

Discussion Questions for Natasha Trethewey's Native Guard Reviewer, Dr. Harbour Winn – June 29 at 6:30 p.m.

- When you read aloud to yourself or to someone else one of Trethewey's poems, describe the experience and awareness of hearing her words, hearing yourself voice them, feeling the words voiced in your mouth. Since poetry is usually meant to be heard, reflect on your experience with one or several of her poems read aloud. Maybe read one in your discussion group.
- What does Trethewey's effort to render historical memory through both facts and imagination generate? Look at a specific poem and consider the gaps or omissions that she conjures up from the historical facts to render the imagined whole experience. What is this experience like for you? Is this comparable to the way historians try to understand the past? Does this reflect how you understand and remember your own familial and personal history and then try to give voice to it in storytelling?
- How does Trethewey as historian, geographer, climatologist, anthropologist, and linguist use all of these roles as a poet? Look at a specific poem in this context.
- In her story poems and in your stories, how does historical erasure work? What in a specific poem does Trethewey try to excavate that has been erased in history by those who pass it on down? What about historical erasure in your own stories from your family, and ones you pass on to the next generation?
- In reading *Native Guard*, consider it as a unified whole, more than only a collection of poems. What do you find? What holds the poems together? Or, do you disagree with this view? Consider particularly the juxtaposition of historical events with autobiographical narrative.
- Trethewey has said that she tried to write in certain established poetic forms to help her channel her emotion, to make the topics she writes about accessible and relatable to our common history regardless of ethnicity or geography or age. Look at a specific example or two for discussion. We'll look at "Incident" as a pantoum to model (41). Some suggestions to have some serious fun: the rhyme pattern of the sonnet "Graveyard Blues" (8); the intricate structure of line sequence reversed between the first three stanzas and the last three in "Myth"

(14); the last line of each sonnet a variant in the first line of the next stanza in “Native Guard” (25-30); the ten syllables per line in “Elegy for the Native Guard” (44); the refrain of “I returned” in “South” (45).

- Look back at the opening and the closing poems in the book. Do they echo each other? Does each respectively introduce and close the themes in the book?
- Consider how historical memory and erasure are at work today. Do they both perhaps provide a path or means to describe divisions within us now, whether these be our nation, our ideologies, our political and religious conflicts?
- What are examples of historical erasure or amnesia in specific poems and the entire series of poems in the book? How does historical amnesia stay alive and well in our lives today? In the contextual experience of being Americans? In political sound bites and implications?
- Do the themes of historical erasure and amnesia recall Edward Jones’ *The Known World*? The series theme of civil rights and equality?
- Did you like this book? Think of your experience of reading it and reflecting about it.
- In any book some subjects or situations must be left out, intentionally or otherwise. Which ones did you find yourself wanting to know about in *Native Guard*?