

FRAMING THE SUBJECT IN NATASHA TRETHERWEY'S

BELLOCQ'S OPHELIA

By

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William Shakespeare's Ophelia persists in the literary and art imagination as an iconic woman: a bearer of masculine desires, driven to self destruction, and ultimately powerless to resist how she is figured by the men who dominate her over the course of the play. As Bridget Lyon's argues, Ophelia is "passive and obedient at the beginning of the play and mad towards the end of it—she exerts little independent influence on the shape of the action, and it seems fair to say that her importance is primarily emblematic rather than consequential."¹ Ophelia connotes what Laura Mulvey calls *to-be-looked-at-ness*; she is always the object, never the subject of the male gaze. The ekphrastic afterlife of Shakespeare's Ophelia, specifically in the John Millais's Pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia*, disconnects her from the world of the play, so that her iconic significance is rendered visual instead of textual. Michael Benton and Sally Butcher suggest that Millais projected his conception of the Victorian women onto the body of the figurative Ophelia, an unwitting replication perhaps of the negotiations that happen in the play.² In this iteration, Ophelia becomes the object of both the painter's and the audiences' gazes, yet she remains connected to Shakespeare's masculine world. Over time, the icon Ophelia becomes something of an empty signifier, connoting helplessness, powerlessness, and a warped ideal of femininity. It is from this hollow trope that Natasha Trethewey names and revises the history of the heroine of her collection of poems, *Bellocq's Ophelia*. Trethewey's Ophelia is composite of several mixed race prostitutes who were photographed by Ernest J. Bellocq in the early 1900s in New Orleans. In some respects, only the name and gender are the same, but both women are constituted primarily as

¹ Bridget Gellert Lyons "The Iconography of Ophelia," *ELH* , 62.

² Michael Benton and Sally Butcher. "Painting Shakespeare," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 53-66.

objects of masculine desire who have been, throughout history, denied any kind of interiority.

In *Bellocq's Ophelia*, Natasha Trethewey seeks to privilege both the material objects—the photographs—and one of Bellocq's historically anonymous subjects that Trethewey names Ophelia. To privilege both the object and the subject as authoritative ways of knowing requires a precarious balancing act wherein the acts of objectification and the granting of subjectivity rely on the semi-transparent machinations of the author. This balancing act at times renders the Bellocq's photographed women little more than objects who are consumed by both the viewer, reader, and text. Ophelia's deliberate choice to become a consumable object mitigates her uneasy transmutation from subject to object in that it affords her the power to move outside the many frames within the sequence of poems. The persistence of frames around Ophelia is deliberate on Trethewey's part and provides the foundational metaphor for the sequence; she writes, "the book is about framing in so many ways and there are so many frames around Ophelia; someone looks at her through a monocle and that's a kind of framing. She's looked at through the lens and photographed, and that frames her. She is framed by the confines of Storyville, the district itself, out of which she's not supposed to venture. This book frames her"³ Trethewey offers a nuanced understanding of the relationship between objectification and subjectivity via the tensions between photography and language, naming and unname, and agency and conscription. She does not consider these terms as binaries but rather creates a complicated web of interactions that ultimately yields an ambiguous, but possibly hopeful, ending for *Bellocq's Ophelia*.

³ Charles Henry Rowell, "Inscriptive Restorations: An Interview with Natasha Trethewey." *Callaloo* 27.4

Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Laura Mulvey supply a critical foundation for understanding how images, particularly photographs can function as transformative objects of memory and history. Sontag asserts that photographs are evidence that an event has occurred, and though the photograph may distort, “there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture.”⁴ Similarly, Barthes suggests that because the photograph does in fact exist, one cannot deny that “*the thing has been there.*”⁵ The photograph becomes a “privileged moment,” one that can be looked at over and over again.⁶ Essentially, there *was* a there there, if only for a moment, and it seemingly remains accessible as long as the object—the photograph—exists. Sontag suggests that this assumption gives the viewer an “imaginary possession of a past that is unreal” and it confers the power of knowledge upon the viewer. This knowledge, however, is incomplete because the photograph cannot contain a total reality: just as the photo cannot account for a total history, it fails as an object of memory and in fact become counter memory because it fixes not a scene but a moment.⁷

Sontag also considers the production of a photograph an event that has the right to disrupt, displace, or ignore the surrounding action. Consequently, the act of photography is invasive; it appropriates its subject by framing it, creating a hierarchical relationship between the photographer and the photographed in that the photographer has the power to choose what is, and is not, in the frame. It confers importance in that the photographer must decide who and what to photograph, and in the choosing he or she holds the subject

⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* 5.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 76.

⁶ Sontag 18.

⁷ Sontag 9, 18, and 23, and Barthes 91.

as an exemplar of the extraordinary or the mundane.⁸ The photographer makes public the subject's inherent "mortality, vulnerability, mutability."⁹ The enterprise of photography is a colonizing act, and in observing the lives of others and adopting a demeanor of professionalism, it attempts to transcending class, gender, and, ostensibly racial interests.

Barthes focuses on the photographer's subject in more detail. As he sees it, the photograph makes the self other through dissociation. He explains that when he is before the camera,

Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.

This distortion fractures the subject, converting his subjectivity into the three discrete objects with three discrete "owners." He becomes a subject who knows that he is becoming both the photographer's object and an art object. This raises the question, "to whom does the photograph belong?"¹⁰ This notion of ownership—by the photographed, the photographer, and, arguably, the public—reinforces the reality that the photographic act is one that changes the speaking, thinking subject into a mute, two dimensional object that is reproducible and subject to be owned. The subject becomes an object of transaction and cultural consumption. Trethewey's choice to give agency to mixed-race prostitutes situates her poems within this nexus of commerce, bodies, and representation.

Although the conventions of cinema differ somewhat from those of photography, Laura Mulvey's discussion of the gaze and the objectification of the female body allows us to understand how images are meant to be consumed. In "Visual Pleasure and

⁸ Sontag 42, 55, 28.

⁹ Sontag 11,4, 15.

¹⁰ Barthes 12-14.

Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey argues that the narrative conventions of cinema, specifically the camera’s attempt to reproduce the “so-called natural conditions of human perceptions,” urges the audience to identify with the ubiquitous male lead, which codes the subject position of perception as male.¹¹ From this masculine position, the audience is then encouraged to project our desires onto the female character. Women are “simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle...she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.”¹² This notion of the image of the cinematic woman as a two dimensional icon or object resists the verisimilitude of cinema, and replicates the limits of photography in representing bodies as subjects. Implicit in Mulvey’s, Barthes’, and Sontag’s arguments is a resistance to the notion of the unmediated gaze. The images produced are carefully constructed by a director, cinematographer, or photographer. The camera is not an autonomous piece of technology but rather it is one that requires an operator to create a product. If we return to Sontag’s and Barthes’ point that the existence of a photograph is a testament to the existence of the photographed object, it becomes clear that each photograph is also a testament to the existence of a photographer, someone who has framed the shot in such a way as to direct our gaze as he or she sees fit.

In *Ordering the Façade*, Katherine Henninger looks at how the triangular relationship between viewer, image, and photographer is further complicated by issues of region, race, class, and gender. Henninger looks at the relationship between photography, literature, and the visual portrayal of women in the South, specifically the ways

¹¹ Mulvey 244.

¹² Mulvey 242-243.

photography has been integral to the formation of the concept of southern womanhood. Her underlying assumption is that photographs have been instrumental in defining southernness, but more specifically, the southern woman. Henninger mostly looks at how fictional photographs function within women's texts, and she argues that they "epitomize the power of visuality, and more specifically, visual traditions, to position female identities within southern culture," and she seeks to "trace the ways these fictional photographs represent the turning of subject into object," that is, the individual southern female into the body of the Southern Woman.¹³ Another underlying assumption of Henninger's study is that contemporary southern women writers, as a product of what she calls a "post-everything" America, are familiar with the history and politics of visual representation and with how representational theory "limits subjective and representative responsibilities." She focuses on the photograph because, as a keystone of visual culture, it becomes a powerful figure through which to interrogate the visual representation and power.¹⁴ She asserts, however, that the discussion of photography has been theorized for too long in terms of mastery and domination. Here, Henninger engages Mulvey's notion of the active male gaze and the passive feminine object to show how this binary limits the possibility of oppressed people using the camera to obtain mastery and define their own subjectivity. Because the camera is figured "in terms of a masculine gaze," it becomes a Western, "masculine predatory agent" that feminizes everything within its view. Under these conditions, it becomes nearly impossible to speak of women wielding the camera with any kind of mastery, and thus it is necessary to change the terms.¹⁵

¹³ Katherine Henninger, *Ordering the Façade* 3-4

¹⁴ Henninger 23, 7.

¹⁵ Henninger 115.

Henninger argues that the Southern obsession with visual notions of “social ‘place’” also contains an anxiety and suspicion about the power of sight and visual markers. This echoes Barthes’ and Sontag’s points that the visual alone is incapable of transmitting every detail; it is only a piece of the narrative. The other piece of that narrative is tied inextricably to language, and in the South, where orality is privileged, there exists a tension between the written and the oral, the oral and the visual, the visual and the word.¹⁶ In the South, the narratives of race and class help alleviate white anxieties about the racial composition of the photographed object if and when that object’s race is unclear. Language helps translate the somewhat ineffable quality of photographs to transform the subject to object. When Barthes writes of the four image repertoires, he articulates the complexity of a transformation that is, in the moment the photograph is taken at least, never complete. The photographed body is, linguistically, is simultaneously subject and object. This notion of simultaneity is further complicated when the body wielding the camera and the body translating the experience is a singular, oppressed body. As Henninger surmises, when the oppressed figure uses the camera to create an oppositional narrative, the act of photography becomes one of resistance to the totalizing discourses of culture that ignore, stigmatize, or disregard non-white, female bodies. In appropriating the privileged male gaze, they claim the right to counter the fraught narrative imposed on their bodies and inscribe their own subjectivity. In doing so, they are able to make themselves visible in the larger cultural narrative.

On the surface, Ernest J. Bellocq would seem an easy villain; as the photographer of the female subjects of *Bellocq’s Ophelia*, he was a white male who photographed mixed race prostitutes in Storyville, New Orleans’ legal vice district, in the early 1900s.

¹⁶ Henninger 22, 18.

But Bellocq's subject position is not so easy to fix. He was something of an outcast, and as such, he was able to complicate the narrative of the Storyville prostitutes by deculturating the brothel rooms by situating them as living, domestic spaces.¹⁷ It is also important to note that although Bellocq photographed these prostitutes and compensated them for their time, there is no evidence that Bellocq intended to sell the photographs for personal gain. Bellocq's photographs elide not only the women's roles as sex workers but their racial composition as well. In fact, it is difficult to tell from the photographs alone that these women were prostitutes, and the distinct wallpaper known to have decorated one of the more famous, mixed race brothels in Storyville is one of the few details that provides a point of entry into the lives of these women and makes some of them legible as black sex workers.

According to Trethewey, Bellocq functions in *Bellocq's Ophelia* "as a kind of disembodied eye that is always looking at her, training the camera on her."¹⁸ This image evokes Sontag and Barthes conceptualization of the intrusive photographer who colonizes his subject. Despite Bellocq's candid approach, Heninger places Bellocq's photographs in the long tradition of the exploitation of mixed-race women in the South and in New Orleans in particular.¹⁹ Jessica Adams, however, suggests that although Storyville, and New Orleans in general, were a kind of enduring nexus of blackness, sexuality, and commerce from the late nineteenth century on, Bellocq's photographs "reimagined Storyville as domestic space and represented prostitutes, at least some of whom were octoroons, as frankly sexual yet ordinary women. Bellocq's work both acknowledged a

¹⁷ In an interview found in *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits*, New York: Modern Museum of Art, 1970, Bellocq is unflatteringly described as a reclusive "hydrocephalic semi-dwarf, a good subject for a caricaturist, who cultivated the company of prostitutes" (8).

¹⁸ Rowell 1030.

¹⁹ Heninger 44.

connection between prostitutes and ‘normal’ women and revalenced it.”²⁰ Even Sontag admits that “[i]t could not be detected from at least a third of the pictures that the women are inmates of a brothel.”²¹ Though the camera rendered them art objects, Bellocq was able to capture an essential humanness and make moral and racial differences almost invisible.²² When looking at a photograph of a clothed prostitute, Janet Malcolm also wonders “whether she actually was a prostitute. What evidence was there that she, or, for that matter any woman in the book, clothed or unclithe, was an inhabitant of a whorehouse rather than, say, a cousin or a sister of the photographer, or a paid model?”²³ This returns us once more to Sontag’s and Barthes’s points: Bellocq photographed a woman, but the ways of knowing who or what that woman was depend on a greater narrative, a cultural literacy that makes legible the visible signs of race and sexual trespass and places them in a larger cultural narrative. In looking at the smaller, unexpected details (what Barthes’ calls *punctums*) Trethewey investigates “that liminal space of appearing to be one thing to people on the outside and having an inside that’s different, something that people can’t see.” This point of entry allows her to “investigate the difference between the reality of [Ophelia’s] life and the images that have become art to us.”²⁴

Trethewey begins her recuperation of the silent, anonymous prostitute by exercising her power as author to name her subject. In naming her Ophelia, Trethewey situates the otherwise unnamed woman within a prestigious, if troubled, literary history. Given her Shakespearean ancestor, “Ophelia” promises to be a dark and troubled heroine

²⁰ Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning*. 50, 49, 51-52.

²¹ Sontag qtd. in Adams 52.

²² Adams 52.

²³ Malcolm qtd. in Adams 52.

²⁴ Rowell 1028.

whose interior theorizing of her sexual interactions with men troubles conventional assumptions regarding black female sexuality in the South. As a product of the South and a photographed object, Ophelia can also trace her literary antecedents to Janie from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and to Thomas Sutpen's first wife and Charles Bon's mulatto mistress in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as well as to the extensive roster of photographed southern women in Henninger's study. Janie, for example, is another southern woman defined by a photograph, and she experiences a period of being unnamed, though her name is not a literary one and thus carries a different kind of cultural baggage.²⁵ When Janie is a young child, she does not recognize herself in a group photograph wherein she is the only black child, but once she is identified, she experiences a kind of perfect coherence of race and sex. She is not troubled that she is black, only that she had thought otherwise, and was no longer like the others (9). Both women in *Absalom, Absalom!* remain nameless and seem to function merely as discarded procreative sites for privileged white males and sources of white hysteria in the novel. As Charles Bon rhapsodizes, via Mr. Compson's somewhat hysterical narration, mulatto mistresses are "created and produced by white men" and so are not whores (142). They "are more valuable commodities than white girls, raised and trained to fulfill a woman's sole end and purpose: to love, to be beautiful, to divert; never to see a man's face hardly until brought to the ball," and in return, the white male provides for her and protects her honor against any who would call her a whore (145). Faulkner's construction of mixed-race prostitutes in the "hot equatorial groin" that is New Orleans, unsurprisingly, makes no room for female agency or interiority; somehow, everything is done by and for the white male consumer who also has the privilege of discarding the cherished female object in favor of

²⁵ Sigrid King, "Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*." 686.

a legitimate marriage (144). Trethewey's protagonist is a revision of this trope, given the existence of her interiority and agency, her ability to speak and write her life, to reimagine both the camera and the gaze.

In naming Ophelia, Trethewey bestows the possibility of subjectivity, but she does so in a way that foregrounds the fictive nature of that subjectivity in the epigraph to the first section:

Ophelia is the imagined name of a prostitute photographed circa 1912 by E. J. Bellocq, later collected in the book, *Storyville Portraits*. A very white-skinned black woman—mulatto, quadroon or octoroon—she would have lived in one of few “colored” brothels such as Willie Piazza’s Basin Street Mansion or Lula White’s Mahogany Hall, which, according to the *Blue Book*, was known as the “Octoroon Club. (6)

The frame that Trethewey constructs around Ophelia's life is restrictive and rendered in terms of race and class. Trethewey is careful to provide the necessary auxiliary narrative by which to read Ophelia's body. Already we know that we cannot trust what the cover photograph tells us. The subject of the book is fixed as both a photographic and sexual object. Lest the photograph fool you—she is “very white-skinned”—Ophelia, bound by traditional, southern racial categories, is black. She has no known name, only an “imagined” one. This type of framing troubles any attempts to read Ophelia as a fully actualized subject, but it also mirrors Ophelia's anxieties and actions regarding how she moves about New Orleans. *Bellocq's Ophelia* is divided into two major sections with two discrete rhetorical preoccupations. The poems in the first major section, “Letters from Storyville,” are epistolary in nature, and as such, they are meant to be read by at least one other person. In these poems, Ophelia openly acknowledges her liminality as both subject and object, and her complicity in the process, and she also negotiates how she is perceived by the world. There is a broad formal variation in this section, due in part

to Ophelia's attempts to justify the shape of her life in New Orleans. The poems' structure reflect the types of responses Ophelia receives over the course of the poems, and at times the lines are long and persuasive, while at others, the lines are short and terse. As the first consistent section in her voice, "Letters from Storyville" presents Ophelia making her case to the reader and establishes the terms of her life in the city. The poems in "Storyville Diary," however, are not meant for even semi-public consumption, and curiously, they are quite regular in form. These sonnets reflect the ways in which Ophelia articulates herself *to* herself, and there is a kind of carefulness that is both meditative and melancholy. The rigor here is not for the benefit of the world but rather it for the benefit of Ophelia who, even in her most private envisioning of herself, places her interiority in a figurative box.

Ophelia's liminality manifests itself not just in her mixed-race heritage but also in her vacillation between being a thinking subject and a retreating object, and the disjunction between her education and her eventual "career." In "Letter Home, New Orleans, November 1910," we learn that Ophelia initially comes to New Orleans to create a new life for herself. Implied in her journey South is a desire for anonymity and the possibility of performing whiteness because in New Orleans, no one knows the counternarrative that would render her very white skin black. If we trust Ophelia's reading of her own body—and we must allow her to inscribe her own character—her brown hands, hidden by a pair of crocheted gloves, are the only sign of her blackness.²⁶ She comes to the city with money and a plan to secure some "modest position" by virtue of her "plain English and good writing" with a local merchant. After a month, however, it becomes clear that "no one needs a *girl*," and in a moment of reflection Ophelia wonders,

²⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. "Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality," 25.

Do I deceive
anyone? Were they to see my hands, brown
as your face, they'd know I'm not quite
what I pretend to be. I walk these streets
a white woman, or so I think, until I catch the eyes
of some stranger upon me, and I must lower mine,
a *negress* again. There are enough things here
to remind me who I am. (7)

There is a dissonance between Ophelia's perception of herself and what she actually believes. She writes that she thinks of herself as a white woman, when in fact, she is incapable of denying her blackness. The stranger's eyes do not reveal her pretense; her reading of the stranger does. Ophelia desires to be someone she is not, and though no one else knows her secret, she cannot forget it. Race haunts her, the wages of blackness—the “back-bending and domestic”—work that she wishes to escape.

Instead of choosing to do domestic work, Ophelia decides to become a prostitute. Ironically, she chooses a “fancy *colored* house,” an institution that makes her body legible as black to anyone who walks in. Jessica Adams would also contend that Ophelia's presence in Storyville would render her legible as black because “the geography it specified spoke not only to the lack of political influence within the community of color it occupied but also to the prevailing attitude among whites that blackness was a signifier of sexual depravity. To be a prostitute of color was to fulfill stereotypes of black sexuality; to be a white prostitute was to be, on some level, black.”²⁷ Ophelia's decision to become a prostitute, then, counters her initial desires to *be* read as white in New Orleans. The key here, however, is that it is *her* decision; she is not forced by poverty, as Henninger suggests, to work in Countess P—'s fancy house.²⁸ I would suggest that to deny Ophelia's agency at this particular juncture is to deny her later acts

²⁷ Adams 38.

²⁸ Henninger 171.

of resistance. She is not, as Trethewey claims, the “nameless inmate of Storyville.” This language, which echoes Sontag’s description of the brothels, makes Ophelia an unwilling participant or a victim, but Ophelia clearly owns this decision. In “Letters from Storyville, December 1910,” addressed to Constance, her former schoolteacher, she recounts how she ended up working for Countess P—:

I must tell you—
when I had grown too weary to keep up
my inquiries and my rent was coming
due, I had what must be considered
the good fortune to meet Countess P—,
an elegant businesswoman who offered
me a place in her house. I did not accept
then, though I had tea with her—the first
I’d had in days. And later, too hungry
to reason, I spent the last of my purse
on a good meal. It was to her that I went
when I had to leave my hotel, and I am
as yet adjusting to my new life. (12)

Ophelia’s class issues, which are located in her desire to appear middle class and white, lead to her temporarily impoverished state. She lives in a hotel; she has tea; she spends the last of her money on a “good meal,” instead of stretching it. Ophelia does not go home to Mississippi once she is under economic strain; she stays in New Orleans and becomes a prostitute. It is clear from this exchange that Ophelia feels that there is some work that is beneath her and that she has become accustomed to a certain lifestyle, one that she would be unable to support doing domestic work. It should be clear, though, that while she has made the decision, it is one that is deeply problematic. She acknowledges the social unacceptability of her choice as evidenced by her attempt to spin the story in order to forestall any concerns that Constance might have—in particular, the phrase,

“elegant businesswoman” is a little elevated in describing a brothel’s madam. In “January 1911,” she writes Constance again, only this time the tone is quite defensive:

My dear,
please do not think
I am the wayward girl
You describe. I alone
have made this choice.
Save what I pay for board,
what I earn is mine. Now
my labor is my own.
Already my purse swells. (15)

The short lines suggest a terseness that is absent in “December 1910.” Here, Ophelia abandons any attempt to persuade her former teacher that her decision is morally understandable, and she relies on the manifestation of success in her swelling purse as evidence that she has made the right choice. With the money earned from her “labor,” Ophelia is able to buy her mother new teeth and have a well dug on her mother’s property. Ophelia displays a newfound swagger rooted deep in her pocketbook, but part of her appeal as a prostitute is her nearly invisible blackness, a puzzle that many of her customers try to solve.

Obviously, Ophelia does not find prostitution to be an ideal form of labor. She recognizes that it requires her to repress her subjectivity so that she might become whatever the customer wants. In some respects, prostitution is a very useful figure in representing the relationship between objectification and subjectivity because it is a socially fraught profession. The madam informs Ophelia that in this environment, “You’ll see/ yourself a hundred times. For our customers/ you must learn to be watched. Empty/ your thoughts.” Ophelia is supposed to “[l]et his gaze animate you” (11). The emphasis on becoming “empty” points to the process of sublimation, of making oneself

an object that can “pose still as a statue for hours,/ a glass or pair of boots propped upon my back” (14). This advice is harrowingly reminiscent of Charles Bon’s expectations of how the mulatto mistresses are supposed to act. Like Bon’s girl, Ophelia has been groomed for this kind of work since childhood, where she learned to stand still and present her body for inspection to her father and to whiten her skin with arsenic (Trethewey 20).²⁹ Countess P—renames her the *African Violet* for “the promise/ of that wild continent hidden beneath/ [her] white skin” (13). Ruth Rosen suggests that the assignation of a new name was a way of “bonding to a subculture considered deviant and degraded by the dominant culture....It was as if a new name (as in a nunnery) made a new claim on the individual’s loyalties to her past through the purposeful elimination of an older identity. Interestingly, the new name never included a surname....In effect, they ceased to belong to any previous father or husband.”³⁰ Arguably, this renaming is yet another step toward objectification, but it has the unexpected value of helping Ophelia keep her subjectivity, which is ineffably bound to her “real” name, intact.

After Bellocq takes her photograph, Ophelia decides to get a camera of her own, a Kodak. She discovers the cruel power of the camera to “dissect the body” (27). Henninger argues that when Ophelia buys the camera and takes possession of the “camera’s gaze,” she is participating in “an ongoing southern visual tradition of resistant re-imaging,” but I would also suggest that, armed with the camera, Ophelia is now able to conceive of and articulate her desires, which were previously inaccessible.³¹ It is as if the camera allows her to see both her world and her place within it more clearly. The act of photography, for Ophelia, reifies her subjectivity via the equation of photography; if there

²⁹ Henninger 171.

³⁰ Ruth Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood* 102-103.

³¹ Henninger 172

a photographed object, there must be someone to photograph it, someone who has the power to compose the objects which enter the scope of her lens. She wants a photograph of Constance, a way of fixing the image of a friend, because her memory is failing; she wants to forget the past, but realizes that she cannot; she wants to capture a redbird, and cannot. Equally important here is the interrogation of desire and her potential for creating her own reality.

Trethewey imagines for Ophelia a morally ambiguous subjectivity. This complex ambiguity also bleeds over into the foundation of the book, resulting in several fissures that either undermine or reify the structure of the sequence. Though Trethewey is the one who names the nameless Ophelia, the right of possession is attributed to Bellocq. It is the resolution of Barthes' earlier question: to whom does the photograph belong? In this instance, Bellocq is the undisputed winner. He owns both the photograph and the photographed object, the material object and the subject. Her body is once again foregrounded as the circulating, commodified object, one that she can never own. Oddly, Ophelia is not just the woman on the cover; she alone is the voice of Bellocq's many subjects. In collapsing several different women into one, Trethewey creates a singular, powerful voice capable of speaking the ecstatic moment. The woman on the cover, however, is not the woman in the title poem, "Bellocq's Ophelia," nor is she the woman in "Portrait #2." This inconsistency counters the privileging of the speaker's interiority, her sense of wholeness, although perhaps it is possible that the kind of dissociation that the speaker displays is reflects this underlying lack of coherence in the narrative. That is, Ophelia is a composite of several of Bellocq's subjects, and because she speaks for so many women who all have the potential for the same kind of traumatic past, she is

necessarily fragmented. Such an explanation would figure Ophelia as a site of shared memory and history, thereby accounting for and validating the somewhat muddled interiority.

But it is the ekphrastic poems, “Bellocq’s Ophelia,” “Photograph of a Bawd Drinking Raleigh Rye,” and “Vignette,” that are the most problematic. As Trethewey’s most potent framing device, these poems, which narrate actual photographs, risk enacting the most serious violence on the women in the photographs. They have the potential to reproduce the violence of the photographic act through mimesis; that is, the poems use language to capture the photograph, and in doing so, replicate the colonizing act of photography. When Trethewey retells the photograph, she does so in a way that denies the complex interiority of the speaker, and the speaking subject is transformed into the mute object that is just one of many objects. At its most transparent, the ekphrastic poem allows the poet to act as Ophelia’s customers do and animate her however she desires.

“Bellocq’s Ophelia” is the first poem of the sequence, and it creates the fundamental tension between object and subjectivity. At the center of this poem is the “other Ophelia,” who is one of at least two, and her body is figured in terms of terms of fracture: “the small mound of her belly, the pale hair/ of her pubis—these things—her body/ there for the taking.” This Ophelia’s body is as “limp as dead Ophelia’s” (3). Trethewey narrowly bypasses the colonizing impulse, however, by reading the parted lips as on the cusp of speaking. As a potential speaking subject this Ophelia possesses a kinetic energy that counters her limp, objectified body. She is not, however, a fully actualized subject, but one who is forever fixed right at the moment of speech. The figuration of Ophelia in this poem models for the reader the underlying tensions of the

entire sequence, though this iteration of the balancing act of privileging both subject/object binary leans most heavily toward objectification.

“Photograph of a Bawd” is even more unbalanced in that it explicitly invites the reader to consume the prostitute’s body. Not only are we as complicit as Bellocq and Trethewey in the objectification of the nameless bawd, the bawd is complicit in the objectification of herself. Trethewey denies both the reader and the woman access to her interiority and the right to resist the transformation from subject to object. Unlike the other Ophelia, she is not caught at the moment of becoming. Instead, she raises her glass of rye to us, the readers, as Trethewey draws our gaze up the woman’s striped stockings to the “fringed scarf draping her breasts, the heart/ locket, her bare shoulder...the round innocence of her cheeks” (34). We are then directed to look at the trinkets on the table beside her, which includes a clock, a tiny rocking chair as well as the following:

the ebony statuette of a woman, her arms stretched above
her head. Even the bottle of rye is a woman’s slender torso

and rounded hips. On the wall behind her, the image again—
women in paintings, in photographs, and carved in relief

on an oval plane. (34)

The correspondence between the female body and its reproduction in a series of objects highlights the techniques by which Trethewey figures the actual woman. The objects, including the prostitute and the photograph itself, are commodities that available to us for the price of admission to see the photograph or read the book. While this equivalence could be a pointed critique of the ways in which photography is capable of leveling all subjects into objects, the poem replicates the very structures it seeks to critique. Trethewey writes, “this is all about desire,” but it is not clear what is being desired or

who is doing the desiring. Is it a lack of interiority, the ability to make others into objects, the right to consume the female body without repercussions? While this poem does replicate the hierarchical structures of photography, it remains in conversation with the poems that are in Ophelia's voice and the larger, unresolved tensions between the subject and the object. This juxtaposition helps to make the power dynamics of language and photography visible, even if it does not do much to disrupt them.

"Vignette," the final poem in the sequence, is, in some ways, the most troubling precisely because we witness the moment when *and* where the woman becomes object. Trethewey does it casually, and with such benign elegance, even as she imagines the claustrophobia of that transformation. The poem imagines the day that the cover photograph for *Bellocq's Ophelia* was made. Trethewey's use of the third person and the conditional is unsettling because it disrupts the fiction that is the bedrock of the sequence: that Ophelia is a thinking, speaking, writing subject capable of negotiating the terms of her existence. It erases both the existence of Ophelia as a named subject and her interiority, and Trethewey is able to project a more generic narrative onto her body. She is simply one of many prostitutes in elegant dress milling about a relatively festive scene outside the brothel, each waiting for her turn before the distorting lens. The language is relatively banal, with Bellocq chatting, "just a little," to put the her at ease while he waits "for the right moment, a look on her face/ to keep in a gilded frame, the ornate box/ he'll put her in" (47). The speaker imagines that he tells her about the circus, which allows her to retreat into her own memories of a sideshow contortionist, a freak, who was able to "make himself small, fit/into cramped spaces, his lungs/ barely expanding with each tiny breath." She empathizes with the contortionist in that she, too, is engaged in the practice

of constricting and compressing herself. In this moment of oblivion and empathy and compression, Trethewey has Bellocq take her.

Trethewey's interrogation of the art object, either as subject or object, reveals that complex negotiations between morality and subjectivity are necessary endeavors in unpacking the history and role of representational rhetoric in the shaping of how bodies are read. Of the final poem, Trethewey writes that she "wanted to find a way to exit all of the frameworks that I had created for her, so I have her stepping out of the frame of the book itself and...into her own life, no longer shaped by someone else's gaze," and it sounds like freedom.³² She demands that we imagine this unnamed woman "stepping out/ of the frame/ wide-eyed, into her life," but it is not enough to completely free any of us—the reader, the photographer and the photographed, or the writer— from the hierarchical cultural constructs. I would suggest, however, that because Trethewey has implicated the reader and herself as agents of colonization, she has also charged us with resisting the very constructs she replicates.

What, then, are we to make of the class offered by Dark Room Workshops in New Orleans? In late September of 2006, the Dark Room Workshop offered an E. J. Bellocq course that would allow potential students to step back into the early 20th century and experience Bellocq's "mystique." After attending a lecture about the Storyville photographs, students would then travel to the Columns Hotel on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans and attempt to "recreate Bellocq style photographs" of a nude model and print them on paper similar to that used by Lee Friedlander—the photographer who

³² Rowell 1030

bought and developed Bellocq's negatives in the early 1970s—all for about \$800.³³

Though it promised lectures on Bellocq and his photographs and offered a chance to view several of them close up, this course elided the history of Storyville and romanticized the commodification of women's bodies, privileging instead the remaining material artifacts of photographs whose subjects are accessible to the consuming public. Ironically, the course replicates the patterns of consumption that marked Storyville, New Orleans as a site of sexual tourism in the early 20th century, only this time students were invited to participate in the economies of photography and history instead of that of sex work, a very slim distinction indeed.

³³Dark Room Workshops. Exploring E.J. Bellocq with Thom Bennett. 3 May 2009. <<http://www.neworleansworkshops.com/artists/bennett/bellocq.html>>.

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