An Interview with Margaret Walker

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AN INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET WALKER

Phanuel Egejuru and Robert Elliot Fox

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PHANUEL EGEJURU: I'll begin by making a reference to your poem "For My People." I noticed in a few of your poems which I selected for study this semester that the tone appears to be quite angry and hostile towards the system. Then we started reading *Jubilee,* and the tone changed; I detected a kind of conciliatory tone at the end. The question is, when did you change your attitude?

MARGARET WALKER: I don't believe I've ever changed. I regard myself as having been a critic of American society ever since I was a child. My poetry may sound far more militant than my prose; however, many people misunderstand what I'm saying in *Jubilee.* I'm sure that there are those, not necessarily my friends, who find as much militance and as much protest in *Jubilee* as in "For My People." Moreover, I have been told that *Jubilee* makes a strong political statement, of which I was not quite as aware as I have been *made* aware.

I tried to show several points of view in *Jubilee.* I am dealing with a number of characters, and I have only one who manifests a kind of militant spirit, and that is Randall Ware. That is precisely what I had intended. I could not take a woman like Vyry, who reflects the Christian upbringing of the Quarters and of the Big House, and show her as a revolutionary. To me that is completely out of the question. Many people have raised the question of black nationalism and militancy in Randall Ware, and even the woman in whose house I lived at the time I was writing asked me, "Isn't he ahead of his time? Where did he get those ideas?" As a matter of fact, he had those ideas *then.* There have always been such ideas among black people in this country. Randall Ware simply represents a segment of the black population.

EGEJURU: Since we are discussing the characters in *Jubilee,* I am very curious to find out whether you were actually expressing your own ideas or those of Vyry as far as religion is concerned-that is, with regard to the role of religion in the lives of the slaves.

WALKER: I have a strong identification with Vyry. Actually, I never knew my great-grandmother—she was dead before I was born—but it dawned on me after I had finished

the book that what I had used as a model was my maternal grandmother who told me the story. But my mother tells me that *her* grandmother, who *was* Vyry, was very much like her mother, and that I had given a faithful representation of my great-grandmother.

Insofar as religion is concerned, I must confess that I have come up with the *twoness* of the culture. I believe strongly in social revolution. I am strongly militant in my beliefs. But I also happen to be very, very religious. I think it may sound to some as through there is a great dichotomy in my philosophy, as if I could not be one and still be the other. I will say that I am not a dialectical materialist, that I do not believe you can find many black people in this country who *are;* indeed, I do not believe that many black people in the *world* are entirely dialectical materialists. Black people in America, like black people all over the world, believe deeply in spirit. We are people of spirit, we are people of soul, we are a noumenous people, and we cannot deny that. It is instinctive in our heritage, in our beliefs. Vyry represents a form of American Christianity—yes, that kind in which the black man has been indoctrinated. Do not say that the black man wasn't always religious. Religion began with him.

EGEJURU: I'm not questioning the fact that everything the black man does, especially in Africa, has some element of religion in it ....

WALKER: *Spirit.*

EGEJURU: Spirit, of course; their traditional religion is animism ....

WALKER: Out of which all great religions have come.

EGEJURU: But my interest is, here, whether you feel religion in this country has been beneficial or detrimental to the black man?

WALKER: There, you have asked a very loaded question now. It is my firm belief as a member of a traditional religious denomination, as the daughter of a Methodist minister and the granddaughter of a Baptist minister, that the Church—organized religion in America—has become the tool of the system. And the system is ugly, awful, and repressive; it is oppressive particularly against black people. Religion has been used against us.

ROBERT ELLIOT FOX: If I might ask a question relating to what I would call, certainly not the ambiguity, but perhaps the duality or multiplicity of your position. In the book *A Poetic Equation* which you did with Nikki Giovanni a few years ago, you mentioned that your father had, as you said, the blood of all races in his veins, and then made the following statement: "I have always secretly felt that mankind should be, in an ideal sense, that mixture of blood and races. I really believe in it. I don't think that there is anything sacred in the integrity of race, white or black." This is very far from the black nationalist position, and even Gwendolyn Brooks' conception of what she referred to as "essential blackness." When she was here, as a matter of fact, she spoke of what she called the "spectre" of a white ancestress in her own background, and declaring herself

totally against, for example, interracial marriage. I'm wondering what you think of the insistence by many contemporary blacks on their Africanness, and the sometimes attendant notion of separatism.

WALKER: DuBois expressed it nearly a hundred years ago when he said that we have a twoness: we are Afro-Americans. We are descendants of black Africa; we are still tied to black Africa in all our physical and cultural manifestations. We look like Africans; we believe and act like our ancestors. But we are Americans; America owes us everything. Africa has no debt to the black American, but America, by right of birth, by right of toil, by right of sacrifice, owes us everything. We are *two* people. And the people in the world, for that matter—unless you go behind the Pyrenees I don't know where you find them—the people in the world are of mixed nationality. There is no escaping it; it's part of the destiny of mankind. We are one family of man. There may be many racial strains. I'm strongly humanistic in my belief, and it is my belief that an ideal society will recognize its various racial strains; the cultural pluralism that exists in this country would be recognized, rather than the false inanity of a melting pot.

EGEJURU: Where do you stand as far as integration is concerned?

WALKER: Well, I wouldn't want you to go out and say, as Arthur P. Davis says, that I'm a pure integrationist. Nor do I want you to say to anybody that I believe in separatism; we've always been kept separate. Segregation meant that. And we still have residential segregation in America; we can have no real integration of any kind as long as this situation exists.

FOX: You have on at least one occasion declared that literature should not be judged on moral, personal or social grounds. I'm wondering whether you would make the same statement with regard to political grounds, and how you would respond, for example, to Baraka's assertion in his poem "Black Art" that "Poems are bullshit unless they are teeth or trees or lemons piled on a step"?

WALKER: Well, LeRoi Jones—or lmamu Amiri Baraka—and I have had some interesting conversations. I regard his genius highly. I think about his three colors, his three periods: white, black, and red. And I find him a most interesting person. He's a very, very marvelous intellectual. However, we don't always agree. I told him that he is coming into the political belief that I observed among black people thirty-odd years ago. It failed then, and I have no reason to believe it's going to succeed now. On the other hand, I am inclined to agree with Mari Evans and with some of my other black friends that there is no such thing in America as not being political. Everything is political. Everything you do has political connotations. It is impossible to be apolitical, and if one is nonpolitical or unconscious politically, he's in terrible shape today.

FOX: However, to be political of necessity is not the same as consciously espousing a particular political ideology.

WALKER: That's right. On the other hand, I do not know how we can fail these days to begin to take sides. Our society is becoming so corrupt that we have to ask ourselves when, if ever, mankind will learn to live together? Recognizing that there has never been an ideal society anywhere—no ideal government, no ideal political ideology—what, then, shall we do? America is changing every day. Our economic system is obviously on a collision course with disaster. We are going to have to have a new political system. What is it going to be like? We cannot last two hundred more years the way we have been.

FOX: To pursue this a little further, what would you feel is the black artist's role in the unfolding development of his culture?

WALKER: The black writer is like all artists in any culture. He has to be the prophet and the dreamer; he has to be a leader; he has to be a part of the *avant garde.* The ideas of the artist are like the ideas of the philosophers and the scientists; they lead the rest of us. They tell us what our future has got to become: A man like Albert Einstein at the beginning of this century offered us a completely new way of looking at life with a revolutionary concept of our universe.

FOX: Are you speaking of relativity?

WALKER: The theory of relativity is only one part of the Einsteinian revolution. Every phase of our lives is involved. Every time we have had a revolution of power and energy in the history of mankind, we have had a changed society because we get a new concept of the universe. And everything then moves in that direction. It so happens that in America and our present day world we still cling to our Newtonian ideas in everything except physics and mathematics. We refuse to adjust the ideas of the humanities and the social sciences to a revolution that took place nearly a hundred years ago.

FOX: So you feel, then, that there is a disparity on the cultural level between our absorption of a changing cosmological viewpoint and our scientific and perhaps spiritual perceptions of that new viewpoint.

WALKER: Spiritual perceptions are what we are lacking. Going to the moon, having an atomic bomb… We are willing to spend all kinds of money. Nobody is talking about feeding the people, housing the people, correcting the evils and problems of our cities. Nobody's talking about international peace; all we're talking about is war. All we know to do with atomic energy is to make a bomb. We're not interested in generating electricity and finding new, safe, clean, inexpensive sources of power. We are living in a society that has witnessed an electronic revolution and we're still using fossilized energy.

FOX: There's interesting symbolism there.

EGEJURU: I want to go back to the question of the role of the writer in society. We always assume that the writer is the spokesman for the people, but I consider this idea a bit utopian because writers don't really get a chance to play that role effectively.

WALKER: Well, I think if you go into the history of this country, and if you will study the tradition of Afro-American literature—which is humanistic, from its beginnings to the present—you will discover that a lot of people, black and white, are influenced by what they read. Whether it's newspapers, magazines, television—the idiot box, through which we are programmed for terror, for panic, for paranoia—we absorb it. We believe what we hear, what we read, and that has far more effect on us than even the memory of all our dead soldiers, all our mutilated veterans, all of our institutions filled with the insane, all of our jails filled with our young men. These things we forget. We listen to the news, and we believe what we hear.

FOX: May I ask you a question which I think you may be interested in? Despite the fact that Phillis Wheatley, the first black writer to publish a book in this country, was a woman, it seems that with very few exceptions black women writers are not anywhere near as well known as black male writers. Would you comment on this apparent disparity?

WALKER: The case of Phillis Wheatley is very interesting. She had the assistance of whites at the time. She wrote a letter and a poem to George Washington, and he invited her to visit him in his military camp. But a man like Thomas Jefferson, who had a lot of dealings with black women, and not all of them above board, made some very disparaging remarks about her. He was highly critical, saying that there was no way that a heathen woman like Phillis Wheatley could write poetry; maybe she could get religion and a little emotion, but she couldn't write poetry.

FOX: Statements like that are being made today.

WALKER: That has not changed in two hundred years. The white critic will say the same thing. I remember hearing a criticism of *For My People* by two white critics whom I admired. They said my ballads either sounded like Paul Laurence Dunbar gone modern or Langston Hughes gone sour. They said some very nasty things about me, all of which I could proceed to ignore, because if one worried about the critics, one would never write.

But the question of the black woman in literature, and the black woman writer, should be understood in terms of the society in which she lives. In America it is not just a question of our historical role-where we came from or what history has said about us. The black experience in America must always be taken into account. The black woman has been seen as the creature at the bottom of the social ladder; she has been seen as the beast of burden, because in slavery that's what she was. Black women worked on the railroads beside men. Black women worked in the fields; they stopped at childbirth only long enough to drop the baby and go back to work. They worked as domestic servants and menials, but more than that, they were exploited sexually, producing what the white politician has called a mongrelized race (and he forgets who mongrelized them, you see).

The black woman has been seen in literature exactly as she is seen in life, because literature is a reflection of life. And the black woman writer has suffered in the same way. She has been ostracized and belittled.

Few people know that a baker's dozen of black women were successful writers during the Harlem Renaissance. They know about Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, and all the marvelous novelists—Wallace Thurmond and Eric Walrond, George Schuyler and Rudolph Fisher—but they don't know about Zora Neale Hurston or Nella Larsen. They don't know that Georgia Douglas Johnson, like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, was a bestseller in her day. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was selling her poetry successfully before the Civil War, in the 1850s. An educated woman, a lecturer, a writer, she was a prominent person in her society. Georgia Douglas Johnson made money on her poetry and plays in the Twenties. Her play *Plumes* went to New York—if not to Broadway, at least off-Broadway. Nobody remembers these women. Jessie Fauset. Or a woman who published much later than the Renaissance, but who was there at the time, Dorothy West. A woman who was the wife of Paul Laurence Dunbar, and also wrote poetry and prose, Alice Dunbar Nelson. There are a baker's dozen of these women in the Twenties, and then, in the last thirty to forty years, you could name another dozen. Recently, Toni Morrison won the National Book Award for a book that is not nearly as good as her first two novels. Why do you suppose *Song of Solomon* won the prize and *The Bluest Eye* or *Sula* did not? The first two books had women as their major characters; the third, which won the prize, had a man.

EGEJURU: What you are saying is that there is an existing prejudice against women writers which goes back to the traditional concept of women's role in society.

WALKER: And, oddly enough, we should add that white women in America have had the same battle with male writers that black women have had. There's been a sexual battle among writers, regardless of race. The status of women has colored everything about her. Her literature is ostracized in the same way that she is. It's a question of gender and class.

FOX: You have indicated that you feel the state of black literary criticism is weaker than the state of black art, and I'm wondering what you feel can be done to alleviate this situation?

WALKER: I said in *A Poetic Equation* that black writers were too interested in what the white critics said, that they were too busy analyzing white literature, and that the critic in black literature, on the whole, was just coming of age. In fact, he hasn't come of age; we're still in an early stage. We've been weakest in this regard because we have not been concerned basically with our own ideas, with our own standards, our own values. We've imitated the white critic; that's been a mistake all along. If we go back to our own blackness, our own black heritage—if we do it in religion, if we do it in language, if we do it in all the phases of our culture—then we'll be on firm ground, because we were in existence long before the West.