

Water as Conduit, Complex Metaphor, and Capitalistic Annihilator in the Works of Ron Rash and Natasha Trethewey

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Contemporary American writers Ron Rash (1953-) and Natasha Trethewey (1966-) seem to have little in common aside from writing about the past and present American South. Rash, a poet and novelist, is known for portraying the beauty and violence of southern Appalachia and for his characters who fight the land, their circumstances, and each other. Trethewey's poetry is situated in the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and she focuses on her personal memories and stories of black southerners whose stories have not been told. However, a closer examination of works where the two are mentioned together reveals multiple areas where they are in conversation. Both are anthologized in Daniel Cross Turner and William Wright's *Hard Lines: Rough South Poetry* (2016), with writer and scholar Turner defining such poetry as 'tactile and turbulent...eschew[ing] the highfalutin to get down to the nitty-gritty' (1). Additionally, Turner discusses both Trethewey and Rash in terms of 'blood memory' in 'Lyric Dissections: Rendering Blood Memory in Natasha Trethewey's and Yusef Komunyakaa's Poetry of the Black Diaspora.' According to Turner, writers who incorporate blood memory in their work explore a collective unconscious mitigated by the trauma and displacement of history and grounded in a particular place. Separately, Rash and Trethewey have been studied according to a few common topics, such as the influence of Seamus Heaney, formal poetic tendencies, connections to the dead, violence committed on bodies, and exploitative labour. The theoretical framework most applied to Rash's novels, poetry, and short fiction is ecocritical, yet although Trethewey frequently discusses natural disasters and environmental changes in her poetry and non-fiction, ecocritical approaches comprise only a small portion of Trethewey scholarship, leaving room for more extensive assessment.

Discussing these two writers together according to an ecocritical framework has twofold relevance. One, it permits an analysis of multiple common links between Rash and Trethewey that have not been explored. Two, an ecocritical discussion of the two writers indicates the applicability of this framework to two distinct southern places central to their work, Appalachia and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In *Ecocriticism & the Future of Southern Studies*, Zackary

Vernon argues that due to southern literature's focus on land and place ecocriticism is an 'invaluable tool' (1) for reading connections 'among individual subjects and culture...subjects and the environment, and culture and the entire biosphere' (Vernon 2019: 2). The world, including the US South, has entered the Anthropocene, marked by environmental change caused by humans, so an ecocritical perspective of southern literature must consider how human intervention in the environment has altered the southern landscape and made the South 'a site of environmental precariousness' (5). The concept of southern environmental precariousness is furthered by Lisa Hinrichsen, who classifies the South as 'a site of real loss': alongside the South's fantasized pastoral image is a 'history of ecological dislocation and environmental degeneration, collapse, and commodification' (2019: 23). Hinrichsen also labels Appalachia and the Mississippi Gulf Coast the as 'kill spaces' of capitalism that endure 'environmental injustice' (2019: 27). Michael J. Beilfuss adds that dismissal of the South as backward and provincial coincides with degradation and disregard of the southern landscape (2015: 378). Hinrichsen contends that communities with less political power suffer and pay financially and emotionally because of disasters resulting from human intervention in nature, while politically powerful communities reap rewards and endure no danger (2019: 27). Since, as Delia Byrnes notes, the landscapes of the South reflect global environmental issues and practices, what affects the South affects the world (39).

Water is the most significant natural element most prevalent in both writers' literary landscapes and ecotheorist Janine MacLeod's 'Water and the Material Imagination: Reading the Sea of Memory Against the Flows of Capital' (2013) creates a framework for reading Rash's *One Foot in Eden* (2002) and *Saints at the River* (2004) and Trethewey's *Native Guard* (2006). MacLeod argues that water is metaphorically loaded with 'emotional, cultural, and sensual associations' that can be used 'both to confirm and to challenge current systems of exploitation, domination, and ecological devastation' (2013: 40). When people engage with or are affected by water in all its forms – rivers, lakes, oceans, rain, floods, even wash water – there is a mingling of the individual experience with collective memories, traumas, histories, and emotions that permits communication between the living, the dead, and future generations. In an interview with Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, Rash confirms that water in his works serves as 'a conduit between the living and the dead' (2007: 225). Although Trethewey does not explicitly state that water in her poetry and non-fiction forges this link, in 'Why I Write' (2014), her essay addressing what

inspires her poetry, she details water's significance for her: 'I had been born to...the state of Mississippi whose name means great river – that river a metaphor suggesting all the hidden history in its murky depths...I have inherited from this geography both great cultural richness and great suffering' (5). MacLeod argues that the associative power of water is enmeshed with its connection to capitalism. Because water-based words such as 'flow' have wrongly been used to naturalize the 'circulation' of wealth and render this movement as life-sustaining, it is important to assess the uncertainty and risk of the cultural significance of water (2013: 41). According to MacLeod, a full ecocritical analysis of water in a work of literature should acknowledge that water, as a flow of capital, can ruin and poison landscapes and displace people. Ultimately, she argues that water can and must simultaneously be viewed positively and negatively: as a conduit between past and present and living and dead, as a force of nature and a commodity, and as a symbol of the unconscious, healing, prosperity, agency, social domination, and devastation (2013: 57). Applying MacLeod's framework to Rash's and Trethewey's work affirms that water as a motif embodies the killing power of capitalism but complicates this connection through water's associations with history, power, and emotion.

MacLeod's contention that water serves as a non-linear conduit, or even a disruptor, between the living and the dead is apparent in Rash's and Trethewey's work, and many times when water serves this purpose in *One Foot in Eden*, *Saints at the River*, and *Native Guard*, the destructive power of capitalism is also present, implying its lethality and mitigating power over history and memory. For example, Rash's *One Foot in Eden* takes place in the Jocassee valley in southern Appalachia; the Jocassee valley, meaning 'valley of the lost,' was named for a Cherokee princess who drowned herself but whose body was never found, giving the place a traumatic designation grounded in water. Water as inspiration for the valley's name makes sense, considering that naturalist William Bartram noted, upon first seeing the area, 'The mountainous wilderness appear[ed] undulated as the great ocean after a tempest' (Rash *One Foot in Eden*: 51). The story of the princess's death in the river is tied to the stories of the homes, churches, farms, and cemeteries in the valley that will soon be lost in flooding planned by Carolina Power to create a reservoir. Echoing MacLeod's language on capitalism, Hinrichsen refers to such actions in the Appalachian region as 'flows of financialization that transform place into capital, and environment into exploitable commodity' (2019: 27). In contrast to the princess's name living on despite Cherokee land being colonized by Scottish, Welsh, Irish, and English settlers,

‘There would be no [people’s or places’] names left...[e]very tombstone...would vanish as well’ after the power company’s flooding (Rash *One Foot in Eden*: 23).

However, the name Jocassee will likely vanish when the town does. In effect, those who took the land from the Cherokee will soon be displaced and erased by water that acts as a palimpsest, covering up the town while its traces remain below the surface, much as the Cherokee princess’ body is simultaneously there and not there. After the flood, Jocassee’s living and dead will be disconnected by water, with the departing residents unable to visit their families’ intended burial sites or stay on the land that holds memories and history. Pursuit of wealth, power, and property in the Appalachian region’s past and present bring the obliterating and killing power of water. Despite the frightening prospect of having one’s place and history covered by water, one character in the novel, Sheriff Will Alexander, welcomes the water as a means of uniting him with the Jocassee dead in its lethality:

I hoped I would be in [my] grave [in the Jocassee valley] before they built the reservoir so when the water rose it would rise over me and Daddy and Momma and over Old Ian Alexander and his wife Mary and over the lost body of the princess named Jocassee and the Cherokee mounds and the trails De Soto and Bartram and Michaux had followed and the meadows and streams and forests they had described and all would forever vanish.

(Rash *One Foot in Eden*: 56-7)

For Alexander, to move out of the Jocassee valley would be akin to surrendering to the capitalistic forces that prioritize profit over family, an act he was accused of when he left Jocassee for college in his youth. To Alexander, succumbing to the water means that he can forge the most powerful link to his dead forbears on his own terms, not that he is allowing dominant, profit-driven forces to overtake him.

The planned Jocassee flooding indicates the imbalanced benefits of large infrastructure projects that benefit energy companies, their workers, and bureaucrats but also purport to benefit the communities they displace by, for example, offering them money to relocate (Hoefler 2015: 502, 506). The power company’s true feelings and intent are expressed at the novel’s end by a company employee admonishing a lingering resident to leave, saying, ‘That dam’s built, and the gates are closed. It doesn’t matter if you’re living or dead. You don’t belong here anymore. Every last one of you hillbillies is going to be flushed out of this valley like shit down a

commodore' (Rash *One Foot in Eden*: 184). This is one aspect of a long history of the flows of capitalism displacing and isolating Jocassee residents.

Destructive flows of capitalism and links between the living and dead are also evident in Rash's *Saints at the River*, which involves a fight between environmentalists and a grieving family over what measures to take to retrieve the body of a drowned girl from the Tamassee River. The water as battleground represents concerns between how best to honour and connect with the dead and how to prevent destructive pursuits of power and commodification of nature. To the environmentalists, who view the river as sacred, tourists who pass through places such as Tamassee are unconcerned about the impact of their behaviours on nature and on the residents they encounter (Villalobos 2019: 216-217). The tourists view the river as 'a longer, more dangerous version of rides at Six Flags or Disney World,' a novelty to check off a list (Rash *Saints*: 51). Ruth Kowalsky, the child who drowns, also sees the river as a novelty, a vessel for placing her feet in two different American states at the same time. Because of these contrasting perceptions of the Tamassee, the environmentalists believe it is their responsibility to uphold the tenets of the Wild and Scenic River Act, which keeps anyone from altering the river's natural state, and refuse the family's request to install a temporary dam to access the child's body. Their argument is that any disturbance to the river, even short term, will open the Tamassee to other exceptions, including ones from developers, which may lead to the river and its surrounding land becoming 'little more than a housing development with an open sewer running through its middle' (Rash *Saints*: 33). However, to keep the river 'clean' from the effects of capitalism, the environmentalists treat the dead child the way Carolina Power treats Jocassee residents, disrupting the connection between the living and dead for their own interests, which speaks to the complexity of water's material and metaphorical meaning.

Further complicating the idea that any intervention in the Tamassee River is a slippery slope toward complete capitalistic annihilation are the townfolks' varied views on how the river should be treated in general, including the recovery of Ruth's body. Consistent with water's role as a conduit between past and present, these views are often tied to people's opinions on the history and potential progress of the river community. For example, some residents see long-term capitalistic value in the Tamassee River area: the river and land around it should look pristine to attract homebuyers and visitors, but drilling a few holes in the riverbed or making a trail will not harm that value. In this view, the river's value lies in what people can see, not what

it conceals, similar to Carolina Power's perspective in *One Foot in Eden*. One community member who sees the river as a site for profit, developer Tony Bryan, has a history of altering the Tamassee landscape, such as increasing silt in a creek which kills off most of the creek's fish, but he simply pays fines for his encroachments and continues building, embodying the flows of capitalism at work. Bryan's main contribution to the Tamassee area is bringing in menial, low-paying jobs, demonstrating Hinrichsen's argument that less politically powerful communities where development occurs pay the ecological and economic price for these changes (2019: 27). Tamassee workers and residents on the environmentalists' side are not completely anti-profit, seeing the value in non-invasive capitalist use of the river, such as rafting and photography. However, they argue that the people are there to serve the river, not vice versa: 'That's what wilderness is – nature on its terms, not ours, and there's no middle ground' (Rash *Saints*: 106). A smaller contingent of Tamassee residents believes the river should be treated as in years before, secondary to human needs and wants; dynamiting the river will cause Ruth's body to quickly resurface, and any damage sustained to the riverbed is worth ending the conflict between the environmentalists and the family. These varied and sometimes overlapping views of the water affirm MacLeod's argument that water's associations both confirm and challenge domination and ecological devastation.

Water as a potential tool for capitalism that also carries deep meaning for people is as strongly felt in Natasha Trethewey's Mississippi Gulf Coast and along the Mississippi River as it is Ron Rash's Appalachia. Poems in Trethewey's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Native Guard* use water as a rumination on the past and the relationship between the living and dead, mitigated by water's associations with progress and prosperity. 'Theories of Time and Space,' the opening poem of *Native Guard*, works as a guide for reading water in much of the rest of the volume. As the poem provides instructions for going to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the speaker directs the reader to

Cross over
the man-made beach, 26 miles of sand
dumped on the mangrove swamp – buried
terrain of the past. (2006: 7-14)

The swamp represents both the history of the place and the consequences of capitalistic progress being covered by sand to be more appealing to visitors. This environmental surface appeal is

akin to residents of Tamasee who see the river's aesthetics as a source of revenue in *Saints at the River*.

More extensively, 'Pilgrimage,' 'Flood,' and 'Native Guard' from Trethewey's volume argue that water is a strong but non-linear path to the past that cannot exist separately from the forces of pursuit of profit, power, and domination. 'Pilgrimage' is set in Vicksburg, Mississippi, the site of a key American Civil War battle and a city focused on preserving its Civil War history in museums, landmark buildings, and cemeteries. In this city, 'the Mississippi carved / its mud-dark path, a graveyard / for skeletons of sunken riverboats' (1-3). The poem's opening lines associate the iconic river, often celebrated in southern literature as a site of maritime commerce for quickly transporting goods, with the dead and the darker history that lies beneath Vicksburg's celebration of the Confederacy. This dark history includes the Mississippi River being used in the annihilating, capitalistic pursuit of profit through transport of slaves. While contemporary visitors to Vicksburg may view the Mississippi River as a pathway to a sanctified encounter with Confederate ghosts, the speaker is unenthusiastic at the lack of any memorial to the black ancestors, and the water disconnects the living and historically oppressed dead (Frye and Hutchinson 2015: 38). Because Vicksburg's memorials are pieces of marble erected in honour of white southerners permitted to tell their version of the Civil War era, when Trethewey looks at the Mississippi River's path she can envision only a white woman safely ensconced in underground catacombs, listening to shells explode above her. The speaker notes that 'Here, the river changed its course, / turning away from the city / as one turns, forgetting, from the past –' using the water metaphor to reinforce Vicksburg's erasure of its ugly history of slavery and violence through sanitized monuments to the Civil War (Trethewey *Native Guard*: 4-6). This erasure is an implied effort to make money by promoting a link between the living and dead that does not make tourists uncomfortable, emblemized by the 'funereal' flowers draping old mansions with the 'gray' river as a backdrop (30-31). On a field trip to the city, the speaker stays in a converted mansion, her room named Prissy's Room after a slave in the novel and movie *Gone with the Wind* (1936, 1939), both of which were commercial successes. Part of *Gone with the Wind*'s appeal, of course, lay in its sanitized portrayal of caricatured slave characters who were often childlike and lived contentedly in bondage. In the room is a window that 'frames / the river's crawl toward the Gulf,' tying the water again to capitalism and the past as it is mentioned alongside the mansion room's name (Trethewey *Native Guard*: 34-35).

The poem titled ‘Flood,’ from the multi-part poem ‘Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi,’ depicts black men, women, and children who were displaced from their homes in 1927 due to a flood and sought passage to higher ground. The context of the poem alone forges a link between water and flows of capitalism, as the displaced people live on flood-prone land because people with more money and power control the more desirable locales. This is part of Mississippi’s history, according to *The Atlantic*’s Vann R. Newkirk II:

The land was wrested first from Native Americans, by force. It was then cleared, watered, and made productive for intensive agriculture by the labor of enslaved Africans, who after Emancipation would come to own a portion of it. Later, through a variety of means – sometimes legal, often coercive, in many cases legal *and* coercive, occasionally violent – [land] owned by black people came into the hands of white people. (2019)

Again, as in *One Foot in Eden*, the appropriation of others’ land by more powerful people invests water with the killing force of capitalism. In the poem, water pushes the refugees against a dangerous barrier instead of carrying them to freedom: after ‘They have arrived on the back / of the swollen [Mississippi] river’, they come face to face with an armed blockade of National Guards to be told they must sing for their passage (Trethewey *Native Guard*: 1-2). The floodwater that drives these people from their homes and that separates them from safety thus brings them close to the dead by recalling other historical black bodies denied a legal place or status and killed. For the refugees, water is not life-giving, profitable, or a place to be reborn; instead, it is an emblem of racial, financial, and geographic domination. The Mississippi River creates a similar boundary in Trethewey’s ‘Miscegenation,’ where the poet’s parents, a white man and black woman, had to cross it to be legally married in Ohio. People in power turn the Mississippi into an obstacle for the couple. In the poem’s description of the still documentary image, the people sing with ‘the great river all around’ as an indication of their status apart and alone, and their forced performance reads as a way to buy themselves into a country that should already be theirs (18). Strategically, ‘Flood’ follows the poem ‘King Cotton, 1907,’ which depicts bales of cotton, once cultivated by enslaved people, as a ‘swell’ and ‘wave of history flooding the town’ of Vicksburg (4). This image reinforces, through the water metaphor, that what gives life and profit to dominant groups is a tool of oppression to others.

Trethewey’s titular poem from *Native Guard* overtly uses water as a palimpsestic conduit between the living and the dead and as a symbol of annihilating capitalism. ‘Native Guard’ is

Trethewey's imagined story of a black soldier in the 2nd regiment of the Louisiana Native Guards, one of the first black Civil War units. Although this regiment of soldiers was stationed on Ship Island for three years, no memorials are present for them, and they were not acknowledged if they died during their service (De Cenzo 2008: 22). In the opening lines, the soldier remembers his life before the military, addressing 'the landscape's / song of bondage – dirge in the river's throat / where it churns into the Gulf' (Trethewey *Native Guard*: 2-4). The prevailing association of the water as a place of profit and adventure does not apply to the speaker, whose description of the river and ocean implies instead economic and legal domination and death, since the water's song is a funeral lament. As the speaker reflects on his new life after enslavement, he mentions his 'berth upon a ship called the *Northern Star*,' which would render the water a conduit of hope and site of rebirth were it not for the soldier being treated as a second-class citizen by his superior officers because of his race (30). Although the man is free, his military labour is as arduous as when he was enslaved, and he and the other black soldiers receive half rations. In his reflections, the soldier looks over the Gulf, seeing 'the surf breaking, / tossing the ships, the great gunboats bobbing / on the water' (37-9). Because the gunboats are weapons of war and thus death, he concludes that all humans are enslaved to destiny, traumatically linking every person past and present. Despite the soldier's epiphany upon seeing the water that destiny is the great equalizer, the reader is aware that other forces associated with power and wealth destabilize notions of equality.

The Native Guards are referenced again in 'Elegy for the Native Guards,' a poem that has much in common with Trethewey's 'Pilgrimage' in terms of who is remembered in southern history, and with Rash's *One Foot in Eden* in terms of water working in complex ways to connect and disconnect the living from the dead. This work also uses water to address how history is presented in order to maximize profit. 'Elegy' opens with an epigraph by Allen Tate, '*Now that the salt of their blood / Stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea*' (original italics) excerpted from 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.' It is an opening that uses water to represent the anonymity of the dead lost to time, which sets the tone of the rest of Trethewey's work. In the poem, Trethewey tours Ship Island, where the Native Guards were stationed, and she sees no monument to the black soldiers. The tour guide tells visitors 'of graves lost in the Gulf, the island split / in half when Hurricane Camille hit,' reminiscent of the cemetery that will be flooded in Rash's Jocassee valley and the unacknowledged dead of Vicksburg in 'Pilgrimage' (9-10). Thus,

the water of the Gulf and of the Mississippi and Jocassee Rivers create a fraught connection between living and dead, the dead potentially flooded into oblivion because of their status as disenfranchised and legally and financially oppressed.

Although MacLeod's theoretical framework in 'Water and the Material Imagination' rests heavily on the concept that water is an embodiment of the potentially annihilating force of capitalism, she also acknowledges that water is associative in a way that connects individual experiences with collective histories, traumas, and feelings, which creates the relationship between the living, dead, and future generations. Because the water imagery in *One Foot in Eden*, *Saints at the River*, and *Native Guard* is so prominent outside the trappings of capitalism, in the authors' three works, water's main metaphorical power is as an amalgamation of birth and death.

The Holcombe family in *One Foot in Eden* – Billy, Amy, and Isaac – are deeply tied to water in the Jocassee valley and strongly associated with its birth and death symbolism. Amy uses water to seduce her neighbour Holland Winchester, whom she hopes will give her the baby her husband Billy cannot. To lure Holland, Amy takes a leisurely bath outdoors where he is sure to see her. Amy describes Isaac's conception, the result of her affair, in the language of water: 'I felt...something deep inside of me, a kind of brightness welling up and spreading all through my body like spring water when it bubbles out of the ground' (Rash *One Foot in Eden*: 88). After Billy murders Holland for laying claim to Amy and his baby, Amy and Billy have sex, depicted with water imagery from Amy's perspective: 'it was like as if my body was nothing but water spreading out into the dark, each ripple taking me farther and farther away from all that burdened me' (96). On the evening Isaac is born, the snowy landscape in the last light of the day looks to Amy like the bottom of the ocean, and as soon as she associates the land with the inscrutable mystery of the ocean floor, Amy envisions Widow Glendower, a woman living at the fork of two rivers in Jocassee who is rumoured to be a witch. In Amy's vision, while she is 'flooded' with labour pains, the widow stands with Winchester's mother at the tree where Billy killed Holland, fully linking birth and death (100-101). When Isaac is born, he is 'drowned-looking' and Amy fears he cannot possibly be alive, but when he begins to nurse, it is like 'sun after rain' (102). After Isaac's birth, Billy suffers from pneumonia, the 'sweat pour[ing] off him like rain' as he lingers close to death (104). Although Billy recovers and the family lives peacefully for many years, Amy feels a sense of foreboding when recalling the series of events that began when she

seduced Holland: ‘thoughts of those bad times laid deep in my mind like river snags. They would raise to the surface ever so often just to let me know they was still there’ (111). For Amy, images of water mingle inextricably with sex, birth, death, fears, joys, and secrets and constitute a dormant threat of her destruction. Couched in ambivalence, these images are connected to the baby Amy has always wanted but fears losing, the husband she loves who cannot give her a child and who almost succumbs to illness, and the lover whose possessiveness precipitates a violent end and the nagging fear that his death could cause Amy to lose everything she loves.

Billy’s bond with water as birth and death goes beyond the imagery accompanying his pneumonia. When Billy is a young man afflicted with polio, he wants only water to ease his burning throat and soothe him to sleep. During the dry season in Jocassee when Amy becomes pregnant with Holland’s child, Billy’s crops are dead except for the tobacco and cabbage he has planted by the river, the same river Amy will later follow to Widow Glendower’s home to procure healing, life-giving herbs for Billy when he suffers from pneumonia. After Billy murders Holland and takes the body over the river, raising it into a tree, ‘Holland’s body circl[es] slow as it raise[s] into the sky like a body caught in a suckhole below a waterfall’ (136). The evening after the murder, when Billy and Amy have sex, which she imagines as water peacefully rippling, Billy feels that they are drowning and clinging to each other for salvation. Once it is clear that Sheriff Alexander will not find Holland’s body, Billy compares Alexander giving up on the search to ‘nail[ing] a board over a well [that] has gone dry’ (153). This image is a contrast to the soothing rain that begins to fall when the body search ends, filling Billy with hope as ‘sleep fall[s] over [him] like warm rain’ (155). Such hope cannot sustain Billy for his entire life, however, and as the Jocassee valley is being flooded, he and Amy are taken by the same water believed by many to have hidden evidence of Billy’s crime.

Isaac, Holland and Amy’s son raised by Billy and Amy, is associated with water and its birth and death symbolism from his conception and birth onward. Displaced from the family farm by Carolina Power along with his parents, Isaac, a young adult preparing for college, returns to the farm ‘in a race with the water’ before the deadly flooding is complete to tend the last crops (168). After witnessing the grisly suicide of his paternal grandmother, Mrs. Winchester, and finding out the identity of his biological father, Isaac sees sickness and death in the increasingly water-covered land:

Scrub pines and blackjack oaks the loggers hadn't bothered with rose out of the water. The stumps of the big hardwoods jutted out like tombstones. But the farther you went the less you saw. Water deepened and hid more. At the end of the valley where the mountains again came close together, a white wall of concrete cut off the river like a tourniquet cuts off a vein. (180)

Isaac's childhood home is almost obliterated by the power company's floodwaters, the cut trees and concrete wall representing death of the natural landscape. Adding to the pall of death over the Jocassee valley, Isaac witnesses Jocassee's gravestones being moved in preparation for the flooding, seeing the stones unceremoniously 'yank[ed]...out of the ground like teeth' before the ground becomes wet and the coffins 'come bobbing up like fishing corks' (181-82). When Isaac recovers his biological father's remains and places them into a sack, he subsequently drops them in the rushing Jocassee river waters, concealing evidence of his adoptive father's crime and ultimately birthing himself as Billy's son. However, Billy's drowning makes Isaac fatherless twice over.

Native Guard's 'Graveyard Blues' also uses water to mark the birth of a parentless child: Trethewey herself. In the work, Trethewey depicts her mother's funeral as a scene overwhelmed by water: 'It rained the whole time we were laying her down; / Rained from church to grave when we put her down. / The suck of mud at our feet was a hollow sound' (Trethewey *Native Guard*: 1-3). The rain is like tears, tied to the sorrow of losing a parent, compounded by the mother's violent death at her husband's hands. Rainwater also creates the 'suck of mud' that holds Trethewey at the funeral and in her mourning, tied to the mother who is no longer there. In contrast, the sun emerges when Trethewey turns to walk away from the graveside, signifying a broken link between the living and the dead.

Other manifestations of water tied to literal and metaphorical birth and death are evident in Trethewey's 'Providence' and Rash's *Saints at the River*. Trethewey's poem is the story of her family's experience in the wake of Hurricane Camille in 1969. Akin to the flooded forests and graveyards and the water-hidden bodies in *One Foot in Eden* and *Saints at the River*, there is 'a swamp / where graves had been,' tying the water to the dead as much as the water threatens death to the living (8-9). Trethewey remembers 'how we huddled all night in our small house, / moving between rooms, / emptying pots filled with rain;' in this memory, water threatens to overflow and overwhelm before the family can be fully reborn as survivors (10-12). The worst

effect of the hurricane, however, is the destabilizing impact of its waters that makes the house appear to float free of its foundation, leaving the family feeling unmoored: ‘nothing I could see / tying us to the land’ (16-17). The death of the family’s connection to their sense of place is again reminiscent of *One Foot in Eden* and displacement from the Jocassee valley. At the poem’s end, when Trethewey sees her family’s reflection in the water outside and goes to touch it, the reflection disappears, implying another death, the end of their sense of wholeness and security.

Literal death marks the Tamassee in *Saints at the River*, and the novel’s first death, Ruth Kowalsky, is depicted brutally, as the river becomes an antagonist that traps the child and beats her body against rocks. In Ruth’s final moments, however, when her body is resigned to its end and stops fighting the water, ‘*she is now inside [a] prism [full of color] and knows...that the prism’s colors are voices, voices that swirl around her head like a crown*’ (Rash *Saints at the River*: 5; original italics). The only other person to see the river in this otherworldly way, environmentalist Luke Miller, nearly drowns in it, but upon surfacing, calls the water ‘the still center of the universe’ and his brush with death ‘entering eternity’ (Rash *Saints*: 64). While Luke may describe his experience as a birth or rebirth, the Kowalskys see the river only as a place of death. Luke’s perception is affirmed when, at a town hall meeting, he argues that he would be comforted if his drowned daughter lay in the Tamassee, undisturbed by human hands: ‘I’d want her where she’d be part of something pure and good and unchanging, the closest thing to Eden we’ve got left’ (Rash *Saints at the River*: 52-3). The Tamassee becomes a site of death again when one of the local men diving for Ruth’s body, Randy, drowns. During Randy’s funeral service at the Tamassee, a townspeople sings ‘Shall We Gather at the River,’ a hymn that calls the river a place where angels walk and where God’s throne is near, effectively a place of death, birth, and rebirth. The bodies of Randy and Ruth finally emerge out of the Tamassee, borne if not born from the river after Randy’s brother throws dynamite into it. For this body of water, unlike others from the work of Rash and Trethewey, the past has won out.

Ron Rash and Natasha Trethewey have rarely been analysed in conversation with each other, despite their several common thematic concerns. Since ecocritical theory is commonly utilized to address Rash’s novels, short fiction, and poetry but sorely limited in scholarly examinations of Trethewey’s poetry and non-fiction, it is an ideal area for exploring links between their writing. Sarah E. McFarland posits the return home to an ecologically transformed place as an act of agency and resistance against land commodification (2019: 193). By writing

about their homeplaces, Ron Rash and Natasha Trethewey are returning, in a sense, to call attention to the ways human-led changes to nature disproportionately affect communities with little political and economic power. Inextricably tied to this issue are the lost lives and stories in these communities that Rash and Trethewey seek to recover. The material and metaphorical implications of water of the works of Rash and Trethewey examined here shows that the two authors use water as a conduit between past and present that is subject to legal, economic, and social forces, particularly capitalistic. Using water to represent loss, recovery, inscrutability, and the complicated relationship between humans and nature, Rash and Trethewey do not necessarily offer hope for the southern American landscape in the Anthropocene, but they encourage readers to view the environmental pasts of Appalachia and the Mississippi Gulf Coast as complex shaping forces of the regions' current beauty, darkness, and precariousness.

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