“Become What You Must”: Trethewey’s Poems and Bellocq’s Photographs

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“A poem is a place where the conditions of beyondness and withinness are made palpable, where to imagine is to feel what it is like to be. [. . . A] poem permits us to live in ourselves as if we were just out of reach of ourselves” (Strand, xxiv).

Natasha Trethewey’s poetry collection titled Bellocq’s Ophelia (2002) is derived from a set of New Orleans photographs taken by E. J. Bellocq circa 1912. These mysterious portraits, selections of which were first published in 1970 and then republished in 1996 as an expanded text with an introduction by Susan Sontag, document the women of New Orleans’ Storyville district of legalized prostitution, which existed from 1897 to 1917. As Sontag asserts in her treatise On Photography, “To photograph is to confer importance. There is probably no subject that cannot be beautified; moreover, there is no way to suppress the tendency inherent in all photographs to accord value to their subjects. [. . .] No moment is more important than any other moment; no person is more interesting than any other person” (Sontag 28). The importance of these images of female prostitutes lies not only in Bellocq’s unusual photographic project but also in the responses to and adaptations of them in writing, from fiction to art history to photographic criticism to poetry. The photographs and, more recently, Trethewey’s poetry collection accord these women value through representation.

As the editions of the photographs are now out of print, Trethewey’s poetry, though unillustrated, is one of the most widely available versions of a narrative these prints construct. In Bellocq’s Ophelia, narrative adaptation of Bellocq’s photographs takes the form of letters, diary entries, and vignettes, just as the group of photographs itself frames a story distinctive to a moment in New Orleans history. Because Trethewey’s collection features only a cover photograph of a formally dressed, seated woman with her hands folded in her lap (<www/fraenkel/gallery.com> [go to Bellocq #25]) and because Bellocq, who died roughly seventeen years before Trethewey was born, is a passive collaborator in Trethewey’s project, one of our goals is to examine closely how certain poems in Bellocq’s Ophelia refer to specific portraits, whereas other poems represent several possible images. In addition to documenting the intertextuality of Bellocq’s and Trethewey’s work, our analysis of their col-
laboration reveals how their work presents and values a layered representation of women through the use of lyric poetry to construct a narrative that the group of photographs implies.

Circa 1912, Ernest. J. Bellocq (1873–1949), an unremarkable New Orleans commercial photographer who specialized in portraits, architecture, and shipyards, embarked upon a project to photograph prostitutes in the Storyville district. Undisclosed but to a few friends and apparently never circulated as prints in his lifetime, eighty-nine glass plate negatives of women made with an 8" x 10" view camera were found in a piece of Bellocq’s furniture following his death. These negatives remained largely unknown until they were purchased from a New Orleans antiques dealer in 1967 by celebrated photographer Lee Friedlander (born 1934), who realized their unusual significance. Totally unlike the vulgar so-called French postcards that characterized most photographs of prostitutes in this era, Bellocq’s subjects appear in ordinary settings rather than ornate studio sets. Dressed, partially disrobed, or entirely naked, the young women impart a relaxed, participatory sensibility, some with bright smiles, as if each played a creative role in the photographic moment.

Almost nothing is known about these subjects. None of the women have been identified, though several appear more than once in the collection. In addition to the portraits, there are some interior views of brothel rooms and still-life tableaux of small photographs and objects in Bellocq’s residence. Remarkably little has been written about Bellocq’s project, not surprising since the historical records are so sparse. Original prints were unknown at the time the negatives were acquired by photographer Friedlander, and though a few have surfaced in New Orleans since then, they are extremely rare. No one who knew Bellocq toward the end of his life had any knowledge of this project, and no written records about it were left behind by the photographer. While no one disputes the erotic appeal of some of the images, and the many traditional poses reminiscent of either art historical nudes or period photographs of clothed women, it is the warm expressions and sense of spontaneity so prevalent in this collection that distinguish it from other photographic images of prostitutes in this era.

Bellocq’s photographs of prostitutes came to artistic attention at a pivotal moment in American social and legal history. Prior to the mid-1960s, most photographic nudity was lumped together in a single category: illegal. Thereafter, the new era heralded such intense visual exposition of the human body and sexuality that unclear boundaries between celebration and degradation still instigate legal review. But without this profound shift in perceptual possibilities for reading the human body, it would never have been possible for Bellocq’s photographs to have obtained a respected American public venue and audience in 1970 at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, and, subsequently, to have been adapted in Louis Malle’s film Pretty Baby (1978), Brooke Bergan’s poetry collection Storyville: A Hidden Mirror (1994), Michael Ondaatje’s novel Coming through Slaughter (1996), and Peter Everett’s novel Bellocq’s Women (2000), in addition to Trethewey’s poetry collection.
Friedlander employed an historic process for printing the images on period paper and shared the remarkable results with John Szarkowski, curator of photography at MOMA. In 1970, Szarkowski organized an exhibition of thirty-four of these prints with an accompanying catalogue. As a result, Bellocq became one of the best-known photographers of the century, identified solely with this singular subject matter. Twenty-one years after an ignominious death, Bellocq’s star was born. In 1996, Random House, with Lee Friedlander, published an enlarged edition of the 1970 MOMA catalogue with a new introduction by Susan Sontag and eighteen new images. The same year, a retrospective exhibition of Bellocq’s photographs appeared at the New Orleans Museum of Art, organized by Steve Maklansky, curator of photography. Stemming from new research by the curator as well as by historian Rex Rose, it featured prints from all eighty-nine of the glass plate negatives, as well as examples of Bellocq’s commercial photography, and photographs establishing context different from Bellocq’s, such as New Orleans police records of prostitutes from the 1910s, though none were found depicting the women in Bellocq’s negatives (Malcolm).

So little is known about the photographer and his subjects, however, that they are chimeras onto which writers have projected fantastic light. This practice originated in the catalogue essay, which Szarkowski presents as a dialogue among identified speakers who recalled Bellocq from life or encountered his glass plates after his death. Though the curator acknowledges his dialogic mode as artifice in print, only recently has it been discussed that the catalogue essay’s content was also artfully shaped to help viewers perceive these subjects in the morally acceptable art historical tradition of the female nude.

Natasha Trethewey learned about Bellocq’s work while in a graduate course as a student in American Studies at the University of Massachusetts in 1996, the same year that the expanded edition of the Friedlander prints brought the portraits renewed attention. In order to understand Trethewey’s use of photography as material for poetry, her earlier intertextual projects must be considered. Even before Bellocq’s Ophelia, Trethewey’s poetry drew heavily from photographs as primary sources, and she had developed an aesthetic approach particularly attentive to the photograph as subject matter for poetry. Her first collection is based on her own family’s photographs, treasured artifacts of her matrilineal relatives. In a 1996 interview published in Callaloo, she discusses the role of photography in her early work: “I love the artifact that a photograph is” (366). Given the timing of this interview, Trethewey makes this statement as she embarks on her next intertextual project.

In this same interview, Trethewey credits Sharon Olds as an influence in writing about photographs, particularly those photographs that document women’s working lives: “She can attach meaning to the smallest details in a photograph, and I think that for any poet that’s a wonderful thing” (369). Hence, it is evident that Trethewey is aware of a tradition of poets, particularly women poets, who have used photography as subject matter to explore the layered representations of women in culture. Trethewey continues to talk of her own poetic range in photographic terms, referring to her estranged father’s side of the family as “the part of a photograph that from a particular angle you won’t get to see”; she also express-
es her goals as a poet using photographic idiom: "the camera’s angle will be a wider-angle lens, and I’ll be able to include more" (369). It’s no surprise, then, that photography—as material object and as metaphor—fundamentally informs Bellocq’s Ophelia.

Bellocq’s Ophelia is divided into three sections, in addition to the opening poem that precedes the main sections. As the collection is unillustrated, the poems stand as poems but can also be examined in relation to how closely or imaginatively they relate to Bellocq’s photographs of the Storyville prostitutes. Given Trethewey’s use of photography as a metaphor for discussing her poetry, it is advisable to consider each kind of poetic form as a visual as well as narrative structure. The letter poems, for instance, appear in conventional form, with dates, and one includes an address and greeting. While Trethewey works largely in free verse, the poems of section three are diary entries that loosely employ the sonnet form. The poet Dana Gioia claims that free verse "presupposes the existence of written texts. While it does not abandon the aural imagination [of traditional form]—no real poetry can—most free verse plays with the way poetic language is arranged on the page and articulates the visual rhythm of a poem [. . .]." (33). Trethewey’s poetry certainly reinvigorates the lyric, turning to historicized personae instead of the confessional disclosure that has become associated with late twentieth-century poetry by women, as it reconfigures narrative through these approaches.

The collection opens with two epigraphs, one from Toni Morrison, which addresses the premise of Trethewey’s narrative of a prostitute who “had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may well have invented herself” (1). Trethewey, likewise assuming her Ophelia has “nothing to fall back on,” invents Ophelia’s narrative. Sometimes that narrative is closely tied to particular Bellocq photographs of different women while, at others, the relationships are imagined just beyond the moment captured in a particular photograph; some poems only loosely imply the portraits. The second epigraph from Susan Sontag—"Nevertheless, the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses" (1)—echoes Trethewey’s goal to bring into her poetry what lies outside the photograph’s frame or viewpoint.

The opening poem, “Bellocq’s Ophelia,” plays off Sontag’s assertion by disclosing the imagined, perhaps hidden, life of a Storyville prostitute. The poem begins with reference to Millais’s Preraphaelite painting of Ophelia (1848, Tate Gallery, London, <www.tate.org.uk/Servlet/ViewWork?workid=9506$ssearchid=27242>) floating face-up in a pond, and especially to the living model who posed for the painting. Trethewey’s layered representation begins with conjuring the larger artistic tradition that has cast and recast the female image. The second stanza moves to the speaker’s recognition of Millais’s Ophelia in “Bellocq’s photograph—/ a woman posed on a wicker divan, her hair / spilling over. Around her, flowers—” (lines 13–15). The whole book is therefore immediately linked to a tradition of interplay between the visual arts and literature, particularly how they together represent—and have historically represented—women and their bodies, often reclining, often surrounded by
nature, often (though not literally in the Millais painting) naked, and surprisingly often (though not literally in the Bellocq photograph) dead.

The final stanza describes the woman's physicality as akin to lifelessness: “there for the taking” (line 25). However, while the body is “limp as dead Ophelia’s” (line 29), the character musters a voice: “her lips poised to open, to speak” (line 30). The poem's fascination with this tenuous moment of time is another crucial theme for the whole text and was articulated by Trethewey herself as she was about to construct this poetic narrative from moments captured in photographs:

Every photograph represents a moment that is no longer, passed, as well as ways of being that have disappeared. I've always been a little obsessed with the way photographs hold and create an object out of that moment. And I've often thought if you look at a photograph, if you really study the gestures and expressions that the people have in the photograph, you could see the rest of their lives, everything that's to come. (364)

And speak Trethewey’s Ophelia does, through letters home, diary entries, and other poetic structures that convey the rest of these prostitutes' lives through Ophelia as proxy.

The first main section of the book opens with a note of historical explanation that the Ophelia of the collection is an imagined version of one or several of Bellocq’s subjects: “A very white-skinned black woman” in a “colored' brothel” (line 6). This section's single poem is a letter home from Ophelia, who recounts her dilemma at not having found work in the four weeks since she left for New Orleans, despite her fine shoes and gloves and her strong speaking and writing skills. She tells of being able to pass as white until a stranger catches her eyes, forcing her to lower her own eyes, “a negress again” (line 23). She cannot fully define herself, for she is in part defined by this viewer on the street while working to distinguish herself from the Black female domestics in the New Orleans streets. Here, the reader discovers that, though Ophelia previously has done “back-bending” work, Ophelia worked just as hard to nearly break the “spines” of her books and make tangible what she read. The reader surmises, perhaps more quickly than Ophelia does herself, that this woman’s options are limited and that her being viewed is an unavoidable condition.

The second section opens with “Countess P—’s Advice for New Girls,” a poem in tercets. Parsed out in these short, regular snippets of information (much like snapshots), the Countess begins with a description and defense of the house itself—“Look, this is a high-class house [. . .]” (line 1)—and goes on to offer advice on how to pose to attract the house’s male customers. “Become what you must,” Countess P— says, “Let him see whatever / he needs. Train yourself not to look back” (lines 22–23). It is evident to the reader that this obviously contradicts what Ophelia had hoped for when she arrived in New Orleans. However, Ophelia, the implied, silent listener, does not yet seem to have grasped this discrepancy.
This poem is followed by a letter in a sequence titled "Letters from Storyville" in which Ophelia recounts her initial experiences at the brothel, including her name change to "Violet," common in Storyville. The letter, written to a woman whom she knows from a previous home, begins with assurances that Ophelia is not in imminent danger but faced financial burdens that have recently been relieved by "the good fortune to meet Countess P—" (line 17, including the date and address). Ophelia reports her lack of success at attracting men and, in stanza three, her auction as an untouched newcomer. Here, embedded in the description of the auction, the reader recognizes that the letter's recipient is a confidante, which is immediately reinforced by the inclusion of mutually shared, private information:

Countess knows well the thing from which
I've run. Many of the girls do too,
and some of them even speak of the child
they left behind. [. . .]. (50-53)

The poem ends with the revelation that the Countess has changed Ophelia's name and that the highest bidder does not know her true name. The layering of the woman's identity—how she presents herself, is presented, and is represented—emerges.

The letters home continue throughout this section—thirteen in addition to the first, all marked by date—and serve to chronicle Ophelia's life as a Storyville prostitute in order to further our understanding of her development and the ways she seems to oscillate between subject and object positions. Ophelia, in "September 1911," buys a Kodak camera and begins posing for and accompanying Bellocq in his work as a maritime photographer. The poem is structured in couplets that allow the speaker to parse out her new experiences; the recurrent white space suggests pauses in which she may form her thoughts before speaking. Ophelia gains the camera's perspective for herself:

[. . .] I see,
too, the way the camera can dissect

the body, render it reflecting light
or gathering darkness—surfaces

gray as stone or steel, lifeless flat.
Still, it can also make flesh glow

as if the soul's been caught
shimmering just beneath the skin. (lines 10-20).

Ophelia, then, has recognized—as both apprentice and model, subject and object—the decisive moment that photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson\(^4\) articulated in 1952 as crucial to photographic style. The decisive moment is just that fraction of a second in which the photograph's composition catches the larger life or event, the soul that's beneath the skin—a mode of compression reminiscent, perhaps, of the couplet. The string of couplets appears like prints drying on the line, each image, each split-second, glistening as it sets. Is Ophelia-
the-apprentice photographer recognizing, especially in the poem’s last couplet, that
Ophelia-the-model is an object to which Bellocq and the camera itself is drawn: “like the
camera’s way of capturing / the sparkle of plain dust floating on air” (lines 32–33)?

The book’s second section ends with “Photograph of a Bawd Drinking Raleigh Rye,” which
refers explicitly to one of Bellocq’s photographs (<www.fraenkelgallery.com> [go to Bellocq
#4]), perhaps the one most widely known, for it even appears on the cover of Marge Piercy’s
latest novel. It is also the one poem in the collection that might be read in Bellocq’s voice,
according to Trethewey (“Inscriptive Restorations” 1029). The poem details aspect of the
photo itself that the reader is asked to notice in a sequence of couplets: the glass, the
woman’s hand, the movement of both; then, later, her stockings, scarf, breasts; and, even
later, “the trinkets on the table” (line 14). In the photograph, a woman holds a small glass,
her elbow on a table upon which sits the bottle of rye, a clock reading noon (a time of sun-
light necessary for Bellocq’s photographic exposure), a statue, and other items. She indeed
wears “striped stockings like roads” (line 7) and a “fringed scarf draping her breasts” (line
10) so that there is no mistaking the connection between the poem and the specific photo-
graph, the strata of written and visual representations of this one woman. Trethewey also
notes a thumbprint, imagined or difficult to discern in the books of Friedlander’s prints, and
asks “[. . .] perhaps yours? [. . .]” (Line 26). But whose: photographer, viewer, speaker, or
self-referenced model? Because of the slippage between photographer and model earlier in
this section of the book, the reader understands that both are, in ways, handlers of the
object—of the model and of the photograph—and each works to construct the moment pre-
served. Importantly, too, this poem includes the layered representations of women present
in several of Bellocq’s subjects, for on the wall behind the prostitute hang other photo-
graphs of women and one cast relief figure in an oval frame. The photograph depicts a col-
lection of images of women. Near the end, the poem asserts, “[. . .] It’s easy to see this is all
about desire, / how it recurs—each time you look, it’s the same moment [. . .]” (lines 26–28).
A photograph seems to be the reference here, since it catches desire so that the decisive
moment may be gazed upon again and again, but the lines also imply that desire infuses
everything—the photograph, the subject, the photographer, the viewer, even memory and
history—rather than confines itself to a singular moment or subject.

The final section of Trethewey’s collection is composed of ten sonnet-length poems in a
chronological sequence entitled “Storyville Diary” and includes a final poem, narrated in the
third-person, about the book’s cover photograph depicting the seated woman in a dress and
fur, her hair pinned back and up, and her brow knitted, perhaps in thought. Trethewey’s son-
nets in this section can be read as continuous with Ophelia’s voice or as the accumulation
of different voices, especially if the reader has knowledge of the photographs, which por-
trait numerous models. These sonnets are unrhymed and unmetered but tend to have a
roughly average line length of ten syllables; they are visual rather than aural sonnets. This
sonnet cycle or sequence link the poems most focused on Bellocq’s photography, and the
fourteen-line structure is brief enough to catch moments and images in ways that echo pho-
photographic style. Photographer Mark Strand, in an introductory essay for The Making of a Poem, discusses lyric poetry in terms that tellingly echo photographic processes and help to highlight Trethewey’s use of the short lyric in ways that expose its resonance with those processes:

At their best, they represent the shadowy, often ephemeral motions of thought and feeling, and do so in ways that are clear and comprehensible. Not only do they fix in language what is often most elusive about our experience, but they convince us of its importance, its truth even. [. . .] The lyric’s] themes are rooted in the continuity of human subjectivity and from antiquity have assumed a connection between privacy and universality. (xxii)

That Strand’s language—“represent,” “shadowy,” “clear and comprehensible,” “fix,” “convince,” “truth,” “subjectivity,” “privacy” and “universality”—applies both to photography and poetry insists upon their underlying affinities. The short lyric, like the photograph, indeed fixes—sets and makes permanent—an image or moment in such a way that the viewer perceives it to be a kind of truth. Through these private portraits of prostitutes, furthermore, one may perceive universal gendered themes, just as Trethewey’s Ophelia unfolds as an individual portrait that simultaneously represents universal narratives and layered representations of women.

Perhaps sonnets make comparable use of those so-called pricking details—what Roland Barthes, describing photographs, has called their punctums—to which we can attribute their deep appeal. Of the punctum, Barthes writes: “[. . .] occasionally (but alas all too rarely) a ‘detail’ attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value” (42). Is the punctum of the photograph of the bawd drinking Raleigh Rye the striped stockings or the clock, or perhaps both, depending upon the viewer? Is the punctum of the poem the line break between heart and locket that allows the breasts that so closely precede the heart to be transformed from physical object of desire to the symbol of emotional desire and then the heart to become the locket, the desire enclosed? Is the poem’s punctum the thumbprint that the speaker questions and, casually but deliberately, connects with desire? Barthes reminds us that “the punctum shows no preference for morality or good taste: the punctum can be ill-bred” (43); likewise, the largely unknown models of Belloq’s plates and the women in Trethewey’s poems are “ill-bred”: of mixed race and illicit trade, but nonetheless beautiful, powerful, tender. Trethewey herself articulates her immediate reaction to Belloq’s photographs in relation to Barthes’s concept: “They were stunning, they were compelling, they were filled with the ‘punctums’ that Roland Barthes talks about” (1028).

The third sonnet in the cycle of ten in “Storyville Dairy” is titled “Belloq” and describes the speaker’s encounter with this photographer. He is a “quiet man” (line 1) whom the speaker calls “Papa Belloq” (line 2). He does not want sex, but instead photographs the speaker clothed, in her room. Her possessions become his composition. She poses in ways she imagines he wants: “[. . .] shy / at first, then bolder [. . .]” (lines 11–12). The poem concludes
with the speaker asserting that portrait photography is a collaboration between the photographer and the posing subject:

[. . .] I'm not so foolish
that I don't know this photograph we make
will bear the stamp of his name, not mine. (lines 12–14)

The subject, whose image remains as the photograph itself, gets no credit for the artwork, though clearly this Ophelia recognizes the inequity of collaboration not only between artist and his subject matter, but also between man and woman, “papa” and child. Trethewey, through her speaker, at once reduces the woman to an object in a photograph and also shows how she has been erased from the process in which she is a collaborator in the act of her own self-creation.

“Portrait #1,” the fifth poem in the sequence, narrates another specific Bellocq photograph of a woman in her bedroom (<www.fraenkelgallery.com> [go to Bellocq #18]), again staying close to the visual details by describing the woman’s slip and stockings, the slight disarray of the dresser. As in “Photograph of a Bawd Drinking Raleigh Rye,” photographs of women, some of them clearly naked, hang on the wall behind her. The poem calls attention to the constructed casualness of the photograph, noting that the wallpaper’s flowers “close in” (line 11) as if stifling the woman who tries to appear relaxed, even unladylike. The reader returns, then, to the gesture of the collection’s opening poem: in “Bellocq’s Ophelia,” the last line reveals the speaker’s “[. . .] lips poised to open, to speak” (line 30), and here in “Portrait #1,” the last lines focus upon the speaker’s hand, “a gesture / before speech, before the first words come out” (lines 13–14). It is as if, therefore, the women in Bellocq’s photographs and recast in Trethewey’s Ophelia, are perpetually on the verge of speech. Photography is, of course, a silent art, compared with poetry’s orality and aurality; and yet, the intersections among the two raise the question of whether the images—photographic and poetic—really are opportunities for the female voicing or, conversely, are the means by which the subjects are held forever in silence. Referring to her earlier work with family photographs, Trethewey tells us that the photographic gesture “keeps moving on into our contemporary days, and suggests something to us about the continual process of a subject’s life, of history, and of the creation and revision of cultural memory” (“Inscriptive Restorations” 1024). With regard to Bellocq’s Ophelia, we can see that, in bringing Bellocq’s photographs to imagined life, Trethewey insists that silence precedes speech and that visual imagery implies the aural, the imagined spoken words that she has put to the page.

The wallpaper of “Portrait #1,” it turns out, is one thing upon which Trethewey’s project hinges, for she recognized the subjects as mixed race only after reading Janet Malcolm’s review (“Inscriptive Restorations” 1028), which posits the link to Mahogany Hall—a prostitution house specializing in mixed-race women—based on information from Friedlander (Malcolm 14). When Trethewey read about the wallpaper in the background of some of the portraits, she “[. . .] began to speculate then, that [. . .] these women who look very white are not” (“Inscriptive Restorations” 1028). Photography seems to offer documentary truth
but can mis- or under-represent; the women, through the lens of this new information, are redefined, re-seen. Trethewey goes on to recount, “One prostitute describes using [arsenic] to be pale, to stay whiter. And so that becomes part of Ophelia’s story—how she tries to look almost look as pale as a marble statue, as an idealized women in art” (1029). In part, poems such as “Portrait #1” attempt to use a new artifice—poetry, and specifically the loose sonnet—to critique the photographic artifice that represents these women. Trethewey remarks that some of her characters “became [. . .] not only a means to discuss and grapple with my own experiences growing up in the Deep South as a light-skinned and biracial woman, but [the character] became her own self as well—which is what I enjoyed so much about writing Bellocq’s Ophelia” (1027).7

The poem that follows, “Portrait #2,” plays with this notion that photography can be both fragile and permanent, both accurate and misleading. The speaker poses seated and nude with an arm behind her back and the other lying limp. When looking at the final print, the speaker states,

> I tried to recall what I was thinking—
> how not to be exposed, though naked, how
> to wear skin like a garment, seamless. (line 7-9)

That she “tried to recall” implies the possibility that these memories are just as likely constructed in the moment of viewing herself, as they are reflections of what she had been thinking when photographed (or what she now thinks she should have been thinking). Is accuracy determined in the shooting of the photograph, the viewing of it, both, or neither, the poem asks? As the speaker questions her memory, the photograph raises the question of whether she indeed wears skin as her garment and creates a seamless image for the world. The poem immediately goes on to note that Bellocq “[. . .] thinks I’m right for the camera, keeps / coming to my room” (lines 10-11). Photographer Bellocq is more enamored with the model than the model is of herself; the model is more confident in stating Bellocq’s opinion than her own. When the poem next takes an overtly violent turn, with Bellocq explaining the fragility of photographic plates, it shows the reader how not only memory but the image itself can be smashed, and with it, the integrity of the speaker; as she articulates it, “a quick scratch carves a scar across my chest” (line 14). The image of the woman and the woman herself are conflated, both easily and permanently damaged by the photographer. Several of the actual Bellocq glass plates are scratched, sometimes with a streak like the one described in this poem, sometimes the scrapes obscuring a face so that it is blacked out in the Friedlander print (<www.fraenkelgallery.com> [go to Bellocq #s 9, 10, 14, 16, 29, 30]). Trethewey’s hypothesis here—that Bellocq was demonstrating fragility to his model—does not really explain why so many plates are scratched or whether all were marred intentionally (perhaps in some cases to prevent reproduction or retain the anonymity of the models). The poem itself neither endorses nor criticizes this violence, as it ends with that scarring action.
The next poem, “Photography,” further complicates this relationship by depicting Bellocq mentoring his subject, teaching her about lighting, shadows, and framing, and about creating rather than destroying the photograph. Photography exhilarates the speaker as she learns the technical aspects of how silver crystals create an image on film. The concept of the negative is particularly fascinating:

the whole world reverses, my black dress turned white, my skin blackened to pitch. Inside out, I said, thinking of what I’ve tried to hide.

The collection’s first letter home and its reference to passing as white—and the more recent reference to the wallpaper of Mahogany Hall—is echoed here, for the photographic negative reveals the light-skinned woman as black. The negative becomes, in important ways, more accurate to her than the final print and perhaps more revealing than the lived moment as well. The final four lines stake a claim for what the speaker can see, things that Bellocq and his camera’s lens cannot:

I look at what he can see through his lens and what he cannot—silverfish behind the walls, the yellow tint of a faded bruise—other things here, what the camera misses. (lines 11–14)

The speaker has greater vision than the photographer and camera; the camera, she knows, does not capture a whole truth.

Trethewey is concerned about what might be seen through a poem that is not seen through the camera’s lens: “I’ve been concerned with what I have noticed to be the erasures of history for a very long time. Those stories often left to silence or oblivion, the gaps within the stories we are told [. . . ]” (“Inscriptive Restorations” 1028). Silence and erasure, then, are two forms of the same process or instant. That many of Bellocq’s plates are scarred, sometimes erasing the women’s faces—their identities—with purposeful, vehement scratches, suggests significant gaps in what we know about these women, their lives, and Bellocq’s project. In “Disclosure,” the speaker asserts that Bellocq scratched plates that he didn’t like and then immediately equates his act with the speaker’s wearing of make-up; both, she says, are “[. . .] ways to obscure a face. [. . .]” (line 3). In the poems, the male impulse to obscure an image is one of violence and erasure, whereas the female equivalent aims to hide the real image beneath a constructed one; her gesture is thus more ambiguous, since it may distort or empower her, make her less visible or more appealing.

This sonnet turns, however; the speaker fails to properly record a bird that lifts into the air just as she shoots the photograph. The amateur photographer captures not the bird—merely “[. . .] a vivid blur [. . .]” (line 12)—but instead the less appealing but real landscape:

“the clutter just beyond the hedge—garbage, / rats licking the insides of broken eggs” (lines 13–14). That the poem ends with an image of vermin feeding upon a symbol of fertility fits well the collection’s examination of the layered representation of female prostitutes but remains understated, presenting the action as factual scenery. Juxtaposing the
lines before and after the sonnet’s turn, the poem makes the contradictory claim that things can but also cannot be hidden.

The speaker of the final sonnet “(Self) Portrait” goes still further by asserting the failure of photography: its inability to capture a whole truth, its inability to hide and reveal simultaneously. The speaker, now an amateur photographer, attempts to shoot a train’s departure: “On the crowded street I want to stop / time, hold it captive in my dark chamber—” (lines 1–2). This first line echoes the first letter home toward the beginning of Bellocq’s Ophelia, recalling the crowded streets of New Orleans and the woman’s arrival there. The second line calls up the womb, the camera itself as a chamber, and the photographic darkroom. But, most significantly, the speaker’s attempt to photograph the train fails—in terms that recall the attempt to photograph the bird in “Disclosure”—because she leaves her lens cap on, a particularly amateurish mistake. She is no more able to capture the image of the departing train than she was able to keep her mother from dwindling in the distance as she left home for New Orleans: “I thought of my mother shrinking against / the horizon—so, distracted, I looked into / a capped lens, saw only my own clear eye” (lines 12–14). The memory of her past distracts her and prevents her from capturing the present. Trethewey’s poems cumulatively present Bellocq as the professional arbiter of images; the woman’s attempts to produce any image seem more futile. The image that ends the sonnet sequence portrays the speaker looking back into her own eye; perhaps that is the truest image, since it reveals the self she never intended to photograph.

The collection’s final poem, “Vignette,” describes the imagined reality of the figure in the book’s cover photograph: a seated, formally attired woman with a furrowed brow. The title, like other photographic terminology in the collection, is crucial: a vignette is traditionally a small, decorative illustration that precedes or ends a chapter of a book, so it is appropriate that Bellocq’s Ophelia—a literary rendition—ends with “Vignette.” This vignette can be read as a small view or brief scene of Ophelia or, more colloquially, as a pleasant picture. Vignette also refers to an elegant literary sketch, here a final delineation of character and setting. Importantly, though, a photograph that is a vignette has no distinct borderline, instead shading off gradually around its edge. Some of Bellocq’s own photographs may have been intended as vignettes, as it was a popular form of photographic prints in the early twentieth century. The reader’s final poetic image of Ophelia is as vignette in the photographic sense, as her life diminishes gradually for the speaker and reader to imagine.

"Vignette" incorporates numerous visual details that are evident in the Bellocq photograph: a chair, the jewelry, the fur around the model, and “her dark crown of hair [. . .]” (line 5). Unlike a poem such as the previous “(Self) Portrait,” this poem overtly references a specific photograph, the only one provided for the reader. Trethewey’s statement about this photograph in a 2004 interview in Callaloo offers a clue about how best to read the photograph’s presence in the poem:

Initially, I was struck by how sad the woman looks, how pensive she seems. It was her furrowed brow that suggested to me the moment photographers call
“the decisive moment.” A photographer will train the camera on a subject and wait until that moment happens when the subject seems most real, most unguarded perhaps. I imagine that, in this photograph, it’s the moment she’s no longer thinking about where she is. She’s no longer aware that Bellocq is taking her picture, and she has entered deeply into her own thoughts. I looked at her and said, “What would she be thinking?” I decided that it was a moment in which she is contemplating her life and where she might go from there.

(1028–29)

By the second stanza of “Vignette,” Trethewey’s poem begins to answer that question and reveal the imagined contemplation:

she’s no longer listening; she’s forgotten
he’s there. Instead she must be thinking
of her childhood wonder at seeing
the contortionist in a sideshow—how
he could make himself small, fit
into cramped spaces, his lungs
barely expanding with each tiny breath.
She thinks of her own shallow breath—
her back straining the stays of a bustier
the weight of a body pressing her down. (lines 18–27)

The prostitute-model-speaker daydreams and, at last, focuses on an image and analogy that seems to represent her as she thinks of herself. The first three line breaks in this stanza are exceptional: the speaker must first forget, then think, and then recall that she has always felt wonder at seeing. These line breaks convince the reader that the speaker’s analogy is sound, can be trusted; the memory becomes—more unexpectedly for the speaker perhaps than for the reader—the analogy. Here, Ophelia asserts that being a woman (wearing the obligatory bustier of the time) and being a prostitute (lying under another’s body) require of her contortion and the effort to keep breathing.

This poem, and therefore the collection, ends, however, with the possibility of a new beginning, with a look not merely at a static moment in a photograph but at potential future moments. The poem demands, in its final lines:

Imagine her a moment later—after
the flash, blinded—stepping out
of the frame, wide-eyed, into her life. (lines 35–37)

Stepping out suggests at once leaving a place for just a moment, only to return quickly; to go out on a date or have a romantic encounter; to beg off an obligation or leave a position; and to be unfaithful in a romantic union. All these connotations or word plays apply to the prostitute-model-speaker here. The idea of being un-framed, beyond the reminder of the impact of the photographic frame, carries similarly rich ambiguities: she is at once un-trapped, un-structured, without limits or borders, perhaps even without the body that is a sort of frame. Just as Trethewey has imagined Ophelia’s life outside Bellocq’s photographs,
readers are asked to imagine a future for her, but there are numerous potential lives she might lead. In both Bellocq’s photograph and Trethewey’s final poem, the prostitute-model-speaker—and by extension the reader—lives utterly within the layered representations and also just out of her own reach.

Trethewey, in constructing additional strata in the representations of the New Orleans prostitutes, imagines a new, complicated context for the women in Bellocq’s photographs. “Rehabilitating old photographs, by finding new contexts, has become a major book industry. A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs). A photograph could also be described as a quotation, which makes a book of photographs like a book of quotations” (Sontag 71). With the passage of time and lack of documentation by Bellocq, the images became unmoored from their real subjects and also from each other so that Trethewey’s Ophelia is all and none of these women. The photographs—and the prostitutes—are open to not only re-reading but also to re-writing. Particularly because the lyric poem offers speech as well as image, Trethewey’s collection is a book of imagined quotations.

The complex intertextuality of this ekphrastic art in which two artists’ imaginations—Bellocq’s and Trethewey’s—are at play deserves additional attention. Our own work will next examine the relationship of the Bellocq–Trethewey collaboration in light of the history of female nude in visual art and to the literary traditions of the sonnet as love poem and of Magdalene poems about the redemption of prostitutes. In addition, Trethewey’s work must be considered alongside the other contemporary, fictionalized accounts of Bellocq and the New Orleans prostitutes. What began for us as a desire to bring contemporary poetry to bear on a course about the interconnectedness of writing and photography has emerged as an ongoing research project to plumb the depths of images and identities both fictive and real.

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NOTES


2Trethewey, born in Gulfport, Mississippi, in 1966, is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Emory University. She received her M.F.A. in Poetry from the University of Massachusetts. Her work has received numerous awards, including a Pushcart Poetry Prize, the Grolier Poetry Prize, and selections for The Best American Poetry in 2000 and 2003. Her first collection, Domestic Work (2000), won the inaugural 1999 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, the 2001 Lillian Smith Award for Poetry, and the 2001 Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Book Prize. The latter was awarded again in 2003 for Bellocq’s Ophelia (2002), her second collection, which was also named a 2003 Notable Book by the American Library Association. Her third collection of poems, Native Guard, appeared in 2006.
The medium of poetry, then, is both an aural and visual one, and, because Trethewey is acutely aware of visual texts, poetic form must be considered in relation to photographic form when examining her work here. In fact, Trethewey’s Bellocq’s Ophelia may be one of the many responses Gioia envisioned to crises in poetry that he defined in 1992, including “...the proximity of the lyric; the bankruptcy of the confessional mode; and the inability to establish a meaningful aesthetic for new poetic narrative” (45).


6 Details are crucial in Trethewey’s poems broadly. Sonnets, too, offer not only imagistic elements that are sometimes akin to Barthes’s punctums, but also brevity—akin to the split-second gestalt of a photograph—and, often, a turn or insight when the situation is re-seen, becoming other or more complex than what was thought, larger or deeper. The sonnet, to the reader, feels greater than the sum of its fourteen lines, just as the photograph’s punctum “is a kind of subtle beyond” (Barthes 59) that allows the photograph to become greater than itself “as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see [. . .].toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together” (Barthes 59).

7 The wallpaper may indeed indicate a specific site, but this is not firmly documented in the published history on Bellocq’s depictions. However, questioning whether this wallpaper was used only in Mahogany Hall does not negate the fact that many light-skinned women in New Orleans in this period were of mixed race. Whether factual or not, Trethewey’s narrative—and the varying accounts of Bellocq’s fascinating photographs—hinges on the ways in which these New Orleans, mixed-race women represent themselves and are represented.

8 Some of his prostitute models appear with legs casually crossed, and sometimes what is behind the backdrop is included in the frame. One photograph a woman in a large, feathered hat, for instance, shows tea towels drying on a clothesline behind the square black backdrop Bellocq uses. Another shows part of a window, and several include brickwork behind the backdrop. When vignetted, these elements would have been eliminated from the portrait.

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