

*This interview was conducted in December 2009, as Natasha Trethewey completed the James Weldon Johnson Fellowship in African American Studies at the Yale University Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library. The interview came on the tails of a conversation between Elizabeth Alexander and Natasha Tretheway, sponsored by Endeavors: Perspectives on Black Life and Culture - a year-long graduate colloquium organized by the graduate students in African American Studies, in which both poets discussed family, place and poetry contemporary era. Natasha Tretheway is author of three major works of poetry: Domestic Work (Graywolf, 2000), Bellocq's Ophelia (Graywolf, 2002) and Native Guard (Houghton Mifflin, 2006). She is the recipient of numerous major awards including the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Native Guard, and the 2008 Mississippi Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts for Poetry. In 2008 she was named Georgia Woman of the Year. Currently Natasha Trethewey is a Professor of English and the Phillis Wheatley Distinguished Chair in Poetry at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.*

**Ana:** It's been so great to have you here at Yale. We're going to miss you. How was your time here?

**Natasha:** It's been lovely. I completed a ton of work, met a lot of people, and had great conversations. When I came here I knew that I was interested in Mexican casta paintings because of their representations of mixed blood people and the taxonomies that were assigned to these mixed blood people. Being a mixed blood person myself, I'm really drawn to the iconography and how this identity is presented across time and space. I had written a sequence of poems about a set of those paintings and so I came here knowing that those images were driving me toward whatever investigation I was going to end up doing.

What I figured out during my time here is that what I'm working on is also about something very personal and something about family as well. In each of those paintings there are representations of families: father, mother and child. In Mexican casta paintings they always begin with the white father, quite literally. I have a white father and a black mother; I'm a mixed race child.

One of the things that I discovered is my relationship to the language of my father's poems. My father is also a poet and there's a lovely poem of his called, "Her Swing". My father wrote this poem in the 1970s. I've been hearing this poem for as long as I can remember and it is very sweet. It's a reflection on his daughter (me) but there was always something that bothered me about it. I just figured out what it was, and why it is now connected to those Mexican casta paintings and those taxonomies. There's a line in "Her Swing" that reads, "I study my cross-breed child". I figured out why it bothers me: "cross-breed" is the language of zoology, not the terms I think we use for human beings, particularly not ones who are our own. It really sounded scientific, or even pseudo-scientific, of course, because I'm not a cross-breed. Cross breed suggests a different species. That's what a mule is. A human being who has a black parent and a white parent is not a cross breed. He wrote that 35 years ago, and maybe there wasn't access to other language, but I don't believe that. And even if that were true he's had a lot of time to revise. That's what you can do with a poem; you can revise the words you chose until you find the best ones.

**A:** What I love about reading *Domestic Work*, *Bellocq's Ophelia*, and *Native Guard* side by side is not just reading them in relationship to each other, but also considering the narratives of your life. What is so amazing about all of these works together is how you reconstitute bodies as integral beings, how you reconstitute black female bodies in the landscape as integral to that landscape, to making that landscape possible. How do your own landscapes impact the creation of your poetry, impact the language that you use, and the frameworks that you use?

*Domestic Work* had a lot to do with the idea of the natural landscape versus the man-made landscape. Even as I say this I realize that this tension is also there in *Native Guard* and it's the thing that keeps coming into all the work: the intersections and the contentions between the natural and the man-made. The Mississippi Gulf Coast, where I'm from, has the longest man-made beach in the world. When they tried to make it into a resort area – like Florida – they did away with the natural coastline of mangrove

swamps and all the natural flora and dumped white sand on top of all of what was there, for 26 miles. It's a layering of the natural with the man-made.

My grandmother's house sits right beside Highway 49, which is a legendary highway of blues music. When they sang about Highway 49 in the blues, they were singing about the old one which is on the other side of her house. It was a small road that went through this area called Four Corners, but when they decided to expand it and connect I-10 to I-90, it cut right through the middle of the neighborhood, North Gulfport, one of the oldest African-American communities on the Coast since after the Civil War. It divided my grandmother's house from where my great-uncle and my great uncle's son lived. What had been a pasture in my mother's childhood became a big highway. My grandmother agreed to allow Marine Life (it's like Sea World) to put a billboard half in her yard, because her house sits right next to the highway. Big 18-wheelers are passing by all the time, and all through the night. And there's this huge giant Marine Life sign shading my grandmother's house. My father once said to me, "Why don't you write a poem about nature."

My father comes from rural Canada and his relationship to nature and the rural landscape is very different from mine and all I could think about was that for me, if nature was my grandmother's yard - where I used to track crawfish in the ditch and pick the fruit from the fig trees - nature always had a highway cutting through the middle of it, or a big billboard overshadowing it. That juxtaposition is central to my understanding of nature. So for me, in terms of landscape, there's always a duality and a contentiousness between what is there and what has been erected there. What story is being told by what's there, what's not being told by what's there.

A: Which is an apt metaphor for the mixed race body, too. Can you speak to the physical connections you make between the personal and the public, the historical and the atemporal as we can see in poems like "History Lesson"? As you are going through memories, whether or not they're your own or fabricated, or informed by history, continuities and discontinuities, do you ever have that experience of discontinuities or atemporalities? When you are writing in the here and now, but writing about memories you may or may not have witnessed, how do you experience that in your process?

N: You know the BBC production of Sherlock Holmes where they start off with a photograph from the 1800s and sometimes there are people in them? All of a sudden the scene that has been frozen in its historical moment comes to life, the people start moving and that's how the movie transports us to that place. I sometimes feel like I'm in one of those photographs or one of those scenes. For me it's necessary to try to go to that place to create something that seems of that moment.

A: What are you looking for when you go there?

N: I'm trying to figure out something about what it was like to be in a different time and place. For example, I was in New Orleans not too long ago and decided to walk the length of Dumaine Street in the French Quarter starting closer to the river and moving away from it. That was a street my grandmother had lived on when she lived in New Orleans, and it was the street where my mother was born. It looks very much like it must have looked in 1944 because the same architecture, the same little houses that were along that street are still there. Sure they've been fixed up or more run down or whatever, but I just walked along there trying to imagine what my grandmother saw or heard or felt walking through that place.

A: That makes me think about memories and how our bodies carry memories.

N: Well I knew that I had to create Ophelia as if I was remembering. As much as I used photographs in that project to bring what I was seeing to life, I spent a lot of time in New Orleans. I had spent a lot of

time there growing up, so it felt like a landscape that was part of my development. But I went back to be in it in a different way, to take notice of things that I might not have taken note of with as much intent and it was only that way that I could begin to imagine a persona: Ophelia. When I was working on Ophelia, I really began to think of her as existing at that moment, as co-existing. It wasn't simply that she had existed and I was writing about her; it was as if she's existing right now. This must be what fiction writers feel when they're working on their characters. I was thinking about what she was doing or what she was going to be doing, not always what she had done.

A: Does the fact of her (Ophelia) or of the *Domestic Workers* you speak of, does the fact of them change you and the way you move through the world?

N: I think that what they give to me is knowledge of the lives of other people. Even though Ophelia was invented, I fully believe that she existed as a possible human being, that there was someone who thought and felt and experienced the world as she did. I think that I write for that reason, in order to know something about the lives of other human beings across time and space. And that's why I think of poetry as a social practice, not just an aesthetic one.

A: I'm curious about labor. In *Domestic Work* you write about black women as laborers – as domestic workers, as sex workers, as mothers, grandmothers and aunts, as the cultural memory keepers. How do you see poetry, if you do, in that schema of labor?

N: I think that the work that I'm interested in taking on as a poet is the work of cultural memory, the preservation of a cultural memory of a people, of a time and place.

A: Would you say it's kind of like the creation of ruins?

N: Ruins is a perfect word to describe so much about me. I used, in this prose piece that I just finished, "Beyond Katrina", I used the Hegel quote: "When we turn to look at the past the first thing we see is nothing but ruins." When I used that quote I was literally looking at ruins and yet, even in something that isn't literally destroyed, as Gulfport was when I was looking at it, there are always ruins.

A: In what sense?

N: Another one of the writers whose quote I used in this book is Flannery O'Connor's. She says: "Where you came from is gone, where you're going to never was there and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it."

I'm certainly a nostalgic person and yet I also know that the very definition of nostalgia is this sort of longing for something that probably never really existed in the first place, at least not as you would have it. That's a ruin to me: something that was never, really. That place I came from has been gone the moment after the moment I inhabited it was gone. I try to get at that in the poem, "Theories of Time and Space", the first poem in *Native Guard*. I'm speaking literally because there's always a foothold in the literal from which I'm trying to extrapolate. But, literally you go on this boat to Ship Autumn, and there's a photographer there who takes your picture and hours later when you come back, he's hung them all up. All the pictures are there waiting for you in hopes that you will then pay five dollars and buy this picture they took of you before you went out on the boat. It was in that moment that I realized what I came back to was a ruin because that picture of me and my husband and my brother, that's who we were hours before we took another route.

A: Before you were transformed by the experience?

N: Everything that is constantly transforming us. The past is breathing down our necks because it's always right there like our shadow. Those people, as they were in that moment, didn't exist anymore. For me, something is always gone. I started writing about photographs because it was the way that I could locate that feeling I had of constant loss: the loss of a moment that is gone from us.

A: What can a poem do that a photograph can't?

N: What I'm trying to do in poems is to create a momentary stay against the inevitability of loss. I'm thinking about Robert Hass when he says a word is an elegy to the thing it signifies. The thing is now gone from this moment of the poem, so we just have these words reminiscent of the thing that's gone and they bring it back to us. Perhaps photographs do this, too. They bring back to us that which is gone. Somebody had sent me a review that someone had written of *Native Guard* in Poetry magazine, and in the review the person seemed to understand my desire to memorialize or to erect monuments to things that had been forgotten or passed, but her take was that a statue is a static, dead thing so even if you write a poem to the thing, it also is a dead thing. I totally disagree with this because the point isn't for the statue to just be out there. A statue is a living thing. You can't tell me every time I see a Confederate statue that it doesn't matter. It lives!

A: You reference the connections between labor and exile in speaking about nostalgia; can you say more?

N: I think it's connected to the questions you ask about labor and the work of the poet. I'm not someone who confuses physical labor or that kind of work with the kind of work that I'm doing. I've written about people who are doing physical work. But I do think that the work of memory and forgetting is a kind of work as well.

I think that I have always lived with a sense of exile. Perhaps that is a condition that is shared by a great number of people, for whatever reason. My feelings of exile are rooted in the duality of the mixed raced body and are rooted in the laws of the state of Mississippi, in the laws of the U.S. that rendered a person like me illegitimate and rendered my parents as law breakers. To be born into a place that is the only geography that I have and in which I am rooted and tied to, and yet to be told that I am the illegal or illegitimate product of this place created a sense of psychological exile. That same sense of psychological exile in the laws of Mississippi is also embedded in custom and in history.

Growing up in the Deep South I was confronted constantly with the absence of narratives about who I was and the people that I felt closest to. We know the work that people did and yet what got inscribed on the landscape through its monuments and the naming of roads and buildings was an entirely different story that was subjugating this other group of people, rendering them non-citizens or second class citizens, as it has been called. I remember being so stunned that people who were so opposed to justice and equal rights would be given buildings named after them. Why are we going to erect a monument to a staunch segregationist who didn't believe in equal humanity of all people? That made no sense to me. There was this constant barrage of things constantly battering my psyche and making me feel like this is mine and yet it's not. I'm constantly being told that this does not belong to me, which is why I use the quote, "*Homo sapiens* is the only species to suffer psychological exile." I could be in Mississippi, in my grandmother's house and still not feel home. So the only home that I have found is the one that I've made in language. *Native Guard* was my grand attempt to say, "This place is mine and I'm going to inscribe it and I'm going to change it so that it reflects more of the fact of me. This is mine, and it is us."

Labor and exile, side by side - it's what I knew. It's not simply that I just happen to know so much about my grandmother's work. She talked about her life in terms of work. When she narrated her history it was a labor history. If you wanted to know anything about her past and you asked her, there was always labor connected to it.

A: It makes me think that given the second class citizenship, or lack of citizenship for many people required that people make themselves through their work.

N: I grew up with the idea that if you were black your class status was still black. In Mississippi black people were laborers. There were certainly people who managed to work their way out of being laborers, but the general understanding about who black people were and where they came from was always about physical labor. You could work the land, you could build the buildings, you could do all that stuff and yet be rendered a non-citizen or psychologically exiled. It seemed to me that whatever work I could do to reclaim this place that I had been constantly exiled from was through language. Now the state of Mississippi can't get rid of me!

People have looked at the history of African-Americans and of white Americans as two trains running on separate tracks; we've got to have black history month because black history isn't interwoven into the larger curriculum. So the common perception is, "Here's what everybody else was doing and here's what the black folks were doing at the same time," not that it is an interwoven, absolutely dependent history. The cover of *Native Guard* shows the diary of a Confederate confiscated by a Union soldier. Because of the paper shortage the man who confiscated the diary had to cross-write over the diary that had already been written in. So you have the intersection between the narrative of the Confederate and the Union, and I gave that to my black soldier so that it becomes the intersection of North and South, of black and white, slave and free.

In its embrace of me, Mississippi has to also embrace the story I have told about us as Mississippians, black and white, and everything else. My father was there with me when I received the Governor's Award, and he was tearing up. He and I never would have imagined when I was born in Mississippi in 1966 and someone wrote on my birth certificate, race of mother "colored", race of father "Canadian" that I would ever be standing in front of the State House in front of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

A: What was that like for you?

N: I think I realized that I had wanted my home state to claim me my whole life. I had to force them to do it. But they have. And they had to do it reckoning with the history I was making them reckon with, too. It had to be done. I received a Governor's Award from a Republican Governor.

A: It's powerful to stake a claim in the midst of exile.

N: It's an irony, a great irony but a perfect one. I was born 100 years to the day that Mississippi first celebrated Confederate Memorial Day: April 26, 1966. On April 26 1866, a year after the Civil War, they developed that holiday because they refused to celebrate the Fourth of July because that was American. And they kept it. That's the day I was born. Growing up and even as an adult, my birthday was a holiday. And I am born mixed race on Confederate Memorial Day, and we know that miscegenation was a huge hot button issue that entered the lexicon in 1863. There was a little pamphlet written by a couple of reporters. It was a hoax and they were trying to drum up a lot of anger against Lincoln because Lincoln was the president of amalgamation, so they were saying that if Lincoln was elected again we would have miscegenation run amok.

A: Because it did not already happen.

N: Right, it didn't happen before. But it was all of a sudden going to happen. I just think that it's crazy that this is what I was given. You can't make this up.

A: All of the ironies! We've come to my last question. In consideration of the power of claiming that space, what are the *creative* spaces that have given to you in your creative work?

I was a Bunting Fellow at Radcliffe in 2001. I went there ostensibly to work on *Bellocq's Ophelia*, and it was where I first started thinking about *Native Guard*. It was the first time that I've ever been given space like that, and it was constructed around giving women space to do this kind of work. That was really useful because I learned something about how I like to work and think.

I think that the most critical thing for me was figuring out that what was important to me was worthy of writing poems about. When I was in graduate school my father had given me a copy of Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*. That book opened my eyes. I remember looking at it saying to myself, "I could write like this. I could write a book that records the life of my grandmother and all the work she's done and it could be of some value." If her book was a space that I entered, then that was the first critical creative moment.

The second moment was in my second year at U-Mass. Margaret Gibson came. Her book *The Daybooks of Tina Modotti* helped me figure out *Bellocq's Ophelia*, so if there's a direct ancestor for *Bellocq's Ophelia* it's Gibson's Book *The Daybooks of Tina Modotti*. When I first met her she was really kind and I think she took a liking to me and I hadn't had that before with any other professors. She was the first one who really liked what I was doing and seemed interested in nurturing it. I remember one day there was this exhibit of Clifton Johnson's photographs. He had traveled in the South and had taken a lot of photographs of African Americans. A group of photographs from this exhibit became the sequence of poems titled "Three Photographs" in my first book. I remember walking around and stopping in front of one photograph and Margaret was standing there beside me and she was saying to me "You see what's here don't you?" It's like she was saying, "You know these people. You know them in a way that this photographer doesn't know them." I knew what she was telling me because in those photographs I saw the faces of my grandmother and my great aunts and I knew that I had something to add to the story that this photographer had inscribed in his work, and it was because of Margaret.