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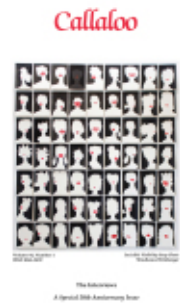
## An Interview with Elizabeth Alexander

Christine Phillip, Elizabeth Alexander

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

Christine Phillip

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*This interview was conducted via telephone on Thursday, February 22, 1996.*

**CHRISTINE PHILLIP:** You have added a new dimension to your writing. Already established as a poet and essayist, you have now ventured into drama. Your first play, *Diva Studies*, was staged by the Yale Drama School in May 1996. Does the theater offer new avenues for creation and expression not available in other genres?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:** It absolutely does. First of all, in my poetry, I am always borrowing what I think of as poetic vernacular language. I am fascinated by the distinctly wonderful ways that people talk, particularly the ways that black people can talk. So what seems exciting about working in the theater is that borrowed language is put back into live bodies when actors embody the language. The issue of audience is also important. Those who love poetry are true devotees. A poetry reading audience is rarely as large as most theater audiences. When a book of poems is published, probably a thousand copies are printed, even if the book's hand to hand life is greater than that. But hundreds of people see a play on a single night. Of course, what is completely different about working in the theater is that it is collaborative. Even though I have found that to be difficult, as I am used to working in solitude, it's wonderful to receive other peoples' expertise to help realize your work. There is something very moving to me about other people devoting their skills to making my words live. I am actively learning about that difficult, exciting new dimension of writing.

**PHILLIP:** As a poet and essayist, you have a great deal of control over your work. Do you have that same kind of control as a playwright? What is it like to see your work manifested through the eyes and voices of others?

**ALEXANDER:** When I got to see, for the first time, the beautiful costume drawings and model sets the designers had made, it was completely thrilling. As a poet, I don't talk about my work very much at all. In fact, I think that when you talk about poetry before you've written it, it kills it. Talk is only a substitute for writing, and the only thing you are supposed to be doing is writing. The part that is perhaps the hardest is that I've had to get used to talking about my work before it's finished, showing my work to people,

to the director, Leah Gardiner, and the dramaturge, Elizabeth Ackerman, before it is finished. Aside from simply getting over the ego part—I don't like to let my work go until it's polished—it's unsettling. I'm really, really used to pouring all my energy into making the work so that it can speak for itself. What you get back from collaboration is that the dramaturge and director have come to know my characters, they've helped me see who those characters are through their eyes. Also, what I have found is that going from the very small scale, miniaturist, meticulous world of poetry, it's hard for me this first go 'round to hold on to the architecture of an entire full-length play. So my collaborators have helped me understand the overall structure and the overall curvature of what it is I'm trying to make, and then make explicit threads that tie it all together. That training is a different kind of mind training than mine, which is more language-based and image-generated. And, of course, there's nothing like watching wonderful actors bring your words to life.

**PHILLIP:** What sparked your interest in the theater, and what is your association with the Yale School of Drama?

**ALEXANDER:** Those two answers are related. My interest in theater has been lifelong because I grew up dancing ballet and then modern dance quite seriously through my teenage years. Then when I was in college, I did some choreography and a little bit of performing as well. I always knew the dance theater life, and I always loved being part of a community of dancers putting on shows together and working together. Also, when I was growing up, my grandmother lived in New York City, and when I visited her, she would take me to theater, theater, theater. In Washington where I grew up, my mother would take me to all the dance that came through. There was a black theater company my parents supported called the DC Black Repertory that we attended regularly when I was a child. My family, like most black families, is full of spectacular stories and storytellers. While much is new, this time in theater feels like a return to someplace that is sort of familiar to me in an ancient way.

**PHILLIP:** Ancient?

**ALEXANDER:** Ancient, in that it resurrects childhood. Another thing that happened to me recently was that I worked as a dramaturge for Anna Deavere Smith for her play, *Twilight*, Los Angeles 1992. I learned a tremendous amount during that work. Knowing a theater artist who had a work method, an aesthetic and an intellect that was as compelling to me as Anna's, created a vortex that sucked me into this world. Her work felt like a bridge between my intellectual concerns and theater. But the biggest factor which answers your Yale question has to do with my long relationship with Leah Gardiner, who is directing *Diva Studies* at the Yale School of Drama. We have been friends for 10 years, and she has done many kinds of work at places such as Crossroads Theater, the Apollo Theater, and Newark Symphony Hall. She is now a finishing graduate directing student at the Yale School of Drama. She has, for years, encouraged me to work in the theater. She would say to me "there are stories in your poems, there are people talking

in your poems, and there are real people in your poems. You should really, really think about how to do something with that.” So, when she was working at Crossroads four years ago, she invited me to do a reading of my poems at the Genesis Festival of New Plays. We decided that we would do some very minimal staging—staging that would help me understand the difference between poems on stage and poetic language for the stage. So we took away some of the basic trappings of the poetry reading. There was no podium: I recited the poems rather than read them out of the book. We chose poems that were first person narratives in different voices, and I eliminated between-poem patter. One poem was *The Venus Hottentot*, one poem was in the voice of Muhammad Ali, etc. Following Anna Deavere Smith’s work, we thought it would be interesting to see what would happen if all these diverse voices came out of one body, mine. Then we did a bit of work with slides and music, and I moved a few different places on the stage. It wasn’t acting, but it was putting the poems in a context where they weren’t just poems anymore. It was also taking my personality as the poet and the author out of the poetry reading. I didn’t do any of the usual chatter that one does between poems. The words just stood on their own. It was incredibly transformative; the poems looked like whole different things to me.

**PHILLIP:** Was that transformation difficult?

**ALEXANDER:** Leah was persistent, and that helped. She kept nudging and nudging because every step of the way was incredibly scary for me. I felt like I didn’t know what I was doing. What did I know about writing a play? What would I do when I let go of my work in that particular way of letting other people interpret it? There was so much that made me nervous, but she kept nudging me and supporting me. Then the summer before last, the Women in Theater Festival Conference and the Black Theater Network Conference had a joint day in Chicago for the work of black women playwrights. They had heard about the work that I was doing and commissioned a short performance. We did perhaps 15 minutes of what is now *Diva Studies*. I worked with a group of brilliant actresses in Chicago, and Leah directed us. We worked together and had a workshop in my apartment for a week.

**PHILLIP:** In your apartment?

**ALEXANDER:** In my apartment. We rehearsed every day. We just worked and worked and worked. I took individual poems and tried to disaggregate multiple voices from those poems. So if the poem seemed like it was in a unitary voice, I’d say, what if there are two people talking to each other in this poem? What happens then? It made for huge leaps in consciousness for me, to hear the words broken up like that. You are used to a poem that you create as coming out of a unitary consciousness, your own. And to hear it in other voices made it no longer me in a way that was liberating. That workshop was incredibly important. We were a group of six black women, four actresses and Leah and me. We would work on the material, which is of course about black women and community and

then would sit literally around my kitchen table eating rice and beans, drinking wine, and telling our stories. That fed the work immeasurably because it seemed like what we were enacting was what the play would ultimately become, that is being a community of black women who understand that telling each other our stories is powerful activity.

**PHILLIP:** Much of your work is grounded in the specificity of history and culture, but as I read the play, I have a sense that it is also mystical. You evoke the presence of the African deity Yemanja, who is revered in Afro-Brazilian culture. What is your vision between Yemanja and characters in the play?

**ALEXANDER:** Yemanja is relevant in a couple of ways. This past November, I took my first trip to Brazil. It is a fascinating country, and I've always had a lot of interest in it and its culture. One of the things that really struck me, at least according to my limited observation, is the spectrum of engagement in Candomblé. There are devout followers for whom it is a very serious religion. There are other people for whom the Orishas make kind of a day-to-day sense, or for whom the Orishas make a metaphorical or symbolic sense. It seemed to me that there were a lot of people who were interpreting them in their own particular ways in their day-to-day lives across a wide spectrum of devotion. I didn't want to be flip or presumptuous about taking an entire religion and feeling I had to learn it and understand in a very deep way what it means to be a follower of that faith. I take that seriously and knew it would require years of experience I simply didn't have. But if the Orishas could have symbolic, quotidian meaning, then I could work with an image that consolidated my interest and obsession: the New Year's Eve ritual in devotion to Yemanja, where hundreds of thousands of people go to the beach, under the moonlight, dressed in white and make their offerings to her. They float candles, or toss flowers, or throw things that she will love into the sea. I thought as a communal moment that was utterly extraordinary, and what a powerful poetic image! I just couldn't get it out of my head.

**PHILLIP:** Yemanja is the sea goddess. Is that why you have images of water, wind, and sea shells?

**ALEXANDER:** Right.

**PHILLIP:** And you chose to open that play with such imagery?

**ALEXANDER:** For a while it was what I was writing toward as the culminating moment of the play as well. For *Diva 2*, it is a vision she can't get out of her head. It's something that she hasn't seen that she wants to see. It has deep meaning for her, but she doesn't know what that is yet. Also, from what I read and learned about Yemanja, she makes sense to me as a sort of international female force, a diva goddess. That she is of the water just seemed very, very resonant to me in thinking about black women divas. It seemed to me that Yemanja had to be the mother diva of earthly divas. There was no other one

who could look after these divas. So this whole idea that the play explores about having divas on the other side to watch after what you are doing on this side of life, it just seemed that she embodied that exquisitely.

**PHILLIP:** I sense an element of spirituality to this play.

**ALEXANDER:** I think there is. My nightmare is that it would be read as a semi-informed, Afrocentric kind of black-girl-travels-the-world-and-picks-up-a-little-bit-of-this-and-a-little-bit-of-that play. Yikes. On the other hand, there is such a thing as cultural continuity within the African Diaspora. I've studied African Diaspora and for a long time now. As I see and read and listen, I pick up details and save them for use. I'm not a very religious person in the sense of organized religion, but I am a very spiritual person and sometimes that expresses itself or it manifests itself or organizes itself in certain kinds of resonant symbols. Yemanjá became one of them.

**PHILLIP:** The play is about five divas. Who are these women, what is a diva, what gives them the currency to be divas, and what can they teach us about ourselves?

**ALEXANDER:** Diva 2, the diva in crisis, is a diva in the conventional sense. She was a dancer, she's had her day. But her body is not performing anymore. Technically, as we understand diva in the simplest sense, she's a has-been diva. The question is how can you have a complex fortitude and flair that persists whether or not you have an audience? Whether or not you are in your eyelashes and nails and gowns? To me, being a diva has to do with day to day survival, and it has to do with day to day flair and style. When I say day to day flair and style, that is not a trivial thing in black culture, because flair and style is something that we have developed and hung on to in the direst of circumstances. When you don't have anything else, you don't have any sort of exalted class status, and you don't have any access to anything but yourself, you can still make yourself in some way fabulous. Again, I don't just mean looking cute, but really making yourself fabulous—it's something at which black people have always excelled, a style which has power and blows other people away, which can serve as armor in a hostile environment. This is generated from within. As far as I'm concerned, there is no style like black style. So style means, yes, looking good but looking good when everyone says that you inherently look bad or are bad. It means looking good and walking into the world with the head held high when you know that the day is going to be filled with events that are going to try to mash you down. Nonetheless, you are still pulled together—it keeps you above all of the madness of being a black person and dealing with everything difficult that can mean in the course of the day. It also means, and again I am sort of talking historically, that being fabulous for each other becomes a really important in-group activity where I think we have always found great pleasure, and great joy, and great exaltation. I think that what black divadom tries to understand is the power of fabulous presentation when the world says you are not fabulous. That fabulousness arrives out of a very, very powerful internal sense of self that is unwavering. I think that is what divadom is truly about—it's being

able to find that internal power source or metronome. One of the ways we find that is through our communities and through the really quite remarkable examples, many of whom are spoken about in the play, of fierce, fierce black women who came before us.

**PHILLIP:** It's so appropriate that you talk about fierce black women. Some of the most powerful lines in the play are uttered by Diva 4. She delivers, at one point, what seems to be a soliloquy that I'd like to quote. She asks, "What does it mean to be a fierce black woman? I know nothing, and I know everything from my mother, who taught me I was fabulous and black. Just like the grandmothers we talked about, the black women divas who come before us, who survived and survived and survived, because we're here. We're still here. We're still here and fierce. The only black woman who taught at my college told me about all the different kinds of black beauty all around the globe. This was when I was not yet beautiful to myself, alien to the globe, but yearning. I'm always looking for black women who can tell me who I am. My teacher wrote about radiance, black women. African art." Do you remember those lines, and what was going on when you wrote them? Do they speak to the importance of models and teachers of black women?

**ALEXANDER:** Diva 4 is someone who, more powerfully than any of the others, productively undermines the stereotype of the black woman diva. It is not all about high heels and nails. It is also about intellect, and about quiet power. I believe Alice Walker said once, and I'm really paraphrasing, something to the effect that black women are incredibly theoretical people. We are incredible readers because, if we didn't know how to be critical readers of our environments, we wouldn't be here. Diva 4 understands the generations of black women who sat quietly and watched, and watched, and watched, and figured out the world, how to strategize.

**PHILLIP:** I suggested earlier that the play ranges from the mythological to the historical present. There is, of course, Yemanjá, and there's talk also about the opera divas Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price, intellectual divas Barbara Jordan and Flo Kennedy, writing divas Toni Morrison and June Jordan, and of course, soul diva Aretha Franklin, to name a few. Getting back to Diva 4, she continues, and I quote, "These women heal us by telling our stories, / by embodying emotion that our everydays can't hold. / But sometimes a diva who operates quietly/ teaches us more than the hollering kind. My mother's/ brown cheeks were moist, the gift, she said, / of an oily skin in old age, a reward / for the bumps of adolescence, because you get old/ and stay old much longer than you're young. / That's what my mother used to say, and quietly."

**ALEXANDER:** I remember what my own grandmother used to say to me when I would get all bent out of shape about people acting wrong. She had a line that came out of her own experiences with racism. When people behaved in ways that upset me, she would say, "You know dear, they are just limited people." She seemed to be saying, feel sorry for them, not yourself, and put your energy elsewhere, because you have more than they have, you are more than they are. So just figure them out and don't waste your time on

them. I think that is brilliant, enduring advice, and I think that is really black women advice. If we expended all of our energy on all of the bullshit, we wouldn't still be here. We wouldn't have time to do anything productive. We would just be wasting our time. I think that what Diva 4 understands is the incredible arsenal of critical reading skills that black people, and black women in particular, have had to have in order to even still be here, let alone be here and productive.

**PHILLIP:** So this speaks directly to your own experiences? Which of the characters do you most relate to or identify with?

**ALEXANDER:** There's definitely some of me and some of the women I know in each of those women. What I have tried to do is think about them as their own people and no longer explicitly just aspects of me or just aspects of women that I know. For example, my mother watches. My mother watches and takes in situations. Her eye is very, very keen. Sometimes she is quiet, but she is watching and figuring things out. Then she will give you a read that will make your head spin. I think that a lot of that Diva 4 comes from her. I think that the energy, exuberance, and naivete of Diva 1 is something that I don't have as much of as I used to but I still have some of. Definitely, that aspect of her feels like a familiar, younger self, something that I would hope always to hold on to, not as naivete, but as excitement. She's eager. She's excited. She wants to be in the world. She wants to find out about things.

**PHILLIP:** What about Diva 2? She's a little older.

**ALEXANDER:** Yes, she's older and there is something capital "T" tragic about her, but she is a tragic survivor. Her journey is one that I understand as well. She is trying to make transitions in life with grace. And she is also making a transition out of life. To make mammoth transitions with grace is an eternal struggle to understand for me. Just through writing the play, I've learned a lot about making passage and knowing how we need ritual to organize our lives. Pattern and beauty help life make sense. Diva 3 and 5 are the closest to my age and are the ones who have academic experience. In that sociological regard, I have certain things in common with both of them. And Diva 4's grace, and how I explained that my grandmother and my mother both have a lot of it, is something that I aspire toward. That kind of grace and quiet wisdom is something that you earn over time and that you learn over time.

**PHILLIP:** Why did you represent these women as types rather than as individuals with names? Were you influenced by Ntozake Shange and her play, *For Colored Girls Who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, which used dance and music to engage the audience in the act of sisterhood?

**ALEXANDER:** Oh, yes. *For Colored Girls* is the mother of this play as far as I am concerned. First of all, Shange is a poet first. I was just teaching *For Colored Girls* last week. It has a very discernible structure, but what drives the play is the way those women are telling their stories to each other, and to the imagined colored girls in the audience. They speak in poetry, and poetry is “normal” speech. That’s utterly borrowed *Diva Studies*. The women in *For Colored Girls* are also archetypal. The Lady in Red, Lady in Blue, “outside Detroit,” “outside Chicago,” etc. It seemed like it would almost be distracting for me to name my women. I actually did name them for a little while, great diva names. The names were Cassis—which cracked me up—Caldonia, Natasha, Lorelei and Sofia.

**PHILLIP:** These are not everyday names, are they?

**ALEXANDER:** No, they are not, although they are in a certain way everyday black names because we do sometimes name over the top. Which I think is a diva thing, too. You will go out into the world with a serious name.

**PHILLIP:** As opposed to Jane or Mary?

**ALEXANDER:** That’s right. But ultimately, for this play, the names were distracting. I think that they have quite distinct voices from each other, as well as distinct biographies. Because the play is kind of magical, for the names to be in some way archetypal seemed appropriate to me. There is a lot of magic that happens in the play.

**PHILLIP:** The term diva is one that is tossed around rather freely in African-American circles. From where did you get the idea for the title *Diva Studies*?

**ALEXANDER:** It is definitely a word that black folks use in all kinds of ways, and it’s recently made its way into an art. There’s Lisa Jones’ book, *Bulletproof Diva*, and there’s the Jennifer Lewis play *The Diva Is Dismissed*, a one woman show. For years, I’ve joked that I wanted an academic appointment as the head of the Department of Diva Studies, where I’d hire all my friends as full professors, with Thrones (as opposed to Chairs)! I’ve loved the phrase for a long time.

**PHILLIP:** *Diva Studies* is very much a play about middle-class, college-educated women. It is often said that much of black literature deals with the lives of the poor. In some cases, black audiences, despite their socioeconomic standings, have come to expect that kind of depiction of themselves. What audience are you trying to reach? Is it African Americans in general, women, young women, old women?

**ALEXANDER:** I’m just beginning to really understand that I am going to have an audience. Leah and I were recently talking about some line changes, and she was talking about how the audience at the Yale Rep would be mostly white, and I had my hands on

my hips and I was saying, “I don’t care who is there, I’m just going to make my play and put it out there and let the audience figure it out.” This is in the same way that I think about a poem: I’m not going to compromise anything; it’s my poem. I’m figuring out the negotiated space between one’s own vision and one’s imagined audience. I suppose my ideal audience is young black women, not only like myself, but younger than me. Like my mini-former self for whom seeing black women who could really be fabulous in all kinds of ways would be significant. So young women of color who can see that flair in some way that feels resonant and can take something from it; who can see, not only what communities of black women can do for each other, but also importantly about the love and devotion from the black men in the play. I think that if they can see that, and if that can make them feel positive about being in the world and being in loving communities, then that would be a really good audience. I think certainly the person who would really get everything in the play is going to be someone who is more or less like me in that they would have an education that is not just a school education but an eclectic education that knows a lot about and revels in black culture and black so-called high culture as well as black vernacular culture, both of those working in an amalgam. So I think that’s who is going to pick up the most from the play. I think that there are a lot of white theatergoers who have an excitement and appreciation for hopefully a more complex version of black culture than they are usually fed, who I hope will be gratified to see this. However, one important thing I’ve learned from poetry is you never can predict who will be moved by your work. Reading my poetry in different places and publishing it different places has been a continual revelation to me. You never know who loves poetry and you never know who loves your poetry, and that’s one of the really, really great things about putting the work out there. You can make certain generalities but you really don’t know who is going to say this poem moved me and why this poem moved me. Poetry really can cut across divisions—I have seen that.

**PHILLIP:** In her book, *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, Jacqueline Bobo contends that the importance of Terry McMillan’s book, *Waiting to Exhale*, is that it effectively demonstrates that black culture is not monolithic, that black readers respond to a range of black lifestyles. How did your audience respond to *Diva Studies*?

**ALEXANDER:** The people in our audiences seemed to love the play, but black audiences aren’t monolithic either. There are a lot of black people for whom going to the theater means August Wilson on Broadway. Or a lot of people for whom black theater means watching rap videos, or going to the Airy Crown Theater to see *Beauty Shop*. There’s a lot of different ways that we could break down that audience. That said, I hope that black people who see this play will see how I think that the way we are and the way we carry on and the way we are fabulous is a deeply nuanced, resonant pleasure that is not nearly often enough put on stage for us to see. One of the things that bugged me about *Waiting to Exhale*—the movie—is that the black women I know are about nine hundred times what they are in that movie—wiser, more complex, more fabulous. So I hope that this play portrays at a pitch of magnificence that fills black audiences with joy at a sort of deep familiar.

**PHILLIP:** Let's change the pace a bit and talk about your other works. You achieved critical acclaim with publication of your book of poems, *The Venus Hottentot*, in 1990. *The New York Times* said that you create "intellectual magic in poem after poem." On the surface it would seem that the Hottentot has little in common with the Divas. What connects these women with your artistic vision?

**ALEXANDER:** That's a great question because how does the Venus Hottentot, a woman who is away from home, a woman who is naked, a woman who has been made a spectacle, a woman who is daily abused and daily gazed upon and touched against her will, how does she go on and how does she maintain a sense of dignity and a sense of self? How do you have a center when everyone is pulling at you literally, physically, and where there are all kinds of controls that you don't have on your life? I think that what the poem tried to do is imagine, who is she to have been able to persevere under those circumstances? Who is she to have been able to do that? And hopefully what the poem gives her also is an intellectual range. When I say intellectual, I don't mean book stuff but a rich and textured inner life that belies the surface exploitation and presentation. I guess that's what I'm most interested in. It's a very interesting black-people-character question because our surfaces are so wildly distorted in Western culture. Therefore, to go into the inside, there is all this contrast and distance frequently with how we are seen and who we are inside.

**PHILLIP:** That is what connects her to the Divas?

**ALEXANDER:** Again, I hope the play shows that being a diva is not just about surfaces, but it is about surviving and finding some corner of something to hold on to when there is a lot to survive in spite of.

**PHILLIP:** Incidentally, a play about the life of Hottentot, called simply *Venus*, by Suzan-Lori Parks, one of the playwrights in this issue, was also staged at Yale. Why should black people in general, and women in particular, care about this woman? We seem to be hearing a lot about her.

**ALEXANDER:** Yes. There is also a visual artist named Renee Green who's done a whole installation based on her life and there may well be other black women artists who are interested in her because she is quite a compelling figure to us. I think we should be interested in her for a lot of reasons. Her story as resurrected is yet another piece of our history that needs to be continually brought to the forefront to remind us in these days when everyone wants to say that racism is over and maybe it wasn't that bad and it's something of the past. We need this to remind us of the real, real depths of what has been done to us and that we have gone on. The Venus Hottentot died, but there are still black women here to tell the tale. When you look at most of the historical accounts, you don't find her voice.

**PHILLIP:** Briefly, can you just tell us how she was treated?

**ALEXANDER:** Saartjie Baartman was a Southern African woman who was taken to Europe in the early part of the 19th century thinking that she was going to be an entertainer and that she could take money back to her family in Southern Africa. Instead, she was exhibited nude at private balls, at carnivals and at circuses in a cage. People came to see her buttocks and her genitalia. A French scientist named George Cuvier did terrible experiments upon her as part of the scientific racism of the early 19th century, which wanted to have us think that, if what you needed to know about European men could be found by studying their brains, what you needed to know about African women and what you needed to know about the essence of those women could be found in their genital region. We need to be mindful of her story because we are still fighting against the idea that the white men are the ones with the brains and the intellect, and all that you need to understand about us literally and metaphorically emanates from the genital region. There are all kinds of ways every day that that story still manifests itself. Understanding her as a woman with a rich and complex inner life is something today's writers and artists can attempt.

**PHILLIP:** Earlier, you talked about the transition from being a poet to a dramatist. Will this association with the theater change the way you write poetry?

**ALEXANDER:** About a week and a half ago, I wrote my first poem, my first straight-up plain poem, that I've written in a long time, because all of what I think of as my poetry energy has been going to the play. It was wonderful to write this poem because it made me see there is still a distinct place that makes distinct poems in my creativity. It was so satisfying to create a discrete and finished thing as opposed to feeling like working on this play could go on forever because it is so long. I want to write more plays. I like the idea of continuing to work in verse for the stage, but it really does take an intense kind of poetic energy that doesn't leave leftovers for poems. And I'm certainly not going to stop making poems, so I imagine it's an ongoing negotiation with time.

**PHILLIP:** Your essays, and now even your play, draw on everyday social occurrences and cultural experiences. Take, for example, the Rodney King beating. You reflect and you see the parallels between that image and the events. Can you discuss your role as a cultural worker? Do you consider yourself as such?

**ALEXANDER:** The work I do is the work that I am best suited to do, and I take its impact seriously; but sometimes I feel like the real cultural workers are the people who are working with young people in after-school programs and doing a different kind of work that directly serves the people who are in front of you, particularly young people, since they are what we have to focus on if we don't want to fall apart and collapse as a society. So that's why I am a little hesitant about that term. But, on the other hand, I'm trying to make my best contribution by continuing to think critically about the way that the world around us works, particularly how black men and women are thought about

in our society and how we manage to be effective despite the limiting ways in which we have been imagined.

**PHILLIP:** Do you consider yourself a feminist or a womanist writer?

**ALEXANDER:** I consider myself a feminist person. I like the term womanist perfectly well, but I don't feel the need for it, though I know some black women who don't like the word. The word feminist is fine with me. To me, it means one is righteous about the quality of human beings. I'd like that tenet to drive who I am on a daily basis, though I certainly don't let it anticipate my writing in any way. As far as my writing goes, I write with the assumption that people are equally complex or equal in their complexity. Let's say that in my writing it goes without saying that women and people of color are just as fascinating as anybody to write about. I just want to do them that justice. I think that's at the heart of a feminist perspective.

**PHILLIP:** You write a lot about AIDS in your essays and poetry. You have friends who have died of the disease. In one essay, "Memory, Community, and Voice," you wrote, "perhaps the most interesting discovery I've made in my research is that time and time again that poetry as a form fails writers in trying to write about AIDS." Why is that so? Is there something basically incompatible between the subject matter and the form?

**ALEXANDER:** Yes, that's a big assertion that I'm still thinking about and that I'm not fully resolved about. I came to that because I looked at a number of black gay anthologies where there was AIDS writing. Much of the poetry didn't feel as interesting as what was being talked about. It was written in a time of complete cultural panic. Here was this disease. What was it? Why were these people dying? What is happening to our communities? We are young people. We don't have community anymore. I think there is something about that panic, no time for reflection, that sometimes freezes the poetic imagination, as it creates something utterly new. These particular writers that I was looking at were HIV-positive themselves. No time, no time, no time, no time. Panic. Those are a lot of the pragmatic reasons that maybe the poetry wasn't always what I would hope it to be. But what was so interesting to me was that for a lot of black gay artists, performance art and dance and film are where all of that poetic energy found incredibly potent expression. And here I'm thinking about Marlon Riggs' films and Bill T. Jones' dances in particular. And David Rousseve's dances. And I think there is something about the power of literally embodying the crisis, of letting the poetry speak through the body under siege. Their performing their stories was somehow more powerful and poignant than any written poetry could be. Poetry became body itself, and that's what I want to think about.

**PHILLIP:** Your forthcoming book of poetry is entitled *Body of Life*. Will you discuss its theme and focus a little?

**ALEXANDER:** Well, first of all there's the vernacular expression "body of life," as in, "Girl, you've got the body of life!" I've always just loved that expression. I love its vernacular power. As an idea, body of life is about having a certain kind of exuberance. What does it mean for the body to contain the joy of life, the joy of dance, the joy of living and loving and drinking up life? The whole last section of the book is poems about people who are dead and dying. So it's about thinking about what's there when life seeps out of a body. Dying from AIDS is such a prolonged seepage of life from the body. So it's sort of the journey from almost like a child's exuberance and body of life throughout a more sort of sexual, sensual understanding of what it means to be powerful in your body of life as a full grown sexual person. Just all kinds of different expressiveness of the body. The way I first heard the vernacular phrase was when I used to dance. The woman I used to dance with, that was how we paid each other compliments.

**PHILLIP:** Girl, you got the body of life.

**ALEXANDER:** Body of life! So it was not only about the static body, it was about the body in motion and the body making beauty in the world.

**PHILLIP:** To what extent have other black women writers influenced your work?

**ALEXANDER:** Of black women I've mentioned Ms. Shange, in particular, as a poet who wrote for the stage. But also because, and in teaching her work, it's very erudite work. There are so many musicians and artists, so much of world black culture that you have to know to really, really understand her work, so many references. She's got this really dazzling intellect that also has to do with body knowledge and woman knowledge, and so I love her for that reason. I think Toni Morrison is the queen. When her imagination needs to go perverse, she lets it.

**PHILLIP:** Is she a Diva?

**ALEXANDER:** Oh yes, she's Diva #1! She really is. I don't think anyone on the planet writes a sentence like she does. So I love her for her sheer, sheer skill. And when I say perversity, I mean that in the broadest and best sense of the word. She does not censor her perversity; her imagination is very singular. If Eva needs to set her son Plum on fire, she does. If Sula needs to speak from the dead, she does. That is very freeing for me as a writer. She makes me feel that if I need to let characters speak from the dead, I'll go on ahead and do it. And she understands that magical things happen in day-to-day life, too. I think of *Song of Solomon* particularly and the black people flying to Africa. She understands in a really deep way the quotidian power and manifestation of mythology. Toni Cade Bambara understood brilliance, the particular ways that black folks talk. Her ear for black vernacular speech was like out of this world. And let me not forget my poetry women, Gwendolyn Brooks and Rita Dove. I think of them as my poetry mother and big sister. And a million others, and not all African-American women, of course.

**PHILLIP:** There's always a sense of place and movement in your work. Repeatedly, you tend to focus on immigrants or what I consider immigrant types. Particularly people from the Caribbean and Latin America. What's going on?

**ALEXANDER:** One of the characters in *Diva Studies* says, "I've had a Latin jones for as long as I can remember." It was amazing to me when I was a kid to understand that there were other cultures of black people in the world. I think that is what it must have been about because really I have had this Latin thing for all my life. I learned Spanish, I loved my Spanish teacher. My Spanish teacher was another brown person in my school, which was mostly white. Maybe it was the roots of understanding diasporicness, understanding that it meant something to be a black person in the world and not just in Washington, DC. Also, Washington, DC, where I grew up, was of course full of colored immigrants. It's a very Afro-North American population, but also because of the embassies there were a lot of black people from all over the world. So I think that it must have been something about understanding myself in a larger context than just North America. What can I say, I like black beans and rice.

**PHILLIP:** You are also a university professor. How does teaching help you to be a better writer?

**ALEXANDER:** My teaching this past semester at Yale went very well. I taught a contemporary black drama class for the first time. So reading all of these plays by black people helped me understand a range of what a play can be. What is its structure? How can I use this to help myself write a play? What are the issues that black people who have worked in the American theater have dealt with? What does it mean that in 1964 LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman* and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funny House of A Negro* both first appeared? That's an incredible spectrum of black expressivity in that one year of 1964. How have white audiences responded to "black rage?" There's been a way that whites have kind of craved it and supported it as though there is a sort of safety in letting the catharsis happen on stage, so that hopefully black people won't really slit your throat when you go out of the theater into the street. What was the response to *Colored Girls* when it came out? All of this really helps me understand my historical role in this particular moment that we are in right now in the theater. Then, I taught a poetry reading class, and we read published poems; and whenever I read wonderful published poems, I want to write poems. It is as though the process of reading a good poem imprints a template in my head. It gives me a little vessel that I then want to fill up with my own stuff. I think that is what reading has always been for me. A lot of my poems in *The Venus Hottentot*, I wrote them when I was in my first year of study in graduate school, and I would go to literature class and we would listen and talk about poems and then I would daydream and start writing poems. It's like a kid saying, "Oh, can I make one of those?" These particular drama students are also actors and dancers and directors, so I am really learning a lot from them. The other day I asked them after we did *Shange*, what is their tolerance as theatergoers for poetry on stage. One student said, "When I leave a play, I want to know what it is about."

What was *Colored Girls* about?" Then someone else said, "Well, I just want to go to the world of the playwright when I go to the theater. I have a generosity about just wanting to understand a complete universe as it's presented by that playwright." We talked about what it would mean to understand the so-called poetic language as actually everyday language, because that is how I understand poetic language. To me it's not weird when people speak beautifully. So I learn many things as I teach, and, of course, when you teach you have to try to express yourself clearly. If you are in the business of trying to express yourself clearly, it does carry over from one realm to another, or so we hope. If you are practicing articulation in one realm, it is easier to do it in others.

**PHILLIP:** In one of your essays, you wrote that you were a voracious reader as a child. Are you still a voracious reader? And what kind of books do you read today?

**ALEXANDER:** I'm a very democratic reader. I'm probably too democratic a reader! My head gets overfilled with all kinds of stuff.

**PHILLIP:** Maybe a liberal reader.

**ALEXANDER:** I love ephemera, and I love people chat. I tend to read poetry, I read essays, critical stuff. I love interviews. I love biographies, more critical stuff about all aspects of black culture, about art, about music and theater. I think when I went to graduate school for creative writing, I started out writing fiction. Then I read a lot of fiction when that was what I was trying to make. Then once I started making poems, my serious apprenticeship in poetry began, and then I was in graduate school and I sort of fell out of the habit of novels because I like density of either language or ideas. Sometimes I get frustrated with novels, Toni Morrison being an obvious exception, and there are other exceptions, where I want every word to be a magical word. I want every word to be wonderful. So I think sometimes I have a little bit of impatience with that. Now I'm reading tons of plays because I need to learn how to write plays. I'm in another gigantic apprenticeship. I read whatever I can get my hands on, and I read what I am trying to make.

**PHILLIP:** There are two parts to this question, and they relate. Derek Walcott, your former teacher and one of the persons you dedicated *Hottentot* to, said in an interview with Bill Moyers a few years ago, "Poets are always making waves." "Poets," he said, "point out the discontent that lies in the heart of man. And how can that be redeemed?" Do you agree with that? What do you strive to do as a poet?

**ALEXANDER:** Well, I think that good poetry is scrupulous. And by that I mean that, by writing it and reading it, there is a certain kind of emotional rigor that goes on in trying to find the right word and trying to put your finger on the precise sentiment in a poem. It has to do with looking inward in a way that is utterly outside of stereotype and doctrine and mandate. And that for me is the incredible privilege of writing poetry. I get to see what it looks like in that place that is outside of stereotype and mandate. And I think that it's very rare that we see representations of that kind of internal rigor in our society.

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## C A L L A L O O

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So that, in going to our individual hearts and trying to put it out there, then it's about somehow contributing to a better society because it's trying to get to a true and honest place about who we are ourselves and who we are in the world. So I agree with Walcott even though I hesitate, because I try to resist self-importance about the work that I do. But on the other hand, what can I say? I take it very, very seriously.