at all obvious, then, that an integrated women's liberation movement could have developed at the time.

Nevertheless, I am hopeful now that we, white and black women, have learned enough, slowly indeed, about ourselves to recognize one another as complicated allies in the long haul. If we take a historical step back, it is a remarkable tale. We accomplished a great deal, given where we started in the fifties and early sixties. In the space of little more than a decade, young women broke with their pasts, challenged social norms and attempted to reinvent themselves. Their youth and the times in which they lived encouraged them to expect that they could transform American society overnight, including the racism that kept women apart. They struggled, and still do, against sexism and racism, discovering it everywhere, including in themselves.

If my own sentiments and those expressed in *The Feminist Memoir Project* are viewed as evidence, I suspect that more has not been written because former activists remain so emotionally connected to the movements they helped to found decades ago. Their lives continue to be shaped by them, and their memories are long. These memoirs suggest that closure on the women's movement will not come soon—which is, undoubtedly, a sign of ongoing success. Feelings of loss and pain appear to be almost as common among feminists of all colors as the sense of accomplishment and pride they so richly deserve to feel. But here, at least, young women, surrounded by today's cultural hostility to feminism, can grapple with the complicated and vital history of second-wave radical feminism in its own voice. Ironically, they will find that its tremendous achievements are tinged with an ambivalence and passion that will be familiar to them. ■

Margaret Walker Alexander

AMIRI BARAKA

Poet and novelist Margaret Walker Alexander, who died recently at age 83, was the first black writer to win the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition. In her long life she was mentored by Langston Hughes, worked as a WPA writer, wrote poetry of struggle quoted liberally by the civil rights movement and founded the Institute for the Study of the History, Life and Culture of Black People at Jackson State University. These remarks were delivered at a program last year celebrating the writer at New York University.

You cannot even spell here without her. First, Margaret Walker, Margaret Walker Alexander. She was one of the greatest writers of the language. She was the grandest expression of the American poetic voice and the ultimate paradigm of the Afro-American classic literary tradition. Margaret Walker Alexander was the living continuum of the great revolutionary democratic arts culture that has sustained and inspired the Afro-American people since the middle passage.

Hers is an American art, but an art deeply rooted in the actual life and history and feelings of the African chattel slaves, transformed by the obscene experience of slavery, from human to "real estate," as Du Bois shocks us into understanding in *Black Reconstruction in America.* Many were suffering throughout the world, the good doctor said, but "none of them was real estate."

It is from this basement of the human repository of recall and emotional registration that our lives in the Western torture chamber began, and it is out of this ugliness and oppression that we have, still, made our judgments and created our aesthetic. So it is, like Douglass, Harper, Du Bois, Hughes, the high-up near heaven thundermouth preachers, laboring in the darkness of our willed salvation, that Margaret Walker Alexander reaches us. Carrying our will and our history, our pain and our precise description of what it is, what it was and who was the great beast rose smoking from the Western sea, snatched us way from home and brought us here to be et, what ghost and pirate. What did this?

Margaret came from the way back. She has clearly been touched by Douglass, at the July 4 speech...that modernism post-Shakespeare and contemporary with Melville and pre-Whitman, you will find that same chronicling of pain and place that Margaret immortalizes in "For My People." It is no accident that that poem has touched so many. Because it

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comes from so far back, so way before ourselves, that when we open our eyes, our minds, she is telling us what we had up in us and never not understood but could not find the words again to say, so perfect were it said.

Margaret was the human speech itself, raised like Du Bois or Langston to reach past itself. To be itself, simple and open and daring to be paraphrased. She needed no hocus pocus, no abstractions, save language, full open, itself. For Margaret, like those others in the tradition, the language itself was the monster. The sounds we make everyday, stirred up, rolled around, these are the what-nots and what-it-is-es of what we slur as literature.

Margaret took the highest of the oral tradition: the oracular divinity of high religious speech. The Preacher. But not just the preacher, like Jimmy B. for instance, she reaches past the preacher to where the preacher spose to be getting his stuff from, the all-the-way-out, past the Waygone-sphere. At that point, just before your eyes roll up in yr head and you screaming hallelujah, or death to slavery, there is that place, it's moving—of high-up sequential reasoning. Where Perception have took us to meet Rationale and we have persisted past that to Use and that use has rose us up from On to reach Dig, before we see Serious. As the Dogon would say.

Margaret took the Douglass mode, the grand sermonic speech form, as Bible and as Prophetic hymn, which both Blake and Kit Smart and Melville and Whitman copped on that other side, and rises up through the intense self-consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance re-expressions of assaulted humanity, wailing its beauty from under the Beast's foot, no matter, "Beast, Beast, I'm from the East"...what Du Bois's Zulu grandmother chanted in the kitchen. That music from way back, as the preacher carries, as oral, as old Bible and the cap of Revelations. The symbol and metaphor—but straight on out, not dry as a bone meditatious over the paper word, while your boy up the street murdering peepas for they oil or whatever they got (check that white skull branded on your Black "Flag of skin"). But Margaret carries the flesh and blood of the oral as the written, making the page rage, the type sing, the form animate.

The reason Margaret Walker Alexander was not as rich and famous as she was beautiful is because if you tells the real life of the living peepas you is gonna, minimally, get hid, *covered*, as the slicksters in Warner Brothers said, as they draped the hid-cloth over Big Joe Turner, making dollars heave out Elvis (The Pod of Jackie Wilson) Presley's mouth. Because after the great Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, the twin headlines of literary divinity were Richard Wright and Margaret Walker Alexander. Both come from Mississippi, like William Faulkner (the Hunchback of Notre Dame). But Wright, finally, alas, turned quite right, or as I see it, very wrong, and Margaret always upheld the mass history and experience, the mass emotional recall from the solid viewpoint of singular clarity.

From the time she says in her first published work (published by Du Bois in *The Crisis*), "I Want to Write," at 19 years old, "I want to write/I want to write the songs of my people./I want to hear them singing melodies in the dark./I want to catch the last floating strains from their sob torn throats./I want to frame their dreams into words; their souls into notes," through the great "For My People." The panoramic drama of her novel *Jubilee*, until her last book of poetry, *This Is My Century*, from the title poem to the bluntly revolutionary "I Hear a Rumbling," Margaret stayed on the case. She always stood up. From her earliest WPA days, even though, like many of us who are whipped and 'buked and scorned for telling the truth, still, Margaret always stood up. She always spoke with the open recognizable voice of the people, a tradition she carries as strongly as Langston Hughes or Sterling Brown.

Margaret's work is always an expression of creation from a deep knowledge of Afro-American, especially Southern Afro-American, culture, as deep as Zora Neal Hurston's. But Margaret never despaired or was turned, in her words or her vision, around. She remained clear and beautiful, moving and prophetic.

Margaret Walker remains part of our deepest and most glorious voice, dimensioned by history and musicked by vision. What she tells us in her books, with that voice of sun and sky, moon and stars, of lightning and thunder, is in that oldest voice of that first ancestor, who always be with us. That is what we people have, inside, to reach where Orpheus goes each night-end to raise day again. That voice to keep us live and sane and strong and ready to fight and even ready to love. Like our mothers' mothers' mothers' mothers' mothers' mother and our wives and sisters and our daughters and our comrades and our mothers' mothers' mothers' mothers' mother, Margaret Walker Alexander. ■