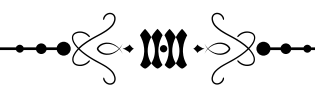




A CONVERSATION WITH NINA LACOUR
AUTHOR OF

MEET ME IN THE GARDEN



The novel is inspired by your grandparents' experience, who came to Los Angeles from New Orleans during the Great Migration. What about their story made you want to explore Odette's story?

My grandparents, Joe and Elizabeth LaCour, were huge figures in my life. Each summer when I was a kid, I'd fly by myself from Oakland to Long Beach to spend a week with them. Even though I was just flying from one part of California to another, it felt like entering another world, and when I got older I realized why that was: They had New Orleans accents, cooked grits and gumbo, and listened to jazz. My grandparents were very proud of my writing and always wanted me to write about New Orleans. It took me a long time to feel ready.

I wanted to take major elements of my family's journey and also give myself full freedom to immerse myself in the kind of story I was burning to explore—which is what it would be like to live in that time and to make the journey my grandparents made for someone who was not only impacted by Jim Crow, not only part of a complex racial and cultural identity, but also queer, and an artist, and a mother.

You did extensive family research—from letters, personal interviews, documents, and newspaper articles. Can you talk about your research journey and how it shaped the direction of the novel? How does writing such a personal novel differ from your previous work?

I had gathered so many family stories about life in New Orleans and Los Angeles from the 30s to the 60s; when I started writing the book my first step was to place them within a broader historical context. The personal elements of the story and what it told me about my grandmother were things I'd thought about for decades already—the complexities it raised about being mixed race, about colorism, about ambiguity, about passing.

It took me a while to give myself the freedom to use my grandparents' stories without feeling constrained by truth. But when I got there, it became such a pleasure. All of my books include personal elements mixed with fiction, but *Meet Me in the Garden* pushes both far beyond what I've written before.



While set in a more restrictive era, Odette's struggles with identity carry deep contemporary resonance. Why is it vital to depict LGBTQ+ themes and the realities of racial inequality in historical fiction, and how does this narrative inform our modern cultural dialogue?

In 2008, when the news broke that Obama was elected president, my dad was overcome by a memory of his paternal grandfather visiting Los Angeles when my dad was a kid. His grandfather had lived his entire life in Louisiana under Jim Crow, and now he was holding my dad's hand, walking with him toward a fair as a crowd gathered. My dad felt his grandfather's hand begin to tremble, and then he discovered that his grandfather was shaking all over, in significant distress. He alerted his dad, and he watched the two men talk. His grandfather had noticed that most of the fairgoers were white and had been struck with panic about going to the fairgrounds. My grandfather put his hand on his father's shoulder and said, "Dad, this is California. We can go anywhere we want to."

On that same election night, though, we were also watching for the results of California's Prop 8, which would ban same-sex marriage. Like many queer Californians, my wife and I had gotten married in the window between May and November while gay marriage had been legal. When the news came hours later that Prop 8 had passed, that the majority of our state had voted against our rights, we cried again. It felt so personal to us, so wrong and so painful. The euphoria of President Obama's election and the heartbreak of Prop 8's passing will always be linked for me. Forward movement and backward movement, at the same time, in the same place. It was important to me to touch (even very briefly) on different experiences of queerness in *Meet Me in the Garden* because we have always been here—and will always be here—no matter how hard society tries to erase or limit us.

This a heart-achingly romantic novel, and yet much of the romance in the story takes place in secret. What interests you about forbidden love?

I have such a weakness for yearning and longing in love stories. That feeling of knowing you could be together and be good for each other but having something significant standing in your way... And then what do you do if you can't be with that person? How do you move through your days in a way that's meaningful? I have a scene where Odette watches the person she's in love with out a window over a series of days. The person she loves is just moving through the parking lot after work with different people, and Odette's so torn up over it. That kind of intensity of wanting something you can't have can be destructive or threatening in real life, so to explore it through fiction offers the intensity without the actual danger. It was heartbreaking but also luxurious to spend so much time in that place of longing in the novel.



How does the novel link Odette's artistic talent and creative expression to her sexuality as a source of power and danger, why does it take so long for her to embrace her passions?

I'm so glad you asked about the correlation between artmaking and sexuality in the novel, because it was one of the great surprises that came out of growing to know Odette more deeply as I drafted. This is a woman who is tightrope-walking through her life: on one side is the acceptability of straight, domestic 1950s motherhood. On the other side is passion and freedom—but at great cost. I discovered that for Odette to make art that reflects something internal and true, it risks exposing her. Allowing herself the instinctual, uncensored experience of artmaking brings her closer to her true self—but she needs to repress core elements of her true self in order to survive and keep her family. She craves painting and she craves sexual relationships with women, and these cravings are almost always incompatible with the rest of her life.

Odette's beloved cousin Delphine falls in love with and marries a white man. The couple moves from New Orleans to Los Angeles where Delphine starts passing as white. Odette and her sisters are light skinned, sometimes perceived as racially and ethnically ambiguous. How is the novel interested in colorism in America, on a national and intimate level?

When I was a kid visiting my grandparents in Long Beach, my grandmother would brush my hair—which is fine and straight—and tell me how “good” its texture was. I didn't place her assessment into a racial context for a long time. By the time I did understand, she was telling me stories about how, when Creole dances were thrown back in New Orleans, she had to show her wrists at the door to get in, and that some of the boys she liked were deemed “too dark” and she and her friends would beg the doormen to make exceptions. Though my grandparents' birth certificates say “Negro,” I only ever heard my grandmother refer to herself as Creole. My grandfather, on the other hand, referred to himself as Black. (Ironically, his complexion was lighter than my grandmother's.) In *Meet Me in the Garden*, Odette and her sisters have a much more nuanced relationship to passing: They enjoy the privilege of being helped in department stores, but know to make a swift exit when the shopgirls get too close a look at their faces. They hold onto their Creole identities through social clubs and traditions, but clash over their relationships to Blackness. The characters' personal identities are further challenged as the civil rights movement takes center stage in their part of Los Angeles.



We see some characters in the novel abandon the role of motherhood and others adopt it. How is the novel interested in the mother-daughter relationship, and more broadly, the hard work of mothering and care-taking?

Odette has a very troubled and distant relationship with her own mother, so she really doesn't have much of a guide. In her early years of mothering, she lives with her sister's family and they raise all the kids together. But as the kids get older and Odette's circumstances change, we really see her way of mothering shift. Not only is she now raising her biological son, Clément, but also Delphine's daughter, Nathalie, who Delphine has been forced to give up. At times the responsibility of motherhood intensifies Odette's isolation and her despair. But mothering also gives Odette some of her most triumphant moments, and in the back of her mind is always the immense loss that Delphine and Nathalie have experienced. With this novel I really tried to capture so many of the experiences of a full life, its ups and downs and joys and sorrows, and mothering gave me so much to work with.

Both Odette's father and cousin Delphine suffer mental health crises that lead to institutionalization. How does the novel use their experiences to critique the ways race and gender dictate the perception and treatment of trauma?

My great-grandfather, great-aunt, and great-great grandmother were all patients at what was then called the East Louisiana Hospital for the Insane. The women were institutionalized there until they died and my great-grandfather was released after around a decade. I actually know more about their stories now than I did at the time of writing *Meet Me in the Garden*, but just knowing they'd been there compelled me to include these struggles for Papa and Delphine.

In the novel (as in my own family history), being institutionalized for mental illness as a mother often equated losing your children. A major tension in the book is that queerness was also considered a mental illness, and could also result in children being taken away. So much was at play for me when I was researching and writing about mental health and psychosis and queerness in the novel—most prominently the (largely barbaric) treatments patients endured. I thought a lot about the impact of racism and the vulnerability of queer people and women. To deliberately pass—as white or as straight—is to live in a constant state of heightened vigilance and anxiety. These characters go through so much. It was a painful part of writing the novel, but such an important one to me.