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The Voices of Native Guard: From the Page to Performance

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The Voices of *Native Guard*: From the Page to Performance

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Background:

Published in 2006, Native Guard received the Pulitzer Prize in 2007, and the book's author, Natasha Trethewey, went on to become the US Poet Laureate in 2012 and 2014. Trethewey emphasizes that Native Guard is a book of poetry, not a collection of poems that were gathered together for publication. This one among many reasons it was an excellent source for a theatrical production by the Alliance Theatre (in Atlanta) in 2014, in restaged in 2018. Actors January Lavoy (the poet) and Anton Neal (the native guard) breathe new life into Trethewey's work, expressing the deep musicality of the mixture of prose and verse. This study applies methods from computational linguistics to understand how the actors use rhythm and intonation to make the written word come alive in this unusual production, termed a "Theatrical Installation". Director Susan Booth and the actors were very deliberate in their fidelity to the written word--they made a commitment to Trethewey to not alter a single line of text. This offers a unique opportunity to study how the poem is interpreted both in recitation and performance across a decade: the study interprets recordings by Trethewey (2007) and the theatrical productions of 2014 and 2018.
CONVERSATIONS WITH Natasha Trethewey
EDITED BY JOAN WYLIE HALL

“Trethewey is clearly a poet to savor.” — Maxine Kumin
“Remarkable.” — Robert Pinsky, Washington Post

NATIVE GUARD
Poems

Natasha Trethewey
“I think that the work that I’m interested in taking on as a poet is the work of cultural memory, the preservation of cultural memory of a people, of a time and place.”

--Natasha Trethewey in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey* (p.130)
“Everybody knows about Mississippi”

- Nina Simone
Trethewey on listening to poetry

(from a video played at the beginning of the 2014 and 2018 productions by the Alliance Theatre)
Trethewey on voicing poetry
(from an interview on WABE’s City Lights)
Trethewey on understanding poetry
(from an interview on WABE’s City Lights)
January Lavoy on interpreting Native Guard from an ADEPt interview in 2018
“Somebody had sent me a review that someone had written of *Native Guard* in *Poetry* magazine, and in the review the person seemed to understand my desire to memorialize or to erect monuments to things that had been forgotten or passed, but her take was that a statue is a static, dead thing. So that even if you write a poem to the thing that it is also a dead thing. I totally disagree with this because the point isn’t for the statue just to be out there. A statue is a living thing. You can’t tell me every time I see a Confederate statue that it doesn’t matter. It lives!”

-Trethewey in *Conversations* (p.131)
Research Goals:

• Combine insight from interviews with quantitative analysis
• Apply concepts from linguistics and music to study performance
• Measurements include:
  • Rhythmic Contrast (nPVI): variability between neighboring syllables
  • Tempo
  • Pause
  • Accents
“Miscegenation”

In 1965 my parents broke two laws of Mississippi; they went to Ohio to marry, returned to Mississippi.

They crossed the river into Cincinnati, a city whose name begins with a sound like sin, the sound of wrong—mis in Mississippi.

A year later they moved to Canada, followed a route the same as slaves, the train slicing the white glaze of winter, leaving Mississippi.

Faulkner’s Joe Christmas was born in winter, like Jesus, given his name for the day he was left at the orphanage, his race unknown in Mississippi.

My father was reading War and Peace when he gave me my name. I was born near Easter, 1966, in Mississippi.

When I turned 33 my father said, It’s your Jesus year—you’re the same age he was when he died. It was spring, the hills green in Mississippi.

I know more than Joe Christmas did. Natasha is a Russian name—though I’m not; it means Christmas child, even in Mississippi.

@Poetry Foundation (2007)
Methodology: Syllable Segmentation

Combine insight from interviews with quantitative analysis
Apply concepts from linguistics and music to study performance
Measurements include:
- Rhythmic Contrast (nPVI): variability between neighboring syllables
- Tempo
- Pause
- Accents

They crossed the ri-ver in-to Cin-cin-na-ti
Rhythmic Contrast (nPVI)

• nPVI (normalized pairwise variability index): a measure of contrast from one segment to the next (Grabe, Low and Nolan)
• A low value means neighboring syllables tend be of similar duration
• A high value means neighboring syllables tend to be different durations
• Trethewey: 51.7881
• Lavoy: 46.0131
• About the same, Trethewey is slightly more varied from syllable to the next
Tempo (Syllables Per Minute)

- **Overall**
  - Trethewey: 162
  - Lavoy: 163
  - Normal Speech: ~220

- **Within phrases:**
  - Trethewey: 206 SPM
  - Lavoy: 233 SPM
  - Correlation 0.644 (fairly strong)
Pause

• Trethewey 22.1% of 86.4 seconds
• Lavoy 34.3% of 86.2 seconds
• Lavoy significantly faster tempo within phrases but pauses longer for audience reaction (laughter) and movement accounting for overall tempos being similar
  • Notably: “Jesus year” gets laughter from audience in live performance
Emphasis (Stresses/Accents)

• Accent operationalized as half a standard deviation longer than neighboring syllables
• Trethewey has 59 accents (25.2% of 234 syllable segments)
• Lavoy has 43 accents (18.3% of 234 syllables segments)
• Lower frequency of accents is consistent with Lavoy’s tempo being faster within phrases
• 69.8% of Lavoy’s accents align with Trethewey’s accents
Dissimilar Excerpt: Phrases 4-8

They crossed the river into Cincinnati.

A city whose name begins with a sound like sin.

The sound of wrong.
Similar Excerpt: Phrases 13-17

BLUE: Trethewey  

RED: Lavoy
Understanding Elegiac Verse

• For Trethewey the difference in pacing and the shorter pauses have a lot to do with her personal connection to the material and the fact that as a daughter of South so much of her personal narrative is tied to pain and the long memory of slavery.

• Trethewey reads the poem as an elegy: a lamentation for the dead, not only for the union soldiers who served in Mississippi as the Native Guard for the Union Army, but also for her mother, who was shot and killed by her enraged second husband when Trethewey was a 19 year old freshman at the University of Georgia.

• The differences in pacing show an agreement with why the story is important (history) and certain factors of the actor’s and the poet’s life (biracial identity). However for Trethewey, this poem is more song and verse, while the actor can stand at a distance (most likely mimicking the audience’s understanding and reception) and offer interpretation.
Summary

• Trethewey is a poet that is acutely aware of “voicing” (néé reading) poetry
• The Alliance Theatre’s production was not a play, but a theatrical installation, “bending theatre to poetry” not the other way around, according to Susan Booth, the director
• Lavoy (“The Poet”) strongly identified with Trethewey’s Native Guard from the start, but also developed her interpretation with coaching from the poet
• Comparing Trethewey’s and Lavoy’s “voicings”:
  • The performances are similar rhythmically to a large extent, but there are some phrases that do not correlate
  • Overall, they are similar in terms of the amount rhythmic contrast (nPVI)
  • Lavoy is faster within phrases, but pauses longer (e.g. for audience response) which balances out over all tempo and length of voicings
  • Trethewey uses timing emphasis (stress/accents) more frequently, but the majority of Lavoy’s emphases align with Trethewey’s, indicating agreement on which words are important in each phrase