

Deborah Keenan and Diane LeBlanc

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

This public dialogue with Elizabeth Alexander was held in front of a live audience during her visit to the Graduate Liberal Studies Program at Hamline University on October 3, 2002. The two interviewers were Deborah Keenan, a member of the faculty, and Diane LeBlanc, a student in the M.F.A. program at Hamline. Questions at the end were from members of the audience.

**LeBlanc:** *Publisher's Weekly* observes that your poems mix a “personal mode” with “prophetic visionary lyrics.” How do you respond to that observation? Do you see yourself in the personal mode? Do you see yourself as prophetic? What does that mean to you?

**Alexander:** I hardly see myself as prophetic. On the other hand, I think of a quotation from Edward Hirsch that I've used a great deal and find very useful, in which he talks about the long line in English poetry. The line that exceeds natural breath is the line of prophecy, the line of the dream space, he says. In that particular book (*Antebellum Dream Book*), there is that large middle section of poems that had their genesis in dreams and have that sense of spilling over – spilling over into the surreal, spilling past a certain kind of daylight logic, let's say. I think that's something we're used to receiving in the prophetic mode. If you think of the way that we listen to someone like Whitman, or to other people who practice that long line, that may be where your observation comes from. A lot of my poetry comes from “personal” or autobiographical material. What is the transformation that has to happen in order for those details and that realm of personal to work within a poem? I can't really say that I could anatomize it, but I know that there's a transformation that has to take place.

In the workshop today, I mentioned a quotation I've been taking around with me like a mantra lately, from Sterling Brown, through the poet Michael Harper, who quotes from Brown at the end of his collected poems, *Songlines in Michaeltree*. He quotes Brown as saying, "Every I is a dramatic I," which I really love because of the way it has let me think that regardless of whether or not you're working in an autobiographical or personal mode, if there is a persona in the poem, you have certain charges to make it work dramatically in the poem itself. So, fulfilling those demands in the poem as such, put a nice set of parameters around the question of working with the infinite personal, because it's quite infinite.

**Keenan:** So both of these are, on one level, removed from the "I" in a certain way.

**Alexander:** Do you mean the day-to-day me "I"?

**Keenan:** Yes, that's the question we're getting at. What is the "I"?

**Alexander:** Yes, one level removed, or alchemized. Or converted, for the purposes of poems, which after all, have very strict demands, a wide-ranging set of demands. I don't think that poems have only one set of strict demands by way of a certain kind of formalism. But at the same time, for any poem to succeed, whatever its rules, there are strict rules, or else the whole thing falls apart.

**Keenan:** I'm curious, having read all your books, and taught them, what you consider now to be the major aesthetic events of your life – a particular art exhibit, a certain book, a work of music. Do you have a sense that there are major epiphanies that have come via the aesthetics that have hit you?

**Alexander:** I love that question, and I've never thought to answer it before. You always get asked, "What are the books that are important to you? Who are the writers?" I've been trying to think lately what a truly honest answer would be. I've noticed that writers whom I've brought to campus where I teach really resisted this question because, of course, it's always hard to commit, there's so much, and how do you commit? And, also, how do you think about the politics? Not of representation necessarily, although that could be there, but the politics of what your answer is. How do you say something that's useful to people? How do you say something that seems to have some coherent relationship to your work? And of course, it does change. Do you 'fess up to things that were actually quite aesthetically important to you that you would not want to admit that you read or you listen to now?

Usually, as far as writers who have influenced me, I talk about my work as kind of child of Gwendolyn Brooks and Walt Whitman. Lately I've been thinking about the Lewis Untermeyer *Modern American Poetry* anthology, which I studied in high school. I read it over and over again, and I particularly loved the imagist poets. I loved H.D.; I loved Amy Lowell. Moving out of imagism. T. S. Eliot was very important to me in that kind of high school period. What I hope I've held onto is the real belief that the powerful, distilled, vital image unto itself is somehow enough.

New York City itself was very important to me aesthetically. I was born there – my parents are New Yorkers. They left when I was young and moved to Washington, but with that sense that many New Yorkers have that they couldn't believe they were in this other place and always thought they were going back. I would visit grandparents, particularly a much-cherished grandmother in New York City who had a great deal of

time for me and took me on what seemed to me to be very grown-up adventures. The space that she lived in was magical, her objects were magical, her street was magical, and her grocery store was magical. Everything was on a quite different scale from the life that I lived in Washington D. C. She also took me to musical theatre. I think those big, loud, brassy anthems actually have something to do with my poems.

**Keenan:** I think you're right.

**Alexander:** Though I've never copped to it before. She also was someone who had a very compelling interest in and respect for other cultures. She lived near the United Nations and was very pleased about that.

**Keenan:** We have an amazing image of her hanging out in the stairway, checking out which cultures were coming down the steps.

**Alexander:** She grew up in Washington D. C. and was obsessed with embassies. Imagine that this was the 19-teens and the 1920s, and what the rest of the world must have seemed like, and how she might have imagined it to be.

Also, I grew up taking ballet. Very seriously and quite regularly. I think that listening to music and trying to learn how to make my body do things with music and trying to be, as our teachers would say, sensitive to the music, have a lot to do with trying to have and utilize an ear in poetry. I find that now with certain aspects of my teaching and my approach to certain aspects of craft and discipline.

**LeBlanc:** We can't talk about your work without talking about historical figures and their influences on you. In *The Venus Hottentot* and *Body of Life*, you write in several voices, and historical figures tell their own stories. You addressed this a bit this afternoon, saying you weren't sure why you were talking about the Venus Hottentot, you

didn't really know you wanted to write about being on display or about objectification. But as a personal poem, "The Venus Hottentot" becomes historical and autobiographical, is that what you said?

**Alexander:** Well, I was saying that in persona poems, sometimes by writing about figures that obsess us, or historical figures, that unwittingly we are activating certain kinds of autobiographical insight and knowledge. We can also trick ourselves into writing about things that feel too close, or too personal, or too undigested, if we were to use the particulars of our own lives.

**LeBlanc:** In *Antebellum Dream Book*, though, you do use more of the personal, of the "I." It seems more autobiographical. Perhaps going back to your earlier response, that it's the dramatic. Can you talk to us about that shift?

**Alexander:** Some of it is about getting older. I wrote the first book when I was in my mid to late twenties. I was in school when I wrote the book, so still very much in apprentice mode. In the middle book I was done with school, in very professional years, and then the last book was written after becoming a mother. A lot of women talk about their voices opening up, freeing up, moving toward a certain kind of embracing of their "I." I think that is a rather typical journey you could chart for me.

Also, the particular apprenticeship that I was in and coming out of in the first book...I only ever had one poetry teacher, Derek Walcott, who was a great teacher for me. He was, as you would imagine from his work, a strict formalist. He would always say never try to charm in your poems, never try to charm with your identity, it's not enough that you're a cute, black girl.

That was very useful advice, not that I would have. I think the point is, he's saying, none of us as persona is ever enough. Whatever your identity, your set of particulars, there is going to be someone out there who thinks it's fascinating unto itself. But that unto itself doesn't make for a fine poem you could stand up with. So he was also saying, don't be swayed and don't let praise go to your head. And don't let it get into your writing, and don't let it get into your quest. At least, that's how I interpreted it.

Subsequently, you'll see, there is a stricter adherence to certain kinds of forms in *The Venus Hottentot*, and the "I" is a bit under wraps.

**Keenan:** It feels that way in *The Venus Hottentot*. I didn't ever think of the "I" as under wraps; I think of the word "guarded." It ends up getting attached to that lyric "I" sometimes, in the first book. Whereas in the third book, the "I" feels like a shield has been thrown up to the sky. It's interesting, these three journeys are so different.

In Rafael Campo's poetry, there's a lot of "what the body told," and he often finds his energy as poet in what the body told. It always feels to me that the material world, whether it's in paintings or your body, is an incredible anchor to you. Even though we think you're getting unfettered, like we were reading "Creole Cat" the other night, you know, you took those three steps and you fly. But you were instantly back, anchored, grounded in your body again.

I think you've been really faithful to what the body told. What do you feel you've stayed faithful or connected to? Has your faith stayed steady to a certain set of allegiances as a writer? Or do you feel like you've tossed them over your shoulder?

**Alexander:** I've developed a great deal more faith in whatever the truly inner voice is. I've kept sporadic journals for a long time. Every now and then, when I look

back at them, even going back into my teenage years, I'm struck at how I have some of these very strange little utterances, clusters, things that were frightening to me when I wrote them, that felt unrecognizable to me as the self that I spent most of my time walking around in, but yet, I wrote them down. I had to write them down. The ongoing quest is to trust the voices that are more and more and more subterranean. And to trust, also, the sense of shape that arises from those voices.

I think that my second book – this is really putting it in too much of a nutshell – but in some ways I think of it formally as a transition. You know, what happens if I open up this line? Because there are a few very long line poems in the second book, and those were big moments for me, to write those poems: “In the Small Rooms” and “Haircut.” Those were breakout moments, and the title poem was, too, but it was also terrifying. I didn't know if I had hit something that was cohesive.

I just saw Richard Wilbur talking on a panel about what form is for him. He said, “if I start a poem and finish half of it and go to sleep and then wake in the middle of the night wanting to finish, if I don't know that I'm writing a rondeau (that was his example), how do I know how to finish it?” That was interesting. In a way, even though the forms I work in now are not only sonnets or villanelles or rondeaus or this, that, and the other thing, I like the idea that there are a whole lot of shapes out there, but that you do always have that sense of shape in your head. Sometimes, it's just a curious and unfamiliar shape, and you have to trust that it's a shape, that the bowl has sides, so I think that's what the sort of developing faith would be all about.

**Keenan:** So you're saying, it's keeping a sense of belief in yourself. That the shapes you're coming up with in dream, or walking around, might hold what you need to say.

**Alexander:** Yes. And I wouldn't call that being faithful to "myself." I would call that being faithful to some sense of shape or vessel.

**LeBlanc:** I'd like to talk more about being faithful, but to our stories. In an interview in the November/December 2001 issues of *Poets and Writers*, you said you had a fear of getting stuck in a rut by writing again and again the kind of poems you do well. We've seen in your books the poems that engage black historical features and an aspect of black history. You've written in Josephine Baker's voice, even in Muhammad Ali's, which is quite a feat. I think many of us fear getting stuck in a rut. Especially, perhaps in an M.F.A. program, where we finally find what is getting praised, and say, here is my story. How do you remain faithful to your own stories but avoid getting in that rut of either voice or form?

**Alexander:** When I was going to college in the early part of the 1980s, black literature, African American literature, and Women's Studies were just taking hold on campuses. It was a very exciting time for me. There were books that we read in xeroxed form in class, that later were brought back into print. I worked on the Black Periodical Fiction project which became the Schomburg Library of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Black Women Writers. Suddenly there were thirty books by black women in the nineteenth century that had not existed on anyone's radar screen before. So it was very, very heady, and really shaped my sense that there was great life and vitality that could find its way into poetry. But also, there were a lot of people like Venus Hottentot who needed to be rescued. I

could spend the rest of my life telling those stories, and I would never exhaust them, because they are such a rich lode.

Recently I wrote a little poem about Ornette Coleman. I'm also working on a poem about the Amistad incident because it has such a New Haven history and there are rich records there. Getting stuck in a modal rut is one thing, but you don't have to completely abandon what still needs to be done, and what still compels. So the question is, how to get better and better at it, I guess.

One of the challenges I've tried to think about with this Amistad poem, which is in sections, still in progress, is, what would a post-postmodern African American poem look like? I think there's a wonderful tradition in this poem that I'm working on, that obviously hearkens back to Robert Hayden's poem, "Middle Passage," from the 1940s, and further back. We know what those landmarks of the African American poem look like, and it's usually about going back, about retrieving, recreating. I've been thinking, "Wow, what could such a poem look like if it does that, but if it also has present knowledge and angle?" I don't know if that will even be manifest in a way that anybody can market.

**LeBlanc:** That definitely shows a way of staying faithful. We've talked about going from the historical and how the poem blends and becomes autobiographical. In my work I'm starting with the autobiographical and wanting to tie into a larger historical narrative of coming from a white, working class family, and I'm wondering how you encourage students to make that connection to the larger narrative. To be consciously thinking, "Here is my story, here is a larger narrative," or even to find a larger narrative.

**Alexander:** I think you always must find ways to honor students' voices. Poems don't really lie too much. You can often see the moments in a poem that are full of vitality and real stuff, and the moments that are fakey, even if people don't know it. They know they've hit a bumpy or uncomfortable patch, they're moving away from something, they're trying very hard not to get to something. The teaching challenge is to honor people's voices. In the workshop, much too often, hopefully not as much in this generation, there are stories about the dishonoring of people's voices.

It's no small thing to create a workshop environment where people can feel free to explore and speak from who it is they are. Another thing I learned from Walcott as a teacher is that he did not do workshop in the conventional way: put a new poem on the table and everyone talks about the poem. He talked about published poems that were great and why he thought they were great. Then you would meet with him individually and he talked to you about your work and what you should be reading, you know, sort of your own tailored thing. I liked that.

Sometimes it means just pressing the right book into a student's hand. Sometimes the Japanese American woman needs to have the book by the Japanese American woman poet. Or something else. Trying to find out what would be really useful, what would break that person wide open and make him or her come closer to the real energy of her own work and her own voice. Often that happens through the reading that is suggested.

**Keenan:** I have two quotes. Stanley Kunitz said, "Never before in this, or any other country, have so many apprentice writers had the opportunity to study with their predecessors and their ancestors. That is one explanation of why it is so difficult to detect and to find a generational style in the work of our contemporaries. Instead, we

have an interfusion, an amalgum of styles and influence, a direct transmission belt that overleaps the age barrier. A two-way learning process culminating in the young writing old, the old writing young.”

And Susan Ludvigson, in the fall 2003 issue of *Water~Stone*, talks beautifully about the lessons she’s getting from her students. Her young students say, “Read this, read this.” It’s blasted her whole vision of her line into a whole new world, in that spirit.

So here’s what I’m wondering: What direct transmission do you think you’ve received from your elders? I know you’ve mentioned a few of them, but beyond the ones you’ve mentioned. And, are there younger writers who are coming on, and you’re going “oh” and then you go home and think, “wow.” Then, do you have a sense in any of your books that you would say, “I speak for my generation”?

**Alexander:** For the last six years, I’ve taught at a workshop called the Cave Canem Poetry Workshop for African American writers. Toi Dericotte and Cornelius Eady founded it out of their own experience, which is like so many of our own experiences – being either the only one teaching mostly white students, or having an empathic feeling about the only student of color, or one of just a few. And asking the question, what would happen if we created an environment in which the poem itself, in all that that means, could really be gotten into? It’s been a completely remarkable community. The writers have ranged in age from 19 to 81. Most people, I would say, are maybe 30, who are working, who’ve done undergraduate degrees, but it truly varies. Often this propels them into an M. F.A. program because they get really excited and confident about the work they do and they have a portfolio to present.

There are a lot of writers in that group who are fierce. I'm thinking of one in particular, Terrence Hayes, whose second book, *Hip Logic*, just came out from the National Poetry Series. I've taught his work. His first book was much more discernibly an "I" that was presumably close to his life – a young, black man who had a difficult relationship with his father. These are some of the sociological particulars of the book, that he said have led a lot of people to feel that that is the more accessible book, that's the book they think is the better book because it's telling the story they want to know, or the story they know how to receive, about a young, black man. In his second book he has a lot of surreal dips, really surprisingly surreal dips, and it is exciting to see him trust in that way. He also has some acrostic word game poems, where he starts off with a word game in a newspaper and then he makes quite remarkable poems out of them. But these are harder for some people to receive, in part because they confound the stereotypical expectation of who the young, black male poet should be.

Bob Kaufman is a poet who's been very important to him, and it's also important to him that Kaufman has not received that kind of attention that Baraka, or other sorts of poets who are his peers have. So Terrence is a young writer I can think of whose work makes me so excited and proud and challenged, and just the ongoing life that comes out of that group, and joy for writing poetry, are sustaining and inspiring. I don't ever lose that joy, but you know, I get a little tired sometimes. And to feel that every summer that I've gone there, I teach and I read, I feel like I have to come up with some hot new stuff. I get very nervous about sharing for this group that is, in many ways, one of my ideal audiences. You know, people who just are very serious, committed people who know

where I'm coming from. You don't often know who your audience is, of course, because the poems go flying out into the air.

And then elders, I would also say, Robert Hayden, I mentioned his name, but he's been, his exquisiteness, his, he called himself a romantic realist, which I like quite a bit, a believer in beauty, a believer in universality in the truest, most rich kind of sense, but also very wedded to the particulars of paradise valley, the Detroit neighborhood that he writes about, or any place where he is. The ways that he has, in a poem like "Frederick Douglass," wonderfully acknowledged what heroes mean to us, but also undercut, you know, that hero to us, not with statues, rhetoric, and bronze alone.

**Keenan:** We just studied that poem.

**Alexander:** It's an amazing poem.

**Keenan:** The poem we studied, connected to Hayden, getting ready for your visit was "Tending," which felt so powerfully connected.

**Alexander:** It is.

**Keenan:** Good, I'm glad I picked that one then. It's just like, oh my God, what your grandfather does in that poem.

**Alexander:** I didn't know it when I wrote it, but it's certainly a response to "Those Winter Sundays."

**Keenan:** It felt powerfully that way.

**Alexander:** Lucille Clifton's work was very important to me when I was younger, and still is. She's an amazing poet. I call her the "Still waters run deep poet," because as a younger person I thought that I could understand what the poems were saying. But they get under your skin, and they reveal themselves and their depth and

nuance and lessons over time in such a remarkable way. My parents had lots of books, but not many poetry books, but when I was young they had Lucille Clifton's *Good Times* in the house, and so I read it over and over again.

**LeBlanc:** I want to talk a bit more about Robert Hayden, in the context of your essay, "Meditations on 'Mecca': Gwendolyn Brooks and the Responsibilities of the Black Poet." You write that in addition to being faced with racism, black writers face judgment within their communities. You explain the pressure to create work that will, "perform a certain service as well as say and not say what is empowering or embarrassing to the race at large." I think of your poem "Race" in *Antebellum Dream Book* as a good example. In your essay, you quote Robert Hayden saying that he identified himself first as a poet and then as a black. He later revised that to say poets' work should be universal, so it should be addressing issues of race and other large issues if it's compelling, urgent work. Now, I recently read your essay from 1994, "Memory, Community, Voice," and you say, "I cannot think about feminist without thinking about black." So, to put these all together, I'm wondering what you consider your responsibilities as a black, feminist writer today?

**Keenan:** We really want you to speak to this whole idea of how many words drop in front of the word "poet," and does that empower, does it limit?

**Alexander:** I've thought a lot about this, over a long period of time. Once, with some of the Cave Canem poets, we made up a great game, where you had to fill in the blanks, "I come from a long line of -----." Then we did, "I come from a short line of ----." My answers surprised me. I come from a long line of "race people." People whose work has been about bettering the race in one way or another. Their sense of themselves in the world has been about bringing black people along with them.

At the same time, there are so many different ways that I have seen that enacted. It can be in your job, or it can be in the way that you are in your neighborhood, or it can be the way you teach your children. In the case of this grandmother that I mentioned, in the way that she dressed and appeared and conducted herself, she was really quite fabulous, and quite composed, and quite impeccable and conscious, and she believed that she was quietly slashing down dragons along the way. So there are a lot of different ways that people interpret this whole business of race responsibility.

When Hayden was talking about being a poet first, I interpreted what he really was saying was that if you are doing the job of writing a poem, that is the job you're doing and that it doesn't negate. I mean really, the difficulty is with the question. I understand why people ask that question, "Are you with us or are you not with us? How do we move forward?" But it's not a good question. Even though I'm sure I've asked versions of that question. Are you in, or are you out?

I think that was Hayden's insistence, saying I'm a poet first, the fact that I attend to the poem doesn't take away from anything else, doesn't take away from writing *Middle Passage* in 1946. Before half the people who criticized him had even written a word. You know, it doesn't interfere with that, and that's what I take from the lesson of Hayden. What I also take from the lesson of Hayden, if that literary history tells a version of the story. Anthologies tell a version of the story.

So that in that essay that you quote from, and looking at Hayden around '68/'69/'70 and looking at Brooks around '68/'69/'70, Brooks is now supposed to be the black woman poet, because she's had her conversion, and she's with the people, and Hayden is the Uncle Tom. But at the same time, in the books they wrote at that time,

both had Malcolm X poems; both had poems about black heroes, [e.g., Medgar Evers] poems. They're about the same thing, from a different angle. They're facing the same challenges as different human beings, but as committed human beings, and as committed, black human beings.

I try to remember that you can get really distracted by the demands people make on you. Demands that are real are one thing, demands that come from a real community in need, or a real person in need, and we're asked all the time to be of service. But demands that are often about posturing – you may have to deal with them, but I'm trying to figure out a way not to let them worm their way in too much.

I was giving a talk about a week ago at Southern Connecticut Community College, which is about two miles away from Yale, where I teach. There are all kinds of issues with what Yale is in the New Haven community, so forth and so on. One of the faculty members said, "So how's it feel breathing the rare, fine air over there at Yale?" I didn't get bent out of shape; he felt had to ask the question. It gave me an opportunity to talk about my students. What do you know about my students? What do you know about me as one of a few black woman teachers at a school where there is only one tenured African American woman in the faculty, and it's not me? And there has only been one tenured African American faculty member for years and years and years. Our visible work lives are one part of our lives, but I travel and go to different places where I read and teach, and I also teach at Cave Canem, I have children, I have ten billion nieces and nephews, I have strangers I correspond with. I mean, there are all of these different ways that each of us act and take responsibility for "the community." And so, I guess, how do you sleep at night, just with the sense hopefully, that you do your best when you can.

**LeBlanc:** As far as the feminism aspect of that, Barbara Smith says you just can't pull the pieces apart.

**Alexander:** I love Barbara Smith, and I don't think you can. I think that's a very important stance to take, when, for example, in anti-discrimination law, if I'm a black woman and something bad happens to me and someone calls me a so-and-so and so-and-so at my job, I have to decide whether I'm going to sue as a black person or as a woman. You know, well, what was the worst part of what was said to me? Well, I mean, that will make you crazy.

But we have such a long, inspiring, touch history of African American women finding ways to maneuver. It wasn't until I think the late 1960s in the American South that a white man was ever convicted of raping a black woman. So you know, you have a whole legal history that says that what you know never happened. How do you maneuver a way around that? How do you stay sane? How do you survive?

I think part of it is in the words of Audre Lorde, who's been really important to me – that refusal to separate. With so many essays, I am woman, mother, dyke, black, New Yorker, so-and-so and so-and-so. Don't divide yourself, because other people will try to. Say who you are because no one will name you kindly. I think that's really, really important. She gave it to us. She's on the elder list.

**Keenan:** This is the last quote I'm going to read to you, from Vassar Miller. She says, "Poetry, like all art, has a Trinitarian function: creative, redemptive, and sanctifying. Creative because it takes raw materials of fact and feeling and makes them into that which is neither fact nor feeling. Redemptive because it transforms pain, ugliness of life into joy, beauty. Sanctifying because it gives the transitory a relative

form of meaning.” I love these categories and thought hard about them for a lot of years, Do you feel like you’re carrying big, abstract nouns around, that are your set? Like Vassar Miller felt these are her set?

**Alexander:** Those are really good. I don’t think that way. What I do carry around is that sense that we live in the word. And the word is precious, and the word must be precise, and the word is one of the only ways we have to reach across to each other, and that it has to be tended with that degree of respect. That is the kind of human level of, “if I’m not precise with my word, if I’m not good with my word, then how can I come soul to soul with anyone else?” I do carry that around. And also, the idea of transformation. I believe that life itself is profoundly poetic, in all sorts of places and guises and unexpected places.

**Question:** Harryette Mullen was here and gave a beautiful reading from her book called *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. One of her comments was about how she’s felt that there’s been so much pressure on African American writers to stay in the oral tradition – her first book was praised for being within that tradition – and she wants to create more space for writers to work with whatever form their voices lead them to. I’m just wondering if there’s more you’d like to comment on, as far as what the canon is, and pressure you felt to write one way or another.

**Alexander:** I’m so glad you mention Harryette Mullen because she’s a genius. She’s really an extraordinary thinker and prose writer, as well as a poet. Harryette is a writer whom I consider a generational peer, to pick up on the generational aspect, and whom I also think of as being, you know because she has a real academic career as well, that I think of her as being analogous, in a way. That book really makes me want to write

because it awakens me to the possibilities of a language. She has such a sense of play – you see that in her mishearings, you know, all of those phrases that she twists just a little bit. It's as though the whole history of the usage of a word and a phrase comes spilling out, and also a future opens up in front of it. So, she's very, very remarkable.

**Question:** Can you talk about your process? How do you write a poem?

**Alexander:** The process starts with a word or a phrase, or an image, or sometimes the utterance goes bit past the phrase. Just when you get on a roll, the kinds of things that come, always, it seems while driving the car or doing other things that hopefully you keep track of. I also keep in my notebook, and in my file folder, newspaper clippings, pictures, things that should be saved.

When there is time to sit down and work, there are a lot of different starting points. But it all begins with utterance, with word. Even if then it grows into, as with the Amistad poem, an idea for a poem. Or even with something like the long poems, like the Ali poem. It began with an obsession with him, and a sense of trying to enter him through his language, rather than, I'm going to write a poem. It's going to have twelve parts. It's going to be in the voice of Muhammad Ali.

**Question:** We read *The Venus Hottentot* in class, and we watched the film and looked at the stories of Venus Hottentot. I was struck by how much there is to the story. How did you distill down what you wanted to talk about when there was such a huge story there?

**Alexander:** That poem is very important to me, but I don't remember much about writing it. Which is to say, it wasn't quite written in a white heat, but it was written in a very, very, very consuming space. The first words that came to me were, "I am

called Venus Hottentot,” and the thought of being called other than the name your mother and father gave you, and living your life that way. Then the challenge was how to hear her voice, and how to hold onto her voice. It seemed very important that the voice be very tight, and very consistent.

I recently read a book by a poet named Peg Boyers called *Hard Bread* that’s told from the imagined voice of Natalia Ginsberg. It brings up a lot of questions, too, about when you have an interesting life, a life that contains volumes. How do you decide what you are going to choose, and how do you also not approach it as reportage? Because that’s not what your job is, as a poet. Your job is to transform in some way. And yet, that process, I think, is mysterious.

For me, it started with getting a sense of what her voice was, what her rhythm was. And making sure that the other voices were tight and consistent. It also is a poem that has a huge amount of historical research in it. Even though most of those details didn’t make their way in in a visible fashion, it was very important to know.

**Question:** Do you think of white vs. black when you write celebratory poems about African American historical figures? What do you imagine reaching across to that audience? Does that play into your creative process?

**Alexander:** It does not play into my creative process, and I think that would be a bad thing. Because to be presumptuous about any kind of audience is not a good thing. I’ve had too many wonderful surprises. I don’t even mean it would be too corny to say, “Oh a white person loved this black poem.” I don’t mean that at all. But too many surprises with people who even read poetry who I wouldn’t have imagined read poetry. That it has a place in their lives. You just really never know. You just can’t let that

imagining get into the creative process because it would twist it and distort it and shut it down. After all, what individual people are we talking about? Some people talk about the ideal reader, and I don't really have an ideal reader. I read the poems out loud to my husband when I write them, and he gives me the thumbs up or thumbs down. (Laughter.) But you know, I'm just trying to be my most articulate self. I just trust that when it goes out there, it will be found by who ever can make use of it.

I can't think of a poet who comes from my exact background. I mean, there are African American poets, but Robert Hayden's life was nothing like mine. Gwendolyn Brooks' life was nothing like mine. Though she had a happy childhood. I feel a kinship with the reverence with which she speaks about her parents. But she had a very different life. The beautiful thing about poetry is that you never know who will find it, and you never know what will be found in it.

**Question:** How do you make time for the work? Your life is very complicated. You teach full-time. You have children and a husband. Your mind is taken up by a lot of thought and critical work. How do you make time for the work?

**Alexander:** Before I had a family to tend to, it seemed that there was never enough time either. But in fact, actually, paradoxically, there's more time because now I know the value of it a bit more. What I used to do was think of the summers. Twice I went to a writer's colony, and that was amazing to have those three weeks to go and only have to worry about the writing. To get so much done that I was jump-started. You kind of get the muscles going again and you keep it going a little bit more. So those summer respites were very important. I don't do that anymore. I just try the best I can to keep track of the scraps as they come, and make the time when I can. It tends to happen in

jags. And in those jags other things kind of fall by the wayside, you know, bills don't get paid, and things get a little piled up and then I emerge and tighten things up again.

I wasn't able to write prose for several years, right when my children were being born. I found that that took a space that was just too wide, and I couldn't find it, and it also distracted me for too long. I'm interested in how poets like Lucille Clifton, who had six children, talk about having a room of one's own. She says, "For me, the ideal circumstances for writing a poem are at the kitchen table. The kids have the measles, and everything is going around." What I love about that, and what I think is really useful and important is that idea of being porous. How can you stay porous at the same time that you have your bubble, in which things can exist or stay safe?