Eager to claim their own voice and role within American society and the literary scene, African-American women writers and poets are especially today showing a new innovative force, producing novels, collections of poems, plays and cultural essays, and experimenting with new themes and forms. However, they do not consider this present renaissance simply as a new, isolated phenomenon; they value their art as a part of a long tradition that has developed after slavery times: their written art derives from a tradition which has its roots in the political and cultural situation created in the post-Civil War era.

The fundamental element is the idea of continuity between past and present, and they seem particularly interested in showing the ways in which the present has been affected by the past and history. So contemporary African-American women writers seem especially engaged in a re-examination of important issues regarding their role and the role of the black people, as a whole, within American society and culture. They think that they can bring back to light parts of the black experience that have been ignored or misrepresented by official American culture. Black women writers want to stress the uniqueness of their experiences and perspectives that differ from those of many black male writers as from those of white American writers. In addition, they feel a strong responsibility in preserving their cultural heritage, and, at the same time, in recreating a culture which could be passed on to the new generations. In her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, for example, Alice Walker stresses how daughters have to rebuild emotional bounds with their own past: «we must know our mothers’ names,... [their] words,... [their] actions,... [their] lives» (276). Her intent is to recollect and reconstruct forgotten lives, in order to rescue them from oblivion or indifference.
The young African-American poet Natasha Trethewey is particularly interested in the relation between public history and individual family history, between cultural memory and private memory. In her poems, she tries to make connections between past and present, investigating how the social, moral and political aspects of a specific historical event are interwoven with the contemporary moment or situation. Trethewey emphasizes the importance of remembering and learning from the past, and through her work she shows her «goal of trying to place [her] own experience, [her] personal history, within the larger context of public history» («Interchange» 386).

Trethewey’s third and latest collection, Native Guard (2006), is divided into three separate parts: an opening section of poems dedicated to her dead mother, which deals with the theme of family memory with details from ordinary life, her mother’s death and funeral and the poet’s personal intimate pain; the central section which narrates the historical experience of the Native Guards on Ship Island during the Civil War, told through the perspective of an imaged black soldier; and finally a concluding sequence in which the poet speaks about her own past and her personal experience as a mixed-blood child in segregationist Mississippi, enlarging her individual experience toward a wider interpretation of African-American history and of Southern history.

In Part One, Trethewey tries to build, in words, a monument to the life of her mother. From the empty spaces left by her dead mother, the poet gradually moves to the empty spaces of forgotten African-American history, and she tries to fill in the voids, she tries to give voice to those stories and people that have been «left to silence and oblivion», to cover «the gaps within the stories that we are told, both in the larger public historical records and in our family histories as well, the stories within families that people don’t talk about, the things that are kept hushed» (Rowell 1021).

The collection opens with the poem «Theories of Time and Space» (Native Guard 1), which introduces the theme of the journey back home to the poet’s native place at Gulfport, Mississippi; it is not simply a geographical return to the hometown, but rather a sort of archetypal journey, back to the «buried / terrain of the past» (1). The poem suggests the impossibility of escape from our past, because wherever we go our personal history will accompany us every minute of our life. The poet seems to speak to her own «self» while going to Ship Island, bringing only the «tome
of memory / [with] its random blank pages» (1). Ship Island 1 is a barrier island off the coast of Gulfport, Mississippi, which was used as a strategic defense point for New Orleans and the Gulf Coast during the Civil War. In 1862, the Union Army took Ship Island and occupied Fort Massachusetts which was before in the hands of Confederate troops. Union soldiers who were stationed there used the fort as a prison for Confederate captives, and from 1863, one of the first black units, the 2nd Regiment of the Louisiana Native Guards, was recruited in Louisiana by the Union Army and stationed on Ship Island for almost three years. In an interview with Charles Henry Rowell, Trethewey tells us that she used to visit the fort as a child, and she describes how Fort Massachusetts has become today a memorial monument of the Civil War, run by the National Park Service:

When you go out there, one of the first things you notice upon entering the fort is that the Daughters of the Confederacy have placed a plaque at the fort’s entry listing all the names of the Confederate soldiers who were imprisoned there, but there is no mention of the black soldiers who were stationed there. Throughout the tour [...] you learn something about the lives of the men who were stationed there. But nowhere is there any kind of marker for the Native Guards. If you don’t know to ask the ranger about the particular history of the island’s black inhabitants, he doesn’t mention it during the tour. And yet, it’s such an important detail — that the Union soldiers who were stationed there were black, that they were members of the 2nd Regiment of the Louisiana Native Guards, that the 1st Regiment of the Native Guards was the first officially sanctioned regiment of African-American soldiers in the Civil War. And so this was yet another way that a history is forgotten, buried and overlooked (Rowell 1032).

1 As a consequence of Hurricane Katrina (September 8, 2005), most of East Ship Island has disappeared beneath the ocean. West Ship Island has also shrunk slightly, all its buildings were destroyed by Katrina’s devastating strength, except Fort Massachusetts which still stands there. On May 12, 2006, Trethewey returned to the coast of Mississippi to witness the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the landmarks she eulogized in «Native Guard». She reported: «This is my first trip back to Gulfport since Hurricane Katrina. It’s been over a year since I’ve seen the place, and it’s odd to come here after having written this book, seeing the places that I was trying to eulogize years ago when I first started working on these poems, in a very figurative sense, because I was distant from these places, not that these places were actually gone. And now, as I walk around here today, I realize that those poems that I wrote have become quite literal, that Gulfport really is destroyed, and so many of those places that I connect to my childhood and growing up are no longer here!» (qtd. in http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june06/misspoet_05-12.html). For information about Katrina and Ship Island, see http://www.nps.gov/guis/historyculture/fort-massachusetts.htm or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina.
The introductory poem, «Theories of Time and Space», becomes a starting point for the poet, who decides to go back to her origins, to investigate her own past and history, as if the boat transporting her to Ship Island would allow her to reach the most unfathomable corners of her personal intimate memory and, at the same time, to understand something more about the collective history of the South.

In this poem, we are also introduced to the theme of photography, a subject which often figures in Trethewey’s work (both in Domestic Work and especially in Bellocq’s Ophelia there are many references to photographs). Trethewey is especially interested in the idea of absence, in the way «photographs hold and create an object out of [a] moment». A photograph «represents a moment that is no longer, passed, as well as ways of being that have disappeared» (Trethewey, «Interview with Jill Petty», 364). In the poem, while the poet is boarding the boat to reach Ship Island, someone takes a picture of her, capturing a fleeting moment of her life, a fragment of existence which will never return but will be kept frozen by the photograph’s frame. The picture will show who she was in that specific moment, but if studied closer, that same photograph will betray something about the rest of her life history.²

In «The Southern Crescent» (Native Guard 5), we find again the theme of the journey across the memory of the past, and we understand how often in the African-American women’s lives, the father is an absent figure. Since slavery times, black families had been separated and disrupted for centuries, and many children were unfathered because they were certainly not officially recognized by the white father – and slave owner – who thought his own right to rape his black women slaves and who had no respect for his mixed-blood sons and daughters. Also in the post-bellum years and up to the period of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the figure of the father was often perceived as absent, and the mother came to be considered the symbol of security and stability, maternal love and family; she has been regarded as the guardian of family values and traditions.

As Trethewey confesses, the men of her family also were often revealed by absence: her mother’s father was absent after divorce

² It is interesting to learn that Natasha Trethewey’s interest in photographs started after her mother’s death. In an interview, she confesses that she «started looking at old photographs of her [mother], trying to see if it was all there in the photographs, what was going to happen to her and to [her family] and [their] lives» (Petty 364).
and also because he chose not be a part of her life; Natasha’s father, «though not absent emotionally, did not live with [her]» after the divorce, and so she «only saw him when [she] went to visit for part of the summer in New Orleans (Rowell 1030). We actually find this idea of abandonment in «The Southern Crescent», where the poet describes her mother in 1959, just sixteen years old, while she is «boarding a train» to meet her father in California (Native Guard 5). She is full of expectations and she continues to look at the picture she has of him — again a token from the past. During her trip, she tries to imagine how her father’s face could have changed in the course of the years, and at the same time, she is also trying to capture something more about her father’s life or personality, probably in order to make a good impression on him when she meets him. When she arrives at the station in Los Angeles, she has the deceptive discovery that nobody waits there for her, «on the platform, no one like [her father] in sight» (5). In the second part of the poem, the poet describes her own journey with her mother, leaving Gulfport to join her father. She tells us that also the meeting with her father failed because the «train derailed» (5). The derailment of the train is not only a recollection from her childhood, but a metaphoric derailment: the failed re-union with her father, the disruption of her own family bonds. Her parents’ marriage was illegal in 1965 Mississippi, and the derailment of the Southern Crescent in «its last run» to reach Trethewey’s father, a white Canadian, seems to suggest metaphorically the division between North and South during the Civil War and the impossibility of a union between whites and blacks, especially in the still segregationist South. 3

What is more relevant is the mother’s role in the poem: in the moment of the derailment, we find the image of the mother protecting the child with her own body. Trethewey borrows again the theme of motherhood from the African-American tradition, representing her mother as a symbol of protection, love and security, while her father remains a distant figure, a blurred image.

3 Beginning with a statute in colonial Maryland in 1661, anti-miscegenation laws in the United States survived the Revolution, Civil War, the First and Second World Wars. Such prohibitions were declared unconstitutional only in 1967 by the US Supreme Court decision, Loving v. Virginia (Sollors, Interracialism, 3-14). Werner Sollors’s works, Neither Black Nor White or Interracialism, deal with the overlooked themes in American history and literature, such as the problem of black-white interracial sexual relations and marriages, interracial descent, the origin of interracial identity, and the social taboos about miscegenation and incest created by white American racist society.
of a man waiting at the station for the arrival of a ghost train, unaware of what was happening to his daughter, not only in that specific moment, but also during the journey of her life. In the last stanza, we find the narrator/poet making another journey with her mother, leaving home – this time probably definitively – with apparently no specific destination. But the reference to «the reflection of her mother’s face» (6), appearing on the window, seems to bring forward the image of her mother’s vanishing through death.

In the following poems, the poet is recollecting other episodes from her childhood, and painful memories, which seemed appeased, re-emerge violently and haunt her present. In «Genus Narcissus» (Native Guard 7), for example, the poet connects a childhood memory, recalling the moment when she gathered up a bunch of daffodils to present «in a jar, to [her] mother» (7), to the present reality of death and absence. In her child’s innocence, the daffodils represented just a beautiful present for her mother; only after her mother’s death, these flowers assumed a completely different meaning: they are now associated with the ancient myth of Narcissus and with the relation between beauty and death. Like the mythical figure of Narcissus, who gazed down at his own reflection in the water, so the daffodils face down rather than up. As Narcissus, entranced by his own beauty and enamored with his own image, lay on the bank of the river and wasted away staring down into the water, so the daffodils «dry like graveyard flowers, rustling / when the wind blew» (7). Narcissus and «the daffodils’ short spring» (7) become metaphors for Trethewey’s mother’s life which has been scythed too early, and the blowing wind is a clear metaphor for death.

In «Graveyard Blues» (Native Guard 8), Trethewey moves to the sad recollection of the day of her mother’s burial. Recovering the blues tradition, the poet gives her last good-bye to her mother; the atmosphere is gloomy and stressed by the beating of a persistent rain and by «the suck of mud at our feet» similar to «a hollow sound» (8). The rain has dug deep holes in the dirt road – an image which may refer to the grave. Significantly, the poem closes with a reference to the «names of the dead» (8). The name written on a tombstone has a very important symbolic meaning for African-American people, because it bears witness of the dead person’s existence. In this poem, Trethewey uses the conventions of the blues song, including the repeated phrases and lines that work as recurring bridges, to enact and re-enforce the
painful tragedy of death. According to the tradition, the blues is an individual song which the single person sings to his/her addressee; but at the same time, the blues song also expresses the feeling of the collectivity. The blues expresses the African-American individuals’ search for identity, the need to possess their own world and to become active subjects of their own history. For Trethewey, the blues song becomes a melancholic, poetic space where she can express her personal mourning and pain for the loss; at the same time, her mother’s suffering in life becomes the symbolic representation of the African-Americans’ bloody scars across centuries of history. In the same way, Trethewey’s reference to the names of the dead, at the end of the poem, clearly seems to refer to the claim of both the individual and the collectivity to recover their own identity and history which are partly preserved in the family names and in the family’s memories. 4

The theme of the names continues almost obsessively in other three poems: «What the Body Can Say», «Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971» and «What Is Evidence» (Native Guard 9-11). In «What the Body Can Say», the poet makes a connection between the tombstone with her mother’s engraved name («Graveyard Blues») and

4 All over the world, naming has always been seen as a sort of politically charged act. In the Judeo-Christian culture, the act of giving a name implies both a socio-political power (Adam’s giving a name to animals and things) and a power of creation (God created the world, human beings, the distinction between night and day, between good and evil, only through the power of naming). In West African tribal cultures, naming is considered as a sacred ritual, bringing the person into being and giving life to inanimate things or beings (Hayes 675). The enslaved Africans brought to America were stripped of their original names which were substituted with the names given by their white slave owners. No names implied that they did not possess anything, not even a past or memories, which are a form of property and cultural capital, too. Also later on, in African-American culture, the act of naming has always held a special double meaning, connected to the duality of the black American cultural experience. For example, dropping one’s slave name and giving oneself a new name to start a new life as a free person was often the first act of former slaves, like Frederick Douglass, for example.

At the time of the Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm X and the other followers of the Nation of Islam dropped their American last names and instead they were given the letter «X», symbolizing their lost African family names which had been substituted, in slavery times, with the name of the white slave master as a mark of property. The black man was considered as a personal property, like things or cattle, which could be bought, sold, exploited, whipped, tortured and even killed without consequences. So Trethewey, as many other African-American writers, emphasizes in her poems the importance of names, because they bear the history of both individuals and their family, they endure like marks, they tell stories which must be cared for, or hide secrets they do not easily yield.
a stone sculpture in which a human gesture can be captured and represented in an «unmistakable» way (9). But the same gesture, she adds, can be interpreted in many different ways according to the «context» in which we see it and try to interpret its meaning. This consideration brings back a memory of her mother «not long before her death» (9): «Her mouth falling open, wordless» recalls the mouths open «to take the wafer» as a symbol of «communion» in church services, but the poet knows that that gesture meant something else. Her mother probably wanted to say something to her daughter, to reveal her some intimate fear or some prophetic doom, a tragic prophecy which her daughter was not able to grasp and interpret in that moment, and which she «still can’t name» (9), as if the only evocation of that painful secret could re-wake some haunting memories.

In «Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971», Trethewey describes a photograph taken after an ice storm in 1971. This picture becomes the occasion to speak about photography and the way the camera’s eye can give only a limited perspective of what was captured in an ephemeral moment. A photograph represents only a particular historical framework, and as Susan Sontag would say, «the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses», and photographs are as much an interpretation of the external world as paintings, fiction or poetry (Sontag 1, 6-7). A photograph can also lie in many ways, showing, for example, «the tired face of a woman, suffering, / made luminous by the camera’s eye» (Native Guard 10). Trethewey seems fascinated with the power of photography, by the surprising insights which photography allows, and, at the same time, by the sense of absence the camera can create, too, by framing a particular moment and cutting out a specific event, an action, a gesture or an emotion from the whole scene. In «Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971», the beauty of the peaceful landscape seen in the photograph, together with the hint that this was a family picture, is contrasted by the angry closing lines. The photograph, like the list of the «names, the date [and] the event» tells nothing about what was hidden behind this representation of happiness. The picture is nothing else than a frozen moment, similar to the landscape of «iced trees» captured by the camera. It tells nothing about the destructive force of «the storm that drives us inside / for days, power lines down, food rotting / in the refrigerator» (10), as it tells nothing about the tragic future still to come, a mother beaten by a stepfather who will murder her. Again the images of beauty are opposed to death imagery:
the «rotting food» becomes a prophesizing image of the poet’s mother’s destiny. As we can realize, the poems dedicated to her mother are not simply commemorating her absence, but they are also trying to recreate her mother’s life and the meaning of her existence and death.

In «What Is Evidence», Trethewey describes her mother’s suffering who, as we apprehend from the poem itself, was savagely beaten by her second husband. In her daughter’s memory, her suffering and final tragic death are not documented by «the official document […] fading already», nor by «the tiny marker with its date, her name, abstract as history» (11), but rather by «the landscape of her body», her broken bones, her outer and inner scars. Her name here loses its traditional sacred value, because what re-emerges from her daughter’s recollections is the concreteness of her mother’s pain and suffering in her life time. In a certain way, Trethewey is here evoking the image of her mother’s tortured and defaced body as a touchable representation of all the century-long humiliations, tortures, whipping, lynching suffered by black Americans. Even if the memory of their names had been lost in the Middle Passage, their history was actually written on their torn bodies, on their «bones / settling a bit each day, the way all things do» (11). So the poet’s mother becomes a sort of spiritual manifestation of history; she becomes the embodiment of the sixty million and more dead and enslaved Africans, returning to reclaim their space and haunting us throughout these poems. She represents the past, a past which creates a feeling of loss, guilt and pain in her daughter.

In «After Your Death», we are called to participate in the speaker’s grief for the terrible sudden loss of her mother. She has simply vanished in her death. Trethewey’s mother is never described physically in any of the poems dedicated to her, but we can feel her absence in the objects which used to surround her, in «the bowl of fruit, bruised / from [her] touch», in «the

\footnote{In «Interchange: Genres of History», Trethewey refers to the shocking lynching exhibit, Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America, at the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Centre, stressing that awareness of that «part of history is necessary and important for understanding the present» and for making sense of that past. She thinks that «not knowing and forgetting are dangerous because each can impair our ability to empathize» («Interchange», 585). These photographs and some of the stories connected with them are now collected into a homonymous book, edited by Hilton Als, John Lewis, Leon F. Litwack, James Allen, Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America. Santa Fe, N.M., Twin Palms Publishers, 2000.}
jars/ [she] bought for preserves», in her emptied closets (13). Her absence can be perceived everywhere in the house, inanimate things seem to have existed because of her, as backdrops to her presence, details are vivid as if to stress the sense of loss and absence. The death imagery of the rotting fig, and of the fruit «being taken from the inside» while «a swarm of insects hollow[s] it» refers to the poet’s mother’s life which was taken away so early «from the inside» (13), by a member of the family. Grief is accompanied by a feeling of remorse. The poet seems to be unable to forgive herself for having arrived «too late»: it remains ambiguous if her late arrival would have prevented her mother’s death in some way, or if her failure was just not having understood a dangerous situation or a message her mother wanted to give to her.

Her mother’s life has been torn away in a sudden and insidious manner, like the snake that killed Eurydice in Orpheus’s myth. Trethewey actually moves to the mythical dimension in the dream-like poem entitled «Myth» (Native Guard 14). The speaker-voice tells us that she was asleep when her mother was dying, so she could not witness that moment of passage from life to death. The poet describes this passage as if her mother were being swallowed into «a hollow» (14), an abyss with no return. In this poem, Trethewey recreates the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Trethewey, a poet like Orpheus, makes a dream-like journey down into the underworld to rescue her mother from eternal darkness and oblivion, and take her back «into the morning» into the world of the living. But like the mythical figure of Orpheus, who turned back, disobeying the condition imposed by Hades to walk in front of his wife, Eurydice, and not look back until he reached the surface, the poet here opens her eyes and realizes that her mother «do[es] not follow» (14). I would like to spend some words also about the metrical form used for this poem. «Myth» is a palindrome sequence: the same lines of the first stanza are repeated backwards in the second one, as in a mirrored image. This structure recalls Narcissus’s reflected image in the pond water and his final look into the waters of the Styx in his final journey into the underworld. Like Narcissus trying to embrace the beloved object in the water, which flees at his touch, but returns again after a moment and with renewed fascination, so Trethewey tries to snatch her mother from the abyss of death. But her mother’s apparition in a dream is not more real than Narcissus’s reflection on the water surface or Eurydice’s materi-
alization behind her beloved Orpheus. The poet wakes up, the apparition vanishes from her sight and she becomes aware that her mother will «be dead again tomorrow» (14).

The reference to myth also continues in the poem closing the section dedicated to the mother-figure, «At Dusk» (Native Guard 15). The dusk is the darkest stage of twilight and clearly used in the poem as a metaphor for death. The narrating voice hears a neighbor calling for someone, «leaning throughout her doorway». At the beginning she thinks that the woman is looking for a child, but then she realizes that the neighbor is seeking her cat, calling it with «the high-pitched wheedling we send out / to animals who know only sound, not / the meanings of our words» (15). This enchanting sound seems to refer to Orpheus’s entrancing power, singing and lyre playing which could tame the wildest beasts. The cat is actually attracted by the familiar voice calling it back home, but at the same time, it seems entranced by the luminous «constellation of fireflies flickering / near [its] head» (15). The neighbor decides to go back home and the poet starts to «imagine her inside the house», waiting for the cat’s return. The poet «wonder[s] that [she] too / might lift [her] voice, sure of someone out there, / sent it over the lines stitching here / to there, certain the sounds [she] make[s] / are enough to call someone home» (15). Again, we meet the myth of Orpheus, trying to call Eurydice back from the underworld: here, we see the poet evoking her mother’s name in the hope of recalling her back to the world of the living. But we perceive that her attempt will be useless, and her call will be turned into a repeating sound, which will fade away to nothing but a faint, plaintive whisper as it happened to the nymph Echo. 6

The second section of Native Guard opens with the poem

6 The theme of bringing back a dead person to life is reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s Beloved, especially in the closing part of the novel. The materialized ghost of Sethe’s murdered baby disappears as soon as she is intentionally forgotten by her community and family. After her final disappearance, the house remains quiet, a house where mysterious skirt rustlings from the other world and «knuckles brushing the cheek in sleep» are still perceived by the inhabitants. «Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative – looked at too long – shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don’t, because they know things will never be the same if they do» (Morrison, Beloved 324). In spite of Beloved’s disappearance, the family still seems to fear that to name Beloved again will be to call the ghost of the murdered baby into being once again. The returning ghost in Morrison’s novel like in Trethewey’s poems becomes a clear metaphor of the haunting past which can come back to torment our memories.
«Pilgrimage» (19): this is an elegiac journey down to the Mississippi river, which can be read as the Jordan, the sacred river for Christians, Jews and Muslims. But if the Jordan has always been regarded as a symbol of freedom for the African-Americans, who often compared their slave condition to the Jews’ captivity in Egypt, the Mississippi is the symbol of the division between Union and Confederacy during the Civil War, between the abolitionist North and the segregationist South, between blacks and whites. The Mississippi is represented by Trethewey as «a graveyard / for skeletons of sunken riverboats» (19); the river has «changed its course / turning away from the city», after having erased the past or at least a part of the past. «White marble» monuments have been erected for the Confederate dead and a museum has been built to remember the «Life in the cave» led by many Confederate families – especially mothers, wives, children and old people – who remained hidden inside the caves surrounding the town, during the Vicksburg Siege in 1863. The poet tells us about the annual commemoration of the bloody battle at Vicksburg, but the poet is fully aware that another part of history has been overlooked or forgotten: the history of the Louisiana Native Guards who fought in the Civil War and were part of Trethewey’s history. The «ghost of history» (20) torments her in dreams and clutches her in an anguishing embrace, as if it should be her moral duty to recover the lost memory of those forgotten heroes of African-American history and of the United States history. So Trethewey continues her journey across history, but now she makes use of written historical documents, photographs, diaries to tell different periods, stories and events from the Southern past, with all its strong ambiguities and insurmountable contrasts.

The central part of section two is constituted by the title poem «Native Guard» (Native Guard 25-30), a sequence of ten sonnets interrelated with one another. Each sonnet closes with a sentence which becomes a variant of the next sonnet’s opening, as if the poet would try to develop a discourse where also pauses and silences become important and part of the text itself.

The poem opens with the epigraph: «If this war is to be forgotten, I ask in the name of all things what shall men remember?» (25). This sentence is part of a speech delivered by the famous African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass in 1871, at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery (Blight 1160). In this speech, Douglass especially emphasized the importance for the African-Americans and for the United States,
as a whole, not to forget the past and the meaning of the Civil War, a war which, in his view, had been essentially fought in the name of freedom, justice and equality for all men including blacks. One of his fundamental attempts was to preserve a historical memory of the Civil War as he believed that black people and the nation itself should remember it as a revolutionary phase of moral and social change in American history: Emancipation became, in his perspective, a national celebration in which the African-American could claim a new identity and hope of equality, human dignity and even citizenship. History shaped peoples and nations and was the primary source of identity, meaning and purpose. His attempt was to create an enduring historical myth about the Civil War that could win further battles in the present. The strongest cultural myths – ideas or stories drawn from history bearing a symbolic meaning which can be transmitted to the next generations – are the «mechanisms of historical memory» (Blight 1161). Douglass thought that Union victory and black emancipation would be so rooted in the recent American historical experience that they would become sacred values, ritualized in memory like myths. But Douglass realized instead that white America preferred to bury dead issues, like slavery and racism, and the Civil War, the war between the old South, fighting for the preservation of traditions and slavery, and the abolitionist North, supporting justice and freedom, would soon be transformed into a conflict between brave white men, Americans against Americans, leaving the role of black soldiers to disappear into oblivion.

So Trethewey, in her poem, regains possession of Douglass’s challenge to America to «never forget» its responsibilities towards the freed blacks who contributed in creating American history as their white brothers did. In Trethewey’s «Native Guard» section, we find not only a shift in time – covering now the three years of history when black troops stationed at Ship Island (1863-1865), but we also notice a radical change of perspective. There is always a first-person narrating voice, but we realize that this is not the poet’s voice speaking about her private memories; the narrator now is an imagined soldier of the 2nd Regiment of the Louisiana Native Guards stationed at Fort Massachusetts.

The first sonnet opens with the strong affirmation: «Truth be told, I do not want to forget / anything of my former life» (Native Guard 23). Immediately, we become aware that this man is going to tell us a part of history which has been hidden or forgotten for centuries, and his desire not to forget his past as a slave in a
Southern plantation seems to echo Douglass’s open charge against America for its historical amnesia. For a black former slave it was impossible to free himself from the burden of a past characterized by continuous physical and psychological humiliations and sufferings; the ghosts from this tragic past are not easily appeased and, sometimes, they come back to haunt the present.  

What is more relevant is that this nameless soldier / narrator, examining the intricate relation between history and past, decides to write down his memories, «to keep record» of events, people, thoughts, as in an attempt to bear witness for the future generations. The soldier reports about the use of black troops primarily as common laborers, as diggers and drudges; they are not given the dignity of soldiers, they are not even called US Army, cavalry, or «infantry», but only «supply units», like extra goods or properties to exploit for dirty work, the «nigger work» as a white colonel defines it («December 1862», Native Guard 25). As a correspondent of the New York Daily Tribune (February 21, 1863) noted, the Native Guards «drilled well, marched well, kept themselves clean, [and] performed all their duties as soldiers. Nothing in the world is alleged against them but that they are Negroes» (Hollandsworth 42). So these men were actually denied their dignity both as human beings and courageous soldiers, and they were assigned to out-of-the-way, isolated places – like Ship Island for example – where they would have minimal contact with other Union regiments, avoiding contrasts with white soldiers who felt uncomfortable serving alongside black officers. In Trethewey’s poem, we understand that black soldiers, who wanted to fight for emancipation, found themselves in a situation of racial prejudice also among the Unionist forces: they were ordered to do slave work, they received «half rations» («December 1862», Native Guard 25) and certainly were not treated as equals by white comrades.

In one of the Confederate abandoned houses, the narrator finds a «journal, near full / with someone else’s words» («December 1862», Native Guard 26), and he starts writing down his own memories on the already written words. This wonderful image of the overlapping memories, of two different stories intersecting one another, makes us meditate about the ways in which «history intersects» (26), or different versions of the same historical event are narrated, understood and assimilated. So we gradually

---

7 In Toni Morrison’s Beloved, the ghost of the murdered daughter, who materializes among the living, becomes a metaphor for all the haunting horrors of slavery that the freedmen have carried with them into their new lives.
realize that the ten-sentence sequence of this poem is but some extrapolated pages from the narrator's journal.

In «January 1863» and «February 1863», the soldier is thinking about the circularity of circumstances in which he has found himself: once slave, destiny, the symbolic master of human existence, has reserved him another kind of bondage: like in slavery, black soldiers are kept busy «digging ditches, strengthening defensive positions and standing guard» (Hollandsworth 97); they have been sent to Ship Island, a desolate, desert-like place; in a semi-tropical environment, «nearly smothered by heat», «fly bitten» and «ankle deep in sand», Native Guards dig artillery emplacements among sand dunes and guard Confederate military convicts and political prisoners (Native Guard 26). While working hard, someone raises a chant, similar to the spiritual songs sung in the cotton fields by black slaves. In that moment, the narrator seems entranced by «the low singing» which he has joined, when he is suddenly awaken by the memory of the slavery horrors: «It was then a dark man / removed his shirt, revealed the scars, crosshatched / like the lines of this journal, on his back» (26). In the poem, the dark man’s scars are reminiscent of Trethewey’s mother’s signs of brutality on her body, like a map across human suffering. Those scars are a documented evidence of the black people’s tragic history as the words written in the journal by the soldier, as a written testament of that ever present painful memory. 8

The idea of the circularity of destiny is also evident in «February 1863», in which the soldier meditates on his absurd condition: once slave, now guarding Confederates who have been captured and imprisoned in the fort, he compares his former life of bondage to his present life as a military officer of the Union Army, guarding the fallen rebels, a jailor «to those who still / would have us slaves» (Native Guard 27). What is interesting is that Trethewey does not use African-American slang or Southern black dialect to create the soldier’s narrating voice: though a former slave, her speaker is a literate (we learn that his former master Dumas taught him to read and write) and is charged with writing letters home for his

8 The scars on the man’s back are also reminiscent of Sethe’s back in Beloved, transformed into a «chokecherry tree» because of the savage whipping she received by her master. Her back is described as «a sculpture», «the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display» (Morrison, Beloved 21). We learn that «her back skin had been dead for years» (21), but the scars on her back – like the scar around Beloved’s neck – are the living evidence of all the pain and humiliations suffered by millions of black slaves.
fellow soldiers and for illiterate or wounded Confederate prisoners. In this way, the soldier is the spokesman of the African-American forgotten history: Trethewey decided to give him a literary voice, a voice which could recall the oratory art of Frederick Douglass, whom the poet actually quotes in the poem epigraph.

The white soldiers do not trust a black man who can read and write; they suspect he could write something different from their own words. The illiterate signs the letter with the «X» symbol which should «bin[d] them to the page» (27), as the evidence of their actual existence and proof that those are really their own words. But the paradox is that the letter «X» remains just an anonymous, «mute symbol» (27) with no name, no identity, no history. Finally, the association of the «X» letter with «the cross on a grave» leads us directly to the theme of the unburied dead whose memory has been erased by history as by the swallowing waters of a Mississippi flood.

In «April 1863» and in «June 1863», Trethewey portrays two of the most tragic phases for black soldiers in the Civil War: the raid in Pascagoula and the siege of Port Hudson. On April 8 1863, a detachment of 180 men from the 2nd Regiment on Ship Island set out with General Nathaniel P. Banks for East Pascagoula, Mississippi. In a four-hour running battle, the black troops held their ground repulsing attack after attack. Learning that other Confederate soldiers were arriving, Colonel Nathan Daniels ordered his men back to their waiting ship, the John P. Jackson. Unfortunately, while the Native Guards were retreating to their boat, crowded on a wharf, a shell from the Union cannons was fired directly at them instead at the oncoming Confederates (Hollandsworth 46). The episode was simply dismissed as «an unfortunate incident», as Trethewey reports also in her poem, but the soldier / narrator, who is telling us the facts as if he had been present during that terrible event and had seen «white sailors in blue firing upon us / as if we were the enemy (Native Guard 28), clearly feels the incident to be more intentional than accidental. As we know from historical reports, and from Colonel Daniel’s conserved diary, the fact could be caused by bad blood between white soldiers and Native Guards. The scrupulous research about the Louisiana Native Guards made by the historian James G.

9 Colonel Daniels’s diary represents a rare surviving narrative about the Civil War and a significant documentation about the experience of the Louisiana Native Guards stationed at Ship Island. See: C.P. Weaver (ed.), Thank God My Regiment an African One: The Civil War Diary of Colonel Nathan W. Daniels.
Hollandsworth, Jr. reports many episodes of racist behavior or mutinous acts by white soldiers who did not accept the presence of black soldiers, especially the authority of black officers. Even if the engagement at Pascagoula demonstrated the black soldiers’ value on the battlefield, and Colonel Daniels expressed his admiration saying, «oppression had not extinguished their manhood or suppressed their bravery» (Hollandsworth 47), and «their names shall deck the page of history» (Native Guard 28), we know that their courage would not be remembered in mainstream history. The names of white soldiers, both Unionists and Confederates, would be «written in stone», while for many black soldiers there would be no memory. A clear example was given during the Siege of Port Hudson. After a first bloody attack, General Nathaniel P. Banks requested a truce to retrieve the wounded and bury the dead. This activity proceeded in all the sectors except the area where the Native Guards had fought, and so black dead were left to lie where they had fallen (Hollandsworth 59-60). When the Confederate Colonel W.B. Shelby asked permission to bury the putrefying bodies of the «colored troops» in front of his lines, Banks refused saying: «I have / no dead there, and left them, unclaimed» (Native Guard 28). In Trethewey’s poem, the narrator appears tormented in dreams by the image of all those unnamed corpses, «with their eyes still open – dim, clouded / as the eyes of fish washed ashore, yet fixed – staring back at me» (28-29). These are other terrifying specters from the past who come back in dreams asking for a justice they never had.

The theme of the memory of the dead is taken up in «August 1864»: the soldier / narrator who was the keeper of other soldiers’ memory, now «tend[s] Ship Island graves» (29). But there is no tombstone, no cross, no engraved name to mark the graves which seem as «mounds like dunes / that shift and disappear» (29). It is this Native Guard who keeps a record of the names of these dead soldiers and «send[s] simple notes» to the families (29).

The last sonnet «1865» refers to another historical event, the massacre at Fort Pillow: thanks to recent studies,¹⁰ we know that, during the battle at Fort Pillow, the Confederates disregarded many attempts by black troops to surrender and Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest is said to have ordered to shoot down black

¹⁰ See, for instance, John David Smith (ed.), Black Soldiers in Blue. Inspired and informed by the latest research in African-American military and social history, the essays in this book tell the stories of black soldiers who fought in the US Army during the Civil War.
troops like dogs. The Native Guards were at that time named «Corps d’Afrique» by General Banks, a name – as the narrator says – which «take[s] the native / from our claim» (29): this new name, which should paradoxically recall the origins of the black soldiers, put into this context, rather becomes another way to debase those men and make them feel as outsiders, as «exiles in their own homeland» (29). After centuries of slavery in the United States, stripped, as they were, of all their traditions and ancestral memories, the only nation they knew and they considered their own was America. They fought for emancipation, to conquer their own space within American society, to be, at last, considered citizens of this country, what they knew as their birthplace. To call them «Corps d’Afrique – especially in such critical phase of American history – means not to recognize them as authentic Americans and to strip them of their own identity once again.

In addition, the most impressive images of this poem – the «dead letters», the «untold stories», «the scaffolding of bone / we tread upon», (30) – all refer to the forgetfulness of history, to untold truths and lost memories. There is no remembrance of all the dead at Fort Pillow or of «the hog-eaten at Gettysburg, unmarked in their graves» (30). Lost memory is also associated to the maimed soldiers, to «every lost limb, and what remains: phantom / ache, memory haunting an empty sleeve» (30). The image of emotional amputation and the «phantom ache» recreated

"This image of the «phantom limb still aching» is clearly reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s imagery used in her novel, Jazz, to express the characters’ experience of radical emotional absence linked to the loss of family, which is connected with the loss of history and ancestral memories. Each character of the novel is an orphan, because he/she has lost a mother or a father (like Dorcas, Violet), or because he/she has never met his parents (like Joe Trace or Golden Gray). The character of Golden Gray, in Jazz, is a light-skinned mulatto, the illegitimate son of a white woman and a black man, and he is haunted by the wish to be emotionally legitimized by his black father whom he actually despises because he has been raised by his white mother as a white boy until he was eighteen. The longing for the «phantom father» is described by Gray the way one might describe the anguishing feeling of a phantom limb after amputation. The representation of the «hurt that [is] not linked to the color of [one’s skin]», is more a sensation of the «inside nothing» (Morrison, Jazz 38). «Only now», he says, «that I know I have a father, do I feel his absence, the place where he should have been and was not. Before, I thought everybody was one-armed, like me, now, I feel the surgery… I don’t need the arm. But I do need to know what it could have been like to have had it» (Morrison, Jazz 158). Using this imagery of mutilation, Morrison wants to mirror the idea of the African family dismemberment and all the damages and wounds inflicted on the African-American people by slavery and its devastating aftermath."
in Trethewey’s poem become evocative symbolic representations of
the psychologically fragmented African-American existences; they
become a sort of mourning for lost identities, lost memories and
lost possibilities.

The third and last section, which Trethewey defined as «Testa-
ment» (Rowell 1030), is formed by poems that deal with other
aspects of Mississippi history which intersect with her life and
with her family’s experiences, speak about «the ways in which
stories get told or not told about such events in the history
of Mississippi» (Rowell 1030), like a cross being burned in her
house yard (see the poem entitled «Incident», Native Guard 41).
In this closing section, there are many references and quotations
from some of the most important white writers from the South,
like William Faulkner, the Fugitive Poets, Robert Penn Warren
and Allen Tate, and Walt Whitman who was not a Southerner
but dedicated many of his poems to the South and its glorious
fascination.

In these poems the main theme appears centered around the
poet’s biracial heritage, exacerbated by the Mississippi legacy of
oppression. Her dark, buried history starts to re-emerge in the
narration of her birth and childhood. «My Mother Dreams An-
other Country», for example, focuses on Natasha’s birth and on
her mother’s distress thinking about the destiny of her daughter
who would be called with horrible racist epithets «like mongrel»
or mulatto. «Words are changing» (Native Guard 37), as the poet
says, but it is not important if society now defines an African-
American with the word «colored, negro or black», instead of
nigger; in any case, racism is a social evil and a curse which still
torments the present of the South. Segregation laws are a very
recent memory; they kept black Americans from their rights as
American citizens: in this context, «the waving Stars and Stripes»,
the symbol of the United States, was not the emblem of national
unity, but the African-Americans’ «national anthem» (37), cursing
American blacks as in the biblical tradition of God’s curse against
Ham and his descendants.

Trethewey investigates the symbolic meaning of the term «na-
tive», exploring the tension in the idea of being a «native of
a place that has denied the full citizenship of many sons and
daughters» (Rowell 1031), of a country which defined her father
as a «peckerwood and nigger / lover» because he married a black
woman, and called her «half-breed and zebra – words that take
shape / outside us» («Southern Gothic», Native Guard 40). The
poet shared this condition and felt herself as a kind of psychological exile, because in 1966, when she was born, miscegenation was still illegal and her parents had to break the laws of Mississippi by leaving the state and getting married. In the poem «Miscegenation», Tetheway tells us her condition of being born into a country that is her home and yet not her home because she was considered to have come from an illegal union, and as a mixed-blood child she was an emblem of «impurity» and transgression. 13 What is more interesting about this poem is the comparison with the character of Joe Christmas, another tragic result of miscegenation described in William Faulkner’s novel, Light in August. She writes:

Faulkner’s Joe Christmas was born in winter, like Jesus, given his name for the day he was left at the orphanage, his race unknown in Mississippi.

My father was reading War and Peace when he gave me my name. I was born near Easter, 1966, in Mississippi (Native Guard 36).

Joe Christmas is a man who does not know anything about his origins and is condemned to think he is a mulatto but not to know even that for sure. He is a shadow figure who walks the fringes, feeling uncomfortable both in the black and white world. In his novel, Faulkner tries to explore the roots and to expose the effects of contemporary Southern violence and racism. He shows how the individual is inextricably entangled with the collectivity of which he is part, or from which he is excluded. Christmas’s torment is caused by the unresolved mystery of his birth and origin; as Faulkner himself wrote about his character, Christmas’s «tragedy was that he didn’t know what he was and would never know, and that to me is the most tragic condition that an individual can have – to not know who he was» (Welsh 125). Christmas actually does not know, but he often thinks to know who he is or believes because somebody else has made him to believe. He finds himself in a terrible existential condi-

13 It is interesting to notice that even the word used to define interracial sexual and marital relations, «miscegenation» is an Americanism. This term was actually coined by two New York journalists in an 1863 pamphlet (from the Latin miscere, to mix, and genus, race). The use of the prefix mis- (as Tetheway also stresses in her poem) suggested the idea of an improper mixture of races, making «miscegenation» appear as it were a sinful act worse than incest itself (see Sollors, Interracialism, 156, 394, or Neither Black Nor White 287-335).
tion, in a struggle of self against self, where being both white and black results in being considered neither. Not knowing his own identity, «he was nothing. [And] he deliberately evicted himself from the human race because he didn’t know which he was» (Welsh 125).

Natasha Treguene did not choose one of the many orphan characters present in Toni Morrison’s novels, for example, but she preferred a troublesome, self-divided character like Joe Christmas to explain her own condition. Christmas is not a sympathetic character, he often behaves like a racist and a sexist, and he is continually trying to escape from the past which wants to imprison him. Joe Christmas is a representative of the South, embodying in his fate the contradictions of this region, and symbolizing within himself the principle of social division which tormented Southern culture. At the same time, he shares the same tragic fate of millions of African-Americans who lost their identity and history: Christmas is a man without history, beyond the personal reserve of memories that create a painful pattern of violence and abuse, and the past, of which he is personally unaware, proves to be a too powerful force to escape or resist. Christmas’s search for wholeness and self-completeness becomes a sort of symbolic journey to find who he is, a journey which seems to mirror Treguene’s own search for her past memories across Southern history.

Another relevant element of connection is the importance of names. Christmas’s lack of a birth name – and the lack of identity that implies – can be seen as the painful tragedy of his life and the driving force behind the restless search that constantly goads him. The choice of Joe Christmas as a name for this orphan child is not only due to the fact that the child was left at the orphanage at Christmas time. In the novel – as in Treguene’s poem – there is a clear association with the Christ-figure. Joe shares the same initials of Jesus Christ and finally his death seems to be the death of a martyr, but his life of violence and his general contempt for humanity transform him into a flawed and conflicted anti-hero who has little to share with the Christ image. It is his unawareness about his identity and racial heritage that brings him to violence and craziness, and to the impulsive need to inflict harm on others. 13 Treguene seems to suggest that

Christmas’s tragic existence is the result of Southern racist rejection of the other, and especially of the mixed blood who comes to hate himself / herself because he / she feels unaccepted both in the white and the black community. The poet tells us that the only reason for her salvation from a similar destiny was due to the fact that she knew «more than Joe Christmas did». She knows her parents, she knows her name and its origins («Natasha» means «Christmas child» in Russian as the name Christmas), and even if she shares the same age of Jesus Christ «when he died» and Christmas is in his thirties when he is lynched, she knows that her fate can be different because she possesses a deeper awareness of who and what she is («Miscegenation», Native Guard 36). It is interesting to notice that the Christ imagery is also linked to the previous narrator / character in the «Native Guard» section: he too is thirty-three years old, like Christ when he was crucified.

In her work, Trethewey tries to show the Southern contradictions, and – like Faulkner – she explores the ever-shifting relations between history and story. Constructing the intersections between history and story, both the novelist and the poet create several narrating voices for whom the «facts» are filtered through the tellers’ subjective and interpretative reconstruction of them: versions of events, historical facts, memories and incidents are filtered through several interpreting consciousnesses who appear to be both outside and inside the events they describe.

Trethewey expresses her contradictory feeling toward the South, which she considers as her homeland and the epicenter for centuries of racial hatred, in the poem «Pastoral» (Native Guard 35). In this poem, in a dream-like situation, she finds herself posing for a picture with the group of Southern poets, the Fugitive Poets. But we soon realize that, in spite of the elegiac pastoral atmosphere, the poet feels out of place among them, as if she could not be recognized as both a black woman and a Southernner artist, and she is «in blackface again when the flash freezes us» (35). The opposition of light and dark imagery serves to re-enforce the contrast between black and white.

The closing line, «You don’t hate the South? they ask. You don’t hate it?» (35) is borrowed, in a rearranged way, from Faulkner’s character Quentin Compson at the end of the novel Absalom, Absalom! (1936). The novel moves in and out of racial issues

14 Quentin’s actual words are: «I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!» (Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, 378).
from the pre-Civil War period to 1909, when Quentin is relating his story, or better his version of the story, which bridges one of the most significant moments of American history. Quentin is the chief narrator and belonging to a younger generation he should be able to free himself of the past traditions and attitudes toward race which are deeply rooted in Southern culture. But he is himself shredded by race, and his desire to make his college roommate, Shreve (coming from Canada), understand the South is in part a need to explain something about race which cannot be explained. Race, which was nothing else than a cultural construction created by the perception of the white beholder, dominates all the Southern characters of the novel and Southern history as a whole. Retelling the story of Sutpen’s crazy and megalomaniac design, Quentin is trying to explain to Shreve what the South is, and at the same time, he embraces the full racial dilemma: the knowledge that blacks should be equal, and yet the feeling that for the white Southerner things are more complicated than that. Trethewey’s quotation in her poem shows how, in a character like Quentin Compson, we can perceive the burden of historical consciousness which both the American and the Southerner must bear. Faulkner did not embrace the mythical vision of Southern innocence, believing that the South could not ignore its guilt and the necessity to assume its own historical burden. In his view, the South is populated by the ghosts of the past which return to haunt the present, and Quentin becomes the emblem of the Southern young man who finds himself entrapped in the web of history and cultural tradition, paralyzed and unable to take a stand.

Trethewey, bearing herself this contrasting feeling toward her South – a love/hate relationship – closes her collection with an «Elegy for the Native Guards» (Native Guard 44). In this poem, Trethewey re-enacts one of her visits to the Fort Massachusetts museum, during which visitors do not learn anything about the history of the Native Guards. Instead, they see that «The Daughters of the Confederacy / has placed a plaque [there], at the fort's entrance – / each Confederate soldier's name raised hard in bronze» (Native Guard 44). But nowhere is a similar monument memorializing the names of the Native Guards. As Trethewey herself noticed, «this omission serves to further the narrative that blacks were passive recipients of the freedom bestowed upon them by white “brothers” who fought and died in the Civil War» (Trethewey, «On Whitman, Civil War Memory and My South» 53).
So in this poem, Trethewey’s attempt is to show how monuments spread all around the South, commemorating the Confederates’ heroic enterprises and historical value, serve to inscribe a particular version of history into public memory, while at the same time subjugating or erasing another. In the beauty of the elegiac language, we learn that also nature, the «Hurricane Camille», contributed in 1969 to the erasure of the memory of those men buried on Ship Island. The hurricane’s violence split the island in two and the Mississippi’s waters overflowed the graves, canceling «all the grave markers, all the crude headstones» (Native Guard 44), and leaving no memory of the Native Guards’ existence. So, Trethewey decides to assume the role of the elegiac poet who commemorates the memory of black soldiers forgotten by history. She is rewriting, in a certain sense, Allen Tate’s famous «Ode to the Confederate Dead» – which she quotes in the epigraph, but her role has here a completely different meaning. If Tate’s poem presents the symbolic dilemma of a man who has stopped at the gate of a Confederate graveyard, and feels trapped in time, isolated and caught between the memory of a heroic Civil War past, which is lost, and the chaotic, degenerate present, Trethewey’s elegy becomes an ode to recover African-American history and give it its due respect and value. She is not interested in mourning the dead, or in recreating a mythology of the past, but she wants to build those men a metaphoric monument, as the monument she would like to build in memory of her lost mother. Her moral duty is to keep alive the memory of the past and, in this way, she assumes the role of «native guard» of history: she decides to «return to Mississippi, / state that made a crime / of [her] – mulatto, half-breed – native / in [her] native land, this place they’ll bury [her]», too («South», Native Guard 46). Trethewey reaffirms again the importance of remembering and perhaps of learning things from the past experiences and of keeping that knowledge alive, being, at the same time, aware of her great responsibility as a poet and a teacher to transmit a message to the new generations. «There is something about the nature of authority in recording and documenting stories, especially when you have the power to write something down», she says. «You have the power to shape things – what gets remembered in history» (Rangus 3).
Bibliography


—, «On Whitman, Civil War Memory and My South», The Virginia Quarterly Review, 81.2 (Spring 2005): 50-65.


ABSTRACT
This article deals with the relationship between public history and individual family history, between cultural memory and private memory in Natasha Trehewey's third and latest collection of poems, Native Guard. In her poems, the young African-American poet tries to make connections between past and present, investigating how the social, moral and political aspects of a specific historical event – the Civil War and the role of Black soldiers in the US Troops – are interwoven with the contemporary situation. The intent in this essay is to explore Trehewey's attempt to fill in the gaps in mainstream American history and to restore a voice to those stories and people that have been left to silence and forgetfulness for centuries. Trehewey imagines the life of a former slave stationed at Ship Island fort, who is charged with writing letters home for the illiterate or wounded Confederate prisoners and his fellow soldiers. Just as this soldier becomes the keeper of Ship Island's memory, so Trehewey speaks about her childhood, recalling her personal experience as a mixed-blood child in segregationist Mississippi and enlarging her individual experience toward a wider interpretation of African American history and of Southern history.

KEYWORDS