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Once was illegal for we to testify. Now all us do is testify.

Harreytte Mullen, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*

In *The Marginalization of Poetry*, Bob Perelman's landmark critical study and literary history of Language writing, Perelman outlines some of the necessarily unstable tenets of this dynamic, highly political, and notoriously difficult school of writing while assembling a canon of Language writers whom he uses to illustrate specific writing practices:

> A neutral description of language writing might attempt to draw a line around a range of writing that was (sometimes) nonreferential, (occasionally) polysyntactic, (at times) programmatic in construction, (often) politically committed, (in places) theoretically inclined, and that enacted a critique of the literary I (in some cases).
>
> (21)

Asserting a crucial point of commonality across the movement, Perelman also references the movement's "deep disinterest in poetics of identity"(36), drawing a significant and still-operative contrast: that between experimental writing/poetry that is assumed to explicitly or implicitly contest the viability of any given lyric subject (perhaps particularly the racially or ethnically marked subject, as I argue below) and writing that foregrounds questions and problems of discrete, often racialized selfhood in

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specific cultural contexts. In the terms of this binary, writing which appears to engage a "poetics of identity" is assumed to be anything but experimental. Amplifying this idea, Bruce Andrews has labeled such work "so-called 'progressive lit'" and voiced a strong claim to its inadequacy as politically engaged work:

> The usual assumptions about unmediated communication, giving "voice" to "individual" "experience," the transparency of the medium (language) . . . pluralism, etc. . . . But more basically: such conventionally progressive literature fails to self-examine writing & its medium, language. . . . [T]hat means that it can't really make claims to comprehend and/or challenge the nature of the social whole; it can't be political in that crucial way.
>
> ("Poetry" 23–25)

Thus in opposition to the conventions of traditional poetic and narrative forms, Language writing as a genre or loose collective is characterized by its practitioners' poststructuralist awareness of and work with the inherent instability of the signifier, as demonstrated in formally disruptive, structurally abstruse writings that render language opaque while consistently reflecting a corresponding mistrust of any attempts to locate or fix singular forms of identity, whether figured as the lyric "I" or as the sociocultural position of the poet. These writing practices are deployed as language-based critiques of normative culture, or what Lyn Hejinian has termed "the cultures that produce atrocities," often represented by bourgeois, consumerist values and capitalist regimes (326). Following the logic of Perelman, Andrews, and others, rejection of the lyric subject, which Hejinian has termed a "simpleminded model of subjectivity and authority" (329), in fact precisely *equates* with denial of the trappings of the contemporary social order. In this way, to contest the very notion of the unified and coherent literary subject in these contexts is implicitly to promote a progressive ideology conducive to fundamental political change via deconstructed/restructured language and exploded conventions of narrative signification.

However tidy or obvious this separation of the conventional lyric from Language writing may seem, the division has not

occurred without concerted debate, particularly over assumptions surrounding who is presumed to write in conventional lyric. In a published conversation, Leslie Scalapino takes issue with the following claim put forth by Ron Silliman in an earlier essay:

> Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history—many white male heterosexuals, for example—are apt to challenge all that is supposedly "natural" about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of this spectrum are poets who do not identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they instead have been its objects. The narrative of history has led not to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers—women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the "marginal"—have a manifest political need to have their stories told. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to whom is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience.
>
> (Scalapino and Silliman 51)

As Scalapino points out, and Silliman does not dispute, Silliman's essay assumed a correlation between "the entire spectrum of the 'marginal'" and conventional narrative. Later in the debate he defends the political viability of such writing in saying that "[b]y demonstrating traditional WMH [white male heterosexual] subject positions (such as protagonist, voice, "I," point-of-reflexivity) inhabited by other subjects—women, homosexuals, people of color—such writing explodes fictions of the universal" (55). Despite Silliman's intentions to validate as also political the lyric work of the historically marginalized, one wonders whether he is unwittingly remarginalizing their work through his support of the old distinction between writing that explodes the very notion of the self and writing that, in a belated and derivative way, adopts the conventions of selfhood to give "voice" to the personal experience of marginality. His implied hierarchy here takes us back to Bruce Andrews's evaluation of such writing: "it can't be political in that crucial way."

As Scalapino also points out, Silliman's claim to own the only position from which subjectivity can be critiqued implies that white male heterosexuals are in some sense free of their own social condition. Addressing this implication, Scalapino counters that "[n]o one is free of their narrative" (52) and "the concept of 'objectivity' *constitutes* a unified subject" (53). Romana Huk has made a similar argument, claiming that Language writing in fact reproduces the very universalisms it claims to deconstruct, by a making-same of all subjects through its rigorously reinforced disavowal of the very notion of the subject ("Progress" 149). In Huk's view, "by dispensing with supposedly 'Romantic' recourse to ideas of the self as a particular site, a new culturally specific, yet universalized, conception of (non)selfhood is born—a photo negative of the bourgeois one . . . whose role in this oppositional poetics is as *centralizingly* envisioned as was that of its predecessor."

Although I find Scalapino's and Huk's arguments provocative and convincing in their related moves to locate some Language writing in a new fiction of universality, they do not entirely describe the complex surrounding identity elaborated by Silliman and exhibited in writings by Bruce Andrews, Clark Coolidge, Larry Fagin, and others. In response to Scalapino's argument that he presumes a position of objectivity for Language writers, Silliman points to its local particularity, arguing that this writing in fact arises out of the socioculturally specific experiences of his own demographic:

> What I did *not* do was claim that straight white males (or any other persons) at any point in history had access to something called "objectivity." . . . What I did write was that a group with an historically specific subject position would have an historically specific response. . . . What is historically distinct about the subject position of the white male hetero (WMH) is its relation to power. Far from being liberating, this experience of power has been profoundly troubling and confusing for many WMHs. Both in that it exists at all (for it has no legitimate basis) and in the particular forms that it takes: always simultaneously privilege *and* oppression. . . . It is this double-nature of power in its relation with the specific subject position of the WMH that has generated, in some writers, a response I have characterized as a critique of subjectivity (and of the sub-

> ject itself). Not because of any peculiar aesthetic or analytical capabilities it gives them—there are none—but because of the specificity of privileged oppression.
>
> (Scalapino and Silliman 54)

Silliman's argument that white males, particularly among his own peer group and during the years of the Vietnam War, have not always benefited from their subject-position is well-taken; here he is pointing to an underexplored terrain within our nation's culture and history. Yet what is most striking in Silliman's argument is his claiming of Language writing's origins within and for a particular group, which significantly complicates our reading of the movement's subsequent disavowal of a "poetics of identity." It is important to note that the movement's collective disavowal of ostensibly coherent identity formations as they manifest in normative writing practices is rooted in the theory that identity itself is a construct of language that posits an illusion of wholeness and authority; in this view, such a formation could be said to be misleading at best, and a detrimental fiction at worst. At the same time, and all claims to be disinterested in identity as such notwithstanding, there is in Silliman's view a distinct core—distinguished precisely by a specific and socially mediated subject-position—within the movement, and that core is explicitly identified as the subject-position held by white men in particular. It is important to note that in Silliman's phrasing, critiques of subjectivity give way to critiques "of the subject itself," while the formal/aesthetic binary is allowed to stand: white male heterosexuals writing critiques of subjectivity and people of color and the historically marginalized writing to challenge the prominence of the culturally elite subject in lyric poetry.

The presence of a demographically specific center within the movement explains what has previously appeared to be a contradiction in the ways in which Language writing by women has been analyzed and anthologized. In *The Marginalization of Poetry*, Perelman partially sidesteps the movement's disavowal of a poetics of identity in conducting readings of Language poetry that do assume more traditional and recognizable relationships between socially mediated subject and authored text when he

considers the difference gender makes in Language poetry. In his chapter "Gender and Mapping," Perelman, who is himself a Language poet, at once acknowledges that "statements concerning sociology and gender are particularly vexed," even as he goes on to conclude that "gender will be a crucial influence" in the works of the women poets he discusses, all of whom are white (Beverly Dahlen, Susan Howe, Rae Armantrout, and Carla Harryman) (127). Perelman subsequently analyzes these poets' works by highlighting the ways in which their gendered identities inform their poetic practice, both recognizing their work as important and keeping the center of the movement presumptively male. Indeed, as Linda Kinnahan has shown, "recent studies like Bob Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry* or Jed Rasula's *The American Poetry Wax Museum* each provide valuable histories of innovative postwar American poetry while nonetheless joining the emerging production of mainstream venues that chart the contemporary history of language innovation through a primary focus on men" (275).

Useful and insightful as Perelman's close readings are, the application of a gender rubric in a study of a movement ostensibly disinterested in poetics of identity would seem somewhat contradictory were it not for Silliman's claim surrounding white male heterosexuals and the origins of critiques of subjectivity. This accommodation of identity as a qualifier seems to me to suggest an approximation of the very poetics of identity that Language writing is committed to eschew and further exacerbates a fundamental contradiction within the movement's own terms. Nevertheless, and following this classification of Language writing into binary gender categories, feminist scholars and writers including Kathleen Fraser, Elisabeth A. Frost, Nancy Gray, Lynn Keller, Linda Kinnahan, Deborah Mix, Megan Simpson, and Ann Vickery have published politically trenchant books on women associated with the Language movement, each clearly assuming some significant set of differences in works created by women poets.[1] The existence of these critical texts focused on

1. Two relevant anthologies organized under the signs of gender and innovation that also include poetry and critical writings by women of color include Mary Margaret

women experimentalists serves to underscore the point that at least one key marker of a socially marginalized subject-position is legitimated in analyses of (and new contributions to) the genre, at the same time that the formation of a subcategory within Language writing that is specifically delineated by a gendered subject-position provokes the obvious and necessary next question: how does a movement aware of itself as white and male in origin deal with matters surrounding race?

Alongside efforts to trouble the nature of subjectivity as it has related to and contributed to the oppression of those presumed to be in power, "critique[s] of subjectivity (and of the subject itself)" have in fact stretched beyond consideration of the white male subject in problematic ways. Bruce Andrews, a leading force in the movement who, together with Charles Bernstein, coedited *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine in the late seventies and early eighties, appears in *The Marginalization of Poetry* under the provocative heading "Cultural and Aesthetic Identities" (101–5). In this section, Andrews's position on identity writing is elucidated through the rather awkward comparison of his markedly antilyrical work with the work of popular poet Maya Angelou. While the virulence and violence of some of Andrews's writing is strong enough to impel Perelman to back away from wholesale endorsement (Perelman alludes to "messy complications" that arise from Andrews's writings [97]), it is nevertheless Andrews's position on a poetics of identity that is offered as exemplary of the movement's collective view.

To begin, Perelman cites "On the Pulse of the Morning," the poem Angelou read at Bill Clinton's 1993 presidential inauguration. In this poem, Angelou names commonly recognized identity groups formed along the axes of race, ethnicity, religion, class, and sexual orientation under a Whitmanesque call for inclusiveness in the American body politic. In sharp contrast, Andrews's writing openly mocks such claims of cultural integ-

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Sloan's *Moving Borders* and, more recently, Elisabeth A. Frost and Cynthia Hogue's *Innovative Women Poets*.

rity, drawing links between diverse cultures and histories, evidently in an effort to reveal the absurdity of cultural/racial/nationalist distinctions. Perelman does note the vastly different audiences assumed by Angelou and Andrews before going on to declare:

> There are many reasons why Andrews will not be invited to read at any foreseeable inauguration, but high on the list would be the intensity of his aggression toward the range of ethnic and cultural identities that Angelou's poem celebrates. The categories themselves and especially their aestheticization—Jew/Sioux; Greek/Sheikh; Teacher/Preacher—are primary targets of Andrews's writing. . . . [T]he following passage serves well as a hypothetical response to Angelou's multiculturalism and as an example of Andrews's anti-culturalism: "We gave the Jews Israel so let's give Puerto Rico to the Palestinians & then have some Finlandization of Canada. Obvious algebraic suicide, am unopposed, squealch-a-roni platitudes as tinder box; would you prefer infantilization or pedestalization? ["I Don't Have Any Paper" 189]
>
> (102)

In what Perelman calls Andrews's "anti-culturalism," ethnic and cultural identities are available in the abstract for the same critique of identity elsewhere leveled by white writers at their own subject-position. Perelman argues that since "[g]lobal capital, the ultimate target [for Andrews] is unlocalizable and can never be hit . . . Andrews attacks the proximate target, the autonomy of the self" (105). This move to call into question ethnic identity as a proxy for identity more generally signals an important problem in the movement's collective theorizing about subjectivity. If we reconsider here Huk's argument regarding Language writing's "new culturally specific, yet universalized, conception of (non)selfhood" (149), wherein selfhood is abstracted from embodied selves and obliterated universally, it in fact becomes a totalizing move of erasure to deny the identity positions of the marginal, as though they are in some way the same as the identity position of white males. A writing practice such as Andrews's in fact precisely reflects the sort of serious cultural blindness made possible by privilege, a blindness originating from the condition Silliman describes when he writes that "in a universe in which only the WMH is acknowledged, the WMH

as such is no longer perceptible in his own landscape" (Scalapino and Silliman 55).

As I will develop in further detail below, the uneven comparison of Andrews's radical writings to Angelou's "progressive lit" obscures the existence of writing by people of color which does undertake critiques of subjectivity. Although Perelman, Silliman, and Andrews are aware of the experimental political work of Erica Hunt, Nathaniel Mackey, Lorenzo Thomas, and others, the continual positioning of Language writing as opposed to lyric poetry, with the latter genre repeatedly linked to writing by people of color, subtly contributes to the impression that political poetry by the socially marginalized is historically not experimental. I don't believe that the elision of an important body of black experimental writing is in any way intentional, and I further acknowledge that the work of Hunt, Mackey, and Thomas has elsewhere been included with that of, and supported by, members of the Language community.[2] I am arguing that the effect of the binary put forth by Andrews, Perelman, and Silliman—a binary indicated in Silliman's own naming of "the other end of the spectrum" and shored up in his claim that the marginalized write "to have their stories told" (51)—tacitly allows for the erasure of an important but excluded middle. Such is the argument elaborated at length by Mackey, Harryette Mullen, and others, to which I will return shortly.

Before moving on, and in the interest of setting up a comparison with particular points in Mullen's own work, I want to discuss briefly Clark Coolidge and Larry Fagin's parody of Angelou's "On the Pulse of the Morning," entitled *On the Pumice of Morons*. The poem is written in an Oulipo-inspired, high-artifice method of wordplay that substitutes every noun in Angelou's poem with a noun occurring exactly seven words apart in their dictionary. As Thomas has pointed out, the Oulipo group, originating in 1960s France, "devised experiments that, paradoxically, seek to liberate expression by imposing limitations"

2. Three of Erica Hunt's poems appear in Silliman's landmark anthology of Language writing, *In the American Tree*. Mackey's and Thomas's poetry, as well as Mackey's prose piece on disjunctive poetics, appear in Paul Hoover's anthology privileging work from the Language community, *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*.

(Rev. 699). The resulting work in this case is an exchange of sociohistorically contextualized identity markers in Angelou's poem for what is perhaps best termed an overtly sinister pseudo-randomness in Coolidge and Fagin's. To take but one example, "Rabbi" in Angelou becomes "Quota" in Coolidge and Fagin, and the list of exchanges continues along a trajectory of anticorrect irreverence. Taking the authors' claims of unengineered artifice at face value, Perelman argues: "To any identifying reader these substitutions might feel like insulting jokes. But if one tried to ascribe a particular location to the source of the insult, it wouldn't be easy. This isn't Andrew Dice Clay joking about faggots, or a racist attack. *It is the dictionary's random speech*" (103; emphasis added). Because readers might be skeptical about the likelihood of so many negatively-charged or at least problematic substitute words occurring precisely seven words apart from these identity markers in any one dictionary, it bears noting that author selection is permitted in Oulipo; that is, the writer reaches for the seventh nearest word but, finding it unsuitable, is then permitted to keep going up or down the list until a more favorable match is made. However one regards claims of randomness on behalf of such an elastic approach to artifice, it is important to note how this ostensibly progressive poetics attempts to counter the alienation of bureaucratized language and supposedly out-of-date markers of individuals' cultural identities through violent parodies of the identities themselves. Throughout these critiques—Silliman's, Andrews's, Perelman's, Coolidge and Fagin's—runs the implicit argument, figured in overuse of Angelou and corresponding neglect of other, more experimental African American or ethnically identifying poets, that identity-conscious poetry equates with lyric poetry, which equates in these critical works with simplistic or vacuous poetry. Thus it would seem that the racially self-identified poet who works in linguistically innovative forms to produce racially, ethnically, or historically rooted critiques of the dominant social order faces something of a double bind, for as the preceding discussion works to show, these points of entry into poetic discourse have been rendered mutually exclusive at critical moments in the dialogue.

"Aesthetic apartheid" is the term used recently by Language poet Harryette Mullen to indicate the practice, common in literature studies and syllabi construction since the birth of African American modernism, of compartmentalizing literary works on the basis of either formal innovation or racial/ethnic representation, but rarely both at once. Critiquing this critical tendency, Mullen observes: "The assumption remains, however unexamined, that 'avant-garde' poetry is not 'black,' and that 'black' poetry, however singular its 'voice,' is not formally innovative" ("Poetry" 30). Indeed, with few exceptions, treatments of experimental poetics, whether modernist or postmodernist, have until very recently presumed a central whiteness in terms of literary history and poetic influences, while efforts to address or recover experimental works by poets of color have resulted in the creation of special categories tangential to the dominant canon. We see this trend play out in some of the most influential studies of modernism, in which the innovations of H.D., Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and William Carlos Williams, for example, are labeled modernist in their work with new forms, while the works of Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Melvin B. Tolson, and Jean Toomer are left out of such studies, to be subsumed elsewhere under the racialized label of the Harlem Renaissance.[3] I want to suggest that this move to shore up a center by creation of eccentric subcategories is a dynamic similar to that occurring around the issue of gender in Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry*. It

3. A primary and highly influential example of an approach to the study of modernist aesthetics which privileges white writers is that of Marjorie Perloff in her otherwise trenchant studies published in the Avant-Garde and Modernism series put out by Northwestern University Press. See *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* and *The Dance of the Intellect*. More problematically, Perloff's *Poetry On and Off the Page* warns against critical emphasis on representations of difference and "postmodernist pieties," which consist of merely proving, in Perloff's view, "that modernism was riddled with racism, sexism, and colonialism" (35). With regard to the categorization of black modernist writing under the rubric of the Harlem Renaissaince, David Levering Lewis has shown how this so-called movement actually comprises a wide variety of work written by African Americans of diverse political and aesthetic affiliations. The term itself is a label applied well after the fact in an attempt, Lewis argues, to organize and consolidate the radically divergent work coming from the African American literary community in the early twentieth century.

is important to note here, however, that a growing body of scholarship—and one to which Mullen contributes through poetry and criticism—treats writing emergent from the African diaspora as radically experimental, as well as foundational to modernist aesthetics.[4]

As Mullen's phrasing suggests, and as we have seen in the assumptions undergirding the Scalapino-Silliman debate, the poet's "voice"—the supposedly univocal speaker—has occupied the central place in the discussion of ethnic poetries generally, often as a prerequisite for a poet's recognition by an ethnically self-identified lay audience, but also as an indicator to an academic audience of the poet's role as a presumably authentic, representative speaker: in other words, an accessible informant. Mackey makes a related point, arguing: "[T]here has been far too much emphasis on accessibility when it comes to writers from socially marginalized groups. This has resulted in shallow, simplistic readings that belabor the most obvious aspects of the writer's work and situation" (17–18). That is, despite the fact that numerous white poets of the mid-century and beyond (Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg, and Frank O'Hara, among others) are treated by critics as more formally innovative and aesthetically complex than their syntactically accessible work might initially suggest, the habit of treating the lyric voice in writers from marginalized groups as a simplified, proselike testimonial to "authentic" experience remains.

The entrenched practice of yoking nonwhite poetry to lyric voice, coupled with the positioning of Language writing in a specifically white, male sociohistorical context, works to impose what Erica Hunt has termed "codes of containment" on the poetry of peoples of color at multiple sites. Writes Hunt, who identifies herself as an African American of Caribbean ancestry: "The languages used to preserve domination are complex and sometimes contradictory. Much of how they operate to anesthetize desire and resistance [by the racially marked subject] is invisible; they are wedded to our common sense; they are formulaic

4. See the work of scholars and critics including Frost, Huk, Hunt, Mackey, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Michael North, and Thomas, to name a short list.

without being intrusive, entirely natural—'no marks on the body at all'" (199). Beginning with the socially positioned individual, then, Hunt goes on to argue the need for poetics that are oppositional to the critical avant-garde's historical practice of delimiting the range of roles and possibilities allotted the racially marked and/or self-identified subject.

Mullen's work situates itself at the very crux of this categorical impasse surrounding reception of innovative writing that is also overtly identified as African American, writing that insists upon the coexistence of these terms. A brief overview of Mullen's published collections of poetry leading up to *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, the text under consideration here, traces an instructive trajectory; such an overview reveals the development of a political/oppositional consciousness that began with Black Arts–inspired notions of black culture and black selfhood, as reflected in *Tree Tall Woman* (Interview 2). Later in her career, what Mullen has called a "provincial" or regional view of black culture gives way to hybridized and remixed notions of black female identity-formations in *Muse & Drudge* (Interview 2); Frost has shown how in this work, Mullen makes "increasingly disjunctive use[] of intertextuality and allusion . . . [in constructing] . . . an alternative feminist poetics" (*Feminist Avant-Garde* 138).

Between these two works dealing with structures, mutations, and reconceptions of black identity, representing opposing views of identity as knowable versus inherently mixed or multiple, Mullen takes a set of minimalist detours through linguistically complex intersections with the fetishized spaces and markers of the domestic/feminine and of consumer culture more broadly. Paying homage to and troping on Gertrude Stein's influentially disjunctive *Tender Buttons*, Mullen nuances Stein's wordplay in her own *Trimmings*, adding a crucial dimension to the reconsideration of the terms surrounding the material domestic milieu. As Frost and Deborah Mix have shown, Mullen revises Stein's project, layering signifiers of race into variations on Stein's meditations on gender in order to foreground the ways in which a racialized subject-position inflects the lens that continually remakes the private and/or female sphere in language. Mix points out that in *Trimmings*, "Mullen found herself in a compli-

cated apprenticeship with a privileged white writer, infamous for her racist pronouncements" (65), even as, in Frost's words, Mullen "pays tribute to Stein's view of the endless possibilities for constructing one's language and oneself" (*Feminist Avant-Garde* 137). In addition to the application of race to Stein's feminism, Mullen's dialogue with Stein is compelling in light of what Michael North calls Stein's "racial masquerade" in *Melanctha*, a text in which the lesbian sexuality revealed in Stein's semi-autobiographical *Q.E.D.* is in the later text concealed under the sign of racialized identity (61). Significantly, Mullen doesn't ultimately reject Stein's poetics as racist; rather, she borrows from Stein's prose poetry and appositive style to facilitate readers in "enter[ing] another subjectivity" (Interview 9).

In relation to this more explicitly experimental poetry, Mullen cites Ron Silliman's work in *The New Sentence* as influential for her own work with paratactic sentences, explaining how "parataxis itself . . . acts as a sort of poetic compression . . . allow[ing] more ambiguity in the work, to create different levels of meaning using a prose paragraph, a prose poetry paragraph as the unit" (Interview 9). In what constitutes a further engagement with Silliman's poetics, Mullen's *S*PeRM*K*T* tropes on the language of advertising and product-packaging, pointing up (among other things) the many layers of "white" marketed in everything from baby food to laundry soap. This work elaborates in syntactically and politically radical ways on Silliman's apt point that "[n]o ad suggests post-purchase indeterminacy" and, in its subversion of the ideology of consumerism, confirms Silliman's argument that "[t]he indeterminacy of a multiply-defined consumer offers immense problems" (Scalapino and Silliman 60). Here and in later work, Mullen takes up the project of Language writing, establishing a poetics of what Andrews calls "a perpetual motion machine, a transgression" ("Poetry" 25).

Muse & Drudge continues Mullen's work with experimental, destabilized language while also exploring in depth the inherent instability of identity. Mullen accomplishes this through her radical juxtapositions of culturally distinct African American female subjectivities, figured through altogether new linguistic and stylistic arrangements. She conspicuously avoids any return to

notions of an authentic black vernacular, relying instead on what she calls a "mongrel" and "multi-voiced" language to comment on the indelibly hybrid nature of identity formations and on the uses of such identities in speaking for tradition and community ("Solo" 653). In her work from *Muse & Drudge* forward, Mullen has worked to bring together her black audiences for her lyric work and her predominately white audiences for her experimental writing, fighting a trend of audience self-selection that she blames in part on the historically homogenizing effect of canons ("Conversation" 14): "[E]ven editors and critics with the best intentions participate in draining the category of 'black' or 'African American' of its complex internal diversity by removing from the category anything so eccentric or formally innovative that it seems unaccountable to . . . what properly belongs to a black or African American heritage" ("Poetry" 30). Through highly experimental writing that invokes and pointedly problematizes African American identity, Mullen troubles this false division of African American and formally innovative poetries, and she works to both reconstruct and to challenge her audiences—African American and white—to read against the grain of received notions surrounding race and identity.

Running through Mullen's work, then, are interwoven concerns with language abstraction, reappraisal and critique of specifically black identity-formations, and reevaluation of the critical dichotomy separating African American writing from formally innovative writing. Departing from her work with markers of subjectivity in her experimental writings and rewritings of Stein, for example, Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary* moves beyond direct consideration of African American identity in a significant way: rather than invoke or display an African American female subject, however complex or problematized, Mullen here both solicits and frustrates reader demand for that subject through poetry that positions the speaker as conspicuously absent. In a twist on the Language movement's overstated prohibition of markers of subjectivity, Mullen invokes a present-as-absence speaker to speak back to this primary tenet of Language writing while simultaneously registering a deep distrust of the dominant culture's reception of the embodied African

American female subject in particular. In other words, Mullen re-races the absent subject of Language writing as implicitly African American, pointing to the political and historical differences between concealing or refusing a white identity and concealing or refusing a black one. Moreover, if much of (white) Language writing aims to teach its audience the ways in which our commonly unexamined language is insidiously programmatic but also available for revolutionary reconstruction, Mullen's Language writing reveals the ways in which the white imagination, and at times white Language writing as well, unconsciously promotes stereotypes and specifically anti–African American racism *also* through programmatic, received language. Whereas Language writers historically have worked against a deracinated, and therefore implicitly white, version of bourgeois culture, Mullen writes against and aslant of an overtly raced version of culture and genre.

The jacket notes for *Sleeping with the Dictionary* frame Mullen's recent work in a historical and uniquely comic series of contexts. Addressing Mullen's title, the editor (or perhaps Mullen herself) explains that the collection is

> the abecedarian offspring of her collaboration with two of the poet's most seductive writing partners, *Roget's Thesaurus* and *The American Heritage Dictionary*. In her ménage à trois with these faithful companions, the poet is aware that while *Roget's* seems obsessed with categories and hierarchies, *American Heritage*, whatever its faults, was compiled with the assistance of a democratic panel that included black poets Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, as well as feminist author and editor Gloria Steinem. . . . A number of the poems were inspired or influenced by the dictionary game called S+7 or N+7, a technique of the international literary avant-garde group Oulipo. This method of textual transformation . . . also creates a kind of automatic poetic discourse. . . . Other American avant-gardists, including . . . Clark Coolidge, have also published poems using [this] technique.

This introduction to the text highlights Mullen's disruptions of hierarchy, her interest in language as defined by black and feminist intellectuals and artists, her use of specifically Oulipo techniques of artifice, and, with a pointed comedic edge, her claim to aesthetic affinity with Language poet Clark Coolidge, whose

"random speech" in *On the Pumice of Morons* is adumbrated above. This foregrounding of sexual intimacy with and seduction by/of a black woman ironically summons historically entrenched narratives of black women's sexual promiscuity, narratives which, according to Candice M. Jenkins, continue to haunt black women into the present day and "show[] no sign of dissipating in the twenty-first century" (10–11). As a witty counterpoint to or reversal of this history, the language mocks, at both the syntactic and signifying levels, any illicit desire called up in this context through rigorous return to the media of seduction, figured here as a sexually suggestive "sampling" and an equally suggestive approach to overtly raced and sexed language play.

"All She Wrote" (3), the volume's opening poem, resonates with the complaint of impotence or disability in Bruce Andrews's *I Don't Have Any Paper* at the same time that the title invokes the folk association of the phrase "that's all she wrote" with finality or a sense of used-up-ness. That is, whereas Andrews's title refers to a powerful "I" who has become disabled through lack of a resource, Mullen's title offers a simultaneous opening and closing of literary power and production, dually signified in the term for a large body of work that is also a term for already-past ending. At the most accessible surface level, the poem reads like a set of straightforward claims to an unspecified malaise, initiated with "Forgive me, I'm no good at this. I can't write back. I never read your letter. I can't say I got your note." Yet within many of the phrases is a second phrase, as in "I'm no good," "I can't write," "I can't say," and the doubly resonant (because directly suggestive of music and tone), "I got your note." In addition to the several surface meanings of "your note," however, is the implication that the speaker, who remains offstage and off the page by virtue of her stated inability to appear, has a firm hold or grasp of the addressee's "tune." In this language game, then, the speaker adopts what psychologists might term a passive-aggressive stance of overt disempowerment that actually equates with a clear knowledge of the operating system of oppression, and she thus mounts a forceful if veiled rebuke against the generalized, unnamed, and therefore presumptively normative addressee.

The excessive presence of the "I" in "All She Wrote," coupled with relentless references to the speaker's inability, incompetence, unavailability, and state of general illness, work at one level to advance an idea of Mullen's speaking subject as hyperpresent in damaged form; indeed, up until the final turn, "I," "me," or "my" saturates nearly every sentence.[5] References to an oppositional "you" or "your" indicate and reinforce the binding dialectical relationship that is the context for this poem, while phonetically encoded references to the self as sick proliferate in the twice-repeated "mail," which rearranges "I am ill," and in the "ill" in "illegible," in addition to the more explicit "I called in sick." The rearranged "mail" can also refer to negative transactions of information (emphasis on the tenor of the exchange) and/or transactions of negative information (emphasis on the quality of the product). In the lines "I'm unable to reply" and "I didn't get the book you sent," exchange becomes densely figured in terms of lack of communicability and a breakdown in the system. Furthermore, in the slightly bent "untied parcel service," the phonetic *I* called up in the slippage from "united" to "untied" implies a coming-apartness of the self, a lack of the unity, coherence, or strength suggested in the more common and properly commercial—as well as nationalistic—"united."

Later in the poem, this avoidant speaker claims that she is "unable to reply to your unexpressed desires," swapping the earlier references to mail and "untied parcels" for a sudden abstraction: now the speaker is unable to "read" her addressee because the latter's needs and wants are slow to deliver (playing with the "express" inherent in "unexpressed") and unclear. At the center of the poem, Mullen provocatively calls up the history of racism in the U.S., albeit through roundabout return "home" from "Kenya and Korea," immediately following which she asks, "[d]idn't you get a card from me yet?" Here Mullen subtly ref-

5. Jessica Lewis Luck also makes this point (357–58), though we come to different conclusions surrounding the subject's erasure from the text. Whereas Luck's excellent essay focuses on the ways in which Mullen's procedural poetics function to illuminate the complex process of cognition, my own work focuses on the complex presence/absence of race in Mullen's writing.

erences the Ku Klux Klan with this triplicate of *k* sounds occurring in direct relation to peoples of color (figured in "Kenya and Korea"), even as she immediately changes the subject, diffusing the suggestion with a return to passivity in "What can I tell you? I forgot what I was going to say," that fourth hard *c* allowing the reader to slip away, unharmed, from the implication of the KKK reference. That is, this language machine is intent on leaving "no marks on the body at all," to reprise Hunt, although the body in question is not Mullen's. In an artful arrangement of reversals and denials, the subject of "All She Wrote" is the structure of white racism, embodied.

That the issue here is that of systematic racism foreclosing both the possibility of open communication and any opportunities for the emergence of a nonessentialized black identity is indicated in the paradoxically breezy and sarcastic, deeply equivocal expression of relief in the closing: "Then *Oprah* came on with a fabulous author plugging her best-selling book." Brokering the stultifying and anti-art terms "plugging" and "selling," Mullen employs the superficial and alienating language of media endorsement to indicate how Oprah herself has come to serve as a problematic representative of black female subjectivity for the consumer public. Oprah's vast material wealth, her success as the embodiment of a corporate empire and as a brand unto herself, and her ubiquity as a household name all function to obscure the considerably less "fabulous"—readable as both fantastic and fictitious—material living-conditions of many black women in this country. In this way, the Oprah phenomenon uniquely undermines the work of radical black poets and writers who wish to complicate the very notions of black female subjectivity that Oprah trades upon and profits from. With this closing sentence, Mullen directs the poem's thrust toward the dominant culture's consistent practice of advancing one hypervisible race representative whose celebrity status conceals the actual material conditions of the group this individual is presumed to represent. For as sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has pointed out in a study that remains relevant into the present day, and that speaks directly to the insidiousness of the racial representative: "The

changing images of Black people and Blackness itself in the mass media consistently mask the effects of continued racial segregation. Influenced by television and other media, many Whites believe, for example, that racism is no longer a problem for Blacks" (31). As Mullen's work attests, this racial segregation continues to function at multiple sites in the realms of American literature and language.

In what can be read as a response to a dictum of the Language school, then, Mullen evidences her own form of skepticism surrounding the lyric "I," inflected as her version is with a political ethos rooted in her own subject-position. In Mullen's case, we do have a clear rejection or renunciation of the trope of the traditional speaking subject, but within a specific context and with a particular goal—to wit, ironic circumvention of white culture's demand for the racially representative speaker. Indeed, this circumvention calls into unusually high relief the white culture machine of desire and visual consummation thereof. In this way, we see Mullen applying sociohistorical critique as a form of political pressure to the formal constraints of the Language school, countering what Hunt has identified as "[o]ne troubling aspect of privileging language as the primary site to torque new meaning and possibility," that being "that it is severed from the political question of for whom the new meaning is produced" (204), an echo in another register of Huk's point regarding the new universal (non)subject of Language writing.

Mullen's implicit argument about the traditional, univocal lyric speaker of racially identified poetry as ultimately a device of containment serving the dominant social order is perhaps most thoroughly elaborated in her poem "Natural Anguish." Consider:

> Every anguish is arbitrary but no one is neuter. Bulldozer can knock down dikes. Why a ragged bull don't demolish the big house? The fired cook was deranged. On the way back when I saw red I thought ouch. Soon when I think colored someone bleeds. The agency tapping my telephone heard my pen drop. Now I'm walking out of pink ink. We give microphones to the voiceless to amplify their silence. The complete musician could play any portion of the legacy of the instrument. My ebony's under the ocean. Please bring back my bone (sic) to me. Once was illegal for we

> to testify. Now all us do is testify. We's all prisoners of our own natural anguish. It's the rickety rickshaw that will drive us to the brink.
>
> (52)

In what we might productively read as a direct response to those arguing for the abandonment of race as a topic inappropriate to discussions of avant-garde art, the first sentence of this poem suggests Mullen's concession that while racial identity is in a sense theoretically "arbitrary," every subject of the social order is nevertheless assigned a position and set of meanings based on these arbitrary marks. Thus, as Mullen argues here, none of us is "neuter," or without a socially ascribed value. "Natural Anguish" subsequently layers in discussion of the violence undergirding and informing American culture, violence often directed against those marked by some form of "anguish" or nonnormative identity, be the marks racial, sexual, and/or gendered. Hence the "bulldozer" that knocks down "dikes" suggests a threat of physical violence directed at lesbians, as well as the linguistic violence apparent in the play on "bulldagger" and the implicit slip from "dikes" to "dykes" and back again. Invocation of the "ragged bull" further tropes on the "bull" in bulldozer and bulldagger, adding in suggestions of a woman "on the rag" and of a human being turned into an animal by the dominant culture, figured in oblique reference to Jake Lamotta, the doomed boxer of *Raging Bull*, whose illiteracy in part precipitates his inward conflict of self-definition.[6] Read in this way, linguistic violence circulates through densely packed images of physical violence, with this set of slippages folding sexual-/gender-/racial-/class oppression into violence both of and within the word.

In the foregoing and deeply layered set of slippages critiquing racism, classism, and the cash market for violence among the marginalized, Mullen metonymically suggests the battle royal that opens Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a scene in which a young black man's planned speech to a group of white businessmen is sidelined to the white men's perverse demand for a

6. See Cousins for a discussion of Lamotta's illiteracy as a primary indicator of his class position (391).

physical fight among the black speakers (17–33). This speaker's question—"Why a ragged bull don't demolish the big house?"—phrased in an ethnically marked, if ambiguous, dialect that could be working or lower class, proposes that these targets of white culture's demand for violence turn their violence on those in power rather than upon each other, the latter a grim fact in statistics surrounding inner-city crime. Deployment of dialect here and elsewhere in Mullen is crucial to an understanding of the levels of reversal operative in her poetry, for ironic revision of dialect in these cases calls up and critiques the enduring habit among the dominant culture of adopting so-called black speech to represent, while in fact concealing, the voice of African Americans. As North comments:

> For African American poets of [the modernist] generation . . . dialect is a "chain." In the version created by the white minstrel tradition, it is a constant reminder of the literal unfreedom of slavery and of the political and cultural repression that followed emancipation. Both symbol and actuality, it stands for a most intimate invasion whereby the dominant actually attempts to create the thoughts of the subordinate by providing it speech.
>
> (11)

At the center of "Natural Anguish," Mullen turns from encoded descriptions of the culture's aggression toward bearers of these various identity markers toward the question of agency, asking how a marked subject can effectively regain control of her personhood in such a hostile climate. Yet Mullen's very invocation of the term "agency" to allude to cultural practices of surveillance suggests the disadvantage faced by the objects of this surveillance, for the operatives of the dominant culture's systems of control in fact tune in to Mullen's silence and her *loss* of agency, both points figured in her dropping of her pen, playing on the common "pin dropping" metaphor for total silence. Indeed, precisely at the center of this poem is Mullen's unambiguous statement of the problem of political agency for the marked subject, delivered in the stark "We give microphones to the voiceless to amplify their silence." Considering Mullen's systematic avoidance of the lyric speaking subject in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, we can interpret this assertion as another indictment of white

culture's co-opting of the racially or ethnically marked speaker, enlisted to "give voice" to what becomes a predictable litany of white-approved rhetoric surrounding the plight of the oppressed, and which thereby effectively obviates any detailed engagement by the politically empowered with material social concerns of the disenfranchised. As Collins writes about African American women used in the media to reveal/conceal inequality, "Poor Black women's visibility in public discourse serves the important ideological function of erasing the workings of power relations" (37). Mullen's image of the microphone amplifying the silence of the marginalized again recalls the silencing of Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man*, who, in addition to his intellectual effacement in the battle royal scene, also becomes the celebrated mouthpiece of the Brotherhood, a radical political group inherently hostile to his interests and the interests of black people. In both of these allusions, we see the imposition of silence on the racially marked subject that is the logical outgrowth of a culture both celebratory of individual or representative voice and simultaneously hostile to representations and representatives which/who don't fit neatly within the designated parameters.

In a revision of the formally innovative yet historically blind poetics of the Language poets discussed above, the lines in "Natural Anguish" that play on the song "My bonny lies over the ocean" reveal dramatically Mullen's counterpoetics of historically rooted Language play. Mullen's bent "My ebony's under the ocean. Please bring back my bone (sic) to me" revises a lyric of white nostalgia for one who "lies over the ocean" into lament for those Africans lost under the sea in the Middle Passage, a poignantly ironic invocation of the slave trade that comments upon an artifact of white desire. Considered in this light, the grammatically skewed "Once was illegal for we to testify. Now all us do is testify" reads as alluding to the subjectivity African Americans built for themselves despite their legal status as property, figured in the placement of the subject pronoun next to an invocation of white law; that is, an empowered "we" was in fact "illegal." Correspondingly, the misused object form of the pronoun in "all us do" points up how the racially marked speaker—despite surface trappings of enfranchisement—is in constant

danger of becoming co-opted, turned into an object of white manipulation through this act of testifying or "coming to voice" about black experience. The ironic dialect of "We's all prisoners" sums up this sociopolitical condition for African Americans, restating Mullen's claim that there is no escaping the trappings/traps of identity, while also—through this use of dialect—locating blame back on white constructions of fetishized black identity. The final metaphor of surveillance and [self-]destruction in "Natural Anguish" summons a fetish object of white colonial culture, the rickshaw, even as Mullen's use of the image places the racialized speaker in the roles of driver and passenger at once, both the servant and the victim/accomplice of systems of unequal power. Throughout this poem, then, Mullen interrogates a racist social order at the same time that she deftly deploys the racially marked individual along a broad spectrum of contradictory social roles, their very multiplicity suggesting a broader range of both the possibility for and a corresponding responsibility of nonnormative subjects. In this way, Mullen subverts the tradition of the literary lyric "I" while advancing a politics of asymmetrical opposition to the status quo.

Against Bob Perelman's acceptance of Clark Coolidge and Larry Fagin's *On the Pumice of Morons* as a politically progressive poem on the basis of its formally progressive work with the dictionary's "random speech," consider Mullen's "Any Lit" (6–7), another artificially limited and linguistically random formal assemblage which carries a markedly different political valence. The title of "Any Lit" reverses and bends the phonetics of "litany," a closed, repetitive chant, into an open-ended suggestion of proliferating alternative narratives in language or literature. Throughout this poem, the reader sees and hears how the signification of "litany" is artfully retained, as Mullen composes one of what she calls her "language machines" ("Conversation" 20) out of carefully chosen and delimited sounds coupled with a wide vocabulary of phonetic equivalents in a rigorously reinforced syntactic structure that refuses the presence of an embodied speaker. In particular, sound in this poem hinges directly on a present other and an absent self, figured in the centrality of the words and linking sounds of "you" and "my."

That the framing term "my" is neither a subject pronoun nor a direct opposite of "you," but rather a metonymically slanted pronoun deflecting an identity claim, indicates a slippage subverting metaphoric substitution, a slippage that precisely highlights the power differential between the subject of address, "You," and the self deferred into the defensive term of possession and/or protection in "my." This displacement of an assumed "I" onto the metonymically slant "my" also exemplifies Mullen's pointed avoidance throughout *Sleeping with the Dictionary* of the frequently too visible, too "accessible" embodied speaking subject. In each of the poem's thirty-three lines, Mullen matches her presumably white addressee (and audience) with words that in themselves might be termed "the dictionary's random speech"; these pairings gain momentum as a layered social critique leveled at the dominant culture in the relentless juxtaposition of that "You" against the feminized and often—but not always—disempowered half of the equation both figured and displaced in "my."

Because of the proceduralist high artifice and terseness of the lines in "Any Lit," multiple meanings associated with the carefully chosen words proliferate through the limitations imposed by the tight form. Thus we get from the first part of the fourth line, "You are a unicycle beyond my migration," images of clowns at the circus, lunatic individualists, and bizarre antisocial amusements juxtaposed against the speaker's more heavily weighted and more serious images of communal travel, group strength, and a sense of productive change, if not the Great Migration itself. Similarly, in "You are a eugenics beyond my Mayan" (line 24), Mullen places the historically and implicitly racist science of trait selection against an ancient non-European civilization known for both its cultural integrity (a historical alternative to the racial purity suggested in the first half of the line) and its scientific endeavors. That "eugenics" is a noun and "Mayan" is an adjective without a noun leaves the second term open to reader engagement in completion of the line, thereby invoking the immediate creation of a community surrounding a specific historical context, even as the first half of the equation is closed both in signification and form. That is, "eugenics" is asserted as both a term representative of European whiteness

and, in its end-stop quality as a noun, a terminal stopping-point when considered alongside numerous other lines in the poem. Deepening the range further, in the fourth-from-last line Mullen invokes disability and polyvalent dysfunction in "You are a eunuch beyond my migraine," suggesting the artistic/intellectual impotence of the dominant culture via a metonym for sexual impotence itself against the presumably reluctant speaker whose "migraine" prohibits social activity/activism as much as the illness tempers any desire for transaction, obliquely summoned in a nod to "I have a headache." The lines "You are a unicorn beyond my Minotaur" and "You are a urinal beyond my Midol" similarly call up relationships of frustrated attempts at transaction or communication. Mullen's language playfully works sound against signification to aid readers in producing complex portraits of two opposing positions, portraits that suggest inequity and polyvalent social dysfunction as much as they demonstrate in formal terms what Lyn Hejinian has termed elsewhere a "rejection of closure" (41).[7]

It is important to note the trajectory of power in "Any Lit": although the You appears at first glance to be in the power position, leading each line with that prominent and phallic capital letter, on closer reading, the You comes to represent an unwieldy and solipsistic, highly visible ineffectiveness that culminates in the closing "You are a uselessness beyond my myopia." The semiconcealed speaker of this poem may have trouble seeing at times, and the reader is free to speculate on the many meanings and causes of near-sightedness or excessively close reading, but this sociohistorical disadvantage, if it is a disadvantage, is as nothing when compared to the utter vacuity assigned finally to that called-out, all-too-visible You. If we recall Coolidge and Fagin's claim to randomness, consideration of Mullen's "Any Lit" shows how any imposition of randomness ultimately reveals a high degree of the author's own design, however artfully concealed.

7. Luck makes the important observation, "Mullen's litany is multicultural in scope, reflecting the cacophony of sound and semiotics created by the information age and our contemporary culture of globalization" (371).

Calvin Bedient proposes Mullen's work as emblematic of "postmodernism with a memory," an alternative to versions of postmodernism that assume as characteristic the "eclipse of historical memory" (Mullen, "Solo" 655). Read in the context of arguments about the speakerly subjects of "poetics of identity" versus the documented whiteness of postmodernist Language writing, which has come with its own complications, Mullen's work in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is not simply a piece of evidence that there is a black avant-garde; rather, her work makes manifest and directly engages with the racial politics of the American avant-garde's whiteness as it operates in literary history. In her socioculturally inflected engagements with—versus ahistorical fantasies of—contemporary language play, Mullen raises questions and troubles received notions about the politics of African American writing in relation to experimental poetics, at the same time that she continually insists on such writings' documented historical relationship to innovation and experiment. Furthermore, Mullen continues in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* to move fluidly among, call attention to, and effectively subvert the ever-shifting politics of representation surrounding black female subjectivity in a commodity culture. And finally, when viewed through a lens that takes aesthetics, politics, and social histories within American culture into account, Mullen clearly defies simplistic readings and easy definitions, working together and across time with other radically innovative writers of color—as well as with those among the Language movement—in the construction and reinforcement of a wider, deeper, inherently more complex tradition of experimental American poetics than that which still-entrenched narratives surrounding the predominately white avant-garde can possibly recognize or, ultimately, conceal.

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