

April 14, 2009

Sixth Annual Sheth Lecture: Natasha Trethewey

Nan Partlett:

Ladies and Gentleman may I have your attention again please. Thank you. I know that many of us are still completing our indoor picnic and it is really like we are indoors. But I will make a start. On behalf of the Emeritus College and the Emory Alumni Association, it is my pleasure to welcome you today for the 6th Annual Sheth Lecture. This yearly event, which explores the topic of creativity in later life, is made possible by a generous gift from Madhu and Jagdish Sheth. Madhu Sheth is with us today and I will ask her to stand so that we may all show her our appreciation. I want the Sheths to know that this event is eagerly anticipated in the calendar of the Emeritus College, and we are most grateful for their generosity. My appreciation to the Emory Alumni Association for their co-sponsorship, and most especially the staff of the Emeritus College – Charity Crabtree and Monica Ali - and if you would stand so we can thank you for all the email and the very important part they played in making the luncheon and lecture possible.

The presentation today will include remarks by our guest, a poetry reading, and a question and answer period, as time allows. Who better to speak with us about creativity than Emory Professor and Pulitzer Prize winning Poet, Natasha Trethewey? A daughter of the South, Professor Trethewey was born in Gulfport MS, and received her BA in English from the University of Georgia, an MA in English and Creative Writing from Hollins University in Virginia, and her MFA in poetry from the University of Massachusetts.

Professor Trethewey's work has received wide acclaim in recent years, appearing in literary journals and as anthologies. Her first collection of poetry, **Domestic Work** (2000), was selected by former United States Poet Laureate, Rita Dove, as the winner of the inaugural Cave Canem Poetry Prize for the best first book by an African American poet, and won both the 2001 Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Book Prize and the 2001 Lillian Smith Award for Poetry. Her most recent collection entitled **Native Guard** won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry.

Professor Trethewey's honors include the Bunting Fellowship from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard and the fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. It is my honor to introduce to you the Phillis Wheatley Distinguished Professor of English and Pulitzer Prize winning poet, our own Natasha Trethewey.

Natasha Trethewey:

Thank you. Thank you all for coming. I have to say that as I look out there today I feel both honored and a little nervous simply because I see among you so many students, colleagues and friends which says to me that a lot of you have seen this dog and pony show before. But we can trot it out one more time. I am going to talk today about writing **Native Guard** and read from **Native Guard** and if time permits I will read to you a few new poems from a new book that I am working on. I call this talk today **Native Guard** on memory Civil War history and myself.

E.L. Wilson has written “Homo sapiens is the only species to suffer psychological exile.” I think about that a lot. Particularly in relation to all the panels I’ve been on at conferences on Contemporary Southern Literature or Southern Poetry. I began to notice after several of these panels that someone almost raised the question about the silences of southern writers. Why we write the way that we do? It seemed to me that just as often someone on the panel would answer that question by saying something like “We southerners write the way that we do because after all we lost the war.” Each time I’ve heard this I’ve had to say, “Myself didn’t lose the war.” On each of these occasions the other panelist most likely had responded to the question unintentionally in a manner that seemed to suggest they had forgotten that I was there. And that seemed to speak of the southern silence and the southern experience as if it were monolithic. In a sense, their responses echo a type of eraser that has affected the documenting of public history, the dedication of public monuments and has continued to affect our public memory. I’m sure my fellow panelist never meant to exclude me when they said “we” I am a southerner too. But these occurrences are evidence of the public memory of the war and its aftermath that still makes outsiders of African Americans. Even as almost 200,000 fought for their freedom in the Civil War and leaves out many narratives which will give us a fuller richer understanding American experience.

In my most recent collection **Native Guard** the restoration of narratives that have been forgotten, left out of our public memory, undergirded by writing and research. Indeed the title comes from the name of the first officially sanctioned regiment of African American soldiers in the Civil War. The Louisiana Native Guards mustered into service in September, October and November of 1862 the second regiment stationed just off the coast of my hometown Gulfport, Mississippi. During the war, they manned the fort on Ship Island as a prison for Confederate Soldiers. Visitors to the fort today will see first the plaque placed at the entrance by the daughters of the Confederacy listing the names of the Confederate men once entered there. Nowhere is a similar plaque memorializing the names of the Native Guards. And if tourists don’t know to ask about the history of these black soldiers most likely the park ranger will overlook this aspect of the fort’s history in his tour. Mentioning only that this was a fort taken over by Union Forces and that Confederate prisoners were kept there. There is next to no mention that the troops stationed on the island were black. Their story has been erased from the landscape and from our public memory as well. Even now, monuments all around the south serve to inscribe a particular narrative onto the landscape while at the same time subjugating or erasing others. Thus, part of this collection is an attempt to reinscribe a narrative of those forgotten soldiers into our cultural memory to create a monument in words to this aspect of our forgotten American history.

The power of recording and documenting is particularly important to me as a daughter of Mississippi. Like the Native Guards and the Confederate soldiers who had returned to a version of home unlike what they’d like behind before the war I am a kind of exile. A native Mississippian. Half white half black born to a marriage which was not recognized by the state thus making me, my existence illegitimate. When I was born there in 1966 miscegenation was still illegal and Mississippi would not fully begin to comply with the 1964 Civil Rights Act until much later was the anti-miscegenation law struck from the books. Perhaps because of this the

clerk who filled out my birth certificate listed the race of my white father as Canadian. Thus my beginnings were documented by someone who skirted the truth for whatever reasons. And something was left out of the public record of my birth. Likewise when the plaque was mounted at Ship Island, the daughters of the Confederacy were creators of that public memory, leaving out the other population on the island.

C. Ben Woodward in his Preface to jump in Jim Crow's southern politics from Civil War to Civil Rights asserts that during the last two decades of the 19th century and the first two of the 20th, it was white ladies who wore primary responsibility for the myths glorifying the old order the lost cause and white supremacy. Woodward is referring specifically to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Daughters of the American Revolution, Daughters of Pilgrims and Daughters of Colonial Governors. They were considered "Guardians of the Past." "Non-daughters" he writes were excluded.

In positioning myself as a native daughter a **Native Guard** as a Mississippi's past. I wanted to explore the rift between public and personal memory to which I am a legacy. And to grapple with the themes of home and exile memory and history which occupy the forefront of the landscape of my imagination.

Historian Michael Vurenbergh has written, "A better more humane civilization can be forged in the smithy of painful memory. In restoring to the memory of the Civil War the savagery, heartlessness and racism of that era we can allow for the possibility of a civilization based on justice rather than amnesia. It is that amnesia that forgetting which I attempt to redress in my work. To bring to light stories that are part of my own or someone else's personal history. But that none the less in the aggregate of what it is to be American belong to us all.

Finally, there is another aspect to history I needed to inscribe with this collection. If this history is the spine of the book the eulogies to my Mother are its heart. I'm going to begin reading now from the first section of the book "A Monument in Words Eulogies to My Mother", and then a few poems from the middle and final sections that stand as monument to my own relationship to the landscape and history of my south as well as my place in it.

Some of you might recall the Southern Crescent, the name of an old train part of its route between Atlanta and New Orleans.

"The Southern Crescent"

This next poem has an epigraph from Robert Herrick that reads "Fair daffodils we weep to see you haste away so soon."

"Genus Narcissus"

"Graveyard Blues"

This poem relies a bit on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice's. And one of the things that I try to do in this poem is capture the experience that Orpheus must have had turning around and

finding Urisyee gone. It's very much like the kinds of dreams I have about my mother. If you've lost someone you might have such dreams. There are two kinds. One, I am aware that she is gone and the dream feels like a lovely visitation and I am always happy when I wake up from that dream. But then the other kind of dream is one in which I don't know that she's gone and that nothing has ever happened and it always takes a half second after waking up and turning over and opening my eyes that I realize that she's gone and the grief is fresh again.

"Myth"

I am going to read now a bit from the title poem of the collection **Native Guard** and one thing I'd like to say before reading this is that in terms of my own creativity I often in order to be filled up, in order to be ready if DeMuse does decide to grace me with her presence I do a lot of research I read pretty widely so that there's always something outside of me that I am considering. But of course those things that I tend to look into are in their own way always showing me back inside myself to the thing that has been the true obsession.

The poet, Mark Doddie says, "Our metaphors go on ahead of us." So when I began writing **Native Guard** it was those soldiers that I talked about at the beginning that I was interested in. This eraser of the public history and I wanted to tell this story of what had been forgotten. To tell a story and to erect a lyrical monument to people who had been forgotten. It didn't occur to me until I got to the writing of the poem "Graveyard Blues" that I read to you that there was another story that had been forgotten or had not been memorialized in the right way. I had after so many years, never put a grave marker a monument on my mother's grave. And so she was just like those soldiers buried and some ways not properly memorialized. But it was not until doing this research all this time later about these soldiers did I realize that there was something else that was really driving me.

So this is where it began, there is an epigraph from Frederick Douglas that reads, "If this war is to be forgotten I ask in the name of all things sacred what shall men remember?" One last thing I'll say is that even as this particular soldier is imagined all of the battles and other skirmishes and other historical details that the poem mentions are all factual. In fact the Major that I mentioned who was stationed on the island Major Dumas, was a free person of color in Louisiana who was quadroon or octoroon. His father was a white planter, his mother mulatto. And when his father died he inherited the plantation and the slaves. And because it was illegal to manumit slaves in New Orleans, Louisiana at the time he kept them, though he never liked having them. And when the Union was enlisting Black soldiers he joined and freed his slaves and encouraged those men of age to join the Natives Guards. The **Native Guard** whose voice you will hear now was in my imaginings one of his servants, perhaps the servant who would have accompanied him to France. Many young men in Major Dumas's position were educated in Europe. He would have been a man servant and learned to read and write because of that.

"Native Guard"

1961 the year Barack Obama was born 21 states still had anti-miscegenation laws on the books. I was born just five years later in the state of Mississippi. Only about 11 years ago did the state

of Alabama vote to remove the anti-miscegenation law from the books. They got rid of it, 40 some percent of the population however wanted to keep it so that at least symbolically it could be said that parents like mine couldn't be married legally and people like me born legally in the state.

"Miscegenation"

"My Mother Dreams Another Country"

"Southern Gothic"

"Incident"

I'm going to close with three poems now.

This is "Monument."

This poem has an epigraph from Alan Tate's "Ode to The Confederate Dead" that reads "Now that the salt of their blood stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea."

"Elegy for the Native Guards"

And this last poem has an epigraph from E.L. Wilson that reads "Homo sapiens is the only species to suffer psychological exile."

"South"

Thank you.

Nan Partlett:

Professor Trethewey has said that she will take a few questions and I think we can have ten minutes for questions. There is a microphone that we can take to you, if that will help so that everyone can hear. Do we have questions?

Question: Inaudible

Answer: To answer that I have to go to great old poets. Percy Bissie Shelly, poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. I do feel that it is my duty to inscribe the cultural memory of a people and a time. To legislate in that way and also Keats, "To sharpen one's vision into the heart and vision of man." And William Carlos Williams, "You can't get the news from poetry but men die miserable everyday for lack of what is found there. So those are my answers.

Question: Inaudible

Answer: You know I have a couple thoughts about that. First, certainly this country has seen no end to dark times. But the triumph of the human spirit in the darkest of times is I think one of the most powerful and beautiful things that we have. One of the greatest gifts that we have to humanity is to show those things. So I'm saddened when folks would rather bury things and forget them. I think that forgetting is a real dangerous thing. I think we can all think of times when forgetting is going to lead us down a path of repeating certain kinds of things. But it reminds me of the controversy surrounding the Lynching Exhibit without sanctuary a few years

ago you know. Emory was part of it the exhibit at the King Center. I had to stop reading the editorial page of the AJC for awhile because of things of things I saw there. But there were good things too. One of the things I remember is someone identifying herself as a young white woman that did not know this history and was so glad that it was being told because it was a shared history it belongs to her as much as it belongs to the victims and their generations. But there were also people who said that this is a history that is better left forgotten and buried, why should we open these old wounds. Now to believe that by telling our fuller versions of our history as Americans is opening old wounds suggest that you believe the wound has healed as opposed to festering for all these years. That is why I am so proud in Mississippi for example they have launched a Truth Commission because I think that by telling the truth across time and space, across gender and racial and economic lines is the only way to actually heal the wounds of the past as opposed to letting them continue to fester.

Question: Inaudible

Answer: Well I am glad you mentioned the tragedy of 911 because I think that they figured out that the blossoming of poetry after that was probably the greatest that we had. More people turned to poetry after that to try to make sense of in language what seemed to be the unspeakable. Of course not all of it was good. Probably most of it was pretty bad, but I think it did allow for people to feel that there was an outlet that language was the only thing that could attend to the grief that they felt after that. I think it can be difficult to deal with such difficult subject matter while also attending to the integrity of a poem as art, as a made thing rather than the poem simply as one's journal entry. It's been really hard for me. When I turned in **Native Guard** in March of 2005 it had been exactly 20 years since my mother's death. It took me that long to write poems that I felt lived up to at least my own standards for what poems have to be and do. And I think that for me turning towards other things, turning toward history, reading widely is a way for me to move out of my own grief and not focus so much on my own navel so that I can look out at the world and see myself within the continuum of history. I think that's a way for any of us to write better about those things that are so difficult for us that we are seeking an outlet for. So not to give up those obsessions, but to find other things through which to articulate them. You know delving to histories that speak to you but also help answer that kind of grief. When I wrote my second collection **Belloq's Phelia** in many ways there was a lot of me in that book. But I couldn't have written those poems about being mixed raced, feeling like I was looked at a lot growing up in Mississippi so instead I find a character who's looked at because of her job and who feels what I feel but in a very different setting. And it allows a kind of distance that the mask that poetry gives. I also think that form is another way to do it to set for yourself the requirements of certain form. Because if I didn't put the envelope of form around some of my subject matter it would get unwieldy. And it's only because of that elegant envelope that I am able to keep a handle on what is potentially everly dramatic or sentimental or sensational. I think form and history things outside of ourselves.

Question: Inaudible

Answer: It's not to say that writing a poem can't be therapeutic or feel that way for the writer but for it to mean something to the reader or the listener we have to look beyond ourselves

and find a way that allows you to enter into that sort of emotional state as being described. And I think that we are all going to be served by the telling of these fuller versions of our history as Americans. All of it is shared history. I feel deprived of things that I don't know.

Question: Inaudible

Answer: Thank you. Thank you for telling us that story. It's a really good story because I think that one of the things that I try to deal with in **Native Guard** by claiming my South, claiming my Mississippi a place that has in so many ways has reminded me that I'm an outsider. You know when we had our flag controversy here in Georgia again I had to stop reading the AJC because somebody wrote in and said, "All true Southerners love that flag." And I'm just told yet again so I'm not a true Southerner this weighs over and over that we're told that this is not ours too. But if this isn't mine I don't have anything else, so I can imagine that for that soldier as bad as things were going to be this is his country too. And some people might be mad at me for saying this but I am going to say it because I understood very well when Michelle Obama said she got in big trouble, "This is the first time that I've ever been proud of my country." Well you know what there's nothing wrong criticizing your country, I mean I am patriotic, I even hate using that word because it always makes a stink of one kind of thing. But you can be patriotic and have every reason to hate your country. I have every reason to hate Mississippi, done you think? Well, that doesn't mean it's not mine. So I've been pretty proud of this country too, I've been pretty disappointed with it at times as well. And I think that that's the only sophisticated response, love and hate. You know blindly loving this place means your avoiding a whole lot of this history that you brought up. Knowing it for what it really is and loving it none the less means you want to make it better. That is the biggest kind of patriotism that I can imagine.

Question: Inaudible

Answer: Well the obsessions don't change just how I go about approaching them. I got interested in writing about as part of the book a spine in some ways Mexican Costa paintings from the 18th century. I'm very interested in these paintings because they illustrated the mixed blood unions in the colony and right on each painting they would have the taxonomies of the people. And so it was that combination of the iconography of the people and the text that and the taxonomies the names that we had given across time and space to control people in a society especially mixed blood people and to keep people separate. So that 's obviously a obsession that I have you can hear it in those other poems. So I'm interested in those things in law in language the language of empire. I'm also interested in the language of science, natural history, natural philosophy, the enlightenment which of course is the beginnings of our ideas of racial difference. It's fascinating but it was both the enlightenment but also the beginning of the really codefining this kind of racialized thinking of racial difference. But beyond that it really is again about what's left out, I mean there is so much to know, so much that gets left out of our textbooks, left out of our histories, left out of the things we say to one another. I'm always trying to find those things and bring them back in.

Question: Inaudible

Answer: I find that delicious actually. When I was finishing up the research on **Native Guard** I was hanging out with my OED as I often do reading the entire entries on a word and I was

looking at the word native. And the first definition that comes up for the word native is not what I expected not like someone who's a native of Mississippi or a native plant. The first definition was, someone born into the condition of servitude, a thrall. And so you're right we are enthralled to language. And I didn't say this answering your question but the title of the book is **Thrall**. And it is very much about the way we are enthralled into the language we have been given and that had named us and shaped our reality our experience. You know I find this very exciting to be given such a thing to make sense of. In the same that writing about Mississippi, I write what I've been given to write and I can't imagine what I would have done had I not been given that history so I'm grateful for being given that and I'm grateful for being given this language that has enthralled us for so long. And to be able to use that language to dismantle some of that at the same time it's very exciting. Thank you for your questions.

Book signing followed