

Because of Blood: Natasha Trethewey's Historical Memory -- Interview

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She reads with a clear cadence and soothing tone, occasionally glancing at the page for formality's sake, as if she has the poem memorized. Here is a little secret; she does. "I tend to be a real foot-tapper," states Natasha Trethewey, the third African American woman after Gwendolyn Brooks and Rita Dove to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. She visited East Carolina University April 2 for a public reading and book signing. Her upcoming work, *Thrall*, deals with telling the untold stories of history, identity politics, racism, and miscegenation. She claims that she writes only what she is given, "a violent history, and the terrible beauty of my South -- my Mississippi."

Lisa DeVries: The Pulitzer Prize has a history of honoring what is in the moment, celebrating what is happening now. Why do you think this is the moment for *Native Guard*?

Natasha Trethewey: On the one hand, I think my story is the quintessential American story; this miscegenation is America, this history across the color line intersected is America. It is a truly American story that we have been waiting for someone to tell. A Civil War history is bringing to light those stories that get subsumed and erased. This book seeks to tell a fuller story of our history as Americans. Not "this" side, or "that" side, because there are no sides. We are not two trains running on separate tracks in America; it is all intertwined, and here is a book that says so, such as when the black soldier is writing letters home for the illiterate white soldier, and their voices become mingled, one, as he writes for the other. The story mingles in my own blood; it is that voice that has to tell the story.

DeVries: In one of your new, unpublished poems from the reading, "The Book of Casta" seems to deal with a kind of blood consciousness, some kind of historical pre-knowing identified with the body. Do you believe there is an unconscious connection between the history inside the blood and writing poetry?

Trethewey: I think I merely write what I have been given to write. August Wilson believed that his subject matter came to him through some memory in his very body, the history of African Americans, the Middle Passage, slavery, Jim Crow. He felt that it came through a kind of blood memory. I do not believe that in relation to my own work. I like thinking about it for August Wilson, though, because he is such a terrific playwright. The danger, however, is that it begins to sound a little essentialist, about how we inherit what it is we have. I think what I have inherited to write is in my blood, in as much as my blood in the state of Mississippi was a problem, but that is a thing outside of me, not inside. That was law and custom, history and society. It is my place in the world and along the continuum of history that I have been given, the thing I am drawn to make sense out of.

DeVries: "Casta" also seems to deal with the historical amnesia that usually accompanies colonial societies. With your next work, are you trying to explore more the similarities between the colonialism of America and the colonialism of Mexico?

Tretheway: I am. My obsessions stay the same -- historical memory and historical erasure. I am particularly interested in the Americas and how a history that is rooted in colonialism, the language and iconography of empire, disenfranchisement, the enslavement of peoples, and the way that people were sectioned off because of blood. I am moving away from the American South, and moving away from the 20th and 19th centuries, but in terms of the research I always do, that has stayed the same. I am interested in 18th century natural philosophy, science, particularly botany, the study of hybridity in plants and animals, which, of course, then allows me to consider the hybridity of language.

Thrall, which is the name of the new book, arises out of finishing the research on Native Guard. I always go to the Oxford English Dictionary and look up every single word that I think I already know. I looked up the word native again, and I was thinking of native in so many ways. You cannot say it and not think of Native Son or Notes of a Native Son, or Native Americans. There are all kinds of ways that one must think of that word, and when I looked it up, my expectation was that the first definition would be something that referred to native plants, or someone that is native to a place, like Mississippi. But the first definition is "someone born into the condition of servitude, of thrall." All of a sudden, the new title came to me. Why do we have this word native? When we claim land, the people who are there are the "natives"; it is about colonialism, it is about empire, and the word thrall is right there. I begin to think, "Okay, so a thrall is a slave, and yet we are enthralled to all sorts of things." We are enthralled to the language that seeks to name us; thus "mulatto," "quadroon," "octoroon," "sambo," "albino." Then, when you think about travel narratives and captivity narratives, it was language that they were using to shape the understanding of a place and its inhabitants. When you look at those colonial maps that have drawings of the people there, it is the iconography, as well as the taxonomies of who they were that they were enthralled to. Thrall is just another digging into that same obsession I have always had.

DeVries: Your mother pervades several poems in Native Guard. Are you trying to keep her from becoming one of these "untold stories" of history?

Tretheway: Absolutely. I didn't know that when I started writing Native Guard; all I knew was that I wanted to write about the untold stories of those black soldiers. I think about Mark Doty saying, "Our metaphors go on ahead of us." And so there I was, chasing down this story from the past with all of the historical research it entailed, looking outward from myself, and that outward looking into the past and into history led me back inward to the thing that was really driving me -- a desire to create a monument to my mother, because like those black soldiers, there is no marker, no monument, that inscribes her former presence on the American landscape.

DeVries: If she were alive today, would she still be a subject of so many of your poems?

Tretheway: I can't even imagine that. I've written a couple of poems about my father, but I think that those poems are poems that are particularly rooted in what our lives have been -- having separated as a family when I was young, and then both of us losing my mother. I think that a defining moment in my life was her death, and it has shaped everything I've done. If I think about the things that have defined who I am as a poet, and what I feel it is my duty to

write, such as being born of mixed race in 1960s Mississippi, it was losing my mother.

DeVries: The poem "Pilgrimage" ends with the line "the ghost of history lies down beside me, / rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm." Do you find that historical memory and historical erasure is a heavy burden to bear, or is it more like feeding your pen?

Tretheway: It's both. People do talk about the burden of history, and for me the sort of tongue-and-cheek thing about those lines is that I have come to believe that the burden of history is a burden that I willingly take on, and that willingness is an intimate thing. It means you might have to lie down with it. History is intimate; you sleep with it.

Joel Brewer wrote in his essay "Cleo Rising" that the muse of history actually holds little influence on contemporary American poets, that there is a tendency to always gaze inward, a kind of navel gazing. He goes on to say that contemporary poets merely claim, "I am here," instead of looking outward to claim, "They were there." My entire life my father has said to me, "You have a story; yours is an important one to tell," and yet at the same time, I am resistant to a complete navel gazing. I am nervous about being self-indulgent with my own interior life and my own stories, and so I turn to the external, which is history, as a way of looking outward. However, it is also a way to place my own stories in a larger historical context. A poem I write is not just about me; it is about national identity, not just regional but national, the history of people in relation to other people. I reach for these outward stories to make sense of my own life, and how my story intersects with a larger public history.

DeVries: *Native Guard*, and your upcoming book of poetry, *Thrall* must require a great deal of research. Do you write or research first?

Tretheway: It goes back and forth. Sometimes if there is some historical question that I have asked myself I will begin writing from what it is I think I already know. Then I conduct research, and at some point try to set it all aside and write from what I have come to know, so that it seems intuitive. There are moments when I become nervous because it seems so organic; once it happens, I sometimes think I must be misrepresenting the facts. Then I have to go back and read again to fact-check. I am always excited to find out that I have made notes or scribbled in the margins things to remind me of "this is where I found it," that this is indeed something that is rooted in historical fact.

DeVries: Do you ever see yourself writing about the present moment?

Tretheway: There are things that I think people are a lot more open to acknowledging if they happened a hundred years ago. If I say, "This is what is happening now," there are people who would immediately draw a shade down and not listen. I can mention that just 11 years ago the state of Alabama voted to get rid of the anti-miscegenation laws, but the poem is about my parents and my childhood. People always want to be on the right side of history; it is a lot easier to say, "What an atrocity that was" than it is to say, "What an atrocity this is."

Years ago I read some of the poems from *Native Guard* and Ellen Bryant Voigt was in the audience, someone I admire tremendously. After the reading she said, "I can just hear the anger seething beneath the surface of these poems." There is anger, a tremendous amount of grief, restraint, and moral outrage. Even when I say the lines, "state that made a crime of me," I have to keep my lips from baring my teeth, which is why *Native Guard* was a departure from my other two books. One reviewer said that there is a certain cold-bloodedness that I am doing in *Native Guard* because I think it is the angriest book I have ever written. It scared

me to write it because I have been so restrained in the past. I have always wanted to be even, and hope that the image I give is enough to evoke in the reader's mind the thing I am trying to do. It took everything I had to push what was rising to the surface in *Native Guard* down. I would not have said one, or even two books ago, "state that made a crime of me." For me, the book communicates white, hot emotion and rage, but maybe that surface level of restraint, that form mediates. It should I suppose, because if I came off like that you probably would not want to listen to me at all. I would be didactic, like Barack Obama's minister, "Goddamn America." But, am I not saying that? Why else would I use Nina Simone's epigraph? "Everybody knows about Mississippi." Do you know what song that comes from? "Mississippi Goddamn," and I am just implying that you remember that when I use the line.

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