

New Historicism: An Exploration in Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*

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Abstract: *New Historicism is a study of a literary text by focusing on the author's life and culture with a historical background. In short, New Historicism can be called as a method based on parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of same time period. The poetry collection Native Guard by Natasha Trethewey includes the history of civil war and the poet's personal experiences as a child of an African-American mother and a Canadian father. Natasha records her history and the nation's history in the format of a diary entry. It also focuses on sufferings of a soldier in Louisiana which is the poet's hometown. The poet's life and history of civil war are explored in the collection. The poet through the representation of soldiers, she insists on preserving the culture. The readers are made to understand the impact of history on individual and collective identities. The poetry collection Native Guard reflects American culture and racial discrimination during the time of civil war.*

Keywords: New Historicism, personal life, literary text, culture, history

I. INTRODUCTION

New Historicism is a literary theory and method of literary criticism that emerged in the late 20th century, particularly in the 1980s. It focuses on understanding literature by analysing the historical and cultural context in which it was produced. New Historicists reject the idea of literature as an isolated, purely aesthetic object and instead emphasize the interconnection between literature and its socio-historical context. Its origins can be traced to the work of scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, and Michel Foucault. The themes of new historicism include Power and Authority, Ideology and Discourse, Marginality and Subversion, Textuality and Language, History and Context, Intertextuality and Cultural Exchange and Relativism and Contingency. Foucault's emphasis on the ways in which power operates through discourse and the production of knowledge encourages scholars to examine the interplay between literature and power in historical contexts.

New Historicism shares similarities with cultural materialism, a literary theory associated with scholars such as Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton. Cultural materialism also emphasizes the importance of historical and social context in understanding literature, and it examines literature as a cultural artifact embedded in specific material conditions. New Historicism is also influenced by interdisciplinary fields such as cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology. Scholars drawing on these disciplines brought insights from fields outside literary studies to bear on the analysis of literature, enriching literary criticism with new methodologies and perspectives.

Natasha Trethewey is an American poet, memoirist, and educator known for her powerful explorations of history, race, and memory in her writing. Natasha Trethewey was born on April 26, 1966, in Gulfport, Mississippi, USA. She grew up in the American South, and her experiences of being biracial (her father was white and her mother was black) deeply influenced her understanding of race and identity. Trethewey earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Georgia in 1989. She later received her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Hollins University and a Master of Arts in English and Creative Writing from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Trethewey's literary career began with the publication of her first poetry collection, "Domestic Work," in 2000. The collection explores themes of race, gender, and labour, drawing on her own family history.

Trethewey's most well-known work is perhaps *Native Guard* published in 2006, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. In this collection, she examines the experience of African American soldiers during the Civil War, intertwining

historical narratives with personal reflections. In 2012, Natasha Trethewey was appointed as the 19th Poet Laureate of the United States by the Library of Congress, serving in the role from 2012 to 2014. She was the first African American to hold the position since Rita Dove in 1993. In addition to her poetry, Trethewey has also written a memoir titled "Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir," published in 2020. The memoir explores her relationship with her mother and grapples with the trauma of her mother's murder by her stepfather when Trethewey was 19 years old. Throughout her career, Natasha Trethewey has received numerous awards and honours for her contributions to literature, and her work continues to resonate with readers for its lyrical beauty, historical depth, and emotional resonance.

In the poetry collection *Native Guard*, New Historicism can be applied to analyse how Trethewey engages with history, particularly the history of the American South and the experiences of African Americans. Trethewey, who is of mixed racial heritage, explores her own personal history alongside broader historical narratives. An important aspect of New Historicism in "Native Guard" involves examining how Trethewey incorporates historical documents, such as letters, photographs, and official records, into her poems. These documents serve as primary sources that anchor the poems in specific historical moments and provide a window into the lives of the African American people. Additionally, New Historicism encourages readers to consider how power dynamics and social structures influence both the creation and interpretation of literary texts. In *Native Guard* Trethewey interrogates the legacy of slavery and its ongoing impact on American society. She also highlights the voices of marginalized individuals who have been overlooked or silenced by dominant historical narratives. New Historicism offers a framework for understanding how *Native Guard* engages with history and the ways in which poetry can serve as a vehicle for exploring complex historical themes and amplifying marginalized perspective.

In Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* the first poem of the collection shares the same title as the collection itself. This poem serves as an entry point into the themes and motif that permeate the entire collection, including those that align with New Historicism. The poem is set against the backdrop of the Civil War, specifically focusing on the formation of the Louisiana Native Guards, one of the first black regiments in the Union Army. This historical context immediately situates the poem within a specific moment in time, allowing readers to engage with the broader historical narrative of African American involvement in the Civil War. Trethewey gives voice to the marginalized history of the Louisiana Native Guards, a group often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. By foregrounding their experiences in the poem, Trethewey challenges the dominant historical narrative and highlights the contributions of African American soldiers to the Union cause. The poem intertwines personal and collective histories, particularly through the lens of Trethewey's own family heritage.

As the daughter of a mixed-race couple, Trethewey reflects on her own identity and lineage, which echoes broader themes of racial identity and heritage explored throughout the collection. Trethewey incorporates historical documents and artifacts into the poem, such as the image of the photograph of the Louisiana Native Guards. These tangible objects serve as touchstones that ground the poem in historical reality, inviting readers to consider the material remnants of the past and their significance in shaping historical memory. The poem engages with themes of memory and remembrance, particularly in its exploration of the legacy of the Louisiana Native Guards. Trethewey reflects on the importance of remembering and honouring the sacrifices of those who have been marginalized by history, suggesting that their stories are integral to understanding the complexities of the past. Through these elements, *Native Guard* encapsulates the spirit of New Historicism by illuminating the intersections of literature, history, and culture. Trethewey's poem serves as a testament to the power of poetry to excavate forgotten histories and amplify voices that have been silenced by dominant historical narratives.

The poem situates readers within a specific historical context, inviting them to engage with the experiences of African American soldiers who have been overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. By foregrounding the voices of the Louisiana Native Guards, Trethewey challenges dominant historical perspectives and illuminates the contributions of marginalized individuals to the broader historical landscape. Moreover, the poem explores themes of memory and remembrance, highlighting the importance of honouring the sacrifices of those who have been marginalized by history. Trethewey suggests that by remembering and reclaiming these forgotten histories, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the past and its enduring impact on the present. In essence, Trethewey's first poem in "Native Guard" exemplifies the principles of New Historicism by interrogating the intersections of literature, history, and

culture. Through her lyrical exploration of the Louisiana Native Guards, Trethewey offers readers a poignant reminder of the power of poetry to excavate hidden truths and amplify voices that have been silenced by the passage of time.

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