

# NATASHA

# STAGG

NATASHA STAGG IS THE AUTHOR OF SURVEYS: A NOVEL, PUBLISHED IN 2016 BY SEMIOTEXT(E). IN 2019, SLEEVELESS: A COLLECTION, WILL ALSO BE ISSUED BY THE INDEPENDENT PUBLISHER FOUNDED BY SYLVERE LOTRINGER AND EDITED BY CHRIS KRAUS. HER WORK HAS APPEARED IN ARTFORUM, BOOKFORUM, TEXTE ZUR KUNST, N+1, SPIKE ART, DAZED, V AND 032C TO NAME BUT A FEW. WE SPOKE IN THE LIMBO PERIOD PRE-PUBLICATION OF SLEEVELESS, EMAILING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN NEW YORK AND LONDON OVER A MONTH. NATASHA'S WRITING HOOKED ME FROM MY FIRST INTERACTIONS WITH HER TEXTS - HER PROFILES OF CELEBRITIES AND HER BANAL YET OFTEN ACERBIC TWEETS - AND DIVING INTO THE BLEAK, BEIGE WORLD OF INTERNET INFLUENCE IN SURVEYS, I WAS STRUCK BY THE DELICACY WITH WHICH SHE JUGGLES THE SELF AND THE SENSE OF AN AUDIENCE SHE ALLUDES TO. APPROACHING FASHION, CELEBRITY AND AUTHENTICITY WITH A TOUCH MORE THAN THE PROVERBIAL PINCH OF SALT, NATASHA'S WRITING IS A STARK, CLEAN REFLECTION OF OUR AGE, A MIRROR WITH STRAIGHT GLASS WEDGED IN THE FUNHOUSE.

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**LJW:** Sleeveless - your upcoming book - is a collection of your essays and stories commissioned by fashion, art, and culture magazines. Did you write any new material for the book?

**NS:** Yes, there are a few stories that are new, and all of the commissioned stuff has been edited, so it might seem fully new.

**LJW:** You've said before, at a reading you gave in Cologne, that you were 'over fashion writing'. Forgive me if the quote is inaccurate, it's second-hand from my boyfriend who met you there. Can you expand on this? And did the editing process for Sleeveless change the way you felt about the pieces included in the book?

**NS:** That's so funny, I remember that conversation and I think I was very jet lagged and nervously drinking.

But I am over some aspect of fashion magazines in general, meaning I am over the aspiration I once had to become a fashion reviewer, knowing the amount of commercial content one has to produce in order to pursue and then keep that kind of job.

I think I'm better off doing the commercial stuff without attaching my name to it, not dressing it up as an honest take on a collection or season or trend, while also writing essays whenever I feel a strong enough opinion about something.

**LJW:** Did you once want to be a fashion reviewer? Was there anyone specific you looked up to in the profession, who inspired you?

**NS:** I vaguely did, yeah. My introduction to fashion shows was via Style.com, and I'd read Sarah Mower and Maya Singer before they went to Vogue. I was impressed by the form of fashion reviewing, maybe as much as I was impressed by fashion. I'm remembering now that in a college linguistics class, I wrote an essay about the flexibility of fashion writing. I was convinced that as a genre it was responsible for a large percentage of our newly adopted language, considering the necessity of creating new words and phrases to describe manufactured

newness. That essay actually won me a writing award after my professor submitted it to a contest, and so I'm sure it exists in the University of Michigan Hopwood Library, which is a funny little room in which they keep blank binders full of award-winning student work and serve tea once a month to those students and the creative writing staff. I haven't seen it in a decade, though.

**LJW:** When you refer to anonymously writing commercial fashion work, do you mean copywriting?

**NS:** Yeah, I have a few copywriting jobs, not just for fashion brands but for art exhibitions, some tech-related stuff, beauty products, etc. I am still not accustomed to disconnecting myself from my writing completely, basically creating a new voice and/or parroting established voices. It seems like a good skill to master, though. By the way, if someone tells you they pay rent in New York with non-commercial creative writing work alone, I'd be suspicious. Not that you asked!

**LJW:** What still interests you in fashion?

**NS:** Lately I'm interested in seeing the panic of a lot of industries—not just fashion but they're definitely included—over the individualization of marketing. There are so many ways to think about how a person is attracted to a thing enough to buy it and what the influx of shopping modes and entry points could mean for production and marketing strategies. There's also somewhat interesting research happening in sustainability, although it's hard to be too optimistic about that. It sort of makes sense, though, that personal brands selling directly to consumers would amount to more up-cycling, at least. I hate seeing vintage institutions like Allan & Suzi in New York City close, likely not able to keep up with online boutiques and massive re-selling platforms, but maybe a bright side is that buying used is increasingly normalized. I wonder if dry cleaners and tailors are seeing more business because of that.

**LJW:** Yes, I'm so interested in the kind of impersonal notion of a voice or an identity when writing. I also do a bit of copywriting - currently for a British luxury retailer, which requests a tongue-in-cheek traditional style - but I actually found I love not having to rely on the strength of my own voice, rather crafting the person they want to sell to and focusing on that dialogue.

**NS:** Yeah, it's so different than how you're taught to write in school.

**LJW:** When you wrote Surveys, did you think of your audience in this way?

**NS:** I started writing Surveys in a grad school novel-writing workshop, so I had four classmates in mind as my audience, at least subconsciously. But I finished it on my own once I moved to New York, and I really can't say I was too distracted by thinking about what other people would get out of it then. By that point, it was a fun little project to keep myself occupied while I was trying to get jobs. I really did not expect to get it published.

**LJW:** Also - in general - when writing fiction, do you create a new voice? Or do you create fictional narratives with your own voice? Or are you writing autofiction?

**NS:** I guess all of the above? I'm not super conscious of it, but I listen to the way people talk and then later that stuff could make it into a story—the shape of a conversation, a tone, an epiphany, a surprising reaction. Maybe on a related note, I'm told I am good at impressions, but I hardly ever try to impersonate. If I'm quoting someone, though, I end up sounding like them.

**LJW:** The way you talk about buying and marketing garments makes me also think about the way we're now fed content, whether written or broadcast. How do you think consumption of media affects your writing?

**NS:** I'm sure it affects my writing greatly. I probably don't read as much as I used to. It's hard to focus on anything for very long, since so

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much of what I read turns out to be garbage basically created by top search engine results pieced together. That kind of thing makes me want to quit. I sit in an office most days, and I end up reading a lot of boring clickbait or needlessly sensational hot takes, which can only be novel for so long. I'd hate to accidentally add to that mix.

**LJW:** The ease with which you describe social media platforms in *Surveys* without dating the piece or inadvertently providing product placement is striking. Were you conscious at this time that naturalisation of social media was bound to take place?

**NS:** Yes, probably with the clarity that comes with ignorance. I was not involved with any type of social media then and I had not read much about it, so I wanted to sort of make up my own version of how it would work. I wonder if I would be able to do that now, knowing what everyone knows about influencers and personal brand monetization.

**LJW:** The story of *Surveys* being published seems to me kind of a literary urban legend now. That you interviewed Chris Kraus and she insisted *Semiotext(e)* publish it – do you look back on this as a pivotal moment?

**NS:** Oh yes, it felt surreal, her asking me to send her my manuscript and then later, to publish it. I'm so happy to be at *Semiotext(e)* now, and that they wanted to publish my second book.

**LJW:** Do you meet people online? Do you or have you ever used dating apps?

**NS:** Yes, I meet people through social media occasionally, but I'm old enough to find it unsettling how prevalent the practice is compared to a time when we were told to never disclose our names online. I used dating apps when they felt new and unconventional, which was the only way I would be able to get into the idea. It was like I was finding other people brave enough to test out this new process that would introduce us

to likeminded freaks. Later, I tried the newer apps. It was still fun, but had become more of a sport. Mostly I meet people face to face.

**LJW:** When you wrote the summer diaries for *Spike*, inspired by Marguerite Duras for *Libération* in the eighties, did you feel a responsibility to be 'authentic'? There's such a commodity attached to authenticity now, I wonder if this came naturally for you?

**NS:** That's funny, I hadn't thought about it. Of course authenticity is relative, and maybe the more we talk about what it means today the more we will understand that it means nothing. But when I was writing those entries, I was glad I was being held to a schedule, because it ended up documenting an emotional part of my life. I had planned on doing weekly commentary on particular innovations or news items, but instead I recorded how raw I felt during a few unforeseen events, which has to be pretty authentic, if anything I write is.

**LJW:** Can I ask, how did the manuscript come up in conversation with Chris Kraus?

**NS:** We were talking about the publishing world in New York, how oppressive it is, and I ended up saying I was at a loss with it because I had moved to New York thinking that I had some connections there and they all sort of fell through. Really I wanted to work in publishing, but I also mentioned that some readers at bigger houses had held a novel manuscript of mine hostage for years saying that it could maybe fall into the right hands, too. So she asked to read it.

**LJW:** In an interview with *Tank Magazine*, you once said that when teaching at grad school, you found yourself panicking to impress when talking about writing. Do you still feel this? Email can very effectively disguise tone, but you seem to consider your practice in a very measured manner.

**NS:** I think I was more panicked about what my classmates thought

of my reading habits. I wanted to go back to school for Library Science originally, but I needed a graduate degree before I could apply for that program, anyway, and so I got a Fiction Writing degree, thinking that I'd be at everyone's level, since I took more than the required literature classes in undergrad. But the PhD students, who were each writing on a specific era, seemed justifiably unimpressed with us Creative Writing MFAs because we weren't up on our history or theory, and the MFA students all read literary journals and new fiction I'd never heard of. We all took the same pedagogy classes because we all had to teach English 101 for the first time, and I felt like the one who knew more about movies than books. I do still panic in certain conversations. I wish I'd read more of the classics, philosophy, and critical theory before my attention span was shot with internet stuff and work. But I also have a horrible memory, so I likely wouldn't have retained any of it anyway.

**LJW:** What are you reading?

**NS:** Right now I'm reading a John Waters book I got for my birthday called "Crackpot," JT LeRoy's "Sarah," just to see for myself, and this little book of Jane Bowles's letters and fragments called "Feminine Wiles."

**LJW:** Have you finished with the final edits for *Sleeveless* yet? How are you anticipating its release?

**NS:** I haven't, no. I really don't know how it will be received, if at all. Maybe it will seem anticlimactic because it's mostly personal essays, which everyone seems sick of.

**LJW:** What makes you think everyone is sick of personal essays?

**NS:** Oh, maybe it's just me. Or maybe I'm just sick of the term. It makes me cringe, like it's trying to be the new "chick lit."

**LJW:** I don't know, isn't that just about a popular form of writing right now? Sure, it's a feminised form – I think the act of personal writing is a brave one. Maybe you're being too hard on yourself. I'm excited to

read *Sleeveless* either way! I like the 'sorry not sorry' detail in the Josephine Pryde photo you chose for the cover. Is this also a statement about moving away from fashion – since Josephine works with fashion vocabulary but doesn't necessarily take on commercial commissions?

**NS:** I didn't choose the cover, but I love it for that reason, too.

**LJW:** And finally, do you think you are as unapologetic as you're often described in blurbs?

**NS:** Am I described as unapologetic? I think I'm pretty open to discussion. I like getting into arguments, but I also like to be convinced. In my writing, though, I'm not really advocating for anything, just attempting to reflect version of life I've observed.

# INTERVIEW BY WHEELER LARA JOHNSON LARA JOHNSON WHEELER INTERVIEW BY