

Thoughts on my process on a Composition-in-Progress

**Working Title: *Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery: An Incomplete List*
by Elizabeth Alexander**

**The following was written for the members of the
ACDA Women's Choir Commissioning Consortium Composition**

My ancestors owned slaves.

This was never hidden from me as a child, but it was also not exactly advertised. What I knew was that my great grandfather was a Weeks, his father a first cousin of David Weeks, who built a prominent plantation house in Louisiana. But to me, this information primarily meant that my family had some connection with a beautiful house now cared for by the National Historic Trust. Such is the nature of the topic of slavery, that it took me a very long time to draw a connection between plantations and slaves.

My great grandfather's family was less wealthy than that of his cousin, but over the years I surmised that slave ownership was also part of his life and livelihood, and part of his parents' and grandparents' lives.

By the time I was born in 1962, spending the first part of my childhood in the Carolinas, a different era had arrived. I knew from a young age that my parents shared the goals of the Civil Rights movement, speaking to us children often about the equality of all people, and making sure we went to integrated schools and recreational programs. A few states to the west, my strong-minded grandmother straddled two worlds; she hired black housekeepers and gardeners, and was apt to see herself as a woman of privilege, but she also drove her employees to and from work to support the Montgomery bus boycott, and took a strong stand for the integration of her church and community. Around the dinner table, my family frequently talked about racism — interpersonal, internalized, and institutional.

But we didn't really talk about our ancestors owning slaves.

We didn't talk about it because there was no way to talk about it. It certainly wasn't something we would brag about. And though we were ashamed that our country and our own ancestors participated in slave ownership, it felt inauthentic to take upon ourselves the full mantle of shame for something that had been over for more than 100 years.

As the years passed, I began to notice that this conversational gap occurred not only in my family, but in the wider society as well. As an adult, I decided to break this code of silence. When I found myself in conversations in which my peers talked about their ancestors, I began to volunteer information about my own family tree's weak branch. In almost every case, I encountered confusion, anger and hostility. Several conversations ended abruptly, aborted by someone's overwhelming desire for something to eat, a strong need for light banter, or the sudden realization that it was getting very late. In their defense, I have since realized that it was probably the first time my conversational partners had ever met anyone who was willing to admit to a lineage that included slave ownership.

Once I decided to own this part of my past, there was no return to silence. I became very interested in

the institution of slavery everywhere it occurred — not only in the South but also in the North, and all over the world. I surprised myself by virtually inhaling Edwin Ball's 600-page documentation of his own family's history, *Slaves in the Family*. I sought out an exhibit on modern slavery at Cincinnati's Underground Railroad Museum.

Whenever I encountered information about the compulsions that lead one person to try to own and control another, I found myself paying close attention. In Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* and Stephen Dobyns' poem *Confession*, I found fearless examinations of the human weaknesses that lead people to ruthlessly dominate others. During a visit to Monticello, an extraordinary African-American docent detailed Thomas Jefferson's serious addiction to expensive art, books and inventions — a fatal flaw which left him in chronic debt, causing him to break his repeated promises to himself and others that he would free his slaves. Overwhelmingly, what I learned pointed to a painful conclusion. The existence of slavery in a given society has more to do with the prevailing economy than with morality.¹

We are shocked when we hear that slave children are harvesting chocolate in Africa and weaving rugs in India, that forced laborers are cutting cane in the Dominican Republic, that girls and women are locked inside of the brothels of Thailand or the sweatshops of New York City. I am always saddened, but I am shocked less and less of the time. I think: Someone had something to gain, and then made a dark choice to seize that opportunity.

Even when slavery is abolished by law, the economic incentives that make slave ownership economically attractive don't go away. While outright slavery may not be in evidence, slave conditions continue to surface over and over again. How do we classify sharecroppers, coal miners and mail-order brides? And how many steps away from slave life are modern day migrant workers, child beggars, and the millions of laborers all over the world who work 14 hour days in polluted environments?

I have come to believe that the eradication of slavery will never be completed, but is a task that each generation of people will need to undertake anew. There are endless possibilities of how our darker natures lead us to fall into, justify, and become dependent on the practice of dominating other people. Because it appears in so many different guises, is called by so many different names, and offers so many seeming benefits to its perpetrators, is unlikely that it will ever completely disappear from the face of the Earth.

It's easy to pretend that slave owners themselves are the only perpetrators of slavery, and certainly they are the most consciously culpable, and often abusive beyond belief. But the more I read about slavery, the more I understand that they are one part of a complex system which offers tremendous rewards to those who have something to offer to consumers at unthinkably low prices — be it chocolate, coffee, sugar, rugs, saris, bricks, oranges, garments, a clean house, soldiers, or sex.

Sometimes it's hard to see that slavery is occurring, and that we ourselves might be part of the system which perpetuates it. In our own time, slaves can be separated from the beneficiaries of their services

¹ “The North failed to develop large-scale agrarian slavery, such as later arose in the Deep South, but that had little to do with morality and much to do with climate and economy.” Author and historian Douglas Harper.

by thousands of miles. Their status as slaves may not be readily apparent, because of economic forces so complex that few can understand them. Slaves can easily be hidden behind walls and borders. The only clue we may ever receive that slavery is at play is the pleasant surprise that the price of a consumer item is quite low.

The few people whom I've told about my work on this piece (including my husband) have asked me, "What exactly are you trying to do with this piece? Raise awareness?" I suppose that is part of why I'm doing this. Certainly the singers and audience members won't forget the theme of this piece — though what they think of the piece itself is another story altogether.

But really, as an artist and a grappling-type person, I'm in the habit of trying to figure things out. I've gotten rather addicted to not being satisfied with easy answers, which is what makes me go to the theater almost as often as I go to concerts. Periodically I go so deeply into a question that it finds its way into my art.

Perhaps I would have created a piece of music grappling with slavery regardless of external circumstances, but this song was precipitated at this time by the ACDA Women's Choir Commissioning Consortium saying that I could write about anything I wanted — a rare privilege, I might say. I hope you know how risky and rewarding those kinds of marching orders can be. I am really grateful to you for that freedom. It really has allowed me to move in a different direction than I've ever moved in.

Yes, I thought about writing about something else. A spunky George Ella Lyon poem was a serious contender for awhile. And a couple of Daniel Ladinsky's Hafiz-inspired poems have been burning a hole in my pocket. But those projects can wait for another time. For now, the working title of my piece is the rather academic *Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery: An Incomplete List*. Hopefully this won't lead you to think that the song will sound academic. (It won't.) The song will be highly rhythmic, and fast. The reasons pour forth, and forth, and forth, as if there is no end to the forces and temptations and rationalizations and justifications and desires that make slavery a problem now and a challenge for us in the future.

If nothing in *An Incomplete List* resonates with you, in your own experience, then I won't have done my job right. The reasons are within us — all of us. This breaks my heart, but it's true. My intention is not to assign blame or elicit shame. It's exactly the opposite of that — it is to try to see this tragedy of human nature with clarity and compassion. It is to examine those human qualities which combine and conspire to lead us again and again to want to possess more, by all rights, than we should. And then to create a work of art, so that others can see through my eyes. That is the job of all art, regardless of its form or theme.²

- E.A. April 10, 2010 (One month before the completion of *Reasons*)

² "We need to shift to a paradigm that recognizes the possibility of slavery in order to be able to identify it." from the website of the nonprofit Not For Sale, which estimates that there are currently 27 million slaves, more than any time in the history of the world.