

Transcription – Alice Walker Interview for You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train  
March 18, 2018  
Ari Bogom-Shanon  
File No.: 19550

Denis Müller: [inaudible]...get a soundcheck.

Alice Walker: Ok.

Deb: I think bring it down just a little bit so I can hear.

Denis: And when did you go to Spellman?

AW: Uh, I went to Spellman in the fall of '61. Mhm.

Denis: And uh,

AW: I went to Russia immediately thereafter [laugh].

Denis: Really?

AW: Yes, and that was really how Howie and I met. I mean really, in a way because I was a fresh person, going off to Russia. I had no idea where I was going except that I knew that this government wanted to kill the people in Russia by dropping bombs on them, possibly before they could, you know, drop bombs on us and so forth and it just seemed so stupid. I mean I was 18 I think, so it really seemed stupid. And I had an opportunity to go the Soviet Union and I went. And I was so completely ignorant that I honestly did not know who was in Lenin's tomb. But I, as soon as I got home, I had a great time in Russia, and really loved the people, um, and I came back to Spellman and Howie was teaching a Russian literature class [clearing throat], and also teaching bits and parts of the language because I think he doesn't know the whole thing but he taught us some crucial parts. And I did a paper on Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy and he really really appreciated it. And I think that was the foundation of our friendship.

Denis: Yeah I went to [inaudible] I had just a similar [inaudible] of ignorance when I was a 21 year old went to Europe and I went down to Barcelona and I saw the Spanish police walking around with machine guns and asked one of the Catalonians of how do you tolerate that without knowing the whole history of, now I cringe at my ignorance of whoever that person was who was so nice and didn't, when I said how could you even put up with this and I didn't know that it was the pockets of resistance in the Spanish Civil War [inaudible] but he was very nice he didn't get mad at me he didn't say you stupid or arrogant not knowing how can you say something like that? He took the patience to explain to me well, you know, this isn't the part of Spain that was particularly favorable of the Franco. but to this day I remember that person being like very patient and kind with me, I was pretty ignorant!

AW: Yeah, no, I don't think it's a bad thing to be ignorant when you're 18 and coming from terrible schools, I mean how could you not be ignorant, you know?

Denis: Yeah.

AW: So I was very happy then to come back to Spellman and to find Howie teaching Russian literature and history.

Denis: And, [offscreen] we're going? [To Walker] Ok. I have a--what made him such a, I mean I have people that talk about him being such a great teacher and, um, I can understand that following him around, but could you maybe elaborate on, what was it about him that made him such a fantastic teacher?

[00:03:33.007]

AW: Well Howie is very funny, as you have noticed. And, I think great teachers should be funny. They should be filled with humor, and wit, they should be able to teach the harshest realities without making you want to crawl under the building. He was also just gifted at saying the most unexpected political thing in the weirdest settings. For instance, we were once at a very kind of uptight all-white women's college, Agnes Scott, in Atlanta. And in those days, you know you bussed people from school to school you bus the white women over to the Black school Spellman and you'd bus the Black students over to the white school. So we had gone over there not on a bus but probably in Howie's car or Staughton Lynd's car or somebody's car and uh, he was addressing these women and these, you know, teachers and they were all just--it was the best they could do to have five or six Black people in the audience you know I mean that was just stretching them to the limit. And Howie gets up and he says a few things and then he sort of introduces himself by saying 'well,' chuckling, ' I stand to the left of Mao Tse Tung' [laughs]. So, it was quite a moment. I don't know if he actually remembers this but I try to remind him every time I see him that that was quite a moment for me. Because, you know he was actually talking to people who were not to the left of anything, they were not event to the left of absolute apartheid. So it was that kind of wit and that kind of courage and irreverence and just the kind of pure expression of being that was just very, very nice.

[00:05:43.007]

Denis: And at that time it was different to use literature and to use books such as Dostoyevsky for a history class, wasn't it? I mean that was very common, not really very common but there's a lot of professors in high school, teachers, that do that now. But at that time it was somewhat different, wasn't it?

AW: Uh, well yes, it was. And I think in a way it still is because many people really do think that people who write history, generally write history, actually know what's going on. And he understood because he was moved by literature, that often you get the best, truest record of what people really were like, and what they really went through, from the people's literature and from their own stories. So he taught in that way. So I was able also to connect with Russians at the level of someone who also came from an agrarian background, and someone who really knew misery when I saw it, and understood to some degree what caused it, in terms of the economic structure.

[00:07:08.007]

Denis: Maybe this quote was wrong, correct me if it was, but I read once when you were quoted, and I can't remember the publication I'm sorry--

AW: I won't either [laughs] I probably won't even remember the quote.

Denis: I've never heard white person talk like that.

AW: Like what?

Denis: [inaudible] say the things that Howard Zinn says and I'm paraphrasing from what I read and trying to--

AW: Oh, uh, well I hadn't. I mean so it's fine, I mean I don't remember saying it but, I'd never heard anyone talk like Howie talked, had you? I mean I don't restrict it to race I think he really captured the essence of kind of the revolutionary spirit embodied in a professor of history. And that is really quite unique, I think. And also of course in Atlanta you would never hear any person, Black white or whatever expressing the thoughts that he did.

[00:08:20.942]

Denis: The students really loved him at Spelman. Can you describe maybe what kind of support he'd give to students?

AW: Well the biggest support that Howard Zinn gave to students was that he listened to them. He listened to them and he could see their beauty. And this was an amazing thing. Because of course they've always been beautiful, but very few people had the courage to say so. An, he did. I mean he actually could see beauty when it was right in front of him and he could express appreciation for it. So, I think that for all these often stunning women at Spellman it was really wonderful to have someone that they could see could see them.

[00:09:05.942]

Denis: His point of view is activism, and where he wasn't universally loved by the administration of Spellman I don't think--

AW: Well, no not at all. His activism was not at all loved by anybody hardly, I mean maybe one or two teachers. But he would have to tell you whether there was you know maybe one or two people in the administration who cared for his political vision and his activism. Uh, he was fired after all you know, from Spelman.

Denis: You left school, you left Spelman after it happened.

AW: Yeah, that wasn't the sole reason, but it was part of it. I really understood that even though I was a poor student there on scholarship and all of that, that I really didn't want to be somewhere where they could fire what I considered the best teacher they had. And so I decided I would leave I had no idea really where to go but, somewhere. And so I ended up at Sarah Lawrence.

[00:10:10.672]

Denis: And Roz and Howard's house was open, wasn't it?

AW: It was. Their house was open to students, and they of course have two children who are grown now, but they had two small children. And so it was possible to drop in there and have dinner, and have good conversation, and to see wonderful prints on their walls. A warm house with lots of art.

Denis: Did it [inaudible] that Atlanta center, could you explain what it was like at the time, who did the activism, the beginnings of a Civil Rights movement and the beginnings of young people being very very much a big part of that, and then maybe trying to fit Howard into that?

AW: Well, when I came to Spelman in '61, the Atlanta movement was really going pretty strong. And I was very excited and of course joined demonstrations. And part of what made it possible to do that was that he was with us, he was with the students, and he was in the capacity of counselor and teacher, and he could connect us up with legal people. It was a very powerful, strong, wonderful time to be an activist.

Denis: You became part of SNCC as a member or--

AW: I was never a member of SNCC, I was one of these who was just completely inspired by SNCC people. And I remain so. I think that the people of SNCC, the young men and women who were so incredibly brave form I think probably the most shining of our hours in this country.

Denis: As a really gifted writer, can you talk a little bit about Howard's writing style? I find it really wonderful, I mean I love the book *The New Abolitionists*, I mean I started to reread it again, and in some ways it flows so can you talk a little bit about his ability as a --it's not dense it's not like historical texts of this I mean he's a wonderful writing [inaudible].

[\[00:12:32.736\]](#)

AW: I guess what I like about Howie's writing is that I feel that I'm really reading one of us. You know I'm reading someone who understands that there is no hierarchy, that we are in this situation together as a society, as a culture and as a planet. He's very direct. I think it's George Orwell who said that fiction, good fiction or good writing should be like a pane of glass. You kind of go through it, you can just go immediately through it into whatever they're describing and you don't have all of the um, the stuff that many writers put--the screen. And Howie, Howie's writing is like that. I mean immediately I--when I read his writing I'm immediately in to the emotion the place the place that he's talking about. And I don't ever feel that he is being deliberately sort of dense for the academic flavor that people think they have to have.

Denis: One of the things I want to get to, and everybody that knows him very well says to us that don't forget Roz.

AW: Yes, and I would say that as well. Never forget Roz because, how can you even say it? I can't even, I can't imagine him without Roz. I cannot. They're really very much together. And in my heart, very equal.

Denis: And that's certainly, I mean, she's obviously supportive. She's like of th--so much together and apart in their points of view, although I'm sure they differ in that, not fundamentally world view, but, her as an activist as well.

AW: Well you know, they might differ, as far as I know. I mean, I have no idea. They might very well differ on who knows what. Because I realized as you were saying that is what I really appreciate about her is basically her spirit. Which is extremely loving and inclusive and warm. And thoughtful and supportive, you know, of all the people who came into their orbit, into their community and into their home. Very generous. Very kind, yeah.

Denis: And now you--everybody, um what's my last question--you maintained knowing Howard and Roz for a long time.

AW: Decades now, so, yeah, since I was 19, 18 or 19.

Denis: Like forty years, how--again I guess it's getting back to the first question, of the importance of teachers like Howard Zinn, and throughout your whole life, can you maybe talk in general of how his importance, I mean not importance, that's not the right word I'm looking for, his view of opening things up, I--I'm sorry.

AW: That's alright, take your time.

Denis: [inaudible] about how he opened boxes and opened things for people. And maybe the last thing I want to ask is how, in that opening for people, for students, that became a lifelong friendship in so many ways. Could you [inaudible] how he opened things up, and as a teacher brought in the real world, especially in the South at that time.

AW: Part of the way that he brought in the real world was that he brought in a real Howard Zinn. It was quite amazing to realize that this man that we all loved so much had actually dropped bombs during the war on people, and that he knew that, and that that was part of his realness. I wish so much that people who teach would be as honest with their students, because that opens you, it opens you as a student tremendously to know that you're not being taught by a saint, you're not being taught by someone who came out of high school or college knowing exactly how to behave in the world. You're being taught by somebody who's been initiated into life by a harsh reality. And this really made a difference.

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Denis: One last question. Do you his background, coming from being so poor. And it seems like every experience he had, he's carried with that. And it's grown and grown. He says so often in lectures, "I learned more from my students than they learn from me". And at first when I met Howard I said oh that's a nice thing to say, but I came to learn that yeah, that's really true. And maybe, do you think there's a correlation or [inaudible] of his poor background and how then he can relate to African Americans students.

AW: Not all African American students are poor. [pause, laugh]. Uh, well

Deb: [inaudible].

AW: I think, um--

Denis: I should maybe rephrase it

AW: Well no, I can work with it.

Denis: I think what you said is very true and Spelman was a, very much a middle class--

AW: In fact, he was actually out-classed at Spelman, because most of those young women are from wealthy families and he was poor.

Denis: Right, right. I think maybe, what I'm [inaudible] coming from a poor beginning, having an affinity for what the underdog is. That's what I really mean.

AW: No clearly. And I also--unfortunately my neighbors are taking this opportunity to sing, mow their lawn, you know, move their helicopters, whatever.

Deb: [inaudible] I can deal with it later.

AW: My feeling about that is that Howard Zinn never left his parents and his class and his people even when he could. And this is another indication of his greatness and of his humanity. Because so many people who are poor and as children, just leave all of that. There's nothing else. So, he hasn't done that. And I think he does see that in his students and he sees it in Native Americans and African American and Chinese Americans and Vietnamese Americans, and Jewish Americans. So it's a wonderful thing, you know not to leave who you are. Because then, you stand in your own inherited strength that goes back so many generation. In his case all the way back to Russia and some part of Asia because I, when look at him I always see his Asiatic features as well as the Russian Jewish.

Denis: Yeah, Ok, [inaudible].

Aw: [laughs].

Deb: You know there was one thing I was thinking of when you talking about books and the pane of glass and the ability to go, to sort of get right into his writing, and that's also something that people have really criticized him for, too. People criticize his writing. It's not footnoted, it doesn't have references. It's a contradiction with him that's difficult for people to get--

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AW: Well, yeah, academics will always have difficulty with the truth. Especially unvarnished. And that is why, and the feminists always say the personal is the political. I mean the more you can be true to your own experience the more true you generally can be. And I sometimes I think academics just hide everything, or try to, behind their footnotes and their references, and who said this when and what and, all of that. And I also think that Howie dos enough of that, it's not as if he doesn't do any. But he just doesn't, you know obscure what he's trying to reveal with a lot of verbiage and stuff that's unnecessary.

Denis: You listen [inaudible] Noam Chomsky [inaudible], he lives in a different word when he's talking about academics in comparison, he lives just in a different world than they do.

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AW: Well he is actually alive, you know? I mean, that's very important. There are so many people who are not. And [sigh], you know when you're alive life is just different, how you relate to people is different. But for a lot of people who have given up their aliveness, he is shocking. [Laughs]. It's like 'woo' [puts hands up, laughs].

Deb: Yeah he is.

Denis: But his warmness, and his humanity, allows hime to say things to audiences that I don't think other people can say.

AW: Well in the Buddhist way of looking at this we would say that Howie is empty. I know, look at that puzzled look on your face.

Denis: I know.

AW: Well in the sense that he gets away with saying things because basically he understands that he is just a form at this point, telling you this. He's not attached to Howard Zinn, really. And I think that has something to do with that initiation dropping those bombs and really understanding what that meant. I

mean that's my view. Among many other things in his life. But at some point you do get it, you know, so they shoot you while you're talking. They're just shooting a form. And I think that most of us who came out of the South during that period have really had to deal with that. We've really had to accept that we have certain things to say, many people in the audience will not like it, but so what? We're in this form at this point to basically do that. So he, he's not attached. And I think that's why his humor is so good.

Denis: Yeah, ok, ok.

AW: [Laughs]. He's funny! He's free. When you're free you can be funny. I mean why not it's all very hilarious.

Denis: You know when I first decided to do this project I read Howard's work and I was in London one time and I was, actually I came from California to Chicago to London working to a film about the VVA [?] and then I was just on holiday I had some British friends [inaudible] I was, oh I couldn't sleep I was waking up at four in the morning. But I thought how do you make a film about what is history? To make a long story short I read a little, I read his book *A People's History*, but I read this little collection of his articles *Failure to Quit* but I said maybe through this guy-

AW: Right.

[\[00:25:22.000\]](#)

Denis: But I was afraid, in many ways to call him because I thought he was this really angered guy.

AW: Yeah, oh I know.

Denis: That I would call up and he would just go 'I don't want to talk to you' and hang up the phone. Yeah. And to see that their anger is there with the injustices of society, and that, but that great warmth I was never [inaudible] looking for.

AW: Yeah, right. And think of that title, *Failure to Quit*. There you have it. [Shakes head].

Denis: Ok.

Deb: And I love that fact that he's writings now to, that he's doing plays.

AW: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Deb: And, you know, in terms of living a full life and finding new venues to say what you've been saying. We just went and did a shot [inaudible].

AW: Yeah, yeah I enjoyed it.

Deb: And the book itself, I read it first and that was [inaudible] but watching Brian? Brian Jones?

AW: Yeah. Yes uh-huh. He's really good. And at some point I told him this. I went to see it because we had it hear for a while, and I said to him, 'do you realize, at some point you became Marx?' At one point he does, it's so interesting. And I think in that play you can actually see Roz's influence more than you would tend to see it in anything. Because the attention that Howie gives to Marx's wife is very much Roz's touch I think.

Denis: Thank you. Cause one of the questions I want to ask Howard is that 'ok Howard, you've taught me as you've taught a lot of people, me in following you around that history is a point of selection. There's an infinite number of facts and out of those facts you choose. Now let's get the *Marx in Soho*, how much is Roz an influence in that in your emphasis on Jenny.'

AW: Right, mhm.

Deb: And Jenny's needling.

AW: Right, and telling him 'oh this is not, you know'. Yeah. I think she's probably a really good critic. Very gently but very trustworthy.

Denis: Yeah, I'm so glad you said the last thing about *Marx in Soho* cause that was like [inaudible]. I told someone who, writing a review in the Chicago paper of the play, generally favorable review, but I'm saying don't miss that!

AW: Right.

Denis: Your review [inaudible], don't give me credit I don't care, but.

AW: Yeah and women really appreciate it. Because part of the thing about Marx you know is that it's true as Jenny said. So much of it is just boring as can be. And also, there's no feminine. So to have Howie do this, and to put the feminine big in the play, as it had to have been in Marx's life, I mean you know, really, is really wonderful.

[00:28:47.000]

Denis: Thank you.

AW: Yeah, you're welcome.

Denis: Ok.

Deb: Ok.

Denis: This is great, thank you so much.

AW: Oh you're very welcome.

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[00:06:14.186]

[Extended clapping]

AW: I want to bring John Lennon back to be with us tonight, to help us remember that some of us don't live a long time. Some of us die well before we should. [Clears throat]. And he was one of those. I also want us to think about how hard it is to remain true to who we were when we came into the world. To remain true to our parents. To remain true to our ancestors. To remain true to our ancestor. And John was someone who did that, even though he became to really filthy rich.

Audience: [Laughs].

AW: And actually did it by breaking down all of the filthy rich things that tried to make him into somebody else. Tried to make him, for instance, into an Englishman.

Audience: [Laughs].

AW: It was always such a relief to understand that at least John knew he was Irish. [Clears throat]. So we are very blessed tonight to have Studs and Howard with us because they have lasted a long time. And this is very, very rare in a way, this kind of rarity. Especially in this culture. They have managed to stay with us, they have not gone on. My welcome begins with a poem, a part of a poem from Walt Whitman, who was so varied in himself, and so beautiful. 'I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny. I see martyrs and prisoners. I observe a famine at sea, I observe the sailors casting lots, who shall be killed, to preserve the lives of the rest. I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon laborers, the poor, and upon Negroes and the like. I hear bravuras of birds, bustle of wheat, gossip of flames, clack of sticks cooking my meals. I hear the sound I love, the sound of the human voice.' And from Pablo Neruda, himself a radical, 'I look at ships, I look at trees of bone marrow bristling like mad cats. I look at blood, daggers, and women's stockings and men's hair. I look at beds, I look at corridors where a virgin is sobbing, I look at blankets and organs and hotels. I look at secretive dreams, I let the straggling days come in, and the beginning also, and memories also, like an eyelid held open hideously I am watching. And then this sound comes: a red noise of bones, a sticking together of flesh and legs yellow at wheatheads meeting. I am listening among the explosion of the kisses, I am listening, shaken among breathing and sobs. I am hear, watching, listening, with half of my soul at sea and half of my soul on land, and with both halves of my soul I watch the world.' With both halves of my soul, I watch the world. I asked Studs Terkel, who just told me we'd never met--

Audience: [Laughs].

AW: [Laughs], when he interviewed me after publication of my first novel, in 1970.

Audience: [Laughs]

AW: I was living in Mississippi, and I had grown up in Georgia, and I was writing about the system of slave continuance called share-cropping, and what it did and what it does to human beings still in the world. What I love about Studs is that he had actually read the book. He knew what it was about, and he saw me and he heard me. He listened. Howard and I met at an honors dinner at Spelman college when I was a student in the early sixties. And he has claimed that I was very quiet then, and I never told him why. And I shall tell him why tonight. He was probably the first white man I had ever sat next to, and he was definitely the first white man that I have ever in my life seen actually listening to Black people speak. I was stunned. That's why I was quiet. As soon as I could manage it I became his student for a whole semester. And this person has been one of the enduring inspirations of my life. These two great human beings, Studs Terkel and Howard Zinn, teach us the beauty of endurance, of being teachers and activists, of seeing them as the same thing. They teach us the joy of illustrating the alternative, which both of them have done their entire long lives. But as I thought about my welcoming of them to our beloved Berkeley, one quality that they share stayed in my mind. They're both listeners. Between them they seemed to have listened to and heard almost everyone in this century. Howard has even listened to the voices of Native Americans, who's words were recorded by those who came to the New World with

Christopher Columbus in 1492. Listening, they have broken chain after chain of silence. Speaking, and helping others to speak, they have changed the world by changing lives. They do not then have to say of themselves, as many men must say of themselves, and as Neruda wrote: 'It so happens, I am sick of being a man. I don't want to go on being a root in the dark. Insecure, stretched out, shivering with sleep. Going on down into the most guts of the earth, talking, taking in, and thinking. Eating every day. I don't want so much misery. I don't want to go on as a root and a tomb, alone under the ground. A warehouse of corpses.' No, Howard and Studs can say instead as I say in this poem that I wrote for them today: 'I have been a standing self in this world. I have braved both pleasure and disgust. I have lived my words. The stranger appeared and I did not look away. The crazy youth wandered by, and I sometimes followed him. The virgin cried, and I investigated her tears. I am a man, a person, and elder, shining and wise. I am someone who happily discovered to use of my ears. I am someone who happily discovered the use of my mind. I am someone who happily discovered the use of my heart. I meet the young people, the soldiers, the prisoners, the students, the poor people, the people of color, the Indians, and the women of the planet. And I am not afraid of them. And for their part, they do not seem to be afraid of me. I sit and eat quietly the bread of resistance on the wrong side of the barricade. I am an elder, shining and wise. I have lived my words. I have discovered the use of my heart, my mind, my tongue. And for that reason alone, I have become devout. A listener devoted to the sound of the human voice. I have lived long enough to be able to tell you that I prefer it to sound happy. For the sake of the generations, I have become magic. I have become the ear that speaks.' I would like to present these candles to Howard and Studs. You should light them and remember that you have many friends who love you in Berkeley. That to us you are yourselves candles that light up the darkness of silence. Studs and Howie.

Audience: [Laughing and clapping].

[Howard and Studs appear and receive the candles, sit on chairs facing each other on stage]