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## **THE POET AS LITERARY CRITIC: ELIZABETH ALEXANDER ON AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE**

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The field of «Black» reading, or African American literary criticism, comes out of the awareness of the black experience and expression in historical and cultural perspectives. As M. Karenga defines it, «Black studies, which is also called Africana studies, is the critical and systematic study of the thought and practice of African people in their current and historical unfolding» [8, p. 148]. Professor Okafor explores the nomenclatural debates within Africology and African American Studies, stating that «across the United States, our discipline goes by a variety of names: Black Studies, Black American Studies, African American Studies, Africana Studies, Pan African Studies, African World Studies, Global African Studies, African Diaspora Studies, and Africology» [11, p. 218]. V.O. Okafor argues that the distinctive names of the studies come out of the three constituents that distinguish the rationale for the field: a domestic vision of black studies, which focuses on the affairs of United States African Americans who descended from the generation of enslaved Africans, «a diasporic vision that is inclusive of the affairs of all of African descendants in the New World, and a globalistic vision of the black studies – that is, a viewpoint that thinks in terms of an African world – a world encompassing African-origin communities that are scattered across the globe and the continent of Africa itself» [11, p. 219].

Thus, the key concepts of African American criticism are racialism and racism, white privilege, cultural hegemony and eurocentrism, intra-racial

racism and double consciousness, black aesthetics and vernacular. W.A. Van Horne writes about the two related, but distinctive, intellectual currents in Black studies – one nationalist and the other universalist: «The cultural nationalists saw the scholarship of Black studies as a means to the national empowerment of black people in the United States. The cultural internationalists perceived in the scholarship of Black studies possibilities for the empowerment of black people worldwide» [6, p. 159]. T. Anderson and J.B. Stewart distinguish the purpose, function, and rationale for African American studies, and indicate that they are «to expand and impart knowledge through scholarly research, theoretical inquiry, and policy analysis» [4, p. 7]. The researchers underline: «For the sake of authenticity <...>, African American studies must approach history with a critical eye and with the goal of educational and social improvements. The most challenging purpose and rationale for African American studies are to effect social reform of the racist tradition of American society» [4, p. 7].

Elizabeth Alexander, whose academic career is closely connected with teaching African American arts and culture at the University of Chicago (1991–1997), Smith College, Massachusetts (1997–2000), and Yale University (2000–2013), is one of the outstanding scholars in the terrain of Black studies. A prominent poet and essayists, E. Alexander is renowned for her poetry collections «The Venus Hottentot» (1990), «Body of Life» (1996), «Antebellum Dream Book» (2001), «American Sublime» (2005), «Crave Radiance: New and Selected Poems, 1990–2010» (2012). Except for her poetry, Elizabeth Alexander extensively writes on race and gender, politics and history, mixing her personal experience with historical perspectives, in her critical essays. She is the author of two books of essays, «The Black Interior» (2004), «Power and Possibility» (2007), and an editor of «The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks» (2005). In poetry and non-fictional explorations, E. Alexander focuses on racial issues, black aesthetics and African American culture. Maria Popova observes that «weaving together history, literature, politics, and personal experience, Alexander <...> examines the rewards and challenges of being a black woman, a poet, an academic figure of authority and, above all, of inhabiting a culture in which the Venn diagram

of these psychographic particulars is still lamentably improbable» [15]. Ann Hostetler argues that «Alexander's poetry and criticism are both informed by an intense appreciation for visual art. She pays homage to the masters of African American modernism – Romaire Bearden, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Robert Hayden – in «The Black Interior» (2004), her collection of essays, as well as present-day artists such as Denzel Washington. Alexander's approach to criticism is exemplified in the title essay, where she explores representations of the living room by both verbal and visual artists in order to examine the overlap between public and private selves in this “presentation space”» [7, p. 4–5].

Although Elizabeth Alexander's poetry has become the object of scholarly scrutiny [5; 10; 12; 13; 14; 15; 16; 17], little has been written about Alexander the literary critic. In the article we address Elizabeth Alexander's book «The Power and Possibility» (2007), analyzing the poet's views on black art and culture, race and identity. **The aim** of the research paper is to investigate Elizabeth Alexander's reception of canonical African American literary figures, to explore the reflections on the concepts of race, the black female's role in the society, black art, and the history of African American culture. The emphasis is made on the key themes of Alexander's essay collections: black identity, black creativity and African American artists.

**The object of the study** is Elizabeth Alexander's essay collection «The Power and Possibility». **The subject of the study** is the poet's critical reflections on African American heritage and contemporary culture.

In the era of modernity, and in contemporary period, examples of poet-critics are numerous – T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, M. Moore, W.H. Auden, S. Howe, J.C. Ransom, A. Tate, R. Pinsky, Sterling A. Brown, N. Mackey, H. Mullen, to name only a few. For literary studies, it is essential to investigate the intertwined histories of poetry and criticism, to analyze how the distinguished poets' critical essays deal with the text and aesthetics of poems. As V. Lange mentions, «the critical utterances of the poet, his reflections either on his work or that of other writers, are today more specifically than ever before, part of his total strategy» [9, p. 21].

The 2007 «Power and Possibility» essay collection highlights Elizabeth Alexander's talent as a literary scholar and critic. In the essays, the writer's critical reflections focus primarily on cultural developments of black diaspora in the twentieth century. As an African American thinker and poet dedicated to promoting African American heritage, Alexander's critical reflections centers around diasporic iconic literary and cultural figures, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Sterling Brown, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Rita Dove, August Wilson, Romare Bearden, and Bill T. Jones. E. Alexander, likewise L. Hughes, regards poetry not only as an art form, but as a powerful tool in the recording of «the most moving events, the deepest thoughts and most profound emotional currents of their times» [1]. In the essay «The Black Poet as Canon-Maker», Alexander lays emphasis on the transformative power of poetic words, stating that: «Poetry possesses the power of worriation. <...> And poetry can make people think. <...> Some poems, like many of the great verses in the Bible, can make people think about changing all mankind, even the whole world. Poems, like prayers, possess power» [1]. The alliterated book title, «Power and Possibility», accentuates the power of literature, music, dance, painting, and the possibilities of culture. E. Alexander states: «These essays together argue for the power and possibility that are legacies of the twentieth-century culture. The past century of world wars, class stratification and upheaval, gender revolution, and the “color line” was also marked by cultural movements of tremendous significance. <...> In the latter part of the twentieth century I wrote looking back and forward concurrently to the possibilities that culture can envision» [3, p. 1]. Natasha Trethewey encapsulates her vision of Elizabeth Alexander's poetic gift in the following statement: «Alexander's poems are well-peopled, whether they are dreams or photographs. All kinds of people appear in these poems, giving advice, providing models, supporting and chiding. Many are well-known figures: Mohammed Ali, Harry Belafonte, Nefertiti, Nat King Cole, Eartha Kitt, Sylvia Plath; others are from family myth and history. The effect is a vivid collage of American, particularly African American, culture» [16].

It is worth mentioning that the structural foundation of E. Alexander's essays is collage technique. In «Memory, Community, Voice», the author reveals the intersections of the African American culture, subdividing the article into distinctive parts: «Amnesia», «Absence», «Books», «Black», «On Mentorship», «Authority», «Gender», and «Coda». Furthermore, in the final part, «Remember», she adds her previously unpublished poems «Dream», «At the Beach», and «Cure», to illuminate the reflections on community and memory, on black gay men and black women, gay and AIDS communities. [2, p. 417-419]. Thus, the scholarly text becomes lightened with the powerful poet's messages, and facilitated by poetic images. The poetry selection elucidates the idea of «living, as we are, in the age of AIDS» [2, p. 421], and commemorates or supports those poets and artists who died or suffer from AIDS.

In «Power and Possibility» collection, Elizabeth Alexander investigates the problem of internal race dynamics, viewing race as a critical aspect of study, and not only race dualism in black and white, but also in brown and black [3, p. 18]. The writer quotes her student's essay which tackles this problem, pointing out that «Dunbar was perhaps one of the first prominent dark-skinned writer to emerge at a time when African American life was dominated and driven by lighter-skinned individuals from Booker T. Washington to Frederick Douglass, DuBois and many others. <...> He was dark, quite dark, and felt complicated by this blackness. <...> He was cut through with a strained sense of inferiority in the face of the “purer” beauty of his wife» [3, p. 18].

The poet-critic writes about the «two-ness» trope as a symbolic mode of split African American consciousness. She quotes W.E.B. DuBois's «The Soul of Black Folk»: «One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body» [3, p. 35]. Alexander insists that the two-ness trope must be revised, as «if the 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. The complex coexistence of a spectrum of black identities in a single space <...> represents

a particular strength and coherence of African American cultural production» [3, p. 35]. For Alexander, W.E.B. DuBois's novel, marked by structural hybridity, signifies the «collaged» identity. She stresses that with the formal multiplicity and referentiality, DuBois «had to make a multiple self in the text at hand» [3, p. 35]. Further on, Elizabeth Alexander states that collage is her model to describe the presentation of self-identities in African American literature and culture: «Collage lets us think about identity as a spoken wheel or gyroscope on which its aspects spin and recombine. Collage also allows us to see African American creative production as cohesive rather than schizophrenic» [3, p. 36]. Regarding collage as book form and metaphor for the creative process, as multiple acts of cutting, pasting and quoting, Alexander associates it with jazz music, rapping, and defines it as the process of reclaiming African American history: «African American culture from the Middle Passage forward is of course broadly characterized by fragmentation and reassemblage, sustaining what can be saved of history while making something new. Collage constructs wholes from fragments in a continual, referential dialogue between the seemingly disparate shards of various parts and the current moment of the work itself, as well as the future the work might point toward» [3, p. 36]. The writer emphasizes that Romare Bearden, the prominent twentieth-century black artist, «refigured collage via European cubism, African American quilting, and idioms of jazz and the blues» [3, p. 34].

Collage is a predominant compositional tool in Alexander's «Power and Possibility». Although the major literary forms, which the collection is compiled of, are essays, reviews and interviews, the book is much more heterogeneous in its literary structure, as it includes autobiographical recollections and memoirs, philosophical reflections, critical analysis of racial and feminist issues, and passages from her students' compositions, containing their receptions of prose and poems of African American writers. In the essays, E. Alexander interweaves her recollections of the start of her career as a journalist in 1984 and memorable events at the dawn of her career as a poet [3, p. 2]. She recalls teaching first black arts class, and reflects upon the progress made by African Americanists in teaching and promoting African American culture [3, p. 4]. The author adds the details

of her family history, namely she refers to the life episode of her late grandmother, when she sailed to the Continent to become the first colored student at the University in Denmark [3, p. 5]. For Elizabeth Alexander, it is an example of empowerment, the act of liberation, overcoming color prejudice and marginal status, imposed by the society. Thus, Alexander's personal experience and family history serve as a framing pattern for the essays. The writer narrates how her father recited Dunbar's «The Party», and she remarks how thrilling it was for her as a young girl when he slipped into the vernacular [3, p. 9]. The reminiscences of such episodes help to illuminate the importance of Dunbar's inspirational figure for the next generations of African American poets. E. Alexander names Dunbar «a great grandfather to today's practicing poets» [3, p. 10], and referring to Robert Stepto's eponymous phrase, she considers the classical African American poet as one of «family bookshelf Afro-Americanists» [3, p. 11]. Writing about Dunbar's influence on contemporary culture, and presenting an in-depth analysis of his poems «The Party» and «We Wear the Mask», Alexander comes to the conclusion (and the essay title «Dunbar Lives!» foregrounds this idea) that his poetry continues living in the lines of contemporary poets. She finds a striking similarity in structure, versification, diction, imagery, and leitmotifs of Dunbar's «The Party», in Sam Cooke's «Havin' a Party», Luther Vandross's remake, Marvin Gaye's «Got to Give It Up», Dave Chapelle's «Black Party». Alexander's poem «The Party» resonates with Dunbar's poem as well. The writer confesses that «I realize only as I write this paper that I have written the poem called “The Party” which is a surreal, freaky-deaky grandchild to Dunbar's poem» [3, p. 13]. She concludes that the party scene has become crucial in black culture [3, p. 12]. Elizabeth Alexander's study of Dunbar's influence is the object lesson of black intertextuality and literary lineage: «Dunbar is taking us as close as he can to the force and presence of those aspects of our culture that literary form will struggle to capture throughout the next century and also which is the powerful bedrock of black creative expression» [3, p. 13].

In her critical output, Alexander breaks new ground while writing on Langston Hughes not only as a poet but as an anthologizer. She

remarks that «Hughes-as-anthologizer demonstrates his participation in the making of the context in which his own work would be read and placed as well as his responsibility to his literary community. And his edited collection “New Negro Poets: USA”, which was published in 1964 after a long and noteworthy incubation, allows us to think about African American canon formation» [1].

Paying tribute to the modernist poet Gwendolyn Brooks, Alexander improvises the unique literary form, a serenade, in the «Ode to Miss Gwendolyn Brooks». The essay is structurally composed of stylistically heterogeneous fragments of memoir, autobiography, literary analysis, and the lesson plan focusing on the contributions of Gwendolyn Brooks to American poetry and novel [3, p. 28-32]. The concluding part entitled «Unfinished Tribute to Gwendolyn Brooks», is the coda of the essay which elucidates Alexander’s poetic talent. Underlining the unparalleled mastery of Gwendolyn Brooks in depicting the urban landscape and the blacks as the integral part of the Southside of Chicago, the poet-critic writes: «She gave the impeccable short lyric to the city, she went inside their homes <...>, she showed us the inside of a brown girl’s head. She sings the song the Southside of Chicago, that mighty city and its mighty black people» [3, p. 30].

The chapter «Black Feminist Thinking» highlights the issues pivotal to Black feminism: blackness as otherness, memory and community, motherhood and sisterhood, oppression of black women and activism, in the literary oeuvre of African American women writers. For Alexander, being a feminist is indispensable from being black. As she mentions in the essay «Memory, Community, Voice», «I cannot think about “feminist” without thinking about “black”. My developing sense of consciousness was absolutely part and parcel with the formal study of African-American literature and culture» [2, p. 412]. Affirming that there is no monolithic essential woman’s experience, the poet defines the current challenge for feminist studies as the requisite to think about something called women’s, or African-American, studies [2, p. 415]. The concluding part of the collections, entitled «Talking», is compiled of interviews with Deborah Keenan, Diane LeBlanc, Meta DuEwa Jones, and Elizabeth Alexander’s



speeches, which aim to highlight the intellectual endeavors of Black American thinkers and cultural figures. The author remarks, she wants «the final section to remind us how much thinking, theorizing, and history happens in talk» [3, p. 4].

We can conclude that Elizabeth Alexander's essays circle around African American artistic and cultural production, as well as the themes of what it means to be both African American and female. Alexander employs a variety of literary techniques in her essays, incorporating memoir, autobiographical and poetic fragments into the texture of art criticism. Widely using the formula of direct speech, she lets contemporary poets, and readers speak on the pages of her book about «their Dunbar», «their Langston Hughes» or «their Gwendolyn Brooks», and express their perception of their poetry. According to our observations, Elizabeth Alexander takes the stance of Black nationalism and Black Arts aesthetics, paying tribute to African American cultural and literary figures.

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#### Анотація

#### **I.V. Яковенко. Поет як критик: Елізабет Александер про класиків афро-американської літератури**

У статті розглядається есеїстичний доробок сучасної афро-американської поетеси Елізабет Александер, яка у 2000-х роках виступила як літературний критик, видавши збірки «The Black Interior» (2004) та «The Power and Possibility» (2007), і як редактор книги «The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks» (2005). Наукова новизна розвідки полягає у тому, що вперше

у вітчизняній американістиці розглядається есеїстика Елізабет Александер у світлі «чорних»/афро-американських студій. Досліджуються ключові проблеми нехудожнього доробку письменниці: своєрідність мистецтва та літератури афро-американців, «чорного» фемінізму, расизму, афро-американської ідентичності. У збірці «The Power and Possibility» письменниця представляє свій погляд на сучасну афро-американську культуру, зосереджуючи аналіз на сферах літератури, кінематографу, малярства та музики. Іконічними фігурами, про творчість яких розмірковує Елізабет Александер, стають Пол Лоренс Данбар, Гвендолін Брукс, Ленгстон Хьюз, Ріта Дав, Джун Джордан, Люсиль Клифтон тощо. Зроблено висновок про новаторство літературно-критичного доробку письменниці, що полягає не лише у вивченні творчості митців афро-американців, але й їх діяльності з популяризації «чорної» естетики, в дослідженні тематики, літературних технік «чорного» мистецтва (Black Arts aesthetics) та аналізі ідей «чорного» фемінізму.

**Ключові слова:** літературна критика, афро-американська література, «чорні»/афро-американські студії, Елізабет Александер.

#### Аннотація

#### **И.В. Яковенко. Поэт как критик: Элизабет Александер о классиках афро-американской литературы**

В статье рассматривается эссеистика современной афро-американской поэтессы Элизабет Александер, которая в 2000-х годах выступила как литературный критик в сборниках «The Black Interior» (2004) та «The Power and Possibility» (2007), и как редактор книги «The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks» (2005). Научная новизна исследования заключается в том, что в статье впервые в отечественной американистике анализируются эссе Элизабет Александер в контексте «чёрных»/афро-американских студий. Рассматриваются ключевые проблемы эссеистики писательницы: своеобразие литературы и искусства афро-американцев, «чёрного» феминизма, расизма, афро-американской идентичности. В сборнике «The Power and Possibility» Александер представляет свой взгляд на современную афро-американскую культуру, акцентируя внимание на сферах литературы, кинематографу, живописи и музыки. Элизабет Александер размышляет о выдающихся литераторах, таких как Пол Лоренс Данбар, Гвендолин Брукс, Ленгстон Хьюз, Рита Дав, Джун Джордан, Люсиль Клифтон. Новаторство литературно-критического сборника писательницы заключается не только в изучении творчества афро-американских художников, но и в исследовании их деятельности по популяризации «чёрной» эстетики, в анализе тематики и литературных техник «чёрного» искусства (Black Arts aesthetics) и идей «чёрного» феминизма.

**Ключевые слова:** литературная критика, афро-американская литература, «чёрные»/афро-американские студии, Элизабет Александер.

### Summary

#### I.V. Yakovenko. The Poet as Literary Critic: Elizabeth Alexander on African American Heritage

In the article we analyze Elizabeth Alexander's book of critical essays «The Power and Possibility» (2007), investigating the poet's views on art and culture, race and identity. The methodological toolkit of the research is Black/African American studies. The publication focuses on Elizabeth Alexander's reception of canonical African American literary figures: Paul Laurence Dunbar, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, June Jordan, Rita Dove, and investigates the poet's reflections on the concepts of race, black female role in the society, a sense of an African American poetics, various forms of black art, and the history of African American culture. The emphasis is made on the key themes of Alexander's essay collections: African American identity, racism, black feminism, black creativity, Black Arts aesthetics in the literary production of African American artists. It is concluded that Elizabeth Alexander breaks new ground while writing on Langston Hughes not only as a canon maker of African American literature but also as an anthologizer. In her essay collection, she defines the current challenges for feminist and African American studies. Elizabeth Alexander widely employs the trope of collage in her writings about historical and cultural contexts of the twentieth-century African American literature, – the technique, which is allied to the quilt metaphor and jazz improvisation. Alexander's personal experience and family history serve as a framing pattern for the essays.

**Key words:** literary criticism, African American literature, Black/African American studies, Elizabeth Alexander.

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