veins. The left – how could five fingers hold all those rings? Three big iron ones; four bigger ones of bronze; some were narrow and copper; three, of silver (on different fingers), were set with shards of different jades; two, of bright aluminum (on the same), bore both agates and opals. The gold one on her thumb was cast in a lizard's head, big as a dyll nut and gnawing a milky stone. Her left hand was hooked, by that lizard-headed thumb, over the webbed belt slanting her hip.

# Alice Walker (b. 1944)

Few writers have probed the imbrications of racism and sexism as incisively as Alice Walker. All the more remarkably, she has done so as both author and critic. At the same time that her Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winning novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), was ascending the *New York Times* best-seller list, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), her seminal work of “womanist” criticism, was reconceiving traditional feminism. Echoing the African American folk term “womanish” (suggestive of inappropriate precocity), Walker defines a “womanist” in this book as one “committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female.” She prefers it to “feminist” because it underscores the tradition of strong African American women. The term was an ideological foundation for African American women’s intellectual discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. Along with Toni Morrison, Alice Walker has led a renaissance in African American women’s literature in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Long before Alice Walker graduated as valedictorian of her high school class in 1961, she had already experienced the pain of isolation that would inform much of her work. Born in Eatonton, Georgia, the eighth child of Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Lou Grant (a sharecropper and a maid), a BB gun accident scarred and blinded Walker’s right eye when she was eight years old. Traumatized and self-conscious of her scarred appearance, Walker retreated from the outside world, reading voraciously and writing poetry. Her parents strove to protect her education, working to keep her in school and away from the numbing labor of fieldwork. After flourishing as a student in high school, Walker earned a scholarship to attend Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1961, amid the Civil Rights Movement. After two years she left to attend Sarah Lawrence College in upstate New York, where she graduated in 1965. A pregnancy and abortion complicated her progress through her final year at Sarah Lawrence, and plunged her into anxiety and depression.

Many of the poems in Walker’s first book of poetry, *Once* (1968), directly and vividly grew out of this dark period. She moved to the Lower East Side of New York City, became active in the Civil Rights Movement, and published her first short story, “To Hell With Dying” (1967), the basis of her 1988 children’s book about an old man revived from death by the love of two children. While working for the New York City Welfare Department, she met Jewish civil rights attorney Melvyn Roseman Leventhal. The two married in 1967 and moved to Jackson, Mississippi, to work on various civil rights projects, including voter registration drives, welfare rights, and children’s programs. Walker served as Writer-in-Residence at Jackson State (1968–1969) and Tougaloo College (1970–1971). The couple was widely ostracized for their interracial marriage. Not only did Mississippi law make it a crime for Walker to live as Leventhal’s legal wife; many African American critics focused more on Walker’s decision to marry a white man than on her actual published works. The couple had one child, Rebecca Grant, in 1969, and divorced in 1977.

Walker's time in Mississippi was productive. *Five Poems* (1972), *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973), and *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973) established her as one of the most acclaimed writers of the era. Her focus on women's issues often entailed excavating the injustice and violence within families and communities. She was vulnerable to accusations of "male-bashing" and pejorative depictions of African American life. *In Love and Trouble* nonetheless won the American Academy Institute of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Award in 1974, while *Revolutionary Petunias* was nominated for a National Book Award. With a common focus on internecine family conflict and women's struggles, her first two novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *Meridian* (1976), announced a new phase in African American literature in which male–female relationships, sexuality, and family conflict were just as significant as political protest and racial pride.

One of Walker's most significant contributions to contemporary American literature came not through her writing but her research. She is greatly responsible for the resuscitation of Zora Neale Hurston's writing, first in her 1975 essay, published in the March issue of *Ms.* magazine, "The Search for Zora Neale Hurston" (later renamed "Looking for Zora"), and subsequently as editor of the 1979 anthology *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing ... And Then Again: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Walker saw both Hurston and Gwendolyn Brooks as literary foremothers to her current generation of African American women writers. Largely through Walker's research, a work like Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* attained its present-day canonical status. Walker also pursued her commitment to African American women writers by promoting and mentoring new writers through her Wild Tree Press. Walker has also taught many courses in African American women's literature, at universities such as Wellesley, Brandeis, Yale, and Berkeley.

*The Color Purple*, Walker's best-selling novel, was immensely popular, spending 25 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. It was also immensely controversial, receiving censure for its depictions of domestic violence, incest, -lesbian relationships, and representations of Africa. The novel was striking in its use of a barely literate narrator, Celie, through whose limited yet eloquent voice the story is told. These criticisms were repeated when Steven Spielberg adapted the novel as an Academy Award-nominated film in 1985, particularly the notion that Walker demonizes African American men. Still, the novel's success allowed Walker to explore feminism, womanism, and international women's issues in two companion pieces to *The Color Purple*. In *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), Walker uses the characters of Celie and Shug Avery, as well as a variety of other women, in loosely related stories, political espousals, sermons, and memories. And in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), she develops the missionary life of Celie's sister, Nettie, to expose the oppressive ritual practice of female circumcision. Neither book was as well received as *The Color Purple*, but both illustrate the increasingly global perspective of Walker's vision. Her research on female circumcision led to her collaboration with Indian-British filmmaker Pratibha Parmar on the 1994 documentary *Warrior Marks*.

In recent years, Walker has remained a lightning rod for controversy. She has drawn fire for her pro-Palestinian stance and criticism of Israel, and had her shortcomings as a mother called out by her estranged daughter. But her impact on African American women's literary history cannot be overstated. Through her novels, short stories, poetry,

and essays, she has uncovered neglected greats, articulated new forms of feminism, and produced a body of work that - continues to engage readers and writers today.

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# Extracts from In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens

## Looking for Zora <sup>1</sup>

On January 16, 1959, Zora Neale Hurston, suffering from the effects of a stroke and writing painfully in longhand, composed a letter to the “editorial department” of Harper & Brothers inquiring if they would be interested in seeing “the book I am laboring upon at present – a life of Herod the Great.” One year and twelve days later, Zora Neale Hurston died without funds to provide for her burial, a resident of the St. Lucie County, Florida, Welfare Home. She lies today in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce, Florida, a resting place generally symbolic of the black writer’s fate in America.

Zora Neale Hurston is one of the most significant unread authors in America, the author of two minor classics and four other major books.

– ROBERT HEMENWAY ,

“Zora Hurston and the Eatonville Anthropology,”  
in *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*

\* \* \*

On August 15 , 1973 , I wake up just as the plane is lowering over Sanford, Florida, which means I am also looking down on Eatonville, Zora Neale Hurston’s birthplace. I recognize it from Zora’s description in *Mules and Men* : “the city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jailhouse.” Of course I cannot see the guavas, but the five lakes are still there, and it is the lakes I count as the plane prepares to land in Orlando.

From the air, Florida looks completely flat, and as we near the ground this impression does not change. This is the first time I have seen the interior of the state, which Zora wrote about so well, but there are the acres of orange groves, the sand, mangrove trees, and scrub pine that I know from her books. Getting off the plane I walk through the humid air of midday into the tacky but air-conditioned airport. I search for Charlotte Hunt, my companion on the Zora Hurston expedition. She lives in Winter Park, Florida, very near Eatonville, and is writing her graduate dissertation on Zora. I see her waving – a large, pleasant-faced white woman in dark glasses. We have written to each other for several

weeks, swapping our latest finds (mostly hers) on Zora, and trying to make sense out of the mass of information obtained (often erroneous or simply confusing) from Zora herself – through her stories and autobiography – and from people who wrote about her.

Eatonville has lived for such a long time in my imagination that I can hardly believe it will be found existing in its own right. But after twenty minutes on the expressway, Charlotte turns off and I see a small settlement of houses and stores set with no particular pattern in the sandy soil off the road. We stop in front of a neat gray building that has two fascinating signs: EATONVILLE POST OFFICE and EATONVILLE CITY HALL.

Inside the Eatonville City Hall half of the building, a slender, dark-brown-skin woman sits looking through letters on a desk. When she hears we are searching for anyone who might have known Zora Neale Hurston, she leans back in thought. Because I don't wish to inspire foot-dragging in people who might know something about Zora they're not sure they should tell, I have decided on a simple, but I feel profoundly *useful*, lie.

"I am Miss Hurston's niece," I prompt the young woman, who brings her head down with a smile.

"I think Mrs. Moseley is about the only one still living who might remember her," she says.

"Do you mean *Mathilda* Moseley, the woman who tells those 'woman-is-smarter-than-man' lies in Zora's book?"

"Yes," says the young woman. "Mrs. Moseley is real old now, of course. But this time of day, she should be at home."

I stand at the counter looking down on her, the first Eatonville resident I have spoken to. Because of Zora's books, I feel I know something about her; at least I know what the town she grew up in was like years before she was born.

"Tell me something," I say. "Do the schools teach Zora's books here?"

"No," she says, "they don't. I don't think most people know anything about Zora Neale Hurston, or know about any of the great things she did. She was a fine lady. I've read all of her books myself, but I don't think many other folks in Eatonville have."

"Many of the church people around here, as I understand it," says Charlotte in a murmured aside, "thought Zora was pretty loose. I don't think they appreciated her writing about them."

"Well," I say to the young woman, "thank you for your help." She clarifies her directions to Mrs. Moseley's house and smiles as Charlotte and I turn to go.

The letter to Harper's does not expose a publisher's rejection of an unknown masterpiece, but it does reveal how the bright promise of the Harlem Renaissance deteriorated for many of the writers who shared in its exuberance. It also indicates the personal tragedy of Zora Neale Hurston: Barnard graduate, author of four novels, two books of folklore, one volume of autobiography, the most important collector of Afro-American folklore in America, reduced by poverty and circumstance to seek a publisher by unsolicited mail.

– ROBERT HEMENWAY

Zora Hurston was born in 1901, 1902, or 1903 – depending on how old she felt herself to be at the time someone asked.

– LIBRARIAN, Beinecke Library, Yale University

The Moseley house is small and white and snug, its tiny yard nearly swallowed up by oleanders and hibiscus bushes. Charlotte and I knock on the door. I call out. But there is no answer. This strikes us as peculiar. We have had time to figure out an age for Mrs. Moseley – not dates or a number, just old. I am thinking of a quivery, bedridden invalid when we hear the car. We look behind us to see an old black-and-white Buick – paint peeling and grillwork rusty – pulling into the drive. A neat old lady in a purple dress and with white hair is straining at the wheel. She is frowning because Charlotte's car is in the way.

Mrs. Moseley looks at us suspiciously. "Yes, I knew Zora Neale," she says, unsmilingly and with a rather cold stare at Charlotte (who, I imagine, feels very *white* at that moment), "but that was a long time ago, and I don't want to talk about it."

"Yes, ma'am," I murmur, bringing all my sympathy to bear on the situation.

"Not only that," Mrs. Moseley continues, "I've been sick. Been in the hospital for an operation. Ruptured artery. The doctors didn't believe I was going to live, but you see me alive, don't you?"

"Looking well, too," I comment.

Mrs. Moseley is out of her car. A thin, sprightly woman with nice gold-studded false teeth, uppers and lowers. I like her because she stands there *straight* beside her car, with a hand on her hip and her straw pocketbook on her arm. She wears white T-strap shoes with heels that show off her well-shaped legs.

"I'm eighty-two years old, you know," she says. "And I just can't remember things the way I used to. Anyhow, Zora Neale left here to go to school and she never really came back to live. She'd come here for material for her books, but that was all. She spent most of her time down in South Florida."

"You know, Mrs. Moseley, I saw your name in one of Zora's books."

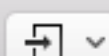
"You did?" She looks at me with only slightly more interest. "I read some of her books a long time ago, but then people got to borrowing and borrowing and they borrowed them all away."

"I could send you a copy of everything that's been reprinted," I offer. "Would you like me to do that?"

"No," says Mrs. Moseley promptly. "I don't read much any more. Besides, all of that was so long ago. ..."

Charlotte and I settle back against the car in the sun. Mrs. Moseley tells us at length and with exact recall every step in her recent operation, ending with: "What those doctors didn't know – when they were expecting me to die (and they didn't even think I'd live long enough for them to have to take out my stitches!) – is that Jesus is the best doctor, and if *He* says for you to get well, that's all that counts."

With this philosophy, Charlotte and I murmur quick assent: being Southerners and church bred, we have heard that



belief before. But what we learn from Mrs. Moseley is that she does not remember much beyond the year 1938 . She shows us a picture of her father and mother and says that her father was Joe Clarke's brother. Joe Clarke, as every Zora Hurston reader knows, was the first mayor of Eatonville; his fictional counterpart is Jody Starks of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* . We also get directions to where Joe Clarke's store *was* – where Club Eaton is now. Club Eaton, a long orange-beige nightspot we had seen on the main road, is apparently famous for the good times in it regularly had by all. It is, perhaps, the modern equivalent of the store porch, where all the men of Zora's childhood came to tell "lies," that is, black folk tales, that were "made and used on the spot," to take a line from Zora. As for Zora's exact birthplace, Mrs. Moseley has no idea.

After I have commented on the healthy growth of her hibiscus bushes, she becomes more talkative. She mentions how much she *loved* to dance, when she was a young woman, and talks about how good her husband was. When he was alive, she says, she was completely happy because he allowed her to be completely free. "I was so free I had to pinch myself sometimes to tell if I was a married woman."

Relaxed now, she tells us about going to school with Zora. "Zora and I went to the same school. It's called Hungerford High now. It *was* only to the eighth grade. But our teachers were so good that by the time you left you knew college subjects. When I went to Morris Brown in Atlanta, the teachers there were just teaching me the same things I had already learned right in Eatonville. I wrote Mama and told her I was going to come home and help her with her babies. I wasn't learning anything new."

"Tell me something, Mrs. Moseley," I ask. "Why do you suppose Zora was against integration? I read somewhere that she was against school desegregation because she felt it was an insult to black teachers."

"Oh, one of them [white people] came around asking me about integration. One day I was doing my shopping. I heard 'em over there talking about it in the store, about the schools. And I got on out of the way because I knew if they asked me, they wouldn't like what I was going to tell 'em. But they came up and asked me anyhow. 'What do you think about this integration?' one of them said. I acted like I thought I had heard wrong. 'You're asking *me* what *I* think about integration?' I said. 'Well, as you can see, I'm just an old colored woman' – I was seventy-five or seventy-six then – 'and this is the first time anybody ever asked me about integration. And nobody asked my grandmother what she thought, either, but her daddy was one of you all.'" Mrs. Moseley seems satisfied with this memory of her rejoinder. She looks at Charlotte. "I have the blood of three races in my veins," she says belligerently, "white, black, and Indian, and nobody asked me *anything* before."

"Do you think living in Eatonville made integration less appealing to you?"

"Well, I can tell you this: I have lived in Eatonville all my life, and I've been in the governing of this town. I've been everything but mayor and I've been *assistant* mayor. Eatonville was and is an all-black town. We have our own police department, post office, and town hall. Our own school and good teachers. Do I need integration?"

“They took over Goldsboro, because the black people who lived there never incorporated, like we did. And now I don’t even know if any black folks live there. They built big houses up there around the lakes. But we didn’t let that happen in Eatonville, and we don’t sell land to just anybody. And you see, we’re still here.”

When we leave, Mrs. Moseley is standing by her car, waving. I think of the letter Roy Wilkins <sup>2</sup> wrote to a black newspaper blasting Zora Neale for her lack of enthusiasm about the integration of schools. I wonder if he knew the experience of Eatonville she was coming from. Not many black people in America have come from a self-contained, all-black community where loyalty and unity are taken for granted. A place where black pride is nothing new.

There is, however, one thing Mrs. Moseley said that bothered me.

“Tell me, Mrs. Moseley,” I had asked, “why is it that thirteen years after Zora’s death, no marker has been put on her grave?”

And Mrs. Moseley answered: “The reason she doesn’t have a stone is because she wasn’t buried here. She was buried down in South Florida somewhere. I don’t think anybody really knew where she was.”

Only to reach a wider audience, need she ever write books – because she is a perfect book of entertainment in herself. In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion. She was full of sidesplitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragicomic stories, remembered out of her life in the South as a daughter of a traveling minister of God. She could make you laugh one minute and cry the next. To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect “darkie,” in the nice meaning they give the term – that is, a naïve, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro.

But Miss Hurston was clever, too – a student who didn’t let college give her a broad “a” and who had great scorn for all pretensions, academic or otherwise. That is why she was such a fine folklore collector, able to go among the people and never act as if she had been to school at all. Almost nobody else could stop the average Harlemite on Lenox Avenue and measure his head with a strange-looking, anthropological device and not get bawled out for the attempt, except Zora, who used to stop anyone whose head looked interesting, and measure it.

– LANGSTON HUGHES ,

### *The Big Sea*

What does it matter what white folks must have thought about her?

– STUDENT, black women writers class

### Wellesley College

Mrs. Sarah Peek Patterson is a handsome, red-haired woman in her late forties, wearing orange slacks and gold earrings. She is the director of Lee-Peek Mortuary in Fort Pierce, the establishment that handled Zora’s burial. Unlike

most black funeral homes in Southern towns that sit like palaces among the general poverty, Lee-Peek has a run-down, *small* look. Perhaps this is because it is painted purple and white, as are its Cadillac chariots. These colors do not age well. The rooms are cluttered and grimy, and the bathroom is a tiny, stale-smelling prison, with a bottle of black hair dye (apparently used to touch up the hair of the corpses) dripping into the face bowl. Two pine burial boxes are resting in the bathtub.

Mrs. Patterson herself is pleasant and helpful.

"As I told you over the phone, Mrs. Patterson," I begin, shaking her hand and looking into her penny-brown eyes, "I am Zora Neale Hurston's niece, and I would like to have a marker put on her grave. You said, when I called you last week, that you could tell me where the grave is."

By this time I am, of course, completely into being Zora's niece, and the lie comes with perfect naturalness to my lips. Besides, as far as I'm concerned, she is my aunt – and that of all black people as well.

"She was buried in 1960," exclaims Mrs. Patterson. "That was when my father was running this funeral home. He's sick now or I'd let you talk to him. But I know where she's buried. She's in the old cemetery, the Garden of the Heavenly Rest, on Seventeenth Street. Just when you go in the gate there's a circle, and she's buried right in the middle of it. Hers is the only grave in that circle – because people don't bury in that cemetery any more."

She turns to a stocky, black-skinned woman in her thirties, wearing a green polo shirt and white jeans cut off at the knee. "This lady will show you where it is," she says.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate this," I say to Mrs. Patterson, as I rise to go. "And could you tell me something else? You see, I never met my aunt. When she died, I was still a junior in high school. But could you tell me what she died of, and what kind of funeral she had?"

"I don't know exactly what she died of," Mrs. Patterson says. "I know she didn't have any money. Folks took up a collection to bury her. ... I believe she died of malnutrition."

*"Malnutrition?"*

Outside, in the blistering sun, I lean my head against Charlotte's even more blistering car top. The sting of the hot metal only intensifies my anger. *"Malnutrition,"* I manage to mutter. "Hell, our condition hasn't changed *any* since Phillis Wheatley's time. *She* died of malnutrition!"

"Really?" says Charlotte. "I didn't know that."

One cannot overemphasize the extent of her commitment. It was so great that her marriage in the spring of 1927 to Herbert Sheen was short-lived. Although divorce did not come officially until 1931, the two separated amicably after only a few months, Hurston to continue her collecting, Sheen to attend Medical School. Hurston never married again.

– ROBERT HEMENWAY

"What is your name?" I ask the woman who has climbed into the back seat.

“Rosalee,” she says. She has a rough, pleasant voice, as if she is a singer who also smokes a lot. She is homely, and has an air of ready indifference.

“Another woman came by here wanting to see the grave,” she says, lighting up a cigarette. “She was a little short, dumpty white lady from one of these Florida schools. Orlando or Daytona. But let me tell you something before we gets started. All I know is where the cemetery is. I don’t know one thing about that grave. You better go back in and ask her to draw you a map.”

A few moments later, with Mrs. Patterson’s diagram of where the grave is, we head for the cemetery.

We drive past blocks of small, pastel-colored houses and turn right onto Seventeenth Street. At the very end, we reach a tall curving gate, with the words “Garden of the Heavenly Rest” fading into the stone. I expected, from Mrs. Patterson’s small drawing, to find a small circle – which would have placed Zora’s grave five or ten paces from the road. But the “circle” is over an acre large and looks more like an abandoned field. Tall weeds choke the dirt road and scrape against the sides of the car. It doesn’t help either that I step out into an active ant hill.

“I don’t know about y’all,” I say, “but I don’t even believe this.” I am used to the haphazard cemetery-keeping that is traditional in most Southern black communities, but this neglect is staggering. As far as I can see there is nothing but bushes and weeds, some as tall as my waist. One grave is near the road, and Charlotte elects to investigate it. It is fairly clean, and belongs to someone who died in 1963.

Rosalee and I plunge into the weeds; I pull my long dress up to my hips. The weeds scratch my knees, and the insects have a feast. Looking back, I see Charlotte standing resolutely near the road.

“Aren’t you coming?” I call.

“No,” she calls back. “I’m from these parts and I know what’s out there.” She means snakes.

“Shit,” I say, my whole life and the people I love flashing melodramatically before my eyes. Rosalee is a few yards to my right.

“How’re you going to find anything out here?” she asks. And I stand still a few seconds, looking at the weeds. Some of them are quite pretty, with tiny yellow flowers. They are thick and healthy, but dead weeds under them have formed a thick gray carpet on the ground. A snake could be lying six inches from my big toe and I wouldn’t see it. We move slowly, very slowly, our eyes alert, our legs trembly. It is hard to tell where the center of the circle is since the circle is not really round, but more like half of something round. There are things crackling and hissing in the grass. Sandspurs are sticking to the inside of my skirt. Sand and ants cover my feet. I look toward the road and notice that there are, indeed, *two* large curving stones, making an entrance and exit to the cemetery. I take my bearings from them and try to navigate to exact center. But the center of anything can be very large, and a grave is not a pinpoint. Finding the grave seems positively hopeless. There is only one thing to do:

“Zora!” I yell, as loud as I can (causing Rosalee to jump). “Are you out here?”

"If she is, I sho hope she don't answer you. If she do, I'm gone."

"Zora!" I call again. "I'm here. Are you?"

"If she is," grumbles Rosalee, "I hope she'll keep it to herself."

"Zora!" Then I start fussing with her. "I hope you don't think I'm going to stand out here all day, with these snakes watching me and these ants having a field day. In fact, I'm going to call you just one or two more times." On a clump of dried grass, near a small bushy tree, my eye falls on one of the largest bugs I have ever seen. It is on its back, and is as large as three of my fingers. I walk toward it, and yell "Zo-ra!" and my foot sinks into a hole. I look down. I am standing in a sunken rectangle that is about six feet long and about three or four feet wide. I look up to see where the two gates are.

"Well," I say, "this is the center, or approximately anyhow. It's also the only sunken spot we've found. Doesn't this look like a grave to you?"

"For the sake of not going no farther through these bushes," Rosalee growls, "yes, it do."

"Wait a minute," I say, "I have to look around some more to be sure this is the only spot that resembles a grave. But you don't have to come."

Rosalee smiles – a grin, really – beautiful and tough.

"Naw," she says, "I feels sorry for you. If one of these snakes got ahold of you out here by yourself I'd feel *real* bad." She laughs. "I done come this far, I'll go on with you."

"Thank you, Rosalee," I say. "Zora thanks you too."

"Just as long as she don't try to tell me in person," she says, and together we walk down the field.

The gusto and flavor of Zora Neal[e] Hurston's storytelling, for example, long before the yarns were published in "Mules and Men" and other books, became a local legend which might ... have spread further under different conditions. A tiny shift in the center of gravity could have made them best-sellers.

– ARNA BONTEMPS,  
*Personals*

Bitter over the rejection of her folklore's value, especially in the black community, frustrated by what she felt was her failure to convert the Afro-American world view into the forms of prose fiction, Hurston finally gave up.

– ROBERT HEMENWAY

When Charlotte and I drive up to the Merritt Monument Company, I immediately see the headstone I want.

"How much is this one?" I ask the young woman in charge, pointing to a tall black stone. It looks as majestic as Zora herself must have been when she was learning voodoo from those root doctors down in New Orleans.

"Oh, *that* one," she says, "that's our finest. That's Ebony Mist."

“Well, how much is it?”

“I don’t know. But wait,” she says, looking around in relief, “here comes somebody who’ll know.”

A small, sunburned man with squinty green eyes comes up. He must be the engraver, I think, because his eyes are contracted into slits, as if he has been keeping stone dust out of them for years.

“That’s Ebony Mist,” he says. “That’s our best.”

“How much is it?” I ask, beginning to realize I probably *can’t* afford it.

He gives me a price that would feed a dozen Sahelian drought victims for three years. I realize I must honor the dead, but between the dead great and the living starving, there is no choice.

“I have a lot of letters to be engraved,” I say, standing by the plain gray marker I have chosen. It is pale and ordinary, not at all like Zora, and makes me momentarily angry that I am not rich.

We go into his office and I hand him a sheet of paper that has:

ZORA NEALE HURSTON  
“A GENIUS OF THE SOUTH”  
NOVELIST FOLKLORIST  
ANTHROPOLOGIST  
1901 1960

“A genius of the South” is from one of Jean Toomer’s poems.

“Where is this grave?” the monument man asks. “If it’s in a new cemetery, the stone has to be flat.”

“Well, it’s not a new cemetery and Zora – my aunt – doesn’t need anything flat, because with the weeds out there, you’d never be able to see it. You’ll have to go out there with me.”

He grunts.

“And take a long pole and ‘sound’ the spot,” I add. “Because there’s no way of telling it’s a grave, except that it’s sunken.”

“Well,” he says, after taking my money and writing up a receipt, in the full awareness that he’s the only monument dealer for miles, “you take this flag” (he hands me a four-foot-long pole with a red-metal marker on top) “and take it out to the cemetery and put it where you think the grave is. It’ll take us about three weeks to get the stone out there.”

I wonder if he knows he is sending me to another confrontation with the snakes. He probably does. Charlotte has told me she will cut my leg and suck out the blood if I am bit.

“At least send me a photograph when it’s done, won’t you?”

He says he will.

Hurston’s return to her folklore-collecting in December of 1927 was made possible by Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, an

“She was always studying. Her mind – before the stroke – just worked all the time. She was always going somewhere, too. She once went to Honduras to study something. And when she died, she was working on that book about Herod the Great. She was so intelligent! And really had perfect expressions. Her English was beautiful.” (I suspect this is a clever way to let me know Zora herself didn’t speak in the “black English” her characters used.)

“I used to read all of her books,” Dr. Benton continues, “but it was a long time ago. I remember one about ... it was called, I think, ‘The Children of God’ [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*], and I remember Janie and Teapot [Teacake] and the mad dog riding on the cow in that hurricane and bit old Teapot on the cheek. ...”

I am delighted that he remembers even this much of the story, even if the names are wrong, but seeing his affection for Zora I feel I must ask him about her burial. “Did she *really* have a pauper’s funeral?”

“She *didn’t* have a pauper’s funeral!” he says with great heat. “Everybody around here *loved* Zora.”

“We just came back from ordering a headstone,” I say quietly, because he *is* an old man and the color is coming and going on his face, “but to tell the truth, I can’t be positive what I found is the grave. All I know is the spot I found was the only grave-size hole in the area.”

“I remember it wasn’t near the road,” says Dr. Benton, more calmly. “Some other lady came by here and we went out looking for the grave and I took a long iron stick and poked all over that part of the cemetery but we didn’t find anything. She took some pictures of the general area. Do the weeds still come up to your knees?”

“And beyond,” I murmur. This time there isn’t any doubt. Dr. Benton feels ashamed.

As he walks us to our car, he continues to talk about Zora. “She couldn’t really write much near the end. She had the stroke and it left her weak; her mind was affected. She couldn’t think about anything for long.

“She came here from Daytona, I think. She owned a houseboat over there. When she came here, she sold it. She lived on that money, then she worked as a maid – for an article on maids she was writing – and she worked for the *Chronicle* writing the horoscope column.

“I think black people here in Florida got mad at her because she was for some politician they were against. She said this politician *built* schools for blacks while the one they wanted just talked about it. And although Zora wasn’t egotistical, what she thought, she thought; and generally what she thought, she said.”

When we leave Dr. Benton’s office, I realize I have missed my plane back home to Jackson, Mississippi. That being so, Charlotte and I decide to find the house Zora lived in before she was taken to the county welfare home to die. From among her many notes, Charlotte locates a letter of Zora’s she has copied that carries the address; 1734 School Court Street. We ask several people for directions. Finally, two old gentlemen in a dusty gray Plymouth offer to lead us there. School Court Street is not paved, and the road is full of mud puddles. It is dismal and squalid, redeemed only by the brightness of the late afternoon sun. Now I can understand what a “block” house is. It is a house shaped like a block, for one thing, surrounded by others just like it. Some houses are blue and some are green or yellow. Zora’s is light green.

They are tiny – about fifty by fifty feet, squatty with flat roofs. The house Zora lived in looks worse than the others, but that is its only distinction. It also has three ragged and dirty children sitting on the steps.

“Is this where y’all live?” I ask, aiming my camera.

“No, ma’am” they say in unison, looking at me earnestly. “We live over yonder. This Miss So-and-So’s house; but she in the horspital.”

We chatter inconsequentially while I take more pictures. A car drives up with a young black couple in it. They scowl fiercely at Charlotte and don’t look at me with friendliness, either. They get out and stand in their doorway across the street. I go up to them to explain. “Did you know Zora Hurston used to live right across from you?” I ask.

“Who?” They stare at me blankly, then become curiously attentive, as if they think I made the name up. They are both Afroed and he is somberly dashikied. <sup>5</sup>

I suddenly feel frail and exhausted. “It’s too long a story,” I say, “but tell me something: is there anybody on this street who’s lived here for more than thirteen years?”

“That old man down there,” the young man says, pointing. Sure enough, there is a man sitting on his steps three houses down. He has graying hair and is very neat, but there is a weakness about him. He reminds me of Mrs. Turner’s husband in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He’s rather “vanishing”-looking, as if his features have been sanded down. In the old days, before black was beautiful, he was probably considered attractive, because he has wavy hair and light-brown skin; but now, well, light skin has ceased to be its own reward.

After the preliminaries, there is only one thing I want to know: “Tell me something,” I begin, looking down at Zora’s house. “Did Zora like flowers?”

He looks at me queerly. “As a matter of fact,” he says, looking regretfully at the bare, rough yard that surrounds her former house, “she was crazy about them. And she was a great gardener. She loved azaleas, and that running and blooming vine [morning-glories], and she really loved that night-smelling flower [gardenia]. She kept a vegetable garden year-round, too. She raised collards and tomatoes and things like that.

“Everyone in this community thought well of Miss Hurston. When she died, people all up and down this street took up a collection for her burial. We put her away nice.”

“Why didn’t somebody put up a headstone?”

“Well, you know, one was never requested. Her and her family didn’t get along. They didn’t even come to the funeral.”

“And did she live down there by herself?”

“Yes, until they took her away. She lived with – just her and her companion, Sport.”

My ears perk up. “Who?”

“Sport, you know, her dog. He was her only companion. He was a big brown-and-white dog.”

When I walk back to the car, Charlotte is talking to the young couple on their porch. They are relaxed and smiling.

“I told them about the famous lady who used to live across the street from them,” says Charlotte as we drive off. “Of course they had no idea Zora ever lived, let alone that she lived across the street. I think I’ll send some of her books to them.”

“That’s real kind of you,” I say.

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. ... No, I do not weep at the world – I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

– ZORA NEALE HURSTON,  
“How It Feels To Be Colored Me,”  
*World Tomorrow*, 1928

There are times – and finding Zora Hurston’s grave was one of them – when normal responses of grief, horror, and so on do not make sense because they bear no real relation to the depth of the emotion one feels. It was impossible for me to cry when I saw the field full of weeds where Zora is. Partly this is because I have come to know Zora through her books and she was not a teary sort of person herself; but partly, too, it is because there is a point at which even grief feels absurd. And at this point, laughter gushes up to retrieve sanity.

It is only later, when the pain is not so direct a threat to one’s own existence, that what was learned in that moment of comical lunacy is understood. Such moments rob us of both youth and vanity. But perhaps they are also times when greater disciplines are born.

1975, 1983

## Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View [6](#)

I became aware of my need of Zora Neale Hurston’s work some time before I knew her work existed. In late 1970 I was writing a story that required accurate material on voodoo practices among rural Southern blacks of the thirties; there seemed none available I could trust. A number of white, racist anthropologists and folklorists of the period had, not surprisingly, disappointed and insulted me. They thought blacks inferior, peculiar, and comic, and for me this undermined, no, *destroyed*, the relevance of their books. Fortunately, it was then that I discovered *Mules and Men*, Zora’s book on folklore, collecting, herself, and her small, all-black community of Eatonville, Florida. Because she immersed herself in her own culture even as she recorded its “big old lies,” i.e., folk tales, it was possible to see how she and it (even after she had attended Barnard College and become a respected writer and apprentice anthropologist) fit

together. The authenticity of her material was verified by her familiarity with its context, and I was soothed by her assurance that she was exposing not simply an adequate culture but a superior one. That black people can be on occasion peculiar and comic was knowledge she enjoyed. That they could be racially or culturally inferior to whites never seems to have crossed her mind.

The first time I heard Zora's *name*, I was auditing a black-literature class taught by the great poet Margaret Walker, at Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi. The reason this fact later slipped my mind was that Zora's name and accomplishments came and went so fast. The class was studying the usual "giants" of black literature: Chesnutt, Toomer, Hughes, Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, with the hope of reaching LeRoi Jones very soon. Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall <sup>7</sup> (unequaled in intelligence, vision, craft by anyone of her generation, to put her contributions to our literature modestly), and Zora Neale Hurston were names appended, like verbal footnotes, to the illustrious all-male list that paralleled them. As far as I recall, none of their work was studied in the course. Much of it was out of print, in any case, and remains so. (Perhaps Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker <sup>8</sup> herself were exceptions to this list; both poets of such obvious necessity it would be impossible to overlook them. And their work – owing to the political and cultural nationalism of the sixties – was everywhere available.)

When I read *Mules and Men* I was delighted. Here was this perfect book! The "perfection" of which I immediately tested on my relatives, who are such typical black Americans they are useful for every sort of political, cultural, or economic survey. Very regular people from the South, rapidly forgetting their Southern cultural inheritance in the suburbs and ghettos of Boston and New York, they sat around reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, listening to each other read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained. For what Zora's book did was this: it gave them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed (told to us years ago by our parents and grandparents – not one of whom could not tell a story to make you weep, or laugh) and showed how marvelous, and, indeed, priceless, they are. This is not exaggerated. No matter how they read the stories Zora had collected, no matter how much distance they tried to maintain between themselves, as new sophisticates, and the lives their parents and grandparents lived, no matter how they tried to remain cool toward all Zora revealed, in the end they could not hold back the smiles, the laughter, the joy over who she was showing them to be: descendants of an inventive, joyous, courageous, and outrageous people; loving drama, appreciating wit, and, most of all, relishing the pleasure of each other's loquacious and *bodacious* company.

This was my first indication of the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora's work: racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature. (In my opinion, only Du Bois showed an equally consistent delight in the beauty and spirit of black people, which is interesting when one considers that the angle of his vision was completely the opposite of Zora's.) Zora's pride in black people was so pronounced in the ersatz black twenties that it made other blacks suspicious and perhaps

uncomfortable (after all, *they* were still infatuated with things European). Zora was interested in Africa, Haiti, Jamaica, and – for a little racial diversity (Indians) – Honduras. She also had a confidence in herself as an individual that few people (anyone?), black or white, understood. This was because Zora grew up in a community of black people who had enormous respect for themselves and for their ability to govern themselves. Her own father had written the Eatonville town laws. This community affirmed her right to exist, and loved her as an extension of its self. For how many other black Americans is this true? It certainly isn't true for any that I know. In her easy self-acceptance, Zora was more like an uncolonized African than she was like her contemporary American blacks, most of whom believed, at least during their formative years, that their blackness was something wrong with them.

On the contrary, Zora's early work shows she grew up pitying whites because the ones she saw lacked "light" and soul. It is impossible to imagine Zora envying anyone (except tongue in cheek), and least of all a white person for being white. Which is, after all, if one is black, a clear and present calamity of the mind.

Condemned to a desert island for life, with an allotment of ten books to see me through, I would choose, unhesitatingly, two of Zora's: *Mules and Men*, because I would need to be able to pass on to younger generations the life of American blacks as legend and myth; and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, because I would want to enjoy myself while identifying with the black heroine, Janie Crawford, as she acted out many roles in a variety of settings, and functioned (with spectacular results!) in romantic and sensual love. *There is no book more important to me than this one* (including Toomer's *Cane*, which comes close, but from what I recognize is a more perilous direction).

Having committed myself to Zora's work, loving it, in fact, I became curious to see what others had written about her. This was, for the young, impressionable, barely begun writer I was, a mistake. After reading the misleading, deliberately belittling, inaccurate, and generally irresponsible attacks on her work and her life by almost everyone, I became for a time paralyzed with confusion and fear. For if a woman who had given so much of obvious value to all of us (and at such risks: to health, reputation, sanity) could be so casually pilloried and consigned to a sneering oblivion, what chance would someone else – for example, myself – have? I was aware that I had much less gumption than Zora.

For a long time I sat looking at this fear, and at what caused it. Zora was a woman who wrote and spoke her mind – as far as one could tell, practically always. People who knew her and were unaccustomed to this characteristic in a woman, who was, more over, a. sometimes in error, and b. successful, for the most part, in her work, attacked her as meanly as they could. Would I also be attacked if I wrote and spoke my mind? And if I dared open my mouth to speak, must I always be "correct"? And by whose standards? Only those who have read the critics' opinions of Zora and her work will comprehend the power of these questions to riddle a young writer with self-doubt.

Eventually, however, I discovered that I repudiate and despise the kind of criticism that intimidates rather than instructs the young; and I dislike fear, especially in myself. I did then what fear rarely fails to force me to do: I fought back. I began to fight for Zora and her work; for what I knew was good and must not be lost to us.

Robert Hemenway was the first critic I read who seemed indignant that Zora's life ended in poverty and obscurity;

that her last days were spent in a welfare home and her burial paid for by “subscription.” Though Zora herself, as he is careful to point out in his book *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, remained gallant and unbowed until the end. It was Hemenway’s efforts to define Zora’s legacy and his exploration of her life that led me, in 1973, to an overgrown Fort Pierce, Florida graveyard in an attempt to locate and mark Zora’s grave. Although by that time I considered her a native American genius, there was nothing grand or historic in my mind. It was, rather, a duty I accepted as naturally mine – as a black person, a woman, and a writer – because Zora was dead and I, for the time being, was alive.

\* \* \*

Zora was funny, irreverent (she was the first to call the Harlem Renaissance literati the “niggerati”), good-looking, sexy, and once sold hot dogs in a Washington park just to record accurately how the black people who bought the hot dogs talked. (A letter I received a month ago from one of her old friends in D.C. brought this news.) She would go anywhere she had to go: Harlem, Jamaica, Haiti, Bermuda, to find out anything she simply had to know. She loved to give parties. Loved to dance. Would wrap her head in scarves as black women in Africa, Haiti, and everywhere else have done for centuries. On the other hand, she loved to wear hats, tilted over one eye, and pants and boots. (I have a photograph of her in pants, boots, and broadbrim that was given to me by her brother, Everette. She has her foot up on the running board of a car – presumably hers, and bright red – and looks racy.) She would light up a fag – which wasn’t done by ladies then (and, thank our saints, as a young woman she was never a lady) on the street.

Her critics disliked even the “rags” on her head. (They seemed curiously incapable of telling the difference between an African-American queen and Aunt Jemima.) They disliked her apparent sensuality: the way she tended to marry or not marry men, but enjoyed them anyway – while never missing a beat in her work. They hinted slyly that Zora was gay, or at least bisexual – how else could they account for her drive? Though there is not, perhaps unfortunately, a shred of evidence that this was true. The accusation becomes humorous – and of course at all times irrelevant – when one considers that what she *did* write was one of the sexiest, most “healthily” rendered heterosexual love stories in our literature. In addition, she talked too much, got things from white folks (Guggenheims, Rosenwalds, [9](#) and footstools) much too easily, was slovenly in her dress, and appeared maddeningly indifferent to other people’s opinions of her. With her easy laughter and her Southern drawl, her belief in doing “cullud” dancing authentically, Zora seemed – among these genteel “New Negroes” of the Harlem Renaissance – *black*. No wonder her presence was always a shock. Though almost everyone agreed she was a delight, not everyone agreed such audacious black delight was permissible, or, indeed, quite the proper image for the race.

Zora was before her time, in intellectual circles, in the life style she chose. By the sixties everyone understood that black women could wear beautiful cloths on their beautiful heads and care about the authenticity of things “cullud” and African. By the sixties it was no longer a crime to receive financial assistance – in the form of grants and fellowships –

for one's work. (Interestingly, those writers who complained that Zora "got money from white folks" were often themselves totally supported, down to the food they ate – or, in Langston Hughes's case, *tried* to eat, after his white "Godmother" discarded him – by white patrons.) By the sixties, nobody cared that marriage didn't last forever. No one expected it to. And I do believe that now, in the seventies, we do not expect (though we may wish and pray) every black person who speaks *always* to speak *correctly* (since this is impossible): and if we *do* expect it, we deserve all the silent leadership we are likely to get.

During the early and middle years of her career Zora was a cultural revolutionary simply because she was always herself. Her work, so vigorous among the rather pallid productions of many of her contemporaries, comes from the essence of black folk life. During her later life she became frightened of the life she had always dared bravely before. Her work too became reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid. (This is especially true of her last novel, *Seraphs on the Sewannee*, which is not even about black people, which is no crime, but is about white people for whom it is impossible to care, which is.)

A series of misfortunes battered Zora's spirit and her health. And she was broke.

*Being broke made all the difference.*

Without money of one's own in a capitalist society, there is no such thing as independence. This is one of the clearest lessons of Zora's life, and why I consider the telling of her life "a cautionary tale." We must learn from it what we can.

Without money, an illness, even a simple one, can undermine the will. Without money, getting into a hospital is problematic and getting out without money to pay for the treatment is nearly impossible. Without money, one becomes dependent, on other people, who are likely to be – even in their kindness – erratic in their support and despotic in their expectations of return. Zora was forced to rely, like Tennessee Williams's Blanche, "on the kindness of strangers." Can anything be more dangerous, if the strangers are forever in control? Zora, who worked so hard, was never able to make a living from her work.

She did not complain about not having money. She was not the type. (Several months ago I received a long letter from one of Zora's nieces, a bright ten-year-old, who explained to me that her aunt was so proud that the only way the family could guess she was ill or without funds was by realizing they had no idea where she was. Therefore, none of the family attended either Zora's sickbed or her funeral.) Those of us who have had "grants and fellowships from 'white folks'" know this aid is extended in precisely the way welfare is extended in Mississippi. One is asked, *curtly*, more often than not: How much do you need *just to survive*? Then one is – if fortunate – given a third of that. What is amazing is that Zora, who became an orphan at nine, a runaway at fourteen, a maid and manicurist (because of necessity and not from love of the work) before she was twenty – with one dress – managed to become Zora Neale Hurston, author and anthropologist, at all.

For me, the most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote is her autobiography. After the first several chapters, it rings

false. One begins to hear the voice of someone whose life required the assistance of too many transitory “friends.” A Taoist proverb states that to *act sincerely with the insincere is dangerous*. (A mistake blacks as a group have tended to make in America.) And so we have Zora sincerely offering gratitude and kind words to people one knows she could not have respected. But this unctuousness, so out of character for Zora, is also a result of dependency, a sign of her powerlessness, her inability to pay back her debts with anything but words. They must have been bitter ones for her. In her dependency, it should be remembered, Zora was not alone – because it is quite true that America does not support or honor us as human beings, let alone as blacks, women, and artists. We have taken help where it was offered because we are committed to what we do and to the survival of our work. Zora was committed to the survival of her people’s cultural heritage as well.

In my mind, Zora Neale Hurston, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith form a sort of unholy trinity. Zora *belongs* in the tradition of black women singers, rather than among “the literati,” at least to me. There were the extreme highs and lows of her life, her undaunted pursuit of adventure, passionate emotional and sexual experience, and her love of freedom. Like Billie and Bessie she followed her own road, believed in her own gods, pursued her own dreams, and refused to separate herself from “common” people. It would have been nice if the three of them had had one another to turn to, in times of need. I close my eyes and imagine them: Bessie would be in charge of all the money; Zora would keep Billie’s masochistic tendencies in check and prevent her from singing embarrassing anything-for-a-man songs, thereby preventing Billie’s heroin addiction. In return, Billie could be, along with Bessie, the family that Zora felt she never had.

*We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away.* And if they are thrown away, it is our duty *as artists and as witnesses for the future* to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone.

1977, 1983

## Extract from The Color Purple

### [Celie Discovers Nettie’s Missing Letters]

Dear God,

All of a sudden Shug buddy-buddy again with Mr. ——. They sit on the steps, go down Harpo’s. Walk to the mailbox.

Shug laugh and laugh when he got anything to say. Show teef and tits aplenty.

Me and Grady try to carry on like us civilize. But it hard. When I hear Shug laugh I want to choke her, slap Mr. — face.

All this week I suffer. Grady and me feel so down he turn to reefer, I turn to prayer.

Saturday morning Shug put Nettie letter in my lap. Little fat queen of England stamps on it, plus stamps that got peanuts, coconuts, rubber trees and say Africa. I don't know where England at. Don't know where Africa at either. So I still don't know where Nettie at.

He been keeping your letters, say Shug.

Naw, I say. Mr. — mean sometimes, but he not that mean.

She say, Humpf, he that mean.

But how come he to do it? I ast. He know Nettie mean everything in the world to me.

Shug say she don't know, but us gon find out.

Us seal the letter up again and put it back in Mr. — pocket.

He walk round with it in his coat all day. He never mention it. Just talk and laugh with Grady, Harpo and Swain, and try to learn how to drive Shug car.

I watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening in the head. Fore I know anything I'm standing hind his chair with his razor open.

Then I hear Shug laugh, like something just too funny. She say to me, I know I told you I need something to cut this hangnail with, but Albert git real niggerish bout his razor.

Mr. — look behind him. Put that down, he say. Women, always needing to cut this and shave that, and always gumming up the razor.

Shug got her hand on the razor now. She say, Oh it look dull anyway. She take and sling it back in the shaving box.

All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble bout the house crazy for Mr. — blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way. By time night come, I can't speak. Every time I open my mouth nothing come out but a little burp.

Shug tell everybody I got a fever and she put me to bed. It probably catching, she say to Mr. —. Maybe you better sleep somewhere else. But she stay with me all night long. I don't sleep. I don't cry. I don't do nothing. I'm cold too. Pretty soon I think maybe I'm dead.

Shug hold me close to her and sometimes talk.

One thing my mama hated me for was how much I love to fuck, she say. She never love to do nothing had anything to do with touching nobody, she say. I try to kiss her, she turn her mouth away. Say, Cut that out Lillie, she say. Lillie Shug's real name. She just so sweet they call her Shug.

My daddy love me to kiss and hug him, but she didn't like the looks of that. So when I met Albert, and once I got in his arms, nothing could git me out. It was good, too, she say. You know for me to have three babies by Albert and Albert weak as he is, it had to be good.

I had every one of my babies at home, too. Midwife come, preacher come, a bunch of the good ladies from the church.

Just when I hurt so much I don't know my own name, they think a good time to talk bout repent.

She laugh. I was too big a fool to repent. Then she say, I loved me some Albert —.

I don't even want to say nothing. Where I'm at it peaceful. It calm. No Albert there. No Shug. Nothing.

Shug say, the last baby did it. They turned me out. I went to stay with my mama wild sister in Memphis. She just like me, Mama say. She drink, she fight, she love mens to death. She work in a roadhouse. Cook. Feed fifty men, screw fifty-five.

Shug talk and talk.

And dance, she say. Nobody dance like Albert when he was young. Sometime us did the moochie for a hour. After that, nothing to do but go somewhere and lay down. And funny. Albert was so *funny*. He kept me laughing. How come he ain't funny no more? she ast. How come he never hardly laugh? How come he don't dance? she say. Good God, Celie, she say, What happen to the man I love?

She quiet a little while. Then she say, I was so surprise when I heard he was going to marry Annie Julia, she say. Too surprise to be hurt. I didn't believe it. After all, Albert knew as well as me that love would have to go some to be better than ours. Us had the kind of love couldn't be improve. That's what I thought.

But, he weak, she say. His daddy told him I'm trash, my mama trash before me. His brother say the same. Albert try to stand up for us, git knock down. One reason they give him for not marrying me is cause I have children.

But they *his*, I told old Mr. —.

How us know? He ast.

Poor Annie Julia, Shug say. She never had a chance. I was so mean, and so wild, Lord. I used to go round saying, I don't care who he married to, I'm gonna fuck him. She stop talking a minute. Then she say, And I did, too. Us fuck so much in the open us give fucking a bad name.

But he fuck Annie Julia too, she say, and she didn't have nothing, not even a liking for him. Her family forgot about her once she married. And then Harpo and all the children start to come. Finally she start to sleep with that man that shot her down. Albert beat her. The children dragged on her. Sometimes I wonder what she thought about while she died.

I know what I'm thinking bout, I think. Nothing. And as much of it as I can.

I went to school with Annie Julia, Shug say. She was pretty, man. Black as anything, and skin just as smooth. Big black eyes look like moons. And sweet too. Hell, say Shug, I liked her myself. Why I hurt her so? I used to keep Albert away from home for a week at the time. She'd come and beg him for money to buy groceries for the children.

I feel a few drops of water on my hand.

And when I come here, say Shug. I treated you so mean. Like you was a servant. And all because Albert married you. And I didn't even want him for a husband, she say. I never really wanted Albert for a husband. But just to choose me,

you know, cause nature had already done it. Nature said, You two folks, hook up, cause you a good example of how it sposed to go. I didn't want nothing to be able to go against that. But what was good tween us must have been nothing but bodies, she say. Cause I don't know the Albert that don't dance, can't hardly laugh, never talk bout nothing, beat you and hid your sister Nettie's letters. Who he?

I don't know nothing, I think. And glad of it.

Dear God,

Now that I know Albert hiding Nettie's letters, I know exactly where they is. They in his trunk. Everything that mean something to Albert go in his trunk. He keep it locked up tight, but Shug can git the key.

One night when Mr. — and Grady gone, us open the trunk. Us find a lot of Shug's underclothes, some nasty picture postcards, and way down under his tobacco, Nettie's letters. Bunches and bunches of them. Some fat, some thin. Some open, some not.

How us gon do this? I ast Shug.

She say, Simple. We take the letters out of the envelopes, leave the envelopes just like they is. I don't think he look in this corner of the trunk much, she say.

I heated the stove, put on the kettle. Us steam and steam the envelopes until we had all the letters laying on the table. Then us put the envelopes back inside the trunk.

I'm gonna put them in some kind of order for you, say Shug.

Yeah, I say, but don't let's do it in here, let's go in you and Grady room.

So she got up and us went into they little room. Shug sat in a chair by the bed with all Nettie letters spread round her, I got on the bed with the pillows behind my back.

These the first ones, say Shug. They postmark right here.

Dear Celie, *the first letter say,*

You've got to fight and get away from Albert. He ain't no good.

When I left you all's house, walking, he followed me on his horse. When we was well out of sight of the house he caught up with me and started trying to talk. You know how he do, You sure is looking fine, Miss Nettie, and stuff like that. I tried to ignore him and walk faster, but my bundles was heavy and the sun was hot. After while I had to rest, and that's when he got down from his horse and started to try to kiss me, and drag me back in the woods.

Well, I started to fight him, and with God's help, I hurt him bad enough to make him let me alone. But he was some mad. He said because of what I'd done I'd never hear from you again, and you would never hear from me.

I was so mad myself I was shaking.

Anyhow, I got a ride into town on somebody's wagon. And that same somebody pointed me in the direction of the Reverend Mr. —'s place. And what was my surprise when a little girl opened the door and she had your eyes set in your

face.

love,  
*Nettie*

*Next one said,*

Dear Celie,

I keep thinking it's too soon to look for a letter from you. And I know how busy you is with all Mr. —'s children. But I miss you so much. Please write to me, soon as you have a chance. Every day I think about you. Every minute.

The lady you met in town is name Corrine. The little girl's name is Olivia. The husband's name is Samuel. The little boy's name is Adam. They are sanctified religious and very good to me. They live in a nice house next to the church where Samuel preaches, and we spend a lot of time on church business. I say "we" because they always try to include me in everything they do, so I don't feel so left out and alone.

But God, I miss you, Celie. I think about the time you laid yourself down for me. I love you with all my heart,

Your sister,  
*Nettie*

*Next one say,*

Dearest Celie,

By now I am almost crazy. I think Albert told me the truth, and that he is not giving you my letters. The only person I can think of who could help us out is Pa, but I don't want him to know where I am.

I asked Samuel if he would visit you and Mr. —, just to see how you are. But he says he can't risk putting himself between man and wife, especially when he don't know them. And I felt bad for having to ask him, he and Corrine have been so nice to me. But my heart is breaking. It is breaking because I can not find any work in this town, and I will have to leave. After I leave, what will happen to us? How will we ever know what is going on?

Corrine and Samuel and the children are part of a group of people called Missionaries, of the American and African Missionary Society. They have ministered to the Indians out west and are ministering to the poor of this town. All in preparation for the work they feel they were born for, missionary work in Africa.

I dread parting from them because in the short time we've been together they've been like family to me. Like family might have been, I mean.

Write if you can. Here are some stamps.

love,  
Nettie

*Next one, fat, dated two months later, say,*

Dear Celie,

I wrote a letter to you almost every day on the ship coming to Africa. But by the time we docked I was so down, I tore them into little pieces and dropped them into the water. Albert is not going to let you have my letters and so what use is there in writing them. That's the way I felt when I tore them up and sent them to you on the waves. But now I feel different.

I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me. Anyway, when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. I am so *lonely*, Celie.

The reason I am in Africa is because one of the missionaries that was supposed to go with Corrine and Samuel to help with the children and with setting up a school suddenly married a man who was afraid to let her go, and refused to come to Africa with her. So there they were, all set to go, with a ticket suddenly available and no missionary to give it to. At the same time, I wasn't able to find a job anywhere around town. But I never dreamed of going to Africa! I never even thought about it as a real place, though Samuel and Corrine and even the children talked about it all the time.

Miss Beasley used to say it was a place overrun with savages who didn't wear clothes. Even Corrine and Samuel thought like this at times. But they know a lot more about it than Miss Beasley or any of our other teachers, and besides, they spoke of all the good things they could do for the downtrodden people from whom they sprang. People who need Christ and good medical advice.

One day I was in town with Corrine and we saw the mayor's wife and her maid. The mayor's wife was shopping – going in and out of stores – and her maid was waiting for her on the street and taking the packages. I don't know if you have ever seen the mayor's wife. She looks like a wet cat. And there was her maid looking like the very last person in the world you'd expect to see waiting on anybody, and in particular not on anybody that looked like that.

I spoke. But just speaking to me seemed to make her embarrassed and she suddenly sort of erased herself. It was the strangest thing, Celie! One minute I was saying howdy to a living woman. The next minute nothing living was there. Only its shape.

All that night I thought about it. Then Samuel and Corrine told me what they'd heard about how she got to be the mayor's maid. That she attacked the mayor, and then the mayor and his wife took her from the prison to work in their

home.

In the morning I started asking questions about Africa and started reading all the books Samuel and Corrine have on the subject.

Did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? That the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the bible meant all of Africa?

Well, I read and I read until I thought my eyes would fall out. I read where the Africans sold us because they loved money more than their own sisters and brothers. How we came to America in ships. How we were made to work.

I hadn't realized I was so *ignorant*, Celie. The little I knew about my own self wouldn't have filled a thimble! And to think Miss Beasley always said I was the smartest child she ever taught! But one thing I do thank her for, for teaching me to learn for myself, by reading and studying and writing a clear hand. And for keeping alive in me somehow the desire to *know*. So when Corrine and Samuel asked me if I would come with them and help them build a school in the middle of Africa, I said yes. But only if they would teach me everything they knew to make me useful as a missionary and someone they would not be ashamed to call a friend. They agreed to this condition, and my real education began at that time.

They have been as good as their word. And I study everything night and day.

Oh, Celie, there are colored people in the world who want us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They are not all mean like Pa and Albert, or beaten down like ma was. Corrine and Samuel have a wonderful marriage. Their only sorrow in the beginning was that they could not have children. And then, they say, "God" sent them Olivia and Adam.

I wanted to say, "God" has sent you their sister and aunt, but I didn't. Yes, their children, sent by "God" are your children, Celie. And they are being brought up in love, Christian charity and awareness of God. And now "God" has sent me to watch over them, to protect and cherish them. To lavish all the love I feel for you on them. It is a miracle, isn't it? And no doubt impossible for you to believe.

But on the other hand, if you can believe I am in Africa, and I am, you can believe anything.

Your sister,  
*Nettie*

*The next letter after that one say,*

Dear Celie,

While we were in town Corrine bought cloth to make me two sets of traveling outfits. One olive green and the other gray. Long gored skirts and suit jackets to be worn with white cotton blouses and lace-up boots. She also bought me a

woman's boater with a checkered band.

Although I work for Corrine and Samuel and look after the children, I don't feel like a maid. I guess this is because they teach me, and I teach the children and there's no beginning or end to teaching and learning and working – it all runs together.

Saying good-bye to our church group was hard. But happy, too. Everyone has such high hopes for what can be done in Africa. Over the pulpit there is a saying: *Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands to God*. Think what it means that Ethiopia is Africa! All the Ethiopians in the bible were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words. All of the people are white and so you just think all the people from the bible were white too. But really *white* white people lived somewhere else during those times. That's why the bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie. It isn't even curly.

What can I tell you about New York – or even about the train that took us there! We had to ride in the sit-down section of the train, but Celie, there are beds on trains! And a restaurant! And toilets! The beds come down out of the walls, over the tops of the seats, and are called berths. Only white people can ride in the beds and use the restaurant. And they have different toilets from colored.

One white man on the platform in South Carolina asked us where we were going – we had got off the train to get some fresh air and to dust the grit and dust out of our clothes. When we said Africa he looked offended and tickled too. Niggers going to Africa, he said to his wife. Now I *have* seen everything.

When we got to New York we were tired and dirty. But so excited! Listen, Celie, New York is a *beautiful* city. And colored own a whole section of it, called Harlem. There are colored people in more fancy motor cars than I thought existed, and living in houses that are finer than any white person's house down home. There are more than a hundred churches! And we went to every one of them. And I stood before each congregation with Samuel and Corrine and the children and sometimes our mouths just dropped open from the generosity and goodness of those Harlem people's hearts. They live in such beauty and dignity, Celie. And they give and give and then reach down and give some more, when the name "Africa" is mentioned.

They *love* Africa. They defend it at the drop of a hat. And speaking of hats, if we had passed our hats alone they would not have been enough to hold all the donations to our enterprise. Even the children dredged up their pennies. Please give these to the children of Africa, they said. They were all dressed so beautifully, too, Celie. I wish you could have seen them. There is a fashion in Harlem now for boys to wear something called knickers – sort of baggy pants, fitted tight just below the knee, and for girls to wear garlands of flowers in their hair. They must be the most beautiful children alive, and Adam and Olivia couldn't take their eyes off them.

Then there were the dinners we were invited to, the breakfasts, lunches, and suppers. I gained five pounds just from

tasting. I was too excited to really eat.

And all the people have indoor toilets, Celie. And gas or electric lights!

Well, we had two weeks of study in the Olinka dialect, which the people in this region speak. Then we were examined by a doctor (colored!) and given medical supplies for ourselves and for our host village by the Missionary Society of New York. It is run by white people and they didn't say anything about caring about Africa, but only about duty. There is already a white woman missionary not far from our village who has lived in Africa for the past twenty years. She is said to be much loved by the natives even though she thinks they are an entirely different species from what she calls Europeans. Europeans are white people who live in a place called Europe. That is where the white people down home came from. She says an African daisy and an English daisy are both flowers, but totally different kinds. The man at the Society says she is successful because she doesn't "coddle" her charges. She also speaks their language. He is a white man who looks at us as if we cannot possibly be as good with the Africans as this woman is.

My spirits sort of drooped after being at the Society. On every wall there was a picture of a white man. Somebody called Speke, somebody called Livingstone. Somebody called Daly. Or was it Stanley? I looked for a picture of the white woman but didn't see one. Samuel looked a little sad too, but then he perked up and reminded us that there is one big advantage we have. We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves. And that we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere.

Your sister,  
*Nettie*

Dear Celie,

Samuel is a big man. He dresses in black almost all the time, except for his white clerical collar. And *he* is black. Until you see his eyes you think he's somber, even mean, but he has the most thoughtful and gentle brown eyes. When he says something it settles you, because he never says anything off the top of his head and he's never out to dampen your spirit or to hurt. Corrine is a lucky woman to have him as her husband.

But let me tell you about the ship! The ship, called The Malaga, was three stories high! And we had rooms (called cabins) with beds. Oh, Celie, to lie in a bed in the middle of the ocean! And the ocean! Celie, more water than you can imagine in one place. It took us two weeks to cross it! And then we were in England, which is a country full of white people and some of them very nice and with their own Anti-Slavery & Missionary Society. The churches in England were also very eager to help us and white men and women, who looked just like the ones at home, invited us to their gatherings and into their homes for tea, and to talk about our work. "Tea" to the English is really a picnic indoors. Plenty of sandwiches and cookies and of course hot tea. We all used the same cups and plates.

Everyone said I seemed very young to be a missionary, but Samuel said that I was very willing, and that, anyway, my primary duties would be helping with the children and teaching a kindergarten class or two.

Our work began to seem somewhat clearer in England because the English have been sending missionaries to Africa and India and China and God knows where all, for over a hundred years. And the things they have brought back! We spent a morning in one of their museums and it was packed with jewels, furniture, fur carpets, swords, clothing, even *tombs* from all the countries they have been. From Africa they have *thousands* of vases, jars, masks, bowls, baskets, statues – and they are all so beautiful it is hard to imagine that the people who made them don't still exist. And yet the English assure us they do not. Although Africans once had a better civilization than the European (though of course even the English do not say this: I get this from reading a man named J. A. Rogers) <sup>1</sup> for several centuries they have fallen on hard times. "Hard times" is a phrase the English love to use, when, speaking of Africa. And it is easy to forget that Africa's "hard times" were made harder by them. Millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery – you and me, Celie! And whole cities were destroyed by slave catching wars. Today the people of Africa – having murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks – are riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion. They believe in the devil and worship the dead. Nor can they read or write.

Why did they sell us? How could they have done it? And why do we still love them? These were the thoughts I had as we tramped through the chilly streets of London. I studied England on a map, so neat and serene, and I became hopeful in spite of myself that much good for Africa is possible, given hard work and the right frame of mind. And then we sailed for Africa. Leaving Southampton, England on the 24th of July and arriving in Monrovia, Liberia on the 12th of September. On the way we stopped in Lisbon, Portugal and Dakar, Senegal.

Monrovia was the last place we were among people we were somewhat used to, since it is an African country that was "founded" by ex-slaves from America who came back to Africa to live. Had any of their parents or grandparents been sold *from* Monrovia, I wondered, and what was their feeling, once sold as slaves, now coming back, with close ties to the country that bought them, to rule.

Celie, I must stop now. The sun is not so hot now and I must prepare for the afternoon classes and vesper service.

I wish you were with me, or I with you.

My love,  
Your sister,  
*Nettie*

Dearest Celie,

It was the funniest thing to stop over in Monrovia after my first glimpse of Africa, which was Senegal. The capital of Senegal is Dakar and the people speak their own language, Senegalese I guess they would call it, and French. They are the blackest people I have ever seen, Celie. They are black like the people we are talking about when we say, "So and so is blacker than black, he's *blue* black." They are so black, Celie, they shine. Which is something else folks down home like

to say about real black folks. But Celie, try to imagine a city full of these shining, blueblack people wearing brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns. Tall, thin, with long necks and straight backs. Can you picture it at all, Celie? Because I felt like I was seeing black for the first time. And Celie, there is something magical about it. Because the black is so black the eye is simply dazzled, and then there is the shining that seems to come, really, from moonlight, it is so luminous, but their skin glows even in the sun.

But I did not really like the Senegalese I met in the market. They were concerned only with their sale of produce. If we did not buy, they looked through us as quickly as they looked through the white French people who live there. Somehow I had not expected to see any white people in Africa, but they are here in droves. And not all are missionaries.

There are bunches of them in Monrovia, too. And the president, whose last name is Tubman, has some in his cabinet. He also has a lot of white-looking colored men in his cabinet. On our second evening in Monrovia we had tea at the presidential palace. It looks very much like the American white house (where our president lives) Samuel says. The president talked a good bit about his efforts trying to develop the country and about his problems with the natives, who don't want to work to help build the country up. It was the first time I'd heard a black man use that word. I knew that to white people all colored people are natives. But he cleared his throat and said he only meant "native" to Liberia. I did not see any of these "natives" in his cabinet. And none of the cabinet members' wives could pass for natives. Compared to them in their silks and pearls, Corrine and I were barely dressed, let alone dressed for the occasion. But I think the women we saw at the palace spend a lot of their time dressing. Still, they look dissatisfied. Not like the cheery schoolteachers we saw only by chance, as they herded their classes down to the beach for a swim.

Before we left we visited one of the large cocoa plantations they have. Nothing but cocoa trees as far as the eye can see. And whole villages built right in the middle of the fields. We watched the weary families come home from work, still carrying their cocoa seed buckets in their hands (these double as lunch buckets next day), and sometimes – if they are women – their children on their backs. As tired as they are, they sing! Celie. Just like we do at home. Why do tired people sing? I asked Corrine. Too tired to do anything else, she said. Besides, they don't own the cocoa fields, Celie, even president Tubman doesn't own them. People in a place called Holland do. The people who make Dutch chocolate. And there are overseers who make sure the people work hard, who live in stone houses in the corners of the fields.

Again I must go. Everyone is in bed and I am writing by lamplight. But the light is attracting so many bugs I am being eaten alive. I have bites everywhere, including my scalp and the bottoms of my feet.

But –

Did I mention my first sight of the African coast? Something struck in me, in my soul, Celie, like a large bell, and I just vibrated. Corrine and Samuel felt the same. And we kneeled down right on deck and gave thanks to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried – and lived and died – to see again.

Oh, Celie! Will I ever be able to tell you all?

I dare not ask, I know. But leave it all to God.

Your everloving sister,  
*Nettie*

Dear God,

What with being shock, crying and blowing my nose, and trying to puzzle out words us don't know, it took a long time to read just the first two or three letters. By the time us got up to where she good and settled in Africa, Mr. — and Grady come home.

Can you handle it? ast Shug.

How I'm gon keep from killing him, I say.

Don't kill, she say. Nettie be coming home before long. Don't make her have to look at you like us look at Sofia.

But it so hard, I say, while Shug empty her suitcase and put the letters inside.

Hard to be Christ too, say Shug. But he manage. Remember that. Thou Shalt Not Kill, He said. And probably wanted to add on to that, Starting with me. He knowed the fools he was dealing with.

But Mr. — not Christ. I'm not Christ, I say.

You somebody to Nettie, she say. And she be pissed if you change on her while she on her way home.

Us hear Grady and Mr. — in the kitchen. Dishes rattling, safe door open and shut.

Naw, I think I feel better if I kill him, I say. I feels sickish. Numb, now.

Naw you won't. Nobody feel better for killing nothing. They feel *something* is all.

That better than nothing.

Celie, she say, Nettie not the only one you got to worry bout.

Say what? I ast.

Me, Celie, think about me a little bit. Miss Celie, if you kill Albert, Grady be all I got left. I can't even stand the thought of that.

I laugh, thinking bout Grady's big toofs.

Make Albert let me sleep with you from now on, while you here, I say.

And somehow or other, she do.

1982

Alice Walker, "Looking for Zora," "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. London: Orion Books Ltd, 2005. Used by permission of David Higham Associates Ltd. From Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*. pp. 116–140. London: Orion Books Ltd, 1983. Used by

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## Notes

### IN SEARCH OF OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS

- <sup>1</sup> First published as "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," *Ms.* (March 1975).
- <sup>2</sup> Roy Wilkins ( 1901 – 1981 ), African American civil rights activist who became executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1964 .
- <sup>3</sup> Richmond Barthé, born James Richmond Barthé ( 1901 – 1989 ), an African American sculptor. *Original reads* : Barthe [ed.].
- <sup>4</sup> Miguel Covarrubias, born José Miguel Covarrubias Duclaud (1904–1957), a Mexican ethnologist, historian of art, and painter.
- <sup>5</sup> *dashikied* dressed in a dashiki, a tunic usually worn by West African men.
- <sup>6</sup> First published as the foreword to Robert E. Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977).
- <sup>7</sup> Paule Marshall, born Valenza Pauline Burke (b. 1929), a Barbadian American novelist and memoirist.
- <sup>8</sup> Margaret Walker (1915–1998), African American poet, novelist, and professor.
- <sup>9</sup> *Guggenheims, Rosenwalds* prestigious fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the Julius Rosenwald Foundation.

### THE COLOR PURPLE

- <sup>1</sup> *J. A. Rogers* Joel Augustus Rogers (1880–1966), a Jamaican American journalist, historian, and writer.

# Audre Lorde (1934–1992)

When the poet and critic Dudley Randall praised Audre Lorde's first poetry collection, *The First Cities* (1968), he said that she "does not wave a black flag, but her blackness is there, implicit, to the bone." Perhaps Lorde's decision not to "wave a black flag" of confrontation, but instead to hunt for connection and identity, came from her life-long association with "sister outsiders."

As the daughter of West Indian immigrants growing up in Manhattan, New York City, during the 1930s and 1940s, Audrey Geraldine Lorde began writing poems in the eighth grade. At Hunter High School she befriended those who likewise were social outcasts. In 1954, Lorde spent a year at the National University of Mexico, where her identities as an artist and a lesbian converged. Five years later she graduated from Hunter College, and, in 1961, earned a master's degree in library science at Columbia University even while working various jobs. From 1966 to 1968, she served as head librarian at the Town School in New York City, but was active in the gay and lesbian culture of Greenwich Village. Still, Lorde decided to marry attorney Edward Ashley Rollins, with whom she had two children before their divorce in 1970.

Lorde's career as a writer began to take shape in 1968, when she earned a National Endowment for the Arts grant and became Poet-in-Residence at Tougaloo College in Mississippi. Her first volume of poetry, *The First Cities*, was published at this time, and her sojourn in the South inspired many of the poems that went into her second volume, *Cables to Rage* (1970). She earned a National Book Award nomination in 1973 for *From a Land Where Other People Live*, and gained more widespread acclaim when the publisher, W.W. Norton, released *Coal* in 1976. Lorde's connection with Norton precipitated her lifelong friendship with Adrienne Rich, a feminist poet and essayist who helped introduce her to a mainstream audience. In 1978, Lorde published *The Black Unicorn* (again with Norton), her most ambitious and heralded collection of poetry. Several centuries of diasporic history and African mythology inspired her creative accounts of womanhood and identity.

That same year, Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer. At a time when breast cancer received little public attention, Lorde eloquently chronicled her struggle with the disease in the non-fiction book *The Cancer Journals* (1980). In a second memoir, *A Burst of Light* (1988), which won the American Book Award, she returned to the theme after her cancer returned in 1984. Lorde famously refused to wear a prosthetic after undergoing a radical mastectomy, a decision she saw as a rejection of the idealized female physique. With her "biomythography" *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982), Lorde cemented her position as one of the most respected women poets alive in the late twentieth century who was willing to push the boundaries of humanist discourse.

In 1985, Lorde moved to the Caribbean and took on an African name, Gamba Adisa – both signs of her abiding

commitment to pan-Africanism. Race and gender were inseparable from social justice, furthermore. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), she describes the relationship between African American men and women, and proclaims feminism as an integral part of the societal fight against racism. By the end of her life, Lorde was unwavering in her commitment to African American women's empowerment. "When I say I am a Black feminist," she once declared, "I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggles on both these fronts are inseparable." In 1992, Lorde died of liver cancer, at her home in St Croix.

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## ***Extracts from Sister Outsider***

## Poetry Is Not a Luxury\*

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, “beautiful/and tough as chestnut/stanchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness/”<sup>†</sup> and of impotence.

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.

When we view living in the european mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious.

But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-european consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes.

At this point in time, I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches so necessary for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean – in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have

found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of “it feels right to me.” We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.

Possibility is neither forever nor instant. It is not easy to sustain belief in its efficacy. We can sometimes work long and hard to establish one beachhead of real resistance to the deaths we are expected to live, only to have that beachhead assaulted or threatened by those canards we have been socialized to fear, or by the withdrawal of those approvals that we have been warned to seek for safety. Women see ourselves diminished or softened by the falsely benign accusations of childishness, of nonuniversality, of changeability, of sensuality. And who asks the question: Am I altering your aura, your ideas, your dreams, or am I merely moving you to temporary and reactive action? And even though the latter is no mean task, it is one that must be seen within the context of a need for true alteration of the very foundations of our lives.

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.

However, experience has taught us that action in the now is also necessary, always. Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours? “If you want us to change the world someday, we at least have to live long enough to grow up!” shouts the child.

Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves – along with the renewed courage to try them out. And we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply, and so many of our old ideas disparage. In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real. Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accord with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors.

For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men. But women have survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They surface in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. Those dreams are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare.

If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core – the fountain – of our power, our womanness; we give up the future of our worlds.

For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt – of examining what those ideas feel like being lived on Sunday morning at 7 A.M., after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth, mourning our dead – while we suffer the old longings, battle the old warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone, while we taste new possibilities and strengths.

## **The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House\***

I agreed to take part in a New York University Institute for the Humanities conference a year ago, with the understanding that I would be commenting upon papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of american women: difference of race, sexuality, class, and age. The absence of these considerations weakens any feminist discussion of the personal and the political.

It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians. And yet, I stand here as a Black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of Black feminists and lesbians is represented. What this says about the vision of this conference is sad, in a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable. To read this program is to assume that lesbian and Black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two Black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.

The absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of Third World women leaves a serious gap within this conference and within the papers presented here. For example, in a paper on material relationships between women, I was conscious of an either/or model of nurturing which totally dismissed my knowledge as a Black lesbian. In this paper there was no examination of mutuality between women, no systems of shared support, no interdependence as exists between lesbians and women-identified women. Yet it is only in the patriarchal model of nurturance that women "who attempt to emancipate themselves pay perhaps too high a price for the results," as this paper states.

For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women.

Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive *be* and the active *being*.

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

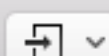
Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.

As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

Poor women and women of Color know there is a difference between the daily manifestations of marital slavery and prostitution because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street. If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the theory behind racist feminism?

In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower.



Why weren't other women of Color found to participate in this conference? Why were two phone calls to me considered a consultation? Am I the only possible source of names of Black feminists? And although the Black panelist's paper ends on an important and powerful connection of love between women, what about interracial cooperation between feminists who don't love each other?

In academic feminist circles, the answer to these questions is often, "We did not know who to ask." But that is the same evasion of responsibility, the same cop-out, that keeps Black women's art out of women's exhibitions, Black women's work out of most feminist publications except for the occasional "Special Third World Women's Issue," and Black women's texts off your reading lists. But as Adrienne Rich pointed out in a recent talk, white feminists have educated themselves about such an enormous amount over the past ten years, how come you haven't also educated yourselves about Black women and the differences between us – white and Black – when it is key to our survival as a movement?

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of Color to educate white women – in the face of tremendous resistance – as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.

Simone de Beauvoir once said: "It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting."

Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. *I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears.* Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

## Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference\*

Much of western european history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women.

As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong. Traditionally, in american society, it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor. For in order to survive,

those of us for whom oppression is as american as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection. Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes. I am responsible for educating teachers who dismiss my children's culture in school. Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.

*Racism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance. Sexism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and thereby the right to dominance. Ageism. Heterosexism. Elitism. Classism.*

It is a lifetime pursuit for each one of us to extract these distortions from our living at the same time as we recognize, reclaim, and define those differences upon which they are imposed. For we have all been raised in a society where those distortions were endemic within our living. Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections. Either way, we do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives. We speak not of human difference, but of human deviance.

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows "that is not me." In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause

of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing.<sup>1</sup> By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist.

Unacknowledged class differences rob women of each other's energy and creative insight. Recently a women's magazine collective made the decision for one issue to print only prose, saying poetry was a less "rigorous" or "serious" art form. Yet even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue. Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper. Over the last few years, writing a novel on tight finances, I came to appreciate the enormous differences in the material demands between poetry and prose. As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women. A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time. The actual requirements to produce the visual arts also help determine, along class lines, whose art is whose. In this day of inflated prices for material, who are our sculptors, our painters, our photographers? When we speak of a broadly based women's culture, we need to be aware of the effect of class and economic differences on the supplies available for producing art.

As we move toward creating a society within which we can each flourish, ageism is another distortion of relationship which interferes without vision. By ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes. The "generation gap" is an important social tool for any repressive society. If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all important question, "Why?" This gives rise to a historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread.

We find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did because we do not pass on what we have learned, or because we are unable to listen. For instance, how many times has this all been said before? For another, who would have believed that once again our daughters are allowing their bodies to be hampered and purgatoried by girdles and high heels and hobble skirts?

Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power.

As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become "other," the outsider whose experience and tradition is too "alien" to comprehend. An example of this is the signal absence of the experience of women of Color as a resource for women's studies courses. The literature of women of Color is seldom included in women's literature courses and almost never in other literature

courses, nor in women's studies as a whole. All too often, the excuse given is that the literatures of women of Color can only be taught by Colored women, or that they are too difficult to understand, or that classes cannot "get into" them because they come out of experiences that are "too different." I have heard this argument presented by white women of otherwise quite clear intelligence, women who seem to have no trouble at all teaching and reviewing work that comes out of the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Moliere,<sup>2</sup> Dostoyefsky,<sup>3</sup> and Aristophanes.<sup>4</sup> Surely there must be some other explanation.

This is a very complex question, but I believe one of the reasons white women have such difficulty reading Black women's work is because of their reluctance to see Black women as women and different from themselves. To examine Black women's literature effectively requires that we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities – as individuals, as women, as human – rather than as one of those problematic but familiar stereotypes provided in this society in place of genuine<sup>5</sup> images of Black women. And I believe this holds true for the literatures of other women of Color who are not Black.

The literatures of all women of Color recreate the textures of our lives, and many white women are heavily invested in ignoring the real differences. For as long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt. To allow women of Color to step out of stereotypes is too guilt provoking, for it threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex.

Refusing to recognize difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women.

Thus, in a patriarchal power system where whiteness privilege is a major prop, the entrapments used to neutralize Black women and white women are not the same. For example, it is easy for Black women to be used by the power structure against Black men, not because they are men, but because they are Black. Therefore, for Black women, it is necessary at all times to separate the needs of the oppressor from our own legitimate conflicts within our communities. This same problem does not exist for white women. Black women and men have shared racist oppression and still share it, although in different ways. Out of that shared oppression we have developed joint defenses and joint vulnerabilities to each other that are not duplicated in the white community, with the exception of the relationship between Jewish women and Jewish men.

On the other hand, white women face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power. This possibility does not exist in the same way for women of Color. The tokenism that is sometimes extended to us is not an invitation to join power; our racial "otherness" is a visible reality that makes that quite clear. For white women there is a wider range of pretended choices and rewards for identifying with patriarchal power and its tools.

Today, with the defeat of ERA,<sup>6</sup> the tightening economy, and increased conservatism, it is easier once again for white women to believe the dangerous fantasy that if you are good enough, pretty enough, sweet enough, quiet enough, teach

the children to behave, hate the right people, and marry the right men, then you will be allowed to co-exist with patriarchy in relative peace, at least until a man needs your job or the neighborhood rapist happens along. And true, unless one lives and loves in the trenches it is difficult to remember that the war against dehumanization is ceaseless.

But Black women and our children know the fabric of our lives is stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest. We do not deal with it only on the picket lines, or in dark midnight alleys, or in the places where we dare to verbalize our resistance. For us, increasingly, violence weaves through the daily tissues of our living – in the supermarket, in the classroom, in the elevator, in the clinic and the schoolyard, from the plumber, the baker, the saleswoman, the bus driver, the bank teller, the waitress who does not serve us.

Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying.

The threat of difference has been no less blinding to people of Color. Those of us who are Black must see that the reality of our lives and our struggle does not make us immune to the errors of ignoring and misnaming difference. Within Black communities where racism is a living reality, differences among us often seem dangerous and suspect. The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity, and a Black feminist vision mistaken for betrayal of our common interests as a people. Because of the continuous battle against racial erasure that Black women and Black men share, some Black women still refuse to recognize that we are also oppressed as women, and that sexual hostility against Black women is practiced not only by the white racist society, but implemented within our Black communities as well. It is a disease striking the heart of Black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear. Exacerbated by racism and the pressures of powerlessness, violence against Black women and children often becomes a standard within our communities, one by which manliness can be measured. But these woman-hating acts are rarely discussed as crimes against Black women.

As a group, women of Color are the lowest paid wage earners in America. We are the primary targets of abortion and sterilization abuse, here and abroad. In certain parts of Africa, small girls are still being sewed shut between their legs to keep them docile and for men's pleasure. This is known as female circumcision, and it is not a cultural affair as the late Jomo Kenyatta<sup>2</sup> insisted, it is a crime against Black women.

Black women's literature is full of the pain of frequent assault, not only by a racist patriarchy, but also by Black men. Yet the necessity for and history of shared battle have made us, Black women, particularly vulnerable to the false accusation that anti-sexist is anti-Black. Meanwhile, womanhating as a recourse of the powerless is sapping strength from Black communities, and our very lives. Rape is on the increase, reported and unreported, and rape is not aggressive sexuality, it is sexualized aggression. As Kalamu ya Salaam, a Black male writer points out, "As long as male domination exists, rape will exist. Only women revolting and men made conscious of their responsibility to fight sexism

can collectively stop rape.”\*

Differences between ourselves as Black women are also being misnamed and used to separate us from one another. As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living.

A fear of lesbians, or of being accused of being a lesbian, has led many Black women into testifying against themselves. It has led some of us into destructive alliances, and others into despair and isolation. In the white women's communities, heterosexism is sometimes a result of identifying with the white patriarchy, a rejection of that interdependence between women-identified women which allows the self to be, rather than to be used in the service of men. Sometimes it reflects a die-hard belief in the protective coloration of heterosexual relationships, sometimes a self-hate which all women have to fight against, taught us from birth.

Although elements of these attitudes exist for all women, there are particular resonances of heterosexism and homophobia among Black women. Despite the fact that woman-bonding has a long and honorable history in the African and African-american communities, and despite the knowledge and accomplishments of many strong and creative women-identified Black women in the political, social and cultural fields, heterosexual Black women often tend to ignore or discount the existence and work of Black lesbians. Part of this attitude has come from an understandable terror of Black male attack within the close confines of Black society, where the punishment for any female self-assertion is still to be accused of being a lesbian and therefore unworthy of the attention or support of the scarce Black male. But part of this need to misname and ignore Black lesbians comes from a very real fear that openly women-identified Black women who are no longer dependent upon men for their self-definition may well reorder our whole concept of social relationships.

Black women who once insisted that lesbianism was a white woman's problem now insist that Black lesbians are a threat to Black nationhood, are consorting with the enemy, are basically un-Black. These accusations, coming from the very women to whom we look for deep and real understanding, have served to keep many Black lesbians in hiding, caught between the racism of white women and the homophobia of their sisters. Often, their work has been ignored, trivialized, or misnamed, as with the work of Angelina Grimke,<sup>8</sup> Alice Dunbar-Nelson,<sup>9</sup> Lorraine Hansberry. Yet women-bonded women have always been some part of the power of Black communities, from our unmarried aunts to the amazons of Dahomey.<sup>10</sup>

Morrison. Her novels and essays represent the best of African American literature at the turn of the twenty-first century. A preeminent novelist of the contemporary period, Morrison has roots that lie in the publishing world of the Black Arts era and the 1970s renaissance in African American women's literature. A skilled artist whose novels have moved readers throughout the world, honored by both Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes, Morrison has pushed the boundaries of African American women's writing and reshaped the canon of American literature.

Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, the second of four children. Her parents, George and Ramah Willis Wofford, were migrants from the South whose storytelling fostered her own interest in folk wisdom, language, and literature. Lorain was a poor steel town on the outskirts of Cleveland, where African Americans and European ethnic groups shared a common working-class plight. Racial discrimination was nonetheless a constitutive part of her childhood experience. As Chloe's mother believed in the nation's capacity for racial equality in the future, her father more often exhibited hostility towards its predominantly white institutions. The antinomy between hope and bitterness subsequently informed many of her most memorable characters and novels. Always a precocious reader and student, she graduated from Lorain High School and attended Howard University, where she began the artistic and professional journey that launched her career as an editor, writer, and critic.

At Howard University, she majored in English and minored in Classics, and took courses with Alain Locke. She changed her name to Toni (because "Chloe" presented pronunciation challenges for her classmates) and performed with the Howard University Players, a campus theater company that toured the South. Graduating in 1953, she continued her studies at Cornell University, where, in 1955, she received her MA in English. Her thesis explored the writings of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf.

After teaching for two years at Texas Southern University in Houston, she returned to Howard to teach in the English Department from 1957 to 1964. In 1958, she married Jamaican architect Harold Morrison; the couple had two sons (Harold, Jr and Slade), but the union did not last. Frustrated and disappointed with conventional marriage, like many women of her generation, she turned to writing for solace. She later described writing as "the most extraordinary way of thinking and feeling ... the one thing I was doing that I had absolutely no intention of living without." In 1964, Morrison divorced her husband, left Howard, and moved back to her parents' home in Lorain. She wrote in the evenings after her sons went to sleep. Eighteen months later she moved to Syracuse, New York, to work as a textbook editor with a Random House subsidiary. By 1968 she was senior editor at the publishing house in New York City.

In her role at Random House, Morrison had a hand in the careers of fellow African American writers who were just emerging on the literary scene in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. During the early 1970s, Morrison helped edit works by Angela Davis, Lucille Clifton, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, Muhammad Ali, and Gayle Jones. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), signaled her own arrival as a major author. She had a unique ability to discuss race, gender, and class in a way that both invoked and challenged the traditions of Western, American, and African American literature. She also edited *The Black Book* (1974), a collection of over two hundred years of African American history

that she called a representation of “Black life as lived.” Through documents and images of slavery, freedom, lynching, and protest, she later said that this powerful collage of African American experience (including family photo albums, recipes, folk songs, and news clippings) countered the identity constructed by the Black Power Movement that failed to account for the contingencies of history. The edification in *The Black Book* anticipated her ongoing work in higher education. She continued her teaching career, with part-time appointments at State University of New York (SUNY) at Purchase (1971), Yale University (1976), SUNY at Albany (1984), and Bard College (1986).

Morrison’s next four novels, published between 1970 and 1992, met with increasing critical acclaim and literary success. *Sula* (1973) received a National Book Award nomination in 1975. *Song of Solomon* (1977) was a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection (the first by an African American since *Native Son* in 1940), and the recipient of both a National Book Critics Circle and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award. Her 1981 novel *Tar Baby* was followed by a play, *Dreaming of Emmett* (1986). Most outstanding, her 1987 novel *Beloved* earned her the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for its lyrical and devastating story of the legacy of American slavery. The genesis of *Beloved* came from a story she had discovered in researching *The Black Book* about an escaped slave, Margaret Garner, who killed her own baby to keep the child from being reclaimed by her slave master in antebellum Ohio. A 2006 survey of writers and literary critics conducted by *The New York Times* judged it the best novel of the past 25 years. The novel also earned her a Robert F. Kennedy Award in 1988, and was released as a major motion picture in 1998, directed by Jonathan Demme and starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover. On the strength of these five novels, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

While known most for writing novels of magical realism about African American women’s experiences, Morrison has also written texts that complicate the actual categories of race and African American literature. She once explained the racial ambiguity of characters in *Paradise* (1997) – namely, the novel’s refusal to disclose conclusively the racial identities of the female protagonists – by providing insight into the short story she first published in *Confirmations: An Anthology of African American Women* (1983), edited by Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka: “Recitatif.” Now being taught in more and more classrooms today, “Recitatif” prefigures *Paradise*, both by experimenting with racial ambiguity and by appearing in a collection that, ironically, sought to crystallize the authentic portraiture of African American women that Morrison was creatively counteracting. “The tradition in writing is that if you don’t mention a character’s race, he’s white,” she states. “Any deviation from that, you have to say. What I wanted to do was not to erase race, but force readers either to care about it or see if it disturbs them that they don’t know.” When race is bracketed, the themes of gender and family in “Recitatif” and *Paradise* turn out to be less anomalous in Morrison’s oeuvre than what meets the eye. Indeed, “Recitatif” evolves from the novels Morrison published previously, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, in which the relationships between women grow in resolve and spirituality despite or because of the absence, violence, or abuse attributable to their parents, particularly their fathers.

Ambidextrous in the disciplines of creative writing and literary criticism, Morrison became in 1989 the Robert F.

Goheen Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University, where she taught African American Studies and creative writing courses until her retirement in 2006, at which time she was conferred with Emerita status. While publishing novels – *Paradise, Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), and *Home* (2012) – she earned an international reputation as a leading literary and cultural critic. In 1988, her Tanner Lecture at the University of Michigan, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” famously called for a racial reexamination of the canon of American literature, a thesis elaborated in her seminal *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). From *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (1992) to the more recent *Burn This Book: PEN Writers Speak Out on the Power of the Word* (2009), she has edited some of the most important volumes on race, gender, literature, and American culture in the last quarter century.

Prior to receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom award in 2012, Morrison was recipient of multiple honorary degrees, including those from Oxford University in 2005, Rutgers University in 2011, and the University of Geneva in 2011.

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Wallace, Maurice. "Print, Prosthesis, Impersonation: Morrison's *Jazz* and the Limits of Literary History." *American Literary History* 20.4 (2008): 794–806.

## Recitatif<sup>1</sup>

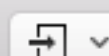
My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick. That's why we were taken to St. Bonny's. People want to put their arms around you when you tell them you were in a shelter, but it really wasn't bad. No big long room with one hundred beds like Bellevue. There were four to a room, and when Roberta and me came, there was a shortage of state kids, so we were the only ones assigned to 406 and could go from bed to bed if we wanted to. And we wanted to, too. We changed beds every night and for the whole four months we were there we never picked one out as our own permanent bed.

It didn't start out that way. The minute I walked in and the Big Bozo introduced us, I got sick to my stomach. It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning – it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race. And Mary, that's my mother, she was right. Every now and then she would stop dancing long enough to tell me something important and one of the things she said was that they never washed their hair and they smelled funny. Roberta sure did. Smell funny, I mean. So when the Big Bozo (nobody ever called her Mrs. Itkin, just like nobody every said St. Bonaventure) – when she said, "Twyla, this is Roberta. Roberta, this is Twyla. Make each other welcome." I said, "My mother won't like you putting me in here."

"Good," said Bozo. "Maybe then she'll come and take you home."

How's that for mean? If Roberta had laughed I would have killed her, but she didn't. She just walked over to the window and stood with her back to us.

"Turn around," said the Bozo. "Don't be rude. Now Twyla. Roberta. When you hear a loud buzzer, that's the call for dinner. Come down to the first floor. Any fights and no movie." And then, just to make sure we knew what we would be missing, "*The Wizard of Oz*."



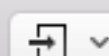
Roberta must have thought I meant that my mother would be mad about my being put in the shelter. Not about rooming with her, because as soon as Bozo left she came over to me and said, “Is your mother sick too?”

“No,” I said. “She just likes to dance all night.”

“Oh,” she nodded her head and I liked the way she understood things so fast. So for the moment it didn’t matter that we looked like salt and pepper standing there and that’s what the other kids called us sometimes. We were eight years old and got F’s all the time. Me because I couldn’t remember what I read or what the teacher said. And Roberta because she couldn’t read at all and didn’t even listen to the teacher. She wasn’t good at anything except jacks, at which she was a killer: pow scoop pow scoop pow scoop.

We didn’t like each other all that much at first, but nobody else wanted to play with us because we weren’t real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky. We were dumped. Even the New York City Puerto Ricans and the upstate Indians ignored us. All kinds of kids were in there, black ones, white ones, even two Koreans. The food was good, though. At least I thought so. Roberta hated it and left whole pieces of things on her plate: Spam, Salisbury steak – even jello with fruit cocktail in it, and she didn’t care if I ate what she wouldn’t. Mary’s idea of supper was popcorn and a can of Yoo-Hoo. Hot mashed potatoes and two weenies was like Thanksgiving for me.

It really wasn’t bad, St. Bonny’s. The big girls on the second floor pushed us around now and then. But that was all. They wore lipstick and eyebrow pencil and wobbled their knees while they watched TV. Fifteen, sixteen, even, some of them were. They were put-out girls, scared runaways most of them. Poor little girls who fought their uncles off but looked tough to us, and mean. God did they look mean. The staff tried to keep them separate from the younger children, but sometimes they caught us watching them in the orchard where they played radios and danced with each other. They’d light out after us and pull our hair or twist our arms. We were scared of them, Roberta and me, but neither of us wanted the other one to know it. So we got a good list of dirty names we could shout back when we ran from them through the orchard. I used to dream a lot and almost always the orchard was there. Two acres, four maybe, of these little apple trees. Hundreds of them. Empty and crooked like beggar women when I first came to St. Bonny’s but fat with flowers when I left. I don’t know why I dreamt about that orchard so much. Nothing really happened there. Nothing all that important, I mean. Just the big girls dancing and playing the radio. Roberta and me watching. Maggie fell down there once. The kitchen woman with legs like parentheses. And the big girls laughed at her. We should have helped her up, I know, but we were scared of those girls with lipstick and eyebrow pencil. Maggie couldn’t talk. The kids said she had her tongue cut out, but I think she was just born that way: mute. She was old and sandy-colored and she worked in the kitchen. I don’t know if she was nice or not. I just remember her legs like parentheses and how she rocked when she walked. She worked from early in the morning till two o’clock, and if she was late, if she had too much cleaning and didn’t get out till two-fifteen or so, she’d cut through the orchard so she wouldn’t miss her bus and have to wait another hour. She wore this really stupid little hat – a kid’s hat with ear flaps – and she wasn’t much taller than we were. A really awful little hat. Even for a mute, it was dumb – dressing like a kid and never saying anything at all.



“But what about if somebody tries to kill her?” I used to wonder about that. “Or what if she wants to cry? Can she cry?”

“Sure,” Roberta said. “But just tears. No sounds come out.”

“She can’t scream?”

“Nope. Nothing.”

“Can she hear?”

“I guess.”

“Let’s call her,” I said. And we did.

“Dummy! Dummy!” She never turned her head.

“Bow legs! Bow legs!” Nothing. She just rocked on, the chin straps of her baby-boy hat swaying from side to side. I think we were wrong. I think she could hear and didn’t let on. And it shames me even now to think there was somebody in there after all who heard us call her those names and couldn’t tell on us.

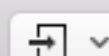
We got along all right, Roberta and me. Changed beds every night, got F’s in civics and communication skills and gym. The Bozo was disappointed in us, she said. Out of 130 of us state cases, 90 were under twelve. Almost all were real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky. We were the only ones dumped and the only ones with F’s in three classes including gym. So we got along – what with her leaving whole pieces of things on her plate and being nice about not asking questions.

I think it was the day before Maggie fell down that we found out our mothers were coming to visit us on the same Sunday. We had been at the shelter twenty-eight days (Roberta twenty-eight and a half) and this was their first visit with us. Our mothers would come at ten o’clock in time for chapel, then lunch with us in the teachers’ lounge. I thought if my dancing mother met her sick mother it might be good for her. And Roberta thought her sick mother would get a big bang out of a dancing one. We got excited about it and curled each other’s hair. After breakfast we sat on the bed watching the road from the window. Roberta’s socks were still wet. She washed them the night before and put them on the radiator to dry. They hadn’t, but she put them on anyway because their tops were so pretty – scalloped in pink. Each of us had a purple construction-paper basket that we had made in craft class. Mine had a yellow crayon rabbit on it. Roberta’s had eggs with wiggly lines of color. Inside were cellophane grass and just the jelly beans because I’d eaten the two marshmallow eggs they gave us. The Big Bozo came herself to get us. Smiling she told us we looked very nice and to come downstairs. We were so surprised by the smile we’d never seen before, neither of us moved.

“Don’t you want to see your mommies?”

I stood up first and spilled the jelly beans all over the floor. Bozo’s smile disappeared while we scrambled to get the candy up off the floor and put it back in the grass.

She escorted us downstairs to the first floor, where the other girls were lining up to file into the chapel. A bunch of



grown-ups stood to one side. Viewers mostly. The old biddies who wanted servants and the fags who wanted company looking for children they might want to adopt. Once in a while a grandmother. Almost never anybody young or anybody whose face wouldn't scare you in the night. Because if any of the real orphans had young relatives they wouldn't be real orphans. I saw Mary right away. She had on those green slacks I hated and hated even more now because didn't she know we were going to chapel? And that fur jacket with the pocket linings so ripped she had to pull to get her hands out of them. But her face was pretty – like always, and she smiled and waved like she was the little girl looking for her mother – not me.

I walked slowly, trying not to drop the jelly beans and hoping the paper handle would hold. I had to use my last Chiclet because by the time I finished cutting everything out, all the Elmer's<sup>2</sup> was gone. I am left-handed and the scissors never worked for me. It didn't matter, though; I might just as well have chewed the gum. Mary dropped to her knees and grabbed me, mashing the basket, the jelly beans, and the grass into her ratty fur jacket.

"Twyla, baby. Twyla, baby!"

I could have killed her. Already I heard the big girls in the orchard the next time saying, "Twyyyyyla, baby!" But I couldn't stay mad at Mary while she was smiling and hugging me and smelling of Lady Esther dusting powder. I wanted to stay buried in her fur all day.

To tell the truth I forgot about Roberta. Mary and I got in line for the traipse into chapel and I was feeling proud because she looked so beautiful even in those ugly green slacks that made her behind stick out. A pretty mother on earth is better than a beautiful dead one in the sky even if she did leave you all alone to go dancing.

I felt a tap on my shoulder, turned, and saw Roberta smiling. I smiled back, but not too much lest somebody think this visit was the biggest thing that ever happened in my life. Then Roberta said, "Mother, I want you to meet my roommate, Twyla. And that's Twyla's mother."

I looked up it seemed for miles. She was big. Bigger than any man and on her chest was the biggest cross I'd ever seen. I swear it was six inches long each way. And in the crook of her arm was the biggest Bible ever made.

Mary, simple-minded as ever, grinned and tried to yank her hand out of the pocket with the raggedy lining – to shake hands, I guess. Roberta's mother looked down at me and then looked down at Mary too. She didn't say anything, just grabbed Roberta with her Bible-free hand and stepped out of line, walking quickly to the rear of it. Mary was still grinning because she's not too swift when it comes to what's really going on. Then this light bulb goes off in her head and she says "That bitch!" really loud and us almost in the chapel now. Organ music whining; the Bonny Angels singing sweetly. Everybody in the world turned around to look. And Mary would have kept it up – kept calling names if I hadn't squeezed her hand as hard as I could. That helped a little, but she still twitched and crossed and uncrossed her legs all through service. Even groaned a couple of times. Why did I think she would come there and act right? Slacks. No hat like the grandmothers and viewers, and groaning all the while. When we stood for hymns she kept her mouth shut.

Wouldn't even look at the words on the page. She actually reached in her purse for a mirror to check her lipstick. All I could think of was that she really needed to be killed. The sermon lasted a year, and I knew the real orphans were looking smug again.

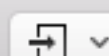
We were supposed to have lunch in the teachers' lounge, but Mary didn't bring anything, so we picked fur and cellophane grass off the mashed jelly beans and ate them. I could have killed her. I sneaked a look at Roberta. Her mother had brought chicken legs and ham sandwiches and oranges and a whole box of chocolate-covered grahams. Roberta drank milk from a thermos while her mother read the Bible to her.

Things are not right. The wrong food is always with the wrong people. Maybe that's why I got into waitress work later – to match up the right people with the right food. Roberta just let those chicken legs sit there, but she did bring a stack of grahams up to me later when the visit was over. I think she was sorry that her mother would not shake my mother's hand. And I liked that and I liked the fact that she didn't say a word about Mary groaning all the way through the service and not bringing any lunch.

Roberta left in May when the apple trees were heavy and white. On her last day we went to the orchard to watch the big girls smoke and dance by the radio. It didn't matter that they said, "Twyyyyyla, baby." We sat on the ground and breathed. Lady Esther. Apple blossoms. I still go soft when I smell one or the other. Roberta was going home. The big cross and the big Bible was coming to get her and she seemed sort of glad and sort of not. I thought I would die in that room of four beds without her and I knew Bozo had plans to move some other dumped kid in there with me. Roberta promised to write every day, which was really sweet of her because she couldn't read a lick so how could she write anybody. I would have drawn pictures and sent them to her but she never gave me her address. Little by little she faded. Her wet socks with the pink scalloped tops and her big serious-looking eyes – that's all I could catch when I tried to bring her to mind.

I was working behind the counter at the Howard Johnson's on the Thruway just before the Kingston exit. Not a bad job. Kind of a long ride from Newburgh, but okay once I got there. Mine was the second night shift – eleven to seven. Very light until a Greyhound checked in for breakfast around six-thirty. At that hour the sun was all the way clear of the hills behind the restaurant. The place looked better at night – more like shelter – but I loved it when the sun broke in, even if it did show all the cracks in the vinyl and the speckled floor looked dirty no matter what the mop boy did.

It was August and a bus crowd was just unloading. They would stand around a long while: going to the john, and looking at gifts and junk-for-sale machines, reluctant to sit down so soon. Even to eat. I was trying to fill the coffee pots and get them all situated on the electric burners when I saw her. She was sitting in a booth smoking a cigarette with two guys smothered in head and facial hair. Her own hair was so big and wild I could hardly see her face. But the eyes. I would know them anywhere. She had on a powder-blue halter and shorts outfit and earrings the size of bracelets. Talk about lipstick and eyebrow pencil. She made the big girls look like nuns. I couldn't get off the counter until seven o'clock, but I kept watching the booth in case they got up to leave before that. My replacement was on time for a change, so I



counted and stacked my receipts as fast as I could and signed off. I walked over to the booth, smiling and wondering if she would remember me. Or even if she wanted to remember me. Maybe she didn't want to be reminded of St. Bonny's or to have anybody know she was ever there. I know I never talked about it to anybody.

I put my hands in my apron pockets and leaned against the back of the booth facing them.

"Roberta? Roberta Fisk?"

She looked up. "Yeah?"

"Twyla."

She squinted for a second and then said, "Wow."

"Remember me?"

"Sure. Hey. Wow."

"It's been a while," I said, and gave a smile to the two hairy guys.

"Yeah. Wow. You work here?"

"Yeah," I said. "I live in Newburgh."

"Newburgh? No kidding?" She laughed then a private laugh that included the guys but only the guys, and they laughed with her. What could I do but laugh too and wonder why I was standing there with my knees showing out from under that uniform. Without looking I could see the blue and white triangle on my head, my hair shapeless in a net, my ankles thick in white oxfords. Nothing could have been less sheer than my stockings. There was this silence that came down right after I laughed. A silence it was her turn to fill up. With introductions, maybe, to her boyfriends or an invitation to sit down and have a Coke. Instead she lit a cigarette off the one she'd just finished and said, "We're on our way to the Coast. He's got an appointment with Hendrix." She gestured casually toward the boy next to her.

"Hendrix? Fantastic," I said. "Really fantastic. What's she doing now?"

Roberta coughed on her cigarette and the two guys rolled their eyes up at the ceiling.

"Hendrix. Jimi Hendrix, asshole. He's only the biggest – Oh, wow. Forget it."

I was dismissed without anyone saying goodbye, so I thought I would do it for her.

"How's your mother?" I asked. Her grin cracked her whole face. She swallowed. "Fine," she said. "How's yours?"

"Pretty as a picture," I said and turned away. The backs of my knees were damp. Howard Johnson's really was a dump in the sunlight.

James is as comfortable as a house slipper. He liked my cooking and I liked his big loud family. They have lived in Newburgh all of their lives and talk about it the way people do who have always known a home. His grandmother is a porch swing older than his father and when they talk about streets and avenues and buildings they call them names they no longer have. They still call the A & P Rico's because it stands on property once a mom and pop store owned by Mr.

Rico. And they call the new community college Town Hall because it once was. My mother-in-law puts up jelly and cucumbers and buys butter wrapped in cloth from a dairy. James and his father talk about fishing and baseball and I can see them all together on the Hudson in a raggedy skiff. Half the population of Newburgh is on welfare now, but to my husband's family it was still some upstate paradise of a time long past. A time of ice houses and vegetable wagons, coal furnaces and children weeding gardens. When our son was born my mother-in-law gave me the crib blanket that had been hers.

But the town they remembered had changed. Something quick was in the air. Magnificent old houses, so ruined they had become shelter for squatters and rent risks, were bought and renovated. Smart IBM people moved out of their suburbs back into the city and put shutters up and herb gardens in their backyards. A brochure came in the mail announcing the opening of a Food Emporium. Gourmet food it said – and listed items the rich IBM crowd would want. It was located in a new mall at the edge of town and I drove out to shop there one day – just to see. It was late in June. After the tulips were gone and the Queen Elizabeth roses were open everywhere. I trailed my cart along the aisle tossing in smoked oysters and Robert's sauce and things I knew would sit in my cupboard for years. Only when I found some Klondike ice cream bars did I feel less guilty about spending James's fireman's salary so foolishly. My father-in-law ate them with the same gusto little Joseph did.

Waiting in the check-out line I heard a voice say, "Twyla!"

The classical music piped over the aisles had affected me and the woman leaning toward me was dressed to kill. Diamonds on her hand, a smart white summer dress. "I'm Mrs. Benson," I said.

"Ho. Ho. The Big Bozo," she sang.

For a split second I didn't know what she was talking about. She had a bunch of asparagus and two cartons of fancy water.

"Roberta!"

"Right."

"For heaven's sake. Roberta."

"You look great," she said.

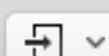
"So do you. Where are you? Here? In Newburgh?"

"Yes. Over in Annandale."

I was opening my mouth to say more when the cashier called my attention to her empty counter.

"Meet you outside." Roberta pointed her finger and went into the express line.

I placed the groceries and kept myself from glancing around to check Roberta's progress. I remembered Howard Johnson's and looking for a chance to speak only to be greeted with a stingy "wow." But she was waiting for me and her huge hair was sleek now, smooth around a small, nicely shaped head. Shoes, dress, everything lovely and summery and



rich. I was dying to know what happened to her, how she got from Jimi Hendrix to Annandale, a neighborhood full of doctors and IBM executives. Easy, I thought. Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world.

"How long," I asked her. "How long have you been here?"

"A year. I got married to a man who lives here. And you, you're married too, right? Benson, you said."

"Yeah. James Benson."

"And is he nice?"

"Oh, is he nice?"

"Well, is he?" Roberta's eyes were steady as though she really meant the question and wanted an answer.

"He's wonderful, Roberta. Wonderful."

"So you're happy."

"Very."

"That's good," she said and nodded her head. "I always hoped you'd be happy. Any kids? I know you have kids."

"One. A boy. How about you?"

"Four."

"Four?"

She laughed. "Step kids. He's a widower."

"Oh."

"Got a minute? Let's have a coffee."

I thought about the Klondikes melting and the inconvenience of going all the way to my car and putting the bags in the trunk. Served me right for buying all that stuff I didn't need. Roberta was ahead of me.

"Put them in my car. It's right here."

And then I saw the dark blue limousine.

"You married a Chinaman?"

"No," she laughed. "He's the driver."

"Oh, my. If the Big Bozo could see you now."

We both giggled. Really giggled. Suddenly, in just a pulse beat, twenty years disappeared and all of it came rushing back. The big girls (whom we called gar girls – Roberta's misheard word for the evil stone faces described in a civics class) there dancing in the orchard, the ploppy mashed potatoes, the double weenies, the Spam with pineapple. We went into the coffee shop holding on to one another and I tried to think why we were glad to see each other this time and not before. Once, twelve years ago, we passed like strangers. A black girl and a white girl meeting in a Howard Johnson's on the road and having nothing to say. One in a blue and white triangle waitress hat – the other on her way to

see Hendrix. Now we were behaving like sisters separated for much too long. Those four short months were nothing in time. Maybe it was the thing itself. Just being there, together. Two little girls who knew what nobody else in the world knew – how not to ask questions. How to believe what had to be believed. There was politeness in that reluctance and generosity as well. Is your mother sick too? No, she dances all night. Oh – and an understanding nod.

We sat in a booth by the window and fell into recollection like veterans.

“Did you ever learn to read?”

“Watch.” She picked up the menu. “Special of the day. Cream of corn soup. Entrées. Two dots and a wriggly line. Quiche. Chef salad, scallops ...”

I was laughing and applauding when the waitress came up.

“Remember the Easter baskets?”

“And how we tried to *introduce* them?”

“Your mother with that cross like two telephone poles.”

“And yours with those tight slacks.”

We laughed so loudly heads turned and made the laughter harder to suppress.

“What happened to the Jimi Hendrix date?”

Roberta made a blow-out sound with her lips.

“When he died I thought about you.”

“Oh, you heard about him finally?”

“Finally. Come on, I was a small-town country waitress.”

“And I was a small-town country dropout. God, were we wild. I still don’t know how I got out of there alive.”

“But you did.”

“I did. I really did. Now I’m Mrs. Kenneth Norton.”

“Sounds like a mouthful.”

“It is.”

“Servants and all?”

Roberta held up two fingers.

“Ow! What does he do?”

“Computers and stuff. What do I know?”

“I don’t remember a hell of a lot from those days, but Lord, St. Bonny’s is as clear as daylight. Remember Maggie? The day she fell down and those gar girls laughed at her?”

Roberta looked up from her salad and stared at me. “Maggie didn’t fall,” she said.

“Yes, she did. You remember.”

“No, Twyla. They knocked her down. Those girls pushed her down and tore her clothes. In the orchard.”

“I don’t – that’s not what happened.”

“Sure it is. In the orchard. Remember how scared we were?”

“Wait a minute. I don’t remember any of that.”

“And Bozo was fired.”

“You’re crazy. She was there when I left. You left before me.”

“I went back. You weren’t there when they fired Bozo.”

“What?”

“Twice. Once for a year when I was about ten, another for two months when I was fourteen. That’s when I ran away.”

“You ran away from St. Bonny’s?”

“I had to. What do you want? Me dancing in that orchard?”

“Are you sure about Maggie?”

“Of course I’m sure. You’ve blocked it, Twyla. It happened. Those girls had behavior problems, you know.”

“Didn’t they, though. But why can’t I remember the Maggie thing?”

“Believe me. It happened. And we were there.”

“Who did you room with when you went back?” I asked her as if I would know her. The Maggie thing was troubling me.

“Creeps. They tickled themselves in the night.”

My ears were itching and I wanted to go home suddenly. This was all very well but she couldn’t just comb her hair, wash her face and pretend everything was hunky-dory. After the Howard Johnson’s snub. And no apology. Nothing.

“Were you on dope or what that time at Howard Johnson’s?” I tried to make my voice sound friendlier than I felt.

“Maybe, a little. I never did drugs much. Why?”

“I don’t know; you acted sort of like you didn’t want to know me then.”

“Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black – white. You know how everything was.”

But I didn’t know. I thought it was just the opposite. Busloads of blacks and whites came into Howard Johnson’s together. They roamed together then: students, musicians, lovers, protesters. You got to see everything at Howard Johnson’s and blacks were very friendly with whites in those days. But sitting there with nothing on my plate but two hard tomato wedges wondering about the melting Klondikes it seemed childish remembering the slight. We went to her car, and with the help of the driver, got my stuff into my station wagon.

“We’ll keep in touch this time,” she said.

"Sure," I said. "Sure. Give me a call."

"I will," she said, and then just as I was sliding behind the wheel, she leaned into the window. "By the way. Your mother. Did she ever stop dancing?"

I shook my head. "No. Never."

Roberta nodded.

"And yours? Did she ever get well?"

She smiled a tiny sad smile. "No. She never did. Look, call me, okay?"

"Okay," I said, but I knew I wouldn't. Roberta had messed up my past somehow with that business about Maggie. I wouldn't forget a thing like that. Would I?

Strife came to us that fall. At least that's what the paper called it. Strife. Racial strife. The word made me think of a bird – a big shrieking bird out of 1,000,000,000 B.C. Flapping its wings and cawing. Its eye with no lid always bearing down on you. All day it screeched and at night it slept on the rooftops. It woke you in the morning and from the *Today* show to the eleven o'clock news it kept you an awful company.

I couldn't figure it out from one day to the next. I knew I was supposed to feel something strong, but I didn't know what, and James wasn't any help. Joseph was on the list of kids to be transferred from the junior high school to another one at some far-out-of-the-way place and I thought it was a good thing until I heard it was a bad thing. I mean I didn't know. All the schools seemed dumps to me, and the fact that one was nicer looking didn't hold much weight. But the papers were full of it and then the kids began to get jumpy. In August, mind you. Schools weren't even open yet. I thought Joseph might be frightened to go over there, but he didn't seem scared so I forgot about it, until I found myself driving along Hudson Street out there by the school they were trying to integrate and saw a line of women marching. And who do you suppose was in line, big as life, holding a sign in front of her bigger than her mother's cross? MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO! it said.

I drove on, and then changed my mind. I circled the block, slowed down, and honked my horn.

Roberta looked over and when she saw me she waved. I didn't wave back, but I didn't move either. She handed her sign to another woman and came over to where I was parked.

"Hi."

"What are you doing?"

"Picketing. What's it look like?"

"What for?"

"What do you mean, 'What for?' They want to take my kids and send them out of the neighborhood. They don't want to go."

"So what if they go to another school? My boy's being bussed too, and I don't mind. Why should you?"

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“Okay,” I said, but I knew I wouldn’t. Roberta had messed up my past somehow with that business about Maggie. I wouldn’t forget a thing like that. Would I?

Strife came to us that fall. At least that’s what the paper called it. Strife. Racial strife. The word made me think of a bird – a big shrieking bird out of 1,000,000,000 B.C. Flapping its wings and cawing. Its eye with no lid always bearing down on you. All day it screeched and at night it slept on the rooftops. It woke you in the morning and from the *Today* show to the eleven o’clock news it kept you an awful company.

I couldn’t figure it out from one day to the next. I knew I was supposed to feel something strong, but I didn’t know what, and James wasn’t any help. Joseph was on the list of kids to be transferred from the junior high school to another one at some far-out-of-the-way place and I thought it was a good thing until I heard it was a bad thing. I mean I didn’t know. All the schools seemed dumps to me, and the fact that one was nicer looking didn’t hold much weight. But the papers were full of it and then the kids began to get jumpy. In August, mind you. Schools weren’t even open yet. I thought Joseph might be frightened to go over there, but he didn’t seem scared so I forgot about it, until I found myself driving along Hudson Street out there by the school they were trying to integrate and saw a line of women marching. And who do you suppose was in line, big as life, holding a sign in front of her bigger than her mother’s cross? MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO! it said.

I drove on, and then changed my mind. I circled the block, slowed down, and honked my horn.

Roberta looked over and when she saw me she waved. I didn’t wave back, but I didn’t move either. She handed her sign to another woman and came over to where I was parked.

“Hi.”

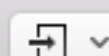
“What are you doing?”

“Picketing. What’s it look like?”

“What for?”

“What do you mean, ‘What for?’ They want to take my kids and send them out of the neighborhood. They don’t want to go.”

“So what if they go to another school? My boy’s being bussed too, and I don’t mind. Why should you?”



"It's not about us, Twyla. Me and you. It's about our kids."

"What's more *us* than that?"

"Well, it is a free country."

"Not yet, but it will be."

"What the hell does that mean? I'm not doing anything to you."

"You really think that?"

"I know it."

"I wonder what made me think you were different."

"I wonder what made me think you were different."

"Look at them," I said. "Just look. Who do they think they are? Swarming all over the place like they own it. And now they think they can decide where my child goes to school. Look at them, Roberta. They're Bozos."

Roberta turned around and looked at the women. Almost all of them were standing still now, waiting. Some were even edging toward us. Roberta looked at me out of some refrigerator behind her eyes. "No, they're not. They're just mothers."

"And what am I? Swiss cheese?"

"I used to curl your hair."

"I hated your hands in my hair."

The women were moving. Our faces looked mean to them of course and they looked as though they could not wait to throw themselves in front of a police car, or better yet, into my car and drag me away by my ankles. Now they surrounded my car and gently, gently began to rock it. I swayed back and forth like a sideways yo-yo. Automatically I reached for Roberta, like the old days in the orchard when they saw us watching them and we had to get out of there, and if one of us fell the other pulled her up and if one of us was caught the other stayed to kick and scratch, and neither would leave the other behind. My arm shot out of the car window but no receiving hand was there. Roberta was looking at me sway from side to side in the car and her face was still. My purse slid from the car seat down under the dashboard. The four policemen who had been drinking Tab in their car finally got the message and strolled over, forcing their way through the women. Quietly, firmly they spoke. "Okay, ladies. Back in line or off the streets."

Some of them went away willingly; others had to be urged away from the car doors and the hood. Roberta didn't move. She was looking steadily at me. I was fumbling to turn on the ignition, which wouldn't catch because the gearshift was still in drive. The seats of the car were a mess because the swaying had thrown my grocery coupons all over it and my purse was sprawled on the floor.

"Maybe I am different now, Twyla. But you're not. You're the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground. You kicked a black lady and you have the nerve to call me a bigot."

The coupons were everywhere and the guts of my purse were bunched under the dashboard. What was she saying? Black? Maggie wasn't black.

"She wasn't black," I said.

"Like hell she wasn't, and you kicked her. We both did. You kicked a black lady who couldn't even scream."

"Liar!"

"You're the liar! Why don't you just go on home and leave us alone, huh?"

She turned away and I skidded away from the curb.

The next morning I went into the garage and cut the side out of the carton our portable TV had come in. It wasn't nearly big enough, but after a while I had a decent sign: red spray-painted letters on a white background – AND SO DO CHILDREN\*\*\*\*. I meant just to go down to the school and tack it up somewhere so those cows on the picket line across the street could see it, but when I got there, some ten or so others had already assembled – protesting the cows across the street. Police permits and everything. I got in line and we strutted in time on our side while Roberta's group strutted on theirs. That first day we were all dignified, pretending the other side didn't exist. The second day there was name calling and finger gestures. But that was about all. People changed signs from time to time, but Roberta never did and neither did I. Actually my sign didn't make sense without Roberta's. "And so do children what?" one of the women on my side asked me. Have rights, I said, as though it was obvious.

Roberta didn't acknowledge my presence in any way and I got to thinking maybe she didn't know I was there. I began to pace myself in the line, jostling people one minute and lagging behind the next, so Roberta and I could reach the end of our respective lines at the same time and there would be a moment in our turn when we would face each other. Still, I couldn't tell whether she saw me and knew my sign was for her. The next day I went early before we were scheduled to assemble. I waited until she got there before I exposed my new creation. As soon as she hoisted her MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO I began to wave my new one, which said, HOW WOULD YOU KNOW? I know she saw that one, but I had gotten addicted now. My signs got crazier each day, and the women on my side decided that I was a kook. They couldn't make heads or tails out of my brilliant screaming posters.

I brought a painted sign in queenly red with huge black letters that said, IS YOUR MOTHER WELL? Roberta took her lunch break and didn't come back for the rest of the day or any day after. Two days later I stopped going too and couldn't have been missed because nobody understood my signs anyway.

It was a nasty six weeks. Classes were suspended and Joseph didn't go to anybody's school until October. The children – everybody's children – soon got bored with that extended vacation they thought was going to be so great. They looked at TV until their eyes flattened. I spent a couple of mornings tutoring my son, as the other mothers said we should. Twice I opened a text from last year that he had never turned in. Twice he yawned in my face. Other mothers organized living room sessions so the kids would keep up. None of the kids could concentrate so they drifted back to *The Price Is*

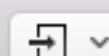
*Right* and *The Brady Bunch*. When the school finally opened there were fights once or twice and some sirens roared through the streets every once in a while. There were a lot of photographers from Albany. And just when ABC was about to send up a news crew, the kids settled down like nothing in the world had happened. Joseph hung my HOW WOULD YOU KNOW? sign in his bedroom. I don't know what became of AND SO DO CHILDREN\*\*\*\*. I think my father-in-law cleaned some fish on it. He was always puttering around in our garage. Each of his five children lived in Newburgh and he acted as though he had five extra homes.

I couldn't help looking for Roberta when Joseph graduated from high school, but I didn't see her. It didn't trouble me much what she had said to me in the car. I mean the kicking part. I know I didn't do that, I couldn't do that. But I was puzzled by her telling me Maggie was black. When I thought about it I actually couldn't be certain. She wasn't pitch-black, I knew, or I would have remembered that. What I remember was the kiddie hat, and the semicircle legs. I tried to reassure myself about the race thing for a long time until it dawned on me that the truth was already there, and Roberta knew it. I didn't kick her; I didn't join in with the gar girls and kick that lady, but I sure did want to. We watched and never tried to help her and never called for help. Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside. Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night. Nobody who could tell you anything important that you could use. Rocking, dancing, swaying as she walked. And when the gar girls pushed her down, and started roughhousing, I knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't – just like me – and I was glad about that.

We decided not to have a tree, because Christmas would be at my mother-in-law's house, so why have a tree at both places? Joseph was at SUNY New Paltz and we had to economize, we said. But at the last minute, I changed my mind. Nothing could be that bad. So I rushed around town looking for a tree, something small but wide. By the time I found a place, it was snowing and very late. I dawdled like it was the most important purchase in the world and the tree man was fed up with me. Finally I chose one and had it tied onto the trunk of the car. I drove away slowly because the sand trucks were not out yet and the streets could be murder at the beginning of a snowfall. Downtown the streets were wide and rather empty except for a cluster of people coming out of the Newburgh Hotel. The one hotel in town that wasn't built out of cardboard and Plexiglas. A party, probably. The men huddled in the snow were dressed in tails and the women had on furs. Shiny things glittered from underneath their coats. It made me tired to look at them. Tired, tired, tired. On the next corner was a small diner with loops and loops of paper bells in the window. I stopped the car and went in. Just for a cup of coffee and twenty minutes of peace before I went home and tried to finish everything before Christmas Eve.

“Twyla?”

There she was. In a silvery evening gown and dark fur coat. A man and another woman were with her, the man fumbling for change to put in the cigarette machine. The woman was humming and tapping on the counter with her fingernails. They all looked a little bit drunk.



“Well. It’s you.”

“How are you?”

I shrugged. “Pretty good. Frazzled. Christmas and all.”

“Regular?” called the woman from the counter.

“Fine,” Roberta called back and then, “Wait for me in the car.”

She slipped into the booth beside me. “I have to tell you something, Twyla. I made up my mind if I ever saw you again, I’d tell you.”

“I’d just as soon not hear anything, Roberta. It doesn’t matter now, anyway.”

“No,” she said. “Not about that.”

“Don’t be long,” said the woman. She carried two regulars to go and the man peeled his cigarette pack as they left.

“It’s about St. Bonny’s and Maggie.”

“Oh, please.”

“Listen to me. I really did think she was black. I didn’t make that up. I really thought so. But now I can’t be sure. I just remember her as old, so old. And because she couldn’t talk – well, you know, I thought she was crazy. She’d been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too. And you were right. We didn’t kick her. It was the gar girls. Only them. But, well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. I said we did it, too. You and me, but that’s not true. And I don’t want you to carry that around. It was just that I wanted to do it so bad that day – wanting to is doing it.”

Her eyes were watery from the drinks she’d had, I guess. I know it’s that way with me. One glass of wine and I start bawling over the littlest thing.

“We were kids, Roberta.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I know, just kids.”

“Eight.”

“Eight.”

“And lonely.”

“Scared, too.”

She wiped her cheeks with the heel of her hand and smiled. “Well, that’s all I wanted to say.”

I nodded and couldn’t think of any way to fill the silence that went from the diner past the paper bells on out into the snow. It was heavy now. I thought I’d better wait for the sand trucks before starting home.

“Thanks, Roberta.”

“Sure.”