SPELL FROM THE COLORED SECTION: PERFORMANCE AND SEGREGATION IN CONTEMPORARY US POETRY

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Theo Hummer
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Theo Hummer, Ph.D.
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All published since 2002, A Van Jordan's Macnolia, Fanny Howe's Tis of Thee, and Harryette Mullen's Sleeping with the Dictionary share a fascination with formal experimentation and with the relationship between the textual and the performative; they also share a focus on segregation that would seem to imply that the problem of the color-line continues to afflict the twenty-first century—though the line is located, forty years after the Civil Rights Movement, not in law but in other places, including in certain performances of language. My dissertation traces the resonance between, on the one hand, poetry's ability to employ language that exceeds racist constraints, and on the other, its exhausting, deforming and reshaping of received literary constraints. Jordan's, Howe's and Mullen's approaches to cross-genre abecedarian play insistently probe double consciousness and double voicedness—both as effects of and as potential tools against racism; my dissertation investigates the complex relationships in all three poets' work among aesthetic stance, audience, the poet, the communities they represent, and those in which they intervene.

My dissertation demonstrates how 21st-century poets are building new, hybrid poetics, radical both in form and content, by drawing upon 20th-century traditions like Black Arts, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Dada, and Oulipo without pledging orthodox allegiance to any single movement. I argue that such collaged stylistic interventions lend new vigor to the literary project of interrogating American racial and economic formations, thereby

opening new poetic avenues to the liberatory performance of repetition with a difference. The dissertation takes as foundational Judith Butler's claim that illicit speech "performatively produces a shift in the terms of legitimacy," while it also addresses Robyn Weigman's notion of "the spectacle" as "the culminating moment for the panoptic's reinforcement" in the Jim Crow social order. To explore how these two insights inform practices of racialization in the present, I further draw on Saidiya Hartman's ideas concerning stage, spectacle, and scene to describe a disjunction between Butler's claims about the performativity of identity and the way contemporary poetry presents the lived experience of race.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Theo Hummer, a Cornell joint MFA/PhD, was raised in Meridian, Mississippi, and graduated from the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. Her BA in English is from the University of California at Berkeley. She received her MFA in poetry in 2004. She has taught at small northeastern liberal arts colleges, Interlochen Arts Academy, a Czech cigarette factory, and the maximum-security men's prison in Auburn, NY. This is her first dissertation.

For all of my various parents—by blood and in spirit—and in loving memory of my aunt, Lindsey Hine Guthu.

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INTRODUCTION

> I spell even when they tell me to sit in the colored section . . .
> Before me, what I do had only been a prayer on a black girl's tongue.
> What more can I ask for? There's a revolution wetting my lips.
>
> A. Van Jordan, from MacNolia

When I first encountered the phrase "the creaking of the word" in Nathaniel Mackey's Discrepant Engagement, I misread it as "the creaking of the world." Dogon weavers in Mali, Mackey explains, rest looms upon a foundation they call "the creaking of the word" (19). Both the phrase and my misreading of it are electric with implication: the word/world (a world made of words, a word made world-sized) is a creaking contraption, a thing not quite solid, in danger of breaking. It makes audible the pressures that human creativity puts upon it. The Dogon phrase places this rickety, untrustworthy word at the foundation of material production—production specifically of fabric. Fabric, too, bristles with connotation: at its most literal and tangible, it is the material humans need to clothe—to protect—our vulnerable bodies. As a product of the spinning and weaving of fibers, fabric suggests interconnection and the complicated strength it produces. At its grandest, fabric names the matrix underpinning everything: the fabric of the universe, a phrase that suggests my misreading—world for word—wasn't so far off. And at the source of the universe's fabric rests the creaky, creaking word.

The word's crash-test engineers, standing by to creak it to pieces, are of course—like Mackey himself—poets. More people are writing and publishing poetry in the twenty-first century than at any previous time in

history. People are writing traditional lyrics that would look familiar to Wordsworth; people are filling up the discipline's happy middle and probing its unexplored edges, testing poetry's boundaries with theatre, music, sound, visual and book arts. Via an array of new means of technological production, reproduction, and dissemination—both decidedly high-tech and high-tech in the service of low-tech—poets are returning to poetry's aural, declamatory roots and introducing new kinetic, tactile, spatial, and nonsequential elements. The rise of the Internet has presented decided advantages for poets, whose relation to the market—and thus to expensive traditional printing and distribution channels—is different from, less comfortable than, prose writers'. That uneasy relationship has itself been both a disadvantage and an opportunity for turn-of-the-millennium poetry, which obsessively thematizes its anxieties about late capitalism and makes conceptual and formal leaps that defy genre (and thus the readerly expectations that make for reliable sales). Meanwhile, queer and speech-act theories have shown our identities to be not fixed categories but creaky, processual performances; postcolonial studies of the world and of the U.S. have revealed racism as a basic constitutive fiber of the fabric of the capitalist world order. Engaging word/world conjunctions as they play out in the twenty-first century, this dissertation investigates poets' representations of Americans' especially awkward relationships to concepts of performance and performativity when it comes to race.

All published since 2002, A. Van Jordan's Macnolia, Fanny Howe's Tis of Thee, and Harryette Mullen's Sleeping with the Dictionary share a fascination with formal experimentation and with the relationship between the textual and the performative. They also share a focus on segregation that highlights how W. E. B. DuBois's problem of the color-line continues to

afflict the twenty-first century. That line is located, forty years after the Civil Rights Movement, not so much in law as in other places, including—crucially—in performances of language. To employ language that exceeds racist constraints, these poets exhaust, deform, and reshape received literary constraints. Their approaches to cross-genre abecedarian play insistently probe double consciousness and double voicedness—both as effects of and as potential tools against racist and other forms of oppression, and as aesthetic aims in their own right. All three books construct or reveal complex relationships among aesthetic stance, audience, and the poet. The strategies they employ are in many ways typical of twenty-first century poetries that seek to carve space outside the first-person lyric tradition that dominates the poetic mainstream, but these strategies allow particular insight into the increasingly covert American language of race relations.

Taken together, these books comprise an instructive sample of the new, hybrid poetics that contemporary U.S. poets are building. This hybrid poetics—often radical both in form and content—preserves an index of 20th-century traditions like Black Arts, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Dada, and Oulipo without pledging orthodox allegiance to any single movement. Rather, contemporary poets adopt a variety of stances in interactions with their predecessors, cycling rapidly between satire and parody on the one hand and allegiance and homage on the other to represent and explore the twenty-first century's complex, ambivalent relationship to its multiple cultural inheritances. Such richly woven stylistic interventions lend new vigor to the ongoing literary project of interrogating U.S. racial and economic formations, thereby opening new poetic avenues to the potentially liberatory performance of repetition with a difference—repetition with attention to repetition's creaking. That performance generates identity—and

that the recognition of identity formation's performativity can deliver people from historical and institutional inscriptions of oppression—is a central tenet of twenty-first century critical discourse. Interrogating such tenets is a basic function of poetry, part of its defamiliarizing project. Yet, inevitably, poets often reinscribe the very pieties they hope to destabilize.

Performing Identity, Performing Poetry: Critical Frameworks

Contemporary poetry inherits twentieth-century anxieties around the ossification and essentialization of identity. Who speaks in the poem? Is the lyric subject dead? Can a poet claim to write in—to "find"—her "own authentic voice"? As poets negotiate these aesthetic issues and others raised by the emergence of new sound- and image-recording media, they also confront pressing ethical and political questions. What do concepts like equality, justice, and difference mean in our lives, and how should we value them? How, for that matter, should our troubled world value poetry itself? This dissertation is particularly interested in how characteristic twenty-first century poetic strategies shed special light when the topic is race. How should we interpret poets' performances around this topic, and how should we interpret their representations of characters' performances?

In Excitable Speech, Judith Butler—drawing upon and departing from Bourdieu—describes speech acts' dual capacities as "rite[s] of institution" and as "insurrectionary acts" (145).

> To account for such [insurrectionary] speech acts . . . one must understand language not as a static and closed system whose utterances are functionally secured in advance by . . . "social positions" . . . [or] prior contexts; . . . an utterance may gain its force precisely by virtue of the break with context that

> it performs. Such breaks with prior context or, indeed, with ordinary usage, are crucial to the political operation of the performative.

Butler might as well be rehearsing L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry's espousal of opaque and gestural writing or even Modernist, Objectivist, or Surrealist rationales for building poems up from allusion and assemblage. Poets who hope that radical aesthetic form will contribute to a radical political agenda in the world have long trusted that, in Butler's words, illicit speech "performatively produces a shift in the terms of legitimacy" (147). We write from a hope, that is, that disrupting standard language patterns will allow new meanings to emerge, which will in turn create new contexts for speech and identity—will change the contours of what can be said, imagined, allowed.

But what has a century of disruptive poetics accomplished in the political arena? And are all bodies equally inscribed and performed as roles from which disruptive speech acts can liberate us? Racial identity categories seem to be produced and sustained via fundamentally different kinds of performance than sexual identity categories—with different relationships to the biological body and the histories of its interpretation, as well as different aims and strategies. Thus Judith Butler's model of performative identity—grounded as it is in feminist and queer theory—may reach a limit when it comes to describing how racial identity works. Timothy Scheie's exploration of performativity and agency in Aimé Césaire's <u>A Tempest</u> provides some helpful starting points for conceptualizing the gap between Butlerian performativity and the project of speaking in a way that might subvert the implicit white supremacy our social institutions continue to enforce.

Scheie asserts about the performative that "despite its apparent liberatory potential," it "does not easily serve the interests of an activist, counter-hegemonic agenda." For him, though a performative model of identity may "radically disturb oppressive identity categories," it "also destabilizes the agent who seeks to subvert them" (20). Of course, not all agents are looking for stability; identity's instability is precisely what queer theory celebrates. But as Harryette Mullen only half-jokingly points out, "It's that white male subjectivity that needs to be put on hold . . . the rest of us . . . need our subjectivity" (Griffin 11). Black people, traditionally denied agency and personhood in the United States and still systematically obstructed by notions of individual agency implicit in institutional and color-blind racism, may find their political aims better served by a model of performative identity that reserves more agency to human beings, allowing observers to trace the power dynamics of particular performative situations and to hold individual and institutional actors accountable.

In Scheie's account, performers "who invoke the performative further relinquish the ability to recast identity at will, for it is precisely such 'wills' that performativity calls into question" (20). But the "ability to recast identity at will" has been, in the covertly white supremacist U.S., specifically a white prerogative. Can racially marked subjects be said to "relinquish" an ability U.S. racial formations have never granted them in the first place?

Thus a gap opens between the lived experience of the sexual other, whose default starting position in a heteronormative social order is "closeted," and the lived experience of the racial other, who, in the context of paranoid U.S. institutional racism, is always already "out." (Passing is of course possible, but it is usually deliberate, seldom the default.) The sexual other's stigmatized identity derives from a general social prohibition of

particular acts and practices; the racial other's very body carries the stigma through which a prohibition may be enforced against engaging in acts and practices allowed to bodies that appear unmarked. Seen another way, the sexual other's transgressive identity might be said to arise from within, from a playful, perverse impulse (whether joyfully embraced or painfully disavowed) to embrace arbitrarily proscribed pleasures and desires (desires that may be created, at least in part, by their very proscription). The racial other's identity as other is, on the other hand, imposed from without, by institutions that—rather than merely include and exclude—declare some bodies inherently includable and others excludable. Both the queer subject and the racially othered subject seek individual liberation in transgressing prohibitions and social justice in disrupting and remolding those prohibitions entirely, but the specific relationship among bodies, subjectivities, prohibitions and liberations is differently structured and draws on a different history of transgressive activism.

Scheie attributes the limits of Butler's model for his argument not to the fact that the identity categories he seeks to disrupt are racial ones, but to the fact that the text he is considering is itself a play. "A dramatic performance in which the performer freely and knowingly assumes a role," he writes, "represents precisely what the performative is not" (24). As Butler writes in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," her (lesbian) identity is, in contrast to the role an actor plays on stage, "not a performance from which I can take radical distance, for this is deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play" (125). For Scheie, the contrast between theatrical roles and performative identity creation "emblematizes the theater's surreptitious reinforcement of an identity's claim to fixity rather than a revelation of identity's consitutive instability" (24). Whereas Scheie sees this as a

limitation of the performative's liberatory potential, I would argue in favor of continuing to consider racial identities as produced through performative processes—albeit ones whose descriptions are modified somewhat from Butler's.

The tradition of black writers and intellectuals' describing black identity in terms of performance predates Judith Butler by at least a century. Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" was published in 1896:

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties.
>
> Why should the world be over-wise,
> In counting all our tears and sighs?
> Nay, let them only see us, while
> We wear the mask.
>
> We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
> To thee from tortured souls arise.
> We sing, but oh the clay is vile
> Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
> But let the world dream otherwise,
> We wear the mask!

Dunbar's description of black life in the Jim Crow-era U.S. is specifically theatrical, supplied with song, smiles, and the mask. Crucially, Dunbar

figures racial performance as performance from which we <u>can</u> take radical distance—in fact, that distance is for Dunbar the space of freedom, the space that protects the vulnerable black subject's emotions not only from white intrusion, but also possibly from being overwhelmed by other black people's pain: "the world" from which the speakers "hide our . . . torn and bleeding hearts" is easy to read as the <u>white</u> world, but nowhere in the poem does Dunbar represent black people removing the mask to share their "tortured souls" with one another. The preexisting agent whom the masked performance shields is a radically private one, and one whose theatricality confers strength and power even while it fails to prevent secret heartache or to transform the world into a more equitable place.

Butler urges us to understand "performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (<u>Bodies That Matter</u> 2)—that is, as deriving its identity-creating power not from a single instance of action, but from coherently (if not identically) repeated habits. Dunbar's mask figure instead points to an African-American tradition of contradictory habit—of bodily habits inconsistent with mental and emotional habits—of isolated actions tailored to specific audiences, and thus calculated <u>not</u> to add up to a coherent identity legible from outside. This is not to say that black social identities lack coherence in all contexts—as Patricia McKee points out on the first page of <u>American Anatomies</u>, "The common identities of white Americans in works of James and Faulkner and the common identity of black Americans in works of Morrison depend alike on a consistency of public political behavior and individual consciousness." Rather, black subjects' incoherent performances arise in interactions with oppressive white gazes. In Dunbar's

tradition, W.E.B. DuBois invokes theatrical performance when he writes in 1903 of having felt that he had been "like [his schoolmates], mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" (2) like a stage curtain. The mask figure appears again from Frantz Fanon in 1952. This sense of racial identity as performed in the self-conscious, counterfactual sense of theatrical spectacle arises again and again in the poems this dissertation takes up.

Such theatrical performance implicitly raises issues of audience and viewership, issues that Robyn Wiegman takes up in American Anatomies. "Does 'the fact of blackness,'" Weigman asks, "lie in the body and its epidermis or in the cultural training that quite literally teaches the eye not only how but what to see?" (22). The implication here is that racial identity and difference arise as much from the viewer's Butlerian performance of expectation and interpretation as from the viewed's theatrical performance of himself in the world. Wiegman is interested here in Foucauldian formations that trace the power relations between viewer and viewed in the disciplinary situations of the spectacle—that is, spectacular punishment—and panoptic surveillance. Whereas Foucault describes a chronological shift in Europe from spectacular discipline in the seventeenth century to panoptic discipline beginning in the eighteenth, Wiegman points out that "the disciplinary power of race . . . must be read as implicated in both specular and panoptic regimes" working simultaneously and in tandem (39). Paying attention to events as disparate and as far apart in time as public lynchings by anonymous, hooded white people and "the rising primacy of difference as commodity" in the post-civil rights era entertainment industry, reading through Wiegman helps to make sense of contemporary poets' obsession with the ambivalent power wielded by and exerted upon black bodies on

stages and screens.

Finally, Saidiya Hartman's Scenes of Subjection helps tease out the complexities of racial performance's power ambivalences. Hartman emphasizes the inextricability of the spectacle of punishment from more "innocent" spectacles like singing, dancing, and joking; Dunbar's description of African Americans as people who "wear the mask" becomes infused with terror and pain in light of Hartman's description of the antebellum scene of slaves called upon to "go before the master:"

> The enslaved were required to sing or dance for the slave owner's pleasure as well as to demonstrate their submission, obsequiousness, and obedience. What was demanded by the master was simulation by the enslaved; yet the capitulation of the dominated to these demands must be considered as pragmatism rather than resignation since one either complied with the rules governing socially sanctioned behavior or risked punishment. In addition, these performances constituted acts of defiance conducted under the cover of nonsense, indirection, and seeming acquiescence. By virtue of such tactics, these performances were sometimes turned against their instrumental aims; at the same time, the reliance on masquerade, subterfuge, and indirection also obscured the small acts of resistance conducted by the enslaved. 8

In light of the practice Hartman describes, the purposely, self-consciously incoherent performance of race begins to seem less transgressive than compliant, less liberatory than terror-bound. And yet Hartman does leave space for "acts of defiance conducted under the cover of nonsense,

indirection, and seeming acquiescence." But how to distinguish one from the other? And where to place oneself as one views and attempts to interpret these ambivalent performances? "At issue here," Hartman writes, "is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between [sympathetic, politically engaged] witness and [voyeuristic] spectator" (4). Following Hartman and Wiegman, I enter this contested and ambivalent field of interaction in the hope that humility and sensitivity will allow me to perform my readership of the texts at hand in a manner disruptive to my own construction as an elite white American subject.

Hartman, like Butler, describes her critical project in terms that echo the methodological approaches of poets working from Modernism forward:

> My attempt to read against the grain is perhaps best understood as a combination of foraging and disfiguration—raiding for fragments upon which other narratives can be spun and misshaping and deforming the testimony through selective quotation and the amplification of issues germane to this study. 12

If I don't always read entirely against the grain crafted by the poets under consideration, I do intend my readings as creative and critical collaborations with those poets against the grain of the larger racial, cultural, linguistic matrix in which we are all performing ourselves. Of course, Hartman is famous (or notorious) for blending academic criticism with creative nonfiction and historical fiction. Her creative approach to scholarship is one this dissertation bears the traces of. Hartman's foregrounding of the mixed creative and critical functions latent but disavowed in most critical and creative work is of a piece with the critically sophisticated poetry I address

here, even if it invites some scholars (especially white men) to view her with disdain or scorn. The three chapters that follow succeed best where they not only elucidate but also collaborate with the poets under consideration in performing their creative, scholarly, complexly intersectional identities in ways disruptive to all manner of coercive expectation; where I can still imagine going further in these chapters, it would be to follow my poets in imagining unauthorized exits from the intellectual traps that reinscribe bodily docility.

Returning to Mackey, I echo an observation from the beginning of Discrepant Engagement:

> Correspondence, counterpoint, and relevance to one another exist among authors otherwise separated by ethnic and regional boundaries . . . This fact is especially relevant to . . . the frequent assumption that black critics are to write only about black writers and that black writers are to be discussed only in relation to other black writers. 3

The poetry with which this dissertation engages works across not only ethnic and regional boundaries, but also across historical period and the high culture/mass culture divide. The particular issue I'm investigating here—what Harryette Mullen calls "aesthetic apartheid," the pigeonholing of art and artists based upon expectations about the ways in which race will inflect expression—leads me to pay special attention to black writers and to writers writing black characters; however, I have tried to remain attentive to each poet's multiracial influences, contexts, and import. And although I am interested in exploring the relationship between the aesthetic stances and the political investments and implications of these texts, I hope to align myself

with Mullen, Mackey, Elizabeth Alexander and others in challenging the "perceived division between what [Ron Silliman has called] the 'Aesthetic Schools of writing' and the 'codes of oppressed peoples'" (Griffin 11; personal conversation with Elizabeth Alexander, February 8, 2007). The notion that any artist could operate free of either aesthetic or political framework—even if she wanted to—is ludicrous. Thus, aware that "arbitrarily . . . lump[ing together] . . . black writers . . . obscures their literary profundity" (Cornel West, The Yale Journal of Criticism, I, 1 (Fall 1987), 198-99 quoted in Mackey 3), I have tried to be purposeful in highlighting these poets' distinct literariness, their contributions to American poetry as a whole.

Egads, I'm on Television: Staging Segregated History with A. Van Jordan

A. Van Jordan's collection of dramatic monologues, MacNolia, sketches the life of a verbally gifted black woman, a national spelling bee contestant, whose educational hopes are quashed by segregation. This chapter attends not only to MacNolia Cox's experience of racially marked verbal virtuosity, but also to the virtuosity with which received forms become redefined by the book's wide variety of talented black characters in search of self-determined performative modes. "I just won/the city-wide spelling bee," MacNolia informs us in the poem "Scenes from My Scrapbook," "and I'm going to the Palace/Theater in Cleveland as the special guest of Fats Waller/and Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson. I can spell like they can/sing and dance." She is figured throughout MacNolia as one of many black people in twentieth-century America whose talents both empower their subjectivity and render them spectacular objects, an ambivalence that recalls Wiegman's and Hartman's work. At the same time,

the book employs and discards received forms one after another as if searching for a hidden exit. At its most thrilling, MacNolia breaks entirely free of its sestinas, terza rimas, and twelve-bar blues, instead possessing dictionary definitions and forcing those traditionally dry arbiters of meaning to embody the most passionate moments of human biography.

It's tempting to use the word experimental to refer to a book of poems so committed to exhausting form (as if to wear it out before attempting escape). But MacNolia's texture isn't that of a work of experimental poetry, for all its experimentation: hard as it works to break received form, it never challenges received syntax. Indeed, MacNolia is accessible to a fault. Mackey links "emphasis on accessibility when it comes to writers from socially marginalized groups" with "failures or refusals to acknowledge complexity among writers from" those groups; both, for Mackey, contribute to "shallow, simplistic readings that belabor the most obvious aspects of the writer's work and situation" (17-18).

Even at the most fanciful, intimate, or trying moments, MacNolia Cox never utters the sort of incoherencies consistent with realism, much less experimentalism. Her speech is always as crisp and poised as her body on the day she "polish[ed her] shoes with Kiwi black," "brush[ed her] teeth with baking soda," and "moisten[ed her] skin with cocoa butter" (102) for the Akron District Bee audience. At odds with her impulse to retire from the stage, MacNolia's speech seems carefully prepared for public consumption. Reading MacNolia through the lenses of the 2006 film Akeelah and the Bee and Percival Everett's 2002 novel Erasure, this chapter examines ventriloquism, virtuosity, and the dangers of a public gaze that loves to spectacularize black bodies.

Our Utopia Tis of Thee

Transgressing formal boundaries even more radically than MacNolia, Fanny Howe's Tis of Thee sprawls somewhere outside and among the neighborhoods of opera and narrative poem, dramatic triologue and science fiction novel. Lineated, illustrated, set to music, and acted out, Tis of Thee invites us into a miscegenated literary terrain in which the repeated failure and fragmentation of a mixed-race family throws into sharp relief a fantasized utopian "nation of outcasts— / outside history— . . . / hovering above and pressed against / the boundaries of Actual America." My dissertation's second chapter investigates the pressures that Tis of Thee's family or reproductive model of the nation—and the consequent utopian desire for mixed-race bodies—exerts upon such bodies and subjectivities. The chapter examines the rhetorical efficacy of Howe's white character's renunciation of white privilege as well as the relationship between the book's generic liminality and the national and racial liminality it represents. In addition, I consider how Howe's book—with its explicitly political content—meshes with and complicates the politics-of-form questions raised by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E tradition with which both she and Harryette Mullen are associated.

As the fragmented story of a fragmented family, Tis of Thee invests itself deeply in love, intimacy, and empathy as means of racial reconciliation and in mixed-race children as longed-for embodiments of a kinder, more just future. At the same time, the mixed-genre book presents itself both as a utopian space in which the dream of racial reconciliation can survive and as a textual child who embodies miscegenated speech. The dissertation's second chapter examines critiques of empathy as a response to racial injustice; it

articulates a proximity model of empathy that may be more helpful than traditional substitution models and teases out the differences between fetishizing mixed-race bodies and maintaining intact mixed-race families. Finally, it considers text's intermediate status between visual and aural media, suggesting that our physical response to text—subvocalization—may be a staging ground for liberatory reinventions of self and even utiopain revisionings of society.

Harryette Mullen's Multilingual Californian Dictionary

Harryette Mullen's poetry collection Sleeping with the Dictionary is heavily Oulipo-influenced—that is, invested in playfully foregrounding the constraints and conventions that enable its composition. But whereas Oulipian texts typically tend to keep their political projects implicit in favor of radical aesthetics for their own sake, Sleeping with the Dictionary quite explicitly critiques American consumer culture, white privilege and mainstream literary canons. Mullen has stated her desire to "bridg[e] what apparently has been imagined as a gap (or chasm?) between my work as a 'black' poet and my work as a 'formally innovative' poet," and to "overcome the social segregation that enforces aesthetic apartheid;" the demographic composition of audiences at live readings of her previous book, Muse and Drudge (1995), made her feel she had begun to accomplish such an integration.

Sleeping with the Dictionary continues Muse and Drudge's project of joining disparate discourses, lashing together academic discourse, children's stories, corporatese, and a variety of slangs and jargons. Sleeping with the Dictionary moves away from the extended song of an imagined voice—however hybrid or collaged that voice might have been—and towards a

series of games in which arbitrary rules reveal the linings and foundations of our constructed linguistic reality. This move marks a turn into highly interactive poetic territory. Mullen's book builds its political agenda via a structure of invitation, crafting unorthodox poems that insist its readers learn to read, and to see, in new ways, and thus initiating us into the playfully critical frame of mind necessary for imagining social change.

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STEREOTYPE, VENTRILOQUISM, VIRTUOSITY: A VAN JORDAN'S MACNOLIA AND PERCIVAL EVERETT'S ERASURE

"I'm twice as good as a Negro girl has any right to claim," MacNolia Cox tells us in the final line of "Scenes from My Scrapbook," a poem at the heart of A Van Jordan's MacNoli*a*; "Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not black enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing," Thelonious "Monk" Ellison announces in an opening section of Percival Everett's novel Erasure. Both books tell the stories of black protagonists whose verbal intelligence places them both metaphorically and literally on stage: MacNolia is a maid and high-school dropout whose prowess at the 1936 National Spelling Bee prompted the white judges to eliminate her by presenting a word not on the official list; Monk is a novelist whose satirical novel exceeds his control and eventually takes him over bodily.

By virtue of their verbal gifts, both protagonists provide their authors with the opportunity for their own displays of verbal virtuosity: MacNolia's interior and dramatic monologues run through an impressive array of received and invented forms, while Erasure, structured as a writer's personal journal, offers the reader the full spectrum of Monk's output: from his CV and a short bio to a conference paper and book reviews to a short story and, of course, the centrally problematic novel-within-the-novel. In their virtuosity, MacNolia and Monk both refuse to perform their racial roles in accordance with the expectations of the characters who surround them, but instead continually exceed the limits others imagine for them. The texts in which they appear, too, are formally excessive, mastering generic boundaries by compulsively performing all variations contained therein. As each book probes racially-inflected American social constraints for fissures, it also

exhausts a set of literary constraints, covering the generic ground minutely in hopes of discovering exits to new territory.

The first section of this essay addresses Jordan's examination of MacNolia Cox's transgressions of her assigned identity role, probing her articulacy's consequences for her relationship to socioeconomic class, education, employment, gender, and family. This section's examination of the ambivalent power dynamic of MacNolia's stage appearance at the spelling bee—and of the black body as the object of spectatorship more broadly—leads into a short middle section which considers how the recent film Akeelah and the Bee represents a black child's education as a corporeally legible project of class mobility. Finally, the essay's third section follows anxiety about class privilege and about the onscreen presentation of the black body through Everett's Erasure. Throughout, I will probe these books' representation of uneasy relationships between onstage or on-camera performance and the performativity that produces subjects, and examine what happens to the possibility of interiority under the condition of spectatorship.

MacNolia: "I Can Spell Like They Can Sing and Dance"

Though "Scenes from My Scrapbook" doesn't come until a third of the way through the book, I imagine Jordan writing it first: the bare facts of MacNolia's biography, as well as gestures towards the book's major tropes, are all gathered here. Indeed, the line "I'm twice as good [at spelling] as a Negro girl has any right to claim" names the conflict—between the rich and confident interiority she derives from her keen verbal intelligence and the selflessly subordinate position her community demands of a "Negro girl"—that drives the book. As "Scenes from My Scrapbook" indicates, the book's

conflict is played out in the arena of wordplay (conceived loosely to run the gamut from poetry to the sport of spelling) both as theatrical performance—"I can spell like they can/sing and dance" (lines 7-8)—and as Austinian or Butlerian performative—"Before me, what I do had only been a prayer on a black girl's tongue"; "My spelling has cast a spell/on this country" (35; 40-1). This poem—and the book—are quite clear and explicit on the subject of white people's abuses of power: "they would have that no more/than they would have me to win. They pulled a word not on the list"; "I spell even when they tell me to sit in the colored section,/even when they don't give scholarships to colored girls for college"(26-7; 32-3). The racial and gendered valences of economic survival are the subject of a more nebulous anxiety that pervades the book: "I'm just not spelling,/ I'm cleaning"; "I've got a good man, but he can't do it on his own./These are hard times for the white man, can you imagine/what it's like for mine?" (17-18; 20-2). Both as a love story and as the story of a woman's education and career, <u>MacNolia</u> is a blues of intelligence, playfulness and optimism betrayed by race and gender: of life in a national community whose identity-role expectations are patrolled so rigidly that a woman's eloquence and competence paralyze her husband with shame and that a black child's manifest academic talent makes "white people afraid" (9).

That "they don't give scholarships to colored girls for college" means that as an adult, MacNolia finds herself "not spelling,/ . . . [but] cleaning." Her white professional-class employer enforces MacNolia's subordinate status and manages his anxiety around her unfulfilled educational and economic potential by positioning himself, in his monologue "In Service," as a kind of ringmaster and MacNolia as the sideshow he will display (pages 36-7). Whereas most of the monologues in the book employ a lyrical,

meditative register that suggests internality, Dr Wittenberg here establishes himself as speaking aloud to an interlocutor: "Come over next week and/ . . . we'll show you/What she can do" (5-7), he invites, and in that invitation he also invites scrutiny of his own performance as a speaker: by having Wittenberg break from the lyric internality of the bulk of the book, Jordan points him up as an unreliable narrator in the tradition of Robert Browning's Duke of Ferrara. Wittenberg purports to be bragging about MacNolia's abilities, but the external dramatic monologue form reveals a gap between intent and utterance, and from that gap relentlessly seeps Wittenberg's contempt for and fear of MacNolia's intellect.

Dr. Wittenberg spends the first six-and-a-half lines of "In Service" setting up his claim: MacNolia "Is [such] a magician" "with a mop/Or broom, a washboard or iron" that "All of our neighbors are jealous" (4, 2-3, 1); however, when he offers, "bring/Some laundry—we'll show you/What she can do" (5-7), it turns out that the "what she can do" that preoccupies Wittenberg doesn't have much to do with laundry at all. Line 7 in its entirety reads, "What she can do. She can spell," and the next twenty-seven lines are devoted to the mastery or disavowal of that ability's implications.

In the offer, "we'll show you/What she can do," Wittenberg asserts himself and his family as the owners or agents of MacNolia's ability: it is not she herself, but "we" (presumably the same "our" whose neighbors are jealous and "us" with whom she interviewed for the job) who will display not only the spelling she is capable of in the present, but also her past ability—"Spelled like a demon as a child" (28)—and aspirations—"she wanted/to be a surgeon" (13). Wittenberg paints himself as a benevolently powerful master who couldn't "say no" to MacNolia—though parentheses make it unclear which he couldn't refuse her: the opportunity to be a

surgeon (13-14) or the grand opportunity to be his maid (16). His remark that MacNolia and her family "seem to do pretty well/For themselves with what she makes/Working in service here " (24-6) also positions him as the openhanded provider.

Even in illustrating his own munificence, though, Wittenberg seems to be maneuvering to avoid any real responsibility to MacNolia: she does pretty well not on "what I pay her," but on "what she makes," as if Wittenberg himself had nothing to do with MacNolia's wages or with whether she did "pretty well" or unqualifiedly well; Wittenberg says he is unable to deny MacNolia the opportunity to work for him or the opportunity to go to college to be a surgeon, but is strangely silent on the topic of whether he offered her assistance—through his money or his professional connections—when she ("luck[ily] for us") "Didn't get a scholarship" (17-18). In her role as his maid, MacNolia is the beneficiary of Wittenberg's gracious omnipotence, but as soon as she's beyond his property lines—whether seeking a college education or simply "over on North St./In a little home with her husband" (21-2), Wittenberg becomes entirely passive with respect to her fortunes. The idea of his supporting her desire for education, for greater power and fulfillment as an autonomous human being, is as laughably impossible as the idea that she would desire those things in the first place—"Would you believe she wanted/to be a surgeon?" (16-7) Wittenberg asks with the amused incredulity of one reporting a child's wild fantasies. MacNolia is real and praiseworthy for Wittenberg only insofar as she is his childlike employee, his curious plaything to display.

His self-inscription in the role of master and controller of MacNolia's talents isn't enough to quell Wittenberg's anxieties, however; it is also necessary for him everywhere to distance himself from personal knowledge

of her intelligence, her past aspirations and her present circumstances. He follows his report of MacNolia's ability to spell "Any word you can pretty much/Think of" (8-9) with "although—at least,/I'm not sure—I don't believe/She knows what they all mean" (9-11): the unsettling notion that his maid's vocabulary is as good as his own must be defused with the belief that her knowledge is rote, born of simple memorization of spellings rather than a real working understanding of language. Even this devaluation of MacNolia's ability is preceded by a line and a half of sputtering denial; line 10, "I'm not sure—I don't believe," sums up Wittenberg's position as skeptic and detractor of the very person whose skill he claims to be advertising. At every turn, Wittenberg's reports of evidence MacNolia's intelligence are attributed to mediating sources—"she told us" (15) or "They say" (12, 27, 29); at every turn, he interjects doubt—"I'm not sure—I don't believe," "I don't know, really" (33). MacNolia's talent and potential pass into the realm of legend or apocrypha, allowing Wittenberg to know and distribute her as story even as he staves off the possibility of coming to a direct acquaintance with her as a human being; thus he is able to dismiss the fantasy of the poor black girl who "They say . . . almost went to college" (12) and reestablish the inevitability and unquestionable rightness of the status quo in his final dismissal of the topic: "I don't know, really, but I'm telling you—/She's the best damn maid in town" (33-4).

In its context within the book, "In Service" also functions as the last in a trilogy of poems about service, labor, and how they function in the life MacNolia shares with her husband, John. "Looking for Work" (page 32-3) introduces the issue; unemployed, John describes himself as "like the snake's body//without the head but the haunting/memory of what his purpose is" (22-4). In contrast, "MacNolia's body . . . still//stands tall and soft beneath

her apron/and gloves, her housedress and rags" (4-6), the badges of her job at Dr. Wittenberg's. Despite the fact that his unemployment makes him "like all the other men" (1), John's awareness that MacNolia's labor is providing for them while he is unable to do so separates him bodily both from MacNolia ("I rub my hands over fire-mouthed barrels/instead of MacNolia's body") (3-4) and, in the figure of the headless snake, from his own torso—as if the "purpose," the missing job, were a body part—the body part that would make a connection between John and MacNolia possible. Though a psychoanalytic argument about the phallus feels inevitable, I suspect rather that what is missing are John's vocal cords: while the poem features "fire-mouthed barrels" and John "lick[ing] my hands" (15), the mouth and tongue are unable to speak. "At supper, what can/I say to her? What can I say?//I lick my hands" instead of speaking (13-5). Even the "freedom songs" of the women in service are "songs to be lived not sung" (12-3).

John's claim to "wonder from where/the next meal will conjure" (17-8) more subtly invokes the poem's link between speech and earning power: literally to conjure a meal would be to create it by speaking a spell—to make food from a speech-act. The question smuggles its own answer: it is MacNolia who, two poems later, will be pronounced a "magician" ("In Service" 4), MacNolia whose "spelling has cast a spell" ("Scenes from My Scrapbook" 40). In the poems where Jordan develops John and MacNolia's relationship, it is always MacNolia who trusts and delights in language, speaking in a variety of verse forms; who trusts the power of speech; who believes language to be alive and intimately connected with the body. It is John who prefers silence and simple language, speaking with only three exceptions ("Wedding Night," "rant," "Death Letter Blues Ghazal") in

modest prose or free verse; who seeks to separate language from the body; who sets up oppositions such as "lived not sung."

Nowhere is this contrast in their understandings of language's relationship to the body more apparent than in their shared tanka series, "Wedding Night" (page 29-31). Though in their courtship poems "The Moment Before He Asks MacNolia Out on a Date" and "Meeting John Montiere" John already sets himself up in competition with books for MacNolia's attention, it is in "Wedding Night" that John and MacNolia address each other directly on the subject. John begins the poem:

> let's strip off our words
> to speak without our tongues. let's
> try to tongue without
> saying a word. let's turn speech
> back into struggle tonight.

In John's understanding of human identity, words are external, excessive; they can be removed like clothing; the body—"flesh to comfort me" ("John Montiere: answer to question one," p 22, *ii*)—is sexier, more vulnerable, without them.

MacNolia takes a more performative, Butlerian stand: "our language frames us/as we resemble our words" (26-7). John has imagined himself to be the knowledgeable and experienced one, reading her body in "The Moment Before He Asks MacNolia Out on a Date" as if it were a book—"I can look at her shoes,/ . . . Look at any woman's walk,/ . . . And I can tell all I need to know" (22, 25, 34)—and what was written there was innocence—"I can tell she has never . . ." (2). But now, faced with MacNolia's insistence

that it is language that is comforting, connective, sexy—"there's always a language born/out of the struggle to touch" ("Wedding Night" 19-20)—he is forced to admit, "I don't know if I/have the words to touch" a lover's body (21-2).

Although MacNolia's final stanza breaks off two lines short, shedding, per John's wishes, words at the moment when her "wedding/dress falls to our floor" (37-8), she submits to John's wishes only after he has accorded her a position of power and knowledge in the relationship: in "and here I thought I/was teaching you!" (31-2), John admits a reversal of the roles of power and instruction that his courtship poems have revealed him to expect. MacNolia's argument that people exist in their words and that a relationship is created from the merging of words shows John "a mirror in/which I see a stranger" (33-4). Although John's next exclamation is, "how/good it is to meet *me* when—" (34-5, italics Jordan's), and although the poem's ending indicates accord, union, a sexy compromise between words and the silent body, never again in the book does John speak with the easy confidence of "The Moment Before He Asks MacNolia Out on a Date;" forever after their wedding night, he marks himself (as in "Looking for Work") as inadequate to and next to MacNolia, his monologues marked by shame and the desire to retreat into silence.

In John's final monologue—the last poem of the book's first half—he remembers having come home from hearing Nat King Cole and "looked at MacNolia and wished/I could be the silver-voiced one" ("Unforgettable" p 70, 37-8). Ostensibly John is fantasizing about being as attractive a mate as Nat King Cole, but in this couplet it seems to be MacNolia he wants to trade places with. MacNolia and Cole become one figure, as their talents—wordplay and singing—become one. In fact, MacNolia paces obsessively

between black entertainers of the stage and screen on the one hand and MacNolia, the competitive speller, on the other, thereby situating her competitive spelling career within an economy of racialized performance and spectatorship. In her prose monologue "On Stage" (divided into five prose blocks like the five acts of a play), MacNolia probes her ambivalent relationship with her mostly-white, mostly-adult Akron Armory audience. In this venue, more commonly used for more corporeal entertainments like "circuses, boxing, or wrestling" (i), the crowd is alternately threatening—"hungry" (ii), "showing its teeth" (iv)—and comforting—"supportive" (iv), "a proud parent, smiling" (iv); the spelling child onstage "maybe . . . [feels] underdressed for the lights and applause" (ii), but also "feel[s] as if [she's] being inflated on stage" (iii), becoming a giant at which the crowd "gasps" and "shrieks" (iii)—at once freakish and powerful; both the power and the vulnerability reside not in the spelling mind or voice, but in the visibly staged body.

Both in MacNolia's fantasy of her "inflated, brown body" (iii) and in her mother's prose block of instructions for foiling the spelling bee officials' racist expectations (v), MacNolia's bodily staging is shaped by the play of power between white spectators and legible black bodies; as the power dynamic shifts back and forth, alternately placing MacNolia at the mercy of the spectators' gaze and the spectators in the thrall of MacNolia's, the model of racial spectatorship wavers between the panoptic (with a central viewer exerting power over many subjects) and the spectacular (wherein many viewers are enthralled by one object). The panoptic surveillance model of social control supplants the model based upon spectacles of punishment in Michel Foucault's historical account, but in "Visual Modernity," Robyn Wiegman describes "the spectacle" as "the culminating moment for the

panoptic's reinforcement" (39) in the case of the ritualized KKK violence which enforced Jim Crow social order. "Legally instituted segregation . . . established a panoptic regime," Wiegman explains, which "radiated its significatory value through the ever-present production of community gazes, inscriptions that read and rendered the truth of the body and, in doing so, produced the experiential truth of the subject as well" (40); when black and white bodies come together in such a segregated community, "the omnipresent gaze of the white eye" (40) threatens the black body with spectacular violence.

Onstage in Akron, though, MacNolia finds herself in parallel or even collaboration with her white audience: "you were trapped there and so was the crowd" (ii); "they want to see you spell—not see you spell in a circus-act way, mind you, but in an adult-looking-at-a-child-in-wonderment way—and they will applaud when you open your mouth . . . and then you realize you're not alone" but in the company of the other, white, spellers (iv). The second-person perspective of the poem invites the reader, too, to become part of the integrated group of "teenagers" who exercise a hypnotic power over the white adult spectators: "tethered to the stage, the crowd listens as if a great light commanded their attention" (i). Still, MacNolia's status as the lone, perhaps token, black body onstage, her vulnerability to the crowd's as well as the officials' judgment, situates her in a "visible econom[y] that . . . feature[s] integration without equality, representation without power" (Wiegman 41). By having MacNolia imaginatively both acknowledge and disavow the crowd's ravenous hostility and the alienness of her own body in their eyes, Jordan holds in suspension a utopian dream of integration and the threat that "integration beckons . . . difference as commodity" (Wiegman 41).

That a body no longer corporeally, geographically segregable will now

be itself visually marketed for consumption threatens black entertainers increasingly, Weigman suggests, as our cultural life increasingly depends upon the visual media of "cinema, television, and video where the circulation of representational images partake in a panoptic terrain by serving up bodies as narrative commodities." MacNolia presents stage performers' negotiations with white audiences as similarly fraught. "Time Reviews The Ziegfeld Follies Featuring Josephine Baker, 1936," for example, uses the obsessive repetitions of the sestina form (triply obsessive, since not only is this a double sestina on the same six end-words, but those end-words are italicized for extra emphasis) to dramatize anxiety over which performer—Baker or the white Fanny Brice—is the more attractive commodity. Simply scanning the end-words clues us into the visuality of the assessment being made (paint, race), the audience who gets to assess (men, Time), and the most immediate stakes of the contest (applause, diamonds). The Time reviewer who speaks the first six stanzas represents Baker as "a life-size black doll" (11), "a street woman" "flaunting her . . . wares" (18, 11-12), a morsel to eat, seasoned "sweet or tart" with "the spice of race" (26, 25). She is inanimate, disposable, consumable. Brice is twice called a "diamond" (8, 36), as is Eve Arden (23)—white women entertainers are also commodity items, but expensive, durable ones.

While Baker's response also aligns herself with diamonds—and diamonds, in turn, with a cheaper commodity, coal (63-9)—the relationship Jordan has her trace among race, entertainment, and personal worth is more complicated. "Race/is not real, only light and love" (61-2), Baker declares; "I'm merely a diamond/Trying to catch some light under the paint" (72-3). Baker's diamond doesn't allow "race [to]/Refract in its eye" (60-1); it "holds so much truth because it endures time;/It struggles through nothingness for

applause/ . . . dark, naked without paint" (64-6). The poem positions the diamond as a praise-craving kernel that preexists both race and the paint necessary to the stage. What is "under" (38) or "underneath" (68) is raceless, durable, praise-craving, loveable; race itself is aligned with stage-paint: theatrical, sheddable. Baker doesn't need rave reviews from white American publications, she claims, because can base her confidence on her fiancé's love and the approval of "all the men//On the Champs[-Elysées]" (54-5).

When Baker insists, "I'm under the paint" (38), when she illustrates her worthiness by telling us her fiancé "stays with me when I take off the paint,/And he doesn't care about this whole race/Hoopla; he loves Josephine for me" (46-8), she manages to remain rigidly in the character of traditional heterosexual femininity, utterly dependent upon male approval (a secondary reading of "he loves Josephine for me" might be "I can't even love myself—I need a man to do that"), while identifying race (as well as theatrical, commodified sexuality) as an identity category to be donned or shed at will. Since, as Timothy Scheie points out, "a willful intent to transgress the sanctioned categories of identity . . . posits a subject whose identity precedes and motivates the performance" (20), Baker would seem to be treating race less like the kind of Butlerian performative identity that one takes on more or less involuntarily through repetition, but rather, like the kind of theatrical role "Butler often defines the performative against" (Scheie 18). Still, at the sestina's end, Baker indicates that romance solves less and race matters more than she has heretofore admitted—"even my man/Who, after all, is white, doesn't see" Baker the way she sees herself (70-1); though she is confident that "race problems will change with time," she expects that change to come "Long after applause and this diamond's light fades" (74-5).

Back in Akron, MacNolia's mother prepares her to take the stage in a

manner calculated to make what change it can in the audience's notions of blackness. Alberta Cox herself is confident that it is precisely the "Her darkness, . . . her dark wake" that "Sways in inverse light behind a man's/Eyelids" ("Morena," p 87-8, 21-3), and she identifies the source of that darkness not in skin, but in speech. It is "the vowels on a dark/Woman's lips" that make "men walk in silence" (9-10, 6); "In her throat,//Lives a lump of coal, which does not aspire/To emerge as a diamond" (18-20). Alberta characterizes the sexy, confident "black-licorice world/Beneath these everyday clothes" as "the secret/Evidence of faith" (4-5, 2-3)—a faith in the reality that her oral performance produces. Here as in Bourdieu's argument which Butler examines in the "Implicit Censorship" chapter of Excitable Speech, "one hears . . . Althusser's invocation of Pascal in the explaining of ideology: one kneels in prayer, and only later acquires belief" (*ES* 155).

By speaking in a way that performs blackness as attractive and confident, Alberta creates herself as an attractive and confident black woman; as her nervous thirteen-year-old daughter prepares herself for the scrutiny of "4,000 blue eyes" ("On Stage" iv), Alberta seeks to transmit, via the poem's final prose block, her attractiveness and confidence to MacNolia in a tough pep talk. Repeating the phrases "I told you" and "Tell me" like a mantra, like a spell, Alberta reminds MacNolia that racist whites "already know you're not smart enough; don't confirm it by losing" (v). The litany of commands with which she girds MacNolia for her performance warn her that her body will be read as intently as the letters she pronounces—indeed, the first, "Say the letters clearly so they don't think all Negro girls have thick tongues," draws attention to the physical site of the production of speech, the point where language touches and breaks off from the body.

Though strategies for speaking and listening to win the competition begin and end the prose block, most of its length is dominated by the imperative to manage the appearance of the body. From the erect spine out through the soaked, unsunburned, moistened skin, the slip, the polished shoes and the beribboned hair, every physical detail must work in concert to ward off the threat of "confirm[ing] it." Butler describes "the abiding incongruity of the speaking body, the way in which it exceeds its interpellation, and remains uncontained by any acts of speech" (155). Something always remains not yet interpreted, not yet incorporated into cultural systems of meaning. As Alberta prepares MacNolia to face a potentially racist white audience, she seeks to determine in advance as much of the body's meaning as possible, minimizing incongruous excesses that might open themselves to racist interpretation. A DuBoisian double-consciousness is at work in MacNolia's preparation for the stage as tutored by her mother: she must develop the skill of "looking at one's self through the eyes of others"—not in order to "measur[e] one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Souls 2), but rather, in order to measure the body in hopes of warding off such contemptuous evaluations of the soul, in hopes of protecting the interiority as a space neither surveilled nor judged by white spectators.

Akeelah and the Bee: The Class Frontier

Arriving in 2004 amongst a spate of spelling-bee movies—Spellbound, 2002; Bee Season, 2005; Akeelah and the Bee, 2006—MacNolia intervenes in a visual discourse of gendered, classed, and nationally inflected pedagogy just at a moment when, on the one hand, increasing emphasis on standardized testing in schools has elicited a flurry of anxiety about the status

of rote learning in national public education, and on the other, race has ceded some ground to class—as constituted through education and economic allegiance—as the criterion for access to power, both in movies like Akeelah and in the Bush administration itself. The spelling bee seems a telling institution for our popular imagination to seize on: it's an exercise both peculiarly American and multiply nostalgic. Writing in 1941, Allen Walker Read reports that "by the middle of the [nineteenth] century [spelling bees] had gained the aura of romantic charm with which we invest the incidents of childhood" (502) and "in 1917 a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters lamented the passing of 'our delightful national fame, now obsolete, of spelling-bees'" (511; Read quotes William Crary Brownell, "The Academy and the Language," in Proceedings of the Special Meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Letters . . . February 22, 1917, p 19). Associating the spelling bee with rusticity and community naiveté, Read tells us,

> The institution which the East had outgrown was transplanted, however, in the simpler environment of the western frontier, and there it came to a new flowering. The attainment of conventional spelling was a symbol of culture, and therefore the frontier adopted this expedient to reach it. As a sociologist has pointed out, "the frontier society traverses in a comparatively few decades the ascent from a low to a high culture."
>
> (502; Read quotes James G Leyburn, Frontier Folkways (New Haven, Conn., 1935), p 3)

The resurfacing—now onscreen—of the spelling bee as a site where American identities can be constituted and contested implies, then, an anxiety that the nation may still contain some frontiers where cultural uplift is required.

Akeelah and the Bee is particularly interesting for its representation of early 21st-century Los Angeles as a milieu in which the black "lower-class mass" still struggles with poverty and inferior education, but where well-educated black aristocracy—that is, a UCLA professor played by Laurence Fishburne—tend tidy gardens or ponder in well-appointed studies right around the corner. Studying with Fishburne's character, Dr. Larrabee, Akeelah prepares herself for the ESPN-televised Scripps National Spelling Bee; over the months, as Larrabee disciplines Akeelah's manners, grammar, and knowledge of the black canon, the audience witnesses another transformation upon which the film makes no explicit remark: her style of dress and coiffure, which at the beginning of the film reflect those of her peers at a poor inner-city school, slowly adapt to fit in with her new friends at a wealthy suburban school where the children of well-educated whites, Chicanos, and (after an initial reluctance) Asians welcome her into their circle. Like the other tidy, polite and well-spoken minority children in her new set, Akeelah has surmounted the new American frontier: class.

The implication is that poor inner-city black people have been imperfectly assimilated into the nation, that their community remains rusticated, that they still need to "traverse the ascent from a low to a high culture." Such a process of sophistication apparently goes hand in hand with consumption: wear more expensive clothes, study and play with higher-class peers, aspire to live in a tasteful, graciously-lawned suburban home like Akeelah's new friend Javier's family. Much like the Bush cabinet, Akeelah's

new social circle is populated by people of every skin color—but these people all speak standard English, all seem to subscribe to the Protestant-capitalist notion that wealth is the just reward for hard work, all belong to traditional nuclear families, and all apparently shop from the same catalogue. In Akeelah's vision, race ceases to be a problem at the moment when one is inducted into a success-oriented middle-class cultural homogeneity. This notion functions as a corollary to media representations of black people as comprising an unemployed and uneducated underclass: at the moment one becomes upwardly mobile, in this paradigm, one effectively stops being black.

Erasure: "You Ain't Quite Dark Enough, Darlin'"

Erasure, too, treats the preparation of the black body for television, but the novel is not so sanguine about class's ability to trump race in early 21st-century Los Angeles. The scene of a black man being prepared to appear before a live and television audience is rehearsed three times in the novel: twice in works of fiction that the novel's protagonist, Monk Ellison, writes, and a third time when Ellison himself, as Stagg R Leigh, goes on a talk show to promote his novel. Monk's horrified fascination with television's perpetuation and physicalization of racist discourse both helps to inspire the novel My Pafology and to make that novel into the monster that destroys Monk.

We first watch Monk watching television when he happens to catch Juanita Mae Jenkins being "welcomed by a talk show host named Kenya Dunston who had put Ms. Jenkins' book on her Book Club reading list" (52). Jenkins's book, We's Lives in da Ghetto, strikes Monk as "a real slap in the face. It was like strolling through an antique mall, feeling good, liking

the sunny day and then turning the corner to find a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars" (29); nevertheless, it is a "runaway bestseller" whose film rights have sold for "something like three million dollars" (28-9). The talk show's immediate focus is on the number of copies sold and the financial success of Jenkins's book; the two women, though they presumably have never met before, appear instantly bonded, first by an initial hug, then through the shared use of casual, lower-class black speech patterns ("Girl, you gone be rich;" "Sho'nough;" "a lotta money, right, girlfriend?") (53) despite their obvious middle-classness, and then by the revelation of the formulaic nature of Jenkins's life:

> "I went to Oberlin for a couple of years, then moved to New York."
>
> "A man?"
>
> "Ain't it always?"
>
> The audience laughed.
>
> "Well, that didn't work out," Ms. Jenkins said.
>
> "Never does."
>
> "Never does." (53)

Part of Jenkins's appeal seems to be that the life story she tells is so unremarkable, so according to stereotype, that Dunston and the audience can guess its details. During this interview it comes out that "When I [Jenkins] was twelve I went to visit some relatives in Harlem for a couple of days and that's where the novel comes from . . . I got this job at a publishing house. . . and I thought, where are the books about our people? Where are our stories?" (53). Not only is it outrageous that anyone who had spent "a couple of days" in a place would presume to write a novel claiming to

capture its essence, but Jenkins's conflation of herself with impoverished New Yorkers like those in her book illustrates DuBois's observation, in The Dusk of Dawn, that "the Negro group is spoken of continually as one undifferentiated low-class mass" (183)—even Jenkins, with her publishing-house job and her Oberlin background, apparently can't (or chooses not to) tell herself apart from that "low-class mass;" her novel and her television performance assure her audience that neither is her story different from theirs nor is their story different from what can be extrapolated from a couple of days' stay in Harlem and a lifetime's exposure to stereotyped portrayals (many of them, most likely, on television). So far from worrying about whether her stereotyped performance of race will, in Alberta Cox's words, "confirm it," Juanita Mae Jenkins performs perfectly according to television's script—and finds it highly profitable.

Not so Monk. His self-performance through language, written and spoken, marks him "not black enough." "I have heard this mainly about my novels, from editors who have rejected me and reviewers whom I have apparently confused and, on a couple of occasions, on a basketball court when upon missing a shot I muttered Egads" (2). Monk practices language as he does partly because of the self-consciously upper-middle class way his parents raised him: his childhood memories include being scolded for saying "crap" (143) and having his "Sorry" corrected to the complete sentence "I'm sorry" (144). At the same time, Monk's idiosyncratically academic, introverted mindset stands out even within his family, and it is language that always betrays him, as in another childhood memory of making a blunder in a basketball game because he was thinking of "the racist comments of Hegel concerning Oriental peoples" (134). Upon confessing he was thinking not about the shot he was making but about Hegel (and after explaining who

Hegel is), Monk is told he'd "better Hegel on home."

It's not that Monk is "putting on" or enjoys being isolated; his equally upper-middle-class black childhood friends are able to "step into scenes and change completely" (166) by using words and phrases like Solid, Dig, Yo, What's up?, What it is?, You better step back, and Gots to be crazy (167), and those words sound "casual, comfortable, and, most importantly, cool" (167), yet he just can't manage to "talk the talk" (166). "In fact, to my ear, it never sounded real coming from anyone" (167)—the performance of race according to televised expectations is always already tainted, for Monk, by his awareness of those expectations.

When he rebuffs suggestions that he "write the true, gritty stories of black life" with the observation that he is "living a black life, far blacker than" anyone "could ever know" (2, emphasis Everett's), Monk, of course, doesn't mean that he has suffered socioeconomically or educationally in the ways that MacNolia Cox did half a century before. Struggling against an official, legally sanctioned apartheid system, MacNolia seeks the stage as an opportunity both to advance her own educational and socioeconomic possibilities and to represent black people in a way that disrupts white racists' expectations of stupidity, inarticulacy, and slovenliness. By contrast, Monk, the son of a doctor, is a UCLA professor with degrees from Harvard and UC Irvine; he has received an NEA fellowship and three Pushcart prizes (57). Racist expectations hound him in a less obvious, more internalized way: consistent with his educational and socioeconomic status, Monk wishes for the privacy and non-representationality that accrue to those who enjoy white privilege.[1] For all his verbal agility, he is unable or unwilling to

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[1] Much like MacNolia, Akeelah—after some urging—willingly seeks the spotlight and the role of representative in hopes of economically improving her educational opportunities: her principal hopes to

master the educated-African-American art of code-switching, and so he has never felt at home in "black" language. He eventually stops imagining his friends identifying him as the one who "talks like he's stuck up? Sounds white? Can't even play basketball" (167), but among non-academics—especially working- and lower-class people—the performance of language that feels authentic to Monk still makes him "awkward, out of place, like I had [felt] so much of my life, like I didn't belong" (21).

Monk's discomfort with the idea of "black" language is what immediately precipitates the creation of My Pafology and its fictional author, Stagg R. Leigh: overcome with nausea at a literary industry that can embrace Juanita Mae Jenkins while rejecting his own novels even as it calls them "challenging and masterfully written and constructed" (42), Monk imagines

> people in the street shouting dint, ax, fo, screet and fahvre*!* and I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that, that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that and I imagined myself sitting on a park bench counting the knives in my switchblade collection and a man came up to me and he asked me what I was doing and my mouth opened and I couldn't help what came out, "Why fo you be axin?"
>
> I put a page in my father's old manual typewriter. I wrote this novel, a book on which I knew I could never put my name. (61-2)

Thus, from Monk's rage at a publishing industry unwilling to reward his erudition and virtuosity, from his fury at the power of the economic

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parlay the television publicity of her success into better funding for the hopelessly impoverished—and mostly black—school she attends.

incentive for black artists to perpetuate the very racist stereotypes that dog them, My Pafology is born, and in the moment that Monk imagines his mouth opening and "Why fo you be axin?" coming out, the book and its fictional author are already possessing and performing through his speaking body.

Near My Pafology's dramatic apex we find Monk's first rehearsal of television's treatment of black bodies. The book's juvenile delinquent protagonist, Van Go Jenkins, gets a call from a talk show: "We want you to be our guest on Snookie Cane . . . we have a guest who wants to surprise you with something. Someone who has a crush on you" (109). Go, designed by Monk particularly as a representative of the stereotypical "low-class mass," is of course elated. But as we might surmise, Go has been lured to the show on false pretenses and is actually confronted on national television by the four mothers of his four children, gathered to humiliate him in retaliation for non-payment of child support; after the audience have enjoyed the spectacle of their bickering, Snookie Cane brings out her pièce de résistance: two policemen who have come to arrest Go for the Native Son-reminiscent rape of a wealthy young black woman (113-8). Snookie Cane and her backers at Optic White Studios display Go's sexual amorality, the four mothers' poverty and distress, and the young woman's rape not in a quest for justice or as an illustration (a la Native Son's Mr. Max) of the evils of racial and economic inequality, but as entertainment for the sake of financial gain.

In her essay "Endangered/Endangering," Judith Butler poses the question, "If racism pervades white perception, structuring what can and cannot appear within the horizon of white perception, then to what extent does it interpret in advance 'visual evidence'?" (205). On the Snookie Cane show, though, the racist visual evidence is not even

left up to advance interpretation, but planted in the form of bodies manufactured as racist parodies of themselves: before Go even makes it to the stage, the studio make-up artist has already revealed that the Snookie Cane show will be a humiliating blackface spectacle by "spread[ing] vaseline on [Go's] face . . . 'This will make you shine like a proper TV nigger,' he say" (112). The show's treatment of Go's body marks Snookie Cane as the 1990s equivalent of the "blackface minstrel" "Tom Show," a form of entertainment that Ralph Ellison "had thought [hoped?] . . . a thing of the past" when he happened upon a poster for one just before starting to work on Invisible Man (xvi). Television, that engrossing box of plastic and glass, literalizes the glass box W.E.B. DuBois describes in Dusk of Dawn as "the full psychological meaning of caste segregation:" on racist television, as in DuBois's segregated America, it is as if "some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass" intervened between the "entombed souls" and "the world" (130-1). As Ellison points out, "what is commonly assumed to be past history is actually as much a part of the living present as William Faulkner insisted" (xvi), perhaps even more so in the age of burgeoning mass entertainment; even after the demonstrations of treachery he has experienced, at the very moment when he is being beaten and dragged off to jail, Go doesn't "care. The cameras is pointin at me. I be on the TV. The cameras be full of me. I on TV. I say, 'Hey, Mama.' I say, 'Hey, Baby Girl. Look at me. I on TV'" (131)—so seductive is the spectacle of television, Monk's story claims, that we clamor to be cast in Tom shows and locked in DuBois's glass box.

In his short story "Àppropos de bottes," Monk paints an even

more bleakly stylized portrait of the rigged racist game of television entertainment. This Tom show's protagonist, Tom Wahzetepe, wishes to compete on the quiz show Virtute et Armis, a show as transparently fixed along racial lines as the state (Mississippi) from whose motto it draws its name. In order to be considered for the show, Tom first has fifteen minutes to answer four ridiculously difficult questions requiring detailed abstruse knowledge of entomology, French nineteenth-century opera, calculus, and automotive engineering history (169-71). This challenge poses him no difficulty; soon he finds himself in Makeup:

> One of the women . . . reached over to the cart which was beside the chair and came back with her fingertips coated with a brown cream.
> "What's that?" Tom asked.
> "You ain't quite dark enough, darlin'," she said. She began to rub the compound into the skin of Tom's face. "This is TV stuff."
> . . . The skinny woman came back with a white shirt . . . The collar turned out to be just a tad tight. (173)

Like Go, Tom is required to put blackface on over his black face before being allowed on television, but Tom isn't even turned over to the police before he finds his neck in jeopardy—television gets to paint him and lynch him, symbolically at least. Then he's being led toward the stage, and "for the first time, he was nervous. He had to win this game. He just had to win. But he also knew how this game worked. It wasn't up to him" (174).

As the lights come up and Tom is ready to face his blond opponent in front of the audience's "ocean of blue eyes," the host tells Tom, "I'm sure you'll do fine and be a credit to your race" (175). In the contest that follows, Tom's opponent, Hal Dullard, "did not know that a gorilla was a primate. He did not know the abbreviation for Avenue. He did not know what a male chicken was called" (177), while Tom correctly describes anaphase and a serial distribution field, identifies a tenth-century Arabic poem, and quotes the first eleven lines of Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (175-8). When Tom is named champion by the reluctant host, "the audience made no sounds. They were dead" (178). The stakes of this entertainment are life and death; Tom's white opponent, like MacNolia's, will be "given chances" to win, whereas black contestants, fighting racist expectations, must give the correct answers "and make it crisp as a virgin's bed" ("Covering the Spelling Bee," p 121-3, 43-4).

Given these imaginations of television's manipulation of the black body and intellect, it's little wonder that when Monk himself—as Stagg—is invited by Kenya Dunston to give a television appearance, he refuses makeup, preferring instead to sit behind a screen (246); the screen itself, though, may simply be another trap, reminiscent as it is of the DuBoisian screen or veil. "Had I," Monk asks himself, "by annihilating my presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh? . . . Would I have to kill Stagg to silence him? And what did it mean that I was even thinking of Stagg as having agency?" (248). To be Stagg, Monk goes voluntarily behind DuBois's screen; despite his vow, early in Stagg's life, that "I was not going to put on an act for" the publishers and public who admire My Pafology, an act is precisely what Stagg is. To silence him and to kill him are the same: Stagg is Monk's performance according to racist expectation, the

performance of language that he has spent his life and his artistic integrity refusing. Kenya Dunston is not wrong when she says of Stagg's disguised, screened, glass-box-mediated television appearance, "it doesn't get any more real than this" (251): "the production of the subject has everything to do with the regulation of speech" (ES 133); to speak as Stagg—to embody the racial expectations that threaten Monk's integrity as an author and as a person—is to produce Stagg and cancel Monk.

Butler writes, "The condition for the subject's survival is precisely the foreclosure of what threatens the subject most fundamentally" (135), and what threatens Monk most fundamentally is the racist objectification of black speech as the kind of instantly recognizeable, lower-class commodity which leaves no room for the creative, opinionated, and linguistically rich interiority that typifies Monk's subjectivity. Erasure ends at the moment of Monk's erasure—the moment when he must publicly announce that he is Stagg, that he is objectifier and object, commodifier and commodity. In uttering his final words of the novel, "Egads, I'm on television" (265), Monk merges his own signature interjection—his own diction—with that of his most hated creation, Van Go Jenkins; the two realms of language represent, for him, antitheses, mutual realms of unspeakability. "To move outside the domain of speakability is to risk one's status as a subject" (ES 133); Monk/Stagg/Go dissolves or linguistically implodes into insanity.

Stereotype, Ventriloquism, Virtuosity

MacNolia Cox's fate, though not as glorious as it could perhaps have been in a more just world, is anyway kinder than Monk's. Preparing MacNolia for the spelling bee, Alberta hopes that a performance of competence, intelligence, attractiveness, and dignity from MacNolia will

defy—and thus help to alter—the white audience's expectations. Although MacNolia is cheated of her chance to win the National Spelling Bee and denied the opportunity to go to college, she continues until her death to define the word "MacNolia" as "a Negro who spells/And reads as well as (if not better than) any white" ("This Life," pp58-9, 17-8); even on her deathbed, her husband observes "Her lips/[which] Curl like dry, burning leaves" as mirroring "her book's curled, yellow pages" ("Mercy, Mercy, Mercy, pp 15-7, 14-5, 9). If by "the logic of iterability that governs the possibility of social transformation" (ES 147), to spend a lifetime performing language contrary to racist expectation eventually goes some way towards changing that expectation, then perhaps MacNolia's lifelong "savoring [of] what you learn/And spit[ting] it back as best you know how" ("This Life" 33-4) can be read as an utterance which "performatively produces a shift in the terms of legitimacy as an effect of the utterance itself" (147)—that is, as a performance of verbal intelligence, and of pleasure in that intelligence, that offers something towards dismantling racism.

Or so we can hope. Monk's example, however, illustrates the potentially high price of racial nonconformity. Expecting Monk's speech and writing to be other than they are, the characters around him are unable to place him socially or to assess his novels on their own terms. Monk is unassimilable in contemporary American culture not because he is a black man able to perform the role of well-educated member of the middle class, but because his speech and especially his writing so fully manifest a central claim: "I hardly ever think about race. Those times when I did think about it a lot I did so because of my guilt for not thinking about it. I don't believe

in race" (2). This unbelief[2], this absence of attention, are simply not allowable—are, as Monk finds as the novel progresses, impossible. As Aldon Lynn Nielsen writes in Reading Race in American Poetry: "An Area of Act," "among the many benefits of white privilege in American culture is the power to make race appear and disappear at will." As long as Monk has "brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors" (2), the social order requires him to believe, to be doubly conscious, to play Stagg.

The brilliance of Erasure is that though Monk is doomed to frustration and insanity himself, he functions beautifully as a conduit through which his creator, Percival Everett, can speak. Like Monk, Everett is a novelist and a professor at a prestigious university in Los Angeles; like Monk's, Everett's novels sometimes have very little to do with race. When Monk demonstrates his virtuosity by running exhaustively through prose genres within the pages of the novel, the even greater virtuosity is Everett's. Everett convinces the reader of Monk's right to choose his own obsessions rather than allowing racial expectations to shape him; he makes the reader feel Monk's frustration and rage. But whereas Monk writes a scathing satire the irony of which is lost on publishers and mass audiences alike, Everett carefully situates the same satire within an illuminating context. Whereas Monk's protagonists Van Go Jenkins and Tom Wahzetepe flourish or fail depending upon their recognition of the racist tropes in which they are trapped, Everett demonstrates through Monk that the constraining, near-invisible ironies of post-integration race politics in America can hamstring even well-educated, sophisticated, middle-class intellectuals. Everett uses the compound form of Monk's journal, with its mixed-genre contents, to allow

[2] Of course, the novel, obsessed on every page with racist expectations and representations, belies Monk's claim not to believe. But even Monk's attempts not to believe provoke confusion, frustration, rage, and dismissal from his colleagues and acquaintances.

space for greater complexity and multiplicity of representation than is possible in any one of Monk's individual single-genre works.

Jordan, too, takes a compound approach to MacNolia, situating MacNolia's monologues among monologues by family members and members of her local and national communities; he introduces a multiplicity of inflections and moods to the monologues in part by couching them in a wide variety of forms. Many of the received-form poems in MacNolia feel overly constrained, too obsessed with formal perfection to break new ground; the five strongest, most exciting poems—those which best foreground language's flexibility and opacity, its innate power—are written in a dictionary-entry form Jordan invents himself. In both Erasure and MacNolia, virtuosity and generic exhaustion enable the authors to break free from old constraints and explore original territory. The performance of formal mastery, that is, enables "a shift in the terms of legitimacy as an effect of the utterance itself"—or, put yet another way: exhaust and escape the accepted ways of saying, and space will be cleared for new and potentially liberatory utterance.

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"NO LONGER WHITE": MISCEGENATION AS RECONCILIATION IN FANNY HOWE'S <u>TIS OF THEE</u>

> Northern men, northern mothers, northern Christians, have something more to do than denounce their brethren at the South; they have to look to the evil among themselves.
>
> But, what can any individual do? Of that every individual can judge. There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that <u>they feel right</u> . . . the man or woman who <u>feels</u> strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter!
>
> —Harriet Beecher Stowe, <u>Uncle Tom's Cabin</u>

In the concluding plea of her famous 1852 anti-slavery novel <u>Uncle Tom's Cabin</u>, Harriet Beecher Stowe calls upon her readers to do everything in their power to end slavery and to welcome former slaves as fellow members of the nation. Stowe's insistence upon <u>feeling</u> as a political act has sparked decades of controversy. What are feelings' material effects? To what extent, and for whom, is "feeling right" enough to promote social justice? This chapter uses Stowe's writing to open questions about the usefulness and the pitfalls of a twenty-first-century white woman's using affect to write about race.

The issue of affect also runs through twentieth- and twenty-first century poetic debates about the purpose of poetry. "Poetry is the

spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," William Wordsworth writes in 1802: "it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." Wordsworth's view has been at the center of the large majority of poets' practices for the past two hundred years, but the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have also produced thriving avant-gardes to whose artistic and literary disciplines spontaneous overflows are often irrelevant and powerful feelings to be handled with great care—if at all. For many of these artists, poetry's mission has more to do with re-energizing a tired, complacent world by defamiliarizing the tired, complacent language that constructs it. For such defamiliarizing projects, the transgression and destruction of genre boundaries is a common and vital practice. Ever since Gertrude Stein, poets have been fascinated by the shifting ground produced by generic liminality.

How does generic liminality open up formal spaces for poetic representations of race? Critical race theorist Patricia McKee describes literary whiteness as constructed in visual terms and literary blackness in oral and aural ones. That is, McKee traces the process through which white characters establish and maintain their white identities by exchanging views and glances; she traces how black characters establish their black identities by talking and listening (2-5). These different sensory modes of identity formation raise questions about the political valences of avant-garde poetic projects that seek to reposition poetry's relationship both to the visual and to the aural. Specifically, Fanny Howe's 2003 <u>Tis of Thee</u>—this chapter's central text—presents itself simultaneously as a book of poems, an illustrated text, and a cd of spoken words accompanied by music. <u>Tis of Thee</u>'s simultaneous existence in visual, textual and aural forms helps Howe explore charged identity issues; it offers readers and auditors a range of affective representations and responses, potentially provoking a range of

personal and political action. At the same time, the text's multiple narrators—named X, Y, and Z—provide alternate identities for exploration and identification as they talk to, listen to, and look for one another.

ABCs

> Here again, sentiment sanctions black subordination because affinity and desire ultimately eclipse equality.
>
> —Saidiya Hartman, Scenes of Subjection

Tis of Thee takes up Stowe's issue of feeling right in the context of the segregated postbellum U.S. Howe explores the possibilities and limitations of affects like empathy, intimacy, romantic passion, and familial affection as potential contributors to a more just and nurturing nation. Tis of Thee's representation of the difficulties of forming and sustaining a mixed-race American family resonates with Howe's autobiographical writings about her marriage to and divorce from Carl Senna, as well as with the fiction and nonfiction writings of her mixed-race daughter, Danzy Senna.[3] At the same time that Howe's representation acknowledges affect's limited power to effect social change, her characters' focus on it may invite some of the same criticisms Stowe's call has elicited from thinkers like James Baldwin and Lora Romero. "Sentimentality," writes Baldwin—that is, "the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion" (150)—"is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of

[3] Fanny Howe and Carl Senna had three children, of whom Danzy Senna is the middle child. The oldest is Ann-Lucien Senna or Ann-Lucien Quincy, who lives in England and is a more obscure writer than her sister; the youngest, visual artist Mario Senna, provided Tis of Thee's illustrations.

cruelty" (150). Romero's reading traces how Stowe's characters' hysterical emotional responses produce a radical mind-body separation that "requires that some people"—particularly those involved in political revolt—"be things" (726); "Stowe's insistence on the mind/body binarism in her representation of . . . acts of resistance allows the body to suffer 'what the mind needn't feel'" (727). Thus, for Romero, extremely emotional displays of resistance to slavery's traumas can confer, in Uncle Tom's Cabin, a protective "inability to feel" (Baldwin), but at the price of the slave's human subjectivity.

At the same time, Romero cautions against dismissing any strategy of resistance too quickly or crudely: "Resistance may not transcend power relations altogether, but that does not mean that it merely reproduces the same power relations or that all power relations must reproduce the status quo" (730). It is thus worth teasing out the specific logics that make empathy—an affective state Tis of Thee explores to its extremes—so slippery and double-edged. Saidiya Hartman's more recent critique of empathy as an antiracist tool focuses on a problematic model wherein "pain provides the common language of humanity" (18) and wherein white readers may mentally substitute their own bodies for black characters'. Hartman pays special attention to abolitionist John Rankin's letters to his slaveholding brother; in one,

> he literally narrates an imagined scenario in which he, along with his wife and child, is enslaved. . . . This scenario enables Rankin to speak not only for but literally in the place of the enslaved . . . Rankin becomes a proxy and the other's pain is acknowledge to the degree that it can be imagined, yet by virtue of this substitution the object of identification threatens to

> disappear. . . . Rankin must supplant the black captive in order to give expression to black suffering, and as a consequence, the dilemma—the denial of black sentience and the obscurity of suffering—is not attenuated but instantiated . . . empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead. (18-20)

The model of empathy that Hartman critiques differs from Tis of Thee's model of empathy in a few crucial respects. First, in Hartman's reading of Rankin, the affect shared through sympathy is pain. Pain "extends humanity to the dispossessed and, in turn, remedies the indifference of the callous" (18). But Tis of Thee's protagonists X and Y by no means limit their empathic connection to the sharing of pain. From within one another's psyches they speak of joy, wonder, humor, intellectual and spiritual searching: X tells us about Y's idea of a perfect day and how falling in love felt to her (14); he "joins her in" her fantasy of the country Tis of Thee (16); Z reports details of X's childhood thoughts and experiences and of his adult reading and political thoughts, even though X and Z never meet in the book (20-24). An empathy that permits only the sharing of pain gives a stunted vision of the other's inner life. Moreover, if to empathize means to feel pain, then the prospect of empathizing with others is a bleak one. Howe's richer model of empathy presents the more attractive prospect of sharing the full spectrum of another's affects.

Second, Hartman's critique seems to be leveled at sentiment applied generally—sentiment that imagines and substitutes itself for nonspecific suffering black bodies. Lora Romero points out that even Stowe's somewhat problematic model privileges specific detail as a spur to political

change, while generalities promote complacency: "Facts in detail, investigation into minutiae, absorptive vision—these can topple political belief and abstract theories" (729). Howe, too, emphasizes specificity in naming her utopia Tis of Thee, implying care for a singular and intimate other (as opposed to the plural or formal you). She simultaneously backs away from specificity, though, in giving her characters the anonymous "names" of algebraic variables (X, Y, and Z) and in leaving them unmoored in time. Thus she foregrounds her characters' synecdochal relationship to the larger nation: though they are specific people suffering the consequences of segregation and white supremacy, they are far from alone—they are both individuals and representatives of the nation. The move to encompass both the specific and the general—both the individual and the nation—seems to acknowledge both the greater emotional impact of connection with specific individuals and the clearer insight into large, complex social problems provided by a bigger-picture view. The story of the one family—our three protagonists—can move in time and gesture towards larger patters, but cannot fully address or represent the situation of the "collective . . . generations whose past histories were interrupted" to whom Howe refers in Tis of Thee's introduction.

Perhaps most saliently, Hartman advises suspicion of empathy that functions via such a substitutive logic, which by swapping bodies (as opposed to having bodies meet) avoids intimate encounters between people from different subject positions. The affects Howe presents in Tis of Thee, though, are exchanged via what I call a proximity model: specific, intimately connected individuals—two parents and a child—share close physical contact and speak as if meshed, merged. Whereas a substitutive model of empathy might be satisfied by "separate but equal" logic, a proximity model

insists upon geographic and institutional integration. The proximity model of empathy requires contact and promotes intimacy; it is communicative, connective, moving fluidly across boundaries.

Howe inscribes such fluidity not only on the level of characters' identities, but on the level of the identity of the text itself. Disregarding generic boundaries, Tis of Thee sprawls somewhere outside and among the neighborhoods of opera and narrative poem, dramatic triologue and science fiction novel. Lineated, illustrated, set to music, and acted out, the book's miscegenated literary territory maps national boundaries and intimate personal fantasies as it explores interracial romance struggling to take root in hostile territory. The characters—X, a black man; Y, a white woman; and Z, their son—exist simultaneously in the nineteenth century and in the 1950s. The nineteenth-century time period is itself not entirely fixed: in her introduction, Howe writes that the first love affair occurred "during Reconstruction"—that is, between 1863 and 1877—but on pages 27 and 34 of the text, Y indicates that the affair happened in 1890. On the one hand, the characters' and events' mobility in time is a move that recalls the postmodernist science fiction of feminist novelists like Joanna Russ and Octavia Butler—the interpenetration of consciousnesses across a span of more than seventy years gestures towards an anarchic empathy that violates even the natural laws that normally separate people.

At the same time, though, the book's blurring of times marks how very little progress the U.S. made towards full citizenship for black Americans during the century following their supposed emancipation. Referring to the way emancipation is often invoked as a radical historical break, Saidiya Hartman writes, "If periodization is a barrier imposed from above that obscures the involuntary servitude and legal subjection that

followed in the wake of slavery, then attempts to assert absolutist distinctions between slavery and freedom are untenable" (13). If Hartman can suggest that black Americans who lived through emancipation experienced more continuity in their life conditions than is commonly acknowledged, then the same must be even more true for Howe's two time periods that both fall between emancipation and the civil rights legislation of the 1950s and '60s. Hartman's caution against seeing legal steps towards equality as absolute, evenly applied, and even necessarily applicable to people's daily lived experiences also seems appropriate as a response to those who contend that in the post-Civil Rights era, "racism is over."

Howe's text registers a fervent, romantic, and very personal wish for a nation in which interpersonal relations can be kinder and more just. The title country comes to us in the form of a secret offered as a gift between lovers:

> One day I told him a silly little secret-that when I was a child, singing
> "My Country Tis of Thee" I thought there was a secondary
> and utopian country called Tis of Thee . . .
> He didn't laugh at me or the fantasy but instead he joined me in it
> imagining that Tis of Thee existed between the two oceans
> hovering above and pressed against
> the boundaries of Actual America. And altruism was its only
> commandment.
>
> (16)

Offered up in intimacy and commanded by the boundary-dissolving principle of altruism, the country Tis of Thee becomes the only space in which these characters' love can blossom: in Actual America the mixed-race

family is in both time periods shattered by the polarizing force of white racial unity. For one thing, as Y reports, "miscegenation was still a crime" in both of the book's time periods (12). For that reason, and because "her love for him [X] was weak in comparison with her fear of her father" (32), Y "let[s] each child be taken away from" her (34)—"My father," she tells us, "came and made sure he was put in an appropriate place for a child like that" (42)—and the audio version of the text bitterly registers the disdain with which the white patriarch speaks those two final words. Z reports that "she never wrote to tell the oysterman [that is, X] about the baby [Z himself]" (32). Although she longs to, Y is ultimately too weak to contradict her father's claim "that people are / like animals who always herd with their own kind" (12).

For the principle of whiteness to retain its power, the text implies, the nation can never be of "Thee," but must always be of "me and mine," of "the line that is necessary to keep <u>us</u> separate and distinct from <u>them</u>." Offering equal and interpenetrating voices to a white mother, a black father, and their mixed-race child, Howe's text invests heavily in the miscegenated body as a figure of redemption and hope. X refers to miscegenation as "a smear campaign against the homogenous" and declares, "Now, had there been more [interracial] fooling around, sooner, the country/ would be much stronger and happier" (69); Y credits Z's fetal body with making her "darker and deeper" (80). Z becomes the book's moral authority and gets the final speech at its close. But Z is also the lost, orphaned child whom Y imagines she must die in order to see again (85). In so idealizing Z's mixed status, Howe makes him a figure of nostalgia and impossible longing, banishing him to utopia, which—it must be remembered—may be the Good Place, but is also Noplace.

Tis of Thee, then, registers an ambivalent stance towards miscegenation, both yearning towards interracial intimacies—the proximity model of empathy—and "a national mixed identity" (69), and at the same time revealing these yearnings' shortcomings and pitfalls when faced with the realities of U.S. race relations in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Howe's characters, in their longing for utopia and for one another, follow Stowe's admonition and "feel right;" in their melding of bodies and hearts, they likely even improve upon her call for affective solidarity. But in light of X, Y, and Z's failures and the complex experience of Howe's own biographical family, this chapter must ask to what extent, and in what ways, miscegenation—interracial romance, the mixed-race family—can yield helpful metaphors for or literal means towards building a freer, more egalitarian nation. The chapter considers each of the text's three characters—X, Y, and Z—in turn, moving towards an explication of two key and interrelated issues: What pressures do the family or reproductive model of the nation—and the consequent utopian desire for mixed-race bodies—exert upon such bodies and subjectivities? And what does this text's generic liminality contribute to its conceptions of race and the nation?

X

> If the flag catch
>
> fire, & an X
>
> burn in, that X is Black
>
> & leaves an empty space
>
> —Amiri Baraka, "The X Is Black"

Strangely for a text dedicated to fantasizing a more racially equal union, Tis of Thee represents X, the black man, as the character with the most to lose, and in some senses the least to gain, from the text's interracial love affair. Joanna Bourke quotes a 1907 article from the Afro-American: "Such is the condition of affairs in some communities that a Negro is almost afraid to meet a [white] woman on the streets or in a road after dark for fear that he will in some way be incriminated and possibly lynched" (102). James Baldwin's 1959 essay "Nobody Knows My Name" echoes the same terror around the same set of issues, juxtaposing in a single page a meditation on sex, family, ownership, pain, and empathy in the segregated South and the image of "the Southern day com[ing] up to find that black man, sexless, hanging from a tree!" (204). Baldwin attributes black men's constant peril to white men's constant guilty awareness of their own interracial lust—and their white power to rape black women with impunity. X knows that his connection with Y places him in mortal peril. "I . . . took an insane risk when I talked to a white woman intimately . . . . I knew I could be killed by one slip of her tongue to the wrong man," he says (Howe 37). And if Y is risky for X, then their child Z is even more so: X says, "Pregnancy was a guarantee of my being lynched."

What, then, compels X to run such risks? What does he hope to gain from intimacy with Y? Although the access to Y's inner emotional and fantasy life that X gains suggests a real connection, Howe tells us nothing of personal qualities that might have drawn X to Y; instead, Howe has X offer his awareness of the economic value of whiteness. As Cheryl Harris writes in "Whiteness as Property," "Even in the early years of the [United States], it was not the concept of race alone that operated to oppress Blacks and Indians; rather, it was the interaction between conceptions of race and

property that played a critical role in establishing and maintaining racial and economic subordination" (1716). Acknowledging the property investment in whiteness goes some way towards revealing the economic stakes of miscegenation: marriage and the family are institutions designed for the maintenance and transmission of property; intermarriage is an opportunity not only for intimate contact between members of different races, but also for property and its attendant privileges to pass from white hands into black. To put this idea into X's words:

> I speculated that white women could form a natural and happy bridge
> for the colored and the poor to escape their conditions.
> Love and marriage could be the gentlest kind of revolution
> where race and economics were leveled.
> Yet violence was the preferred course of mankind.
>
> (33)

Tis of Thee highlights the family's status as a nexus of intimacy (both affective and bodily) and property as it traces the white community's investment in keeping X, Y, and Z apart.

Throughout the text, X's obsessive musing on industrial capitalism serves as the book's index of the twined constructions of race and class. For instance, he observes that "Freed slaves have been given neither shelter nor training./ So the nation is like a market in full operation/ resulting in ruin for" them (58); he attributes this state of affairs to abolitionists' preference for the abstract idea of a freed slave over the specific, material specificities of free men and women. He is also interested in changing technologies' and mores' relationship to gendered labor: in the 1950s, he says, "white women

in particular were becoming/ their own servants and slaves, as if wicked histories had returned to haunt and/ possess them in their one lifetime" (33). Speaking closely focalized through X's point of view, Z discusses the United States's transition from Reconstruction to the Gilded Era:

> It was, for people like him, a time of terrible trial.
> After the end of slavery, the economy gained momentum like
> something freed
> from the controls of law and ethics. Now greed increased like a
> lurching wheel
> on a down curve. . . .
> Measure for measure, money eliminated a concept of value based in
> physical
> quality.
>
> After the Civil War . . . people rushed by sucking,
> sweeping, pushing, retreating, contracting, pulsing, eyeing, eyes as
> periscopes,
> crystal balls and bubbles, myriad-made, implicit, insistent, variegated,
> spirit-
> members managed, produced, distributed
> and there was no attention or shelter for the weak, the chicks.
> Owners were too busy wondering:
> Who is longest? Who is fat? Who is cheapest?
> Who is best? Who is measuring?
> What's my credit? What's my debt?
> (39)

Though X is not likely to take up the Lost Cause position that such anti-industrial, anticapitalist nostalgia reveals the superiority of the antebellum plantation system, he does insist that human beings' attention has become monopolized by the market to the exclusion of care for "physical quality," an idea that could encompass both the lovingly created products of unalienated labor and the intimately known, proximal, individual other human being—someone a person might converse with, love, or even quarrel with as opposed to simply appraising in economic terms. Also excluded is a sense of socially just power relations which would offer "attention or shelter for the weak, the chicks."

In X's anticapitalist vision, "American lawns green and shaved in the suburbs/ call to mind the last stages of rhymed verse . . . / poor leads to war"—that is, the bourgeoisie surround themselves with conformist comforts, but their privilege is founded upon a growing material inequality that makes violence inevitable. No wonder X jumps at Y's vision of the utopian country Tis of Thee. He recalls it, in later years, as an anti-bourgeois paradise.

> I remember that in Tis of Thee there were no guns, no bombs, no
> poisons.
> We made it into a quiet place, rising from old waste-heaps, and the
> basins of
> sewage plants.
> Just as the knuckles of trees underground can burst open the
> pavement,
> given time, so this strange little place, given patience, might also
> overcome.

(87)

Like Y, who pictures the country as made up of "a series of unattached railroad cars occupied by derelicts" (16), X envisions the country Tis of Thee as a non-violent haven for bourgeois society's unmarketable waste. But X goes further to imagine Tis of Thee slowly, organically rising from below to retake the nation from those obsessed with wealth. For him, Tis of Thee is not a personal haven, but a humbler, kinder vision of the future for us all.

X's economic obsession insistently reminds the reader that Tis of Thee's narrative illustrates not just a failed romance, but—more to the point—a failed redistributive fantasy. X believes that Y may share his dream of redistributing her white wealth: "She came forward first, of course," X says of Y, "as if offering her body bravely as a / sacrifice to history. And I believed that she, being white and privileged,/ knew what she was doing" (37). With the knowledge of hindsight, the grown child Z reports of his father, "Embarrassed that he had actually hoped she might lead him to a more / secure life he was finally just glad that he had survived the contact at all" (50). X ends the book old, sad, and alone, apparently powerless—despite his reading and his endless, compelling philosophizing—to found a family, to feel at home in the world, to anchor himself anywhere.

Despite X's inability to save or change himself, he does offer something very valuable to Y: his interaction with her provides an invaluable model for Y's change of feelings over the course of the text. Never taking his own identity or subjectivity for granted, X is in Tis of Thee always already empathically aligned with Y—a position that resonates clearly

with the passage in which W. E. B. DuBois lays out his concept of double consciousness. "This American world," Du Bois writes, "yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." The doubly conscious person is conscious of himself always as subject and object—spectator and spectacle—simultaneously. Such an empathic alignment of points of view characterizes the utopian experience of love and intimacy that Fanny Howe represents in Tis of Thee.

Throughout the book, the characters—although physically separated from one another—speak for one another and from one another's most private inner experiences. For instance, the book's second monologue describes Y's internal, subjective experience of falling in love—"like having a slippery whale shoot / through her fingers"—but the speaker who is privy to "her idea of a perfect day" and to the fact that love "made her remember her feet bleeding / from sharp shells curtained in mud" is not Y herself, but X (14). X reports that it "made her hard to be so happy," and that when they fell in love, Y was "still like a boy in / trunks." Not only does X report the imaginative interior experience of love from a position within Y's psyche, his descriptions of her sound distinctly male—as if she were indistinguishable from himself. Just as Du Bois describes, X—a black man—is conscious for and of both himself and the white Y. And yet this is not the experience of, in Du Bois's words, "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 694); the double consciousness X practices with Y is instead a generous and joyful, if extremely vulnerable, intimacy.

But does Y take full advantage of X's generously empathic example? Her consciousness does change over the course of the book, as we will see in the next section. However, she never attains the level of empathic mobility of consciousness that X and Z perform. X is able to report Y's inner thoughts and experiences and Z is able to report X's, but Y never completes the circle and tells us about Z's inner world. Thus, the mixed child never receives the same admiring, sympathetic attention that his parents do in this text; and the white mother may never really attain double consciousness.

Y

Wise, why's, y's

—Amiri Baraka

In her book Visible Identities, Linda Martín Alcoff advocates the development of a white double consciousness—but instead of the DuBoisian sense of doubled perspective that leads one empathetically to subjectify others even as one is objectified oneself, Alcoff believes that "for whites, double consciousness requires an ever-present acknowledgement of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclusive human community" (223). The text itself displays an ambivalent relationship to history: though it dwells obsessively upon racial, gender, and economic injustices, Tis of Thee's murky, messy blending of time periods suggests an historical sense more intuitive than intentional. In any case, Y herself—who is aware that she is

"stamped throughout [her] cells/ with the United States Service" (31) and who wonders whether "in an earlier life" she was "a cruel mistress to slaves and their children" (19)—invests herself heavily in the identity of a "traitor to white privilege."

Early in the text and in their romance, Y shares with X that she sees herself as an outsider to the nation of which she is a citizen: "I thought there was a secondary / and utopian country called Tis of Thee that belonged to me / and a few others. I imagined this country as a nation of outcasts— / outside history—like a series of railroad cars occupied by derelicts" (Howe 16). Y identifies with derelicts, people with no property at all; she aligns herself with "outcasts" and those "outside history;" later, X and Y declare together, "If you are guided by love, you are always outside the law!" (49-50). "Outside the law" is precisely the phrase Thomas Jefferson used in his draft of race laws for Virginia to describe "any black freedman or freedwoman or any white woman who had given birth to a black or mulatto child and remained in the commonwealth for more than a year" (Thandeka); had his laws taken effect, the life of any such person would have been forfeit.

White supremacy's deep investment in parents—especially white mothers—who produce racially pure children makes more sense in light of Shirley Samuels's description of republican motherhood as constructed in early American literature. "In the historical romance," she writes, "questions of political and national identity become attached to female bodies, and a national subject is formed through the coordination of citizenship and family ideology" (19). If the national identity is segregated and white supremacist, then Y's production of black heirs to her white wealth is traitorous. "The pressure in these discourses is . . . to produce . . . a national body and a

national family that could reproduce that body" (Samuels 19). In gestating Z's mixed race body and longing to raise him together with X and according to their anticapitalist values, Y is actively engaged in building an alternative nation—the country Tis of Thee—and thus in sedition against a state modeled upon the white bourgeois family. To paraphrase the motto of Race Traitor magazine, "loyalty to humanity is treason to whiteness"—and the stakes of treason are inevitably high.

Although Y is not, in fact, killed for her affair with X or for the birth of Z, she does sacrifice a great deal. Howe uses Y to explore the extent to which members of the racial elect are vulnerable to falling from grace. Y's infraction of racial codes is clear, but the consequences—though dire—are inconsistent, shifting, and difficult to articulate. Even after Y submits to her tyrannical white father's demand that she give Z up for adoption, he still disowns her; she spends the rest of her life in various institutions, regarded as unfit to care for herself or possibly insane, and in her 1950s incarnation undergoes shock treatments. In effect, it seems, she is stripped of much of the comfort and status she formerly enjoyed as a middle-class white woman.

Y muses, "If 'white' means that nothing has happened to a particular body / to disrupt its ancestral history; / if whiteness means extreme individualism, I was no longer white" (71). As in Patricia McKee's model, blackness is forged in dialogue and community; autonomy is the privilege of the racial elite. And later in the text, "If you are white / and have carried a baby who is not, that baby's body / becomes one with your own and you are darker and deeper for it" (80). Y claims to be what she calls "a dark one budding from inside the skin" (67), and if Nella Larsen's take on the issue is any indication, perhaps Y is right. During a scene in Passing in which a white man makes racist comments to three women he is unaware are black,

Larsen's protagonist notes, "It was . . . unbelievable and astonishing that four people could sit so unruffled, so ostensibly friendly, while they were in reality seething with anger, mortification, shame. But no, on second thought she was forced to amend her opinion. John Bellew, most certainly, was as undisturbed within as without" (174). Here, whiteness is unselfconsciousness; whiteness is the luxury of behaving outwardly in a manner consistent with one's internal thoughts. Y has lost that luxury and many of the comforts of whiteness, such as her bourgeois feminine "birthright with its clear glass tables/ in livingrooms—except where the cocktail left a circle—or the peanut a shower/ of salt" (Howe 34). But she has received as compensation a new perspective on the world—the stereoscopic vision of double consciousness—along with a sense of moral justification, a feeling of being on the right side of history.

However, Y is aware that others still read her as white. "Assumptions were made by on-lookers," she says; "You are a white one who is just like us?" As Alcoff points out, "whites cannot completely disavow whiteness or distance themselves from their white identity. One's appearance of being white will still operate to confer privilege in numerous and significant ways, and to avow treason does not render whites ineligible for these privileges, even if they work hard to avoid them" (215).[4] Y's personal renunciation of whiteness is at best too little, too late. She has already abandoned her mixed-race child, orphaning her longed-for embodiment of a racially united future nation. Worse, to avow race treason may even be just another

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[4] Much of Howe's daughter Danzy Senna's work—in essays and in her novels Caucasia and Symptomatic—deals with the deep and real pain that accompanies the privilege accrued by subjects who experience themselves as nonwhite but whose bodies are read as white by onlookers. Such subjects, in Senna's experience, tend to become undercover witnesses to slurs against themselves. Perhaps it is the experience of this pain that most reliably distinguishes, within an apparently white exterior, a truly nonwhite or doubly conscious subjectivity from one merely enjoying the righteousness or cachet of avowing race treason.

exercise in white arrogance: as Aldon Lynn Nielsen points out, "among the many benefits of white privilege in American culture is the power to make race appear and disappear at will."

Ultimately, both the abandoned lover X and the abandoned child Z find Y's avowal of race treason—her feeling right—ambiguously valuable, both radical and insufficient. After years of searching for one another, X and Y finally catch a glimpse of one another outside a Boston public toilet on a rainy or sleety Sunday. Y feels herself still bound to X, yet also bound to his retroactive absence: "like a spinster on a widow's walk, who watches the empty sea,/ I felt the air and the rain between us/ as a chain that would never disappear" (93). Even as the air and weather permanently bind the lovers, Y watches X and watches for X like a widow—but also like a spinster, a woman who has never married. Despite the connection she feels, she also feels both that she has lost X and that she never had him.

From X's point of view, this encounter is the final failure of his and Y's experiment in empathic intimacy.

> I started to call out when I realized that my absence from the place
> where she was actually standing
> would make my voice a waste.
> So I got back into my truck and drove away
> into the billows of sleet. I was afraid. (92)

Even though X and Y are close enough to see and hear one another, X feels that Y is not sufficiently "standing in the same place" as him to hear his voice. That is: for X, Y's subject position is still too alien for her to understand him, no matter how he might try to reach her. Their empathy is somehow not proximal enough. And yet, X—honestly? gallantly?—does

not place the blame for this situation entirely upon Y: he acknowledges that he retreats because he is afraid.

X also claims the absence between them: not "her absence from the place where I was standing" but "my absence from the place/ where she was." Such an ascribing of absence to the black party signals a shift from a model common in American literature that registers blackness as marked and whiteness as blank, empty. Howe describes this model in X's speech on page 37:

> The moon is what is seen by the light of the sun.
>
> So whiteness is what is dependent on a witness.
> The moon's opaque and egg-like sheen is the kind of zero
> that wants to be more than air and negativity.
> This zero wants to be counted as one of the numbers.
> Likewise the moon is a blank whole, instead of a black hole.
> It makes us believe that the sky is as solid as whatever is in it.

In X's account here, whiteness may yearn towards inclusion in a larger human community, but it is also "a blank whole," a body that claims universal neutrality, a self-satisfied and un-self-critical mass as unflappable as Larsen's John Bellew. It is the free American citizen who requires a foil—a slave, an impoverished sharecropper, a body subject to imprisonment and lynching—in order to understand itself as free.

Finding this examination of whiteness in the context of a book of poems presented both visually and aurally prompts me to question the ending of Charles Bernstein's otherwise wonderful article, "Hearing Voices," on aural presentation as foregrounding poetry's materiality. Bernstein writes,

> Recognizing that a poem is not one but many, that sound and sense are as much at odds as ends, makes the study of poetry's sound a test case for midrashic antinomianism, a new approach to critical studies that I am launching here . . .
>
> Which is to say, to come to some conclusions
> A work of art always exceeds its material constructions
> As well as its idealizations Physical or digital instantiations
> Anterior codes or algorithmic permutations
> Experiences while reading or viewing are no more than weigh
> stations
> And any number of interpretations, contexts of publications,
> historical connections—
> All these have a charmed affinity
> Clustering around a center that is empty.
>
> That empty center or blank space is the possibility of freedom. 148

While I can agree without reservation that spaces of undecidability or interpretive unorthodoxy—what I take Bernstein to mean by "midrashic antinomianism"—feel liberatory, I am anxious about calling such spaces blank or empty. For one thing, I wonder whether celebrating emptiness might simply further fetishize a condition associated with cultural whiteness? Besides, if what excites us about poetry presented in multiple forms or through multiple performances is its excess—the ways in which it "exceeds its material constructions"—then the center around which interpretations and contexts cluster would seem not to be empty at all but, like an astronomical black hole, infinitely full and yet still able to accommodate more. In that case, Bernstein's celebration of the multiplicity of poetic

readings ("readings" in both senses: performances, interpretations)—complete with the image of "any number of interpretations, contexts of publications, historical connections" clustering around a space of "possibility of freedom"—suggests that although readings and bodies are invariably marked, those marks are also always in motion, unfixed and unfixable. To read identity in such a way certainly allows subjects space in which to act counter or even sideways to racial and class norms.

For Z's part, he finds the newly racially aware Y to be on the one hand "a new creation, / a completely unknown quantity, an equalizer / who can't be incorporated into the social body, a citizen / who is a witness to all sides of history" (82). Z describes Y in yearning utopian terms, making her doubly conscious white body sound much more radical even than Z's own mixed one. The passivity and internality of this radical change, though, undercut its power to effect social change. "Everyone outside / continues to see you as white all the way through," Z observes. "Too bad you didn't take action."

Z

> She referred to him as "your father" and he to her as "your mother" so that we children became owners of the problem.
>
> —Danzy Senna, Where Did You Sleep Last Night?

Z is of course right not to see himself—a mixed-race orphan—as a new phenomenon in American history. As X muses, "Since the country was founded, there has been racial mixing by rape and by / choice, by marriage and by fornication" (69). Even though this miscegenation—quoting X again—"has acted as a kind of politics of / infiltration—a smear campaign

against the homogenous," X acknowledges that it has not been "quite enough to successfully achieve a national mixed identity." U. S. customs such as the law under slavery that the child should follow the condition of the mother or the Jim Crow era's one-drop rule have functioned to shore up a binary racial system that works to deny, erase, and orphan the mixed bodies who have always constituted living evidence of interracial intimacy.

"Isn't an 'American Negro' multiracial by definition?" Margaret Kent Bass asks on her blog, Writin' Black from the Academy.

> Over the years, increasing numbers of students with various shades of brown skin have loudly proclaimed: 'I'm not black; I'm biracial.' . . . Let me just give you my initial reaction when I hear someone tell me this: Okay, you're obviously not white. We see that . . . So why does your need to tell me that you're not black feel like a rejection of me? If we can see that you're not white, what drives you to tell us that you're not black?

Fanny Howe's daughter Danzy Senna goes some way towards answering Bass's question in her essay "The Mulatto Millennium." "Call yourself mixed and you just might find the world shines a little brighter on you," Senna writes; "Pure breeds (at least the black ones) are out and hybridity is in. America loves us in all our half-caste glory . . . Major news magazines announce our arrival as if were proof of extraterrestrial life. They claim we're going to bring about the end of race as we know it" (430, 429). Despite X's announcement that "racial mixing" has been part of our bioculture "since the country was founded" (69), Tis of Thee picks up on just the tone of millennial utopianism that Senna mocks—less in its content than in its structural positioning of Z as both the lost and desired object for

whom both parents search and as the text's final moral arbiter, speaker of its final speech, representative of the younger generation and thus of the nation's reproductive futurity.

Despite Z's status as the desirable embodiment of utopian America, the fact is that his parents do not raise him but leave him to join the other "children—social orphans—[who] on stone-dented buses/ have traveled the breadth of this city, joggling and pressing/ at each other like mobs of unwanteds/ who will only too soon struggle in a kind of mutual suicide pact" (84). Z shares this orphaned status with X, who was also given up by his mother and raised at "The Home for Little Wanderers, an orphanage" (24). In fact, X and Z are so closely aligned that on one page we learn that Y is pregnant with Z and the next begins, "He was born . . .," but the "he" in question is X (19-20). X and Z are joined in orphanhood just as Howe's daughter imagines that she and her father might have been:

"I never knew back then that he'd spent a portion of his childhood in an orphanage, but I sensed that to ally myself with him would be to orphan myself" (Where Did You Sleep 182). As X gazes at the hospital "for wayward women" to which he has traced Y, he "hold[s his] heart/ that had already been assigned to an adoption agency once,/ and I couldn't bear imagining my child's heart suffering the same fate./ But of course he did. Suffer it. His half-caste heart all lost heart, gone" (62). X grieves for the orphanhood he shares with Z—a state of loss and grief produced by segregation and white supremacy, which make black Americans the orphans of the national family. Z muses, "It is said that the Messiah will not come until the tears of Esau are exhausted./ Until Hagar's tears are wipes from her face and she is welcomed home,/ there will be no peace" (68). In other words, Paradise or utopia will be achieved when the rejected members of the

family regain their rightful places; the United States will become Tis of Thee when it learns to nurture its nonwhite citizens.

One reason why the multiracial body, despite its high status in twenty-first-century U.S. culture, has little revolutionary potential by itself is precisely because of its utopian cachet in our post-civil-rights-era consciousness—and because consumer capitalism is so good at co-opting utopian dreams into the service of entertainment and advertising. In her satirical essay "The Mulatto Millennium," Senna strikes to the heart of the matter: "All this celebration of mixture felt to me like a smoke screen, really, obscuring the fundamental issue of racism, and for that matter, class divisions. It seemed to me we spent so much time talking about kimchee and grits, we forgot to talk about power" (434). Nothing sells expensive sportswear like that "fetishized object, an exotic bird soaring above the racial landscape" (439)—that is, a happy, unproblematic mixed body amnesic of the histories of power and domination his gleaming smile distracts from. "Everyone's money is good here, see? Racism is over!" proclaims the post-Civil Rights Era shopping-mall billboard.

This mad rush to "the end of blackness"—and the sense of betrayal both Senna and Bass describe on the part of those who <u>do</u> identify as black—springs from the highly contentious history of blackness in the United States and the antibourgeois polemicism of the Black Power movement. To flaunt one's mixedness—to "take back the white," as Senna jokes that the newly fashionable "Mulatto Nation" advocates—is to highlight just how assimilable blackness in fact is to the bourgeois consumer culture that, in the U.S., dwells at the heart of and sometimes feels synonymous with whiteness. Senna writes that she "sneered at those byproducts of miscegenation who chose to identify as mixed, not black. I

thought it wishy-washy, an act of flagrant assimilation, treason, passing even" (431). She writes of the "danger in this muddy middle stance. A danger of disappearing. Of being swallowed whole by the great white whale" (433). Senna's image of whiteness devouring difference resonates with the colonial Australian project of "breeding out the colour" that resulted in that country's Stolen Generations during roughly the same period as the century between Emancipation and Civil Rights in the United States. Here in the country that produced Ralph Ellison's invisible man, to work for real interracial reconciliation and true integration (as opposed to assimilation) is to embrace the visibility of "a people bonded not by shared complexion or hair texture but by shared history," as Senna describes black people (431). Because of Americans' long history of racial binarism, we have trouble perceiving the mixedness of mixed-race bodies. They resemble one group or another. They blend in—and are orphaned from the radical barrier-crossings that produced them.

Unorphaned and highly visible, though, is the intact mixed-race family. Within it, interracial intimacy, exchange, trust, and mutual aid are not fleeting, as in X and Y's brief encounter, but ongoing. The intact mixed family represents a constantly renewed commitment to proximity; this is the commitment X and especially Y fail to make. Despite her divorce from Carl Senna, an anecdote from Fanny Howe's own life illustrates what she herself has done—if not perfectly—then at least better than her characters. Danzy Senna writes, "My mother, trying to downplay the extent of the damage" done by her parents' divorce and her father's irregular involvement in her life, "made this strange comment to me from time to time: 'You never had a father. He was more of a big brother to you.' [I remember] me one day correcting her: 'No, Mummy, everyone has a father. He was the father I

got'" (Where Did You Sleep 26). On the one hand, this anecdote illustrates—in a protective parental context—Howe's privileged white impulse to rewrite history, to retrospectively assign normative identities; Senna, speaking from her black-identified mixed position, reminds her mother that she has no right to do so. In preserving a relationship with her children (and even her ex-husband), Howe has maintained an ongoing mixed-race conversation in which voices of different races can argue; Senna has the opportunity to hear and correct her mother's version of the family's history.

Since Y gives away Z, they have no such opportunity for ongoing dialogue. They have no opportunity to get to know one another at all, and as a result, the character Z—despite his utopian promise and moral authority in the text—is barely a character in his own right. We learn nothing of his biography or personality beyond the way he reports his parents' story. Thus, the intimately associated, assorted bodies of the intact mixed-race family—unrealized in Tis of Thee—are what would represent the new, the unassimilable, the revolutionary because of their ongoing proximity, their relationship, their intimate knowledge of one another not as symbols, but as people. They would not need ask, as Y does of X, "Did I even love this man, whom I hardly knew, whom I was forbidden to know?/ Who was he?" (19). X and Y get to know one another—and especially Z—only as symbols of nostalgia and hope, never as complex individuals with human needs and desires. To quote the mixed child of the failed family at the heart of Senna's novel Caucasia, "They should have stuck together. They should have tried harder" (407).

Tis of Z: The Textual Child

Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain . . .
If for thy father asked, say thou hadst none;
And for thy mother, she alas is poor,
Which caused her thus to send thee out of door.
—Anne Bradstreet, "The Author to Her Book"

Where X and Y have failed, Howe has in some ways succeeded in the body of the book itself. In the New England poetess tradition of Anne Bradstreet's "The Author to Her Book," Howe offers a textual body that is the body of the child: an uncategorizeable text that sometimes sings effortlessly across genres and sometimes jumbles them into awkward juxtapostion. In the best tradition of experimental art, Tis of Thee gropes towards an insight it cannot yet quite articulate as argument, but which it can untidily and partially embody. In its multigenre form as well as its miscegenation plot, Tis of Thee advocates and undertakes a project of mixed speaking: its characters communicate across the color line, of course, and at times speak as racially mixed, ambiguous, or unstable subjects. But I imagine Tis of Thee as most radically suggesting speaking towards a more empathic and just nation by always addressing the other as (at least potentially) mixed.

In nineteenth-century sentimental literature, the beautiful mulatto who learns of her black ancestry only when she becomes subject to sale as a slave is a common tragic trope. The implication is clear: not only do the horrors of slavery happen to people who look like you, O genteel white

reader—they could happen to you personally. Taking mixedness and contingency of identity rather than whiteness as the neutral, presumptive identity of the generic American would be a radically liberatory move indeed—the dismantling of compulsory whiteness could do for race what the dismantling of compulsory heterosexuality promises for sexual identity. If white were no longer "neutral," it would have a hard time remaining central. Still, framing this presumptive mixedness as "of thee" rather than "of me"—"I am likely speaking to a mixed subject" rather than "I likely am a mixed subject"—sidesteps some of the pitfalls Danzy Senna and Aldon Lynn Neilsen raise with regard to multiracial chic and the white privilege of invoking or dispelling race at will. (As Senna writes, "Cultural Mulatto: Any American born post-1967. See Wiggers." "Mulatto" 432) Experiencing the self as mixed invokes a substitutive model of racial empathy in which the righteous self displaces the other; assuming that the other is mixed invokes a proximity model in which concern and sensitivity are directed outwards towards the other in order to strengthen interpersonal bonds. As we have seen, substitution threatens to erase the very subjects with whom it empathizes, while proximity dissolves borders, promotes fluidity and connection. In a substitutive model of empathy, the empathizer turns inwards towards her own imagination, visualizing the other's experience; in a proximity model, she must turn instead towards the other, paying attention, listening.

Tis of Thee embodies its project of mixed speaking formally in its physical presentation: a book of poems interspersed with nonverbal visual art and accompanied by a cd. Tis of Thee invites its audience to experience it visually—as Patricia McKee describes as central to white experience; it also invites us to experience it aurally—as McKee describes as central to black

experience. To address a text's physical presentation is to consider how audiences will interact with it, and thus what kind of intervention it can make into their experiences of the world. We read, look, visualize, mentally substitute ourselves for the characters; we listen to the characters and musicians as separate from, yet vocally and instrumentally present to, ourselves. "I . . . see aurality and writing not as indicating separate domains but as suggesting a bodily response to certain literary possibilities," N. Katherine Hayles writes; by presenting the two together (along with illustrations), <u>Tis of Thee</u> invites a range of bodily responses.

Take, for instance, the text's final illustration, which faces Z's final pronouncement as the text's moral arbiter (94-95). Mario Senna's image here, as in much of the book, seems too small even to take full advantage of the book's small pages. A square of about two inches by two inches, this small patch of swirling grays is bisected vertically by a line across which values are inverted: what would be darkest on the left is lightest on the right. But I recognize this effect—as I recognize the human face the illustration presents—only because by now, the text has trained me to see it. This picture reminds me that on page 38, Senna has presented a grayscale group portrait; a black woman in a white nineteenth-century-style dress stands to the side of a group of children whose races I cannot determine. The image is blurry, low-resolution, like a pixilated photograph or a painting made with an awkwardly large brush. Slightly off-center, a vertical stripe of value inversion runs down the image, showing only that piece of the picture in negative. Still, the image of a woman with a group of children is familiar enough; this illustration is easy to recognize, especially if I hold the book at arm's length and squint a little. That gesture, optional for viewing the image on page 38, becomes necessary for the one on page 95. Only because all of

the other illustrations in the book have been representational—most images of human beings—does it occur to me to relax my eyes' focus and see the swirl of positive-negative grays in this little square for the human face it is—a portrait of Z, or of his final declaration: "Celebration./ A life of pure contradiction." I must perform physical work to interpret this portrait, and still I am left having to admit that I cannot be certain precisely what I am looking at.

Y speaks in Tis of Thee of her suspicion of visual representations, those central elements, in McKee's model, of autonomous white subjecthood:

> Now I believe that when the Messiah comes the world will
> have no images,
> since the image will be cut free
> from the object, released like beef from a cow,
> and competition will automatically founder
> as an instinct, having no visible object in sight.
> Then on that day I won't have to look for you in order to know
> you. (61)

The analogy of images free of objects like beef free of cows is an odd image of Paradise. For one thing, in the ages of mechanical and digital reproduction—of print, television, and internet advertising—images are already reduplicated and disseminated much more freely than their objects. Given special effects technologies—becoming more sophisticated all the time, but present from the birth of photography—no object is even necessary for an image to be produced. So images are already free for distribution and consumption, just as factory-farmed beef is readily available

for city- and suburb-dwellers who have never been in the presence of a live cow. The lines "competition will automatically founder/ as an instinct, having no visible object in sight" suggest that freely circulating commodities—images and beef—are just the opposite of what Y means, though. No visible objects of competition: Y is describing an anticapitalist utopia like X's. It's not the images or the beef Y values; it's the objects and the cows. In a Paradise free from commodities and the images that drive consumer markets, Y imagines that human connection will become somehow automatic as well as authentic—that she will no longer need to search for X or Y, but will somehow find them already near her, available not for purchase but for intimacy.

Print text, of course, is also often deployed in advertising; text's illusion of transparent communication lends itself all too easily—in the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry critique—to commodity fetishism and alienation of labor. However, text's relationship to visuality and aurality is different both from pictorial images' and from audible sound's. "We read," Hayles writes, "in the body, particularly in the vocal apparatus that produces subvocalization during silent reading" (74). Our bodily response to text—subvocalization—creates an oral and aural component for a medium that might at first seem purely visual. Moreover, reading's oral/aural component dovetails with readers' own ongoing self-production processes. "Reading is akin to the interior monologue that we all engage in, except that it supplies us with another story (usually a more interesting one) than that we manufacture for ourselves to assure ourselves we exist" (Hayles 75). Reading printed text, then, becomes a site for alternative subject production—and thus, a potential locus for change and liberation. As Hayles points out, "Drama produces and is produced through bodies

physically present onstage. Sound comes not through subvocalization but directly through the auditory channel" (79). Thus, strangely, Tis of Thee may not have the same potentially life-changing force for those who experience it as an aural performance as for those whose silent reading and subvocalization stage the text themselves, in their own voices.

Tis of Thee's presentation as recorded sound also foregrounds two intertwined problems for the recorded, preserved, disembodied voice as a guide to racial utopia. For one thing, just as Patricia McKee links white subject formation with visuality and autonomous individualism, so she links black subject formation with aurality and "media of social response" (3). In Tis of Thee Howe expresses a hope that people might become doubly conscious, empathic through proximity and intimacy, by learning to experience the world in a less individualistic—a less white—way. Such a hope resonates nicely with McKee's description of black identity "produced in exchanges that occur among more often than within characters. Media of call-and-response, for example, instead of authorizing extensions of individualism, express a responsiveness among persons that is understood to move social exchange beyond the bounds of individual consciousness" (5). The imperative seems clear: produce the self in a less visual and more aural way, and thereby become more responsive, other- and community-centered. The recorded voice, however, threatens this model: it is a voice to which one cannot answer back, a voice one cannot engage in conversation. As Charles Bernstein points out, "Listening to such recordings, we hear . . . a voice that we can hear but that cannot hear us" (144). Listening to the speech of others present, we connect with the speakers, engage in social rituals, answer back. Listening to recorded speech, we remain passive, alone.

This one-way quality of interaction with the recorded voice brings me to the other difficulty with the power dynamic between auditor and recorded speaker: its structural similarity to the power dynamic between viewer and viewed. As we saw in Robyn Wiegman's description of both spectacle and surveillance models, disciplinary power inheres mostly on the side of the viewer; both spectacular and surveilled bodies are disempowered because they are the objects of gazes they cannot return. Thus these bodies, these subjects, must work to reproduce performances with difference, inconsistency, or subterfuge in order to generate liberatory space between themselves and the normalizing forces acting upon them. Using Richard Nixon's Oval Office tapes as an example, Michael Davidson shows that unlike voices in real-time conversation, recorded voices share the disempowered position of spectacular and especially surveilled bodies. "The technologies that contained the voice of subversives and opponents also trapped the one running the machine . . . in a world where presence is increasingly verified by information storage and retrieval" (Davidson 103). Although Davidson shows how surveyor can become surveilled, he also makes clear that in a surveillance model, listening is power. To speak and be recorded is to become othered, the voice now fixed in a technological "gaze" and subject to the expectations and disciplinary action of the listener.

Despite the complex power dynamics embodied in audio recording as a form, Davidson and Bernstein also offer insight into the ways in which audible—as opposed to printed—poetry highlights specificity, materiality, and affect, thus furthering Howe's project of exploring power and positionality. For one thing, just as the book's illustrations appeal wordlessly to viewers' emotions with their dauby, out-of-focus family portraits and children's-book-like line drawings of cows, the cd's musical accompaniment

to the spoken text orchestrates listeners' emotions. The patriotic standard "My Country Tis of Thee" is repeatedly invoked and then deformed, twisting away into odd, unfamiliar minor modes that trouble our easy familiarity with this music.

Contrasting spoken to print poetry, Davidson writes, "Orality signifies unmediated access to passional states, giving testimony to that which only <u>this</u> poet could know" (97); music is widely held, too, to bear a direct relationship to affective states. On the <u>Tis of Thee</u> cd, string, brass, and woodwind parts run the gamut from stately to playful to mournful as the dramatic reading progresses, cuing listeners' emotional responses much as a film score would.

Moreover, as Charles Bernstein emphasizes, aural presentation preserves materialities that text doesn't transmit, highlighting the human specificity of authors and actors. For him, focusing on the sound of a performed poem "returns voice from sometimes idealized projections of self in the style of a poem to its social materiality, to voicing and voices" (Bernstein 144). The materiality of the audible voice richly encodes information about subject position: gender, class, nationality, region. Race, too, may sometimes be communicated in speech—but only insofar as it is performed via accentual and syntactic patterns that conform to listeners' expectations about the speech of particular identity groups. The clearly-enunciated, standard-accented speech of the professional actors on the <u>Tis of Thee</u> cd gives away as little as possible in the way of information about these particular speakers' identities—and since the text is read by actors, we do not hear Fanny Howe's voice at all. To obscure the particularities of the identity, of course, is to exercise power: the less idiosyncratic and human an author, the more authoritative. "Poetry's all about the accent while theory

has a tendency to sound the impersonal," Bernstein writes (143); similarly, in seeking status, the upwardly mobile often discipline their accents to an elite normative accent that the community has agreed to perceive as no accent at all. But to know a person is to know the idiosyncracies of which her voice is capable; in casual or intimate situations, we allow our standardized vocal masks to slip away and our specific histories to become audible.

In Tis of Thee, those specific histories mark bodies, forge community, and undermine the bourgeois, elitist power of racial whiteness. Throughout the text, Fanny Howe makes it very clear that the challenge the United States faces is not—and has perhaps never been—the integration of bodies. X and Y live near one another and have no trouble meeting, falling in love, or conceiving a child; Z is a mixed-race child among many, many mixed-race American children. Bodies mingled under even under Jim Crow, and they certainly mingle now. But what America has still not managed to integrate is status: white versus not-white, elect versus fallen, free versus unfree. Altruism's turn away from the self and its competitive desires, towards the other to whom one responds, tends to erode such distinctions. And if whiteness is extreme individualism, then the committed altruist creates a self, a nation, a little less white.

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STRANGE INVITATION: NONSENSE AND UTOPIA IN HARRYETTE MULLEN'S SLEEPING WITH THE DICTIONARY

If you thought that you were making your way
To where the puzzles and pagans lay
I'll put it together: it's a strange invitation

—Beck, from Odelay

To subtitle this essay "Nonsense and Utopia" may be to structure its investigation around a central vacuum: non-sense, no-place. But the vacuum in Harryette Mullen's Sleeping with the Dictionary is not a lack; this is robustly playful writing with strong moral and geographic centers—there is a there there. The space in these poems is not so much an absence as a place that has been set with care and now awaits a guest. Sleeping with the Dictionary actively and curiously welcomes its active, curious reader.

For Mullen, crafting hospitably spacious texts is an explicitly political project. She has announced that she is "interested in the shared aspirations of social and aesthetic movements that envision a better world" (Kane 134); more recently she explained, "Given my concern about literacy, I've often thought about the possibility of connecting writers, readers, and nonreaders through a practice that encompasses aspects of written and spoken language. To the extent that a text hails its readers, I've begun to consider how a poetic work might overcome the social barriers that reinforce what I've called 'aesthetic apartheid'"[5] (Crumpacker). Active verbs and spatial imagery (connecting, encompasses, hails, overcome . . . barriers) that often appear as

[5] "While I celebrate the differences that create distinct aesthetic preferences," Mullen tells Kane, "I seek to overcome the social segregation that enforces aesthetic apartheid. In Los Angeles, for example, this might require that I drive out of my own familiar neighborhood to see an art exhibit in Little Tokyo or attend a poetry reading at the Institute of Italian Culture—to recall a couple of excursions I've made recently—in between taking visitors to the Watts Towers and to the World Stage in Leimert Park" (134).

metaphorical in the context of literary discourse become more concrete and literal when Mullen uses them: not only is "the reader . . . invited to participate in" Sleeping with the Dictionary's elliptical poems very directly "through the 'game' of filling in the blanks" (Kane 16); her previous book, Muse & Drudge, was in part an experiment in changing the demographics of the bodies physically present in the audiences at Mullen's readings. As Mullen has expressed it on different occasions, "Muse & Drudge was crucial, because it seemed to unite readers of my first book, Tree Tall Woman, with the audience that was attracted to the formal innovation of Trimmings and S*PeRM**K*T" (Crumpacker) "and, judging from the audiences that I see now, it has done what I wanted it to do, because I'm now reading to an integrated room" (Griffin 18). In the more usual metaphorical sense, Mullen describes "the instability of interpretation when people don't necessarily share the same cultural knowledge or social background" as a challenge that has led her to "leave space for divergent interpretations of unknown readers" (Crumpacker, emphasis mine). Thus Mullen's poetry sets out explicitly to desegregate (along lines of race, class, nationality, and education) both the imaginary community of private readers and the public performance space of the poetry reading.

Context: Utopian "Poetics/Politics"

Utopian literature has been defined as literature that "invites readers to experience vicariously an alternative reality that critiques theirs by opening cognitive and affective spaces that encourage readers to perceive the realities and potentialities of their culture in new ways" (Roemer 20).[6] Inviting her readers not only to alternative "cognitive and affective spaces" but also to

[6] To be fair, Roemer himself acknowledges that this "working definition" is in some ways too narrow.

physical spaces where diversity and social justice are manifestly valued, Mullen's work both fulfills and exceeds such criteria for utopian writing. "Recent attempts to define literary utopias imply an elevation of the reader," this argument continues, "as scholars and critics shift their interests away from what utopian literature is to what it does" (3). Again, Mullen's interest in the (admittedly modest) material effects a book of poetry can produce and her regard for readers as participants in a mutual creative process mark her as a utopian poet. Mullen aligns herself with Robert Creeley and Allen Ginsberg as she observes, "The poems these writers produce are intended, in part, to serve as alternative models for a progressive and flexible poetics/politics" (Kane 17).

That slash mark hinging poetics and politics cuts to the heart of Harryette Mullen's work. Citing Erica Hunt's "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics," Mullen notes that "aesthetic and political opposition to the status quo do not necessarily go hand in hand" (134), but in his introduction to the same volume Daniel Kane points out that progressive politics are a distinguishing feature of the contemporary American avant garde (15). Commitment to a politics that challenges capitalism, imperialism, racism, and sexism has been a major force in American poetry throughout the twentieth century and reaches back at least as far as the abolitionist poetry of the nineteenth. It makes sense that we should be moved by works which both delight and boldly confront us: philosophical, moral, or political intervention without delight strikes us as sermon or propaganda, while beauty or fun without such confrontation can offer at best only pretty, forgettable trifles—and at worst can flatter complacency, dullness, and unquestioned conformity.

In recent years, overtly political projects in American poetry have belonged, roughly, to one of two strains. On the one hand, certain poetry practices take up radical politics very straightforwardly as a topic. The spoken word poetry that falls into this category is related to rap and to the work of the Beat and Black Arts poets. On the other hand, some poetry seeks to question the very concept of topic. Such poetry locates its political project in a disruption and examination of poetic and linguistic form. These poems are heavily indebted to language poetry. For readers in search of poetry that provides both aesthetic and political excitement, each of these approaches presents some serious potential pitfalls. A brief look at excerpts from two poems—Amiri Baraka's "Understanding Readiness" and Ron Silliman's Tjanting—will demonstrate what I mean. I choose these poems as my "bad examples" not because I find them valueless or unappealing—in fact, I quite like them—but because neither of them dances as gracefully across the "progressive and flexible poetics/politics" slash mark as most of the poems in Sleeping with the Dictionary.

Turning first to three stanzas from Amiri Baraka's elegy for Stokely Carmichael, "Understanding Readiness," I want to highlight their apparent subscription to the hope and belief that poetry can be—in the words of poetry activist and slam promoter Bob Holman—"powerful, not as a literary conceit, but as an actual tool for building a new society, a tool for a new patriotism." Following Derek Attridge, I will term such "hope or . . . assumption that [poems] can be instrumental in furthering an existing project" poetic instrumentalism.

How do we know who are our friends and
who are our enemies

Only by what they do, who they hold on too [sic],

who they fight for and support. Who they help,
who they feed in the storm, whose side
they're on.

How do we know who can lead?
Only by seeing them do it, only by
Feeling the realness and hopefulness,
their sincerity, and
courage, only by touching their love
for the actual selves of us, only

By their suffering in our name, the jailings,
the beatings and torture, only by the way
our enemies describe them,
only by their wisdom and plans,
their affirmations, their pronouncements and
positions, what they think and move on.

What direction they give
us to transform our slave conditions.

Can we name those who are our heroes?
Yes, if we are conscious, even when
they are still alive.

This poem's identification with the jailed, the beaten, the tortured and the enslaved makes its progressive political agenda clear; its plural point of

view, its double impulse towards empiricism and idealism, and its dedication to Stokely Carmichael all strengthen that alignment. The poem's form resonates with the speeches of the Civil Rights Movement and the sermons of black American churches. With its clear, accessible diction and syntax and its strongly anaphoric, catechistic structure, "Understanding Readiness" bends all its formal force towards making its meaning easy to follow and remember, even aurally, even for an audience hearing it only once. But while the poem's politics may be one of "transform[ing] our slave conditions," its poetics is less—to use Mullen's terms—"progressive and flexible."

To elucidate why and how not, it may be helpful to turn to Ron Silliman's 1977 essay "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World." In that essay, Silliman distinguishes between reference and referentiality. He writes:

> In its primary form, reference takes the character of a gesture and an object, such as the picking up of a stone to be used as a tool. Both gesture and object carry their own integrities and are not confused: a sequence of gestures is distinct from the objects which may be involved . . . . A sequence of gestures forms a discourse, not a description. It is precisely the expressive integrity of the gestural nature of language which constitutes the meaning of the "nonsense" syllables in tribal poetries.
>
> 125

Silliman identifies such poetic elements as rhyme as traces of this primary "gestural nature of language." Another way of understanding Silliman's

argument is in terms of the signifier versus the signified. In very instrumental language—say, the instructions in a manual, or my words to you if I saw you were about to spill your wine on my lap—signifieds are, of course, primary. It matters little how you aesthetically experience the gestures or sounds I make or the way the little marks I write on the page look. Instead, in such a case, I want you to experience my language as transparent—I want you to skip musing on the signifiers in order to access the ideas that are signified: "Don't spill your wine on me!"

Poetry, though, is a venue where we are interested in gesture and its aesthetic effects. Poetry organizes itself around the physical properties of signifiers—their rhyming or assonant or rhythmic sounds, their lineated shapes, the oddly appropriate or ironic relationships between signifier and signified we see in puns. Such wordplay collects and organizes signifiers, implying a necessity in the mark or sound that ordinary, everyday language treats as arbitrary. "Understanding Readiness" strikes me as (in a twenty-first century context) fairly formally conservative because it seems so uninterested in exploring the pleasures of signifiers. Even when it plays on them, as in the repetitions of words and syntactic structures, that play is all in the service of helping us apprehend the signifieds to which it directs our attention. A perusal of Baraka's own 1963 critical book Blues People reveals that the relatively unadorned didacticism of "Understanding Readiness" runs counter not just to twenty-first-century avant-garde aesthetic preferences but to the African cultural values Baraka prizes. He quotes anthropologist Ernest Borneman: "In language, the African tradition aims at circumlocution rather than at exact definition. The direct statement is considered crude and unimaginative; the veiling of all contents in ever-changing paraphrases is considered the criterion of intelligence and

personality." By such a criterion, Baraka ought to prefer a style more like Silliman's from the opening of Tjanting:

> Not this.
>
> What then?
>
> I started over & over. Not this.
>
> Last week I wrote "the muscles in my palm so sore from halving the rump roast I cld barely grip the pen." What then? This morning my lip is blisterd.
>
> Of about to within which. Again & again I began. The gray light of day fills the yellow room in a way wch is somber. Not this. Hot grease had spilld on the stove top.
>
> Nor that either. Last week I wrote "the muscle at thumb's root so taut from carving that beef I thought it wld cramp." Not so. What then? Wld I begin? This morning my lip is tender, disfigurd. I sat in an old chair out behind the anise. I cld have gone about this in some other way.

Silliman allows us to savor words which, strung together outside syntax ("of about to within which"), lose their referents and become mere sounds; he points up the contingency of the signifier-signified relationship by having his speaker tell us about his hurt thumb and lip twice, in different words each time. His frequently contracted orthography plays on the relationship between printed and spoken signifiers, orchestrating a colloquial, oral "feel" for the page. Enjoyable as this play with signifiers may be, though, it strikes me ultimately as politically quietistic. The reader is invited to join the poet in playing around with language—to imagine and reimagine expression as contingent. But in this instance, the contingent

language we're invited to play with is the musing of a beef-fed writer struggling, in a fairly uncritically solipsistic way, with writer's cramp in the pleasant writing space of his backyard, behind the anise. It's difficult to imagine how such play, however intellectually stimulating, could have particularly high social stakes.

One might be tempted at this point to ascribe the political progressivism, on the one hand, of Baraka's poem and the aesthetic progressivism, on the other, of Silliman's, to their respective subject positions—distinguished from one another by race. Silliman has, in fact, engaged in just this sort of ascription:

> Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history—many white male heterosexuals, for example—are apt to challenge all that is supposedly "natural" about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of this spectrum are poets who do <u>not</u> identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they have been its objects. The narrative of history has led not to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers—women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the "marginal"—have a manifest political need to <u>have their stories told</u>. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to whom is the subject of those conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and

audience. "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject" 63

In the introduction to his book Discrepant Engagement, Nathaniel Mackey counters, "There are, however, writers from socially marginalized groups who do both—tell their stories while calling such conventions into question, tell their stories by calling such conventions into question. The distinction between a formally experimental center and a formally conventional periphery distorts and grossly oversimplifies matters"—as so many poets' work illustrates, Harryette Mullen's especially (19). Although Mullen sympathetically cites an account similar to Silliman's—"You know, there was a joke that circulated among minority (and some women) graduate students: 'It's that white male subjectivity that needs to be put on hold . . . the rest of us . . . need our subjectivity'"—she also questions it:

> Ron Silliman, in "The New Sentence," talks about . . . I think the essay's called "The Political Economy of Poetry," and he ends it by talking about this perceived division between what are called the "Aesthetic Schools of writing" and the "codes of oppressed peoples." He says, of course, the aesthetic schools are not without their politics or their ideological stance, they just express it through aesthetic means and procedures. And I would want to add that—I don't think he does but I would want to add—the codes of oppressed peoples also have their aesthetic basis.
>
> Griffin 11

Mullen joins Mackey's category of "writers . . . who do both" by asking herself, "Well, in what ways would I want to problematize my black female subjectivity," acknowledging and rethinking the assumptions that underlie "the tradition of the 'authentic voice,'" in which she places her first book, Tree Tall Woman (Griffin 2).

Before looking closely at Mullen's work, this essay will take one more brief detour. Although Sleeping with the Dictionary is a twenty-first century American—and in fact quite specifically Los Angelean—book of poems, its obsession with the playful rearrangement of linguistic elements according to gamelike sets of rules places it squarely in the tradition of the Oulipo. Formed in France in the 1960s, the Oulipo dedicated itself to producing sets of constraints for the purpose of triggering and inspiring works of literature. Famous examples include the snowball, in which each successive word is one letter longer than the previous one; the N+7, in which each noun in a pre-existing text is replaced by the seventh noun after it in a designated dictionary—for example, depending upon the dictionary you choose, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name" might become "Our fauna, who art in hedgerow, hallowed be thy napkin;" and the lipogram, in which a chosen letter or letters are systematically excluded from the text—for example, George Perec's La Disparition, translated into English as A Void, a novel that contains not a single letter e.

The Oulipian business of inventing sets of constraints immediately invites readers to reverse-engineer constrained texts and to try their own hands at constrained writing—indeed, histories of this group generally read like books of creative-writing assignments. And because Oulipian sets of rules generally concern issues of sound and orthography, Oulipian constraints focus readers' attention very particularly on signifiers as opposed

to the concepts they signify. If everyday conversational language tends to focus on signifieds—and if literary language (and poetry especially) produces aesthetic pleasure by playing with signifiers, or by playing with relationships between signifiers and signifieds—then Oulipian writing takes the literary preoccupation with signifiers to an extreme that stands conventional linguistic priorities on their heads. Take for example this excerpt—a lipogram in which all vowels other than o have been excluded—from Eunoia, by contemporary Canadian poet Christian Bök:

> Monks who vow to do God's work go forth from donjons of monkhood to show flocks lost to God how God's word brooks no crooks who plot to do wrong. Folks who go to Sodom kowtow to Moloch, so God drops H-bombs of horror onto poor townsfolk, most of whom mock Mormon proofs of godhood. Folks who do not follow God's norms word for word woo God's scorn, for God frowns on fools who do not conform to orthodox protocol. Whoso honors no cross of dolors nor crown of thorns doth go on, forsooth, to sow worlds of sorrow. Lo! No Song of Solomon comforts Job or Lot, both of whom know for whom gongs of doom doth toll. Oh, mondo doloroso. 60

In reading more traditional poetry, the reader tends to focus first on the content being expressed, and then to experience sonic felicities as a kind of bonus. But in Eunoia and similar texts, the constraints on signifiers are so extreme and obvious that they come to the forefront of the reading

experience. That such constrained language manages also make fairly coherent sense starts to seem like the product of incredible virtuosity. Here, the play and pleasure of signifiers is primary, and what is signified becomes the bonus.

Stitched Fragments, Disruptive Readings

Similarly, Mullen's Sleeping with the Dictionary structures itself first and foremost around the sensual pleasures of language, around the beauty and humor a play of signifiers can produce. As in Bök's Eunoia, sometimes the games and constraints to which Mullen subjects signifiers make it seem miraculous that any sense is produced at all. And in this context, the greater marvel still is that this delightfully playful, inviting book manages to maintain an insistent, historically and geographically specific political engagement. (As we will see, it is only when the book's political engagement relaxes—or, less often, when it usurps linguistic play's primacy—that Sleeping with the Dictionary fails to delight.)

"Between" (9) is one of the book's most strictly and identifiably patterned game-poems. As printed in Sleeping with the Dictionary, its eleven lines read:

> My ass acts bad
> Devil your ears Charybdis
> Good engagements deep blue sea
> Heaven my eyes your elbow
> Last night jobs hard place
> Now his legs hell
> Rock the lines me
> Scylla her breasts shinola

Shit the sheets then

Yesterday my thighs this morning

You your toes today

The poem can be imagined as divided into three vertical columns (A, B, C).

A	B	C
My ass	acts	bad
Devil	your ears	Charybdis
Good	engagements	deep blue sea
Heaven	my eyes	your elbow
Last night	jobs	hard place
Now	his legs	hell
Rock	the lines	me
Scylla	her breasts	shinola
Shit	the sheets	then
Yesterday	my thighs	this morning
You	your toes	today

In column B Mullen has arranged eleven plural nouns that commonly occur as the objects of the preposition between. Of these, seven are intimately bodily: the cerebral ears, the threatened eyes, the legs, breasts, thighs, toes, and the metonymically sexual sheets. Of the four remaining, two imply unemployment—engagements and jobs—while the other two refer to

dramatic loci of, respectively, suspended and surfeit meaning—acts and lines.

Eleven common phrases and idioms beginning with between have been split into columns A and C: Scylla, for example, appears in A and Charybdis in C; devil in A and deep blue sea in C; shit in A and shinola in C. But since the items within each column have been arranged alphabetically (except her breasts, which have sagged far below their place), Scylla has become detached from Charybdis to recombine into a new phrase: "Scylla her breasts shinola" (line 8). The effect is a cubist jumble of body parts and economic anxiety couched in tough talk. Each line becomes a three-windowed slot machine (or maybe the children's mismatching toy Ole Million Face). Sometimes the recombined phrases work as new sentences ("My ass acts bad," line 1; "Shit the sheets then," line 9), but more frequently the fit is less comfortable—lines like "Good engagements deep blue sea" (3) and "Now his legs hell" (6) offer potential sense, but elliptically—the reader must supply connective tissue to fill the interstices, or in other words, the reader is now responsible for what comes between. The inherent equivocality of between-ness becomes evident: pushing themselves between columns A and C, the contents of column B both separate the elements of established idiom and glue together the fragments once that idiom is fractured. In the context of economic and bodily vulnerability, such equivocal between-ness carries high stakes.

In contrast with Baraka's "Understanding Readiness," "Between" never spells out what those stakes are. Nor does it spell out even the constraints that have structured its construction; Mullen has left the three-column structure for alert readers to discover, offering the poem's prepositional key—between—in its title as a person lending her house to

friends for the weekend might leave a key under the mat, inviting readers to the pleasure of discovering its organizational principle via their familiarity with the discourses from which the poem's idioms are drawn.[7] Kenneth Roemer might describe the relatively straightforward "Understanding Readiness" as a utopian text "emphasi[zing] . . . the normative-prescriptive functions"—a text which "privileges the author and text as creator and transmitter of representations of" (or exhortations to create) "better worlds that 'correct' the evils of the present" in what "could be termed the conversion experience model of utopian reading" (63). Structured to invite readers to an open-ended process of meditation on the physical and economic pleasures and risks of liminality, "Between" emphasizes what Roemer identifies as utopian writing's other function: the iconoclastic. "Utopias disrupt assumptions about the reader's present. The disruptions cause confusion, but they can also create room . . . for the development of critical perspectives about the present hitherto unexamined by the reader . . . The text invite[s] the reader's confusion." In "Between," readers arrive at a productive confusion about the political stakes of being "between" via an initial, inviting confusion about poetic syntax and structure. At the same time that the poem performs this utopian function, it is not necessarily a political poem per se—its withholding of the context and stakes of the between-ness it probes makes it feel more like a pre- or potentially political poem, a poem whose game-structure moves readers into the playfully alert and critical mental state that Sleeping with the Dictionary—like active citizenship itself—requires.

[7] I use discourses—plural—to point up the very different milieux in which a speaker would likely utter the phrases "between shit and shinola," for example, and "between Scylla and Charybdis." Such a blending of discourses is another of Daniel Kane's criteria for inclusion in the contemporary poetic avant garde, and it's a technique Mullen frequently uses to inclusive, democratizing effect.

The unrhymed and unmetered prose blocks "Dim Lady" (20) and "Variation on a Theme Park" (75) also present a reconsideration of the poem qua poem as their invitation to disruptive reading. Rewriting or translating Shakespeare's Sonnet 130—"My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun"—complete clause by complete clause (Mullen uses a period everywhere Shakespeare uses a period or a semicolon), these poems play on the ultimate canonical English-language poet—Shakespeare—as he writes in the ultimate canonical English-language poetic form—the sonnet. The poems are reverent in their very irreverence, marking the English canon as a set of objects to be enjoyed deconstructively and interactively rather than treated as fragile relics. Mullen's collaging of readymade contemporary vernacular phrases and idioms onto Shakespearian templates highlights the readerliness of her poetic practice, encouraging reader to identify with writer and to try his own hand at the games she plays with language. These two poems arise from exercises she offers to her creative writing students, a fact which illustrates Mullen's belief in their infectious generativity (Kane 135).

"Dim Lady" retains Sonnet 130's basic sense, but trades Shakespeare's idiom for an exaggeratedly slangy 2002 vernacular; "Variation on a Theme Park" modifies the Oulipian game of S+7 to retain the original poem's syntax and the initial letters of all the poem's substantive words (personal pronouns and forms of the verb "be" change their initial letters as the mistress becomes Walt and verb usage is updated), but transform Shakespeare's love poem into the lament of one lost in a nightmarishly commodified and Disneyfied late-capitalist American landscape. In fact, both revisions of the sonnet evoke an overwhelmingly commercial contemporary landscape; "Dim Lady"'s diction is not only casual and irreverent (very much in keeping with the spirit of Shakespeare's original

poem), it is also infected at every turn with brand names (Red Lobster, Slinkys, Shakey's Pizza Parlors, Muzak, Twinkie) and references to advertising (neon, minty-fresh mouthwashes) and commodified human beauties (Marilyn Monroes, any lanky model or platinum movie idol). Such infection reveals the extent of the commercialization of the century American milieu: to speak in our idiom is to spew product placements, even (especially?) in the intimate space of the love poem.

"Dim Lady"'s translation also points up the insistent whiteness of beauty standards, both in Shakespeare's time and—even more—our own. The Shakespearian mistress fails to live up to the Elizabethan ideal of snow-white skin, coral-red lips, rose-red cheeks, and silky black hair; Mullen's dim lady similarly fails in the quest for the perfect red-and-white complexion. But whereas Shakespeare's mistress' hair is black and wiry—a type of hair that in the U.S. might tend to racialize the mistress as other than strictly white—Mullen's lady is blonde. And yet, even this whitening fails to approach the new standard of white perfection: the dim lady's blonde is "dishwater," whereas she aspires to the "platinum" of a "movie idol" like Marilyn Monroe. Given that platinum blonde is so unnatural a hair color that its popularity as a beauty standard is linked with the tacitly acknowledged expense of maintaining it (everyone knows Norma Jeane was really a brunette), even the whitening-up of the updated beauty standard smacks of commodity fetish.

"Variation on a Theme Park," in contrast to Shakespeare's sonnet, is not a love poem at all but a cry of "loneliness as reckless as any bought with free coupons." The personal, flesh-and-blood mistress has become that two-dimensional mass-mediated image, Mickey Mouse; "heaven" has become "halogen-light," "perfumes," "breath" and "cheek" are now

"purchases," "bargains" and "checkbook" and the result of this consumer isolation is that "roses damasked, red" become "roadkill damaged, riddled;" "delight" becomes "deliberation;" "snow" becomes "sorrow" and "love," "loneliness." Indeed, where Shakespeare's original poem proclaims that the mistress's imperfections do not dampen the lover's desire, Mullen's revisitation both advances and hamstrings the argument that alienation is no less tragic or desperate for occurring in a banal commercial fantasyland: exactly how "reckless" *is* "any souvenir bought with free coupons"?[8] Shakespeare and Mullen both claim transcendent emotion for the unromantic and quotidian world, but whereas Shakespeare's relatively sincere speaker seeks to reconcile flawed reality with ideal perfection, Mullen takes on the even more complex and harrowing search for authenticity and significance in an economy where everything is available for discount—and she does so in a voice whose surreal bathos threatens to overwhelm the argument with comically juxtaposed details.

Turning to another highly contested and racially segregated segment of the late-capitalist economy of Southern California, Mullen offers us "Bilingual Instructions" (10)—despite its bilinguality one of the most transparent, and transparently political, poems in the book. Beginning with a reference to the 1998 referendum in which Californian voters passed the Unz initiative requiring all public school instruction to be conducted in English, the poem reveals Californian priorities by noting where Spanish instructions are not to be found ("on ballots") and where they are ("on curbside waste receptacles"). The message is clear: California (whoever that

[8] The ambivalent recklessness of a souvenir "bought" for free indicates the pinnacle (or nadir) of the plastic Disney fantasy: the souvenir's free status means there are no limits, but there are also no stakes.

comprises) insists that voters speak English, but graciously extends its regulations regarding proper waste disposal to English and Spanish speakers alike. The Spanish speaker's place is not in the voting booth, but at the curbside, keeping his own neighborhood orderly as well as the wealthy white neighborhood where he might work: the final couplet, "*Recortes de jardin solamente* / Yard clippings only" brings to mind the figure of the hired Mexican gardener, a person himself reduced to yard clippings by an "only" sign—reminiscent, in the apartheid climate Mullen reveals, of the "white" and "colored" signs of Jim Crow. By arranging the poem into six couplets the last three of which are translating pairs, Mullen mimics the non-English speaker's experience of meaning withheld from him: the lines in the "English" position of the first two couplets read "to bilingual instruction in schools" and "to bilingual instructions on ballots," but so far from including Spanish speakers in debate on these issues, the positionally "Spanish" line of each couplet offers only "Californians say No" in place of translations. Even when in the third couplet "Californians" finally "say Yes," what they've said yes to is the longest and potentially least comprehensible English line; the bilingual demonstration that follows is a crushing mockery of real inclusion.

Similarly, "We Are Not Responsible" (77) adopts the language of standard airline disclaimers to articulate the United States' hand-washing social Darwinist stance towards foreigners, immigrants, and people of color within its borders. Maintaining an ironic tone that balances on a knife's edge between comic and terrifying, Mullen begins with a reference to this country's failure, in the century and a half since emancipation, to offer reparations or even an official apology to the families of former slaves—"We are not responsible for your lost or stolen relatives"—and builds,

disclaimer by disclaimer, to a climax—"Please remain calm, or we can't be held responsible for what happens to you"—which is homicidally threatening under any circumstances, but becomes psychotic in a context which implies that it is spoken in the calm and cheerful disembodied voice of official corporatespeak. Mullen's adoption of the "we" point of view satirizes the language of corporate disclaimer, but the first-person plural also subtly implicates both reader and implied author in the disavowed cultural violence the poem describes: Mullen skewers corporate American complicity and complacency, but implicitly acknowledges her own—and her implied reader's—membership in the American economy.

Placed side by side with Baraka's "Understanding Readiness," Mullen's "Bilingual Instructions" and "We Are Not Responsible" still feel quite geared towards the iconoclastic or disruptive end of Roemer's scale of utopian literary function. In the former poem, the first three couplets simply report recent California legislation and the last three simply transcribe the instructions on curbside waste receptacles; all moral comment, all didactic prescription, is communicated by the juxtaposition of those first three couplets with the second three, by the poem's translating-couplet structure, by resonances between its language and historical languages of exclusion, and by its context in this book of diversity-celebrating poems. The poem's didactic message is not on the surface, but only available for the reader who is willing to engage the poem analytically. Once tracked down, though, that message is unambiguous. "We Are Not Responsible," though taking its cue from standard disclaimers such as "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone," makes the bitter irony of its we voice unmistakable: "You were detained for interrogation because you fit the profile" and "It's not our fault you were born wearing a gang color" are certainly messages that

contemporary U. S. authority figures often strongly imply, but to speak them explicitly as this poem does is shocking, damning. As iconoclastically reader-centered as Mullen's poems may seem next to Baraka's, in the context of Sleeping with the Dictionary these two are quite prescriptive; in particular, "Bilingual Instructions" lacks the humor—even the dark humor of "We Are Not Responsible"—at the heart of most of the book's poems; the grim purposefulness of "Bilingual Instructions" robs it of a great deal of its poetic excitement and thus its utopian power to disrupt. Somewhat more mysterious, difficult, and thus subversive is another of the book's poems about white California's exploitation and exclusion of immigrant workers.

Couched in ornate nineteenth-century legalese into which the surreal phrase "bitter labor" insistently, repeatedly intrudes, "Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language" (81) feels, at first reading, opaque and mysterious: "Whereas, in the opinion of the Government of the United States the coming of bitter labor to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof . . . " "Bitter labor," it turns out, is the literal English translation of the Chinese term from which the word coolie is derived. The poem paraphrases four sections of the United States' 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, replacing the phrases Chinese laborer and Chinese person wherever they occur with the phrase bitter labor. Thus Mullen renders the language of the Act's xenophobic nightmare foreign—inviting the reader to reflect upon the foreignness, in turn, of the Act's original English to the people it was designed to exclude. On the one hand, the poem's adjusted text now bans not Chinese people, but the grueling work to which they were subjected, from the United States; on the other, its substitution of the labor for the laborer points up the utilitarian objectification Chinese Americans may have experienced in their new

homeland—a place in which they were regarded not as immigrants, citizens, or people, but as laborers.[9]

The metonymic shift from laborer to labor is a loaded one, mirroring as it does the physical synecdoche experienced by alienated workers divorced by late capitalist overspecialization from the satisfaction of crafting a whole object. In New Deal Modernism, Michael Szalay suggests that early twentieth-century avant gardists—the Dadaists, for example, to whom Mullen and other century experimental writers owe so much—were attracted to performance and to arbitrarily constrained creative practices precisely in order to attempt mastery over the relationship of parts to wholes (111-2). Szalay explains,

> Fashioning fully organic texts . . . is a means of producing forms invulnerable to the wounds that beset the body and personal identity . . .a literary text . . . is the aggregation of a specified set of words and the stipulation that this set of words is a unique identity . . . the loss of any one of its words makes it not a lesser version of the original but something categorically different from it. Inviolate, this text is not subject to pain,

[9] Somewhat more puzzling is the poem's dedication or subtitle, "waking up with Enrique Chagoya." Chagoya, the artist whose Line Essence Color adorns the cover of Sleeping with the Dictionary, is a Chicano artist whose highly political, often comic or satirical collaged and mixed-media artworks—like Mullen's poems—draw their inspiration from a wide range of sources ranging from pre-Colombian art to U.S. popular culture. Drawing a parallel between Chagoya's work and Mullen's makes sense, as both their artistic methods and their political stances are similar. But why this poem in specific? In 2004 Chagoya took part in the traveling exhibition "Misleading Trails," designed to promote exchange between Chinese and American artists, but Sleeping with the Dictionary was published in 2002. Of course, since both Mullen and Chagoya live in Los Angeles, it's possible that Mullen knew the exhibition was being organized. At any rate, Chagoya's complex take on economic and racial relations provide a refreshing wake-up call from the xenophobia that produced the Chinese Exclusion Act. The pairing "sleeping with the dictionary" and "waking up with Enrique Chagoya" positions Chagoya—and perhaps, by metonymic extension, creative practice in general or the visual arts in specific—as a livelier alternative to the static, arbitrarily arranged, and institutionally approved printed reference tome. Of course, the erotic tone of the dedication is also undeniable.

> because once altered "it" is a different form unrelated to the original.
>
> 100

Such singular, inviolate texts—a hypermasculine literary response, Szalay shows, to the horrific mayhem of the first World War—are at the same time immensely fragile: they cannot brook any alteration. Following her Dadaist predecessors, Mullen instead crafts flexible texts: not only ones vulnerable to—yet able to survive—wounding, but even texts that are in a sense pre-wounded. I am referring, of course, to the collage-like texture of many of Mullen's poems. "The brash act of taking other people's property and calling it your own," Kane writes—referring to property like Shakespeare's or the 1882 U. S. Congress's—is "both subversive and democratic. Collage prompts us to think about the very nature of language and identity" (12) as we encounter familiar phrases in strange contexts, textual bodies broken apart and rearranged into new, surprising, and vital wholes haunted, for readers who recognize them, by their original configurations.

Mullen's metonymic and synecdochal play invites readers into tricky linguistic territory. At basic levels of meaning-making, metonymy "does not call for the magical"—that is, flashily "poetic"—"sharing of meaning that a metaphor implies; instead, it relies on connections that build up over time and the associations of usage;" in other words, in contradistinction to the insistently literary device of metaphor, "metonymy places us in the historical world of events and situations" (McLaughlin 85). Dealing as they do in common-sense associations, metonymy and synecdoche risk contributing to languages of alienated labor and of essentialist stereotype—as Kate Pearcy

points out, "the demand that minority texts be 'sufficiently representative' in order to claim critical attention . . . identifies the persistent logic of part for whole" (28). But with her disruptive cut-and-paste poetic methods Mullen tends instead to point up and upset typical, stereotypical, thoughtless metonymies and synecdoches. Mullen's observation, "I can be a black woman while chewing gum and thinking about Disneyland or supermarkets, while reading Stein or Shakespeare, just as I can be a black woman contemplating conventional representations of black women in literature, media, and popular culture" (Kane 30) indicates her sensitivity to the myriad unexamined and unacknowledged parts of creative production and of human experience, whose complexity—when acknowledged—always far exceeds expectation, stereotype, and category. And if the wholes Mullen creates still feel holey, fragmented—well, that too contributes to their utopian function: Mullen's poetry, like John Ashbery's as Kane describes it, "attempts to evoke the urge towards wholeness even as it recognizes that it cannot possibly capture everything. But to fail . . . [presents the reader with] an even greater responsibility to continue chasing after the thought, even if it has no final, conclusive end" (21). The open-endedness of Mullen's synecdochal form exerts a moral and epistemological obligation upon the reader.

At the same time, that fragmentary, non sequitur-filled, telegraphically synecdochal diction recalls the discourse with which we are barraged as we spend more and more time online. "Swift Tommy" (70), a poem comprising a series of eight quasi-nonsensical Tom Swifties[10], is a groan-inducing exercise in punster brainstorm, and yet from its ridiculous opening "nostalgia for parentheses" to its final image of virtual masturbation, it builds a sense

[10] A Tom Swifty is a type of pun involving direct reported speech: "I've been eating lemons," said Tom sourly.

of increasing technological anxiety and loss. Such a punning form manages to pack gestures towards a huge number of complicated issues in remarkably few words, while the form's reference to Victor Appleton's wholesomely futuristic tales of a boy inventor contributes a whiff of retrofuturism to the poem's cybermelancomic stance.

In "Swift Tommy"'s first sentence, Sister Ka's (an anagram for asterisk's) nostalgia for punctuation seems not bizarre but commonplace in the context of burgeoning textspeak; a punctuational vocabulary that includes dashes, asterisks, parentheses, and dingbats as well as periods indicates an educational sophistication once associated with at least upper-middle-class socioeconomic standing, now being technologically banished from the writing of all but professional writers and academics. In the third sentence, it is the critic's "moving finger" which speaks; alluding to The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam's pronouncement—

> The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
> Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
> Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

—the moving finger is a figure for the indelibility of the written word. But this moving finger is "scrawling" about photographs "on the electronic notepad;" the ephemerality of the photograph (etymologically, light-writing) and especially of the electronic communication undermine any such permanency, and the oxymoronic or nonsensical "found topiaries" call into question the authority—even the identifiability—of artists and authors in the age of mechanical reproduction and Duchampian appropriation.

The next question—"Was it plastic or a fetish?"—unpacks itself from a question of relative rigidity (or of the technological origin of materials) to a question of kink to a question of commodity compulsion or mental health care for sale on credit. Double entendres echo back and forth between "the imagineers of indebtedness" and "the psychosurgical micromanagers of desire." That plastic and fetish are posited as mutually exclusive possibilities would seem to evacuate any possibility of intense emotional investment in the synthetic material;[11] opposed in this way, they might also come to stand in for the division between an over-technologized West and a more "primitive," racialized, fetish-producing culture. In fact, in the next enunciation, we see a synthetic material—"mock cashmere"—devouring and incorporating the speaker's "ethnic pride"—a case in which technological commodity culture is not opposed to the racialized Other at all, but eager to appropriate his culture and leave him spewing paraphrased commercial slogans: "I can't believe it's not bitter."

The next two Swifties view the body and the body politic as overlapping sites of nostalgic regret. In the first—"'Think of your appendix as an archaeological site, or a library of preventable diseases,' the bespectacled white-coated professional added gratuitously to the critical list"—a vestigial body part (the appendix) becomes a cultural and public-health vestige. This apotheosis "burst"s the already-"ruined institutional pyramid scheme"—presenting medicine ("the bespectacled white-coated professional" who advises on appendices must be a doctor) as an artifact not only twice removed to the past, but as fraudulent in the first place; if the

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[11] The Barthesian mythology of plastic both evacuates it of the power to become a commodity fetish—"until now imitation materials have always indicated pretension . . . they aimed at reproducing cheaply the rarest substances, diamonds, silk, feathers . . . Plastic has climbed down, it is a household material"—and elevates it to the ultimate commodity fetish—because "the whole world can be plasticized," "objects will be invented for the sole pleasure of using them."

body is gratuitous and the medical profession corrupt, the body's continued health—either on its own merits or as maintained by social mechanisms—becomes a slippery hope. Meanwhile "the recidivist backslider falling off the anniversary wagon of second-hand chainsmoking reactionaries" vows "Never again!"—verbally striding into a hopeful future while inhaling and embodying a multiply compulsive, both private (anniversary, smoking) and public (recidivism, reactionism) repetition of the past.

Finally, technology appears to close down the human realm entirely, leaving "the virtual master of cyberpornotopia" presumably online and thus in the most public of all possible spheres, yet disembodied and alone; despite his nominal mastery and the agency he assumes in making an obscene suggestion, that suggestion reveals that he is in fact powerless: "If I had you where you've got me, I'd give myself a blowjob." But he doesn't; it's his own "pixilated hologram" who has him at its mercy in a censored scene of imaginary masturbatory sub- or abjection. This representation of discorporated self-disempowerment is the logical conclusion to a poem this dystopian in its fractured and frustrated content—even while it offers readers pleasure and a reminder of their own relative, and embodied, power.

Conclusion: Artistic Excess as Utopian Someplace

This examination of Sleeping with the Dictionary ends at the book's beginning, with another poem whose diction of frustration and inability, in ironic tension with its own playful generativity, points up Mullen's and the reader's combined creative power. "All She Wrote" (3) opens the book paradoxically with a phrase generally used as an ending; taking the traditional opening apologia to its logical extreme, this prose block piles up excuse after

excuse for not writing until one hardly expects any book to follow at all.[12] Yet the poem's denials list precisely the methods Mullen will employ to write the book: She writes, "I can't write back. I never read your letter. I can't say I got your note . . . Your hand's illegible. Your postcards were defaced," but the book is everywhere a writing back—addressing, contesting, and revising the utterances that constitute our environment, and thus modeling the active, argumentative stance of her utopian reader. She writes, "my computer was stolen. Now I'm unable to process words. I suffer from aphasia," but the book is very specifically a kind of aphasic processing of words, a series of experimental computations in which language becomes defamiliarized, disoriented from its ordinary meaning. "Didn't you get a card from me yet? What can I tell you?" the speaker asks, but the book is her card and contains what she can tell us. "I admit I haven't been recycling . . . I didn't get to the market. I meant to clip the coupons"—but through each poem drift recycled language (language destined for a Recyclopedia?), salvaged parts, commodities of all kinds—the book is in fact an exercise in the recycling of late-capitalist American cultural flotsam and jetsam. In the poem's final sentence, "Oprah came on with a fabulous author plugging her best-selling book"—a glut of advertising of which an experimental poet, even one as established as Mullen, can only dream. The popularly and financially successful author, with her even more successful television

[12] "Critics and utopian authors [seem to believe] that after witnessing the horrors of world wars and tragically failed attempts by Hitler and Stalin to impose utopian blueprints, and after reading the powerful dystopian visions of Zamiatin, Huxley, and Orwell—late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century readers cannot and will not believe that humans can create perfect worlds or that writers are capable of envisioning a perfection that would appeal to many more than one reader, the author. The (modern) classic expression of this assumed skeptical reader is the voice of Le Guin's narrator in 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.' She repeatedly questions the reader's ability to accept the possibility of a better world ('Do you believe? . . . No? Then . . .'); admits her inability to articulate such a world ('How can I tell you about the people of Omelas?'); and [explicitly] gives readers freedom to imagine their own Omelas, since she knows her words will never satisfy the readers" (Roemer 62). "All She Wrote" engages in a similarly apologetic direct address of the skeptical utopian reader.

advocate, provides the final interruption "preventing" the production of the book in our hands.

And yet Oprah Winfrey makes a telling funhouse reflection for Harryette Mullen: both of these black Southern women have succeeded in creating racially integrated audiences for their cultural productions; their cross-media television-literature projects might be seen as roughly symmetrical; both promote democratic access to literature. If Winfrey corresponds to the Kenya Dunston character in Percival Everett's Erasure, Mullen (at least superficially) much more closely resembles Monk Ellison: of limited fame and only middle-class means, but highly educated, sophisticated, highbrow, avant-garde. Whereas Monk's deadly earnestness, his partial capitulation to complicity with forces he despises, and the highly ironically charged distance he maintains between himself and all of his cultural productions—from his paper on S/Z to his novel Fuck—leave him mortally fragmented by the end of Everett's novel, Mullen's pre-wounded book maintains a sense of control and good humor throughout via its gamelike persistence in rearranging fragments of autobiography, high and mass culture in versatile (or equivocal) patterns that can be shored up against culture's ruin or against its hegemonic dominion equally. It is precisely in her avant-garde word-nerd games that Mullen locates a resiliently perverse silliness[13]—precisely her highly educated "monumental / music made of syllables" that she aligns with the outsider artist's "heartbroken crystal / cathedral with gleaming walls / of Orangina bottles" ("Outside Art," page 56)—precisely from the Oulipo, an obscure French apex of erudition, that

[13] I can't help but contrast Mullen with sober, responsible fellow word nerd MacNolia Cox (in A Van Jordan's book of poems, MacNolia). Could a sense of the absurd have eased MacNolia's troubled relationships with education, work, and her husband? Or is it Mullen's privileged position relative to MacNolia that allows her the luxury of silliness?

she derives her poems' childish ability to expose and confound power structures by using language orthogonally to workaday utilitarian aims. Sleeping with the Dictionary represents an extreme version of one of poetry's central projects: opening a space of imaginative liberty, available equally for beauty and babble, by refusing linguistic instrumentalism and thus placing its pages, according to the language-poetry view of such matters, outside the economic sphere.[14]

In his essay "The Burden of Culture," Jonathan Sterne boils down the question of poetry's function—of instrumentalism versus functionless pleasure—to a question of the uses of leisure time.

> Where the culture industry looks to each possible text or practice as a means of revenue generation, cultural studies considers each text or practice in terms of its possible and actual political uses. . . . leisure time is political capital. In a strange way, both the political economists and populists have mirrored the very capitalist logic they seek to criticize. . . . We must let go of the idea that all cultural practices can or should be converted to politically productive labor. Otherwise, we are not better than ratings companies like Arbitron. 82, 97

Are we convinced by Sterne's insistence that "a humane society would allow for meaningless, nondirected activity that nonetheless uses human energy,

[14] Of course, the language-poetry view that noninstrumental language is untainted by the commercial sphere overlooks that fact that books of poetry are available for sale—this one handsomely printed by a prestigious and financially stable university press—and provide poets with publication credit important to their own economic stability.

effort and creativity"? If "the alternative is to put our subjects to work day in and day out, which leaves them to a rather dim social fate" (99), then Bob Holman's pro-instrumentalist question, "if the poem were to become [an actual tool for building a new society], wouldn't this obviate its imaginative power, its anti-utilitarian purpose as the site where one can go to get away from the world's madness?" starts to sound counterproductive. What kind of utopia offers to relieve us of the burdensome necessity of imaginative play (as if escapism were such play's only motivation)? But the power of Mullen's poetry is that it works politically and plays at the same time—that it models a style of critical and creative thought that in its very disruption of meaning embodies both gestural delight and activism. Just as the Oulipian method Mullen shares with Bök turns poetic reading practice on its head to produce signifier-play as necessity and signification as exciting excess, so the poems in this volume are so babblingly playful that their grave political implications become necessary to the pleasure of the poems' games.

Moral gravity's necessity to Sleeping with the Dictionary's pleasure becomes particularly clear in the case of the few poems whose lack of political import leaves them to fizzle, too slight to carry their weight. For instance, the titular "Sleeping with the Dictionary" (67) may paradoxically appear as one of the book's less interesting poems—perhaps because, for all its clever local puns, the poem's conceit (an erotic, oneiric encounter with language as antidote to insomnia) never moves beyond the title—or perhaps because the poem remains in the bedroom rather than spreading beyond the private, traditionally lyric first-person descriptive mode to connect its personal meditation with the larger political questions that lend force and consequence to so many of Mullen's playful experiments.

Other poems whose agenda does not push as far beyond play and the personal sphere include Mullen's three poems for her family—"Ask Aden" (8) and "O, 'Tis William" (54) for her nephews and "Kirstenography" (46-7) for her sister. The former two are certainly fun tributes to children, playing on the boys' names, but are these games fascinating enough to hold the interest of readers not named Aden or William Otis? The poems' invitation can be extended if readers imagine the poems as prompting us to play similar games with our own loved ones' names. Ultimately, though, these games lack the excess of moral weight or public import that invigorates the book's better poems. "Kirstenography," a biography of Mullen's sister Kirsten, at first glance appears to be complete nonsense: "K was burn at the bend of the ear in the mouth of Remember. She was the fecund chill burn in her famish." But reading the poem aloud reveals it to be an exercise in homophonic substitution: "K was born at the end of the year in the month of December. She was the second child born in her family." The poem's homophonic structure draws attention to sound, to the similarities between and among signifiers signifying entirely different concepts; it invites the reader to piece together the elements that have been replaced by homophones in order to make sense of the story of Kristin's life.

However, the task of re-translating is a finite one, offering limited rewards: though local pleasures swirl around particular irreverent substitutions ("per rental doodly" for "parental duty," "reckoned comics" for "economics," "Cutie Ostentatious" for "UT Austin, Texas"), the life story that emerges strikes a well-educated middle-class reader as happy, certainly, but also eminently ordinary—K is born, grows up in a loving, education-valuing household, excels in school, finds a congenial job, marries, divorces, remarries, has two children, and lives happily ever after ("loved

shapely over laughter"). Once the poem is re-translated, the joke is spent; the poem has limited re-read and meditation value. At a stretch, the poem's political value might lie within the very ordinary happiness of this story of a black girl raised by a divorced mother and yet firmly in possession, by the end, of the prizes mainstream American life offers: the well-educated and happily married Kirsten might represent a corrective to the dearth of published stories, lamented by Zora Neale Hurston in her 1950 essay "What White Publishers Won't Print," "about the internal lives and emotions of . . . non-Anglo-Saxon peoples within our borders, above the class of unskilled labor" (117) or the "insistence on defeat in a story where upperclass Negroes are portrayed" (120). The veiling of Kirsten's story in a playful homophonic code might gesture towards white audiences' traditional reluctance to hear such a story. But such a reading demands more internal tension, more of Kirsten's inner experience, than the poem provides. "Kirstenography" appears similar to the opening of Ron Silliman's Tjanting: fun, but in no way radical.

I offer these counterexamples to help focus my account of what Sleeping with the Dictionary does offer in most of its poems: an approach to poetry that draws attention to convergences between the techniques of the American avant-garde—an avant-garde that Silliman's "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject" seems to identify as white—and traditional African-American modes of expression. In Producing American Races, Patricia McKee traces how Toni Morrison's characters "enter into exchanges in which referents"—that is, signifieds—"are suspect. Any image or word, then, calls for a critical response . . . What becomes critical to black identity is . . . how people respond to one another" (192). Harryette Mullen's poems respond to their cultural environment by sending out renewed calls. They

reveal difficulties of language—both inherent linguistic problems and the cynical snarls of corporate Orwellianism—which make language a precarious (yet beautiful) medium in which to build coalitions and mount political critique. Her quotational and citational choices evoke not just synecdoche and wounding, but also recycling and composting—projects in which disposable rubbish is re-crafted to nourish and delight; her inclusive, wide-angled cut-and-paste aesthetic method does not allow for reductive analyses. Sleeping with the Dictionary never reduces race in America to a black/white binary, for instance, but instead embeds questions of identity (gendered and sexual identities that come in black, white, yellow, red, and brown) in a larger discourse about languages, economics, power, and the nation. Mullen's poetry includes but transcends—transcends by including—criticism and propaganda, reveling in the artistic excess that creates space for beauty and pleasure. That excessive space—that utopian noplace—is the place Mullen has set for reader-guests from a wide variety of discursive backgrounds; she invites us in to make it someplace together.

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