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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER SELECTED AS INAUGURAL POET**

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*Cave Canem Lauds Founding Faculty Member on Historic Achievement*

NEW YORK, NY (January 2, 2009)—**Cave Canem Foundation**, North America's premier home for black poetry, congratulates founding faculty member **Elizabeth Alexander** on her recent selection as Inaugural Poet. Chosen by President-elect Barack Obama to compose and read a poem for his inauguration on January 20, 2009, Dr. Alexander is the fourth poet in United States history to read at a swearing-in. When interviewed by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Cave Canem co-founder Toi Derricotte observed that Ms. Alexander "is the right kind of poet for Barack Obama. She's very clear and intellectual in her poems, not abstract, but she makes you think about complex subjects... Her poems take their subjects from history, from her personal life and from current events, too. Reading one of her poems is a lot like reading the newspaper. They have that sense of immediacy about them."

Dr. Alexander follows in the tradition of poets Robert Frost, who read at John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961; Maya Angelou, who read at William Jefferson Clinton's in 1993; and Miller Williams, who read at Clinton's second inauguration in 1997. On January 20, she will join soul singer Aretha Franklin, civil rights figure Joseph E. Lowery and classical musicians Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, Gabriela Montero and Anthony McGill on the program.

"My joy at being selected to compose and deliver a poem on the occasion of Obama's Presidential inaugural emanates from my deep respect for him as a person of meaningful, powerful words that move us forward," says Dr. Alexander, reflecting on her selection. "The distillation of language in poetry, its precision, can help us see sharply in the midst of many conundrums."

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In 1996, along with Afaa Michael Weaver and co-founders Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady, Dr. Alexander taught at Cave Canem's first week-long writing retreat for African American poets—the first of its kind in the country. Since then, she has remained active in the organization, serving on Cave Canem's board of directors, 1997-2002; teaching at subsequent retreats; conducting Legacy Conversations with poets Rita Dove, Derek Walcott, Haki Madhubuti and E. Ethelbert Miller; leading regional writing workshops for emerging African American poets; and curating readings showcasing Cave Canem fellows and colleagues.

The recipient of many grants and honors, in 2007 Dr. Alexander was awarded the first annual **Jackson Poetry Prize**, a recognition honoring an American poet of exceptional talent who has published at least one book of recognized literary merit. In 2005, she received the **Alphonse Fletcher, Sr. Fellowship** for work that contributes to improving race relations in American society and furthers the broad social goals of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954. She is the author of five books of poems, including *American Sublime*, a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize, two collections of essays, *Power and Possibility* and *The Black Interior*, and a young adult collection (co-authored with Marilyn Nelson), *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color*, winner of the 2008 Connecticut Book Award. She is a professor of African American Studies at Yale University.

Founded in 1996 by poets Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady to remedy the under-representation of African American poets in MFA programs and writing workshops, **Cave Canem** is a home for the many voices of African American poetry and is committed to cultivating the artistic and professional growth of African American poets. The organization has grown from an initial gathering of 27 poets to become an influential movement with a renowned faculty and a high-achieving fellowship of 272 poets residing in 34 states. Its programs include a week-long summer retreat, first and second book prizes, a Legacy Conversation series, writing workshops, publications and national readings. Such renowned poets as Lucille Clifton, Yusef Komunyakaa, Carl Phillips and Sonia Sanchez number among the organization's faculty and judges. Cave Canem fellows have over 150 books in print across several genres and have received many prestigious awards—Guggenheim and Lannan Literary Fellowships and the Whiting Writers' Award, among others. To date, the organization has published *Gathering Ground: A Reader Celebrating Cave Canem's First Decade* (University of Michigan Press, 2006) and *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South* (The University of Georgia Press, 2007). For more information, go to [www.cavecanempoets.org](http://www.cavecanempoets.org).

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