

A review of *The Performative Sustainability of Race* by Bryant Keith Alexander (Peter Lang: New York, 2012., ISBN 987978-1-4331-1284-3) by Meredith C. Shockley-Smith (smithm26@nku.edu), Co-Director of Women's and Gender Studies Program; Instructor-Black Studies Program, Department of History and Geography; Northern Kentucky University.

Author Bryant Keith Alexander uses auto-ethnography in his book *The Performative Sustainability of Race* to examine the performance of acting White as a Black, gay professor. In the introductory section of the volume Alexander urges the reader to learn more of his story and piques interest about the notion of performing in the concept of “whiteness” in both his personal space and in academia.

In general, Alexander seeks to aid the reader in “understanding the location of identity in the construct of race—and the cultural investment in racial narratives belonging and sustaining memberships through performance” (p. 44). Thus he argues for the need to understand the various techniques of implementing “new ways of feeling southern that more fully come to terms with the history of racial oppression in the south” (p. 54). Furthermore, Alexander contends that the “the political stakes that anchor cultural practices around cultural performance at the university at large and in the classroom space” (p.87) are vital to comprehend in today's society. Finally, the author examines the link between understanding race and the social orientation of performing race.

In *The Performative Sustainability of Race*, the author divides his book into six powerful, well-written chapters. So in chapter 1 Alexander “explores the notion of acting White . . . as a critical examination of such a performative accomplishment” through an autoethnography (p. 21). He further identifies and emphasizes the distinction of performing race (e.g. walk, talk, dress and level of education) and the challenge of holding in tension one's own Blackness as expected by the Black and White community. Alexander finally notes the obvious association of White privilege and explores the demonization of the behavior performed by Blacks as perhaps a protection of White's positionality, privilege, power, and propriety and discusses it's the effects on the perpetuation of racism.

Next, in chapter 2, Alexander travels through his upbringing in the south and critiques the “romanticized images that promote notion of the South at the expense of other southern experiences invoking a hierarchy of experience that silence histories of difference.” (p. 54) He advocates for the south to come to terms with a more accurate and fully realized reality of its oppressive past, and add it to, rather than replace the current depiction.

In chapter 3 the author goes on to navigate “the intersections, overlaps, and confrontations of cultural performances dictated by place and space” (e.g. the encounters of race, gender, and culture in the university and more specifically the classroom) (p. 87). He tells of the expectation of performance as a Black, gay professor and shares illuminating stories that shed light on his lived experience navigating higher education.

The author uses Tyler Perry’s *Madea’s Family Reunion* in Chapter 4 as a case study to provide an expressed Black experience. Perry’s success has been attributed to his ability to show a concretized Black experience. Alexander utilizes Perry’s work as a common understanding and then attempts to expand the reader’s understanding of that experience as a means to examine the representation of Blackness.

Chapter 5 Alexander addresses racialization as a process of “coming to know oneself and the possibility of consciousness-raising” (p.140). To do so, he explores the specificity of experience within cultural/racial contexts as a point of reference or even as a point of entry for those on both the inside and outside of those cultural or raced experiences (p.152).

In Chapter 6, Alexander concludes with a previously published reflection of the materiality of bodies. This chapter uses “autopoetic narratives to speak to the politics of race through the constructions of performativity” (p. 169). This chapter is centered around education and the democratization in schooling “and the ways in which democracy is a performance of inclusion against racial and ethnic bias” (p. 169). Alexander includes this essay in this text as means to ground the text in a larger political conversation. This allows him to then social knowing as a means for social change on structural level.

As an instructor in a Black studies Program as well as the Co-Director of a Women and Gender Studies program, I appreciated the conversation regarding the performance of Blackness. I found Alexander’s critique through the lens of Whiteness studies to be unique. The autoethnography allowed for personal reflection that I found helpful in understanding his performance of Whiteness in a black-skinned, male, gay body. Given that, this text was also able to open a discussion on how education level, sexual orientation, and class participate in the performance Whiteness.

I appreciated Alexander’s proclamation on the final page of this text: “We all must continue to explore the materiality of bodies individually and collectively” (p. 188). However, despite the strengths, I found this book to be quite dense, and therefore not the best option as a text in one of my undergraduate courses.

Specifically, the language used in the volume was convoluted and excessive. Furthermore, although many of the topics that appeared in this book were very much aligned with my own lived experience, the dense nature of this writing was disappointing. This type of jargon impedes potential conversation with non-academics or budding-academics, in that they spend more time trying to digest unnecessarily complex passages than truly engaging with the relevant content. Perhaps the complex language was a nod to the performance of highly educated Whiteness. Nonetheless, I found it to be distracting. Overall, the text was an interesting read, and I appreciate Alexander's push for more conversation and analysis in this arena.