

# The Dissolution of Racial Boundaries

## Colonial Diction and Mixed-Race Representations in Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall*

Juliann Knaus

### Abstract

As the field of mixed-race studies continues to expand, my article adds to this growth by analyzing the representation of mixed-race children in Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall* in relation to the corresponding Mexican *casta* paintings she refers to. I explore how Trethewey uses diction and etymology in *Thrall* by performing close readings of her Mexican *casta* painting poems. Throughout my analysis, I pay special attention to how aspects of knowledge and colonialism affect the portrayal of these mixed-race offspring. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that Trethewey skillfully uses diction and etymology to emphasize the relationship between knowledge and power, particularly with regard to the representation of mixed-race people in society. Trethewey intertwines mixed-race representation and experiences that seem disparate—her poems cross geographical, temporal, and spatial boundaries—in order to illustrate how mixed-race peoples' positioning and representation in society often transcends such boundaries while additionally critically assessing power dynamics controlling said representation. Accordingly, by closely examining the representation of mixed-race people and miscegenation in art and poetry, this article sheds a new light on how meaning can be developed between races and cultures and stresses how colonialism and knowledge can be connected to contextualizing difference across time and space.

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# The Dissolution of Racial Boundaries

## Colonial Diction and Mixed-Race Representations in Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall*

Juliann Knaus

Former two-term U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey's poetry is abound with racial commentary from a marginalized perspective. According to Malin Pereira, Trethewey "sees herself as an advocate for blacks and maintains a strong identification with black culture and black people" and "assumes an activist role in relation to the erasure of blacks in Southern history."<sup>1</sup> This advocacy for (Southern) black culture becomes especially apparent in Trethewey's poetry collections, in which she claims an active role in telling the stories of people who have not always been listened to. History has typically been written through a hegemonic white male perspective; therefore, by writing about otherwise marginalized populations, Trethewey provides an outlet for a history left untold. This untold history, however, does not only belong to the black population, but includes the mixed-race populace, as well.<sup>2</sup>

Of her numerous volumes of poetry, Trethewey has stated that her 2012 collection *Thrall* "is the book that is actually most about race that I've ever written. Race always appears in my work because I have a racialized experience of America. But in this new book I'm fully examining race as such, as a category itself, and its relation to that vexed issue of blood."<sup>3</sup> Trethewey was born in Mississippi in 1966 to a white Canadian father and an African American mother. Trethewey's mixed heritage and her position as a mixed-race U.S. author (from the South) place her in a prime position to address race in U.S.-American society from a critical standpoint.

*Thrall* contains multiple poems that deal with the Enlightenment era's obsession with racial classifications. About a quarter of the poems in the collection more specifically address race in colonial Mexico and the systems of classification set in place there. Throughout the collection, these musings surrounding race in colonial Mex-



ico are intermixed with transnational, historical, and autobiographical poems, which broaden discussions of the U.S. within transnational mixed-race discourses.<sup>4</sup>

Trethewey has often referred to herself as being mixed-race or mixed-blood.<sup>5</sup> In her work and in her public persona as a poet, Trethewey embraces the labels that she self-identifies with, namely, labels associated with her multiracial heritage. Racial ideologies have, many would argue, moved beyond their connection to (pseudo-)scientific or biological concepts; however, social views have not progressed in the same way and retain convictions about inherent racial differences. Trethewey argues that the language used to label mixed-race individuals should be analyzed and she constantly underlines why race is still an essential topic of discussion. As a result, many questions arise when one considers how language—both language as employed by Trethewey and language as employed by ruling populations—has been instrumentalized to classify multiracialism. These questions include: How is language connected to mixed-race classification? How are racialized terms related to colonialism and othering? And what connections does Natasha Trethewey establish between language, knowledge, and power particularly with regard to colonialism and imperialism?

Because Trethewey's poetry is an intervention into the long-standing transnational debate about defining and thus socially restricting mixed-race people, this article will seek to answer these questions. Accordingly, my aim is to demonstrate that Trethewey skillfully avails herself of diction and etymology to critically address the way that those in power have claimed to have classified and attempted to bind mixed-race individuals through language. Trethewey's strategic use of language serves as a tool to approach the fluid identities of mixed-race people in order to expose the relationship between knowledge, power, and representation.

## **Blurring the Borders of Racial Classification in the United States and Mexico**

Although the United States and Mexico are located on the same continent and have intertwining geographies and histories, their colonial legacies and cultures have developed in different directions. In particular, the formation of race—although culturally and politically influenced in both countries—took different paths from colonial times onwards, especially in terms of the classification and recognition of mixed-race people and the binaries (or lack thereof) of racial categories.

In the United States, the so-called one-drop-rule was central to racial classification, particularly in the early twentieth century. The one-drop-rule, which socially and legally classifies a multiracial individual as exclusively black if they have any black heritage, has formed the basis of the United States' approach to classifying mixed-race

people.<sup>6</sup> This rule, although not part of current legal specifications, is still visible in the mixed-race politics of today and continues to reduce mixed-race identity to the perceived lower hierarchical race(s), which again affirms the racial binary that prevails in discussions of mixed-race identity in the United States.<sup>7</sup> This “rule” signifies that not only social restraints, but also political, ethical, and legal restraints were fundamental to the United States’ control over the growth of the mixed-race population.

By contrast, the classification systems that were created in Mexico during colonialism and the period of the Enlightenment move beyond simple black–white binaries so as to include other races and racial mixtures that are not solely based on (perceived) skin color. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in New Spain—vastly stretching from Panama to parts of the southern and western United States—a *sistema de castas* was put into place to organize society in the New World. *El Sistema de Castas*, also known as the caste system or system of castes, was a complex societal arrangement used by the Spaniards in their colonies in the New World. More specifically, the word “castas” (with an “s”) was initially used to designate groups of the population who were mixed-race, of “illegitimate descent,” and who did not possess “*limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood),” which gave the term “a pejorative connotation.”<sup>8</sup>

The *casta* system eventually became more or less obsolete or, rather, was no longer the main determiner of one’s place in Mexican society as emphasis began to be placed more on socio-economic factors rather than racial ones.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, there was a one-of-a-kind trait that made the *casta* system distinctive from other racial structures in colonial territories. This rare characteristic was that aspects of the *casta* system were not only verbalized in legal, political, and social terms, but further existed as visual art in the form of *casta* paintings.

*Casta* paintings were a colonial art form that depicted the variety of racial mixtures found in Mexican society and became quite popular in the latter half of the eighteenth century. As Christina Sue notes, these *casta* paintings represented “taxonomy and exotic portrayals of the New World” and also “powerfully displayed the role of phenotype in socio-racial classification.”<sup>10</sup> Hence, the paintings reaffirmed the racial stereotypes and phenotypes that had been established through Enlightenment thinking. Trethewey’s *casta* painting poems in *Thrall* stand out because they combine colonial diction with mixed-race themes and cross geographical as well as temporal boundaries. Notably, her interaction with Mexican *casta* paintings and the resulting *casta* painting poems create parallels between U.S.-American and Mexican racial ideologies, as well as imperialist ideologies more generally.

Although the main differences between U.S.-American and Mexican categories of race are integral to understanding Trethewey’s usage of the colonial Mexican sys-

tem, the lines between these aspects of racial classifications and racial formations become blurry when considering that the U.S. southwest was part of Mexico until the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. That part of the United States historically belonged to Mexico and would have thus been influenced by *casta* system classifications. U.S.-American and Mexican conceptions of race should therefore not be distinguished as two completely separate systems.<sup>11</sup> For example, the poem “Calling,” with the subtitle “Mexico, 1969,” points toward the poet’s focus on Mexico not solely being limited to the temporal constraints of the colonial period, but rather extending to the latter half of the twentieth century. In “Calling,” the speaker describes a familial (and most likely autobiographical) experience, which has become “palimpsest—one memory / bleeding into another.”<sup>12</sup> This bleeding together of memory, experience, geography, and time acknowledges the transnational “vexed issue of blood,”<sup>13</sup> which Trethewey focuses on in *Thrall*.

The blurred boundaries between the United States and Mexico are not only visible through geographical land boundaries, but also through maritime boundaries. The shared Gulf of Mexico and the use of the Mississippi River as a crucial travelling and trading point further represent grounds for exchange of people, goods, and ideologies. In the poem “Geography,” Trethewey mentions the “I-10 from Mississippi to New Orleans,” “Wolf River,” and “the Gulf and Ship Island Line,” all of which signal land-based and nautical travel (predominantly across state boundaries).<sup>14</sup> However, in the early nineteenth century, the interstate highway I-10 would have been located in Mexican territory. Additionally, as a native of Gulfport, Mississippi, along the Gulf of Mexico, Trethewey’s home state has a French, Spanish, and English colonial history, as well as Native American roots, which would have likewise been intertwined with Mexican racial classifications. Adding to that, aspects of racialization in the U.S.-American South have their own complicated history of colonialism, slavery, and segregation. As a result, Daniel Turner states that Trethewey’s poems “recall the South’s cross-hatching of ethnic traditions, a stunning admixture of ethnic blood types (Native peoples, European ‘settlers,’ African and Caribbean exiles/transplants . . .) threaded among the area’s remarkable ecodiversity.”<sup>15</sup>

The poem “Enlightenment,” which largely portrays a father–daughter visit to Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, illustrates the blurred connection between European colonial powers, Mexico, and the United States. Analyses of this poem tend to concentrate on the speaker’s (possibly Trethewey’s) experiences as a mixed-race individual with their white father visiting Jefferson’s Monticello, Jefferson’s white hegemonic power, or Jefferson’s Enlightenment thinking and racist ideologies.<sup>16</sup> However, I would argue that this poem and its references to Jefferson evoke the blurred geographical boundaries of the United States and its conceptions of race, which Trethewey explores throughout her collection. For example, Jefferson’s role in the Louisiana Pur-

chase and Louisiana being a state located on the Gulf of Mexico, with complex linguistic, cultural, racial, and most importantly colonial histories epitomizes Trethewey's focus on what Turner calls "the South's cross-hatching of ethnic traditions."<sup>17</sup>

Examining differentiated, yet overlapping, perspectives toward the histories of racial definitions in the U.S. and Mexico/Latin America provides the tools to investigate how Trethewey utilizes these historiographies in her writing with the aim of critically addressing race in both nations. The shifting and blurry geographical boundaries between the U.S. and Mexico thus become metaphors of the indistinct boundaries of racial divisions in both countries. The *casta* system and *casta* paintings, however, supply Trethewey with a tradition that did not explicitly exist in all parts of the U.S. South. This allows her to use this system and art form in order to play with aspects of estrangement and familiarity with regard to mixed-race representation. The portrayal of (un-) differentiated Mexican and U.S. perspectives, in turn, prevent a U.S.-focused, U.S.-based perspective, which is noteworthy because Trethewey does not use race in Mexico to avoid talking about the United States directly. On the contrary, she uses the comparison to highlight details about the U.S. system that are usually ignored or misconstrued because of the perceived hierarchy between U.S. and Mexican culture.

### **A Diachronic Approach to Colonial Diction in *Thrall***

Trethewey's use of diction as well as her diachronic approach to words are crucial aspects of her poetry's aesthetics and argumentative trajectory. In multiple interviews, Trethewey affirms her use of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.<sup>18</sup> She reflects on this method by stating that "every word is a poem in itself because there's the history of the word, all its uses across time, all of the secondary and tertiary definitions that can help deepen the figurative level of the poem."<sup>19</sup> Hence, words should be considered with their historical contexts and the development of their meanings over time in mind. A word cannot, and should not, be watered down to a single modern definition, as Trethewey uses etymology and archaic forms to affix a historical dimension to her poetry. Her historical consciousness then not only extends from her themes of mixed-race people and their representations from colonial times onwards, but is also an essential element of her writing style. Therefore, neither are her themes restricted to the twenty-first century, nor is her language oblivious to the extensive history of English language semantics and pragmatics.

Already the single-word title of the poetry volume, *Thrall*, directs attention to the historical dimensions of a noun unknown even to the majority of poetry readers. The word "thrall" is not a common one; even Trethewey herself admits that she had never heard the word as a term for slave; she had only encountered it in the phrase "in thrall



to,<sup>20</sup> as in “to be captivated by something.” The definition of thrall provided by the *OED* is: “One who is in bondage to a lord or master; a villein, serf, bondman, slave; also, in vaguer use, a servant, subject.”<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the selection of “thrall” as the title of this collection links the word to the content, which includes topics regarding colonization and hierarchical racial classification.

The development of the title began when Trethewey, who was in the process of finishing her third collection of poetry, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Native Guard* (2006), decided to look up the word “native.” The definition she found was “someone born into the condition of servitude; a thrall.”<sup>22</sup> Once Trethewey began to contemplate the definition of native, she wondered: “Why do we have the word ‘native?’”<sup>23</sup> The answer was rooted in colonialism. She argues that “when we claim land, the people who are there are the ‘natives’; it is about colonialism, it is about empire, and the word ‘thrall’ is right there.”<sup>24</sup> “Native,” she continues, “carries with it a history of imperialism, of colonialism, the idea that when we go there to colonize someplace, those people are the ‘natives.’”<sup>25</sup> It is then only through colonialism that there are natives; and it is the language of colonialism that is used in othering.

The word “native,” which was so crucial to the creation of *Thrall*, appears once in the collection. Trethewey uses the word “native” in the poem “De Español y de India Produce Mestizo.” Interestingly, “native” is italicized in the poem.<sup>26</sup> While Trethewey primarily reserves italics for Spanish words in the collection or for English translations of Spanish *casta* labels, in this poem she uses italics to add emphasis, among other words to the term “native.” Importantly, this specific poem ekphrastically describes the painting that was chosen for the cover of *Thrall*. This suggests that the inclusion of “native” in said poem is a nod toward acknowledging the role the word “native” played in the title and creation of the collection.

Additionally, the word “native” can be applied to the mother of the child represented in the painting used for the cover, because she is “indian,” or a “native” of Mexico. It is furthermore possible to associate “native” with the child servant in the painting, who was born into a position of servitude, thus embodying the definition of the word. As a further point of connection, the inclusion of the word “native” also relates to the mixed-race child in the painting and the fact that she was born into a position in which she is a slave to the racial mixture that defines and confines her.

The word “native” in this poem is contained in the run-on line “He is dark / as history, origin of the word / native.”<sup>27</sup> Here, Trethewey points to the “origin of the word” that was so integral to the creation of the collection. The “dark / as history” indicates a negative, overshadowing history, such as one connected to slavery, or to the violent treatment of indigenous communities by colonizers—both concepts that are not limited to Mexican history, but instead emphasize the link Trethewey wants to

establish between colonial Mexico and the United States.

In Trethewey's discussions of the word "thrall," she links the word to knowledge, power, and colonialism, and calls attention to the role language plays in creating hegemonic societies. She argues that "we're in thrall to: language, knowledge, ideas, power."<sup>28</sup> Thus, we are all slaves to these concepts that control our society. As Trethewey notes, if we look back at "travel narratives and captivity narratives, it was language that they [colonizers] were using to shape the understanding of a place and its inhabitants. When you look at those colonial maps that have drawings of the people there, it is the iconography, as carefully as the taxonomies of who they were that they were enthralled to."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, as Europeans explored new regions of the world, producing writings about both the places they "found" and the people there, they always included a "native" element and an element of hierarchy in their representations.

Language is not just based on etymology or historical associations, but is also closely linked to how power is used to gain control over people, societies, and ways of thinking. In particular through the eighteenth century and the Age of Enlightenment, ways of thinking became rooted in the language of classification. This era concretized the employment of language in classification systems which, according to Trethewey, produced the "emergence of codified racial difference" and "taxonomies" that "were a form of knowledge production that subjected some peoples" and which "we still hold on to today in many ways."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, although the Enlightenment era provided useful ways of looking at the world around us, the language developed during that time led to knowledge, or rather presumed knowledge, which in turn encouraged the disempowerment of othered subjects.

Race is systemically integrated into our society and culture. Michael Omi and Howard Winant claim that "we utilize race to provide clues about *who* a person is" and, therefore, when we come across someone who is mixed-race, "such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning" because we are unable to classify or label this person unambiguously.<sup>31</sup> This may, in turn, become a crisis of identity for both the individual and the Other. The individual not only questions the other individual's identity, but also begins to question the parameters of their own racial identity. Additionally, the connection between the phenotypes that we see and the racial assumptions we hold about them does not always match these two components. It is this unplaceable aspect of mixed-race people that encouraged the labeling and classifying of mixed-race individuals.

This attempt to join phenotypes and language should be connected to Trethewey's use of the word "taxonomy." Four of her ekphrastic *casta* poems are included in a section titled "Taxonomy," which presents examples of mixed-race unions in Mexico



including the taxonomies used to label mixed-race people. Taxonomy is a scientific field that focuses on classifying and naming organisms; accordingly, Trethewey's use of "taxonomy" infers a scientific basis for the classification of mixed-race people. By exerting control over the naming and classification of mixed-race people in society, the Spanish recognized these populations, but naming them gave the Spanish the ability to control them based on said categories. Trethewey's ekphrastic approach to the *casta* paintings is to first examine the "language" that is applied along with "the imagery that accompanies that language."<sup>32</sup> The Mexican *casta* paintings that she writes about have both "the imagery—the painting of the parents, the mixed-race union, and then the offspring they would have produced—in addition to the names: the taxonomies made to name those mixed-blood people."<sup>33</sup> These taxonomies are present in the titles of various poems, as well as in the labeling language used in the *casta* painting poems.

Trethewey's arguments about mixed-race people being "in thrall" to taxonomies and language is concretized in her poem "The Book of Castas" featured in the section titled "Taxonomy." At the beginning of the poem, Trethewey employs various mixed-race labels that were used in colonial Mexico. As Malin Pereira explains, "Trethewey traces an Enlightenment-associated discourse of race in which . . . mixed race persons' value is calculated through proportion of white blood, expressed in a taxonomy of terms."<sup>34</sup> In Trethewey's words, this shows "the ways in which the people had been labeled as a form of social control: to name them and thus to know them in the naming."<sup>35</sup> Since we are enthralled by such labels, the poem ends by saying that a mixed-race female and "all her kind" are "in thrall to a word."<sup>36</sup> The "her" in the line refers to the mixed-race child and the final line encourages a reading that the multiracial child is a slave to the terminology that binds her. She is held captive by the labels attached to who she supposedly is, as determined by those in power. Furthermore, as Joseph Millichap makes clear, "the cast, or color, of these bi-racial progeny, as well as the caste, or class, assigned to them within their culture therefore are determined by their white fathers to whom the children then are forever in thrall."<sup>37</sup>

Trethewey refers to the names and equations of mixture associated with each mixed-race child. She demonstrates her knowledge of the outcomes of these equations in "The Book of Castas," in which she describes the eponymous book that was used to provide the legal and social record of a person's racial classification.<sup>38</sup> Trethewey describes this book as being both the "catalog / of mixed bloods" and "the book of naught."<sup>39</sup> The catalog of mixed bloods would include every aspect of a person's ethnicity and/or heritage. However, the word "naught" suggests that the book is, in fact, a book of nothing. The book accordingly reveals everything the person is not. They are not Spanish and not white, meaning that they hold a liminal position of neither being one thing nor the other. On the other hand, in phrases which use "naught,"

such as “to bring to naught,” the nothingness of naught takes on a vastly different meaning. It begins to represent the destruction of purity, of pure lineage, and whiteness, thus othering the subject based on everything that they are (of mixed bloods) and everything they are not (of nothing).

The poem “The Book of Castas” includes the highest number of labels of mixed-race classification out of all of Trethewey’s *casta* painting poems: “*mulatto-returning-backwards*,” “*hold-yourself-in-midair*,” “*the morsica, the lobo, the chino, / sambo, albino*,” and “*no-te-entiendo*.”<sup>40</sup> Hence, the poem foregrounds labeling and classification so as to emphasize the extent of racialized language. The sheer number of terms used to classify mixed-race people in *casta* paintings is extensive; with Maria Herrera-Sobek estimating that at least “fifty-three different names,” if not more, composed “the *casta* nomenclature” of various “racial mixtures.”<sup>41</sup> Christa Olson, however, points out that “far fewer caste names [were] in common use.”<sup>42</sup> This expansive racial terminology, regardless of the extent to which the terms were used, point toward the colonial fixation on race. Trethewey exposes this obsession with the use of labels and language and implies a link between these racial ideologies and control/power particularly in the last line—“in thrall to a word.”<sup>43</sup> Consequently, by exposing these terminologies as historically linked to the assertion of power, the ways in which racial codification across history affects current ideologies toward race and attitudes regarding mixed-race people becomes visible.

Trethewey’s use of words for the classification of mixed-race people in colonial Mexico in her *casta* painting poems corresponds with the taxonomies, racial mixtures, and key racial ideologies detailed in the *casta* system. In “De Español y Mestiza Produce Castiza,” Trethewey lists “three easy steps / to purity,” explaining three different intermixtures: “*from a Spaniard and an Indian, / a mestizo; / from a mestizo and a Spaniard, / a castizo; / from a castizo and a Spaniard, / a Spaniard*.”<sup>44</sup> Generation after generation, these intermixtures become whiter, eventually returning to a category of someone with full Spanish blood. The parents’ races are always placed on one line, and the resulting label of their mixed-race offspring is placed on the line directly below. By placing the mixed-race child on the line below, Trethewey separates the child from their parents and the parents’ races, highlighting the child as the creation of something new. Here, each of the racial labels is written in italics, which visually sets these “steps of purity” apart from the rest of the text. The only other word that is italicized is “*Mexico*,” in the line “(call it *Mexico*).”<sup>45</sup> Italicizing “*Mexico*” creates a visual link between the racial mixtures and the country. This visual link emphasizes the underlying connections between Mexico and its racial ideologies of the *casta* system. The three mixes are conjoined with the use of semi-colons and the completion of the purity process ends with a period. This period signals the completion of the steps to purity, with the mixed-race individual attaining the label of “Spaniard,” the ultimate goal.



Naming, labeling, and classifying were of great importance, not only in the Mexican *casta* system and in the process of colonization, but also to U.S.-American society. As Trethewey emphasizes, “We are enthralled to the language that seeks to name us; thus ‘mulatto,’ ‘quadroon,’ ‘octoroon,’ ‘sambo,’ ‘albino’” and we are enthralled by language that “make[s] us occupy certain positions in society, in history.”<sup>46</sup> Mixed-race people are defined and confined by the labels imposed upon them. Although the system of mixed-race classification in the United States is not as in-depth as that of the Mexican *casta* system, as Trethewey makes clear, “there is legal language meant to define me, and also render me illegal or illegitimate,” “to name me as other, and in that way to shape my identity and place in the world.”<sup>47</sup> The lack of recognition of mixed-race people in U.S.-American society and the legal language that places someone like Trethewey into the category of being “black” rather than mixed-race are all ways in which language keeps Trethewey in thrall. This is also the case, for example, with the word *miscegenation*, which—at the time of her birth—was meant to “render” Trethewey “illegal” and “illegitimate.”<sup>48</sup>

Legal terms such as *miscegenation* are furthermore interconnected with questions of agency. Who has the power to regulate language? Who has power over the naming of individuals? This power is visible in the introduction of *miscegenation* into legal systems, in order to codify racial differences and hold power over others because of those racial differences. The legal system, however, is an abstraction—there are always people behind the system who are not always named, but who nonetheless have the power to name others. As Trethewey argues, “someone had a word for what they thought they saw in me. That’s a memory that doesn’t just belong to me. It belongs to our national memory in terms of how we divided and parsed human beings.”<sup>49</sup>

Robert B. Moore notes that “language not only develops in conjunction with a society’s historical, economic and political evolution; it also reflects that society’s attitudes and thinking. Language not only expresses ideas and concepts but actually shapes thought.”<sup>50</sup> Trethewey reaffirms this statement by arguing that “we are in thrall to language, to ideology . . . Language comes first, in some ways, before you even begin to think.”<sup>51</sup> The individual is consequently always exposed to socially determined and socially determining language. The labels that are attached to mixed-race people draw on the collective ideologies of race and the labeling of race that is engrained into U.S.-American history and culture. Thus, the language and supposed knowledge used by those in power to produce the othering of the colonized or marginalized constitutes a noteworthy aspect of this work; a fact that is already apparent from the title of Trethewey’s collection and its development.

## The Semantics of Mixed Blood

In *Thrall*, Trethewey moreover explores the Mexican *casta* system's focus on *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) by utilizing various levels of blood imagery in her poems. In fact, all of her *casta* painting poems apart from one (as well as seven of her other poems in the collection) include references to blood. Trethewey is then "looking at ideas of otherness, racial difference, blood purity and impurity across time and space" in order to see "how these ideas assert themselves, these notions of blood and purity, through varied histories, [and] how these concepts are still affecting how we think about and treat other human beings around the world."<sup>52</sup>

"The Book of Castas" notably features an abundance of blood imagery. Expressions such as "mixed bloods," "typology of taint," "stain," "blemish," "sullyng spot," "purified," and "blood" all elicit the image of blood. Connections between mixed-blood and purity, especially "that which can be purified, / that which cannot" are the focal point.<sup>53</sup> In particular the word "taint," employed twice in this poem, stands out.<sup>54</sup> The use of the word creates an image of tainted blood, blood that is not pure. This reference to tainted blood links back to the so-called scientific taxonomic trajectory in the labels of classification for mixed-race individuals, which was not objective, but rather ideologically inflected, because it included evaluative and often pejorative implications.

According to Olson, *casta* paintings typically portrayed that "sufficient dilution of indigenous heritage returns a child to the status of Español,"<sup>55</sup> which is visible in Trethewey's poem "De Español y Mestiza Produce Castiza." This meant that mixed-blood could be returned to pure blood. However, "there is no such cleansing for African heritage"; therefore, "African blood is depicted as most degraded and most contaminating."<sup>56</sup> This is mirrored in ideologies of the one-drop rule in U.S.-American society. Correspondingly, mixed-blood that was tainted with black blood could not revert back to pure Spanish blood. Unlike "The Book of Castas," "De Español y Mestiza Produce Castiza" has only two mentions of blood: "mixed blood" and "the promise of blood."<sup>57</sup> In this poem, blood is no longer emphasized because the mixed-race child has the opportunity to return to being fully Spanish, and thus, they are not as haunted by their blood mixture as other mixed-race individuals, especially those with African blood, who are referenced in "The Book of Castas."

"De Español y Negra Produce Mulato" mentions blood only once, and the reference is not directed toward mixed blood or the mixed-race child, as in the previous examples, but instead links blood with the black mother. In the lines "red beads / yoked at her throat like a necklace of blood," the red beads of the black mother's necklace evoke the image of drops of blood.<sup>58</sup> Using a word like "yoke" ties the placement of the necklace on the mother to a harness employed to exploit animals for farm labor. This

encourages readings of how African blood enslaves the black mother to her social position; she is, consequently, “in thrall” to her African blood.

The poem “Blood” located in the “The Americans” section of the collection refers to a painting by George Fuller titled *The Quadroon* (1880).<sup>59</sup> Quadroon was a racial classification used in the United States to describe someone with one fourth black or African blood. This mixed-race classification dates back to ideologies of the one-drop rule. Apart from the title, blood is mentioned once in the poem in the lines, “the pathos of her condition: / black blood.” The “condition” in this case is the tainting of black blood on the “melancholic beauty” of the subject figure in the painting. Notably, “*black blood*” is the only italicized expression in the poem apart from the word “*Mezzo*.” Trethewey, once again, uses italics to add emphasis to the role that blood plays in her collection and in her critical approach to mixed-race representation, as well as to signify a foreign word, this time in Italian. The half- or in-between-ness implied by the Italian word links with the liminal mixed-race position of the girl in the painting, due to her half (or in this case quarter) “black blood.” In addition, it evokes the girl’s position in the painting between the viewer (most likely the white gaze) and the “dark kin working the fields behind her.” Her role then becomes “to bridge the distance between.”<sup>60</sup>

## **Combating Racial Codifications through Fluid Mixed-Race Identities**

Trethewey’s writing traverses many borders; her writing crosses the North American border of the United States and Mexico, as well as transatlantic boundaries between Europe and North America. The temporal boundaries she addresses cover a span of hundreds of years, from colonial times to the modern day. Katherine Henninger argues that the speakers and contexts within Trethewey’s poems “move repeatedly between personal and international material, fluidly drawing cross-cultural comparisons between the two and creating a mixed race community based on the experience.”<sup>61</sup> The limitless nature of Trethewey’s poetry and diction in *Thrall* interconnects issues of mixed-race identities across the visual and the textual modes and encourages links between Mexican and U.S.-American concepts of race while also emphasizing communal imperial experiences of mixed-race people.

Trethewey’s focus on diction encourages delving into etymology to uncover the socio-historical power of words. She takes a linguistic parallel track to looking at mixed-race ideologies with a historical mindset. Additionally, her usage of Spanish words alongside English ones signifies her acknowledgement of the power of language in a transnational history of colonization, racism, and discrimination.

Although Trethewey is a U.S.-American—and, more importantly, a mixed-race U.S.-American and Southern—author, she implements a transnational strategy in her poems by including a double perspective of race from both a U.S. and Mexican viewpoint. She acknowledges the transnational phenomenon of mixed-race ideologies by writing poems that oscillate between the United States and Mexico in order to underline the intertwined, yet differing histories of race ideologies in both countries. The overlapping nature of the subject matter in her poems creates a layered form, where intersections between racial ideologies become visible, while the shortcomings of such ideologies are emphasized. Trethewey does not limit or confine herself to the Mexican *casta* system; instead, as Malina Pereira notes, she sheds light on “the history of colonization, and who the colonialist is, and who the colonial bodies are” to critically assess the representation of mixed-race people throughout history, across boundaries of time and space.<sup>62</sup> Trethewey refuses to accept the limitations imposed by the colonizing words of power; instead, she writes poetry that “needles us to think deeply about something and perhaps have to rethink ourselves and our position in the world and everything we thought up until that moment.”<sup>63</sup> Trethewey’s force pushes us all beyond the boundaries of our ways of thinking and liberates mixed-race people from the binds of colonial language.

If mixed-race individuals accept and celebrate all aspects of their multiracial identity, they blur the boundaries between racial groups and actively combat “the denial of their existence,” as Cynthia Nakashima puts it. As Nakashima explains, this establishes a space that enables the dismantling of racial categories and encourages discussions of how “biological, sociocultural, and sociopolitical arguments” relating to mixed-race individuals can be seen as myths.<sup>64</sup> G. Reginald Daniel proposes that mixed-race people should therefore affirm a “nondichotomous and nonhierarchical identity,” rather than trying to assimilate into the discriminatory system set in place to define them.<sup>65</sup> As Michele Elam suggests, there is a “call for a refocusing of ways of seeing that can afford not merely a defensive but also a productive opportunity for social insight into the intersubjective processes of racial formation.”<sup>66</sup> By recognizing the power of cultural, social, economic, legal, and political systems, as well as their effects on multiracial formation, Trethewey exposes how verbal representations of mixed-race identities both harmonize and oppose one another. Thus, through embracing the fluidity of mixed-race identities and by shedding light on the language that has been used to bind mixed-race individuals throughout history, the confines that this language imposes can begin to dissolve.

## Notes

- 1 Malin Pereira, “Re-reading Trethewey through Mixed Race Studies,” *Southern Quarterly*



50, no. 4 (2013): 147.

- 2 Because Trethewey has used her voice for activism in both the black and mixed-race communities, Pereira suggests approaching Trethewey as having a “mulattoesque blackness,” a term she credits to Michele Elam. Elam connects this concept to the term “blaxploration,” which “honors a hybridity that is ‘in service to’ and ‘on behalf of’ black needs and ends.” Michele Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 21. I am, however, hesitant to endorse the term “mulattoesque” due to the both negative and tragic connotations attached to the term “mulatto.”
- 3 Natasha Trethewey, “Southern Crossings: An Interview with Natasha Trethewey,” interviewed by Daniel Cross Turner, in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 166–67.
- 4 Natasha Trethewey, *Thrall* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).
- 5 See, for example, Natasha Trethewey, “Outside the Frame: An Interview with Natasha Trethewey,” interviewed by Regina Bennett, Harbour Winn, and Zoe Miles, 2010, in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 152.
- 6 G. Reginald Daniel, “Black No More or More Than Black?,” in *Racial Thinking in the United States: Uncompleted Independence*, ed. Paul R. Spickard and G. Reginald Daniel (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 282.
- 7 For discussions of the one-drop-rule, see, for example, David Hollinger, “Amalgamation and Hypodescent: The Question of Ethnoracial Mixture in the History of the United States,” *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 5 (2003): 1363–90, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/108.5.1363>; Winthrop D. Jordan, “Historical Origins of the One-Drop Racial Rule in the United States,” *The Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/91g761b3>.
- 8 Colin M. MacLachlan and Jaime E. Rodriguez O., “Society,” in *The Forging of the Cosmic Race: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico* (1980; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 200.
- 9 For more information regarding race and social mobility in Mexico/Latin America, see Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art of Colonial Latin America* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2005), 68; G. Reginald Daniel, *More Than Black? Multiracial Identity and the New Racial Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 14; MacLachlan and Rodriguez O., *Forging of the Cosmic Race*, 200–201, 216–17, 223; Christa Olson, “Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2009): 327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940902991429>; Maria Herrera-Sobek, “Casta Paintings and the Black Legend: Ideology and Representation of Black Africans in New Spain (1700–1790),” in *Slavery as a Global and Regional Phenomenon*, ed. Eric Hilgendorf, Jan-Christoph Marschelke, and Karin Sekora (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 85; Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.
- 10 Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race*, 11.
- 11 I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for indicating this noteworthy point.
- 12 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 66. I will use page numbers as a point of reference rather than line

- numbers.
- 13 Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 167.
  - 14 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 45–47.
  - 15 Daniel Cross Turner, "Lyric Dissections: Rendering Blood Memory in Natasha Trethewey's and Yusef Komunyakaa's Poetry of the Black Diaspora," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013): 100.
  - 16 See, for example, Katherine R. Henninger, "What Remains: Race, Nation, and the Adult Child in the Poetry of Natasha Trethewey," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013): 66, 70; Pearl Amelia McHaney, "Natasha Trethewey's Triptych: The Bodies of History in *Belloq's Ophelia*, *Native Guard*, and *Thrall*," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013): 170; Joseph Millichap, "'Love and Knowledge': Daughters and Fathers in Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall*," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013): 196, 202–203. The way Trethewey frames "Enlightenment" at her inaugural reading as U.S. Poet Laureate at the Library of Congress indicates that the inspiration for the poem is strongly autobiographical. See: "Inaugural Reading of Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey," *Library of Congress*, September 13, 2012, video, 51:57, <https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-5645/>.
  - 17 Turner, "Lyric Dissections," 100.
  - 18 See, for example, interviews with Fink, DeVries, Teresi, and Turner in Joan Wylie Hall, ed., *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), as well as the introduction to that collection; and Natasha Trethewey, "'The Larger Stage of These United States': Creativity Conversation with Natasha Trethewey and Rosemary Magee," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013).
  - 19 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 23.
  - 20 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 23.
  - 21 "Thrall," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2019, accessed October 10, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/201091>.
  - 22 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 23.
  - 23 Natasha Trethewey, "Because of Blood: Natasha Trethewey's Historical Memory," interviewed by Lisa DeVries, 2008, in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 108.
  - 24 Trethewey, "Because of Blood," 108.
  - 25 Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 166.
  - 26 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 18.
  - 27 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 18.
  - 28 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 23.
  - 29 Trethewey, "Because of Blood," 108. For further information on how travel narratives were used as tools of empire and colonialism, see Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, "Introduction: Reading Postcolonial Travel Writing," in *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations*, ed. Justin D. Edwards, and Rune Graulund (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1–16; Claire Lindsay, "Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Carl Thompson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), Routledge Handbooks Online, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203366127>, ch. 3.
  - 30 Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 166–67; Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 27.



- 31 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s," in *The Inequality Reader: Contemporary and Foundational Readings in Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. David B. Grusky and Szonja Szlényi (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007), 201.
- 32 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 24.
- 33 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 24.
- 34 Malin Pereira, "An Angry, Mixed Race Cosmopolitanism: Race, Privilege, Poetic Identity, and Community in Natasha Trethewey's *Beyond Katrina* and *Thrall*," in *New Cosmopolitanisms, Race, and Ethnicity: Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Ewa Barbara Luczak, Anna Pochmara, and Samir Dayal (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 267, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110626209-015>.
- 35 Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 166–67.
- 36 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 26.
- 37 Millichap, "Love and Knowledge," 195.
- 38 For more information on the "book of castas," see Magali M. Carrera, "Identity by Appearance, Judgment, and Circumstances: Race as Lineage and Calidad," in *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 1–21.
- 39 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 24.
- 40 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 24–25.
- 41 Herrera-Sobek, "Casta Paintings," 94.
- 42 Olson, "Casta Painting," 310.
- 43 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 26.
- 44 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 23.
- 45 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 22.
- 46 Trethewey, "Because of Blood," 108; Natasha Trethewey, "An Interview with Natasha Trethewey," interviewed by Christian Teresi, 2009, in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 125.
- 47 Trethewey, "An Interview," 125; Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 166.
- 48 Trethewey, "An Interview," 125.
- 49 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 24.
- 50 Robert B. Moore, "Racist Stereotyping in the English Language," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001), 365.
- 51 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 24.
- 52 Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 166–67.
- 53 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 25.
- 54 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 24–25.
- 55 Olson, "Casta Painting," 311.
- 56 Olson, "Casta Painting," 311.
- 57 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 22, 23.

- 58 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 20.
- 59 See George Fuller, *The Quadroon*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1880, oil on canvas, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10925>.
- 60 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 34.
- 61 Henninger, "What Remains," 71.
- 62 Pereira, "An Angry Mixed-Race Cosmopolitanism," 269.
- 63 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 26.
- 64 Cynthia Nakashima, "An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed-Race People in America," in *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P. P. Root (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1992), 177–78.
- 65 Daniel, "Black No More," 289.
- 66 Elam, *Souls of Mixed Folk*, 26.

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