



ALICE WALKER AND MARGO JEFFERSON: A CONVERSATION

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening and welcome to the New York Public Library. I'm the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, now known as Live from the New York Public Library. It used to be known as PEP, but that sounded as though it was suffering from stomach disease. I do have some pep, but I think that Live works better. The goal of the program here is quite simply to make the lions roar. As you know, we have some magnificent lions in front of the Library, and one way I like to talk about the program we're doing here is how do you make a heavy institution such as this one dance, and I think one of the ways of making it dance is to invite Alice Walker and Margo Jefferson. **(applause)**

I recommend that all of you join our email list so that you can get free tickets to our remaining events of this season, of which there is only one. Michael Kimmelman will be speaking next week. Michael Kimmelman as you know is a chief art critic of the *New York Times*. He will be talking about the dilemma of the new, but I'm extending that offer until next season, when we have the great pleasure of welcoming Bernard-Henri Lévy, a French philosopher, with Tina Brown and someone else I can't yet name but of great importance. So I invite you both to the last evening, next week, and to opening night next year on the 26th of January. I should also say that Alice Walker will be signing books after this event, after this conversation, and we will also have a short period of Q and A, and I would like to stress that, in my experience of ten years of doing these kind of public programs, a question can usually be asked in about fifty-two seconds, or fifty-eight seconds, so make it a real question rather than a statement.

On the eve of the opening night at the Broadway theater of the new musical of *The Color Purple*, it gives me great pleasure, of course, tonight to welcome to the New York Public Library not only one but two Pulitzer Prize winners. Margo Jefferson is critic at large—I would love to have that title, I mean, critic at large, I mean it's just fantastic. **(laughter)** You're able to criticize *everything*. It must be such a pleasure. Maybe when I grow up, I can become a critic at large. Now I'm just a critic, but at large—well enough of that joke—for the *New York Times*.

MARGO JEFFERSON: It's their terminology. It's *Times* terminology, not mine.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think we should have a conversation about that. Margo Jefferson is the forthcoming author of a book on Michael Jordan—Michael Jackson—called *On Michael*

Jackson, forgive me for that mistake, forgive me for that mistake. And I read a preview, review from *Publishers Weekly* that says that “this slim, smart volume of cultural analysis may remind readers of Susan Sontag’s early brilliant essays on pop culture.” I can’t wait to read it, my mistake, again, please forgive me, it was Michael Jackson.

And Alice Walker, the beloved Alice Walker, author of *The Temple of My Familiar*, *By the Light of My Father’s Smile*, *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down*, and of course *The Color Purple*. I asked Margo Jefferson to give me an idea of what she might be talking about tonight with Alice Walker, and this is what she wrote, and I think it’s quite brilliant: “Alice Walker has lived many lives, as poet, novelist, and essayist, as civil rights fighter and womanist, as Southerner, Northerner, and traveler. She has been much praised and sometimes much attacked. Even as *The Color Purple* has made its way from book to film to Broadway, other books and stories of hers are being censored by school boards. I want our conversation to explore these lives, how they have taken shape and direction through the years and how they go on changing.” It gives me great pleasure, and it’s an honor, to welcome Margo Jefferson and Alice Walker to the New York Public Library.

(applause)

MARGO JEFFERSON: Do you remember the first things you ever wrote, first words, first poem?

ALICE WALKER: No. **(laughter)**

MARGO JEFFERSON: Do you remember why you wrote it, or why you started to write?

ALICE WALKER: I think I started to write because I was in love with the feel of pen on paper, or pencil on paper, and that it was something that I could do in solitude, and it was something that seemed to feed me as a little child.

MARGO JEFFERSON: You were the youngest of eight.

ALICE WALKER: I was the youngest of eight.

MARGO JEFFERSON: So solitude—

ALICE WALKER: Was hard to find. **(laughter)** And very much something I *loved*.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And where did you find—where did you write? Where did you go off?

ALICE WALKER: I went off behind the house. Well, actually, there's a story that my mother told. She said that when I was crawling, she would look for me, because apparently, you know, I had a way of getting away from them, and she would look for me, and I would have crawled to the back of the house and I would be writing in the sand with a twig or in the margins of a Sears, Roebuck catalog, and I think she said that that was, as far as she was concerned, that was my beginning as a writer.

MARGO JEFFERSON: So she always took note of it.

ALICE WALKER: Well, I think she took note of it fifty years later, you know. **(laughter)**

MARGO JEFFERSON: I think she *had* to take note of it fifty years later.

ALICE WALKER: It wasn't that way, she wasn't—

MARGO JEFFERSON: You mean, she wasn't, "Oh, my daughter,"

ALICE WALKER: No, no, no, no, this was not the kind of family, actually, where there was that kind of thing happening a lot. Although my sister took notice, one of my sisters took notice, and *that* was enough, and my teachers took notice, and, as you know, you just need one person to *notice* that you're doing something and to say, "My goodness, that's wonderful, that's different, that's whatever," but at least they notice.

MARGO JEFFERSON: I have to say, it took you as many years to notice your mother's garden as a form of art, right, in a sense?

ALICE WALKER: Well, in a sense, it took me a long time to really get it, to really get—

MARGO JEFFERSON: Let me just go back. Alice grew up in Eatonton. I always want to call it Eatonville because of Hurston—

ALICE WALKER: I know, Zora.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Georgia, on a farm. All right, so your mother and her garden.

ALICE WALKER: Well, my mother had this amazing ability to grow anything, and in fact, she'd also *can* anything and my sister says this, my sister says, "anything that could grow or that, you know, could walk around, my mother could put it in a jar," meaning, you know, she could... **(laughter)** But she had this amazing ability and so her garden was something that was a work of art, and I have relatives here tonight, who I'm so happy they're here, because they remember this garden. They may not remember it in all the ways that I did growing up, but it was such a sanctuary, and I saw that when my mother, having worked in some other woman's kitchen all day, or worked in the dairy with my father all day, or worked in the fields all day, when she came home, and she kicked off her shoes, she went into her garden, and she was in, you know, *bliss*, she was in a place that only artists and extremely religious people and spiritual people get to. She was in this *amazing* state of grace. And *that* is why that when I grew up, and I understood that, I realized that as daughters and, of course, sons too, but especially daughters, we are often looking for that, we are in search of our mother's gardens, that place that lifts us very high.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And that when you first wrote *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, which was in the early seventies, you were also speaking very particularly about the garden as

the way for a woman to find her art, her creativity, and, as you said at the time, Virginia Woolf said a woman needed at least a room of her own, and most black women, you know, had *no* space of their own, not a room, not necessarily anything, even a plot of land, and most black women did not necessarily have pen and paper of their own, or literacy of their own, so you were talking about art forms that live in the realm of the vernacular, the oral, what people call “crafts.”

ALICE WALKER: Yes, and also, knowing that if we can understand these quote “crafts” as art, and if we can understand the fulfillment that comes from creativity, then whatever it is that we have that we do, *that* is our art, that is our sanctuary, that is where we become holy, and this was very important to talk about with people, because often people just say, “Well, you know, I don’t know how to do anything, I don’t have a gift, I’m not creative, I don’t, you know.” But I could see that in my community, these women who were making these incredible quilts, and you know quilts have now been shown and acknowledged to be a very high art form.

MARGO JEFFERSON: With the quilts of Gee’s Bend, just finally—they just finished off that notion that art and these kind of crafts are—

ALICE WALKER: Exactly, exactly. And that is what, that is one of the things we could bring to the culture. These overlooked areas of creativity that gave our ancestors so much joy, because art, as you know, is *joyful*. People often ask me, well you know, you write so many sad stories, aren’t you weeping and moaning and groaning? Not at all. Even if I am weeping and moaning and groaning, the joy is just right there, because the whole point about creativity is that you can *do* it, that you’re able to actually do it, that what you envision is something that someone else can

see, can touch, can smell, can feel, and they can feel *exactly* and know exactly what you felt, and this is a kind of magic.

MARGO JEFFERSON: What—I can't answer this myself either. What do you think is being overlooked now? You know, thirty, forty years ago, quilts were being overlooked. What are we taking for granted now?

ALICE WALKER: You know, that's something for everyone here to think about. I would have to ponder it. I would have to ponder it for a while, and *really* look at the culture, and look at my friends. I have many artist friends. What are they creating? I have a friend who not only paints huge beautiful paintings but she realized that she had never seen a frame that she liked. And so now when she paints these amazing paintings, she also makes the frame and paints the frame so that you get the whole thing at once.

MARGO JEFFERSON: It's very beautiful. Whenever I teach that very troubled and troubling book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I always ask myself, what are we missing, what are we as ignorant about as Harriet Beecher Stowe was? I mean, she grasped many things, but she could not grasp that, say, black people had a civilization, they had to become good Christians. And I think, all right, what are we going to look as foolish about, you know, twenty, forty, a hundred years from now? Will it be animals? Will it be nature? Yes, I'm sure.

ALICE WALKER: I think it will definitely be animals, other animals, because we're animals, too. But I think that very soon, everyone, even if they don't change their eating habits, everyone

will have to acknowledge that animals feel, and that they think, and that they are perfectly aware of what's happening to them, and that they are constantly trying to communicate this to us, sometimes through illness, so I think that in the same way that two hundred years ago, people looking at us, you know, our ancestors out there slaving away and the ministers were saying that we didn't have souls, so it was okay to just basically grind us into the ground, in that same way, I think, people will see that the way that human beings abuse other animals, and the way that human beings think of them solely as food, I mean, I think that people will just think that that's really just unbelievable. And in fact, at least, I hope this is what happens, because it's also true it could go the other way, where we just become beings who just *devour* mindlessly whatever there is, you know, people, we devour animals, the planet, and nobody stops.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Well, warfare is a form of devouring.

ALICE WALKER: Uh-huh.

MARGO JEFFERSON: People, it seems to me—my experience of you is as one of the first black feminists publicly to be called that I could, not only that I read, but that I spoke to in person and interviewed. I do remember, in those days, people would ask every woman of color who was also a feminist, “Well, how do you experience the balance of racism and sexism? Does one matter more? Did one affect you more? And I want to ask this differently, I want to actually ask you what you *remember* as your first experience of racial and sexual—it could be powerlessness, it could be self-doubt, it could be a sense that contempt was coming from outside or suddenly had sprung up inside you.

ALICE WALKER: Well, on the racial issue, I think that I noticed, from a very early age, that white people, when they came into the vicinity of my parents' basically shack, caused a certain *coldness* to just descend on the whole area, and it seemed to petrify my parents, so I noticed that they actually behaved in a different way, and this was extremely frightening to a small child. The other racial incident that was very marked for me was the reality that my mother, who I needed to be at home with me, had to go to work for these other people, white people, with white children, and that that meant that I was left unprotected at home and this was a *terrible* situation. It was so—and it's so global, I mean this is what happens when a mother has to go somewhere else to tend other people's children and her own children are unprotected, and this is something that we should really work on very hard to stop because our children need us, and we need to be with them, and it's a bind because usually our governments don't give adequate support to mothers, to parenting. In fact, every children that is born should know that it is going to be well taken of, fed, clothed, housed, and educated, at the very minimum, and that its mother can be with it.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And that it was wanted.

ALICE WALKER: And that it was wanted, yes. Now, the other question about sexism.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yes.

ALICE WALKER: Well, I have to say, that my father, who had started out, according to my mother, I wasn't there, early in their marriage, but he actually was a very tender parent, very tender with his children, he liked to bathe them and nurture them, much more than she did, this is what she says, but by the time I was a child, he had become very narrow and so he actually thought that there were certain areas of work for men and for woman. For instance, he would not let his sons sweep a floor or wash a dish, because this was women's work. Needless to say, we fought. **(laughter)** Because it was absurd, you know, we grew up with men and women doing everything. My mother milked cows, my mother worked in the fields, and so it made me very sad for him, in addition to being very angry with him, that he started to narrow in his perspective about women.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And you perceived that as soon as the first chore.

ALICE WALKER: Exactly. I certainly did. I was not happy.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Did your brothers lord it over you?

ALICE WALKER: Of course, of course they did, of course they did.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yes, how could a brother not?

ALICE WALKER: "Yeah well, we don't have to do that. Yeah, we made a mess in the kitchen, but we don't have to clean it up, we're boys." I wish I knew where the rat poison was. **(laughter)**

Those are the kinds of things that really go very deep when you are oppressed. It *is* a kind of oppression, and you actually see that they are preparing you to be oppressed in the bigger culture and in the world, which I *really* don't like.

MARGO JEFFERSON: That's the thing. As soon as you take the small things for granted, you're prepared to take the larger things for granted.

ALICE WALKER: Exactly.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Now, let me add the third element to the trinity, as I now call it, which is class. What was your first visceral experience of that?

ALICE WALKER: Well, we were poor, although we didn't really think of ourselves as poor, because we had, as my sister loves to say, "We had plenty food." (**laughter**) "How can you be poor if you have plenty food?" But we were and the way you know that you're poor is if you can't afford health care. That's really it. If you cannot see a dentist, if you cannot, you know, go when you have an appendicitis attack, well, you're poor. I really *got* it when our cousins, who lived in Macon, this is a little town, a bigger town from Eatonton, would come and visit, and they had cars, and they could go to the dentist, and they could have health care, and I couldn't understand it, because we *worked*. We worked *so* hard. We had these huge fields to, you know, clear, and plant, and poison cotton, I remember being out there five years old with my little dipstick and my bucket. You have to do that to kill the boll weevils. See, you didn't even know about this.

(laughter)

MARGO JEFFERSON: No, I didn't, but I'm a city girl.

ALICE WALKER: Well, somebody back there was not.

(laughter)

MARGO JEFFERSON: I can sing Ma Rainey's "Boll Weevil Blues."

(laughter)

ALICE WALKER: Well, it didn't last that long for me either, because that whole system was changing, and it was changing basically because the landowners, I know, the people who had grabbed all the land, had basically worn it *out* with cotton, it was a monocrop, they planted cotton until it they just—the same was true of you know many places in the world, like Hawaii for instance, where you can go fly over Hawaii and see all these huge plantations where there used to be pineapples, but they planted pineapples there until *nothing* will come up. So that is why eventually sharecropping, that whole system, collapsed.

MARGO JEFFERSON: A land driver, like soul-driver. An antidote.

ALICE WALKER: No, the thing is, these roses don't have any scent, and that's a big problem.

(laughter) And this is something that we should actually refuse. We should start refusing plants that don't have their essence, you know? **(applause)** I mean, the same way that you refuse to be with people who don't have an essence. **(laughter)** You know? Don't waste your time.

(laughter)

MARGO JEFFERSON: It's true.

ALICE WALKER: So this looks, it's got the red, and it's got the green, and it's the little spot of color, but this rose has no life, this rose has no essence.

MARGO JEFFERSON: It's an accessory.

ALICE WALKER: It is, and this is—if we're not careful, this is what we will be, this is exactly what we will be.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Or fruit with no taste, there is that.

ALICE WALKER: You know, GMO'ed food, you know, engineered food, we have to keep our souls, our grits, that just—ineffable thing that makes us *us*. You know, we don't need to all look alike and be the same size, you know, this brave new world, isn't it a nightmare?

(laughter)

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yes, yes it is. I'm abandoning any notion of transition. **(laughter)** This is going to be a collage conversation, and that's just fine. Oh god, yes, yes yes yes. But you know what? Alice's first book of poetry, or first or second, was called *Revolutionary Petunias*, so you were already there. Now you started off as a poet.

ALICE WALKER: I did, yes.

MARGO JEFFERSON: How come—why start as a poet and what drove you toward prose?

ALICE WALKER: I love the succinctness of poetry. In fact, my early poetry, actually my very early poetry was kind of longwinded, but I soon understood that that was not necessary, partly because I became enamored of the Buddhist Japanese haiku poets, Basho and Issa, you know, poets like that. I liked the idea that you could say something, you could write a poem, and it would be almost like a snapshot of something. One of my very favorite poems is “sitting quietly doing nothing. Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.” Now, isn't that just *it*? **(laughter)** I mean, doesn't that just make you want to just, you know, abandon all the strife and stress of trying to get somewhere, you know, “spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.” Do you remember that? How do we forget that? How do we forget that that is actually also what is happening, and that the *rushing* that we do—I came down—well, first of all, we got here last night, we checked into a hotel that was just a *nightmare*. It was so noisy. It was just impossible. So I got up early this morning, checked myself into a different hotel, went to bed, but even so,

coming down to here, I noticed so many people, all of them moving very fast, and you know, it is just not necessary.

(laughter)

MARGO JEFFERSON: (inaudible)

(laughter)

ALICE WALKER: Well, you notice, I lived in Brooklyn, not in Manhattan. Yeah, I did, I have lived in New York many times and I enjoyed it very much. But even when I lived here, I worried a bit about the *speed* of things, because there is nowhere really to go other than where you are. It was much slower, I had a rose garden, I had roses that were hundred-year-old roses, and they smelled great, and right around the roses I planted collard greens, and they *also* smelled great.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Now, did the smells mingle?

ALICE WALKER: Does it matter? **(laughter)**

MARGO JEFFERSON: It would be interesting if they did.

ALICE WALKER: Yes, of course they did.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yeah, no, I like that idea.

ALICE WALKER: Good. That's the thing, you know, more things go together than you would ever imagine.

MARGO JEFFERSON: There we go. There we go. Now what about living—could you live anyplace but in California now, within the U.S.?

ALICE WALKER: I don't think so, I really like northern California, not southern, but northern, and I like it because it reminds me a lot of Georgia.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Now, I'm going to wander back to your writing life. Okay?

ALICE WALKER: All right.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Your first novel, *Third Life of Grange Copeland*, which came out—Alice really, you know, is—basically your whole career arcs the movement right from civil rights into the women's movement in 1970, and that was when the first little controversies began that would then—and you can roll your eyes, I don't blame you—that would then get larger. But the first controversy, as I recall, had to do with that old question of intragroup and self-censorship, meaning, if you belong—well, bluntly put, you got *some* criticism, which would recur, for depicting several generations of black men in torment, in various emotional and social ways, and that torment was taken out on themselves and on the women in their lives. It marked,

it seems to me, it really split that world open, and let me put it properly because it's something I'm obsessed with because it so hits you internally.

If you belong to an oppressed group, you are constantly aware of being stared at, and watched, and judged. Therefore, though you may be criticizing each other constantly, and though you may be criticizing the oppressor, there is a great deal of anxiety about when any kind of criticism of the group is *published* so that the outside world can see it. I experience this. The visceral feeling is "It will be turned against us," that's what one always grew up hearing. That's what I think was happening. How do you—and it climaxed with *The Color Purple*, and then it—I'm not going to worry about "climaxed," I'm just not—

ALICE WALKER: (laughter) Good.

MARGO JEFFERSON: We just have to go on with it—and then still more when you wrote a book about genital mutilation. How did it look to you? You lived through it. How did it feel, *now* with some distance, what does it look like?

ALICE WALKER: You know what an African man—I actually had many a time with African men, because they would say to me, "We do not have female genital mutilation. This is just something that you are making up out of your own distorted imagination."

MARGO JEFFERSON: Are you serious?

ALICE WALKER: Oh, yeah.

MARGO JEFFERSON: This was after it was also published?

ALICE WALKER: Yes, yes. And also, another one said to me, We have a saying in our tribe, or our group, that to tell the truth hurts the people.

MARGO JEFFERSON: This was a saying he had just made up. (laughter)

ALICE WALKER: No, no, no. Well, well...

MARGO JEFFERSON: No, not necessarily.

ALICE WALKER: I'm just getting to this whole thing about people being afraid of what other people are going to do with the information that you give them, as if they haven't noticed.

MARGO JEFFERSON: As if it hasn't already been said.

ALICE WALKER: Exactly, and as if it's not happening in every corner of the globe that I have been to. I just cannot understand this feeling that, if you attempt to heal yourself, there's something about that that's going to make you sick. No, it's true, you may get grief-stricken and sad and angry and sick in *that* way while you're dealing with it, but you're going to be a lot healthier after you deal with it honestly, and look at it. You know, so when I'm writing about

these so-called men who have suffered through the generations and done this, that, and the other thing, what was really different, I think, is just that I was showing what that behavior looked like from the perspective of the women to whom it was happening, who *matter* to me.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And you were also showing what it was taking out of the men who were doing it.

ALICE WALKER: Oh, absolutely, and out of *us* collectively. You cannot batter and abuse and stand on half of your population and expect to thrive. How can you do that? I traveled all over Africa talking about FGM. And sometimes I would just very bluntly say, “Look at this village. Look at this community. There’s so much sickness, there’s so much pain. People are barely shuffling along.”

MARGO JEFFERSON: That walk that you describe. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice keeps describing the walk that the Alinka girls and women have after the cliterodectomy is performed, and it is this painful little shuffling walk, it’s what we associate with the abject shuffle of the dispossessed black person.

ALICE WALKER: And not only that, it’s very painful. When women have intercourse, it’s excruciating. There’s no such thing as pleasure. When they give birth, they often have to be cut open again in order to give birth. I mean, this is as horrible as anything you can imagine. How are you going to sit and justify that? How are you going to sit and justify beating women and girls and forcing them to be subservient because they are female? You cannot do it. And

furthermore you cannot expect to be a healthy people if you abuse each other in this way. It is impossible. So I accept all the criticism. I am so thankful that my ancestors made me really strong. You know, I'm really strong, and I understand that strength, having suffered a lot, but I am strong enough to take it, because we are worth it. We are *worth* it. And we are worth it, not only the men are worth it, but the women are worth it.

MARGO JEFFERSON: You speak of healing oneself and what it costs and it strikes me that a great deal of what stands in the way of healing is one's own shame and embarrassment of not only how you will be perceived by others, but of facing it yourself.

ALICE WALKER: Yes.

MARGO JEFFERSON: What does one do with that?

ALICE WALKER: Well, I was shot when I was a child, and I was blinded in my right eye, and this was something that was so excruciatingly painful, and caused so much shame, that it took me so long to deal with it at all, but when I was able to deal with it, Margo, it just transformed the way that I could see the world, and I began to understand that it is when we can accept our own woundedness, when we can see the way that we have suffered, and just accept it, acknowledge it, and say, "Okay." And I've talked to people who have been raped, who have been cut in various ways, who have been shot, whose parents did this and that and the other thing or to child soldiers who have killed their parents. When you can at least say that this is what life has brought to me, you know, openly, honestly, then there is a possibility for some kind of shift

and transformation, but if you can't do that, if you are sitting there, holding on to all of the grief and all the sadness and all the shame, you will never move.

MARGO JEFFERSON: What made it possible for you to deal with the scar, the wound from the eye?

ALICE WALKER: I think love. Love is what usually helps us deal with anything. I had this *amazing* brother who had basically tried to have my eye operated on when I was still in Georgia but the doctor basically took the money and didn't do anything, so years later, like six years later, he asked me to come to Boston, and he took me again to the hospital and he had surgery performed. And the surgery was wonderful and I loved feeling a lot more *sightly* but what really did it was his love of me. This is the thing. If we can truly love our siblings and truly love each other, there is a possibility of transforming the most heinous, horrible things that happen to us.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And that is it seems to me what you are going at more and more in each piece of writing. You are moving from the black American world of the early works in Africa, Latin America, you now speak of your American Indian and black ancestry. Did it start with those characters coming to you in *The Color Purple*?

ALICE WALKER: The inclusiveness or the healingness? No, here is one of the places it started. My ancestry is actually English, Irish, Scottish, from the Euro side, Cherokee, from the indigenous side, and African, from I think Ghana, because I get along really well with Anansi.

Now, this is something, really, I want to share this because everybody in here probably is a mixture of something.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yes, we're a mongrel country.

ALICE WALKER: Yes, and so many people do not want to deal with that. There's one you don't like. This one did that. Well, I actually had that problem, I had the problem with the European ancestor because they did some awful things. Part of my family comes from something that's still today called Grant's (Grant like Hugh Grant) Grant's Plantation. You know, and then they're the Walker section, that's the Scotch/Irish people. What do you do with these people, you know, what do you do with them? One of them was a rapist. He raped my great-grandmother when she was fourteen. This is where Mister comes from, you know, and it's been so sad to see that we are so ahistorical that we can't even recognize the behavior of the slave-owner in ourselves.

So I had to *really* deal with this ancestor, this white ancestor, because he's here, he's nowhere else but here. So I really decided that he had to have other attributes than rapist. And I know that he—and I now know this after many long nights and many struggles and traveling all the way to Edinburgh, where they just *adore* me. They sit there and say things like, “Well, Alice, the English are trying to bury their nuclear waste in Scotland. What shall we do?” I say, “Brother, I don't know.” **(laughter)** Oh, my brother. But, anyway, so I decided, knowing that the Scotch people, and I really grew to like them because of their poetry. I realized that, oh, this is an ancestor who must have loved poetry, even if he was run out of Scotland, and he probably liked

music, because they do love to dance, and this is true also of the Irish, and to some degree of the English as well. You know, I had to enlarge my sense of who this intrusive person was. And then I had to think about how he came to Georgia. How did he get there? You know, was he like one of those little starving boys in *Oliver Twist*? I mean, was he Oliver Twist? You know, I mean these are the connections we make.

And then there's my native American great-grandmother and what was her story. I learned very late in life because of my friend Wilma Mankiller, she used to be the chief of the Cherokee, but the Cherokee held slaves, you know, and so this was an ancestor who was part African, she was Cherokee, but she was part African, and then she came into our family through the Calloways. The Calloways are these people in Georgia who have big flower gardens. Now, gardens. And on and on like that. And then the African. The African got off the boat and walked from Virginia to Eatonton, Georgia, carrying two children. Now *there's* an ancestor.

See? And that's who's sitting in front of you, that's who's sitting here, and you, look into who you are, that's who's sitting there, maybe not the same configuration, maybe a different configuration, but we have to really claim all these strands in order to be whole. I remember in the Black Power phase of the movement there was this insistence that you had to be just black, and they were saying things like that about someone who looked like Kathleen Cleaver, just really, very, very light-skinned people had to be as if they had just come completely from Benin. **(laughter)** And this is *absurd*. We are people of color. I love Du Bois for giving us that phrase. Isn't it beautiful?

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yes, I love it, too. Yes.

ALICE WALKER: People of color, you know?

MARGO JEFFERSON: Intense and muted and every kind of, yes.

ALICE WALKER: And all my English and Scottish and Irish people, they are now people of color. And I'm sure they're very happy. **(laughter)**

MARGO JEFFERSON: I hope mine are, too.

ALICE WALKER: Yes, they are, Margo, they are, listen, I'm telling you. When you free them, you're happy. Set them free.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Oh, Alice, you've just reminded me of a painful story. In the height of the Black Power movement, I had a friend who had dead-straight hair, as we used to say, and was very light. So there she was in New Orleans, which was very hot, in a huge Afro wig in a restaurant one evening. She got up to go to the bathroom, basically to take a wig break.

(laughter) She walked into the bathroom, and there, facing her, was a woman, a browner-skinned woman, who was also taking a wig break, but she had taken off her straightened wig and, yes, and underneath was a small version of the Afro that my friend craved. According to my friend, first they saw each other in the mirror and then they exchanged a look that meant, "something will be learned from this," but they then each had to put the wig back on and return

to their place, **(laughter)** but I think my friend ceased to wear her wig shortly after that. But it happened and that's comic, though not entirely, but terrible things were done in the name of all of that.

ALICE WALKER: Exactly. And I hope we learned, I think we did. I think now it's more a matter of choice.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And I think the whole view of mixed-race children and all that, there's more flexibility, there's more room, absolutely. Which characters did come—because I'm still thinking of your moving from the U.S. to Africa and in *The Color Purple* Nettie making her way to Africa, who did come to you first? Because you describe yourself as writer and *medium* in thanking people in *The Color Purple*. Who came to you first and how?

ALICE WALKER: Okay, well, I had a step-grandmother whose name was Rachel, and she loved me very much. My own grandmother had been murdered by a man who wanted to date her, and she said no, and he just shot her dead in front of the church, and she died in my father's arms, but in any case I had this step-grandmother Rachel, and all I knew about her is that she had two children, nobody ever knew what happened to them, she had married my grandfather, who was not the sweetest husband you could imagine, and she was this loving though servile kind of person, and I wanted so much to honor the love that she managed to give to us, that I decided to try to write in her voice but I could never remember much more of her voice, her actual voice, than an expression that she used to use which was sho' do. "Sho' do." and I was then able to construct an entire book **(laughter)** out of her "sho' do," and so that was a kind of start, and it

was a way of honoring, also, the people, my grandfather, her, my grandfather's lover, you know, all of these people, it was a way to spend *time* with them, because I was so little that you know, most of my siblings, all of my siblings left pretty much before I got, you know, big and then the grandparents were getting really old, and so all you could have here was like these little fragments, of "well, then they did so and so," "and she was wearing this," and "oh, that hat."

But I think there was something in me that so loved them, that so loved the remnants that were left of them, that I resolved to spend a year trying to be with them, and so when you read *The Color Purple*, you actually are reading someone who is actually feeling like she is with these people, and the only way that—since they're all dead, the only way that I could possibly do that, and it was a wonderful time, it was truly wonderful. They were so funny. And that was the other thing that was so annoying, people that were complaining about *The Color Purple*, they're all like, "it's so you know depressing and tragic and this and that," but that's life, life has all that in it, but what you need to counter that is your own sense of humor, and these people I thought were just hilarious.

MARGO JEFFERSON: How did Nettie find her way to Africa? I keep asking that because Nettie's—the children who lived with her, Celie's children who live with Nettie in Africa, show up in two more books, *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret*.

ALICE WALKER: Okay, well, Nettie is named after my mother's mother, Nettie, who died when I was two. Now, this woman was battered terribly by my grandfather, the other grandfather, he was also a batterer.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Did you ever see them battering each other?

ALICE WALKER: Never, never, I never saw any of that. This was all legendary, well some of them had unfortunately the scars to prove it. No, I never saw that. This woman, my grandmother Nettie, who died when I was two, never went anywhere. Here's where the slave thing just goes right into what followed slavery. During slavery, you could not leave the plantation. The women *never* left. The men might get a pass to do something, but the women were *there*. So this Nettie after slavery, not very long after slavery, also never went anywhere. This is what my mother used to say. "My mother never went anywhere." So I said, you know what, this woman is going to be named Nettie, and she's going to go everywhere. **(laughter)** And not only that, then two children that nobody ever knew. My step-grandmother was the least quote sexy person you can imagine, so how she even got those children, you know, was just such a mystery and you know it was a terrible way, I'm sure, but because she had had them, and because they had disappeared, I said, "Well, I'm going to give her some children, they're going to travel with Nettie, and they're going to one day come back to her because she deserves to have her children." So *there*.

MARGO JEFFERSON: But did they—the way you describe in later books you really do have visions, and this is a little different, so it began to change in later books.

ALICE WALKER: Yes, because I did. I did. In fact, the reason I love *The Temple of My Familiar* is because when I was writing *The Color Purple* I was just in service, I don't know if you've ever had the experience of just knowingly putting yourself at the service of whatever it is.

So I was like a priest, not the kind of priest you hear about in the news these days, but you know, a priest priest, where you really know what you're supposed to be doing, and you're there, you're on the job, you give up everything else to do that, so I was serving these ancestors, basically, and I did it as well as I could possibly do it, I was just—it was like prayer, the whole year, and then I finished it and I just cried, you know, because I missed them so much when they left. But, then, after I finished that novel, *they* turned around and gave me, it seemed to me, *The Temple of My Familiar*, which started with a dream.

I had bought a little house in Park Slope and I had gotten a divorce and I—long story—but then I bought a little house, and it was only twelve feet wide, so we used to call it a sliver of a house. And one night in that little house I had a dream that I went down the stairs and I went to the basement and in the middle of the floor there was a trapdoor, a round trapdoor with a metal thing and I lifted that up and there were more stairs and I went down there, too, and in this subbasement there were all these people from South America, and they were all making incredibly beautiful things. Beautiful things, I mean, weavings and things with feathers and, you know, just incredible—and they were all speaking Spanish and some of them were even speaking I think Quechua, or Mayan. Who were these people? I had no idea. Years went by. I wrote whatever, this and that, and then one day I realized that I had to start this new novel, and I started dreaming in Spanish and I hired a tutor, because I didn't speak Spanish, so I hired my daughter's teacher to tutor me in Spanish, and I started writing *The Temple of My Familiar*, and that's who they were, they were the people in this new book, and I felt it as just the most generous gift.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And then what about *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, what drove you to that, which is the female genital mutilation, or as you refer to it, FGM?

ALICE WALKER: Well, the son of Celie marries a woman who is genitally mutilated because in her culture they think that unless you're that way, you can't marry and you're no good. So when we were making the film in Burbank, or wherever that is down there, one day she arrived. She came from Kenya, this wife came from Kenya, the wife to be, the fictional wife, and I was looking for her to see how she was walking, whether she had been mutilated, and I don't think she had been, but in any case, it made me realize that I had to—for me if I create a character who has a whole hidden story, especially of suffering, I cannot just leave her or him there, I have to pay attention to this person because I understand *fully* that this is not just about fiction, that every character, quote character, is living somewhere in the hills of Kenya, somewhere in Benin, somewhere in Ghana, somewhere in Alabama, so I decided to take the time, which was I think a little over a year, maybe two years, to write a story about this woman and how she decided to be genitally mutilated and that's how that happened.

MARGO JEFFERSON: It's not just about fiction.

ALICE WALKER: No.

MARGO JEFFERSON: No, I mean, I feel that in your books. Have you always known that?

ALICE WALKER: Yes.

MARGO JEFFERSON: But it seems to me to become more and more intense.

ALICE WALKER: Yes. It's not, how could it be? You know, look at Charles Dickens. There was someone who fully understood that it's not about fiction, it's not just about fiction. We are capable, as writers, of changing some horrendous situations. I have been back to Africa many times and talked with people who five years or ten years before, would have sworn that this didn't even happen but now they know a hundred million women, horrible transmission of AIDS, great devastation of the communities, not to mention self-esteem, and self-respect, you know, so we're actually, it's within our power to do some really good things just for the health of people. Even if you don't want to go into the spiritual whatever, just on this basic level of health, we can do some incredible things as writers.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Two things are actually warring in my head. One thing, well, I'll say this first. I am always struck at your—and very appreciative—at how willing you are amidst quite a panoply of spiritual practices and healings—to put black people in therapy and in psychoanalysis, because it seems to me that this is another taboo. **(laughter)** For many centuries—no, generations, let's say, psychoanalysis seems centuries old, but it's not. You know, the myth was that we were too strong for that. Whatever we had endured, and also, then the myth based on some truth arose that it couldn't encompass our experience and therefore couldn't be encountered and expanded but simply had to be denied but you're one of the only black writers I know who consistently has black characters encountering psychoanalysts and therapists and I thank you.

(laughter)

ALICE WALKER: You're welcome.

MARGO JEFFERSON: No, it matters, and now I realize I had to say it because it's one of those life and fiction connections. It removes—it's like writing about depression, it takes away a stigma, it really does.

ALICE WALKER: Yeah, I just really want us to be healthy. I want us to be healthy and wealthy and wise, you know. It's wonderful to be able to—for instance, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Usually what happens with me is I will study something for a long time to understand it as fully as possible, so I spent like years studying Jung, and I love Jung, and I was actually able then to understand his theories and his way and I went to visit Bollingen, where he had his little tower by the sea, and I was able then to actually put Jung himself in the novel and that was such a delight because I feel that the people like Jung give us new ways of understanding our behavior, when they help us to see the shadow that we just don't want to face, that they are actually helping us to see the light, to see the light of health, of who we really are. People like that should be honored, and so I was delighted to have him show up in the novel as Imsi, the old man who goes to Africa. And he actually did go to Africa, you know. I don't think he—here's an interesting little place where I think Jung and I, because I'm you know, *me*, and he was *him*, where we saw things very differently. He had one of these old-fashioned video things. What do you call these things?

MARGO JEFFERSON: They used to take those home-movie type things.

ALICE WALKER: Well, he had one of those. You know what I mean, this thing. So he went to this village, and he saw all of these young girls who were lying in a row and they were obviously suffering but they weren't permitted to show it, so they were just like you know immobilized. So he took this picture of them, and he came back and first of all he said they were boys, because they had had their hair shaved off, but that's what happens, you know, and then he went on about you know some kind of initiation, blah blah blah, but what he had actually seen, I think, was what I saw when I went, was that these were girls, little girls, who had been mutilated and they were lying in the row.

So I believe that psychoanalysis is really helpful, and I have spent some really wonderful—and it's fun, really, once you, you know. You shouldn't have somebody who's just going to sit there and not say anything much and just tell you to pay the money and come back Thursday.

(laughter) You don't need that. You need somebody who's alive, who's alive to life, and who loves life and lives life.

In fact, by now, we must never, never put ourselves under the dominion of anybody who's half-dead **(laughter)**. I mean, check people *out!* **(laughter)** They will try to fool you by looking all like well-dressed and calm and collected and everything, but if they don't have the spark of life they are no good to you and don't waste your time. See the finger thing comes when you get to be sixty. **(laughter)**

MARGO JEFFERSON: Put down the rose and lift the finger.

ALICE WALKER: Exactly.

MARGO JEFFERSON: I think that you all should be able to talk to Alice Walker, from now. It's kind of shadowy back there, but if people, ah, they can approach microphones? Yes. Okay!

Q: Good evening, I just wanted to say it is an absolute pleasure to be here tonight. I have two questions, fifty-two seconds, I'll promise. First. I just moved here from Nashville to New York City. I'd like to know what was your biggest cultural shock when you moved from the South to the North? Which you can answer hopefully quickly. The second one a little bit more provocative. My mother who was a fair-skinned, dead-straight hair kind of person, she is not a fan of *The Color Purple*, because she feels like it totally mis-portrayed black men, and it aired our dirty laundry, so I wanted to know how do you deal with black people who are critics of that particular book.

ALICE WALKER: Let's see, the cultural shock. Not enough flowers. Not nearly enough flowers, and also that black people seem very ashy. **(laughter)** And you can also tell that they thought that not being ashy was really wonderful. Or not being shiny. They thought shininess was like—like country bumpkins were shiny. You know, I wrote a book called *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* and it answers every question you can imagine about how I responded to all the people criticizing, you know, this and that. You know, maybe your mother

just doesn't like the book, maybe she has her own issues, I would imagine, because it's a book that is just full of love, it really is, there's nothing in that book but love, even the people who are hating each other are coming out of love. It takes love to create people, clearly, who are doing self-hating things. It takes a lot of love to do that. I like to—I sort of think about Che Guevara, who said, the revolution comes out of love. It's the same with creativity. It's the same with writing novels, singing. You know like when Stevie Wonder sings to us, you know that man is singing out of love. He's often telling us some very sad things but we know that he just loves us. So if your mother with the lightness, the hair, there's a lot of pain there, so just be patient with her, and tell her to come see the musical.

(laughter/applause)

Q: Hi. I have a question about you being able to embrace your creative-writing niche at a time when that may not have been easy. Like, basically nowadays, they say, forget creativity, get a job, make money. And when you have that creative niche and you want to kind of get into it, how do you— how did you do it, basically?

ALICE WALKER: You know, life will give you some sort of spur. I think—I had had an abortion, actually. This is where my first book came out of and I was very, very happy that I was not going to be trying to raise a child that I knew I couldn't raise, and I had also been facing suicide around this issue, and so when I realized that I could have my life, the response was just this outpouring of poems. And I gave these poems to my teacher, I was at Sarah Lawrence by then, and she gave them to a publisher and you know, then I just kept writing, but luckily for me,

my feeling of self-worth and self-respect meant that money just didn't matter as much to me as feeling good about myself did and I knew that writing was a way that I could really utilize my whole being. It's such a wonderful discipline, writing, in that way. So I would say to you that just forget about the siren song of the big bucks. Try to make enough, or get a grant or something, grants are good, something that will give you six months to a year to work on something that you really feel you must do, and do that.

Q: First of all, I just wanted to say thank you for everything and especially on the eve of *The Color Purple* opening on Broadway—congratulations—I wanted to hear you speak a little bit about the transition from the written word to the spoken and acted word, and what you find particularly fulfilling or thrilling and what you find challenging about that transition.

ALICE WALKER: The written to the spoken?

Q: Yeah, from the text of *The Color Purple* to it becoming a movie and it becoming a play and it being embodied not just in your mind and in the reader's imagination, but in actual bodies.

ALICE WALKER: Oh, right, yeah. Oh, it's been magical, really, you know, it's like when we were making the film, it was just—there were all these synchronicities. And synchronicity is a sign of life so whenever your life is full of synchronicity, you know you're right on it, you cannot do a wrong thing, it's all just good, you know. So there we all were down in Burbank making this film and we had these incredible synchronicities. I mean, one of the big ones of course, you may know, is that Oprah is Harpo spelled backwards. The other one was that when

Celie was giving birth in the film, Steven Spielberg's wife was also giving birth. It was like an endless kind of thing and it's been so long that I don't remember all of them. I have learned to really trust that generally speaking good people turn up in my life and when they are not good people, I try to help them move along, **(laughter)** but for the film I felt that Quincy Jones and Steven Spielberg were really good and I felt the same way with the producer who came to ask me if he could make a musical of the novel. And then what happens, this is part of the real magic. You know how I was saying how I missed my parents, my grandparents, my siblings, because they all went away, or they were all very old, and I felt like as a little child I just had all this *love* for them and I couldn't really be with them because they were gone. So now what happens? Well, I walked on to the set for the movie. There they all were! And then I walked to look at the people doing the musical. There they are again! I have this feeling that they're not going away until I am really fulfilled in this desire to be with them. When I have had enough of them, you won't see any more movies or musicals. But I'm not done yet. I still miss them.

Q: Hi. I just wanted to ask just an overarching larger question. You mentioned briefly that we are ahistorical, in the context of the social structures that currently exist in the U.S., like the disparities in education and the minority and black students, the incarceration rates and politics, and I just wanted to ask how do you think our lives would be different if we as a people were exposed to the true histories of like race and class and gender and how they have played a part in forming our country or do you think our lives would be different at all?

ALICE WALKER: Oh, I think our lives would be so much different if we knew our own history and we knew how things got to be this way, and also that we could see how they make a

circle. We are going back in some ways to places we have already been and we really don't, we really shouldn't be able to, we shouldn't *have* to do that, and if we had a firmer grasp on the history, and on who we actually are, and what people have already created these wheels, we wouldn't be doing them over and sometimes I feel a sadness about that, because I can see how young people especially, from the cradle really and before, even in utero, they are so attuned to television and other media, and I really appreciate these media, I mean, they are magical in themselves, but you know you cannot actually understand who you are if you are constantly being bombarded by things to buy, you know, how to look, you know how thin you can be, how this, how that, so we've become extremely distracted in a way that actually did not exist when I was a child, we were not distracted in that way, and so I would say that we really, all of us, not just African Americans, but people in the world have to learn how to turn off the distraction in order to connect again to what is vital. We will never get our people out of prison if we are all watching—I don't know what you're all watching—but you know, you have to really have a certain amount of a sacred solitude in which you develop what is a priority for you in this lifetime. You cannot do that if you are distracted, and just pulled this way and that way all the time, so I don't know if that answers you, but those are some thoughts.

Q: I identify something with you during the question and answer. I was an immigrant from Hong Kong and you mentioned the children being alone and the parents working, and people are saying this was changing. Can you name some things that the immigrants can help their children feeling that way—how to deal with that feeling?

ALICE WALKER: Well, I don't know, but what comes to mind is to say to this group what I say almost everywhere I go, which is that the time that we live in is so dangerous, is so precarious, for all of us, for our children, I cannot imagine what it looks like to our children, but it is very important that we form circles, that we form circles in which then the children who come into our circles feel that support, they feel that they have a community. Many of us have left communities. And some of us will never actually have the community of origin that we were born into—that's gone. But if we creatively make circles. You know, I have, I belong to two circles, one is a women's council, we meet four times a year, and then I belong to a sangha, which meets every month, and these are both circles that if there were children, little children around, they would be coming in, you know, grabbing a cookie off the table, where there are these *grand* women, sitting and talking about the fate of the earth and the fate of the community and the fate of *them*. This is what our children need. They need to know that there are adults *somewhere* sitting together and discussing, at least, what it's going to take for us to survive this brave new world.

Q: I have a question, pretty simple, you basically answered my question already about young adults realizing how much we need to connect with our history and how much we need to learn from that and move on with our future, but my question now is going back to the movie *The Color Purple* and the night of the Oscars. Now, I understand that the movie wasn't recognized at all, and I just wanted to know what was your reaction to that night. I understand that God has a purpose for everybody and everything happens for a reason, and if anything God will bless you with that opportunity in the future, but at that moment in time, what was your reaction?

ALICE WALKER: Well, one thing you understand really early on in this kind of thing is that you don't need awards. You don't. **(applause)** You know, you don't. So, or another way of putting it, is that the award is *life* and we won, we got it. What more do we need? So I was thinking, you know, they told me, well, Steven really wanted an Oscar, well, I thought I'm going to call up my friend in the country and have him just make him one. **(laughter)** It is true, that if you have Oscars, you get more money, and you do this and that, but in fact one of the things I hope I've conveyed is that the creativity is the joy, when you're actually doing it, that's the award, not the other thing. So, personally, I felt very glad that we didn't get an award, and the reason I felt that was I didn't know any of the people who were giving the award. Now if my first grade teacher had been one of those people. If even my high-school teachers had been some of those people. If some of my uncles and aunts had been some of those people, but what are we talking about? We are talking about a few, you know, very well-to-do, basically white men in Hollywood. Do they know what they're doing? **(laughter)**

So it was not really that difficult. Actually it was not difficult for me at all. But I did feel. I felt for Oprah. I felt for Whoopi. I felt for Danny. I mean, all the people who were nominated. You know, there were eleven nominations. So there we all were in this huge hall, which I don't know if you know this, but you know, it looks very sophisticated on the TV, but outside, it's not, because you come in and there are these people on bleachers, like in high school, and they're yelling and they're screaming, and it was really not that wonderful. So I wanted *them* to have that affirmation, but we must deeply understand, especially in this culture, *especially* in this culture, that you do not need an award from people you don't know. You do not. It is

meaningless on a deep level. It is absolutely of no use whatsoever if they don't really know you. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Q: Hi. Thank you Miss Walker and Miss Jefferson for tonight. My question is just as having loved your novels, but as an adult, having come to understand and really identify with your essays is my question is how do you deal with—well, what I identify with is that you kind of I felt like were the first person to kind of call out and tell things like they were that I had noticed about the world. And I just wonder how you deal with the frustrations of ignorance. Like for me, it sometimes it often turns to rage just dealing with racism and sexism. And I'm always the person who's the naysayer and oh here she goes again, bringing some realism into it and stats and everything else, so how do you deal with that within yourself, and also I feel like I want to *help* people, and often it comes out where I'm pushing them away because I get so wired up about it.

ALICE WALKER: I don't know. Actually, what comes to mind is how in my last novel—I have spent again two years studying Buddhism and Shamanism and those are the twin pillars of that novel, and I was showing how, even though we think that they are very far apart, Buddhism and Shamanism, because one is like it's not really a religion, but it's a philosophy, and it's all written and everything and then Shamanism tends to be somebody with a drum and herbs and dances and ritual, you know, and so we think that they are just like yay apart, but in fact they are so similar, because the aim of each one is to open the heart, because they understand that with a closed heart, you really can't do anything, you have to open your heart. So then imagine my surprise when I—I don't read reviews but people always tell you. **(Laughter)** You know, they'll

say, “Did you know?” and I’ll say, “No, I didn’t know that.” But imagine my surprise when this whole aspect is just completely—it’s as if it didn’t exist.

And not only that, I was also very interested in indigenous medicine. You know, this is medicine that is older than anything you’re taking, and more people have been taking it, and more people have been getting well with it. So I wanted to know about it so I studied it, I took it myself. I can’t tell you how many times I threw up trying to *learn* about medicine that people have used for so long. And then to understand that when it reaches the desk of someone who lives in New York, or wherever, and they have no notion that there are this whole history, this lineage, this world of medicine and shamans, and so they write really disrespectful, just madness, really, because it’s so provincial and insular, you know? So what do I do? There’s nothing I can do. All I can do is write my books. What I do when I love a writer, say for instance Charles Dickens or that man that I love so much whose name is just completely gone, but, anyway, but what I do when I really love someone’s work is I trust them not to give me, then, five books down the line absolute garbage. Usually it’s just not in the artist to do that, unless they’ve just completely sort of sold out and gone over, you know. Generally speaking, if someone you know cares deeply, and you can tell, you can really tell. Read *Oliver Twist*. Charles Dickens really, really cared. So then you just really trust that they are going to continue to probe deeply, to try to see clearly, and to share this with *everyone*, because our existence is in the balance right now. It’s not even you know like tomorrow, it’s now, it’s yesterday. So there is just on my part the feeling that eventually I can wait. And I don’t even have to be here for the people to discover my work that has been misrepresented. Eventually somebody will find it. I mean, look at Zora Neale Hurston, we found her. This is what we can do.

MARGO JEFFERSON: I think that that is a fine place to end but really to begin again. Thank you.

ALICE WALKER: Thank you.

(applause)