



BLACK LITERATURE

The world in the artist's seeing eyes

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens
By Alice Walker
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,
397 pp., \$14.95

By Deborah E. McDowell

In the closing essay of Alice Walker's latest book, she recalls a childhood accident that left one of her eyes blind and surrounded by a mass of scar tissue. The emotional scars remained long after the unsightly tissue had been removed, until her three-year-old daughter swept them away one afternoon with a single remark. The story, titled "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self," exemplifies the extraordinary openness and honesty that characterize the entire collection.

As Walker puts her child down for a nap, the child focuses on her blind eye. Walker cringes, steadying herself for the worst. But the daughter stuns her mother with this innocent, yet trenchant observation: "Mommy, there's a world in your eye." What the child perceives without understanding is a striking paradox—an eye no less "seeing" for being blind.

Comprised of essays, articles, reviews and addresses written between 1966 and 1982, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* shows a writer with expansive and incisive vision. With few exceptions the prose is crisp, confident, elegant and moving.

In these pieces, all published earlier but collected here for the first time, Walker's panoramic eye ranges over personal matters—her childhood in the South, her lamented separation from her father, her attempted suicide, the fears engendered by her interracial marriage in bigoted Mississippi, her experiences as a writer. It also takes in political matters as well—the civil rights movement, the women's movement, homophobia, intra-racial color prejudice, nuclear disarmament and anti-Semitism. As Walker's

eye surveys subjects both personal and political, it focuses on the connections between the two, clarifying the now axiomatic statement that "the personal is political."

Walker establishes links between people and events separated by time, space and specific situation, reinforcing her belief that "every single thing on earth is connected." We must "strain to encompass" the larger perspective, she says, and attempt to make connections "where none existed before." We must search for the common thread.

Many of her pieces reveal this "common thread." Walker hears echoes of black freedom fighters (Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King) in *History Will Absolve Me*, Fidel Castro's defense of the Cuban revolution.

The prose is crisp, elegant and moving.

She connects her father's poverty and anonymity with that of men like him everywhere who have been exploited by the rich. In Israel's "settlements," Walker sees "a chilling reminder" of "those forts that dot the American plains." She links the American women's movement with women's struggles all over the world.

Although Walker believes American feminists often don't make that connection, she writes, "To contemplate the women's movement in isolation from the rest of the world would be—given the racism, sexism, elitism and ignorance of so many American feminists—extremely defeating of solidarity among women, as well as depressing to the most optimistic spirit."

Walker freely acknowledges the common thread connecting her with other writers, particularly Phillis Wheatley, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer, whose work has been frequently misunderstood and forgotten. It isn't enough, however, to acknowledge this connection in passing. Nothing less than a full-scale resurrection of their work will suffice.

In "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View" and "Looking for Zora," Walker records the great lengths to which she went to bring Hurston's work out of the shadows of literary history, not only because of its literary merits and cultural value to black people, but also because Hurston's experience as a writer can serve as a "cautionary tale" for future black writers. Despite—or perhaps because of—Hurston's depiction of "black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings," her work was attacked, belittled and "consigned to sneering oblivion."

Worse still, Hurston herself was forgotten: she died alone and penniless and was buried in an unmarked grave. "If a woman who had given so much of obvious value to all of us" could be forgotten, Walker asks, "what chance would someone else—for example, myself—have?"

One immense story.

Although Walker emphasizes the links between herself and earlier black writers, she sees the larger picture of all writers "writing one immense story—the same story, for the most part—with different parts...coming from a multitude of different perspectives. Until this is generally recognized, literature will always be broken into bits, black and white." Walker finds this segregated view of literature unsatisfactory and limiting. Her reading must include Zora Neale Hurston and Flannery O'Connor, Nella Larsen and Carson McCullers, Jean

Toomer and William Faulkner, Zen epigrams and haiku.

The same eye that roves and connects also "looks to the back and to the side" (the title of one of the essays), not with wishy-washy neutrality, but with an understanding of the complex nature of things. For example, she is inspired by post-revolutionary Cuban society and believes it will become more sensitive to its still disenfranchised citizens—homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, women, political prisoners. But she is very critical of Cuba's "government-sanctioned dislike of homosexuals," considering it both "unfair and dangerous," as well as "an affront to human liberty and a mockery of the most profoundly revolutionary statement of the Cuban *Family Code*: 'All children are equal.'"

Similarly, Walker sees the Arab/Israeli conflict in much more complicated terms than any simple stand allows. "Yes, Israel must exist," writes Walker, for it has certainly suffered "heinous world maltreatment." But "when it moves into other people's territories, when it forces folks out of their kitchens, vineyards and beds, then it must be opposed."

Dissecting black writing.

Throughout this collection, Walker remains broad-minded and opposed to the "narrowed and narrowing view of life" that often prevails. She sees evidence of narrow thinking among black critics who "devalue any black writing that does not depict white people as primary antagonists." As she notes in "The Unglamorous but Worthwhile Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist," these critics disparage any work that does not conform to the popular and prescribed formula for black artists: "usually two-thirds 'hate whitey's guts' and one-third 'I am black, beautiful and strong, and almost always right.'" Walker concludes, "Art is not flattery, necessarily, and the work of any artist must be more difficult than that."

While a formulaic approach to black writing has had a homogenizing effect on much black literature, recent work (significantly, by a greater number of black female than male writers) shows a reversing trend that makes this aspect of the essay seem dated. Other pieces are uneven or sketchy—perhaps because they were all written for different occasions and audiences and necessarily vary their pitch and scope. While the collection might have been strengthened by eliminating some of these sketchier pieces, such as "The Almost Year" and "Making the Moves and the Movies We Want," it does not lose coherence, for the editor has skillfully organized the pieces to create a remarkably revealing, developing self-portrait of Walker as artist and woman.

Although the pieces form an inventory of many evils—racism, sexism, classism, colorism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, imperialism—*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* has an optimistic spirit. That spirit particularly emerges when Walker remembers her childhood in the South, which she associated with poverty, pain, defeat and degradation until Martin Luther King returned it, redeemed, to her and other blacks.

This "new" vision of the South fuels most of Walker's writing and gives it its distinctive voice and character. Some may doubt that "there is a great deal of positive material I can draw

from my 'underprivileged' background," she says, "but they have never lived, as I have, at the end of a long road in a house that was faced by the edge of the world on one side and nobody for miles on the other."

This spirit of affirmation and optimism may find its most complete expression in the title essay. Beautifully lyrical and moving, it laments how the artistic spirit of centuries of black women was "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release," how black mothers and grandmothers "died with their real gifts stifled within them." But then the eulogy shifts and soars in telling another part of the story, for not all those stilled creative spirits "perished in the wilderness."

Walker searches for the key to their survival as artists, despite slavery, back-breaking toil, relentless childbearing and extreme poverty. She finds that key in her mother's ambitious, brilliantly colored and originally designed gardens, one of the few outlets available to her and other "ordinary" artists who "ordered the universe in the image of [their] personal conception of Beauty." Walker challenges us, their descendants, to reclaim and celebrate the legacy of these everyday artists. "We must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know."

There is a message in this essay for everyone buckling under the weight of oppression—a message both simple and challenging. Despite all the "isms" that oppress us in some form, we must struggle to "own our own souls." The creative impulse, however it is expressed, virtually guarantees such ownership. Walker saw this struggle in her mother, who succeeded in transforming the pain of oppression into the beauty of art. Walker has accepted her mother's legacy, recognizing that it carries the great responsibility to "give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate, but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love."

Deborah E. McDowell is an assistant professor of English at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, and is currently a fellow at the Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College.

YOU CAN ORDER BY MAIL:

Books by Alice Walker:

- ☐ **In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens**
\$14.95 cloth
- ☐ **You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down**
(short stories)
\$4.95 paper
- ☐ **The Color Purple**
\$6.95 paper ☐ \$11.95 cloth
- ☐ **The Third Life of Grange Copeland**
\$4.95 paper

from
Your Black Bookstore by Mail
AFRO-AMERICAN BOOK SOURCE
P.O. Box 851-I
Boston, MA 02120
(617) 442-3545

Just send us the cost per book plus shipping charge of \$1.75 for the entire order (if under \$30.00). FREE SHIPPING on orders over \$30.00. Please allow 4 weeks for delivery. Mass. residents: include 5% Sales Tax.

Enclosed is a check or money order in the amount of \$_____ for the books checked above.

Name _____
Address _____
City/State/Zip _____

ARTS»ENTERTAINMENT



Susan Meiselas/ Magnum

PHOTOGRAPHY

Camera casts light on war

By David Helvarg

Susan Meiselas stops the car. The Salvadoran army has set up a roadblock at the bridge over the Torola River. Fighting can be heard from the fog-shrouded hills across the way. "Any chance to go on?" she asks, getting out of the car, a camera ready in one hand, a second hanging around her neck, swinging in front of her sweat-stained cotton blouse.

A truck comes up the road: civilian irregulars carrying G-3 assault rifles, ORDEN men bringing supplies for the troops. Meiselas is shooting away, self-assured, so at ease that no one remembers to tell her it's forbidden. These men are not to be seen—no photographs.

The troops are friendly but under orders, and there is no access to the fighting. So Meiselas and her colleagues drive back to the town of Osicala where she shoots portraits of displaced refugees. "A hard war to shoot," she says. She knows that there will always be another firefight.

At age 35, Magnum photographer Meiselas has won a reputation as one of this country's top photographers. Her images have not only documented the toll and suffering of war but the responses of people forced to take sides. Raised in suburban New York, Meiselas attended Sarah Lawrence and Harvard and taught in the South Bronx before becoming a full-time photographer. She then traveled throughout New England with women carnival strippers.

In 1978 she traveled to pre-insurrectionary Nicaragua, staying on through the popular but bloody uprising against the Somoza dictatorship. Her work began appearing in *Geo*, *Time*, the *New York Times* and other major publications. Following the war she received the Robert Capa Prize, the Overseas Press Club's gold medal for "exceptional

courage and enterprise."

In 1981 Pantheon published her color-photo book *Nicaragua*, which included 72 of her strongest images from the revolution. She has continued to work in Central America, while helping to edit *El Salvador*, a stark collection of black-and-white images by 30 photographers. The following interview was conducted during a recent trip she made to California.

How did you get involved in photography?

I studied anthropology in college. I got a graduate degree in education, learning to teach using photography. I did this for several years in the public schools before I really identified myself as a photographer. I was interested in how to use photography to stimulate kids to learn. The first photographic project I got involved with became the book *Carnival Strippers*.

What inspired the shift from carnival strippers to the war in Nicaragua?

I didn't go to shoot the war. I went in June 1978 before there was a war. I wouldn't have gone if there'd been one at the time. I doubt I would have had the courage. The war sort of grew up around me.

I saw this enormous article in the *New York Times* about Nicaragua. I was struck by the fact that I'd never heard of it, had no sense of its history or what it looked like. I hadn't really traveled or worked very much outside of the U.S. at the time. I had a sense something was evolving there, but had no idea how fast it was going to happen.

When I got there I didn't speak the language. I was limited in my understanding of what was going on initially, but had this tremendous sense that every day anything could happen.

When things did explode you were shooting a lot of Kodachrome. Why only color?

I shot a little bit of black and

white but mostly color. It felt right to shoot color. It was too alive to be shooting black and white. Now I sort of feel the reverse about El Salvador. I would really rather be shooting black and white, although the magazines demand that you do some color.

Your color photo book from Nicaragua contains very powerful but also very hopeful images. The feeling in the black-and-white Salvador book is different—bleaker.

It is, but that's dictated by reality. On the question of black and white versus color, take John Hoagland's color picture of a Salvadoran soldier juggling oranges over some dead bodies. When you convert it to black and white, the picture doesn't work. But having it in color doesn't make you feel any more hopeful.

How have you experienced the differences between working in Nicaragua and El Salvador?

There are enormous differences.

Susan Meiselas goes beyond the news in shooting Central America. Above, Nicaraguans mourn members killed on the border.



Jean Gaumy/ Magnum

I don't know where to begin. Just the obvious things, like when you covered a demonstration in Nicaragua they didn't shoot you down in the street.

It's also protracted. We've been working in Salvador for four and a half years intensively. I worked a year, intensively, in Nicaragua. There are also similarities, in that both countries are small. You can work both sides of the conflict, which people could not do in Vietnam.

Another big difference is the organization of the right and the death squads in Salvador, which makes our work more difficult. The assumption is that journalists are to blame, that it wouldn't be happening if we weren't there.

Somoza certainly held the press responsible for the bad publicity he was getting, but I don't think the killing of Bill Stewart [an ABC reporter killed by a Nicaraguan soldier at a national-guard roadblock] was really the same as the killing of Koos Koster [one of four Dutch television reporters killed in a Salvadoran army ambush]. There's a lot more suspicion in El Salvador.

More than 14 foreign journalists have been killed in Central America since 1978. You were riding in a car that hit a mine in January 1981. You and John Hoagland were injured. [Hoagland was killed in El Salvador in March of this year.] Do you see any way that the risk can be reduced?

I don't know. It's unfortunate that, because of the risks, the way people work has been affected. They don't live in the small towns. They travel in groups, which means they speak more English and spend less time living with local people.

How does your work as a still photographer differ from that of print reporters or TV network crews?

I have more flexibility. TV crews have to be back by two in order to shoot to the bird [satellite relay]. There are deadlines for written reporters. Of course, even if they weren't there, they can still talk or write about it. We've got

to be there. If we're not, we don't have the evidence of what took place. The photographer is the witness.

How does the growing U.S. presence in the area affect what you do?

It becomes more important to do the work we're doing. The face of U.S. power is not as visible in Salvador or Nicaragua as it is in Honduras. In Honduras, we're all quite polite. We just go on the few press photo opportunities we're given. We have very little chance to document the extent to which the U.S. is really involved. The same is true at the regional level.

Do you get to shoot the way you would like while working for TIME or the other major magazines?

There are different theories about the most effective way to work. If it weren't for the politically polarized situation, the best way to do photo-journalism is to stay as close to your subjects as you can and live and work with them. That's the last thing most magazines want their photographers to do.

The assumption is that one should constantly cross the boundaries and be on all sides. One can, at a certain level, but it's superficial. You cover, you move around a lot, but I'm not sure you get better reporting or documentation that way.

The biggest problem we had doing this book was that there was very little material on daily life. People were not inside anyone's homes, and we're talking about 30 photographers' work over four years.

There's a lot of pressure from the marketplace for photographers to produce images that have already been seen.

Combat and bodies?

Right, which means you need some soldiers and some guerrillas. That's not El Salvador. That's not all there is. But the tendency is to live in the Camino Real [a hotel popular with the press corps] and not venture very far.

How do you get your satisfaction as a working photographer? What gives you a lift?

Making pictures that matter, a photo someone looks at and they're moved or one that makes them understand something or feel it. If pictures can in any way bridge the gap, that means a lot to me.

Books are important because they give otherwise isolated photos a context. Pictures get used in books, magazines, slide shows, posters, all sorts of ways. They stay alive. The image will take on a life of its own separate from the original experience.

Do you find your images in unexpected places?

All the time. The image on the cover of the Nicaraguan book was made into a rug in Monimbo [a neighborhood of Indian artisans in Masaya, Nicaragua]. Another was used on matchboxes. The Salvadorans painted one picture as a mural at the University of Law. Pictures are stolen and used for many more things than I'll ever get to see.

How long do you see the conflict in Central America continuing and how long will you continue to work there?

I think it will go on a very long time. I assume I'll be there. Of course, one never knows beyond the day one lives.

David Helvarg is a free-lance journalist based in San Diego. A version of this article appeared in the San Diego Union.