

## Introduction

In a recent discussion I heard myself saying, “Reading is experience, as digging a ditch or having a baby or going to Paris is experience.” I was speaking of my own journey in particularly interesting communities of letters. This is not to say that I have spent the last twenty-five years curled up in an overstuffed chair; rather, I have been studying, writing, reading, teaching, puzzling over, and attempting to illuminate words that have in some way happened to me.

It has long been my way to be the young person listening at the feet of elders. I have learned much in that manner, and in large part my writing has been an attempt to make solid something from that rich and gorgeous evanescence. I have seen, also, much that is not recorded and can be easily lost. No longer the ingenué, I see how this listening led me to work that is in keeping with the historical recovery that has been such an important part of African-American and women’s history over the last several generations. I have thought about why I move toward culture and its offerings as well as what I have struggled against. The mysteries of art and the bounty of black creative expression have changed its receivers and changed me.

These essays together argue for the power and possibility that are the legacies of 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. With each movement comes its artifacts: its poems, paintings, dances, and other creative expressions of the times. In the latter part of the twentieth century I wrote looking back and forward concurrently to the possibilities that culture can envision. “Where there is no vision, the people perish” comes first from the Bible, but the saying became a talisman

for me when I saw it inscribed on James Hampton's remarkable "vernacular" sculpture *Throne Of The Third Heaven Of The Nations Millenium General Assembly* in Washington, D.C. The work collected here ranges from 1990 to 2006 and mostly looks at African-American culture, much of it created by women, through a critical lens with poetic sensibility.

I have always been fascinated by writers who work in more than one genre. I first wrote fiction and then worked at the *Washington Post*—my hometown paper—in 1984 just after college. There soon came a clear moment when I could feel myself bumping up against the limits of daily newspaper writing. I was suited to write in different forms. But I have continued to love newspaper folk and the wide and democratic reach of newspapers. I cherish my indoctrination into that world at a moment in my life when I could learn so much from it: how to write clearly and quickly; how to distill information; how to choose apt details; how to work within form but convey a distinct voice; how to go out into the city and simply talk to people and listen for their idioms; how to move outside of myself.

I left my brief stint in full-time journalism and enrolled in a one-year master's program in creative writing at Boston University. I was admitted into the fiction program but found my true vocation in study with Derek Walcott, whose poems I revered. At the end of that year I was absolutely clear that I wanted to be a poet, and I decided that a Ph.D. in English would prepare me for a career that could make sense and make possible my life as a poet. I also wanted to resume the enriching study of my undergraduate education, despite having proclaimed upon graduation—a scant year before!—that I was never going back to school, never writing another paper, never taking another test, never. During graduate school I continued to freelance as a journalist, mostly for the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* while that paper was in a truly golden era in black cultural criticism, publishing the work of (among others) Thulani Davis, Michelle Wallace, Greg Tate, Lisa Jones, Lisa Kennedy, Joe Wood, and Colson Whitehead.

Those were interesting times in the academy. African-American literature, which would become my field of expertise, was burgeoning. Literary theory was also in full effect; one

graduate-school professor became incensed whenever a student spoke of “theory” instead of the teacher’s preferred “criticism.” The pieces in this collection mark years of fascinating and dramatic change in which the very definition of literature has transformed. To choose one example, when I first studied African-American literature, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was a cult favorite emerging from obscurity and back into print. Just thirty years later there are full-length critical studies of Hurston, dissertations, a Hurston Society, and biography and collected letters in print with major publishers. I’ve felt lucky to have a front-row seat to developments in African-American and feminist studies since the early eighties.

*Reading as a woman. Towards a Black Feminist criticism. Gynotexts. Aframerican theory.* These were some of the terms and titles that were in the air when I began graduate study, and they opened my mind to the many ways that who we are affects how and what we read and think. The next important step of theorizing identity politics for me was to challenge monolithic assumptions of who “we” are; I am grateful that my leanings toward romantic or nostalgic group identities have been challenged. Yet still, I believe that great art shifts human beings, and that the widely defined culture of African-Americans will merit critical attention long after I’m gone. As I wrote in “Today’s News,” “we are not one, not ten, not ten thousand things / not one poem. We could count ourselves forever / and never agree on the number.” I assume I have always “read as a poet,” which is to say, there are various shapes of poetic argument and logic that no doubt inform how I recognize and craft argument in prose. Reading as an African-American woman intellectual poet? Reading, as my lodestar Audre Lorde would have it, with all of my selves active and present and vigilant and alive. 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.

The composition of the first section of this book, “Black Arts 101,” emerges from my teaching years, which are ongoing. The

first “black arts” class I ever took, “Problems in the Study of Afro-American Literature,” featured a syllabus typed in a minute font on extra-long paper that covered three hundred years of the literature in all genres. Such was the field in 1982. Now enough progress has been made that African-Americanists can come out of graduate school without the obligation to be able to teach every single literary word ever written by an African-American, along with a full-fledged field of “white literature,” as was still true as I was being trained. Now single-author seminars on writers such as Ellison and Morrison are de rigueur in many English departments. This section of the book can be thought of as one syllabus among thousands, a syllabus in which the “text” might be a novel or poem or painting or dance and in which that text might be examined by close reading, historical contextualization, or any number of other methods combined, as the guiding light of cultural studies has shown us.

While this entire book is evidence of one particular “Black Feminist Thinking,” that section attempts to mark some of the aspects of my movement through years in which the term *black feminist* both took hold, was revised, and has ultimately been destabilized by the retrograde political forces we live with today. I hold on to the term both as it reflects my times and as it aptly describes some aspects of my mission.

Finally, and simply, I have always loved interviews with writers, and I want the final section to remind us how much thinking, theorizing, and history happens in talk, and how we must hold on to our galvanizing talking and what it memorializes.

My late grandmother, Wenonah Bond Logan, is often by my side when I am writing. Needless to say, she grew up during racial segregation in a world of sharply limited opportunities for black women. Yet she apparently possessed not one iota of gender or racial self-doubt. And though she never would have put it this way (because she was beguilingly taciturn and disapproved of excess in all forms), she loved what she came from: an incomparably rich community of black men and women who taught her all they knew and perfected the art of cherishing without coddling, ever. Only a fool would wish to be coddled.

When my grandmother finished college in 1931, she wrote to

a university in Denmark and said, “I imagine you have never had a colored student. I would like to be your first,” and soon she set sail for the Continent. She had read “The Little Mermaid” and heard of her statue in Copenhagen harbor, which was unveiled in 1913. She wanted to see it. I do not know what it meant to her, but I do know that it gave her an idea that moved her geographically, emotionally, and spiritually beyond anything she had known to that point, and anything that anyone around her had imagined.

To go forth in my grandmother’s questing spirit and explore the world of words and the ideas, power, and possibility they contain is what I have tried to do. I have tried less successfully to be as elegantly, fiercely understated as was she, but perhaps my voice and style are better suited to this century.

—Elizabeth Alexander  
New Haven, Connecticut  
January 2007