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North and South: Photographic Mediation in the Work of Seamus Heaney and Natasha Trethewey

Amanda Sperry and Jill Goad

In the inaugural issue of *Irish Studies South*, titled *Remembering Seamus Heaney*, Mississippi-born poet Natasha Trethewey contributed a reflection, “North and South: A Calling,” on the importance of Seamus Heaney’s *North* to her work. While writing a collection, she kept a copy of the poem “North” on her desk because it provided a call to make sense of the geography and history into which she was born, “my South, with its terrible beauty, its violent and troubled past.” She specifically credits Heaney for providing “a way into my own work.” In an earlier interview with *The New York Times*, Trethewey acknowledged the importance of Heaney’s *North* to her collection, *Native Guard*, noting that she read Heaney’s book because it helped her understand her relationship to history. Trethewey’s acknowledgement of Heaney’s work as a type of map for her writing invites an exploration of the way both Heaney and Trethewey poetically venture into the imagined geographies of North and South and the way, most notably, both poetic journeys are mediated by the photographic image. Through references to photographs in their work, both Heaney and Trethewey return the power of the gaze to those whom history has elided, those whose social status erased them from the dominant narrative.

In the collection *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, Trethewey refers to Heaney repeatedly as an influence in interviews with southern scholars, remarking on his inspirational visual and language precision and his pursuit of justice in his work. Although Trethewey’s interviewers asked extensive questions about her use of photographs in her poetry, particularly in *Bellocq’s Ophelia*, none addressed the link forged by photography between Trethewey and Heaney. Richard Rankin Russell’s “The Black and Green Atlantic: Violence, History, and Memory in Natasha Trethewey’s ‘South’ and Seamus Heaney’s ‘North’” explores the connections between the single poems named in the article’s title. In this article, Rankin Russell engages in an analysis of the violent pasts of Northern Ireland and the American South as presented in the poets’ respective works, and he posits violence and ambivalence about one’s native soil as the sole ties that bind Trethewey and Heaney.¹ Although both poets explore cultural violence within the context of imagined geographies, photography provides an access point into those terrains and a metaphor for the mediation techniques both Heaney and Trethewey employ to negotiate the complexities of their cultural heritages.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes seeks to define what he calls the *noeme*, “the particular essence of photography.” The *noeme* is “that-has-been,” since the photograph speaks to something such as an event that “has now departed and can only partially be grasped by the

image itself.”² Barthes defines the photograph’s *spectrum* as its relationship to the real, the actual, and as Derrida noted, despite the photographic referent’s absence, “its *having-been-there* is now part of the referential structure of [the viewer’s] relationship to the [photograph]” where “the return of the reference...takes the form of a haunting.”³ In effect, what has been photographed is resurrected and elicits a powerful emotional reaction from the viewer. According to Barthes, photography is “culturally and historically linked with ideas of subjectivity, with identity, and with the body. It requires material bodily presence...that remains hauntingly absent to the viewer”⁴; the photograph encompasses broader cultural and personal implications than can be contained in the frame and captures something frozen in time that is still virtually ungraspable. However, a link that Barthes describes as “umbilical” and “intimate” exists between the body in the photograph and the gaze of the viewer.

Barthes also argues for a particular relationship between photography and memory where photography overtakes memory, the image in the photograph, instead of personal recollection, often becoming the source of memories. Marianne Hirsch, in *Family Frames*, connects photographs and memory as well, positing photography as the link between memory and post-memory, using Barthes’ term “umbilical” to label this connection. Defining post-memory as “a powerful and very particular form of memory” with a “connection to its object or source...mediated...through an imaginative investment and creation,”⁵ she contends that post-memory’s generational distance makes it distinct from memory because memory has a more direct connection to the past. Those experiencing post-memory are influenced by stories occurring prior to their birth passed down from older family members. If a person experiencing post-memory examines photographs representing these passed-down stories, he or she internalizes memories of a time before birth, formed by family stories and sharpened by the photograph, giving the person an image with which to identify.

Seamus Heaney’s *North* (1975) appropriates the cultural and technological mediation techniques Barthes presents as uniquely photographic functions. As has been well documented, the poet appropriates images of petrified bog bodies from Northern Europe depicted in photographs contained in Danish archaeologist P.V. Glob’s *The Bog Bodies* for his own socio-political agenda regarding the Troubles violence in Northern Ireland. Although only four poems in the collection engage in ekphrastic description of Glob’s photographs (“Bog Queen,” “The Grauballe Man,” “Punishment,” and “Strange Fruit,”), the earth goddess worshipping Northern European culture depicted in *The Bog Bodies* provides a mythological cognitive frame through which Heaney contextualizes a political agenda. Most of the poems in Part I are a cultural mediation of a ritualistic pagan worship and/or archaeological burial framework provided by the bog photographs. In the more personal and contemporaneous Part II, photography as technological mediation predominates. From the “zoom lenses” in “Whatever You Say Say Nothing” to the pun on “Exposure” in “Singing School,” Part II transforms the “artful voyeur,” the observer, into the observed, the object of news reports and police state surveillance. The

photographic mediation allows the poet to frame the cultural chaos of the Troubles while maintaining the distance of a photographer.⁶

Mediation in photography also plays a crucial role in the vast divergence of critical perspectives on *North*. The dual photographic function of providing a frame, of zooming in on a topic, but of also providing distance has critics of *North* split about whether Heaney's poetry ethically depicts violence. The technological mediation and contextual framing lead to positive criticisms like that of Conor Cruise O'Brien who writes *North* is written by a poet "on intimate terms with doom," and the poetry is "alert, accurate, and surprising."⁷ The zooming-in and provision of vivid detail also lead to the famous review, "Escaped from the Massacre," by Ciaran Carson, in which Carson accuses Heaney of moving "from being a writer with the gift of precision, to become the laureate of violence." This move from precision and accurate description to exploitation is a fine line that both journalistic and artistic photography negotiate. The result of this negotiation for Carson is that *North* is "a curiously uneven book. Its division into two parts seems to reflect some basic dilemma, between the need to be precise, and the desire to abstract...."⁸

Carson captures the exact photographic dualism between realistic depiction and contextual framing with which photographers of the Troubles struggled. In an article on Northern Irish poetry and photography, Shane Alcobia-Murphy argues that photographers of the Troubles tend toward self-reflexivity and techniques that undermine "the straightforward realism of the documentary image."⁹ He quotes the photographer Brian McAvera, who explains, "the chronic political instability has curtailed access to a realist aesthetic and they [visual artists] have been forced to subvert the fixed gaze of the camera by foregrounding both mediation and context."¹⁰ Mediation and context allow artists to react against the reductive simplicity of Troubles photojournalism that relied on "clichéd imagery as a convenient substitute for investigative reportage," according to Alcobia-Murphy.¹¹ While Part II of *North* engages in realism and a critique of reductive photojournalism, Part I engages in a metaphor of the bog as source of both violence and creativity with the effects of subverting the fixed gaze and a layering that "undermines the straightforward realism of the documentary image."¹² Although *North* is a collection that expresses both the desire for abstraction and precision and for subversion and realism, the two dedicatory poems at the beginning of the collection suggest the photographic mediation techniques provide a structuring principle that accounts for the tension Carson claims makes the collection uneven.

As with *Camera Lucida*, which began with a photograph of Barthes' mother developing into an exploration of photography and memory, Heaney begins *North* with two poems dedicated to a maternal figure, his Aunt Mary, who lived in the family home, Mossbawn.¹³ In an interview Heaney describes the maternal bond: "Mary was my father's sister and she lived at home with us. And since I was the first child, I was her favorite. She was a woman with a huge will of affection...Mary dispensed affection to all of us, but as I say, I was favored because I was the

eldest.”¹⁴ The poem captures an image of Mary baking scones, an image the poem compares to “love / like a tinsmith’s scoop / sunk past its gleam / in the meal-bin.”¹⁵ The poem begins with “a sunlit absence” and the second poem of the sequence, “The Seed Cutters,” ends with the metaphor for writing poetry as being like “compos[ing] the frieze.”¹⁶ These framing images are reminiscent of photographic functions. The flash of the camera captures a moment, a person, or an event, and according to Derrida, it “takes the form of a haunting.”¹⁷ Heaney begins the poem about his aunt with the Enlightenment image of sunlight illuminating a scene, but that scene is of an absence. The images of his aunt that follow are a haunting by someone who is no longer present, of which he attempts to reconstruct an image. The image captures the relationship between photography and memory as acts of recreation serving to highlight the absence of that which was. Likewise, the choice of the concluding image of the dedicatory poems of an architectural sculpture, often of mythological persons or events, rather than a painting or mural, suggests the homophone “freeze” and that Heaney views poetry as a form of the photographic desire to freeze an image in time, a desire to exert control over the uncontrollable. The poem captures this desire to freeze time with an accurate poetic image through the self-reflexive phrase, “You’ll know them if I can get them true,” and the references to “time” and “calendar customs.”¹⁸ In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney notes that his address to the Flemish artist Breughel at the beginning of the second poem occurs because he “always felt at home with his scenes. Things looming large yet pinned down in the smallest detail.”¹⁹ His references to visual media throughout the poem suggest the work may have been inspired by either a photograph or a picture of rural activity.

While the dedicatory poems create a technological or creative-process mediation, they also create a cultural mediation predicated on gender used to structure the collection. The maternal figure of Aunt Mary becomes the mythological earth goddess of the bog bodies and the Viking culture depicted in Part I, while the potato planters in “The Seed Cutters” serve a paternal function that artistically mediates the content generated by the maternal role. Since Heaney’s early poem “Digging,” the act of planting or archaeological work has been associated with his father specifically and a paternal archetype generally. As in “Digging,” there is a violent element associated with the masculine role conveyed through the image of the pen as a spade with which to dig and the infamous pen as a gun image. Heaney’s descriptors for digging, such as “rasping” and “Nicking and slicing” and “the cut curts of an edge,” also capture an aura of violence.²⁰ In “The Seed Cutters,” Heaney describes “each sharp knife” used to pierce the earth and of having “time to kill.”²¹ Henry Hart argues for Heaney the “pen is his figure of power, the substitute for the spade wielded by his father and grandfathers...but ultimately [Heaney] finds a mother, whose abundantly creative powers appear in mythopoetic form as the *telos* of his work.”²² In *North*, however, the maternal archetype and the creative functions associated with it in Part I transition back to the arena of the pen in Part II with a critique of language and patriarchy. Where Part I primarily represents a Kristevan semiotic state that is culturally generative and creatively

inspiring, Part II transitions into a Lacanian symbolic where poetic language interrogates journalistic and political discourses that support oppression.

Much of the controversy over *North* centers on accusations of Part I's mythologizing violence and engaging in scopophilic reconstruction of female bodies especially with regards to "Punishment." Patricia Coughlan writes in her influential essay, "Bog Queens," that by recreating the Windeby Girl as "centre stage but silent," Heaney has engaged in "the scopic spectacle of the girl's utter disempowerment."²³ Coughlan draws on an early definition of the gaze from Laura Mulvey, the scopophilic pleasure men derive from looking at female bodies in images Mulvey calls "voyeuristic."²⁴ A decade later, however, Mulvey writes in "Changes" of a mythic structure that incorporates Kristeva's "discourse of otherness" derived from the semiotic state as a source of poetics.²⁵ Kristeva associates this state with colonial revolts that coalesce around an old mother goddess figure.²⁶ Within this liminal phase, Mulvey argues it is possible to critique patriarchy by "maintaining heterogeneity within the symbolic, and subjecting myths and symbols to perpetual re-evaluation."²⁷ In "Punishment," Heaney writes of a sacrificial victim, but in "Bog Queen," Heaney writes from the perspective of a mother goddess figure. Although, as Mulvey acknowledges, there is usually an eventual patriarchal reinscription, the creative re-evaluation of symbols creates a moment where Heaney presents the alignment of colonial and patriarchal domination and presents a female archetypal figure that speaks back to colonial domination.²⁸ In the "Bog Queen" Heaney writes from the feminine perspective violated by a masculine figure just as he does in "Act of Union," where Ireland as female has been brutalized by a masculine England.²⁹ When Heaney engages in post-colonial critique, he assumes a feminine archetypal position.

Heaney's "Bog Queen," therefore, partially resists the scopophilic binary of active male and passive female by returning the gaze of an ocularcentric Western tradition toward the material and maternal of a mother goddess opposed to colonial/patriarchal dominance before being reinscribed into a patriarchal narrative. Luce Irigaray argues the Western philosophical tradition is founded upon an erasure of the maternal.³⁰ The lyrical "I" of the poem is that of the Bog Queen's. From the ground of "the illiterate roots" and "fermenting underground / dreams" comes the source for "the bearings of history."³¹ Heaney envisions a semiotic state, a realm associated with the pre-Mirror-state development of an infant in Lacanian psychoanalysis but also associated by Kristeva with poetry, music, and rhythm, and other creative processes that resist rational thought and rely on the instinctual. This semiotic realm of the Bog Queen in the womb of Mother Earth is a fertile place for creativity and a liminal state that resists patriarchal or colonial inculcation, a place where the intense description of her physical state, her "fabrics and skins," are "robbed" by a masculine figure, where her state of creativity becomes dominated by a male figure that leaves her "hacked bone, skull-ware" on the edges of a bank.³²

Although the bog queen momentarily speaks back to her masculine oppressors, she as the source of creativity, a monstrous muse, receives expression only through a male translator. The poet's use of the female perspective and mythic goddess figure interrogates an ocularcentric culture that inverts the gaze from the maternal body processes by reenacting a birthing process. However, this birthing process both enacts a form of colonial resistance and performs a patriarchal inculcation through the fantasy of masculine birth. Irigaray critiques Plato's sun metaphor for enlightenment as a "tradition of ocularcentrism that permits a fantasy of self-birthing."³³ Heaney writes, "I was barbered and stripped / by a turf cutter's spade."³⁴ Turf-cutters enact the same masculine archetype from "The Seed Cutters," and this turf-cutter is referenced with the masculine pronoun "him."³⁵ This masculine figure cuts "the plait of my hair, / a slimy birth-cord / of bog," and the Bog Queen then "rose from the dark."³⁶ The masculine birth fantasy commences when the bog queen's removal from the earth becomes a metaphor of the poet drawing on semiotic creativity that he births or shapes into a poem. Although Heaney's poem draws attention to the material and maternal the critique that "the painful birth process is forgotten, repressed, in the service of a male myth of autogenesis" still applies.³⁷ Here, also, the position of the poet as photographer conveys the way Heaney's gendered subject positions do not become the object of the gaze so much as fertile ground to reinvigorate patriarchy. Through Hirsch's analysis of Barthes' umbilical cord image, photography becomes a technological form of reproduction,³⁸ and the mother figure, the object of the photograph, becomes what Walter Benjamin calls the "optical unconscious" that threatens to overwhelm the self instead of give birth to it.³⁹ The optical unconscious, a realm of experience that accesses a type of Freudian dreamwork that resists symbolic representation, can, in the case of Heaney's bog queen, more specifically be read as an "optical semiotic," a way of employing creativity as a technological function that frames a semiotic source. Both the "Bog Queen" and "Punishment" resist the scopophilic gaze that fixes gender roles in a binary that produces pleasure, and instead creates a liminal ground through the optical semiotic through which the maternal becomes the mirror that reflects one's sense of identity formation for entrance into the patriarchal Symbolic.

Part I's bog poems are viewed as the greatest poetic achievement of the volume for all of the intense scrutiny, while Part II is often degraded by critics such as Floyd Collins, who calls the poems "too didactic, often lapsing into strict reportage of events."⁴⁰ This critique can be explained by Heaney moving from what he envisions as the source of his creativity, from the optical semiotic, to engaging with problems in his contemporaneous socio-symbolic. The most reviewed poem of Part II, "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," conveys a critique of news media reporting. In this poem, the poetic persona becomes the object of "newspapermen" and the "ministry of fear."⁴¹ Heaney's most famous poem directly about the Troubles may also be inspired by a type of photography. The title phrase of the poem derives from a poster of a man in paramilitary garb carrying the Sten gun mentioned in the poem with the intimidating warning to prevent collusion with the British government forces, "Loose-talk costs lives...Whatever you say—say nothing" (see Figure 1, below). The poem presents a critique of news media reports as

a collection of just such images and loose-talk presented as unmediated reality. Like the construction of the poster from newspaper font and photographs, the news reports also present a reductionistic narrative of the Troubles violence that is culturally invasive. Here Heaney takes the image of the masked gunman whose Sten gun penetrates the “o” of “costs lives,” as an image of linguistic invasion of journalistic discourse he presents in quotation marks. He writes of words such as “escalate,” “Backlash,” and “crackdown,” “provisional wing,” and “long-standing hate,” as the “jottings and analyses / Of politicians and newspapermen.”⁴² Within the socio-symbolic of the Troubles, this discourse creates binaries that reinforce the violence being perpetrated without presenting nuanced perspectives.



Figure 1 • “Whatever you say—say nothing”

Heaney presents both the technological mediation, “Where zoom lenses, recorders and coiled leads / Litter hotels,” followed immediately by the cultural mediation from *Hamlet*, “The times are out of joint.”⁴³ The technology of mediation creates a dual context for Hamlet’s phrase. Hamlet had just finished speaking with his Father’s ghost and laments that he exists at a moment when he is responsible for rescuing the kingdom from Claudius. In a Lacanian sense, this moment depicts a literal command by the law of the Father, the law of the Symbolic, to become what his culture demands of him, to take on his prescribed function within society. For a poet from a culture experiencing the trauma of the Troubles, Heaney has commented on the pressure he felt to create art that responded to the socio-cultural impact of the political violence. Heaney responds to this pressure in an essay by thinking about whether it is “perfectly justifiable in earshot of the carbomb” to create art.⁴⁴

Heaney concludes poetry has the power to redirect someone’s gaze inward toward a personal reconsideration of his or her role in society. Heaney states, “a new language would create new possibility” and through poetry, “People are suddenly gazing at something else and pausing for a moment. And for the duration of the gaze and pause, they are like reflectors of the totality of their own knowledge and/or ignorance.”⁴⁵ The “time is out of joint” allusion corresponds to Heaney’s desire for people to pause for a moment in order to redirect their gaze. Both poetry and prose phrases respond to the technological mediation of the zoom lenses and video recorders that create an anxiety about the way memory is formed. If the Troubles are mediated only through photojournalistic display, then it is the poet’s responsibility

to create “post-memory,” memory mediated through creative investment.⁴⁶ Although Hirsch applies post-memory to a second generation’s experience of traumatic events through photograph and narrative, Heaney’s poetry attempts to provide an alternative narrative that counters the reductive account of trauma being presented to those that are experiencing the Troubles. Through a photograph or through poetry, one’s gaze is redirected internally and one gains access to the optical semiotic. The image functions as a Lacanian mirror that accesses the semiotic state to allow one to reconfigure a relationship to his socio-symbolic moment. Foregrounding technological mediation in a cultural context enriched by literary allusion allows Heaney to reinvigorate the language of the Symbolic and present a post-memory poetic experience to counter journalistic discourse’s devaluation of Troubles trauma.

Even in this poem most directly reflective of his contemporary moment, Heaney seeks recourse to a birth image as a form of creative renewal, but not without self-reflexive critique, a critique that implicates *North* and Heaney’s attempt at photographic mediation throughout the volume. Heaney writes,

When amplified and mixed with the bangs
That shake all hearts and windows day and night
(It’s tempting here to rhyme on ‘labour pangs’
And diagnose a rebirth in our plight....⁴⁷

In the midst of recreating the sounds and images of bombings, Heaney is tempted to create an image of a violent monstrous birth, an image that allows an acceptance of the violence as a labor process that will result in a renewal of the community when it is reborn as a result of the conflict. Heaney both resists and indulges in the image by presenting it in the poem distanced by self-reflection and parenthetical punctuation, and he calls the birth image the result of his “Drouth for words at once both gaff and bait.” The birth image is mediated by another metaphor, a fishing metaphor where his lack of an accurate image becomes both a spear to kill a fish, a “gaff,” and the “bait” that will lure the fish toward the instrument of its demise. Heaney presents the distinct worry that his forms of mediation, the photographic use of the bog poems and their birth metaphors, may be inadequate to the task of creating a post-memory reflective of the Troubles experience.

Post-memory revision also has its place in the history of the American South. Natasha Trethewey draws inspiration from photographs of often overlooked or unacknowledged figures such as prostitutes and domestic workers and of seemingly insignificant moments. She uses these snapshots to comment on broader issues in public life and complicate dominant perceptions of southern history. Poems from *Native Guard* refer specifically to photographs Trethewey found conducting research and examining her family’s albums, and she uses these images to explore what is outside the photographic frame, “gaps in history.”⁴⁸ By dismantling the social ideologies of photographic images and by exploring what photographs both conceal and reveal, Trethewey

seeks to understand the past because it affects her present sense of identity and the collective southern identity. As Katherine Henniger notes, “Using photographs and photography as their organizing metaphor, Trethewey’s poems offer a...model for how we might reread the ‘evidence’ of southern history for the unheard and unseen, and how once acknowledged, this evidence leads to new mappings of the past and future South.”⁴⁹

Native Guard is divided into three sections: the first focuses on Trethewey’s late mother, the second reflects on the fraught history of the Deep South, and the third combines both the personal and the historical, largely using the former to assess the “truth” of the latter. As Pearl McHaney notes, “While this personal history is important, it must be seen as part of the public histories that have been erased, censured, and/or forgotten, not as isolated, individual history.”⁵⁰ In all sections, photographs are connected with both memory and post-memory, and the collection’s epigraph, comparing memory to a cemetery, speaks to the link between photograph and viewer that is predicated on resurrecting the past and revising dominant perceptions of the past, mediated by post-memory. The thread that connects Trethewey’s ekphrastic poems is the works’ adherence to Barthes’ contention that what is contained in the photograph is a haunting reminder, a selective fragment of what has been that can be read in terms of broader cultural and historical values and events.

Outside of the collection’s three sections is an introductory poem, “Theories of Time and Space,” which depicts the speaker advising the reader to take a journey through Mississippi that culminates in “you” crossing a beach at Gulfport and boarding a boat for Ship Island. The speaker notes that visitors will have their picture taken upon boarding the boat, and “the photograph—who you were— / will be waiting when you return.”⁵¹ Nagueyalti Warren contends that the use of the photograph introduces two questions that shape the rest of *Native Guard*, “Is *there* past and *here* present? Can one get to the past from the present?”⁵² the words in the first question referencing the poem’s opening lines: “You can get there from here, though / there’s no going home.”⁵³ Reading these opening lines alongside the image of the waiting photograph, one can access and be linked to the past by retrieving and viewing the photograph taken at the start of a journey; the photograph is a visual reinforcement of memory. However, a person cannot “[go] home” or embody the past, since the events unfolding between the time a photograph is taken modify the self, distancing the person more from the past and mediating his or her perceptions of the memories represented in the photograph. In the opening poem, “This usage of the photograph provides both a way of seeing ahead to changes wrought by experience and of looking back at past formations of self.”⁵⁴ Time and experience have the same relationship to the past as the sand dumped over the swamp, the “buried / terrain of the past,”⁵⁵ does in the poem: they obscure or distort what has happened before without completely eliminating it. The poem implies that the speaker is haunted by her past selves but must revisit those past selves in order to understand her place in the present.

“The Southern Crescent,” the first poem in section one, focuses in part on Trethewey’s mother’s cross-country train journey to meet her father for the first time. She holds a picture of her father through the trip and uses it to try to find him on the train platform, but he never comes. Barthes’ contention that what a photograph contains is “hauntingly absent” and can only be partially grasped applies here; for Trethewey’s mother, Gwendolyn, the photograph is a reminder that the only thing she knows about her father is what he looks like, since she has been deprived of knowing anything else about him: his values, experiences, why he was never a part of her life. However, viewing the picture after the disappointing journey can empower Gwendolyn, giving her the power of the gaze over a man who presumably wanted to erase her from his history. She can look at this fragment of her father and make her own assumptions about the person he is; she is able to write his history, in effect knowing and not knowing him at the same time, maintaining the intimate, umbilical connection Barthes and Hirsch reference while still being distant from the man in the photograph.

For the poem’s speaker, ostensibly Trethewey due to the work’s autobiographical content, the photograph is the link between memory and post-memory. Since this journey occurred before Trethewey was born, she only knows what occurred from her mother’s stories, memories mediated by time. Trethewey’s account of the journey is vivid, as though she was present in the train car and on the platform with her mother, so she has adopted this story as though it is her own memory. The photograph, a visible reminder of disappointment and abandonment, sharpens this post-memory. In the poem, Trethewey compares her mother’s journey to a later one they took together, where the train derailed and the two were unable to see Trethewey’s father. Thus, both Gwendolyn’s memory and Trethewey’s post-memory are linked and affected by the photograph of the absent father, and Trethewey’s post-memory of her mother’s abandonment and memory of the derailed train are linked. Gwendolyn and her father have an umbilical connection because of the haunting emotional power of the photograph, and the photograph helps form a strong umbilical connection between Trethewey and her mother, predicated on the shared experience of missed opportunity.

Another poem in the first section reflects on a mother and daughter’s shared experience, one with drastically changed implications based on the mediating power of time. “Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971” documents a storm from Trethewey’s childhood and is comprised of a series of questions, two provocative ones referring to the photograph and to the camera: “Why / the tired face of a woman, suffering, / made luminous by the camera’s eye?”⁵⁶ and “The picture we took that first morning, / the front yard a beautiful, strange place— / why on the back has someone made a list / of our names, the date, the event: nothing / of what’s inside—mother, stepfather’s fist?”⁵⁷ The woman referred to in the poem’s first lines, Trethewey’s mother, is objectified by the camera, by the gaze of the photographer, her husband and Trethewey’s step-father. The photographer’s selectivity will not show Gwendolyn’s stress and fatigue, her “true” story of being a victim of domestic violence, but will only show her beauty.

However, that the speaker, Trethewey, specifically questions the camera's selectivity here and at the poem's end returns the power of the gaze and post-memory to her, not to the photographer, her stepfather, who had control both over the family and the dominant family narrative. As Trethewey points out in the poem, the photo taken during the ice storm is only landscape, but what is most significant and haunting about the poem is what it does not show, the abusive stepfather and the abused mother. By referring to what were both in the frame and what she knew should have been in the frame, Trethewey refuses to keep her family's violent past silent. Domestic abuse victims can often be overlooked, their suffering "out of the frame" of family history, and Trethewey's stepfather's later murder of Gwendolyn could be read in part as his attempt to elide her completely. "Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971" uses the link between memory and post-memory, what Trethewey remembers and the dominant family narrative, to tell a fuller story than the camera can show. Combined with other poems in the section such as "What is Evidence," "After Your Death," and "Myth," this poem forges an intimate link between Trethewey and her mother where Trethewey can re-create the story of a life and honor and mourn her mother properly.

"Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi" is a four-part poem in the collection's second section that departs from the personal, moving to the historical, and refers to stills from the aforementioned documentary. According to Trethewey, "these were not simply stills, frozen moments in time, but the historical acts and the actors who are continuing to influence our lives and who are a significant part of the history that is going on all around us."⁵⁸ The first part of the poem, "King Cotton, 1907," depicts a parade with the streets of Vicksburg lined with flags and piled with bales of cotton. Black children sit on top of the cotton while waiting for President Roosevelt to walk the streets. The second part, "Glyph, Aberdeen 1913" shows a malnourished, physically disabled man picking cotton, his hungry child by his side. The third section, "Flood," is a still of black refugees seeking help after river floodwaters destroyed their homes. The armed National Guard blocks them from higher ground and the refugees have been forced to sing in order to be offered passage. Finally, the fourth section, "You are Late," depicts a girl trying to enter a black-only library that has been closed for the day. In this poem, ultimately, "Trethewey configures a complicated and divided world that...was created and sustained by whites for power and control over others."⁵⁹

Nagueyalti Warren argues that: "The images [in the poem]...reveal the history that privileges the white, cotton-land-owning kings and ignores the pickers as if the cotton has bagged itself," and this argument can especially be made for the poem's first two sections.⁶⁰ The parade in "King Cotton, 1907" is intended to honor the cotton, not the people who picked it; cotton bolls are piled up high to form arches over the street and are the most prominent fixture in the still, and the sign over the street, "Cotton, America's King," again privileges the crop. The people responsible for picking the cotton, black men, women, and children, are hardly visible against the scale of the

bolts, and the American flags, symbol of a country that does not privilege their labor, they wave further obscure them. The most important figure to come into the frame will be “the President who will walk through the arch, bound / for the future, his back to us,” while “the [black] children, on their perch— / those great bales of cotton rising up from the ground— / stare out at us.”⁶¹

The speaker of this section challenges the dominant southern narrative by classifying the President as an embodiment of white privilege, with the luxury of turning his back on those who made his livelihood possible. He also ignores “us,” the readers, because he is so certain of his place in history that he does not need our acknowledgment. However, readers, with the benefit of post-memory, have to acknowledge the faces looking at us, the black children on whose backs our country’s agricultural profits rested and whose stories had no prominent place in history.

The cotton pickers in “Glyph, Aberdeen 1913” are even more painful to view and arguably even more erased from history—a simple search for this image yields no results. The man, “gaunt in his overalls, / cradles the child’s thin arm—the sharp elbow, white / signature of skin and bone— pulls it forward / to show the deformity—the humped back, curve / of spine—punctuating the routine hardships / of their lives.”⁶² The poem’s speaker classifies the lives of the father and child as based on a series of plaintive questions about the lack of usable cotton, a lack of food, and why God has made their lives centered on suffering. The child’s humped back represents the burdens he has had to bear in his short life. Since the man and child are the focus of the picture, there is no distraction from them: no tall bolls of cotton, no signs proclaiming cotton king. The speaker and the reader must acknowledge that the cotton that sustained the South for so long was harvested by people whose contributions were not recognized and who sacrificed their health for virtually nothing. The emotional power of the image depicted in the poem creates the umbilical connection Barthes and Hirsch refer to between the people in the photograph and the viewer/reader; these figures are indelibly connected to the viewer because they carried the burden of the South’s economic progress. The man and child are but a fragment of the larger picture of the invisible poor class picking cotton for landowners’ profit, and they haunt the viewer because they can be resurrected as part of southern history now, but they were invisible when alive.

“Flood” and “You are Late” focus on images of black southerners existing in a society that kept them apart. The black refugees in “Flood,” needing passage to higher ground, are faced with a National Guard blockade and rifles and are forced to sing for the chance to go to safe, dry land. The camera captures the people singing and one boy pledging his allegiance to America, their safety depending on their performance. Since this is a single moment in the South’s fraught history, the people are easily forgotten “refugees from history...waiting to disembark” and become part of the narrative.⁶³ By focusing on these refugees, the speaker puts their story in the forefront, showing another example of black Americans denied equal access to the land they

were born in. “You are Late,” in contrast, seems to focus on a much less significant point in history, but by making a black child locked out of the library a central figure in a poem, the speaker shows that everyone is and should be part of a broader, historical narrative. The child in the poem speaks to the limitations placed upon and the erasure of people based on race in the early-twentieth-century South. She is barefoot on hot concrete and relegated to a blacks-only library closed in the middle of the day. The moments in history depicted in the third and fourth sections of the poem, the speaker seems to argue, should have been part of the collective Southern post-memory, but by focusing on them now, the speaker facilitates an intimate link between viewer and subject and permits the reader to reconfigure his or her post-memory and bring these forgotten people back to life.

The final section of *Native Guard* combines the personal and historical, and two poems in this part feature photographs and the camera prominently. “Pastoral” depicts a dream Trethewey had about being photographed in modern-day Atlanta with the Fugitive Poets. A rural photographer’s backdrop conceals the Atlanta skyline, and Robert Penn Warren’s voice, telling everyone how to pose, drowns out the noise of bulldozers. The photographer has rendered the set a white-dominated, bucolic scene and prompts everyone to say “race” as the picture is snapped, freezing Trethewey in blackface. Malin Pereira pinpoints the transitions in Trethewey’s position: “The poem moves the poet from an insider position, gathered with her southern poetic forebears for a picture to memorialize and ‘fix’ her place in their lineage, to an outsider in ‘blackface’ once race is mentioned, and finally to an indeterminate position as biracial, both in the South but also alienated by it because of its binary racist ideology.”⁶⁴ Initially, the poets welcome Trethewey, though the cows lowing “no, no” in the background imply that she does not belong in this group due to her gender and race.⁶⁵ The artificiality of the rural backdrop that nonetheless includes live animals speaks to the simultaneous persistence and artificiality of the Fugitive Poets’ South.

However, Trethewey does assume a certain authority by readily joining her fellow writers, an authority compromised by the photo showing her in blackface, indicating that one can be either white or black in the South’s historical narrative, not both. In response, Trethewey tells the poets that her father is white and rural, aligning herself with her fellow writers with the part of her heritage that aligns with their identity. Despite her lack of acknowledgment that her mother is black, that she is biracial, Trethewey firmly inserts herself into this group of southern voices, showing there is room for someone whose South is mediated by experiences of racial discrimination, experiences often erased from history.

“Blond” describes a childhood picture of Trethewey where she dressed in and pranced around in a blond wig and tutu, Christmas presents from her mother and father. She “didn’t know to ask, nor that it mattered, / if there’d been a brown version.”⁶⁶ In the picture, “[her] father—almost / out of the frame—looks on as Joseph must have / at the miraculous birth.”⁶⁷ Trethewey is “in the foreground— / [her] blond wig a shining halo, a newborn likeness / to the child that chance, the

long odds, / might have brought.”⁶⁸ According to Thadious Davis, “A blond wig and blond ballerina doll and pink sequined tutu...only underscore the reality of a black childhood in Mississippi, where possibility is limited for the child and for her parents.”⁶⁹ In “Blond,” “Trethewey forces a line that travels back and forth between the personal present and the historic past.”⁷⁰ The child in the picture is part of a white-dominated culture, represented by the lack of toys she can identify with as biracial, which is part of a larger Southern history that did not acknowledge anyone existing outside the simple categories of black and white. In effect, with her parents’ marriage not sanctioned by Mississippi, Trethewey should not exist as she is, but should be the blond, passing-for-white child the costume turns her into. The picture’s selectivity creates an intimate connection between Trethewey present and past and between the reader and the child who wanted to belong in her culture. It also speaks to what exists outside the picture, the racist names Trethewey was called, referred to in “Southern Gothic,” and the attention paid to the family by the Klan, portrayed in “Incident.” The image of Trethewey is a haunting reminder of the erasure from Southern history of all who did not fit neatly into the white, agrarian image it wanted to perpetuate.

For Heaney in *North*, photographs provide access to a gendered sense of semiotic creativity, and Heaney engages with post-memory to recreate a fuller understanding of violence he has experienced. He presents a very masculine notion of being inspired by a feminine source. Trethewey’s engagement with photographs in *Native Guard* fits Hirsch’s definition of post-memory exactly, and her re-narration of her past, the imaginative creativity she must employ there gives her a space to make the personal historical and to speak through the voices of invisible and disenfranchised people. In contrast to Heaney, Trethewey appears quite gender-neutral, her inspiration stemming from images of all people marked as other due to race and economic status. Though Heaney and Trethewey relate differently to the imagined geographies of North and South through the photographs they use, they both channel photographic inspiration into the “justice” Trethewey admires in Heaney’s writing by resurrecting elided voices that need to be heard alongside dominant discourse.

Notes

¹ Richard Rankin Russell, “The Black and Green Atlantic: Violence, History, and Memory in Natasha Trethewey’s ‘South’ and Seamus Heaney’s ‘North,’” *Southern Literary Journal* 46 (Spring 2014): 155-72.

² Susan Cahill, *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years 1990 to 2008: Gender, Bodies, Memory* (London: Continuum International, 2011).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

- ⁶ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975), 52, 67, 31.
- ⁷ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "A Slow North-east Wind," *A Twentieth Century Literature Reader: Texts and Debates*, eds. Suman Gupta and David Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2005), 266.
- ⁸ Ciaran Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?" *A Twentieth Century Literature Reader: Texts and Debates*, eds. Suman Gupta and David Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2005), 268.
- ⁹ Shane Alcobia-Murphy, "'The Eye that Scanned It': The Picture Poems of Heaney, Muldoon, and McGuckian," *New Hibernia Review* 4 (Winter 2000): 85-114.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. R. Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), 70; Heaney, *North*, ix-xi.
- ¹⁴ Henri Cole, "Seamus Heaney: The Art of Poetry No. 75" *The Paris Review* 39 (Fall 1997). <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1217/the-art-of-poetry-no-75-seamus-heaney>, accessed December 2, 2015.
- ¹⁵ Heaney, *North*, x.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.
- ¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, ed. H.J. Silverman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 89-108.
- ¹⁸ Heaney, *North*, xi.
- ¹⁹ Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2009), 173-74.
- ²⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poem, 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 3-4.
- ²¹ Heaney, *North*, xi.
- ²² Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 14.
- ²³ Patricia Coughlan, "Bog Queens: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney," *Theorizing Ireland*, ed. Clare Connolly (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 41-60.
- ²⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film and Theory: An Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), 483-94.
- ²⁵ Mulvey, "Changes," 3-19.
- ²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 141.
- ²⁷ Mulvey, "Changes," 3-19.

²⁸ Ibid., 3-19.

²⁹ Heaney, *North*, 25-7.

³⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 16.

³¹ Heaney, *North*, 25-26.

³² Heaney, *North*, 27.

³³ Irigaray, *Speculum*, 274.

³⁴ Heaney, *North*, 26.

³⁵ Ibid., xi.

³⁶ Ibid., 27.

³⁷ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Degeneration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 537.

³⁸ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997), 5.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 512.

⁴⁰ Floyd Collins, *Seamus Heaney: The Crisis of Identity* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 99.

⁴¹ Heaney, *North*, 52, 60.

⁴² Ibid., 52.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," 418.

⁴⁵ Cole, "Seamus Heaney."

⁴⁶ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

⁴⁷ Heaney, *North*, 53.

⁴⁸ Sara Kaplan, "Interview: Natasha Trethewey on Facts, Photographs, and Loss," in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 37.

⁴⁹ Katherine Henninger, *Ordering the Façade: Photography and Contemporary Southern Women's Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 170.

⁵⁰ Pearl McHaney, "Natasha Trethewey's Triptych: The Bodies of History in *Bellocq's Ophelia*, *Native Guard*, and *Thrall*," *Southern Quarterly* 50 (Summer 2013): 170.

- ⁵¹ Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2006), 1.
- ⁵² Nagueyalti Warren, "History, Memory, and Nostalgia in the Works of Natasha Trethewey," *Southern Quarterly* 50 (Summer 2013): 84.
- ⁵³ Trethewey, *Native Guard*, 1
- ⁵⁴ Thadious M. Davis, "Enfoldments: Natasha Trethewey's Racial-Spatial Phototexting," *Southern Quarterly* 50 (Summer 2013): 38.
- ⁵⁵ Trethewey, *Native Guard*, 1.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ Davis, "Enfoldments," 39.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ⁶⁰ Warren, "History," 87.
- ⁶¹ Trethewey, *Native Guard*, 21.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 22.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ⁶⁴ Malin Pereira, "Re-reading Trethewey through Mixed-Race Studies," *Southern Quarterly* 50 (Summer 2013): 149.
- ⁶⁵ Trethewey, *Native Guard*, 35.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ Davis, "Enfoldments," 50
- ⁷⁰ Pearl McHaney, "Natasha Trethewey's Triptych: The Bodies of History in *Bellocq's Ophelia*, *Native Guard*, and *Thrall*," *Southern Quarterly* 50.4 (2013): 167.