

Mongrel Poethics: **Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary***

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I. The Poethical Background

Harryette Mullen is one of the most recognized experimental or “exploratory” (Keller 2) poets in the U.S. today. As Lorenzo Thomas noted, she “enjoys a deserved reputation as a writer who is developing into a major figure in contemporary American poetry” (697). In her work, the influences of Gertrude Stein, French feminism, Language writing, and the Black Arts aesthetic meet. Those various influences are all on display in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002), her fifth collection, and she adds Oulipo games to the mix for another twist. In that book, she “looks at the politics of language itself, whether it originates at the center or at the margins of culture” (Mullen, “Everything We Can Imagine” 1015).

Indeed, she often centers the marginal. As she remarks in "The Solo Mysterioso Blues," "A lot has been said of how America is a miscegenated culture, how it is a product of a mixing and mingling of diverse races and cultures and languages." She then turns her focus to the word "mongrel," which, she notes, "comes from 'among.' Among others. We are among; we are not alone. We are all mongrels" (652). Mullen's exploratory, miscegenated among-ness creates a kind of "poethic": the "poethical" as theorized by Joan Retallack is nonlinear, violating a masculine logic. According to Retallack, "In the Möbius comic strip that seems to be our cultural default mode, irrational Feminine is the swerve (or swish) away from stolid Masculine rationalism" (104). In its "swerves," a poethics is complex, defying "rampant fundamentalism" (49). In considering how to "frame a poetics of the swerve," Retallack argues that "[i]n today's world politics a geometry of straight lines in the sand ('we dare you to cross') is obsolete" (1).

She continues by identifying "a poethical attitude" as a "poetics of responsibility with the courage of the swerve," and she argues that "swerves" "are necessary to dislodge us from reactionary allegiances and nostalgias" (3). In this "necessary" dislodging, a poethics is created by readers in cooperation with writers and texts; as Retallack writes, "I would rather conspire (active voice) than be inspired (passive voice)" (123). Thus, a "poetics of responsibility" is not just a poetics that adheres to moral or ethical obligations but one that asks for a reader's response, or active involvement in the text. Retallack's writerly conspiracy parallels Juliana Spahr's idea of "autonomy" in one of

the key critical considerations of Mullen's work. Spahr notes that "Mullen's emphasis is on reading as a communal act of resistance, a utopian, dissident space" (*Everybody's Autonomy* 110-11). Mullen herself indicates a poethically conspiratorial aesthetic: she has a "serious belief in poetry's social usefulness." She claims to be "always trying to multiply the points of entry for any reader or anyone sitting in the audience listening'" (McEnaney). In the spirit of those multiple entry points, I will sometimes swerve outside the bounds of standard academic discourse with references to contemporary events on which an active reader might focus in reading Mullen's work. More than in most poems, Mullen's play with language pushes the reader into such active contact with contemporary events.

II. The Swerve

In the conspiratorial, actively resistant pages of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, Mullen, who is herself African-American, writes out of a problematized—or mongrelized—lineage of black writing, recalling for me Malcolm X's entrance into a fully literate world as he not-so-simply copies out the entire dictionary, finding liberation in its apparently rigid classificatory systems (Malcolm X, *Autobiography* 175-76). His graphemic repetitions in the act of writing lead to an active engagement with the political embeddedness of language. Mullen's poethic similarly engages the reader; her miscegenated text requires the reader to conspire, not least in her organizing principle. The poems are ordered by

alphabetizing the titles, placed according to an external, linear logic against which a person must read as he or she recognizes references and implications that cross from poem to poem.

Mullen's conspiracy incorporates the feminine challenge to stolid masculinity in a poem like "Kamasutra Sutra" (45), which at first appears to be simply a joke about male self-involvement in its euphemistic description of sexual intercourse. When "the holy one," while "in a passionate embrace / with his beloved wife," reports that he is just about to reach "enlightenment," his wife responds, "'I'm truly happy for you, my love, / and if you give me another minute, / I believe I'll get there too.'" The feminine, it might be said, falls outside the intelligible logic of masculine consummation and standard narrative closure, becoming his anti-climax in trying to delay it and reach her own. Of course, "enlightenment" refers to a state of spiritual awakening in Eastern religious traditions. Given that "enlightenment" is also a dominant metaphor for historically- and male-determined Western systems of logic, as evidenced by the period identified as the Enlightenment in the Western world, the poem challenges that logic, arguing playfully for a logic that includes the feminine.

"Kamasutra Sutra," with its subversion of simple narrative sexuality, points toward the title poem and its love affair with the dictionary, a book that can always wait for the arrival of its reader, no matter how much it might seem a compendium of "stolid Masculine rationalism." In the title poem (67), Mullen emphasizes the subversive, swerving exchange between reader and writer as she uses multiple plays on words either rooted in or alliterative with the Latin *vert-ere*, "to turn": "versatile," "conversant," "verbal,"

"averse," "perverse," "vision," "lover's." Of course, a poethical swerve is also a kind of turning, a turning away from the straight and narrow of conventional cultural denotation.

Under the influence of her swerving dissidence, "Aroused by myriad possibilities, we try out the most perverse positions in the practice of our nightly act, the penetration of the denotative body of the work" (67). Here, "the work" is not just the poetic work, the published text, but the political work; thus, it is the *poethical* work. In the sexualized language of penetrating the denotative body of the work, Mullen suggests the function of innovative poetry to break open assumptions of transparent signification, assumptions that lead to an oversimplification of the denotative properties of language. In penetrating that "denotative body," we create "perverse positions," a creation that indicates a turning against those denotative assumptions.

In the African-American tradition of signifying, turning what is good to what is "bad" and *vice-versa*—a kind of perversion—becomes the ethical model in positioning against dominant discourses, as Mullen has recognized in commenting on the Black Arts movement:

[B]lackness had signified negation, lack, deprivation, absence of culture. So people took all of the things that had been pejorative and stigmatized, and made them very positive. . . . Words were *turned around* [my emphasis] in their meaning and all the things that were thought of as being pejorative aspects of blackness became the things to be praised. (Interview by Cynthia Hogue)

Trying out “perverse positions,” particularly in the political ethos that underlies this volume, is a positive gesture. Such a gesture informs the opening sentence of the title poem: “I beg to dicker with my silver-tongued companion.” The perversity in this sentence, of course, lies in the play on the Standard English phrase signifying disagreement: “I beg to differ.” Mullen has said that she “want[s] to use the pun as a lever to create the possibility of multiple readings” (Interview by Cynthia Hogue). The differ/“dicker” pun is such a lever: dickering with the dictionary creates a conversation, and being in conversation with the dictionary is a kind of challenge to a presumed authority. Indeed, that conversation indicates that the dictionary has no authority beyond what we concede to it. The dictionary describes meanings as they exist, and it is always left behind by innovations in language and new shades of meaning that develop between editions. The dictionary may have an unquestioned authority for many readers, and accepting and conceding the authority of naming to the dictionary without question has its parallels in unreflective obedience to political and legal authority. The act of dickering contests the dictionary’s presumed authority, thus complicating that authority, and, according to Retallack, “In times of rampant fundamentalism complex thought is a political act” (49). The swerve away from the assumed obviousness of rampant political and intellectual fundamentalism turns me toward Mullen’s more overtly political poems.

III. Against American Fundamentalism

Mullen's poethic contrasts with the rampant American fundamentalism that swept the U.S. in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Towers the year before *Sleeping with the Dictionary* was published, and that continues to be a significant influence in American politics and public life. In adding the qualifier "American" to Retallak's concept of fundamentalism, I mean to suggest the neoconservative combination of simplistic nationalism, Christian fundamentalism, and white supremacy that has gone "rampant" since 9/11. It is reflected in such things as blaming black victims of police and vigilante violence for that violence, demanding strict anti-immigrant legislation, dismantling social welfare programs and voting rights protections, rejecting scientific evidence for climate change and evolution, assuming every Muslim is a potential terrorist sympathizer and supporter, believing that Barack Obama is a secret Muslim and so a terrorist sympathizer, insisting that Christians are an oppressed minority in the U.S. and in particular danger from the Sharia law that Obama wants to impose on America, supporting the "birther" movement that claims the current U.S. president was born in Kenya and is not really an American, and distorting history to construct the American founders as born-again Christians who intended to create a theocracy. In other words, it is a fundamentalism that lives outside "the reality - based community" (Suskind), adhering to its own neoconservative belief systems without question and accusing those who disagree with them of being treasonous,

immoral, and un-American.

Although most of the poems in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* probably were written before 9/11 (Henning 98), Mullen's poethics swerves away from the political "geometry of straight lines in the sand" (Retallack 1) that made "reactionary allegiances" (Retallack 3) even more common in American cultural discourse after the attacks. Indeed, Retallack ties those straight lines directly to the reactionary atmosphere of post-9/11 America. The post-9/11 demonization of any Islamic Other is symptomatic of a strain in American nationalist and racial political fundamentalism that fears foreign difference, a strain that has existed at least as long as America has. Mullen emphasizes the historical depth of that fear in the poem "Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language" (81-82), in which she copies out the bulk of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, simply substituting the term "bitter labor" for the term "Chinese laborers," as in this opening clause: "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" (my emphasis).

While Mullen has been *sleeping* with the dictionary, she refers to "*waking up with Enrique Chagoya*" in this poem's epigraph (81). Of course, to wake up is not just to go from a state of being asleep to a state of being awake; it also suggests realizing the truth of something, becoming aware of reality. Chagoya is an apt choice for this "miscegenated" poem, since his work parallels Mullen's own aesthetic; indeed, one of his etchings supplies the cover art for the book. Chagoya, sounding quite poethical, explains his work as "a visual reflection on various, and often

opposite, cultural realities" (qtd. in "Enrique Chagoya Exhibition"). "Often," he claims, "the result is a non-linear narrative with many possible interpretations" (qtd. in Selz 180). Chagoya's visual art, like Mullen's verbal art, celebrates the mongrelized among-ness of American culture as he perverts dominant paradigms, and he is only one of several "mongrel" artists, including poets, with whom Mullen contextualizes her art in other works in the volume, artists including Douglas Ewart, who creates musical instruments out of found materials, Jayne Cortez, Ted Joans, Richard Wilbur, William Shakespeare, and Bob Kaufman, certainly a miscegenated set of influences.

Given that Chagoya himself has come to the U.S. from Mexico and now teaches at Stanford University in California, and that Mullen has stated that this volume was influenced by living and working in L.A. ("Licked All Over"), a city that has and is in a state that has lost its white majority, the xenophobia of the Chinese Immigration Act takes on particular resonance, especially because California has historically been a major force in anti-Asian-immigrant sentiment. Dominant (white) Americans don't want "bitter labor," but they want labor—happy, unquestioning, obedient labor that is willing to work for wages lower than those other Americans will accept. The desire to both employ and exclude migrant labor is the focus of "Bilingual Instructions" (10), in which Mullen translates American xenophobia to linguistic racism, perverting the language of newspaper headlines into a poem:

Californians say No
to bilingual instruction in schools

Californians say No
to bilingual instructions on ballots

Californians say Yes
to bilingual instructions on curbside waste receptacles

Here is labor that apparently should not be “bitter” even though it is legally hindered from receiving adequate education or participating fully in democratic processes. I suppose they should be happy to have an economically appropriate linguistic directive on the garbage cans, as Mullen ironically suggests when she finishes the poem by translating the instructions on the receptacles, including this directive: “Yard clippings only.” These workers must follow instructions on the garbage cans, but their children cannot get adequate instruction in the schools. “Californians” find it acceptable to use the Spanish language for the yard work, a stereotypical occupation of non-white immigrants, but not for participation in the cultural or democratic work. Of course, identifying the anti-Spanish sentiment as belonging to “Californians” suggests an imagined state in which Californians and Hispanics are two mutually exclusive categories, when, in fact, many Californians are Hispanic. That is, the anti-immigrant contingent wants to draw a simple line between who is and who is not an acceptable Californian, when the issue is much more complex. That line has become, for all practical purposes, “obsolete” (Retallack 1).

Mullen further critiques the white-nationalist rejection of difference, of whomever is non-white or non-English-speaking or just non-conformist, in "Resistance is Fertile" (60). She recasts political culture through one of her many allusions to popular culture, in this case to the Borg, who were antagonists to the crew of the starship Enterprise in the popular science-fiction television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and subsequent *Star Trek* movies. The Borg space ship is a gigantic cube, and the Borg assimilate living beings into their collective by turning those beings into cyborgs without independent thought or existence (Okuda, Okuda, and Mirek 50-2). On her use of popular culture, Mullen said, "'The things that are part of popular culture have displaced poetry. My revenge is to turn that back into poetry'" (McEnaney). That turning, or perverting, swerves into playful language manipulations appropriate to the campy heritage of the *Star Trek* franchise.

Like the immigrants and their children assimilated into the laboring class and locked into that class by an educational system that hinders their education in "Bilingual Instructions," the "you" of "Resistance is Fertile" seems to be important only for its surrender to the digestion of the Borg-voice. The title itself is a punning turn on the Borg hail and warnings: "Resistance is futile"; "You will be assimilated." Mullen's Borg-voice hails the resistant people: "We call you irresponsible, say you're indigestible, and it's undeniably true that it's tough to swallow you. Your data resisted analysis, but if you are not consumed, your flawed construction only proves that we are perfection cubed." That which is culturally indigestible is waste, and the

"indigestibles" likely include the Spanish speakers of "Bilingual Instructions."

Mullen juxtaposes a metaphor of Dracula on to the metaphor of the Borg. The "bloodsucker" has to "worry about irregularity" in the sense that non-conformity, what Mullen might also call "mongrelization," has the potential of disturbing its hegemony. The "irregularity" is part of another extended gastrointestinal metaphor, a mixing of metaphors that she likens to food production, introducing the turn to Dracula as a way "To Cuisinart our metaphors once again." She creates consumable art, art as cuisine playing on a background of assimilationist metaphors like melting pots and salad bowls, the food metaphors and images that have been a staple of ethnic writing.

In the mouth of the Borg, however, this blending mashes everyone together without distinction, and what cannot be mashed is expelled. The "roughage" of the resistant leads to plays on "bowel movement" with Dracula's "smooth movement," which is later echoed by a reference to a Libertarian "avowel movement" in a sentence packed with scatological figurations: the "Pundits" are also full of shit (so to speak) as they "pooh-pooh"; the "law and order candidate" gets off of his "potty to go on a turd-pooty ticket." This leads to piles of "guano," and to the unassimilables, the irregulars, having to shovel it. Those irregulars are also "all pooped out," like waste, like Hispanic or Chinese immigrants in other poems, but also in the sense of being worn down, exhausted, used up, while the Borg machine gathers a foul energy in "breaking a second wind," as Mullen again mashes her metaphors, since to get a second wind means to get renewed

energy and to break wind means to be flatulent. The unassimilables bring energy to the country but reap no rewards of that energy, and the country's treatment of them is foul. Like the ten drops of black liquid that turn paint "Optic White" in Ellison's *Invisible Man* (190-91), the irregulars serve to reinforce the regularity of the dominant Borg-like, inhuman machine.¹ While the irregulars are treated as undesirable, the gastrointestinal truth is that this fiber is necessary for health. As Benjamin Lempert notes, "What gives this poem its particularly political bent [. . .] is the fact that roughage (today the word would be 'fiber'), the 'resistance' that is 'fertile,' keeps a biological system healthy precisely because of its *indigestibility*" (1067).

But not everything that is indigestible is good for the health. Lempert is right when he notes, "if the system (whether politically or linguistically construed) is a type of body, this poem suggests, then it is the very act of linguistic resistance, what Mullen calls 'the false note' or 'the flawed construction,' that functions as the roughage keeping the system healthy, protecting the 'tree of liberty' from constipation" (1067). On the other hand, there is a much more chilling cultural resonance to Mullen's reference to the tree of liberty, a reference that she has adapted from a 1787 letter by Thomas Jefferson in which he wrote, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure" (Jefferson 911). Jefferson's metaphor in his second sentence, although Mullen does not use it directly, clearly connects to her scatology. Mullen's

1) Indeed, Mullen has used that scene as the foundation of a superb critical essay, "Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness."

adaptation of Jefferson reads, "Our constipation requires frequent amendments to feed the tree of liberty." Amending or fixing constipation requires a laxative or a lot of fiber, a laxative produces feces, feces are a kind of "manure," manure is a common fertilizer, and fertilizer "feed[s]" trees (and other plants). Thus, from Lempert's positive perspective, in her allusion to Jefferson, Mullen would seem to support spilling the blood of patriots and tyrants as a means of protecting liberty.

That sort of call seems unlikely, given the current cultural import of Jefferson's statement, which has become a refrain of the far right in America, the most politically fundamentalist segment of American society. The "tree of liberty" statement has therefore come to represent a position that is vehemently and sometimes violently opposed to the progressive politics underlying poems like "Bilingual Instructions" and "Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language," since the far right is often associated with English-only, anti-immigration, and other white-supremacist positions.²⁾ Indeed, those far-right groups might be troublingly irritable and indigestible, but often in ways that out-Borg the

2) For instance, Timothy McVeigh was wearing a t-shirt with Jefferson's first quoted sentence printed on the back when he bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, killing 168 people, which was the most deadly terrorist attack in the U.S. from the Wounded Knee Massacre on December 29, 1890 until 9/11. On the front of the shirt was a picture of Abraham Lincoln with the Latin *sic temper tyrannis*, "thus ever to tyrants," what John Wilkes Booth shouted after assassinating Abraham Lincoln (Michel and Herbeck 269). More recently, we can see the line quoted by people who seem to consider seriously an armed overthrow of the U. S. Government because Barak Obama is the President (Mantyla, Tashman).

Borg-like in desiring conformity from or, more frighteningly, exclusion of all others. Those for whom Jefferson's words are gospel do not celebrate the being "among" in America's "miscegenated culture" that is fundamental to Mullen's poethical aesthetic. Mullen addresses the troubling history and politics of racial division in the poem I will consider next.

IV. Responsibility

Mullen's is a potentially visionary poethics in its crossing over of categorical ethnic/racial and readerly/writerly differences. Again, as Retallack claims, "In times of rampant fundamentalism complex thought is a political act" (49). Consider, for instance, the collection of patriot speech acts from Mullen's "We Are Not Responsible" (77), which reads like instructions from Borg Airlines, since some of the sentences play on phrases commonly heard at airports or on airplanes. Mullen uses a Borg-like first-person plural point of view that reinforces the white-supremacist current in American thought she critiques in poems like "Bilingual Instructions" and "Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language." Among other effects, this poem highlights the tenacity of racial division in the U. S. as Mullen brings together historical legal discrimination against black people with references to events of racial profiling that occurred not long before the publication of the book.

The poem's 18 sentences echo the legal disclaimers found throughout American culture, each with a twist, or "swerve" that

highlights the politics of the statement. The first sentence mimics the common disclaimer, "We are not responsible for lost or stolen articles (or items or valuables, etc.)." The things for which the disclaiming party is not responsible do not usually include human beings, but that is the swerve in Mullen's sentence: "We are not responsible for your lost or stolen relatives." The statement takes on a specifically American historical resonance when the "peculiar institution" of slavery is considered. There have been consistent, often ignored or rejected, requests for reparations and/or apologies from the descendants of the slaves, who were stolen from their families during the slave trade, both trans-Atlantic and domestic. When the history of race enters the field of understanding, what it means to lose one's relatives or have them stolen from one is compounded in its complexity. Furthermore, a disproportionate number of black people in the U. S. are lost to poverty, prison, and hopelessness as their dreams are still too often deferred. A simplistic politics reduces that "loss" to individual personal responsibility, blaming the loss solely on the losers and the lost while ignoring real structural inequalities.

In light of that commentary on contemporary blackness, the second sentence echoes the peril that black males especially face in most American cities through frequent profiling by law enforcement agents: "We cannot guarantee your safety if you disobey our instructions." Of course, black people are not the only Americans subject to racist racial profiling, especially post-9/11, and that is emphasized in sentences reflecting the anti-immigrant sentiment in parts of the U. S. that has, if anything, increased since 9/11 but also has a long tradition in the U. S., as Mullen

indicates in her use of the Chinese Immigration Act in "Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language": "If you cannot understand English," states one of the sentences from "We Are Not Responsible," "you will be moved out of the way."

The lack of guaranteed safety becomes almost guaranteed danger. The disclaimer makes it seem as if the disclaimant really would *like* to guarantee safety but will be unable to do so under circumstances of disobedience, when it might *actually* be a euphemistic threat to guarantee that one will be put in danger by "us" if one is disobedient. Such a reading against the apparent meaning is affirmed in this later sentence in the poem: "You are not presumed to be innocent if the police have reason to suspect you are carrying a concealed wallet." Of course, the expected concluding word is "weapon" not "wallet," and that substitutional swerve is a direct allusion to the murder of Amadou Diallo, "an unarmed West African immigrant with no criminal record," who "was 22 years old when he was killed on Feb. 5, 1999, by four New York City police officers." The officers discharged 41 bullets, 19 of which struck Diallo, because, according to the officers, "when he pulled out his wallet to show identification they mistook it for a gun" ("Amadou Diallo").

On February 25, 2000, the officers were acquitted of all charges against them. The argument for the officers' innocence is almost exactly that of the disclaimer that "We cannot guarantee your safety if you disobey our instructions." According to a *New York Times* report on the blanket acquittal, the officers' "lawyers laid much of the blame for the shooting on Mr. Diallo himself, saying he had behaved suspiciously and had not obeyed the

officers' commands to stop" (Fritsch); thus, Diallo was responsible for his own murder because he took out his wallet. Indeed, all the police have to do is "suspect" a person of something, or just say that they suspected someone, in order to negate the person's right to presumed innocence. The more direct means of stating that "you are not presumed to be innocent" is to say that "you are presumed to be guilty," and the guilt can be simply having been "born wearing a gang color," in which case, "It's not our fault." If it is not "our" fault, it must be yours, as in the Diallo case. Gang colors most generally refer to articles of clothing that identify one's belonging to a specific gang, like blue for Cripps and red for Bloods ("How Are Gangs Identified"), but, in the context of racial profiling, the color is the one you are "born" with, a color profiled as black or brown.³ One thus becomes guilty of or at least suspected of gang association simply by the color of one's skin, and, as noted already, suspicion easily becomes presumed guilt.⁴

3) The web page from the Los Angeles Police Department offers basic information on gang colors as well as an example of potential profiling in highlighting Hispanics and blacks as potential gang members ("How Are Gangs Identified"). Of course, the L.A. Police Department was long notorious for racially discriminatory profiling (Ayres and Borowsky, Rubin).

4) It is worth noting that police or vigilante violence against unarmed black males is a continuing concern in the most tragic of ways with the deaths of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and the series of highly publicized police killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford III, Akai Gurley, and Tamir Rice in the last half of 2014. As I write this, no one has been held accountable for these deaths except the dead themselves. None of them were "presumed to be innocent," and all of them were born with the presumptive gang or criminal color of blackness. See the article by Carimah Townes and Dylan Petrohilos for information on these and other people killed by police in 2014. The murder of Trayvon Martin evoked numerous

The loss of rights in the face of discriminatory profiling is further emphasized and historically contextualized by the almost direct quotation from the Dred Scott decision of 1856, in which the Supreme Court of the U. S. determined that black people were not eligible for citizenship and so could not file a suit in federal court because blacks “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect” (“Dred Scott Decision”). In Mullen’s adaptation, she writes, “You have no rights that we are bound to respect.” The original phrase “white man” is changed to “we,” but the historical context of white supremacy is clear, and the supremacist positioning of the first-person plural voice is reinforced.

In the previous sentence, Mullen writes, “Step aside, please, while our officer inspects your bad attitude,” clearly using the first-person plural to represent a voice of authority that creates suspicion out of perceived attitude rather than evidence of wrongdoing. In depicting a command to “Step aside,” Mullen emphasizes the political and often legal marginalization of nonconformists, those with a “bad attitude,” when she creates a metaphor of physical movement off to the side, out on the edge or margin. That forced movement echoes the previously-noted warning to those who do not speak English: “you will be moved out of the way.” In the marginalizing context of presumed guilt, of being “not presumed to be innocent,” it may be hard to remain

popular and academic responses—it was addressed by Barak Obama and became a divisive moment in American racial politics. Essays by Owen Brown and Richard Purcell offer complex scholarly reflections on Martin’s death and its significance. Obviously, the issues raised by Mullen in this poem remain current, which is one reason the poem remains eminently teachable.

calm, hard to avoid a “bad attitude.” As soon as that attitude appears and a person becomes agitated, however, that person is endangered and without legal recourse, as Mullen suggests in returning to the disclaimer of responsibility with which she began the poem: “Please remain calm, or we can’t be held responsible for what happens to you.” Even legitimate outrage might place one in danger.

The poem is also a general protest against the neoliberal policies that have been gaining momentum in the U. S. ever since the Ronald Reagan presidential administration of the 1980s. Those policies mold governments that assume less and less responsibility for the welfare of citizens, as well as less and less responsibility for simply assuring citizens’ rights rather than violating them. The neoliberal argument appears as the disclaimer, “We do not endorse the causes or claims of people begging for handouts.” Indeed, “the causes or claims” for greater social justice in the form of social welfare programs like health care, financial assistance for the poor, government-subsidized higher education, and guaranteed old-age pension benefits like the Social Security program in the U. S., are often presented as “begging for handouts,” as giving things to people who simply do not want to work for them. David Harvey explains that a goal of the neoliberal state is “to transfer all responsibility for well-being back to the individual.” Indeed, “[t]he social safety net is reduced to a bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility. Personal failure is generally attributed to personal failings, and the victim is all too often blamed” (76). The person in need becomes nothing more than a beggar shirking his individual responsibility, a “taker”

rather than a "maker" (Schweizer).

That neoliberal dismissal of social welfare continues in some of the sentences that make the poem, as noted above, sound like taking a flight on Borg Airlines. "In the event of a loss," reads one sentence, "you'd better look out for yourself." This sentence, of course, mimics the in-flight instructions about what to do in the event of a loss of cabin pressure: put on your own oxygen mask when it drops before helping others with theirs. While the original sentence indicates the best procedure for helping others, Mullen's swerve suggests that the concept of helping one another is disappearing from our discourse. Mullen's alterations highlight the neoliberal drive to eliminate social safety nets in favor of personal responsibility: "you'd better look out for yourself" because it is not the government's responsibility. In modifying the form of the word "lost" from the introductory sentence in the poem ("We are not responsible for your lost or stolen relatives") to "loss" here, Mullen here implies a connection between the refusal of responsibility to help in that sentence and in this one. Thus, she sees an historical neglect of humanity, from slavery in the past to the undoing of the social contract in the present, as one persistent aspect of the American character.

Mullen further highlights the refusal of responsibility for a social contract when she mimics the ticketing legalese that often puts passengers on standby because of airline overbooking: "Your ticket does not guarantee that we will honor your reservations." Her use of the word "reservations" in the context of this poem creates a swerve from the word's most obvious meaning. The word refers not just to a ticket bought in advance but also to a

limiting condition or concern, as when one has reservations about whether or not an airline can be trusted. If one might have those sorts of reservations, or limiting concerns, or questions, about the ways a government or business, or a government and its justice system in cooperation with a business, might behave, those reservations may not be “honored” or respected. In other words, the poetical swerve in Mullen’s airline language leads again to the idea that civil disobedience, a failure to obey instructions, a bad attitude can be unsafe.

The idea of reservations (or rights) that “we are [not] bound to respect,” or “honor,” is reiterated not just in the later allusion to the Dred Scott decision but in the next two sentences in the airline instruction motif: “In order to facilitate our procedures, please limit your carrying on. Before taking off, please extinguish all smoldering resentments.” The first sentence plays on the airline rules to limit “carry-on” items to one piece of luggage. The verb “to carry on” can mean to act in a silly or obstinate manner: one might say to a disobedient or rambunctious child, “Stop carrying on!” The implied threat to anyone who will not follow the instructions, who continues to “carry on” has been considered above, and Mullen’s parody of the take-off and landing instructions to extinguish all smoking material that used to be given along with the request to fasten trays and put seats in an upright position warn not just against acting out (“carrying on”) but against having any internal reservations, or “smoldering resentments,” at all. The instructions are meant to control not just how one acts but how one thinks. By using the dated language of the airline instructions, along with historical references like that to

Dread Scott, Mullen suggests longstanding historical precedents for contemporary legal, political, and cultural regulation, what Louis Althusser identified as Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses, or RSAs and ISAs (Althusser 141-48).

V. Now

Mullen's experimental forms and rejection of the singular lyric speaker oppose what Charles Bernstein once called "official verse culture" (248-49). Jessica Lewis Luck has noted that the lack of conventional lyric voice is embedded in the overall structure of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*: "A quick perusal of the table of contents [. . .] reveals that Mullen has left the letters *I*, *U*, and *Y* out of her abecedary. This erasure becomes the punning subject of a poem in the book titled 'Why You and I,' which begins, 'Who knows why you and I fell off the roster?'" (357). Mullen's poethics likewise opposes official political culture and the ISAs that help to maintain it. Althusser argues that ISAs "provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words'" (133) by the manipulations of language. While the ISAs are the site of reproducing ruling ideologies, they are, on the other hand, "also the *site* of class struggle" (Althusser's emphasis), the very location where "the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself" (147). While I think class would have a different meaning for Mullen than for Althusser in his more committed Marxist allegiance, Mullen using the very words enlisted for the ruling ideology with a "swerve" that resists that

ideology and to get readers to participate in that resistance at the level of language shows her “means and occasions to express” resistance. Mullen addresses not just the immediate political context at the time *Sleeping with the Dictionary* was published but also reflects enough of the historical context to clarify that oversimplified ways of thinking are systemic and that the complexity of Retallack’s poethical swerve is important in resisting oversimplification. As Retallack claims, the poethical “vitality engages with the forms of life that create its contemporary context” (40).

Mullen, in her self-styled miscegenated poetry has swerved away from the conventions of American exceptionalism, as in “Present Tense” (57), in which every sentence starts with the word “Now.” “Now as the voice of America crackles and fades,” she writes, “the market reports that the Euro hit a new low.” She mimics the language of the news broadcast to suggest that the Euro-centric age that culminates (perhaps) in its furthest outpost in the western hemisphere has had its position of supremacy shaken. “Now as the reel unravels,” she continues, switching from the language of the news broadcast to the language of the news reel, with a pun, perhaps, on “the real,” which unravels, or comes apart as one recognizes its constructedness. She finishes the sentence and the poem by commenting, “our story unwinds with the curious dynamic of an action flick without a white protagonist.”

Like the various ways of reading Mullen’s use of the Jeffersonian “tree of liberty,” the reading of this sentence “unwinds” in various ways according to the meanings one finds in the verb “to

unwind." In one instance, to unwind means to fall apart, to lose coherence, like Yeats's center that cannot hold, and that would be a key fear of the far right fundamentalists in the U. S., the fear that the American story might be one without a white protagonist. In the other, more poethical instance, to unwind might mean to relax, "to become free of nervous tension" (according to Mullen's own beloved *American Heritage Dictionary*). While the American "real" has not achieved and may never achieve freedom from a colorless white narrative, Mullen's work demonstrates Retallack's principle of poethical literature as "an entry into public conversation. At its best, it enacts, explores, comments on, further articulates, radically questions the ethos of the discourses from which it springs. Hence [. . .] the term *poethics*. Every poetics is a consequential form of life" (11). By forcing examination of the ideologies underlying everyday language, Mullen encourages an everyday poethics for such a form of life, a "mongrel" form of life "among" many significant others, a form of life that asks us to be both responsible for and responsive to one another.

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Mongrel Poethics:
Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary*

Abstract

Robert Grotjohn

Harryette Mullen writes out of a problematized or mongrelized lineage of black writing. Her exploratory, miscegenated aesthetic in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002) creates a kind of "poethic" as theorized by Joan Retallack. A poethics creates a conspiracy with the reader against hegemonic discourses. Mullen's poethic opposes American fundamentalism, and her poems create vital, complex engagements with the contemporary world. She critiques rejection of difference. She subverts neoliberal discourses. She highlights the politics of conventional statements embedded in Althusserian ISAs. By forcing examination of the ideologies underlying everyday language, Mullen encourages an everyday poethics for an engaged and questioning form of life.

Key Words: Harryette Mullen, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, Joan Retallack, Poethics, American Poetry, Exploratory Poetry

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