



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

Reimagining Elizabeth Alexander's "The Antebellum Dream" through the Lens of Social Practice Theory

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The present paper aims to examine Elizabeth Alexander's *The Antebellum Dream Book* through the prism of Dorothy Holland's 'Social Practice Theory' in an attempt to unravel how African American identity is built, disintegrated, and repossessed both as a legacy of the past and part of history and culture. The close examination of important poems like "Fugue", "Visitor", "Race", and "Early Cinema", underscores how Alexander has merged the memory, geography, and the surreal imagery to criticize and redefine the Black identity as a reaction to slavery, migration, and racial violence. Besides being a poetic record of trauma and struggle, the collection is also a place of active cultural formation and the construction of subjectivity. The paper illustrates how the poetic voice of Alexander involves collective memory, disrupts the dominant racial master narratives, and puts Black body and voice in place as both objects and agents of change through a socio-historical approach. In conclusion, the paper establishes the relevance of the anthology as a crucial literary place of expression of identity (both Black and personal), agency, recovery, and movement within the intersection of past trauma and the future.

KEYWORDS: Elizabeth Alexander, *The Antebellum Dream Book*, African American Identity, Social Practice Theory, memory and trauma, cultural resistance

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Introduction

The Antebellum Dream Book by Elizabeth Alexander explores the psychic byproduct of slavery, legacy, and blackness through utopic and historical imagery. The poem also coincides at the vantage point between personal and collective memory; thus, functioning as not just a dreamscape, but a field of battle in which the construction of personhood is established against the historical material of American racial formation. The present article offers a socio-historical rethinking of Alexander and examines the ways that the poem criticizes the processes through which black bodies became legible or unreadable within the antebellum sociopolitical system.

The strange familiarity is one of the three issues that Alexander discusses in the dream diary. In the first part, Alexander introduces poems in which she sets similarities and differences in the four histories of the self, family, community and country. Actually, the poems are the gravity imitation of the several dimensional actions of the origin stories. In part two, Alexander offers weird dream poems that are narrated in the first person and are strongly influenced by pregnancy, and depicted as a fantastic fugue state (Somia, 2018, pp:30-42).

It is worth mentioning that the African-Americans underwent a lot of setbacks in the antebellum period (late 18th century to 1861, the period before the American Civil War), such as slavery, discrimination, and inability of accessing basic civil rights. The impact of their struggle against freedom and equality was substantial in the evolution of the American history in general. The following concepts are very important regarding the plights of Afro-American people in their struggle of pursuing and aiming at liberation and equal status, depicted through *The Antebellum Dream Book* (Kaalund, 2019, pp. 44–45).

Through analysis of symbolic and historical tropes of the collection, this paper highlights the role of systems of power, such as those involving law, culture, and ideology, in the production of persons and in the context of slavery and its legacies. *The Antebellum Dream Book* can be read as a form of protest and reclamation along with the repression of identity that can be dreamed as a form of resistance. So, this book is not merely a lyrical meditation but a resistive record against the historical oppression of identity. The collection cheerily brings forth gender, race, and early motherhood, but, separately, they are merely the rugs upon which Alexander schemed poetically (Clayton, 2001, pp. 27–30).

At the beginning of the 19th century, slavery became rooted in the South of the United States. Hundreds or even millions of African Americans lived in oppression, harsh conditions, and were enforced to work. In her *The Antebellum Dream Book*, Alexander protested against such displeasing practices of the racial history in poems.

The horror of the racial tensions within American culture in the beginning of the 20th century was a reality because one could see the inter-racial conflict within the Afro-American families. Therefore, the North which was opposed to slavery fought with the South which supported slavery over this question during the civil war (1861-1865). In her poem “The Antebellum Dream”, Alexander aspired to show this visage of racism that is depicted in an interpersonal setting as a rift and a clash among the family members in the initial half of the 20th century (Saktiningrum, 2021, pp. 17-27).

The Antebellum Dream Book by Elizabeth Alexander is an incredibly compelling study of the historical and cultural formation of the Black identity; however, the book remains under-theorized in regard to its role in acting as the location of the socio-historic negotiation and defiance. As much as these themes of memory, race, displacement, and trauma are pivotal, they have been researched in isolation without the assistance of others, instead of an interfering process by which the art of personhood is established. In her poem “The Antebellum Dream”, Alexander wants to reflect this image of racism presented in an interpersonal context as causing a rift and tension amongst family members in the first half of the 20th century (Ibid.). Alexander succeeds in presenting the effect of racism where black intellectuals, elites, and regular people have always had mixed feelings about collective memories of slavery because these memories are frequently characterized not by tales of bravery and autonomy, but rather by a sense of pain and humiliation. A form of disremembering known as humiliated silence has resulted from the dishonor attached to a heritage that embraces the labor pledge. In her poems, it is clear that African Americans continue to play subsidiary roles as passive victims whose liberation is derived at the hands of white saviors in the widespread history that the Civil War was a story for white people, by white people, and about white people. This idea is still widely thought within the black community (Davis, 2016, pp. 47–50). African Americans faced constant attacks on their humanity, including exclusion from citizenship, voting rights, and equal military treatment. The dream poems in “The Antebellum Dream” draw inspiration

from the globe, highlighting the strange nature of race and its family, and creating a peculiar, ambient space. (Brown & Tettentborn, 2008, pp 10 to 11.). While such existing critics have generally referred to points such as these themes of memory, race, displacement, and trauma, the present paper significantly aims to fill this gap of the scholarship through the application of the Social Practice Theory developed by Dorothy Holland to uncover how Alexander poems reflect identity as constructed performances and historically grounded. A close reading of some of her poems helps reveal how Alexander employs poetry as a means to challenge the established racial narratives, redefine Black subjectivity, appropriate cultural memory as an instrument of empowerment and agency.

This study provides a crucial contribution not only as a literary research but also as an interdisciplinary focus on cultural studies by further evidencing *The Antebellum Dream Book* as a poetic intervention on the socio-historical manufacturing of Blackness. Applying Dorothy Holland's Social Practice Theory, the study goes beyond symbolic interpretations and analyzes how identity is constructed through lived experiences, memory and socially situated social practice, which is historically determined.

It accentuates the anthology as the cultural archive where past and present are preserved, criticized, and reimagined in solving the African American identity problematically in context and time. The study adds to academic knowledge about the possibility of poetry as resistance and reclamation, and includes a study of literature and how it is used as a place of identity construction. Such a reading strategy is designed to deepen the understanding of contemporary Black poetics and is applicable toward current debates in Black studies, memory studies, and cultural theory after slavery.

The study thus aims to follow the socio-historical component of literary analysis, supplemented with Social Practice Theory. In the analysis, through close readings of selected poems, including "Fugue", "Race", "Visitor", and "Early Cinema", the nature of Alexander manages to invoke memory, displacement, resistance, and use of historical allusion to critique the historical process of Black identity. In addition, the paper situates poetic images in the larger historical context of slavery, civil rights, Great Migration, and Reconstruction. Dorothy Holland's theory of identity informs the way of comprehending identity as being performed through mediation by "figured worlds" and relations that are historically located. Within this context, the present paper poses a number of questions regarding how Alexander's *The Antebellum Dream Book* re-builds the socio-historical meaning of Black identity, how the poems present things such as memory, trauma and heritage as ways of resistance and how Social Practice Theory explains Alexander's portrayal of identity.

Finally, the present paper attempts to discuss the construction of Black identity in *The Antebellum Dream Book* as a historically and socially constructed phenomenon and the way in which Elizabeth Alexander uses poetic form and voice in the endeavor of subverting the dominant racialized discourses. Using Social Practice Theory, the study interprets identity as a process that is dynamic and goes through changes as a result of memory, cultural practice, and social interaction.

Discussion

The Antebellum Dream Book is a multiple-voiced and densely textured poetic collection that can be described both as a cultural store and as a place of identity formation. Relying on the Social Practice Theory of Dorothy Holland with the premise that personhood comes out of engagements with culturally and historically grounded practices, Alexander's poems demonstrate how the African American identities are created, fractured and aligned by means of memory, space, resistance, and the history of racial oppression.

Alexander creates a polyphonic poetic universe where a voice of the past, present, and imagined future come together. This is shown in poems such as "Fugue" and "Visitor" where memory is not a receptive but an agent that creates an impression in the speaker. "Fugue" opens with the statement "Memory is a house where I live," (lines 5-8) and develops to demonstrate how the collective memory, especially the slavery, migration, and racial violence exist inside the speaker. It is here that Holland introduces the notion of the "figured worlds". Alexander's speaker lives in cultural worlds that are characterized by historical trauma.

In "Visitor," the figure of a visitor in the house replaces history as such that invades the present. "The visitor is memory / and the visitor is history," (line 9-12) the speaker proclaims, reflecting the way in which the past injustices shape the lived experience. The poem erases the border between past and present, personal and political, private and public, placing identity as a creation constructed in response to both relations between

people and larger cultural discourses. This duality is upheld in Holland's theory in relation to the way subjectivity is socially embedded or produced by history.

An especially strong instance of identity conflict is found in "Race" which tells the tale of Paul, a black man who passes as white having moved to Oregon after resettling in Alabama. The inner struggle that Paul is going through and the fact that he is no longer on friendly terms with his siblings whom he capitalizes on to prove daily that they are not going to be confused as anything other than what they are in their skin Black shows how frustrating being a racial passer can be. His loss of touch with his roots speaks to the loss that a sense of cultural authenticity almost always carries with it in the case of geographic and social displacement.

Nur Saktiningrum (2021) states, "Alexander's "Race" is structured as a poem with a story about race-related experiences, and in the aforesaid theoretical context, the poem offers a specific interpretation of— or a case representation of—racial passing" (p. 19).

Such a reading supports the notion that the change in identity in Paul is not merely an individual decision but is anchored in history as the reaction to systematic pressure. However, as he opens himself up to the benefits that whiteness affords, his strained relationship with his siblings and their denial of participating in his deception unveils the psychological and relationship-related expenses of this transformation.

Paul's ability to seek the role of a "passing person" should be seen as an example of what Holland would call self-authoring on the limited figures of the worlds. Paul takes the liberty to move within the white dominated society but this is at the price of cutting his social practices and loss of his identity in the community that affirmed his early identity. The decision of his siblings not to pass is a form of counter-practice, a decision that focuses on community and opposition to assimilation. Alexander herself discusses the role of dreams and surreal imagery in African American poetry as a form of historical and cultural intervention rather than escapism, Alexander thus writes:

The dream space in African American poetry is not an escape but a confrontation—a reimagining of history that refuses to be bound by its horrors. Laughter in the face of enslavement, as in 'I Dreamt I Was a Slave and Woke up Laughing,' is a radical act of reclamation, turning trauma into a site of creative resistance. (Alexander, 2004, p. 56)

The dreamlike and surreal objects in Alexander's poems can be seen as the critical interventions in the historical and cultural memory, instead of serving as the means of escape. In "I Dreamt I Was a Slave and Woke up Laughing," dreaming of being enslaved and waking up laughing is used as both resistance and imagination. The line "My back a conduit that linked to his prosperity" (line 5) echoes the commodification of the Black body in the past, but the laughter suggests the rejection of being constrained by history. In this context, Holland's theory of improvisational practices comes into being: the laughter is the improviser in a painful figured world.

Alexander links such surreal moments to historical particularity. In "Early Cinema," the romanticization of whiteness in cinema and the desire to "pass" are presented as rebellious acts and inner struggle for Black women in a segregated society like the American society. The desire of the protagonist to fit into a cinematic space where whiteness prevails and controls the majority of images tells about the emotionalization of the racial hierarchy as a product of media and cultural industries. However, the speaker breaks these stories by contemplating and irony, pointing out the irony of identification and alienation. "Early Cinema" is a poem that explores the origins of film and its cultural significance. Brown & Tettenborn mention that the temporary passing depicted in Alexander's poem "Early Cinema" even though illegal, is quite different from permanently becoming white which can be thought of as a kind of memory loss state in which a person loses racial consciousness and generates alternative self to reframe that loss rather than recover from memory loss (2008, pp: 27-30). Within this context, Holland uses "Social Practice Theory" and the "historical production of persons" to analyze how cultural practices, such as early film, impact individual and collective identities. The poem highlights the fleeting nature of memory and identity, as well as the communal aspect of early cinema, which was viewed in group settings. The poem also explores how early film shaped identities, particularly concerning race, gender, and class. The poem acknowledges the contributions of underrepresented workers to the filmmaking industry but denounces the erasure of non-white identities. The poem highlights the transformative power of film as a means of reinterpreting identities, highlighting the importance of understanding the historical contexts that shape identities on and off-screen.

Geography is not setting in *The Antebellum Dream Book*; it is rather a process of identity change.

Regarding the 'Great Migration', captured in such poems like "Georgia Postcard," geographies represent a reimagining, both literally and metaphorically, of the self. The poet is in flux shifting between geographies and being visible or invisible and continuously finding her way in the symbolic interpretation of skin color as she goes across geographies, as in Brazil, where there are "so many words for skin color," (Brown & Tettentborn, 2008, pp 10-11.) Identity is mushy, fluid, a state of fugue in the constant self-metaphor of Alexander. This trend is consistent with the development of the New Negro identity, a diasporic consciousness that can be seen as the result of both voluntary migration and opposition to white supremacy in the South and the activity of modern Black aesthetics. The theory developed by Holland assists in expressing this change: as African Americans physically relocated, they transferred between the social practices as well: they redefined their racial subjects and destinies in the world.

Collective cultural heritage is also a topic that Alexander investigates, in the way Black women carry the memory of generations in their bodies. In "Neonatology," the integration of the birth canal and the Middle Passage exaggerates the flow between historical trauma and cultural re-creation. Black female body is presented as a body capable of suffering, birth and change. Holland's cultural production is particularly developed and relevant in this case: Alexander deploys the poetic form as a means to convert the pain of history into a domain of reconstructing identity and futurity.

Poems such as "Paul Says" and "Crave Radiance" emphasize the importance of tale-telling, oral heritage and collective memory. Memory is not a passive activity, but that of survival and African Americans that could keep identity alive through generations. In "Fugue," Alexander asserts, "I reach a zone of supreme power and self-possession" (Ibid.), a statement which summarizes the purpose of cultural continuation and resistance written within the African American experience.

The critical investigation on *The Antebellum Dream Book* shows that the book is simultaneously a poetic rework of the past and a dynamic act of identity formation through memory, geography, and resistance. The poems reveal that African American identity cannot be described as fixed or formed but produced, socially and historically in specific contexts. The results are based on the Social Practice Theory by Dorothy Holland, that demonstrates how identity construction arises as a result of engagement in cultural memory and personal agency through "figured worlds". Poems such as "Fugue" and "Visitor" demonstrate the way in which memory can be an agent that maintains identity and recreates it. These are not only individual but shared, shaped out of historical trauma like slavery and migration, and central to the speaker feeling about her or himself. In "Race," the situation of Paul being able to pass as a white highlights the agonizing bargains of racial assimilation.

The findings bring out the way in which displacement fractures identity and the ways in which a refusal of this fracture can reinforce identity, as evident in the case of Paul siblings who uphold their Blackness with intentional pride. The surreal elements in poems like "I Dreamt I Was a Slave and Woke up Laughing" are not an escape but a barely veiled judgment. They intervene in powerful histories and are ways of improvising survival and writing the self in oppressive worlds. Alexander depicts physical mobility, particularly during the Great Migration as a transformation of identity by proxy. Such poems as "Georgia Postcard" and the references to Brazil show how racial meaning in space shifts and complicates the performance of identity and its perception. Through poems like "Neonatology" and "Paul Says," Alexander places Black women as generational trauma as well as agents of cultural renewal. The impression to utilize the body in the metaphorical range depicts profound interdependence of memory, agony, and the future. The poems highlight the importance of storytelling and shared memory as traditions, and modes of cultural endurance. The identity is not only extended and flagged in terms of inheritance, but also poetic voice, resistance and memory.

These findings prove that *The Antebellum Dream Book* is a highly constructed historic work, a site where history, imagination, and opposition come together to rebel against impositions and take back their agency.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Alexander's *The Antebellum Dream Book* becomes a strong literary text that manages the nuances of Black identity, memory, and cultural survival. In terms of Social Practice Theory, this paper has demonstrated that although the poetry of Alexander demonstrates historical trauma, it is not a passive reflection of the same but a point of interaction: re-imagining the meaning of selfhood in the light of racialized histories, displacement,

and cultural transmission.

The exploration of surrealism, historical referencing and multiple unheard voices shows identity as a performative experience, which is dynamic and very embedded in social experience. Investigating the themes of racial passing, resistance, migration, and collective memory, Alexander reestablishes a poetic space as a means of self-authoring and cultural redefinition. Indeed, the research certifies that *The Antebellum Dream Book* serves as both a document of African American experience as well as an act of resistance /imagination and transformation. It is recommended to researchers and scholars to employ interdisciplinary theories, like Social Practice Theory, the Black feminist thought, and postcolonial theory, to other contemporary Black literary texts in order to widen critical interaction with identity as historically specific and socially constructed. Educational organizations need to integrate Alexander's poems into educational policies in African American literature, cultural studies, and identity theory classes to enhance comprehension of the ability of literature to restore agency and displace power narratives. More possible future research on Alexander might approach other poetic texts she has produced in connection with alternative historical periods or theoretical prisms. Alexander's poems, with their availability and heritage enrichment, are relevant both in the community and in forums, literacy projects, and cultural heritage programs as a means of engaging in the discussion of race, memory, and identity in the past and the present.

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