



RECLAIMING ERASED HISTORIES: INTERTEXTUALITY IN NATASHA TRETHEWEY'S ELEGY FOR THE NATIVE GUARDS

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Abstract

This paper explores the poem *Elegy for the Native Guards* by Natasha Trethewey, from the perspective of postmodernism. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality and employing Alan McKee's textual analysis methodology, the study explores how Trethewey engages with historical, cultural, and literary references to interrogate selective historical memory and cultural erasure. The poem exemplifies postmodernist tendencies such as fragmentation, multiplicity, and skepticism of grand narratives, particularly those surrounding the Civil War. The analysis indicates that *Elegy for the Native Guards* disrupts the traditional historical narratives by reconstructing the silenced history of the forgotten.

Keywords: *Postmodernism, Intertextuality, Textual analysis*

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1. Introduction

The poem “*Elegy for the Native Guards*” (2007) by Natasha Trethewey is investigated through the lens of intertextuality. The poet uses textual references to reclaim the histories of the marginalized people, especially African American soldiers, the *Native Guards*. Their histories were deliberately eliminated by the conventional narratives. Furthermore, the concept of intertextuality is that a text is a “permutation of texts”. It means that texts are not isolated rather they are shaped by and extracted from other texts, creating a connection of meaning (Kristeva, 1980). The purpose of Intertextuality is that how works are interconnected and how their meanings are created by the relations in them. It gives a way for deeper understanding of themes and ideas that transcend individual work. In the poetry of Trethewey’s, intertextuality becomes a device through which the histories of suppressed people, particularly the experiences of the African American in the South, might be restored. The concept of Postmodernism, with its emphasis on fragmentation, multiple perspectives, and skepticism of grand narratives, helps in understanding the in-depth and complex meaning in Trethewey’s work. The poet’s use of historical memory and poetic form thus functions as both a narrative of personal and collective mourning and the act of resistance against historical ignorance. The title of the poem itself invokes the tension between past and present interest of the readers to confront the suppressed voices of African American soldiers and their elimination from history and literature.

The textual analysis methodology of Alan McKee is used for the analysis of the study. By examining Trethewey’s use of intertextual references, referring from Allen Tate’s Ode to the Confederate Dead to other historical events, this study explores the postmodern critique of the historical representation of the *Native Guards*. This study is significant as it provides insights into the power of poetry in the postmodern era to regain and reintroduce history. By challenging the dominant narratives, the true representation of history is possible. By examining the intertextual analysis of the poem, this study explores how different historical, literary, cultural texts and events help in a better understanding of the American history. Lastly, through this approach, the researcher gets deeper understanding of the role of poetry in healing, remembering, and re-maintaining eliminated histories.

1.1. Statement of Purpose

The aim of this study is to investigate how Natasha Trethewey’s *Elegy for the Native Guards* (2007) employs intertextuality to challenge dominant historical narratives by embodying postmodernist principles, revealing underlying socio-cultural and political contexts.

1.2. Research Objective

1. To explore how Natasha Trethewey's *Elegy for the Native Guards* uses intertextuality to challenge dominant cultural, political, and historical narratives through the lens of postmodernist principles.

1.3. Research Question

1. How does Natasha Trethewey's *Elegy for the Native Guards* employ intertextual references to challenge dominant historical narratives while reflecting socio- cultural and political history within a postmodernist framework?

2. Literature review

Metin Çolak's (2022) study explores how postmodern cinema employs intertextuality, pastiche, and parody, marking a shift away from the modernist approach by embracing complex narrative structures. Drawing on postmodern theorists like Jameson and Baudrillard, the article underscores how these features challenge traditional cinematic forms and provide insight into the differences between modern and postmodern film practices. Similarly, Saha and Roy Chaudhury (2023) analyze the use of intertextuality in Henry Louis Vivian Derozio's poetry, focusing on how his hybrid Anglo-Indian identity blends Western Romantic ideals with Indian nationalist themes. Likewise, the works of Saha and Roy Chaudhury (2023) contextualize intertextuality in the writings of Derozio, highlighting his diasporic identity which synthesized British Romanticism and Indian nationalism, through a few subsequent references. For instance, when he mentions poets such as Thomas Moore, Derozio's poetry touches on issues of slavery and women's fight for rights which depicts post-colonial aspect. Apart from it, Ali (2023) utilizes an ancestral approach in studying how Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise* as well as Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* offer "counter-histories" that go against the perceptions of global history. These two poets also interpret stories of strength, and fight, showing a different side of history, from their perspectives such as Native American and African American respectively. Almaarof and Abdul Al-Jabbar (2024) similarly explore A Poem for a Dried Upriver through a postmodern lens focusing on intertextuality, hyper-textuality, and nonlinear storytelling as means of combating environmental issues. Oswald seamlessly intertwines mythology with ecology in her work which gives more depth to the connection between the environment, people, and history while reinforcing postmodernism. In another case scenario, Bezabih (2023) examines the use of

intertextuality in Ethiopian Amharic films, such as *Ethél* and *Wuhaina Werq* in which the author discusses incorporating myth, history, and religion.

These movies try to tell stories in post-modern contexts, incorporating identity along with narrative cultural history as a matter of concern. Radulović (2021) also considers the notion of intertextuality and looks at Riffaterre's semiotic theory as applied to T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, uncovering intricate Biblical and cultural elements which are integrated with the insights as well as the poetry's breadth. Also, Silva (2024) analyses another aspect of intertextuality in the film *Christopher Robin: An Unforgettable Reunion* and the directors of literature that are adapted for the film, providing a better context and storyline for the movie. Further, the article on intertextuality in the New Testament also looks at how New Testament writers react and make use of Hebrew scriptures, especially where these link together with the exegesis of New Testament passages (Alkier & Boxall, 2022; Hays, 1989). While Translating Economic Opinion Articles on the Ukraine Conflict: The Challenges of Intertextuality and Other Literary Devices, the author discusses the problems of translation of economic opinion pieces, and the first part is about textual intertextuality, metaphors, cultural aspects and their impact on Ukraine-related texts. The author explains how careful template observation is required for these rhetorical elements in the translation, noting that the use of metaphors and intertextual elements became more frequent in the subsequent articles. Together, these studies emphasize the point of the central option which is the use of intertextuality in postmodern literature, films, poetry, and its boundaries (Medina, 2023).

3. Theoretical Framework

Postmodernism, as a critical perspective, questions the authority of grand narratives and emphasizes that truth is fragmented and socially constructed. Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality is that a text is a "permutation of texts," meaning it is shaped by and draws from other texts, creating a web of meaning.

Texts are not isolated; they are interconnected, and their meaning emerges from these interactions with other works within a social and cultural context (Kristeva, 1980). In *Elegy for the Native Guards*, Trethewey invokes intertextuality to engage with and critique historical, cultural, and literary texts that marginalize African American contributions to the Civil War.

This approach reflects postmodernism's skepticism towards the objectivity of history, suggesting that history is shaped by those in power. The poem's contrast between Allen Tate's Confederate-focused epigraph and the overlooked story of the *Native Guards* demonstrates this postmodern critique. By mentioning the daughters of the Confederacy

and events such as Hurricane Camille, Trethewey challenges traditional ways of remembering the past and repositions history to include voices that have often been ignored.

4. Research Methodology

This study is qualitative. According to Kumar (2011), a qualitative study is an approach through which a problem, situation, and phenomenon are analyzed and interpreted from its micro and macro level for the judgment and measurement of variables. Apart from this, the study employs Alan McKee's textual analysis methodology, which emphasizes examining texts for their contextual meaning, cultural significance, and relationship to broader discourses. According to McKee (2008), textual analysis is the practice of making an educated guess about the most likely interpretations that people might make of a given text. A textual analysis of *Elegy for the Native Guards* (2007) is conducted for identifying intertextual references and their postmodern implications. McKee's approach enables an understanding of how Trethewey's poem operates within and against historical narratives.

5. Data Analysis And Discussion

Natasha Trethewey's poem "*Elegy for the Native Guards*" uses intertextual references to challenge dominant historical narratives and restore marginalized voices while reflecting postmodernist ideas. These references make use of quotation, allusion, and architextuality to provide a rich and layered analysis of memory, erasure, and cultural bias.

The poem "*Elegy for the Native Guards*" questions the erasure of African American soldiers, especially *Native Guards* from historical memory criticizing the inequity in how history is preserved. The poem highlights how African American soldiers are excluded from the history and criticizes the dominant historical narratives by engaging with literary, historical, and cultural references. Moreover, it deals with how memory is constructed and whose contributions are remembered or erased.

The poem begins with an epigraph from Allen Tate's Ode to the Confederate Dead, "Now that the salt of their blood stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea..."

Allen Tate uses "salt" symbolically to link the soldier's blood with the sea's "saltier oblivion". The imagery of salt and sea symbolizes the inevitability of forgetting, a natural process where memory is gradually washed away by the tides of time. The "stiffening" of their blood means their memory becomes distant and forgotten, showing how history

slowly fades away over time. Tate wrote this poem during the height of the Southern Agrarian movement to memorize and glorify the efforts of Confederate soldiers. He portrays the Confederate Dead as tragic heroes lost to history and laments the natural fading of memory. However, Trethewey reinterprets this imagery and directly challenges the literary traditions that glorify the Confederate soldiers. Rather than a natural fading of memory, Trethewey frames oblivion as an act of exclusion rooted in the racial politics of commemoration. She draws attention to the selective nature of historical memory, where the romanticized narratives of the Confederacy are preserved and amplified, while the sacrifices of African American soldiers are deliberately marginalized or erased. She is of the view that it is the intentional erasure of African American soldiers from history. It is not that their memory fades due to the tides of time but rather a deliberate erasure. Instead of the natural loss of memory, she highlights how systemic racism excludes Black Contributions from historical narratives, contrasting the preserved myths of the Confederacy with the neglected sacrifices of African Americans. Her work counters Tate's passive acceptance of forgetting by highlighting the deliberate neglect of Black contributions to the Civil Wars. African Americans served the Confederate States of America during the Civil Wars in a variety of roles, but they were not considered soldiers.

Moreover, their contributions from history were also erased by cultural and historical narratives dominated by whiteness like in Allan Tate's "*Ode to the Confederate Dead*". Hence, memory is not a neutral or universal process, but it is shaped by societal and cultural forces. This intertextual engagement critiques the glorification of Confederate history and confronts the deliberate omissions that shape collective memory.

In the poem, the journey begins moving from Gulfport to Ship Island. The setting of "*Ship Island*" adds to the poem's complex references to other texts. As a historical location where the *Native Guards* were stationed, it becomes both a symbolic and contextual place. They travel with "gulls overhead trailing the boat streamers, noisy fanfare," evoking a festive, ceremonial atmosphere. This tone contrasts sharply with the neglected reality of the fort which is described as a "weathered monument" and a "half reminder" of the soldiers who served there. It seems ironic in the context of the *Native Guards*' erased legacy: a White glare, an ironic layer of history that does not admire history, does not honor history's truths. Ship Island is in the Mississippi where the *Native Guards*, the Union Army's Black regiments, were settled during the Civil War.

They captured Fort Sumter and fought bravely during the Civil War. But they have been erased from mainstream narratives of history, despite the incredible feats of bravery and sacrifice they made. The "roof of grass, a lee" of the fort, signifies the neglect of their legacy. The images of overgrown grass illustrate how the memory of these men has fallen victim to neglect, unlike the carefully shaped monuments to Confederate soldiers. The

phrase “*weathered monument to some of the dead*” points to the racial split in remembrance of the *Native Guards* and Confederate Soldiers. Monuments and statues honor Confederate soldiers, but *Native Guards* are only partially recognized. They fight and die in defense of the Union and the freedom of enslaved people as *Native Guards*. Despite the focus on impact, their contributions have gone unexamined and overlooked in the arc of mainstream history. Their stories have been drowned out by the dominant discourses.

In addition, “*Hurricane Camille*”, referenced in the poem for splitting Ship Island in two, alludes to a real historical event. Hurricane Camille was one of the deadliest and most powerful hurricanes to strike the Mississippi coast. This allusion embodies how corporeal histories are quadrangular and become an additional layer of meaning. As a natural force of destruction, hurricanes serve as a metaphor for the fragility and incompleteness of memory, a reflection of the postmodern skepticism of the substantiveness of truth. The storm split the island, and so too have the narratives surrounding the *Native Guards*, torn and uprooted, leaving an irresistible but ultimately incomplete and distorted rendering of their legacy. Trethewey’s suggestion to such historicity of the poem into the broader environment of natural and cultural forces that profile and alter how we memorialize the past.

The image of graves “*lost in the Gulf*” symbolizes both the physical loss of the burial sites and the metaphorical erasure of African American soldiers from the historical memory. The grave in the sea reveals the graves of these marginalized communities, especially *Native Guards*, whose contributions are forbidden and left to decay. It means that the memory of these soldiers has been diluted along with their physical bodies.” This literal sinking parallels the cultural act of erasure whereby African American soldiers are buried from the records of his story. Not so much forget about it naturally, but on purpose. Elaborating popular narratives often feature white people and Confederate heroism.

Natasha Trethewey further criticizes the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) in the poem: The Daughters of the Confederacy has placed a plaque here, at the fort’s entrance— each Confederate soldier’s name was raised hard in bronze, no names carved for the *Native Guards*— 2nd Regiment, Union men, black phalanx.

The UDC is an organization founded in 1894 by the descendants of Confederate veterans. The UDC’s purpose was to preserve the memory of the Confederacy and to honor the soldiers who fought for the Southern cause during the American Civil War. One of their main pursuits was the erection of Confederate monuments throughout the South, memorials that praised Confederate generals and soldiers, often with little or no mention of the role of African Americans, particularly Black Union soldiers who fought for

freedom. The UDC's work was an arm of the "*Lost Cause*" ideology, a narrative that glorified the Southern cause, recontextualized the Confederacy as a noble endeavor, and downplayed the centrality of slavery to the Civil War. In Trethewey's work, the UDC stands in for the larger struggle over historical memory that continues today, a struggle to determine how the Civil War and its legacies will be remembered, often through the erasure of African American soldiers, and *Native Guards*.

Karen Cox and David Blight are among the documents about this historical context of the UDC and its mission to shape the narrative of the Confederacy. In the book, *Dixie's Daughters*, Cox analyzes how the UDC strove to propagate the "Lost Cause" myth, a revisionist history that celebrated the Confederacy and marginalized the role played by African Americans. Cox criticizes how the UDC's monuments and educational work reinforced a narrative of history that either excluded or downplayed the role of the Black soldiers who fought for the Union. The UDC's actions are symbolic of larger attempts to write history to ignore the struggles and sacrifices made by Black Americans. This is also mirrored in Trethewey's poem where "no names carved for the *Native Guards*" inscribed on the plaque of Fort. The *Native Guards* and African American soldiers who fought for the Union played a great role in the struggle to preserve the United States and to end slavery. Their contributions are deliberately ignored in favor of the narrative that glorifies Confederate efforts.

Another book, "*Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*" by David Blight, goes further in critiquing UDC's work to erase African American contributions from the historical record. Blight critiques the post-Civil War moment when the North and South, in the name of national reconciliation, put their reconciliation first and African Americans' rights and recognition second. This demand for unity resulted in the systematic erasure of Black soldiers' sacrifices and their fight for equality. Selective remembering, Blight contends, helped institutionalize the narrative that African Americans were not playing a role in the nation's reconciliation — and that a version of history that glorified the Confederacy was more worthy. Trethewey's haunting representation of the absent names on the plaque supports Blight's argument, reminding us how the memory of African American soldiers was actively erased as we sought unity. These names are not forgotten by the ravages of time; they are actively erased, and they are politically lost, buried under the weight of Southern systemic white supremacy.

In addition, Trethewey's reference to the term "*Black Phalanx*" comes from Joseph T. Wilson's book, "*The Black Phalanx: African American Soldiers in the War of Independence, the War of 1812, and the Civil War*" (1888). This work is one of the earliest comprehensive histories that explores the contributions of African American soldiers to U.S. military history. Wilson aimed to document the significant roles played by Black

soldiers and to counter mainstream historical narratives that often minimized their impact. By using the term “phalanx,” Wilson highlighted a strong and organized military formation, symbolizing the bravery and sacrifices of African American soldiers, including the *Native Guards*. In her poem, Trethewey’s use of the “Black Phalanx” serves to emphasize both the strength and unity of these soldiers, as well as the ongoing erasure of their contributions despite their bravery. By referencing Wilson’s work, Trethewey connects herself to the tradition of reclaiming the histories of African American soldiers while also challenging the historical organizations like UDC.

The term “Black Phalanx” in Trethewey’s poem not only emphasizes her message about the neglect of African American soldiers in historical accounts but also highlights how this erasure is ingrained in American history. By referencing Wilson’s work, Trethewey connects her poem to a broader movement of reclaiming African American history. Wilson’s book has been a vital tool in recognizing the often-ignored contributions of Black soldiers, and Trethewey’s goal to commemorate the *Native Guards* aligns with Wilson’s efforts to honor those who displayed such courage and sacrifice. The mentioning of “Black Phalanx” thus operates as both a direct challenge to the historical amnesia that surrounds African American soldiers and reinforces Trethewey’s desire to illuminate the contributions of these men, whose names have been eradicated from monuments and plaques, such as the one at Fort Sumter.

In addition, Trethewey conjures a sense of historical erasure and the passing of time. The “water-lost” grave markers and grubby headstones show how attempts to remember the past by people have been washed away by time and weather, leaving only the fort, which represents a power that has lasted many moons. “Fish darting among their bones” implies that the history of these African American soldiers is buried in the deep past. They were not given importance in history like Confederate soldiers while they also played a significant role in the Civil wars. This fort remains “unfinished” and “half open,” which also shows that our understanding of history is an incomplete understanding of history. God’s deliberate eye seems to evoke the awareness of the historical injustice that is the difference between the public claims and the repressed truth.

Overall, the poem exemplifies postmodernist principles through its fragmentation of established historical narratives and its insistence on reconstructing a larger story in which marginalized voices are fully heard. Trethewey’s use of different texts such as Tate’s Ode to the Confederate Dead and Black Phalanx, historical events like Hurricane Camille, and institutions such as The Daughters of the Confederacy shows how intertextuality can be employed to intervene in and reimagine history. Rooted in Alan McKee’s textual analytic methodology, this analysis shows how the poem post-modernly interrogates how history is written, remembered, and commemorated. Through

Trethewey's work, we see a necessity to know more about our past and histories, so that we can reclaim or restore the histories of the marginalized people which have been erased deliberately.

6. Conclusion

Through intertextuality, Natasha Trethewey's *Elegy for the Native Guards* has come to foreground forgotten voices namely that of black soldiers, and challenge dominant historical narratives. By invoking works like Allen Tate's Ode to the Confederate Dead and events like Hurricane Camille, Trethewey laments the selective remembrance of certain people. So, the poem's postmodern approach of rewriting history and challenging the canons of historical representation of the past calls for a different kind of remembrance, one that reconstructs the silenced history of the African American soldiers, the *Native Guards*.

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