

JERZY KAMIONOWSKI¹

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University of Białystok, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3515-8751>

On “roots, pollution, and ... the [im]purity of lineage”: Race in Natasha Trethewey’s *Thrall*

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to explore how Natasha Trethewey—arguably one of the most important contemporary American poets and a mixed-race person—confronts the issue of race on various, though arguably inseparable, levels: personal, linguistic, and one pertaining to the history of humanity and the American nation. I operate within the frame of recent conceptualizations of race as a phenomenon rationalized by racism, following the poet’s trajectory present in her ekphrastic poems from *Thrall*—i.e., from roots of race represented in European visual arts (“Miracle of the Black Leg”) to its pollution and a question of (im)purity of lineage (“Taxonomy” and “Enlightenment”). At the same time, the article demonstrates how race, although it has been scientifically proven not to exist, is constituted by racism, to which it is a necessary excuse and alibi.

Keywords: black poetry, ekphrasis, mixed-race studies, Natasha Trethewey, race, racism

In critical studies of race, the attempts to overcome the negative burden of the past include Rachel Afi Quinn’s category of the “magic mulatto” and Trey Ellis’s concept of the “cultural mulatto.” The former term refers to the promotion of an ultra-positive image of a mixed race person—Quinn describes the “magic mulatto” as a “well-educated, economically privileged and aesthetically-pleasing person, whose hybrid cultural and racial identity makes him or her highly consumable and socially acceptable within a white dominant mainstream” (Pereira 126).² As Malin Pereira points out, Quinn proves that the “magic mulatto” does not really subvert or challenge American race-cum-class ideology, as it complies with the existing mainstream standards of beauty and social attractiveness. Nevertheless, this term can be applied to Natasha Trethewey, whose public image, judging by her photographs on the back covers of her four volumes of poetry and the front cover of the Natasha Trethewey special issue of *The Southern Quarterly*, is

¹ Address for correspondence: University of Białystok, Faculty of Philology, Department of Anglophone Literatures, Pl. NZS 1, 15-420 Białystok, Poland. E-mail: j.kamionowski@uwb.edu.pl

² Quinn, R. A.: *From Tragic Mulatto to Magic Mulatto: Mixed Race Aesthetics and Exceptionalism in MAVIN Magazine*. 2013. Unpublished essay quoted by Pereira, *ibid.*, p. 126.

intentionally pleasing and ‘aesthetically correct’. Yet, even though the former US Poet Laureate can be characterized by the same adjectives as those used by Quinn in her definition of the “magic mulatto,” there is much more to it than that in her poetic persona, who may be more precisely classified as a “cultural mulatto,” described by Ellis as a person

educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures [who] can also navigate easily in the white world . . . We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white or black people... Today’s cultural mulattoes echo those ‘tragic mulattoes’ critic Sterling Brown wrote about in the Thirties only when they too forget they are wholly black. (235)

Arguably, cultural mulattoism represents not a rejection but an extension of one’s blackness, and in this way positively evaluates impurity. In this case, blackness is not a legal necessity/limitation or burden, which stigmatizes socially and marginalizes culturally, but an asset and advantage in the analysis and comprehension of not only American culture and history. Such a re-evaluation of blackness as a quintessentially positive component of a mixed-race identity is also emphasized in the term “mulattoesque blackness,” applied to Trethewey’s work by Michelle Elam (21), who used it to pinpoint the nature of the poet’s endeavors to reclaim black history and culture as an indispensable part of American national heritage. Moreover, this modification of Trethewey’s persona from an adult-child to a mature black mulatto makes it possible for her to overcome the personal experience of race/racism (as documented for example by such poems as “White Lies,” “Southern Gothic,” “My Mother Dreams Another Country,” “Southern History” or “Incident”), and move on to writing much more analytical ekphrastic poems, in which she dives much more deeply into the phenomenon of race to understand it and expose the role it plays in supporting racism.

Undeniably, race has always been one of the central issues that Trethewey explored in her poetry, and it dominated her fourth volume *Thrall*. I am going to investigate these explorations in three of her poems—“Miracle of the Black Leg,” “Taxonomy,” and “Enlightenment” to demonstrate that the poet’s intuition had brought her to a position pertaining to race which overlaps to a great extent with Donna J. Haraway’s anxieties concerning the phenomenon, and a claim made by W. J. T. Mitchell, who argues that race is in a sense necessary for racism as its perversive justification and rationalization. That is why we can witness its active presence in contemporary America despite the fact that race, understood as a biological construct in the material world, has been discredited and eliminated from the discourse by contemporary scholars. Nonetheless, before moving on to the analyses of particular poems, with an emphasis on the notion of race, there is a need to cursorily introduce and briefly discuss the present debate on the concept of race, as it confronts us with its complexity, uncovering the phenomenon as a paradox and conundrum. That conundrum is, for instance, well-documented in a book *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*

by a sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who explores various forms of “the strange enigma of race in contemporary America” (1).

Similarly, race has always been both a controversial and unavoidable issue in the United States. The philosophical and sociological analyses of its functioning in American history and the influence it has had on the country’s social dynamics suggest that race is not so much a biological reality as a pragmatic ideological construct that has allowed the maintenance of asymmetrical power relations between white Americans and the so-called “people of color,” particularly African Americans. Since Antony Appiah’s breakthrough essay on the illusion of race, published in 1985, which contains a famous statement that “[t]he truth is there are no races” (35) in the American scholarly race discourse, an emphasis has been put on conceptualizing it as an illusory phenomenon, the concept that eliminates the reality of race. Appiah’s statement brought an end to a dominant position of a standpoint labelled “*essentialism*” in Linda M. Alcoff’s nomenclature, which had held a position that race is “an elemental category of identity with explanatory power” (182); in consequence, this concept of race made it possible to pinpoint in “[m]embers of racial groups” some biological and characterological features (for instance *essentialism* is responsible for upholding a stereotypical perception of black people as cunning, lazy and stupid) as well as to identify “a set of [their] political interests, and a historical destiny” (182). By negating this argumentation with the discoveries of modern science, not only did Appiah discredit the hegemonic theory of race (in which it is taken for granted as something visible, thus obvious), but also shifted race from the field of nature into that of language.

Thus, race has become an ideological (i.e., discursive and artificial) construct located in culture. For that reason, Joshua Glasgow recommends a replacement of the term “race” with “race*,” where the asterisk signals the ultimate shift of the conceptual status of the term away from biology to the realm of the socio-cultural construction, from the natural to the artificial. Yet, as Mitchell acutely points out, “in eliminating biological discourse completely, . . . reconstructivism rejects the key element of genealogy and reproduction, the notion of race as constituted by ‘bloodlines’ as well as by body types” (188). That a thorough cancellation of biological features in the discourse on race would be a grave mistake is testified to, for example, by such researchers as Howard Winant, Naomi Zack, and Arun Saldanha. In the words of Saldanha, he himself, together with the other two scholars, is a practitioner of a “materialist ontology of race,” which grants that “there *are* phenotypical differences” whose “social force depends on culture, economics, and the law” (9).

Mitchell’s standpoint on the matter, which includes the biological underpinnings of race, seems to come out of the anxiety and uncertainty pertaining to a conceptualization of race that permeates Donna J. Haraway’s reflections. Haraway notices the dubiousness and simultaneous stubbornness of race as an active force in contemporary America, and observes that race

is a fracturing trauma in the body politic of the nation—and in the mortal bodies of its people.

. . . Race is a peculiar kind of object of knowledge and practice. The meanings of the word are

unstable and protean; the status of the word's referent has wobbled—and still wobbles—from being considered real and rooted in the natural, physical body to being considered illusory and utterly socially constructed. ... Race, like nature and sex, is replete with all the rituals of guilt and innocence in the stories of nation, family, and species. Race, like nature, is about roots, pollution, and origins. Race, like sex, is about the purity of lineage. (213)

Thus, according to Haraway, race should be perceived as “the drama of inheritance of bodies, property, and stories” (213). As such, it has received much attention from writers of fiction and poets in the United States, both black and white, who have tackled it directly or reflected symbolically, and understood it as an essential component of a group identity or deconstructed it to expose its arbitrariness and oppressive nature. Toni Morrison, in her book-length essay entitled *Playing in the Dark*, observes that until very recently, “the readers of virtually all of American [literature] have been positioned as white” (xii). She is interested in finding out the answer to and explore the question that reads: “What does positing one's writerly self, in the wholly racialized society that is the United States, as unraced and all others as raced entail? What happened to the literary imagination of a black author who is at some level always conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be ‘universal’ or race-free?” (xii). And that there is nothing like freedom from race or the universality of whiteness-as-race is proven by Mitchell in his highly sophisticated conceptualization of the presence of race in social interactions between black and white people in America today. Mitchell's point of departure is an observation that on the one hand “[t]he idea that racial identity corresponds to some real substance in the physical world is generally understood to be a fallacy,” whereas on the other hand “[r]acism persists. Why?” (xi). To put it in other words, how and why something that does not exist in reality can have such a strong influence on social interaction?

The answer to the question posited by Mitchell, nevertheless, lies at the nexus of the physical materiality of the bodies (i.e., the material reality in which the bodies act or are objects of violent actions) and in the representation of the physical world in terms of Lacan's modified triad of “psychological and semiotic ‘registers’” (16) (the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real), where racism (*nota bene* not race) is located in the Real (i.e., in the unspeakable wild zone of trauma). And this—as race is “constructed out of the Symbolic and the Imaginary”—leaves race out of Lacan's scheme. As a result, the critic adds a fourth sphere to the scheme profoundly altering it, a sphere that he identifies as “Reality,” where “racism is the brute fact, the bodily reality, and race is a derivative term, devised either as an imaginary cause for the effects of racism or as an attempt to provide a rational explanation, a ‘realistic picture’ and diagnosis of this mysterious syndrome known as racism” (19). The significant linguistic operation of changing our expectations concerning derivation proposed by Mitchell allows him to draw a conclusion that “[r]ace is not the cause of racism, but its excuse, alibi, explanation, or reaction formation” (19).

As has been said above in the chronological and brief summarization of the present functioning of the category of race, since it was demasked as not a natural phenomenon but a discursive/

artificial construct, race still has the power to affect social interactions between whites and blacks in the United States. As upheld by Mitchell, its function is to provide a rationalization to racism, be it in the form of microaggressions, institutional discrimination, or brutal acts of open violence in present-day America. Still, it also has remained a vital subject matter for American writers, Trethewey among them, who discuss, dissect, and deconstruct race in their works as both a personal experience and a cultural phenomenon that affects the entire population.

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Natasha Trethewey's writerly method in exploring the phenomenon of race and her capability to explore it profoundly seems to be a striking example of the realization of Jonathan Holden's prediction made in 1991. The critic claimed that American poetry, then trapped in a cul-de-sac of self-referential elitism and experiments in language, must return to its traditional tasks from before the Modernist breakthrough. Holden maintains that

[t]he changes in American poetry will be in the domain of 'subject matter,' of content . . . ; and one could . . . almost predict what the subject matter will be. It will consist of the very material that [contemporary academic criticism] dismisses as the 'verse essay': 'discursiveness,' stories and ideas, many of them explicitly moral . . . – in sum didactic subject matter, together with imaginative rhetorical tactics to give this material dramatic force, without being preachy or pedantic. (59–60)

Holden advocates that in order to “enlarge the estate of [American] poetry,” poets should not remain locked in the ivory tower of words and demonstrate contempt for the needs of their potential readers, who, assumingly, “want poetry with a ‘message’” (60). Thus, despite the widespread poetic practice and universal opinion in the circles of academic guardians of literary quality that didacticism cancels poetry, there is, in Holden's view, a desire on the side of the readers for poetry that offers them guidance and moral instruction, as well as for poetry that tells humanly wise stories. Meeting both of those expectations leads to a reintegration of the poet with the community.

The author of *Thrall* is a poet who consistently defines herself as a member of her community, both at the local Southern and national levels, catering to the readers' demand for humanly wise poetry with a morally engaging message as its content. As pointed out already, among Trethewey's central subject matter and themes are the issues of race and racism, approached by her from the position of a mixed-race person, well-familiarized with race as a personal experience, a product of discourse, part of the American nation's/human history, and an excuse for racism. Those aspects of race frequently appear separately, each an object of reflection in the Poet Laureate's verse, but sometimes they become tightly interwoven, which points to their quintessential inseparability and interdependence.

For example, a poem entitled “Miracle of the Black Leg,” which consists of four ekphrastic sonnets written in blank verse, takes as its subject matter the myth of a miracle transplant,

and provides an analysis of how the motif of the black leg was transformed in Christian art in the period of two hundred years, i.e., from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century. Trethewey refers to several paintings that document the evolution of representation of the black donor and white recipient, who remain in a significant relationship, the evolution that begins with the absence of the black donor in the pictures, and goes on to representing him as dead, to finally making him alive like the white recipient. In the explanatory note that accompanies the poem, Trethewey mentions the titles of two scholarly books that helped her select the images she explores in “Miracle of the Black Leg,” and emphasizes the fact that “[r]epresentations of the myth appear in Greek narratives, in a Scottish poem, and in paintings and altarpieces in Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Portugal, Switzerland, France, and Belgium,” pointing out that the survival and circulation of the motif of the black leg over a long period of time was not a local but universally European phenomenon (81). At the same time, she refrains from naming specific artworks and artists. As acutely observed by Daniel Cross Turner, this strategy “deepens the thick intertextuality of the poem, lending it an elusive allusiveness as ‘version after version’ . . . of the myth gets transplanted across cultures as well as historical periods. . .” (110).

Nevertheless, the precision and accuracy of Trethewey’s descriptions of the artworks and her concentration on their details make it possible to identify them with a high degree of certainty. Chronologically, these are: *The Miraculous Transplantation of the Moor’s Leg* by Matteo di Pacino; Fra Angelico’s *The Miracle of the Black Leg*; Fernando del Rincon’s late 15th century *Miracle of the Black Leg*; and the relief of the same title from the Monastery of San Francisco in Valladolid, attributed to Isidro de Villoldo. Not only do these artists’ works on the miracle of the black leg document different stages of development of the myth, but they also have an additional function to play in Trethewey’s four-sonnet poem, as they provoke particular reflections and questions pertaining to race and racism that the poet does not abstain from making/asking. In this category we must place the word “always,” which appears several times in the sonnets, as well as the meta-comments Trethewey makes which emphasize the myth’s provoking character even today, such as: “Even now, it stays with us: when we mean to uncover / the truth, we dig, say *unearth*” (9); “For centuries / this is how the myth repeats: the miracle—in words / or wood or paint—is a record of thought” (10); “what knowledge haunts each body,/ what history, what phantom ache?” (11); as well as the sentences which close the last sonnet in the series and the series itself:

... How not to see it–

the men bound one to the other, symbiotic–
 one man rendered expendable, the other worthy
 of this sacrifice? In version after version, even
 when the Ethiopian isn’t there, the leg is a stand-in,
 a black modifier against the white body,
a piece cut off– as in the origin of the word *comma*:
 caesura in a story that’s still being written. (12)

The phrases quoted above talk about the survival of the myth until today and its discreet presence in the everyday practice of social interaction between black and white people, even though it is manifested differently, not necessarily through visual artworks. Moreover, at the end of the fourth sonnet there emerges an ironic or even bitterly sarcastic tone, when Trethewey says that the men are “bound one to the other” in “symbiotic” relationship as if parasitism, which we clearly deal with in the myth of the black leg, is qualitatively equal with symbiosis based on the mutual benefits of both organisms involved. In this case, the black man sacrifices his healthy limb (and life), although we do not know whether he does so out of goodwill. More probably, he is not consulted on the matter but falls into the category of an “expendable” supplicant or even a slave, who knows and accepts automatically with no reservations his own inferiority and a duty to help the white man. The assumed self-contempt of the black in the act of convincing himself (or merely taking it for granted) that the white recipient is “worthy of this sacrifice,” may be perceived as an example of a racist attitude which constitutes blackness as race.

But what else can be gleaned about racial attitudes and relations from the black leg myth? In the early paintings, “always / one man is healed, his sick limb replaced, / placed in the other man’s grave.” Two centuries later, however, “[b]oth men are alive in Villoldo’s carving. / In twinned relief, they hold the same posture, / the same pained face . . . ” (12). Nonetheless, despite their striking similarity, the vertical positioning of the white recipient and the black amputee leaves no doubt as to the hierarchy of colors implemented here, which follows suit the established in Europe meaning of colors, through which spoke, as Jean Devisse and Michel Mollat put it, “the Occidental prejudice, which considered blackness itself as being in essence evil, dangerous, and a sign of inferiority” (98). Indeed, the inferiority of the Ethiop and superiority of the white patient are reflected in the vertical encoding of both: “[t]he black man, on the floor, / holds his stump. Above him, the doctor retains / the patient’s arm as if to prevent him touching / the dark amendment of flesh” (12). In the earlier representations, the white man survives even though originally it was his gangrened leg that needed to be severed (and replaced), whereas the black man must die as a result of losing a healthy limb for the purpose of life-saving transplantation.

Still, the message communicated by the vertical symbolism remains the same: as Trethewey says in the third sonnet in the series, “[o]ne man always / low, in a grave or on the ground, the other / up high, closer to heaven” (11). The whole attitude shared by the artists, who produced various versions of the myth, does not escape the poet’s attention, as she registers how the black man’s inferiority is systematically emphasized in the paintings as a consequence of racism inscribed in the white gaze—through a desecration of his dead body; representing him as faceless, “featureless in a coffin” (11); dehumanizing the Ethiop as “merely a body” (11); and pointing out that he is ignored by the saint physicians or “relegated to the background” (Devissse and Mollat 230). It seems that a covert topic of the poem is how the race of a black man is constituted through a series of acts of racism, so carefully listed in Trethewey’s four sonnets.

Furthermore, the stubbornness of racial categories generated by racism is also present in the poem on the formal level. As already mentioned, “Miracle of the Black Leg” consists of four

sonnets, and the number four signifies material reality, its stability, durability, and permanence, like four seasons, four parts of the world, or four phases of the moon. Apparently, this structure of the poem enhances the morose truth that racism and race have always been with humanity, and are here to stay.

Similarly, the four poems written in free and blank verse, which comprise “Taxonomy,” are focused solely on race as it was represented in so-called *casta* paintings, a unique genre that appeared in the eighteenth century in New Spain (Mexico), and contained depiction of racial lineages (the *sistema de castas*). The subject of these paintings is the issue of race in the colonial context, which included racial intermarriage and children born out of such wedlock, or, as Charles Ford et al. put it:

[T]hese works, unlike any other genre of painting in Western art, deal directly and concretely with the visualization of racial categories within the colonial context of a broader racial discourse. As such, *casta* paintings resonate in various ways with modern sensibilities. . . . *Casta* paintings constitute a pivotal part in the formation of racial categories and how they were registered in Mexico. (246)

Yet, to make all racial categories visualized in the paintings, a painter had to produce a series of sixteen paintings to exhaust the list that appeared in the book of *castas*, which designated each of the *castas* in the linguistic terms. Trethewey, who uses the paintings by Juan Rodríguez Juárez, an artist from the beginning of the eighteenth century, reverses this process in “Taxonomy,” and transforms the visual back into the linguistic form again. Still, the poet retains the original Spanish titles of the paintings in three subsequent parts of her poem (“1. DE ESPANOL Y DE INDIA PRODUCE MESTISO”; “2. DE ESPANOL Y NEGRA PRODUCE MULATO”; “3. DE ESPANOL Y MESTIZA PRODUCE CASTIZA”), whereas the fourth part has a title in English (“4. THE BOOK OF CASTAS”). As we can see, Trethewey uses only two of the racial categories, which begin the sequence (i.e, mestiza, and castiza), from the whole system of sixteen, only to signal the direction of the vector of reproduction. Nevertheless, she confronts the reader with the linguistic complexity of racial lineages at the beginning of part 4, when the persona says:

Call it the catalog
of mixed bloods, or

the book of naught:
not Spaniard, not white, but

mulatto-returning-backwards (or
hold-yourself-in-midair) and

the *morisca*, the *lobo*, the *chino*,
sambo, *albino*, and

the *no-te-entiendo* – the
I don't understand you.

Guidebook to the colony,
 record of each crossed birth,

it is the typology of taint,
 of stain: blemish: sullyng spot:

that which can be purified,
 that which cannot . . . (24)

According to Thadious M. Davis, in part four of “Taxonomy,” Trethewey “deploys images from *casta* paintings . . . to raise issues about the consignment of mixed-race bodies to specified racial designations and racial taxonomies” (48). The critic notices the absurdity of the racial categories in the paintings, but, being not an art historian, does not give it full justice. As Ford et al. comment on the relation between the written list contained in the book of *castas* and the visual rendering it received in the form of paintings,

[t]he full written list of sixteen *castas* is essentially meaningless, and the terms become something that is identifiable only through the images themselves, the pictured bodies. The differences and distinctions implied by such names can only be imagined as substantial by a comparison of the figures in one painting with the other figures in the series. The *castas* therefore must be painted in a series, as seriation is crucial to their comprehension and thus is a defining element of the genre. In fact, one cannot think of the genre in terms of individual works. . . . The series begins with recognizable types in terms of both word and image (Spaniard, Indian, mestizo) so that the absurdities of the subsequent paintings become believable through their association with the known and recognizable. (248–249)

Nonetheless, Trethewey does seem to think of Juárez’s paintings “in terms of individual works,” as she chooses to analyze and interpret only three of the series. Apparently, it is not her purpose to trace the intricacies of various, even smallest, manifestations of race as they were depicted by the painters proficient in the patois of Mexico, and in this way recreate the eighteenth century’s obsession with grotesque aspects of the functioning of race in the legal system of New Spain. Condensation of the absurd terms and names in a few lines in part 4 of “Taxonomy” is apparently enough for her assumed purpose, which must be twofold: to cast

a new light on the American system of color, and to rethink her own position in the taxonomy and classification as a mixed-race person. Thus, for Natasha Trethewey looking at the paintings means almost looking in the mirror and reading out of it her own position in the narrative of race, which verges on the (im)purity of lineage.

Yet, the poet's sharp awareness of a personal aspect of the paintings does not mean that Trethewey takes it without reservations, as she combines the personal with the communal, and sees in the paintings "the mind / of the colony" (22) that establishes "the catalog / of mixed bloods" (24), which permits her to decode the castiza child as a fruit of the mother's "womb – / dark cradle / of mixed blood" (22). The title of the four-part poem ("Taxonomy") emphasizes a fundamental feature of any taxonomy, i.e., a need to order, systematize, classify, and name things so that they may be placed in particular groups. In case this purpose escaped a viewer's attention, casta paintings have it written on the canvas in "gold letters inscribing / an equation of blood—*this plus this equals this*" (16). Such a "contract with nature" (16) reads as an introduction to rudiments of eugenics, as the inscription leaves no doubt that two adults (a Spaniard and an Indian woman) can be certain that a sexual intercourse between them, if reproductively successful, will produce a mixed-race child—a mestizo. As a result both parents and the child lose their individuality, or to put it more precisely, their individuality is pushed into the background and becomes of secondary importance or even insignificant since they only represent some larger categories.

Hence, a mulatto boy who "was nothing: blank / canvas – before image or word," after receiving some categorical individualizing traits (i.e., a degree of color) does not become an individual since "a last brush stroke fixed him in his place" (21). As a result, he is merely an example specimen whose existence confirms and illustrates (as he is "fixed in his place") one of the racial categories, which cannot be erased or overcome. The racial divisions expressed by the casta paintings not only help to make the subsequent categories of race less abstract, as the categories become visible, but also set up a fixed hierarchy of racialized lives, the hierarchy that is fundamentally racist from the very beginning, as it excludes by the letter of the law any chance of upward social mobility.

It is interesting that the *casta* paintings refer to the free people rather than slaves, as according to Ford et al., "there is no overt reference to slavery," even though it is "in the condition of slavery that most interracial unions took place, that the first new people of the New World were begotten, and that subsequent intermarriages begot even more 'new people'" (249). Nonetheless, there is no representation of slavery itself in the paintings, since slavery and its social conditions are not the subject of the *castas*, in spite of the fact that "social hierarchy is an underlying part of the series." The subject of these paintings is the offspring of the sexual intercourse of two people of different races. Still, Natasha Trethewey introduces the topic of slavery very briefly, as if through the back door at the very end of part 1 of "Taxonomy":

The servant, still a child, cranes
 his neck, turns his face

up toward all of them. He is dark
 as history, origin of the word
 native: the weight of blood,
 a pale mistress on his back,

heavier every year. (18)

Trethewey's implementation of poetry for the purpose of arriving at a more complete concept of race and its relationship with racism which race's role is to validate, is welded with her positioning herself as a biracial person and poet, thrown 'body and discourse' into the complexity of Southern history and the production of race within American culture, a functioning of the one-drop rule included. As Jee Eu Kim acutely observes in her 2011 article:

The one-drop rule defined her as black, but she chose to develop a mixed-race identity that synthesizes blackness and whiteness. Her exploration of racial and regional identities culminates in *Native Guard*, where a self-conscious poet-speaker integrates all aspects of her identity and re-defines southern identity by reading both her personal history and a collective history of southern blacks through the central metaphor of miscegenation. (18)

Such a neatly interwoven combination of the personal, discursive, and historical complexities of race is provided in another ekphrastic poem entitled "Enlightenment," where a brief description of the Thomas Jefferson portrait at Monticello³ serves as the point of departure for deconstructing the issue of race as it has functioned in the United States ever since. Trethewey begins the poem by drawing our attention to a contrast between Jefferson's forehead "white with illumination," and his face "in shadow, / darkened," which contrasts "his bright knowledge" with "its dark subtext" (68) that "[b]y 1805" (i.e., the year when the portrait was painted) Jefferson "was already linked to an affair / with his slave." The verb "linked" suggests that back in 1805 there were already speculations about Jefferson's sexual relationship with his slave Sally Hemings, who gave birth to six children by him. And they have remained speculations since he never admitted to a relationship with her by not making any commentary on the matter, which was widely interpreted by historians as a complete denial of their affair. Thus, a contrast between a bright light of knowledge and the darkness of its subtext has remained maintained,

3 The painting referred to in the poem is the portrait of Thomas Jefferson from 1805, painted by Gilbert Stuart. The portrait is on permanent display at Monticello, and can be seen on the Monticello official website page: <http://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/jefferson-portrait-gilbert-stuart-painting>

and became a pretext to explore other contradictions readily explained by the poet's white father, who was fascinated with Thomas Jefferson:

The first time I saw the painting, I listened
as my father explained the contradictions:

how Jefferson hated slavery, though – *out*
of necessity, my father said – had to own
slaves; that his moral philosophy meant

he could not have fathered those children:
would have been impossible, my father said. (68–69)

The contradictions around Jefferson were so blatant that the poet's father put all his rhetorical talent into clarifying to his black daughter how come that Jefferson had slaves (despite hating slavery), and why his "moral philosophy" forbade him to have children with a slave. Yet, the oversimplified arguments turn into what I call *racist mansplaining*, as Eric Trethewey not only speaks to his daughter from the position of self-granted authority (as father, an adult, and man), but also as a *white* man talking to a *black* girl, using this privileged position. As a result, Natasha is positioned at the receiving end of his argumentation, which is based on sexism buttressed by unconscious racism. Especially that his eagerness to defend Jefferson's reputation is related to Eric's need to conceal the fact that, as Natasha phrases it, "Jefferson's words made flesh in [her] flesh":

the improvement of the blacks in body
and mind, in the first instance of their mixture
with the whites – or that my father could believe

he's made me *better*. . . (70, emphasis in the original)

The words in italics in the quote above come from Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, where, among other things, he justifies white supremacy, which, translated into a father-daughter relationship, gives Eric a conviction that he "made [her] better". Even though the one-drop rule makes her legally black, in actual fact to him she is a mixed-race child "*in body / and mind*," which means an "*improvement of the black*"; a word "improvement" used willingly and with certainty by one of the intellectual architects of the Enlightenment—a privileged white man holding power, and hence a law maker and definer.

In an interview with Rosemary Magee, Trethewey speaks about a need to revise Jefferson's moral heritage pertaining to his concepts of race and slavery on personal level, which affected

public thinking about both concepts. The poet mentions a “sentence in a letter by [him] that scholars in many ways have intentionally left out,” a sentence which puts in a fundamentally different light “his decision to keep slaves” and preempts the “out of necessity” excuse. As Trethewey points out, it “became quite a money-making venture that made him think, ‘Maybe I should keep them instead.’ That changes the narrative of how we’ve thought about his being troubled about slavery” (Hall 27).

But, as the quotation above from Trethewey’s “Enlightenment” demonstrates, there is also a strong personal, even intimate aspect in her revising of Jefferson’s influence—the possibility that her white father, being so fascinated with Jefferson as a moral hero, might have perceived his mixed-race daughter in racist terms. Gaining this awareness becomes equal to the poet’s personal enlightenment. Thus, as she tells Magee, the debates about Jefferson, which she had with her father for years, were both about race in the United States and about the two of them: black daughter and white father, as those things are inseparable.

Still, the question of (im)purity of lineage does not end here in Trethewey’s poem. She introduces her and her father’s second visit to Monticello years later, at a different moment in terms of perception of race in American culture:

Now, we take in how much has changed:
talk of Sally Hemings, someone asking,

How white was she? – parsing the fractions
as if to name what made her worthy
of Jefferson’s attentions: a near-white,

quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave. (70–71)

The intimate relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings turns out to be not a taboo anymore, but becomes part of the official history as the Monticello guide tells it to the visitors. Yet instinctive racism is located-cum-barely-concealed in the language used to address the question of Hemings’s identity, the language which draws on the distinctions that are rooted in the color line thinking and the one-drop rule. The question asked about her by a visitor (i.e., “*How white was she?*” 70) is immediately decoded by the poet, who points out that it may have expressed a hope that Hemings was “a near white, / quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave” (70–71). Clearly, in the eyes of the visitor / an average American, compared to Hemings’s “near white[ness],” “a plain black slave” must always stay inferior; and this very distinction made Hemings “worthy / of Jefferson’s attentions” (70). Thus, even if we take into consideration the fact that the result of these attentions were six children they produced, the astonishment it may cause (as according to Eric Trethewey, “*it would have been impossible,*” 69) is reduced and minimized, like the question of impurity of lineage itself.

Reading Trethewey's ekphrastic poems from her fourth volume, *Thrall*, makes us aware of how complex, multilayered, artificial, and tabooed the issue of race has always been. It also confronts the reader with the question of how it is possible that race, even though it is proven not to exist in the material sense of the word, exercises such a strong influence on social reality, be it in Renaissance Europe, New Spain during the Enlightenment, and the early United States. Trethewey's unique mixed-race perspective equips her with sharp tools with which to revise and deconstruct the category of race and to expose the paradoxes of its functioning in American culture on various levels—personal, discursive, and historical, which turn out to be mutually complementary and inseparable. The insightfulness of Trethewey's observations, especially in her ekphrastic poems from *Thrall*, together with her formal discipline and originality, make her work both aesthetically and morally engaging.

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Jerzy Kamionowski is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Białystok. He teaches history of English literature and courses on feminist and African American literary theory and practice at the University of Białystok. He is the author of *Głosy z "dzikiej strefy"* (*Voices from the "Wild Zone"*) (2011) on the poetry of three women writers of the Black Arts Movement generation: Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Audre Lorde. He has published articles on women and African American writers and postmodernist novelists, often focusing on such issues as attitudes to literary and cultural tradition, the question of identity, and the ethical value of transgression. He also co-edited three volumes of critical essays on American women poets: *Piękniejszy dom od Prozy* (*A Fairer House than Prose*) (2005), *O wiele więcej Okien* (*More numerous of Windows*) (2008), and *Drzwi szerzej Otworzyć* (*Superior – for Doors*) (2011).