

Graywolf Press announces



THE BLACK INTERIOR: ESSAYS

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

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What unites these essays is an idea, a metaphor, of what I call “the black interior,” that is black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination. The black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of and know: it is a space that black people ourselves have policed at various historical moments. Tapping into this black imaginary helps us envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty. —from the Introduction

“*The Black Interior*, a critical look at some of black America’s most influential cultural voices, may be a masterpiece.... [Alexander is] best known for her poetry, it may be that poet’s lyricism and eye for nuance that makes this new work so compelling.” —**SAVOY**

“This original and electrifying collection greatly enriches and extends understanding of African American culture and its essential role in American culture as a whole.” —**Booklist**

In ***THE BLACK INTERIOR* (January 2004)**, poet **Elizabeth Alexander** explores a wide spectrum of contemporary African American artistic life through literature, paintings, film, and popular media, and discusses its place in current culture. She examines the vital role of such heavyweight literary figures as Gwendolyn Brooks, Michael Harper, and Langston Hughes, as well as lesser known, yet vibrant, new creative voices. She offers a reconsideration of “afro-outré” painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, the concept of “race-pride” in *Jet* magazine, and her take on Denzel Washington’s career as a complex black male icon in a post-affirmative action era. Also available is Alexander’s much-heralded essay on Rodney King, Emmett Till, and the collective memory of racial violence.

Alexander’s acclaimed debut collection, ***THE VENUS HOTTENTOT*** will also be reissued in January. Originally published in 1990, this collection introduced Alexander’s vital poetic voice, distinguished by its examination of history, gender, and race. These poems range from personal memory to cultural history to human personae: John Coltrane, Nelson Mandela, and “The Venus Hottentot,” a nineteenth-century African woman made into a carnival sideshow exhibit.

Elizabeth Alexander is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *Antebellum Dream Book*. She has taught and lectured on African American art and culture across the country and abroad for nearly two decades. Alexander currently teaches English and African American Studies at Yale University.

Essays, Paperback Original, 6 x 9, \$15.00, 240 pages, 1-55597-393-0; January 2004

PRAISE FOR *THE BLACK INTERIOR*:

“*The Black Interior*, a critical look at some of black America’s most influential cultural voices, may be another such masterpiece. . . . best known for her poetry, it may be that poet’s lyricism and eye for nuance that makes this new work so compelling.” —**SAVOY**

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“In prose that is both elegant and clear, rigorous and accessible, Elizabeth Alexander illuminates in these essays on art, literature, film and politics, places in African American culture that elude stereotypic representations and the limits of public discourse.” —**Valerie Smith, Princeton University**

“Elizabeth Alexander’s keen observations about a broad range of African American artifacts—poems, films, photographs, and conceptual art, for example—offer far more than clever visual analysis. They set cultural objects into their broadest social context. In these perceptive and eloquent essays, Alexander continually reminds us of the power of representation—words, images, indeed art itself—to oppress, to provoke, and ultimately to liberate. *The Black Interior* represents the best and most resonant form of cultural history, writing that tackles life-and-death issues through the lenses of visual and literary culture.” —**Maurice Berger, Senior Fellow, The Vera List Center for Art & Politics, New School University**

“Elizabeth Alexander is one of the brightest stars in our literary sky, a poet of poise and power. Now we see that she’s also capable of striking prose. These essays speak eloquently not only about literature—especially poetry—but also about life itself and the complicated culture in which we live. Her sharp intelligence and her knowledge of the contemporary arts make her a superb, invaluable commentator on the American scene.” —**Arnold Rampersad, Stanford University**

“When a poet of such declarative distinction as Elizabeth Alexander unfolds her critical wings, she swoops across the landscape of Black cultural thought, making it new, making it her own. This is a work of great generosity and insight that explores the deep springs of African-American creativity with a sensibility that is both moving and engaging.” —**Homi K. Bhabha, Rothenberg Professor of English, Harvard University**

PRAISE FOR *ANTEBELLUM DREAM BOOK* (2001):

“*Antebellum Dream Book* sports the page-turning pull of a good story, the intimacy of personal verse, and an unforced braininess that so few smart poets can get right.” —**Jace Clayton**, *The Washington Post Book World*

“Alexander, an African-American, explores tensions inherent in gender and race and expresses the ambivalence of motherhood in jazz-inflected tones.” —**ELLE**

“In narratives sweetened by the lyric pulse and pierced through by felicitous turns of irony, Alexander chronicles the world of ‘black and tan.’ Her poems bristle with the irresistible quality of a world seen fresh. Race is present in her poems in the way that sex, class, age, even weather are present in all of our lives.” —**Rita Dove**, “Poets Choice,” *The Washington Post*

“Fans of Alexander’s debut, *The Venus Hottentot*, have been waiting for something this good from her: here it is.” —**Publishers Weekly**, *starred review*

“A beauty, musical but restrained as each word, each note, releases its full range of sound and meaning.” —**Booklist**

“These poems of personal history are so particular in their rendering and so precisely made that they often transcend the poet’s private domain and stand beautifully for the human condition in all its glory and tragedy. In other words, Alexander has an instinct for turning her profound cultural vision into one that illuminates universal experience.” —**Clarence Major**

“Elizabeth Alexander’s new book—her best yet—uses the structure of dreams to meditate about the strangeness of race, the mysteries of family, the centrality of African American precursors, and the excitements—the estrangements—of motherhood. What joy to have this book of birthings that burns with a radiant black light.” —**Edward Hirsch**

“Once again Elizabeth Alexander uses exquisite care & delicacy to explore turbulent times and feelings, Bravo!” —**Ntozake Shange**

“Elizabeth Alexander crafts poems that are vivid in how they construct and lyricize memory. There is always in this collection a studied spontaneity, a warm appreciation of the sensual, a subtle but substantial wit, a rich tension in the conflict between the prosaic and the wondrous.” —**Gerald Early**

PRAISE FOR *BODY OF LIFE* (1996):

“Alexander explores the impasses of love, work, race, and politics. If Alexander can sing, she can also strip and peel words to their luminous, ambiguous cores.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“*Body of Life* arrives with the assurance of a poet at her full artistic power creating poems that range through wide imaginative territory.” —*The Riverfront Times*

PRAISE FOR *THE VENUS HOTTENTOT* (1990):

“Readers owe themselves the many pleasures to be found in this book; Elizabeth Alexander creates intellectual magic in poem after poem.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“One of the most exciting books of poetry to come out in a very long time is *The Venus Hottentot*. . . . An extraordinary new voice has been added to literature.” —*People Magazine*

“The poems are catchy, seductive, steeped in history, more rewarding on successive readings. . . . *The Venus Hottentot* is a superb first book.” —*Poetry*

“My life is black and filled with fortune because of young black people like Elizabeth Alexander.” —*The Washington Post*

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R :

Elizabeth Alexander was born in New York City and grew up in Washington, DC. Her three previous collections of poetry include *Antebellum Dream Book*, *The Venus Hottentot* and *Body of Life*. She received a B.A. from Yale University, an M.A. from Boston University, and the Ph.D. in English from the University of Pennsylvania.

Alexander has read her poetry and lectured on African-American literature and culture across the country and abroad. Her poems, short stories, and critical writing have been widely published in such journals and periodicals as the *Paris Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Village Voice*, *The Women’s Review of Books*, and *The Washington Post*. Her poems are anthologized in dozens of collections.

Alexander’s play, “Diva Studies,” was produced at the Yale School of Drama in May 1996. She is also an acclaimed professor who has taught at Haverford College, the University of Chicago, where she won the University’s top teaching prize, and Smith College, where she was Grace Hazard Conkling Poet-in-Residence and first director of the Poetry Center at Smith College. In the summers, she is a faculty member at Cave Canem Poetry Workshop. She presently teaches in the English and African American Studies Departments at Yale University.