

POETRY MEDIA SERVICE

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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “that can come together in one leader’s vision.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

POETS IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

Poet Elizabeth Alexander, who will read a poem at the 2009 Inauguration, discusses President-elect Barack Obama and his relationship with language.

By Elizabeth Alexander

Poetry Media Service

The Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies announced on 12.17.08 Alexander’s place in the Inaugural Program. This interview is transcribed from a Poetry Foundation “Poetry Off the Shelf” podcast which aired on 11.25.08. Listen to the podcast at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/audioitem.html?id=643>

Curtis Fox: Elizabeth, where were you on election night?

Elizabeth Alexander: I was with my family, with my husband and my nine year-old and ten year-old sons, and two families—lovely friends with their young children as well—and we all let our kids stay up until midnight, because this is their reality and nothing could be more powerful than that. It was beautiful.

CF: How do you think the election of Obama, who seems to have gotten a lot of support from intellectuals and poets, is going to affect poetry?

EA: From the very beginning, in his public utterances we’ve seen that Obama is someone who takes great care with language, who understands that language is the medium that we travel in—it’s what we have to communicate with each other. And so his words have always been unusually precise, unusually careful, and certainly beautiful, but not for beauty’s sake. So I think that there’s something that he really understands in his rhetoric about the twinning of form and function that has made him an extremely effective communicator.

CF: Do you think that this respect for language, which seems to be new in the political sphere, will take some of the edge off of poets' attitudes towards political power?

EA: I don't think so, because that is in part the very essential work that poets do. Poets are always looking from the outside. Poets are never in any significant way the center of power. Poetry is an art form that is not well compensated, which leaves poets in a wonderfully free place to be able to criticize constructively without any kinds of economic ties or incentives.

So I think that's where poets always reside in the society. But I think perhaps what I hear is a lot of poets taking heart, in that not only is this someone who takes care with his language, not only is this someone who is evidently a thinker—certainly we haven't had a president who's been a professor, that is to say, someone who spends at least a part of his professional life thinking about complicated ideas and trying to make them comprehensible and working them through with students—but also, this is someone who appears to care about poetry itself. As many people have noted, he was photographed three days after the election carrying Derek Walcott's *Collected Poems*. I mean, the inbox went wild!

Poets just absolutely couldn't believe that, with that gesture, he was saying that a few days after being elected president, [he was able] to find the time for the contemplation that poetry provides, to read one of the great poets of world poetry, Derek Walcott; that is to say, not to have a strictly nationalist view of where important art is found . . . it is utterly extraordinary.

We heard one of his refrains, "We are the ones we have been waiting for"—that's a line from June Jordan's "Poem for South African Women."

(From Barack Obama's acceptance speech, 11.04.08: "Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for.")

CF: Do you think he self-consciously quoted that? Or is that just a coincidence?

EA: Well he certainly didn't invent it out of whole cloth; at least that's my guess. I think that there are probably other moments [from which] we could parse little hidden gems that suggest to us that this someone who appreciates the effective distillation that poetry offers.

CF: Can you imagine how it would electrify poets in this country if they thought that not only Barack Obama but other political leaders actually read what they wrote?

EA: Well, that would be electrifying indeed, and again not just because we don't sell very many books and we like for people to pay attention to our words; but rather, because we think what we do is important. Because we struggle to be precise and that is how human beings communicate across divides, communicate across difference. We take that work

dead seriously, and that is the work that we want our leaders to be engaged with, with equal care.

CF: I think this particular cultural moment is pretty exciting for a lot of people; a lot of people have a sense of the country that's dramatically different. Do you have any recommendations for a poem that reflects that spirit?

EA: Yes—I have truly in my head been hearing lines from Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing."

I Hear America Singing

By Walt Whitman

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the
steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon
intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl
sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust,
friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

EA: So I think this campaign truly belonged to an extraordinary cross-section not only of Americans, certainly as a campaign to Americans, but of the world over. Everyone from their own particular is finding a way to sing of what this moment can be, to sing of what their hopes and aspirations and frustrations and needs are; and somehow, that can come together in one leader's vision.

Elizabeth Alexander is a professor of African American Studies at Yale, and her latest book of poems is *American Sublime*, published by Graywolf Press. This interview originally aired on the podcast series "Poetry Off the Shelf." Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Elizabeth Alexander, and her poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org

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