Magee: Well, it’s great to see you all out here tonight. And joining us for this creativity conversation, as many of you know, this is part of a series of creativity conversations that we’ve been holding on campus. We’ve had public conversations with Salman Rushdie, E.O. Wilson, Hanif Kureishi, and some more private ones with Umberto Eco and Seamus Heaney. So this is part of that series with more to come. And in that process, is sponsored by a variety of groups, including the Provost’s Office, and the Creativity and Arts Initiative, the Center for Creativity and Arts, and really to notice and reflect upon creativity on our campus, and within ourselves. So thank you for joining these conversations.

Tonight, we have a particularly special occasion. We’re meeting in anticipation of the world premier of Ophelia’s Gaze with Katherine Blumenthal, Soprano, and the Vegas String Quartet, and the composer, Steve Everett. The conversation this evening is intended to explore the processes of creation of both the artists who are with us tonight, Steve Everett and Natasha Trethewey.

Professor Everett is a Professor of Music and teaches composition and computer music. He is affiliated with the Center for Mind, Brain, and Culture. He has had visiting professor positions at Princeton University, the Eastman School of Music, and a variety of places in Europe and elsewhere. Many of his compositions involve performers with computer control electronics, and have been performed in 17 different countries throughout Europe, Asia, and North America. He’s received numerous composition awards from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Asian Cultural Council, Chamber Music Association, and more. In addition to substantial experience conducting opera, and in his orchestral repertoire, he has presented over 200 works of contemporary music as conductor of Thamyris Music Ensemble here in Atlanta since 1992. So it’s especially wonderful to be having this creativity conversation with our friends and colleagues here on campus.

Joining Steve tonight is Natasha Trethewey, Professor of English, and the Phyllis Wheatley Distinguished Chair in Poetry. Natasha is an award winning poet. Her first collection, Domestic Work, won the inaugural Cave Canem Poetry Prize. She’s also received an award from the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters, and the 2001 Lillian Smith Award for Poetry. Her second collection, which is the one that we’ll be talking about tonight, Belloq’s Ophelia, received also an award from the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters, and was a finalist for both the Academy of American Poets Award, and the Lenore Marshall prizes. It was
named a 2003 Notable Book by the American Library Association. And then, of course, her most recent collection, Native Guard, won the Pulitzer Prize, as well as many other awards and notices. Natasha is the recipient of the 2000 Mississippi Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts for Poetry, and was named the 2008 Georgia Woman of the Year, too. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies, and she also has received fellowships from a variety of places, including the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Bunting Fellowship Program, and the National Endowment for the Arts. So you see here, within our own community, we have these two very distinguished thinkers, artists, a musician, and a poet.

Our focus tonight, as I mentioned, is going to be on Bellocq’s Ophelia, which was the work that Natasha wrote as a poetry collection, and now being transformed into the world premier of a Ophelia’s Gaze, a new chamber opera by Steve Everett.

What we thought we would do this evening is to start with Natasha reading the poem, or one of the poems from that collection, and as to really kind of set the mood for our conversation. And then the three of us will engage in a conversation and talk among ourselves, and then open it up to larger questions and discussion. So, now let me present to you, Natasha Trethewey.

Trethewey: Good evening. Thank you all for coming. Some of the, I’m glad that we have this one right here now for you guys to look at because that first painting, of course, was John Everett Millais’ Ophelia. And I remember that painting from my childhood. I believe that it was on the cover of my ninth grade Hamlet text. So the first time I saw one of Bellocq’s photographs in a graduate class called Materials for the Study of American Culture, I was immediately struck by how, in my opinion, that painting and the photograph had something very much in common. When the photograph comes along, I’ll show it to you, maybe you’ll agree that it has some things in common, perhaps not. But I’d like to convince you that it does with a poem.

I began to imagine the life of Ophelia. My Ophelia is a mixed race prostitute who was photographed by E. J. Bellocq circa 1910 to 1912 in Storyville, New Orleans, the Red Light District. She would have been very white skinned, mallato, quadroon, or octoroon, living in one of the Octoroon Houses, such as Willy Piazza’s Basin Street Mansion, or Lula White’s Mahogany Hall.

Bellocq’s Ophelia, from a photograph circa 1912. In Millais’s painting, Ophelia dies face up, eyes and mouth open, as if caught in the gasp of her last word or breath, flowers and reeds growing out of the pond, floating on the surface around her. The young woman who posed, lay in a bath for hours, shivering, catching cold, perhaps imagining fish tangling in her hair, or nibbling a dark mole, raised upon her white skin. Ophelia’s final gaze aimed skyward, her palms curling open, as if she’s just said, take me. I think of her when I see Bellocq’s photograph, a
woman posed on a wicker devon, her hair spilling over. Around her, flowers on a pillow, on a thick carpet, even the ravages of this old photograph bloom like water lilies across her thigh. How long did she hold there? This other Ophelia, nameless inmate in Storyville, naked, her nipples offered up hard with cold. The small mound of her belly, the pale hair of her pubis, these things, her body, there for the taking. But in her face, a dare, staring into the camera, she seems to pull all movement from her slender limbs and hold it in her heavy lidded eyes. Her body limp, as dead Ophelia’s, her lips poised to open, to speak.

That was good timing. It came up right about the finishing.

Magee: It did, yeah, we had that perfectly planned and orchestrated. I really want to start with a question about inspiration, and give both of you a chance to talk about the sources of inspiration for you as artists. And maybe, perhaps, start with you, Steve, and you can talk a little bit about the way that you responded to Natasha’s poetry, and also to the photographs as well.

Everett: Yeah. As a composer, I’m always looking for ideas as the _____ for creating some kind of patterns of sound to generate. And so I read a fair amount of poetry and look at a lot of paintings, looking for any kind of source that might resonate with me on some level. I’d met Natasha a couple of times over the years, and so I went down to the Dweedles(?) Bookstore and I wanted to just get one of her collections and just sort of see what she was about. And I just randomly picked up Belloqc’s Ophelia, and there were several there. And I went back to my office, I remember, and I just, before class I had an hour, and I read the entire collection. And this rarely happens, but I just sort of envisioned this entire piece. I mean usually when I compose, you get some inklings of ideas and then you spend a year of perspiration trying to fulfill the inspiration that you had in that one moment. But this one felt like I really, really felt like I knew this character that Natasha had created, that I sensed her world was filled with all sorts of ambiguities, mystery, the fact that it was set in Storyville was also important for me because being a musician, and being a jazz musician historically, obviously Storyville is an important place for the birth of jazz. And so I knew a lot about these photos already, the Belloqc photos. And so something about this just captured my imagination. And I really just knew that I had an idea for this piece from beginning to end, which I didn’t have all the music figured out. I didn’t hear specific pieces, but I had the form, and I had a sense of how this character, who was traveling and ends up in Storyville trying to find work, ends up in this brothel, and then all of the issues that she goes through and all of her questioning of identity, trying to find control over her life, trying to find a way maybe out of that in the end. And there was something about it that just made me want to try to explore her world and the issues around her world more than what Natasha had done and sort of my own sense of that. So that really began, and so I called Natasha and asked if she would be okay with me doing this. And of course, she was thrilled, so that’s how I got started.
Magee: Well, what bout for you, Natasha? You alluded to this a little bit when you started, but beyond your high school textbook and seeing a photograph, what other images came to your mind or stories or ideas that led you down this path?

Trethewey: Well, it seems like, after listening to Steve, it happened for me very much the same way, that right when I saw that photograph and made the connection with Millais’ painting, class was over, I ran straight to the library, and found the collection of Belloqc’s photographs. And I sat on the floor in the stacks and quickly wrote what became the title poem, sketched out a draft for Belloqc’s Ophelia. Sitting there in the library that day, I could envision a whole life for her. And I knew that what she was going to do was to spend time writing letters and keeping a diary. And so I could imagine the format of her self discovery, about during I suppose about a year-and-a-half of her life in Storyville. At the time, I think I had been searching for a way to write about my own experience growing up biracial in the Deep South, the experience of often being looked at a lot when I was a child, and being asked over and over what are you, and always feeling under the gaze of some scrutiny. And so when I saw Ophelia and, well, she wasn’t Ophelia then, of course, but when I saw the woman in the photograph and learned a little bit about the history of Storyville and that there were these Octoroon Houses where the exotic curiosities of women who looked very white were more valuable to customers because they weren’t, it seemed to me a perfect voice through whom to contemplate my own experience growing up biracial.

Magee: Well, I want to pick up on that idea of the gaze because obviously that’s what caught your attention, Steve, or one of the many things that caught your attention. So the idea of both looking at another person, and also being looked at. What was meaningful to you about that? And how would you describe that experience?

Everett: Yeah, in that experience of sort of feeling this entire structure, it really occurred to me that Belloqc, the photographer who took these women’s photographs that we’re looking at over here, he was the first one who basically stared, captured this woman’s image and created her first existence outside her real existence. So then that carries on to the 1970s, these photos are discovered, they’re made public. Natasha has almost the same kind of epiphany. She sees that photograph of Belloqc’s image of her, and then creates another image of her in this text. Then I read the text and hear this world that this woman exists in. So there are three people that have basically gazed upon this woman and have given her an identity, a group identity. And it really sort of caught me that this woman’s life was all about gaze. She was posing and pretending to be somebody that her clients would pay for, that her whole life was not in her control because she was controlled by the camera, by people’s gaze, by Belloqc, Natasha, and I. We were controlling her. So when I really got the idea for this, it was how do we allow this woman, Ophelia, to really, which was implied in the way Natasha wrote this, is that the only way she’s going to break out of that is to get her own gaze, is to be able to find her own view, and to be able to look back. So that’s what this piece really became for me was it was a way to explore how the camera is capturing her at the
beginning, but then through the series of poems, she finds a way to reverse that. She then is able to look through the camera and to see the world, which then frees her from that, all of us as sort of gazing upon her and controlling her in some ways.

Magee: Well, Natasha, how does that feel to you? How does that seem to you that you have created, in a way, this story, this poetry, this character, this persona, and that then that persona is then adopted by somebody else and further developed and taken in perhaps new and different ways, ways that you hadn’t even thought of yet?

Trethewey: Well, I’m interested in the larger conversation between art and different forms of art. So what Steve has done, of course, is an ecphrastic composition, as was what I did. And in that very opening poem, there is the reference to not only Belloq’s photograph, but also to John Everett Millais’ painting, which, of course, references Shakespeare’s Hamlet. And so there’s all these layerings of ecphrastic conversation within these various forms of art. And I think what I like best about it is that not only does she become real for me, I think she becomes very real for Steve. And once she becomes real, she is then able to escape the frames that we’ve made for her. This image that we’re looking at now is the cover image of the book, and it represents the last poem in the book, too, in which I imagine her being photographed, and just after the flash, stepping out of the frame and going off into her life. Lots of people have said to me, well, what happens next? Where does she go now? And I don’t know. I like to think that she’s gone away, but we’ll see her for a little bit next weekend.

Everett: As I was working on this, trying to make some kind of statement as to what happens at the end, and when you title something Ophelia, then there is this kind of ghost of the Shakespeare’s Ophelia. Is it going to be the same outcome for this character as the Hamlet Ophelia? And of course, Hamlet dies and we have Millais’ painting as sort of the visual representation of that because she doesn’t actually die on stage in Hamlet, she’s off stage, so we don’t ever actually see her except in these paintings. But in this Ophelia, without giving away the ending, you kind of think that she’s contemplating death through some of the poems. But it may not be death is what we end up with at the end. There’s another option for Ophelia I think in your words, and also I try to find a way for her to step into the future, and maybe give a hint as to what that future might be at the very end. So without giving away the ending, there is a future for her that you will see just briefly.

Trethewey: I can’t wait.

Magee: Yeah. I’m looking forward to that. So also for you, Natasha, the choice of the name Ophelia, if you’ll talk about the kind of multiple levels of resonance that that has and how that connects to other cultural images and ideas we have.
Trethewey: Well, when I, again, when I first saw the image, that’s the first thing I thought of. And as I began to think more about it, and about the original Ophelia, Shakespeare’s Ophelia, I thought about her silence, her voicelessness in many ways, and her fate, as well. And it occurred to me that I remembered the line get thee to a nunnery meant brothel when Hamlet said it. And so it seemed a perfect place for this character to go, and for her to be named Ophelia. And one of the interesting things about Storyville, too, in terms of this idea of naming, naming factors in a large part in the collection. She is named Ophelia, so she has this name that comes with a lot of baggage. And yet in Storyville, it was common for women to be given stage names or in the brothel. So she had yet another name, which is Violet, very common in Storyville. So she tries to exist within these two names, the one that she’s been given that carries a lot of weight, and then the one she’s given again in the brothel, which is meant to suggest, they called her the African Violet Violet, which is supposed to suggest the Dark Continent hidden beneath the white skin. So the naming for her is crucial. I think one of the challenges was whether or not to call the book Belloqc’s Ophelia. One person said to me, well, if you call it that, it seems that you’re only making her owned by someone yet again. But it seemed to me that to start there allowed her to move away from that, and to become her own Ophelia. And certainly, with Steve’s title, Belloqc is gone from it, and it’s indeed her vision that we’re given.

Everett: I was trying to sort of see when she finally does get her gaze, that’s what this opera is about. It’s not so much Belloqc’s gaze on her, but we start with that. But we move from that into her finally getting her own gaze, and so it becomes Ophelia’s Gaze, not Belloqc’s gaze anymore, or Natasha’s gaze or Steve’s gaze. It becomes hers.

Magee: And in a way, presumably, once we see it, it becomes our gaze at her, I mean the rest of us who are members of the audience and participate in that gaze. So that gets expanded. I want to pick up on the name, since we’re talking about names, Storyville, which I know is an actual historic place, and has a specific designation. But also it has so many interesting resonances to it as well. And your poems really create a story, they tell a story. So as I told you yesterday when we talked about this, I had read several of those poems before, but as kind of discrete entities. And then when I read them all together as a collection, I saw a story being told, a story unfolding. Steve, in your work as a musician, I know you’ve done many things, but you’ve chosen the form that you’ve chosen as an opera type form, which is more consistent with telling stories in a narrative. And I’m interested from both of your perspectives about this kind of story telling quality of both poetry and music.

Everett: Yeah, when I’m reading poetry looking for sort of an inspiration or an impetus for an idea, generally poems get set in short chanson song forms, leader forms. Two or three minutes you can take a poetic moment, a poetic reverie, and capture that in two or three minutes without having to get into narrative story telling. So that’s why you don’t find poetry as the basis for operatic forms or longer narrative forms with music. So this collection was interesting because it contained both.
You had chronology, you had the narrative storytelling, but you had those poetic moments because, for me, it was a series of reveries that I felt this woman going through. As she was writing letters home, she was projecting her life to her old teacher, Constance Wright, that she was writing to. So many of these poems are these letters home, her talking about her life to somebody else, and what she says about her life is sort of one dimension of her. Then another collection are some of her diary entries. And those are very different, because when she’s not writing to someone, she’s writing for herself. And those become more where time stands still and it’s just her going into her own thoughts. And for me, it felt like there were moments where she, in Natasha’s poems, there were moments where she would look into pools of water, like I think one of the poems the bathtub was filling up, and she just saw her reflection in the water and started going into this thought about her life and so forth. So those to me were moments of poetic reverie that I wanted to try to capture in this, that you don’t feel like you have to think about the story, you can just feel her going into this space where time stands still. At the same time, the fact that it is a dramatic work, there is a structure on top of those series of vignettes of, little tableaux perhaps, which stream together. There is a story being told with those reveries and those letters home that Natasha was able to create. And that’s why this collection for me was extraordinary when I read it because it enabled something other than just a three minute chanson to come out of the particular poem, that these poems could be strung together in some kind of larger structure, something like an operatic form. But because it was about one character, I did not want to have a traditional opera with five singers or a large orchestra. It felt much more intimate than that. It didn’t need large forces. And there are several characters that are referenced in the collection. The poem that Natasha just read is the opening poem. And that is sort of the narrator voice of setting the stage for the series of events that happen. Then there’s also the madam of the brothel, Countess P, who has a very important role for me. So I decided to have one character, one singer, who sings and reads. She doesn’t sing the whole time. But she basically carries all the voices of everybody in the poems. So she has to change roles. So to me, that was much more interesting to have her, here again, pretending to be these other people, because that’s what her life is about, it’s pretending to be this character for the clients, and she has to pose in certain ways for them. So it was very natural for her to pretend to be Countess, to pretend to be Natasha, the narrator, that my Ophelia became somebody who was very adept at acting and could play whatever role she needed to. But in her diaries is when you really discover the real essence of her. And that’s where I wanted to be able to capture those where you don’t think about what happened before or after, you just go into those moments with her. And so that was the challenge for me was to try to in some ways capture the same form you had, which was these poetic moments within a larger form, just telling a story.

Magee: And for you, Natasha, had you kind of created a series of poems in this way before that tell a story or have a narrative device interacting through it over time?
Trethewey: Well, I had written a sequence of poems in my first book. But this was very different. I was thinking, I think of them as a sequence rather than simply a long poem. Even as Letters from Storyville, which is the longest sequence in the book, is more like a long poem in that the different sections, I think, rely upon each other a lot more. They are not as standalone as an individual poem. I think that’s true in Storyville Diary, too. I did publish some of the poems individually, but I was pretty fortunate, because sometimes it’s really hard to get such a long poem published in a magazine. But on both occasions, with Storyville Diary and Letters from Storyville, an editor decided to publish the whole thing, which was really good. So only one of the letters that sort of stands alone in the book as it is now was published by itself. And the rest of them were together. And I think that that really helps the story. One of the things that Steve was talking about also is the story that she’s trying to tell about herself, the two different kinds of stories. In her letters, she’s still performing. There’s still an audience. And even in the form of the letters, she’s trying out different things. And so there isn’t a uniform form there. Those poems are more wide-ranging in terms of their lines, their free verse, some of them have very short lines. But in Storyville Diary, the place that I think she expresses most that core of self, that sense of self that’s unchanging even as she’s performing for her audience, those are the very tight little sonnets, unrhymed sonnets. And it seemed to me that that was a way to reflect those two different types of storying. When I was first putting the collection together, I imagined at first that I would intersperse the diaries, the diary entries with the letters, and so that you would get a letter, and then a couple of letters then maybe a diary entry. But I ultimately decided against that, because I wanted to shake up the linear narrative that exists in the letters and in the diary. And the way that I do that is I tell the same story. I call it the same story both times. So chronologically, the letters move from here to there, and then there’s a break in the middle of the book, and then the same chronology exists in the diary. And yet the story that gets told over the same period of time is a different story.

Magee: You mentioned earlier that as you were thinking through some of your own issues around identity and yourself, that you felt a connection to her position in life. And do you, while not seeing the poetry as being strictly autobiographical, do you find that your elements of your own past and your own feelings about the past rise up to the surface of the poetry, either as you’re writing it, or later as you reflect back on it?

Trethewey: Oh, absolutely. I think when you’re creating a persona, and wanting that persona to be as real and fully imagined as possible, you have to give to the persona a good portion of your own interior life. And so there are details, subtle things from her life, that were indeed things in my own life, not prostitution, obviously, I have to say that. But for example, little touches of things, her relationship with her father, for example. When I would see my father in the summer, the first thing that he would do was to grab my hand to check to see if my fingernails were short and clean. And I just never forgot him doing that. And so I have Ophelia’s father do that to her. It takes on a much more sinister quality in Ophelia, my poor father,
of course, recognizing this, I had to talk him off the ledge about it. But she does have a lot of things that I’ve given her from my own life.

Magee: What about for you, Steve, do you see any kind, as you have worked on your own creations, have you had a similar kind of experience where you feel like your own life is reflected in the work that you’re doing?

Everett: When I compose, I’m always aware that there are certain inclinations to sounds that are part of my history that I keep gravitating toward. They’re like magnets that keep pulling me there. And I’m always, well, sometimes not aware of them when I’m writing them. I will after the fact go back and sort of hear the whole piece, even when it’s premiered, and recognize, oh, there it is again. There is that same sound, that same, whatever, I don’t know if you have the same experience. But it’s like you have these themes that you just can’t get away from. So this definitely has some of those in it. I won’t say which. But they are sort of gravitational centers for me. But in trying to capture, in this particular piece it was a little bit of a challenge because when I first envisioned the structure, my next thought was okay, well, what kind of sound world do I want to build around this character? I mean this character lives in a place that we somewhat know a lot about, and there were lots of musics going around for her in this place that we know Jellyroll Morton, Lou Armstrong, Buddy Bolden, there were lots of musics that she probably would have been hearing in that setting. So how much do I want to allow that to control my musical vocabulary? And do I want to reference that whole world she’s in? Or do I want to create a world that maybe hints at it, but it is still an abstract world that is my world that I’m kind of putting her in. So these were questions I struggled with for a long time. And also, I wanted to give a complexity to the character that she was not one world, because she has these multiplicities, the external and the internal world that she’s living in. And I wanted to try to have different kinds of ways, different kind vocabularies that I would put into this piece. So I consciously, each time, there are, I can tell you, there are ten different sections to the piece. And each one was built on a very different compositional premise. So each time I started, I intentionally tried not to work in the same vocabulary that I was working in in the previous section to try to see if I could make myself find a new expression, just as she was trying a different way to acting, to present herself differently, and what you see in the readings are very different kinds of psychology are coming out of that. So, for me, the sonic world does have my own sort of autobiographical sounds in it. But I was really struggling with trying to make this something that would capture this character’s dimensions. So it was a little bit harder than a normal piece where you sort of write in one continuous style. I wanted this to be multiple styles, so.

Magee: How long has it taken you since you actively started working on it?

Everett: I’ve been working on it off and on for over two years. But I had other projects that I was actually writing. But I kept thinking about this one. I actually contacted Katherine Blumenthal, Katherine I met, she was a music major at Emory a
number of years ago. She graduated probably 2000 I believe, or maybe 2001. And she has just turned into this remarkable soprano. She got her masters at New England Conservatory in Boston, and now lives in Paris. And every time I hear her sing, I’ve just been so taken with her ability to not only sing well, but to express the meaning of text better than almost anybody I know. So when I thought of Ophelia, I thought of Katherine immediately, that she has the range, she has the youthfulness, she has the versatility to do all the different kind of roles. And if you know anything about opera, one of the most difficult high soprano roles is the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s Magic Flute. Katherine has sung that about 70 times with the San Diego Opera. So she has amazing facility technically, but also she has a depth that she could bring something to this character that I didn’t know anybody else could. So that was an important step of getting her involved. So I immediately contacted her to see if she’d be interested in doing it. And she was, and got real excited. She read the poetry, got as excited as I was about the poetry. And so over the next two years, I was then able to have more time to actually start composing it. So I’ve been composing it for under a year now. So when I finally got the ideas worked out and the sections in mind, then I was actually able to start writing it. So it’s been less than a year for the music.

Magee: One thing that is evident from talking to both of you is the important role of research in your work as an artist. So we started off by talking about inspiration and how that comes to you. But especially here on this campus and as a part of a research university, it seems very important to point out the, not only the kind of artistic inspiration aspects, but the depth and quality of research that you put into it. And I know that’s something that’s important to you, Natasha. I’d be interested in you describing how you interweave both artistic inspirational moment and the solid and in-depth research that you need to do for something like this.

Trethewey: Well, I could envision Ophelia and the interior landscape of her psyche very easily at first. And yet there was a whole world around her that I had to make real and make accurate. So I did a lot of research in order to avoid historical anachronism, first of all. So reading about the history of New Orleans and of Storyville, but I also read the Almanacs because I needed to know about the weather, how much it rained, and if there was an explosion in the mosquito population. I needed to know something about the sewers in New Orleans. But I also read a lot of art history because the book is, in many ways, about art and the role of women in art as artist models. One of the books that I loved was Alias Olympia, and I can’t at this moment recall the writer. But it was a book about the woman, Victorine Meurent, who posed for Manet when painted Olympia, and this art historian’s search for something about this woman’s life, which proves to be a dead end at some point. There’s only so far she could go, which is often the role of the women. We don’t know so much about them, we don’t know the names of the women in these photographs. The woman who posed for Millais caught pneumonia and died from being in that bathtub, and so there’s something important about research surrounding that. When I first published that poem, the
poem that I read to begin, I had missed something in the research, and I thought that she had actually posed in a pond for the painting. I knew that she had gotten sick from it. But I thought she had posed in a pond, so I had her in the pond and not in a bathtub. The Southern Review published the poem just liked that. Fortunately, I had a friend who read it and said, you know she was in a bathtub. And if I had done a little bit more research, I would have known that. But I was able to go back and correct it before it appeared in the book. But I also read a lot of theory about looking, about the gaze, a lot of John Berger’s work. And at that point, there were moments when I would sit down to write the poems, and they just were coming out like little essays in the theory of art, art history, and the gaze. And so, finally, I had to shove all of that aside and go back to looking at the real primary documents, which were the photographs.

Magee: Well, do you know that moment, Steve, when you compiled a lot of work, a lot of research, a lot of material, a lot of documentation, and then at some point you take all of that, presumably you have much of it in your head, and then you set it aside and begin the work of composing? Is that how it works for you or is there a different process?

Everett: I think similar. On this particular project, once I read the collection, and I had this sense of these, what I wanted to try to do was to capture these various reveries and states of mind that Ophelia would be into. I was reminded of a work that I had read recently at the time by a French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, and I was reading his last, his actually next to the last collection in 1961. It was The Poetics of Reverie, which obviously captured my imagination. So I went back and reread that again. And he really describes all different kinds of reveries very clearly, and where those come from and why they’re so important, why all of us have various states of daydreams, dreams, reveries, all sorts of conscious states that we go into. And I felt in Natasha’s collection that there were various shifts in the cognition of this woman. So I wanted to kind of get my head around what are those various states and what do they mean? And Bachelard really is great about kind of connecting them back to childhood, and that a lot of what he submits is that a lot of our adult reveries are connections back to those childhood when we first were open to the world, and we were first imagining the world and making connections to it. Thos are such powerful images that stay with us, and that when we go into adult reveries, we’re actually connecting back to many of those childhood moments of first awareness of the world. And that’s what I felt in Ophelia was there was an innocence about her, and I really wanted to kind of go back into that. So there was a long period of time where I was just reading many of Bachelard’s work, just like Psychoanalysis of Fire, his books on Waters and Dreams, many of these take a look at elements and try to do kind of a poetic psychoanalysis of those elements. And for me, that was very helpful to kind of get into what I wanted to try to capture and what I had perceived in Natasha’s writing for that. So once you do that research, you have to get away from it before I start thinking musically because if I’m still thinking of this mechanically and trying to think of music, I get confused for me. So once I put Bachelard down and then I start
having those reveries kind of structured in my mind, then music starts to sort of flow. And then music takes over for me, and I have to get other thoughts out.

Magee: Well, both of you are clearly very creative people, and you’re scholars and researchers as well, and you’re also teachers. And so how do you translate this approach that you take or how do you take what you’re doing and bring it to the classroom? And can we teach creativity? Are these things that we can teach to our students? How does the work that you’ve done then translate into the classroom?

Trethewey: That is so unfair.

Everett: Ladies first.

Trethewey: Well, I have a couple of answers to that question. One of the things that I think that I’m teaching in a creative writing class is form. It really comes down to form and elements of craft. I think that all of our students can learn the elements of craft, those things that go into the making of a poem. I spend a good deal of time talking about syntax, about rhetorical structure, those elements that create formal movement in a poem. And in doing that, I think I’m giving each student a way to write a better poem, and perhaps a way to harness their own creativity. I’m often quoting those famous lines of intuition is the result of prolonged tuition. And so they have been studying for a long time. There are a lot of things that they know intuitively. And one of my jobs in the classroom is to find a way to help them harness their intuitive talents and develop them through craft, through a knowledge of form. I think anybody can learn to do that. I mean there are devices, too. I talk about using photographs, I talk about Roland Barthes’s idea of a punctum, how there is something in that photograph that catches your attention. And if you can go to that, it’s sort of like also Ezra Pound’s Luminous Details in History. If you can find those things and begin there and follow them, the hope is that they’ll lead you to where you were headed all along. Mark Doty says our metaphors go on ahead of us. If I can get students to trust their metaphors and to write well enough to catch up to them, they’ll do a good job.

Everett: I think for me, I teach composition, I teach craft, I teach ideas and ways to do things. But do I teach creativity? I think all of us involved in university, whether we like it or not, are involved with that because what is the creation of thought, the creation of ideas is involved some kind of creative act in every discipline. I don’t think that the arts have necessarily a market on creativity, that we are creative individuals when we come into this earth, and that creativity starts as the childhood, in Gaston Bachelard, where we are imaging the world from the moment that we see the world. And so creativity is something that is implicit in all of us. And so I can’t teach people how to be creative. I can help them maybe get back in touch with it and find new patterns that their creative imagination can unlock. So for me, teaching composition is another way of expanding consciousness. And that consciousness is wrestling with ideas, it’s wrestling with understanding and analyzing other kinds of works of art, of literature, of painting,
that through that process of historical and cultural journey that you do when you are looking at other works, you become more empathetic, you become more able to travel outside and understand the condition of somebody else. So for me, this was a great experience going back into travel into the world of Ophelia and to try to understand her world, and the world that Natasha has created for her, and maybe understand Natasha’s world a little bit at the same time. And so that, for me, helped me understand something historically and made me understand something about myself, about Natasha, about the world of women’s issues in this particular place, and maybe women’s issues other places. So that, to me, is a type of expanded consciousness, which is no different than a historian, that is no different than a philosopher, I don’t see creativity as something that is only housed within the arts. That is something that we do and that we have to have creativity operating fully and robustly, but it’s not something that we can necessarily teach you to be creative I don’t think. We can show you ways of doing it.

Magee: Are there conditions that we can create on a campus or in a classroom? Are there conditions that help to make people more receptive to creativity or more likely to get in touch with their own creativity?

Everett: Well, of course, there are certain patterns that do encourage and foster creativity. And a world in which you have the open idea, the concept of Umberto Eco, the open work where you don’t fix rigid kind of forms and structures in curricula or whatever, or you don’t have environments where people are not embraced and somehow valued for their ability to go against the mainstream, that you promote and somehow support financially and curricularly avenues for people to think in different ways. And if you become, this is another huge issue, which I’m not sure is part of this topic, but when you look at institutions, as institutions become bigger and more reliant on the necessities of generating funds and becoming the corporatization of university and so forth, we have to be careful that we don’t allow the corporatization to diminish the freedom for those avenues for people who want to think a little bit differently and who maybe will fail sometimes in those avenues. There’s the sense of that you go down a road, there’s a lot of trial and error, just like in the sciences, you go into a lab and you don’t always know what you’re going to end up with when you set up an experiment. And that’s a little bit of the way I feel when I’m composing. I don’t always know where I’m headed with that. And there is a lot of erasing, I feel like as I get older I end up doing more erasing than I do writing because I sort of know what’s not working now. And so there’s a lot of trial and error for me. It’s not kind of a straight romantic process where I just wake up in the middle of the night and hear this whole piece and write it down in perfect form. I don’t know about you, whether that happens to you.

Magee: I want to talk for a second about something you mentioned in passing, and that is anxiety and fear of failure. But actually I want to just focus on the idea of anxiety. First, do you see anxiety as a way in which you can get into a creative space or an
unexpected space? And does either one of you have anxiety about this particular project? Did you have anxiety about taking this on, Steve or Natasha, having Ophelia then become somebody else’s work?

Trethewey: No, I’m not afraid of that because, oh. Walter Mosley, that’s who I was trying to think of the other day, Walter Mosley once told me that when Devil in a Blue Dress, his mystery novel, was being made into the film, Devil in a Blue Dress, and he was on set watching it, that the thing you have to remember is that once it goes to someone else, another artist who’s going to make something of it, it’s no longer yours. And so I’m very happy to have given away some part of Ophelia that Steve has made his own. And I’m eager to see it. So there’s no anxiety about that. The anxiety that comes with writing, for me, is always the same anxiety of facing the page and wondering what I’m going to get to put on it, and if it’s going to work. And as you say, there’s a lot more erasing and scratching out than the other these days. But I think that it is about knowing more and more what works and what doesn’t. And I can remember working on Belloq’s Ophelia, and I don’t know if this is anxiety so much, but I would sit for hours, I could sit for eight hours without stopping to get up at all. I would be so immersed in this character and what she was doing and what she was thinking and what would happen next. And I would perspire and I wouldn’t even think. I would just be sweating, wiping my face. And I don’t know if it was anxiety or some other thrill of recognition, finding her there and being able to at least, for a moment, pin her down in language.

Magee: Discovery.

Trethewey: Uh huh.

Magee: What about for you, Steve, did you have anxiety, either in general or specifically about this piece? And especially as it’s connected to a colleague’s work?

Everett: Well, there’s a little bit of anxiety because it hasn’t been performed yet. So there is a sense of is it all going to work. And that is a real anxiety because I had such a clear idea of what I wanted to try to accomplish in this that I don’t know yet until next Friday whether I’ve done that or whether – I have a sense that it’s there, but you don’t know until it’s performed. While I’ve got the piece kind of now shaped and I’ve really started thinking about it and thinking about all the words, I’ve developed a little bit of anxiety knowing that Natasha’s going to be in the room because I know she’s very generous and has given Ophelia over to me at this point, but at the same time, knowing that she lived for three years with that photograph and developed a whole life around this character and it’s like a child that you’ve given over to a babysitter or something. You don’t really know what’s going to happen to that child. So I do feel a certain ownership that I didn’t really feel in the beginning. I pushed it as a text. But as I got into it and started to live with Ophelia, I felt connected to her. And it was almost like you’re the mother and somehow I’m kind of coming into Ophelia’s life, and who am I? And what
am I? Are you going to like me as the friend of Ophelia’s? So there were just kind of weird moments that I felt about I don’t own her, and so there is that sort of sense of that. I want to be true to the kind of psychology that I felt was in Ophelia that you had created. And I don’t want to not treat that lightly. So I think that’s a true anxiety, which I’ve never felt before because I don’t guess I’ve set music to a poet who has been at the premier before. This is the first time for me on that. I’ve set a lot of music to living poets, but they haven’t been there for the performance.

Magee: I want to mention, us to mention one other aspect of this project, and that is that in addition to the connection that’s developed between the two of you through the work, there are other Emory artists, you’ve already mentioned one of them, but others as well who are part of this process, and that kind of larger collaboration here on the campus.

Everett: Yeah, as I got into this, I realized this became opera or became theater, and there were many components to this that I needed some help with. Leslie Taylor, Chair of the Theater Studies Department, and also Executive Director of the Creativity and Arts Center is doing –

Magee: She’s here.

Everett: Is Leslie here? There she is in the back. Leslie will be doing the stage design, and will be doing costume design for that. And then when I was working in Paris, the field that I work in is called computer music, which is really an exploration of using technology as an expansion of performance opportunities. And so I’ve been working in this field for about 20 years using technology as a way of working with live performers on stage to just kind of expanding what are the potential for live performers with these new tools. So the center for that research is in Paris at a place called Eurcom(?) at the Pappadeaux Center. So every year I pretty much go there and work or present. And I met a video artist there, or film artist, an avant-garde artist there, and I was just talking to her about this project. And then I looked at some of her work, and she does this kind of film work where she does very long exposure photographs that they look like they were made in 1860 because she runs the film through all sorts of acetate kind of process. And it’s a very laborious process that she does with these box cameras that she makes herself. And it’s a very archaic kind of approach. And so she got really intrigued by this project just by the description of it. She went and bought the poetry, and then we emailed back and forth and she just, like everybody that reads this poetry, just finds some kind of connection into it. And then I asked her if she would be involved in creating, don’t want to give away too much of the show, but toward the end there is an important dream sequence that happens at the end. And so this woman in Nantes, France, not in Paris, her name is Isabelle Dehay, she wrote or created this film that is part of this dream sequence. And it’s a spectacular work. It just really captured exactly what I was envisioning for that. I didn’t talk to her about it. And it’s interesting, because when she tried to create that, she created a series of 45 photos, of long exposure photos that she made for this kind of film
montage. And she really did it by staring at Belloqc’s photos for about six
months. And so these are really a capturing of, if you could take Belloqc and turn
it into a film, I think Isabelle has done that. So that was kind of an important piece
for me that I’m doing live video processing during the show. There will be times
where Katherine, the soprano, will be seated in front of a camera, and I’ll actually
be doing what is called motion capture with her. And I’ll be taking images of her
and reprojecting it back on to herself, so I can change her own image of herself.
So the technology I’m trying to use in this, not to be seen on stage, hopefully you
won’t see any of the technology. But the technology is there in support of what I
was hoping to accomplish in the kind of various mental states of this character. So
I think that may be _____.

Magee: Well, I think the two of you have shown just in this conversation the clear sense
of connection you have with the other artists who have been part of it, either
historically or presently with one another, with Ophelia herself. And so that kind
of connection I think is one that will deepen, and in a way, both of you refer to a
kind of serendipity about how you discovered the work and how you came to it,
and where it’s led you. And so, with that in mind, I really would like to give the
opportunity to other members of the audience to ask, we have a few minutes to
ask a few questions because I think this conversation provokes a lot of thought.

Q: You didn’t have to do that, so I’m curious about this, did you change the language
or want to change the language because of the difference in forms between poetry
and what opera would be?

Everett: I was very careful about not changing any of her words. And I was very careful
about not even cutting and slicing parts of poems. And that became, as I got into
this, I realized I can’t do this because usually when you’re doing libretto for an
opera, you take a text and you just cut and splice it, you take things to tell a story
and to make the scenes look better. So that was how I thought I would be going
about it a little bit more. But as I got into this, I felt that there was something that
I could not do about this. I needed to keep the integrity of the poems themselves.
So I don’t use all the collection. I couldn’t use every poem. But the ones that I
used, there’s only a couple of times where I take portions of poems. But none of
the words have been reordered, there’s no liberty like that. And actually, as I got
into it, I realized that the words needed to be kept in such a pure form that I
decided that much of this needed to be read, rather than sung because the singing,
sometimes people lose the meaning, depending on the setting of that. So there’s
about 36 minutes of this piece that are sung, and there’s about 30 minutes of
actually spoken text where it’s just straight reading of the poetry. And that
actually was a bit of a stress for Katherine because she’s an opera singer, she’s
used to singing. She’s comfortable singing. But singing and then reading in the
scene going back and forth, she’d never done that. And she then became kind of
nervous, I think, about with Natasha sitting because it’s actually, I don’t know if
you could tell in Natasha’s reading, but she has a fabulous reading voice. And her
rhythm and her intonation, when I first heard your read last year, I was just, it was
like a composition, it’s like a song. So I asked Natasha if I could record her last year reading some of Belloq. And so I recorded her reading a number of poems, and I’ve actually embedded some of that of Natasha’s voice into the work reading because I wanted to keep her voice, not only her words, but I wanted to keep her quality of voice in this work. So in some ways, I felt such a reverence for these words and for Natasha that I didn’t want to change anything about that.

Magee: Any other questions?

Q: Steven, what instrumentation have you used to accompany the singer?

Everett: I started out, it’s funny, because the first sound that I heard when I finished reading it was the instrumentation for Ravel’s Introduction and Allegro, which is a piece for string quartet, flute, clarinet, and harp. I just heard that piece as a sonic world. And that was my original idea was have seven musicians, and I guess I could tell you this. The reason I cut it down to four is practicality. I decided with electronics, I can make the string player sound like a harp, don’t need the harp player. It will sound more interesting if I make the violin sound harp-like. So that got rid of the harp player. And then the flute and the clarinet just kind of went by the wayside over time, as well. And then once I got to know Vega String Quartet. And there’s also something about the integrity of a quartet, has such a, that’s a family and there’s something very tight about that. If you put a quartet and then you put extra musicians with that, you have to create kind of a new dynamic. And I loved that Vega already had that dynamic built in. And so the quartet will be on stage. And they become factors in Ophelia’s life. They’re not just musicians there, they are part of the gaze, they stare at her as part of the audience, part of the clients, we don’t know what they are, but they are a function. Then in Vega there are three women and one male, the cello is male. So the male becomes a potential character in the show, I won’t tell you who. And the females become particular characters. You can imagine maybe who they might be. So they do have a function in the work. So it’s quartet plus soprano. I decided to go with less is more on this.

Magee: We have time for one more question.

Q: Well, I’m really excited to see the show. Can you say anything about how the pictures by Belloq figure into the presentation? How the image, this is a very interesting discussion ______ displaced and then displaced again ______ displaced in the language and displaced ______. How does the primary encounter by the audience with Belloq’s pictures figure into the show? Or does it figure into the show?

Everett: I’ll let Natasha also answer that. I haven’t used any photographs in any of the visual from Belloq. It’s kind of the same question as to why I didn’t use any ragtime jazz at this kind of a sonic ______ that by getting a form of these photographs and the image and the character and the multiple layers you see,
sometimes there are clothes hanging behind the _______, there are multiple layers to these pieces. That was definitely in my thinking about the shape of this music and all the structure in the video and audio of the piece. I laid multiple layers to capture what Belloq had in his photographs, so that by looking at these, that guided me to all sorts of ideas about the structure of the music. But I don’t have any kind of specific photographs that I ______.

Trethewey: Well, there are several people that have asked me why I didn’t use photographs in the collection beyond the cover image. And the main reason for that is that even as I reference a lot of the photographs in the book, what I’ve done is really created Ophelia from a composite of all the women that you are seeing as the video was scrolling at first. So I didn’t choose just one of those women, even though there’s one obviously on the cover who sort of embodies most Ophelia. But she’s a composite of all of those women in Storyville, all of those nameless women to whom she tries to give voice.

Magee: Laura, did you have a quick question?

Laura: Well, it’s for Natasha, and first of all, thank you both. It was just a wonderful conversation ______. Something that I’ve struggled with myself and I’d love for you to talk about is specifically around the relationship between research and poetry. And I loved Rosemary’s question because I find that what sometimes happens to me is that I’ve fallen in love with the research, and then the research becomes a form of poetry that can distract from _____ move into another direction. And so I’m wondering, (A), has that happened to you at any point, and (B), currently thinking about doing something creative in a historical way or in a historical voice, sometimes you come against, you’re so involved with constructing the world, that then you come up against an actuality, a historical fact that throws the world that you’ve created off as you’re doing it because your research ______ and it’s not ______. So I’m wondering if that experience has happened to you as well in the whole process?

Trethewey: Well, yes. The biggest problem often is I really get excited about other research, too. And I spent a long time doing it. I’m in the process of doing it again right now for another book I’m working on. And I know that I absolutely cannot sit down to write the poems until I’ve gotten far enough away from all the research. And getting far enough away means almost forgetting it in some ways. Forgetting it, and then going back in as if all of this is coming from just my own imagination, and yet of course, it’s that prolonged tuition back there that’s informing it. There are these moments when I write and I get really nervous because I think oh, I’m probably, this is all anachronistic, I’m getting it wrong. And then I have to go back and sort of fact check and look in the history that I read and put away, and for the most part, I’m happy when I find out, oh, okay, I didn’t make that up. That really is something that I read. If I found that I got something wrong, well, then I have to reckon with that, to see what new direction it might take me in because certainly I try not to. I think a good historian doesn’t go in with too big of a
preconceived notion about what they expect the research to reveal. So I have to fight that tendency because I already have an idea of what it is I’m looking for, and then I find something else.

Magee: I have a final quick question for each of you. And that is have you learned anything from the other person as you have both engaged in this conversation and in previous conversations we’ve had, or you’ve thought about the work that the other person is doing. What have you learned, either about the artistic process, or anything else?

Trethewey: Your turn.

Everett: I mean for me, this was such an unusual experience from the very beginning, that I knew that there was something extraordinary about why I was so drawn to this. And it wasn’t just the character of Ophelia and the fact that I found the poetry kind of captured me, there was something about the way this person who had made these words had gone about this process that for me was different than I had ever seen before. And we talked about that before, the combination of this kind of poetic moment embedded with this sort of historical narrative that is operating on so many different levels, and drawing from this photograph is where she just started from, and then imagined for several years. And when Natasha and I first met and had coffee last year, and I had all these questions about Ophelia, her background, her parents, her grandparents, where she’s from, how does she get to New Orleans, all these kinds of questions about her life, I wanted – and she had a real clear image of this whole history of this person. And it was just stunning that you had developed not only just these poems, but you had developed a world, a person really had been created from scratch. And that, to me, was an extraordinary understanding of how you go about your craft. And it really made me, I don’t do that same sort of historical research that you would do, but the idea of what goes behind a work kind of resonated with what it takes for me to write a composition, and how much time it takes of dealing with not just historical, but other kind of abstract ideas. So for me, I had a much greater appreciation for the uniqueness in some ways. I never read a poet who captured exactly the way she does it, and why it resonated with me so powerfully I’m still not quite sure.

Trethewey: Well, I have to say that I don’t think there’s anything more delightful than getting to have a conversation with someone who has read your work so closely. I mean I feel like I’m in heaven. This is what you want. You want someone to read and pay that much attention to what’s going on, in such a way that they reveal to you things that are there that you obviously sort of put there, but maybe unconsciously. And so yesterday, when we were talking, and even today, Steve keeps using the word reverie to describe Ophelia and so much of what she’s doing in the book. And I hadn’t thought of that word. I hadn’t thought of that. I think I even used that word in the book. But I knew that I was most concerned with her interior life, especially because she’s in a place that the external world is raucous, it’s bawdy, it’s noisy, and she’s always retreating to the interior life of the mind.
And yet, it hadn’t occurred to me that there are very many times in the book where she does go into these extended periods of reverie. I didn’t know it until that was the thing that he found there.

Magee: Well, I want to thank both of you for both revealing something about your own interior lives and process, and helping us think together as a community about the really vibrant world of creative life that we have, both within us and around us. So thank you very much, and thanks to the audience.

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