

# TRUTH

A year-long conversation about knowledge crises  
& politics from humanistic perspectives

ALICE KAPLAN INSTITUTE FOR THE HUMANITIES  
Northwestern University

A Truth Dialogues Report/Reflection

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## Poetry/History/Race/Truth

(Natasha Trethewey, Carol Anderson, Leslie Harris—October 30, 2017)

The first keynote event in the Kaplan Institute for the Humanities' yearlong series of discussions surrounding the theme of truth featured Northwestern History Professor Leslie M. Harris, in conversation with Northwestern English Professor and former U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey, and Emory University African-American Studies Professor Carol Anderson. The event was very well attended – standing room only! As five o'clock approached, every chair in the room was taken. People gathered in the sides and back of the room eager to hear the talk. The audience included Northwestern students and professors from many disciplines, as well as members of the Evanston community.

The current polarized political climate in this era of "alternative facts" can understandably result in a pessimistic condemnation of America's relationship to truth and history. Fabricated realities prove especially pervasive and dangerous regarding our perceptions of the history of American race relations – a subject all three scholars tackle in their work. For example, Harris exposed the centrality of slavery to New York City's past through her academic writing and a public history exhibition. Anderson's newest book, *White Rage*, details the cycle of advancement in racial equality followed by white supremacist backlashes. Trethewey's poetry concerns the erasure of African-American historical participation and illuminates our country's racist legacy. Yet, Harris observed at the beginning of the evening that the fact that three

African-American women were seated on stage as authoritative truth-tellers marks a sign of progress that cannot be taken away.

The overall theme of the conversation centered on Anderson and Trethewey's understanding of the role of truth in their goals for and approaches to their work. All three scholars share a deep commitment to uncovering hidden narratives and experiences that have been ignored or erased in America's collective memory and discourse. Anderson and Trethewey stressed the importance of evidence-based interpretation and asserted that no discussion can be had, or progress made, if the public cannot agree on facts. Harris directed the conversation to four different categories of truth-related questions: the difference between facts and truths, and which should constitute the historian's starting point; what to do when a scholar confronts holes in an archive; public responses to historical interpretations they have not yet confronted; and the relationship between emotional and fact-based truth.

Carol Anderson emphasized the deep archival research necessary for scholars whose questions have not been adequately addressed by the secondary literature. She depicted historians as relentless pursuers of truth that is hidden in the gaps and silences of the record. Natasha Trethewey described the disturbing absence of African-American history in mainstream narratives promoted by educational institutions, monuments, and national parks. She explained that she aims to use her poetry to create imagined characters that might have lived, thus filling in for the sources and perspectives of forgotten histories. At the same time, Trethewey stressed the importance of avoiding anachronisms in creative work, and not "playing with the facts" when writing about history.

Anderson demonstrates her storytelling abilities through her engaging conversational and presentation skills, as well as in her compelling written work. Yet, despite her love of narrative, Anderson never sacrifices accuracy for drama. She said that if something is unverifiable by evidence, she will not write about it. If historians write without documentation, it leads to a slippery slope of claiming truth based merely on belief and feeling. However, she noted that historians' reliance on archival sources inevitably results in holes, because material that was not archived ceases to exist in the record. Anderson called historians to be more creative regarding the types of sources they use in order to broaden the range of voices included by scholarship.

Trethewey and Anderson recounted the public responses to their work over the years. Trethewey described the stubborn disbelief she encountered when discussing collective amnesia

regarding black participation in the Civil War on the PBS Newshour, and a publisher's reticence to connect her work to academic discussions of black Civil War soldiers. Anderson participated in the OpEd Project, which encouraged university faculty to utilize their expertise in the public domain. She wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* following the shooting of Michael Brown and the subsequent protests in Ferguson, Missouri. She sought to counteract prevailing media narratives of "black pathology" by situating the incident in its historical context. The op-ed laid the groundwork for her *New York Times* bestseller *White Rage*. Both the article and the book provoked deeply racist public comments. Anderson described how documentation was her main recourse against vitriol, as she was able to point to her footnotes and leave the disbelievers to wrestle with the facts for themselves. Anderson believed that the only way to diffuse white rage against progress in racial equality is to reach out to those who simply don't know how we got to where we are, and to emphasize the role of local and national policy in creating racial discrimination rather than voyeuristically fixating on the figurative and literal flames created by the most extreme white supremacists.

Professor Harris finished the conversation by discussing the role of the author's emotional truth in her fact-based work. Anderson reasserted the primacy of evidence, claiming that stories and facts do their own work in revealing emotion, though historians do not have to be dispassionate or lose their sense of humanity. Trethewey related that she recently evolved towards more personal works of poetry and memoir. She described how at the beginning of her career, she thought that removing emotion and emphasizing evidence over subjective interpretation added to her credibility. Now, she believes she can find a different kind of authority through connecting her personal experiences to larger historical trends, intertwining factual and emotional truth. She attested to the efficacy of the arts in pushing back against received knowledge, confronting historical amnesia and erasure, and bringing redress, by reaching audiences who are unlikely to read works of historical scholarship.

As an avid storyteller and historian-in-training, the discussion affirmed for me the importance of creating accurate and accessible historical interpretations that highlight underrepresented voices. These scholars also inspired me to consider the role of evidence, facts, imagination, and personal connection when crafting a nuanced, honest, and ethical narrative.

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The 2017-18 [TRUTH Dialogues](#) are a year-long conversation about knowledge crises and politics from humanistic perspectives, co-presented by the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities in partnership with multiple Northwestern departments and programs.

[Franke Undergraduate Fellowships](#) are awarded to three promising seniors pursuing independent humanities research projects. Franke Fellows receive a stipend and research funds, and enrich their projects by taking part in a senior humanities seminar and interdisciplinary exchanges sponsored by the Kaplan Humanities Institute. They present their work at the annual Future Directions Forum in the spring.