

The Resistance Transcript

Natashia Deón - Episode 34

Matt: Hello, and welcome to The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner, and I'm your host. Today, we're graced with the presence of Natashia Deón. Natashia, how are you today?

Natashia: I'm doing really well. Thank you for asking, Matt. How are you?

Matt: Yeah, good. Good. You know, we'll dive into all the normal things that we cover in The Resistance on a typical podcast, but it's just hard to divorce this conversation from the context we're in, which is: global pandemic, heavy social time, etc. Are you faring at least okay, keeping your head above water, as you say? Or does sunny California help, I'm assuming?

Natashia: Yeah, you know we're in February, it's Black History Month, it's about 70 degrees outside. It's beautiful. And the sun helps a lot. You know, I'm light sensitive. I lived in London for awhile, and it got really difficult towards the end when it was rainy and short days. It makes me feel better, but no I'm not exempt from the effects of this Covid season. I don't know if there's a word for it. But I'm personally well and safe, and my family are personally well and safe, but you know I'm still grieving the rest of the world, people who are losing people, losing jobs, loneliness, all of that. So my heart goes out to them.

Matt: Yeah, that is a weird balance to be okay and yet to grieve that everything is not okay. Well, maybe that's part of the resistance. But also individually for you, I'd love to know how you'd respond. We begin every episode with the same quote. Our source material comes from a book by a writer, Steven Pressfield, in his book *The War of Art*. In his book, he leads out with this quote. I'd love your take on this. He says, "Most of us have two lives. The life we live, and the unlive life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." I know earlier we were talking that you have several plates that you spin, and you can feel free to define those even now if you'd like, but what does resistance look like for you these days as an author, and then whatever else you'd like to explore?

Natashia: Sure, sure. I get that question often. They're like, "How do you do this?" I'm like, I just keep walking. That's it. So I'm an author, and I'm also a mother. I'm a practicing criminal defense attorney. I'm a law professor and creative writing professor for UCLA and Antioch, and I'm also a student in seminary right now, getting a Masters of Science and Psychology. So there's a lot of, and I take care of my mom, and my son has special needs. And I'm a fortunate wife with a partner who makes this a group effort. Family's a group effort. I'm fortunate in that way, so I'm always just saying to myself, because of probably my world view, is that I get to do these things.

Even more specifically, God lets me do these things. Because there was a time when I was really sick for about 6 months straight and almost bedridden. I remember praying often, saying, "If I can get up and do more, I want to do more. I want to be able to take advantage of my life. I'm still young. I'm still able. I just can't get out of the bed right now." So as soon as I was healed or better, I went through a couple of surgeries, and I felt good. I said, I want to make the most of it.

So when I think of the quote that you just read about us being two people, the life we live and the unlive life, I kind of set that aside a long time ago, shortly after that, when I decided, I want to live integrated. And what that means, integrated, is putting all the parts of myself into one person, so that I don't have to remember who I am, because this is who I am all the time. And being integrated allows you to be truthful and honest with yourself and other people, in a kind and loving way, obviously. But just walking in your integrity. I don't have to remember if I told one person one thing and somebody else something else.

When I walk in a room, I can have my lawyer mind. I can have my creative mind. I can have my mothering role and my creative role. And I walk as one person. And I know it's really hard to do in our society,

especially when we go to work and there's hierarchies, and there's different cultures. But for me, I have to be myself at all times, but also walk in humility of the cultures that I have the privilege of being a part of, whether that's on a Christian campus, or whether that's in a club in Hollywood, or in a different culture, like literally.

Whether I'm in Armenia or in London. But just being humble, but still being myself. So I'm not two people living two lives un-lived. I'm living the life that I want to live as best I can, and giving myself permission to grow, to be wrong, to change, and apologizing, and forgiving myself. So that's what it means to me to live integrated.

Matt: When you said, "I was laying there, thinking, God if you let me get up, I want to do more," now that you're doing more, what are you finding out? There's a whole other conversation about healthy boundaries and self care, and yet if you've had some sort of extreme experience, like I just want to live life to the fullest, it feels like there could be these sort of extremes at work against each other. I wonder what tension you feel there, or not.

Natashia: You know, I feel pain, often. So walking sort of in your fullness doesn't mean that you're like walking around skipping and happy. Actually, I feel more pain now. Because you feel other people, you see yourself in other people. There's no passes. If you're honest with yourself. You can't ignore what's around you. So self care to me is, because people define these things for us: boundaries and self care. America has a specific way of what that means, which is very western, and I don't think we realize it when we're in it.

So for me, boundaries look very different than what it means, I guess, in the popular culture, pop culture boundaries. For instance, as a Christian person, and I usually don't talk about my Christian views like this, but I am, when we talk about boundaries.

So from a Biblical perspective, everybody who achieves something great in the Bible crossed boundaries. It's the woman who's bleeding who reaches out to Jesus and holds his hem. All these people crossing boundaries, doing things they shouldn't do. So boundaries look very different to me, because sometimes I know I have to either be that bleeding woman who's reaching out for healing, I'm not Jesus obviously, but if I was that person, I have to be able to say, you know what, I need to stop for a minute. Something is happening here. I need to be present here. A

nd so boundaries to me isn't simply saying, I'm not going to do this, or I'm going to draw these lines. I draw lines, but I know that they can be crossed, and I'm not offended by it. I try not to live in offense. The other thing we talk about, self care, people will say, oh, self care is, I don't know, for a woman, getting your nails done, your hair done, or going on vacation.

And for me, when I think about what self care means to me, especially being a mom and just, parenting just is a mind fudge, right? You can't just think about yourself. And you can't explain it to single people who don't have children. I get it. It's just a different world. But self care isn't just about escape. It's about doing what is life-giving to you. Whatever that is.

So sometimes what's life-giving to me is gardening. And then all my plants will die, because I have literally a brown thumb. So that's not life-giving. It's devastating. I killed some living things today. Sometimes it's just sex with my husband. You know, being in that moment. Or sometimes it's just taking a drive, being in a space where I'm quarantined still because my mother is 80 and she's a Black woman, and having a son with special needs who is also susceptible to some bad outcomes with Covid. I like going on a fake commute, because I'm used to going into court, driving into court every day, or to work. And so now, being quarantined, I'll get in my car, and I'll drive about 5 miles, and then I'll turn around and come home, park, and then walk in the house. I try to trick myself that way, but it's whatever is life-giving. I think there's so many people who want to tell you what self-care is, what boundaries should

look like, and I think it's so individual, when you're being honest with yourself and your needs, which is a hard place to get to.

Matt: It feels like there are several doors open for you: writing and teaching, learning, obviously, the law, practicing law, etc. How much do you wrestle with knowing what door to walk through? Where to give your time? I guess I'll just leave it there.

Natashia: That's a great question. Where to give your time. It's whatever feels right. I kind of pose the question to myself in an opposite way. "What hurts me to do right now?" And sometimes it is writing. Sometimes it is showing up for clients. And I have to look at those things and say, what can I set aside? What can I not do today, so that I can be okay?

Because there are times, I'll be honest, that, well it could even happen every day, where it hurts me to do something to walk today, and I'm almost to a point of tears just to send an email that's hard to respond to. Not because it's a particularly hard thing to do, it's just that I just can't do it today. And sometimes I'll push through, because it feels good, and that's part of the way to get over a hump of stuckness, is to do the one thing that hurts, but sometimes it's just saying, you know what? That can wait until tomorrow. I need to take care of my mind. I'm going to sit and watch a show on Netflix, and it's 2:00 in the afternoon. I'm going to do something else.

For me, it's making up my own life. And like I said, all of it hurts for me. Especially in this time of covid, with the election, with the harmful, hurtful things that people say, the abuses, I have to just play it by ear, and give myself permission to do that. So much of our American lives are prescribed. "This is what you're supposed to do when you're this age." You know, so I set all that stuff down, and it was like leaving a pile of clothes in one step, and then stepping to the left, and saying I can leave that there. Now what do I want? So that's kind of how I balance all that. Does that even answer the question?

Matt: It did, but I want to zero in on one thing you said, because there was a real authority to the way that you said it. When you were describing stuckness, and you said, "You know, sometimes you just have to do the hard thing that maybe you would naturally avoid to get over that." It was the way you said it that just sounded like, "oh yeah, this is one thing I've learned, for sure."

Natashia: Oh absolutely. Because the things that bring on, especially the depression, as an artist suffering from depression, and it's just an extreme sadness, is it's often a thing that's in my face that I can drag it on for three months, something that would take me literally 10, 15 minutes to knock out. Like all you have to do is send this email. All you have to do is make that call to so-and-so, and you'll be off the phone in an hour, but you've given it 3 months of your life and grief and worry. But it doesn't make it any better. So you have to choose to take that step, to do it, because it'll be over soon.

Matt: I want to shift gears just a little bit here, because I know you have a new book coming out later this year, correct?

Natashia: Yeah, thank you.

Matt: First of all, what can you tell us about that?

Natashia: Oh, okay, it's called *The Perishing*. It's out in November 2021. We're here. It's a historical fiction, so it's set in the 1930s, Los Angeles, and a young Black girl begins to believe she'll live forever just as she finds a love in a city worth dying for. So that's sort of the elevator pitch. It's about love and loss, and loss over time, and love over time.

Matt: Some of those themes are also very clearly in *Grace*. I would love to talk about what it's like to follow that up. In what way did you feel a shadow from *Grace*, which really seemed to be very well

received, a lot of acclaim, and rightly so? What's it like to sort of proverbially put pen to paper after that and start over again? Did you feel a sense of, okay, how do I follow this?

Natashia: Yeah, you know, I didn't try to follow it, necessarily, but like you said, all those ghosted themes carry over into the new book. So actually there's parts of *Grace* that are seen in *The Perishing*, as if it's a follow-up, like it's related. So there are characters that you might see in the next book, or a part of it in sort of supernatural ways. I tried to carry it on, so it became an accidental follow-up. It's not quite the prequel, but it does cover prequel, and then after, because it's set in the 1930s instead of the 1860s. So it's sort of a follow-up, because we never really let go of the things that plague us as writers. I say plague us, but I mean haunts us. Like America is haunted. We have so much history that wants to be heard. And as artists, we tap into the things that are around us. Some of those aren't just relegated to our five senses. So it is a follow-up to *Grace* in many ways. And it's about love. The love that's in *Grace* is mostly mother-daughter, but also love, relational love. So did that answer your question? I was like, what am I talking about?

Matt: Yeah, you're totally fine. I'd love to hear more about your own writing background. I was trying to understand it myself, and it just seemed like there was quite a bit of time between *Grace*, I mean going back, that there seemed to be some writing awards or Fellowship or something, and there's all these years where maybe practicing law came in, or family, etc. Was there a waiting for you to launch the writing career in the way that you'd wanted to?

Natashia: Yeah, so people often say, "Oh look. She was an overnight success." That just doesn't happen for anyone, mostly. I mean, there are social media stars and stuff. But most artists are in this for the long game. As a writer, I've been writing since I can remember. I can remember creating games for my sister when I was 5 years old, 6 years old. And they would have stories. So I always wrote stories, or I always rewrote, for instance bible stories, I would write my own version. I was always writing. But my parents came from a small town in Alabama, and when they came west during the Great Migration, it was a big deal that their children would be a doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer.

So writing was not even an option in my household. And I even think of it now that way, that it's a privilege to be able to write. To be able to say, you know what, I'm not going to have a traditional life for whatever that means to the person. Because I want to dedicate it to my art. It is a privileged position, and it's one that's hard. Like you say, it's the resistance. Because nothing wants you to create like that, even though it's so natural for us as human beings to create, biologically, psychologically. So I've always written. I became a lawyer because I could still write. I could still retell the stories of my clients. I could go in deeper about motivations. Why is this person doing this thing? Why is it unlikely that what they're telling me is a lie, or what they're telling me is a lie or the truth?

So I'm always using those skills. I've always written. But I didn't take it seriously until 2010, when I made the plunge, saying, I'm going to do this. I quit my job, and I began to write seriously. At that time I got a fellowship with PEN America, and then from there, just sort of moved on and just became dedicated to this art form. And you know, for artists, nobody's waiting for your work. Especially writers. You're writing this thing. Nobody's like, "Oh, we can't wait." They'll give you that compliment, but life goes on, whether you deliver it or not. So it's up to us to get it past the imaginary finish line, so it can do the things, whatever it's supposed to do. So this is my eleventh year of full dedication to my writing life, but also still practicing law.

Matt: What did those early days look like? *Grace* came out then, seven years into your timeline. What did those early days look like when maybe some of the tangible successes weren't there?

Natashia: You know, I think it was, had it not been for, and I'm not intentionally plugging PEN America, but I am as an Emerging Voice Fellow, when I came into writing as a whole, I was lucky that they were

the first person I ran into in my journey. And not everybody gets that. Some people decide to write, and they're just writing in their room. Their mom is writing, or they're going to a class, and you have writers of different levels, who are either giving you good advice or terrible advice, and you don't feel as confident. But I was lucky that they were my first step, because they said you can do this. You're a good writer. You can do this. And they introduced me to other writers. And they were very much encouraging, but also critical enough to say, you know what, this is hard.

So I had a very realistic perspective of what it meant. Because as artists who apply for things, there's a lot of stuff I haven't gotten, even now. I'll apply for a scholarship. Nope. None of that changes. But you also, as an artist, you're like an actor. An actor, you go to all these auditions, and you're not going to get every one. You'd see the same actors all the time. You're going to be turned down, so you have to get used to being rejected. The same way an actor would. As a writer, that's what happens, because people are looking for a certain thing, or a certain voice, or a certain look. And you have to understand that you're not for everybody. You're not everybody's ideal. And that's okay.

Matt: You mentioned earlier the imaginary finish line. Is that easier for you to cross now than it was 5 years ago?

Natashia: No. No, it's probably...no. Because as an artist, you have to have a healthy self-appreciation. A certain ego to believe that I can do this. Oh, they're wrong because they didn't love me. But then there's some people that will hurt you, because they are right. And you're just like, okay, let me get it together. And you'll find your trusted people. I was still going against an imaginary finish line.

When I sold this current book, *The Perishing*, two years ago, it was on a first draft. Because I was that eager. But I was also that sure. I was like, this is good. And it was such a horrible...if you talk to writers, your first draft is shit. My first draft was no different. But I was like, this is great. But I went with my same publisher, who says, "I know that you're capable of better than this. This ain't it. But we'll work with you on it." So I was more impatient this time, for a lot of different reasons. I think the hardest part is that Grace had done really well. The things about books, which I learned after mine came out, is that the shelf life for most books is 6 months from the date of publication. That's when all the energy goes into your book, for 6 months. So I'm still having interviews. This is now, what, 2021? And that book came out in 2016.

So my book was supposed to be over. My tour was supposed to be over by the end of 2016. But instead, it just picked up, because I got the NAACP award nomination, the *New York Times* listed it as a top book of the year, and then it just kept growing and growing. And the American Library Association, where I met John Lewis, before he passed away, and he was like, "Congratulations on this book. God is with you." All this stuff, and then it was like, so I'm moving, and then it became 28 city tour, and then 3 countries, and then I became a US delegate for Armenia. Like all this stuff started happening, and I got further and further away from my release date, and then I look up and it's 2019, 2020, and people are saying, "Okay. When's your next book come out?" And I was like, "Uhh. I don't know." You get these sort of sarcastic comments.

But when you think about American literature, any literature, most books that we're reading now came out a very long time ago. And I hadn't considered that actually having a long shelf life was not, there wasn't something wrong with me. Like I was living too long on this wave. It was just what it is. If it's going to hold up, you're going to be there a long time. But nobody I knew had had something like that. Most people are saying, "Oh, what about Maya Angelou's *I Know Why A Caged Bird Sings*?" If you look at when it came out, or any of the books that are considered classics, they came out a long time ago. So I just felt, I had to change my perspective and not begrudge being on the road in 2017, 2018, 2019, and then zoom 2020, and now here. But I stopped being able to write, because all those things take time and energy from the creative process.