Guest Editor’s Introduction:  
“The Necessary Utterance”—Natasha Trethewey’s Southern Poetics  

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“I was fated to Mississippi,” Natasha Trethewey told an Emory University audience in 2011, citing Heraclitus’s comment that “Geography is fate” (Byrd 187-88). After the death of Seamus Heaney on 30 August 2013, the US poet laureate again quoted this axiom to suggest the impact of the Irish author’s North poems on her poems about African American life in the South. “One finds in Heaney’s accessibility a precision of thought and image that not only represents the pursuit of beauty and truth, but also justice” (Trethewey, “Seamus Heaney”). Trethewey praised the Nobel laureate for “grappling with the difficult history and hardships of his homeland,” an example that pointed “a way into my own work, the calling to make sense of my South, with its terrible beauty, its violent and troubled past.” As each section of Southern Quarterly’s special issue on Natasha Trethewey affirms, the South is indeed her geography and her fate in all four poetry collections and in her prose volume Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. “In Mississippi”—the refrain from “Miscegenation” in her Pulitzer Prize-winning Native Guard (2006)—is a leitmotif of her artful achievement.  

Trethewey wants “the largest possible audience of people to be welcomed into my poems and to use the most important muscle human beings have, which is the muscle of empathy” (“Southern Crossings” 160). During her initial term as poet laureate in 2012-2013, her active touring schedule took her to England and the United Arab Emirates but
also to Mississippi, where she serves as state poet laureate for 2012-2016—the first writer with simultaneous appointments at the state and national levels. Trethewey summed up her first term in Washington at a lecture in the Thomas Jefferson Building: “From the catbird seat, I’ve found poetry to be the necessary utterance it has always been in America” (Charles, “US Poet”).

As she began her second term as US laureate this summer, Trethewey outlined plans for a PBS NewsHour series, “Where Poetry Lives,” on social concerns that have also affected her family. For the premiere on 12 September, she interacted with Alzheimer’s sufferers at the New York Memory Center and read the poem “Give and Take” about her Aunt Sugar. Trethewey says in a related blog that “the need to record and hold on to what was being lost” was an impetus to her “journey in becoming a poet” (Trethewey, “Poet’s Notebook”). In the coming year, she will also work with teams from Emory—where she is Robert W. Woodruff Professor in English—and Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre to adapt Native Guard for stage as part of the National Civil War Project. Connecting the war to contemporary issues, the NCWP involves regional partnerships that will become models of collaboration between non-profit performing arts groups and academia. Trethewey’s endeavors for NewsHour and the Civil War Project underscore her belief that “poetry still matters” (Charles, “US Poet”).

Southern Quarterly’s Trethewey issue opens with the thematically rich “Enlightenment” from her latest collection, Thrall (2012). The poem’s references to philosophies of knowledge, debates about race, and a visit to Jefferson’s Monticello with her father are reprised in the Emory Creativity Conversation that follows. In this October 2012 discussion with Emory Vice President Rosemary Magee, the poet reflects on her laureateship and on the reasons “poetry still matters” for her and for the nation. On stage before a large gathering, Trethewey responded to Magee’s questions about the research and the personal experiences that inspired Native Guard and Thrall. The “sensory stimulation” of her childhood in Mississippi and Georgia was an early influence, and an “external image”—whether a painting or household object—is frequently the source of her poems. Appropriately, photographs and other illustrations are essential elements of the Trethewey issue.

Trethewey’s remarks on Southern history in the Creativity Conversation should also be read in conversation with a unique contribution from James Applewhite, Duke University Professor Emeritus in Creative
Writing. Applewhite’s prose account of a Fellowship of Southern Writers panel on Southern poetic identities is a companion-piece for the poem that he dedicates to his fellow panelists, poets, and FSW members: Trethewey, Andrew Hudgins, and Rodney Jones.

Comprising the greatest part of the journal, eight scholarly essays are grouped to suggest three approaches to Trethewey’s work. Studies by Thadius M. Davis, Katherine R. Henninger, and Nagueyalti Warren emphasize the poet laureate’s representations of “History, Race, and Nation.” With Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature (2011), Davis was among the first to make extended reference to Trethewey’s Pulitzer Prize-winning collection in several Southern contexts. Davis’s essay further develops the discussion of race, place, and the past by focusing on Trethewey’s uses of photography from Domestic Work through Thrall. In creating “phototexts,” the poet gains “access to the bodies that cannot otherwise be resurrected,” says Davis. Moreover, by viewing the photograph as “the window on imagination,” Trethewey “enfolds” her personal racialized self and Southern history, regardless of the seeming distance between herself and her topics.

Henninger examines the ostensibly autobiographical daughter in several Trethewey poems. This figure is, in fact, a crafted persona, culminating in Thrall (2012) with its many portrayals of biracial children of white fathers. Drawing on recent scholarship on the poetics of childhood, Henninger contrasts the child’s pastoral world in the Romantic tradition with the “repressed violence” and the “schooling in racial consciousness” to which children are subjected in Trethewey’s work. She concludes that, in “offering her bodily self as a symbol of national/transnational racial dynamics, Trethewey provides a complex and affecting model for reading ‘mixed-ness’ as the American story.”

Surveying Trethewey’s five books, Warren comes to a similar insight. Even at their most personal, Trethewey’s memories are “not narrowly conceived; for they are the story of the African American South.” A poet and biographer, Warren compares Trethewey’s themes to those of Lucille Clifton, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Alice Walker, and others. She describes Trethewey’s search—through memory and research—for “the landmark traumata that produce the present moment.” In contrast to Henninger, Warren stresses Trethewey’s nostalgia, an aspect of the poetry that introduces a saving note of mercy.

Under the heading “Blood, Memory, and the Biracial Self,” studies by Daniel Cross Turner and Malin Pereira comprise a second group of essays.
Turner’s *Southern Crossings: Poetry, Memory, and the Transcultural South* (2012) contrasts treatments of the past by the Fugitive poets with the poetry of contemporary Southerners. Centering on the black Diaspora’s “lyric dissections” in the work of Tethewey and Yusef Komunyakaa, his essay applies “strains of blood knowledge” to the poets’ portrayals of dead black bodies. The transnational South of their poetry, says Turner, is a place “where human forms are deformed and stitched back together.” One shocking example is the legend of the black leg sutured to a white body in a *Thrall* poem that is also evoked by Nagueyalti Warren.

Pereira surveys the fairly new field of mixed race studies, preliminary to discussing Tethewey’s “biracial and poetic genealogy.” A key text for reading the laureate’s oeuvre is a poem in which Eric Tethewey describes his “crossbreed child.” Patriarchal figures in *Bellocq’s Ophelia* include both the scrutinizing white father of the mixed-race Ophelia and the “Pygmalion artist-figure” of the photographer. With Ophelia’s “artic-
tic self-recognition and development,” she is released from the control of both men. Although the Tethewey’s “poet-to-poet” relationship was apparently close until *Thrall*, Pereira believes a mixed race reading should consider not only the influence of a “poetic father” but the impact of Rita Dove as a “poetic mother.”

The heading “Intertextuality and Ekphrastic Arts” indicates the emphasis on verbal and visual creativity in a final group of essays by Pearl Amelia McHaney, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, and Joseph Millichap. Arguing that Tethewey’s reader is “trained to see,” McHaney proposes that *Bellocq’s Ophelia* be viewed as the central panel of a triptych that includes *Native Guard* and *Thrall*. McHaney observes the many bodies that populate Tethewey’s three-part poetic structure, comparing Storyville prostitutes in *Bellocq’s Ophelia* to the suffering bodies of New York garment workers whose fiery deaths are mourned by Ophelia. Shapes and gestures of human anatomy have a parallel in Tethewey’s poetic forms, and McHaney describes the art of the ghazal, the palindrome, and the corona of sonnets—elegant architectures that bring erased histories to light, creating “active agents for personal and public change.”

Wallace-Sanders selected the photographic illustrations in her essay to form “a meta-narrative steeped in the contradictions of reality and distortion.” Clifton Johnson, E. J. Bellocq, and Robert Frank provide early and mid-twentieth-century backgrounds for ekphrastic poems in *Domestic Work, Bellocq’s Ophelia, and Thrall*. Images of African American nurse-
maidens with white children present a particular interpretive challenge. Also
fascinating are poems based on portraits of Booker T. Washington, his son David, and a cabbage farmer who threatens to unleash her hoodoo power against Clifton Johnson’s “spirit box.” Here, as in Belloq’s Ophelia, the poet warns the cameraman against misusing his tools.

With meticulous reference to works of Eric Trethewey and Robert Penn Warren, Millichap follows Natasha Trethewey’s intertextual relationships with her “father figures” through all five books, culminating in her latest collection. A “thematic emphasis on white fathers pervades Thrall from its epigraphs to its endnotes,” and the essayist demonstrates convincingly that “Elegy,” “Geography,” “Fouled,” and other pieces reveal Trethewey’s “dialogue with her father’s earlier efforts.” Milli- chap detects “filial tension” and “elegiac premonition” not only in the contemporary settings of “Elegy” and “Enlightenment” but repeatedly in the casta sequence. Yet he proposes that Trethewey’s four closing poems are more hopeful about the possibility of balancing love and knowledge at last.

Poetry from Jake Adam York, Olga Dugan, and Claude Wilkinson is a special feature of this Southern Quarterly number. The first material to arrive for the issue was York’s pair of “Letter” poems, each dedicated “To Natasha Trethewey,” his friend and one-time Auburn University colleague. Last December, this chronicler of the South’s civil rights martyrs died suddenly at forty. Dugan was selected as a fellow for Trethewey’s Cave Canem poetry workshop, and her “Calling . . . of an Artist” responds imaginatively to the Thrall poem “Calling, Mexico, 1969.” Like Trethewey, Wilkinson is a Mississippian—evident in “Snowy Egret Flies over Parched Mississippi Field”—and also an apt reader of photographs. “Drinking Fountains, Birmingham, Alabama, 1956” joins Wilkinson’s multi-poem Gordon Parks series; the child beside the “colored only” fountain resembles the innocent children of Trethewey’s works.

In her review of Trethewey’s most recent book, Lorie Watkins begins where Joseph Millichap’s essay leaves off, with “Illumination.” This last poem in Thrall admonishes the reader that there is always “more to know.” Watkins brings the special issue full circle with her remarks on Trethewey’s “Enlightenment” as an especially “telling” poem.

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**Works Cited**


