

From the Catbird Seat: Season 2

Making “American Conversations”: Part 2

[RECORDING—Car audio featuring Ruth Franklin & Tracy K. Smith]

Ruth Franklin: Okay, so here we are in the car, getting ready to head back to Charleston, I know it’s a little early, but maybe you could give us a couple reflections, on how this trip went, after you put on your seatbelt.

Tracy K. Smith: Yeah, let’s do that. Um, I feel like it’s been beautiful. I love the different ways people have shared. So some people’s questions and interests had to do with poetry, and sometimes it’s their own, even after someone came up to me and asked me about some things that she’s struggling with in her own writing. So that layer of the conversation, and then there are people whose responses have been thematic, you know, especially in terms of the history that’s here, and people like to be reminded of and like the idea that it is honored or shared. I think that’s really exciting too. What else? It’s nice to enter into these community spaces and just see what community means in different places.

Anne Holmes: Welcome to “From the Catbird Seat,” a poetry podcast from the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress. I’m Anne Holmes, the Center’s digital content manager.

Rob Casper: And I’m Rob Casper, head of the Poetry and Literature Center.

Anne: This is the second episode in our three-part series revisiting some of U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith’s travels around the country as part of her current project, “American Conversations: Celebrating Poems in Rural Communities.” Last week, we followed Tracy’s trips around rural New Mexico in January 2018, and on today’s episode we’re exploring her travels to South Carolina in February.

Rob, you traveled with Tracy to South Carolina, along with a few other folks from the Library, as well as Ruth Franklin, a reporter from the *New York Times Magazine*. At the beginning of the episode, we heard part of a conversation between Ruth and Tracy in the car at the end of the trip heading back to Charleston.

So Rob, can you set the stage for this trip to South Carolina?

Rob: Sure. This was the second of our three pilot project trips for the “American Conversations Poet Laureate” project. It was an opportunity for us to test out the format. We wanted to see which communities and audiences we should be reaching, what partners we should be working with, and what was the best approach to take when we were traveling around and connecting to various small communities. We also wanted to make

good on Tracy's desire to connect to rural communities—communities that are like the place where she grew up in rural California, and also places that were far removed from the big cities and college towns she would normally give readings at. To that end, we visited three locations in South Carolina. First, Lake City, a town of about 7,000 people. Then, Summerton, a smaller town of about 1,000 people, and Wiltown, a town of about 3,000. They were all within an hour, hour and a half of one another. It gave us a lot of time to talk in the car about where we were going and about the project in general. We had in the car Tracy and myself, as well as Brett Zongker and Shawn Miller from the Library's Office of Communications, and an embedded reporter who I'll talk about a little bit later. Here's a clip of conversation from the car as we headed to our first location: Lake City United Methodist Church.

[RECORDING—Car audio featuring Tracy K. Smith and Rob Casper]

Rob Casper: All right, here we are, on the road to Lake City! With a car full of folks! Everyone say hi!

[Four "hi"s are heard.]

Rob: All right, Tracy, is this an interview, do I ask you questions?

Tracy K. Smith: Yeah.

Rob: Okay, well what are you thinking about, on the eve of your first event in South Carolina?

Tracy: I guess I'm just curious about who's going to be at these different events, and what the feeling in the room will be. I have a sense of different things that I might read, that relate to what I'm thinking about, but I really hope that something organic will happen. So our first visit is to a church, and curious about the spirit that's going to be in that room.

Rob: Yeah, and I'm also curious just about how many people are going to be there. And maybe you can talk about what the audience was like in New Mexico.

Tracy: Sure. So there were two events: the first event that we did was a reading and discussion at Cannon Air Force Base, and that room probably had about 30 people mostly who were mostly servicemen and women. I have to say "servicemen" is a gender neutral term, so it includes everyone. And some spouses, and a lot of people who were excited to have a conversation about the poems and then willing to read some of the poems that I had read that we had talked about. And one young man had a notebook of his own work and he read a couple of his original poems, which he's been writing while he's on duty and was excited to have a space where that could be shared.

Rob: You know, that brings up something interesting too, which is how these events may depart from the kind of events that you're used to doing as a poet, and the kind of flexibility that you may have to have. Especially as you said, with what kinds of poems you said you were going to read, maybe you could talk a little bit about the poems you have to select from?

Tracy: Sure, well I have all of my work with me, I'm probably most excited about my newest work, but there are topics across the books and poems that behave in different ways, poems that are thinking about private experience, poems that are looking at particular public events or moments in history. I think the sense of what people respond to will determine where I go. And then I've got some work by other poets, contemporary American poets. I've got a poem by Aracelis Girmay, which is essentially I think a poem about being a stranger in a new place, which I kind of read in terms of immigration or crossing from one kind of home to another, one sense of community to another. I have a couple of poems about childhood, one by Major Jackson, and one by John Yao, and a poem by Laura Kasischke that I think is so interesting because it's a poem that teaches you how to read it, and I think that is a really great thing that poems do, but often they do it kind of quietly. This poem kind of is bold in showing what you have come to understand by way of what you've just read. I think it's great to talk a little about other poets' work. I feel like I can go in and talk about my own craft-based choices people have made and talk about it. With my own work I tend to think about the place, where the poems come from, what's the question on my mind, and maybe what are some of the discoveries that I made in writing the poem.

Anne: There's something really pleasing about hearing these conversations literally on the road, in the car. Also, Rob, I know this trip was unique in part because Congressman James Clyburn, who represents the rural district of South Carolina where Tracy was visiting, helped steer the coordination for this trip, and I know he attended all three of the public events. Can you talk a bit about Congressman Clyburn's involvement?

Rob: Sure. We were really excited to visit his district. It's the sixth district of South Carolina, which includes parts of Charleston as well as the rural areas to the North, West, and South of the city. He was involved in a very different way than Senator Udall, which Anya Creightney detailed in the kickoff episode of the podcast. The congressman chose these three locations himself. And because the trip took place in February, which is African-American History Month, he had a special focus on civil rights and history with these three locations. It was exciting to have him in all three kicking things off and concluding the events. I had the opportunity to talk to him afterwards about these locations, and here he is explaining two of the three.

[RECORDING—Rob Casper interviews Congressman James Clyburn]

Rob Casper: Congressman, you went to all three locations that you selected for our trip to South Carolina, can you tell us about your selection process and what did each location offer?

Congressman James Clyburn: Well, the one thing that each location had in common was the fact that they were all rural communities. For instance, our first stop was in Lake City.

Rob: Right.

Clyburn: Lake City is a rural community in South Carolina. Ron McNair, the astronaut that blew up in the Challenger, is from Lake City, South Carolina, and he talked about not being allowed to use the library in the little town he grew up in, and the fact that he went on to be an outstanding astronaut after getting his degree in physics from MIT and North Carolina State University. So, Lake City's also where Reverend Joseph DeLaine, the man who led the Brown v. Board of Education case and the Briggs v. Elliot case. The case came out of Summerton. Few people realize that Reverend DeLaine pastored and lived in Lake City, and his church was burned down in Lake City, South Carolina. So these associations with the history of Brown v. Board of Education, with our African-American astronaut, all of these made me look at Lake City. So we went from Lake City and went over to Summerton.

Rob: Right.

Clyburn: Summerton was where Brown v. Board of Education took place, and we held an event in the auditorium of the school that was to be integrated, and was integrated, by those students. It's right on the infamous I-95 corridor that people have nicknamed "The Corridor of Shame," because of its low-income, poverty-stricken communities. But to know that the people who gave us Brown v. Board of Education all came from that little community, where it all started. We tend to think of Brown, being from Kansas, and few people realize that rural South Carolinians, rural Virginians, in Davis case, Belton v. Gebhart was the case coming out of Delaware, and then Washington D.C. with the District of Columbia v. John R. Thompson case, Brown v. Board of Education wasn't about initiating integration, it was about speeding up integration.

Rob: Right.

Clyburn: So I just thought it was necessary for people from these communities to feel that they too can participate.

Anne: On their drive to Adams Run for the final event on the trip, Tracy and Rob discussed the previous day's events in Lake City and Summerton. Let's hear it from them.

[RECORDING—Car audio featuring Tracy K. Smith and Rob Casper]

Rob Casper: Tracy, I felt it would be good to talk about what yesterday was like and what you're looking forward to today.

Tracy K. Smith: Okay. So we had two events yesterday, the first was in a church, and there were students from local schools, there were community members, there were people who were there in some civic capacity, school board, local government and the reverend of the congregation. The reading—I kind of front loaded the reading, basically. Representative Clyburn had comments that situated our location in historical terms, and that made me feel like I wanted to read poems of my own about history. And then we had a Q&A session afterward. There weren't a lot of questions, but a lot of comments came from that. I think people were interested in talking about how what they did or where they were from related to some of the themes that came up. One of the poems that I read had to do with certain companies in the civil war, and the 54th Massachusetts company had spent a lot of time in that area of South Carolina, so that came up. And then somebody who is enlisted, or a veteran, spoke about his experience. And it reminded me in some ways of going to church when I was growing up: there was a generational kind of spectrum, people were really warm and kind, and afterward there was that feeling of after church, let's greet each other. What did you notice?

Rob: Well, I thought it was great we had such a big crowd, that the church was filled to capacity. And also it was exciting to meet people, like the guy who came from North Carolina, and from the State Arts Council, there was a sense that because it was a public event there was a much bigger crowd and a crowd that both represented Lake City itself and the surrounding community but the larger literary arts community in the area.

Tracy: Yeah. And then the second event yesterday, which was at old Summerton High School, which was the school that had been integrated as part of the Brown v. Board of Education decision, and there were members of that class or subsequent classes who attended which I was really kind of blown away by—another reminder of how recent that history is, really. That was a smaller crowd. We had more back-and-forth-interaction. I read a group of poems and then sort of solicited questions and talked more about the process of writing. It felt like a conversation to me because of the way we were going back and forth.

Rob: Well I'm interested to have you talk a little bit about in a sense what you feel or what you've seen these readings require of you to talk about in terms of your own work, your own interest, how you feel you like you need to communicate the power of poetry to an audience that's made up of people who, as we saw yesterday, sort of happened to come to this event for various reasons, and were really excited about it.

Tracy: I kind of think, really, the power of poetry is something that happens. There was a group of people and many of them knew each other, and because of the way everything was framed from the beginning by the congressman, there was relevance in some way to people's lives and experience of place within the poems that were read. But I think that talking a little bit about the process, about why I would choose to write a poem about

history, that might have decoded a little bit of the mystique of poetry. A poem is something you can write to think about something; a poem can speak to not just love or private experience but another time or set of events. Maybe that was new or engaging to people. There were a lot of people afterward who said—not a lot. I met a group of women who said “oh I used to write, I used to do spoken word, I felt like that side of me was shut down but I really want to turn it back on, I want to get back into that.” And I think that’s exciting, and I guess what they’re saying is “there’s something I miss about what I used to do and these poems reminded me of that.” I don’t know exactly what it is for each person, but it’s nice to know that maybe it’s a useful or inspiring thing to say, oh this is something that I think is important, this is something that we can come together around. There were some questions, you know, about the writing life, but again there were a lot of comments that were almost just “this is what came to mind for me,” “this is what I feel,” and maybe that’s even the deeper point to it. Okay, not everybody’s going to become a poet from going to a poetry reading, but to be reminded of things that might have been quiet or dormant in the self is I think a huge part of what poems do.

Rob: I totally agree, and I also think one of the most remarkable aspects to this trip, and one of the biggest surprises, is how the congressman and yesterday the historian as well and all the introducers, really connected us to the history of these places. We’ve talked a lot about the importance of a rural tour and connecting to rural communities, but we haven’t thought about it in terms of connecting to not only to the people who were there in front of us, but the history of those places and how they connect to the history of those places. Do you think that’s a kind of thing we might want to focus on if possible, going forward?

Tracy: I think it could be a really interesting, quiet theme. What I liked about the way the congressman talked about history was that he was really using it as something that could be momentum for thinking forward. His comments at the end were really about, you know, making great choices and supporting the people who are vulnerable and young, and basically I felt he was saying we have this history of powerful change that we’ve come together as a community to enact—and it wasn’t just here locally, it affected a national change. And that seems like a charge; it’s not just saying that let’s celebrate that and then go back to doing what we always do, it’s a way of saying we can keep doing this. That’s exciting. Maybe places that have a legacy of powerful social movements would be really exciting to visit, and I’m sure the relationship of people to that history will be slightly different from place to place.

Rob: Well, and also every place has its history, and some places have histories like Summerton that are more explicitly connected to social movements in a national consciousness, but of course any place we go to might have something that we could possibly unearth. What’s been interesting is that the congressman himself set up these visits around, these three places around a history that connected to or connects to Black History Month. He’s talked about that, and it’s been exciting to have him at all these events. What’s it been like for you to have him be part of the presentation?

Tracy: I think initially I was apprehensive, you know, saying okay, there’s going to be a political representative here; is this going to be a platform for making everyone remember

why they elected him? But it wasn't. I think it was really, you know, "I'm proud of this place, I'm connected to people here, and I want to be a host," you know, so I appreciated that. His take on it has to do with history, but I bet that going somewhere else, even if that place has a really powerful history, it might mean going somewhere where someone's take, our hosts take on things about something else. Maybe it's more interesting to follow what comes, if somebody says "we are trying to revive this practice, or we are excited about this new trend, or this is a problem that we're struggling with," maybe it's interesting just to see whether and how poems dip into that conversation, instead of trying plan or choreograph it.

Rob Casper: We had one other person along with us on this trip, which I alluded to earlier. That is, our embedded reporter from *The New York Times Magazine*. National Book Critic Circle-award winning biographer Ruth Franklin had previously written a big profile for the magazine on novelist Claire Messud. So we had an idea of what she was looking for and what she would do in talking about Tracy. She was with us from beginning to end—in our car, at the events, at dinners, and running around trying to figure out where we should be and at what time. It was a lot of fun to have her there and it was exciting to see the piece a few weeks later.

Here's a little segment of Ruth talking to Tracy in the car while we were driving from one location to the next.

[RECORDING—Car audio featuring Ruth Franklin and Tracy K. Smith]

Ruth: One thing you've talked about a lot is listening to other people, hearing their perspectives, how poetry can listen to each other. And obviously one element that's so dramatic in our public conversation right now is the red/blue divide in America, and how people on other sides don't listen to each other or can't listen to each other, don't even have a common vocabulary for how to talk about the events around us. I guess part of what I was wondering if we'd see at these events was, you know, encounters with people on different sides of the political spectrum and what that might be like. I haven't really seen that happen, but I'm wondering if people came up and said things privately to you. Was that part of what you were hoping to achieve?

Tracy: It is part of what I am hoping to achieve, and I don't know how or what it will look like and I don't even know how I can know what side of the spectrum people sit on. And maybe this is just my assumption—I was speaking with two law enforcement officers who were there. They liked the poems, they liked listening to them, and they invited me, if I'm ever back, to go on a ride-along with them. They said "a lot of people think that we are just driving around looking to cause trouble, to upset people, that we're not doing our work in a fair-minded way, and we'd love for you to come and see how we do what we do," and I mean that's a really fascinating invitation. I would be interested in taking them up on it if I

ever were back. I don't know how that relates to your question, but I feel intuitively like that might be a way of getting closer to that, you know, divide.

Anne: Tracy's interest in returning to the rural communities she visited in South Carolina was shared by Congressman Clyburn, too. Before we wrap up today's episode, let's hear from the congressman about the final event on the South Carolina trip. It took place at the James E. Clyburn Wiltown Community Center.

[RECORDING—Rob Casper interviews Congressman James Clyburn]

Rob Casper: I want to focus my last question on that last stop, at the community center named after you. You and Tracy were both there early and you effectively greeted the audience as they walked in, and I felt like that changed the tenor of the event. Can you talk about the importance of a project like this engaging people on a one-on-one level, on a really intimate level, in the way that we did there at the community center?

Congressman James Clyburn: I think it's very important for people to feel that you are a part of them, and they of you. I feel like if I had just run in there at the appointed hour, leave as it was all over, I would lose so much of what it was I was trying to demonstrate. I got there early, I wanted to engage people, I wanted to get a feel for them, and hopefully they'll get a feel for us. And quite frankly, probably I ought not to say this but I feel it: I think that was the best stop of this thing, and I didn't expect for it to be. I kind of thought that Summerton would be, but it wasn't.

Rob: Well we didn't know we were going to compete with the women's state basketball tournament.

Clyburn: That was a big problem. We didn't know that at all either. But I'm not too sure that even if we had three times the crowd, I'm not too sure the quality and the interaction would've been what it was down there at Wiltown.

Rob: Yeah, I agree.

Clyburn: There was just something about the spirit in that place that had me telling my wife when I got home, that we got to go back down there and spend some time with those people.

Anne: Wow, what a way to end the trip! That sounds like a fantastic event.

Rob: It was really amazing to see what happened when Tracy greeted everyone beforehand, how it changed the tone of the whole event. At the two previous events, Tracy had gone to the green room and then stepped out when it was time to give the reading and

have a discussion, and it just made it a little bit more formal. It was lovely to see how the audience engaged more fully with Tracy because she'd had the opportunity to talk to them face to face and welcome them to the center.

You know, it's interesting to see how we learn so much just by doing with these pilot project trips—that, until we were in the communities, we didn't really know what would work and what wouldn't work.

I'm immensely grateful to the congressman and his staff, including the District Director Robert Nance, and everyone both in the district and here in Washington, D.C., who helped ensure that our travels were smooth and we reached amazing audiences. It was interesting, all three events really helped argue for the power of poetry to speak to the past as well as the present thanks to the congressman's careful selection of the locations. The congressman also connected poetry to civic engagement through his involvement. He opened up each event by telling stories that situated us, and he concluded each event by grounding it in a place in history. So, we always had a sense of where we were and why we were there and how Tracy's reading there and her conversations with audiences as the U.S. Poet Laureate mattered. Programmatically speaking, the South Carolina trip was a contrast to the New Mexico trip. We had three private events in New Mexico that focused on targeted audiences, and we had three public events in South Carolina that connected to these locations in a very public way. We also focused on a district instead of trying to cover the whole state, and that meant that we had the help of the congressman and his staff in a way that was very meaningful.

Of course, we changed things up for the final pilot project trip. You'll have to wait until next week to hear about what we did and what he learned when we were in Kentucky. And since it will be the final podcast for the series, you'll also hear us talking about what we made of our trips and how we decided to change things up for the American Conversations tour that started in September.

Anne: Great. Thank you so much, Rob!

Rob: Thanks Anne!

Anne: And that concludes today's episode. Thank you for joining us on "From the Catbird Seat." We'll be back next week for our third and final episode in this short series, where we'll follow Tracy K. Smith's March 2018 trip to Kentucky. To learn more about "American Conversations," visit the project online at read.gov/americanconversations. And, as always, you can find out more about poetry past, present, and future at the Library of Congress at loc.gov/poetry. Stay tuned.