I and I: Elizabeth Alexander's Collective First-Person Voice, the Witness and the Lure of Amnesia

By Terri Francis, Yale University, USA

Abstract:
Black women's writing is characterized by expressive multiplicity in three major ways: intertextuality, intergeneric textual strategies and the collective first person. In this essay, I show the ways in which in The Black Interior and Power and Possibility Alexander speaks in the tongues of many genres and at times uses the first person collective or, "I and I," in a radical depth of identification between a reader and the text. I find that Alexander's anthological or collective first-person voice is analogous to the Rastafarian (imperfectly realized) ideal of unity among people, which is expressed through the collective first person pronoun, I and I.

1 Black women's writing is characterized by expressive multiplicity in three major ways: intertextuality, intergeneric textual strategies and the collective first person. Despite feted single-author publications by individual black women, it was the anthology, a collective expression of black womanhood as in the form of I and I, which ushered in the idea of black women writers as a discrete politicized and aesthetic phenomenon. It was initiated with the publication of Toni Cade Bambara's edited volume *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) and followed by Mary Helen Washington's edited anthology *Black-eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (1975). Showing that the anthology was "the outgrowth of work that had been ongoing" in her introduction Bambara writes, "throughout the country in recent years, Black women have been forming work-study groups, discussion clubs, cooperative nurseries, cooperative businesses " which further complicates one-sided images of the black woman (qtd. in Alexander,Power 90-91; Power 91). Acting as both an institutionalizing platform and a metaphor of "the black woman" the anthology embodies and encourages the formation of a collective subjectivity.

2 Exemplary of this writing practice and black feminist ethic, contemporary scholar Elizabeth Alexander's writing is diverse, consisting of poetry and prose that includes literary and culture criticism, reviews, and interviews and it is anthological, moreover, in its featuring of various genres. In her poetry and prose alike, Alexander investigates the formation of subjectivity-as-historical consciousness, primarily through her persona poems as well as her use of a collective first-person voice, the invention of personas and combining genres in her essays.[1]

[1] Alexander's persona poems include: the title poem of her first collection, The Venus Hottentot, "The Josephine Baker Museum" and "Yolande Speaks" in Body of Life and "Narrative: Ali" in Antebellum Dream Book.

3 Alexander's prose is underappreciated in existing scholarship relative to her poetry, but the significance of her concern with subjectivity and culture in her essays has been noted.[2] One reviewer writes, for instance, that in *The Black Interior* essay collection, Alexander "explores the way in which the very notion of an African American "culture" impedes attempts at self-understanding and self-definition by its individual members" (Walsh 85). However, the reviewer's comment barely addresses what I have found in Alexander's prose: ground-breaking concepts of black culture around a racialized psychic spaceor dream life articulated as her innovative use of the first-person voice.

4 In this essay, I show the ways in which in *The Black Interior* and *Power and Possibility* Alexander speaks in the tongues of many genres and at times uses the first person collective or, "I and I," in a radical depth of identification between a reader and the text. I find that Alexander's anthological first-person voice is analogous to the Rastafarian (imperfectly realized) ideal of unity among people, which is expressed through the collective first person pronoun, I and I. This Jamaican/Rastafarian patois term, for which there is no counterpart in American or other forms of English and the concept of which is largely absent from modern languages, uniquely expresses the relational sensibility that Alexander uses as a black woman writer. She writes her social identity into being partly through explicitly addressing and representing the shared interests of a black female readership, breaking down traditional norms of objectivity and abstraction-without resorting exclusively to literal forms of direct address such as letters. Further, I contextualize these innovative rhetorical forms within Alexander's intellectual history, paying particular attention tothe use of intergeneric textual strategies and the collective first-person voice (I and I) among illustrative writers that she references and analyzes in her work and beyond. While a thorough analysis of all of Alexander's essays is beyond the scope of this essay, I refer to several of them, selecting three for closer reading: "Anna Julia Cooper: Turn-of-the-Century 'Aframerican' Intellectual," "The World According to Jet, Or, Notes toward a Notion of Race-Pride," and "'Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)."Before delving into local analyses of Alexander's essays, I will look at her framing concept of black culture or what she calls "the black interior."

5 If in her essays Alexander presents her diverse interests then, on a deeper level, this

[2] Alexander's awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, two Pushcart Prizes, the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching at the University of Chicago, the George Kent Award, given by poet Gwendolyn Brooks, and a Guggenheim fellowship. She is an inaugural recipient of the Alphonse Fletcher, Sr. Fellowship for work that "contributes to improving race relations in American society and furthers the broad social goals of the U.S. Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954."

anthological expression defines her subject, black culture, in terms of multiplicity.[3] Such ideas depart from both the simplistic one-sided views of stereotypes as well as the respected notions of "twoness" or double-consciousness in African American cultural philosophy, first established by sociologist and historian W.E. B. DuBois. In his 1903 anthology of essays, The Souls of Black Folk he emphasizes "irreconcilable" struggles between the two sides of black Americans' cultural origins (3). DuBois's words, "'One ever feels his twoness' would become a veritable mantra to legions of students of blackness and DuBois's image of an ineffably split African-American consciousness, and of bifurcation as the major twentieth-century trope for African American consciousness remains resonant today" (Power 35). It remains resonant despite major shifts in the modalities with which we view African American culture such as greater attention to the ways in which black culture has been shaped by migrations throughout the Diaspora, conflicts of race, class, and gender within the group and aesthetics that tend to favor multi-dimensional rather than two-dimensional fragmentation. Alexanderrevises DuBoisian double-consciousness by using collage as a metaphor for black culture.

6 Alexander's notion of culture seeks to address blackness as a coexistence of many conflicting, incomplete parts and sources. In "The Genius of Romare Bearden, "which appears in *Power and Possibility*, she discusses her applications of the term collage.[4] Alexander writes, "if African-American intellectual consciousness is split, it is split multiply rather than doubly, and that so-called fragmentation, arisen from the fundamental fragmentation of the Middle Passage, has become a source of our creative power." She continues, "Formal conflict is the locus of true innovation", citing for example, Du Bois' own *Souls of Black Folk*, which is not a two-part text or a translation between two languages; it is an experimental textual collage, an anthology of essays which effectively "makes the written space" in which he can explore his "collaged identity." Finally, collage enables us to envision a holistic theory of black culture: "Collage, in both the flat medium as well as more abstractly in book form and as a metaphor for the creative process, is a continual cutting, pasting, and quoting of received information, much like jazz music, like the contemporary tradition of rapping … and reclaiming African American history" (Alexander, *Power*, 35-36).

7 Alexander argues essentially that collage as a concept applied to culture urgently unveils "black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination." She goes on to term the life behind stereotypes "the black interior." The

[3] In her 1992 dissertation, "Collage: An Approach to Reading African-American Women's Literature," Alexander argues that black consciousness is best understood as multiple not dual, against Du Bois' axiomatic formulation of black identity as split between irreconcilable strivings.

[4] Romare Bearden was a twentieth-century American painter known for his large-scale mixed media collages, particularly portraits composed from the fragments of various materials.

combination of "collage" and "black interior" complicates what might easily be taken as a simplistic notion of the latter as another way of exoticizing black people as alluring but unknowable. She writes, "The black interior is a metaphysical space […] [of] complex black selves" that is behind stereotype and beyond social convention. This notion of an expansive racial self is not a traditional view" (*Black*, x). Going back to the cultural debates of the Harlem Renaissance, for wider context on this issue, we know that essays such as "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," by Langston Hughes, "Negro Art Hokum" by George Schuyler and "Characteristics of Negro Expression" by Zora Neale Hurston" engaged the question of whether there was even such a thing as black culture. During the period we think of as a golden movement of African American culture because of the sheer number of publications, performances, and public personalities and the attention they received from international publics, black culture was not an undisputed given and was often viewed as an obstacle to artistry. Hughes's essay in particular argued for the richness of working-class black expression, but he needed to argue his point against what he described as many black artists' tendency to reject "blackness" as a limitation to their expression when he found it to be the sort of liberating field of interiority that Alexander would write about so many years later in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For Alexander, perhaps taking a cue from Hughes, social identity is not seen as "a constraint but rather as a way of imagining the racial self unfettered, racialized but not delimited. What I am calling dreamspace is to my mind the great hopeful space of African American creativity" (*ibid* 5). Just by assigning black consciousness to the realm of the interior or the dreamspace, the psychic level of humanity, Alexander enables us to envision how social forces register upon subjectivity, upon a person, upon a community and how they refashion all of this for their own means.

8 Alexander's notion of racialized psychic space should not be confused with abstractions of racial identity. During the 1980s and 1990s, black women writers' work was toxically linked with deconstructionist theories that did less harm to Whiteness, which continues to determine cultural norms, and more harm to the expressive cultures women and people of color. At stake is not only the theoretical textual space for black women intellectuals. As significant are the hard won physical locations, such as offices and positions of authority on college campuses and other manifestations of our literal roles in the university and other spheres of intellectual life, which appear to be alarmingly expendable and misunderstood.[5] As academia genuinely moved to make space for the writings of women and people of color, Alexander writes:

[5] See Rooks, Noliwe M. "The Beginnings of Black Studies." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 10 Feb. 2006: B8.

> [It] birthed a tricky trend: to so theorize and construct and deconstruct identity 'categories' that some were apt to forget women and people of color themselves, in bodies, who wrote things that we urgently needed to read and who remained grossly under-represented among the professoriate, women and people of color whose voices and actions in historical, political and cultural life were too often marginalized, trivialized, forgotten, or erased. As "race" became a "category" […] the focus was lost on actual people of color […] (*Power* 202).

In other words, theorizing race served as a new way of universalizing and obscuring the specificities of black experience. Race became a category between quotation marks as well as a euphemism for racism that was disengaged from its historical determinants and the people that embodied it, partly as a result of cultural shifts away from clearly defined racial lines. Alexander's concept of a racialized dream space reconstructs the notion of race around interiority and physicality, which would seem to be contradictory. However, for Alexander embracing racial identity releases the individual from what she calls the shorthand of sociological and fantasy discourses and into the freedom to know and be known by their real culture in all its horror and glory.

9 Turning to examples from Alexander's prose, we locate the ways in which she negotiates the conflicting but, in her view, not irreconcilable imperatives toward psychic dream space and racial identity. Alexander draws upon crucial scholarship in which writers modeled forms of flexible thought and textual multiplicity. Her influences include intellectuals who have made use of fragmentation in their works, such as Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo, The Black Book*, which is a cultural scrapbook edited by Middleton A. Harris, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's concept of heteroglossia in literature, Alice Walker's use of the epistolary form in *The Color Purple*, Faith Ringgold's quilts and, of course, Bearden's collages. Through these examples we can understand how her concepts of collage and interiority work together to make possible expressions of self that are fragmented without being incoherent, both racialized and dreamlike. However, the greatest direct influences on Alexander are fellow scholars such as Henderson, lawyer and professor of law Patricia Williams and literary theorist Hortense Spillers who prioritize the capacity of texts to speak in tongues or themselves write in multiple genres. And they do so with particular urgency grounded in their historical position as black women. Alexander quotes from Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: The Diary of a Law Professor*: "I am trying to create a genre of legal writing to fill the gaps of traditional legal scholarship. […] To this end I exploit all sorts of literary devices, including parody, parable and poetry" (qtd. in *Black* 104). Williams sought to address what Spillers has described as the ways in which

> [t]he language of the historian was not telling me what I needed to know. Which is,

> what is it like in the interstitial spaces where you fall between everyone who has a name, a category, a sponsor, an agenda, spokespersons, people looking out for them- but you don't have anybody. That's your situation. (Eversley and Morgan 308).

10 Alexander may not write with exactly the same intergeneric textual strategies as Williams or address the precise issues of historiography Spillers describes but she does write within a conceptual framework that to a large extent builds upon these scholars' ideas and agendas. Alexander's bibliography illustrates an aspect of what Hazel Carby calls an "intertextual coherence"or a shared discourse among black women writers that is thoughtful and deliberate as they draw upon each other's work in order to address shared concerns (160-169). Thus when, in her essay on Cooper, Alexander describes the author's intergeneric textual strategy, which I refer to as "speaking in tongues," in which "the essays are at once allegory, autobiography, history, oratory, poetry, and literary criticism" we can observe her marking the historical precedent for Williams' intergeneric forms and her own work in diverse genres such as poetry, prose, and drama.[6] Alexander goes on to assert, "only such a diverse structure could encompass the tensions of forging an African American, female, demonstrably thinking self from whatever intellectual material was at hand" which demonstrates to us the urgency with which Alexander views formal innovations in writing among black women (101).

11 What makes Alexander's engagement of Cooper so persuasive is her critical approach. As a black feminist scholar, Alexander tends to avoid the family metaphors that abound in black feminist writing and yet she writes about the writers whose works are important to her with close, intimate attention to their craft. Her essay on Cooper is not only a praise song in a single-minded form of sisterhood; rather Alexander's essays on black women writers demonstrate the ways in which one can have a critical relationship to a writer-forbearer such as Cooper. Used as a critical device the term I and I means that as Alexander critiques her subjects, she voices them. And in so doing she makes and marks her own emergence as a writer, clearing tracks for her to write herself into textual expression, which is to say, into intellectual existence. But there is nothing "natural" about this process of critical engagement between black women writers. Alexander writes that "the great utility of so much black feminist theory was the guiding truism that black women have blazed alternative routes to making sense of the world, that regardless of our differing circumstances, we have had to look from the outside to make sense of a world that has not endeavored to include us among its intellectuals" (*Power* 3). These "alternative routes" required alternative written expressions

[6] Alexander's play, "Diva Studies," was produced at the Yale School of Drama in May 1996, and she was a dramaturge for Anna Deavere Smith's play "Twilight" in its original production at the Mark Taper Forum.

and intergeneric textual strategies are formal innovations in black women's prose.

12 In "Anna Julia Cooper: Turn-of-the-Century 'Aframerican' Intellectual" Alexander does a close structural analysis of Cooper's use of the first-person voice in *A Voice from the South, Written by a Black Woman*. Literary historian Mary Helen Washington called *A Voice* "the most precise, forceful, well-argued statement of black feminist thought to come out of the nineteenth century" (qtd. in *Black* 99). This essay, first drafted for Alexander's dissertation, represents fundamental principles for her current theories of culture that are necessary to explore. As the essay is about the best-known writing of the fourth African American woman to earn a Ph.D., which she did at the age of sixty-seven, it is certainly celebratory.[7] Alexander does not, however, withhold criticisms of Cooper's essentialism about both men and women as well as the sense of superiority that at times seems to underlie her sense of duty toward the masses of African Americans (*Black* 106; 109). The essay's understructure, however, consists in Alexander's own search for writing models, written as it was while she was studying for her Ph.D. It shows the elements in Cooper's work that Alexander found most important: Cooper's intergeneric textual strategy and her expansion of the concept of "I" to include "us."

13 In Alexander's view, Cooper grounds her philosophy in the specificities of her own life with well-chosen autobiographical elements, such as her region and parentage. In turn these details of her life as the daughter of a slave, an educator, a mother and so on, clarify what I understand to be the vagueness of the unspecified "a voice" and the broad reference to "black woman" in the title of Cooper's book. The book is not published anonymously and its authorship is known. However, by using the terms "a voice" and "black woman" in the title Cooper leaves room for a shared black woman's perspective and indicates that she understood her self-expression to be a collective and representative one. Alexander points out that one of the ways in which Cooper constructs this relationship is to reconstruct or ignore the limitations of time. For example, according to Alexander, Cooper writes that she "was born during the civil war years, "which began in 1860, when she was born in 1858 before the war. Alexander figures this misstatement as a "blueprint for the ideas of self-situation" that Cooper uses in *A Voice* to "place herself squarely within the slave community" as a "prophet" and one with "privileged status" (*Black* 105-106). Alexander goes on to say that Cooper's association with the Civil War "illustrates the war Cooper will fight in *A Voice* between intuition and 'book learning'" (*Black* 106). We will see in Alexander's essay *Jet* that she addresses a similar tension between something like visceral connections to black identity and responsibility

[7] Cooper earned her degree at the Université de Paris, Sorbonne for her thesis, written in French, on attitudes toward slavery in France between 1789 and 1848.

toward social integration.

14 Although for lack of space I cannot rehearse Alexander's thorough and detailed analysis of Cooper in its entirety here, I want to emphasize the ways in whichthe nineteenth-century scholar's influence is in terms of writing forms, rather than only or primarily an emotional sense of sisterhood. There were a number of early black women writers who might have offered Alexander writing models, including Frances Harper, Harriet Jacobs, and Ida B. Wells. However it was Cooper's "sense of racial collectivity and duty" coupled with her formal innovations in the collective I, which Alexander felt would best "open up the way [she] saw [herself] and record that which is unreconciled and perhaps unreconcilable inside [I and I]" (*Black* 104). My insertions replace the pronouns "we," "ourselves," and "us," respectively and respectfully. I made this move in order to try to illustrate the ways in which Alexander's claims on Cooper are both personal and collective, on behalf of her own imagined audience of women readers who would share her search for writing models whose work would help them to think about their own creativity as Cooper did for her. Alexander is particularly taken with Cooper's first-person voice. She writes:

> Cooper's strategic use of the first-person 'I' reveals the ways in which she allows her own experience-her own existence, even-to inform the rhetoric of her text as evidence for the feminist strategy she advocates. By metaphorically writing her body into the book, Cooper forges textual space for the creation of the turn-of-the-century African American female intellectual (*Black* 101).

The ways in which Cooper reaches out to her audiences as witnesses,not just distant readers, through the life experiences she narrates and the issues facing black women that she represents become clearer through Alexander's analysis. By expressing "I" she logically addresses "you." Alexander quotes Valerie Smith who writes, that autobiography is "process, rather than genre;" and adds that it is "a mode of thinking and therefore a theory of reading as well" (qtd. in *ibid.* 112). When the writer talks about herself, the reader rises out of his or her own abstraction or objectivity in order to make a more direct and immediate connection with the writer and her ideas. She reads autobiographically, in other words. In this essay about scholarship and subjectivity, Alexander certainly wrote about her own relationship to Cooper. She gives us a glimpse into why and how she read Cooper at a moment "marked historically by Anita Hill's treatment during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearing" (*ibid.* 102). Far from a confessional, Alexander writes the beginnings of her own intellectual biography, asking, "How would I 'write theory' in a voice that was truly mine? Why, in academic exercises, did I frequently feel that so much of my knowing was inaccessible to me? Yet why did I also not feel comfortable writing in the 'womanist' mode of Alice Walker" (Alexander,

Black 103)? Alexander selects Cooper rather than her contemporaries and she eventually describes her affinity with the legal scholar Williams rather than *the* black woman writer of her day, Walker. For Alexander, Williams and Cooperwere writers who shared some of the specific details of autobiography and intellectual history that she wanted to resolve as a prose writer and scholar.

15 There are many more ways that Cooper has influenced Alexander - use of wit and sarcasm, writing about the body, using corporeal, physical metaphors, the tension between intuition and book-learning, modulating the authority that comes with status as a Ph.D. and a educator, negotiating racial collectivity with individual needs for expression-than I can address here. However, in my view, the aspect of Cooper that shaped Alexander the most is the integration of the writing self with the reader and the way that Cooper used language, not just as a vehicle to carry ideas, but as tools to expand existing rhetorical barriers to the level of expression that she felt was most urgent in her day. Due to Cooper's use of autobiographical details in A Voice, Alexander points out that the text "becomes a symbolic representation of the body of the African American woman of letters" (*Black* 101). The autobiographical process between reader and writer, Cooper and Alexander, and Cooper and I through Alexander's analysis, makes A Voice an emphatic statement of and agent ofa collective body of African American women of letters.Such a writing and reading community acts like a balm amidst the usual stereotypes naturally, but particularly when confronting the isolation that comes with her position as only the fourth African American woman to earn a Ph.D. In writing A Voice, Cooper created a place for herself as a writer in English, in the U.S. within her own communities and ours today.

16 Alexander ends her essay with wit that is perhaps inspired by Cooper's use of sarcasm in *A Voice*. She writes that as Cooper creates her self in writing, she forges a space for the "unimagined African American woman intellectual, working and thinking at the turn of her century, and this one" (*Black* 131). "This one" is somewhat ambiguous because it is not clear whether it refers to the century or to the unimagined intellectual. The richer reference is to the intellectual, to Alexander herself or even to the reader. With those two words, "this one" Alexander condenses, with the skill of the poet she is, the whole framework of ideas about the self, the reader and history that she has been writing about. The writer boldly imagines Cooper writing in the late 1800s imagining another Ph.D. candidate in the late 1900s-that *A Voice* was written with future generations of black women intellectuals in mind. There again we have the conflation of the reader and the writer through the text-a text wherein the author, in constructing I and I, a collective I, makes room for such identifications.

17 Alexander's writing is not as intergeneric as Cooper's in the same way nor is their use of the collective "I" done with the same implications. Alexander's goal would not have been to mimic *A Voice*. More to the point is that Alexander reads Cooper in order to be able to imagine her own relationship to writing and to develop her own voice, as she says in the essay. Her reading is autobiography. Her inclusion of this essay in her first collection of essays makes the importance of the nineteenth-century educator to her clear. And in doing so, Alexander constructs a chain of readership across the hundred or so years since the publication of *A Voice* that links her to Cooper to me and to my readers in a network of textual, anthological existence.

18 In "The World According to *Jet*, Or, Notes toward a Notion of Race-Pride," Alexander changes register from autobiography through collective identification to the question of group identity. Here the site of collectivity appears to be the shared readership of "a little lozenge of a magazine" called *Jet* (*ibid*. 91).[8] Alexander uses constructed personal elements strategically in order to explore the individual interiority and the social complexity of the choice that I think she sees the African American community facing between blackness and integrated blackness. Further, she casts a skeptical light on *Jet*'s "romantic language" of race-pride, while also, since it is the subject of her essay, presumably being drawn to it. Alexander creates a persona for the poem, a little girl during the Civil Rights movement, whose sense of identity is animated in ways that she felt were not sanctioned by the wider, more authoritative society around her.

19 In the age of integration, Alexander writes that the magazine, which featured black people who had achieved notoriety in some form, whether in horror or in glory, "seemed to [her] to sound black notes from the lower frequencies,[9] saying go ahead, hold hands, but know who your people are, and know that it means something crucial-though who could say what-to be of a people" (*ibid*. 94). Alexander's avoidance of being definitive with the phrase, "though who could say what" is crucial here because it represents resistance to prescriptive didacticism. Alexander's non-didactic, subjective writing encourages open-ended, unproven thoughts, which can yield actual dialogue and insight, writing as she does from inside an ongoing community dialogue that has scholarly, political and personal stakes. Thus,

---

[8] *Jet* is a popular African-American publication founded in Chicago, Illinois in 1951 by John H. Johnson of Johnson Publishing Company. Jet is notable for its small digest-sized format. It was influential in the early days of the American Civil Rights movement, with its coverage of the murder of Emmett Till and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. But as Alexander suggests in her narrative the fact that Jet had so many pictures of black people, particularly celebrities, and noted the rare appearance of black people on television documented presence and conferred importance.

[9] The phrase "lower frequencies" is from the novel *Invisible Man*. See Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1952.

Alexander's abrupt break in thought, "though who could say what," spoken under the breath yet made to stand out with the two dashes on either side, embodies her resistance to submit to traditional scholarly requirements and like her literary models, seek an alternate pathway. It is significant further, not just that there is a "war" of sorts here between the black notes and the idea of racial harmony, but that blackness is associated with the lower frequencies. Here, Alexander aligns race-pride and blackness with a private, visceral part of her consciousness while "hold[ing] hands,"presumably a reference to integration and the Civil Rights movement, is associated with what could be seen as a public performance based on social expectations of respectability. Particularly arresting in that regard is the paragraph where Alexander presents a first-person persona. I stop short of staying that it is autobiographical because the essay is intergenerically critical of a magazine that is about aggrandized constructions of personhood-a black celebrity magazine. Whether it is literally Alexander is less important than the figurative meanings that emerge from her use of the persona and the fact that she would choose to mask her writerly self as a first-person voice at all and to do so in this way. Therefore, Alexander in the persona of a little girl "reading her grandfather's *Jet* magazines before she could read" symbolizes unattended-to pre-adolescent and pre-linguistic needs for recognition of the self among the black community.

20 It is important that Alexander describes the little girl as "sneaking." It is not that the magazines were hidden exactly, but the way Alexander characterizes their appeal as "sneaking into [her] subconscious" suggests that there was something forbidden yet alluring about them. Twisting a cliché in which a child sneaks peeks at an adult's hidden, forbidden pornographic magazines, Alexander describes herself looking at the pictures in *Jet*, drawn to images of "a black nation" that lured her into what I imagine as a near-illicit sense of blackness-whole, discernable, essential and bodily-from which integration had distanced, if not alienated her in some ways. She writes, "before I understood the profound difficulties of the enterprise of integration, that low rumble of race-pride was sneaking its way into my subconscious, to the part driven by compulsion, the part that yearned for the world according to *Jet*" (*ibid*. 94). It's as if integration was linked to a kind of respectable behavior or false performance while *Jet* tempted her toward blackness, which was true and raw. Alexander represents her concept of black culture as a pre-linguistic sensuality rather than an intellectual position. But this association does not mean that she views the lure of race-pride as irrational.

20 It is important that Alexander describes the little girl as "sneaking." It is not that the magazines were hidden exactly, but the way Alexander characterizes their appeal as "sneaking into [her] subconscious" suggests that there was something forbidden yet alluring

about them. Twisting a cliché in which a child sneaks peeks at an adult's hidden, forbidden pornographic magazines, Alexander describes herself looking at the pictures in *Jet*, drawn to images of "a black nation" that lured her into what I imagine as a near-illicit sense of blackness-whole, discernable, essential and bodily-from which integration had distanced, if not alienated her in some ways. She writes, "before I understood the profound difficulties of the enterprise of integration, that low rumble of race-pride was sneaking its way into my subconscious, to the part driven by compulsion, the part that yearned for the world according to *Jet*" (*ibid*. 94). It's as if integration was linked to a kind of respectable behavior or false performance while *Jet* tempted her toward blackness, which was true and raw. Alexander represents her concept of black culture as a pre-linguistic sensuality rather than an intellectual position. But this association does not mean that she views the lure of race-pride as irrational.

21 After recounting her family's interpretation of the time someone threw a brick at their house, Alexander writes:

> *Jet* is somehow a handbook for a logic that understands the primacy of race, the primacy of blackness; *Jet* understands the way in which some situations are reducible to and explicable by race and the way in which such formulations are not simplistic. This was important for me to understand as I grew up in an era in which the happy rhetoric of integration was gospel (*ibid*. 95).

Because *Jet* focused on people-celebrities and black people of note in various fields of endeavor, wherever they appeared on the cultural radar-the blackness that was its appeal to Alexander was an embodied one, linked to living people and how they looked. She holds up integration as its contrast, while recognizing that the magazine's black embodiments might seem outdated today: "[…] I thought about *Jet*'s legacy to me, what I remembered. It was the freaks, freaks whose stories were in *Jet*'s pages merely because they were freaks and black" (*ibid*. 95). She continues, addressing the reader directly, "why would anyone want to know these stories anymore, you might ask, but in this young millennium there is still something potent about a magazine that says, Your life is important because it is black. You exist […]" (*ibid*. 96). The way that Alexander emphasizes *Jet*'s affirming role resonates with the basic premise of African American literature since its earliest expressions under slavery: to bear witness to the writer's subjectivity and by extension his or her community. The "I" means "we." Establishing and negotiating personhood through words has been a primary objective in African American writing and this has been the case in black women's prose particularly. In this essay, Alexander appears to negotiate her own personhood as a metonym for discussing issues that affect the larger community. There is a kind of call and response, or at least a call with an expected response, pattern in the essay that comes through most clearly in the last

section quoted above where she directly addresses the reader with "you may ask."

22 Alexander represents herself as a little girl who goes through a kind of mirror stage, seeking confirmation of her self through the reflection of others. But she also seeks a sense of "the real" over rhetorical constructions of who she is and what the world is like. The magazine intervenes between acceptable forms of identity, i.e. representatives of integration such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and a more basic desire to feel linked with people whose bodies look like hers and to know their stories. Perhaps her grandfather's copies of *Jet* were literally hanging on a rack on the back of the bedroom door, as she writes. But Alexander's positioning them there makes an apt metaphor for this magazine's position relative to the wider cultural and social movements of the day. Reading *Jet*, as figured in the essay, might be like watching Tyler Perry films, UPN, WB or BET, four examples of somewhat questionable but nonetheless celebrated media outlets and products that offer all-black programming marketed at least partly toward black folk, in the age of Barack and Michelle Obama, who are now in the process of the ultimate integration platform, a run for the U.S. presidency.[10] If you watch that stuff, either you discuss your viewing habits with a sense of irony or criticism or, in certain circles, you don't admit to them at all. Like *Jet*, however, they fill a fundamental need for identification that is beyond respectability and integration. In conferring a sense of identity and meaning to those folks that appeared in its papers, *Jet* confers the same to its readers.

23 Cooper makes an analogy between herself and the young post-Emancipation black American community, and so too does Alexander seem to makean analogy between herself and the people, undefined beyond her family who embody a black interior. Through the figure of the little girl Alexander suggests to me that the civil rights community was in some ways disembodying itself in order to fit into an integration model. It was leaving behind its need to feel important as black people whether it was fantastical, odd, or terrible. Not that the civil rights movement was unconcerned about the body. I do not think that this is her point. There are ways in which the black body was undeniably in crisis, through lynching, attacks at demonstrations and in other violent, brutal ways. The civil rights movement was in many ways a movement to protect the black body, not just in an abstract political way, rather in a direct, literal way. *Jet* is known for having published the gruesome images of the murdered boy Emmett Till. Thus the magazine actually seems to represent bodily identification that is more gut-level and spectacular, though not necessarily pleasant. Who can be sure that this is

[10] The Obamas have had several *Jet* or black pop culture moments during the campaign, however, including Barack Obama's shoulder brush gesture (Jay Z) and possibly the fist bump they exchanged after he announced that he would be the Democratic Party's presumptive nominee for the presidency.

what Alexander means since being suggestive without being strictly definitive is a most productive hallmark of her prose, but what my readings of her work makes me wonder about is whetherit is the case that the movement for integration brought many gifts while that sense of psychic pleasure, comfort with one's own skin was perhaps not among them. And perhaps there are ways in which one actually needs to depart from the larger social movements, through somewhat essentialist, irreducibly and basic constructions of blackness like *Jet* in order to satisfy the ways in which they touch cords of basic desire in us for connection and recognition, particularly recognition, that make us uncomfortable because they make us vulnerable to our core, lower frequencies.

24 What is perhaps more certain is that *Jet* functioned as an instrument of "imagined community"that is formed apart from the imposed ideas of a group that would have been sociologically or fantastically defined by forces outside of or hostile to the group.[11] Segregation created an imagination of the black community to be sure but "imagined community" is a different kind of affirmation of collective identification from within. *Jet* facilitated these links to some degree. As a publication, it acknowledged with every issue, the reality of a black public, especially a reading black public, even if it is the pictures that stand out most. In Alexander's critique of *Jet*, she shifts from attention to writing style, which concerned her in Coopers work to the magazine's visual archive. *Jet*'s content metaphorically and literally presumed, then articulated a black readership tuned to its "low rumble of race pride" because it addressed them directly through pictures of black people. It reflected and created its imagined community because its weekly publication demonstrated and affirmed the fact that the readers were out there and would return week after week. But what I am most struck by is the "low" in the phrase "low rumble of race-pride." It is a reference to volume, most straightforwardly, but surely it also refers the place of race-pride on the cultural hierarchy relative to higher rumbles - magazines might be lower than books; *Jet* possibly lower than its counterpart *Ebony*; both of them lower than a feature on a black person in *Life* magazine. In any event, Alexander's portrayal of *Jet* in the essay shows its potential to offer a clearly defined black presence and race-pride in it amid the both social and psychological aspects of integration. But, with a mixture of regret and relief that perhaps after book-learning, this sensual pull to identity is less of a pull, Alexander's persona, no longer the little girl reading her grandfather's magazines, ends her *Jet* essay sayng:

---

11 "Imagined Community" is a concept established by Benedict Anderson, which states that a nation is a community socially constructed or imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Furthermore, the distribution of publications across distances great and small automatically construct community but they can also be seized upon to deliberately create community through shared images with which readers and viewers identify. Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 2006, 6-7.

> My problems with *Jet* are myriad but I'm still a reader. With each instance in which the violation of a black person is made public in its pages, I am able to think about whether it is violence, or its ever-present possibility, that unites us a people. And I still revel in straight-up celebration of black glory. However tacky, however ephemeral those photos of black celebrities outside *Ebony-Jet* headquarters may be, I still hold onto them as to an idea that this thing called black culture and these people called black people can both be productively, complexly understood as nuanced entities whose acts and practices we hold to the challenge of criticism (*ibid*. 98).

Here we find the real knot in Alexander's concept of black culture: how to be both embodied in ahistorically defined blackness and be "complexly understood as nuanced entities." She expresses the desire to "still hold on" to this thing called black culture while questioning and theorizing while yet being drawn toward its "low rumble" expressions. The attractions of the world according to *Jet* - that blackness is glorious, curious, and constitutes a world- complicates matters for Alexander's essay persona and we see changes from the beginning to the last paragraphs. Alexander's essay on *Jet* makes this magazine available to us in a time when "we still haven't 'overcome' (*ibid*. 98) and it enables us to envision the cultural conundrums that mark this post-Civil Rights era.

25 In "'Can You be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," Alexander addresses the specter and reality of present-day violence in late-twentieth century America decades after the height of the Civil Rights movement. She directly addresses the reader to whom she presents a collage or anthology of cases that describe witnessed, recorded violence. Evident in the title is her emphasis on racial identity through the capital letters that she uses to mark the word black. Once again she pays homage to Cooper who used "large, bold, capital letters, its body standing taller and stronger than anything else in the sentence, asserting its right to space" to write "BLACK WOMAN" in her essay (*ibid*. 125). More than an abstract notion of racial memory, Alexander grounds her ideas in the history of physical, bodily torture that is part of the collective history of people of African descent. However, rather than a notion of "glory" which guided her ideas about community and connection in *Jet*, in the King videos she unpacks a complex relationship between bearing witness to violence and the urgencies of community formation. Originally published during the 1990s, when it was becoming more common to place the term race into quotations, in order perhaps to illustrate its constructed nature, Alexander's thinking about an irreducible blackness was a significant departure.

26 In the King essay, Alexander argues that since the lived realities of many people continue to be determined by real racially motivated violence, there should be a space for what she calls "bodily history," a recognition of irreducible black collective, physical

memory. Further, she reclaims the history of "black bodies in pain for public consumption" and repurposes it, through the example of the Rodney King videos, as a site around which the black community could organize productively (*ibid*. 177). Alexander begins the piece as follows:

> At the heart of this essay is a desire to find a language to talk about 'my people.' 'My people' is, of course, romantic language, but I keep returning to it as I think about the videotaped police beating of Rodney King, wanting the term to reflect the understanding that 'race' is a complex fiction but one that, needless to say, is perfectly real in at least some significant aspects of our day-to-day lives (*ibid*. 175).

When Alexander declares that she writes, "to find a language" we should hear an echo of Williams, which I quoted earlier.A quest for language rather than an argument drives the essay; thus it is true to its French roots *essai*, which leads to the verb *essayer*, meaning to try and is further associated with risk, *risquer*. One important difference is that an essay typically focuses on a single subject but Alexander presents a collage of subjects around an idea. In this case, the essay is divided into separate sections: "A Witness and a Participant," which is about scenes in Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative; "Emmett Till" "Rodney King" and "Post-black"? Post-script." I focus on the King section as well as Alexander's forms of address to the reader throughout the essay.

27 Returning to the opening lines quoted above, we read that Alexander connects King's experience to "our day-to-day lives." Alexander writes:

> In these anti-essentialist, post-identity discursive times, I nonetheless believe that different groups possess sometimes-subconscious collective memories, which are frequently forged and maintained through a "storytelling tradition," however difficult that may be to pin down, as well as through individual experience. There needs to be a place for theorizing black bodily experience into the larger, ever-evolving discourses of identity politics" (*ibid*. 178).

In Alexander's concept then, King's experience, which is in a sense his personal, isolated reality, becomes generalizable as a community event through its telling. When viewed on television and interpreted through an historical lens, the Rodney King incident can and I think she might say should become all of our experience, through empathy, through being a witness. The videos act as storytellers and our viewership serves as the means to empathy and community formation. By learning our history we witness it and it becomes part of our collective memory (*ibid*. 183). The word metaphorically enters our flesh.

28 Empathy is a metaphoric, imaginative leap that can build collective memory and form bonds of community. Alexander frames her discussion of Douglass by asking, "What do the scenes of communally witnessed violence in slave narratives tell us about the way that 'text' is carried in African American flesh" (*ibid*. 181)? This reference to flesh can be linked with

Spillers' discussion of body and flesh in her 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: American Grammar Book," which first appeared in the journal *Diacritics*. Alexander explores the idea further on in this section when she examines an excerpt from the Douglass narrative in which he describes his Aunt Hester being whipped. Alexander writes of Douglass' description of the beating:

> Douglass's synaesthetic response is instantly empathetic, and the memory is recorded in a vocabulary of known bodily sensation. He imbibes the experience, which is metaphorically imprinted on his now traumatized flesh in the shrieks experienced as 'heart-rending' and that left him 'horror-stricken' (*ibid*. 183).

This scene communicates the ways in which violence is witnessed both visually and aurally. Through description of bodily sensations, Alexander writes, Douglass communicates empathy with his aunt. The text mediates how he feels; perhaps as he writes to find language for his feelings, he makes the experience part of his memory, thus part of his own bodily experience. There is also the implication that he is next, which Alexander addresses, saying Douglass's witnessing of the event revealed the true brutality of the institution and strengthened his resolve to escape. And, of course, he eventually was instrumental as an abolitionist orator and writer in the movement to overthrow slavery once he was free.

29 If empathy means stepping into another person's place or feeling that you are in their place and share the same fate-even that you are willing to share their fate then we need to figure out language to represent that unity. It is not merely that I step into King's place. When I watch him on the video that is me. That's I and I or I-me and I-him getting beaten like that.

30 Although Alexander does not literally use the term "I and I," as I read the way she constructs this radical formation of identification between the viewer and King in the videos, I recognize the concept of I and I. The notion of "I and I" in this specific orthography originates with the Rastafarians in Jamaica. Although it can be written in many languages - Je et Je for the French, Yo y yo for the Spanish, it signifies absolutely nothing in those languages because they do not have a concept equivalent to the Rastafarian use of the first person. I and I is an expansive notion of self that includes the speaker and his or her audiences. It refers to the unity between people and their shared interests. Sometimes I actually replaces other pronouns such you or him. Rastafarian gender politics (due in part to the sexualization of Rastas through Bob Marley's commercial reggae, which is a whole other story) is the crashing limit to all this notion of unity but their way of addressing each other with the pronoun I when they mean you or even he, goes some distance toward expressing my view of how the first-person voice works in such a unique way here.

31 Despite the fact that I and I looks like double-consciousness and resembles the

DuBoisian split into a bifurcated consciousness, it is actually closer to the collage concept, which is an infinite series of links between people, even between people and God, so that when any one person speaks, he or she bears a certain awareness of speaking for the group or with the group in mind. Of course, there are problematic limits to this-who represents whom and in whose interests? It is a concept that can be and often is abused when the desire power comes into play but it nonetheless represents a possibility of expression that opens up innovative aesthetic and social formations. I and I can represent what Alexander argues for in the expansion of I that would include the wider community. The way in which she corrals the media, often a hindrance to black community formation, into a vehicle of this formation-whether it brings news of glory or of horror, reclaims it from a multiracial viewership in the public arena and repurposes it for a *Jet*-defined viewing public of I and I.

32 Still, how to live with yourself after witnessing black people's, your people's horrific history? How to manage the pull toward NOT looking and NOT listening to the storytellers?"What do a people do with their history of horror? What does it mean to bear witness in the act of watching a retelling? What does it mean to carry cultural memory on the flesh" (*ibid*. 201)? Can you be BLACK and NOT LOOK at this?

33 One of the epigraphs to Alexander's King essay is from Betty Shabazz on witnessing her husband, Malcolm X's murder: "I still carry it with me all the time. I prayed for years for it to be taken away, not to be able to remember it" (qtd. *ibid*. 175). I and I feel that.

Works Cited

Alexander, Elizabeth and Marilyn Nelson. *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color*. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Alexander, Elizabeth. *Power and Possibility: Essays, Reviews, and Interviews*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007.

_____. *American Sublime: Poems*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2005.

_____. *The Black Interior*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004.

_____. *Antebellum Dreambook*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2001.

_____. "The Venus Hottentot." *Callaloo*. 24.3 (2001): 688-691.

_____. *Body of Life*. Chicago: Tia Chua Press, 1996.

_____. "Memory, Community, Voice" *Callaloo*. 17.2 (1994): 408-422.

_____. "Collage: An Approach to Reading African-American Women's Literature." University of Pennsylvania, 1992.

_____. *The Venus Hottentot*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990; Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2004.

Carby, Hazel. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

DuBois, W.E.B. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York: Bantam, 1989.

Eversley, Shelly and Jennifer L. Morgan. "Whatcha Gonna Do?" -Revisiting 'Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book'" *Women's Studies Quarterly*. 35.1/2 (2007): 10-19.

Phillip, Christine. "Interview with Elizabeth Alexander." *Callaloo*. 19.2, 1996. 492-507.

Walsh, Felicity D. . Review of The Black Interior. *Library Journal*. 1 Feb 2004. 85