ELIZABETH ALEXANDER INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Elizabeth Alexander
Author and Friend
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Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 30 minutes and 43 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATT HENDERSON:

(Inaudible) take two, roll call take one, marker.

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

Elizabeth Alexander

Author and Friend

Meeting the Obamas

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Hyde Park, Chicago is a place where you find your people pretty quickly. And so, when I was there as an English professor, my first real job out of graduate school, I pretty soon afterwards heard that there were these wonderful people who I should meet in the neighborhood. Nobody—they were recently married, you know, nobody had kids. I heard about Barack Obama first and—because he was also teaching in the law school.

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Actually, first I met her at an event for some kind of good cause. Hyde Park is filled with events around good causes and you find the people who think that the things are good that you think are good, and I remember just feeling that I had met a true friend and then when I met him at a dinner party, we just looked at each other and smiled at each other and I said, "You look just like my brother." And he said, "You look a lot like my sister." And from that moment, it—it felt that this was a special family friendship.

Dinner with the Obamas

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

In those years, it was all about dinner and dinner at other people's houses and dinner with a lot of people around the table, and dinner where anybody is welcome, and dinner in a community where there were always lots of fascinating people passing through because it was a dynamic university community and a community also where there were all kinds of dynamic political things happening. So at those dinner tables, you talk about everything and I think that all of us were trying to figure out what we wanted to do with the opportunities that we had to be useful people. So then you know, again, this was before there were any children when we were just finding our way really in our work.

Obama's intelligence

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I honestly thought he was the smartest person I had ever met. To all of my other brilliant friends, I am sorry. But there was just—and all of my friends are brilliant, but there was just a way that his mind took things in, processed them, processed incredible amounts of information in a kaleidoscopic way, that his curiosity was probing and deep and relentless, so I knew that whatever he wanted to do, that he could do. I laugh now to think that there was a moment where I thought, oh maybe he'll run a foundation. It was the first I knew what a foundation was but I thought, well that's a big job, you know, you'll do that big job. The political stuff and certainly the presidential stuff never occurred to me. I just knew he was the smartest person I ever met.

The influence of the Civil Rights Movement

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I think we're actually kind of an interesting generation, because I think those heroes of the civil rights movement and those heroic acts of the civil rights movement, by which I mean not just the headlines of the civil rights movement. I mean the long civil rights movement, I mean the on the ground civil rights movement. I mean the civil rights movement as it manifested

itself in arts and culture. So I'm really talking very, very, very broadly. And the civil rights movement in the context of other kinds of social movements.

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I know that for myself, and I think this is something that we shared. We looked to those big brothers and sisters and aunties, you know, that generation and saw their courage and saw them acting on their courage. We've never talked about this but both of us in our college years were very, very engaged with anti-Apartheid work. And so I think that, you know, South Africa and the wrongs of Apartheid gave those of us with certain sensibilities a way to enact our politics, even though that wasn't something that was happening in the United States. So what did we then do when we had trained and—and found our way? That's what is—is—was the interesting question. With my own family and with my parents, yes, my parents you know, the iconic story was that they took me to the march on Washington when I was a baby in the carriage.

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And there was a way in which, you know, change—my father worked for President Johnson on the Voting Rights Act, on the Civil Rights Act. You know, was a liaison to the civil rights community with the White House, was first head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. He is a justice warrior who comes out of that movement in a way that people don't always see, so I always knew that but I still couldn't own it. I didn't do it. I had to figure out ok, well all of this road has been cleared for you so you better figure out something that moves it forward. And I think that that is kind of where generationally President Obama and I met.

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We are very deeply schooled in the philosophy of, you know, the I that doesn't exist without the we and that, you know, we weren't just invented with our talents out of nothing, and that you actually can't get anything done by yourself, even if you do have certain individual talents. I make poems, I write poems, I write books of poems. They're written by me. I, you know, sweat over them, I do them, no one else did them. But I exist in a much larger context of other writers who have cleared space and also other writers who are writing alongside me. It's actually not fun to be by yourself. It's not meaningful to be by yourself. This is not me, this is us. This is your victory, this is collective victory, and that many, many, many, many, many, many hands worked to make this happen.

"It can be done"

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

So, my brother, Mark Alexander, is an amazing systems thinker and a very—and a political junkie, and a very methodical, mathematical political thinker. He had worked on a lot of different political campaigns. He was the issues director for Bill Bradley's presidential campaign. He had worked for Senators Metzenbaum, Kennedy, law school professor. And very early on, and of course what we must remember is that a lot of people didn't—I mean, I didn't imagine that this was anything that was gonna happen. He started—he got a look on his face that I'd seen before. And he's like, "I'm looking at the

map, and thinking about the Electoral College and thinking about actually how it could be done, what the path to victory might be."

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And he wrote up a memo and he had met President Obama at that point you know, through—at my wedding, at family gatherings. And he said, "You know, I think you should send this to him because I really—I see it." And so that's how that happened. I couldn't answer the rest of what the whole process was from within the campaign but that's how it came about, from my brainiac brother having a notion.

Lessons from Obama's 2008 presidential campaign

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

The Obama presidential campaign and the senate campaign as well actually, but was a great time and object lesson moment for teaching African American studies. One of the courses that I always believed in teaching—I'm a literature scholar, but I've always liked teaching our intro to African American studies because I felt that one of the great aspects of this field of study is that you know, you can take history and political science and sociology and literature and you can look at all of these things at the same time to have a very, very rich and multi-dimensional understanding about a moment or a social movement or a person or, you know, a historical

happening. We had, playing out in real time, this object of study that we could talk about in the classroom.

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One of the ways we talked about it is I would regularly would teach his memoir, *Dreams From My Father*, because that, I think, is actually a great American memoir and I think that its complex understanding of what it is to become African American, and that even if we have brown skin and live in the United States, that still for all of us becoming African American is a very, very interesting process and he lays it quite bare. Even though his story is maybe not a story that you hear very often. Talking about that journey and that Blackness is not just one thing, that Blackness is not fixed, that aspects of identity are shaped and chosen, that affiliation and how your politics develop in relationship to who you think of as your people is very, very dynamic.

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So this was quite exciting to talk about with young people who were themselves, all of them, whatever their race, figuring out who they were. I think that what was also wonderful about talking very closely about the campaign, and I certainly remember election night on campus and the exaltation and exhilaration of all those young people, that they were all calcified into ideas of can and can't. They—their racial ideas were not calcified, so you know, here in this multigenerational way, you know, I'm thinking I never dreamed this. Certainly, the elders are thinking we didn't think we'd live to see the day. But the 18 year olds are saying, "Yeah," you know, "he's cool, look at that family," you know, "this makes sense, we like how he talks to us. We like being part of a we." There was something very

pure about teaching in that moment because their hope was unalloyed. It was gorgeous.

Dreams From My Father

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I was not surprised, but what struck me about the book that was so wonderful was, here was my friend who was a law professor. Here was my friend who was a state senator, here was my friend who was a legal theorist, here was my friend who was a civil rights attorney. Here was my friend who had been a community organizer. Here was my friend who was my friend. But here was my friend who was a writer and who cared—I knew him as someone who lived by the word, who was a voracious reader, who cared about literature tremendously. We see that to this day. He crafted a work of literature with that degree of care when he didn't have to because that is a book that could have gotten by with being the story of, you know, a supernova, even though he had not yet been elected president or senator actually. So that was what I learned, was how much he cared about being a serious writer.

Election night 2008

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Well, if you'll recall on election night 2008, it was suddenly called. The election was called. I—I don't know if it was—I think it was Virginia that came in for Obama, and we thought it would be a longer night and suddenly it was done. I was with my children who at the time were, you know, seven and eight or something, my late husband, with family friends and we all immediately got—and this was all Black people, and we all got on the phone and called our parents, and I remember just those of us whose parents were still living, and it was very quiet and almost eerie. It had happened.

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We didn't know what it would feel like but it happened and then when we talked to our parents, who were just shaking their heads. Didn't have language. It was not jubilance. It was—it was wonder. It-- it had to sink in. It was late enough for the kids, so the kids were bouncing and running and dancing and excited and-- and they knew it was a happy thing and I think we were quiet and stunned and emotional, but it was very important that it was multi-generational.

Being the Inaugural Poet

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

The hard thing was writing the poem, you know, trying to sort of, if you will, listen across the land. Well, how can you even do that? I thought a lot about Walt Whitman and that way in which Whitman with those long lines and the

sweeping encompassing spirit is saying like, America, here you are in all your everythingness. I'm gonna listen to you, I'm gonna pay attention to you, I'm gonna put you in this poem. So, I didn't write one of those long line poems, but I tried to work in that spirit because I felt that was actually my responsibility with the poem.

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That the poem had to try to listen in that kind of way. It was also an unusual kind of poem to write because I knew that most people would never read it and I write poems that people read. And I knew that most people would only hear it when it was spoken out on that particular day, and I knew that I wanted it to be not in a simple language, not that so much, but I wanted to use language that would be widely understandable, which to me just felt like the hardest thing in the world, you know, to find each clear word that would have utility and beauty and be clean and communicate in an instant sort of fashion. So the job of writing the poem was you know, just like harrowing and you know, stacks and stacks of--stacks and stacks of you know, copies of the poem, writing, rewriting, rewriting, doing it in a short period of time, stress, stress, stress.

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But once it was done, then the job—and it was my late grandmother who said, "You better be ready now. You're ready. We made you ready so just get up and do your job. Just do your job." And then when I got up to read the poem feeling that I was just doing it on behalf of American poetry and American poets living and dead. So honestly, my experience of reciting that

poem was that I was on a very crowded stage, crowded with American poets. And you know, I remember when—when the Senator read my name, she said, "Elizabeth Alexander, an American poet." And I thought, that's what I'm doing up here. I am an American poet for this moment, which is not even just about this extraordinary man but is about this moment he's brought us to.

Elders witnessing the inauguration

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Um, you could, um, have one person on stage with you. And my beautiful late husband, who's from Eritrea in East Africa, he-- who had a great understanding of the power and importance of elders. He said, "Baba," which is what he called my father. He said, "Baba needs to be up on that stage with you because the world needs to see his white hair." By which he meant, the tableau needs to be that elders moved us to this moment. Which, you know, in a way also President Obama, by having, you know, the John Lewises, and the, you know, Muhammad Alis, and the, you know, all of those elders on that stage was saying the same thing. So, my father–– I-- I said to him, "Don't look at me and don't make me cry." Um, but he held my hand very tightly, and he had his original March on Washington button, and he was my ballast and my anchor. Um, as I just got ready to… do what I was supposed to do.

The next generation

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I don't know why anyone's not interested in the next generation. Honestly, I mean I think that one of the things I always tell young people when they go to college is, make sure you have friends who are older than you and who are younger than you. You know, that it's just important to always live in a sense of generational spread, and so to that end we've gotta not only invest in young people but I mean, we live with them. It's normal. I don't know what the Obama's would say, but I think that we experience young people as a normal and dynamic part of life, not to be venerated any more than or less than you venerate anybody else. But it's dynamic, you know. And also certainly just practically speaking, you have to invest in them. You have to teach them well because we need them to do an awful lot for us.

Violence against Black youth

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

At that point, I was the sole protector—I mean, not really sole but of two young Black men, you know, coming—I mean they were really boys at the time but you know, growing, coming of age. I think about the Trayvon generation and all of these young people who have grown up watching the violation of young Black men on their phones, and being inundated with their

vulnerability and with people who treat them worse than animals, that danger.

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So, you know, thinking about teaching and protecting and keeping safe and teaching them how to keep themselves safe my own young men, there was a convergence with what's happening in our streets and with their vulnerability of having lost their father. I think that so many of the young people of this country actually are in a post-traumatic depression. I think that we actually see it in a lot of the Black popular culture of our day. If you think about the depressive side of genius Kendrick Lamar's work, if you think about television shows like Atlanta, like Insecure, I think that depression, it's not always called depression, but I think it is not only post-traumatic but trauma related is something that we are dealing with, with these young people. What does it mean to fear random violence in a very material way? You know, what does it mean—one of my sons is almost six foot five and in the elevator he said once in our building, which is not a lot of Black families in the building, he said, "You know, mama, sometimes I—I just rattle my keys so people know I live here." Because he sees how people look at him. I think that just this sense of the quickness, you know, Tamir Rice, not even a moment to evaluate the situation, things that just change on a dime. I think it's a generation and I think we have to really, really understand and listen to what those young people are dealing with because we don't yet have answers for how to keep them safe. And how to have their humanity recognized in their brown, male bodies.

“A More Perfect Union”

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I think what was extraordinary about then candidate Obama’s so-called race speech is the fact that it happened at all. You know, race was this third rail. There was no precedent. I mean, yes Black people had run for president before so you know, we’ll remember Shirley Chisholm, we’ll remember Jesse Jackson, but at this stage in the game, there wasn’t a clearly marked road that said, you know, this is how this kind of Black person deals with people trying to disparage him and take him down in the name of race and by twisting and distorting certain ideas of race and trying to stick them onto him to make him a dangerous person.

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So it was really, really, really a high wire act. And I think that this gets back to the book and, you know, the writer's care and the precision of his language and, you know, all of the structures of rhetoric and echoes of great American works past and great American rhetorical styles. It was just a very carefully made thing that I think came out of all the different rhetorical styles that he had—you know, a vast range, I’ve only named a few of American modes that let him write a very American speech to deal in an unprecedented way with this subject, which after all is at the center of what this country is all about.

How the Obamas dealt with criticism

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

You know, the Obamas are remarkably… You know, I'm thinking of words that are not the right word. You know, calm. That's not quite the word I mean. Equilibrium, they certainly have a lot of equilibrium. Compartmentalized, that's a little colder than what I mean, exactly. Eyes on the prize. Focused. The prize, by the way, is not the presidency, the prize is the work, right? Um, so I think that some part of them understood that they could not let all of this rhetoric take them down, because it would be a spiral staircase. I think, you know, it's not that it does not hurt to be defamed and misnamed. Um, but I think that probably what served both of them well was understanding that they were in service to more people and to a larger ideal. And that what leadership meant in that moment was to just keep on the path. Keep on the path. Because you could-- you could really be-- be derailed. Looking back from now, I think what it's really important to remember was again, he charted his own course. There was no one to tell him how to do it and a lot of people telling him how to do it. A lot of people telling him how to do it. Ultimately, to do it, what made sense out of his own experience, out of his own, I think, very interesting Americanness which looks in from the outside at the same time as it stands in the middle.

Michelle Obama and their daughters

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

The idea of the Black woman in the public imagination and all of the stereotypes, and all of the violent stereotypes, and the hateful stereotypes, and all of the negativity that was put onto her and what it meant over the course of their many years in the spotlight for Michelle Obama and their daughters to come to occupy a place of being admired, of being beautiful, of being wise, of being brilliant. All of these adjectives that are not normally—of being authoritative accorded to Black women. I think that she created a tremendous amount of space for other Black women in her wake.

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Part of them understood that they could not let all of this rhetoric take them down because it would be a spiral staircase. I think, you know, it's not that it does not hurt to be defamed and misnamed, but I think that probably what served both of them well was understanding that they were in service to more people and to a larger ideal and that what leadership meant in that moment was to just keep on the path, keep on the path, because you could—you could really be derailed. And I don't even think we can begin to measure what—what that has meant.

Charleston church shooting

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

The national grief over the Charleston shooting, the national grief that was compounded by the fact that those people let a stranger in, let a stranger into sacred space and were murdered and violated in that space. You know, all mass shootings are horrifying, but that gave a particular cast to this horror. And so how could the president take the nation through that grief and give us something in that mourning? In that church, in that Black church, which is not the community he grew up in, Blackness is a fact but Blackness is a text. Blackness is a series of texts.

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Blackness is something that we learn. Blackness is something that we adapt, that we embrace, that we affiliate with, that we say, "These are my people." There in that church, not the church he grew up in, not the community he grew up in, he went to the words of the spiritual. He went to *Amazing Grace*. He broke into song because words couldn't do what needed to be done in that space. He understood the power of Black art that has done what it's done across time to take Black people through unimaginable things, but those sorrow songs are what we have turned to when we can't offer an explanation. There's no explanation, there's no real balm, there's no answer. But there is that collective moment of song.

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And I could watch that videotape over and over again of when he goes into those first beautiful notes of *Amazing Grace* and at first there's a smile and a laugh of recognition with the people and they say ok, he's taking us there. He knows where we need to go. He's a Black man who's taking us to that Black

place that will make America a better place. He knew that and that's what he did, and it was beautiful.

Obama's legacy

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

There were many, many, many, many policy things that you could say about the Obama presidency and that is more time than we have. I like to think about the Obama presidency for its what I would call real symbolic power. That the ways that not only that man but that family stood on the world stage, the way that his living in family, inseparable from family showed us a different way of being a male leader, showed us that being a whole person means loving people and belonging to people and being responsible to people. You could move through your days with courtesy and grace and ethics. That being smart mattered, that reading mattered, that knowing the world mattered, that coming to people in their own languages mattered.

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That seeing the world as a connected place and not that the United States is unto itself, that having that kind of worldview mattered. That understanding that there's a lot to learn from history, that it mattered, it enables you to be able to make wise decisions in the moment. That letting women—you know, there's that famous picture of President Obama with Susan Rice and Samantha Power and there's the third woman who's part of his all female

national security team, just that to show—oh Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State, just to show that women could make those kinds of decisions and that a man could entrust women with those kinds of decisions, that is just a fraction of what I think this presidency stood for and why it mattered and how it let us think that we could do better and be better and be collective and communal.

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Just showing us in his persona the joy of living, the love of music, the love of children, the love of connecting with other human beings. I think of all those great Pete Souza photographs and the photograph of the Black boy touching his hair. All of the ways in which he comes close to people and that, you know, shines—you know, the smile that was—the smile that I saw the first time I saw him, of a human being filled with light, who believed in other human beings and wanted to connect with other human beings and bring us closer to each other. I think all of that stood for something and stands for something and encourages other people to be better. One person can't do everything, but one person can stand for something that others can take on and bring out in themselves and that's just to begin.

Donald Trump

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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I think what we can deduce from the Trump presidency following the Obama presidency, is that everything is true at the same time, which is to say, the people who ascribe to the violent and hate filled rhetoric of Donald Trump were around when Obama was president. Just as right now in a moment when we are being led with hateful rhetoric, the people who believe in something better are still here doing their work, doing our work, you know, trying to make our way. So that's one thing that I would say, is that it's not like there was, you know, like a beautiful thing and then there was a horrible thing, and you know, no, everything was true at the same time.

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I do think that the determination with which so much that Obama did that they're trying to undo it, is about undoing the legacy of a brilliant Black man leading this country. The overt racism and the resurgence of it that we're seeing right now--I don't know what to make of it. I don't know what to make of it. I wish I had a better answer. Do I think it is a rebuke? Yes, but I guess that really the way I want to answer the question is, I just try to keep remembering that we haven't yet seen the young people, you know, my children's age, who came of age seeing that this was normal. They want something different and so they'll make something different. I really—I really do—I really do believe that.

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