

Feb. 3, 1983

Handwritten: Mike
Handwritten: Copy to Ray

Dear Lou, Mike, Eugene:

The Afro-American writers conference that Lou just called to our attention interests me very much and I do think that Lou should go there, but both the money question and whether New York could likewise go there will have to be discussed further with Olga.

I was trying to see both the topics and whether ~~any~~ I knew any of the participants. The topics interested me a lot although I don't know who their keynote speaker, Lance Jeffers, is. Do you? The ~~the~~ topics I especially underlined were the question of the historian, the question of Marxism, and that on both Black women's literature and the one on Sociology. Since it is a writer's conference, I fear that the one on the role of the historians would hardly be on the making of history whereas we would definitely wish to speak of masses in motion as history-making and the historian who knows how to appreciate oral history, rather than just leaving it to the written word, i.e. academic historians. We can try to discuss that further, even though the time is very short.

The topic that requires no additional comment because we are all experts (!) is the 2PM Feb. 9 session on the "Political Dimensions (Nationalism, Marxism, Feminism, etc.)". The first thing that should be criticized is why is the word "recent" used on this political dimensions, since Marxism has been around for quite some time and in Marx, himself, especially as related to America, he was a most active participant both as having organized the very first international organization of working men to both stop the British bourgeoisie's attempt to side with the South and with that mass force to establish relations directly up to the White House as well as -- and that is above all -- that Black dimension was in his greatest theoretical work and in many a pamphlet as well as the reporter for the Tribune and relations with the Abolitionists, not to mention the fact of his projection that a single Black regiment would have such magnificent effect on the nerves of those greater generals in the South compelling Lincoln himself to stop pussyfooting on this being a war only for unification and transform it into a revolutionary Civil War. That you, Lou, for one, would like to speak both on the Marx of Marxism and the Black dimension and on your own pamphlet on Frantz Fanon, is what you should transmit to them.

It's harder for a male to claim the right to speak on Black women's literature, but we certainly could take the floor and in this case, from the floor, bring in the question of Maria Stewart and some of those we have reviewed in NAL of the present writers. I note that ~~the~~ Toni Cade is one of the speakers and she surely has a dual kind of background, except, as against The Black Woman, her present fictional writing has received the most praise-worthy reviews and acceptance in the white writers' world. I don't know whether we would also try to get in on

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Sociology, but I consider it most important to refer both to Mazrui's works on literature and to Wole Soyinka's essays, and not to forget to mention that, as early as 1960, not only had Langston Hughes' An African Treasury included articles and essays as well as poems and stories but was the very first one who included an African woman's piece (Phyllis Ntantala) and she is still working in the U.S. this time in the movement for Black liberation.

I actually would like a call made to N.Y. to find out whether they could attend. I imagine that Ray ~~could~~ could find a way to attend, and, indeed, he has contacts in that city and might be able to find out something the ad doesn't tell us. There was one professor there (I believe he said his name was Wilson) who was quite interested in getting me to speak there, and though it obviously fell through, he may very well be contacted to see if he could help two Blacks like Ray and Lou, even if we are not formally invited. Certainly our literature should be there, and I would want us to be there, whether or not we are invited. I also see that they are advertising a phone -- 202-686-6862 -- for further information; they advertise no admission price, but I don't know if that means there is none. You should also have little surprise items, even if only for individuals you talk with, such as the fact that the Howard Univ. Political Scientist chaired the famous Leon Trotsky meeting and was chairman of the LT Defense Committee during the Moscow Trials, (I've forgotten the name again, but Lou will remember it), as well as the fact that Carter G. Woodson had arranged for the meeting of CLRJ and in general that N&L was active in the 1930s in Washington, D.C. to try to break down the Jim Crowism that existed there.

Lou, there was one other thing that interests me in relation to the D.C. conference, and that is that you should try to see some of our recent contacts and for that you would have to talk to Ray and find out details of whom he had seen. And of course any subscribers we have there. Two of those had come to my meeting two years ago and were supposed to start corresponding but there was no follow-up, which doesn't mean that those two wouldn't be present at this conference and would immediately recognize you if you had any literature on you.

Have a good time,

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Feb. 16, 1983

Dear Friends:

My report on the Afro-American writers conference in Wash., D.C. and trip to New York has two aspects: 1) establishing contacts with Black intellectuals and follow-through; and 2) new openings for Raya's lecture tour.

I arrived at Howard Univ. in the middle of student protests and marches demanding the resignation of the president of the university. This was also the setting of Fifth Annual Afro-American Writer's Conference which was co-sponsored by the American Writer's Congress and the D.C. Arts and Humanities Council. Unfortunately, the student protests and the writer's conference remained in two separate worlds, not because the students didn't invite this generation of Black writers from the 1960s to come and address their rallies but because none of the Black intellectuals who had come to talk about the relationship of Black literature to social movements thought that the more than 500 students protesting at Howard represented the "political dimensions" of recent Black literature.

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Of the six panels that took place on Feb. 9 and 10, I was able to attend 4 and got the chance to speak from the floor at 3 of them. The first panel was on role of the historian and Black autobiography. The most interesting speakers were James Spady from Temple Univ. and Joanne Braxton from Maryland. Spady spoke about Black labor as subject of Black literature, said that Temple U. was an unknown resource of Black labor archives, and presented some quite interesting material on Arthur Faucett, Jessie Faucett's brother. Incidentally, he said that Jessie Faucett was the real editor of the Crisis but that DuBois got all the credit. Spady said that Arthur Faucett had been the editor of several pre-Harlem Renaissance journals which took labor and socialist questions and that he had helped to found the Phila. teacher's union along with being very active in the early labor movement in the East. The point was that whereas literary historians of the period dismissed Jessie Faucett as merely a Black middle-class woman writer who was in the shadow of DuBois, the truth was that both he and her brother were in advance of DuBois in their interest in Black labor and socialism. Spady himself is a recent contributor to Rayford Logan's just published Dictionary of American Negro Biography. In talking to Spady in the hall at my make-shift lit. table he said that he already had a copy of Indignant Hearts: A Black Worker's Journal by Ch. Denby, and helped me sell two copies by telling intellectuals to buy it as it was one of the very few autobiographies by a Black worker. I told him about Peter Clark as the first Black socialist and founder of the first teacher's union in Cincinnati and he bought a copy of the 1877 pamphlet.

The other speaker, Joanne Braxton, who I had met before the conference began spoke about the need to "reclaim lost ground" in the history of Black women. The subject of her thesis was the autobiography of Ida B. Wells, Guns for Justice. I imagine that the renewed interest in Wells is due to the resurgence of opposition to the Klan. However, Braxton concentrated on Wells' autobiography as a "narrative confessional and Memoir" which sought to reconstruct past moments in the life of a "feminist and Black social activist". Though Braxton didn't call it dialectics, she said that Wells' autobiography demonstrated from the language of today, the Black woman's "recreation of herself in the light of one's method" vs. racial stereotypes and fragmentation of woman. From the floor I commented that the subject of Black labor and Black woman in literature revealed that historical narrative when tied to Black masses in motion was historical reason. One of the people I sold IH and the Fanon pamphlet to was the Librarian at the Univ. of Maryland - Baltimore County campus. He also wants to order the Marxist-Humanist Archives

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for his campus, and I will follow-up with a letter to him.

The panel on "Recent Black literature: the Political Dimension (Nationalism, Marxism, Feminism, etc.)" was the most prominent one. While attendance throughout the conference was at 200, this panel filled the hall to overflowing. The speakers were Toni Cade Bambara, Acklyn Lynch (former sociology prof. at Howard in the 60s and presently teaching at U. of Mass. Amherst), Kalamu ya Salaam (a cultural nationalist from New Orleans), and Amiri Baraka. Cade spoke first on Third World expatriate writers who survey in their work the lost or betrayed revolutions in their countries. She singled out in these writers an "emphasis on and desire for totality" as well as an "articulation of present tense concerns". Against this and what Cade called the "primary reality of the American struggle" she concluded that Marxism doesn't evaluate race though it does analyze the class dimension of Black reality. Acklyn Lynch followed and sounded like a recording from the 1960s. With the Black writer as the cheerleader of the Black liberation struggle Lynch said that "we must write to revolution irresistible." However, it wasn't irresistible enough for him to show up at the student's rally that night after he had accepted their invitation. Salaam, the cultural nationalist, expressed the greatest duality in the thinking of the conference of Black writers. On the one hand, he expressed such sensitivity to Black women's liberation, not only because he had collaborated with his wife on a book on Black women and works with a Black women's group in New Orleans. But, Salaam was the only one to say during the whole conference that it was no accident why most of the recent Black literature was by women. He went on to say: "Black women writing is more inventive than Black men because they haven't joined the status quo. Black women are searching for a new voice, so what is wrong with learning from women. Black women as revolutionaries are fulfilling their historic mission as articulated by Frantz Fanon. And in Black women writers we see the political power of the imagination." On the other hand, Salaam concluded with yet another twist on the conception of "underdevelopment": "The Black audience for our work is underdeveloped."

Naturally, Baraka was the one that all had waited to hear. Unlike the other panelists he didn't take for granted the fundamental relationship of Black literature to Black masses. Thus he gave an historical outline of stages of Black social movements from Abolitionism through Garveyism to the 1960s and showed how Black literature was given birth to and reflected those periods in Black history. However, his conclusion was failure of the movement in the 60s was due to its lack of a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party. It was only out of respect that the laughter wasn't louder. At any rate the discussion took off but didn't develop anything new, and I was unsuccessful in getting my hand recognized from the floor. During the break I did meet a South African student from the Black Consciousness Movement who told me how remote he thought the writers' conference was from his struggle. The fact is that absolutely no one mentioned Africa at the conference. He gave me the latest pamphlet from the BCM and assured me that it was alive and well, especially among the youth. New things were happening in Botswana and SA, and they had just concluded a convention in D.C.

The third panel was pretty uninteresting on the sociology of Black literature, except that Houston Baker spoke. Baker is probably the foremost Black literary critic today. He gave a very obtruse paper on the social science methodology (sic) of structuralism and the Blues matrix in Black literature. As against the positivism of traditional social science Baker finds a "fresh reading" of Black literature and its Blues matrix through such anti-dialecticians as Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault. When I took the floor and explained

that Fanon's critique of Sartre's attempt to reduce Black subjectivity to a minor term in the dialectic could also be applied to structuralism, Baker took my criticism serious enough to engage me in discussion on dialectics on the spot. We continued the discussion in the hall at the break where he bought the Fanon pamphlet. We got so much into a discussion on Hegel, Marx, Fanon and dialectics that he wanted to know who Raya was and told me about a study-group he was in at U. of Penn. (Phila) on Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind. Because he had just begun to study Marx and Hegel for himself he wanted to read P&R.

The last panel I attended and the one which provoked the most debate and emotion was the one on "Issues in Black Women's literature". The panel was composed of four academics, 3 women and 1 man. However, half way through the first paper student protestors, mostly young women, march^{ed} through the corridor shouting their slogan "Boycott classes tomorrow!" and disrupting the conference entirely. I was the only one to get up and follow them (some 300 strong) down into the student snack bar where they gave speeches and began a half a dozen discussion groups right on the spot. (There will more on the student protests in the paper). By the time I got back to conference the last paper was being read by Charles Rowell on recent works by women writers. Rowell's comments that Black women writers were more interested in form than in politics brought heated response from Lynch no sooner than discussion commenced. Lynch attacked Rowell not on the political nature of women's literature but for saying that the literature of the 1960's lacked form. Then Lynch turned to the women on the panel to challenge them to explain why they needed to speak autonomously. Rowell walks out of the conference, others jump to their feet and demand the floor, the women on the panel try to bring everyone to order. Finally, I get the floor and say that literary form is a political question. In addressing Lynch I told him that he had to confess that during the 60s the political space in the leadership of the movement, especially on this campus where we both were, was dominated by men. And if Black women have chosen such literary forms as the letter (Alice Walker's Purple); the memoir and play (Shange's Colored Girls); and the autobiography and family narrative (Lorde and Marshall), it was as a retreat or separation from politics of the Black struggle. Rather Black women writers were showing that the personal is political and they have shown it in a space and through a form that wasn't male dominated -- the mind of the Black woman. And finally, what is revealed by so many who attack these writers has nothing so much to do with them as individuals, as it reflects the self-criticism within the Black movement has been long overdue. If the Black movement puts American civilization on trial, Black women are posing a serious critique from within that movement as well. During the whole conference that was the only comment which received applause. Since they wouldn't let me set up a lit. table because it is prohibited at Howard, a number came out and bought everything I had on WL and again wanted to know who Raya was. They couldn't believe that a Marxist had such an appreciation of literature. One woman who edits a literary journal in D.C. wanted me to write for it, another woman who has organized a Black women's resource group wants to correspond and get whatever else we have on Black women. And Rowell came over to shake my hand to thank me for defending him, while Lynch's supporter thought that I had made their point. The dialectics of that afternoon were not to be believed. I also talked to a Haitian intellectual who had M&F and P&R as well as the Fanon pamphlet. He said that he was disappointed by the conference because of its lack of dialectics. He told me that Harold Cruse had a great title for a bad book that still needed to be written, and wanted to begin a correspondence committee of Black intellectuals who are interested in dialectics.

It is against this background that I went to see the Haitian Prof. who is the chair of the philosophy department at Howard. And while I certainly didn't

go to get a lecture for Raya at this late date, that is all the Haitian prof. would talk about -- how it is absolutely necessary for Raya to speak at Howard this year. He had heard her several years ago and feels that "she cuts the finest figure as a Marxist philosopher in the world today." O, Mr. Turner we must have her for the day at Howard to address a colloquium of philosophy classes and to deliver a major paper to the campus community. Later, I spoke to a history prof. about his dept. co-sponsoring and he said that he would get his part of the honorarium. At the moment we are looking at the dates of Mar. 14 or 15 (which is the actually date of Marx's death). Another Black intellectual, Ethelbert Miller, who is the librarian at the Afro-American research library at Howard bought M&F and wants to get Raya Archive for his library. He too offered to help.

I left D.C. before the blizzard, but it caught me in NY my magic having worn off. Ray had begun to arrange a radio interview and thinks that we will be able to put together in April when he and I will attend the Marx centenary conference at the Univ. of Maryland.

What did happen the afternoon that I left NY was that I spent an hour with Gloria Richardson. She was very interested in what we had to say about the CRM and her role as leader in the Cambridge Maryland movement. In looking at the new book she wanted to know who RL was. Though she hasn't been as active as she wants to be she is very interested in the WLM and what it means in relationship to Black women. We promised to correspond and she took a copy of the Fanon pamphlet.

As Raya lecture tour begins we have such Black intellectuals as Ali Mazrui at Ann Arbor, Robert Hill at UCLA, Vince Khapoya at Oakland U. in Michigan, intellectuals at Howard U. and others we have met during Black History Month who are interested in Marxist-Humanism. And just yesterday we met a young Gambian woman at Wayne State who bought the Fanon pamphlet and is reading the new book for further discussion next week. I am certain that the convergence of Black History Month and the Marx centenary has found only one philosopher with a view of Marx and the Black world as theoretic preparation for Black liberation in the 1980s.

A luta continua,

Lou