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Layers and Forms of Relational and Collective Memory

War and Inner Conflict in Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* (2006) and *Memorial Drive* (2020)

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Zusammenfassung

Natasha Tretheweys *Native Guard* (2006) und *Memorial Drive* (2020) vermitteln eine revisionistische Sichtweise afroamerikanischer Geschichte. Als Dichterin und als Tochter einer afroamerikanischen Mutter und eines weißen Vaters kritisiert Trethewey das unvollständige kollektive Gedächtnis der USA. Zudem wird in *Native Guard* und *Memorial Drive* die Familiengeschichte, insbesondere das Leben ihrer Mutter, zur Projektionsfläche für die Folgen des Schweigens über Afroamerikaner*innen in der Geschichtsschreibung. Trethewey verwebt nicht nur komplexe literarische Formen mit Betrachtungen über das kollektive, familiäre und persönliche Gedächtnis; sie vertieft diese Verknüpfung durch ein oft schmerzliches Nachdenken über Eigenverantwortung und Schuld, die sie möglicherweise durch das eigene Schweigen auf sich lud. Dieser innere Konflikt verbindet die Frage nach der möglichen Rettung ihrer Mutter mit der Aufgabe, ihr Andenken zu wahren sowie afroamerikanische Geschichte sichtbar zu machen. In *Native Guard* (2006) und *Memorial Drive* (2020) werden figurative Sprache und faktenbasierte Erinnerung zu Überlebensmechanismen im Umgang mit persönlichen und kollektiven Traumata.

Schlagwörter: US-amerikanischer Bürgerkrieg, kollektive Erinnerung, relationale Memoiren, afro-amerikanische Lyrik und/als Geschichtsschreibung

Abstract

Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* (2006) and *Memorial Drive* (2020) nudge readers towards revisionist perspectives on African American history. As a mixed-race poet who critiques myopic collective memory and who contemplates her role as a creative writer, Trethewey continues the work of African American poets like Robert Hayden whose research-based poems address blind spots in historiography. In addition, she employs her family's and especially her mother's life story as projection screens for the long-term impact of erasing African Americans from mainstream historical accounts. The poignancy of her blending of complex literary forms with reflections on collective, family, and personal memory is heightened through the in-depth contemplation of individual responsibility and even guilt at not speaking up or acting early enough to save her mother's life or to preserve her memory—which thus blends into the African American historiographic dilemma. *Native Guard* (2006) and *Memorial Drive* (2020) demonstrate that both figurative language and fact-based memory merge to become tools of survival in the context of personal and collective trauma.

Keywords: U.S. Civil War, collective memory, relational life writing, African American poetry and/as historiography

Introduction

In an interview published two years before her Pulitzer Prize–winning poetry volume *Native Guard* (2006), Natasha Trethewey claims:

> *My project has been and continues to be to try to find a way to restore lost narratives to our collective and public memory; things that are left out of authoritative histories.*[1]

The writer's engagement with large-scale historiography occurs alongside reflections on her own family history, particularly on being the daughter of an African American mother and a white Canadian father, and on her mother's untimely death (she was murdered by her second husband). Discussing her book *Native Guard*, whose title refers to a Black Louisiana regiment during the U.S. Civil War, Trethewey ascribes to poets the twofold role of "native guardian": they bear responsibility as protectors "of not only personal memory but also of collective memory" (McHaney 2007/2013a, 54). She thus sees herself as continuing the work of African American poets like Robert Hayden whose research-based poems about—for instance—the Middle Passage and about historical figures she summarizes as acts of "redressing the mistakes or the errors in history about African Americans" (Teresi 2011/2013, 116). Regarding the potential impact of her work, she muses that "poetry may not create social justice, but it might get someone to think differently than they might have because of that intimate interaction, through language, with another voice" (McKee 2010/2013, 149; also see Trethewey 2014, 59, 61). Her expectation or at least hope, thus, is that the ideal reader's inner self will resonate with the mental and emotional worlds to which the speakers of her poems provide access.

These reflections, first, on the poet as linking individual and collective histories and, second, on the poet's responsibility as an artist-historian throw Trethewey's work into the cauldron of debates that have been taunting literary theorists and historians for decades: what are the functions of literary forms, and how does literature's content relate to historiography and to the present sociopolitical situation? *Native Guard* demonstrates Trethewey's minute attention to stylistic detail: she uses various closed forms of poetry; and she creates a dense web of interrelations within the minuscule space of each poem, throughout the poetry volume as a whole, and beyond that through allusions and references to myriad histories (e.g., of literature, the visual arts, the Civil War, the South, the civil rights movement, and classical mythology). This tightly woven fabric interrogates how gaps and falsifications of memory occur both on an individual and on local, regional, national, or culture-

1 Haney 2004/2013, 20.

wide levels. While her poetry and prose demonstrate how historiography—more often than not—serves those who dominate the social discourse, Trethewey simultaneously addresses how individuals and small social units like families can be equally prone to manipulating painful recollections for specific purposes.

In the following, I will first illustrate Trethewey's method in *Native Guard*, a volume of poems which embeds a critique of the erasure of African American soldiers from mainstream U.S. Civil War historiography and public memorials within the self-scrutiny of an autobiographical persona who analyzes her shortcomings as a daughter, her mourning for her late mother, and her sense of self in relation to being a mixed-race Southerner and an American poet. Beyond that, I will argue that Trethewey's 2006 poetry collection is complemented by her memoir, *Memorial Drive* (2020). This recent prose volume echoes *Native Guard*'s relational method of representing autobiographical reflections as interwoven with family members' lives. It confronts the daughter-narrator's 25-year struggle to face and re-think her own recollections alongside the all-too-slowly, partially belatedly emerging facts about her mother's spousal abuse and death. This account of personal experience and loss continues the trajectory of *Native Guard*: it links reflections on how Trethewey's and her African American relatives' lives have been impacted by a social environment (especially in the U.S. South) that commemorates white Confederate "heroes" at the cost of obliterating African American involvement in the war. Ultimately, Trethewey channels her internal conflicts—survivor's guilt, her inability to save her mother, and the inadequacy she perceives in her own willingness to remember—into a manifesto of writing-as-survival. Narratives and metaphors, be they focused on individual lives or on history at large, thus assume a function that both needs and transcends aesthetic finesse.

As complementary contemplations, *Native Guard* and *Memorial Drive* thus demonstrate how stories of individual lives are inscribed into larger sociopolitical histories and vice versa. Both works emphasize that the Civil War, its aftermath of Jim Crow laws, the civil rights struggle, continued anti-Black violence, and the mechanics of collective memory and forgetting exert an immense impact on individual and artistic self-definitions. Stressing this interrelation, Trethewey recounts:

> *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.*[2]

2 J W Hall 2013b, 20.

From the perspective of the poet who grapples with historical and historiographic issues through artistic forms of representation, the confrontation with collective memory—including the harmful perpetuation of specific myths—poses challenges within the private and public realms. Individual memories and publicly sanctioned collective memories can rerun in one's mind in an unaltered fashion. Nevertheless, one's understanding of a specific memory changes over time—just as increased factual, conceptual, and experiential knowledge influences readers that repeatedly reread the same book. Despite the interconnectedness of *Native Guard* and *Memorial Drive*, and despite the fact that both works express unceasing exasperation at the South's continuously distorted collective memory, the memoir ends on a more consoling note than the rather distraught book of poems. Having reflected on her life, mourning, and artistic development, Trethewey concludes that her approach to writing enables her to cope with inner conflict and trauma. While Trethewey keeps her emotional wounds in plain sight, she offers a final glimpse of how figurative language and fact-based memory merge to become tools of survival.

Relational Poetic Life Writing and Collective War Memory in *Native Guard*

Native Guard (Trethewey 2006/2007) comprises an epigraph from contemporary American poet Charles Wright's *Meditation on Form and Measure* a prologue-like poem entitled *Theories of Time and Space* and three untitled parts consisting of ten, four, and eleven poems respectively. The poems in parts I and III are written in the voice of an autobiographical and relational lyrical I/we. The persona in the poem *Native Guard* in part II is an African American soldier, a member of the Union Army's Louisiana Native Guards. The volume's envelope or triptych structure oscillates between the present and the past as well as between the private/personal and the public/historical/social. Various scholars thus describe Trethewey's method as palimpsestic (Henninger 2013, 67; McHaney 2013b, 163; Queen 2020). Recurring features include the foregrounding of relational life writing,[3] that is, linking the autobiographical persona poems with elegiac musings about her mother and references to other family members; situating these family-related poems within the larger contexts of African American, Southern, and US history; and reflecting on being a poet of mixed-race parentage and of multiple literary heritages tied to various geographies (the South, the US as a whole, the Western Hemisphere, and the entire world). Beyond referencing poets associated with these geographical, cultural, and historical contexts, Trethewey alludes to and describes photographs,

3 For a definition of relational life writing, see Smith and Watson 2010, 216.

paintings, and public monuments that demonstrate the psychological violence of being represented as inferior, or of being ignored as a person and member of a community—particularly when it comes to African Americans from the antebellum period to the present.

On the level of individual poems, Trethewey stresses how poetry (as a genre of word-based literature) can function as historiographic representation of individual and collective memories. She uses closed forms that pivot around patterns of "repetition or refrain" in *Native Guard* "in order to reinscribe those things that had been erased or forgotten" (Turner 2013a/2010, 157). Her central aim is

> *the integration of my personal story, my history, cross-hatched, written over and within the public histories and more dominant narratives that I have received. I like the idea of how these strands are interwoven, because our stories are never simply two trains running on separate tracks. They are much more like the basketweave of that crosshatching.*[4]

As a result, she argues that all narratives are always present as part of a larger pattern, but whether you perceive them depends on your angle of vision. On the simplest level, repetition serves as a mnemonic device and as a method of favoring specific narratives. Repetitive forms also drive home the importance of the Native Guard's voice, as I will discuss next. What scholars have neglected, however, is that repetition may also result in indirection bordering on denial and, thus, erasure, as the second example in this section will show.

Native Guard is a so-called 'crown' of ten sonnets, in which words from the last line of one sonnet recur in the first line of the respective subsequent sonnet. The first nine sonnet titles refer to a month and a year, thus they resemble diary entries. The final sonnet title simply reads *1865*. Trethewey's endnotes to the sonnets clarify the historical references to Civil War battles and to the mistreatment or even murder of African American troops at the hands of Confederate and Union commanders. In the closing sonnet, the persona demands that these atrocities and the crucial contributions of Black regiments be made visible in collective memory. The final words—"Truth be told" (Trethewey 2006/2007, 30)—repeat the opening words of the first sonnet (25), thus closing the crown's circle and stressing that collective memory must be complete and truthful.

4 Turner 2010/2013a, 160.

Acts of 'truth-telling' then occur in a cross-hatched narrative: the speaker of *Native Guard* uses a Southerner's diary in order to write down his own thoughts: "[…] on every page, / his story intersecting with my own" (Trethewey 2006/2007, 26). He describes the pattern of "scars" on a former slave's back as "crosshatched / like the lines in this journal" (ibid.). The shape recurs in the "X" with which illiterate white Confederate prisoners of war, for whom the literate Black speaker writes letters, sign their name: "X binds them to the page—a mute symbol / like the cross on a grave" (Trethewey 2006/2007, 27). The motif continues with a soldier dying with "his arms outstretched as if borne / upon the cross" (Trethewey 2006/2007, 28). The image of the "basketweave," based on crossed lines, visually links the power associated with penning words to violence: of the slaver's whip, of war, and of martyrdom. The multiple x-shapes relate experiences whose interconnectedness needs to be revealed in order to be remembered. Also, the contrastive implications of crossed lines emphasize the layered meanings of crosshatched narratives from which, the speaker hopes, truth will emerge.

The second example, "Incident," combines a closed poetic form with describing how the retelling of a specific experience changes and, to some extent, distances and thus erases a horrific event. The poem retells a Ku Klux Klan attack on a family's home in an increasingly veiled manner so that the repetition does not make it more visible but rather transforms it into a seemingly negligible myth. For instance, the line "a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns" alludes to the attackers' outfits. In another iteration, the simile ("as angels") changes into "the angels" whose presence is surmised: "[i]t seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns" (Trethewey 2006/2007, 41). The closing lines read: "Nothing really happened. / By morning all the flames had dimmed. / We tell the story every year" (ibid.). If there was no event, how can you re-tell it? Obviously, the reference to "Nothing" depends on one's perspective or intent.

Brian Reed explains that "Incident" follows the closed form of *pantoum*, "a Malaysian-derived poetic form" in which

> *the second and fourth lines of a given stanza must become the first and third of the subsequent one. A poet signals closure with a final stanza whose second and fourth lines repeat, usually in reverse order, the first and third lines of the initial stanza.*[5]

Reed argues that "[t]he repetitions demanded by the pantoum form cause the horrible event to linger, as if the speaker is compulsively re-experiencing the details of

5 Reed 2007, 738.

a trauma" (2007, 738). The compulsion to reiterate the story on a regular basis certainly implies this psychological urge, but the contradiction between the claim that the event was negligible or even non-existent and the necessity to re-narrate it annually goes against any sense of "closure." Indeed, the private re-telling ritual indicates that the true implications of the event are not publicly acknowledged, as the bitingly sarcastic descriptions of the 'angel-like' attackers and the burning "cross trussed like a Christmas tree" (Trethewey 2006/2007, 41) indicate. Furthermore, for anyone familiar with the history of American poetry, Trethewey's poem evokes Countee Cullen's eponymous 1925 poem in which the Harlem Renaissance writer juxtaposes a childish-sounding ballad stanza pattern with the lyrical I's account of a sojourn to Baltimore at the tender age of eight. Of the eight months the speaker spent in the city, he only remembers that another child hurled a racist epithet at him.[6] The painful insult and its long-term psychological impact contradict the poem title "Incident," which might imply something trifling and ephemeral.

Beyond the specific allusion to Cullen's use of closed form to literally 'contain' an overwhelming psychological strain, this example illustrates Trethewey's strategy of weaving epigraphs and references to other writers, to painters, musicians, and political leaders into her text. This densely woven web, which does not come across as the kind of modernist erudition associated with T. S. Eliot, constitutes part of the crosshatching. It contextualizes Trethewey's relational poetic life writing within a broad range of histories: (especially U.S.) literature, the Civil War, and continuing violence. I will illustrate this with the help of the linkages among four poems: the above-mentioned sonnet *1865*; the opening poem of part III, "Pastoral"; and the two closing poems of part III, "Elegy for the Native Guards" and "South." As a group, these poems link the erasure of Black soldiers from official Civil War accounts with Trethewey's perception of her task: to claim her country's history and, in turn, to be claimed by Mississippi, the South, and American poetic traditions.

Civil War battlefields, unmarked graves as emblems of forgetting, and the antidote of being heard and seen are central to *1865*. The grass-covered sites of slaughter and death hide, as the Native Guard/persona describes it, "—a scaffolding of bone / we tread upon, forgetting. Truth be told" (30). "Pastoral" shifts to a dream setting in which the lyrical I and the so-called "Fugitive Poets" pose for a photograph at an Atlanta studio. In their controversial manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), these white

6 "Once riding in old Baltimore, / Heart-filled, head-filled with glee, / I saw a Baltimorean / Keep looking straight at me. // Now I was eight and very small, / And he was no whit bigger, / And so I smiled, but he poked out / His tongue, and called me, 'Nigger.' // I saw the whole of Baltimore / From May until December; / Of all the things that happened there / That's all that I remember" (Cullen 1997 [1925], 1306).

male artist-scholars insisted on confirming the continued validity of Southern cultural traditions—as opposed to elevating the Northern states to representatives of 'general' US cultural values. Feeling awkward in their midst as a mixed-race woman born in 1966 and thus at a time in which her parents' union was illegal in Mississippi, the autobiographical persona notices the disconnect between the contemporary urban setting and "the photographer's backdrop" (35) showing a stereotypical rural "pasture" with "soft-eyed cows." Here, the fake landscape shown on the backdrop obviously serves as a cover-up that demonstrates the power of long-lived clichés about an unchanged agrarian South.

How, then, does Trethewey deal with these white male poets of an earlier generation? In an interview, she explains that

> *Robert Penn Warren, for me, is the greater influence [than T. S. Eliot]. His career, his trajectory as a thinker, has meant a lot to me. […] To see him as a man in the midst of change, someone whose position in Segregation [1956] was very different from his position in the 30s in I'll Take My Stand—I admire that about his work.*[7]

Her appreciation of Warren's development does not come across in the poem, even though the persona mentions him. The poem rather dramatizes feeling threatened by a reductive understanding of a Southern literary tradition that excludes Trethewey. What gives more depth to "Pastoral" is the recurrence of the Fugitive Poets in other parts of *Native Guard*, especially in the context of anti-pastoral battlefields and cemeteries. As Turner argues regarding *1865*,

> *Trethewey's volume builds a collective cenotaph for the black soldiers who served in the Louisiana Native Guard. The final sonnet from the long sequence of the title poem revises Vanderbilt Fugitive poet Allen Tate's 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' (1928) to expose the brute untidiness of combat death, the massed mess of bodies, where blood, skin, and bones—and therefore skin color—become inextricable, indistinguishable […].*[8]

In line with Turner's argument, Trethewey's epigraph for "Elegy for the Native Guards" (Trethewey 2006/2007, 44) stems from Tate's poem, and she returns to describing battlefields strewn with corpses and unmarked graves in "South" (45-46).[9]

7 J W Hall 2013b, 25.
8 Turner 2013b, 108.
9 For a brief discussion of Trethewey's reference to Tate's poem and her evocation of the poet Robert Lowell's response to Tate, see Brundage 2011, 176.

Trethewey complicates the historical basketweave by not only alluding to a Fugitive poet's highly debated poem dedicated to questions of how to remember Confederate soldiers and how to deal with the memory of the Civil War (again excluding the legacy of Black soldiers and not seeing them, to use Judith Butler's term, as "grievable" [Butler 2004, xvi]). She also weaves two other poets into part III of *Native Guard* and into the closing poem: Walt Whitman and—less obviously—Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Part III opens with a quotation from the East Coast white male poet Whitman. This epigraph from "O Magnet South" (Whitman 1881) expresses the Janus-faced character of the South as both fascinating and appalling (Trethewey 2006/2007, 33), and the closing poem in Trethewey's voice echoes this ambivalence. In "South," the persona returns to her home state. She observes its flora and revisits the histories of slavery and the Civil War as well as the one-sided collective memory focused on "roads, buildings, and monuments / [which] are named to honor the Confederacy" (46), whereas Black soldiers' "unmarked" graves are covered by "earth's green sheet" (46). The lush grass here is neither romantically pastoral nor a Whitmanian emblem of democracy and equality.[10] It rather obliterates memory. Continuing the theme of death, the persona describes: "I return / to Mississippi, state that made a crime // of me—mulatto, half-breed—native / in my native land, this place they'll bury me" (46). To my mind, the closing line evokes Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "Bury Me in a Free Land" (1864). While the persona does not expect anyone to build a "monument, proud and high, / To arrest the gaze of the passers-by," she does ask not to be buried "in a land where men are slaves" (l. 4, Harper 1864/1997, 417). As Trethewey expressed her astonishment at realizing that the word 'native' contains the semantic dimension of 'thrall' or 'slave,' I cannot help thinking that this veiled allusion to Harper's poem might imply that the legacy of slavery and of covering up the memory of Black Mississippians continues into this century. By closing the volume with a projection into the future and the persona's own erasure from collective memory, Trethewey again intertwines the historical and the personal.

While all of her books involve family members' experiences that she partially fictionalizes and that she contextualizes within large-scale historical events or developments,[11] *Memorial Drive* most prominently connects with central features of African American life writing. According to Joycelyn Moody, "[a]fter four hundred

10 In "Song of Myself" (Whitman 1997 [1855, rev. 1881]), Whitman uses the symbol of grass to express his egalitarian and democratic ideas.

11 Domestic Work (2000) implicitly reflects on the social world of her maternal grandmother; Beyond Katrina (2005) highlights her half-brother's life story in relation to the hurricane; and Thrall (2012) critiques her father's problematic way of addressing her mixed-race identity.

years of Anglophone African diasporic life writing, avowing the humanity, interiority, and intelligence of people of African descent remains its central project" (Moody 2017, 191). Such life writing includes "persona poems" (191), "auto|biographical elegies[,…] African American trauma and grief narratives and literature of the dead" (192). Using both poetry and prose, Trethewey engages in such projects of re-constructing individual lives alongside African American experiences in a larger sense. In addition to overlapping content, *Native Guard* and *Memorial Drive* demonstrate an axiom that Trethewey formulates towards the closing of her memoir: "What matters is the transformative power of metaphor and the stories we tell ourselves about the arc and meaning of our lives" (Trethewey 2020, 208). Metaphors are obviously central to poetry. A narrative arc as a meaning-making device is more readily associated with prose. As Trethewey's approach makes clear, the meticulously coordinated subdivisions of both volumes as well as their use of motifs inextricably interlace figurative language and story.

Remembering and Forgetting Personal and Public Recollections in *Memorial Drive* (2020)

The subtitle designates *Memorial Drive* as a work of relational life writing, that is, as *A Daughter's Memoir*. The memoir comprises two parts of twelve sections each. This diptych conjures up symbolism related to the number 12 (such as Christ's apostles or the traditional number of jury members). The doubling of two sets fits into the motif of the Narcissus myth (which links mirrors, death, selfishness, and sacrifice) that is prominent in *Native Guard* and in *Memorial Drive*. In addition to an unnumbered "Prologue" and eighteen numbered and titled chapters, five unevenly distributed segments are headed by a set of empty brackets ("[]"), as if a title were impossible. The eighteen chapters may hint at "number 18-D" (Trethewey 2020, 10), "the apartment we lived in that last year" of her mother's life. Trethewey's remark about the importance of perspective when perceiving a crosshatched basketweave recurs through the prominent role of visuality: she describes and interprets five photographs related to her family, comments on photographs of violence against Black people and against civil rights movement activists, and repeatedly includes visual impressions of the "Stone Mountain" Confederate monument near her mother's apartment. As a result, she depicts her mother's life and her own experience as necessarily impacted by the legacy of the Civil War and of collective memory in the South. In the following, I will demonstrate how Trethewey revisits the themes of violence, death, mourning, and the power of writing. Implicitly, the motivic weave

of the memoir offers a certain degree of balance and solace. Aware of how she constructs meaning through narrating her mother's life and death in a specific manner, Trethewey argues that this coping mechanism helps her "survive" (Trethewey 2020, 211).

Several passages in the memoir recall specific poems in *Native Guard*: the prologue indicates that Trethewey was a "girl" when she first entered her mother's apartment after the murder, whereas she subsequently emerged from the building a "young woman" (Trethewey 2020, 12). This resembles the prologue-like poem "Theories of Time and Space" (Trethewey 2006/2007, 1) which states that a photograph shows who one *was* when the picture was taken but not when one picks up the printed image, thus implying that we change constantly. Furthermore, Trethewey narrates the Ku Klux Klan attack at the center of "Incident" (Trethewey 2020, 35-36), characterizing its ritualistic re-telling as her grandmother's cautionary measure meant to inspire vigilance. Other linkages set up a contrast between two iterations of similar situations from the poetry volume to the memoir: for instance, playing outside within earshot of her home, Trethewey can hear her mother call her to the dinner table (Trethewey 2020, 80), while the poem "At Dusk" (Trethewey 2006/2007, 15) expresses an unfulfilled yearning for such communication.

The Narcissus motif becomes more elaborate in *Memorial Drive* than in *Native Guard*. It merges reflections in mirrors and varying vantage points with Christian iconography and highlights the writer's preoccupation with the interpretative power of visual perceptions.[12] For instance, Trethewey implicitly revisits the epigraph from Shakespeare's third sonnet, which purports that a daughter is the mirror image of her youthful mother (Trethewey 2020, 13), at the end of the memoir. Shakespeare's metaphor of shared looks bridging a temporal chasm prepares the closing visual recollection of fifteen-year-old Natasha "leaning into" her mother "so close we seemed conjoined, and I could feel her heart beating against me as if I had not one, but two" (213). Significantly, this memory has mother and daughter not facing one another. Instead, the daughter is situated in front of the mother, and both are looking in the same direction, thus counteracting any Narcissistic dangers

12 In Native Guard, "Genus Narcissus" (Trethewey 2007 [2006], 7) juxtaposes a child's self-absorbed delight in bringing her mother spring flowers, whereas in hindsight the persona reads them as foreshadowing her mother's untimely death. The poem "Myth" (14) expresses the speaker's guilt at not being present and awake when her mother was killed. Here, the form—nine lines that are then repeated in reverse order, as if mirrored—and the title refer to the Narcissus myth, but the description of the inability to make her mother's spirit follow her back to the world of the living evokes Orpheus. Similarly, she compares her inability to recall her mother's voice to Orpheus losing Eurydice through his own mistake (Trethewey 2020, 157). When remembering in her memoir that she gave her mother narcissi, Trethewey mentions the Persephone myth (Trethewey 2020, 72). In Greek mythology, both Persephone and Orpheus's beloved Eurydice enter Hades after picking such flowers.

of mirroring. Earlier in the memoir, Trethewey includes images of the two facing one another. In a moment of bliss, young Natasha resembles a "daffodil" gazing up at her "sun"-like mother (111). More prominently, such a configuration is linked to a dangerous situation that portends death: Trethewey refers twice to nearly drowning in a hotel pool in Mexico as a child and seeing her frantic mother above her through the surface of the water. She recalls that her mother "was in the line of the sun and what she did not block radiated around her head, her face like an annular eclipse, dark and ringed with light" (41). In the final numbered section, Trethewey describes this visual impression as "a corona of light around her face" and asks: "Did I know that it reflected an iconic image of the Virgin Mary?" (207). Whatever the case may be, she concludes that memories recur to us from the same visual vantage point, but that our reading evolves according to our growing knowledge and experience. During this near-drowning, the daughter survives and, implicitly, has a premonition of her mother's untimely death.[13]

Trethewey combines revisiting this memory with presenting a variation of the dream she recounts at the beginning of the book. Seeing her mother and her stepfather in this dream, Trethewey awakes while wondering whether she can save her mother from the murderer's bullet (3). When the dream recurs, she tries to intercept the bullet (209). Having "acknowledged the undeniable presence of [her] deepest wound [… t]hrough the metaphor of the dream" (210), Trethewey suddenly revisits the pool scene and sees her mother's face "in the negative—a reversal of light and dark that transformed her face into pure light ringed in darkness" (210). As a result, she reads her own re-emergence from the water as a baptism and as the moment in which she received her "calling" (a word she uses twice in the same paragraph; 211).[14] This metaphysical reading of perceiving her mother through water resolves the impression earlier in the memoir that interpretations of photographs always remain inconclusive, as shown in the narrator's struggle to fathom her mother's last formal portrait in the prologue (p5-8). Similarly, Trethewey's devastating reading of a photograph of herself with her mother becomes a premonition of her mother's death when she imagines a white fleck on the picture growing and obliterating her mother's likeness (50). Ultimately, the memory of resting her back on her mother's chest while driving and gazing in the same direction offers respite

13 The title of chapter 18, "Before Knowing Remembers" (Trethewey 2020, 207) recalls Jacques Derrida's statement that "[w]e know, we knew, we remember—before the death of the loved one—that being-in-me or being-in-us is constituted out of the possibility of mourning" (Derrida 1986, 34). The pre-existing knowledge, then, articipates in selfhood.

14 My thanks go to Juliann Knaus for pointing out to me that Trethewey also describes this in her poem "Calling" in Thrall (Trethewey 2012, 66), which is another reminder of the interconnectedness of her books.

from mirror images, self-absorption, and erasure through death or forgetting.[15] It represents a shift from remembering as gazing backward to remembering while moving forward.

Where, then, does this closing evocation of metaphorical meaning leave the intertwining of the history of war and violence with inner conflict and feelings of guilt? In harmony with the book's subtitle, the *Daughter's Memoir* ends on a personal note on how Trethewey's work as a writer has allowed her to deal with loss and mourning. Nevertheless, the fact that her "mother was murdered in the shadow of Stone Mountain, the symbol of the Confederacy and a monument to white supremacy" (204), continues to impress on Trethewey "the geography and history—both public and private, national and personal—of [her] deepest wounds" (204). Shortly after this assertion, the memoir focuses on how Trethewey received the police and court materials related to her mother's death. These materials, which the daughter first saw twenty years after the murder, include her mother's eloquent draft of a speech about being abused—a speech she was preparing to support an organization that assists battered women. Most devastatingly, Trethewey learns only then that the policeman who was watching her mother's apartment in order to protect her from an expected attack left his look-out several hours earlier than planned. Thus, she realizes, "[*t*]*hey could have saved her*" (205). The lack of diligence on the part of the police stands in stark contrast to her mother's detailed collecting of evidence in order to have her second ex-husband arrested so that she and her children could live in safety. The location of the crime, then, contextualizes this tragic chain of events within larger histories of violence. Monumental Stone Mountain serves as a poignant backdrop, "as if to remind me"—Trethewey writes—"what is remembered here and what is not" (10).[16] The phrase "as if" acknowledges that the lifeless monument is not an agent here. Nonetheless, the monument's unmistakable presence functions as a visual stimulus for Trethewey's personal association between collective memory, as materialized in the Civil War monument, and the erasure of her late mother whose name vanishes into "the chalk outline of her body on the pavement"

15 Significantly, section 6, "You Know" (Trethewey 2020, 89-104), is written in the second person—a method rarely used in autobiographical writing. Trethewey uses the second person to confront herself with memories she wants to forget and to chastise herself for using such a literary distancing device. The conflict between knowing and acknowledging one's knowledge expresses her sense of guilt, particularly at the end of the chapter, which uses a visual reference that again foregrounds looking at oneself from the outside or in a mirror: "Look at you. Even now you think you can write yourself away from that girl you were, distance yourself in the second person, as if you weren't the one to whom any of this happened" (104).

16 The close associations among collective memorialization of white supremacist history, Trethewey's family history, and the role of language and writing also characterizes the new poems that constitute the final section of the aptly titled volume Monument (Trethewey 2018, 163-83).

(11) and TV-news descriptors such as "*the murdered woman*" (p11-12). In Trethewey's mind, her mother's death and subsequent invisibility conjure up the lack of respect for Black soldiers based on their race and their obliteration from public memory, which the poet put centerstage in *Native Guard*.

Layers and Forms: A Closing Reflection

In both of the works discussed here, Trethewey avoids linear chronologies and rather uses metaphors and motifs in order to let internal links emerge. She summarizes this approach as follows:

> *I am really interested in how I can tell a story that is obviously a linear story that has a beginning, middle, and end, and yet by circling back through the sequence it doesn't have simply that straight line through it.*[17]

The writer's method of representing time supports her conceptual metaphor of creating a basketweave rather than spinning a single thread that might imply teleology or even progress. Patterns, Trethewey claims, counteract "willed forgetting" by "trying to remember" (Haney 2007/2013, 30). What is invisible and forgotten serves as a point of creative departure. For example, when regarding visual images that hide more than they show, the poet finds that "the erasures become a place to investigate" (J W Hall 2013b, 20). The imaginative manipulation of the unseen occurs alongside the poet's investigation of history. She thus demonstrates how historiographic writing (in whatever genre) entails constructing a narrative arc based on engagement with extant representations and their blind spots. Most importantly, Trethewey's poetry and prose challenge readers to consider contrasting angles of vision and their potentially tragic consequences: for instance, racist perspectives on Black and mixed-race Southerners versus Trethewey's self-depiction as an English-language poet untrammeled by ethnic subdivisions; or the diverging perceptions of the failed marital relationship that led to Trethewey's mother's death at the hands of her second husband.

These observations do not yet explain how the intricacies of form support Trethewey's arguments about literature's function in relation to history, historiography, and contemporary social relations in the United States. In *Memorial Drive*, she primarily resolves her personal dilemma of confronting recollections, guilt, and mourning at losing her mother.[18] But the histories of the South, of the Civil War,

17 Fink 2008/2013, 84.

18 The issue of guilt is related to Trethewey's knowledge of her stepfather's plan to kill her in order to punish her mother. When he arrived at the stadium during Trethewey's cheerleading training, she waved to him. Her friendliness convinced him not to shoot her (Trethewey 2020, p144-45).

of social conflict, and of the ways in which racism "hemmed in" (Trethewey 2020, 17) her mother as well as the ostensible impact that military service in the Vietnam War may have had on her mother's murderer (p77, 144, 164) constantly remain in sight. Furthermore, the slow revelation of details about her mother's final days, about the incessant threats by her mother's second ex-husband, and about her mother's courageous and meticulous acts of compiling sufficient evidence for his arrest demonstrates the vagaries of conclusively investigating individual experiences and of reconstructing courses of events. Trethewey only gained access to these court materials shortly before their routine disposal twenty years after the case. The fact that this only happened because she coincidentally ran into the person (by then assistant district attorney) who "was the first police officer on the scene" (203) of her mother's death stresses the potential consequences of an incomplete and erased historical record—an insight that again intertwines personal and public history.

If poetry and prose were simply meant to convey factual information, attention to form—especially to the degree found in Trethewey's works—would seem emptily ornamental, even frivolous. In her new formalist theory which combines minute attention to literary style and to distinctly patterned power relations, social interactions, and institutions, Caroline Levine suggests that one should not merely perceive "aesthetic forms as responses to given social realities" (Levine 2015, xi). Rather, one should ask "how both aesthetic and social forms act[…] in the world" (xi). Diagnosing an interdependence of effective artistic form and social context (see 11), Levine argues that "aesthetic and political forms emerge as comparable patterns that operate on a common plane" (16) and that they can cooperate or interfere with one another (p16-17). One goal of her methodological reflections is to show "ways in which literary and social forms come into contact and affect one another, without presuming that one is the ground or cause of the other" (22). Addressing the difficulty of such an endeavor, Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out that the main challenge is to strike "a balance" between "the macro-historical and the micro-ethnographic" as well as between the "social and aesthetic realms" (DuPlessis 2012/2014, 63).

If one regarded Civil War monuments as material objects that are experienced primarily as reified collective memory rather than as sculptures, then Trethewey's references to such monuments in her poetry and prose would provide examples of connecting "social" and "literary" forms in Levine's sense. Levine might also perceive an example of "rhythm" in how Trethewey's references to regular commemorations of the Confederacy's feats as part of collective memory can be related to the aesthetically oriented subdivisions of *Native Guard* and *Memorial Drive*. According to Levine, such "rhythms […] can produce communal solidarity and bodily

pleasure" and serve "as powerful means of control and subjugation" (Levine 2015, 49). At the same time, this understanding of monuments, public holidays, and festive parades pinpoint the difficulty inherent in trying to pry apart "forms—discursive, aesthetic, conceptual, material, political" (Levine 2015, 36), as such "forms" necessarily overlap. Ultimately, I find it more productive to discuss how artists themselves encode aesthetic and social forms, all of which are based on relating nodes of meaning. When doing so, one can read—for instance—the Confederate memorial that Trethewey could see from the street on which her mother was murdered as both real and metaphorical. Such an emblem of the history of white supremacy visibly and palpably reminds Black perceivers of the ongoing threat of racist violence and of the continued invisibility of African American Civil War soldiers in collective memory. On a metaphorical level, the Confederate memorial overshadows Trethewey's experience as a mixed-race Southern woman who was born on the hundredth anniversary of Confederate Memorial Day. Her own struggle with her sense of belonging is, thus, embedded in her parents' respective racial and regional origins which, in turn, are characterized by specific historical predicaments.

For Trethewey, sociohistorical and contemporary experiences are necessarily linked with literary (and other artistic) representations and—crucially—with ways of understanding all of these components. Her focus on co-existing perceptions and on competing understandings of individual and collective memory foregrounds meaning-making processes. Analogous to the shocking details that Trethewey learns twenty years after her mother's passing,

> *[h]istorians are well aware that the past never stays the same. New documents are discovered. Events lost to contemporary memory are recovered and adjustments ripple through accounts of past actors, key episodes, and entire periods alike.*[19]

The intricate structures residing in recurring metaphors, in circling back to specific moments in time, and in a wealth of allusions to other artists provide a scaffold for evolving thought. Just as Trethewey's expression of ideas about the personal and historical past heaps traumatic experiences upon reflections on human shortcomings and guilt, the structures refuse to let aesthetics degenerate into a distraction from conflicts and violence. In *Native Guard*, the neatness of closed forms contrasts with poignantly disruptive epigraphs that contextualize and provoke. For example, the quotation from Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddamn" (Trethewey 2006/2007, 17) that precedes the central section of the book places the Native Guard's crown of sonnets squarely within the history of murder and racism of the 1960s South. Similarly, the segments of *Memorial Drive*, which contrast widely in terms of length, and

19 Nelson 2012/2014a, 3.

the balance between calm narration and emotional outburst joltingly walk readers through the process of trying to cope. Coping through metaphor and other literary devices, thus, prevents the persona and/or narrator from letting the text burst at its seams. It does not deny the conflict-ridden path towards moments of solace.

Trethewey's metaphor of the basketweave with its crosshatched structure highlights the importance of visual perception and of the willingness to look at complexly interlocking threads from multiple angles. As a scholar of American literature and cultural history, I consider this metaphor as particularly effective because it alludes to a tight relatedness of U.S. history and literature. Since the colonial era, the production of raw materials and of textiles as well as cloth-related metaphors in discourse have been central to ideological controversies about defining national characteristics. A few examples may suffice here. In the 1780s, Thomas Jefferson raged against European "[m]anufactures" and cities as cesspools of vice, whereas he praised agrarian Americans as morally sound farmers; he had to admit, however, that American homespun clothing was inferior to "foreign" products (Jefferson 1787/2007, 664). In 1793, Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin showed an American knack for tinkering and invention, but it tragically spurred Southern cotton production and, thus, fostered slavery as the bedrock of the Southern economy. Textile production in the Northern States further imbricated the free states in supporting the continued existence of slavery. English textile miles also gladly purchased Southern cotton, even after Britain abolished slavery in 1833. In the realm of literature, Trethewey's cross-hatch metaphor recalls Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" (1962)—a pathbreaking poem about the slave trade. Similar to Trethewey's research on the Native Guards, Hayden engaged in unearthing African American history during and after his work for the Works Progress Administration. In his poem, slave ships on the Atlantic resemble a weaver's "[s]huttles in the rocking loom of history" (Hayden 1962/1997, l. 94. 1503) which, in the process of going back and forth, create a pattern of "dark ships" (l. 95) contrasting with "their bright ironical names" (l. 96). Thirty years later, Paul Gilroy's prominent theorization of the Middle Passage evolves into what he calls the "Black Atlantic" (1993). This cornerstone of scholarship transcends national and cultural boundaries for the sake of figuring out the layers and threads of historical and cultural fabrics. In other words, metaphors of weaving/crosshatching have played a prominent role in U.S. cultural and literary history for quite a while. Trethewey's work highlights the complexity of interwoven and often contradictory strands of history and experience as well as the necessary willingness to perceive the implications of painful collective—and, as she stresses, individual—memory and forgetting.

During her tenure as poet laureate of the United States and as poet laureate of Mississippi, Trethewey expressed the following wish:

> *[…] I hope […] to push us toward a better nation than we've built so far—and it can be better. By the way poetry does that is to remind us, across time and space, how we are alike, not that we are different.*[20]

Possibly buoyed by her double appointment as poet laureate of Mississippi and of the United States, Trethewey's vision emphasizes the potential impact of poetry as creating social cohesion. *Memorial Drive* stresses the immense pain that personal and collective memory can cause, even more brutally than *Native Guard* does. Nevertheless, the writer maintains that her art strives to reveal as much as it strives to console and heal. The conversation between historiography and literature must continue. Accordingly, Trethewey's interweaving of continuously emerging factual knowledge and aesthetic representation as well as of large social predicaments and individual inner conflicts invites recipients to explore multiple layers and angles of perception.

20 Trethewey in J W Hall 2013b, 28

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