BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT

THE TRAYVON GENERATION

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

The

THE TRAYVON GENERATION

Elizabeth Alexander

Author of

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

2022 BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY BOOK PRIZE FINALIST
In the midst of civil unrest in the summer of 2020, following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery (among numerous others), Elizabeth Alexander turned a mother's eye to her sons' and students' generation and wrote a celebrated and moving reflection on the challenges facing young Black Americans. Originally published in *The New Yorker*, the essay incisively observed the experiences, attitudes and cultural expressions of what she calls the Trayvon Generation, who even as children could not be shielded from the brutality that has affected the lives of so many Black people.

*The Trayvon Generation* expands the viral essay that addressed the persistence of race as an ongoing issue at the center of the American experience. Alexander looks both to our past and our future with profound insight, brilliant analysis and mighty heart, interweaving her voice with groundbreaking artworks by Black artists. At this crucial time in American history when we reckon with who we are as a nation and how we move forward, Alexander's lyrical prose gives us perspective informed by historical understanding, her lifelong devotion to education, and an intimate grasp of the power of art.

This book is sure to be embraced by those who are leading actions for change—and anyone rising to meet the moment.
Elizabeth Alexander is a prize-winning, *New York Times* bestselling author, renowned poet, educator, scholar and cultural advocate. Her most recent book, *The Trayvon Generation* (2022), is a galvanizing meditation on the power of art and culture to illuminate the challenges facing young Black America. Among the fifteen books she has authored or co-authored, her memoir, *The Light of the World*, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Biography and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2015. Her poetry collection *American Sublime* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 2006. Notably, Dr. Alexander composed and recited “Praise Song for the Day” for President Barack Obama’s 2009 inauguration. Over the course of an esteemed career in education, she has held distinguished professorships at Smith College, Columbia University and Yale University, where she taught for 15 years and chaired the African American Studies Department. Dr. Alexander is currently president of The Mellon Foundation, the nation’s largest funder in the arts, culture and humanities.

LEARN MORE ABOUT ELIZABETH AT ELIZABETHALEXANDER.NET.
BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WARNING: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDE SPOILERS!

1. This is a nonfiction book that asks you to read in different ways: there are poems, visual art and more woven throughout. Which of the visual artworks did you find most compelling and why? How did they affect your reading experience?

2. Dr. Alexander analyzes a number of monuments and memorials—many that honor white supremacists, including Stone Mountain and numerous Confederate monuments. Think about what statues, monuments or memorials exist in your area. Or think about the names of streets, schools or cities in your area. Who is honored? Who isn't honored? What kinds of lessons are these public symbols teaching you? Whose memories are you asked to remember?

THESE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS WERE CREATED BY THE PUBLISHER GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING AND ARE NOT AFFILIATED WITH BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY.
The chapter “a tale of two textbooks” delves into how American history is taught, including the intense efforts to suppress Black history in textbooks and classroom lessons and the value of Black studies and discipline. Think back to how you were taught American history—how were colonialism, slavery, and the Civil Rights Movement covered? What wasn’t covered? Were there times you were uncomfortable with what was being taught? Were there moments of “delayed comprehension” as Adrienne Su put it, where you later realized what you had been taught was false or not the whole story? What do you keep with you from that education? What have you unlearned in the years since?

What we remember—and are taught about—the past and history is a key focus of the book. What are the different forms of remembering the book discusses? Consider more everyday forms, such as songs and rituals, as well. How do these various forms affect your experience of learning and memory?
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5. How has the digital age (the advent of social media, smart phones, etc.) impacted how we—especially those who have grown up in the digital age—witness and comprehend race-based violence?

6. Dr. Alexander describes the pride and fear that are integral to her life as a mother. Find some examples in the text that show what motherhood means to Dr. Alexander. What elements of Black motherhood are specific to the Black experience? Which elements feel intrinsic and universal to motherhood itself?

7. In the chapter “we dress our ideas in clothes to make the abstract visible,” Dr. Alexander writes about a visit to the Louisiana State Penitentiary (also known as Angola) and the crisis of mass incarceration in the United States. She writes, “If we forget them, we will not understand who, in total, we are.” How do you understand “who we are” in this context? How do the artists and artwork discussed in this chapter also influence your understanding of “who we are”?

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8. What is a “free Black man” in Dr. Alexander’s use of the term? What does it mean to you, and are there any men who come to mind when you hear that phrase?

9. Dr. Alexander focuses on several poems throughout the book. Choose one and read it out loud. Are there a few lines or images that strike you? What about the poem resonates with the book?

10. Dr. Alexander poses the question, “Do I really believe that cultural expression can somehow shape a world where our children are safer?” (P. 64) at the end of the first section. How do the next two parts of the book answer the question? Did your answer to this question shift at all as you read?
In the last chapter, Dr. Alexander declares a few wishes for today’s young people: “I wish for these young people freedom of movement, of thought, of imagination...I wish also for our young people rest from the unending labor that is race work, and from spectral anxiety that is part of what it is to be Black.” What do you wish for this generation, or yourself and your peers if you are part of this generation? What about for the generation to follow? And what about for our elders?
INTERVIEWS WITH ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

Read and listen to Elizabeth Alexander speak about her work in these insightful media interviews:

- **Literary Hub / “Just the Right Book”** - "Elizabeth Alexander: How Do You Keep Yourself Safe but Not Live in Fear?"
- **Oprah Daily** - "Elizabeth Alexander on the Tragedy That Changed a Generation"
- **KQED / “Forum”** - "Elizabeth Alexander on The Trayvon Generation"

Photo: © Djeneba Aduayom
PLAYLIST: SOCIAL JUSTICE PROTEST SONGS

- “A Change Is Gonna Come” / Sam Cooke
- “Revolution” / Arrested Development
- “Don’t Shoot” / The Game
- “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)” / Marvin Gaye
- “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” / Nina Simone
- “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round” / The Roots
- “Alright” / Kendrick Lamar
- “Black Rage” / Lauryn Hill
- “The Bigger Picture” / Lil Baby
- “Hooded procession (read the names out loud)” / Ambrose Akinmusire
- “American Silence” / Chris Pierce
- “We Shall Not Be Moved” / Mavis Staples
- “Say It Loud - I’m Black and I’m Proud” / James Brown
- “Strange Fruit” / Billie Holiday
- “This Is America” / Childish Gambino
- “People Get Ready” / The Impressions
- “Ferguson - An American Tradition” / Immanuel Wilkins
- “Paternity Leave (Intro)” / Starlito
- “South Gotta Change” / Adia Victoria
- “Long Violent History” / Tyler Childers

YOU CAN LISTEN TO THIS PLAYLIST ON SPOTIFY HERE.

BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT: THE TRAYVON GENERATION
BKLYN BOOKMATCH READALIKES

Did you enjoy *The Trayvon Generation*? Want to read something similar? Check out these readalike titles below.

- *The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation* by Anna Malaika Tubbs
- *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely
- *Of Blood and Sweat: Black Lives and the Making of White Power and Wealth* by Clyde W. Ford
- *God Is a Black Woman* by Christena Cleveland, PhD
- *Letters to My White Male Friends* by Dax-Devlon Ross

YOU CAN ACCESS THE LIST AND PLACE HOLDS ON THESE TITLES IN MULTIPLE FORMATS THROUGH THE BPL CATALOG: BORROW.BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG

IN THE MOOD FOR SOMETHING ELSE? GET CUSTOMIZED READING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY'S FREE BKLYN BOOKMATCH SERVICE: BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/BOOKMATCH

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