

Is a Picture Really Worth a Thousand Words?

Domonique Finley, English 300

Ernest J. Bellocq set up his camera in Storyville about a hundred years ago in order to take obscene yet consensual photographs of prostitutes in the red light district of New Orleans. After Bellocq's death the negatives were found deliberately damaged, possibly by Bellocq himself. The faces of some of these women were scratched out, erasing their identity. In order to restore the identity of the women Natasha Trethewey, author of *Bellocq's Ophelia*, wrote a book of poetry about them. Because these nameless women, unlike the white prostitute in Édouard Manet's famous prostitute painting, *Olympia*¹ (1863), are black and openly display their genitalia, Trethewey writes in an attempt to reverse the common practice of the exploitation of female African American bodies. Yet she fails in her efforts to give what she calls "Bellocq's Ophelia" an independent identity in her poems; the name Ophelia itself directs readers to the common interpretation of the character in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and that character's traits. The title makes one imagine a victim of insanity who depends on the male gender to control her and has no sense of individuality because she only appears in connection to a man. Because the women appear by themselves with no males in the frame, [Bellocq's photographs](#)² are more successful in granting African American women a voice than Trethewey's attempts toward "the restoration of what is not seen or is forgotten as a result of erasure from local and national memory" (Rowell 1022). Instead of correcting the representation of black women in history, Trethewey only rehearses it and therefore fails to put an end to the hypersexual view of African American femininity.

The hypersexual view of African American women is one that has been developed and exploited over centuries. African American women have been constructed in literature as Jezebels as part of this racist and highly sexualized genealogy. A "Jezebel . . . is a cultural image that is portrayed as a mulatto or a fair-complexioned African American female, who possesses features that are considered European," a description which has long been used to characterize the sexuality of multiracial women (Jewell 46). In the racist genealogy of African American female sexuality, Jezebel connotes blackness whereas the view of white women remains antithetical to this view and white females are often desexualized. Even "semi nudity. . . [is] misinterpreted as lewdness" in literature when referring to African American women (Pilgrim). The idea that race defines human sexuality, that the African American male is a brute or rapist and the female is a Jezebel, has been promoted by dominant culture as fact. Trethewey's *Ophelia* tries to address the "continued onslaught of negative images" that is given to black women of all shades (Peterson xvi). Instead, her poems lack any individuality. *Ophelia*, as Trethewey has stated, "becomes what . . . [she] must" (11). She is a prostitute, just another Jezebel.

Trethewey's poems further allude to the sexualized image of the Hottentot, which also appears in the artwork of Kara Walker. In one of her poems, to reference that image, she writes of the "reversed silhouette . . . against the black backdrop" (20). The use of this imagery mirrors the "explicit, playful, grotesque, and deliberately shocking" silhouettes of Walker's artwork (Keizer 1656). These images are powerful because they help "reconstruct. . . African American history that attempts to leave out reference to the relationship between masters and slaves" (1662). Walker's *Camptown Ladies*³ portrays a silhouette that has an exaggerated case of steatopygia, a "Hottentot Venus . . . [that is used in] linking past conditions of coercion with black female subjectivities in the present" (1663). These photos alone display how black, female sexuality has been raped by the genealogy of African American women's stereotypes. Trethewey doesn't attempt to combat inaccurate historical accounts but instead retells them, with no new depth or revelation.

¹ For image, see <http://locus.cwrl.utexas.edu/jbrown/files/Olympia.jpg>

² For image, see http://www.artpapers.org/images/feature_articles/2003_1112/RECLINING_LADY.jpg

³ For image, see http://www.30americans.com/Artist/Kara_Walker/1.html

Misguided stereotypes about the hypersexuality of African American women are more fully corrected in the work of Toni Morrison and Sojourner Truth than in the poems of Trethewey. In contrast to the poet, Morrison uses her novel *Beloved* to “rewrite the history of African American women . . . by affirming the ineffable beauty of these bodies” (Peterson 16). She knows that words can never paint the truth because it has been so badly damaged throughout history, yet feels obligated to offer a less stereotypical view of black femininity. Instead of recognizing that African American women may have “self-respect, self-control, and modesty—even sexual purity [like] white women” (Jewell 24), Trethewey merely resurrects the past without the complexity found in Morrison’s books. She neglects the history of African American women, whereas other writers like Morrison and Truth work to correct the past. When Truth draws attention to her body in her speeches she reverses the sexual view of women of her race by portraying the “bodily labor” she participated in as a slave, and her “child bearing,” in order to “transform . . . her female sexuality into tools of labor . . . as a black woman worker” (Peterson 14). She takes a different approach than other speakers and writers by reshaping the view of African American women through her own struggle. Because the “nineteenth century stereotype stay[s] problematically lodged in the popular memory [of Americans] today,” modern African American writers should work to combat all negative stereotypes of black sexuality (Brady 264). Trethewey, unlike Morrison or Truth, fails to reverse or critique misconceptions and even keeps them alive in the twenty first century.

Arlene Keizer poses the question, “Can this past ever be put to rest?” Because the past shapes the future, it will always be part of the present. In regard to Keizer’s idea of post memory as the “haunted condition, in which images from the past hover over the present or erupt into it,” Trethewey only aids in the systematic psychic dismembering of the cross-racial body (1650). Trethewey’s failure to tackle the past could have been prevented had she given Ophelia more depth and complexity as a woman than the common stereotypes of the character do. The women in Bellocq’s photographs appear to be of European descent, depth is only granted to these women when their black identity and background is examined. Trethewey introduces the world to the Storyville prostitutes and gives them a race in her poetry. This revelation of race adds implied meaning to the photographs that could have been disregarded otherwise such as the idea of the tragic mulatto, Jezebel or the sexually seductive stereotype which surrounds African American females. As Annette Debo notes, Trethewey “gives voice to the African American sex workers living in Storyville” (201), but this voice only reiterates the negative depictions and deleterious events suffered by African Americans of the time.

This use of race and sexuality is commonly found in literature. Race in Trethewey’s case is now a “placeholder for a less stark, more complex set of relations of domination for which we do not yet have a literary or visual language” for sexuality (Keizer 1650). Trethewey constructs Ophelia through her acquisition of a drop of black blood, which can be dated back to slavery through the relationships masters had with female slaves through the “context of coercion” (Peterson 15). White males felt they had the right to access the bodies of African American females through sex, which gave birth to many Ophelias, young black women who seek fulfillment through men. Many young women whose mothers were subjected to rape would never know the identity of their fathers, like Trethewey’s Ophelia, so they seek out other methods of affection from men. Because of this, slavery itself has an impact on the later prostitution of female black bodies.

Ophelia, whose existence is based upon the system of placage, is never transformed by her condition in Trethewey’s poems. Joseph Roach describes “the weird demimonde of placage, [as] the Creole custom of arranging extramarital liaisons with educated mulattos” in New Orleans (217). This custom is related in the lines “earliest training—childhood—how/ [her] mother taught [her] to curtsy and be still /so that [she] might please a white man, [her] father” (Trethewey 20). Unable to grasp the idea of independence as a woman, Ophelia remains a victim of placage. The subjects of Bellocq’s photographs could be misread as white women, but Trethewey reveals the racial background and casts Ophelia into the permanent role of a victim. She treads on the thin line between the depiction of black prostitutes as individual victims of circumstance and women plagued by historical curses. She rehearses many events that undermine the African American female gender but fails to transform any views.

Trethewey’s Ophelia, like Shakespeare’s character, is dependent on men for survival. In “The Naming” she describes meeting her father: “my mother pushed me toward a white man . . . *Your father, I*

she whispered. *He's the one that named you, girl*" (37). From this moment onward she suffers from a need for attachment to the male gender; her father created her and, because of his position and race, she is now a victim of the genealogy associated with mulattos. She transcribes this idea onto Bellocq when Ophelia claims that "this photograph *we* make / will bear the stamp of his name, not mine" (39), even though she is the subject and without her there would be no artwork.

The elements that Trethewey incorporates from the African American women's genealogy in her poetry include the idea of the tragic mulatto, African American subservience, and the rehearsal of slavery. The events that helped in the creation of this racist genealogy are also present in the fancy girl auctions and the exploitation of Saartji Baartman. In the poem "December 1910," Trethewey juxtaposes the tragic mulatto with a fancy girl auction; Ophelia describes how "the auction was near" and her "dignified birth . . . [was] a tragic occasion" (13). She is surrounded by "wealthy gentlemen" and she must "recite poetry" for these men: she claims that she is "the *African Violet* for the promise / of that wild continent hidden beneath / [her] white skin," which calls attention to her "wild" side because of the African heritage she inherits from her mother (13). The fancy girl auction is further developed to the point where she goes "upstairs with the highest bidder" (14); her prostitution marks an end to the poem. History has shown how fancy girl auctions are damaging to a woman's sense of self worth, but Trethewey only retells what we already know rather than giving Ophelia an identity or an escape route.

Another example of this particular genealogy can be found in the case of Saartji Baartman, a South African woman from two centuries ago who was famous for her case of steatopygia, an extreme accumulation of body fat around the buttocks. Because of her enormous buttocks she was seen as animal-like, a "freak show" to be stared at (Brady 263). After she agreed to be taken from Africa to England, Baartman was put on display where customers (including males and females) were able to touch her abnormal body parts. Eventually this display grew into the "crude stereotype of black femininity," Baartman's exploitation became the accepted stereotype for women of African descent including African American females (Brady 263). Although Baartman was of pure African descent her sexuality soon became a trait that Europeans likened to all shades of the African Diaspora, an indication that "white culture defines blackness and vice versa" (Fanon 104). Trethewey alludes to this representation of Ophelia's physical attributes when she notes "a glass or a pair of boots propped upon my back," a reference to the women in Bellocq's photographs with oversized buttocks (14). This remains a stereotype of African American culture which is difficult to correct.

Though she views her own birth as civilized, Ophelia can never escape her past or genealogy. She holds this view because of her white blood and her outwardly white appearance, yet because she is not fully white she must

pretend to be . . .
a white woman . . . until [she] catch[es] the eyes
of some stranger . . . and [she] must lower [herself to]
a *negress* again. (7)

The refusal of African Americans to look into the eyes of white people dates back to slavery and displays African American subservience, a role that Ophelia is willing to play. She "wait[s] to be / asked to speak" in the poem "Countess P--'s Advice for New Girls," then she "lets him see whatever / he [Bellocq] needs" (11). She adheres to this idea of African American subservience and describes herself as the "grinning *nigger*" in "April 1911" (23). By her grin Ophelia indicates that she is tolerating something unpleasant without complaint, Trethewey never gives Ophelia the strength to not feel subservient to white men.

Trethewey also fails in her attempts to "participate in the tradition of recovering mythic female figures denied a voice" (Debo 202). Although Debo claims Ophelia is given a voice with which to "recount lost American history," the poems never go beyond those historical scripts (202). Slavery is not lost and its memory will never be erased from history, yet Trethewey rehearses it again without the liberation of her character. Though Ophelia is not a slave she is plagued by the effects of slavery and by extension she becomes a sex slave. The allusions to slavery begin early on in the book, specifically in the poem "January 1911," when Ophelia says "my labor is my own / . . . I have bought my mother" (15).

Given that it was common for masters to rape “slave women [because they] were property” (Pilgrim), Ophelia is no more free than her mother had been as a slave. Trethewey also paints this picture through the lines:

Or I am back at the farm store
The man leaning over me, pinching
The tiny buds of my new breasts,
Sneering, calling me womanish
As I stare at the lines in the floor
Until they blur into one smooth path
Leading away from that place—
I am then nothing
But the light I see behind my shut eyelids. (18-19)

This ending to the poem “February 1911” leaves Ophelia with a feeling of belittlement and she is never given a firmer sense of racial pride or identity throughout the entirety of Trethewey’s collection.

Trethewey would have aided in the breakdown of the female hypersexual genealogy if she would have let the women of Storyville be “frozen in time, forever about to speak” (Debo 203). These cut and dry images would have ultimately given way to their own voice. Because they are stiff, sociological and uninviting, these images would tell individual stories to male viewers and not awaken the past. As Debo notes, “Trethewey creates a composite character as the volume’s primary persona and uses her to envision the aspects of her life that transcend the written histories and recorded images” (201), but this usage of one underdeveloped character does not transcend history but instead reverts back to history and digs up old bones. Photographs and printed images are two of the most powerful tools used to record history. Left alone, without the flawed interpretation of a poet like Trethewey, these images from the past are truly worth a thousand words.

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