

AMISTAD

Elizabeth Alexander

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After the tunnel of no return
 After the roiling Atlantic, the black Atlantic, black and mucilaginous
 After skin to skin in the hold and the picked handcuff locks
 After the mutiny
 After the fight to the death on the ship
 After picked handcuff locks and the jump overboard
 After the sight of no land and the zigzag course
 After the Babel which settles like silt into silence
 and silence and silence, and the whack
 of lashes and waves on the side of the boat
 After the half cup of rice, the half cup of sea-water
 the dry swallow and silence
 After the sight of no land
 After two daughters sold to pay off a father's debt
 After Cinque himself a settled debt

After, white gulf between stanzas

the space at the end

the last quatrain

THE BLUE WHALE

swam alongside the vessel for hours.
 I saw her breach. The spray when she sounded
 soaked me (the lookout) on deck. I was joyous.
 There her oily, rainbowed, lingering wake,
 ambergris print on the water's sheer skin,
 she skimmed and we skimmed and we sped
 straight on toward home, on the glorious wind.

Then something told her, Turn (whales travel
 in pods and will beach themselves rather than split)—
 toward her pod?—and the way she turned was not
 our way. I begged and prayed and begged for her
 companionship, the guide-light of her print,
 North Star (I did imagine) of her spout.
 But she had elsewhere to go. I watched
 the blue whale's silver spout. It disappeared.

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ABSENCE

In the absence of women on board,
when the ship reached the point where no landmass
was visible in any direction
and the funk had begun to accrue—
human funk, spirit funk, soul funk—who
commenced the moaning? Who first hummed that deep
sound from empty bowels, roiling stomachs,
from back of the frantically thumping heart?
In the absence of women, of mothers,
who found the note that would soon be called “blue,”
the first blue note from one bowel, one throat,
joined by dark others in gnarled harmony.
Before the head-rag, the cast-iron skillet,
new blue awaited on the other shore,
invisible, as yet unhummed. Who knew
what note to hit or how? In the middle
of the ocean, in the absence of women,
there I no deeper deep, no bluer blue.

boy haiku

the motherless child
rests his hand on a dead man’s
forehead ‘til it cools.

PORO SOCIETY

Without leopard skin, leather,
antelope horns, wart-hog tusks,
crocodile jaws, raffia muffs,

without the sacred bush,
the primordial grove,
our ancient initiations,

we will find a way
to teach the young man
on board with us.

We contend
with the forces of evil
in the universe.

Aggressive magic
addresses the need for control
in an imperfect world.

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APPROACH

With shore in sight, the wind dies and we slow.
Up from the water bobs a sleek black head
with enormous dark eyes that question us:

who and what are you? Why? Then another
and another and another of those
faces, 'til our boat is all surrounded.

The dark creatures are seen to be
seals, New England gray seals, we later learn.
They stare. We stare. Not all are blackest black:

Some piebald, some the dull gray of the guns
our captors used to steal and corral us,
some the brown-black of our brothers, mothers,

and two milky blue-eyed albino pups.
Albino: the congenital absence
of normal pigmentation. Something gone

amiss. Anomaly, aberration.

CONNECTICUT

They squint from shore
at scarlet-shirted blackamoors.

The battered boat sails in.
White sky, black sea, black skin,

a low black schooner,
armed black men on deck

in shawls, pantaloons,
a Cuban planter's hat—

parched, starved,
dressed in what they found

in the dry goods barrels,
the Africans squint

at trees not their trees,
at shore not their shore.

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OTHER CARGO

Saddles and bridles,
bolts of ribbon,
calico, muslin, silk,
beans, bread, books,
gloves, raisins, cologne,
olives, mirrors, vermicelli,
parasols, rice, black bombazine.

EDUCATION

In 1839, to enter University,
the Yale men already knew Cicero,

Dalzel's *Graeca Minora*, then learned more Latin prosody,
Stiles on astronomy, Dana's mineralogy.

Each year they named a Class Bully
who would butt heads with sailors in town.

"The first foreign heathen ever seen,"
Obookiah, arrived from Hawaii in '09.

The most powerful telescope in America
was a recent gift to the school

and through it, they were first to see
the blazing return of Halley's comet.

Ebenezer Peter Mason
and Hamilton Lanphere Smith

spent all their free time at the instrument
observing the stars, their systems,

their movement and science and magic,
pondering the logic of mysteries that twinkle.

Some forty years before, Banneker's
eclipse-predicting charts and almanacs

had gone to Thomas Jefferson
to prove "that nature has given our brethren

talents equal to other colors of men."
Benjamin Banneker, born free,

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whose people came from Guinea,
who taught himself at twenty-two (the same age

as the graduates) to carve entirely from wood
a watch which kept exquisite time,

accurate to the blade-sharp second.

THE YALE MEN

One by one the Yale men come
to teach their tongue to these
caged Africans so they might tell

in court what happened on the ship
and then, like Phillis Wheatley,
find the Yale men's God

and take Him for their own.

TEACHER

(Josiah Willard Gibbs)

I learn to count in Mende one to ten,
then hasten to the New York docks to see
if one of these black seamen is their kind.

I run to one and then another, count.
Most look at me as though I am quite mad.
I've learned to count in Mende one to ten!

I shout, exhausted as the long day ends
and still no hope to know the captive's tale.
Is any of these black seamen their kind?

I'd asked an old Congo sailor to come
to the jail, but his tongue was the wrong one,
I learned. To count in Mende one to ten

begin *eta, fili, kian-wa, naeni*.
I spy a robust fellow loading crates.
Is this the black seaman who is their kind?

He stares at me as though I am in need,
but tilts his head and opens up his ear
and counts to me in Mende one to ten,
this one at last, this black seaman, their kind.

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TRANSLATOR

(James Covey)

I was stolen from Mendeland as a child
then rescued by the British ship *Buzzard*
and brought to Freetown, Sierra Leone.

I love ships and the sea, joined this crew
of my own accord, set sail as a teen,
now re-supplying in New York Harbor.

When the white professor first came to me
babbling sounds, I thought he needed help
until *weta*, my mother's six, hooked my ear

and I knew what he was saying, and I knew
what he wanted in an instant, for we had heard
wild tales of black pirates off New London,

the captives, the low black schooner like
so many ships, an infinity of ships fatted
with Africans, men, women, children

as I was. Now it is my turn to rescue.
I have not spoken Mende in some years,
yet every night I dream it, or silence.

To New Haven, to the jail. To my people.
Who am I now? This them, not them. We burst
with joy to speak and settle to the tale:

*We killed the cook, who said he would cook us.
They rubbed gunpowder and vinegar in our wounds.
We were taken away in broad daylight.*

And in a loud voice loud as a thousand waves
I sing my father's song. It shakes the jail.
I sing from my entire black body.

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PHYSIOGNOMY

Monday, September 16, 1839

Another of the captured Africans named Bulwa (or Woolwah) died on Saturday night. This is the third who has died in this city, and the thirteenth since their leaving Havana. One more remains sick in this city, the others having been removed to Hartford on Saturday, to await their trial on Tuesday the 17th. Several are still affected with the white flux, the disease which has proved fatal to so many of them.

The Daily Herald, New Haven

Kimbo, 5 feet 6 inches, with mustaches and long beard, in middle life, calls himself Manding. Very intelligent,

he counts thus: 1. *eta*, 2. *fili*, 3. *kian-wa*, 4. *naeni*, 5. *loelu*, 6. *weta*, 7. *wafura*, 8. *wayapa*, 9. *ta-u*, 10. *pu*.

Shuma, 5 feet 6 inches, spoke over the corpse of Tha after Reverend Mister Bacon's prayer.

Konoma, 5 feet 4 inches, with incisor teeth pressed outward and filed, with large lips and projecting mouth, tattooed on the forehead,

calls himself Congo (Congo of Ashmun's map of Liberia, or Kanga, or Vater).

They are represented by travelers as handsome. They are supposed to be more ancient of the soil than Timaris. Their language, according to Port Chad, is distinct from any other.

Biah, 5 feet 4-1/2 inches with remarkably pleasant countenance, with hands whitened by scars from gunpowder, calls himself Duminah (Timmari),

counts also in Timari. He counts in Bullom thus. He counts in Manding like Kwong.

With face broad in the middle
With sly and mirthful countenance (rather old)
With full Negro features
With hair shorn in rows from behind
With permanent flexion of two fingers on right hand
A mere boy, calls himself Manding
With depression of skull from a forehead wound
Tattooed on breast
With narrow and high head

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With large head and high cheekbones
Marked on face by the smallpox
Stout and fleshy

Teme, 4 feet 3 inches, a young girl,
calls herself Congo but when further interrogated
says her parents were Congo, she a Manding.

Observe that in this examination
no one when asked for his name
gave any other than an African name.

No one when asked
to count counted in any
language other than African.

There was no appearance in any of them,
so far as I could judge,
of having been from Africa more than two or three months.

CONSTITUTIONAL

Mary Barber's children beg their mother
to take them into town each day to see
the Africans on the New Haven Green
let out of their cells for movement and air.

A New York shilling apiece to the jailer
who tucks away coins in a full suede purse.
The children push through skirts, past waistcoats,
to see the Africans turn somersets.

In the open air, in the bright sunlight,
the Africans chatter, and sound to
the children like blackbirds or cawing gulls.
The Africans spring. The Africans do not smile.

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MENDE VOCABULARY

they
my father
our father
your father
my mother
our mother
my book
his house
one ship
two men
all men
good man
bad man
white man
black man

I eat
he eats
we eat
they sleep
I see God
did I say it right?
we sleep
I make
he makes
they have eaten

this book is mine
that book is his
this book is ours
I am your friend
here
now
that
there
then

THE GIRLS

Margru, Teme, Kere,
the three little girls onboard.
In Connecticut
they stay with Pendleton
the jailer and his wife.
Some say they are slaves
in that house. The lawyer
comes to remove them,

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but they cling to their hosts,
run screaming through the snow
instead of go. Cinque comes
and speaks in their language
with much agitation.

Do you fear Pendleton? *No.*

Do you fear the lawyer? *No.*

Do you fear Cinque? *No.*

Who or what do you fear?

The men, they say, the men.

The girls will become Christians.

They will move to Farmington

with the Mende mission

and return to Sierra Leone.

One will return to America

to attend college at Oberlin.

They will be called Sarah,

Maria, and Charlotte.

KERE'S SONG

My brother would gather the salt crust.

My grandmother would boil it gray to white.

My mother boated in the near salt river,
grabbed fat fish from the water with bare hands.

Women paint their faces with white clay and dance
to bring girls into our society, our

secrets, our womanhood, our community.

The clay-whitened faces of my mothers

are what I see in my dreams, and hear
drum-songs that drown girls' cries after

they have been cut to be made women.

If someone does evil, hags ride them

all night and pummel them to exhaustion.

Hags slip off their skins and leave them

in the corner during such rambles.

At my grandmother's grave, cooked chicken, red rice,

and water to sustain her on her journey.

I was learning the secrets of Sande

when they brought me here, before my dance,
before my drum, before my Sande song.

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JUDGE JUDSON

These negroes are *bozals*
(those recently from Africa)
not *ladinos*

(those long on the island)
and were imported
in violation of the law.

The question remains:
What disposition shall be made
of these negroes?

Bloody may be their hands
yet they shall
embrace their kindred.

Cinqueze and Grabeau
shall not sigh for Africa
in vain

and once remanded
they shall no longer
be here.

IN CURSIVE

Westville, February 9, 1841

Miss Chamberlain and others,

I will write you a few lines
because I love you very much
and I want you to pray to the great God to make us free
and give us new souls and pray for African people.

He sent his beloved son into the world
to save sinners who were lost. He sent
the Bible into the world to save us
from going down to Hell, to make us turn from sin.

I heard Mr. Booth say you give five dollars
to Mr. Townsend for African people. I thank you
and hope the great God will help you and bless you
and hear you and take you up to Heaven when you die.

I want you to pray to the great God make us free.
We want to go home and see our friends in African Country.
I want the great God love me very much and forgive all my sins.
All Mendi people thank you for your kindness.

Hope to meet you in heaven. Your friend, Kale

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GOD

There is one God in Farmington, Connecticut,
another in Mendeland.

None listen.
None laugh, but none have listened.

We will sail home carrying Bibles
and wearing calico.

The journey this time
is seven weeks.

If we find our mothers,
children, fathers, brothers,

sisters, aunties, uncles,
cousins, friends,

if we find them,
we will read to them

(we read this book)
the God stories in our Bibles.

That is the price for the ticket home
to Mendeland

for us the decimated three years hence.

WAITING FOR CINQUE TO SPEAK

Having tried,

having tried, having failed,

having raised rice
that shimmered green, green,
having planted and threshed.

Having been a man, having sired children,
having raised my rice, having amassed a bit of debt,
having done nothing remarkable.

Years later it would be said
the Africans were snatched into slavery, then,
that we were sold by our own into slavery, then,
that those of our own who sold us
never imagined chattel slavery,
the other side of the Atlantic.

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Having amassed debt, I was taken to settle that debt.
(Not enough rice in the shimmering green.)
Better me than my daughter or son. (I was strong.)
And on the ship I met my day
as a man must meet his day.
Out of the Babel of Wolof and Kissee
we were made of the same flour and water, it happened.
On the ship, I met my day.

THE AMISTAD TRAIL

The *Amistad* Trail bus
leaves from the commuter parking lot,
exit 37 off Highway 84.
There is interest in this tale.

See where the girls lived while waiting
for the boat to sail home, see Cinque's room,
the Farmington church where they learned
to pray to Jesus, Foone's grave.

Good things: eventual justice, John Quincy Adams,
black fighting back, white helping black.
Bad things: the fact of it, price of the ticket,
the footnote, the twist, and the rest—

Done took my blues
Done took my blues and

—the good and the bad of it.
Preach it: learn. Teach it: weep.

Done took my blues.
Done took my blues and gone.
The verse will not resolve.
The blues that do not end.

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CINQUE REDUX

I will be called bad motherfucker.
I will be venerated.
I will be misremembered.
I will be Seng-Pieh, Cinqueze, Joseph,
and end up CINQUE.

I will be remembered
as upstart, rebel, rabble-rouser, leader.
My name will be taken by black men
who wish to be thought RIGHTEOUS.
My portrait will be called "The Black Prince."
Violent acts will be committed in my name.
My face will appear on Sierra Leonean currency.

I will not proudly sail the ship home
but will go home, where I will not sell slaves,
then will choose to sail off
to a new place: Jamaica, West Indies.
In America, they called us "Amistads."
The cook we killed, Celestino, was mulatto.
Many things are true at once.

Yes I drew my hand across my throat
in the courtroom, at that cur Ruiz
to hex his thieving, killing self.
Yes I scuffled here and there instead of immolate.
Yes I flaunted my gleam and spring.
No I did not smile.
No I never forgot the secret teachings
of my fathers. No I never forgot

who died on board, who died on land,
who did what to whom, who will die
in the future, which I see
unfurling like the strangest dream.

THE LAST QUATRAIN

and where now

and what now

the black white space

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Elizabeth Alexander is a poet, essayist, playwright, and teacher born in New York City and raised in Washington, D.C. Alexander has degrees from Yale University and Boston University and completed her Ph.D. in English at the University of Pennsylvania. Most recently, she composed and delivered "Praise Song for the Day" for the inauguration of President Barack Obama. The poem has recently been published as a small book from Graywolf Press. In addition, she has published five books of poems: *The Venus Hottentot* (1990), *Body of Life* (1996), *Antebellum Dream Book* (2001), *American Sublime* (2005), which was one of three finalists for the Pulitzer Prize and was one of the American Library Association's "Notable Books of the Year," and her first young adult collection (co-authored with Marilyn Nelson), *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color* (2008 Connecticut Book Award). Her two collections of essays are *The Black Interior* (2004) and *Power and Possibility* (2007), and her play, "Diva Studies," was produced at the Yale School of Drama.

Professor Alexander is the first 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." She is the 2007 winner of the first Jackson Prize for Poetry, awarded by Poets & Writers, Inc. Other awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, two Pushcart Prizes, the George Kent Award, given by Gwendolyn Brooks, a Guggenheim fellowship as well as the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching at University of Chicago. She is currently chair of the African American Studies Department at Yale University.