The Robert A. Schanke Award-Winning Essay Whispers from a Silent Past: Inspiration and Memory in Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*

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Whispers from a Silent Past

Inspiration and Memory in Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*

—CHANDRA OWENBY HOPKINS

The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet.
WALTER BENJAMIN, *ON THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY*

Some names shall deck the page of history as it is written on stone.
Some will not.
NATASHA TRETHEWEY, *NATIVE GUARD*

As part of the National Civil War Project, in the fall of 2014 the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia, partnered with former US Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey to stage her Pulitzer Prize–winning collection of poetry, *Native Guard*.[1] Inspired by her youth as the child of a then-illegal marriage between her black mother and white father, Trethewey fuses autobiography with historical meditation on a Civil War soldier's experiences in the first African American Union troop. *Native Guard* has been called "a play, a poetry reading, an art installation, a film, a diorama and an immersive experience for the audience."[2] "Theatrical installation" may come closest to defining Trethewey's stage work, which defies traditional categorization. Trethewey was born on the hundredth anniversary of the

Civil War's end, and her poetry in performance offers a wellspring for reshaping interactions in the contemporary southern United States.

Employing Walter Benjamin's image of the angel of history as an analytical touchstone, I engage the tension at play in the first full staging of *Native Guard* at the Alliance Theatre between personal and collective history, text and stage.[3] Similarly, I draw on Hans-Thies Lehmann's exploration of postdramatic theatre to parse the transition of poetic voice to fixed historical subjectivity when adapted for the stage despite multivalent staging techniques. Moving from historical event to author, performer, and audience, I ask: How might Trethewey's poetry-in-production work allow theatre scholars to reconsider the foundational dialectic of text-based theatre and its alchemical move from page to stage? What new categories for praxis and study are mobilized by theatrical installations that blend fact and fiction, hybridizing the individual and communal histories of race in the United States? From these questions, I propose that even as the stage performance uses the exact text from Trethewey's poems with words spoken, sung, and projected, including the beautifully sparse dedication, "For my mother, in memory," the performance is fundamentally multivocal and in this aural plurality the power of historical question and discovery is unleashed.[4] What start as Trethewey's painful personal reflections become echoes of a larger history of unwitnessed lives and forgotten deaths. In the fusion of poetry and play Trethewey's *Native Guard* offers a new medium for discovering the shared history that relentlessly shapes the present of the American South.

To understand this new approach to historical performativity, I first consider the source text of *Native Guard*, and then I examine Trethewey's fusion of familial memory with Southern history and the affective power of that collision in the Alliance Theatre's production. Three conflicts drive Trethewey's elegiac collection: race and the American South, the death of her mother, and what Trethewey calls the "historical amnesia" that has haunted the unmemorialized yet unforgotten black Union soldiers of the Louisiana Native Guards.[5] The collection begins with an opening poem, "Theories of Time and Space," and follows with parts one and three, which are primarily centered on Trethewey's life, and a middle section of four poems from a black Union soldier's imagined journal entries. Like the soldier she channels, Trethewey was born in the Deep South in Gulfport, Mississippi, on April 26, 1966, to Eric Trethewey and Gwendolyn Ann Turnbough. Trethewey's birth came one year before the US Supreme Court struck down antimiscegenation laws in *Loving v. Virginia*; her birth certificate, which lists her mother's race as "colored" and her father's as "Canadian," echoes the criminalized ontology to which she was born.[6]

Trethewey weaves the dangerous aftermath of her parent's union in

haunting terms within a collective Southern history scarred by war. She marks her own past, remembering the pejorative names she was called as a child and that the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in her family's yard. She binds the stories of these personal traumas to a larger Civil War history—including the experiences of a black soldier guarding Confederate prisoners of war at Fort Massachusetts on Ship Island, Mississippi. Her poetry creates original monuments that work to redress absences in history, a direct and defiant response to the overt Southern memorialization of the Confederacy to the extent that, as Trethewey has stated, "You might think the South actually won the war."[7] While Trethewey explores her experiences of being an outsider yet native of the South and the skewed relationship to the Civil War she grew up within, she problematizes the desire to sentence the South as the only site of erasure and willful forgetting. Trethewey asserts, especially her titular poem "Native Guard," that denial, amnesia, and willful rejection was not confined to the Confederacy. In the Alliance Theatre production the poem "Native Guard" was performed by actor Thomas Neal Antwon Ghant, who entered the theatre with the audience and sat in the house with his blue Union soldier's jacket draped over his arm, casual and calm, as if he were another audience member.[8] Ghant shared his reaction to this staging, commenting: "Since I was seated with the audience throughout the opening half of the show, I found a rare opportunity to get a hand on the pulse of the audience on what I call 'ground level.' I would USE that to charge my approach to the poetry each night."[9] Ghant began his performance of "The Native Guard" character from his position in the audience and later, from the stage, he shared the following:

> *June 1863*
> Some names shall deck the page of history
> as it is written on stone. Some will not.
> Yesterday, word came of colored troops, dead
> on the battlefield at Port Hudson; how
> General Banks was heard to say *I have*
> *no dead there*, and left them, unclaimed.[10]

The corporeality of performance connects present actor and audience bodies to those bodies condemned to disintegrate without burial. Their forgotten lives and unmemorialized war deaths are tied to their largely absent existence in our nation's memory of the Civil War.[11] Contemporary theatre that challenges text as the modus operandi of performance has, as Lehmann asserts, "the power to question and destabilize the spectator's construction of identity and the 'other.'"[12] Trethewey's text in performance troubles the discreet categories of

audience and performer, dead ancestors and living descendants, via her contextualization of her life within a larger Southern and US history. Through performance and the deliberate intention to create a shared theatre event including, for example, Ghant's provocative "ground level" process, traditional categories of temporal identities ("now" verses "then") and performative agents ("actor" verses "spectator") are dismantled.

Working with the National Civil War Project, noted choreographer Liz Lerman comments on this sesquicentennial of the war's end: "Every anniversary is an opportunity to reflect. Our Civil War was 150 years ago: What does it still mean? What is the aftermath? Where is the damage?"[13] The damage of the war is articulated explicitly through Trethewey's imagined black Union soldier's journal entries that when brought to the stage become a shared journey to understand the violent transformation of not only the war but also the ontological movement from enslaved to free, or what Saidiya Hartman has called "the burden of transformation."[14] To this end, Trethewey makes clear the connection between past historical trauma and present corporeality through the aftermath of the war in her own life and how it influenced her personal experiences as a multiracial child in the Deep South. This enduring legacy is made clear through performance. From the fundamental transition of what is read to what is heard from multiple voices on the stage, the performance shifts the personal, poetic voice of Trethewey's collection to the shared space of audience and performer, resulting in what Lehmann calls the "total text" of the theatre, a cocreated text forged jointly between actor and spectator. Interestingly, this performance of lived and imagined personal and national histories further illuminates the failure of words to capture experience and preserve memory. The death of Trethewey's mother and Trethewey's inability as a writer to understand that loss in words becomes a personal microcosm in performance of the larger failure of language to adequately honor historical trauma. January LaVoy, who narrated the performance in the role of "the Poet," used Trethewey's words to guide the audience through a performance that routinely questions the assumption that progress toward racial and social equity has been finished in the United States:

> The brochure in my room calls this
> *living history*. The brass plate on the door reads
> *Prissy's Room*. A window frames
> the river's crawl toward the Gulf. In my dream,
> the ghost of history lies down beside me,
> rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm.[15]

Sleeping in "Prissy's Room," the character of "the Poet" notices the unsettling repetitive cycle of race and history, and in her recognition she is joined with Benjamin's angel, who questions the "appearance of a chain of events" and sees instead the crushing weight of the "rubble-heap" before us.[16]

While other writers, such as playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, abstract the personal and interlace it with historical figures that loom large in America's collective consciousness, Trethewey grounds the failure of history to capture the truth of experience in the absolutely personal loss of her mother. Trethewey's experience of her murder at the hands of her mother's second husband is evoked in "Myth," the tenth poem of *Native Guard*: "I was asleep while you were dying. / It's as if you slipped through some rift, a hollow / I make between my slumber and my waking, / the Erebus I keep you in, still trying / not to let go. You'll be dead again tomorrow, / but in dreams you live."[17] Onstage, LaVoy finished these words, folded a small piece of paper she held in her hand, and walked downstage toward the audience to move a round rock and place the paper beneath it in the sand. She rested her hand reverentially on the top of the rock and paused with her gaze to the ground before standing again, transforming the rock to headstone and the stage to shared cemetery through her movement. Localized in the loss of the maternal figure on the page, on the stage the poet's personal grief spirals out into a collective loss of forgotten ancestors from the bloodiest war in US history; the performance, akin to the Southern Crescent train, winds its way through scrubby backwoods and port city alike in a shared Southern terrain of the past and present onstage and in the audience.

In the migration from page to stage and stage to audience, the greatest efficacy of the performance is its ability to create a transtemporal space that is inhabited and shared between performer and spectator, history and present. Lehmann urges: "Theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing *and* the spectating take place."[18] Upon entering the collective space of *Native Guard*, each audience member was handed an approximately four-by-two-inch brown cardboard memory tag that had been stamped with a typewriter-like font that read "Remember." The tag also bore a small brass safety pin that audience members were encouraged to use to attach their tag to the raw burlap that wrapped the theatre's walls. The night I saw the performance, tags had been hung across the walls, a great many of them creeping across the back wall of the stage. The set was open to the modified three-quarter thrust architecture of the Alliance's black box theatre with sand, rocks, thin wooden panels, and a shallow pool of water evoking an exterior that was a suggestive, yet neither Georgia nor

Mississippi, setting.[19] The largest concentration of sand was against the back wall of the space, which meant that when the audience moved to hang their memory tags, their feet sunk in and transformed the stage floor's surface into one reminiscent of a sandy shore before the tide washes away the echoes of human traffic. The design of the theatre space, including the audience seating, theatre walls, and open stage areas, reinforced the collectivity of shared experience between not only performer and spectator, as Lehmann articulates, but also actors and audience members as belonging to the same communities, including Atlanta, the South, and the United States.

To complement the open set, the traditional theatre audience seating had also been intentionally changed to include the spectators in the world of the performance. Chairs—dining room, kitchen, desk, and porch—unified only through their wooden materiality formed the audience seating and evoked something not of home or comfort but of the angel's uncanny pile-up of shared history. The chairs alone sparked a mental dialogue born of the fusion of the material and immaterial: "Didn't my grandmother have a lattice-backed chair like that once? The seat was small and hard like this one." Invited to sit in chairs that plausibly, presumably, were once in someone else's home and to "write a *name*, a *moment*, or an *idea* that you feel needs to be memorialized" and pin them to the theatre's walls, the audience became cocreator in the total text of *Native Guard*.[20] Rather than feeling comforted by sitting in someone's old chair or reading the walls of memories that included phrases such as "Remember butterscotch," "Remember July 4th, the first time he said he loved me," and the names, birth, and death dates of others, the performance space made manifest the impermanence of meaning and impossibility of memory, or what whispers from Trethewey's text: "That home-going road's always full of holes."[21] The prompt to add memories to the physical walls of the theatre materialized the evocative power of the performance to catalyze memory and affect the audience. While the performers never removed and read the memory tags onstage, the audience's shared memories became the physical backdrop for the action onstage, making an explicit and reciprocal bond between audience imprint on the space and the space's impact on the audience.

On the night I participated in the performance, Atlanta as troubled homeplace was central in the audience/performer discussion that followed the show. For what the Alliance titled "Act 2," audience members were given a drink ticket with their programs before the show and encouraged in the curtain speech and printed program to stay after the performance and "gather with a complimentary beverage to share your experience of the piece."[22] *Native Guard* director and Alliance Artistic Director Susan V. Booth explained in her program note to the

audience: "Rather than bending the poetry to fit the theatrical form, we must figure out how to bend the theatrical form to serve the poetry. Act 1 is our attempt. In Act 2, we're hoping you'll tell us how we did."[23] I was corrected when I asked a staff member I assumed to be the House Manager about the "talkback" after the show: "It's not a talkback, it's a conversation." While the goal of act 2 was to create an open conversation, a different community member of Atlanta in the arts, academia, local government, or business moderated the dialogue each night as a "Guest Speaker." Audience members were asked by the guest speaker to speak up and state their name and where they were from before sharing their comment or question. The cast, including the vocalist and jazz pianist who provided preshow and transition music throughout the performance, changed out of costume and sat together in the bank of seats on the left side of the house among the audience.

Audience comments mirrored Trethewey's journey to understand her home, including shock over the fact that as middle-aged Atlantans they could remember that the film *Gone with the Wind* was watched in public school history courses as a factual account of the Civil War. This baffling treatment of shared history was discussed as laughable yet equally damaging in the perpetuation of a lie born from the justification of slavery as "good for them." These memories underscored the onstage performance of Trethewey's nineteenth poem, "Southern History," that preceded the conversation:

> *Before the war, they were happy*, he said,
> quoting our textbook. (This was senior-year
> history class.) *The slaves were clothed, fed,*
> *and better off under a master's care.*
> I watched the words blur on the page. No one
> raised a hand, disagreed. Not even me.[24]

Echoing Trethewey, perhaps the most repeated phrase during the audience conversation was, "I can remember." Inspired by a performance born of personal and collective histories, the audience moved away from typical talkback questions such as how long the cast rehearsed or how they went about creating their characters and instead engaged fully in a shared dialogue that was much more focused on one another as spectator witnesses than on the actors' process to create "the play."

If act 1 brought the lost histories of black Union soldiers' lives and deaths to audience awareness, the generative power of *Native Guard* to reach beyond the page and stage to create change came in act 2. Armed with complimentary cups of wine, soda, or water, black and white audience members spoke

up and articulated the space between intention and reality in their attempts to live peacefully in the same phoenix city that was nearly obliterated as it fell to Union General Sherman following the 1864 Battle of Jonesborough. When I asked Booth why "the production team created the 'Act II' audience conversation part of the evening," she replied: "What we *didn't* want to create was a didactic post show discussion in which experts told us what we'd just seen. The notion was to create a shared space in which act one was a prompt and act two was a dialogue—and that both had equal weight and equal pride of place."[25] The ability of the audience to talk honestly about race and class relations and their own gaps in knowledge and understanding was best articulated by Ghant, the actor who embodied the memory of the Union solider. He shared, "I felt most nights the audience was on board with me and the Native Guards [sic] journey, because I think all of us could relate to a certain level of betrayal in the things we believe. How do we deal with that?"[26] As the onstage channel for Trethewey's imagined words of the Native Guard, Ghant made it his goal to not create a solitary character or "one GUY" but to bring to the audience "more like a spiritual representation of the Guard."[27] By creating a collective representation of many men rather than a singular Civil War–era character, Ghant's acting process took up the larger goal of dismantling "us" versus "them" categorical definitions that Trethewey engages in her writing on the Native Guard.

After *Native Guard* closed on October 19, 2014, I asked the Patron Services Manager of the Alliance, Shana Orr, what became of the memory tags that audience members had attached to the walls of the theatre. I was told, "Our props manager has them in storage."[28] It is uncertain whether the tags will stay stacked on a rarely touched shelf in props storage or whether they will be shared and displayed through the Atlanta History Center, as I was told they would be after act 2 concluded the night I participated in *Native Guard*. As tiny phenomenological emblems of the performance apparatus itself, the tags, like the pages of the Native Guard's journal, link us to ancestors both remembered and forgotten. Staging the living present of racial identity in the South *in dialogue with* the Civil War past, rather than restaging an attempt at authentic Civil War–era characters, offers the most dialectic for change and challenge in the contemporary Deep South in which Trethewey, Ghant, Booth, and the audience of *Native Guard* all live. Out of the sea of spoken and written vows of "I remember," *Native Guard* becomes a cocreated text or what Booth calls "poetry in motion," offering a template for creating community-based theatre events that engage the audience in a space not to watch quietly and leave on separate paths but to articulate together a new understanding of living peacefully one hundred and fifty years after the American Civil War.[29]

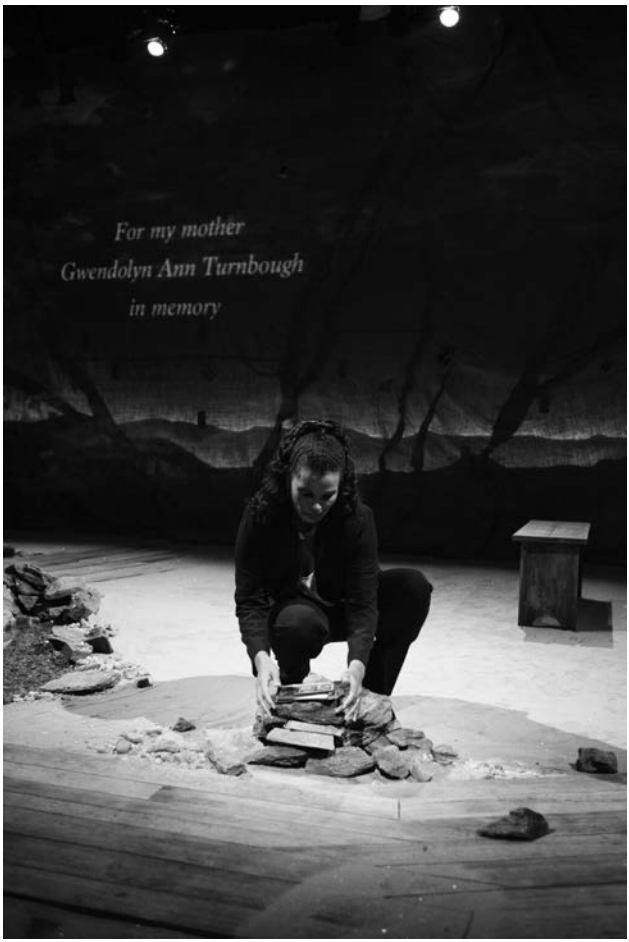

Figure 1. "For my mother" dedication with January LaVoy as the character of the Narrator in the September 26–October 19, 2014, Alliance Theatre production of *Native Guard*. Photo by Greg Mooney. Courtesy of the Alliance Theatre.

Figure 2. Thomas Neal Antwon Ghant as the character of the Native Guard in the Alliance Theatre's *Native Guard*. Photo by Greg Mooney. Courtesy of the Alliance Theatre.

Figure 3. January LaVoy in the Alliance Theatre's *Native Guard*. Photo by Greg Mooney. Courtesy of the Alliance Theatre.

Figure 4. Vocalist Nicole Banks Long in the audience of the Alliance Theatre's *Native Guard*. Photo by Greg Mooney. Courtesy of the Alliance Theatre.

Figure 5. January LaVoy in the Alliance Theatre's *Native Guard*, with set design by Anne Patterson and projection design by Adam Larsen. Photo by Greg Mooney. Courtesy of the Alliance Theatre.

Figure 6. "Southern History" moment with January LaVoy in the Alliance Theatre's *Native Guard*. Photo by Greg Mooney. Courtesy of the Alliance Theatre.

Figure 7. Thomas Neal Antwon Ghant in the Alliance Theatre's *Native Guard*. Photo by Greg Mooney. Courtesy of the Alliance Theatre.

Notes

This paper is the Robert A. Schanke Award-Winning Essay, as presented at the annual Mid-America Theatre Conference, March 2015, in Kansas City.

1. Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006). Epigraph quote on page 28. Before making it to Alliance's Hertz Stage, *Native Guard* was first developed as a stage performance with support from the Playwriting Center of Theater Emory at Emory University, where Trethewey is the Robert W. Woodruff Professor of English and Creative Writing. The world premiere was part of the National Civil War Project, which involved the development of twelve original theatrical pieces, four of these works being completed through partnerships between higher education institutions and professional theatres, including Emory and the Alliance; Harvard and the American Repertory Theater; George Washington University and Arena Stage; and the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center and Center Stage.
2. Collin Kelley, "Theatre Review: 'Native Guard' at Alliance Theatre," *Atlanta INtown*, October 7, 2014.
3. Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* (New York: Classic Books America, 2009), 11.
4. See photograph 1 in Image Appendix following text. All images courtesy of the Alliance Theatre.
5. Charles McGrath, "New Laureate Looks Deep Into Memory," *New York Times*, June 6, 2012.
6. Ibid.
7. Deborah Solomon, "Native Daughter: Questions for Natasha Trethewey," *New York Times Magazine*, May 13, 2007.
8. See photograph 2 in Image Appendix following text.
9. Neal Ghant, "Thoughts on Native Guard." E-mail to author, February 8, 2015. Capitalization in original.
10. Trethewey, "Native Guard," 28. Italics in original.
11. For an excellent examination of how race historically shaped the ways in which America remembered its Civil War, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
12. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.
13. "About the National Civil War Project," *National Civil War Project*. n.d. Web. http://www.civilwarproject.org (accessed January 8, 2015).
14. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 132.
15. Trethewey, "Pilgrimage," 20. See photograph 3 in Image Appendix following text.
16. Benjamin, Walter, *On the Concept of History* (New York: Classic Books America, 2009), 11.
17. Trethewey, "Myth," 14.
18. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 17. Italics in original. See photograph 4 in Image Appendix following text.

19. See photograph 5 in Image Appendix following text.
20. "Remember," *Native Guard* Program. n.d., 18. Italics in original.
21. Trethewey, "Graveyard Blues," 8.
22. "Native Guard Act 2," *Native Guard* Program. n.d., 17.
23. Susan V. Booth, "Between Us," *Native Guard* Program. n.d., 7.
24. Trethewey, "Southern History," 38. See photograph 6 in Image Appendix following text.
25. Susan V. Booth, "Act II of Native Guard," E-mail to author. February 4, 2015.
26. Neal Ghant, "Thoughts on Native Guard," E-mail to author. February 8, 2015. See photograph 7 in Image Appendix following text.
27. Ibid. Ghant, Neal. "Thoughts on Native Guard."
28. Shana Orr, "Memory Tags Question," E-mail to Author. February 7, 2015.
29. Booth, "Between Us," *Native Guard* Program. n.d., 7.