
Conducted by telephone and then by email by Professor Meta DuEwa Jones.. Date?

Meta Jones:

Your poetry has meditated—mediated—through the dynamics of enslaved Africans and resistance or rebellion such as Saartje Bartman, Nat Turner, and others. In “Islands Number Four,” for instance, you “describe a slave ship in 1789. . . At a distance, pattern. Up close, bodies / Doubled and doubled, serried and stacked.” This is dated before the 1839 Amistad Revolt. In your new book of poems, *American sublime*, you have an epic poem called “Amistad.” Did earlier poems such as these foment your interest in the Amistad affair? Or were you also motivated by its close proximity—the ship was brought into New London, Connecticut and the enslaved Africans were detained in New Haven, correct—to you, personally, geographically, and politically? Why did you choose to explore this historical and political imbroglio?

Elizabeth Alexander:

Seven years ago I was walking my first son in the stroller through New Haven. We came upon the New Haven Historical Society and I thought, why have I never been in here? Once inside, we saw the original of the famous portrait of Cinque as well as other documents from what you aptly called the “political imbroglio,” and I realized that not only was there much more to know than I did but also it made me think about the ground on which I walked, New Haven, Connecticut, and what I could learn about its history. The story brought in Yale and teaching, which was of course of great interest to me, and I thought that perhaps in poetry I could imagine my way to a fresh understanding of some aspects of the affair.

MJ: Your treatment of the translator, James Covey, is intricate and engaging. The search for a translator fluent in Mende to enable the jailed Africans present their version of the events in court must have had great implications for you as a poet. In some way, your series of poems read as a “translation” of this international affair in ways that communicate more fully than what one might find in government documents, history books, or even, film. Could you discuss translation, in terms of theory and praxis?

EA: The character Covey was close to my heart. He himself was brought from what is now called Sierra Leone in the slave trade and became a dock worker in New York. Many years after he was brought to the United States he was found by the Yale professor Josiah Willard Gibbs who was looking for someone who spoke Mende who could help the captives tell their story. What would that moment of being spoken to in your language after so many years feel like? What would it mean to meet with those captives after being away from home so long? What new identity would Covey have had to assume in order to survive? Where does what you leave behind after that violent separation reside?

- MJ: What process of selection framed your ordering of *American Sublime*? How important are the macro-organizational details such as poem order, table of contents, section titles and arrangement, font type, to you in the development of your creative statement?
- EA: The title “*American Sublime*” operates many different ways: it is literal, as in the poem “*American Sublime*,” to describe paintings out of that school and time period, but also ironic, because those paintings were made in the midst of a violent slave economy. In the *ars poetica* poems, part of what I realized I have always reveled in the possibilities of American englishes, its sublimities. So “*Sublime*” is sometimes literal and sometimes ironic, and “*American*” is meant to contain all of the possibilities, erasures, and contradictions of American-ness and the American story.
- MJ: You seem able to make the archive come alive, to give flesh, bone and teeth to the historically important figures you write “about” and through, from Paul Robeson’s wife, Eslanda, to James Vanderzee, to Yolande Dubois to Muhammad Ali. In poems such as “*Translator*” and “*Cinque*,” for instance, the human-ness, as a given, not as something to be “proven” pushes through. Does working with major figures from a previous epoch or era present particular challenges, offer special rewards?
- EA: The study of African-American history and culture has been a great gift to my work, because the font of rich stories and characters appears limitless.
- MJ: In *First Afro-American Esperantist*, you invoke both the literal and metaphoric possibilities of “*lingua franca*” as well as the interplay between identity, audience commodity and language. I love your phrase “*dialect bucket*” for the history, music, politics, poets it conjures. Could you comment on this poem?
- EA: Isn’t that a quirky little poem? There actually *is* a first Afro-American Esperantist – William Pickens — and there is a certificate that says so amongst his papers. He went to Yale in the early 20th century. There is such beautiful hope in the idea of Esperanto, the wish to communicate across place and boundary, and I think I am also interested in what we might call *Negro esoterica* – I love our quirks and oddnesses, our particularities, and my poems are sometimes a way to make an archive, to preserve them.
- MJ: *Family*, both literally—in terms of kinship—and figuratively—in terms of community, appears as a recurrent theme in your work. The reader meets, in your poems, a civil-rights hero father, a historian and storytelling mother, a great uncle that painted, another ancestor that passed, and now an East African mother-in-law that blesses and weeps. How has family influenced your creative process, conceptually or concretely, your career as a professional writer?

- EA: I'm very lucky in the family department. I come from and have joined with clear, committed people, whatever they do. I think they have affected me most in the way of being a teacher and being someone who always feels I am supposed to be helpful to others and generous. That's the family ethic.
- MJ: *Spirituality*, seems to be a vital component in your work. In this, I am not intending to invoke a sense of religiosity, but instead human and heavenly nature of the spiritual: the divine, divination, intuition, the incorporeal. At the same time, you have written a great deal about corporeality in your life as a writer. How do you keep these in balance? How does spirit inflect your writing?
- EA: Writing poetry seems to be a way that I explore such questions. Spiritual and ethical situations and conundrums are occasions for poems – though I am rarely aware of the conundrum as such when I embark upon the poem — and the writing of the poem is a way of working through those conundrums and accepting their frequent open-endedness. Besides making and raising children, the mystery of making art is the most spiritual zone of my life.
- MJ: You have written of the poet, Gwendolyn Brooks' "specialized vocabulary. . . the strange diction that could belong to no one else; the tensile strength of each line," her rhyming of "banshee" "Gets" and "vinaigrettes," for instance, adding that "If such wild and unexpected curiosities were possible in her language, then anything might be possible for me." In one of your untitled poems, the speaker exclaims, "my thinking looks like blue vapor, / red sparks, yellow tildes, then viscosity." Here's what your lexicon looks like: "viscous," "gelatinous," "angostura," "tonsured," "mende," "damask" "tulle" "finger-fucked," "Whassup G," "ziggurat," "Hey, Blood," "bloody crotch." As you write in "Fugue," "You could / ruminate all night about / the difference between "taut" / and "tight." Can you comment on these, or other words you choose in your work that incite curiosity, surprise and delight?
- EA: That is what writing poetry is for me, on a level, the profound – and I do mean profound – pleasure of writing certain words, preserving them, giving them a place to be and make sense and raise new questions and possibilities.
- MJ: Several of the poems in American Sublime have appeared previously in various poetry journals. What transpires between journal and book publication? Do you revise for the book?
- EA: I do some revising for the book if the poems need them, but mostly they are pretty done when I release them to journals and magazines.

I'd like to ask a question that your poetry and most clearly your recent essay collection, The Black Interior asks and answers in a variety of ways. In one of your poems, "Haircut," for example, the speaker begins by quote "getting off the IRT in front of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture," in New

York, and ends by asking the question: “What is black culture?” I’d like to extend that question to you. What is black culture? How does it impact your life, your poetry, your writing in general?

EA: On one level, we need to remember that any culture is that which makes it way to an audience. As critics and scholars and appreciators of art, what we can talk about is what we have received, and much has not made its way to us or has only begun its journey to limited pockets of the populous. Marketplace issues very much affect what we even think of as culture of any kind. That said, black culture is that which black people have made across an unimaginably wide spectrum of backgrounds, esthetics, and identities. And we have not yet fully taken stock of all that black people have made under the rubric of culture because I think that there has been too much that’s getting stuck in prescriptive ideas of blackness. We get caught up in the politics of, is it black enough? Does it follow this particular trajectory?

MJ: The statement that you made, “Black culture’s that which black people have made” seems deceptively simple, but it points to a key aspect of black culture and black work. It reminded me of an interview with Gwendolyn Brooks you may have seen in Joanne Gabbin’s *Furious Flowering of African-American Poetry*. She says “the black poet should only write about the black experience,” which sounds proscriptive but then she follows it up by saying, “the black experience is *any* experience any black person has.”

EA: Absolutely. It is really too astonishing in 2005 that the widely defined mainstream imaginary still sees black people in such limited terms. You know the feeling when a white person is looking at you or listening to you speak as though you could not possibly exist?

MJ: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

EA: No matter how devoted we are to the culture and to each other, we have a lot to overcome, imagining ourselves, or imagining each other. And in receiving each other.

MJ: In terms of The Black Interior’s form and subject, it struck me that this is the kind of work because of the level of its language, the range of its subjects, that I can imagine seeing in an undergraduate Introduction to African American Studies, or African-American Literature course. You move from talking about poets such as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks and Michael Harper to Jet magazine to an extended meditation on the film actor and producer Denzel Washington to the 19th century black intellectual Anna Julia Cooper. You cover a range of kind of black subjects and at the same time that you do close textual readings of not only literary works but of culture. What kind of pedagogical contribution do you see The Black Interior making?

EA: I've been teaching at universities for a long time now, and so and certainly some of the ideas in the book have gotten their start in the classroom. I've tried them out in the classrooms and one of the things that I really love, and one of the reasons that I never have and never want to write exclusively, is that staying engaged with the literary and cultural traditions as a teacher, you have to keep going back to the texts. That's the pleasure of university teaching for me. And so it wouldn't be surprising if that pleasure and that practice made its way to the book.

The essays formally are whatever they have to be. When you talk about Anna Julia Cooper in the 19th century, she had to invent a form that served her unimagined "type," that type being the turn-of-the-century African-American female intellectual. So she used the first person. She quoted from scripture. She commented on world literature. She engaged what we would now call political science. She made her way and this made space for her mind and then she was visible, imaginable, plausible, real. I've always been interested in the kinds of essays that cross genres and follow what I would call poetic logics and stretch the way we think about the essay, and stretch the way we think about thinking and defining arguments in a wider way. I've always written critical prose but I've also always wrestled with how to call upon all of my aesthetics and intelligence at the same time, when it felt that it did not fit into received forms.

MJ: I want to turn to your first book of poem the Venus Hottentot, it seems appropriate to me that *The Black Interior* would be titled as such because your poems address the issues of race, gender, sexuality, class. Particularly the issues of the exterior. Or the literal black exterior in terms of Sartje Bartmann's exoticized or eroticized exteriority, her exploited exterior, in terms of the public display of her body in Europe. On the other hand your poem envisions a contrast to that through her own negotiation of her interior life, her very deliberate private self. As a black artist, a poet, a creative and critical thinker. Are you always in some sense negotiating the interior and the exterior self in your work and in these works? How do these terms that you put out,—race, gender, sexuality, and class,—work within the context of the interior and the exterior and *The Black Interior*?

EA: I often say when I do teach creative writing that it's all well and good to have an idea, to say, I want to write about such-n-such and such-n-such. But I think the idea has to be rooted in language. It has to live in language. You can talk forever about the idea of the Venus Hottentot. But the first line of that poem which came to me, "I am called Venus Hottentot," was a real voice speaking and saying, essentially, I've been called out of my name. The name my parents gave me is no more. I am called Venus Hottentot. That's the language part, where character lives. That is what we have to protect and that is very challenging for black writers because of how challenging it is to be a social creature in the way black people are forced to be. Obviously I don't mean social creatures like just hanging out. I'm talking about what it means for us to walk around in the world as

physical people and actually deal with stereotypes and expectations that deny our own complex interiority.

This is what I explored in the dream poems of Antebellum dream book. I imagined I would find a sort of “fictional space” in the dream world, but what I found instead was space that wild and intimate and raced and gendered. So it’s not about kind of superceding the social identity, but it is about protecting the full dimension of the self. Anything and everything that black people are.

MJ: That’s so lovely. I like the idea of kind of the rootedness that idea of being rooted in language. Some of the poems in Venus Hottentot work so well because they’re not didactic in that way. It’s not just this idea—that what happened to Sartje Baartman was that she was exploited but it’s about the language. The poetic language of her voice saying: I speak English. I speak French. I speak Dutch and languages Cuvier will never know have names. You wrote that the one thing that wasn’t in the historical register, that you couldn’t find despite all the visual imagery that abounded about her, was her voice. And that poem is in part about giving voice rooted in poetic language. And that is what makes it art.

EA: That’s what catches the imagination of somebody else. Even the way that we express ourselves as none-poet “civilians,” if you will, is what makes us interesting to other people. What stops you on the bus when you overhear a conversation is the way people use language. Who is the self in language? And what is the revelatory and unguarded and surprising self in language? That’s what makes someone else pay attention. When you start turning that into art, that’s what making poems is about.

MJ: Absolutely. Could you talk about the distinction between making poems and making essays? As the author of what Donna Seaman called in a review of your work, three “indelible” collections of poetry, why a collection of essays as opposed to another volume of poetry? Is there something specific about the essay form that enables you to write about the subject’s historically, personally, politically or dream wise that engaged you differently than in poetry?

EA: I worked on the essays of the Black Interior for a long time over time and simultaneous with poems. There is a lot of subject matter that doesn’t quite work for poems, or that perhaps can go in both directions. Often I cannot answer. Because again, there’s a lot of reading and research and thinking my poems that is not necessarily made explicit. There are a lot of arguments in my poems. There’s a lot of narrative in my poems. Why in a given moment do I turn right or do I turn left? I’m just not sure how that happens. One of the things that I enjoy in essays is – I’m very opinionated, very declarative and I like being able to plainly state certain things or try to convince with textual, often close reading. In a poem I think you just are suppose to be there and if somebody wants to come be in your world, you being the poem, then they can come there, but poems are not meant to work to convert or charm. In essays, as in teaching, I enjoy that work of saying

okay, come on, are you with me? Though I wanted the essays to be completely clear, I wanted them also to do things that were mysterious and evocative and, therefore, interesting over time, too. In a way that poems remain mysteries to me, even if I have written them, even if I – if I lived with them for a very long time.

Interviewer:

Yes, I can see that. You talked about and have returned to discuss the joy of teaching. And I know that you've been involved as a teacher not only within a classroom setting at Yale, but also in your role as an instructor and mentor to many poets through your work in Cave Canem. Could you describe your involvement in Cave Canem and its significance as a black literary and cultural institution?

Interviewee:

We're coming up on Cave Canem's 10th anniversary, which is amazing. I joined the community as a guest poet and teacher at the invitation of Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady in its first year, and then it became a huge part of my life and a very vital community to me. We really are in the middle of a black poetic renaissance, in different cultural locations. It's all over the country. Many more black poets are getting published than in previous years. They're getting published by black presses, they're getting published by white presses that never published black people in their lives. Our work varies tremendously, stylistically and thematically. Black poets are in creative writing programs where we never were before. And that's not totally taking care of some of the isolation and some of the issues that were problems, but nonetheless, I mean, but you know, to sound old for a moment, when I was coming along, the moment, was not like this. It was not like this. And so it's really very exciting and remarkable and I think what Cave Canem most potently represents to me is the incredibly rich and healthy and loving, yet challenging, diversity amongst ourselves and our aesthetics. Because there is no one aesthetic or doctrine in Cave Canem between the faculty or the fellows—even sometimes making that distinction. You know, so many of the fellows have published books and are very well known, and have remarkable careers of their own – Major Jackson, Honoree Jeffers, A. Van Jordan, Evie Shockley, Tyehimbas Jess, and many others. I am proud that at Cave Canem we have made the commitment to help sustain, challenge, and develop whatever the best of each other is. By taking some important intra-community historical lessons very seriously, we are also trying not to litmus test each other into extinction.

Interviewer:

When you talk about a black poet renaissance, it really does link to the earlier things that you were saying about the extensiveness of the aesthetic and the expansiveness of what one black aesthetic or cultural experience might be or look like. When you speak of the lineage that Cave Canem really creates, the presence, of an institutional lineage that enables us to kind of look back and talk about what's been happening with black poetry and where it might go in the future.

EA: You don't have to be a scholar to be aware of the fact that ongoing availability of our work is an issue. I've spent a lot of time in the Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale, especially around the James Weldon Johnson collection. It's very humbling. You see the amazing the writing in *The Negro Digest* by the people who never went on to publish books, who would only be known through those periodicals. You see letters from important poets late in life practically begging for readings and publication. You see exclusive first editions of poetry that have been out of print for forty-five years. The reality is that most people will never know these books even exist. That's why I keep coming back to the institutional aspects of work being available.

MJ: It's so wonderful to emphasize that institutional because I think often one of the things that it goes against is this individual model. It's important for having this concept about black poetry that is institutional and communal and a part of the culture in a broader sense. Not just individual. Not just singular, star black artists that is the exception and that exists as an isolate.

MJ: In African American poetics, historically, the rubric of the oral, the rubric of the vernacular, the rubric of the spoken, the sung, the musical is what – has predominated critical study. Yet as Harryette Mullen said in her essay *African Signs and Spirit Writing* we must also pay attention to the graphic in black literary traditions as well. We have a history of black poets who were very particular about who illustrated their work. Langston Hughes and the drawings by Miguel Covarrubias and E. Simms Campbell [yes??], among others, or Ishmael Reed's work with Betty Saar in the 70s, or, more recently Saar's daughter, Alison Saar, composed *Arcade* collaboratively with Erica Hunt, or Kevin Young's work on Basquiat, and then of course we have your plethora of poems and essays on the photographer James Vanderzee and Romare Bearden about Monet, so not necessarily solely black individual artists, but certainly other visual artist as well. I very feel that is the critical turn that needs to take place, to focus not only on ekphrasis in poetry but also more generally the relationship between black poets and visual poetics, visual politics. Can you talk about your choice of book cover art?

EA: I'm so proud of my gorgeous book covers, all of which have important works by African-American artists on the cover: Charles Alston, Kerry James Marshall, Carrie Mae Weems, Bob Thompson, Elizabeth Catlett, and Henry Ossawa Tanner – so far! I think it is an opportunity not only to expose my readers to that great work but also to make an implicit conversation between the poems and the paintings. And black artists haven't even come close to getting their due. The cover of *American Sublime* is Tanner's "Annunciation," where the angel Gabriel is not embodied but rather represented as a blazing column of pure light. That use of light I think points to Tanner's interest in the painters of the "American Sublime," but he is also doing something radical by making Gabriel body-less, therefore race-less (in the late nineteenth century), therefore potentially of any race. Tanner opens up a space of great possibility.

MJ: I couldn't agree with you more. Our culture needs to have the same familiarity with and some of investment in black visual artists that might come close to how we value our musicians.

EA: Ntozake Shange talked about that when she says in the introduction to *Nappy Edges*, all Chaka would have to do is sing one note and you'd know who it was. She's saying Chaka Khan singing *Empty Bed Blues* is not the same as Bessie Smith singing *Empty Bed Blues*, and she goes on like that to say if you are culturally literate about black music, then, it should follow, you should be so literate with the rest of the culture. She's saying why can't you tell the difference between reading a Nikki Giovanni poem and an Amiri Baraka poem? You don't mix Romare Bearden up with any other artist. You don't. Not if you're paying attention. You don't mix James Brown up with anybody else. How we "sound" – in poems, music, painting – is what we are.

MJ: I'm glad you mentioned Romare Bearden. There's an illuminating essay by you in the Grant Hill Collection of African American Art catalogue, Something All Our Own in which you state, "It's difficult to imagine twentieth-century American art without Romare Bearden," adding that "the Bearden collage gives us a way to think about the complexities of African American identity." What is Bearden's significance as an individual and an *institution* in terms of his relationship to black art, black culture and black identity? How important is he to *you* in your own writing? Or might he be for other poets and writers? What do you think his significance for American culture, broadly conceived?

Interviewee:

Now that he's had his big show at the National Gallery and he's on refrigerator magnets and so forth, but it wasn't always so. His career was a career of struggle, of doing different kinds of work, as you know. He was a social worker for a long, long time. He tried to be a song writer, tried to be a poet. He did a lot of different things. He traveled in the armed services. So I think that that sort of became number one in terms of when we talk about Bearden in 2004 is that he was not always that "famous artist." When I wrote about him in my dissertation in the late 1980s there was some scholarship, most notably Mary Schmidt Campbell's dissertation, and there had been some important Bearden shows, but nothing like the kind of availability to his work and his images that there is now.

As I've written, I think his particular use of the collage, as he specifies that technique as African –American; as it engulfs the call and response and jazz improvisation; as it references the Middle Passage and the ripping of something from its original source and reconstituting it in a new space that still has allusions to and memory to that old place, is a brilliant metaphor for talking about black creative production, survival, and living. Also his use of color has always spoken to me very powerfully. That's not just to say that black folk love our bright

colors! What I love is that he does not fear the force of color, and he understands the musical power that can be present as it is in the way that he uses color.

Interviewer:

Yes. That's a lovely way to figure the visual.

Interviewee:

There's a lot that is inchoate in how that is part of the poetic process. But nonetheless his work is deeply part of the bedrock of the process of making poetry. He's also personally very important to me because I grew up with his work and with stories about him. Charles "Spinky" Alston, my mother's uncle, was Bearden's cousin. Alston helped Bearden in the New York and Harlem art scene when Bearden came from North Carolina to New York City. One of the Bearden paintings in particular that I grew up with on the wall of my parents' home was a watercolor that he gave to my mother which she was eight years old and he came to Christmas and didn't have any money, and what I took from that story as a child is something about commitment and the long struggle of an artist. In college I was writing a paper on his work and I called him up on the phone. I didn't know him, and I asked him to talk about his work and his life. And he said, artists are like mice. They need old houses where no one can bother them and they can just go about their business and do what they have to do. And he said don't do it – that is, become an artist — if you don't have to. I didn't take that as discouragement. Because I guess for me the answer was, well I have to. I try to translate that for my students: be crystal clear about your need to make art. Don't mix it up with trying to get a certain kind of job, or build community, or gain recognition. You can tape up your poems on the wall of a bathroom stall and have more readers than in a literary journal. A carpenter or a ballet dancer understands clearly about perfecting craft, and we who write must also. Why do you do this? Why must you do this? And why must you do this in a way that extends beyond a hobby, something executed with pleasure but not necessarily with devotion. Bearden's "Don't do it if you don't have to" was a very real and necessary statement that I continue to think about and learn from.

I always knew that he was a very well-read and aware person. And that he was an aware black person in the world. And that is to say that being an artist didn't mean for example that he didn't have race politics, or that he wouldn't read novels. Perhaps being a great artist is about having many passions and knowledges in excess. Spinky, who I did know in the family in my childhood before he died, was also a tremendously capacious person. He didn't make it seem like being an artist was about sacrifice, because he was passionate about his work and lucky enough to know what he wanted to devote himself to. As my mother says, well, isn't it good you're not a gymnast because you would have peaked long ago and there'd be nothing you could do about it —

MJ: (*Laughing*) That is so true, I can hear Adele Alexander saying that.

- EA:* Thank goodness I'm doing something I can keep getting better at. I want to connect that back to when we were talking about my work in the college classroom. I want to emphasize is that even as we talked about my coming out of that academic world, what I really wanted for *The Black Interior* was for intelligent interested people to be able to pick it and feel like they had come to be challenged but not shut out by a certain kind of specialized discourse.
- MJ:* I can appreciate that. You dedicated *The Black Interior* to: Barbara Christian. June Jordan. Toni Cade Bambara. Claudia Tate. Audre Lorde. Shirley Anne Williams—the list continues. You spoke of Elizabeth Catlett before, about her art being on the cover of the book. Why is this lineage of black—diasporically speaking—women artists, critics, writers, and scholars essential to you and your creative work?
- EA:* What is the institution building work? And the mentoring work and the breaking-down-the-door work? And the first black woman this that and the other thing work, that Barbara Christian did. That means that we don't have fifteen books by her. And she's left this earth. You know. That needs to be spoken and acknowledged. Someone like June Jordan, who was a poet but also who was an institutional and political person. That work is profoundly taxing. You're filled up with other people's words and vibes and energies and struggles. And what do you have to show for it sometimes except that you're tired at the end of the day? Thank God they did the work that they did. But the cautionary lesson is for us to take advantage of the fact that they made it possible for us to make more life affirming choices. Sometimes NO is more life-affirming than YES. Because for black women in institutions, all that YES can eat you up and break you down. Many of these institutions are calcified and wedded to their status quo, and being an empowered, and intelligent black person and even more so being an empowered and intelligent and self-respecting black woman, is profoundly destabilizing to most status quo. You've got to remember that in a way that's not disabling.
- MJ:* When you think about the premature demise of many of these black women, it's not that you can explicitly stand and say the institution per se caused their untimely deaths. But when you think about cancer on a metaphysical level, there's a sense of the limitations of the body's psychic or spiritual or physical ability to ward off or withstand the kind of pressures they had to have faced over and over again. The daily micro-aggressions posed by the sometimes subtle and not so subtle intricacies of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism as they operate on an institutional and individual level surely affected them.
- EA:* Audre Lorde and June Jordan have given us an important written legacy about cancer and what *that* has to tell us about living in predominantly white institutions – institutions that have not historically welcomed us, both of those women lived with cancer years longer than anybody expected them to. Even in their writings at least they say that the way they were able to keep fighting and living with it is that

they learned to listen to their selves and their bodies, in the face of extreme institutional pressure, of doctors saying, you know, we have to take it out. I can't even imagine being Audre Lorde and the doctors saying you will die if we don't cut your liver out. And one after the other and saying you know, I'm going to – you know, there are other ways of thinking in the world and I'm going to go around the world. And I'm going to learn how other people have dealt with this. I think that's a metaphor, too. That's a metaphor. You know, what would it mean – what would it mean if all of the black women throughout history and to this day had swallowed and acted upon that which was said about us? We wouldn't survive. I don't think we would.

MJ: Right. In the *Cancer Journals*, Lorde describes her struggle with cancer as only another face of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that Black women fight daily, often in triumph.” Quite literally, it's what Toni Morrison said in an interview over a decade ago; the marvel is that we're still living. You know, in the face of all of the pressures, that which might seek to devalue or destroy our lives, the marvel is not that at some point one of us, ends up succumbing to the insanity of the world and then that gets put forth within the media as the stereotypically angry and/or crazy black woman that does this and kills her children. The marvel is that most of us don't. That we *live*. That alone is the miracle.

EA: I love the late Melvin Dixon's poem “Fingering the Jagged Grain.” His work was really important to me and he's talking actually about Bearden in the poem. It concludes: “What did you do? You lived, you lived. With open wings so black and blue, open like mouths about to sing.”

MJ: What vibrant lines, lovely.

EA: He lived. He lived. Those examples of fierce brilliant, courageous, beautiful, engaged lives full of rampant loving, loving of the word. Loving of the work. Loving of each other. Moving towards what we love and not just towards the destruction of enemies. Now that's what all those women represent to me as well. And that that driving force – that love act—is a force of nature that they believed in. And it and it empowered them. And you know, that's what I feel like it's important to do upon rising each day.

MJ: And it touches on something that I thought was so powerful about your essay on *Jet Magazine*, this different notion of black pride. In that essay you illuminate things about *Jet* that you love – you use that word—whereas there's other things about *Jet* that are problematic and one of the things that to me is terms of thinking about how this current institutional or moment or current of black literary and cultural work is different than earlier periods. One is that it in this space that I think there is very particular queering of black studies that is taking place at this moment that is absolutely essential. And this notion of the love act that is not just in this traditional heterosexual matrix which isn't badgering heterosexuality and

saying well that is a love act that is corrupt and untenable, but to say that there should be a notion of black love and black community that includes all of those. That includes men loving men and women loving women, and some loving both, and then all loving in between. So this sense that, I think Jet as an institution and that a part of your critique in that essay is that there is value in the black interior of these black cultural products that these are worthy of kind of critical thought and analysis. Nor are you saying let's let go of Jet altogether but instead asking and saying what was valuable about Jet, was that in it black life *mattered*, that the minutiae of it was important in a way that you don't necessarily see much of in *People* or *Time* or *Newsweek* magazine or what-have-you but on the other hand, but still being able to say, it was valuable but still being ardent in your critique of it at the same time. To criticize the narrow –narrowed vision of what black life and black love is that appeared in its pages.

EA: Right. You said it really beautifully. That's what I was trying to get at in that essay. When I was younger I used to think that love as an ethic was – I mean, obviously a good thing but a little corny. I am certainly an optimist but not a fool. In academic environments, we are taught a skepticism that can lead us to discount the power and force of love. But the older I get, the more I think of all its possible permutations and possibilities of a love ethic. To love someone or something is not just to agree with them or affirm them. To bother to engage with problematic culture, and problematic people within that culture, is an act of love. So what does it mean in a complex and dead-serious way to come from that place of love. If I say, I love black people. I love my people, that is not uncritical space, not sentimental. How can that love be useful, echoing Marge Piercy's wonderful poem, "To be of Use"?

MJ: Thinking about that "uncritical space" as a way to talk about black people and black culture, one thing that I think often historically has happened in the way that we think about black culture that you mentioned earlier in terms of the Harlem Renaissance is that too often we focus on just one particular locale for it to symbolize the multiplicity as a whole. How does geographical, social and cultural location impact and influence your work? I know in previous interviews people have asked you about New York in particular, but being a native Washingtonian, I noticed that Washington, too, is a crucial site for how you reflect critically on some of the material in The Black Interior and in the language and source and movement of some of your poems. Could you talk a bit about a city *other* than New York where black cultural work takes place that is also important to you?

EA: As I recently said in a Studio Museum of Harlem publication, Harlem is my Valhalla. So, yes, I was born there. Yes, that's where my parents come from. And that that is an identity as powerful as if they were from, oh, Yugoslavia! They are both from that place, so that necessarily affects who I am and is part of my mythos, an imaginary/real space that I've always been trying to get back to. I think all artists have those spaces or places, those lost childhood and roads not taken, where versions of ourselves exist. For me, Harlem is an utterly diverse

place with everything in it and a rich artistic and political legacy. I think I'm always trying to get back to a party I remember as a child, at my Uncle Spinky's and Aunt Myra's house. Where you know, it just seemed like there was jazz, and there was great food, and interesting black people sitting around and I thought this is what I want in my life, period.

With all that said, of course, as you know, Washington is an incredibly diverse and rich and global black place. And it was a wonderful place to grow up. I miss it right at this moment in New England when it's suppose to be springtime and it's not. That DC weather put you out on the street for more of the year. You were in contact with other people, and their talk and their walk and their ways. That I really loved growing up. My grandmother was born in Alabama but spent much of her girlhood in Washington. And she – I've written about this in a poem — would go sit on steps of the embassies and just imagine the world. There was the world, the beyond. When she left Washington to go to school, she always said that all her girlfriends came to the train station and just wept. Nobody else was leaving Washington. So she was the adventurer. She became a world traveler. So the presence of the embassies and the people from all over the world who worked there was always something that I felt was quite wonderful. I was also intrigued by black Washington's proximity to its southernness. But I didn't realize that until I left, how very southern it is.

MJ: Yes, very much so. The same thing happened to me when I left D.C. for college in New Jersey. I learned from other classmates that—Oh—I grew up in the *south*. I didn't know. (*Laughing*)

EA: It's all about being interested in how people do things. The *ars poetica* of life. How people talk. And I got to see all of these different ways of being. Also, Washington is a city of free museums. I had to cross town to go to school and I would pass by the museums on the way, get off the bus early and just go visit “my” paintings. My father, as you know, ran for mayor of the city, in the first mayor election held in DC – that was '74, so I was twelve. During the campaign just being out in the street with Dad, to the extent that we did, gave us a political awareness of the city and its issues. We were – and still are — taxed without representation. Home rule is still a struggle not unrelated to being a predominantly black city. It was very inspiring to join hands with people in that political realm as my dad was part of what was also a very symbolic race for mayor. It was a wonderful place to grow up. I always am very, very happy when I go back there. I think I was probably eighteen or nineteen when I met Ethelbert Miller for the first time and went to his reading room at Howard, and heard stories and saw papers from the many writers he'd known. That is still a rite of passage for young writers in DC. Sterling Brown, Lois Mailou Jones, Elizabeth Catlett, the color field painters – DC has a wonderful cultural history. And for better or worse, DC is a black city, and an international black city. We do everything in the city, some beautifully and some not. And I have to say for better or worse. (*Laughing*)

- MJ: Do you have writing rites? Where and when do you engage the process of composition? Is custom an essential element of the writing life, of your livelihood as a poet?
- EA: I try to grab things when I can, to keep notes of things as I internally hear them so that when I do have writing time I have something to begin with.
- MJ: Why do you write? What motivates your continual return to your writing desk, your computer? What makes you turn your face towards the blank screen, or ink your ideas onto paper?
- EA: Paper first, then the screen, for. I feel bollixed up if I don't attend to my internal soundtrack, so there is a personal satisfaction that comes from attending to it in writing. Also, at this point, twenty years into my life as a poet, I feel clearer about having something to say and people who benefit from hearing it.
- MJ: Your verse employs a vibrant spectrum of forms and styles: sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, syllabics, accentual-syllabics, free verse, narrative, blues, jazz, ekphrasis, and beyond. Do poems and poetic forms "happen" to you? Which comes first, the subject or the form for a poem? Or, if that's a false dichotomy, what encourages your use of particular forms or styles?
- EA: I always tell student poets to read and listen as much and as variously as they can to build up a rolodex of possibilities in their minds when they sit down to write a poem. You always need to have many more possibilities of approaching a poem than you end up using. Walcott would say, "the form will suggest itself to you as you begin the poem," and though I found that mystifying when I first heard it, after many years of practice I now find it is true for me. It's about tuning your internal ear and listening to what the poem at hand is trying to do and be.
- MJ: You published four volumes of poetry, a collection of essays, and a play. Does *American Sublime* signal you are you more at home in the world and rooms and multiple possibilities of form that poetry offers? Or do you have plans to write in other genres, prose fiction, for example in the future? Have you written any verse or stories for children?
- EA: I began my life as a creative writer with short fiction, many moons ago. I was lucky enough to study with John Hersey my senior year in college, who helped me find a fictive voice that I now see as compatible with my voice in poetry. I imagine one day I will return to short fiction – many of my poems are "short stories." I have been carrying around an idea for another verse play for a few years now but life with small children in not really compatible with life in the theater. I am in the midst of several more scholarly prose and editorial projects. I have written a book of poems for young adults with Marilyn Nelson, on Prudence

Crandall, the nineteenth century Connecticut teacher who went to extreme lengths to educate young black women. I make up poems and stories for my own children all the time to I suppose I should put them down on paper. But at the end of the day, the bottom line is that I live centrally in poetry.

MJ: What advice might you give to newer poets and writers concerning the creative process?

EA: Submit to it, tend it, nurture it, honor it. Too many young writers get distracted by thinking about career before process; without process, there is no real work and thus, no career. Every day is another blank page to be filled from your own particular landscape. Process is all.

MJ: I'm appreciative of the time and spirit you've put into this interview. As an artist, as a thinker and as a human being. Thanks so much.