



2013-03-14

# Nostalgia: Movement and Stasis in Contemporary American Poetry

Rebecca Cecilia Hay

*Brigham Young University - Provo*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Hay, Rebecca Cecilia, "Nostalgia: Movement and Stasis in Contemporary American Poetry" (2013). *All Theses and Dissertations*. 3475.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/3475>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

Nostalgia: Movement and Stasis in Contemporary American Poetry

Rebecca Cecilia Hay

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Trenton L. Hickman, Chair  
Lance E. Larsen  
Daniel K. Muhlestein

Department of English  
Brigham Young University

March 2013

Copyright © 2013 Rebecca Cecilia Hay

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### Nostalgia: Movement and Stasis in Contemporary American Poetry

Rebecca Cecilia Hay  
Department of English, BYU  
Master of Arts

A remarkable amount of award-winning contemporary American poetry incorporates nostalgia as a prominent idea discussed. This poetry appears to use nostalgia as means to a greater end. In other words, nostalgia, while a dominant theme within different works, is more a way to treat concepts such as representation and memory, more so than the work being an actual commentary on nostalgia itself. Given the poetry's predominant concept, it seems poets such as Carl Dennis, Natasha Trethewey and Ted Kooser could be representative of a literary historical moment. This moment is one which comments heavily on the past's presence within the present. While each poet's writing is heavily influenced by nostalgia, I posit the theory that these poets are speaking to a greater literary historical moment found in both the literature itself as well as current trends in literary theory. It is not that these poets are writing to a specific theory, rather, their Pulitzer-prize winning poetry is rooted in a trend of yearning for the past. As overt a connection between contemporary poetry's treatment of nostalgia and nostalgia theory itself, little, if any, literary criticism has connected these two.

In his essay "Theorizing Nostalgia Isn't What It Used to Be," Paul Grainge contends, "Since the late 1980s, when memory became a topic of concerted critical interest, nostalgia has been taken up in critiques of reactionary conservatism, in accounts of retro phenomena, in relation to the growing memorial tendencies in Europe and America, and as central to particular theories of postmodernism" (20). Grainge continues on to describe two forms nostalgia takes: "mood" and "mode." Similarly, Svetlana Boym suggests nostalgia as either "reflective" or "restorative" (41). This type of current scholarship addressing nostalgia seems to set up a nostalgic reading of texts as more the end game of the literature—the literature is nostalgic. However, if literature then ends as only nostalgic, there seems to be a lack of nostalgic theory's breadth. Dennis, Trethewey and Kooser all address this gap through their poetry—expanding the notion of nostalgia as being more the vehicle leading one through the landscape of memory. Suggesting nostalgia as merely reflective or restorative, as Boym and Grainge have done, seems to create a sense of nostalgia as stagnant rather than as a dynamic movement within the literature, and even the act of recollection itself.

The three poets addressed in my project all suggest at some level that this residue of the past can lead one to see that perhaps experience itself delights in memory. Furthermore, nostalgia's dependence upon present memory indicates not just a longing for the past, but rather the past's presence in the present. The act of remembering serves as a type of catalyst which transforms memories to manifestations in present circumstance.

Keywords: Nostalgia, American Poetry, Natasha Trethewey, Ted Kooser, Carl Dennis

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been produced without the support, love and guidance from people who hold a special place in my heart. To my thesis chair, Trent Hickman, I owe two and a half years' worth of gratitude. Trent, your good humor in agreeing to chair my thesis before I even knew I was accepted into the program has continued throughout my entire graduate career. Your kindness, understanding and very practical advice (“Becca, don’t go home and revise this tonight.”) has been invaluable to my success. To Dan Muhelstein I owe my thanks for listening, helping me ruminate on ideas and for caring about both my academic success as well as my personal life. Your kindness has endeared you to many students and I am no exception. My thanks goes to Lance Larsen who pushed me to think about my texts not as merely words together, but as poetry (“But Becca, why does this have to be a poem?”).

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the friends and family in my life who believed in me and supported me from day one: Daily, my best friend—you remind me that to laugh is the key. Tanis, from my first semester to now, our friendship has deepened and the more I know you the more I love you. Christa, you know my every side and love me more for it. Thanks seems inadequate for all you do for me. Clancy, though miles and states separate us, our calming and supportive gchat sessions got me through some of the hardest times during this project. Rachel and Sarah, my dear sisters, you have shown me that love has no limits. And finally to Mom and Dad—you saw my potential from the day I was born. I would not be here if not for your strength, guidance and assurance. You have wiped my tears and held me close all these years.

Though words cannot express all my thanks, perhaps this project can begin to show that gratitude. Teachers, mentors, friends and family, it is to you I dedicate this thesis.

## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Nostalgia: Movement and Stasis in Contemporary American Poetry .....	1
Works Cited .....	27

### Nostalgia: Movement and Stasis in Contemporary American Poetry

In a 2012 address to the Poetry Society of America, Carl Dennis stated, “I would like to believe that at least some American poets manage to maintain the faith they can reach in a single work a diverse audience with a variety of perspectives as opposed to one two specific constituencies” (par. 1). With his remarks, Dennis envisions a poetry that not only reflects and responds to a cultural time and place, but engages various generations by combining what he identifies as “the embodied and the disembodied, the America of history and the America that history has betrayed or disappointed” (par. 1). Dennis’s comments point to a recurring theme in contemporary American poetry: nostalgia. He seems to suggest that through combining the past and the present, contemporary poets can create a text which, while paying homage to its historical roots, simultaneously creates a sense of modern society’s treatment towards a similar issue. This combination situates contemporary American poets in a unique position: they are both commentators on past issues’ recurrence within current society and chroniclers of those same issues’ importance in contemporary society.

While rewriting the historical past in the imagination of the present is nothing new to the literary scene, recently, a remarkable amount of award-winning contemporary American poetry does so while heavily influenced by nostalgia. In particular, poets such as Carl Dennis and his contemporaries Natasha Trethewey and Ted Kooser could represent an important development in our current literary historical moment—a moment which comments heavily on the past’s presence within the present. Each of these poets has won the Pulitzer Prize for his or her constituent works: Natasha Trethewey for *Native Guard*, Ted Kooser for *Delights and Shadows*, and finally Carl Dennis for *Practical Gods*. Ted Kooser was nominated as poet laureate of the United States in 2004 and most recently Natasha Trethewey was appointed to the same

prestigious position for 2012-2013. With Dennis's remarks to the Poetry Society of America in mind, all these poets seem to be speaking to a greater literary historical moment which deals with history as a recursive and influential theme within modern times; indeed, their Pulitzer-Prize winning poetry is rooted in a more ubiquitous trend in contemporary America of yearning for the past as evidenced in interviews and subsequent publications. Despite these connections between contemporary poetry's treatment of nostalgia and a similar treatment of nostalgia in contemporary theory, little, if any, criticism has connected the two. Consequently, in this article, I will begin to narrow the gap between poets and theorists by analyzing a number of poems written by Dennis, Trethewey, and Kooser. Rather than treat Dennis, Trethewey and Kooser as a triptych, I will move freely between their works, to create a richer constellation of both literature and criticism. Near the end of this work, I will show how nostalgic theories promoted by authors such as Kerwin Klein, Paul Granige, Svetlana Boym, Jan Duyvendak, and Alexander Zinchenko are brought into fruitful dialog through close readings of the selected poetry.

In his article "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," Kerwin Klein proposes memory and history, while not interchangeable, are inseparable because on a societal level, Klein sees memory serves in two functions: "namely, to re-enchant our relation with the world and pour presence back into the past" (145). Klein sees memory in its time-conscious manner—namely, its presence indicates not merely a past but a present as well. When he states that the purpose of memory is to "re-enchant our relation with the world," Klein suggests that memory serves a function in the present: a person using memory as a lens to see their current circumstance. Klein then flips this line of reasoning, suggesting that memory can conversely "pour presence back into the past." Arguing for the recollection of things past, Klein advocates the present as a potent element to the past, reading the Janus-faced element of memory: it is

recursive—as the past reoccurs in present circumstance—and circular, as the present gives “presence” or voice to the past. As suggested earlier, the role of the past in the present is currently of interest to poets and theorists alike. While the two do not necessarily respond to each other, their common interest with the past’s role in the present creates a literary moment in which several contemporary writers have established some language to discuss the different avenues of nostalgia within the larger concepts of memory and representation. In his essay “Theorizing Nostalgia Isn’t What it Used to Be,” Paul Grainge contends, “Since the late 1980s, when memory became a topic of concerted critical interest, nostalgia has been taken up in critiques of reactionary conservatism, in accounts of retro phenomena, in relation to the growing memorial tendencies in Europe and America, and as central to particular theories of postmodernism” (20). Grainge goes on to describe the two forms that he thinks nostalgia takes: “mood” and “mode.” Grainge sees “mood” as a feeling of loss—an experience with emotion as the driving force. By contrast, “mode” focuses not necessarily on the loss of a golden age per se but on the mourning for the loss of memory itself. In that mourning, “The nostalgia mode does not find utopian meaning in the past, but indiscriminately plunders it for style, refracting the past through fashion and glossy images of ‘pastness’” (30). Flags, symbols, clothing fashions of the time—all these elements contribute to a societal representation of the past. Through these objects memories of past events become encompassed in an object and stand in as representative of that time. Objectification of the past dominates nostalgia as a mode.

Following Grainge’s lead, Svetlana Boym suggests that nostalgia is either “reflective” or “restorative” (41), defining nostalgia in terms of its function. She asserts, “Longing might be what we share as human beings, but that doesn’t prevent us from telling very different stories of belonging and nonbelonging. In my view, two kinds of nostalgia characterize one’s relationship



to the past, to the imagined community, to home, to one's own self-perception: restorative and reflective" (41). Boym further contends,

Two kinds of nostalgia are not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing. Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps.

Reflective nostalgia dwells on *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. (41)

Where restorative nostalgia attempts, through symbols and signs, to physically rebuild a past home, giving a complete sense of the past, reflective nostalgia tends towards a more personalized memory. Suggesting that nostalgia is merely reflective or restorative, as Boym and Grainge have done, seems to create nostalgia as a static rather than a dynamic motion within exploration of memory. The mere act of restoring something—whether it is an idea, era, or memory—cannot help but remind people that there is a present day the reductive nature of restorative nostalgia is trying to resist. This self-reflexive pointing suggests nostalgia's connection with loss and longing is the end and not necessarily the motive. In *The Lancet*, Erin Sullivan states that "Searching in 1688 for the perfect word to express the strange emotional and mental symptoms seen in Swiss mercenaries fighting far from home, medical student Johannes Hofer...settled on the term nostalgia, a combination of the words *nosos* (return to native land) and *algos* (suffering or grief). Nostalgia was literally the pain that came from the intense but unfulfilled desire to go home" (585). Characterizing nostalgia as yearning indicates movement—yearning as the act of leading one towards something. If nostalgia is a yearning for the past, it follows that as movement occurs, the end of that journey is not nostalgia itself but a memory of what was lost. In other words, longing for home occurs through remembering and wishing for that home, which in turn allows that longing to fill a desire for a specific time and place in the past.

If, as I argue, nostalgia's connection to the past indicates its yearning for the past, then the work of scholars like Jan Duyvendak and Alexander Zinchenko attempts to name where that yearning ultimately leads. In his work *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States*, Duyvendak connects nostalgia's sense of longing to yearning for an idealized home: "Feeling at home is a sentiment that has its appropriate and even necessary place in the politico-cultural sphere. To be inclusive, this "home" needs to be open and hybrid in its symbols—necessary to peacefully accommodate different feelings of home in the public arena" (124). In essence, Duyvendak's connection of the politico-cultural sphere and the personal idea of home joins Grainge and Boym's respective descriptions of nostalgia. While acknowledging the need for a sense of loss, Duyvendak accepts that cultural/political symbols create that feeling.

Zinchenko furthers this connection to home by identifying two types of home associated with nostalgia. He writes, "Home is, first and foremost, a geographical place that, 'in addition to being the ground of life itself, opens the possibility of 'being oriented' and 'being identified' as human entities.' Place also orients us in time since it embodies history" (70-71). Because home encompasses an idea of physical landscape and time, Zinchenko contends,

If place provides us with visceral, tangible identifications, the cultural-historical context of the psychosocial milieu molds the development of our identity. Our sense of self-constancy is supported by the language we speak; cultural myths, values, and rituals shared with others; identification with certain social groups; and habitual lifestyle and everyday routines. (71)

Connecting individual experience with yearning indicates home as a personal and individual experience. Home, upper-case "H," indicates the physical location of an individual's biography.

In contrast, home, lower-case “h,” indicates a lifestyle lived, language spoken and practiced cultural mores. Likewise, yearning for the past is derived from individual cultural experience within a set time and place. When these connections to home are established, representation transforms shape from individual memories to physical objects encompassing personal memory and experience—combining the idea of both Home and home.

As home and nostalgia play integral roles within the context of memory, having the lived past and the present combine in the act of moving through memory requires individuals to rethink their worldview in both the lived present and the lived past. In his book *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets*, Ted Kooser claims that a key function of the poem is to find memory’s sharpest points: “Poems that change our perceptions are everywhere you look, and one of the definitions of poetry might be that a poem freshens the world” (7-8), a point that echoes Klein. What Klein views as a “re-enchanting” of the world, Kooser claims a freshening (Klein 145). Both agree that a dominant characteristic of poetry is a type of service to mankind, a re-freshening, a deepening of knowledge which is inescapable: “We are thus indelibly marked by the poems we read, and the more poems we read the deeper is our knowledge of the world” (Kooser 7). Kooser furthers his argument claiming, “You have to trust the process of writing to lead you toward the heart of the poem” implying that the act of writing, of transferring the form of the memory from neurosynaptic impulses to articulated and written thought, guides one through memory possibly filling the absence manifest from longing (77). Here, Kooser proposes the heart of a poem may indeed be the memory of a past manifesting itself through a lived experience. Memories are filtered and selected, transformed from neurosynaptic impulses into ink, and it is that act of writing which leads to the heart of the poem—the motivation behind the act of writing.

Kooser's treatment of the past seems to suggest that a residue from the past always exists in the present. By contrast, Carl Dennis's approach to representing the past deals specifically with objects' presence in the present. Dennis writes of how physical objects transfer the past to the present. Likewise, Natasha Trethewey brings the past into the present with voices speaking from the grave through memorial sites, written records and photography. When approaching each author's text, focusing on the placement of the past in a present becomes key to understanding how these poets utilize nostalgia.

Claimed by Stephen Burt as, "a poet of what we are pleased to call Middle America, of a circumscribed middle class in mid-sized towns, of self-control, long-range planning, and middle age," Carl Dennis uses his easy, mild tone in his work *Practical Gods* to begin an exploration of how objects contain inherent meaning (par. 1). The book's title itself gives a sense of Dennis's approach to the past: objects contain the potential to represent past events. This theme manifests itself in many of the book's poems. "Prophet," "On the Bus to Utica," "A Letter from Mary in the Tyrol," "Numbers," and "The Lace Maker" all explore how objects, people and events are assigned meaning and importance. One poem which exemplifies this idea is the poem "History," in which the poem's persona explores what historical events—survivors and victors coupled with the events themselves—"illuminate" what they "define" and what they favor (2, 3). The poem begins with the claim of history as an object: "I too could give my heart to history" (1). When the poem's persona suggests that they "too" would give their heart to such an object—the word "too" indicating others before have also given their hearts—the persona likewise presupposes that history is a compilation of previous individuals' giving of their hearts and treats history as primarily a collection of individual memories. As a collection of individual memories, the value of that collection derives from its "illumination,/ For a definition of who we are, what it means to

live here” (2-3). History, in the speaker’s view, speaks to how the act of looking back gives light to the present. The uncertainty of the present is further underscored by the lack of purpose or clarity in the phrase “what it means to live here” (3). These opening lines suggest that using the past as a springboard to view the present defines and illuminates that present. This illumination provides meaning to the lived present. Dennis pulls on Boym’s idea of restorative nostalgia when he uses objects to invoke the past.

Problems arise when one looks at the past for illumination and definition of the present. The poem’s narrator laments, “If only history didn’t side with survivors” and, “if only it didn’t conclude that the rebels who take the fort/ Must carry the flag of the future in their knapsacks” (11, 13-15). Where the opening lines of the poem establish history as a collection of individual memory, the poem now speaks to the kind of individual memory which is represented within a collective history. The survivors prevail, and their memory becomes collective truth. Invoking the image of a “flag of the future” poses the future as born in physical objects which represent cultural memory from past events. Using these objects to represent and travel to the past is characteristic of nostalgia’s need for recreating the past. When this re-creation occurs, it depends upon the presupposition that a series of sure, stable events guides the present into the future. When Dennis writes of history as defining “who we are,” looking to the past shows its influence on definitions of the future. Nostalgia begins to make its mark in the poem through recreation of the past through use of historical symbols and figures, such as flags, historical leaders and battles.

Yet, while listing many key figures and their associated historical moments—everything from invoking Caesar and Brutus to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln—the poem concludes with the assertion that all these great historical leaders and the moments they are

known by, “sadly confused the time-bound world we live in/ With a world where credos don’t wear out” (33, 36-37). The irony of this closing statement articulates the idea that current society’s reading of the past burns through credos as quickly as said credos are found in the past. This use of Boym’s restorative nostalgia draws attention to the fact that historiography or credos are not the same as being nostalgic. Merely using time-period objects as representative of a past society differs from using those same pieces as methods of bringing the past into the present. However, when those credos represent a collective idea of the past, they are the historical landscape through which individuals travel.

Yearning for the past, while innate within a society which functions around the past as a place of illumination for the present, is an act that contains more than merely time-honored objects representative of the past. Where “History” looks to the past for illumination of present circumstance, Dennis’s poem “Delphi” presents the future as the most profitable strategy for understanding since the future can dictate both past and present action. The narrator of “Delphi” explores the different circumstances surrounding how people predict the future: a simple notebook containing lists of pros and cons regarding an issue (20-27); a farmer knowing his son’s education will lead him away from the land (8-14); a father listening to a servant of Apollo muttering “words that even to her are a mystery” (15-19). Dennis writes, “Though I don’t believe in oracles, I’m encouraged/ By those who do, by their certainty that the future,/ However narrow, isn’t so closed as the past” (1-3). These opening lines propose the future, while “closed,” as a more malleable feature of a time-bound society than is the past. In short, the future, however “narrow” Dennis claims it to be, can change. Additionally, the beginning lines establish a closed past, which is stable and unchangeable—bound by facts and closure found in events which have already taken place. These oracles convey ideas which prevailed in the past and persist in the

present. Playing both sides of this spectrum suggests that nostalgic movement through memory occurs not only through lived experience but perhaps, as “Delphi” states, also through prophesying the future. For Dennis, nostalgia can be found in yearning for an idealized future. In this text the poetry begins to push against the idea of yearning only for a past. Nostalgia changes from travel to the past into yearning for control of a stabilized, idealized future.

Writing then becomes the means by which the future is known, for Dennis writes, “As for me, my only oracle is my notebook” (20). He speaks of the divide between the pages, “a heavy line” straight down the middle of the paper. On either side of that line sit two arguments—the left-hand path “outnumbering” those on the right, suggesting that it is the right one to heed. “Unless,” as Dennis writes, “the arguments on the right, however few,/ Appear more beautiful, their truth more piercing” (23, 26-27). When truth pierces, that penetration infiltrates and reshapes the current system of truth at play by introducing a new idea—one that forces someone to take into consideration new information which is “more piercing” than the old. Replacing the numbers—arguably indicative of facts and past evidence pointing in one direction—with a “path that would lead me to the brighter good,/ Me and the rest of the world worth helping,/ My first choice, not my distant second” crafts new truths (31-33). The ending of the poem hearkens back to the idea of individuals contributing to history by writing oneself into the void created by generalized memory. Yearning for the past manifests itself in this need to write oneself into history—that act personalizing a remembered, accepted social past. The two paths presented provide the options to see either through the lens of established ideas or listen to truth—poignant, personal and beautiful given its individual nature—and in that listening, establish a new perspective. This new perspective allows one to write individual experience and truth into his or

her ideas of the past. Both these options allow for those in the present to identify with ideas of the past—these ideas in the present defining and situating themselves in relation to that past.

Natasha Trethewey, current Poet Laureate of the U.S., picks up the theme of individual experience's part in crafting collective memory within her own writing—establishing a new forum in which nostalgia plays a central role. Trethewey's work moves from personal to collective history. In an interview with Mark McKee, Trethewey explains that her interest in writing to the “erasures of history” is more historic than personal (156). During this same interview with McKee, Trethewey was asked where she finds the “kernel of energy allowed for the poem's genius” (146). She admits,

Because I do a lot of research, often ideas for poems or the germ of a poem come from finding the luminous details: you know, Pound's phrase, in some history text I'm reading, some image or detail that strikes me as so strange it's worth asking questions of. All my poems tend to begin in inquiry. There's always some question I'm asking myself. I want to know why this is a thing in history or what this has meant across time and space. (146)

In her Pulitzer prize-winning poetry collection, *Native Guard*, Trethewey writes of the contributions of a group of black soldiers during the Civil War. Her poem “Southern History” uses three sources—a photo from a text book, a history teacher and a student—to show how history tells the tale of a black man during the Civil War. By focusing on the individual, Trethewey presents history as a dominant yet malleable feature of memory. Other poems in *Native Guard* which suggest history as a dominant yet malleable feature of memory are “Theories of Time and Space,” “What the Body Can Say,” “Myth,” “Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi,” and “Elegy for the Native Guards.” In “Southern History,” the poem's



persona first quotes a line from the class's history textbook: "Before the war, they were happy" (1). This history teacher, "quoting our textbook" assures the students "The slaves were clothed, fed, and better off under a master's care" (3-4). As he instructs his high school seniors of the putatively-real old South, the teacher stands as an authority figure, an archon—the Derridean term for one who selects and guards certain historical artifacts which are representative of a culture's history—guarding a carefully crafted and strongly maintained image of the historical past. As the teacher speaks, "the words blur on the page. No one/ raised a hand, disagreed. Not even me" (6-7). This opening establishes tension between the narrator's intuition and the crafted of an official text.

This truth established by the textbook comes in the form of a picture. Trethewey highlights the power of photography when she states, "Every photograph represents a moment that is no longer, passed, as well as ways of being that have disappeared" (qtd. in Petty 364). Yet, the picture of the slave, "big as life: big mouth, bucked eyes" (12-13), though stagnant in image, speaks as though living through the persona's silent questioning of the teacher's statements. The students' moment of silence refuted the lie that the persona's "teacher guarded. Silent, so did I" (14). If photography is a means by which the past is established, photography then becomes a new mode which fills yearning for the past. Paul Grainge addresses a similar theme when he contends in his essay "TIME's Past in the Present: Nostalgia and the Black and White Image": "In a culture that has become disposed in various ways to the 'authentic past' and its representational idioms, monochrome has become in *Time* the signature of (historical) authenticity and in certain cases nostalgia for the present" (384). Besides identifying America's cultural fixation on representing the past, Grainge further argues, "Black and white gives a picture status beyond that of being 'news'; it suggests that an image has cultural significance in

the broad construction of historical identity. If color reports, monochrome chronicles” (385). Considering Grainge’s ideas in the context of the picture presented in Trethewey’s poem, the color of “Southern History’s” photo and its use implies that because the picture was taken during a particular time, that picture can fairly fill the gap between past and present with an irrefutable monochrome history.

Grainge’s idea of monochrome pictures chronicling the past points not to the construction of history as much as to the reinforcing of set cultural ideas established by a school curriculum. By keeping silence in the face of the teacher’s interpretation, the students tacitly accept this problematic curriculum. Even so, the silence of the students also hints at two intertwined elements of history: a still photograph representative of a cultural past alongside modern-day interpretation. The consciousness of the poem’s persona—hyper-aware of feeling uncomfortable with the assertion that those enslaved could ever be happy—points to the impending deconstruction and eventual reconstruction of an idea such as slavery. While within this poem the teacher represents a mainstream version of history—teaching the students from a perspective established in a text book—the poem’s persona rewrites that past through personal interpretation. Trethewey enacts the possibilities manifest when yearning for understanding leads one through a cultural memory. When combined with individual questioning, the poem shows how individuals can reposition themselves in respect to the historic past.

When approaching the past with the idea of restoring some semblance of understanding in the present, the personalized nature of reconstruction points to how history’s construction occurs at an individual level. Slavoj Žižek comments on individuality’s reconstruction of past events: “What (ethnic communities) are not aware of is how their ‘return to’ constitutes the very object to which it returns: in the very act of returning to tradition, they are inventing it” (29).

This pull between historical representation of the past and individual writing of past events changes perspectives in the poem “Native Guard.” The poem’s voice is a thirty-three year old black soldier of the Native Guard. Of this collection, Trethewey writes, “I started doing research about black soldiers in the Civil War, trying to imagine the voice of this one soldier who might have things to say about then as well as now” (qtd. in McKee 147).

Trethewey begins the poem with an epigraph from Frederick Douglass: “If this war is to be forgotten, I ask in the name of all things sacred what shall men remember?” (25). Douglass echoes a key question posed by Trethewey herself: when writing of historical events, which individuals are to be remembered and which are to be (or have already been) forgotten? Here, the line between personal memory and collective memory sharpens as Douglass questions; “a national war is forgotten, what then are individual men to remember?” Understanding the constructedness of the past—how the Derridean archons have shaped our sense of the past through their management of the historical archives, both literal and figurative—appears in Trethewey’s poem to offer the key to navigation through that past. After visiting the site of the Native Guard’s origin, Trethewey decided this group of soldiers deserved the respect and honor of having their stories written into American history. In writing the poem, she begins the process of navigating the past to fill the lived present. Trethewey states, “Well, the poem [“Native Guard”] is a living monument [to the soldiers of the Native Guard]. I would argue that stone monuments have a life to them, too. But let me just say that a poem is a living monument—it lives and breathes each time it’s spoken, read, heard” (qtd. in McKee 150).

In memorializing the soldiers through the poem, Trethewey writes their stories as framed through the journal entries of a black soldier. The journal in the poem, found in a Confederate’s abandoned home, “near full/ with someone else’s words, overlapped now,/ crosshatched beneath

mine. On every page,/ his story intersecting with my own” ( 25-28). The image conveyed shows the joining of two worlds—that of the Confederate soldier with the black Union soldier.

Trethewey tells their stories discretely, one not taking precedent over the other. Instead, as descriptions of two separate lives converge onto the same pages, the two stories “intersect” and enact on paper what the country as a whole fought to find and maintain—unity and truth between parallel yet separate lives.

As the poem progresses, the act of writing, etched into the memory of individuals and community alike, brings black Union soldiers onto equal terrain with the freedom for which they fight. The poem’s persona records, “I’ve reached thirty-three with the history of one younger/ inscribed upon my back. I now use ink/ to keep record, a closed book, not the lure/ of memory – flawed, changeful – that dulls the lash/ for the master, sharpens it for the slave” (9-14). Rather than rely exclusively on collective memory, Trethewey combines individual and collective memory into one narrative: the soldier’s tale. This soldier, thirty-three years old and free from bondage, lives a life belied by his physical body—his past life “inscribed upon my back” (11). Additionally, as this man begins working at dawn “It was then a dark man/ removed his shirt, revealed the scars, crosshatched/ like the lines in this journal, on his back” (49-51). In these scars, Trethewey hints at similarly-crosshatched levels of constructed history. The scars begin at the individual level—the dark man, a former slave, shows the physical signs of his memories through scars etched into his being. Equating those crosshatched scars to the lines written in the journal begins to reveal the process of constructing personal history into written record—a record which tells individual memories with a medium aimed at collective memory.

The poem ends with a list of “things which must be accounted for” (127). This list is one of the raw, hidden, unaccounted acts of war. The soldier who writes history must remember

“every lost limb, and what remains: phantom/ ache, memory haunting an empty sleeve” (133-34). This poem combines Grainge’s idea of nostalgic “mood” and “mode.” There is the need to account for history as a collection of battles won alongside limbs lost is an accounting which still needs to be told. The mere cataloguing of trauma is not the answer to cure this loss; rather, replacing what was lost, filling the “phantom ache” and the “untold stories of those that time will render/ mute” comes only through the present (133-34, 137-38). When the “phantom” aches and the stories left “untold” are catalogued, they take up space like cast-off shells—solid on their exterior but empty inside. Nostalgic mood yearns for a lost feeling, so while there are aches, they are without reprieve. The stories “untold” suggest nostalgic mode as collective memory seems to be forgotten. Combining these two problematizes Grainge’s catalogues. What happens when nostalgic mood and mode inhabit the same space? While these aches and stories fulfill the need to represent the past, it is only with superficial representations. The dead, while mute, lie in graves crying out for memory to reclaim their loss. The gaps left in collective memory are filled with the tales of individuals remembering. As the “battlefields, green again,” bury the physical embodiment of the past, the “bones we tread upon, forgetting” signal the loss with a single request: “Truth be told” (138-40). Trethewey’s poem shows that the reading of individual scars, loss and memory, begins the process of identifying individual truths assigned to a nation. Carl Dennis picks up on this same theme when in “History” he suggests that many have given their hearts in creating a past. Dennis shows that one can identify the collective truths by looking at individual truths.

These truths, and the longing which leads to their creation, inquire whether the questions being asked even lead one to the past. In his poem “View of Delft,” Carl Dennis paints a verbal picture of Vermeer’s painting: “The brick facades of the unremarkable buildings/ Lined up at the

river's edge manage to lift the spirits/ Though the sky is cloudy" (1-4). Dennis's poem is that of a person, viewing a painting of Delft and, remembering a dinner appointment, contemplates the picture and the yearning to return to that time, as they walk to dinner. After the initial verbal picture, the poem further comments on the different moods of the painting's passersby: "But these moods/ Won't last long while the mood in the painting/ Seems undying, though the handful of citizens/ Strolling the other side of the river are too preoccupied/ To look across and admire their home" (23-27). Here, Dennis's reconstruction of the view depends solely upon the perspective of those within the portrait. As the "handful of citizens" takes no notice of their homes which Vermeer so carefully and skillfully crafted, it is as though taking a lived picture and recreating the image through a new medium—in this case, Vermeer's painting—one inevitably recreates the portrait's original meaning. Yet Dennis pulls the viewer from this "layered" experience back to lived experience claiming, "As for your dinner, isn't it time/ To close the art book you've been caught up in,/ ... and stroll/ Three blocks to the house where your friend is waiting?" (30-33). Within the poem, two realities—the painting and the voyeuristic viewer—collide when the viewer, walking to his friend's house, finds the "painting lingers awhile in memory" (34). This lingering, once combined with the voyeur's memory, infuses the present with the voyeur's recently-lived past. The lived reality changes perspective based on longing for the past as suddenly present time is obsolete—the art book having so fully engaged the reader that time only exists in memory of the painting. Yet "the trees set back on a lawn you're passing/ Seem to say that to master their language of gestures/ Is to learn all you need to know to enter your life" (35-37). The poem suggests that when living in the past, one loses the present.

Nostalgia in this poem invokes a sense of regret. As Duyvendak suggests, “Regret over changes that have taken place, expressed as a longing for the past, relates directly to the meaning of places and those feelings attached to them” (24). Regret for the loss of a moment, a time, or a place, constitutes all the characteristics of nostalgia in this poem. However, the poem does not end at mere nostalgia. Rather, Dennis sees regret and the accompanying nostalgia to be opportunities move through individual memory as he sees longing for a lost past leads one to the present. At the end of the poem, Dennis suggests contentment for a life once lived can be found in the present because in “Delphi,” the present defines the past.

Dennis concludes with the idea that joy found in the present comes from recognition of the past’s influence on the present: “But this joy, disguised,/ The painting declares, is yours already./ You’ve been longing again for what you have” (39-41). Claiming the joy as “disguised” prompts this question: how does joy mask true identity? The answer is found in the painting’s declaration of the past. The longing for a pristine, clear cut, identifiable past acts as a measuring rod for what is already present. In this poem, yearning for a past is yearning for what was understood. Juxtaposed against the realities faced by the persona in journeying to a friend’s house, the clarity of the picture and its memory are the persona’s desired reality. Dennis suggests longing and loss are found in acceptance of the present. When accepted, these two elements become an end through the journey of memory, for once identified, these gaps can be filled with elements of the present. While the past influences the present, yearning for a past event misplaces that yearning. When the past is yearned for, one loses the ability to live in the present. As Dennis says, “You’ve been longing again for what you have” suggesting the present holds the answers to the needs and questions it creates (41).

In one of her best known pieces, “Graveyard Blues,” Trethewey introduces the notion of voices from the grave dictating present-day action from the living. Inasmuch as the living inhabit the spaces the dead once inhabited, this combination embodies the present cohabiting with the dead. Alluding to the experience she had while burying her mother, Trethewey writes, “It rained the whole time we were laying her down” (1). As the preacher “called for a witness I raised my hand -/Death stops the body’s work, the soul’s a journeyman” (6 original emphasis). The preacher’s lines, coupled with Trethewey’s witness, shows the journey of life does not end at death. Indeed, the living feel the influence of the dead and witness for their lives lived. Memorializing the dead occurs through the raising of a hand, a living witness testifying of memories of loved ones. Even as the soul journeys through the different landscapes of death, their voices speak beyond their mortal frame. In speaking for the dead, the living embody Dennis’s point in “Delphi”—the present fills the gaps left by the past. The journey of nostalgia becomes a journey through the present’s landscape with the voices of the past dictating what is seen.

The poignant lines of this poem come at the end: “I wander now among names of the dead:/ My mother’s name, stone pillow for my head” (13-14). As the image of a mother’s name on a headstone acts as a pillow for Trethewey, the sense of longing for a loss—a time once there—indicates yearning for the past. Graveyards act as spaces filled with the past. These spaces, connecting the living to the past, act as a residue of the past. The space gives voice to the past, inviting the living to join the journey and live a life laced with that residue. When the dead are memorialized and remembered by the living, they are given voices beyond the grave. Those voices speak to a life lived, a past created, and a personal future fulfilled.



While Trethewey's work points to the voices of the dead changing the living, Ted Kooser's poem "Memory" embodies the idea of memory in the form of a tornado. It is this embodiment which Kooser, a well-known Midwestern poet, uses to describe how memory can change the landscape of the past. The poem opens with images of opposites vividly placed alongside each other. The image of "dust,"—scattered particles of what was once solid—is contrasted against an image of "cornshucks," solid, tangible presence (1). This force of memory brings opposites together: "hot work, cold work...good horses, bad horses...better or worse than the horse" (4-7). Within the poem, each image serves as a moment of experience. Memory doesn't select only positive images; rather, within this poem, memory serves as a collection of opposites, reminding us that memory both idealizes the past and causes trauma. The juxtaposition of images continues on when the poem moves from describing inanimate objects to living, thinking things.

The poem begins by describing only nouns which are violently acted upon: "dust and cornshucks" are "spun up," "lunch buckets" are "sucked up," and "the threshing machine" is "rattled" (1-4, 8-9). The images stand alone as inanimate, movement only occurring through the vortex's "fury" (15). As the poem progresses, Kooser's description moves from inanimate objects which are acted upon to animals which act of their own accord: "cows kicked over buckets...gray cat sat" (16-17). The progression of images ends with threshers "having dinner...uncles and cousins, grandma, grandpa, parents and children one by one" (22-27). By moving from inanimate objects to human subjects, the poem raises the expectation that the last image will feature animate subjects acting with intelligence. Kooser turns these objects into the equivalent of the opening images by inanimating them—describing them as "dolls" which are acted upon, being "held" and "set...back in their chairs" (28-30). The most animate object is the

vortex itself. It has a “heart,” hands to “peel back” and “reach down and snatch up,” eyes to “look” and a mouth to “sigh” (3, 23, 25, 28, 36). The personification of the vortex serves two purposes: first, it seems to represent memory’s ability to construct the past in such a way that there may be movement either through memory’s action upon the object or the objects’ actions themselves. This movement suggests the only intelligence, or rather the only meaning ascribed to the images, comes from memory itself. Second, personifying the vortex suggests recollection can occur because memory objectifies the past. The items examined must first become objects. Once that occurs, the meaning of things in the past propels the present’s ordering and understanding of these past images. The end of the poem suggests just as the past is objectified and given meaning, understanding of the present comes from identifying where the present stands in relation to the past. Memory, or movement through the past, is the thing which animates this vortex and in the end this movement is the vortex. It is the controlling force behind crafting the present’s remembrance of the past.

The ending of the poem presents a thought-provoking resolution to the chaos which has reigned so prominent throughout the entirety of the poem. The final image, while resolving tensions of time (everything being brought into the present) complicates the ending as well. This massive animate force “suddenly./ with a sound like a sigh, drew up/ its crowded, roaring, dusty funnel,/ and there at its tip was the nib of a pen” (35-38). Against the previously violent images enacted by the force, the resolution “sounds like a sigh.” This evokes a sense of longing, of an ending. It suggests a resolution found through longing. However, as this resolution “sounds like a sigh” it likewise draws up the funnel at the end into the tip of a pen, suggesting a new beginning where all these images become representations in a new form of writing. Through the torrent of memory, then, all that remains is the stain of ink. Ink, the act of recording memory,

fills the absence of what was once present through its marking, creating a new form, a new sign, for that which has occurred in the past. If the presence of something remains, is it ever truly gone? Does the residue of a thing—or the writing about it—then replace the thing itself? Perhaps in these questions we find the answer to why nostalgia permeates modern-day American society: residue becomes the substance. Society propels itself on ideas of the past and forces these ideas into objects functioning as restorative nostalgia. Forcing these memories to take objective form allows modern society access to imbed new meaning, as any former meaning has been removed. Replacing meaning is violence against the past, since disregarding the past suggests that only the present qualifies as part of any valuable body of knowledge.

As Dennis suggests yearning is answered in the present, Trethewey builds upon that idea suggesting the present to be filled with voices from the past. Kooser, picking up on a similar theme, writes in the same collection of poems as “Memory,” a work entitled “Lobocraspis griseifusa.” In this poem Kooser describes a sleeper’s encounter with a tiny moth that visits at night, leaving only a bit of dust to be found in the morning. The first image which confronts the audience is a moth drinking tears: “This is the tiny moth who lives on tears,/ who drinks like a deer at the gleaming pool” (1-2). The tears are important as they are an indication of “sorrows” in an alternate form (8). Within the experience, the knowable world itself is absent as the moth “a moonlit figure” only appears “in your dream,” a realm of the unconscious (5). The experience expands: “He asks if he might share the poor bread/ of your sorrow. You show him the table./ The two of you talk long into the night” (7-9). The reality sets in by morning, yet “the words are forgotten” (10). As the day breaks, the specifics are lost yet “You awaken serene, in a sunny room,/ rubbing the dust of his wings from your eyes” (11-12). The entirety of the experience remains in vague impressions of events occurring, images remembered, but the tangible dust of

his wings remains. Memory serves as a vehicle which assigns meaning to the physical objects around: what began as an encounter with a moth ends with dust. This act expands the meaning which began in one to encompass two. The thing itself can remain through various object-based forms, be it a memory, a shadow, or that memory transferred to a physical object.

Turning to one of the last poems in Kooser's collections, "Starlight," we see the past's place and weight in shaping the present. The poem's title—"Starlight"—is the guiding force for understanding the work's content. The poem is two lines: "All night, this soft rain from the distant past./ No wonder I sometimes waken as a child." Kooser equates "starlight" with "soft rain." An interesting choice is made in indicating the subject matter is not stars themselves, but rather starlight. Though the star itself may have exploded and long since disintegrated into nothing, the light from that star remains traveling through space. In this sense, the starlight seems to be what indicates the passage of time, as it is from "distant past" yet still viewed in the present. Seen through this poem, starlight then suggests a shadow of the past as part of the present. Invoking starlight as the predominant image plays with the sense of time within the poem for as the poem's voice slumbers under starlight, that light seems to have a transformative effect indicated by the speaker's two references to self. The persona refers to itself in the present tense: "I sometimes waken..." and yet that present self is defined as a past self: "...as a child." As in the previously discussed poem, the day/night, consciousness/unconsciousness pairings are still present, but instead of the unconscious finding place within the speaker's consciousness, the opposite occurs. The erasure of time comes from the idea that the past becomes the present. This erasure occurs through an idea's ability to manifest itself in various forms. The past remains in the present: journeying to past experience imbues the past's shadow with significance.

The idea of memory playing a role in shaping current circumstance is nothing new to literary theory. But it is important to note that Boym's well-established assertion that nostalgia acts as either "restorative" or "reflective" relies on physical objects innately representing an idea found in the past (*e.g.* a flag represents a nation's origin, past and present society). If nostalgia indicates the absence of something or a lingering presence, then something—a shadow, a shade—points to that absence. Using nostalgia to look at memory shows that the absences found in the present are created because of a prior loss. Thus when these absences are filled, the substance used is not the original thing yearned for. Rather, the past transforms into new forms, filling these gaps and satisfying the feelings of loss.

This situation can lead one to see that perhaps experience delights in absence, in shadows, representations of ideas—of memory itself. Just as in "Native Guard" the "phantom aches" and untold stories formed hollow shells for memory it suggests that while memory is the remembrance of a past, nostalgia and its associated yearning for an earlier time or place function as the vehicle transporting one through the past to find that moment or experience of loss which created the feeling of longing. In writing of the view from "Delphi," Dennis suggests the literal landscape to indicate misplaced yearning ("You've been longing again for what you have" [41]). He shows the hazards associated with memory. A fixation on past events leads to a life of absence. The thing yearned for should be the present. Furthering Boym's point is Grainge's focus on memory as either a "mood" or "mode." These two avenues translate into feeling that the past can be presented as either a feeling or an absence. That absence, created by the past, is acutely felt in the present indicating all this dynamic movement through memory occurs through present circumstance. Thus, nostalgia's dependence upon present memory indicates not just a longing for the past, but rather the past's presence in the present.

The act of remembering serves as a type of catalyst which transforms memories, both collective historical memory and individual neurosynaptic impulses, into residues or residue-like manifestations in present circumstance. As seen in “Graveyard Blues,” Trethewey treats memories of the past as a gap filled by the re-collecting of past ideas, assigning new meaning and feeling to such moments (“I wander now among names of the dead:/ My mother’s name, stone pillow for my head” [13-14]). Reassignment of meaning begins a process of nostalgia leading one to look to the past, asking questions and searching for answers. In the answers found spring forth new interpretations and understanding of both past and present cultural events. Kooser furthers this conversation through connecting elements of the present—writing, physical objects, natural phenomena—to their origins in the past. He pays homage to the past by suggesting the gaps are not filled with arbitrary reconstructions but rather with residues from the past that fill the gaps in the present.

Nostalgia, while leading to longing or loss, relies on reconstruction. The mere act of remembering, of recreating, allows an idea of the past to be remembered as new. Such a simple concept of redefining to restructure history may seem arbitrary given the forces at play which are individual and collective memory. Yet, as Carl Dennis states in his address to the Poetry Society of America, “The difference may only be a matter of degree, but in these matters degree is everything” (par. 1). In yearning for the past, individuals utilize nostalgia as a vehicle, a transport into memory’s landscape, which in turn allows one to remember and refine memory. As time—past, present and future—is all-present, it seems to be frozen, or rather attempting to mimic experience with memory—recursive and influenced. Time is manifest only through the present distinguishing past from future. Even as these three elements intermix, the accumulation serves

as a way to begin anew, with experience and knowledge from the past guiding hope in the future and defining and refining the actions of the present.

## Works Cited

- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic, 2004. Print.
- Burt, Stephen. "The Call of the Mild." *New Republic* 25 01 2011, n. pag. Web. 26 Feb. 2013.
- Dennis, Carl. Interview by Poetry Society of America. *Carl Dennis*. Web. 12 Nov 2012.
- . *Practical Gods*. New York: Penguin, 2001. Print.
- Duyvendak, Jan Willem. *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States*. New York: St. Martin, 2011. Print.
- Grainge, Paul. "Theorizing Memory Isn't What It Used To Be." *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Memory in Retro America*. Westport: Praeger, 2002. 19-41. Print.
- . "TIME's Past in the Present: Nostalgia and the Black and White Image." *Journal of American Studies* 33.3 (1999): 383-92. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Aug. 2012.
- Klein, Kerwin. "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse." *Representations*. 69 (2000): 127-150. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Aug. 2012.
- Kooser, Ted. *Delights and Shadows*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2004. Print.
- . *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2005. Print.
- McKee, Marc. "A Conversation with Natasha Trethewey." *The Missouri Review* 33.2 (2010): 144-59. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 Sept. 2012.
- Petty, Jill. "An Interview With Natasha Trethewey." *Callaloo* 19.2 (1996): 364-75. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 Sept. 2012.
- Sullivan, Erin. "Nostalgia." *The Lancet* 376. (2010): 585. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Aug. 2012.
- Trethewey, Natasha. *Native Guard*. New York: Houghton, 2006. Print.
- Zinchenko, Alexander V. "Nostalgia: Dialogue Between Memory and Knowing." *Russian Social*



*Science Review* 53.1 (2012): 68-81. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Aug. 2012.

Žižek, Slavoj. *How to Read Lacan*. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.