

Truth be Told: On Natasha Trethewey

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By Teow Lim Goh

History and Poetry

Natasha Trethewey writes in the poem “Southern History” that she learned a skewed view of slavery in school. Her teacher quotes the textbook as saying that the slaves were better off under the master’s care because they were fed and clothed and housed. He also tells his students that *Gone with the Wind* is an accurate depiction of life in the Old South. Trethewey bristles at these lies and manipulations, but as a half-black student in a white teacher’s classroom, she knows that she is powerless. She remains silent.

Trethewey is now the U.S. Poet Laureate. In her poetry, she gives voice to histories that are untold, misrepresented, and otherwise silenced. In her first collection *Domestic Work*, she draws portraits of the everyday lives of the black working class in the Jim Crow South. *Bellocq’s Ophelia* is a fictional story of a biracial prostitute in New Orleans in the early 1900s. *Native Guard* juxtaposes memories of her mother, who was murdered by Trethewey’s stepfather, with the forgotten histories of the Louisiana Native Guards, one of the first black regiments of the Union Army. *Beyond Katrina* takes her back to her hometown of Gulfport, Mississippi, after Hurricane Katrina, a storm more often associated with New Orleans. And in *Thrall*, she meditates on the colonial art of the Americas and reckons with her relationship with her white father.



Trethewey has a historian’s eye for accuracy, but as a poet, she also lives in the imagination. She draws on personal and family stories, historical photographs, archival research, interviews, and art to recreate the lived experience. She intertwines her memories with public histories. She wrestles with the problems of memory. And she shows us ways with which we can write our own stories.

Writing the Truth

Trethewey spent her childhood summers with her grandmother in Gulfport. She and her grandmother rode the ferry to Ship Island, a barrier island just off the Gulfport coast, and visited Fort Massachusetts, where the Union held Confederate prisoners of war during the Civil War. On the island, the Daughters of the Confederacy erected a memorial for the fallen soldiers, their names emblazoned in the bronze. After one of these trips, Trethewey and her grandmother were talking about the island when a woman interrupted them and told them the untold history of the place: it served as the base for the Louisiana Native Guards, one of the first black regiments of the Union Army.

*Truth be told, I do not want to forget
anything of my former life: the landscape’s
song of bondage – dirge in the river’s throat
where it churns into the Gulf, wind in trees
choked with vines. I thought to carry with me
want of freedom though I had been freed,
remembrance not constant recollection.
Yes: I was born a slave, at harvest time,*

*in the Parish of Ascension; I've reached
thirty-three with history of one younger
inscribed upon my back. I now use ink
to keep record, a closed book, not the lure
of memory – flawed, changeful – that dulls the lash
for the master, sharpens it for the slave.*

In the poem “Native Guard,” which appears in the collection of the same title, Trethewey brings to light the history of the Louisiana Native Guards and considers the methods, obligations, and ethics of writing history. The unnamed narrator is a former slave who joins the Native Guards. He finds a journal in the abandoned home of a Confederate sympathizer. Though its pages are already filled, he writes over the lines, crosshatching their words and creating an intersecting story. He writes to remember: he knows that as time passes, the slave owners would rewrite history to mitigate their atrocities and even cast themselves as benevolent, while the slaves would remember the pain of bondage with a heightened acuity. In writing he can record the stories of his own people and ultimately of himself.

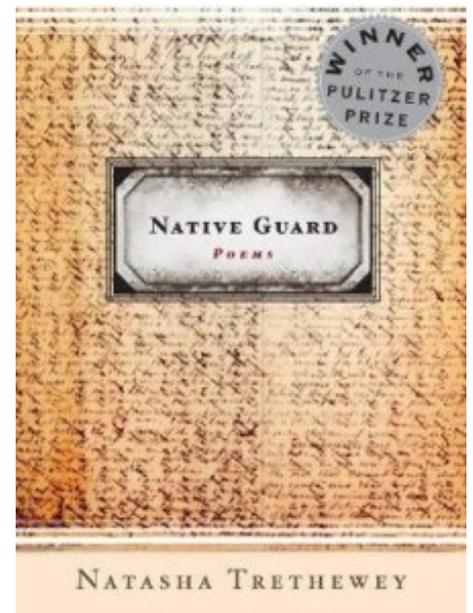
Besides making notes of his time in the army, as one of the few literate men, he helps the Confederate prisoners to write letters to their loved ones at home. He hides his journals from the white officers. He knows that they would be suspicious of a black man who writes, who records, who creates his own stories. He knows that in the very act of writing he is claiming a power that the officers believe he does not deserve. They want their version of history to be preserved without ambiguity. And life in the Native Guards, it turns out, is not much different from that of slavery. The black soldiers remain under the command of white officers, are given half rations, and are assigned the jobs thought to be beneath the dignity of white soldiers.

*Some names shall deck the page of history
as it is written on stone. Some will not.*

In April 1863, the Native Guards land near Pascagoula, but the Confederates outnumber them and they begin to retreat. A battalion of Union soldiers fire on them from a nearby ship, as if they instead of the Confederates were the enemy. The next month at Port Hudson, the Union loses a skirmish and General Nathan Banks orders his troops to locate and bury the dead, but they avoid the area where the black soldiers have fought, claiming that there are no dead there.

“There are things which must be accounted for,” the narrator says. As scribe, he abides by his official duties of recording the names of the dead and informing their families. His superiors tell him that it is best to avoid recounting the incidents and stick to the simple, verifiable information of the time and location of the deaths. He obeys his orders, but he also secretly records these stories in his journal. In 1865, the Union renames the Native Guards the Corps d’Afrique, “words that take the *native* from our claim.” He believes that as a writer, he is obligated to ensure these stories are remembered and the truth be one day told:

*Beneath battlefields, green again
the dead molder – a scaffolding of bone
we tread upon, forgetting. Truth be told.*



Imagining the Past

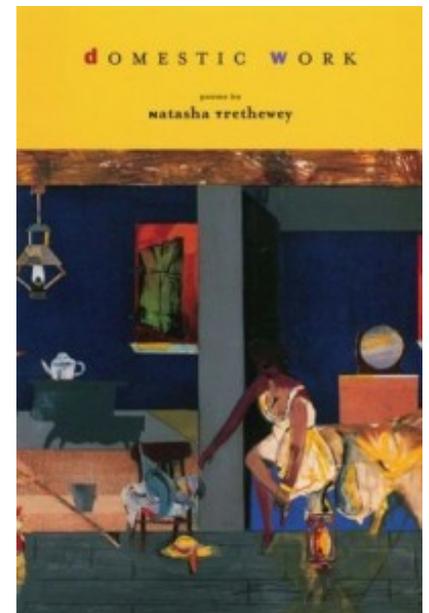
In *Domestic Work* and *Belloccq's Ophelia*, Trethewey imagines the lives of people overlooked by history. She describes her methods and ambitions in "Wash Women," which appears in the first section of *Domestic Work*:

*The eyes of eight women
I don't know
stare out from this photograph
saying remember.
Hung against these white walls,
their dark faces, common
as ones I've known,
stand out like some distant Monday
I've only heard about.
I picture wash day:
red beans simmering on the stove,
a number three tin tub
on the floor, well-water ready
to boil. There's cook starch
for ironing, and some
left over to eat.*

The laundresses in the photograph, which Clifton Johnson took in 1902, remind Trethewey of the women she knew growing up, in particular her maternal grandmother. In the poem, she imagines a story for each of them: the three sisters chat about their leisure plans, a woman sings as she scrubs linens by hand, another woman daydreams as she soaks lace, a pregnant woman struggles with a pile of clothes. They are engrossed in their work and do not look at the camera. They gaze past the photographer, as Trethewey writes, "to me, straight ahead."

Domestic Work is inspired by historical photographs and Trethewey's own family stories. In the second section of the collection, also titled *Domestic Work*, she quotes W.E.B. DuBois, "I shirk not. I long for work. I pant for a life full of striving." She creates portraits of her grandmother at work and at home: as a housekeeper, as an elevator assistant, dancing in a club, on a date, pregnant and waiting for her husband to come home, realizing the irreparable rift in her marriage, departing on a train after the divorce, going to beauty school, working in a factory, tending to her second husband's callused hands, working from home as a seamstress. The history that Trethewey portrays here is private and intimate. But in imagining the lives of her family, in drawing out the frustrations, longings, and joys in their daily routines, she creates faithful portraits of the black working class in the Jim Crow South.

Belloccq's Ophelia is based on a series of portraits the photographer E.J. Belloccq took of prostitutes in Storyville, the legalized red light district of New Orleans in the early 1900s. The women appear to have worked in one of two "octoroon" brothels, that is, they were light-skinned black women, eroticized for the uncontrollable sexuality supposedly hidden under their white refinement. The portrait of a woman reclining nude on a wicker divan reminds Trethewey of Ophelia in John Everett Millais' painting, which in turn depicts Shakespeare's Ophelia just before she drowns. Trethewey notes that the model who posed in a cold bathtub for Millais' painting later died of pneumonia. In writing this fictional story, Trethewey gives Ophelia



back her voice. She also writes a history of race and gender in the turn of the twentieth century Deep South.

Trethewey's Ophelia is a black woman who can pass for white. She grew up in the rural South to a black mother and white father. She is accustomed to domestic and field work and was raped as a child. Despite her circumstances, she is determined to educate herself. Her teacher Constance, who becomes her friend and confidante, encourages her ambitions. Ophelia moves to New Orleans, where, despite her meticulous dress, facility with English, and white appearance, she cannot find an office job. Desperate and unable to pay for board, she accepts the offer of a Countess P—and begins work as a prostitute.

Ophelia records her stories in three ways: in letters to Constance, in a diary, and in photographs. A letter directly addresses the reader; the subjects and style hinge on the relationship between the writer and the recipient. In Ophelia's letters to Constance, she describes her new life. She tries to justify her new work in the face of Constance's disappointment, even as she worries that it would take over her life:

*please do not think
I am the wayward girl
you describe. I alone
have made this choice.
Save what I pay for board,
What I earn is mine. Now
my labor is my own.
Already my purse swells.
I have bought my mother
some teeth, paid to have
her new well dug.*

A diary on the other hand is private, meant only for the eyes of the writer. In her diary, Ophelia reveals a more intimate side of herself. In particular, she struggles with defining an identity:

*I cannot now remember the first word
I learned to write – perhaps it was my name,
Ophelia, in tentative strokes, a banner
slanting across my tablet at school, or inside
the cover of some treasured book. Leaving
my home today, I feel even more the need
for some new words to mark this journey,
like the naming of a child – Queen, Lovely,
Hope – marking even the humblest beginnings
in the shanties. My own name was a chant
over the washboard, a song to guide me
into sleep. Once, my mother pushed me toward
a white man in our front room. Your father,
she whispered. He's the one that named you, girl.*

In both the letters and the diary entries, Ophelia describes meeting Bellocq. He pays for her time, but he consummates his desires only with the camera. The work is a collaboration between the artist and model, but she knows it will be attributed only to him. She learns to pose before the lens, to try on and shake off different identities,

and she eventually becomes his apprentice. She learns the craft from him and with the money she makes, buys her own camera. Standing behind it, she learns to attest to her own reality and make her own history. This power and confidence gives her the courage to leave the brothel and forge a new life for herself:

*I feel what trees must –
budding, green sheaths splitting – skin
that no longer fits.*

The Graves of Memory

The dedication of *Native Guard* reads, “For my mother, in memory.” In “Southern Crescent,” she evokes her mother as a young girl, on the train to Los Angeles to meet her absent father. He does not show up. Years later, she brings the young Trethewey on the train to meet Trethewey’s father, but the train derails and he waits in vain for them. Trethewey and her mother ride the last run of the old Southern Crescent together:

*I watch
each small town pass before my window
until the light goes, and the reflection
of my mother’s face appears, clearer now
as the evening comes on, dark and certain.*

This poem sets the stage of Trethewey’s elegy for her mother: the daffodils she picks for her on the way home from school, not realizing that they are symbols of an early demise; laying her in her grave as the rain turns to sun; her mother’s silence in the face of abuse. In this portrait, her mother appears both intimate and distant. Trethewey tries to hold onto something intrinsic to her, but as she sorts through her mother’s belongings, she finds a hole she has yet to fill. Her mother appears instead in dreams. In the end, we see her only in the silences of Trethewey’s poetry.

In the poems “Monument” and “Elegy for the Native Guards,” Trethewey juxtaposes her mother’s untended grave with the lost graves of the Native Guards. When Trethewey was away at college, her stepfather shot her mother dead. Years later, she sees an anthill next to her porch and thinks of the anthills she saw the summer before at her mother’s grave. Unlike her, the ants till the soil of her mother’s remains. In their industry she sees that even though she holds us accountable for the lapses in our memories, it is she who has not erected a headstone for her mother:

*Believe me when I say
I’ve tried not to begrudge them

their industry, this reminder of what
I haven’t done. Even now,
the mound is a blister on my heart,
a red and humming swarm.*



On Ship Island, there remains the fort, open to the wind and sun and rain, and the Daughters of the Confederacy's memorial plaque. In 1969, when Trethewey was three, Hurricane Camille split Ship Island in half and washed the graves of the Native Guards away. Graves, whether of family or fallen soldiers, mark on the land the lives that have come before. The graves of the Native Guards are literally lost at sea. Without this physical history, Trethewey writes:

*All the grave markers, all the crude headstones –
water-lost. Now fish dart among their bones,
and we listen for what the waves intone.*

We listen for what the waves intone. We can still read history by listening to what places have to tell us. The poems in *Native Guard* are Trethewey's monuments and memorials to her mother and the Native Guards. She may not tend to her mother's grave, but in her words she tills the soil of her mother's memory. And in writing about the Native Guards, she delivers the commemoration that the Union promised after the debacle at Pascagoula and never delivered.

Rewriting the Present

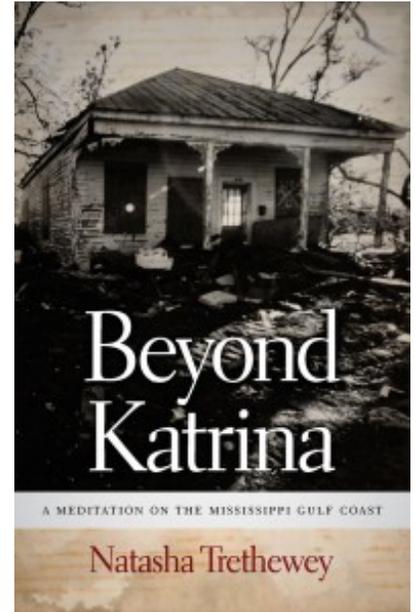
A year after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and made its final landfall on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Trethewey returns to Gulfport, where she was born and where her mother's family still lives. She books herself a room in a casino hotel on the coast. As she surveys the damage, she sees that a new narrative is literally being built: only the casinos have the money to rebuild quickly. Fifteen years before, when the first casinos came to the Gulf Coast, onshore gambling was not yet legal in Mississippi. Many casinos were on barges docked on the beach. In the wake of the storm, the state legalized onshore gambling, citing the boost to the economy. The casinos bring in money and jobs for people like Trethewey's brother Joe, but they also erase the histories of the place.

In Gulfport, Trethewey meets up with Joe and his girlfriend Aesha. She talks to the locals, the security guards and wait staff she meets on her errands. They all lived through the storm and are struggling to rebuild their lives. Aesha works as a legal secretary and is fortunate that her firm reopened after the storm. Many companies simply closed or left town. But Aesha is evicted from her apartment without due notice because her landlord's daughter needed a place to live. Landlords increase rents by seventy percent on the properties that survived. Federal aid tends to go to middle and upper class homeowners rather than working class renters. These are the stories buried under the glamour of the casinos.

In *Beyond Katrina*, a book of prose and verse, Trethewey bears witness to the ongoing disaster wrought by the hurricane. She contests the narratives imposed by money and power. And she wrestles with her own memories. After the storm, Trethewey brings her grandmother to live near her in Atlanta. Before her grandmother dies, she begs Trethewey to bring her back to see Gulfport one more time, but Trethewey put off her requests until it is too late. In hindsight, Trethewey sees that she has been waiting for a complete recovery so that she can show her grandmother the only home she had known without the scars on the landscape. That is to say, Trethewey realizes that it is she who did not want to acknowledge that her home has been irrevocably changed.

The week before Trethewey brings her grandmother's body back to Gulfport, Joe is arrested for trafficking cocaine. He had taken over his great uncle Son Dixon's business in renting shotgun houses in North Gulfport. Before the storm, he spent his savings renovating the houses. The storm damaged them. Desperate, he accepted offers to smuggle drugs. Joe's story is emblematic of the slow and problematic recovery on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the lack of opportunity compounded by misfortune, but he is more than a metaphor to Trethewey. He is her brother. He writes to her from prison and they talk on the phone often, but Trethewey writes, "We keep a fiction between us rooted in silence. I learn to weigh what he is telling me against what I know he must not be. Not until much later do I come to see that my silence was the heaviest."

On Trethewey's first trip to Gulfport after Katrina, she visits her mother's grave. As there is no headstone, she circles the weeds and dirt looking for it. She writes:



It was nearly overtaken, nearly sunken beneath the dirt and grass. How foolish of me to think of monuments and memory, of inscribing the landscape with narratives of remembrance, as I stood looking at my mother's near vanished grave in the post-Katrina landscape to which I'd brought my heavy bag of nostalgia. I see now that remembrance is an individual duty as well – a duty native to us as citizens, as daughters and sons.

She vows to put a headstone on the grave and mark her mother's memory on the land.

Amid these devastations, she writes a liturgy to the Gulf Coast and continues the reckoning with history and memory she began in *Native Guard*:

This is a love letter to the Gulf Coast, a praise song, a dirge, invocation and benediction, a requiem for the Gulf Coast.

This cannot rebuild the coast; it is an indictment, a complaint, my logos – argument and discourse – with the coast.

This is my nostos – my pilgrimage to the coast, my memory, my reckoning –

native daughter: I am the Gulf Coast.

The Legacy of Blood

Trethewey was born on April 26, 1966, the hundredth anniversary of Confederate Memorial Day and a year before *Loving v. Virginia*, to a black mother and white father who had to break state law and marry in Ohio. This experience of growing up biracial in the Deep South informs all of Trethewey's writing. In *Domestic Work*, she writes that as a child she could pass as white, though her mother would wash her mouth with soap when she found out. Ophelia is biracial. Trethewey continues to reckon with this legacy in *Native Guard*, amid the memories of her mother and the untold histories of the South. In the final poem, "South," she writes:

*Where the roads, buildings, and monuments
are named to honor the Confederacy,*

*where that old flag still hangs, I return
to Mississippi, state that made a crime*

*of me – mulatto, half-breed – native
in my native land, this place they'll bury me.*

In *Thrall*, she expands her lens to the history of race in the Americas. The title comes from an Oxford English Dictionary definition of *native*, “someone born into the condition of servitude, of thrall.” The word *enthralled* also comes to mind. In these ekphrastic poems, she turns to colonial art and in particular the *casta* paintings of Spanish Mexico. These paintings are taxonomies of children of mixed race unions. Each depicts a Spanish father, a mother of another race, and their child. The child of a Spaniard and an Indian is a *mestizo*, of a Spaniard and a *mestizo* a *castizo*, and of a Spaniard and a *castizo* a Spaniard, for example. The paintings are also implicitly illustrations of sexual unions between races, that is, they also represent the thrall of the flesh.

“The wages of empire is myopia,” Trethewey writes in “Torna Atrás,” which is based on the anonymous painting of the same title. In the art, a white painter is trying to make a portrait of his dark wife as their child watches and a servant mixes colors. As hard as he tries, he is unable to capture her likeness, beauty, and sophistication on the canvas. His art is crude and unfinished. He depicts her as domestic and homely rather than as the fashionable woman she is. This rendering of his wife, Trethewey charges, arises from his need to see himself



*as architect of Truth, benevolent patriarch, father of uplift
ordering his domain. And you might see why, to understand
my father, I look again and again at this painting: how it is
that a man could love – and so diminish what he loves.*

Her father is the poet Eric Trethewey, who is still alive. It was he who had introduced her to books. He recited the *Odyssey* to her as a bedtime story. He means well, but he is not always cognizant of the power dynamics of race. One of his poems contains the line, “I study my crossbreed child,” as if she were an exotic specimen. In the wake of her mother’s untimely death, he tells her that he could not understand her loss. She loves and admires her father, but their relationship is complicated. In the opening poem “Elegy,” she describes a fishing trip with him. She catches two trout, her father none. As she releases the fish, she writes:

*I thought about the past – working
the hooks loose, the fish writhing*

*in my hands, each one slipping away
before I could let go. I can tell you now*

*that I tried to take it all in, record it
for an elegy I’d write – one day –*

*when the time came. Your daughter,
I was that ruthless. What does it matter*

If I tell you I learned to be?

She traces her father's myopia to the ideals of the Enlightenment. On a visit to Monticello, Jefferson's Virginia plantation, her father explains to her that the former president was morally opposed to slavery but had to own slaves out of necessity. He also argues that Jefferson could not have fathered children with one of his mixed-race slaves. She looks into this history and learns that Jefferson believed that in mixing with whites, the black race could be purified. Her father, she realizes, "could believe he's made me *better*." At Monticello, the guide asks the visitors to imagine stepping back into the past, and Trethewey whispers to her father,

*This is where
we split up. I'll head around to the back.
When he laughs, I know he's grateful*

*I've made a joke of it, this history
that links us – white father, black daughter –
even as it renders us other to each other.*

Writing Home

The poem "Theories of Time and Space" opens both *Native Guard* and *Beyond Katrina*. A meditation on home, it takes on another meaning after the storm:

*You can get there from here, though
there is no going home.*

*Everywhere you go will be somewhere
you've never been.*

Both books are centered on Gulfport. In *Native Guard*, home for Trethewey is an unsafe place, where intimacy turns to violence, where her black heritage is misrepresented, where her birth itself was illegal. It is a place of psychological exile. After Hurricane Katrina, her home is literally no longer there, replaced with a landscape of loss and ruin. The same poem ends,

*On the dock where you board the boat
for Ship Island, someone will take your picture.*

*The photograph – who you were –
will be waiting when you return.*

When Trethewey boarded the boat for Ship Island she journeyed not just to a place but into a history. For her, history is not just about the literal truth. It is instead where individual lives intersect with the forces of culture. In writing poetry, she can use metaphors and associations to recreate the emotional terrain of the past. Where definitive facts

are lost or misguided, she can draw on her research and experiences to imagine what may have happened. She ultimately argues that history is subjective and the truth dependent on our personal lenses and biases.

In writing history, Trethewey also questions what she knew before and creates new stories for herself, her family, and her culture. In other words, the act of writing history changes us. In reconsidering our stories, we reevaluate what we believe. Stories shape and reflect our beliefs and identities. When we rewrite our stories, we rewrite ourselves.

Teow Lim Goh lives in Boulder, Colorado. Her essays have appeared in Pilgrimage, The Rumpus, The Lit Pub, and Shadowbox.