Emory University Creativity Conversations
Dorothy Allison, Natasha Trethewey and Michael Elliott
April 15, 2008

Speaker: I’m going to give you a very brief introduction, because I’m sure by now everybody knows who these two people are. We have as our guests this semester, Dorothy Allison, the author of Bastard Out of Carolina, Cavedweller, Skin, Two or Three Things I Know for Sure and probably my favorite prose writer in the entire whole world. Next to her is my favorite poet writer in the entire whole world, Natasha Trethewey, winner of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for Native Guard. And they’re going to talk to each other and we’re going to listen. Thank you.

Allison: We have to decide whether we’re going to be scandalous or not.

Trethewey: Yes, I was going to say, it seems like a good opportunity to be scandalous.

Allison: So long as we don’t cry.

Trethewey: No crying though. We decided that. But we have to say first how great Michael Elliott was. I mean I just – I’m just thinking about historical memory now and it was so good to hear you. Dorothy, you were supposed to start this off.

Allison: Yes, and I want to start by quoting Michael, because he – there was one phrase that just hit me in the heart, the idea of a useful past. And in your work, I loved when I read Native Guard, that it gave me a history I had not had access to before, the history of Gulfport and the Native Guard. But useful to who?

Trethewey: Well, you know, for me it certainly has felt like a useful past. I mean there’s ways that I think it could have felt not like that at all, but the poet Phil Levine has written, “I write what I’ve been given to write.” And having grown up in Mississippi with that troubled and violent history and that terrible beauty, I feel like I have plenty of stuff of use for me as a writer, things to make sense of for a long time.

Allison: To make sense of in complicated ways.

Trethewey: I did this interview with Deborah Solomon a year ago who write for The New York Times Magazine, and we were talking about historical memory and I think in some ways these ideas of useful past. And she tried to insist – and we had a big
fight during this interview – that I was saying something about the necessity of forgetting and obviously forgetting is not at all what I’m interested in. I’m interested in remembering. And the work I do is an attempt at a kind of stay against forgetting. And yet, she kept trying to insist that there are necessary types of forgetting.

Allison: I don’t think I understand that. I mean I can see correcting a history.

Trethewey: I do too.

Allison: But that’s not about forgetting.

Trethewey: Well, in this very difficult exchange with her, I was trying to talk about the necessity of historical memory, in terms – in a larger sense that there are great things in history -- by great I mean big and significant -- that we can’t forget for what they might tell us about ourselves and about humanity. But I think on a more personal level, she must have been thinking about things in one’s own past that might be safer or better somehow if you just forget it. And I tried to sort of be kind and say, okay, “Well, I can imagine someone who had this experience or that experience, it might be a better thing to try to forget.” I tried to concede that to her. I’m not even still sure that I believe it though.

Allison: I don’t even know how to relate to that concept of forgetting. It seems to me that one of my tasks as a writer is to correct and to correct a historical record. Particularly about the people that I love and that…

Trethewey: So a personal one, not even a public historical record.

Allison: Yeah. No, that public, too, because a lot of times I find that what I believe I’m doing is writing a working-class narrative in a way that I have found very few examples that I feel honored by. Instead I find a lot of examples of – oh good, well, redneck, white trash, sons of bitches is all over southern literature, but we get very, very little respect. And the portraits tend to be caricatures and they tend to be contemptible and I think that one of my tasks is to try to write as large complicated full portraits as I can and that’s a correction. So I wouldn’t mind if everybody forgot Tobacco Road, no, that could leave, we could let that go. Erskine Caldwell, I forgive you, and put in the record respect, not shaving off any of our tendency to be not so subtlety horrific, because we can be.

Trethewey: Or to tell – yeah, a truth that’s not pretty.

Allison: Not pretty. In gorgeous language. You know, bloody violence can be written about in gorgeous…

Trethewey: It can be beautiful, yeah.

Trethewey: Absolutely. Well…

Allison: You do it. You take on and seem to me fearless about violence and family complication, and contempt.

Trethewey: I keep getting reviews or things that say – restraint yes, and that’s something that I try, but also quiet, that it’s quiet. And that’s an interesting thing to me to think that the perception of what I have done so far is quiet. But I wonder if something about that quiet – this made me think back to – and I wanted to ask you a question about your experience of sort of taking on the subjects that you have. When I was in graduate school, a very, very prominent American poet said to me, “Unburden yourself of being black, unburden yourself of the death of your mother and write about the situation in Northern Ireland.” I thought that was fun.

Allison: Can you guys not hear me? [inaudible] I warned him that my titties would get active.

Trethewey: I see how you’re doing.

Allison: It’s also because I’ve had three sips of wine, and two is my limit. Three sips and I start mentioning body parts. Northern Ireland?

Trethewey: Well, I think he – when I try to be generous to him, I think that – well, first let me not be generous. I think he wasn’t interested in my subject matter and that’s a thing that I think I face, perhaps you do, and he wanted me to write about something that he was more interested in. When I’m…

Allison: Was he from Northern Ireland?

Trethewey: No, but he has a great poem called, *I Am a Fin*, hint, hint. You can go look him up. I just think that was a more interesting history to him.

Allison: Or more understandable. It always fascinated me that some of the poets that I loved best were criticized for being domestic poets. Mostly women, writing about “women’s issues”, death, birth, family, women’s issues.

Trethewey: Well, you know, Charles Johnson…

Allison: Ah, Mr. Johnson.

Trethewey: …he published that book of criticism, *Being in Race*, probably in 1980 or something like that. And in it he made that kind of comment that no black women, for example, had written any fiction of consequence because they only wrote about the domestic sphere. Because nothing big happens in the home, you
know. It happens outside the home, like in wars and stuff. But nothing inside the home. And I got to ask her Majesty Toni Morrison about that. At the same time telling her, the title of my first book is *Domestic Work*.

Allison: I think that’s lovely. I’ll bet she liked it.

Trethewey: She did.

Allison: Yeah. Charles probably apologized, Mr. Johnson.

Trethewey: Later on.

Allison: Yeah.

Trethewey: That’s good.

Allison: He’s an honorable man. That’s what I like about honorable men writers, they apologize, then they write something different. And occasionally they write domestic novels or poems.

Trethewey: Well, I think that they have been for a long time, but no one has called them domestic novels.

Allison: The problem is, it actually does have an impact being constantly told that your world is not the center of the world, that you’re not important. That what you care about most and want to write about most is not real or not of interest, not legitimate.

Trethewey: Or too narrow a focus. It only relates to “those” people and not the universal group of people.

Allison: And if you write about women and children, you’re necessarily sentimental. You’ve been sentimental, yeah, yeah.

Trethewey: And if you write about black people, you’re “only” writing about race.

Allison: Right. And if you write about lesbians, well, you’re only going to sell about 9½ books, so…It seems to me that all the reasons that I’ve been given to not do the work I do, have helped shape me into the writer I am, because of the sheer naked perversity of being raised redneck in this culture. And I think you have some of the same perversity, since you grab the subjects you’re told not to touch.

Trethewey: Well, after he told me that, I just dug my heals in and wrote *Native Guard*.

Allison: So talk to me about being creative in resistance to the tide.
Trethewey: I mentioned this to Dorothy before we came up, just about that term creativity. I was trying to figure it out. I think you had a better handle on it, but something that you said was that often – well, I told Dorothy that I remembered when I was downstairs coming in that in my senior year in high school when they do those senior superlatives like best dressed and stuff, I was voted most creative. And when I told you that you said, “Sometimes that’s a term used for some kind of otherness that people can’t quite figure out. They call it creative.” And so I was thinking about – I don’t know that I’m so creative. I think I’m angry.

Allison: Well, maybe it’s the same thing. Maybe there’s a real relationship, because it seems to me that a lot of my creativity flows from an engine powered on rage, a lot of it.

Trethewey: And I think wanting to make sense of history and what we’ve been given. I mean when I first read James Baldwin’s words, “This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art,” I mean I thought he’d said it for me. And out of that disorder, out of that rage, I think I find the desire to make some sense of something, to right the wrongs of historical erasure, to tell a more dignified story of people whose stories aren’t always recorded, or acknowledged.

Allison: To make sense out of things that do not make sense.

Trethewey: Yeah.

Allison: And sometimes making sense – it isn’t about explaining – I hate explaining – but it is about showing people living their lives in very – in full, in their meanness as well as their sweetness.

Trethewey: This particular book, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, I saw it recently as one of those American classics, you know? You know.

Allison: It’s a sales technique that they decide they’re going to name 90 or 100 classics. It’s amazing how Penguin always picks “their” books, the 100 classics.

Trethewey: Now see I didn’t think of it like that when I saw it, but I thought about like what it means for it to be called that in a way, and to think about a decision that such a story is an American classic story to tell.

Allison: Well, it’s dangerous, because that means that a lot of unbounded, angry novels will be written in that model, about which I’m happy, but about which I’m not sure that – I don’t think that necessarily most literary critics are that thrilled with narratives of family violence, incest, rape.

Trethewey: But people must be. I mean people must buy the book, because people must empathize somehow with the characters and their story.
Allison: I think that there are a lot of stories that are out of bounds for polite conversation that are actually the stories we live with all the time, and that there is a great desperate hunger to have your story told back to you.

Trethewey: So to find it in a book like that.

Allison: Yeah, yeah.

Trethewey: So would you say, and I hope that you would – I hope this is true…

Allison: Put words in my mouth, do it Natasha.

Trethewey: Well, I want to believe that that’s true, that people need to find those stories about themselves or people they know being told, and not that there’s a prurient interest in certain kinds of stories. That it is human empathy and compassion and a need to find one’s self in literature that drives people to read a certain book, rather than prurient interest.

Allison: Well, and to imagine yourself worthy of being loved when you have never felt worthy of being loved. I know that *Bastard* would not have been written if I hadn’t read the *Bluest Eye*. It’s like each one makes room for another one that will reflect a different place, because in the *Bluest Eye*, I had never read anything that’s so absolutely captured my experience with such compassion and such complication. Because I know you’ve read it, read it lately. The thing that messed me up was that the story is told by another little girl who hates Pecola, who can’t stand her, but who at the same time is giving you a complicated, sympathetic portrayal of this raped child. I had not imagined that there was a world in which that was possible. And to see it on the page and to see it treated with love, it was – it was like everything broke open.

Trethewey: Did you start writing that book after reading the *Bluest Eye* or was it sometime after?

Allison: Sometime after. I started writing really bad poems and short stories. I mean you have to begin.

Trethewey: Does this mean I have a future as a novelist?

Allison: I believe all good novels begin as bad poems. See the problem is, you write great poems. If you had the capacity for writing really bad poems, the way I am capable…

Trethewey: Then maybe, then maybe…

Allison: Then you could shift it over. I can write country western lyrics.
Trethewey: Well, you know Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone*, has – the only black woman to have a number one country and western – she’s a singer songwriter. Y’all know that, right?

Allison: No.

Trethewey: Yeah, she’s the only black woman…

Allison: What is her number one…

Trethewey: I don’t even know the name of it. I shouldn’t have brought it up because I can’t tell you, but she…

Allison: Somebody with your iPhone, Google.

Trethewey: Yeah, Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone*. She’s the only one. She is a country…

Allison: I wonder if she publishes those songs under her own name.

Trethewey: I think she does.

Allison: That’s it. I’m looking her up as soon as I get back. A number one country western hit.

Trethewey: I think she does.

Allison: It’d be nice. What are you working on now? Where is your creativity turning?

Trethewey: Well, this is another reason why I think, Jim, it was a great idea to have Michael here and to sort of listen to the wonderfully creative language used to talk about this scholarly endeavor. Because I really do feel that – and when you said the arts and humanities are so connected here and they feed each other – I do think that’s the case. And I think that my impulse is always a scholarly one and I’m always interested in research and finding out something and I don’t know, maybe if I were a better scholar, a historian or something, I would write it differently. But it seems to me that poetry just is my medium for it. Probably ‘cause I’ve had several sips of wine, I might be willing to say here in front of a really large audience -- and I often don’t say this -- that I feel like I’m more interested in people and history than I am in poetry. Poetry is just how it comes out. That’s a dangerous thing for a poet to say, because all of a sudden everyone can say, “Well, you’re not a real poet,” because if I were a real poet, I’d be more concerned with aesthetics or something.
Allison: I’m always waiting for them to come to me and withdraw my license and say, “You’re not a real writer, you’re just a trashy storyteller.”

Trethewey: Well, I mean that same professor of mine said that I was much too concerned with my message to write real poetry. So real poetry doesn’t have anything to say to you, okay? And if you’re getting anything out of it, you’re not reading it right. [inaudible] Right, exactly, exactly.

Allison: Maybe pre-content publishing. Now, all that is so absurd.

Trethewey: My father once had this nightmare before we gave a reading together at AWP, the Associated Writing Program’s Conference, and the next morning he said as we walked into the room where we were going to do this daddy-daughter poetry reading, these poems that speak to each other, kind of call and response about our family history – in the dream he said that some very esteemed poet came up to him and said, “And by what criteria do you call these little narratives poems?”

Allison: Oh, oh. This was in the dream?

Trethewey: It’s in the dream.

Allison: And did your daddy hit him?

Trethewey: In real life he would have.

Allison: Yeah.

Trethewey: But in a dream he was more well-behaved. But you just said that people think you’re writing trashy stories.

Allison: Though, you’ll only be read by women. I love that line. You’ll only be read by women. I’m supposed to worry about that?

Trethewey: They buy more books actually.

Allison: Well, hell yes. Well, my eyes are always seeking out the women in the audience anyway. I have an aesthetic appreciation for men, but it’s aesthetic, it’s not personal.

Trethewey: Well, you must have an aesthetic appreciation for women, too.

Allison: But it’s personal. I care that they like it. And if they don’t like it, I’ll work real hard to change their minds. It is one of my worst tendencies. I can be – I will shift to try to please the people I want to most engage, and I’ll change stories and – but that’s – I think that’s also inherent in my family history. I think – it seemed to me that I grew up in a family in which every woman in my family, all my aunts, all
my cousins, had a narrative and it was always a tragic narrative. And they were in love with the tragic narrative of their lives, which meant they didn’t make much changes because then they could talk about how doomed they were. And there was a kind of romance of doom that is horrific if you really think about it, especially with – since they stay in it, cling to it and pass it on. And I’ve come along and I’m like, “Wait, couldn’t we like light out for the border? Couldn’t we do something different like – could we become truck drivers and leave this town?” And I sometimes think that’s the impulse that made me a lesbian more than elements of lust or my unholy appreciation of the aesthetic female form. I think it is that desire to retell the female story, make it a little bit more adventuresome and let me assure you, that’s a creative act, to speak against the romance of death is pretty – it takes a lot of nerve. And it does, it has the risk of robbing, of robbing people you love of their reason, their explanation for why they’ve done what they’ve done and why it can’t be changed.

Trethewey: When you make sense of it in print.

Allison: Yeah.

Trethewey: What’s your family think about that?

Allison: Well, I have a couple of wonderful things and a couple of hard things in terms of my family. Wonderful and hard at the same time. They don’t read much, which gives me just an enormous license. Since they don’t read my books, I can tell anything and make anything up and pretty much they’ll go along with it, if they pick it up at all.

Trethewey: Have they picked up any of it and…

Allison: They buy it, but I don’t think they read it. No, it’s…

Trethewey: So nobody said, “Why did you write that?”

Allison: …it’s there, it’s on the shelf. It’s like I am the vindication of poor white trash. Every Gibson, every Henderson, every Allison, they’ve all got the book, but they do not read it. I think they read the book when it first came out and when they discovered that they themselves personally were not named, they took little interest. And more of them have copies of the movies than they have of the books. It’s that kind of a family.

Trethewey: Well, what do they say about that?

Allison: They love it. One, we’re related to Lyle Lovett. He plays one of the uncles in Bastard. That is all good. And then one of them wrote a book. You have to remember, I’m the first one in my family to graduate from high school. So the notion that “one of us” wrote a book is just – I mean they will take that book and
hit people with it. My aunt wrote this, and they’re very proud of it, but they don’t read it. So they don’t talk to me about what’s in it. I can name – and I have hundreds of cousins – I can name five cousins who have ever talked to me about what is in the book. So I know they don’t read it. And that is a great license.

Trethewey: You don’t have to wait ‘til anybody is dead or anything.

Allison: No, they died anyway. I’m the second – I’ve recently discovered that I’ve got one cousin older than me still alive. Other than that, I’m the oldest woman living in my family. I’m 59. And we’re prolific. So this means we die at a rate almost unimaginable, which is also the – it’s an advantage ’cause I get to say what happened. All my aunts who are older and would have argued with me are gone. And their daughters and sons adore me, because I can write recommendations for their children to get into school. I can make short-term loans on a credit card. This is the defining power in the creative realm of my family. So they like me a bunch and mostly they show up and beam and – but there’s no – I think the hardest thing is that they don’t talk to me about the stories, except for those five, and when we have conversation, usually there has to be whisky, because when we talk, we talk real stories and it’s painful. Because it is about death.

Trethewey: You know, my father has some of that romance about doom and I can remember at some point when I realized that when he would get together with our family, his side of the family in Canada, over whisky and the playing of his guitar and his brother’s guitar, all the stories of woe would come out. And I would even be included in these stories of woe. I mean my father would be there telling these stories about “Oh, I don’t know about Tasha, I don’t know what she’s going to do…”

Allison: All of a sudden you’re a tragic figure.

Trethewey: Yeah, I just became a tragic figure in his stories, which drove me crazy. And so once I began writing poems, I was trying to tell a different story in my mind to set the record straight. Because there’s this whole narrative that he’s been giving. And so I think that for the longest time, he anticipated with great pride the possibility that his daughter would also be a poet and sort of follow in his footsteps, but then, I think very early on, he realized the danger of it, too, which meant that I was going to take the stories that he’d been telling for years and put a different spin on them. But that’s about historical memory. So those tensions that exist between the public record or the stories we tell in our own families, the silences in our own families, the lies that are told.

Allison: Useful past, sometimes useful lies. When you make a new narrative, when you tell a completely new story, new version, do you feel as if you’re breaking some rule?
Trethewey: Oh yeah. Well, you were saying something about correcting. I’m not – I guess I would use the word, well, if I tell a story in a poem about some event that happened when I was a child, in which I did not feel in control, that things just happened in some way. Sometimes when you’re a child you see – you’re not able to stop whatever is going on around you. That’s the powerless feeling that sort of might haunt my psyche and make me need to set the record straight. By retelling that same thing, but the power of constructing the narrative of best words, best order, I feel like I’m in charge then in ways that I couldn’t do then as a child.

Allison: I think I know how that feels. I need it to be – I need it to sing, not always pretty, but it has to sing, it has to have – has the possibility of lifting people, a little bit like really dangerous music. Yeah, a version that sings. Hopefully not sentimental, pretty much usually not pretty, and occasionally I make cacophony, but sometimes I can make it sing. But I also don’t – I don’t know any – let’s be very clear – I write lies, for the most part. I take little pieces of real stories, real history, real people and then I shift them over into an imaginary realm and I’m pretty clear about the distinction between real events that I will remake on the page in a fictional stance. And I know it’s fiction. It’s interesting to me that the reading audience, and sometimes my family, loses track. And it’s astonishing to me how when they do read the book, they believe it’s all true. They’re quite – and there’s a way in which it’s almost insulting, like you can’t make any of this up. Really, you can’t…

Trethewey: Now that has to be true.

Allison: You can’t imagine this, this actually happened. And I’m like well, actually no, I did, I made it up.

Trethewey: Well, you know, that has something to do with, I think, people’s expectations of first person narratives. I mean recently we’ve had people who were not very good novelists, so all they have to do is say it’s a memoir and somehow it’s a better book, because it actually happened or supposedly actually happened. In our classes we – in poetry we talk about the speaker of the poem and students often – and just people in general often slip and say, “Well, oh, well your mother in that poem,” rather than the speaker’s mother or something like that. And I think that there has for the longest time been some expectation that the I in a poem is the closest thing to the speaker, to the poet, with a little bit of the mask of artifice lifted. There are a lot of poets today that are writing persona poems that don’t even identify anywhere in the poem that it’s a persona. And I often feel tricked by them actually. I even feel tricked by them. But so usually, unless I’ve said, I am writing in the voice of the Civil War soldier or a prostitute from 1912, people can pretty much assume that the speaker in my poems is some version of myself. And yet, they’re fictions in those poems. If you didn’t know that, I have to admit it. Of course. And yet if you were to ask me about – if you pointed to certain things and said, “Did that happen?” I might say, “Well, no, but is it true? Absolutely.”
Allison: Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.

Trethewey: Absolutely true. The little fictions that you have to tell in order to tell a larger truth.

Allison: Or steal someone. I steal people and they don’t always recognize themselves. And sometimes I steal people for…

Trethewey: That’s funny.

Allison: …revenge.

Trethewey: Yeah, so you’re kind of wicked.

Allison: I can’t help myself. You mess with me, I’ll put you in a story. For many reasons, legal not the least among them, but also karma, I will obscure your identity so much that you might not recognize yourself. But I get the…

Trethewey: But other people will?

Allison: …satisfaction and every – occasionally, other people will say, “I think that’s – I think that’s that woman that we….” Yeah. But that’s part of the creative, that’s the trick. But I think that’s something that we do intrinsically. We make up fairy tales and fables and we call it – we say the witch. But really, it’s mama. And the huntsman, and really it’s that person that we were attracted to in the diner. You make them into symbols.

Trethewey: I was listening to Tobias Wolff on the radio the other day on NPR and he was talking about how he believes that all of fiction is autobiographical in some sense, because we have to give to it our – some of our internal lives, which sounds similar to something that Kundera said in the Unbearable Lightness of Being. But what do you think of that?

Allison: Well, it seems to me that all – when my – it’s a terrible thing and I have to apologize in advance that I use it in my class a lot, but I talk about those writers from Connecticut. And when those writers from Connecticut write stories about their lives, it is seen as fiction. But when we write a lot of stories about people we know, then it’s badly – thinly disguised…

Trethewey: It’s a documentary.

Allison: …biography. Yeah, yeah. Whereas, so you know, legitimate fiction, respectable literary fiction…

Trethewey: Is made up.
Allison: …is written about people in Connecticut and Long Island. It’s written about Yankees. If you write about southerners, you write about people of color, you write about women, then you are almost surely writing thinly described – the thinly-disguised biography and it’s not given respect.

Trethewey: No because...

Allison: And the only reason they get away with it is because they are also the people who are doing most of the critical work. Connecticut, Long Island, do you not agree with me? Well, you know, John Cheever, he wrote about John Cheever, for God’s sake. Philip Roth, I think he’s got multiple personality stuff cause some of his stuff is definitely not him. But a lot of it it’s him. And I love when I pick up a book and I think it’s the writer and I think I know something juicy about the writer. So sometimes I’m wrong and sometimes when people read me and ascribe things to me they’re wrong. But that – but let me be really clear, I want the license to do that. I want the license to write in persona and to write as I. I want the license to break frame and tell secrets, some of my own and some of people that wouldn’t approve.

Trethewey: I do too, but like you, I want those stories to be seen as equally valid to other stories.

Allison: Yeah, yeah.

Trethewey: I don’t want to have to pick up somebody’s book and turn over and read the book jacket and find a well-meaning blurb that says, “This rises above black experience to the level of human experience,” as if they’re mutually exclusive. Like somehow you can’t find yourself in a book written by that person because they’re so different from you. Where is human empathy? What does it mean to be human if I’m supposed to read literature from centuries ago and see how it means something to me as a human being now and somebody – boy, I’m going to say something that sounds like Barack Obama -- some bitter person in some small town reads it and says, “Oh, I can’t get into that because it happened to black people. That has nothing to do with me.”

Allison: And they’re all reading Jane Austin, for God’s sake. If you can read Jane Austin, you can read Toni Morrison and identify with the characters just as strongly. For God’s sake, wearing those corsets and dancing those silly dances, no, no.

Trethewey: I found myself in Wuthering Heights.

Allison: Well, but then again, I was Heathcliff.

Trethewey: I was Heathcliff. I was Heathcliff.
Allison: You know, of course, Heathcliff digs up the dead body? I’m Heathcliff, digging up the dead body.

Trethewey: I’m Heathcliff, too.

Allison: Oh God, we’re twisted, very twisted.

Trethewey: I was both – I loved Heathcliff and I was Heathcliff. So I, think about that.

Allison: And I think I married Heathcliff. She used to be in the Army. She’s got tendencies.

Trethewey: So maybe we should, just before we close, I thought you might say something about what it means to be a southern writer and the canon of southern writing.

Allison: My God. You know, it’s almost as if to become a writer you have to climb a ladder and the ladder you’re climbing, in my opinion, is Jacob’s ladder. You know about Jacob’s ladder in the Bible? The important thing about Jacob’s ladder is it’s on fire. So you’re climbing a ladder on fire if you’re trying to be a writer. And you are climbing these incredibly widely spaced rungs and each of them is intensely painful. And you have to climb over the one about being a women. And you have to climb over the one about being trashy. I have to climb over the one about being a lesbian. You have to climb over the one about being from Mississippi, which is almost worse than being from South Carolina.

Trethewey: I was going to say…

Allison: And then at some point, you’re climbing in really rarified air and you’re climbing over the ladder about being southern. And I have to say, I have gotten more difficulty in that kind of contempt that believes it is not contempt for being a southern writer than for being a lesbian or a working-class writer. It’s just as if the concept of what it means to be a southern writer, it’s as if they’ll give credit – they’ll give credit to Flannery and they’ll give credit to Faulkner, but the rest of us are not given much respect. And in fact, in fact we’re given a lot of dismissal and it’s a really hard barrier to climb over. Look at how many tremendously gifted southern writers get remarkably little attention outside the south. We’re regional writers, while meanwhile, Connecticut and Long Island…

Trethewey: That’s not regional.

Allison: They’re not regional, they’re the world.

Trethewey: It’s universal, right.

Allison: Yeah. Like you’re going to be – to become human you have to stop being a black writer.
Trethewey: Or a southern one.

Allison: Or a southern writer.

Trethewey: Or a woman.

Allison: So, does that mean that we have a lot of rage to power our writing and our creativity?

Trethewey: Aren’t we lucky?

Allison: Oh God. Such a gift to be from the south. We were going to ask you to come up and join us, want to bring a chair and then we can wire you for mic, or have you stand up and…oh, he has his own…

Elliott: And a chair.

Allison: And a mic. Be careful not to back up or you’ll fall head over backwards and go through the window. [inaudible] I’m really glad you wrote about the Custer battles because I really have no desire to go, but I’m thrilled to hear you write about them and to see them through your imagination.

Elliott: I enjoyed going. I mean it was actually going to the battlefield that hooked me on doing the project.

Trethewey: That’s how it started for you?

Elliott: Yeah, I mean the story – I actually talk about the story in the book. I was doing the thing you do after you finish a book, you start casting about and flirting with other projects, sure afraid you’re never going to write anything else again. And I became interested in the battle and the history and sort of interested because I didn’t know very much about it, even though that’s my period of American studies, late 19th Century. And then I found out there are these groups of people who are intensely passionate about this history. Well, that’s interesting. And then I found out they’re reenactments. I said, well, I’ll go see a reenactment. I had a little research money, I’m sure, and went and did that, then I saw all these different groups converge on these small towns. I thought, well, that’s really interesting. What is this stake that they all have in this history? And I just kept going back. It was a lot of fun to research.

Allison: I loved the way you read the honoring poem and the way I heard it. I have this suspicion that not everybody hears that the same way, that look at me, look at me. I don’t think Custer realizes that I think he’s a fool, yelling look at me.
Elliott: Yeah, I mean it’s an interesting moment and this figure, Joseph Medicine Crow is a very interesting man. He has been a tribal historian. He was in World War II. He actually, if any of you watched the recent World War II Ken Burns series, was on there, because he’s the last Crow Indian to complete the four things that a Crow has to do to become a chief, which include counting coup on an enemy horse, as the last war the horses were in. So he has this very deep sense of what battle is and also this really complicated relationship with this history. He’s been around it for decades. He actually wrote the script for this reenactment in the early ‘60s, had a run through the ‘60s into the early ‘70s and then it stopped and then it was revived again around 1990. So are we supposed to take…

Allison: Is there irony in it or do I just hear irony?

Elliott: Oh, there’s irony in everything around Custer. Because they both need Custer and they want to kill him at the same time, right? And again, remember that these are all Crows, so his ancestors actually fought with Custer. But the appeal of this thing is that you get all these Crow young men to go out and ride out and kill Custer. And they love that. I mean you could really see how much they enjoy this performance, even though they’re actually performing for somebody else’s tribe, and so it’s a very complicated relationship. And I think it is, it’s both ironic, but it’s also – they do have a sincere affection for their ancestors who fought with him and the reason that they have this reservation land around the battlefield is because of that allegiance to the United States. It was a completely strategic move on their part. So it’s very complicated for them.

Allison: I always remember Lillian Smith wrote a book called *The Winner Names the Age*. The winner gets the land.

Elliott: Yeah.

Trethewey: Yeah, and the story.

Allison: Yep, their version. You guys want to ask us questions or, or just want to eat cake?

Trethewey: Walter has one.

Q: Reading *Bastard Out of Carolina* in my class, I was reminded of the narrative where Bone empowers herself by writing about mean sisters and John Wayne had a mean sister and Jackie Kennedy has a mean sister. And it kind of reminded me of Toni Morrison _____ meanness, as well as dispensation as a form of empowerment. I’m wondering how that figures into your energies as a writer.

Allison: I am the spirit of meanness. I remember when I was a kid, we actually went to see the *Dalton Girls*, which was a Saturday matinee movie – you don’t know about this. There were the Dalton Boys who were outlaws and then they made this really awful movie about the Dalton Girls who completely against their will took
up guns and shot people. And I thought, whoa. So we all came home and played the Dalton Girls. I wanted to grow up to be a gunfighter, but there are very few careers for gunfighters.

Elliott: You should come out to the reenactments.

Trethewey: Yeah, Custer.

Elliott: I see Calamity Jane.

Allison: No, I think just honoring your spirit of meanness is necessary.

Elliott: Have either of you ever had your – had editors or anybody tell you were too angry in your writing?

Allison: Yes, yes. Didn’t publish with them. Have you ever been told you were too angry?

Trethewey: No.

Allison: But you were told to write about Ireland.

Trethewey: Right, I was told to write about something that was…

Q: Natasha, I would love to hear your poems about Northern Ireland.

Allison: They’re coming.

Q: It actually reminded me of Eavan Boland, who wrote, writing during the troubles in Northern Ireland, she said, it was easier to quit a bomb than a baby and partly – that what you’re saying about having those large topics seem to be, you know, seem to invite creativity but they often shut it down really prescribes for you.

Allison: I love her poems against love.

Q: Yeah.

Trethewey: But you know, this seems, perhaps is sort of off what you’re saying, but Eavan Boland’s work is some of the work that’s meant the most to me in terms of trying to figure out how to write about myself, my sense of psychological exile, from this place that is my home and not my home and of course, she even has a new book called Domestic Violence. I mean she’s just…

Q: Which sounds as though she’s going______.
Allison, Trethewey & Elliott Creativity Conversations, 4-15-08

Trethewey: That’s why she’s meant so much to me, particularly in a time of violence. I do too.

Q: But you actually did write an Irish poem...

Trethewey: Well, that was Heaney’s sure, absolutely. It was sort of part Heaney part Boland, but the two of them and how they approach history and that native land.

Allison: Yes, back there.

Q: Y’all were saying that – and I heard you, you said that you’re writing as a function of rage-pain like hardship in your past, or not – did I miss other like a motive – was I not listening right?

Allison: Well, maybe because we haven’t talked enough. I think rage is a good place to start, it’s not a good place to stay. But it will give you a lot of energy to begin something, being really angry. And when you’re being told that the stories you want to tell you shouldn’t tell, that triggers an anger that then lets you – you’re not so much writing about what you’re angry about, but you’re writing the resistance when you’re told you can’t write. That gives you a lot of energy. But if you stay one note just angry all the time, it gets a little bit hard to stay with.

Trethewey: I would say that my rage is, on the other hand, a curiosity, I mean it – what I’m angry about is historical erasure. All the histories that we’re not told, that aren’t recorded in the textbook, all the people who’ve gone – have been lost or forgotten. Actually, the lies that we’ve been told throughout history. I’m not making this up. I’m not the one who says – you guys know what historians are talking about right now. That’s the thing that fuels me. And my curiosity about finding out what’s between what we’ve been given and what’s been left out. So it’s just as much a curiosity to fill in the gaps, those silences left to oblivion in our history as a people. So you can call it rage or you can call it curiosity. I’m mad that stuff gets left out, but I’m just fascinated about putting it back in the place that it belongs.

Allison: There was a woman…

Q: Yeah, I’ve actually, Michael, I wanted to ask you about – to keep up this anger discussion – is there an anger that’s fueling this work? I mean, I thought I heard something at the end when you were talking about the present moment and war and so on....

Elliott: Yeah. Anger is maybe – I mean there are definitely moments that I felt angry. You can’t – but there’s a reason I spent a paragraph on unemployment statistics on American Indians. You can’t not spend time around these, in these rural reservations and be sort of acutely aware of the deep poverty that’s there and wonder what exactly – how it’s connected to the history that I was interested in
and what should be done about it. I certainly do have anger about the contemporary Americans involved abroad. But I think actually what I was – what fueled a lot of writing about the book, in the end, was a surprise for me in this book, which was that I came to think very differently about what it means to be in the military. And one of the things I didn’t say that I should have said at some point to set up the final epilogue is that American Indian communities have one of the highest rates of enlistment in the country, which is extraordinary to think about. For them, it’s actually – one of the things that when I heard that was, is that ironic? Do they have a kind of ironic relationship to the US military? And in fact, my sense is that they don’t, but they actually see this as being continuous with their sense of themselves as Indians and continuous with this history of military resistance to the United States. And I guess to the extent that I’m angry it’s to – it’s about in this final chapter, it’s about the ways in which that intense patriotism has been taken advantage of in the current moment, because there are – every time one of these reenactments is run by -- the other reenactment I didn’t really talk about -- it’s run by a Crow Indian family – for every single performance that I’ve ever been to, and they’ve all been post 9/11, a man doing the run-up to the show gives the exact number of Crow men and women who are fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. He has that number on the tip of his tongue always. And that’s just extraordinary to me. And I didn’t grow up in a military family. My grandfather fought in World War II and that was kind of a distant past. My father stayed out of Vietnam and tried hard to stay out of Vietnam by enrolling in the National Guard, and in my kind of post-Vietnam education, I didn’t really think very much about military history, which is one of the reasons I didn’t know much about this history. And so for me, there’s been a kind of new appreciation for the men and women who are part of that now.

Q: The subject of empathy came up a little bit earlier, and it seems like each one of you…empathy is an important dimension in your work…So, and it seems to me that in a way empathy is another side of rage, because it’s through a kind of awareness of other people’s pain as well as your own pain or your own history that that kind of rage might come up and also evoke that empathy in the reader and so I was wondering if that seems, like, connected...

Trethewey: Well, I think that’s absolutely right because I keep thinking, yeah, I know, to have used that word rage now it just has filled the room when what I’m concerned with is truth and social justice and I think empathy is a way to get at those things..

Elliott: I have a question about that. I’m so glad you brought this up. You were talking about wanting to – you were worried that readers were being prurient and not empathetic. You guys were having this conversation. And my question is, how do you separate the two of them, because for me there’s a – it seems like there’s always a really fine line and especially – for me this is the first book that I’ve written where I’ve done significant field work, interviewing people, as opposed to just working the texts. Or the text is as a literary and critic, especially working with those great 19th Century authors, because they’re dead. It’s great because you
never have to worry about being prurient in your interests because they’re all dead people. Now these are all people who come back and tell me that I got things wrong. How do you divide the prurient interests from empathy?

Trethewey: I have to say for me it’s – I don’t know, I want to hear what Dorothy says too, but just an example for me. I gave this interview with Terry Gross last summer in which I talked very frankly about things that are behind the making of some of the poems, a story, a personal sort of family tragedy that I’ve lived with for a long time that – so when I wrote the elegy about my mother, I mean those poems are about my grief, I mean they’re – they’re not – that’s what they’re about. They’re about that feeling of loss, how it’s carried and transformed. But I’ve gone to give a few readings this year where I’ve been introduced and it’s as if the two things are colliding when the introducer says, “She writes about three main subjects in Native Guard,” and they’ll talk about the Civil War soldiers and they’ll talk about sort of my relationship to myself. And then they’ll say, “And the murder of her mother.” That’s before I have to get up and give a reading. I’m not writing about the murder of my mother. I’m writing about grief. But that’s why she’s dead, which is that’s why I have grief. But that they bring that to me, suggests an interest in that. It may just be that they…

Elliott: It’s like it’s a crime scene.

Trethewey: …find it a fascinating story and so I’m not upset with people for that, but it really – I don’t know why that that’s how I’d be introduced. Because the book is about historical memories.

Elliott: I’ve seen some other introductions of you that we can talk about later, which would probably…

Trethewey: But murder? I’ve got to stand up after like the word murder has been put into the room and everybody is like, oooo, murder surrounds her. I mean I was receiving an award from the Governor of the State of Mississippi, Haley Barber – don’t y’all love that? And they were doing a video and in the video it was talking about my mother’s murder. I’m like, wait a minute, I’m here to be honored for something and we’re going to talk about like murder during this ceremony. That didn’t seem – maybe I brought it on myself, because I told the truth in an interview.

Allison: You can’t always control how people are going to play with the details of your life. That prurient – I write about violence. I’m very, very clear that almost everything I write has that at its core, not always rage, but almost always some act of violence. The thing that I’m most consumed with is what happens after violence, how people survive, how they don’t go crazy or how they go crazy, how, in fact, you make it useful. That’s why I like so much that phrase of a useful past, because you can come through violence and on the other side of it, you can have some muscle, some callous, some strengths, some philosophy, religion,
whatever helps you to deal with it. But I am very, very clear that most of the reading public has an enormous prurient interest in violence and in sex and that it is my job as a writer to craft a narrative that kind of dances around what they want me to give ‘em, which is the blood and bone and misery and snot and what I’m going for is the blood, bone, misery, and snot, but with respect and with not so – no, sometimes not respect. I want to shape it in their minds so that, put simply, it can’t be just jerk-off material, which is what I object to with prurience, where I suddenly become – I become an itch they’re going to scratch and it will be scratched fairly easily. I want it to hurt if they’re going to scratch it and I want them to think about it differently. I don’t want to be the easy prurient approach. I want it to be really complicated.

Trethewey: I guess the thing that bothers me about it a little bit is that if you do write about things that have some – that are sensational, in a way, things that are seemingly ripped from the headlines of newspapers…

Allison: Much of my life.

Trethewey: Yeah, your own life, that it’s often easy if the interest that a reader has is only prurient to move beyond the details of the facts of things, to see what else a work is doing. And I find that often people – there are some people who read me and stop at race, stop at murder, stop at – instead of saying that I write about history or that I write about ideas or that I write about historical memory. What’s easiest…

Allison: You also do something else. The language that you use is very particular and beautifully chosen to sidestep that easy language, those buzzwords.

Trethewey: But people still find a way to say, this is about this, as opposed to…

Allison: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Trethewey: …what I think it’s about.

Allison: And the cover of my book in Japan has a little girl in her white panties on a couch. That’s not what I made, that’s what they made. And we’re fighting it with everything that we have, but the fight is gonna always be there.

Trethewey: But when experience bubbles to the top – and I remember this same teacher saying to me that experience was passé. He didn’t want to hear anybody writing about experiences…

Allison: Because he didn’t have any.

Trethewey: Well, I…if you have nothing to write -- but if experience is the thing that out of which you make art, it’s easy for people to get bogged down in looking at the experience and not the art that was made out of it.
Allison: But I do not believe that one has to have been raped to write about rape, or to have had someone in your family murdered to write about murder. I mean let’s be clear, the creative act…

Trethewey: I don’t either.

Allison: …is the act of empathy in which you create a character that these things happen to.

Trethewey: And I absolutely don’t believe that, but let me just say, to counter what you just said, I was reading the back of – actually, I was reading this book by William Heyen called *Shoah Train*, a few years ago. Have any of you read this book? It’s a book of poetry. It was financed for the National Book Award a few years ago. I was reading it for some other committee and I never read the jackets cause I don’t want to be influenced by anything on the back. And so I’m reading the book and something is not right to me. And I don’t know what’s wrong with it, but something – I’m halfway through and I’m feeling weird about it. So then I finally turn it over and I look at the jacket and there’s one really large blurb from Carl Shapiro and I agreed very much with the first part of this blurb in which he says, “William Heyen is not Jewish, he’s German,” and Shapiro says, “This is his story to write to.” And I absolutely agree with that, but these things don’t just happen to some people, they happen to humanity. And so I absolutely think that it’s also his story to tell, and that he ought to take it on. But then, Shapiro actually goes on to say, “And perhaps he’s better suited to tell it than the people who are actually victims of this history.” Not having been a victim of it – because the victims are going to write elegy and dirge. So we need the people who have not experienced this to actually tell the story. If you extrapolate from that, people most equipped to tell stories, I guess would be white men for whom no suffering has ever occurred. So it’s like you’re doubly like slapping somebody by saying, first of all you were a victim of this history, this happened to you, and now you can’t write about it either, because you’re going to be too like sentimental or dirge or elegy or…

Allison: Too emotionally involved to write about it.

Trethewey: We need somebody removed…

Allison: Dispassionate story…

Trethewey: …that’s writing…

Speaker: …as a fiction writer and not have the audience think you were raped. I mean this is – because when I was in Berlin _____, I’m walking out there in front of 900 people, the very first question I get is, is this autobiographical? That word autobiographical, she didn’t understand what it meant. And I said, “Oh, so you want to know did my father rape me when I was eight?” And the place fell dead.
And I said, “No you don’t want me to answer that question.” And we moved on from that. But I don’t – I’ve had – I’ve published books that had a young girl going through these things in the ‘40s, which I did not live through, and the first question from the audience, this where I tell them -- this book is about my mother. And the first question from the audience is, is this autobiographical? Is this about you? They’re always going to ask me that question, because they want it to. I mean that’s what the prurience – that is what prurient is all about. I want this to have happened to you, I want to know. I want to know you suffered. There is a sick impulse.

Q: Why do you think that impulse is there? I’ve been interested to listen to you all talk about how you’re trying to write different history or correct maybe historical records through fiction and I wonder why then this desire with the audience to not read fiction, to get some truth from nonfiction instead of fiction.

Speaker: I want them to read the fiction. That’s not the point. I would like them to consider – it’s a curious age we live in when everybody assumes that fiction writers are telling the literal truth, but nonfiction writers are lying. And they come to these categories with these assumptions.

Trethewey: And we don’t need facts to tell the truth. I mean this, what we’re talking about is they want to know something is fact. I’m just interested if it’s true. It’s true if the language rings true. If it’s so beautifully done that it convinces us and makes us believe and care. Not that it really happened.

Speaker: I think this is a good time for us to break up the formality of this and start talking. So let’s just give – let’s thank these folks…[applause]

END