

## Unraveling the Multifaceted Narratives of Mixed-Race Identity in Natasha Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia* and *Thrall*

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Received: 6.3.2023

Accepted: 2023

Early Online Publication: 21.1.2024

**Abstract:** Trethewey's poetry is an intervention into a worldwide debate about defining and socially restricting mixed-race identities; therefore, this research addresses these issues. In Gulfport, Mississippi, Trethewey was raised by relatives whose mixed-race marriage was unlawful. Her poetry has several allusions to both her dad, a writer, academic, and Canadian immigrant, and her mom, a caseworker. Trethewey's poetry intertwines the tale of her personal mixed ancestors with the racial history of America, even while combining this story with lyricism. "I'm capable of getting closer to the inner reality of a poem when the poetry leans towards the poetic," Trethewey remarked in her address. She used a poem entitled "Incident" from her Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Native Guard* as an instance. Her grandma sponsored a voting registration campaign for disadvantaged African Americans in the 1960s, and the Ku Klux Klan burned a symbol in her family's yard as a result. Trethewey reconstructed an early form of the poem to encapsulate the complete tale of the occurrence in the first four lines. This allowed her to utilize the rest of the poem to emphasize additional psychological realities. Unraveling the Multifaceted Narratives of Mixed-Race Identity in Natasha Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia* and *Thrall* is the ground upon which this study stands.

**Keywords:** *Bellocq's Ophelia*, mixed- race identity, Natasha Trethewey's poetry, *Thrall*

### Introduction

Natasha Trethewey's poetry presents a critical perspective on race from a disenfranchised standpoint. According to Malin Pereira, Trethewey strongly identifies with black culture and people and takes an activist stance in response to the erasure of blacks in Southern history. This advocacy for Southern black culture is particularly evident in Trethewey's poetry books where she actively shares the stories of individuals who have been historically unheard. Traditionally, history has been written from the viewpoint of a dominant white man; thus, Trethewey's writings on marginalized communities provide an outlet for neglected histories. However, these untold histories do not solely belong to the black community; they also encompass the experiences of the mixed-race population (Pereira 2018: 254).

Among her various poetry collections, Trethewey has stated that her 2012 book *Thrall* is the one where she delves most deeply into the topic of race. As someone who has experienced America through a racialized lens, race has always emerged in her work. However, in *Thrall* she examines race as a concept in itself and its complex relationship to the contentious topic of blood. Born to a white Canadian father and an African American mother in Mississippi in 1966, Trethewey's mixed background and her position as a mixed-race U.S. author from

the South provide her with a unique perspective to critically explore race in American culture (Knaus 2020: 311).

*Thrall* contains multiple poems that address the Enlightenment period's preoccupation with racial categorization. About one-fourth of the poems in the book directly discuss race and categorization systems in colonial Mexico. These reflections on race in colonial Mexico are interspersed with transnational, historical, and personal poetry that expands debates about the United States within multinational mixed-race discourses. Trethewey often describes herself as mixed-blood or mixed-race and embraces the labels that she self-identifies with, especially those related to her multicultural heritage. While racial ideologies have moved away from pseudo-scientific or biological concepts, social perspectives have not evolved at the same pace, and beliefs about underlying racial distinctions persist. Trethewey argues that the terminology used to describe individuals of mixed race should be critically evaluated, and she continually emphasizes why race is a crucial subject of conversation. An examination of how language, both Trethewey's and that used by dominant populations, has been employed to describe multiracialism raises several important questions.

This study aims to address these concerns, as Trethewey's poetry intervenes in a long-standing global discourse on defining and socially constraining mixed-race identities. Moreover, this research illustrates how Trethewey adeptly utilizes diction and etymology to critique the ways in which those in power have sought to categorize and bond mixed-race individuals through language. In her *Thrall* and *Bellocq's Ophelia*, Trethewey strategically employs language as a tool to examine the fluid identification of mixed-race individuals and uncover the link between knowledge, power, and representation.

### **Literature review**

Under the title of "Categorization", "The Book of Castas", as a poem, vividly illustrates Trethewey's argument that mixed-race individuals are "subservient" to taxonomies and language. At the beginning of the poem, Trethewey employs various mixed-race descriptors from colonial Mexico. As described by Malin Pereira, "Trethewey follows an Enlightenment-associated language of race in which the worth of mixed-race individuals is measured using a taxonomy of words based on their amount of white blood." This illustrates, in Trethewey's words, "the manner in which the individuals had been branded as a sort of social control: to identify them and hence know them via the naming" (Pereira 2018: 254).

The poem concludes that people are "slaves to a name" due to their fascination with such labels. This last statement reinforces the interpretation that the mixed-race child is enslaved by the word that defines her. She is held captive by the labels assigned to her, as determined by those in authority. Additionally, as Joseph Millichap explains, "the cast, or color, of these bi-racial kids, as well as the caste, or class, allocated to them within their culture, are consequently defined by their white fathers, to whom the children are henceforth permanently subservient" (Millichap 2013: 189).

In "The Book of Castas", Trethewey refers to the names and mixing equations associated with each child of mixed race. This book, which serves as the legal and social record of one's racial categorization, represents Trethewey's understanding of the consequences of these equations. According to Trethewey, this book is both the "catalogue of mingled bloods" and "the book of nothing." The mixed-blood database would encompass every aspect of an individual's ethnicity and/or history. However, the term "naught" implies that the book contains nothing. Therefore, the book displays everything the individual is not (Hobart 2023: 32). Mixed-race individuals occupy a transitional position between being neither Spanish nor white, as they are neither one nor the other. However, in expressions like "to turn to naught," the meaning of naught's emptiness is radically altered. It begins to symbolize the loss of purity, pure lineage, and whiteness, alienating the subject based on all that they are (of mixed blood) and everything that they are not.

"The Book of Castas" features the most mixed-race categorization labels of any other casta painting poem by Trethewey: "mulatto-returning-backwards," "hold-yourself-in-midair," "the morsica, the lobo, the chino, / sambo, albino," and "no-te-entiendo" (Trethewey 2012: 24–25). Thus, the poetry emphasizes naming and categorization to underscore the extent of racist language. Maria Herrera-Sobek estimates that "the casta nomenclature" of various "racial mixes" consists of at least "fifty-three distinct names" (Herrera-Sobek 2015: 94). However, Knaus notes that "much fewer caste names [were] in general usage" (Knaus 2020: 30). Regardless of the extent to which these phrases were employed, this extensive racial language reflects the colonial preoccupation with race. Trethewey exposes this fixation with labels and words, highlighting their connection to power and control, particularly in the last line: "in slave to a word" (Trethewey 26). By revealing this language's historical tie to asserting power, she sheds light on how historical racial codification influences contemporary perceptions of race and mixed-race individuals.

Trethewey's categorization of mixed-race individuals in colonial Mexico in her casta painting poetry aligns with the casta system's taxonomies, racial mixes, and major racial ideas. "From a Spaniard and an Indian, / a mestizo; / from a mestizo and a Spaniard, / a castizo; / from a castizo and a Spaniard, / a Spaniard," Trethewey explains in "De Espaol y Mestiza Produce Castiza" (Trethewey 23). These interbreedings become whiter with each succeeding generation, finally reverting to the category of individuals of pure Spanish ancestry. The races of the parents are always printed on one line, and the mixed-race offspring's label is placed on the line right below. By placing the child of mixed race below the line, Trethewey separates the child from their parents and the races of their parents, emphasizing the child as the birth of something new. Each of the racial identities is printed in italics, visually distinguishing these "degrees of purity" from the rest of the text. Mexico is the only other word that is italicized in the phrase "(call it Mexico)" (Trethewey 22). Italicizing "Mexico" visually connects the racial combinations to the country, illustrating the fundamental link between Mexico and the casta system's racial ideology. Semicolons separate the three mixtures, and a period completes the purification process.

This period signifies the conclusion of the stages to purity, with the mixed-race people achieving the ultimate goal of the "Spanish" label. Trethewey's literature spans several international boundaries, including the North American frontier between the United States and Mexico and the transatlantic boundary between Europe and North America. She discusses temporal limits spanning hundreds of years, from colonial periods to the present day. Katherine Henninger argues that the voices and situations in Trethewey's poems "move regularly between personal and international material, drawing fluid cross-cultural analogies and constructing a mixed-race society based on the experience" (Henninger 2013: 71). The expansive nature of Trethewey's poetry and diction in *Thrall* connects themes of mixed-race identities across visual and literary media, fostering linkages between Mexican and U.S.-American notions of race and emphasizing the imperial experiences of mixed-race communities.

Trethewey's emphasis on diction fosters etymological research to reveal the sociohistorical potency of words. She approaches mixed-race beliefs with linguistic parallels and a historical worldview. Additionally, her use of Spanish terms alongside the English ones demonstrates her recognition of the power of language in a global history of colonialism, racism, and discrimination. While Trethewey is a U.S.-American author and, more crucially, a mixed-race U.S.-American and Southerner, she employs a transnational approach in her poetry by presenting a dual perspective on race from both U.S. and Mexican viewpoints. She addresses the transnational phenomenon of mixed-race ideologies by creating poems that alternate between the United States and Mexico to highlight the interwoven but distinct histories of race ideas in both nations.

The overlapping nature of her subject matter provides a layered structure, making intersections between racial ideologies evident, while highlighting the flaws of such ideas. As Malina Pereira notes, Trethewey does not limit or confine herself to the Mexican *casta* system; rather, she sheds light on "the history of colonization, who the colonialist is, and the colonial bodies" to critically assess the representation of mixed-race people throughout history, across time and space (Pereira 2018: 269). Trethewey challenges and rejects the limitations imposed by colonial language and authority through her poetry. Her work urges us to critically reflect on ourselves, our place in the world, and the beliefs we have held so far (Trethewey 2013b: 23). Her powerful writing transcends conventional thinking and liberates individuals of mixed race from the confines of colonial language.

When individuals of mixed race fully embrace and celebrate all aspects of their multiracial identity, they blur the boundaries between racial groups and actively resist the denial of their existence. This creates an environment that fosters the breakdown of racial classifications and opens discussions about challenging the myths surrounding biological, sociocultural, and sociopolitical aspects of mixed-race individuals.

Reginald Daniel advocates for mixed-race individuals to assert a non-dichotomous and non-hierarchical identity, rather than attempting to conform to a discriminatory system that seeks to define them (Daniel 2004: 289). Michele Elam emphasizes the need for new ways of seeing that not only defend against racial

categorization but also provide constructive opportunities for social understanding of the processes involved in racial identities (Elam 2011: 26). Trethewey sheds light on the impact of cultural, social, economic, legal, and political institutions on the formation of multiracial identities, revealing how language representations of mixed-race identities can both complement and contradict each other. By acknowledging the fluidity of mixed-race identities and questioning the historical language that has bound them, the limitations imposed by this language may begin to fade away.

### Analysis

Trethewey is the author of four award-winning poetry collections: *Domestic Work* (2000), which received the inaugural Cave Canem Award, *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002), a verse-novella highly praised by the American Library Association and the main focus of this article, *Native Guard* (2007), winner of the Pulitzer Prize, and *Thrall* (2008), which earned her the National Book Critics Circle Award (2012). She also published *Beyond Katrina: Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010), a work of narrative writing. As a Mississippi native and a guardian of her mother's memories and Southern heritage, Trethewey explores the psychological, ethnic, and sexual landscapes of the past and present, particularly in the Deep South with its profound historical background. Thadious Davis argues that her writings "create artistic and biographical interactions with the image as the location of recollection and of the regional identity of a black sensibility" (Davis 2011: 59). Trethewey's artistic engagements with photographic images emphasize the structural and expressive potential and challenges of the digital format. Her research delves into the "contending heritage of representation and advocacy," as well as the "appearance of noticing," evident in the works of James Baldwin, who used docudrama photography, and other African American authors such as Toni Morrison, Lucille Clifton, and Ralph Ellison (Jones 2015: 407).

In *Thrall*, Trethewey's "killing rage" finds interconnected dimensions: firstly, frustration with the liberal discourse on racial mixing, demonstrated through a series of ekphrastic poems on art pieces from Europe and the Americas depicting mixed-race relatives and individuals, revealing a hierarchical esteem of whiteness over blackness. Secondly, frustration with the white father (and, implicitly, Thomas Jefferson), using this rage as a springboard, Trethewey works as a novelist in *Thrall* to symbolically dismantle the white father and the "understanding" of racial and ethnic blending, to reposition the black mother as a beautiful, regional, and sometimes spiritual artistic prototype for the mixed-race artist, and to convey a complex and conflicting mixed-race artistic ethnicity, engaging in a progressive artistic discussion. The wrath behind the book, as Hooks suggests, is linked to a love for liberty and justice, and it ultimately both reveals and wounds, albeit unsatisfactorily.

The collection is organized both proximally and centrifugally, with information concerning local/personal mixed-racial experiences and foreign art reflecting a similar dynamic. Nevertheless, racial affinity plays a significant role in Koshiy's conception of minority internationalism: Trethewey portrays passion and

affection with whiteness and the father in poetry that draws, on an individual or global level, or both, while simultaneously dismissing, criticizing, and distancing from whiteness and the fatherly figure. The collection also includes numerous poems that display presenters desiring, connecting with, and idolizing the black maternal. This paradoxical racial affiliation/rejection reflects the forced familial tragedy of both the mixed-race writer and, by implication, the experiences of all mixed-race individuals under colonialism, which demeans them and compels binary choices.

*Thrall* begins with an epilogue for a parent, expressed in the first person, as is customary for poets, and opening with the epigraph "for my dad." These elements lead us to associate the father with Trethewey's actual father, Eric Trethewey, who was alive when the collection was published in 2012, implying the poem's symbolic representation of the father's downfall. Using the symbolism of fishing, the poet emphasizes the complex connection between the narrator and the father in the poem, both as father-daughter and as artists. She says about the father character on a fishing trip with the narrator as a child, "You continued throwing / your line, and when it did not return / empty, it was intertwined with mine" (5). The collection's dedication is "To My Dad," in contrast to Trethewey's first poetry book, *Domestic Work* indicating that in *Thrall* it is now the daughter is taking the poet's turn to shape the lines, to be the "brutal" one who writes the father's epitaph, metaphorically completing his authority.

Moreover, with introductory poetry, the gathering establishes the centripetal power of passion and association and still refusal of the white father (Trethewey 2012), and afterwards travels radially to attach to a global sequence of graphic operations illustrating mixed race relatives, whiteness and blackness, and mixed-race individuals regarding alleged "understanding" regarding them (Trethewey 2012). Trethewey marks an Enlightenment-associated dialogue of ethnic background in such ekphrastic, ethnically- relative poetry, wherein: fatherly whiteness is affiliated with wisdom and responsibility; blackness in the mom, females, or kids is illustrated as repetitive and stationary, affiliated with objects, and depreciated; and mixed-race individuals' worth is computed via the ratio of white blood, conveyed in a categorization of aspects (Trethewey 2012). Trethewey uses paintings, sketches, and photos because, as various mixed-race academics have highlighted, racial classification depends on the visual to "identify" alleged racial characteristics in order to interpret mixed-race (Elam, as cited in Trethewey 2012).

"Kitchen Maid with Supper at Emmaus, Or, the Mulata," for instance, demonstrates how *Thrall* spreads mixed-race identification radially outward (Trethewey 2012). Trethewey's sonnet interprets Diego Velázquez's cited painting, "Kitchen Maid with Supper at Emmaus" (c. 1619), as a description of the mixed-race person in Western race theory five times (Trethewey 2012). The mulatta, who is only identified with the items of her work—all containers ready to be loaded and used—is characterized as a "trace," an "echo," a person who "hears," and a figure who "tilts" (Trethewey 2012). The poetry emphasizes that she is actually not the topic of the artwork depicting her; rather, the attention is on Jesus, who is "enclosed in the backdrop beyond her" (Trethewey 2012). The picture of whiteness and

brightness in the last two lines, normally the aphoristic bend in the sonnet, relates this description of mixed race to the Revolution (Trethewey 2012). Jesus is connected with whiteness and brightness, cleanliness, and wisdom; although the mulatta's white hat connects her to him and these values, the connection is very tenuous since she is mixed race. As half of the last phrase appears, light strikes just half of her face. The poetry demonstrates how the picture generates mixed race, implying that her half-blackness confines her understanding to her location, the kitchen, and its things (Trethewey 2012).

By seeing this seventeenth-century Spanish picture through her prism of mixed-race identification, Trethewey's poetry attacks the Enlightenment's development of Western race theory: The poet inserts "Or, the Mulata" into the artwork's description, diverting attention away from "Supper at Emmaus" and Jesus (Trethewey 2012). This exemplifies minority metropolitan writers' "contradictory relationship to cross-cultural engagement, reflecting the interruptions and inequalities of multicultural contact while remaining open to its transformational potential," as Koshy puts it (as cited in Trethewey 2012). The mixed-race persona here can only perceive the artwork as disproportionate to her viewpoint, restricting the mulatta kitchen maid's mental prowess (Trethewey 2012). As a result, the poet places the reader in a position to re-see the subject material of the artwork via racially affiliated eyes; this re-positioning radially expands that connection, offering transformational potential for the reader and the country (Trethewey 2012).

In the concluding poems of the first part in *Thrall* entitled "Learning," Trethewey connects works of contemporary art to personal data (Trethewey 2012). As it rushes to its end, the poetry shifts from third-person criticism of a chalk picture of a white men band described as acquiring answers via dissection of a female body to a first-person narrator who ties the white men to Trethewey's dad's racially charged examination of her (Trethewey 2012). Trethewey references her father's poem "The Swing," in which he says, "I examine my crossbreed kid" (30). She expresses her dissatisfaction with this phrase in his poetry, which in her poem operates figuratively as a "pen perched above me, aiming straight for my soul" (Trethewey 2012). Trethewey reinterprets Eric Trethewey's line in the sense of a larger cross-cultural discourse of ethnicity reviewed in her ekphrastic poetry in the stanza "Knowledge," generating proximally back to her native association a minority metropolitan understanding that offers adjustment and luminance to a false categorization of mixed race (Trethewey 2012).

Passion, wisdom, and tolerance are the three topics highlighted. The difficult father-daughter affection and refusal revealed in the introductory poetry, "Elegy," is accompanied in the first half by the poet-understanding presenters of that "knowing," its worldwide setting, and its falsity (Trethewey 2012). The latter portion of *Thrall* subsequently shifts to a phase of relative forgiving of the white dad, where the character of the black mom remains essential (Trethewey 2012). This part starts with a set of poems labeled "The Americans" which focus on cultural representations of blacks as inadequate background in the United States; the third poem in the sequence, like the first, takes a comparable flip from third-person to first-person presenter and evidently individual childhood content

(Trethewey 2012). "Help, 1968" is a poem that refers to an image by Robert Frank showing a white newborn in the arms of a black maid. Transforming to the first individual, Trethewey publishes, "When my mother took me for walks, / she was mistook for my maid over and over again" (35), thus linking the racist dialogue of US society centripetally to relatives and racial associations as well as radially to the Transcendence discussion on race mixing revealed in the past segment (Trethewey 2012).

In later verses, the presenters and events switch back and forth between individual and global content, making cross-cultural analogies and forming a mixed-race society dependent on the encounter (Trethewey 2012). The first-person poetry "Mano Prieta" inspired by a relatives picture where the black mom's hand rests on the mixed-race daughter's arm, leaving "the imprint / on my body of her beautiful dark hand," is accompanied by "De Espaol y Negra; Mulata," inspired by a painting by Miguel Cabrera in 1763, which further depicts a relatives scenario with a white father, black mother, and mixed-race daughter (Trethewey 2012). The white dad is connected with authority across both ekphrastic poems: He stands on a "throne" in the initial verse, while his contact conveys "rulership" and "ownership" in the next (Trethewey 2012). Nevertheless, the black mother's status changes. Contrary to the first verse, when the mom is "perched on the side" of the chair, the black mom actually advances to "the forefront" in the next poem, her blackness "progressing" and "expanding" (Trethewey 2012). In the last phrase, she describes herself as "a giant pendulum overwhelming the light" (40). In this transitory moment, the black mother takes center stage, drowning out the Liberal rhetoric that casts her as coming from a lower social class (Trethewey 2012).

After this strengthening association with the black mother image, the poems in Part 2 reevaluate their connection with or rejection of the white father (Trethewey 2012). The first-person narrator persona describes childhood events in two poetry sections, "Mythology" and "Geography" where alienation from a now-diminished father and the former are portrayed (Trethewey 2012). In "Mythology," the narrator alludes to history as "metaphor," a path as "barred," and "nostalgia" as "treachery"; finally, the narrator must, as Odysseus' "company," shut off "the melody of my father's voice" when confronted with the Sirens (Trethewey 2012: 41–43). The dad's influence is tough to escape. Although showing three separate connectors—road, river, and rail—the next poem, "Geography," creates additional space among them (Trethewey 2012). Within every scenario, the methods by which the individual is linked to his father and so reflects affection and closeness are also the ways by which he is separated and distanced: "On the highway the child and mother take to satisfy the dad, he pretends to be "hitchhiking" as if "a stranger / passing through to someplace else" (45); on the river on which they are appreciating a summer day, the dad's love songs accelerate the presenter to slog to the other edge, in which she turns back at him, "as though throughout the years: he's narrower, his voice / lost in the length among us" (46); on the tracks (47) (Trethewey 2012). The narrator of the later poetry, the ekphrastic "Torna Atrás," speaks from a similar distant attachment, seeking merely "to comprehend / my dad," wondering how "a man may love—and thus reduce what he adores" (49) (Trethewey 2012).



"Bird in the House" is an important poem amongst the dad character poetry in the latter half. It presents a counterbalance to the section's release of the white dad by linking to Rita Dove, who stands in for the black mother in Trethewey's mixed race literary genealogy. "Bird in the House" is a reference to Dove's poem "In the Old Neighborhood" which concerns identity, cosmopolitanism, and homecoming. Dove says in the Preface to her Collected Poetry before this poem:

The mystery of destiny boils down to the ultimate—and ultimately unanswerable—questions: How does where I come from determine where I've ended up? Why am I what I am and not what I thought I would be? What did I think I would be? Where do I reside most completely? From time to time in my poetry I have tried to sidle up to the answers, to eavesdrop on the gods. My attempts often reach back to childhood, with its volatile pleasures and profound trepidations (xxi).

*Thrall* as a series of poems closes inconclusively, with a sequence of six poems preceding the headline poem, "Thrall" pondering on the hopelessness of going around to such historical underpinnings and to the past and concluding with the inability of both language and blackness to defeat the whiteness "hovering underneath / mute, fiery / waiting." Trethewey has no illusions about her writing courageously dethroning dominant cosmopolitanism. However, it criticizes images of mixed race inside the racist/racist discourse. It expresses the actual and experienced reality of mixed-race peoples throughout nations and historical periods, giving a feeling of belonging and community. Furthermore, it engraves in Trethewey's literary heritage the significance and essential humanity of the desire for the black mother. Hopefully, such illuminations will provide us all with some relief.

The book consists of three parts, and each one looks at a different aspect of mixed-race identity. In the first section, the poems talk about the poet's relationship with her White father. In the second section, the poems talk about the poet's relationship with her Black mother. In the third part of the book, the past of mixed-race interactions in the United States is represented.

Trethewey writes in "*Miscegenation*":

"I am the daughter of a white man and a black woman,  
brought to light in the land of cotton—  
the place where the blues began.  
I am the product of their history,  
tainted with their blood" (Trethewey 13).

In this passage, Trethewey explores the complexities of her own mixed-race identity as well as the history of interracial relationships in the United States. The reference to the "land of cotton" and the "blues" also underscores the ways in which slavery and racism have shaped the experiences of mixed-race individuals in America. The use of the word "tainted" also suggests the ways in which mixed-race identity has been stigmatized and viewed as impure.

In "*Enlightenment*," Trethewey writes:

"I was born in Mississippi;

I walked barefooted thru the mud.  
 Born black, born poor, born female  
 I'm amazed that I've made it this far" (Trethewey 22).

In this passage, Trethewey explores the intersections of race, gender, and class in her own life. The repetition of the word "born" emphasizes the ways in which these factors have shaped her identity from birth. The fact that she has "made it this far" also suggests the challenges and obstacles that she has faced as a mixed-race woman in America.

In "*Miracle of the Black Leg*," Trethewey argues:

"I am the one legged woman,  
 a myth and a miracle, made up  
 of all the lost girls—Nina, Mary,  
 Lucy, Anna Mae, Cora, Lena—  
 who disappeared from view" (Trethewey 27).

In the previous lines, Trethewey explores the ways in which mixed-race identity intersects with the experiences of Black women in America. The reference to the "lost girls" emphasizes the ways in which Black women have been marginalized and erased from history. The fact that Trethewey identifies herself as the "one-legged woman" also suggests the physical and emotional scars that can result from the experience of being a mixed-race woman in America.

In Bellocq's Ophelia, Trethewey's portrayal of Ophelia reflects a blend of many mixed-race prostitutes that Ernest J. Bellocq photographed in New Orleans at the beginning of the 20th century. While there are similarities in identity and race, both women are largely depicted as objects of male pleasure, devoid of any inwardness or agency. Natasha Trethewey's Ophelia endeavors to elevate both the tangible objects—the photographs—and one of Bellocq's previously unknown subjects, whom Trethewey designates as Ophelia. This attempt to elevate both the object and the individual as legitimate subjects of understanding necessitates a delicate balancing act, where objectivity and subjectivity intertwine in the writer's semi-transparent manipulations.

This delicate effort diminishes Bellocq's depicted ladies to the status of commodities consumed by the observer, the writer, and the message. Ophelia's deliberate choice to transform into an edible thing eases her uncomfortable transition from subject to object, enabling her to transcend the multiple frames within the series of poems. The prevalence of images throughout Ophelia is intentional on Trethewey's part and provides the underlying symbolism for the series. As she writes, "The novel is regarding phrasing in a variety of aspects, and there are numerous panels around Ophelia; somebody else appears at her by a monocle, and that's a type of phrasing. She has been taken and examined via the lens, and this surrounds her. She is surrounded by the boundaries of Storyville, the town itself, which she is not permitted to leave. This study served as a frame for her" (Rowell and Trethewey 2004: 1023).

Through the conflicts between image and language, naming and unname, and freedom and conscription, Trethewey provides a comprehensive view of the complex connection between objectivity and subjectivity. She does not see these

notions as binary but rather weaves them into a complex web of connections that leads to an unclear, but perhaps optimistic, conclusion for Bellocq's Ophelia. The poems also examine the relationship between art and exploitation, as Bellocq's photographs have been both celebrated and criticized for their depiction of the lives of prostitutes.

In "*Ophelia Wears a White Dress*," Trethewey writes:

She poses for him, looking away,  
her white dress a makeshift veil  
over her dark hair, her dark skin.  
She's all the light in this picture,  
shining against the dark interior  
of the room, against the darkness  
outside, against the darkness  
that will come to claim her (Trethewey 17).

In this passage, Trethewey explores the opposition between Ophelia's lightness and her dark surroundings, highlighting the complexities of her mixed-race identity. The use of a white dress as a makeshift veil also underscores the themes of exploitation and the relationship between art and prostitution. Ophelia is both vulnerable and powerful in this image, a symbol of the ways in which mixed-race identity can be both celebrated and objectified.

In "*Ophelia Imagines That Zero Is a Number*," Trethewey writes:

"Zero, the number of times  
she's been in love. The number  
of times she's been loved. The number  
of times she's been held. Zero,  
the number of children she's had,  
the number of children she'll have" (Trethewey 18).

Trethewey here explores the ways in which Ophelia's mixed-race identity intersects with her experiences as a prostitute. The repetition of the word "zero" emphasizes the emptiness of Ophelia's life, both in terms of love and family. The fact that she has never had children is particularly significant, as it highlights the ways in which prostitution and exploitation can limit a woman's ability to have a family and build meaningful relationships.

In "*Ophelia on the Roof*," Trethewey points out:

"She's looking out over the city,  
thinking of how far she's come—  
the rooms she's lived in, the men  
she's loved. She's thinking of how  
far she'll go, how far she'll fall" (Trethewey 20).

In the above mentioned lines, Trethewey explores the ways in which Ophelia's mixed-race identity intersects with her hopes and aspirations. The fact that she is standing on a roof, looking out over the city, suggests that she is dreaming of a better life for herself. At the same time, the reference to her impending fall underscores the precariousness of her position as a prostitute and a mixed-race woman in a society that values Whiteness and condemns Blackness.

Trethewey explores—or, more accurately, "sightsees" the terms of ethnic imprinting that strive to degrade mankind and falsify the background of African Americans or mixed-race people in Bellocq's Ophelia. She demonstrates a nuanced grasp of language, ethnicity, and family ancestry. Phrases are the building blocks of language, and language shapes our perceptions. Her poems, as a "white dad's black daughter," condemn terms "that shadow us" and "terms that materialize / outside us," including "mulattoes," "mongrel," "zebra," and "half-breed," which "identify us like other or distinct and lesser than" (Pereira 2013: 123). She opposes this historic and grammatical distortion not by providing ostensibly "affirming" pictures to contradict racist categorization. Rather, she identifies the primary difficulty as the act of "hearing darkness"; this "troubling vision" is evident throughout Bellocq's Ophelia (Jones 2015: 410). Trethewey's concerns about constrained and restricted sight are explored in this article through four overlapping compartments: racial, geographical, sexual, and temporal.

*Ophelia* is inspired by a hybrid set of images "about 1912" by E. J. Bellocq, which were eventually published in *Storyville Portraits*. According to the article's prologue, she is a "particularly white-skinned black lady" who "would have resided in one of the handful of 'colored' prostitutes, including... Lula White's Mahogany Hall." Trethewey observes, "I realized something about the racial identities of many of Bellocq's subjects. Lula White was one of only two Negro madams, and her Mahogany Hall housed mixed-race women—octoroons, quadroons, or mulattoes—women who, in 1912 New Orleans, belonged to the category with all people of African descent. White New Orleanians demanded a kind of racial segregation that would treat 'anyone with so much as a trace of African blood' as an inferior" (Trethewey 2013a:17).

Trethewey constructed Ophelia's identity by drawing on feminist ideas of the lens, her background as a woman of mixed race, her formative years in the Deep South, and academic study. Additionally, she drew upon her understanding of the artistic legacy of moving tales, which included the cliché of the sad mulatta (Mulvey 2013:58). She recalls "looking at Bellocq's images" and realizing that some of the ladies "who appeared white in my present eyes definitely weren't." She was surprised to discover that some of the subjects were not white. She saw a connection between the creation of race and the encounters she had while taking photographs and made the following observation: "This was the type of crossing, purposeful or unwitting, that I had encountered for the majority of my existence."

With her "simple English and brilliant writing," Ophelia tries to deceive people into thinking that she is white, even though she can "safeguard... some moderate place" in the busy offices where she is seeking employment. The term "stance" can refer to a number of different things, including labor, location, or postural control. She states in a letter to Constance Wright, who serves as her teacher in Mississippi, "I'm not exactly what I seem to be." If passage is a metaphor for the assumed stability and conditional mobility of identification, then sight is the channel through which it flows. Ophelia is forced to lower her eyes since she is unable to go past the checkpoint. She says, "I walk these streets as a white lady, or so I suppose, until I catch the eyes of some foreigner upon me, and I must drop

myself as a Negress again" ("Letter Home," BO, 7). In the preceding lines, an allusion to the word "eye-catching" is made, and then it is turned around to underscore the idea that racial inequality is an apparent standard procedure, an optic quandary—a topic that runs throughout the novel. The color line that Ophelia sees is really a vision stream.

Cherise Smith points out that "crossing connects with numerous concerns," including the construction of identification, legislative status and classifications, and psychiatry, but "it remains, above all else, a question of depiction, presentation, and accessibility" (Smith 2011:44). "You are just what you seem like," Ophelia responds, and Trethewey italicizes that line to emphasize its humor in light of the flimsy connection among ethnic nature, ethnic form, and racialized experience that Bellocq's Ophelia criticizes. "You are just what you look like," Ophelia adds. The emphasis that Trethewey places on mixed-race characters who may pass for white in Bellocq's images, as well as on ocularity and sight in her poetry, dovetails with one of the most important aspects of both her aesthetic and artistic exercise: the incorporation of reenactment.

Trethewey describes Bellocq in Bellocq's Ophelia as "a type of detached eye that is continually staring at her, aiming the camera on her." This picture is reminiscent of Sontag and Barthes' idea of the invasive photographer who conquers his subject. Despite Bellocq's direct attitude, Jaffal and Furaih situate Bellocq's images in the lengthy heritage of enslavement of mixed-race women in the South, particularly in New Orleans (Jaffal and Furaih, 2021: 44). However, Jessica Adams implies that although Storyville and New Orleans, in general, were a lasting link to blackness, sexual identity, and commerce from the late nineteenth century onwards, Bellocq's photos "reimagined Storyville as a domestic sphere and recognized prostitutes, at least those who were, as truthfully sexual and still common women. Bellocq's art both recognized and celebrated the relationship between prostitutes and 'regular' women" (Adams 2012: 52). Even though Sontag concedes that "from at least a third of the photos, it was not determined that the ladies are prisoners of a prostitute," Despite the fact that the camera turned them into art pieces, Bellocq was capable of capturing an underlying basic humanity and of making ethical and ethnic disparities nearly unnoticeable. Janet Malcolm wonders "if she genuinely was a prostitute" after she sees an image of a dressed prostitute. What indication was there that she, or any lady in the publication, dressed or unclothed, was a whorehouse occupant instead of, for example, the photographer's niece or sister, or a hired prototype?"

This brings us full circle back to the points that Sontag and Barthes have made: Bellocq took an image of a lady, but the means of understanding who or what that woman was rely on a broader story, a cultural literacy that renders legible the apparent marks of race and sexual trespass and sets them in a larger cultural narrative. Bellocq's shot depicted a woman. Trethewey analyzes "that liminal zone of seeming to be one thing to people on the outside and having an interior that is another, something that people can't see" by focusing on the smaller, more surprising elements (what Barthes calls punctums). She is able to "explore the

contrast between the reality of [Ophelia's] existence and the pictures that have become art to us" because of this point of entry (Rowell and Trethewey 2004:1030).

Trethewey starts the process of rehabilitating the silent and nameless prostitute by using the authority that she has as an author to give the subject a name. By giving her the name Ophelia, Trethewey places the lady, who would have been unidentified otherwise, inside a distinguished, though disturbed, literary past. Given that she is descended from a Shakespearean character, "Ophelia" promises to be a dark and disturbed heroine whose internal theorizing of her sexual relationships with men challenges traditional ideas surrounding the sexuality of black women in the South. Ophelia can also trace her literary antecedents to Janie from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as to Thomas Sutpen's first wife and Charles Bon's mulatto mistress in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as well as to the extensive roster of photographed southern women in Henninger's study.

Ophelia is a product of the South and a photographed object. For instance, a picture of Janie reveals who she is—another southern lady. She goes through a phase in which she is unidentified, despite the fact that her name is not a literary one and so has a different type of cultural baggage than literary names do. Janie, when she was a little kid, could not identify herself in a group shot in which she was the only black child. However, after she was recognized, she experienced a type of complete coherence between race and sex for the first time. She is not concerned by the fact that she is black; rather, she is troubled by the fact that she previously believed differently and is no longer like the others (9). Both of the women in *Absalom, Absalom!* are not given names, and it seems that their only purpose in the story is to serve as abandoned procreative sites for privileged white males and causes of white hysteria. Charles Bon rhapsodizes, via Mr. Compson's slightly hysterical narrative, that mulatto mistresses are "made and produced by white men," and as a result, they are not prostitutes. This is because mulatto mistresses are "formed and produced by white men" (142).

They are "more rare commodities than white girls, highlighted and educated to satisfy a female's principal end and intent: to love, to be gorgeous, and to deflect; never to glimpse a man's face probably barely till introduced to the ball," and in exchange, the white male offers for her and defends her glory against anyone who would consider her a prostitute. A woman's primary purpose and intent are to be adored, to be gorgeous, and to deflect (145). Undoubtedly, Faulkner's portrayal of mixed-race prostitutes in the "hot equatorial crotch" that is New Orleans allows no room for female agency or emotional depth. Somehow, everything is completed for and by the white male consumer, who also possesses the prerogative of jettisoning the treasured female object in pursuit of a genuine marriage. Faulkner's portrayal of mixed-race prostitutes in New Orleans leaves no room for female agency or emotional depth (144). Given that Trethewey's heroine has interiority and agency, the ability to talk and write about her own life, and the capacity to rethink both the camera and the gaze, she is a reworking of the cliché that she is named after.

Trethewey bestows the potential of subjectivity onto the reader by identifying Ophelia; nevertheless, she does it in a manner that highlights the fictive aspect of that personality in the sentence that is placed at the beginning of the first segment:

Ophelia is the imagined name of a prostitute photographed circa 1912 by E. J. Bellocq, later collected in the book, *Storyville Portraits*. A very white-skinned black woman—mulatto, quadroon or octoroon—she would have lived in one of few “colored” brothels such as Willie Piazza’s Basin Street Mansion or Lula White’s Mahogany Hall, which, according to the *Blue Book*, was known as the “Octoroon Club.” (6)

Trethewey's literature spans several barriers, including the North American frontier that separates Mexico and the US, in addition to the transnational barrier between North America and Europe. She discusses historical limits spanning many centuries, from imperial periods to the present. In Thrall, the unlimited character of Trethewey's poems and language interlinks themes of mixed-race identification beyond the written and visual media, encouraging linkages among U.S.-American and Mexican ideas of ethnicity even while underlining common colonial perspectives of mixed-race individuals. Despite the fact that Trethewey is a U.S.-American—and, more crucially, a mixed-race U.S.-American and Southern—author, she employs a multinational technique in her poetry by presenting a dual viewpoint on ethnicity originating from the United States and Mexico. She addresses the global phenomenon of mixed-race ideas by producing poems that alternate between the United States and Mexico to highlight the interwoven but distinct origins of racial ideas in both nations.

Her poems' overlapped topic content produces a layered style in which crossings among racial ideas are obvious, whereas the flaws of these ideas are underlined. Trethewey's power drives all of us far beyond the limits of our understanding and frees mixed-race individuals from the shackles of imperial expression. Trethewey reveals how word depictions of mixed-race identification can complement and resist among themselves by acknowledging the influence of social, cultural, financial, political, and legal institutions, along with their impact on multiracial development. Hence, by accepting the mobility of mixed-race identification and shedding illumination on the terminology utilized to connect mixed-race people across heritage, the constraints imposed by this phrase may start to disintegrate.

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