The Women's Center
Reid Lectureship

November 11, 1975

Papers by Alice Walker and June Jordan

Barnard College
New York

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FOREWORD

The Barnard College Women's Center was established in 1971, reaffirming the commitment of a women's college to the education of women. Over the past five years the Center has initiated a wide range of programs and services, both academic and non-academic. These include: assembling an extensive resource collection of books, articles, and periodicals on contemporary women's issues; organizing an annual conference examining the impact of feminism on traditional modes of scholarship; sponsoring speakers, films, and workshops on feminist topics; and compiling an annual bibliography of research on women and feminism.

In the fall of 1975 with a bequest from the estate of Helen Rogers Reid, class of '03, the Center sponsored a new program, The Reid Lectureship. Designed to bring to Barnard distinguished women who have shown a commitment to the problems of their sex, the program will be an annual event, extending over a two day period. Through public dialogue and informal meetings with members of the Barnard community, the Lectureship will provide new opportunities to broaden and deepen our understanding of women's experiences.

Two outstanding writers, Alice Walker and June Jordan, shared the first lectureship on November 11 and 12, 1975. Alice Walker's collection of short stories, In Love and Trouble, *won the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and her collection of poems,* Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems, *was nominated for a National Book Award. Her other books include* Once, The Third Life of Grange Copeland, *and* Langston Hughes, American Poet. *A fellow of the Radcliffe Institute from 1971 to 1973, Ms. Walker has received many*

honors, including The Lillian Smith Award, and a Creative Writing Award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

June Jordan is the author of Who Look at Me, Soulscript, The Voice of the Children, Some Changes, His Own Where, Dry Victories, Fannie Lou Hammer, I Love You, New Life: New Room, *and most recently,* New Days: Poems of Exile and Return. *A winner of many awards, Ms. Jordan received the Rockefeller Grant in Creative Writing in 1969-1970 and the American Library Association Best Books Award for her novel* His Own Where, *which was also chosen by The New York Times as one of the outstanding books of the year 1971 and nominated for the National Book Award, 1972.*

The response to the initial Reid Lectureship has been so enthusiastic that the Women's Center is publishing the Walker and Jordan lectures. In this way we may share some of this extraordinary dialogue. We are fortunate in being able to publish the papers through a generous gift from Lynn and Harold Strudler.

Jane S. Gould
Director, Women's Center
Barnard College

March 1976

Saving the Life That is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life

by Alice Walker

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There is a letter that Vincent Van Gogh wrote to Emile Bernard that is very meaningful to me. A year before he wrote the letter, Van Gogh had had a fight with his domineering friend, Gauguin, left his company, and cut off, in desperation and anguish, his own ear. The letter itself was written in Saint Remy, in the South of France, from a mental institution to which Van Gogh had voluntarily committed himself.

I imagine Van Gogh sitting at a rough desk too small for him, looking out at the lovely Southern light, and occasionally glancing critically next to him at his own paintings of the landscape he loved so much. The date of the letter is December, 1889. Van Gogh wrote:

However hateful painting may be, and however cumbersome in the times we are living in, if anyone who has chosen this handicraft pursues it zealously, he is a man of duty, sound and faithful.

Society makes our existence wretchedly difficult at times, hence our impotence and the imperfection of our work.

...I myself am suffering under an absolute lack of models.

But on the other hand, there are beautiful spots here. I have just done five size 30 canvases, olive trees. And the reason I am staying on here is that my health is improving a great deal.

What I am doing is hard, dry, but that is because I am trying to gather new strength by doing some rough work, and I'm afraid abstractions would make me soft.

Six months later, Van Gogh — whose "health was improving a great deal" — committed suicide. He had sold one painting during his lifetime. Three times was his work noticed in the press. *But these are just details.*

The real Vincent Van Gogh is the man who "has just done five size 30 canvases, olive trees." To me, in context, one of the most moving and revealing descriptions of how a real artist thinks. And the knowledge that when he spoke of "suffering under an absolute lack of models" he spoke of that lack both in terms of the intensity of his commitment, and the quality and singularity of his work — which was frequently ridiculed in his day.

The absence of models, in literature as in life, to say nothing of in painting, is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect — even if rejected — enrich and enlarge one's view of existence. *Deadlier still,* to the artist who lacks models, is the curse of ridicule, the bringing to bear on an artist's best work, especially his or her most original, most strikingly deviant, only a fund of ignorance, and the presumption that, as an artist's critic, one's judgment is free of the restrictions imposed by prejudice, and is well-informed, indeed, about all the art in the world that really matters.

What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity, a fearlessness of growth, of search, of look, that enlarges the private and the public world. And yet, in our particular society, it is the narrowed and narrowing view of life that often wins.

Recently, I read at a college and was asked by one of the audience what I considered the major difference between the literature written by black and white Americans. I had not spent a lot of time considering this question, since it is not the difference between them that interests me, but rather the way black writers and white writers seem to me to be writing one immense story — the same story, for the most part — with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives. Until this is generally recognized, literature will always be broken into bits, black and white, and there will always be questions, wanting neat answers, such as this.

Still, I answered that I thought, for the most part, white American writers tended to end their books and their char-

acters' lives as if there is no better existence for which to struggle. The gloom of defeat is thick.

By comparison, black writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom. *Perhaps this is because* our literary tradition is based on the slave narratives, where escape for the body and freedom for the soul went hand in hand, or perhaps it is because black people have never felt themselves guilty of global, cosmic sins.

This comparison does not hold up in every case, of course, and perhaps does not really hold up at all. I am not a gatherer of statistics, only a curious reader, and this has been my impression from reading many books by black and white writers.

There are, however, two books by American women that illustrate what I am talking about: *The Awakening,* by Kate Chopin, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* by Zora Neale Hurston.

The plight of Mme Pontellier and that of Janie Crawford is quite similar. Each woman is married to a dull, society-conscious husband and living in a dull, propriety-conscious community. Each woman desires a life of her own and a man who loves her and makes her feel alive. Each woman finds such a man.

Mme Pontellier, overcome by the strictures of society and the existence of her children (along with the cowardice of her lover), kills herself rather than defying the one and abandoning the other. *Janie Crawford,* on the other hand, refuses to allow society to dictate behavior to her, enjoys the love of a much younger, freedom-loving man, and lives to tell others of her experience.

When I mentioned these two books to my audience, I was not surprised to learn that only one person, a young black poet in the first row, had ever heard of *Their Eyes Were Watching God (The Awakening* they had fortunately read in their "Women in Literature" class) primarily because it was written by a black woman, whose experience — in love and life — was apparently assumed to be unimportant to the students (and the teachers) of a predominantly white school.

Certainly, as a student, I was not directed toward this book which would have urged me more toward freedom and experience than toward comfort and security, but was directed instead toward a plethora of books by mainly white male writers who thought most women worthless if they didn't enjoy bullfighting or hadn't volunteered for the trenches in World War II.

Loving both these books, knowing each to be indispensable to my own growth, my own life, I choose the model, the example, of Janie Crawford. And yet this book, as necessary to me and to other women as air and water, is again out of print. But I have distilled as much as I could of its wisdom in this poem about its heroine, Janie Crawford:

Janie Crawford

I love the way Janie Crawford
left her husbands
the one who wanted to change her
into a mule
and the other who tried to interest her
in being a queen.
A woman, unless she submits
is neither a mule
nor a queen
though like a mule she may suffer
and like a queen pace the floor.

It has been said that someone asked Toni Morrison why she writes the kind of books she writes, and that she replied: because they are the kind of books I want to read.

This remains my favorite reply to that kind of question. As if anyone reading the magnificent, mysterious *Sula,* or the grim, poetic, *The Bluest Eye,* would require more of a reason for their existence than for the brooding, haunting *Wuthering Heights,* for example, or the melancholy, triumphant *Jane Eyre.* (I am not speaking here of the most famous short line of that book: "Reader, I married him." as the triumph, but rather of the triumph of Jane Eyre's control over her own sense of morality and her own stout will, which are but reflections of her creator's, Charlotte Bronte, who no doubt wished to write the sort of book *she* wished to read.)

Flannery O'Connor has written that more and more the serious novelist will write, not what other people want, and certainly not what other people expect, but whatever interests her or him. And that the direction taken, therefore, will be away from sociology, away from the "writing of explanation," of statistics, and further into mystery, into poetry and into prophecy. I believe this is true, *fortunately true; especially* for "Third World Writers"; Morrison, Marquez, Ahmadi, Camara Laye make good examples; and not only do I believe it is true for serious writers in general, but I believe, as firmly as did O'Connor, that this is our only hope — in a culture so in love with flash, with trendiness, with superficiality, as ours — of acquiring a sense of essence, of timelessness and of vision. Therefore, to write the books one wants to read, is both to point the direction of vision at the same time as following it.

When Toni Morrison said she writes the kind of books she wants to read, she is acknowledging the fact that she must, in a society in which "accepted literature" is so often sexist and racist and otherwise irrelevant or offensive to so many lives, she must do the work of two. She must be her own model as well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself.

(It should be remembered that, as a black person, one cannot completely identify with a Jane Eyre, or with her creator, no matter how much one admires them. And certainly, if one allows history to impinge on one's reading pleasure, one must cringe at the thought of how Heathcliff, in the New World far from Wuthering Heights, amassed his Cathy-dazzling fortune.)

I have often been asked why, in my own life and work, I have felt such a desperate need to know and assimilate the experiences of earlier black women writers, most of them unheard of by you and by me, until quite recently. Why I felt a need to study them and to teach them.

I don't recall the exact moment I set out to explore the works of black women, mainly those in the past, and certainly, in the beginning, I had no desire to teach them. Teaching being for me, at that time, less rewarding than star-gazing on a frigid night. *My discovery of them* — most of them out of print, abandoned, discredited, maligned, nearly lost — came about, as many things of value do, almost by accident. As it turned out — and this should not have surprised me — I found I was in need of something that only one of them could provide.

Mindful that throughout my four years at a prestigious black and then a prestigious white college I had heard not one word about early black women writers, one of my first tasks was simply to determine whether they had existed.

After this, I could breathe easier, with more assurance about the profession I myself had chosen.

But the incident that started my search began several years ago: I sat down at my desk one day, in a room of my own, with key and lock, and began preparations for a story about voodoo, a subject that had always fascinated me. Many of the elements of this story I had gathered from a story that my mother several times told me. She had gone, during the Depression, into town to apply for some government surplus food at the local commissary, and had been turned down, in a particularly humiliating way, by the white woman in charge.

My mother always told this story with a most curious expression on her face. She automatically raised her head higher than ever — it was always high — and there was a look of righteousness, a kind of holy *heat* coming from her eyes. She said she had lived to see this same white woman grow old and senile and so badly crippled she had to get about on *two* sticks.

To her, this was clearly the working of God, who, as in the old spiritual, "...may not come when you want him, but he's right on time!" To me, hearing the story for about the 50th time, something else was discernible: the possibilities of the story, for fiction.

What, I asked myself, would have happened, if, after the crippled old lady died, it was discovered that someone, my mother perhaps (who would have been mortified at the thought, Christian lady that she is), had voodooed her?

Then, my thoughts sweeping me away into the world of hexes and conjures of centuries past, I wondered how a larger story could be created out of my mother's story; one that would be true to the magnitude of her humiliation and grief, and to the white woman's lack of sensitivity and compassion.

My third quandary was: How could I find out all I needed to know in order to write a story that used *authentic* black witchcraft?

Which brings me back, almost, to the day I became really interested in black women writers. I say "almost" because one other thing, from my childhood, made the choice of black magic a logical and irresistible one for my story. Aside from my mother's several stories about rootdoctors she had heard of or known, there was the story I had often heard about my crazy Walker aunt.

Many years ago, when my aunt was a meek and obedient girl growing up in a strict, conventionally religious house in the rural South, she had suddenly thrown off her meekness and had run away from home, escorted by a rogue of a man permanently attached elsewhere.

When she was returned home by her father she was declared quite "mad." In the backwoods South at the turn of the century, "madness" of this sort was cured, not by psychiatry, but by powders and by spells. (One may see Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* to ascertain the role voodoo played among black people of that period.) My aunt's "madness" was treated by the community conjurer, who promised, and delivered, the desired results. His "treatment" was a bag of white powder, bought for fifty cents, and sprinkled on the ground around her house, with some of it sewed, I believe, into the bodice of her nightgown.

So when I sat down to write my story about voodoo, my crazy Walker aunt was definitely on my mind.

But she had experienced her temporary craziness so long ago that her story had all the excitement of a might-have-been. I needed, instead of family memories, some hard facts about the *craft* of voodoo, as practiced by Southern blacks in the 19th century. (It never once, fortunately, occurred to

me that voodoo was not worthy of the interest I had in it, or was too ridiculous to seriously study.)

I began reading all I could find on the subject of, "The Negro and His Folkways and Superstitions." There were Botkin and Puckett and others, all white, most racist. How was I to believe anything they wrote, since at least one of them, Puckett, was capable of wondering, in his book, if "The Negro" had a large enough brain? Who needed *him*, the racist turkey!

Well, I thought, where are the *black* collectors of folklore? Where is the *black* anthropologist? Where is the *black* person who took the time to travel the backroads of the South and collect the information I need: how to cure heart trouble, treat dropsy, hex somebody to death, lock bowels, cause joints to swell, eyes to fall out, and so on. Where was this black person?

And that is when I first saw, in a *footnote* to the white voices of authority, the name of Zora Neale Hurston.

Folklorist, novelist, anthropologist, serious student of voodoo, also all around black woman, with guts enough to take a slide rule and measure random black heads in Harlem; not to prove their inferiority, but to prove that whatever their size, shape, or present condition of servitude, those heads contained all the intelligence anyone could use to get through this world.

Zora Hurston, who went to Barnard to learn how to study what she really wanted to learn: the ways of her own people, and what ancient rituals, customs and beliefs had made them unique.

Zora, of the sandy-colored hair and the daredevil eyes, a girl who escaped poverty and parental neglect by hard work and a sharp eye for the main chance.

Zora, who left the South only to return to look at it again. Who went to rootdoctors from Florida to Louisiana and said, "Here I am. I want to learn your trade."

Zora, who had collected all the black folklore I could ever use.

That Zora.

And having found *that* Zora (like a golden key to a storehouse of varied treasure), I was hooked.

What I had discovered, of course, was a model. A model, who, as it happened, provided more than voodoo for my story, more than one of the greatest novels America had produced — though, being America, it did not realize this. She had provided, as if she knew someday I would come along wandering in the wilderness, a nearly complete record of her life. And though her life sprouted an occasional wart, I am eternally grateful for that life, warts and all.

It is not irrelevant, nor is it bragging (except perhaps to gloat a little on the happy relatedness of Zora, my mother, and me), to mention here that the story I wrote, called "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," based on my mother's experiences during the Depression, and on Zora Hurston's folklore collection of the 1920s, and on my own response to both out of a contemporary existence, was immediately published and later selected, by a reputable collector of short stories, as one of the *Best Short Stories of 1974*.

I mention it because this story might never have been written, because the very bases of its structure, authentic black folklore, viewed from a black perspective, might have been lost.

Had it been lost, my mother's story would have had no historical underpinning, none I could trust, anyway. I would not have written the story, which I enjoyed writing as much as I've enjoyed writing anything in my life, had I not known that Zora had already done a thorough job of preparing the ground over which I was then moving.

In that story I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and my own continuity. I had that wonderful feeling writers get sometimes, not very often, of being *with* a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know, through the joy of their presence, that indeed, I am not alone.

To take Toni Morrison's statement further, if that is possible, in my own work I write not only what I want to read — understanding fully and indelibly that if I don't do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction — I write all the things I *should have read*.

Consulting, as belatedly discovered models, those writers — most of whom, not surprisingly, are women, who understood that their experience as ordinary human beings was also valuable, and in danger of being misrepresented, distorted, or lost:

Zora Hurston — novelist, essayist, anthropologist, autobiographer.

Jean Toomer — novelist, poet, philosopher, visionary, a man who cared what women felt.

Colette — whose crinkly hair enhances her French, part-black face: novelist, playwright, dancer, essayist, newspaper woman, lover of women, men, small dogs. Fortunate not to have been born in America.

Anais Nin, recorder of everything, no matter how minute.

Tillie Olsen, a writer of such generosity and honesty, she literally saves lives...

It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. Whether we are "minority" writers or "majority." It is simply in our power to do this.

We do it because we care. We care that Vincent Van Gogh mutilated his ear. We care that behind a pile of manure in the yard he destroyed his life. We care that Scott Joplin's music *lives!* We care because we know this: *The life we save, is our own.*

Notes of a Barnard Dropout

by June Jordan

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Let me try, today, to share with you my perspective on things, and let me offer a few ideas about how, and why, I came to it. You could probably characterize my world view as apocalyptic — or, let's just say that I believe that, as Aretha sings the song, "A Change is Gonna Come."

To be honest, I expect apocalypse, or I look for and I work for defeat of international evil, indifference, and suffering, only when I am not otherwise stunned by the odds: temporarily paralyzed by revulsion and grieving despair.

But life itself compels an optimism; it does not seem reasonable that the majority of the peoples of the world should, finally, lose on possibilities of dignified existence, joy, and rational justice as a global experiment to be pursued and fiercely protected. It seems unreasonable that more than 400 million people, right now, must struggle against hunger and starvation, even while there is arable earth aplenty to feed and nourish every one of us. It does not seem reasonable that the color of your skin should curse and condemn all of your days and the days of your children. It seems preposterous that gender, that being a woman, anywhere in the world, should elicit contempt, or fear, or ridicule, and serious deprivation of rights to be, to become, to embrace whatever you choose.

And here, in this country, it seems absurd that we should knuckle to a leadership of lies, treachery, misbegotten self-righteousness, wanton butchery committed in our name, our national self-interest, and a brutal, stupid willingness to define issues, first and finally, in terms of money — not

human life, but money. This seems to me an implicitly untenable state of affairs.

I cannot accept that "balance the budget" will ultimately eclipse a concern to balance the distribution and availability of wealth, of chances for self-respecting survival.

It seems to me merely reasonable, for instance, that the mayor of the City of New York should instigate a tax strike against Washington, and call upon private employers to follow suit. Since this city gives 19 billion dollars to the Feds, and receives, in return, a maximum of 8 billion dollars back regardless of how you compute things, and since the impending default of New York will mean a colossal loss of livelihood, and a loss of services to keep life feasible in the city (human life, I mean) and since the federal government is manifestly uninterested in serving these people it is bold to represent, or, at least, to deny, then it seems merely reasonable to withhold our monies, 19 billions of dollars of the peoples of New York, and to use those funds for the emergency human life needs of our city. A tax strike will remind Washington that taxation without representation of the interests of those so burdened has never been a popular idea.

Now I have given you some of the contents of my optimism, or world view.

When I try to understand why or how I arrived where I am, one image keeps recurring: at nights, in Brooklyn, in our home, I would sit, studying, or eating in the kitchen, as my mother, her progress a slow and heavy tread on the wooden stairs, came up from the basement, carrying heavy pails of ashes from the furnace. This ritual nightmare never ended; even after a stroke, my mother carried the ashes up from the basement furnace, her breathing short and ragged, her thin frame crooked and lopsided from the weight of those filthy pails. Carrying the ashes up, and outside, you see, was her responsibility, as my father defined things. What would you have him do? Stay home from work to empty the ashes? Or switch to a day shift, which would mean less money, a few dollars less, even, than he earned by working nights? These were rhetorical questions only. The ashes remained the responsibility of my mother, who, I must add, also worked, whenever her health allowed, as a private duty nurse, also at night. But later she worked the so-called "midnight shift." Why? Because nighttime was, otherwise, incredibly barren for her, with my father away, and because nighttime duty meant a little more money for the family. Throughout my growing up, my parents worked as hard as they could devise, and yet we never had a car, my parents never had a vacation, our family never knew what it was to feel satisfied, or proud, or basically secure. In fact, more than anything else, my father felt himself a man despised, a man whose maximal efforts to achieve would be regarded by the powerful as pitiful, as ridiculous. He suffered for this, and he made my mother suffer for this.

Well, I was born in Harlem, and raised in Bedford Stuyvesant. Then, when I was 12 or 13, I was sent away to prep school. In other words, I began my life in a completely Black universe, and then for the three years of prep school, I found myself completely immersed in a white universe. When I came to Barnard, what I hoped to find, therefore, was a connection; I hoped that Barnard College (which I attended while living at home, in Brooklyn) — I hoped that Barnard College would either give me the connection between the apparently unrelated worlds of white and Black, or that this college would enable me to make that connection for myself.

Let me say, at once, that: whereas Barnard, or in other words, a relatively conventional, elitist education, gave me friends (and one of them introduced me to architecture as

environmental control); whereas Barnard gave me the father of my son (that is also to say that Columbia College was, even in 1954, right across the street); whereas Barnard trained me to think, independently, honed my capacity for cram ingestion of materials, forced me to master analytical skills, and taught me the difference between an Ionian and a Corinthian column; whereas Barnard College changed me in these various respects, not listed according to importance, please note, it did not, none of the courses of study, nothing about the teaching, make the connection for me, or facilitated my discovery of a connection.

After school, every day, I went home via the subway; that was the only connection I encountered: a dirty, alien, underground trip between the Parthenon and what was subsequently termed the ghetto.

It was quite a ride. But, at Barnard, there was one great teacher whom I was privileged to know, Barry Ulanov. And in freshman English I remember to this day two assignments for which I will always feel gratitude. One was the assignment of a paper to pull together, I think he said "somehow," Whitehead's *Aims of Education* and Edith Hamilton's *Greek Mythology*. Many of my classmates became more or less suicidal as they reflected on this task ahead. But I thought, damn, if you can synthesize Whitehead with Greek mythology, then maybe you can bring the Parthenon to Bedford Stuyvesant, and make it *all* real.

The other assignment Barry Ulanov gave to us came in the form of a surprise, in-class exam: write about anything you want, without using any forms of the verbs "to be" and "to have" (That's extremely difficult, in case you don't know). And I learned more about the functions of our concepts of Being and Having, from that fifty minutes of class, than I had ever known, or considered, until that moment, altogether.

On the debit side of things, the farce side of Barnard, I must mention a required zoology lab. You had to take three hours of lab. That was in addition to three hours of SRO lectures in zoology, held in the Minor Latham Playhouse. But the lab was amazing: every experiment was rigged. It turned out there were predetermined right answers and wrong answers. I mean, they gave you these ears of corn, see, and you were supposed to count the blue kernels, the white kernels, the red kernels, and the yellow. Can you imagine more of a weird way to spend time? If you came up with too many blues, or reds, you were wrong. I couldn't believe it: what kind of a rigged, pro forma, non-experiment was this? Counting corn kernels that had already, long ago, been counted, and summed up into some kind of an unassailable genetic principle? Pure farce.

But to return to the credit side: the one year of sociology that I took was helpful: even though the woman teaching the course on the family, or marriage, used to show up in dark glasses that failed to conceal her black eyes (and she seemed to have a black eye, at least one black eye, throughout the semester); even so, I remember Professor Bernard Barber telling us that, if you really assimilated the perspectives, and assumptions, of that discipline, you could never be bored; he was telling the truth; sociology even helped me to get through a lot of classes that, pre-sociology, I would have cut, without thinking twice about it. Plus, it gave me a new way to think about everything.

But nothing at Barnard, and no one at Barnard, ever, once, formulated, and expressed, the necessity, the political, if you will, necessity for the knowledge they required you to absorb. Precedent and tradition, after all, are not of themselves sufficient justification for anything whatever. And nobody, and not a single course of study at Barnard, ever spoke to issues judged critical, or possible commitments

evaluated as urgent. More specifically, no one ever presented me with a single Black author, poet, historian, personage, or idea, for that matter. Nor was I ever assigned a single woman to study as a thinker, or writer, or poet, or life force. Nothing that I learned, here, lessened my feeling of pain and confusion and bitterness as related to my origins: my street, my family, my friends. Nothing showed me how I might try to alter the political and economic realities underlying our Black condition in white America.

Nothing that I learned here prepared me for not being able to get a taxi, anywhere, when I can afford one. Nothing that I learned here prepared me for the tragedy of the death of the Black Boy that produced the Harlem Riot of 1964, nor the atrocious, non-reporting by white media, of what actually happened. Nothing, here, prepared me for the travesty of high-paid, "anti-poverty" planning and research on the lower East Side, research that yielded no new, safe housing to the peoples forced to live there, in continuous jeopardy. And so forth.

And because Barnard College did not teach me necessity, nor prime my awareness as to urgencies of need around the world, nor galvanize my heart around the critical nature of conflicts between the powerful and the powerless, and, because, beyond everything else, it was not going to be school, evidently, but life-after-school, that would teach me the necessities for radical change, and revolution: I left; I dropped out of Barnard; it was, apparently, an optional experience.

And so I continue: a Black woman who would be an agent for change, an active member of the hoped-for apocalypse. I am somebody seeking to make, or to create, revolutionary connections between the full identity of my love, of what hurts me, or fills me with nausea, and the way things are: what we are forced to learn, to "master," what we are trained to ignore, what we are bribed into accepting, what we are rewarded for doing, or not doing....

Ah, Momma,
Did the house ever know the nighttime of your spirit: the flash and flame of you who, once, when we crouched in what you called "the little room," where your dresses hung in their pallid colorings—an uninteresting row of uniforms—and where there were dusty, sweet-smelling boxes of costume jewelry that, nevertheless, shone like rubies, gold, and diamonds, once, in that place where the secondhand mirror blurred the person, dull, that place without windows, with doors instead of walls, so that your small-space most resembled a large and rather haphazard closet, once, in there, you told me, whispering, that once, you had wanted to become an artist: someone, you explained, who could just boldly go and sit near the top of a hill, and watch the setting of the sun
Ah, Momma!
You said this had been your wish when you were quite as young as I was then: a twelve or thirteen-year-old girl who heard your confidence with almost terrified amazement: what had happened to you, and your wish?

Ah, Momma:
"The little room"—of your secrets, your costumery, perfumes, and photographs of an old boyfriend you never married—(for reasons not truly clear to me because I saw you make sure, time after time, that his pictures were being kept as clean and as safely as possible)—the "little room" adjoined the kitchen, the kitchen where no mystery survived, except for the mystery of you: woman who covered her thick, and long, black hair with a starched, white nurse's cap when she went "on duty" away from our home, into the hospital I came to hate, jealously, woman who rolled up her wild and heavy, beautiful hair before she went to bed, woman who tied a headrag around the waving, well-washed braids, or lengthy fat curls of her hair, while she moved, without particular grace, between the table and the stove, between the sink and the table, around and around in the ugly, spacious kitchen where you never dreamed about what you might do instead, and where you taught me to set down silverware, and even fresh-cut flowers from the garden, without appetite, without expectation

It was not there, in that open, square cookery where you spent most of the days, it was not there, where nothing ever tasted sweet or sharp enough to sate the yearnings I began to suspect inside your eyes, and also inside the eyes of my father, it was not there that I began to hunger for the sun as my own, legitimate preoccupation; it was not there, in the kitchen, that I began, really, to love you
Ah, Momma,
It was where I found you, hidden away, in your "little room," where you life, the rhythms of your sacrifice, the ritual of your bowed head, and your laughter, always partly concealed, where all of you, womanly, reverberated big as the whole house, it was there that I came, humbly, into an angry, an absolute determination that I would, one day, prove myself to be, in fact, your daughter
Ah, Momma, I am still trying