**'Reading Harryette Mullen is like hearing a new Musical Instrument': Post-National Sampling, Verbal Art and New Blended Lyricisms.**

By Lisa Mansell

The poet, Michael Palmer, remarked that, “reading Harryette Mullen’s work is a bit like hearing a new musical instrument for the first time, playing against a prevalent social construction of reality” (poets.org, 2010) and what is most striking and ‘new’ about Mullen’s poetic writing is not only its bold and diverse collage of stylistic technique that draws simultaneously from jazz, blues, hip-hop, soul, but influences that emerge also from classical formalisms, avant-garde and experimental practice, European, postmodern and innovative atonalities. Her poetry offers a new space in which her virtuosic hybridist practice places text beyond binaries that concern black-versus-white or minor-versus-major and into a more complex and compelling arena of post-genre and post-national poetics. This is a blended space of identification, and as such, her poems are as varied as these multiple points of identification and range from performative, rhythmically complex jazz poems (for example, “Playing the Invisible Saxophone/ *en el Combo de las Estrellas*” collected in Feinstein and Komunyakaa’s *Jazz Poetry Anthology*, p. 159), or experimental, formalist, language poems (“Coo/Slur” in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, p.17), to the collision of languid bluesy quatrains and jumpy hot-jazz fragments that manifest in her long poem *Muse & Drudge*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Mullen’s diversity and stylistic agility is united, however, by a concern for music’s influence, or rather, the inseparability of language, music, and sound in lyrical, poetic expression. Perhaps Feinstein summarizes this perfectly in his assertion that poetry of this kind is a “synaesthesia of musical and literary innovations,”( Feinstein, cited by Thompson) and like the lyric modality that intersects the varied discussions of black music and poetry in this volume, lyricism connects Mullen’s texts, and instantaneously crashes against her mixtured, speckled, and plural approach.

 To suggest that because Mullen’s work is postmodern and linguistically or formally innovative does not mean that lyricism is underprivileged in her practice. In echoing Frye’s axiom on Dunbar’s lyricism that emphasizes words as words, and Thompson’s subsequent elaboration of this idea that supposes ‘words as sounds’(Thompson, p. iv) it is possible to imagine that linguistic innovation in Mullen’s text blends formalist practice and emotional lyricism in its performance of sounds. Her work directly addresses the untruthful dichotomy between formal practice and the ‘feel’ of the line—it’s lyricism:

Damballah,
I am a horse for you to ride.

Saddle me with rum trances
and let me bronco
under you, voodoo horseman
with a lasso of pythons. (*Blues Baby*, p.89)

The lyricism of these lines is evident in their melodic cadences. Each phrase is lineated by breath with the exception of the slight syncopation of ‘bronco/ under you’. Furthermore, attention to linguistic sound is prominent in repetitions and patterning of breathy fricatives ‘th’/‘s’ (‘horse’ / ‘saddle’ / ‘trances’ / ‘lasso’ / ‘pythons’ ), the trilling roll of rhotic ‘r’ (‘horse’ / ‘ride’ / ‘rum’ / ‘bronco’ ) and the low bass notes of deep vowels ‘aʊ’, ‘ɒ’ , ‘əʊ’ and ‘uː’ (e.g. ‘horse’/ ‘bronco’ / ‘lasso’ ). The positioning of these sounds in not arbitrary. This text is stylized and formal in its privileging of linguistic sound in an quasi-musicological method; the rumble of ‘o’s—its harmony that forms the sonic narrative of the piece, the consonants that are melodic colour in the ‘s’—the *clef* of the text, and the decorative ornamental trills of ‘r’ and ‘v’. The poem can be analyzed as a kind of music that alludes to the ‘new kind of musical instrument’ that Palmer perceives in her work.

 A semantically driven narrative runs synchronously alongside its sonic equivalent, but this is neither a grand-narrative nor a ‘story’. Like the blues tradition that infuses Mullen’s work, the narrative is fragmented, hinted at, and it is the placement of cultural signifiers that allude to a matrix of reference or inference. These signs offer an imagistic exoticism that is defamiliarizing, arresting, vibrant and highlight a blend of language (and clichés) of the Wild West and the West Indies/West Africa that hints toward the diverse vast cultural matrix that Mullen accesses and with whom her text dually identities. This is fusion poetry. This text too reflects the blues’ meta-narrative intertextual assessing of a blended cultural matrix; however, these sings are foregrounded by formalist linguistic patterning and it is the textual verbal art that directs the semantic content. ‘Bronco’, ‘lasso’, ‘voodoo’ and ‘python’ represent both a linguistic and (defamiliarization) imagistic. Cadences and breath/rhythm of the line are prioritized over semantic meaning and thus the practice of creating imagery leads to acrobatically unfamiliar positions and a new kind of lyricism.

 If lyricism is bluesy (suggested perhaps by perceived links between emotion, blues lyric, and heritage) and linguistic experiment and formalism is a kind of jazz (as portrayed in Nielsen’s *Integral Music*), then Mullen’s text challenges this division in her foregrounding of formal practice to create lyricism in her work. While it is true some of her poems seem ‘jazzy’ and others feel more ‘bluesy’ it is by and large difficult to designate Mullen as either a jazz poet or a blues poet--her corpus of text is thoroughly both. For example, *Muse & Drudge* “is a crossroads where the blues intersects with the tradition of lyric poetry,” (Mullen, Recyclopedia, p. xi) and its stanzas offer ‘unfurling sheets of bluish music” (*M&D*, p. !!). However, there are hot-jazzy, staccato sections in the work, “butch knife / cuts cut / opening open / flower flowers flowering” (p. 110) or “devils dancing on a dime / cut a rug in ragtime / jitterbug squat diddly bow / stark strangled banjo” (p. 116). These ‘Briggflattian’ phrases rest comfortably beside more hymnic (or spiritualeqsue) passages of lyricism, “women of honey harmonies offer/ alfalfa wild flower buckwheat and clover” (p. 135) because what drives the semantic lean of the text and the kinetics of the line is language and most especially a foregrounding of the physical/oral choreography of sounds over the meanings of words.

 It is perhaps equally misleading to suppose that the blues tradition (and consequently long blues poems like *Muse & Drudge*) lack a formalist capability or convention. Paul Hoover notes that:

Although the connection is probably coincidental, Muse & Drudge has striking numerological similarities to Ifa divination. Each interchangeable page contains sixteen lines, and the number of pages in the book is eighty, a multiple of sixteen (by five). (Hoover. p. 77)

While Hoover connects this serendipitous numerology to Yoruban divination, it is equally plausible to relate this patterning and formal organization, to blues’ heritage and most especially the sixteen-bar-blues. The text’s quatrains could refer to the common time (4/4) signatures of blues music. The numerology of this pattern might be supposed, but the pattern itself is unyielding, formal, deliberate and bluish. Formalist patterns are not only designated to extra-semantic content at the periphery of the text in neither the blues nor in Mullen’s textual practice. "Formulas", e.g. "I woke up this morning”, which they creatively rearranged and combined with original material, generally in a stream-of-consciousness manner,” (Baker) are woven into the semantic fabric of the text. For example, Mullen’s “Old Mugger Blues” adheres to a remarkably conventional bluesy blueprint of “formulas” or, to use Mark Turner’s cognitive-literary approach to analysis of this kind, “image schema”:

That old mugger blues stole my love,
knocked me in the head,
took everything I had and left me for dead.

Blues stomped my belly
and left me flat.
Woke up wondering where I was at.

Blues cleaned me out,
with nothing left to steal.
Now I’m wondering,
Will I ever heal?

I read the headline
in the morning news:
Kicked in the teeth
by that old mugger blues. (*BB*, p. 104)

This blues poem performs two important features that foreground Mullen’s later work. The first is the formulaic sequences of schema, “that old mugger blues” and “blues stomped my belly … Blues cleaned me out”. This repetition of formulae portend Mullen’s more complex sampling in her later work, where lexical, phonemic units are subjected to the same schematic process. The second significant technique that is prototyped here is the non-narrative stylizing of cultural textual material via slogan, cliché, and idiom. This represents an intertextuality that extends beyond the language of the poem and reaches into the language and signs of heritage and culture: the poetic and the everyday, or the formulaic and the lyrical:

Although blues songs do not narrate stories as ballads do, the entire body of the blues lyrics may be said to comprise a story: a cycle of journeys in search of fair treatment and better times. (Titon)

If the blues poem in isolation contributes to a matrix of threads that belong to a larger framework of narrative (that of African-American experience), then Mullen’s text reaches more deeply into both this textual reservoir and incorporates not only African-American signs, idioms, formulae, but also non-specifically African-American material. At is at this point that the text reveals its origins rooted in the plural, in not just one touchstone of heritage, but many. These multiple points of identification collaborate, collide, and compete in a nexus of linguistic tension.

 Blended with the blues and African-American roots of Mullen’s textual practice is a perhaps surprising European avant-garde influence. Perhaps the most formalist, and also the jazziest poems written by Mullen are in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. As the title of the collection implies, there a concern here for the molecular structure of language—its phonemic structure, its etymologies. It is also a text of atonalities, disjunctions, homophonic/visual slippages that conceptually blend formal and lyrical practice to form a new kind of lyricism:

Da red
yell ow
bro won t
an orange you
bay jaun
pure people
blew hue
a gree gree in
viol let
purepeople
be lack
why it
pee ink (*SwtD*, p. 17)

Word boundaries here are stretched, shattered, contracted and blended to create a multi-layered palimpsest of meaning. In “Coo/Slur”, amid an already complex semantic texture, there is an extra-semantic slippage of rhythm that represent a syncopation—a delightful interruption of the usual flow of language to which we are accustomed. The effect is exquisitely defamiliarizing and bends both the cadence of the phrase and the meaning of its words. This technique additionally emphasizes the phonemic quality of language and makes words be sounds—sounds that are normally invisible, transparent in the utility of meaning. Suddenly, the transparency of language becomes material, the background mechanics of speech brought to the front in an inversion of the dynamic between meaning and sound.

 Jazz, as Nielsen remarks in *Black Chant*, has some identification with European avant-garde practice. On the interrelationship between music and poetry he cites Melzter who observed that “a jazz ensemble played arranged compositions for Patchen to enter into a manner akin to Schoenberg’s use of *sprachstimme*” (Nielsen, p. 177) during the jazz “movement” of the 1950s. In Mullen too it is possible to perceive a quasi-Schoenbergian influence in the sampling technique in her text:

--It is Otis?
--I’m…
--Otis, so it is.
--Am I?
--‘Tis Otis.
--I am …
--So, it’s Otis.
--I am William.
--O, Otis, sit. (SwtD, p.54)

The sampling process is demonstrated prominently in this playful poem. Its humor and lightness perhaps distracts us from the strict formalism of its technique and seems superficially effortless. Close analysis reveals sophisticated translation of a complex musical technique akin to a Schoenbergian twelve-note row. Divide the sounds into musical phrases and the process becomes clear: ‘Am I’ is a sonic inversion of ‘I’m’ and similarly so is “Otis” and “sit”. These inversions and retrogrades are reminiscent of modernist twelve-note rows in Schoenberg’s practice. An improvisatory persuasion further problematizes the blended origin of influence in this collection. Is this jazz, or is this Joycean?:

ab flab abracadabra Achy breaky Action Jackson airy-fairy
 airefare
Asian contagion analysis paralysis Anna banana
 ants in your pants
Annie’s Cranny Annie Fanny A-Okay ape drape argle-bargle
 artsy-fartsy awesome blossom (SwtD, p.34)

It is both. Is it formalist or lyrical? It is both. Again, Mullen’s text accentuates untruthfulness in textual practice that divides influence and heritage into tidy conceptualized lineages. Presented here is the post-identity text that does not exclude or deny heritage, but celebrates, challenges and negotiates a matrix of blended traditions.

 Perhaps the most elaborate translation of musical technique to verbal art in Mullen’s text (and one that perhaps perfectly unites the lyrical and formal, the bluesy and the jazzy) is ‘sampling’-- a ubiquitous device in hip-hop. There are (at least) four types of sampling evident in the collections *Trimmings*, *S\*PeRM\*RKT*, *Muse & Drudge* (gathered in *Recyclopedia*), and *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. The first kind is familiar in oral traditions: repetition of image schemas. Despite designation of a text’s transmission as ‘oral’ or musically derived, the image repetition schema exists as more than just a stylistic idea. Rather, this schema has the capacity to organize concepts (via symbolism, for example), and even take on a generative role at the level of process where the images lead the creation of meaning. These qualities are present in text whether they are oral or not, however, it is easy to neglect the mnemonic significance of the image in the oral text:

What is being transmitted it the theme of the song, it imagery, its poetics. A verbatim text is not being transmitted, but instead an organised set of rules or constraints set by the piece and its traditions. In literary terms, this claim makes the structure of the genre central to the production of the piece. In psychological terms, the claim is an argument for schemas that involve imagery and poetics as well as meaning… Visual imagery is perhaps the most widespread faction in mnemonic systems. (Rubin, p.7)

Most especially in *Trimmings*, Mullen employs this kind of intra-sampling in the repetition of images of domesticity, in particular the skirt and the folds of the skirt: “Behind her shadow wears color, arms full of flowers. A rosy charm is pink. And she is ink. The mistress wears no petticoat or leaves. The other in shadow, a large, pink dress,”( p.11) ”in folds of chaste petticoats, chupamirtos”( p. 14) “Night moan star sun down gown. Night moan stir sin dawn gown” (p. 19) “loose skirt a petal, a pocket for your hand. My dress falls over my head. A shadow overtakes me” (p.29) “Girl, pink, beribboned” (p. 31). Intra-textual sampling of images of womanhood and the domestic are prominent in almost every stanza of this collection—a rich, almost cubist, re-sampling of the same image over and over manifesting each time with variation--reflections refracted rather than represented and fragments glimpses of a supposed reality. The idea of the fragment is developed further in *Muse & Drudge* in its dialogue with Sappho. While it is true that *Trimmings* is not an oral text in the traditional sense of orally transmitted epics or ballads, Mullen’s text, in its use of image-schema-repetition, refers to this tradition as a point of identification, an act of interpellation with the oral and the sonic.

 Mullen extends this sampling technique further. Evolving from this intra-sampling is a more complex form of inter-sampling, or macro-sampling that accesses and recycles larger frameworks of idiom and cliché that are derived outside the text. This macro-sampling is a recycling of culture, of societies via language drawing in cultural and cross-cultural dynamics. This technique is used in a protogenic way in *Trimmings*, using fairytale, “Cinderella highball cocktail frock” (p. 38), and “Think-skinned Godiva with a wig on horseback, body in a sit calm” (p. 12), which are kinds of cultural mythologies that define a society. More extensively, the text macro-samples ‘wives-tales’, idiom/cliché: “sitting pretty in lap de luxe” (p. 15), “Stiff with blood. A little worse for wear” (p. 31), “stars burn out at both ends” (p.37), “Bang and a whimper. Two to tangle. It’s a jungle,” (p. 41). Each cliché or idiom and slogan is defamiliarized by blending with a different conceptual metaphor or context, by subverting it from the original ever so subtly—a copy of a copy of a copy. In these reproductions we see quasi-modulations. To imagine that the statement of the cliché/idiom is a kind of ‘tonic’—the tonality to which society roots—then its development or subversion is a modulation away from that root, perhaps to a dominant—a related key (the cliché/idiom is never made unfamiliar and is perceivably within the same harmonic context). The technique is even more elaborate by the time Mullen comes to write *S\*PeRM\*RKT*. The supermarket itself is a cultural product, a frenzy of advertizing slogans and memes: “just add water” (p. 68), “Aren’t you glad you use petroleum?” (p. 69 )“in ten or less or yours is free, we guarantee” (p. 70 ). “Mink chocolate melts in you,” ( p. 86). The scale and scope of this textual ‘found material’ seems to become wider, larger, and more ubiquitous as the concept and the collections ensue.

 From inter-sampling we move to micro-sampling. This technique works the phonetic units of language as material units and rearranges the sounds into patterns. Formal Welsh poetry has a technique called *cynghanedd* (roughly translated it means ‘metrical consonants’) whereby the phonetic sounds are organized into intricate patterns of retrograde, inversion and echo. A phonetic anagramizing pattern similar to this is also evident in Mullen’s text:

 Rumors of May | made mermaids murmur.
 r m z m | m d m r m dz m r m r

 Plato opens utopia | to poets on opiates.
 pl t p nz t p | t p ts n p t s (*SwtD*, p.66)

It is this kind of intensive sampling that perhaps has the most direct correspondence with Classical musical composition, where words become sounds and inherit a tonal quality. These micro-samples are melodic motifs and musical subjects that co-exist within a framework of complicated narratives that range from micro-, macro-, to intra-, inter-relationships with textual material.

 The most complex kind of macro-sampling is Mullen’s recycling and quasi-musical treatment of ‘image metaphors’, a term coined by the cognitive linguistics George Lakoff and Mark Johnson who assert that there are metaphorical image schemas that organize our cognitive-linguistic expression. Put simply, they offer the formula:

 *Orientational metaphors* ... have to do with spatial orientation: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral. These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment. Orientational metaphors give a concept of spatial orientation: for example, HAPPY IS UP the fact that the concept HAPPY is oriented up leads to English expressions like “I’m feeling up today.” (Johnson and Turner, p.14)

 ‘Upness’ could be regarded as major, while ‘downess’ perhaps represents a minor. “Smoke rose to offer a blessing” (M&D, p.130) is a ‘major’ phrase, and a harmonic narrative is constructed in the text around the tensions of orientational metaphors in the same way that the modulation from key to key in music forms harmonic narrative. The type of harmony supplied by orientational metaphors can be examined more closely in the linguistic verbal art that manifests in the text. For example, the low ‘o’ tonality of “and let me bronco / under you, voodoo horseman /
with a lasso of pythons” is composed of a repetition of vowels produced low in the mouth. These ‘low’ vowels are consequently ‘down in the mouth’ sounds and are therefore (in Lakoff and Johnson’s formula) sad sounds. However, linguistic, textual material differs dramatically from a musical material in its comparatively monotonic palette. Where music offers possibilities that are beyond our physical capacity and invites an interpellation into these impossible (but imaginable) positions, language usually offers to an audience sounds that are within our gamete of vocalization. This places the audience in close proximity to the sonic material and a profoundly powerful subvocalization occurs:

You scratch out on surface words you imagine yourself saying aloud in some realizable oral setting. Only very gradually does writing become composition in writing, a kind of discourse-- poetic or otherwise-- that is put together without a feeling that the one writing is actually speaking aloud (as early writers may well have done in composing). (Ong, p. 26)

Instead of audible vocalization as a by-product of reading and writing, the process becomes submerged, subvocal. The body is mutely articulating linguistic utterance but inhabiting the same muscular tensions, breathing, but augmented, exasperated, by the interruption of notation, the agency of rhetoric, and the dynamics of typographical marks. While natural free-speaking, free-writing can demonstrate subvocalization, utterance can be manipulated to force subvocalization into unanticipated if not impossible positions and further intensify the ocular and oral collisions of text. Consequently Mullen’s text harmonically reflects the diverse cultural matrices accessed by the text. Her textual palette is as varied as her intertextual touchstones and is itself a kind of ubiquitous, verbal matrix.

 Mullen’s elaborate sampling blends blues and jazz, lyricism and formalism—from the re-use of cliché to the incorporation and subversion of slogan to linguistically innovative micro-sampling at the level of phonemic patterning. This sample/blend technique also presents questions about rich textures of influence, heritage, and echoes of ancestors in her text—influence that do not belong to one particular, totalized, cultural source. Her collections *Trimmings* and *S\*PeRM\*RKT* are explicitly Steinian in their influence—re-writings of Tender Buttons:

*Trimmings* and *S\*PeRM\*RKT* are serial prose poems that use playful, punning, fragmented language to explore sexuality, femininity, and domesticity. These companion pieces began as my response to Gertrude Stein’s simple yet elusive poetic prose…My books *Trimmings* and *S\*PeRM\*RKT* correspond to the “objects” and “Food” sections of Stein’s Tender Buttons …Originally I had planned a trilogy, with a third volume responding to the “Rooms” section of Tender Buttons. (R, p.x)

Of equal influence are black musics, which saturate each of her collections. Similarly, black musics have evolved through intersections of this kind through varying degrees of sampling: hip-hop from funk, funk from soul, soul from blues, blues from spirituals, and so on. There seems to be a tradition of isolating a particular motif, tradition, or perhaps just a rhythmical idea, followed by an elaboration of this fragment into a new idea, a new form, and a new musical instrument. It is no coincidence that *Muse & Drudge* responds so closely to the Sapphic fragments. This kind of sampling (or recycling as the title *Recyclopeadia* might suggest) is also a determinedly postmodern idea—a reflection or refraction of the fragmented self in which accents of emphasis shift and blend to foreground diverse, perhaps contradictory, fluid, evolving points of identification.

In addition to the verbal-art of Stein and the black musics that bass-note Mullen’s texts, this ‘new instrument’ poetic demonstrates a concern for the postmodern. She says this of her identification with Stein: “I share her love of puns, her interest in the stuff of life, and her synthesis of innovative poetics with cultural critique, (*R*, p.x)” and Mullen’s later work manifests as a kind of critical lyric—a demonstration, performance of theory rather than a blank description of it. What we see in Mullen is not a poetic of “slave-sublime” postmodern resistance, but an inhabitation of it, a reclaiming and recycling of it in the frameworks of both Eurocentric and Affric ontologies—a blended space in which this text performs:

Living, talking, making music, and writing in the subjectivity of resistance was built—had to be built—against the economic and philosophical bulwarks of slavery and colonialism, black cultures conceived postmodernism long before its 'time' as construed by writers who had to wait and take their cue from Derrida, Foucault, or Lyotard. (Potter, p. 6)

Writing post-Derrida-Foucault-Lyotard, Mullen incorporates these voices, ancestors, into her text. To regard each of her dynamics and touchstones not as polarities, hierarchies that contribute to a kind of un-postmodern unobtainable whole, but rather, as blends of fragment, process, a de-hierarchized intersections is to release the text into a post-national space, a post-chronological time in which complex constructions of identity can quasi-represent. On the contrary, traditional hip-hop, blues, and soul lyrics and music alone occupy this linear, categorized arena of opposition—simultaneously ‘out-of-time’ and caught within it: “Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat…that’s what you hear in Louis’ Music”. (Ellison) Or:

So what time is it? With the question, rappers situate themselves within a black diasporic timezone, outside the “official” time of calendars and digital watches; for hip-hoppers, as for the Last Poets, “time is running out.” Or perhaps it has already run out; as Run Ra says, “it’s after the end of the world”. (Potter, p.7)

There is no time.

 A glance at these traditional song-lyrics will at once reveal (from a poetic or formalist point of view) un-innovative, non-progressive technique (rhyming couplets, clichéd imagery, stylistic derivation that echoes populist Romantic poetry). These texts’ primary concern is one of cultural rather than critical documentation, which sets the scene for an intertextual matrix in itself; whereas Mullen’s text, the critical lyric, in its blending of music, language, poetics, and theory, open the page to virtuosic innovation and arresting performicity while maintaining this complex matrix of stock-phrase, slogan, cliché and derived material—a blend of high artifice and everyday colloquy:

Crenshaw is a juicy melon. Don’t spit, and when you’re finished, wash your neck. Tonight we lead with bleeding hearts, sliced raw or scooped with a spoon. I’ll show you my shank. I’d rend your cares with my shears. If I can’t scare cash from the ashen crew, this monkey wrench has scratch back to my business. This ramshackle stack of shotguns I’m holding in my scope. I’m beady eyed as a bug. Slippery as a sardine. Salty as a kipper. You could rehash me for breakfast. Find my shrinking awe or share your wink. I’ll get a rash wench. We’ll crash a shower of cranes. I’m making bird seed to stick in a hen’s craw. Where I live’s a wren shack. Pull back. Show wreck. Black fade. (*SwtD*, p.15)

This text combines stock phrases that range from a kind of maternal authority (“Don’t spit, and when you’re finished, wash your neck”) to ubiquitous cliché (“Slippery as a sardine. Salty as a kipper”) with a muscular, physical musicality in the verbal art that virtuosically structures this piece. On hearing these words as sounds there is a sense that there is a common ‘key’ of clef that drives the sonic narrative. By removing the semantic content of the text and to regard its sounds as sounds reveals its linguistic patterns more transparently:

 (1) k {sh w} c(s) l n| n t sp t| ( n w n) n {sh| w} {sh n k| }
 t n w l w **b**l **d** ts| sl c(s) d { w or(w) sc(k)} p d w sp n|
 l {sh w} m {sh k}|

(2) **d d** c(k) s(z) w m {sh s(z}| f c(k) n t sc(k) c(k) sh f sh n c(k) w|
 s m nk w ntch s sc(k) tch b k m b s(z) n s| s r msh kl st ck sh tg s(z)|
 ld sc p| **b** **d d b** | sl p s(z) s d n |s lt s k p |
 d sh m f b kf st|

 (3)

f nd m shr nk {w or(w) sh} w nk| l t {sh w} nch |
w lc(k)r{sh sh w} c(k)r n s(z)| m m k b d s d t st ck n h n s(z) c(k)r w |
w l v (z) wr n sh k |p l b k| {sh w} wr ck |

 (4)

bl k f d

At first, this ‘score’ of sounds seems complex and through composed, but close analysis uncovers a tonal palette of harsh fricatives (‘sh’ ‘z’ ‘s’) plosives: (‘t/d’ ‘p’ ‘b’) with soft nasals (‘m’ ‘n’) and approximants (‘l’ ‘w’). This is the tonality of the text—a supposed ‘sh’ major. This tonality is developed and emphasized by repetitions and motifs. The first ‘subject’ is {sh w} and this is the primary motif in the text. It is later modulated to {sh z} and {sh k} and inverted to {w sh}. In addition to this quasi-musical treatment of the subject there are triadic patterns: (n w n) (b l d) and clusters ‘nch’ ‘msh’ ‘tch’. These build energy in the phrase, akin to musical sequences. It is the tension of these sounds that creative a narrative. The vowels of the text are predominantly ‘high’ which contrast with the “sh w” motif that forces the lips to purse. This physical process is not only the basis of linguistic tension a catalyst for the energy for the narrative but also a kind of ‘bend’ in the tonality like the bent or blue notes of blues and jazz—the harmonic sevenths, flattened fifths. These combinations of sounds are unexpected, acrobatic, and ‘accidental’. The term ‘accidental’ (#,♭) to refer to a musical tone of a different key is revealing, especially since jazz and blues rely on these ‘accidentals’ as signifiers. If the strangeness of {sh w} is the ‘accidental’ in the text then the privileging of this sound via repetition forces a reconsideration of which tonal elements are central and which are peripheral and in turn leads to a review of absolute boundaries of identity. It is no longer accidental of peripheral because there is no there is no longer division or hierarchy.

 It is the idea of blending the familiar and the disparate, the owned and borrowed (so that identification is neither owned nor borrowed anymore) in textual and conceptual sampling that opens time, space, boundaries. The blending of musical techniques with verbal art is an obvious starting point to explore this idea of a democratized identification. The merger of music and language is not a new idea. The conflation of black poetry with music or musicality is one of Western ideology’s most persuasive mythologies—one in which a perceived textual hierarchy exists between a fuzzy, consolidated oral-tradition (implied together as ‘orality’, ‘minority’ and ‘primitive’) and a more Westernized, Classical, visual logos. However, the combination of a verbal art (inspired by European Modernism in Mullen’s case) and musical techniques incorporated as poetic practice is perhaps a new idea that demolishes these dogmas of opposition.

 Another kind of musicality and lyricism exists in both Mullen’s work and is theme in many texts that contribute to the African-American canon. Sonic interpellation is evident in references to music and musical instruments in Mullen’s work—her collections are brimmed with mention of saxophones, violins, blues, ragtime. These are not only poems that constitute a kind of music but are often also about music. Nowhere is this more palpable than in Mullen’s earlier work where her text proclaims:

I am the blues consultant.
Think of me when you get the blues.
If you have problems, I can help you.
Helping others is the reason
I was put here on this earth.

Is something evil riding your back?
With my help you can get rid of it,
So nothing can hold you down.

…

I have divine gifts of seeing
bestowed on me by the All Knowing.
The spirits talk directly to me. (*BB*, pp. 86-7)

Why does this idea persevere that black poetry and music are symbiotically related? The early African-American text is consequently disregarded as a vehicle of critical intelligence that not only reflects the social segregation of the pre-civil-righteous West, but it emphasizes the value that textual economics places on the written versus the oral text. The ‘blues poem’ emerges from this minority position, from a simultaneous and willing habitation of the sonic position and subjugation to it:

The Black Language is constructed of—alright let me take it all the way back to the slave days and use something that's physical. All the slave-masters gave our people straight chitins and greens, you feel me, stuff they wasn't eating. But we made it into a delicacy. Same thing with language. It's the exact same formula. How our people can take the worst, or take our bad condition, and be able to turn it into something that we can benefit off of. Just like the drums. They didn't want the slaves playing drums because we was talkin through the drums. ([Interview with rapper JT Bigga Figga, cited partiality in Alim 2000].)

 A mythology is created and persists. But the relationship between blackness and poetic musicality achieves more than a reflection of the social binary of dominant versus minority, and to designate African-American blues-inspired poetry as a polar opposite of dominant, white, Eurocentric poetics would be a horrifically superficial observation. In particular, Mullen’s text challenge this interaction between the visual and the musical in the production of a sonic text comprises of a complex blended space where role-models, mythologies, and multiple registers of interpellation collide.

And so, it is both unhelpful and untruthful to quantify blackness with the sonic and whiteness with the scopic even in the setting of texts that interrogate this maxim. Of them, the blues and jazz poetry, echoes of Harlem that preserve, persist, and fossil in some contemporary black writing, represent now an un-innovative position—an adherence to mythologized identity-history. What occurs is a dual-layered mythology where the dominant bestows upon a minority the freedom of the sonic because it already has its own scopic logos. The minority has free access to the sonic, but not the scopic. In addition, the minority subject willingly occupies the sonic arena in the name of heritage, tradition—an ownership of the position in a perpetuation of the mythology. Motives for this perceived synonymy between oral and blackness root in the Afric--where oral textual production preserves history, cultural memory, survival--where the West-text rituality is inverted hierarchically--where verbal transmission is more valued than writing. A combination of verbal arts--exact vernacular notation that bends the mimetic fix of utility, a changing of the linguistic map, fractures in the conceptual rigidity of a visual logos that allow for sonic ruptures—non-conformist language that interrupts the notion of language as a clean transparency that is simply functional—hint toward an arresting rift of deviance. A new language emerges—and not a sub-English—that flips the ideological reliance of the visual text. Grammars and syntaxes now establish a new oral tradition—sophisticated and rhythmic. The minority, enslaved into sound, begin to interpellate identity as being deviant to the dominant through sound.

It is significant, then, that Mullen identifies with those outside her obvious cultural milieu, Stein, Others, Eurocentric verbal-art movements. It is also significant that she remarks on her difficulty with indentifying with Stein:

For years I had difficulty the Stein… I was interested in her meditation on the interior lives of women and the material culture of domesticity, focusing on the intimate objects that find their way into the home. Her idiosyncratic verbal “portraits” of hats, umbrellas, cups, and cushions illuminate, animate, and eroticize the domestic space to which women traditionally have been confined. .. as well as a text for collaborative reading and an occasion to unite audiences. (R, p. ix)

Among these prior critical movements, Russian Formalism through Shklovskian verbal-art, a textual ‘art for art’s sake’, and a deliberate and critical disregard for the textual periphery of history, identity, author/reader and Futurism through Eichenbaum’s *aktualisace* (‘foregrounding’) emerge as strange role models for Mullen. Bringing into the foreground what normally resides in the background is what motivates a sonic narrative as a prominent vehicle of expression. The sonic text is a specific designation that locates the important interaction between the oral and the ocular, voice/breath and type, sonic and scopic, and defines texts where the au/oral contingent of meaning is strongly prioritized and foregrounded, or integrally equal to the scopic at the level of compositional production.

 But the sonic text did not erupt from history as a consequence of relatively recent Russian Formalist and Futurist ideologies. The sonic text, far from being a modern phenomenon, is just a small part of a long tradition, and one notably minority in origin. Placing a critical value on factors such as ‘tradition’ and ‘minority’ is indeed an unusual maneuver from a critic so influenced by Shklovskian Formalism which isolates textuality from emotion and history. But in the same way that it is unhelpful to create false polarities and an either-or philosophy so inherent to an insufficient dominant critical discourse, it is equally mythological to ‘choose’ one ideology and stick to it, to universalize a school of theory as being capable of explaining every textual possibility. While Russian Formalism and Futurism are role-models that underpin some of my critical approach, context, emotion (nostalgia), history and identity (albeit mythologized) are equally engaging critical concepts.

 "Sonic narrative" is a type of narrative because it is a structural force that allows text to move from beginning to end, and that narrates images that arbitrarily develop from sonic procedures and patterns, a reversal and foregrounding of the traditional maxim that supposes that narrative is nothing more than a chronological container for story, and that any sonority is extra-semantic, incidental and arbitrary. The concept of a sonic narrative is influenced by musical narratology, a combination of harmonic progression, the relationship between key and modulation that approximates a journey of tensions, and interpellation of register that becomes physically internalized and sub vocalized. The tonic key of a work becomes established as home, as familiar, and modulations away from the tonic key are acts of defamiliarization. In conventional Western bitonality narrative becomes resolved by a return to the tonic key, and the anticipation of return suspends tension forming a textual kinesis. Sounds, in the case of music, pitch and timbre are subvocalized and interpellated, a process that Wayne Booth describes in *For the Love of it: Amateuring and its Rivals*:

More to the point, why the cello-path rather than dozens of other musical and non-musical possibilities?

 Could it be that my choice began with my enjoying, in adolescence, the new macho power yielded by the bass line-- I often called it, incorrectly, the basso profundo line-- in hymns and barber shop quartets? (Booth, p 37)

 The relationship between sonority and minority, hyphenated, identity, and now, post-identities can be measured by the value designated by the dominant Western critical thinking to the sonic text. Dominant systems of textual expression value the visual. A canon of textual production emerges from Aristotle to the present that places an ideological value on clarity, wholeness, truth, transparency. These texts are visual because they disregard semantics of utterance and privilege the sign/signified image of language. To indulge in the sonic text is to choose to be deviant, to be other-- retaliatory, alternative, and to refuse to conform to dominant paradigms-- to be minor. But minority is seldom a choice. While dissatisfaction with the dominant textual ideology and role-model might encourage a tenancy towards alternative, sub-dominant methods of textual expression, individual sonic interpellation can be extended and contribute to a secondary cultural sonic interpellation.

But they are not their ancestors.

What really occurs is a blend that threatens to topple the binary—a reconsideration of boundary. In ‘I am the Blues Consultant” Mullen connects the notion of musical interpellation and ownership with the idea of ancestral access,” I have divine gifts of seeing
bestowed on me by the All Knowing/ The spirits talk directly to me”. This connection not only validates the cultural ownership of blues with tradition, heritage and a past (though nonetheless mythologized) that is accessed via ancestor, but opens the conceptual process to a kind of blended space where a kind of synaesthesia occurs between the physical and non-material. Ancestry, is of course, an important ontological concept to West Africans, and one that provokes a non-linear dialogue with the past, memory, and cultural identity, which Western preoccupation with visual-or-vocal logos fails to support. Paul Hoover describes this in African-American poetry as a “cultural ventriloquy” (Hoover, p.80), and like Mullen’s blended practice, West African ancestors defy too the binary of physical and non-physical; material opposing non-material:

[The] concept of spirits is linked closely to Akan ideas of the living character of humans as already possessing features that are immaterial as part of their existence and identity, which would also apply to aspects of the slaves’ self-identity. In their ontology of human personality, the Akans refer to some elements that are conceptually quasi-material. [Kwasi] Wiredu explains, “A person is understood to consist, apart from the body, of something called *okra*” (a speck of the divine substance, for example, of the same ontological character as God), which provides animation. At the time of death, the *okra* leaves the body to travel by land and water to the world of the dead, where it eventually turns into an ancestor. The spirit remains actively involved in the lives of its descendants and relatives, looking for them, staying responsible for them, holding them accountable for their actions, staying in dialogue, being able to move through ceilings and doors, and appearing and disappearing at will. (Ramey, 146).

In a binary-shattering mix of death into life, material into quasi-material, West African ontology celebrates blended spaces at the level of cultural ideology and belief. And if one supposes that African-American text emerges as an extension of this philosophy, transferred, relocated, and developed--from plantations to present--one can also suppose that the literary text has a deep-rooted basis in the notion of blending—a position where either-or choices are unnecessary—perhaps even crude and arbitrary. It could therefore cautiously be supposed that it was not the blend of African into American that is the cause of textual plurality. It was already there.

Not only do ancestors occupy a slippage between visual and non-visual--they speak too in equally fluxing instability. The poet and critic, Nathaniel Mackey observes the sonic equivalent to Wiredu’s quasi-materiality in the act of spiritual ventriloquism:

Dream too is a school of ancestors, one of the altered states in which the dead re-appear, one of the states that we in these pages pursue. (The Aranda word for dream also means ancestor.) Among the Dogon, elders get drunk on millet beer, into which the souls of the disgruntled dead have crept. These are the dead who have not been laid to rest by their surviving kin, those for whom the required rites have not yet been performed... They get into the beer, under whose influence the elders accost the community with insults and accusations, openly muttering abuse along the streets. (Mackey, p.!!!!)

Mackey describes a ventriloquism of dead ancestral voices speaking through living mouths, and these ancestors, in their vocalization, origin a metaphorical *ur*-speech—an utterance shared by descendant and ancestor in a shared cultural voice. This trans-generational hum reinforces a collective sense of identity based on sonic interpellation. They speak with the dead; the dead speak back and it is this music, lilting through the boundaries of physical and temporal space that defines them as inhabitants of the oral. And music is integrally entwined into this sonic procedure—not only through rhythmical physicality of ritual dance and ancestor-worship, but in the cultural murmur that pulses an extra-semantic nuance in a culture that conceptualizes knowledge through voice—we-sound—an oral tradition. But the binary is not so simple, actually, and simply an arbitrary construction. We must look to the spaces where Afro-sonic and visual traditions blend. Mackey calls up, incants, inhabits and even imbibes the ancestors in his text. There is an explicit link between the dead ancestor and the physicality of body via language and by extension via text. These dead figures are no longer dead but quasi-material (to use a term from the philosopher Kwasi Wiredu's work on Akan ontology). This quasi-material ancestor forms a part of the interpellant's identity in a practice that is more conceptual than a symbolist representation of the ancestor as an image-schema in the text. In Muse & Drudge, Harryette Mullen engages similar modes of quasi-materializing the ancestor, be it via intertextual summoning, ventriloquising of the Other, and ultimately the self: “pregnant with heavenly spirit/ … smoke rose to offer a blessing” (M&D, p.130), and in her earlier work: “bestowed on me by the All Knowing/ The spirits talk directly to me”(BB, p.87). However, while this text is concerned with the ancestor it is not a colloquy with them, but rather an engagement with the concept of the quasi-material that leads to a notion of linguistic quasi-materiality. The text's mediumship is more connected with the idea of blending positions of utterance, quasi-body, embodiment and post-bodies than with reviving a sense of rootedness or direct African signifiers.

Harryette Mullen demonstrates that this ancestor-hum persists in contemporary African-American ontology. Complicates the relationship between sound, cultural and personal heritage, and identity:

signs in the heavens
graphemes leave the trees
turning over fresh pages
of notation: a choreography for bees

cooter got her back scratched
with spirit scribble
sent down under water
with some letter for the ancestors

the fold shuffle off
this mortal coffle and
bamboula back to
the motherland (M&D, p.129)

The critical importance of the ancestor concept as a preserver of cultural memory, identity, and role-model shifts as new African-American identities develop. The need to root and fix to origin and heritage in some ways becomes emphasized, but multiple points of identification emerge from a culture unfixed and constructed by collisions of blended traditions—histories that are no longer accessible and now mythologized; a blended space of collision, plurality, gap. And post-minorities identify simultaneously with an unempirical, negotiated origin-myth and with the identity-model of the dominant—oppressor—the logos into which many are born but never belong fully. This dual-identification leads to a mixture of role-models—a blended space of ancestor and a blend of oral and ocular ways of experiencing that is perhaps more representative and genuine than the axiom of a sonic minority.

This fracture, blend and collision manifests in the production of text by writers who experience multiple points of identification, and works of canon, specifically African-American canon are not exempt. Mullen’s textmaterializes from this blending of role-models—a double-interpellation of self as both minor and as allied/belonging to the ontology of the dominant that articulates a relationship between the visual and sonic as being more elaborate and complex than the superficial binary purported by prior, Western critical and philosophical movements. These text, throughout, synaesthesically qualify the visual in terms of the sonic—not as polarized antithesis—but in terms of slippage and blend. More specifically, addresses this slippage in terms of a visual lack and a creak of discrepancy in the rhythm of black music. It becomes clear that identity is more-than and fuller-than what conventional schemas of the scopic and sonic allow. Syncopation and invisibility conceptually rebel against perfect notions of visibility and, westernized, studio-recorded rhythm. But neither does this text explicitly designate sonority to the minor, visibility to the dominant. Rather, influences are developed and blended from both schemas of heritage—both ancestors—through a discourse that fits and unfits both the typically linear story-narrative of Western fiction and the vernacular, social, perhaps even avant-garde elements in civil rights literature. It’s a refusal to chose, a belonging to both.

Invisibility foregrounds Mullen’s text thematically, and it is this concept of cultural invisibility that motivates the pursuit of alternatives. A mistrust of the visual as a means of representing identity occurs in the dual-identification and blending of schemas. This echoes Franz Fanon’s oft-quoted “racial epidermal schema” in which he, like Mullen after him, avoids a tendency toward oversimplified and the arbitrary binary purported by prior theoretical approaches:

at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. I had already stopped being amused. It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other … and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea. … (Fanon)

This epiphany of a suddenly plural identity is negotiated through a triplicate—not binary or dual—identification. It is a position that interrogates the traditional, psychoanalytical self versus Other, and by extension visual versus oral interpellation, black versus white. Space and physicality—nausea—are introduced as alternative concepts in this argument for representing not just identity but identities that co-exist with the subject. This spatial-physical negotiation fragments the overwhelm of ocular schemas and allows the formation of new connections, parallels, identifications to occur across what are only superficial boundaries of race, class, gender, splits.

And Mullen demonstrates the same conceptual fragmentation of the visual to allow alternative sensory interpellations to manifest. There are multiple occasions where the text omits visual imagery and foregrounds the o/aural. This process of auralization is integrally demonstrated by innovative language-manipulation (because conventional language rules fail to articulate or emphasize this flexibility of the sonic schema). Occasions of linguistic virtuosity alter the passive utility of breath to a gasp of phonetic materialization. She extends this procedure in an almost Joycean fashion and the visual boundaries of words vanish and the text leaves only the physical long-bellowed howl of utterance. Language forms opaque arabesques of indeterminacy that force a reading of heavy breath-altering, compounding—a shift from the subvocal to a(n) (ex)plosive thud of verbalization. This is language being—exhale—an externalization of language as a bodily act, and physical as Fanon’s nausea. What emerges is invisibility as visual-lack in a discourse that is conceptually sonic and only beginning to allow the material verbal art of sonic narrative to fizz through the fissures created by flexible approach to the visual-oral dynamic.

This conceptual, cognitive, sonority as a means of cultural interpellation is developed by Mackey in *Discrepant Engagement*:

What I mean to suggest is that there are bass notes bottoming the work of these various writers—writers who, poet or novelist, black or white, from the United States or from the Caribbean, produce work of a refractory, oppositional sort—one hears the rumblings of some such “place” of insubordination... Marginality might be another name for that place. (Mackey, DE, p. 1)

This extra-semantic bass-note, a *duende*-like drone is an auditory identity-root of a communal sonic, minor, self. (Mackey is referencing Latino ontology here too in a virtuosic border-crossing maneuver that emphasizes the anti-binary of black versus white and broadening the argument to support instead ideas of major versus minor). It is so unspecificable in the context of sign-signifier based discourse because it is an expression of sonic consciousness manifested through evasions and alternative interactions with the visual—like Harryette Mullen’s invisibility, Fanon’s nausea. These procedures are based on phonetic patterning and form a sonic narrative that can only then begin to accommodate the overflow of a more-than identity. Linguistic experimentation therefore occurs more often in text of minority origin that supports the idea of this unspecific bottoming bass-note as a signifier for a sense of shared identity. And Mackey’s re-mapping is music--he uses musical terminology to describe some of these sonic positions, because there is no other nomenclature to articulate this alternative discourse. He is also referencing the historical associations between Blackness and Jazz (and by implication, slave songs) and in doing so—firmly conforming to a sense of belonging to these genres, but also perpetuates the mythology that only blackness inhabits this discourse. But rather than only a superficial engagement with the black-Jazz axiom, he roots deeper to find its bass-note—the genuine point of sonic interpellation, the aural ancestor re-emerging. This is a luxurious linguistic and expressive signature and one that is deeply and inherently sonic.

Mullen’s practice seems to reflect equally black traditions in musical influence and also identification with Others, most especially a kind of Eurocentric verbal art that echoes Dada, Formalism, Surrealisms. Moreover, her poetry challenges Western ontologies as central points of identification, though neither does her text privilege black traditions. This is a poetic practice that demolishes the hierarchy altogether by introducing into this textual mix African, American, European, touchstones of interpellation. Rather than regarding Mullen’s work as “accidentals” or “blue notes” within a Western kind of even-temperament, this chapter reconsiders the boundaries of this tonality to allow for infinitely more complex, colliding, shifting and blending notions of identification—a new key, a new voice, or as Palmer notes, a new musical instrument that can accommodate and attempt to represent new complexities in identity-construction, post-identities, and the sounds that creak in-between. Through communities of blended identity, mixed role-models, and adopted ancestors, it is possible to cross (multi)racial and geographical boundaries—a shattering of the cultural stasis. This blend of boundaries opens the possibility for influences to arrive from new directions, from role-models that do not directly belong to the same cultural milieu or canon as the interpellant. Music is one of those ancestors—a cultural hum that undulates our sense of nationhood that anthems our identity. Mullen’s text is also full of foreign songs and Other lyricisms. Ancestral music is negotiated, challenged and channeled—figures of influence, anxiety, mothers and fathers, and these influences are authentic and genuine inter-cultural points of identification. This is how the idea of the ancestor, the ancestor-signature, traverses cross-cultural, post-cultural connections in interpellants of the minority, or of the periphery. Literatures that blend music and verbal art emphasize two things; one, that inhabitants of the perceived periphery or minority leans towards a more sonic interpellation, and two, that sonic interpellation leads to a fluid and powerful identification with others writing on the periphery—be it geographical, conceptual, racial, or cultural minority, and linguistically innovative writers, such as Mullen, complicate this argument exquisitely via bold indeterminacy—the ancestor of meaning, the quasi-material apparition of language(s) that connect her text to those of other peripheral writers in the context of music, poetry, ancestor and towards a post-identity.

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1. More discussion with Mullen about her work can be read in Frost’s “Interview with Harryette Mullen,” in Contemporary Literature. Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 397-421, Bedient’s “The Solo Mysterioso Blues: An Interview with Harryette Mullen,” in Callaloo .Vol. 19, No. 3 (Summer, 1996), pp. 651-669, and Allen Williams, “"The Queen of Hip Hyperbole": An Interview” in African American Review. Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter, 2000), pp. 701-707. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)