

CHERRY JACKSON

Playwright

} → (center)

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After serving as the athletic director of a Harlem community center, <sup>and 45</sup> a physical education coach in the Peace Corps in Africa, Cherry-Jackson took a B.S. in Physical Education from UCLA and and M.A. from Mills College. She taught <sup>physical education</sup> PE in the Oakland Public Schools until, at age <sup>thirty-five</sup> 35, she gave it all up to write. Her first stage play, "In the Master's House There Are Many Mansions," was produced by the Black Repertory Theatre in Berkeley in 1977. A second play, a collaborative work called "Worry Beads," was also produced by the Black Repertory Theatre in 1979. ~~Her books, Agate Eyes, (a children's story, and Buttermilk Bottom & Other Poems, have been published by the Sea Urchin Press in 1979.~~ <sup>still an avid athlete,</sup> Jackson runs track, skis, and deep sea dives, <sup>she has logged</sup> with more than 2000 hours at the bottom of the ocean. She is currently working on short stories and plays for television.

CHERRY JACKSON

*Is she lesbian? The issue seems to be raised & then avoided.*

Writer, age 37  
Interviewed by Gloria Frym  
January 18, 1978, Oakland, California

Gloria: What do you think kept you from taking your writing seriously before you were 35?

Cherry: It took me the longest time to get into my own womanhood and live with it. And I didn't do it until I met real women whom I could admire. You know, there are places you don't grow unless you get what you need. I mean, the grass doesn't grow until the rain comes. You need certain things to help you out of adolescence, into womanhood, into maturity. And you're always looking at women, whether you know it or not, because that's what you are.

How do you feel this has been a specific problem for the young black woman?

It's been a problem for all women, but black women had less choice of who to look at. Women like my mother went to work in somebody else's kitchen, restaurant, whatever menial jobs black women were allowed to do. Even college educated black women didn't have many options other than the helping professions.

You were a teacher and you worked in other 'helping' professions...

When I was growing up, there was no path articulated for me. My family lived in a slum as far as exposure and opportunity. <sup>are concerned</sup> Mostly, if you live in Harlem or Brooklyn, everything is finished... not only finished but they begin to put salt on it! But they'd done a very good job on me in school. I did what I was told to do, I was a good kid, a passive person, aspiring to middle class stuff. My athletic energy kept me out of trouble with dope and getting beat up.

Did your parents make a distinction between what you could do ~~as opposed to~~ <sup>and</sup> what your brothers could do?

The usual distinction, that boys are preferable. I was small and obedient so I never got the brunt of anything. I wasn't programmed or slated to do anything. I know my parents weren't in a place to plan for their kids. About the only thing I heard my father say about me was that he wanted his daughter to grow up and learn how to cook biscuits and iron somebody's white shirts the way my mother had done...

Did you ever write about your family directly?

Earlier. In my poetry. I wrote about things that bothered me because I had to, not because I thought of myself as a poet. Interestingly enough, I'm coming to an end of my poetry, the more I get serious about fiction.

In what I've read of your work, you use a male persona <sup>(X)</sup>  
Any particular reason?

I don't know women. I'm just now beginning to know women. All the big influences in my life until I was twenty were men. When I was a kid, I was always with the boys shooting marbles. I was 13 before I stopped wrestling. And only because they wouldn't let me anymore. I never even read anything by a woman when I was growing up. I don't even own many books by women. And if I started at this moment trying to portray the black woman I still wouldn't have enough time in my own life to do it properly. It is difficult to treat black women because of our history and because of our men.

How do you feel the black woman has been treated in the scant literature and art she's appeared in?

Well, there's the ambivalence that exists. For a start, she's not posed in relation to her man, she's rarely posed in relation to anyone. Instead, remember D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation?" Griffith created one of the first images on the screen of the black man chasing the white woman. Since white women were the standard of beauty, the brainwashing was pretty thorough enough to get the black woman to dislike herself... I can remember nigger bleach days, something you put on your skin to make yourself lighter. Black is beautiful just arrived, you know. That the black man <sup>has always</sup> fantasized beauty as the inaccessible white woman, <sup>the</sup> created a big problem <sup>for</sup> with black women.

Is that part of the black woman's reluctance to identify with feminism? That the movement is a luxury of the white woman?

That's part of the dilemma. The black woman has always had access to certain jobs because black women were less of a threat to whites. Now, if I feel I am denying my man something that he deserves and I'm getting, we have confusion and tension. For years, our concerns have been around how we're gonna get our freedom or the vote.

Historically it's been that once black people start something, the vote, for instance, the white woman follows. Some blacks see that as a kind of co-opting.

As with civil rights and then the women's movement following quickly behind?

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Yes. The women's movement took attention away from us. On top of that, people were just starting to get interested in ecology. Not that the causes weren't just... but many black women feel that we don't have enough energy to carry the white woman. I can't come out and get activist about the white woman, when essentially what she's saying is that she's tired of her husband oppressing her. My priorities are so much father up the line...

But isn't the connection between white women and black women apparent, in that metaphorically speaking, those same white women's husbands were oppressing blacks as well?

There's a difference between saying to your husband, well, I want more freedom, and I need a job to buy a loaf of bread...

You're talking about <sup>saying</sup> survival. But the women's movement is also involved with psychological levels of oppression...

The thing that I like about a fact is that whether people admit it or not, it exists. The fact is that women have discovered that they are human beings, whether they are black or white. When white women started thinking of themselves as niggers, it was the best thing that could've happened to them. Because that's the issue: power.

We're in an age when the general protest against powerlessness has become personal...

okay I did an article once called "The Black Woman as Nigger in the Black Studies Department." Which was me in the Black Studies department where they all talked about men. In that sense, color isn't important. We've all been divided and we fight each other because of our powerlessness. When it was OK to oppress black people, whites were kept from recognizing their own powerlessness. I dive a lot. There's a place I go to in Santa Barbara where some oil company came in and said they were going to put these big tanker monsters off the coast. And the people said, the hell you are. But if you drive down the coast today, you'll find that those same people were treated just like niggers. When the money came in, the corporate structure did what it wanted to do. Look, it's the same on all fronts. Look at the Baake case. Both men wanted to be doctors... that's the important issue. The pill pushing plumbers of the AMA make decent health care impossible for the unwashed millions of us. With the need for doctors in the country, why should any person who wants to serve be denied? Medical care in this country makes you sick. And for them to be harping around with a case in the Supreme Court about two guys who want to be doctors...it's nothing...it's a smoke screen.

Many black and third world people would disagree with you...

Well, I'm looking at the larger issue. White people are finally seeing that they've been niggers too. Madison Avenue turned old patched jeans into an enormous success. The whole movement of the '60's was perverted. There was just enough energy in that movement to realize the sickness of racism.

Perhaps political 'consciousness' didn't take us far enough. Do you experience sexism and racism still, even now when it's unfashionable?

Figuratively speaking, the racial issue is like a dead rat caught in the throat of the entire country, one which we can neither digest nor throw up. It's festering and stinking there, and its stench continues to stultify the generations.

Listen, there are those people who'll have you to dinner but not vote for fair housing. At UCLA, the women were moving and the men were sitting around complaining, oh, I can't buy you lunch anymore, well what can I do for you; you gonna proposition me before I proposition you? Those guys didn't know what to do. Their role had been removed from them and they hadn't picked up another. A friend of mine said to me, I went to bed with my wife and woke up with a woman. Pretty surprised he was.

Have you experienced this surprise from black men?

No, because I frighten black men away, in general, because I don't come on to them sexually. Women have all kinds of ways of dropping handkerchiefs and I never do any of those things. You see, because of our position in history, black women have very seldom been in a position to deal from power, so it's all a kind of sexual thing you do with each other. It's difficult to grow up in this culture dealing outside of the vaginal politic...

And that crosses color lines. Don't you think that things are changing between men and women as women come into their own humanity?

It has to change. Look, it's like being black, once you know you're whole, there's nothing anybody can do to fracture you again. There's no format. We're on the trail and it's just a question of how dynamic we are. But there's plenty of people who still won't look at the things that are crumbling around us... We can't follow the old models or we'll meet the same disasters.

As with women mimicking men? There's a safe brand of 'equal opportunity' advocate that says that women should be generals in the army if they want and men should train for careers as typists. I think that's missing the point...

Ah yes, now we see black people in the same jobs that were shitty with white people in them. But you know, the exciting thing that gives me hope is that women can create

new forms, new jobs. And the great thing about writing is that you can cross all kinds of boundaries, sexual and otherwise. A writer sees in a way that distinguishes appearance from reality. Appearance in the sense that the ordinary person sees things and is often stuck with what they see. I have faith, you know, so that I can sit here relatively alone and not blow my brains out at what I sometimes see. Once I was very very angry...

What made you angriest, aside from general racism and sexism?

Here's a nice example: I had a job not too long ago and my boss was black. And he had a problem. He couldn't fuck me, and he couldn't fire me, because I was too good. I was working with ex-cons, helping them when they just got out of the joint. The project was funded by the feds, which sorta turns out to be a boondoggle and a sophisticated version of slavery. They needed a nigger and they needed a woman

who just got out of jail

Reward

And I had so many pluses. I get angry when I see minority people hired and once affirmative action is fulfilled, the hiring is cut back. But if I had kept up that pace of anger, I wouldn't be here now. I would have done something drastic. I know how cynics are made. I also know how to subdue anger.

reward - fractured system

Were you involved in civil rights activism in the 60's?

I sure was. I was involved in <sup>the philosophy of</sup> Martin Luther King and Gandhi <sup>that said</sup> subduing...where you subdued all your anger and hostility if somebody spat on you. Like when four of us sat down at a counter in Atlanta and a white guy threw a bowl of soup in my face. I was shaking and subduing.

and the hiring cut back once the affirmative action requirement is filled.

Were you affiliated with the Panthers?

No. By the time I got to UCLA the Panthers had been blown apart by the CIA. But there was plenty to be angry about there. There were all these old World War II colonels teaching in the Physical Education department. One day I was walking across campus and I thought, I've never seen a black face behind the podium the whole time I've been here. In my history class, I never heard of anybody except Jackie Robinson. I got fed up and went to the Chairman's office and I said, Chairman, how come there are no black people on this faculty? And he said, well, we don't have any openings. At least he didn't say there are no qualified ones. I had thought of getting him and two or three other of those anti-life dogs in the toilet and threatening them just to get the publicity, and say, you have got to change your ways!

But you didn't get those professors?

No, But I was getting pretty angry.

This is the only country that teaches you you're equal and shows you you're not. The whole thrust of my education at UCLA was designed to show me contempt for myself.

I remember freshman English, the great sifting pot of the university, thirty of us sitting there shaking scared. The teacher comes into the room and scribbles something on the board that says, write me three paragraphs concerning one of these historical figures: Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and somebody else. Now this was when I was in my real black period, right. I took Lincoln. The teacher had these little subtitles under each name that he wanted you to deal with, like reconstruction, freed the slaves, etc. So I wrote down, Lincoln ain't never did nothing for black folks and if he did, I ain't heard nothing 'bout it and I don't know nothing 'bout it. And I signed my name to my paper. The next day the teacher says, Cherry Jackson, I'd like to see you at the end of class. And so at the end of class, the teacher says, this is a basic English class and if you want to stay in it, I would advise you to write English. Well, I swallowed all my piss and vinegar and said, OK.

You went to college when you were in your late twenties. What were you doing before that?

I worked and then I was in the Peace Corps.

How did you come to join the Peace Corps?

When you're in Harlem and when you live on the fourth floor of a tenement house at 135 St. and 8th Ave. and at night you have to walk over junkies going upstairs and in the morning you have to walk over them coming downstairs and people coming up to you saying, I got to have this fix... there's a kind of desperation, you wanna get out, you <sup>want</sup> wonder what the hell you're doing there and what is it that you want to do. One of the things that hastened my departure was somebody breaking into my house twice on the same day. I had a police lock and a steel rod that went down to the floor and they just took the whole thing off the door. So I signed up to go to Africa.

I've heard stories of Jews going to Israel and not being able to relate to Israeli life, discovering how American they really are...

Well, it's different for blacks. I was searching for origins.

I saw my mother's face and my father's face and it shocked

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me and I knew racially and tribally I was in the right place. When you go to Africa, you understand that you are in the arms of Mother Earth. When I saw the land in Africa, I knew there was something perfect and untouched.

You didn't experience culture shock?

Once you've been technologically oriented, <sup>you have to</sup> ~~it takes a tremendous amount of clawing~~ off your ethnocentric nuances. As long as I kept my mouth closed,

people didn't know I was any different. Spiritually, I knew where my homeland was. I had no problem with culture shock when I was there, but it happened when I came home. It actually radicalized me, looking at my country after having another perspective for a few years.

Is that when you broke the obedience chain you described you were hooked to in your childhood?

Look, if you grow up with a certain moral code and you break it, it causes you a lot of anxiety and pain. It didn't happen overnight. I had to question why it was I was following the code in the first place. I don't know any single thing that made me break the code. But at some point I became aware that I had the power to make observations about what went on around me. And I saw the contradictions of what had been taught me. What got me to realize that the early bird doesn't necessarily get the worm, I don't know.

How did you decide to say no to teaching, after you'd worked so hard to make a career for yourself?

I can only tell you in retrospective observation. Whatever I got involved in, I always did a good job. Administrators love that kind of shit and they push you and give you certificates for accomplishment. Listen, when they find a good nigger, you can do anything you want, you know, because there are a lot of black people who are angrier than I was and don't deal with the schools at all. But somewhere along the line I observed I was always fulfilling other people's notions of what I should do. When you get strokes, it's even more difficult to know what you really want, whether it's your idea or theirs. I had a lot of success teaching and I knew I was good and energetic, but I also wanted to write and never had the time. I might as well have brought my <sup>students</sup> kids home with me, they were dancing around in my head all night. And there were the kids in the Oakland schools, mostly being broken up by the system. I couldn't see any hope for it.



Did you write when you were younger?

I did but it wasn't serious. I knew I wanted to write when I was out of high school but there was nothing there to encourage it and I sure didn't know any writers. I had this frozen ass English teacher in high school and I loved to write poetry. I wrote a poem about this tree, it had all kinds of human emotions, but when the teacher gave me the paper back, she said, you NEVER describe trees that way with human characteristics.

Didn't she know about personification? What did you do?

I kept that poem somewhere and hid it.

~~You were courageous. I had an art teacher in the 7th grade who told me never to take another art class again because I couldn't master perspective...~~

I've always had a healthy ego. Besides, poets don't take criticism well. This one editor told me to change a tense in one of my poems. She was a grammarian. The poem said exactly what I wanted to say. I didn't publish it.

Would you feel the same about a prose work?

With prose, I'll revise all day and bury the ashes. I took a fiction writing class, I went to my teacher with eight pages and he said tear up 7. I took the criticism. I guess I won't do it with my poems because they come from my gut. My fiction comes from my heart and my brain. Which is why I said, I'm getting rid of the demons and don't need to write poetry anymore.

You said you have a healthy ego. Does that come from competing in sports?

I think so. In sports, I very seldom lost or got rejected. Of course, I knew when I started writing, I'd get rejection thrown in my face a lot of the time. But I'm not afraid of competition. Once a woman produces something that people can see, once she can bid and compete, she has ammunition.

So you think that women should be taught to compete more?

In sports, we'd always say of a weak team, no competition. But you know, I don't mean that women have to learn to compete with men. When a woman comes on the scene with some authority, she's got the ammunition she needs to do what she wants to. I don't worry about competition. I'm just beginning. It's enough that I had to make this decision that writing was going to be my life. I don't like other people setting a pace for me. I'm in no hurry. Anyway, once you hit your center, whether it's a fight or not is irrelevant.

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Your commitment to writing solidified after your first stage play was successfully produced twice. How did you come to write for the theatre?

That play was the toughest thing to do and it took me a year to do it. I wrote it when I was still teaching. It came out of something I saw. I was on my bicycle peddling by the Solid Rock Baptist Church in the Fillmore. All these people were standing in line on the street, black folk, white folk, Chinese, and I said, I know I haven't been to church in a long time, but I know it didn't get so good that people are waiting to get in in the middle of the week. I saw a guard standing in the church, holding a big magnum, <sup>GUN</sup>.

I said, what's happening? And he said, people is lining up for food stamps. I had this premonition that somebody was going to get it in that church. About six weeks later a friend told me a guy had been shot there.

*gun  
but many  
people  
won't know  
this.*

I became really emotional. I had to do something about it. I didn't know what form it would take but I had to decide which medium I was going to use to express my anger. Was I going to do an essay or a play or what?

So the play came out of my feeling that legitimate theatre is one of the loudest mouths in the community. And what I was dealing with, the problem of church and state, where the church is the last black bastion that white people can't corrupt but somehow have done it ...how people sell themselves and rip each other off with dope and prostitution...I was dealing with a whole lot of things as a new writer, all in a one-act play.

You also wrote the play with a lot of black dialect...

Yeah. That's something I never want to do again. There's a difference between dialect and street talk. If you walk down Fillmore Street ~~there is~~ a particular black tone to the language, but it's in the rhythm and the selection of vocabulary. It isn't dialect the way that Dunbar or Langston Hughes did it...like "go 'way and quit dat noise Miss Lucy." Well most black people on the street can't read ~~that shit dialect~~.

*you will hear*

It's just for effect on the page. It's like science having to create a language to describe "laser," because there's nothing that exists yet to describe it, or how Chinese books use English words to describe certain technological items totally new to their culture.

*dialect*

Do you feel you have to talk differently around white people?

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I talk pretty much the same all the time. Sometimes black people will get into old vernacular street talk, doing what they call niggerese, when they want to lord it over somebody who might not know what they're talking about. If I wanted to do another stage play, I'd use street talk. It's so succinct. One of the things that black people have not had the leisure time to do is become euphemistic! They fuck it and you fuck it. It's frustrating to me to meet people who insist on calling shit something else...

Yeah, I have a neighbor who says her cats 'go to the bathroom' in the garden...

Geez. I remember Eldrige Cleaver came to talk at UCLA when I was there. It was the final liberation of the word fuck. There were a lot of students in the audience and he went through his sermon and at the end he said, fuck Reagan, and somebody from the audience said fuck Reagan, and another person said fuck Reagan and pretty soon the whole audience was saying fuck. All those white kids who'd never been able to say fuck finally got the chance to come unraveled. It was all right!

Doesn't  
Further  
the  
narrative

Do you have problems capturing the <sup>particular</sup> rhythm that black people speak with?

Sure. ~~English is~~ <sup>not</sup> quite the language of black people. When you listen to a person on the street, it's sometimes a strain to get it down on the page. Written English puts limitations on expressing gesture and eyebrow-raising and all those body movements. And I don't want to whitewash street talk in my writing. I mean, we gotta clean up our act in order to get those jobs we're supposed to get but we have to be careful not to lose our language...

You're working on television plays now. Won't you have to whitewash your language for TV?

I've been working on plays for cable television, where you are allowed to be an adult writer and talk about adult themes. Sure, I can tell a story without using a four-letter word, but sometimes I feel like using some of the obscenity I see inherent in something. An obscene situation calls for obscene language. I'm not going to say, I grew up in the 'inner city'. Shit, I grew up on the reservation!

Why have you chosen TV as a medium?

Television is a challenge to me, a whole technology I can work with. I'm just learning the tools. People are tired of the pabulum they get. There's nothing real on commercial TV. When I first started looking at TV as a tool, to see how scenes are made, where the drama is, how commercials are treated, how old people, women

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are treated, I couldn't believe it. When I look at Norman Lear's shit, why he's the only guy I know who can put five or six black male characters on one set and all together they won't equal one black man. And I'm not talking about super-nigger or Uncle Tom, just an ordinary black man.

Aren't black writers creating black characters for television?

Maybe now more than ten years ago. But it's so difficult to get into a writing stable as a paid staff writer, that once you get in, you don't rock the boat. One of the things that black people are famous for is holding those blacks who are in positions of power responsible for the whole race. A black person will get a position. When he starts selling out, other black people are enraged. But if that person doesn't compromise, he'll be on the streets. Writers who are paid to perform are in the same bind.

Earlier we talked about why you've so far used only a black male persona in your writing. Do you have any plans to explore female characters?

I'm reserving my commencement with women in fiction. I'm preparing myself. When I present my women, they will not be weak or pleasing. They will have accepted their womanhood as being as good as anything else. They will be active, doing people. What themes I'll chose, I don't know yet. The stories sit around for a long time unwritten. I do know that I want to work in unexplored areas. I want women's sexuality, for instance, to be treated as a matter of fact. My women will be sexual all right, but I won't make a big thing about their sexuality and they won't be asking permission to be sexual either.

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CHERRY JACKSON

Writer

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1st interview  
rough transcript.

1/13/78

I went to UCLA for five years and I hated it too. Originally, you know I/m from Harlem. I was abroad for a few years and I came back, never having been further east than Chicago... From 1968-72, things were tumultuous at UCLA, two of my friends were killed, they were Panthers, the authorities were on campus all the time. They were doing Dragnet kind of stuff, helmets and gas masks, they sell you where to go, it doesn't matter that you're going to the library.

WHAT WERE THESE AUTHORITIES DOING?

Trying to establish power, the presence of power that the students had rejected. As quiet as UCLA was, it's very conservative, there was so much action going on at CAL that it scared the hell out of me when I was perusing a place to go to college...so I went to the other extreme. Still there were advocates for everything at UCLA, a lot of action, so the authorities came on without provocation because they wanted to keep UCLA free from what happened at CAL. You'd look around and there'd be 200 motorcycles and cops on them...

I HAD NO IDEA... I WAS LOST IN PARADISE AT THAT TIME... UNTIL 1971, WHEN OF COURSE, THE WAR CAME TO EVEN NEW MEXICO. YOU WENT TO SCHOOL LONG AFTER HIGH SCHOOL... AFTER TRAVELING?

When I first got out of high school I worked. If you live in <sup>black and poor and</sup> New York, in Harlem, in Brooklyn, everything is finished... not only finished but they begin to put salt on it. It's a very desolate place economically. ~~I got a job, but so much of me wasn't fulfilled. I was very unpolitical, I was doing the Horatio Alger thing I'd been taught, being obedient. I did what I was told to do. I was a good kid, a passive person. Aspiring to middle class stuff. They'd done a very good job on me in school.~~

WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS DO?

My father's a contractor, my mother worked in a restaurant... upper lower class, as far as dwelling, training, education... My father didn't drink, nobody in my family fights each other... but we lived in a slum as far as exposure and opportunity... My family's awareness of my being a girl and growing up in a different way than boys grow up was really very low... I don't even know what they expected from my brothers... there was no path articulated. Some middle class parents take all these precautions to raise their children... you know, don't get pregnant, don't use drugs. We had nothing imbued in us from our parents.

WAS THERE NO DISTINCTION MADE BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR BROTHERS?

The distinction was that boys are preferable. I was always small

Harlem  
School

B

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and obedient so I never got the brunt of anything. I'm the youngest. I never had any problems. I was not programmed or slated to do anything. I know they <sup>my parents</sup> weren't in a place to plan for their kids, they didn't have the consciousness...but the only thing I ever heard my father say about me was that he wanted his daughter to grow up and learn how to cook biscuits and iron somebody's white shirts the way my mother had done.

BUT ALL OF OUR FATHERS SAID THAT...

Well, that's what I remembered most from him. Later on, I found myself getting more and more angry with him because of his role as a father...he reneged on it. Of course, the older I got, the more mistakes I made and the more I understood him. But he caused me problems at one time.

My father was a sportsman and a conqueror and he murdered animals and he had an arsenal of guns, he killed deer and birds. My mother was very passive and genteel. I see that mixture in myself. That gentleness she had allowed her to be subdued and not kick my father's ass when he needed it.

→

I wish my mother had been more aggressive in paying attention to me as a girl...there are places you don't grow unless you get what you need, I mean, the grass doesn't grow until the rain comes. Things you need to get out of adolescence, into womanhood, into maturity. You have to have women around you who know what they're doing. You're always looking at women, because that's what you are. You use the term "late bloomers". Well, it took me the longest time to get into my own womanhood and live with it. It wasn't until I met real women who I loved and admired. Women like my mother went to work in somebody else's kitchen, restaurant, whatever menial jobs black women were allowed to do. Even college educated black women didn't have many options other than helping professions.

~~MANY OF THE WOMEN I'VE TALKED TO FOR THIS PROJECT HAVE SAID THAT IN SO MANY WORDS, THAT THEY FELT LIKE NOTHING WAS WATERING THEM BEFORE...~~

~~My childhood was spent being a child...I'm happy about that. I didn't have the burden of taking care of another person..I was left untampered with. My parents were off working. My brothers are older. I was happy as a child. The problems came later.~~  
~~Consciousness.~~

~~YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE EVEN FELT RESENTMENT TOWARD YOUR FATHER HAD YOU NOT GONE TO COLLEGE...YOU GOT TO SEE WHAT YOU WERE MISSING, IN A SENSE...~~

~~Later on, when I met people in college who had close knit families, I really felt resentful that I didn't have that...but I learned very quickly about the if you got a lemon, you better make lemonade out of it...that family was a lemon, a kind of sour experience, which I've managed to sweeten up...compensate for.~~

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*Writing*

DO YOU WRITE ABOUT YOUR FAMILY?

Earlier. In my poetry. I'm coming to an end of my poetry. Whatever bothers me I get out in my poetry. The political situation, I can never get past, but the emotional...

STEINBECK ADVISES FICTION WRITERS WITH WRITERS BLOCKS TO WRITE POETRY...KEEPS YOU IN TRAINING.

I wrote about those things that bothered me so much because I had to, not because I thought of myself as a writer. Ofcourse, once you hit your center, whether it's a fight or not is irrelevant, you know you have no choice. ~~In "Buttermilk" Bottom", which talks about where I grew up, I talk about how we never lived in a decent house...my father was a contractor but we didn't have a real house. I wrote that in high school...~~

~~Now the personal things that happened to me allows me a solidarity to do my work, which is fiction.~~

*insert  
from  
p4*

YOUR WORK HAS MEN AS MAIN CHARACTERS...WOMEN USUALLY WRITE ABOUT WOMEN. WHY HAVE YOU CHOSEN A MALE PERSONNA?

I don't know women. I'm just now beginning to know women. All the influences in my life until I was about 20 were men. Even through college. I had to choose outright to go to an all women's graduate school. My play, as in my story "Agate Eyes," was mostly with boys...the marble games, I was standing around with the boys. I liked the action. I was always athletic, active. I was 13 before I stopped wrestling. And only because they wouldn't let me anymore.

OH YES, WE MUSTN'T LET GIRLS AND BOYS TOUCH EACH OTHERS PRIVATE PARTS...

~~I was rather slow coming to that awareness. My sexuality was played out in physicalness. I didn't have that inhibition until later on. One of the things I'm starting in my fiction writing, you must understand, I'm at the beginning of it, I'm writing about things I know about...the aura of women in my work will be different in the future. I never even read anything by women when I was growing up. I don't even own ~~10%~~ many books by women, maybe 10%.~~

I'm reserving my commencement with women in fiction...when I present my women, they will not be weak or pleasing...they will have accepted their womanhood as being as good as anything else. Instead of asking, they will be demanding. They will be active, doing. What themes I'll choose I don't know yet...one story in my head, that's the way I work, the stories sit around for a long time unwritten. ..I want to do work in unexplored areas...I want women's sexuality, for instance, to be as a matter of fact... I don't want to make a big thing about women being sexual...or not. They will be sexual, they will not be asking permission to be sexual.

*Women →  
Characters*

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insert  
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WE ARE AT A STAGE IN HISTORY WHERE EVERYONE IS WEARING THEIR SEXUALITY SPELLED OUT ON THEIR TEE SHIRTS...WHICH IS GOOD FOR THE TIME BEING, BUT ONE WOULD HOPE FOR THAT TO PASS AND GET ON WITH THE REST....

That's why I feel purposefull. I have a lot of hope for presenting women in a different perspective. ~~Since 1962, I've been knowing women differently than the ones I knew as a child...~~

Black  
Woman

DO YOU FEEL ANY RESPONSIBILITY TO PORTRAY THE ~~NEW~~ BLACK WOMAN IN LITERATURE? OR TO GO BACK AND DELVE INTO WHAT IT IS TO BE A BLACK WOMAN? A WHOLE LOST ARENA?

I think it would probably be the most challenging thing I could do...If I started at this moment trying to do it I still wouldn't have enough time in my own life to do it properly. I know what a difficult thing it is to treat black women, because of our history and because of our men.

TALK ABOUT THAT MORE... *Do you feel that the black woman has been treated ambivalently in lit art?*

*Yes* There/s the ambivalence that exists politically. For a start, if you remember in DW Griffith's "Birth of a Nation", there's the question of the black man chasing the white woman. In the beginning, from our history of slavery, black men didn't have a choice as to what kind of women they could have. Since white women were the standard of beauty and the brain washing was so thorough to the point where I can remember when we used to tease people about using nigger bleach...something you put on your skin to make yourself lighter...black is beautiful just arrived, you know. And it's just superficial. Slavery, in my opinion, was the most successful institution that this government has spun. We were completely wiped out as a race, psychological corpses walking around, trying to deal with whatever happened to us in slavery. We swallowed the image...the problem with slavery was that black men didn't have a choice, his fantasies were about the inaccessible white woman.

The black man also has a problem with the black woman. The black woman has access to jobs because black women were less of a threat to whites. So we do have these questions to beg...black men and white women and black men and black women.

If I feel I am denying my man something that he deserves and I'm getting, then we have confusion and tension.

IS THAT PART OF THE RELUCTANT THAT BLACK WOMEN HAVE IN IDENTIFYING WITH THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT? THE BIG COMPLAINT AGAINST THE MOVEMENT IS THAT IT'S BEEN WHITE AND MIDDLE CLASS AND THAT IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO RECRUIT, IN A SENSE, THIRD WORLD WOMEN, BECAUSE THEY FEEL THAT THEIR STRUGGLES AS THIRD WORLD PEOPLE ARE MORE IMPORTANT AND THAT THEY SHOULD NOT BE DEVISIVE ABOUT THEIR POLITICAL ENERGIES...

That's the dilemma I was talking about. If you are a conscious black woman, you know history and you know about the myths...



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Our concerns have been around how we're gonna get our freedom, or the vote, or integrate the schools, get the machine going to fight for our freedom. Historically, it's been that once black people start something, the vote, for instance, the white woman has followed. A kind of co-opting.

AS WITH THE CIVIL RIGHTS AND THEN THE WOMAN'S MOVEMENT FOLLOWING QUICKLY BEHIND...

It takes attention away from us. There was civil rights and then people started getting interested in ecology, saving the redwoods, not that the causes weren't just, but that we don't have enough energy to carry the white woman. I can't come out and get involved and support the white woman...what white women are saying, essentially, is that they're tired of their husbands oppressing them. My priorities are so much farther up the line.

BUT ISN'T THE CONNECTION, BETWEEN WHITE WOMEN AND BLACK WOMEN, THAT THOSE SAME WHITE WOMEN'S HUSBANDS WERE OPPRESSING BLACKS AS WELL?

There's a difference between saying to your husband, well, I want more freedom, as a white person, than saying I need a job to buy a loaf of bread.

YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT SURVIVAL...THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IS ALSO HEAVILY INVOLVED WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL LEVELS OF OPPRESSION.

**B** The thing that I like about a fact is that whether people admit it or not, it exists. The fact is that women have discovered that they are human beings, whether they are black or white. They're off the farm. And you ain't gonna get them back! When white women started thinking of themselves as niggers, that was the best thing that could've happened to them. Because that's what it is. I did an article about 3 years ago called "The Black Woman as Nigger in the Black Studies Department". Which was me in the Black Studies department where they all talked about men. All people are beginning to recognize how powerless they've been, how power has been in the hands of a few people. In that sense, color isn't important. We've been divided and we fight each other because of our powerlessness. All of us are slaves. When it was OK to oppress black people, whites were kept away from recognizing their own powerlessness...

I dive a lot. There's a place in Santa Barbara, people are pretty wealthy there. Standard Oil or somebody came in and said they were going to put these big tanker monsters off the coast...and the people said, the hell you are, you're not gonna fuck up our ocean. But if you drive down the coast to Santa Barbara today, you'll find that those same people were treated just like niggers...when the money came in, the corporate structure did what it wanted to do. ~~They keep us fighting among ourselves. They being, the establishment, who make slaves out of us...~~ Look it's the same on all fronts...look at the Baake case...both men want to be doctors...that's the important issue. Medical

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care in this country makes you sick. And for them to be harping around with a case in the supreme court about two guys who want to be doctors...it's nothing. The smoke screens that we generate with this kind of garbage...

WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS THAT MAYBE STARTING OUT WITH CIVIL RIGHTS, THAT CONSCIOUSNESS CAUGHT ON...THAT THERE ARE POWERS THAT HOLD US IN OUR PLACES IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER, THAT KEEP HOLDING US AND DIVIDING US FROM EACH OTHER...

White people are finally seeing that they've been niggers too. Love now has been perverted and Madison Avenue turned old patched jeans into an enormous success...that whole movement, particularly of the young white people, was perverted. Nobody wants to deal with a hippie. A hippie is obseene now. There was enough energy in that movement, just enough, to move us to another place. To realize the sickness of racism. Even though sometimes it seems like the 60's never happened.

PEOPLE DIDN'T TAKE IT FAR ENOUGH...WE'VE SLIPPED INTO A MEDIOCRE ATTITUDE THAT TAKES EVERYTHING FOR GRANTED, BUT REALLY ISN'T CONSCIOUS...LIP SERVICE LEVEL. OF COURSE, IT'S NOT FASHIONABLE TO BE RACIST IN THIS DAY AND AGE OR SEXIST...BUT I KEEP FINDING CLOSET RACISTS AND CLOSET SEXISTS...

*complacency*  
*substituted*

Those are the people who'll have you to dinner but not vote for fair housing. The subtle intrusion into our heads, the 30 second coke ads, we are all victims of that brainwash...  
~~When you say sexism, that's the way it's dealt in this country and I don't even mean the places you've seen it outside this country...that gets right down into the gut of what's been taught you and who you are.~~ AT UCLA, the women were moving, and the men were sitting around complaining, oh, I can't take you to lunch anymore, well what can I do for you, you ganna proposition me before I proposition you...they didn't know what to do. Their role had been removed from them and they hadn't picked up another role. A friend of mine said to me, "I went to bed with my wife and woke up with a woman." Pretty surprised he was. He was one of those IBM execs, who never thought a woman past house and home and car and all. What is this new man going to be like?

DO YOU EXPERIENCE THIS SURPRISE FROM PEOPLE WHO USED TO KNOW YOU BEFORE?

No, because I frighten black men away, that's mainly because I don't come on to them sexually. Women have all kinds of ways of dropping handkerchiefs and I never do any of those things. Because of our position in history, black women have very seldom been in a position to deal from power and so it's all a kind of sexual thing you do with each other. If you don't do that, you get black men saying, huh, you sleeping with a white guy, what's the matter. It always has to do with a sexual thing...if you don't come on, then something's wrong with you. I only have two male friends and it's difficult for a lot of black men to relate to a black woman just as a person. I say that with limited



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~~experience. I know there are some men who can deal with women on a person level, but it's difficult to grow up in this culture without dealing outside of the vaginal politic. H~~

THAT CROSSES COLOR LINES...INSTANTLY THE STRATEGIES OF SEXUAL CONQUEST ARE SET UP...

Well, men have a formula, a simple one and it works, it worked. Some men get caught with a woman they might love but they still don't know, and all of a sudden they have to deal with her humanity. He doesn't quite know how to do it. There's nothing in our culture that teaches men how to do it. One of the most disheartening things to me is that people don't take me seriously, because I'm a woman, or because I'm black or because I'm small, whatever it is.

DO YOU OVERCOMPENSATE, SO YOU WILL BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY? IN WHAT WAYS HAVE YOU FELT THAT PREJUDICE?

There was a time about 3 years back, that i stopped dealing with men.

WERE YOU MARRIED?

*You're the only one*

No, never. In high school, I wanted to get married and have 12 kids, a football team. But I found out pretty quickly that I wanted to do other things. I saw my friends going through bad experiences. I had a very simplified life in high school and when I got out, I just wanted to do something...I didn't consider anyone I knew to have a good marriage...I didn't have any good models of happiness. My desire to get married was overshadowed by my adventureousness...I got that from my father. I wanted to go and see and I already knew what people who got married did. Nothing.

YOU SAID YOU WEREN'T CONSCIOUS POLITICALLY WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER AND YET THAT'S A PRETTY ASTUTE CONSCIOUSNESS FOR A TEENAGER...

One of the things my aunt always said to my mother was "I wish I had done" this or that. I can remember asa teenager I thought, god when I get to be her age I dont want to be saying I wish, I wanna do it!

Bio

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I went to high school in Harlem and Atlanta. When I first started having those wet dreams, I was on the move so much and I was athletically inclined and so that sexuality was being drained off. I didn't really get caught. I was running, played basketball and swam. My energy kept me out of trouble a lot. Away from dope and getting beat up. I ~~attribute~~ attribute keeping myself together to a healthy and fundamental athletic program.

When I became involved in something, I put my whole self in it. After I had been on my own for a while after high school, I got a job in Harlem, on 118th st and Lennox in a kind of crime prevention neighborhood community center. It was just being build, with aquatic facilities, gymnastics, everything.

OUT

They found this nigger who knew all this shit and paid me a pittance. I organized a program for boys and girls up to the age of 13, I was the athletic director and that community was crowded. That absorbed my whole mind... if I had started out right after high school trying to figure out what the hell to do, I probably wouldn't be writing now.

IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU WAITED, INTUITIVELY, TO KNOW WHAT YOU WANTED OUT OF COLLEGE...MOST PEOPLE JUST GO BLINDLY...

The time that I worked at the cmmunity center helped to mature me. It kept me out of trouble, there was a lot of stuff going on in the streets. With an ordinary job I would have gotten lonely. Maybe I would have gotten married. I can't imagine living with one man all my life.

IN SOME RESPECTS, WHAT WE'RE SAYING MIGHT SOUND MAN-HATING, BUT REALLY I THINK WE'RE MUCH MORE ANARCHISTS THAN ANYTHING ELSE. IN RETROSPECT, WE HOOKED OUR LIVES UP WITH A MALE CULTURE, WITH PATRIARCHAL THINGS...THAT DID HAPPEN AND THERE'S ~~NO~~ BITTERNESS BECAUSE THERE WAS NO CHOICE FOR US.

HOW DID YOU ESCAPE NOT HOOKING UP WITH SOMEBODY EARLY ON?

I met a guy whose son I was teaching. He was the first guy I'd been involved with sexually. I was 22, it was really great, but he was married. I had this old Catholic upbringing about morality. And in Harlem, well ~~you walk around~~ it just ain't too cool, you walk around the corner and get beat up for stealing another woman's man. He had told me one thing, and it wasn't true, but I believed it because I wanted to, because he was so good to me. That was my introduction. I thought, what the hell have I been doing running and riding bicycles. Once I became involved with sex, my desire to get up in the morning at 6 o'clock and do physical things diminished for a while. All of my energy was going to him, thinking about him, wondering about him, and this fabulous new feeling. When I found out he was married, I really withdrew. But it introduced me to the neat feeling, of what ~~your~~ your sexuality is really supposed to be used for...

IS IT AN EITHER ORTHING FOR US? SURELY IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE. DO WE AS WOMEN HAVE TO GET SLOBBY WHEN WE FALL IN LOVE?

Lovers have a problem with that. The very things that attract you to someone sort of go away when you make the conquest, you stop doing those things that made you so attractive.

DO YOU THINK YOU'LL EVER GET MARRIED?

No. I'm married to a lot of people now, not in the conventional sense. I have binding relationships I know I'll always have. Those relationships are ones that I chose. They are with people with whom I have joy and ultimate moments. When you connect to another human being, who is perfect because of his or her humanity, you come as close to god in the Christian sense...

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Because of these kinds of marriages I'm sane.

WHY IS IT THAT THOSE KINDS OF MARRIAGES ACTUALLY GIVE YOU ENERGY TO GO ON WITH YOUR WORK AND THE CONVENTIONAL MARRIAGE BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN OFTEN DRAINS RATHER THAN ENERGIES. THAT'S A GENERALITY...BUT...

I accept that. Well, in the first place, men don't like women in this culture. It's fear, we know. Men have to pretend they like women. But they go to other men for companionship...they think of other men as people.

DON'T YOU THINK THAT'S CHANGING? IN THE POST-70's relationships, as women come into THEIR OWN HUMANITY?

*Africa*

It has to be the next frontier. Look it's like being black, once you know you're whole, there's nothing anybody can do to fracture you again. I didn't know I was whole until I stepped off the plane in Africa.

WHERE DID YOU GO?

Monrovia...on the West Coast...that's where I started.

*Men & Women*

What I was saying that things between men and women have to be different. There's no format, we are the pioneers. We're on the trail. It's just a question of how dynamic we are. There's plenty of people who still won't look at the things that are crumbling around us.

THE NUCLEAR FAMILY IS ONE OF THEMZ...

It's going. And people are still talking about how we gonna get it back. It's never coming back, not in the old way.

I THINK IT WAS A PHENOMENON OF THE WHITE MIDDLE CLASS...SURELY THIRD WORLD PEOPLE LIVE AND RELATE IN EXTENDED ~~REXXXXX~~ FAMILY SITUATIONS...

It's the Madison Avenue approach. Everybody has their own little things...and then they throw them away.

~~Some of these people feel that~~ Whatever the great white father was about was a debacle. [We can't follow the old models or we'll meet the same disasters.]

AS WITH WOMEN MIMICING MEN AND MALE ROLES...

Those women are thoughtless. Many just don't know how to do something new.

~~IT REMINDS ME OF A BRAND OF FEMINISM THAT SAYS WOMEN SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO BE ARMY GENERALS AND MEN SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO BE TYPISTS AND NURSES...THOSE JOBS ARE SHITTY AND POLITICALLY,~~

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MISSING THE POINT...

The only model those women will ever know is the one the man has set up and they can never look past that. Now we get to see black people in positions that ~~xxxx~~ were shitty with white people in them. The exciting thing is that women can create totally new positions...

IT MAKES IS NICE TO BE A WRITER IN THAT SENSE BECAUSE YOU ARE IN THE MOST ANDROGYNOUS POSITION...GOOD ART WILL HAVE TO CROSS SEXUAL BOUNDARIES...

A writer sees in a way that distinguishes appearance from reality... appearance in the sense that the ordinary person sees things and is often stuck with what they see.

I have faith because I've been with enough good people so that I can sit here, relatively isolated and not blow my brains out. Once I was very very angry...

I WAS EXPECTING YOU TO BE POLITICALLY VEHEMENT...

I am but I'm just much more in control of it. Last year I had a job. My boss was black and he was a driver...he drove you all the time. And he had a problem...he couldn't fuck me and he couldn't fire me because I was too good. And later on, he didn't want to because he knew what a prize he had. I was working with ex-cons, people just out of the joint with no place to go, looking for jobs and housing. The project was supported by the federal government, which is kind of a boondoggle and a sophisticated version of slavery...they hired me out of desperation. They needed a nigger and they needed a woman and if they didn't get one, they'd lose that Title II money. When I finally found out why they really hired me, to save their asses, they said to one another, we got to get usa woman nigger here...I had so many pluses. So many minority people get hired like that and once affirmative action starts to happen, then they cut back the hiring. Or they find something wrong with the program.

But if I had kept up that pace of anger, I wouldn't be here now. I would have done something drastic, dumb, I know how cynics are made. Or anarchists.

LOOK, THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT EVEN HATES ANARCHISTS. LUCKILY IT'S NOT SUCH A BOUND MOVEMENT IDEOLOGICALLY THAT YOU CAN'T BE DIVERGENT...BUT STILL IT HAPPENS...I USED TO GO TO MEETINGS AND SOMETHING ABOUT THE SHERE POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE, THE SET-UP MADE MY NECK GO HOT...I GET OBNOXIOUS. I WANT TO CRACK JOKES. OR TELL LEWD STORIES.

I was an obedient child and that's how I grew up. I was involved in civil rights marches, and non-violent things. But I was at the corner of Whitehall and Mitchell in Atlanta. And one of those corners has a Woolworth's with a hot dog stand in it. They wouldn't allow black people to sit down there. Can you imagine

*Tokenism  
(Token woman)*

*Anger of the 60's  
dissipated?*

*Anger  
at racism*

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pll

I THOUGHT ATLANTA WAS SUPPOSED TO BE LIBERAL?

No no no. Atlanta is pretending to be liberal now, with a black mayor and Julian Bond. Black people in Atlanta own a lot. The city is segregated, but black people bought up stop...there's an affluence amongst black people that's more widespread than anyplace else in the United States.

AND WITH THAT, A CORRESPONDING CASTE SYSTEM ECONOMICALLY?

Sure. We've all learned our lessons. When we become rich blacks, then we treat poor blacks badly. I can remember how black kids in Harlem used to talk about Puerto Ricans...

ALWAYS SOMEBODY TO SCAPEGOAT...THE INDIANS AND THE CHICANOS DO THE SAME THING IN THE SOUTHWEST. ONLY IT'S A QUIET KIND OF RACISM.

You don't know it unless you know it. I know that kind.

I was involved in Martin Luther King and Gandhi subdoing...where you subdued all your anger and hostilities if somebody spat on you. And we sat down at that counter in Atlanta that day and a white guy threw a bowl of soup in my face. And there were four of us. I was shaking. ~~I'd never hated people.~~

IT MUST HAVE BEEN A SHOCKING EXPERIENCE. FOR ALL THE PROBLEMS OF HARLEM, STILL YOU CAN GO WHERE YOU WANT TO GO...

Look in Atlanta, we had second class books, we'd get rejects from across town in school with some of the pages torn out. I began to know the difference between the north and the south. It was pretty tough. After that I decided I couldn't be passive anymore. The first streaks of my consciousness were coming out. But even though I was getting angrier, there were a lot of people who saved me from getting a machete and lashing out...

WERE YOU INVOLVED WITH THE PANTHERS?

No. By the time I got to UCLA, the Panthers had been blown apart by the CIA and Ron Karenga. I had friends who belonged. Karenga had already done his thing and planted his infiltrators.

In my department at UCLA, there were all these old World War II colonels, the Phys Ed. Department. In high school, I had very humane and democratic teachers and instruction, but that was all gone at UCLA. One day I was walking across campus by Pauley Pavillion and thought, I've never seen a black face ~~in~~ ~~the program~~ behind the podium in two years, and in my history ~~class~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ class, I'd never heard of anybody except Jackie Robinson. You never study any ~~black~~ athletes... One day I just got fed up and I went into the Chairman's office and I said, how come there are no black people in this faculty? And he said, well, we don't have an opening. At least he didn't say there are no qualified ones. I had thought of getting him and two or three other of those anti-life dogs and put them

Racism  
at College



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I'm writing a book for women who want to dive...in addition to the mechanics of diving, I want to discuss the spiritual aspects of the ocean, the accepting of whatever primeval notions of humans...the feeling that's beyond deja vu..that the ocean is where we're from. Not in our particular physical state at the present, but our cells are from there...somehow.

I THINK IT'S A GENETIC MEMORY...

(SHOWS PICTURES OF PEACECORPS STUDENTS...~~BLACK~~~~AFRICANS~~ IN MONROVIA) ( TELLS STORIES OF HER TEAM)

When I was going on retreat, I had about \$2,000 that the Mother Superior had given me to buy uniforms for my team. I was on a motor bike and I drove over the ocean to look down on the ocean. I had my passport, all my papers, and \$2,000 in my wallet that I pinned on the back of the bike. The earthquake had just happened up there...when I got up to the top, I couldn't figure out what the hell had happened to my wallet. You know how you get this horrible feeling inside you...I went back down to the bottom of the hill, and walked into the resort where some guys were working and some Africans were standing around...this guy came up to me and said excuse me, in halting French, I have your wallet. It had all the money and stuff in it...I said thank you, can I give you something. He said, now no no, the reason he told me he didn't say he'd found it was that his boss would have thought that he stole it...

HOW DID YOU DECIDE ON THE PEACE CORPS?

When you're in Harlem and when you live on the 4th floor of a tenement house at 135 St. and 8th Ave and at night you have to walk over junkies going upstairs and in the morning you have to walk over them coming downstairs, the stench of urine, people coming up to you saying, I got to have this fix...there's a kind of desperation about what the hell I'm doing here and what is it that I want to do...

BUT WHY GO SO FAR AWAY AND LOOK FOR TROUBLE? WHY NOT VISTA?

I don't know.

DID YOU WANT TO MAKE THAT TOTAL ESCAPE?

You don't escape. One of the things that hastened my departure was somebody broke into my house twice on the same day. I had a police lock, a steel rod that goes down to the floor. They took the whole thing off the door.

~~The PeaceCorps recruiters did a bang up PR job. I have a book in the planning called Young Wheat, which talks about what the peace corps did, used young women as an exchange, like wheat. It's not an experience I wouldn't want to have. A black person going to Africa probably gets the best thing that could happen~~

Get photo of  
Cherry with  
Rita

Peace  
Corps  
(~~the~~ ~~the~~  
before collect)

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~~in their life...I might not have had the opportunity on my own.. but the way in which I was propagandized and the way it really was is two things. I was in for three years, still doing the Horatio Alger thing...there was so much pleading and asking that I stay till the project was done that I did. It was good for me. But in effect, when I got to Africa, I told the Peace Corps establishment to kiss my ass and I went to work on my own. They originally put me in this gestapo government school, where the kids have to line up in the morning and there was corporal punishment for the children who didn't conform...a tribal school. The oppression was too much. I just quit. Someone told me about St. Theresa's and at first I said, no, a Catholic school...but the kids there were so great and so good to me.~~

*How felt about Africa*

A LOT OF JEWS GO TO ISRAEL AND FIND THEY DON'T REALLY LIKE IT THERE...CAN'T RELATE TO ISRAELI LIFE AT ALL OR THE HARDSHIP... ALL THEIR LIVES THEY WANTED TO GO TO THE PROMISED LAND AND WHEN THEY DID, THEY DISCOVER HOW AMERICAN THEY ARE.

Well, it's different for blacks. When you go to Africa, you understand that you are in the arms of Mother Earth. When you look up, and in New York you never see the sky and in Atlanta it's not worth your while to look, when I saw the land in Africa, I knew there was something perfect and untouched...I'm not even talking about the people.

I was searching, not in the way of Alex Haley and his commercial search for his roots, I saw my mother's face and my father's face, it shocked me, I knew racially and tribally I was in the right place.

WHEN YOU DON'T SEE ANYBODY WHO LOOKS LIKE YOU, YOU WONDER WHERE THE HELL YOU COME FROM...

Once you've been technologically oriented, it takes a tremendous amount of clawing off your ethnocentric nuances, you are a victim of the larger culture. As long as I kept my mouth closed, and didn't drive a jeep or something like that, people didn't know I was any different. Spiritually I knew where my homeland was, but technologically, I'd been oriented toward somewhere else. That gap you can never bridge, I don't think. I had not been raised in a tribal way. ~~There's a difference between being interested and being fascinated.~~ There's a whole sisterhood, a Sandee (?) Society, where you get educated into the tribes ways. Rites of passage. We don't have anything like that here. I am very ceremonious, but I can't relate to what's considered ceremony in America.

~~THE COUNTER CULTURE DID TRY TO CREATE A SENSE OF CEREMONY...THOUGH MOST OF IT WAS BORROWED FROM OTHER CULTURES...~~

The notion of ~~women coming together~~, the older women telling you what it's all about...that continuum of life...it's something we need.

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HOW WERE YOU TREATED IN AFRICA?

Special. I accepted that. It was sort of like being in a fish bowl. I was a curiosity. ~~But you always find those people who you break through to...those are the people that make you cry when you leave...they are few and precious.~~

*Racism*  
I had no problem with culture shock when I was there, but it happened when I came home. It was the issue of looking back at my country, after having another perspective. [This is the only country that teaches you you're equal ~~when you're not~~ and shows you you're not.]

BUT THAT'S WHAT AMERICANS BASED ON...THE IDEALISM OF EQUALITY, EVEN IF IT ISN'T TRUE. OTHER COUNTRIES DON'T EVEN TEACH YOU YOU'RE EQUAL, THEY DON'T HAVE SUCH PRETENSIONS IN SAY, LATIN AMERICA. YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE AND YOU STAY THERE.

*The 60's*  
Yes, that way you don't have the frustration of trying to get out.

ARE THE EMERGING BLACK AFRICAN NATIONS MORE REALISTIC IN THEIR DEMOCRACY? OR PERHAPS, DO THEY PRACTICE A PURER FORM OF DEMOCRACY?

Unfortunately, many of the anti-life dogs, the dictators have been trained by the CIA. Many of the dictators, Francois DuValier, Idi Amin, they went to school here. These folks have no notion of personhood or freedom or choice. One of the most frustrating things a young person has to live up to, the notion that a man's reach should exceed his grasp, they taught me that shit in 7th grade...but really, the government will tell you, in a place where people hate free spirits, who to fuck, who you can't fuck, which toilet paper you should use, if you let them.

[The moment you start saying this is my body and I will do with it what I please, then the government is in trouble.

[IT SEEMS TO ME THAT PATERNALISTIC CONTROL COMES FROM A VERY NEGATIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS HUMAN WORTH...SOMETHING SIMILAR TO ORIGINAL SIN. SINCE YOU'RE ALREADY NO GOOD, YOU NEED SOMEBODY TO PUT THE CLAMPS ON YOU AND TAKE CARE OF YOU. WHAT'S HAPPENED IN THE 60's and the 70's IS A MASS REVOLT AGAINST THAT ATTITUDE.

When people started to grow beards and hair, I think that was the most threatening thing to the government. People weren't asking permission to do something with their bodies. Once you start with your body, you're on your way.

*→*  
WHAT HAPPENED THAT YOU BROKE THE OBEDIENCE CHAIN YOU DESCRIBED YOU HAD IN SCHOOL?

I fyou grow up with a certain moral code and you break it, it causes you a lot of anxiety and pain. Then you have to question why it was you were following the code in the first place. I don't know any single thing that made me break the code. But I became aware that I had the power to make observations about what went on around me. And I saw the contradictions of

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*Career  
Change*

what had been taught me. What got me to realize that the early bird doesn't necessarily get the worm, I don't know.

HOW COME YOU JUST DECIDED TO SAY NO TO TEACHING? TO YOUR CAREER?  
AND YES TO WRITING?

Whatever I got involved in, I always did a good job. Administrators love that kind of shit and they push you and give you certificates for accomplishment...I observed, somewhere a long the line that I was always fulfilling other people's notions of what I should do. When you get strokes, it's difficult to know what you really want. Whether it's your idea or theirs. I had a lot of success teaching and I knew I was good, energetic...but I also wanted to write and never had the time. It was what I was happiest at.

DID YOU WRITE WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER?

I did but it wasn't serious. I knew I wanted to write when I was out of high school, but there was nothing there to encourage it. I didn't know any writers.

YOU HAD LOTS OF MATERIALSXXX...

Yeah.

*element school in Oakland*

When I was teaching, I might as well have brought my kids home with me, they were dancing around in my head all night. And the schools break kids and fuck them up, short of getting a tommy gun and bringing the whole thing down, I can't see any hope for the system. I decided I didn't want to sacrifice my life.

~~YOU WERE TEACHING HIGH SCHOOL?~~

~~No, 54th Avenue Elementary School in Oakland. I could have taught anything I wanted. Look when they find a good nigger, you can do anything you want, you know. There are a lot of black people who are angry and don't want to deal with the schools...they see the corruption.~~

PERSONALLY, I GET EXCITED WHEN I HEAR THE KIDS ARE BURNING THE SCHOOLS DOWN AND THE TEACHERS ARE STRIKING. IT'S A GOOD SIGN. ~~XXXXXXXX~~ THE GREAT EDUCATIONAL THINKER, IVAN ILLYCH AND THE OTHER, PABLO FREERE, BOTH OF THEM RADICAL, MARXISTS, AGAINST INSTITUTIONS...I DON'T BELIEVE IN INVOLUNTARY SERVITUDE. THAT'S WHY I LEFT. THE MACHINERY IS TOO INTRICATE AND IT'S PART OF THE MADISON AVENUE GRIP ON THE COUNTRY.

There's no way I'd let a child of mine go to public schools.

OF COURSE, PEOPLE ALWAYS WILL ASK US, WELL, IF IT WAS SO BAD, HOW COME YOU TURNED OUT SO GOOD?

I don't know. The whole thrust of my education at UCLA was to teach you contempt for yourself. I remember freshman English, the great sifting pot of the university, 30 of us sitting there shaking scared. The teacher came into the room, he was some

*College  
Racism*

CHERRY JACKSON

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in the toilet and threaten them just to get the publicity. And say, you have got to change your ways. That's the only way you can bring about change. Do something as dramatic as that.

YOU CAN'T JUST ASK FOR IT, YOU HAVE TO DEMAND IT...  
YOU HAVE TO GO EVEN FARTHER THAN YOU WANT TO...

There ~~was~~ ~~xxxx~~ ~~were~~ three of us, only three blacks in the department. There was only  $\frac{1}{2}$  of 1 percent black students enrolled at UCLA.

A lot of people were victimized by the 50's and stayed there. There is a point in your life where you must grow, and if you don't, you have so much trouble trying to grow later on. It's like the difference between learning to ride a bike when you're eight years old or waiting until you're 27. A lot of people should have developed their consciousnesses in the 50's, and now they're kind of stuck. I'm glad for the 60's and that it happened.

ISN'T THAT LIKE PERSONAL GROWTH, NOT JUST IN THE SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AREA, BUT HOW WE MUST BREAK AWAY, AT CERTAIN JUNCTURES IN OUR LIFE... WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF GROWING PAINS? WHERE DO YOU GET THOSE SIGNALS AND EITHER YOU PAY ATTENTION OR YOU DON'T?

I pay attention, believe me. There was a time, for instance, when I was a physical ball of energy, I ran track, I played ball, swam, worked and come home totally exhausted and go to sleep. And get up the next day and do it again. There was a point in my life when I immersed myself in work, when I was in Africa... I was in charge of planning and carrying out an athletic program that was to be certified by the Ministry of Education. In the Peace Corps. I had a friend at that school who taught me how to be quiet and how to meditate. I kept waiting for her to tell me about Catholicism, I was ready to fight her...but she taught me about meditation. I was not an introspective person because I was always doing physical things. I got sick at one point... and fatigued...so I went to the seashore in Senegal to a retreat house. And used the knowledge my friend had given me to meditate. That was when I started to pay attention, real attention to growing. I was forced to pay attention. I was changing from this diesel engine...It was the place, the specialness of the ocean. I learned to dive very early on...I love the ocean. I have more than 2000 hours on the bottom of the ocean...but it's not a physicalness after the plunge...I go down for the ~~xxx~~ spiritual..the ocean is one force you ask permission to go to. And you must know the rules first. You can never fight the ocean.

When I first started diving, I used to take things out of the ocean...everything from lobster to garbage fish. The bigger your bag, the more successful your dive. But after some time, I stopped. I figure that was my father coming out, the killing part. Fish trust you so completely, as anthropomorphic as that sounds.

Spiritual  
reverence  
for the  
physical  
world

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and I could have done it more succinctly. I took the criticism. I won't do it with my poems, because my poems come from my gut. My fiction comes from my heart and my brain. The poems are just twisted out of me. Which is why I said, I'm getting rid of the demons and don't need to write poetry anymore. Somebody said to me, about the poem the brown paper sack, don't you mean brown paper bag, I said no. They always want to fix it up for you. You gotta do it yourself. People who want you to fix it up so it tantalizes or pleases them, or rhymes in the right place...that means you lose perspective and write for them. I don't write my poetry to please people. I write fiction, I hope, to communicate. I don't want to seal my poetry, if I did, I'd probably change it.

I'm just learning the tools...this is my first year, you know. I'm not interested in having a reputation as a poet. Poetry helps heal me. I want to be a fiction writer. My poetry is too personal to peddle.

My ego is healthy...I can take criticism and apply it.

DOES THAT COME FROM COMPETITION IN SPORTS?

I think so. In sports, I very seldom lost or got rejected.

JUST WAIT IN WRITING!

I know. I think the worst <sup>feeling</sup> thing in the whole world is to be rejected by another person. I haven't seriously ~~reje~~ been rejected in my life time. When you start writing, you get it thrown in your face.

THIS IS THE REJECTION YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR ALL YOUR LIFE?

I know it's gonna hurt.

YOU BEGIN TO LOOK AT THE MAILBOX WITH A SNICKERING, JAUNDICED EYE. YOU WANT THE MAIL TO COME AND THEN YOU WISH IT HADN'T. NO FUN.

IS IT EASIER TO CAPTURE DIALECT AND GESTURE IN DRAMA FOR YOU? IF YOU FEEL LIKE IT'S NEVER BEEN REPRESENTED WELL, IS DRAMA A BETTER MEDIUM FOR YOU?

It's hard to write for the stage. I used this dialect because of something that was going on in my head. My play is symbolic. It has very little to do with what is said. I saw it succeed when it was produced. But if I were going to be a playwright, I would not write in dialect. Because it's too hard and it doesn't deal with contemporary problems. What I was attacking in this play was the problem of church and state, where the church is the last black bastion that white people can't corrupt, but someone have done it...how people sell themselves and rip each other off with dope and prostitution. I was dealing with

son of some famous poet or playwright. He scribbled something on the board that said, write me three paragraphs concerning one of these historical figures. He put down, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln and somebody else. This was when I was in my real black period, getting in touch with my feelings. I took Lincoln, right, and he had these little subtitles under each name that he wanted you deal with, like under Lincoln, reconstruction, freed the slaves. So I said, I wrote down, "Lincoln ain't never did nothing for ~~xxxxxxx~~ black folks. If he did, I ain't heard nothing about it and I don't know nothing about it." And I signed my name to it. The next day, he said, Cherry Jackson, I'd like to see you at the end of class. And so at the end of the class, he said, this is a basic English course, and if you want to stay in it, I would advise you to write English. Well, I swallowed all the piss and vinegar I thought I had, and said OK.

Later, in the class, I wrote a paper on language and how its used as a political tool. My thesis was that institutions, particularly white teachers, want to white wash your language, because it's so vehement and it expresses the pain you have and they can't deal with it. Since we have no money, no land, no material hold, the only thing left to us is our angry voices. He gave me an A on the paper. How frustrating it is when you meet people who insist on calling ~~shit~~ something else. This cat died in my neighborhood and this women said to me, they put the cat to sleep.

*Language  
Euphemism*

OH YEAH, MY NEIGHBOR TELLS ME ABOUT HOW THE CATS GO TO THE BATHROOM IN HER SWISS CHARD PATCH...

I remember Eldridge Cleaver came to talk one time at UCLA. It was the final liberation of the word fuck. There were a lot of students, right during the hot time, and he went through his sermon and at the end he said, fuck Reagan, and somebody from the audience said, fuck Reagan, and another person said fuck Reagan and pretty soon the whole audience was saying fuck. All those white kids who'd never been able to say fuck finally got the chance and get unraveled. IT was all right.

DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE TO TALK DIFFERENTLY AROUND WHITE PEOPLE?

I talk the same all the time. ~~Serious~~ I try to remain whoever it is that I am. Sometimes you want to get into old vernacular street talk, people do what they call niggerese, when they want to lord it over somebody who might ~~not~~ know what they're talking about.

*a play*  
YOU WRITE WITH DIALECTS...

Yes, that's very conscious. The dialect I used in the play is hard. I'll never write another play with dialect in it. Dialect is just that. If you walk down Filmore Street, there might be a particular black tone to what people are saying, but it's more or less the rhythm of how they're saying it, the selection of vocabulary. It isn't dialect in the way that Dunbar or Langston Hughes did it. It's hard work to do, it's harder than romanization. Black dialect historically...like the poem by Dunbar called "Lamenday" (?), "go way and quit dat noise Miss

Lucy". Well, that's the old fashioned kind of dialect he specialized in. Like Walt Whitman created words. Dunbar created alot of that dialect. You take a black person who lives anywhere and they can't read that shit. You can only read that stuff by discipline. It doesn't have anything to do with they way theytalk. ~~xButxxxx~~ ~~andxxxxxxx~~ The dialect really doesn't exist. It's just for effect on the page. It's just like how science has to create a language to describe "laser". There's nothing that exists to describe it. Chinese books use English words to describe certain technological items.

The language on the page isn't flexible enough to capture the rhythm with which people speak. When you listen to a free flowing person, <sup>Written</sup> English puts limitations on expressing gesture and eyebrow raising and all those body movements.

~~THERExxx~~ There's a strain in me that ~~gf~~ feels angry about what English did to black people.

MAYBE YOU FEEL THAT BECAUSE ENGLISH WASN'T THE NATIVE LANGUAGE... THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE WAS LOST TO BLACK PEOPLE FROM AFRICA.

You take away the land, you take away the language, you take away the culture. No wonder we feel at loss.

I REmember I had this old frozen ass English teacher in high school and I loved to write poetry when I was young. I wrote about this tree, it had all kinds of human emotions, she gave me the paper back and said, you NEVER describe trees that way with human characteristics.

DIDN'T SHE KNOW ABOUT PERSONIFICATION?

No they didn't teach her that when she went to Normal School, or wherever the hell she went. I kept that peem somewhere and hid it. I liked it so much, it said exactly what I wanted to say.

YOU WERE LUCKY YOU HAD THECOURAGE...OTHERS MIGHT NEVER HAVE WRITTEN ANOTHER POEM. I HAD AN ART TEACHER IN THE 7TH GRADE, WHO SMELLED BAD AND ALWAYS HAD WHISKERS AND HE TOLD ME NEVER TO TAKE ANOTHER ART CLASS AGAIN BECAUSE I COULDN'T MASTER PERSPECTIVE.

I never change mypoetry for anyone. Poets don't take criticism from a lot of folk. If I come to terms with a poem that I've written and put it away and six weeks later, I don't like it, I tear it up. But once I capture what I want to say, then no power on earth can move me to change it. This one editor told me to change a tense, she was a grammarian. The poem said exactly what I wanted to say. I didn't publish it.

WOULD YOU FEEL THE SAME ABOUT A PROSE WORK?

With prose, I'll revise all day and bury the ashes. I went into my teacher the other day, with 8 pages and he said tear up 7. But he told me what was wrong with the work. It wasan exercise



*Theatre* a whole lot of big things as a new writer, in a one act play. The dialect is really a stick figure. I wanted the first line that Fletcher spoke to tell people exactly who he was. That stuck him so far in that hole that he could never get out again. The theatre in the black community has a long history, it is a political tool. There's nothing more entertaining than a crisis in your life. It's hogwash to go to the theatre to forget.

THE ORIGINAL PURPOSE OF THE THEATRE, WITH TRAGEDY ANYWAY, WAS TO INFORM AND TO PROVIDE CATHARSIS. YOU DIDN'T GO TO FORGET, YOU WENT TO GET IT DRAGGED OUT OF YOU...

The more we are aware, the less we can be manipulated. And the theatre is one of the loudest mouths in the community.

If I wrote for the contemporary stage, I would do street talk, rather than dialect. It's so succinct. One of the things that Black people have not had the time to do is become euphemistic. They fuck it and you fuck it.

NO WAY TO CALL IT BUT WHAT IT IS...IT'S A LUXURY, ISN'T IT?

It's a luxury that we can't afford to give up. IF we start cleaning up our act in order to get these jobs we're supposed to get, we have to be careful not to lose that.

I'D LIKE TO SEE SOMEBODY MAKE WHITE DIALECT MORE TO THE POINT, CLEAN IT UP OF ITS EUPHEMISMS, YOU KNOW.

*Language* A lot of white people were trying to pick up on black lingo. Popular songs. People do recognize that there is a richness in the other. My first notion of a movie script was to throw some light on anthropological study. I have ambivalent feelings about anthropologist...two of them got their Phd's on my family. Studying my family. From Columbia.

THAT'S WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT THE NAVAJO FAMILY...MOTHER, FATHER, FOUR CHILDREN AND AN ANTHROPOLOGIST. THEY'RE THE MOST STUDIED PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY.

*Play* The data collectors. The reasons I do a lot of things are because that's where my instincts are. This play comes out of what I saw, I was peddling by this church on Golden Gate and Lyons, Solid Rock Baptist Church, all these people were standing on the street in a line, black folk, white, folk, chinese, dogs, and I said, I know I haven't been to a church in a long time, but I know it didn't get so good that people go to church in the middle of the week in the day like this. I saw this guy with a big magnum on, a guard, he said get in back of the line. There was another couple of guys behind a bullet proof glass. I said, what's happening, he said, that's the food stamp place. Food stamps. Wow.

CHERRY JACKSON  
2nd interview

*History*  
WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU CAN'T GET STARTED IN YOUR WRITING?

I clean my nails. That's when I know I've sat down too quickly and can't do anything yet.

WHEN DO YOU WRITE?

Mostly my best writing happens between 4 in the morning until 2 in the afternoon...that comes from training.

I look at the typewriter, then I push it aside, then I get a pad, then I put my elbows on the table, then I lean on my elbows. I actually have to physically go through all these routines before I can start working. Very seldom can I jump out of bed and jump into the typewriter. I browse around in my mind. Sometimes I just linger in that in between state between dreaming and sleeping and waking...if I can let myself go, a lot of good ideas come at that time. Sometimes I can just go get something to drink and come down here and let the ideas flow.

I know I've got a solid idea when it keeps coming back...that's when I know I've got to do the work on it.

DID THE IDEA FOR THE PLAY YOU WROTE HAPPEN THAT WAY?

*Anger  
Drama  
Blow*  
The play was a kind of premonition. When I saw the scene at the church, I knew at once that somebody was going to get it in that church. Then I went to talk to a buddy about it...it was she who called me about six weeks later and told me to buy a paper. When we first talked about it, I was really emotional and she picked that up. Inevitably I had to do something about it...I didn't know what form it would take, I had to decide which medium I was going to use to express my anger. Was I going to do an essay, or a play, was I going to go get a gun? The form came out of my feeling that the legitimate theatre is the most acute way of communicating in the community.

A POEM OR A SHORT STORY WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN SO PUBLIC...

Or critical to me. The play was the toughest thing to do. It took me a year to do it. Then it was produced twice in Berkeley. It will also be read in the community where it took place...the Filmore. I don't ever want to write anything for the theatre again unless that's all I'm doing. I was working 12, 14 hours a day then... When I finished that play, I was glad to get rid of it. When it was produced, people asked me when I was going to do another one. I don't know when I can. The theatre demands so much. It's like being on a bronco, you never know if you're going to be aboard when you come down and you're holding on.

I did three revisions of that play. When I first finished it, I took it to the liquor store in that community. I gave it to ordinary people to see what they would say. I gave it to an 80 year old lady. When I went to pick it up, I said what did you think?



She said it frightened her. I never thought about that. Certain people grow up with notions about death and death stories scare them.

THIS PLAY TAKES PLACE IN THE EMBALMING ROOM OF A MORTUARY. IT'S A DIALOG BETWEEN A DEAD MAN AND A FRIEND WHO COMES TO PAY THE DEAD MAN HOMAGE. THE DEAD MAN COMES TO LIFE. YOU HAVE TO SUSPEND THE FEELING THAT THE CONVERSATION IS ACTUALLY IN THAT ROOM IN ORDER TO GET INVOLVED IN THE ISSUES THEY DISCUSS.

I worked hard on that scene. That's where the play either lives or dies.

YOU HAVE A GREAT SENSE OF COMIC RELIEF. AT ONE POINT, THE DEAD MAN BECOMES VERY AGGRESSIVE IN HIS TALK AFTER BEING RATHER MATTER OF FACT. HIS FRIEND SAYS, ARE YOU OK? IT WAS PERFECT. AND FUNNY TO ASK A DEAD MAN IF HE'S OK.

That scene had to do with black men going off to war. It doesn't have to stop with Vietnam. It could happen in Africa. The U.S. could be sending black men to Africa!

WE WERE TALKING ABOUT DIALECT...FOR A GOOD PART OF THE PLAY, ONE OF THE CHARACTERS, TYRONE, THE DEAD MAN, DOESN'T SPEAK IN BLACK DIALECT PARTICULARLY. HE HAS THIS INSIGHT INTO WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE STREETS AND YET...

Tyrone has a fundamental knowledge before he gets involved in the church, but he ultimately gets his power when the bullet hit him. When that magnum goes through his chest, that's when he becomes omnipotent, that's when he knows he's fallen as the patsy, for the master. He was cool in the streets, he was cool with the women, he didn't use dope, but he didn't have the power to stay away from trouble...all the trophies in the master's house ain't worth shit, they're all traps.

THE PLAY EVEN TOUCHES ON MOTHERHOOD...THERE'S A KIND OF FUTILITY IN SPITE OF THE FACT THAT TYRONE'S MOTHER HAS DECKED HIM OUT IN A SILK SUIT ...

I deal with the overprotective mother. She runs to the city, but the political forces are ~~more~~ so much more acute than she's used to, ~~the~~ ~~is~~ alienated from his mother, she has no idea of the things he sees going on, he has mobility and he's out in the streets. She wants her children to be safe, but the children can not be saved by the mother, because she has no power in that society. All she can do is indulge them.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING <sup>currently</sup> ON NOW?

I'm <sup>been</sup> working on a ~~90-minute~~ television plays I'm putting together a folio of television and screen plays I can give to my agent for sale. I'm just learning the tools. I can tell the story, but TV is a whole technology you have to work with.

WON'T YOU HAVE TO WHITE WASH YOUR LANGUAGE FOR TV?

On cable television, you are allowed to be an adult writer and talk about adult themes. I can tell a story without using a four letter

word, but sometimes I feel like using some of the obscenity I see inherent in something. An obscene situation calls for obscene language. ~~Instead of~~ saying "I grew up in the inner city". I grew up on the reservation. Shit. ~~I'd like to go to the inner city.~~  
*What the hell is*

I feel ~~I can reach a larger audience to say what I have to say.~~  
~~I know if I deal with commercial TV, I'll have to prostitute myself.~~  
 I know that. There are certain themes ~~they~~ <sup>that</sup> will not deal with. The theme that I'm working on now concerns a man, who in 1976, got mugged by a group of anti-bussing demonstrators. The man was a totally upstanding citizen, he just happened to be black and they mugged his ass and almost killed him. Now that's a true story. All the little things that I'm sprinkling in are fictional. I think that's network material. I would never spend my time ~~knowing~~ knowing these things out if I thought people wouldn't read them.  
 [ The only reason I write is because I believe somebody will read it.

*Why Write*  
 I don't get very high preaching...this play is about as high as I've gotten. When you start preaching, people soon lose interest. But I have something to say and I think that PBS and cable television and some commercial television will go for it. People are changing.

*Do you think TV is going to change?*  
 IS CONSCIOUSNESS CHANGING?

*There will be more critique on noncommercial TV*  
 Yes. People are tired of the pablum they get. There's nothing real on television. When I first started looking at TV as a tool, to see how scenes are made, the drama is, to see how commercials are treated, how old people, women are treated. When I look at Norman Lear's <sup>male</sup> shit, he's the only guy I know who can put five or six black characters on one set and all together they won't equal one black man. The people who are writing aren't interested in presenting a real person. I'm not talking about a super-nigger or an uncle Tom.

DOESN'T HE EMPLOY BLACK WRITERS? WHAT ARE THEY DOING?

*Maybe one or two.*  
 I think they're making money. It's so difficult to get into a writing stable as a paid staff writer, once you get in there, you don't rock the boat. One of the things that black people are famous for, is holding other black people who they think are in positions of power, which is seldom a position of power, holding them responsible for the entire race. A black person will get a position. When he starts selling out, black people are enraged. They think he ought to be upright, but it's not real. People get very disappointed. But if that person doesn't compromise and do what he's supposed to do, he'll be on the streets. Writers have to do that.

ISN'T THAT NAIVETE ABOUT THE NATURE OF POWER?

Yes. When we see a black person who does get a break, people will tend to identify every black person with somebody like Martin Luther King, say. White people will identify all black people with the one who's made it. By no means can all black people be lumped like that.

Generally when you show up, people assume that you're ignorant. As a writer, that might be your best defense. Particularly as a black woman. Let people assume that you don't know anything but get your foot in the door. But you know what you're up to.

*age*  
*believed while*  
I'm preparing myself. I had to make this decision that writing was going to be my life. Whatever opportunity comes along, I'll be able to direct it. I don't like other people setting a pace for me. I'm in no hurry. I like to set my own pace.

I don't view success as having money. If I did, it'd be a lot easier than writing.

I feel good about my decision. I feel secure about my life. The people who love me don't care about how much gold I have.

DID THAT SECURITY ENABLE YOU TO MAKE THE DECISION TO WRITE?

That security enabled me to say I'm gonna do what it is that calls me. It doesn't mean that I didn't have problems with somebody who had some images of who I was... But I've always taken care of myself and had a sense of being in control of me. Even as a child, I felt in control of my environment, I could come and go as I wanted.

DO YOU FEEL IN CONTROL OF YOUR <sup>Writing</sup> PROSE?

When I'm writing, when I'm in control is when I can just let myself flow, when I can let my imagination go...I feel secure enough to start a story and not know where it's going, so that I can grow in the characters, and follow them along whatever path they take until they come to a boulevard and all of us converge. I feel confident enough so that when I write myself into a corner, I can write my way out.

IT'S THE CHARACTERS THAT CAN GET YOU OUT...

Mostly I feel confident that there's a public out there who'll want to read my work.

My teacher gave me a Dashiell Hammett book. I turned in an outline to him about something I was going to write. He said, I see some hostility and resentment in this, how much ~~am~~ of that do you have in you. I said, I got so much in me I can't begin to tell you. So he said, listen, I want you to write me a story. Anybody you resent, you just rip them off. I said, are you crazy? I never liked murder mysteries. But I remember that one of my favorite writers growing up was Poe. So I said, maybe I'm not so devoid of this experience after all. What am I going to do to exorcise all of this hostility. I kind of thought of three or four rats in my life. I thought, how can I get rid of these guys in a real interesting way, and really show that the assholes don't deserve to be living anyway. I have four men going in different locales at the same time. Somebody asked me, why don't you use women. I said, I don't hate any women to the point where I want to rip them off. That's because there haven't been that many in my life and the ones who are have been more or less constructive. These four characters are going to manifest themselves in a play, a murder mystery. There will be this

...through the house that evening of the day when they were...  
...of the village...  
...of the village...

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woman who'll figure out ways to get rid of these guys.

YOU WONDER IF AGATHA CHRISTIE DIDN'T HAVE THAT IN MIND!

The idea gives a woman a dynamic role to play, she'll be disguising herself in many different ways.

A PIECE that I'm working on now, My Father, My Son...will say something about racism, about the losing of that innocence that you feel as a child, the transition from adolescence...it's really about the time of life when you begin to know that your parents aren't invincible. The son realizes that his father is a mortal being, not a paragon of virtue. This is for television.

As a child I never expressed rage. When I came to San Francisco, I once saw a therapist...we talked about the resentment I had about my father. Every six months he starts trotting back in my dreams. We got it out into a playing field, beyond that trap door I kept throwing it in. You're never supposed to express rage.

SURELY NOT A DAUGHTER AGAINST A FATHER...

This last exercise is gonna do it.

One of the characters is my diving instructor who didn't like women, especially black women, who thought that the only competent diver had to be a tall blond Swedish type. I'm gonna get him good... we gonna have an underwater chase scene there...

A LOT OF US BURY OUR CREATIVITY UNDER THE PEOPLE WHO FORCED US TO THINK NEGATIVELY...

One of the characters is going to be my physiology teacher, who taught a course out of a programmed text, there were only 3 in the library, a room that sat 50 people and 150 would show up. I've had teachers who've understood how bludgeoned to death students are, but this one had no humanity. He didn't want to deal with any undergraduate, the ~~TX~~ did that shit.

Women are an endangered species. Women are just being born into their consciousness. [Men who have fashioned ~~the world~~ the world so far find themselves in a strange position, they don't know what to do about women ~~are~~ who are making noises. They're still pointing, but we're not going in that direction anymore. We're trying to figure out which direction we can go. When you're just starting, you may take the wrong path, like women following men. and their lust for power, imitation...the beacons are out there and some women chose those ways because they don't see an alternative.]

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Competition

The moment a competitor enters the field...like in sports, we'd always say of a weak team, no competition. But when a woman comes on to the scene with some authority, the claws of the competitors



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get long and sharp. And then, the woman might not be in the same class. If they can't categorize you, then you're really in trouble. They can make you sound esoteric, when you're really beyond what they're all about. What fool can identify a genius. If you don't seem to be dropping handkerchiefs around them or want to get involved in vaginal politics, and you're good at what it is you're doing, then they don't know what to do with you.

First they try to fuck you. If that doesn't work, then they'll fuck you over. If they can't get away with that, then they'll co-opt you. The white establishment does that with black people. Give 'em an office in the back room.

I give my ego to very few people. I don't ask permission or opinions ~~from~~ from very many people. The first critical acclaim I got for my play was from a man who smothered me with praises. You know, if you have some kind of grip on your work, you know when you've done well.

DO YOU COME ACROSS OTHER WRITERS WHO ARE JEALOUS?

Yes. There was a guy in my class who said he didn't want to read a piece because he was afraid somebody would steal it. But when you get up there in the thin air, where all the big boys are... you have to look around and see who it is that's doing what. Great people don't deal that way, they don't have time to be jealous. Jealousy comes from frustration.

The white males are the lawgivers, as few of them as are in power. And even the ones who don't have any laws to give get the message that they're supposed to. Whatever happens, they have to make a commentary on it. Those are the guys who are paid as critics whether they have any critical ability or not.

mp | Once a woman produces something that people can see, once she can bid and compete, she has ammunition.