

BOOK REVIEW

Opal Moore

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens by Alice Walker. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983. xviii + 397 pages.

I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited and that pops out in wild and unlikely places

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens is a collection of the non-fiction writings of Alice Walker, poet and novelist, from 1965 to 1983. As a collection, the writings gathered here, which include book reviews, speeches, articles, and personal statements, cease to be simply responses by the writer to singular events. Instead, many of the individual essays become tangible pieces of history, artifacts. In this instance, however, the rearranging of the scattered potsherds and pieces has not been left to the chance of some later archaeologist. The artist has taken it upon herself to gather the remnants of her own personal history and piece them together as a living gift, anticipating the needs of the daughters.

When presenting a collection of essays, there is the obvious problem of organization. The subject matter will inevitably be diverse and, to the neat or linear mind, seemingly unrelated. In order to appreciate the final format of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, it is necessary to consider some typical alternative solutions. The essays could have been presented chronologically—in the approximate order that they were written. Or, they could have been presented in order of preference—placing the favorite (usually the title piece) first, the least favorite last. The organization of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* is much more of an accomplishment. It tells as much a story as any of the individual articles.

Through the arrangement of the thirty-five essays, an attempt is made to trace the evolution of the artist from student to historian and seer. It is not only the messages and truths within the essays themselves, but also the attention to process built into the very structure of the collection that makes this book especially useful to black women artists who have wondered at the oddity of their existence and longed for a recipe. The effect is autobio-

graphical—Walker is revealed through her own explorations of conscience and conflict as she explores her models and her history, and creates synthesis.

The “recipe” begins with the essay entitled, “Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models . . .” It is commonly accepted that there is a basic human need for models that we can imitate, measure ourselves against, and from whom we inherit our spiritual touchstones. In this first essay, Walker recalls the period in her life during which she discovered that she could not continue her natural evolution as a writer with the models she had at hand—namely, white, European, and/or male. Walker realized that there were valuable lessons in the tragic struggles of a Vincent Van Gogh, in the impeccable style and empathetic morality of a Flannery O’Connor, and in the beauty and simplicity in the flattering romanticizations of a Jean Toomer. However, these people and others like them could not help her to conquer her special dilemma: how to be a black woman and an artist working under “the oppression of silence.” As Walker discusses these various artists and their considerable influence upon her, the reader becomes painfully aware of the dexterity and mental diplomacy that she needed to employ in the reading and interpreting of their work. This in no way diminishes the quality or importance of the work of these artists, but only points up the void that exists for a black woman seeking herself within their sole example. As Walker states it: “I don’t recall the exact moment I set out to explore the works of black women . . . [but] I found I was in need of something that only one of them could provide.” Clearly, it was more than mere curiosity spurred by the total absence of black women writers from her college reading lists, it was necessity which started Walker on a personal search which climaxed in her “discovery” of Zora Neale Hurston.

Hurston, a little known black female anthropologist and writer of fiction who lived from (roughly) 1901 to 1960, became (by Walker’s admission and frequent mention in her essays) a substantial figure in her evolution as a writer, chronicler, and woman. Hurston filled the void of the sought after and missing model. Walker eventually visited Eatonville, Florida, Hurston’s birthplace, to place a stone on the woman’s unmarked grave—a cornerstone experience chronicled in the article “Looking for Zora.” This singular act reveals the purpose of this collection of essays; it is taking a step toward breaking the “curse of silence” that has kept black women isolated from themselves and each other, cut off from the seeds to be gleaned from our artistic history. It is a necessary step backward to self-discovery.

Knowing this allows us to understand the phrase “our mothers’ gardens” as Walker intends in the context of this collection—as a symbol for all the unacknowledged but rich artistry, tradition, ritual, and stories handed down by anonymous or scantily known black women of unmarked graves who, though their creativity was rarely preserved in any formal way, managed to keep alive “a notion of song.” The search for these little known, uncelebrated women provides the central consciousness of this collection.

The issues and heroes of the 1960s were a major factor in developing Walker's attitude regarding what it means to be an artist. What is the artist's responsibility to her times? Is art incompatible with anger? These were questions central to black artists emerging during the 1960s, caught up in the inescapable hatred of the times. They are central now for black artists who think that racism is *passé* or, at least, too embarrassing to deal with in their art. Or for those who feel there is no place for protest in "real" art—for those who have been frightened away from the seriousness of their own lives, who cringe at terms like "social relevance." Walker addresses the dilemma of the artist: is it enough just to preserve the stories?

Walker addresses a broad range of issues: artistic, political, and personal. She recalls the tragedy of growing up in a racist society to suddenly "meet" her elders who, through her adult eyes, had lost their stature—appeared diminished, squashed by an unrelenting society. She recounts her own disappointment in her father and the process of forgiving him which involved understanding that he was only a product of his time. She looks at the women of our childhood, no rose colored glasses to soften their flaws, none needed to recognize their beauty and humanity. These portraits sent me back to the pages of recent history to study the photographs of faces I had forgotten—faces implacable and removed from the prods and dogs—to try to decipher the source of their calm. But Walker is not stirring at white guilt, but establishing the place and time of which she is the physical and philosophical product. And in the course of these essays, which are portrait and story, Walker offers a logic for the reclaiming of the South as home.

Throughout these pieces, it is clear that Walker decided early on not to settle for the creation of beautiful, non-controversial icons. Instead, she has struggled to evolve a philosophy which would transform the ugly. Out of her writing comes a positive approach to life and art which somewhat clarifies Walker's ability in her fiction to deal with the most damning side of human nature and social politics and still allow her characters to transcend themselves and their era. It is a philosophy which would allow her, an expatriate of the racist South, to reclaim the land which is hers (and ours) as birthright and creative well-spring, retain the spiritual wholeness of the men and women who comprise home, and also permit her to interpret the civil rights movement, and what it did or did not accomplish, on her own terms.

The title essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," forms the apex of the collection. It is the metaphor for all of the pieces before and after it; it is the coming of age of the artist. Within the essays in this third section, certain elements conjoin just as the mature artist is a combination of all the shards and scraps of the poverty and richness of her youth. Within the title essay, and throughout this section, Walker explores her relationship with the black women artists whose excellence and creative gifts have been all but lost to us, also exploring their weaknesses in a meaningful context. Walker also takes a long look at how black women have been defined, outside of such a context, in literature.

What does it mean to be a black woman and an artist? What did it mean in Hurston's time, Phillis Wheatley's time? In yours or my mother's time? There is a need to reach back and reclaim the valuable artistic past that has been hidden from us, or that we have made ourselves blind to. Primarily, it is about attaining vision, becoming able to interpret the work of these artists within the context of their lives, becoming able to recognize the art practiced by women who had not the leisure or finances or indulgence of society to paint their pictures on broad canvases or sculpt their ideas into stone or metal, who owned no museums—except their children—within which to preserve their wisdom or their history. Walker encourages all of us to recognize the importance and endurance of our own mothers' artistry—even a thing as natural as the stories she repeated often and with care, the stories that shaped us. We should become able to recognize the creativity that women brought to daily activities without benefit of audience or accolade. As Walker says: "Perhaps [your mother] was herself a poet—though only her daughter's name is signed to the poems that we know."

The final essays in this collection appear to be the least cohesive. But a closer look reveals the disarray of the artist reassembling her tools, maybe for the purpose of returning to mine an old excavation, but digging even deeper into the same past in order to envision, interpret, and manage the future. These last pieces do not attempt to conclude, but further reveal the artistic process. They bring into view the loose threads of Alice Walker's current explorations and allow us to see this process of questioning, history gathering, soul searching, and synthesis; questioning, gathering . . . on and on, as the cyclical movement of women, nature, and art.