

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 19

Article 3

9-12-2017

The Poet Legislator

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Recommended Citation

Simonson, Thomas (2017) "The Poet Legislator," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 19 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol19/iss1/3>

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Keywords

poet, legislator

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In *A Defence of Poetry*, the great British Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley declared “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (46). While today’s poets may not occupy the same cultural space as Shelley’s contemporaries, his declaration of their occupation’s distinction is still largely indicative of the influence artists of the West have, and the roles they take on because of that influence. Given the freely activist stances of filmmakers, authors, and other creative individuals, it should not be surprising that poets too can perform the same role as their flashier counterparts working in other media. In fact, the American government still provides for an official position, the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, which has been held by many distinguished poets.

Unlike their British counterparts, however, the duties of American laureates are kept to a minimum specifically to enable the success of each appointee’s projects. Instead of focusing on state compositions, the laureate comments freely on events and devotes considerable energy to promoting the arts. As such, despite their influence and position, they are not obligated to be political. However, in keeping with the model set forth by Shelley, Natasha Trethewey’s work was decidedly political when she served as the laureate from 2012-2014. It is important to note that this approach did not develop when she assumed the position; Trethewey has emphasized throughout her career her conviction that artistic occupations present the artist with an opportunity to act in response to the wrongs they perceive. Following in the footsteps of her forerunner, Rita Dove, her laureateship was characterized by a blending of political advocacy and artistic outreach. Trethewey sought not only to bring poetry to new and widespread audiences, but also to stir in those readers an augmented engagement with the historical problems facing their country.

Before we proceed, a clarification of what I mean by political may be in order: Trethewey’s work is not political in the sense that it exhorts readers to adopt certain policies or even to take certain

positions. Her tactics are far subtler and more incisive. She aims for the reader's sense of moral justice by providing historical and contemporary narratives, then targets their emotions by featuring a reflection on what the poem has related. Many of her pieces end with a distinctive flourish that signifies a truth that has been illuminated, and the reader must not let it escape his/her grasp. Centering as her work does on narratives that coalesce into emotional lessons, her work is political because it aims to accomplish an internal realization or communion in its readers that promotes external affirmations of equality and solidarity. As such, there is broad critical agreement that the content of her work, its historical and contemporary contexts, its ubiquitous references to race, makes it political.

In particular, I will explore the ways in which her latest volume, 2012's *Thrall*, functions as part of a larger project—one which aims to amend historical erasure, to expose the enduring racial factions of society, and to invoke a call, in chorus with others, for unified change. To support such a reading, in this paper I will refer to various texts in Trethewey's oeuvre, but will most closely examine poems from *Thrall*, in order to add to the critical conversation established in this area of the scholarship by Katherine R. Henninger, Pearl McHaney, Joseph Millichap, Malin Pereira, and Nagueyalti Warren on three fronts: first, while Trethewey has long been acknowledged as a poet-historian correcting historical erasure (Henninger), I examine how her embrace of the solubility between poet and persona in the lyric poem instructively connects the historical to the personal; second, although Trethewey has been categorized as a "race writer" by default, with attention sometimes centering on certain figures (Millichap), I will favor a focus on biracialism (Pereira) in order to point to the nuanced ways in which her work's use of familial biracialism symbolizes the past and present racial turmoil of American society; third, instead of interpreting poetic form chiefly as a protective barrier between difficult topics and the reader (Warren), I investigate how Trethewey's use of form, in embodying elements of the West's artistic traditions, tailors for the widest audience possible her activist message of acknowledging, then correcting, racial inequality.

1. Rewriting History

To correct the gaps in historical narratives, Trethewey uses multiple personae to tell interrelated stories. Rather than narrating exclusively personal stories, Trethewey concerns herself as well with

historical individuals who represent the vast portions of society that have remained unacknowledged in much of American literature and throughout much of the nation's history. Speaking of poems inspired by her grandmother, she describes a permeable membrane through which she and the personae that represent fellow "Othered"¹ individuals become unified: "She became a character for me. I'm not separate from that character, and I don't think I would have been able to write those poems if each feeling expressed and what her character goes through in every poem wasn't something that was close to home, something I knew very well. So it's still my pain, but I have taken someone's life and made a picture out of it" ("An Interview," Petty 4). This principle is at work throughout Trethewey's oeuvre: Her first collection, 2000's *Domestic Work*, pairs poems narrated by a speaker who refers to the poet's own experiences with others that speak from the psyches of working-class women as they reflect on their physical labor, and the labor of existing in gendered, racialized bodies. The 2002 collection *Bellocq's Ophelia* again explores this theme, this time as Trethewey writes from the perspective of a mixed-race woman struggling for agency in early 20th century New Orleans. Recalling the format of *Domestic Work*, the opening section of *Native Guard* (2006) chronicles Trethewey's emotions following the death of her mother, before her perspective shifts and eventually settles on that of a black soldier who narrates the series of sonnets at the heart of the book. In her most recent collection, *Thrall* (2012), Trethewey comments on her personal experience of biracialism and simultaneously speaks from the triangle of perspectives present in ekphrastically described biracial families: white fathers, black mothers, and mixed-race children. Each of these volumes blends Trethewey's personal experiences with the experiences of individuals from the past. This rescuing of the past from cultural erasure might have limited her work to a poetic variation of historical fiction, were it not for the political charge that results from Trethewey's additional step: she juxtaposes what has been recovered with what she has experienced. The poetry thus acknowledges and vivifies the previously erased contents of the past.

Trethewey herself makes the case that this association between personal and historical personae is what lends many of her poems their weight. Referring to the titular figure of her 2002 collection, she says, "Ophelia's exploration of mixed race identity and being looked at and all of those kinds of

¹In the context of this essay, the term will refer to female or non-white individuals.

things are my issues, but how much different might it have been if I wrote all those poems just from my point of view? [...] That sort of lyrical self-investigation that we like to do so much [...] I can't imagine doing it without a social and historical context" ("A Conversation," Haney 30). The incorporation of others' voices enables Trethewey's work to evade the drawbacks of traditional author-centric first-person speakers. The poems that speak with a historical figure avoid the appearance of a poet preaching. They instinctively remind readers of the speakers who narrate works of nonfiction, in which validity is presupposed owing to the responsibility the medium carries. As such, the utterances of Trethewey's historical personae can be better received than comparable statements understood to originate exclusively with an autobiographical speaker. This is more to avoid the "navel-gazing tendencies in modern poetry" than it is to conceal what Trethewey offers of herself in her work (Henninger 55). On the contrary, she makes it clear that the distinction between herself and the persona that speaks allows for greater clarity, not concealment: "I think you are allowed to investigate the self a little bit more comfortably behind the thicker mask, this distant historical mask of a persona" ("An Interview," McHaney 46). In wearing a mask, Trethewey is free to enjoy the unfiltered expression such a disguise affords, as poem and poet merge in a manner that is neither purely autobiographical, nor a fabrication of the poet's identity. She describes this process when referencing a debate with her father:

My father always tells me, 'You have to stick to the truth, you have to tell truth in a poem.' I believe that, [...] but when I write my poems, if those stories become true, they really do become yet another piece of the story. I've listened to chunks of my grandmother's stories, and I've gone and written a poem that I've just created, out of my imagination. I came back to my grandmother, and I read it to her. And she says, 'That's just how it was; it happened just like that.' Now that's impossible, but it just becomes the truth for her and me ("An Interview," Petty 15).

Trethewey's historical narratives are incorporated into her own personal history, just as her historical personae are vitally linked to a persona indicative of the poet herself. She describes the intention of this overlaid pattern in this way: "I made it a rule for myself that I was going to write these

poems using this ‘she’ who became my character. And my ‘she’ was going to be filled with all sorts of characteristics that are my own, but she was going to be living in a different time and having different experiences” “An Interview,” (Petty 15). Trethewey’s tactic allows her to comment with personal authority from the perspective of others. Not merely content to recount her family history, however, Trethewey exercises her activist ambition by recounting stories from the perspective of individuals who would not otherwise be the subject of a book of poetry, let alone that of a history textbook. The relationships between fact and fiction, personal and historical are transformed via this artistic process.

While much praise has been directed to Trethewey for amending erasure, recent scholarship has not always emphasized these connections between Trethewey’s historical speakers and her autobiographical ones. Katherine Henninger describes the persona Trethewey utilizes in her autobiographical pieces not in terms of proximity, but distance, which is employed for safety: “The persona that narrates these poems in past-tense is the adult survivor [...] an adult child not just of particular parents but of the racialized past” (64). While connecting Trethewey’s personal poems to her historical ones, Henninger argues that the function of the persona is to insulate Trethewey from the “immediacy of that offering” of herself as symbolic, “reducing its threat” by relying on a constructed persona (57). This argument accounts for readers’ tendency to read the poet into the text, but emphasizing the metaphysical distance between Trethewey and any speaker that may represent her may only be so useful. Indeed, even if it weren’t for Trethewey’s making the connections explicit within the poems, there is the maxim that writers usually write what they know, or at least what they have psychologically explored in order to artistically recreate. Thus, while Trethewey’s personal narrator may insulate the poet, the relationship between the two is necessarily intimate. Indeed, what identifies Trethewey’s work as political is accomplished not by separating herself through personae that are valid when she is not, nor by separating herself from painful experience through the utility of a constructed persona, but by specifically uniting a personal self with a historical self, to bring what was omitted into the spotlight. Trethewey tells related stories, or, more profoundly, an old story which is topical and being relived in the present day.

To do this, Trethewey’s historical and personal personae undergo transformative assimilations.

This occurs over the course of her collections, as their respective sections shift from personal narratives to historical narratives, occasionally within a single poem, as when Trethewey injects herself into a historical scene for comparison. Offering varied examples of this exchange of identity, *Thrall*, much like the preceding volume *Bellocq's Ophelia*, features Trethewey's narration of personal experiences and historical readings of biracial children. The ekphrastic piece "Knowledge" inhabits a past event set forth in a painting, describing men of science poring over a woman's body, only to dramatically alter course when Trethewey interjects by placing herself and her father within the event: "Each learned man is my father / and I hear, again, his words—I study / my crossbreed child—misnomer / and taxonomy, the language of zoology" (lines 31-33). Her comparisons are not merely insinuations of persistent cultural trends: rather, she problematizes the notion that racial dynamics have undergone a paradigm shift in the time between her experiences and that of the historical eras she references. Trethewey's purposeful juxtaposition of these time periods and their respective personae draws attention not to broad themes of the human experience, but to the endurance of a very particular affliction her society has been unable to heal.

Trethewey's personal fixation on her father's cold terminology ("my crossbreed child") is echoed in her description of a biracial child in "Taxonomy 4": "the child / [...] cannot slip their hold [...] all her kind / in thrall to a word" (lines 26-32). Like Trethewey, the child in the latter is bound as if in a "hold" by the word which qualitatively defines her. This relationship is also seen in "Taxonomy 3": "the child / [...] turns toward the father, / reaching to him / as if back to Spain, / to the promise of blood" (lines 6-14). In this moment as well, the child of the poem recaptures Trethewey's depiction of herself. The child "reaches" for the blood validity of the father in this piece just as Trethewey reaches back through memory to "hear, again, [her father's] words: [...] my crossbreed child" ("Knowledge" lines 31-33). These words signify the same influence that the fathers of the "Taxonomy" pieces have over their children's blood and its worth: "crossbreed" is a devaluation.

The title poem of *Thrall* features another biracial child whose experience is strikingly parallel to that of Trethewey's. This poem's speaker, the son of a painter, confides, "only once / did he fix

me in paint / my color a study / [...] the yoke of my birth / gone from my neck” (lines 70-77).² The inescapable “hold” mentioned in “Taxonomy: 4” is present here as “the yoke of my birth.” The yoke is not featured in the painting the poem describes, but like Trethewey and the child in “Taxonomy 3,” here the speaker fixates on the status that has only been “fixed” by paint (or color) controlled by a father. The child’s color is “a study” in color, another instance of devaluation, as the painter’s son goes on: “I ground his colors / my hands *dusted* black / with *fired* bone *stained* / blue” (lines 15-18, my emphases). This image utilizes color on multiple levels, depicting with rich visual imagery the condition that each of the biracial children refer to in looking at their father, whose whiteness and blood is devalued, “dusted,” “fired,” and “stained” when it is present in biracial bodies.

The placement of Trethewey’s contemporary experience of biracialism within the framework of historical moments is thus a prime example of her mingling of an autobiographical self with a historical identity, the visage of both taking shape in conjunction with the other. Her artistic choice sends a clearly political message, that the experiences of individuals long relegated to the past are being relived in the society of the poet. She suggests that the record of the past can be illuminated, alarmingly, by its similarity to the present, when many are still grappling with inequality. The poems provocatively suggest that the thrall evident in *casta*³ paintings from hundreds of years ago is experienced by a poet in one of the most advanced Western societies of the 21st century. Trethewey is not talking about the origins of America’s “racial problem” and her personal experiences as vaguely connected elements; rather, she is telling one story, inextricably linked across time and space, and the political ramifications of making this point are clear. Only the most desperate of bigots would assert that race as it is experienced today has nothing to do with race as it was constructed hundreds of years ago, but few would readily point out, as Trethewey does through paired narratives and linked personae, that the “race problem,” at its ideological core, is as topical and damaging now as it was at the onset of this country’s formation. Calls for equality like those of the Black Lives Matter movement and invocations for respect like those heard

² I have reproduced Trethewey’s idiosyncratic spacing here and in quotations elsewhere.

³ A *casta* was a system of racial classification originated by Spanish conquerors of the Americas in the 18th century that delineated names and hierarchical placement for the children of various mixed-race unions. Trethewey’s *Thrall* consists, largely, of ekphrastic poems that “read” *casta* paintings that depict examples of such unions, invariably featuring white fathers, black mothers, and biracial children.

on Beyoncé's *Lemonade* are contemporary reminders, like Trethewey's, that there is much unfinished work in perfecting American society.

2. Unmasking Society

In juxtaposing, and mutually empowering, personal and historical speakers, Trethewey's focus is squarely on the presence of race in American society. Dismissing summaries of her work that prioritize the historical or the contemporary narratives, Trethewey has pointed to the inevitable connections between these elements: "I get a little annoyed that people aren't necessarily setting my personal experiences within a larger historical context. To me, that's the only way it makes sense. My little memories are actually memories of a culture. My experience of race [...] has everything to do with the laws at the time, which are a kind of [...] history of the nation" ("The Larger Stage" 20). In *Thrall*, she tackles this inextricable union through ekphrastic pieces describing works of art depicting biracial families, and pairs with them poems reflecting on key moments of racial identification within her family's history. Although she admits that "race always appears in my work because I have a racialized experience of America," she clarifies that "*Thrall* is the book that is actually most about race that I've ever written" ("Southern Crossings" 167). In some ways, the book can be thought of as continuation of the work begun in *Bellocq's Ophelia*: moving beyond that book's solitary biracial speaker, in *Thrall* Trethewey speaks for the biracial children within the ekphrastic historical poems. From these collected perspectives, she approaches biracial families—both from paintings and from resurrected memories—by paying attention to the triangular position of three individuals present in each depiction: the biracial child, a black mother, and a white father. Instead of fixating on the inherent conflicts between rote representations of the black/white binary opposition, Trethewey focuses on the psychological space at the center of this familial triangle. The thrall she refers to is a dynamic, multi-directional force: it does not flow exclusively from the white men toward the black women, nor from the mixed-race children toward their mothers and/or fathers. Rather, each point of the triangle can be seen as an arrow pointing to the remaining two, and their shared thrall is the binding element that collectively symbolizes the American experience of race.

Before turning to the first figure within this triangular symbol, it is important to discuss Trethewey's identification with biracialism itself. She emphatically declared in one interview: "I am the quintessential Southern writer! Quintessentially American too! The story of America has always been a story of miscegenation, of border crossings, of integration of cultures and again, I embody this in my person" ("Southern Crossings" 165). The correlations between the biracial children of the ekphrastic poems and her autobiographical persona are clear, as she implies in admitting, "the more I've gotten interested in writing about history and making sense of myself within the continuum of history, the more I've turned to paintings, to art. I look to the imagery of art to help me understand something about my own place in the world. By just beginning to contemplate a work of art, I find myself led toward some other understanding" ("A Conversation," McKee 137). This quest for the undefined, and identifying with what is traditionally suppressed, is suggested again when Trethewey acknowledges a compliment from Rita Dove that her work is syncopated: "In poetry, infusing poems with a syncopated rhythm would be putting emphasis where one would not only not expect it, but would not want it— [...] the biraciality" ("An Interview," McHaney 57). Perhaps it is fitting, then, to examine the biracial children within *Thrall's* symbolic families.

Biracial Children

Despite the presence of biracial children in each of the poems, critical opinion does not always incorporate an acknowledgment of their equal power in effecting *Thrall's* symbolism. Millichap, for example, points to Trethewey's father, and, by extension, to the white fathers within the book, as "the focus throughout *Thrall*" (Millichap 194). Such a reading relies upon Trethewey's dedication of the book "to" her father, and, in turn, an emphasis on the collective gazing backward of the book's biracial children at their white fathers, much like Trethewey herself is perceived to be resting her gaze on her own white father. Such a reading is perhaps most clearly represented in the child within "Taxonomy 3," in which the child "turns toward the father, / reaching to him / as if back to Spain, / to the promise of blood" (lines 11-14). However, focusing chiefly on this facet of the turbulent negotiations of power within the biracial families of the *casta* paintings leads to an incomplete observation of the scene. As indicated by the title of the book, Trethewey's focus is on the "thrall" of enforced systems of racial

status that affect each figure of the biracial family depicted in the casta painting reproduced on the book's cover. Reducing this thrall by prioritizing the biracial child looking to the white father leads to an incomplete observation of the scene, for it does not acknowledge the close, competing presence of the black mothers in the paintings, who both unite and compete with the white fathers in the child's quest for identity and validation. The child in "Taxonomy 3," for example, is indeed turned toward the father, but is positioned securely in his mother's arms. It is impossible to make a pair exclusive within this larger trinity, which is named within the poem as a "trptych." The poem concludes that this child, along with "all her kind," are "in thrall to a word" (32). While it is immediately apparent that this concluding line refers to the condition of biracial children, the larger implication is that "all her kind" refers to each of the humans in question, not exclusively to those bearing the burden of similar racial markers. Indeed, the biracial child is in *Thrall* to one of the various words that a title like "Taxonomy" connotes; however, relative to race, each of the elements of the triptych are in thrall to this identification by their respective relation to it. It is not the presence of whiteness that makes the white fathers "free," it is the property of race at work that does that. As such, they too are subject to the "thrall" that determines the fate of each figure of the triangle.

Additionally, following Trethewey and the biracial children's line of vision to white fathers and interpreting that as indicator of their place in the hierarchy of the book's attention may divert from both what Trethewey is doing and what the biracial children in her poems represent. In dedicating the book "to" her father, the poet is not merely "in dialogue with the man and his work" (Millichap 194); rather, her position is one of agency in addressing him not only as an equal, but from a position of instruction and even of interrogation. This would not be the case had she dedicated the book "for" her father. Analyzing the dynamics of Trethewey's complaint in writing to her father requires a focus on what is passing between racialized individuals who are struggling to communicate, rather than on either individual's discrete significance. For, while Trethewey has described *Thrall's* content as a very "intimate conversation," such a description does not exclude those intimate conversations proceeding from indignation: it does not deny the assertive power of the book, in which the poet, addressing her father, can be thought of as addressing whiteness, and thus, the thrall of race itself.

The first poem of the book is the bizarrely titled “Elegy”—written for a father who is still living—in which the descriptions of her father are unapologetic, even defiant. There is a daring condescension in lines such as the following: “You must remember how / the river seeped in over your boots / and you grew heavier with that defeat” (lines 10-12). This defeat is not mentioned in passing, as she elaborates: “I kept turning to watch you, how / first you mimed our guide’s casting / then cast your invisible line, slicing the sky / between us; and later, rod in hand, how / you tried—again and again—to find / that perfect arc” (13-18). As in the preceding quote, her father is depicted in terms of “defeat,” trying “again and again” to master a cast. Importantly, his daughter has already cast well enough to catch “two small fish” (19). On another level, Trethewey’s admission that she “kept turning to watch” means that she neither shirks from this image of her father, but perhaps even welcomes it—both during the experience that triggered the poem, and again in writing the poem and having it lead the collection.

However, merely following the direction of Trethewey’s gaze on the white fathers of *Thrall* diverts attention from what both she and the biracial children in the collection represent: contemporary Americans wrestling with the cultural memory that partitions each of us according to traditionally defined racial meaning. The biracial children in *Thrall* look to their white fathers not in simple admiration but in full cognizance that their fathers signify validity, which in turn affects their own process of self-identification. The child in “Taxonomy: 3” looks “to the promise of blood” for the legitimacy in which their fathers—in which whiteness itself—luxuriates. They are seeking to dismantle racist constructions by identifying with the whiteness they have partially inherited. This is the purpose of the backward glances, and the fixation is not because of the importance of the white fathers, but in defiance of it. Within the larger symbol of biracial families, the biracial child embodies the longing of many modern Americans to disentangle themselves from racial ideology. The biracial child is thus integral to Trethewey’s image of biraciality as the American condition. This can be seen in the book’s content as well as its cover, which reproduces one of the *casta* paintings of a biracial family. Interestingly, when speaking of the similarly revealing cover art for her preceding collection of poetry, *Native Guard*, Trethewey could easily be describing *Thrall* itself: “Being of mixed blood, is the larger metaphor that the cover suggests, and that is the intersections of white and black, north and south, slave and free. [...]”

Those very intersections are in me, in my very blood, they're in the country, they're in the very nature of history" ("An Interview," McHaney 53). She points to the condition of biraciality again as being a symbol of our society's paradoxical unity, problematized as it is by racism and other distortions of difference.

White Fathers

This is not to say that the white fathers are not richly informative referents within the symbolism engendered by *Thrall's* biracial families. Within that larger framework, aspects of the traditional patriarchy and privilege of the American white male appear in these fathers. Despite the love they bear their children, they are consistently described as ostensible masters, depicted with objects in hand that contribute to the tension of possible violence. The very first poem sets the tone for this reading: the aforementioned "Elegy," already discussed as an indication of Trethewey's willingness to challenge her father, here emerges as significant for the object in her father's hands. She describes him with "rod in hand, [...] slicing the sky." The rod suggests any number of instruments of power, as it slices the sky. This imagery is reflected in "De Español de India Produce Mestiso," which features another father's hand, which, "*beneath / its crown of lace, / curls around his daughter's head; / she's nearly fair / as he is*" (lines 8-13, my emphases). The hand is "crowned" by lace, which suggests superiority in the same way that the fishing rod, like a scepter or whip, suggests power. Again, in "Mano Prieta," Trethewey describes her father in similar monarchical fashion: "His armchair is a throne / [...] his hand draped / across my shoulder" (lines 7-11). Images from both earlier poems are present here: the white father is positioned like a king through his use of an object, in this case a throne, which corresponds to the fishing rod/scepter and the lace crown. The hand in "De Español de India Produce Mestiso" which curls around a daughter's head is "draped" on Trethewey's shoulder in "Mano Prieta". Each image suggests the blessing one receives at the significantly placed hand of a monarchical figure.

Thus, even moments of tenderness are rendered with unmistakable implications of the power dynamics existing between the white fathers and those around them: In "De Español y Negra; Mulata," a father demonstrates only "what looks to be / tenderness: [...] caressing / his daughter's cheek, the

painter's light / finding him—his profile glowing as if / lit beneath the skin. Then, the dominion / of his touch: with one hand he holds / the long stem gingerly, pressing it / against her face—his gesture at once / possessing both” (lines 7-16). While a tender image on the surface, Trethewey's description divulges more: his touch is described only as possessing “dominion.” The stem he holds is pressed “against her face,” not like a gift, but as a forced transfer, a “gesture [...] possessing” both the child and that which he presses against her face. Similarly, in “*Thrall*,” a poem written from the perspective of a mixed-race male, the speaker confesses of his painter father: “Only once / did he fix me in paint / my color a study” (lines 70-72). Instead of painting his biracial son from a motivation of affection or pride, even this deeply personal act is “a study” in which the child is “fixed.” Then, in “Torno Atrás,” Trethewey encapsulates the connections between these historical fathers and her own in describing another white painter father. Like the other white fathers, he bears an object, and is dominant even in a moment of affection. He “renders” his wife “homely” (lines 6, 7), his hand holding a brush. Trethewey does not mince words in comparing this individual to her own father: “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” (27-29). In the personal and the historical contexts, then, the white fathers are uniformly depicted with objects and in postures that symbolize their privileged position.

With love from the fathers thus distorted, the pair of epigraphs that open *Thrall* take on enormous meaning. Trethewey quotes an initial couplet, “What is love? / One name for it is knowledge” by fellow Southern poet Robert Penn Warren, and answers it with another quote, this time from T. S. Eliot: “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” In viewing the love of *Thrall*'s white fathers as conflated with knowledge, another aspect of these figures' symbolism becomes clear. While not depicted as kings or fathers, as the men in the preceding discussion were, the men in “Knowledge” are still in distinct positions of power, bearing objects of equal significance, and placed in symbolic dominion over an Othered figure: “The anatomist presides / [...] in his hands / instruments of the empirical—scalpel, pincers” (lines 13, 18-19). The anatomist is not merely present; he “presides” over the body of a woman. His authority is evidenced by his placement over the figure and by the instruments he holds, the scalpel and pincer, which, while tools of science, suggest violence and pain as well, even as they enable the

anatomist's empirical dominion. Mirroring this image, another man is nearby, his hand symbolically on a stack of books (25). Like the anatomist, he is not the object of anyone's gaze, and is "presiding" over the female, even as his hand guards and monopolizes the stack of books, in a nod to the poem's title. This explains why the men unfailingly "diminish" even what they love, muddling that greatest of humanity's capacities with the coldness that proceeds from racial ideology, here closely connected to the idea of knowledge.

For in each of the images of white fathers, Trethewey incorporates details which point to the Enlightenment's ideological genesis of race, a mental condition that allowed and even encouraged the supposedly superior sex of the supposedly superior race to "love" and improve (through knowledge) the lesser varieties of humankind through rightful dominion. The objects which have been pointed to—the fishing rod, the monarchical crown of lace and armchair/throne, the scalpel and pincers, the stack of books, the painters' brushes and Trethewey's father's pen—all represent not only dominion, but dominion through knowledge and learning, manipulated to render the white males as inherently superior. Most of the objects are phallic symbols, and each is part of a larger set of symbolic images that connect the fathers with America's colonial founders of race. As Trethewey points out in "Torno Atrás," the American problem with race lies squarely in the account of the white men empowered by an abuse of knowledge:

If I tell you such terms were born
in the Enlightenment's hallowed rooms, that the wages of empire
is myopia, you might see the father's vision as desire embodied
in paint, this rendering of his wife born of need to see himself
as architect of Truth, benevolent patriarch, father of uplift
ordering his domain. (lines 22-27)

The painter who has "fixed" his son through a color study, the father who presses a stem against his daughter's face, another who embraces his daughter with a hand "crowned" with lace, and Trethewey's own father, who "studies" his biracial child: each could be seen as men needing to see themselves as an "architect of Truth, benevolent patriarch, father of uplift / ordering his domain" (26-

27). Her father, she suggests, she can understand by looking “again and again at this painting” because it models “how it is” for him to be the way that he is (28-29). The men’s continued subscription, unknowing or not, to constructed superiority, nestles contemporary examples of patriarchy and racial hierarchy squarely next to historical examples. Indeed, “Enlightenment,” another poem featuring Trethewey’s father, unabashedly references Thomas Jefferson to demonstrate this. Describing his appearance in a painting, Trethewey points to the disjunction between the founding father’s countenance and his moral knowledge: “At Monticello, he is rendered two-toned: / his forehead white with illumination— / a lit bulb—the rest of his face in shadow, darkened as if the artist meant to contrast / his bright knowledge, its dark subtext” (lines 2-6). The “two-toned” visage of Jefferson alludes to his whiteness and troubling support for racialized hierarchies, even as he fathered biracial children.

The white men from the historical sphere of the ekphrastic paintings, including Jefferson, symbolize within Trethewey’s depiction of biracial *families* the role of whiteness in the construction of race. The separations of time and space are discarded entirely, because Trethewey is not merely focusing on the physical objects in these men’s hands, but the symbolic power that their positions have in describing the social order as it existed, and as it struggles to endure. In every incarnation throughout the book, the fathers are thus depicted as apparent heads of morally ambiguous power struggles, rendering loved ones—and, by extension, anyone who is neither male nor white—in diminished fashion. Like their biracial children, the book’s men become tied to contemporary biracial families, which, Trethewey concludes, are as cross-hatched as American society itself: “History [...] links us—white father, black daughter—/ even as it renders us other to each other” (“Enlightenment” lines 52-54). Given Trethewey’s efforts in uniting historical and personal personae, and historical and personal stories, her suggestion that biracial families are symbolic of American society should not be discounted. Trethewey acknowledges the damage that racial constructions have wrought by using the image of the family, a unit that is understood to supersede differences, real or imagined. Depicting a family in racial turmoil thus inevitably provides an adumbration of the desired reverse: a family, and society, that is whole, no longer destroyed by racial inequality.

Black Mothers

The final figure within Trethewey's three-part symbol of biracial families is that of the black mother. The mothers within the paintings described in *Thrall* are paired continuously with mentions of a "luminous" or "lit from within" white male. Contrasting with him, a darker woman is usually mentioned moments later, like an inverted shadow that is the object of imposing physical and cultural whiteness. This is communicated from the first pages of the book, as "Miracle of the Black Leg" introduces a concept of blackness through a sequence of poems that refer to paintings depicting a legendary surgical procedure by which a black slave's leg is severed and then surgically attached to a white man whose own leg has just been amputated. Trethewey refers to the many paintings featuring this garish scene, pointing to the black slave's appearances in each of them as a displaced and negligible component: "Always, the dark body [is] hewn asunder," separated from itself and from its surroundings by difference and rendered meaningful by its relative position to whiteness. In the "Miracle" poems, the black body becomes what has been forgotten, in addition to what has been usurped. The stolen leg represents a multitude of bodies and souls which have been possessed, and rendered inferior and disposable: "If not for the dark appendage / you might miss the story beneath this story— / what remains each time the myth changes" (lines 5-7). What remains each time is the black body, normally concealed into the background of the paintings, just as the humanity for which it stands has been brushed into the dark recesses of history. Initiating a theme she will revisit repeatedly in the book, Trethewey observes, "in one painting / the Ethiop is merely a body, featureless in a coffin, / so black he has no face" (3. 1-3). Her word choice in these lines is stunning, indicating the painters' extreme disregard for their black subjects: the boy is "merely" a body—a description which points to the painter's rendering of the black body as something completely lacking personhood. He and his face are "featureless," as though the individual were already dead and ripe for plundering even while he was alive.

This sensation of noticing a black individual melding into a dark backdrop bears similarities to those black women toward whom Trethewey's poems turn to next: In "Taxonomy: 2," the mother's face is "so black she nearly disappears / in the canvas, the dark wall upon which / we see the words that

name them” (lines 17-18); this dark wall is constructed by the painter, both to illuminate the name of his work and to all but erase the black woman also featured. The mother is present enough to “nearly disappear,” as though her presence is required for the subject of the painting, but coerced into the shadows for the viewer. The following poem, “Taxonomy: 3,” represents a woman’s womb as a “dark cradle / of mixed blood” (lines 7-8), her reproductive properties as blended with an absence of whiteness as her physiognomy. This image is discernible again in “Taxonomy: 4” in the mention of a mythic “stain: blemish: sullyng spot” (line 14) that marks non-white individuals. Such descriptions point to the ideological framework of the artists behind the *casta* paintings, who would have believed that the “stain” or “blemish” embodied in these women was inescapably reproduced in their representations of them. As reported by Trethewey in “De Español y Negra; Mulata,” the artists’ view of these women is occluded enough that they darken their surroundings, so that their bodies appear “like spilled ink spreading on a page” (line 27). Using the image of ink within this simile augments the theme of stains and blemishes, even as the mother in that poem is eclipsed by a “flat outline, / the black cloak making her blacker still, / the moon-white crescent of her eye / the only light in her face” (20-23). Only that part of her body which perceives whiteness, as she advances “toward” her husband and child, can bear any “light in her face.” In contrast to this eye, her hand “gestures—a dark signal in the air” (26), as though she possesses blackness for the painting’s sake, not only physically and reproductively, but supernaturally.

If the white men of *Thrall* represent patriarchy and the racial entitlement spawned by the Enlightenment, then these women, as glimpsed in Trethewey’s ekphrastic re-representations and in references to her own family, stand for the subjugated spheres of society. But paired with these acknowledgments of the women’s raced experiences are subtle allusions to the mothers’ collective defiance of the system. These images frequently depict the black mothers exercising agency through their position in relation to their biracial children, which parallels the white men exercising authority through the same means. In the most significant example, the mother in “Taxonomy: 1” dares to point to the joint contributions which have resulted in the state of their child: “The mother, glancing / sideways toward him— / [...] gestures / with one hand a shape / like the letter C. See, / she seems to say, / what we have made” (lines 30-31, 34-38). This image is the cover of the book, and its importance

lies not in part because of this aspect of the woman's appearance. She points to the child, toward whom the father is smiling, as evidence of her worth. This is not because of an inherent lack of worth on her part, nor simply an acknowledgment of the quantum of whiteness her biracial child possesses. Rather, she points to the biracial child because therein lies the undoing of what separates her from the whiteness encapsulated in the white father. Biracialism, to the mother, offers definitive proof of just how arbitrary their differences are, and the child is the best indication of her point that the white father can understand. It is more effective than her dignified clothing, for "the scarf on her head / white as his face, / his powdered wig" (32-34) can be removed. Such significations of status are not as effective as the gesture to her living child, the flesh and blood indication that the racial differentiation of father and mother is not insurmountable.

Additionally, even those women who are not rendered in positions of elevated status, who are clearly symbols of subjugated lives, demonstrate defiance. In "Taxonomy: 2," the mother is featured at the stove; she has to "contort" to keep an eye on her child, "her neck twisting on its spine, red beads / yoked at her throat like a necklace of blood" (lines 12-15). This is an image of profound discomfort: her physical burdens are twofold in that she is working at the stove but is also tasked with watching her child. The red of her necklace resembles blood, and the necklace itself is "yoked" at her throat like a chain. But what is startling about the image is the mother's ability to be "watchful" and protective of her child, despite these challenges. The father is neglectful, "transient, rolling a cigarette, myopic— / his eyelids drawn against the child / passing before him" (10-11). Despite the lack of violence in this image, and the allusion to the advantage of her child being able to "pass" before his father without harm (and, as suggested by Trethewey's word choice, to pass for white) the mother is protective, twisting away from the stove at which she has been stationed. This suggests that she is attuned to her child, yes, but also that her presence is not negligible in the triangle—despite the constraints of her circumstance, she exerts influence and control over her child.

"Taxonomy: 3" too features a similarly guiding mother, who cradles her child with a "careful grip" in the father's presence (line 26). Trethewey again points to such an image in "Help, 1968," in which she describes a woman "holding her charge" (line 7). While it is fair to point to the relegation of

these women to strictly maternal roles, it is equally vital to recognize how the women utilize the status of motherhood to assert their worth. Protectively nurturing the “charges” which they are seen holding indicates their importance, not their disposability. In a disarming demonstration of this, Trethewey then connects these reconstructions of the past to her own mother: “I think of my mother and the year / we spent alone [...] / when [she] took me for walks, / she was mistaken again and again / for my maid” (4-5, 14-16). When questioned about this by passersby, she reveals her mother would “say I was her daughter” (17). Like the woman in “Taxonomy: 2,” Trethewey’s mother points to her child as evidence of the personhood and worth she possesses. In many respects, this continues the work of undoing the erasure of black women which Trethewey began in *Bellocq’s Ophelia* and *Domestic Work*. In *Thrall*, however, her mother enters the text not only as a memory but as an individual whose experiences are made timeless by their association with the black mothers of the paintings Trethewey describes. As in each of the images of mothers in *Thrall*, the pervading shadow of physical blackness is drawn to the forefront of Trethewey’s poems to bring them into the light. This reversal of erasure affixes what has been obscured onto what is being revealed, like a palimpsest.

Trethewey is therefore not only correcting erasure; she is doing so in a meaningfully nuanced way by using symbolic, biracial families. Trethewey critiques racial inequality and necessitate its resolution by using this symbol, which incorporates both those in power and those in subjugation, as well as those wrestling with an indeterminate position relative to the others. It is not coincidental that the image Trethewey chose for the cover of the book features all three individuals comprising this symbol—a white father, a black mother, and their biracial child in a perfect triangle. And betwixt them, in the black space of the canvas? The title of the book: *Thrall*, that condition that binds and unites each of the individuals to each other. Through the intimate, willful connection of her white father and black mother to historical representations of biracial families, American society is thus not revealed to be black and white, or even black, white, and various shades in-between. Instead, in its racial incarnation, American society is revealed as a system of thrall itself, affecting each shade of race and flowing between and through each participant in the system which has been in place to varying degrees for our country’s entire history.

Yet such descriptions should not lead the reader away from the importance of Trethewey's use of a family. This is why the women and the biracial children in her poems cannot be described as longing for and legitimized by whiteness—since the families they form disrupt the idea of racial incongruity through miscegenation. The mothers point to their children as proof of racism's tenuous nature, while the biracial children's challenge of their fathers represents the current generation's increased resistance to its strictures. The family features individuals within a larger unit that transcends differences. This is analogous to the common bond of humans that exists beyond the fetters of social constructions like race and gender. Trethewey points to her desire to rely on these connections, as well as her conviction that such connections are not only appropriate, but beneficial:

I am greatly influenced by the words of James Baldwin, who wrote, 'This is the only real concern of the artist: to recreate out of the disorder of life, that order which is art.' I felt that I had been given, as all Americans have been given, a very disorderly history; in my personal life as well, among my family, there were many disorderly things, and I saw poetry as a way to make order out of them, to make sense out of and grapple with the disorderly stories and histories we have been given. ("Inscriptive Restorations" 1025)

Trethewey builds upon the goal of rewriting history to include each of its participants, unmasking as she does the multiracial face of American society. Whatever their appearance in the larger landscape of society, she extracts the identity of the figures in the *casta* paintings "to make sense out of and grapple with the disorderly stories and histories" of her family and her country.

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