

Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery

SSAA a cappella



Elizabeth Alexander

Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery: An Incomplete List

I. The Sheer Possibility in the First Place

The sheer possibility in the first place.
Unstoppable wanting. Wanting the unstoppable.
The need for cultivation. The cultivation of need.
Hard choices. Easy outs.
High hopes. Slippery slopes.

The allure of order. The desire to acquire.
Classes of people. People of class.
The gain of capital. Capital gains.
The persistent perception of greener grass.

The justification of pride.
The pride of ownership.
The ownership of justice.

The tidiness of titles. The convenience of caste.
Distributions of wealth. A wealth of distributions.

The price of cotton. The price of rice.
The price of sugar. The price of gold.
The price of oranges. The price of tomatoes.
The price of keeping the prices low.
The price of beauty. The price of toys.
The price of plenty. The price of more.
The price of a hit. The price of a life.
The price of liberty. The price of anything.

The desire for a fix. The fixation on race.
The race towards civilization. The civilization of desire.

Chains of command. The commands of corruption.
The corruption of language. The language of chains.

Classification, misinformation,
Collaboration, accumulation,
Calculation, rationalization.



II. The Existence of Endless Prepositional Possibilities

The existence of endless prepositional possibilities:
As a short-term solution, in the interest of progress,
'Til my head's above the water, 'til my feet are on the ground,
For the good of the nation, for the company, for my family,
Despite a few misgivings at the present time,
Behind closed doors, by hook or crook,
Beyond our borders, as a very last resort,
Between you and me, beyond my control,
On the cheap, on the sly, with my back against the wall,
Out of sight, out of mind, out of my hands,
Under the radar, under the gun, under the table, around the law,
In for a penny, in for a pound, in for a lifetime —
Just this once.

III. An Unexamined Life

Longings for chocolate, palaces, pyramids,
Flowers in the winter, rubber and rum.
What people will do for a little black dress,
A hand with the children, a carpet, a kiss,
An immaculate house, an unexamined life.

The price of cotton. The price of rice.
The price of sugar. The price of gold.
The price of oranges. The price of tomatoes.
The price of keeping the prices low.

Looms of fingers. Fields of hands.
Chests of organs. Pounds of flesh.
Platters of thighs. Legions of legs.
Rivers of blood. Heavings of hearts.
Batteries of arms and backs and shoulders.

Business, pleasure, labor, leisure,
Backers, buyers, brokers, liars,
Winners, losers, dealers, users,
Borrowers, lenders, traders, vendors,
Profits, losses, owners, bosses.

People of means. The means to an end.
Unheeded rumors. Eager consumers.

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** Note: Part I: The Sheer Possibility in the First Place, may be performed separately; an alternate ending appears on pages 18-19.*

Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery

Music and Lyric by Elizabeth Alexander

Composer's Introductory Words at Premiere Performance

Lawrence University ~ May 28, 2010

Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery is a song about slavery, but it is not a song about American slavery. Although my initial interest in slavery grew from my childhood in the Carolinas, my family background, and my fathers' own interest in the Civil War, I soon discovered that I could not hope to understand the nature of slavery if I limited my research to the Antebellum South. Slavery has been with us since the beginning of recorded time; sometimes it seems like only the names and places have changed:

In centuries past, slavery flourished on sugar plantations in Brazil, rubber plantations in the Belgian Congo, farms in pre-Industrial Europe, and the brothels of ancient Rome. Whereas today, slavery can be found on sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic, rubber plantations in Liberia, farms in Florida, and the brothels of Thailand — indeed, in brothels all over the world.

In New York City, ownership of child beggars in the late 1800s has given way to ownership of sweatshop workers today.

In Columbia, slaves grow flowers, in India they weave carpets, and in the Ivory Coast they grow 40% of the chocolate in the world.

Of course, most of them are not *called* slaves. They are called guest workers, indentured servants, quota workers, migrant labor and apprentices. But these seductive synonyms for slavery are about as convincing as calling layoffs “corporate downsizing.”

Our own participation in slavery is complicated now, and often hidden from us. Through the simple act of buying products such as sugar, chocolate, orange juice, clothing, handicrafts and automobile tires, we enjoy the fruits of slavery, which are, first and foremost, low prices. When our governments resist passing laws requiring documentation of the source of consumer goods — and those kinds of legislative proposals are out there — we turn our heads and allow slavery to continue. While experts disagree about exactly how many slaves exist today — 27 million is a common estimate — they all agree that there are more slaves now than there have ever been, at any time.

Okay, here's where the shame and blame start to be brought forward — which is a natural tendency for compassionate human beings — but let's not go there. It's not that shame and blame aren't warranted; it's just that they don't help our understanding of slavery, or help the situation itself.

With this in mind, I approached the writing of this song with as much curiosity as I could muster, with the desire to really *get at* what drives humans to control other people in such an extreme way. Why do we want more and more stuff, more and more security, more and more leisure? Why do we let low prices drive so many of our decisions? Why does the human race so often fail to live up to its own cherished ideals?

Like many others who have pondered this question, I've come to believe that slavery is possible because, deep down, we *are* human. The tendencies and temptations which make slavery possible are rooted, sadly but truly, in the depths of every person's heart. An honest understanding of the reasons for the perpetuation of slavery comes not from finger-pointing, but from the willingness to see that the best and worst qualities we observe in ourselves and those we love sometimes do lead down a dark path that can end in human abuse.

For me, the most powerful lyrics in *Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery* reflect those qualities which I recognize in myself — “the allure of order,” “the pride of ownership,” “the persistent perception of greener grass,” “high hopes,” “slippery slopes,” and my own longings for chocolate and a clean and tidy house. If I’m at all honest, I know I’ve taken convenient shortcuts in my life which fell far short of my own ethical convictions. If I can understand these desires and shortcomings in myself, and begin to see them with compassion — if I can say “*Ah, this is part of what my species struggles with!*” — then I maybe can arrive at a place where healing and change can start to happen.

How audacious — this notion that musicians have that by singing honest and compassionate songs, we participate in radical acts of love. Not *blind* love, but love that is open-eyed and challenging, and which in some circumstances might change the course of history. This is the audacity with which I wrote this song, and which leads singers to sing their most powerful songs, day after day, again and again.

More information about this song, including notes on the specific images in this song, details about the musical setting, the part slavery played in the composer’s background, and this song’s premiere performance by *Cantata*, see:

<http://www.elizabethalexander.com/works/reasons.html>

Performance Notes:

× = Snap fingers

‡ = Clap

✂ = Brush hands together

℞ = Tap right ball of foot on floor, using heel as a fulcrum
(Alternately, choir may step lightly.)

ℓ = Tap left ball of foot on floor, using heel as a fulcrum
(Alternately, choir may step lightly.)

℞
■ = Step or stomp with right foot

ℓ
■ = Step or stomp with left foot

L and R indicate left and right foot.

If desired, choir may process onto the stage during the opening measures.
If the choir processes, the number of repeats is indeterminate.

Unless marked otherwise, all steps, claps and stomps should be the same dynamic as the music.

Tempos may be taken slightly faster or slower than marked, but rhythm should be precise.

12

S
rea - sons,

A
Rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons,

11/16

11/16

11/16

11/16

$\frac{3}{8} + \frac{5}{16}$

15

S
Rea - sons for the per - pe - tu - a - tion of sla - ve - ry,

A
Rea - sons for the per - pe - tu - a - tion of sla - ve - ry,

11/16

11/16

11/16

11/16

19

S
Rea - sons, rea - sons,

A
Rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea - sons, rea - sons,

3/4

3/4

3/4

3/4

31 **A**

S
A

The sheer pos - si - bi - li - ty in the first (st) place (ce)

33

S
A

Rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea - sons, rea - sons, un -
 Rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea - sons, rea - sons, un -
 Rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea - sons, rea - sons, un -
 Rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea - sons, rea - sons,

pp *mp*

37

$\frac{2}{8} + \frac{2}{8} + \frac{3}{8}$

S
A

stop - pa - ble want - ing and want - ing the un - stop - pa - ble,
 stop - pa - ble want - ing and want - ing the un - stop - pa - ble,
 Rea - sons, rea - sons,

41 $\frac{3}{8} + \frac{2}{8} + \frac{2}{8}$

S
 Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The
 Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The
 Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The
 Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The

A
 Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The
 Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The
 Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The

45 *mf*

S
 need for cul - ti - va - tion, the cul - ti - va - tion of need.
 need for cul - ti - va - tion, the cul - ti - va - tion of need.
 need for cul - ti - va - tion, the cul - ti - va - tion of need.
 need for cul - ti - va - tion, the cul - ti - va - tion of need.

A
 need for cul - ti - va - tion, the cul - ti - va - tion of need.
 need for cul - ti - va - tion, the cul - ti - va - tion of need.
 need for cul - ti - va - tion, the cul - ti - va - tion of need.
 need for cul - ti - va - tion, the cul - ti - va - tion of need.

61 $\frac{3}{8} + \frac{5}{16}$

S

(p) rea - sons, rea - sons, _____

(p) rea - sons, rea - sons, _____

A

Rea - sons for the per - pe - tu - a - tion of sla - ve - ry, _____ The al -

Rea - sons for the per - pe - tu - a - tion of sla - ve - ry, _____ The al -

mp

mp

B

65 $\frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8} + \frac{2}{8}$

S

mp the de - sire to ac - quire, *mf* the

mp the de - sire to ac - quire, *mf* the

A

lure of or - der, the de - sire to ac - quire, class - es of peo - ple and peo - ple of class,

lure of or - der, the de - sire to ac - quire, class - es of peo - ple and peo - ple of class,

69 *a little drunk on this...* *port.* *...and here's a toast!*

S gain of cap - i - tal, cap - i - tal gains,

A *mf* gain of cap - i - tal, cap - i - tal, cap - i - tal, cap - i - tal, cap - i - tal,
mf gain of cap - i - tal, cap - i - tal, cap - i - tal, cap - i - tal cap - i - tal,

72 $\frac{3}{8} + \frac{2}{8} + \frac{2}{8}$ *f*

S the per - sis - tant per - cep - tion of green - er grass.

A cap - i - tal gains, the per - sis - tant per - cep - tion of green - er grass.

10

75

mp *p*

S
 Rea - sons, _____ rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The

A
 Rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The

Rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The

Rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The

79

C

$\frac{2}{8} + \frac{2}{8} + \frac{3}{8}$

S
 jus - ti - fi - ca - tion of pride, The pride of own - er - ship, The own - er - ship of

A
 jus - ti - fi - ca - tion of pride, The pride of own - er - ship, The own - er - ship of

oh The own - er - ship of

oh The own - er - ship of

83

S

A

mp

mp

jus - tice. The ti - di - ness of ti - tles, the con - ven - ience of caste,

jus - tice. The ti - di - ness of ti - tles, the con - ven - ience of caste,

86

$\frac{2}{8} + \frac{2}{8} + \frac{3}{8}$

S

A

mp

mf

mp

mf

dis - tri - bu - tions of wealth, and a wealth of dis - tri - bu - tions, The

dis - tri - bu - tions of wealth, and a wealth of dis - tri - bu - tions, The

dis - tri - bu - tions of wealth, and a wealth of dis - tri - bu - tions, The

dis - tri - bu - tions of wealth, and a wealth of dis - tri - bu - tions,

12

89

S

A

price of cot - ton, the price of rice, the price of su - gar, the price of gold, *mf*

the

price of cot - ton, the price of rice, the price of su - gar, the price of gold, *mf*

the

93

S

A

price of o - rang - es, price of to - ma - toes, The

Price of keep - ing the pri - ces low, The

price of o - rang - es, price of to - ma - toes, price of keep - ing the pri - ces low, _____

95

S
A

price of beau - ty the price of toys, the price of plen - ty, the price of more,
price of beau - ty the price of toys, the price of plen - ty, the price of more, the
The price of more, the

7/16 6/16

99

S
A

patriotically (of course)
the price of a life, the price of li - ber - ty,
patriotically (of course)
the price of a life, the price of li - ber - ty,
patriotically (of course)
price of a hit, the price of a life, the price of li - ber - ty,
patriotically (of course)
price of a hit, the price of a life, the price of li - ber - ty,

6/16 2/8 4/4

108 *mf*

S
rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The de -

A
sla - ve - ry, Rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The de -

sla - ve - ry, Rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The de -

sla - ve - ry, Rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, The de -

D

$$\frac{3}{8} + \frac{2}{8} + \frac{2}{8}$$

112

S
sire for a fix, The fix - a - tion on race, the

A
sire for a fix, The fix - a - tion on race, the

sire for a fix, The fix - a - tion on race, the

sire for a fix, The fix - a - tion on race, the

$\frac{2}{8} + \frac{2}{8} + \frac{3}{8}$

114

S
race to ci - vi - li - za - tion, the ci - vi - li - za - tion of de - sire,

A
race to ci - vi - li - za - tion, the ci - vi - li - za - tion of de - sire,

race to ci - vi - li - za - tion, the ci - vi - li - za - tion of de - sire,

race to ci - vi - li - za - tion, the ci - vi - li - za - tion of de - sire,

$\frac{3}{8} + \frac{2}{8} + \frac{2}{8}$

$\frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8} + \frac{2}{8}$

117

S
mp
Chains of com - mand, the com - mands of cor - rup - tion, the cor -

A
mp
Chains of com - mand, the com - mands of cor - rup - tion, the cor -

mp
Chains of com - mand, the com - mands of cor - rup - tion, the cor -

mp
Chains of com - mand, the com - mands of cor - rup - tion, the cor -

119

S
rup - tion of lan - guage, rea - sons, rea - sons,

A
rup - tion of lan - guage, the lan - guage of chains...

rup - tion of lan - guage, the lan - guage of chains...

rup - tion of lan - guage, rea - sons,

Solos, to be divided between any number of individual singers:

123

mp
class - i - fi - ca - tion, mis - in - for - ma - tion,

S
rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons,

A
rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons,

rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons,

rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons,

Alternate Ending:

136alt

S

A

Rea- sons, rea- sons,

Rea- sons, rea- sons,

Rea- sons, rea- sons,

m

11/16

Alternate Ending:

140alt

$\frac{3}{8} + \frac{5}{16}$

S

A

Rea sons for the per-pe-tu - a - tion of sla - ve-ry,

Rea sons for the per-pe-tu - a - tion of sla - ve-ry,

Rea sons for the per-pe-tu - a - tion of sla - ve-ry,

Rea sons for the per-pe-tu - a - tion of sla - ve-ry,

mf

Fine

mf

Fine

mf

Fine

mf

Fine

Fine

Part II: The Existence of Endless Prepositional Possibilities

E

(♩=126) Tempo della pecore

141

mp

The ex - ist - ence of end - less pre - po - si - tion - al poss - i - bi - li - ties;

pp

bum bum bum bum bum bum bum bum

pp

bum bum bum bum bum bum bum bum

144

mp

As a short term so - lu - tion,

list - en as we list them, 1, 2, 3: in the

mp

bum bum bum bum bum As a short term so - lu - tion,

bum bum bum bum bum in the

151

S
com - pa - ny, de - spite a few mis - giv - ings at the pres - ent time.

A
com - pa - ny, for my fa - mi - ly,
com - pa - ny, for my fa - mi - ly,

154

S
p leggiero Be -
tra - la - la - la - la - la - la - la - la - la - la Be -

A
p leggiero *mp*
tra - la - la - la - la - la - la - la By hook or crook,
p leggiero *mp*
tra - la - la - la - la - la - la - la By hook or crook,

157 *poco rit.* ten. (♩. = 66)

S
hind closed doors, Be - yond our bor - ders as a ve - ry last re - sort, Be -
hind closed doors, Be - yond our bor - ders as a ve - ry last re - sort, Be -

A
Be - yond our bor - ders as a ve - ry last re - sort, Be -
Be - yond our bor - ders as a ve - ry last re - sort,

* Tempo primo may be felt, approximately, as (♩ = ♪.)

F
160

S
tween you and me, on the cheap, on the sly,
tween you and me, on the cheap, on the sly, with my

A
tween you and me, Be - yond my con - trol, with my
Be - yond my con - trol, on the cheap, on the sly, with my

170

mf

S
In for a pen - ny, in for a pound, in for a life - time, just this once,

mf

A
In for a pen - ny, in for a pound, in for a life - time, just this once,

mf

In for a pen - ny, in for a pound, in for a life - time, just this once,

mf

In for a pen - ny, in for a pound, in for a life - time, just this once,

Part III: An Unexamined Life

174

p subito

S
Rea- sons, rea- sons, — Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea- sons, rea- sons,

p subito

A
Rea- sons, rea- sons, — Rea- sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons,

p subito

m Rea - sons, m Rea - sons,

p subito

m Rea - sons, m Rea - sons,

178

f
R

S
Rea - - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons for the per - pe - tu -

f
R

rea - - - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons for the per - pe - tu -

f
R

A
m rea - sons, rea - sons for the per - pe - tu -

f
R

m rea - sons, rea - sons for the per - pe - tu -

181

S
a - tion of sla - ve - ry, rea - - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons,

a - tion of sla - ve - ry, rea - sons, rea - - sons, rea - sons, rea - sons,

A
a - tion of sla - ve - ry, rea - sons for sla - ve - ry, rea - - sons, rea - sons,

a - tion of sla - ve - ry, rea - sons for sla - ve - ry, rea - - sons, rea - sons,

190

S
 a car - pet, a kiss. an im - ma - cu - late
 a car - pet, a kiss. an im - ma - cu - late

A
 hand with the chil - dren, Rea - sons,
 hand with the chil - dren, Rea - sons,

p

193

S
 house, or an un - ex - a - mined life, The
 house, or an un - ex - a - mined life, The

A
 Rea - sons, or an un - ex - a - mined life, The
 Rea - sons, or an un - ex - a - mined life, The

mp

$\frac{2}{8} + \frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8}$

201

S
A

Chests of or-gans and pounds of flesh,
Looms of fin-gers and fields of hands,
Looms of fin-gers and fields of hands, Chests of or-gans and pounds of flesh,

205

S
A

mf

mf
riv-ers of blood, heav-ings of
plat-ters of thighs, le-gions of legs, riv-ers of blood,
plat-ters of thighs, le-gions of legs, riv-ers of blood,
le-gions of legs, riv-ers of blood,

32

209

f

S

hearts, hea-vings of hearts, Bat-ter-ies of arms and backs and shoul- ders,

mf *f*

Rea- sons, rea- sons, hea- vings of hearts, — Bat-ter-ies of arms and backs and shoul- ders,

mf *f*

Rea- sons, rea- sons, hea- vings of hearts, Bat-ter-ies of arms and backs and shoul- ders,

mf *f*

Rea- sons, rea- sons, hea- vings of hearts, — Bat-ter-ies of arms and backs and shoul- ders,

A

213

H

p subito

S

bus' - ness, plea- sure, la - bor, — lei - sure,

p subito

um, rea - sons, — rea - sons, — rea - sons, —

p subito

um, rea - sons, — rea - sons, — rea - sons, —

p subito

um, rea - sons, — rea - sons, — rea - sons, —

A

217

S
back-ers, buy-ers, bro-kers, li-ars, win-ners, los-ers, deal-ers, us-ers,
oh, win-ners, los-ers, deal-ers, us-ers,

A
oh, win-ners, los-ers, deal-ers, us-ers,
oh, win-ners, los-ers, deal-ers, us-ers,

221

S
pp oh, *p* pro-fits and loss-es., own-ers, bos-ses,
pp oh, *p* pro-fits and loss-es., own-ers, bos-ses,

A
pp oh, *p* oh,
p bor-row-ers, lend-ers, tra-ders, ven-ders, *pp* oh,

225

pp

S Oh, _____ peo-ple of means, _____ un - heed - ed

pp

Oh, _____ peo-ple of means, _____ un - heed - ed

p

A peo-ple of means, _____ the means to an end, _____ *p* un - heed - ed

Oh, _____ peo-ple of means, _____ un - heed - ed

230

S ru - mors, _____ (z) ea - ger con - su - mers, _____

ru - mors, _____ (z) ea - ger con - su - mers, _____

A ru - mors, _____ (z)

ru - mors, _____ (z) m, _____

