

Disordering the Border: Harryette Mullen's *Transaborder Poetics* in *Muse & Drudge*

Harryette Mullen's fourth book of poetry, *Muse & Drudge* (1995), written as one long lyric poem "sung" in blues-inflected quatrains by a funky diva-muse, takes us on a many-tongued journey through feminized spaces of black diaspora—that chronotope Paul Gilroy has called the "black Atlantic."¹ While other scholars, most notably Mitchum Huehls, have productively historicized Mullen's poem within the theoretical frame of Gilroy's important research on transnational black cultures, I hear the echo of Mullen's transnational muse in the tension between the seemingly diffuse condition of diaspora and more site-specific geographies, such as the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.² The poem's range of cultural references--from West Africa to the Caribbean, from the U.S.-Mexico border to your local urban supermarket--are united through the poem's point of view—the voice(s) of a contemporary black woman. Thus, the poem references a diverse array of Afro-Caribbean peoples, cultures, and cultures, to "insist," as Evie Shockley argues, "that we see African American women's identity extending beyond the boundaries of the U.S." (Shockley 103).³ But, the muse's voice also sings and signifies from boundaries closer to home: the imaginary transnational social spaces of "Greater Mexico," as theorized by the proto-Chicano scholar Américo Paredes.⁴ We encounter Greater Mexico in Mullen's use of Spanish and her references to border iconography, such as the factories known as *maquilas*.⁵ Therefore, this essay asks: what does it mean to read *Muse & Drudge* as a text of the transnational U.S.-Mexico borderlands?

In their photo-essay on contemporary Tijuana, *Here Is Tijuana!*, Fiamma Montezemolo, René Peralta, and Heriberto Yépez claim that the U.S.-Mexico border city Tijuana is not just a city, but also a “transa.” According to the authors, “transa” means:

[...] agreement, bribery, business, intention, reflection and project.

Transa refers to the illegitimate and what happens on the verge; not only of illegality but also of any non-conventional initiative. It is derived from ‘transaction.’ A transaction within another transaction—this is how Tijuana functions, Tijuana muddles everything up—Tijuana transa.

(*Tijuana* 4)

Transa is both local and global. While the term is rooted in the specificities of the city, its emphasis on transactions, speaks to Tijuana—and the U.S.-Mexico border in general—as a global space of transboundary flows (of people, goods, capital, cultures). Drawing on the authors’ appropriation of the Spanish slang word, I expand *transa*’s field of reference from the mean streets of Tijuana to Paredes’s Greater Mexico, as a new metaphor for a more diverse understanding of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.⁶ In its emphasis on transaction, negotiation, and exchange, *transa* opens the borderlands as a geographical and cultural site to make visible the multiplicity of peoples, ideas, goods, cultures, and languages that transact between and across borders. By emphasizing the unconventional, *transa* is an especially effective metaphor for describing the aesthetics of innovative cultural productions in, about, and of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, including Mullen’s. *Transa* captures the complicated linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic movements embedded in a text like Mullen’s, exposing its global reach while simultaneously linking it to the

geographies of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, a location whose importance to the poem remains under-examined.

Paredes's Greater Mexico "allows us to make sense of the new geographies of citizenship in an era of the emerging globalization of capital with its intensified flow of idea, goods, images, services, and persons" (Saldívar 59). Mullen's poem, written fifty years after Paredes, when the era of "emerging globalization" has become an era of entrenched globalization, gives those "new geographies of citizenship" a voice. Mullen's poetic language both enacts *and* theorizes the discursive multiplicity from which it's created. In *Muse & Drudge* innovative poetic language and voice are *transa*—mobile, contested, contentious, gritty and deceptive (and sometimes celebratory) transactions. What emerges from this multiplicity is a style of innovation based on "exploration" and "interrogation"—"an open-ended investigation into the possibilities of language, the aesthetic and expressive, intellectual and transformative possibilities of language" ("Untitled" 11). Mullen's language-centered quatrains invoke the traditional blues quatrain as well as the lyric and gather their dizzying momentum through word games and language play. From this innovative multiplicity, I identify a "*transaborder* feminist poetics" in *Muse & Drudge* where the literal and figurative transactions between multiple discourses and the corresponding sets of material conditions these discourses conjure reveal shared experiences of women of color under the violence of colonialism as well as contemporary discrimination and exploitation.

In doing so, Mullen's work invites comparison with another radical *transaborder* feminist, the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa. Mullen's *transas* resonate with Anzaldúa's *nepantla*, "an Aztec word meaning torn between two ways...and in a state of perpetual

transition” (Anzaldúa 100). Anzaldúa’s path-breaking work in *Borderlands/La Frontera* famously named this in-between condition of painful transition as the condition particular to the new *mestiza* of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. While Anzaldúa’s work remains closely aligned with the specific experiences of the lesbian Chicana/*mestiza*, Mullen’s “muse” offers a very similar theorizing, in the voice(s) of a black woman. The muse, like Anzaldúa’s new *mestiza*, reclaims her multilingual “wild tongue” as part of the process of representing herself/story and healing the wounds of history.⁷ Both Anzaldúa and Mullen use their personal experiences as borderlands-diasporic subjects to theorize a new poetic consciousness of transition and transaction. Within this movement, both poets ask readers to recognize how identities are constructed through certain public and private discourses, which can themselves be linked back to the specific social/historical/political contexts out of which they are produced. The similarities between these two *transaborder* feminist writers offer another opportunity to theorize a comparative, radical woman of color poetics, across and between the borders of race.

Ultimately, Mullen’s muse refuses to chose either diaspora or the borderlands as her locus of enunciation, showing instead how black women’s identities, cultures and histories are deeply implicated in both concepts. As a result, Mullen allows her muse to speak from the more complex condition of transaction between diaspora and the borderlands. What makes the poem unique is not just the nexus of languages, references, and allusions she gathers, but also that these languages transact between themselves, disrupting, signifying on, and changing each other. It’s a form of innovation that comes, as Mullen has said, from the “discomfort” or “awkwardness” of being “in-between

discourses, cultures, communities” and the movement “back and forth between these different arenas” (“Untitled” 12—13).⁸

To read the poem as a *transborder* feminist text of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands requires uncomfortable movement. Such movements—as *transas*—expand our understanding of the borderlands to include the experiences and voices of African American women, like Mullen, who inhabit the spaces of the borderlands yet are not made visible there in the same way as U.S. Latinas and Latin American women. Importantly, to read *Muse & Drudge* within a U.S.-Mexico borderlands framework offers new insight into the existing Mullen scholarship by exposing possible sites of transnational solidarity between women of color, particularly African American women, U.S. Latinas, and Latin American women.⁹

Many scholars of feminist and/or avant-garde poetry have written on Mullen’s relationship to experimental women’s writing. Deborah Mix (2005), Cynthia Hogue (2002), Juliana Spahr (2001), and Elizabeth Frost (1995) have explored Gertrude Stein’s influence on Mullen and the various ways in which Mullen revises the Steinian feminist project.¹⁰ These scholars look at the similarities and differences between Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and Mullen’s earlier books, *Trimblings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*.¹¹ Frost and others have cogently identified and explicated the various “hybrid traditions” at work in Mullen’s poetry.¹² Frost identifies what she names a “poetics of multiplicity,” which includes “both repetitions and renovation” of established traditions, such as the classical lyric, the blues, and the Black Arts “voice” (*Feminist Avant-Garde* 158). Such work has done much to establish Mullen’s place in a canon of contemporary experimental women’s writing and to identify the linguistic and cultural diversity of her poetics.

Several of these feminist critics rely on adjectives such as “mongrel,” “liminal,” “border-crossing,” and “hybrid” in their analyses of Mullen’s work, and *Muse & Drudge* in particular.¹³ Cynthia Hogue refers to Mullen’s revisions of Stein’s privileging of white femininity as “revisionary border work,” which consists of “explorations of the linguistic, racial, gender, and visual border work that created the foundation for [Mullen’s] mature poetic project” (“Beyond the Frame” 87). She also argues that Mullen’s use of code switching in her early work anticipates her later explorations of “being in a linguistically and racially mongrel community” (84). Frost similarly notes Mullen’s “linguistic border crossing,” “mongrelization,” and “hybridity of forms” (“Sleeping with the Dictionary” 411; “Ruses” 467, 475).

Even though this critical terminology doesn’t have racist intent, the term “mongrel” has a specific racialized history: the history of racial classification and hierarchies in the United States, particularly real for African Americans subjected to the violence of the “one drop rule.”¹⁴ Shockley notes that this terminology

inevitably brings the baggage of biological racism to the new contexts in which it is being used. The language of ‘hybridity’ and ‘miscegenation,’ for example obscures the global range of cultural influences that compromise ‘blackness’ and reduces the text’s diversity to dichotomized, faintly transgressive mixtures of (‘black’ and ‘white’). (114)

Mullen’s references to “passing” in the poem and also her own scholarly research on the trope of passing in African American literature indicate her awareness of these meanings for black subjectivities. She gives “mongrel” a broader diversity, not solely yoking it to the history of African Americans in the U.S.¹⁵ In her interview with Bedient, Mullen

reclaims the term “mongrel,” noting that the word itself comes from “among”—“among others” (Bedient 652). Shockley understands Mullen’s deployment of the term “mongrel” as referencing an ‘amongness’ that is “a characteristic not only of black culture, but of ‘American culture,’ not only of her text, but of all American texts” (Shockley 116).

While scholars use phrases like “border work” and “border-crossing” to describe Mullen’s poetics, Mullen’s own biographical connection to the actual U.S.-Mexico border, the references to that border in the poem, or the ways in which the borderlands become a site of social critique and cross-racial female solidarity are largely ignored in extant scholarship. Thus, the language of borders, hybridity, and miscegenation must be carefully historicized and also contextualized within the “diversity and expansiveness of ‘blackness’” that Mullen’s poem explores (Shockley 114). A failure to do so threatens to obscure violent histories and on-going struggles of America’s racialized bodies, those real-life border crossers who appear throughout the terrain of the poem.

Another site of inquiry and contestation has been Mullen’s relationship to African American literary traditions, which is sometimes seen as at odds with the avant-garde and/or feminist influences in her work. This struggle stems from a well-known tension for writers from marginalized communities who often feel pressure to conform their writing to certain expectations about authentic voice. Deborah Mix notes how Mullen’s work intervenes in such a tradition that generally values the experiential over the experimental qualities of much ethnic writing (Mix 65). Mullen has commented widely on this tension in her poetry, interviews, and critical essays.¹⁶ She writes: “the codes of oppressed peoples also have their aesthetic basis” and that their discourses “really are

very rich, very aestheticized, very metaphorical” (*Combo* 45). This recognition disrupts common perceptions that an “authentic” black voice must be a vernacular one and that “black culture” is defined by its relationship to orality.¹⁷ Mullen acknowledges the importance of orality but worries that “African-American literature that privileges a speech based poetics, or the trope of orality, to the exclusion of more writerly texts will cost us some impoverishment of the tradition” (“African Signs” 670-71). As a result, some readers associate African American writing with a set of stereotypes about vernacular, region, race, history and identity.¹⁸ Mullen has contested the hegemony of these absolutist ropes and themes by documenting how African and African American cultures have used script, writing, and reading as part of the cultural tools throughout history.¹⁹

Partly in order to address this tension, Mullen wrote *Muse & Drudge* as a response to “[...] this idea that you can be black *or* innovative...*Muse & Drudge* is my attempt to show that I can do both at the same time” (*Combo* 47). In dramatically re-enacting how “a speakerly text may also be a very writerly text” (41), *Muse & Drudge* uses translated fragments of Sappho’s ancient Greek poetry, which, Mullen says, “sounded to my ear like a woman singing the blues,” in combination with another voice, “Sapphire, an iconic black woman who refuses to be silenced” (*Recyclopedia* xi). Thus one linguistic transaction the poem performs takes place where the traditional lyric voice of “high art” meets the bluesy musicality of a contemporary black woman’s voice(s). Mullen inscribes into poetic language what happens at that meeting.²⁰ Shockley has addressed these tensions in Mullen’s work and critical reception by identifying the poem as “an African American blues epic,” which draws its inspiration from classical lyric and

epic forms, as well as African American musical traditions, such as blues, jazz, religious music, and hip hop. Shockley's analysis claims Mullen's text as innovative, feminist, *and* part of the Black Arts legacy, an example of the "possibilities for innovative, aesthetic resistance to racist or racial constraints that fall outside the rigidly prescriptive boundaries of the Black Aesthetic" (Shockley 117).

Drawing on Shockley's elegant framing of the poem within a black feminist "renegade poetics," I argue that the poem, like much Chicano/a poetry, can also be read in terms of what Chicano poet Alfred Arteaga has called "border verse." According to Arteaga, border verse "makes lines of poetry from the competing lines of discourse that crisscross the border zone" (Arteaga 91). In *Muse & Drudge*, these "lines of discourse" don't compete as much as they transact in complex and intriguing ways. The poem foregrounds language as the site from which the muse performs her *transas*—colonial difference—and contests the operations of power that attempts to silence her. Paul Hoover has argued that the poem's many voices "suggests the shuffling of cards in a poker or Tarot deck. It therefore invites comparison to Ifa divination, in which sixteen cowries or palm nuts are cast on a tray in an act of prophecy" (Hoover 62). To my ear, the poem sounds more like a *transa* than a Tarot deck, where Ifa divination is just one of many registers being "mused" upon and "dubbed" by Mullen, a list that also include the blues, hip hop, African American vernacular speech, the lyric tradition, the language of advertising, Creole, Spanish, and Spanglish.

Out of these multiple transactions emerge a pointed critique of how language structures social roles, particularly for women of color. These *transactions* demonstrate how, as Stuart Hall says, the subjects of America's multiracial border and diasporic

spaces constitute *hybrid* identities through “very specific historical formations” and material conditions (Hall 502). As Mullen’s poem moves between layered discourses, each layer invokes a set of material geopolitics. Encoded within and between these discourses are commentaries on slavery, drug trafficking, exploitative labor, urban poverty, sexual and gender violence, racism, and the commodification of culture in the media. As a *transaborder* feminist text, the poem calls attention to the presence of borders (as literal and figurative tools of representation and regulation) and attempts to work from that space of negotiation and transaction between them. Themes of hybridity, separation, definition, and regulation are always already gendered and racialized concepts, deeply embedded in the violent histories of racial mixing and *mestizaje* that are both named outright and also alluded to metaphorically through Mullen’s hybridized language. Yet, to return to Mullen’s point, which Shockley highlights, to reduce our reading of the poem’s hybridity to a dichotomized understanding of mixing between black and white misses the “global range of cultural influences” that compromise not only blackness, but American cultures in general (Shockley 114). To read *Muse & Drudge* as a *transaborder* feminist text means more than simply claiming the text as part of a new, expanded borderlands or black canon—it also opens up multiple critical perspectives that reveal how the text’s diversity performs and models the transnationalism of American cultures themselves.

One example of the global reach of American cultures can be found in Mullen’s own life history. In interviews, Mullen has acknowledged that her familiarity with and use of Spanish comes from her own life experiences, growing up in a middle-class

African American family in Fort Worth, Texas where she interacted daily with Mexicans and learned to speak both a black vernacular and Spanish. She was “between the Anglos and, as we called them then, the Mexicans” (*Combo* 39). Her daily experience of Spanish included:

[...] hearing Spanish spoken whenever I was outside of my neighborhood, say downtown or on buses, and wanting to know what people were saying in that language. Actually, where I heard Spanish spoken frequently was in my grandmother’s neighborhood, a black community with one Mexican-American family. We used to practice our few words of Spanish with them. We always exchanged greetings in Spanish with the Cisneros family, our next door neighbors. (Bedient 651)

Mullen also picked up Spanish on her first job as a waitress at an all-white summer camp, where she felt more comfortable interacting with the gardeners and laundry women who were Mexican and Mexican American and spoke Spanish (Hogue, “Interview,” par.3). Later, she studied Spanish in high school and college and read literature in Spanish. While Mullen does not claim to have access to Spanish in the way a native speaker does, she identifies “[...] a Southern or Southwestern emphasis in my work. In many of my works I have sprinkled Spanish words ... Spanish is always in the background; it’s that other language that cohabits with English” (Williams 702).

Mullen’s early “heteroglossic” childhood experiences in Texas have influenced how she understands shared oppressions between Latin American and African American subjects in the borderlands and also how she approaches poetry from gaps, margins, and spaces of overlapping boundaries. In her interview with Henning, Mullen says:

The linguistic, regional, and cultural differences marked by southern dialect, black English, Spanish and Spanglish are fundamental to how I think about language, and how I work with language in poetry. My attraction to the minor and the marginal, to the flavor of difference in language, has something to do with this sense of heteroglossia that was part of the environment of my childhood in Texas...The heterogeneity of these various communities has influenced me, often in complex, unpredictable and subliminal ways. I think of myself and my writing as being marginal to all of the different communities that have contributed to the poetic idiom of my work, but at the same time it is important to me that I work in the interstices, where I occupy the gap that separates one from the other; or where there might be overlapping boundaries, I work in that space of overlap or intersection. (Henning 9)

Mullen reveals a provocative example of such overlapping boundaries and interstices in a story she relates about growing up in segregated Fort Worth, Texas: “One of my elementary school teachers when I was still in a little segregated black school was a man from Panama, who was a native Spanish speaker, bilingual, so I identified Spanish also with black people as well as Mexican Americans” (Bedient 652). For the young Mullen, language and race function as complicated and intertwined categories. She identifies with her Spanish-speaking teacher because in her town black and Spanish-speaking people are racially marked as different. Interestingly, although her teacher was from Central America, Mullen identifies Spanish speakers with Mexican Americans, no doubt because most Spanish speakers in her town were Mexican or Mexican Americans. The segregated

school becomes a chronotope that collapses the differences and distances between Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States.

In *Muse & Drudge*, the chronotope of the segregated school becomes a *transa*, written into the fabric of the poem through discursive techniques such as code-switching and linguistic multiplicity to dramatically re-enact the tangled transactions between diaspora and borderlands, as evident in the following quatrains:

creole cocoa loca
crayon gumbo boca
crayfish crayola
jumbo mocha-cola (*Recyclopedia* 162)

bring money bring love
lucky floorwash seven
powers of Africa la mano
poderosa ayudame numeros suenos (126)

restore lost nature
with hoodoo paraphernalia
get cured in Cuban by a charming
shaman in an urban turban (126)

Keeping in mind the Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz's argument that complex processes of cultural innovation (transculturation) are the result of violent colonial encounters between European and Caribbean cultures, these quatrains demonstrate how alliteration, assonance, and end rhyme create a playful *transaculturation* of languages and references. In this *transa*, playfulness mediates the potential trauma in the memories of the shared histories of Afro-Caribbean-borderlands colonial violence. As Mitchum Huehls has noted, the first quatrain contains several references to mixing, from the Creole stew "gumbo," to "crayola," which invokes the ubiquitous set of different colored crayons, and "mocha," a term often used to refer to the mixture of black and white in people of mixed

race (Huehls 42). Huehls argues that this quatrain foregrounds “linguistic miscegenation” to expose “the fact that we, like language, are always already mixed-blooded,” thus raising the specter of racial mixing (as a consequence of colonial contact). Mullen’s Afro-Caribbean diaspora also includes Latin America and perhaps even Latino/a America, as indicated by the inclusion of the Spanish words for *crazy* (“loca”) and *mouth* (“boca”) (and it’s no coincidence that both these words are feminized in Spanish with an *a* suffix). The Spanish words complicate the black/white racial dichotomy implied in Huehls’ linguistic miscegenation. After all, the term “mocha” is also frequently applied to describe the skin color of Latino/as and Latin Americans. In the second set of quatrains, which appear earlier in the poem but are thematically linked through their cultural references, the “powers of Africa” are aided and invoked by a supplication to “the powerful hand” (“la mano ponderosa”) and “numbers dreams” (“numerous sueños”), which are written in Spanish. These allusions to *voodoo*, *Santería* and the revelatory power of dreams are named explicitly in the second quatrain as the “hoodoo paraphernalia” of a “charming” Cuban shaman in an “urban turban” with the power to “restore lost nature.” Mullen cleverly uses assonance and consonance to yoke unexpected terms together: *Cuban*, *shaman*, *urban*, *turban* and *charming* and *shaman*. As the muse speaks a *transaculturated* language made possible by the movement(s) between diaspora and borderlands, the poem reveals the simultaneous “blackness” of the U.S.-Latin American borderlands and the “latinidad” of the black diaspora.

In other places, Mullen simply uses a Spanish word as one part of a quatrain in English, as in her description of an “occult iconic crow” as alone/only and mysterious by

using the Spanish adjectives “solo misterioso” (138). Or they appear as characters in other quatrains:

la muerte²¹ dropped her token
in the subway slot machine
nobody told the green man
the fortune cookie lied (114)

go on sister sing your song
lady redbone señora rubia
took all day long
shampooing her nubia²² (149)

The muse code-switches easily between the two languages without explaining or apologizing. The Spanish grammar, which, unlike English, includes gendered articles before nouns, grants Mullen access to a more emphatically feminized language. This structure is appropriate for the quatrain’s theme—cross-racial female solidarity between “lady redbone” and “blonde lady” (“señora rubia”) who can celebrate their feisty independence by spending all day “shampooing” their “nubia.” By rhyming “rubia” and “nubia,” we hear both the “Afrocentric” reference to Nubian and also to the word nubile, creating something suggestively erotic and female. Mullen uses Spanish grammar, where feminine words are also recognized by their “a” ending, to “Spanishize” nubia in a playful and productive linguistic *transa*—an unequivocally assertive, sexual female language.

Mullen also uses complete or long phrases in Spanish. In the following quatrain, she uses a Spanish phrase comment on skin-whitening creams:

if your complexion is a mess
our elixir spells skin success
you’ll have appeal bewitch be adored
hechizando con crema dermoblanqueadora (132)

This quatrain represents one of the numerous places in the poem when Mullen uses the language of advertising both playfully and critically, a topic that Mullen explored heavily in her earlier works, *Trimnings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*, which devote much attention to gendered marketing and commodification. Here, the commercial “jingle” provides the tone, rhythm, and rhyme scheme for the quatrain, which faithfully imitates the “catchy” sound of an advertisement. In this case, applying skin whitening cream (“hechizando con crema dermoblanqueadora”) is offered as the “elixir” to increase a woman’s sex appeal so that she may “bewitch be adored.” Mullen positions the discourse of advertising in order to turn it back onto itself, drawing attention to the role language plays in packaging and selling (and “spelling”) identities for women of color. This doubling effect allows Mullen to propose “transactions” of her own where social roles are not “sold,” but dismantled, in order to create opportunities for building alliances between marginalized communities on the basis of difference.

On one level, the quatrain appeals to all women who feel societal pressures to conform to certain standards of beauty and who spend considerable sums on products and treatments meant to beautify. The quatrain has particularly troubling resonances for women of color who often feel they don’t fit societal standards of beauty. “For women who are not White,” write Joanna Rondilla and Paul Spickard, “much of the beauty issue is concentrated around the color and texture of their skin. The prime value is placed on being light and smooth, and such qualities can affect one’s life chances significantly” (Rondilla and Spickard 1). For African American women, light skin has been both fetishized (Beyonce!) and punished in the public imagination.

Mullen's use of Spanish to name the skin whitening cream alludes to how Latin American and Latina women are also adversely affected by the privileging of light skin. As Christina Gómez points out in her essay, "Brown Outs: The Role of Skin Color and Latinas:"

Notions of female desirability and respectability are tainted by historical colonial domination and by current consumer media today. Women of color have been marginalized for not fitting into socially constructed 'notions of beauty'... This phenomenon has had real costs for women of color through wages, education, occupational attainment, marriage selection, health, and self esteem. (202)

Mullen's text invokes the commercial transaction, through the language of advertising and the presence of commodities, as a site worthy of poetic exploration and social commentary. While consumer cultures frequently replicate and create gendered and racialized inequalities, consumption is also a site of access to a coveted American identity. Grewal notes that women are not always solely victims of U.S. commodity culture: "the right to consume became an important aspect of the struggle for full citizenship and identity in the United States" (Grewal 30). Certain ideas around "lifestyle," "taste," and "fashion" play important roles in creating an "'American consciousness' in which consumption was linked to democracy and choice." Many women, especially marginalized women, have found agency in their ability to choose (between products) as consumers. Thus, consumer technologies are complex, both "subject-producing" and "subjectifying" (31). Yet under advanced capitalism the creation of "the consumer as citizen" depends as Mohanty reminds us, "on the definition and

disciplining of producers/workers on whose backs the citizen-consumer gains legitimacy” (141). In invoking gendered and racialized minority communities in her use of Spanish, Mullen’s quatrain echoes Mohanty’s question: “Who are the workers that make the citizen-consumer possible?” Ironically, many of the poor, immigrant, and women of color who would be the target audience for this type of advertising are also the most likely to be the workers producing/packaging the very same products their TVs, radios, and Internet are encouraging them to purchase.

In addition to her incorporation of fragments of Spanish language, Mullen’s poem also alludes in other ways to many contemporary realities of life in U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Analyzing how Mullen’s poem “conjoin[s] the fragment and the quatrain” in the first quatrain below, Shockley analyses the many-layered references from religious songs, folks sayings and the language of advertising to show how “Mullen asks us to think about the struggles of previous generations of African Americans against racism in relation to more recent constructions of black freedom as the opportunity to participate in American consumer culture” (Shockley 96-97). I agree with Shockley that these lines show how “the blues provides the formal glue that hold together both fragment and quatrain, on one level, and the lyric and the epic, on the other.” Yet the images also suggest another layer of reference—the U.S.-Mexico borderlands:

.....
dry bones in the valley
turn over with wonder
was it to die for our piece
of buy ‘n’ buy pie chart
when memory is unforgiving
mute eloquence
of taciturn ghosts

wreaks havoc on the living

intimidates inmates

polishing naked cactus

down below a bitter buffer

inferno never froze over (169)

Iconic images of the Southwest locate us in the desert: the “dry bones in the valley” and “naked cactus” that dot the landscape of a “bitter buffer.” For those familiar with the tragedy of the Juárez murders, images of “dry bones” recalls the media images of search parties looking for missing women in the desert and finding only bones and perhaps a shred of clothing or a lone shoe. Since 1993, more than four hundred women have disappeared in the norteño border town of Ciudad Juárez (across the border from El Paso, Texas), and by mid-2002, 282 women had been identified as victims of femicide (Fregoso 1). In her haunting documentary of this femicide tragedy, filmmaker Lourdes Portillo’s *Señorita Extraviada* (*Missing Young Woman*) visually and aurally represents the “mute eloquence” of the “taciturn ghosts” of the dead women who wreak “havoc on the living.” Thus, this historical and social trauma hinges upon women’s perceived muted (ghostly) invisibility within traditional, patriarchal societies and the brutal visibility of their murdered bodies. In attempting to account for this gender violence, feminist scholars such as Julia Estela Monárrez, Debbie Nathan, Rosa Linda Fregoso, and Ursula Biemann have analyzed how power relations operate on Latin American (Mexican) and Latina women within the simultaneous processes of globalization, social-economic changes at the border zones, and traditional patriarchal societies. Thus: “Femicide in Juárez makes evident the reality of overlapping power relations on gendered and

racialized bodies as much as it clarifies the degree to which violence against women has been naturalized as a method of social control” (Fregoso 2). In this violent equation, the bodies of brown female workers are seen as expendable victims in the fight for domination by states, the rich, and white elites—the perceived “order” protected and bounded by the border.

Women living in the borderlands are indeed victims of globalization’s dark side—a “bitter” piece of the “buy ‘n’ buy pie chart.” In the new international division of labor, the majority of Juárez’s femicide victims are employees at the large multinational *maquilas*, or assembly plants, where they assemble components for electronic and high-tech goods (such as televisions and computers), which are then exported, tariff-free, back to the U.S. Mullen’s “buy ‘n’ buy pie chart” satirizes a profit-oriented neoliberalism, which encourages multinational corporations to locate their factories in places such as the U.S.-Mexico borderlands where wages are lowest and government regulations the least intrusive.

Yet one of neoliberalism’s problematic contradictions, as Inderpal Grewal reminds us, is that “the mobility of capital and goods is not matched by the mobility of labor (especially labor that is perceived to be ‘unskilled,’ which defines the work of so many women and the poor)” (Grewal 15). Thus, kind of global factory labor symbolized by the *maquilas* is both racialized and gendered:

The biggest losers in this global assembly line are women—Latina and Asian women—characterized as inherently, innately, and naturally suited for the kind of low-skill labor in light manufacturing, whether in the Third World export-processing

factories or U.S. electronic assembly plants and sweatshops. This ‘myth of nimble fingers’—a purely ideological construct—is nothing less than the rationalization for low wages, not to mention justification for the perpetuation of the notion of Third World women’s intellectual inferiority. It is not just the gendered quality of the international division of labor that is so problematic, but that the gendered division is inferred and inscribed as a permanent hierarchy that is further reinforced by race, class, and nationality differences, as well as denial of immigration and citizenship rights in the case of the smuggled and undocumented. (Hu-DeHart 252)

The exploited factory worker, the sweatshop laborer, the sex worker, the domestic worker...these women have become “the unattractive public faces of the New World Order” (251). Mullen asks readers to confront such “unattractive,” homely faces when she muses:

how a border orders disorder
how the children looked
whose mothers worked
in the maquiladora (*Recyclopedia* 108)

To invoke the maquiladora invokes the Juárez murders and the violence of patriarchy, the backlash of NAFTA, the continued oppression of the U.S.-Mexico border as an export-processing zone for the North and West, as well as a long history of conflict along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. By asking us to consider “how the children looked / whose mother’s worked in the maquiladora,” Mullen’s poem somewhat sentimentally encourages her readers to humanize these women and to understand them as wives, girlfriends, and mothers working within complex and violent power structures in order to

provide for their families. In doing so, Mullen's poem contests and rejects the dehumanization of factory work and the erasure of women's humanity by both local and global processes.

In an interview, Mullen has observed how borders are created to separate a perceived "order" from the threat of a perceived "disorder." These borders "define social organization" and "artistic form," even when they are "imaginary" or "arbitrary."²³ As a political statement on the regulation of movement across geo-political borders, Mullen's comments echo border scholar Claudia Sadowski-Smith: "literal or symbolic forms of transborder movement undermine state-based nationalist ideologies and oppressive nation-state structures by defying a central aspect of state power—to define, discipline, control, and regulate all kinds of populations, whether in movement or in residence" (Sadowski-Smith 3). Shockley agrees, noting: "if the order this border is supposed to provide is in part a racial division, increasingly it defeats its own purpose" (Shockley 103).

The line can also be interpreted as a statement of poetics. Here, the chronotope of the border as a defensible space and a moment in time (of order and organization) becomes the explosive coordinate from which Mullen can theorize a *transaborder* feminist poetics. Art and ideology, she claims, as much as people and national boundaries, cannot be absolutely regulated. In fact, the kind of aesthetic divisions that separate "art" from "garbage" are continually being troubled, or erased altogether. Mullen reminds us that oppositional politics and formal innovation are not incompatible. To connect them is to enact an equally assertive political and aesthetic opposition to the forces of power that attempt to regulate and silence women of color.

Mullen's references to the global division of labor invite comparison between African American women in the United States and Mexican women and U.S. Latinas. The earlier reference to "inmates" and her allusion to the illegal drug trade in the following quatrain similarly locate us in a landscape of illegality and violence:

precious cargo up crooked alleys
mules and drugs
blood on the lilies
of the fields (172)

Mullen puns on the title of the poem, replacing "Muse & Drudge" with "mules and drugs."²⁴ This wordplay encapsulates many ideas at once: a repetition of the theme of women as workers, the double meaning of "mule" as an animal used for hard labor and as slang for those (mainly women) who transport illegal drugs across the border from Mexico, the violence perpetrated on the bodies of women who have no other choice but to smuggle contraband—"precious cargo up crooked alleys." Here, "crooked alleys" works both literally and figuratively: the "crooked alleys" are also the bodies of the women themselves. Her references to the back alley world of smuggling, drug trafficking, and drug use invoke the U.S.-Mexico border at the same time that they reference conditions in the urban ghettos of the United States. While our illegal drugs may come from or through Mexico, African American young men bear the burden of the drug dealer stereotype in U.S. culture, and black bodies continue to fill the nation's prisons on drug-related charges.²⁵ When asked about this line, Mullen has said, "That very literally refers to the frisking and strip-searching of black women in airports, because they're supposed to fit the profile of the drug courier, or mule" (Bedient 667). Mullen recognizes that not all border crossing can be abstracted as metaphors for

aesthetic and cultural theories. Our ultimate inability to regulate borders also creates conditions of violence, exploitation, and criminality, not only for immigrants but also other communities. As Saskia Sassen points out, writing about the survival of migratory women in global cities: “The same infrastructure designed to facilitate cross-border flows of capital, information, and trade also makes possible a range of unintended cross-border flows, as growing numbers of traffickers, smugglers, and even governments now make money off the back of women” (Sassen 273).

Mullen’s social commentary links different racialized, gendered and criminalized bodies, particularly through the lens of women of color’s shared struggles against dehumanizing stereotypes as sexually desirable objects, prostitutes, and laborers. The poem responds to media stereotypes of black women “as welfare queens, drugs addicts, and skanky prostitutes on the one hand, or fabulous divas and fashion supermodels on the other,” Mullen said in one interview. She connects these images with the heightened attention on “the war on drugs, the growth of the prison industrial system, and attacks on affirmative action, welfare, and proposals for universal health care throughout the 1980s and early 1990s” (Kane 131). “Mules and drugs” are the African American women and murdered U.S. Latina and Mexican *maquila* workers in the borderlands whose bodies are used as vehicles for the illegal drug trade. Mullen’s verses are a pointed critique of the perceived illegality and expendability of women of color’s bodies.

The poem connects black women, Latinas, and Latin Americans again in one of the final quatrains:

disappeared undocumented workhorse
homeless underclass breeder
dissident pink collard criminal
terminal deviant indigent slut (*Recyclopedia* 176)

The quatrain's references transact between political categories of identity created by the state: the *desaparecidos* or disappeared persons (most commonly associated with the dictatorships of Chile and Argentina) and the "undocumented worker," as well social identities created by dominant discourse about women of color, particularly black women.²⁶ By yoking "disappeared" and "undocumented" together, Mullen invites us to consider the similarities between the violence of foreign (Latin American) dictatorship and the violence of U.S. hegemony, which depends on the same immigrant labor it criminalizes. According to Kent Ono and John Sloop:

The rhetoric of 'immigration,' one of the key ideographs of the United States, illustrates well the production of ambivalence surrounding others within narratives about citizens... The two sides of the ambivalence are the desire for productive laborers and a loathing of the laborer who does anything other than work specific jobs associated with facilitating the interests of efficient capital processes. (Ono and Sloop 27)

What Ono and Sloop identify as "ambivalence" takes on a more sinister meaning when we consider the poor material conditions of many of these immigrants and laborers, as well as the hostility they face as outsiders in U.S. citizenship narratives. By replacing "worker" with "workhorse," Mullen emphasizes the dehumanizing that occurs when laborers are valued only for the demanding physical labor (drudgery) they perform and are seen as political non-entities or as a threat to a cohesive national identity. This is particularly ironic because there is no doubt that "immigrant labor is indispensable for the labor-intensive, service-dependent economy of the United States" (Hu-DeHart 253). Mullen's ironic critique points to one of the fundamental hypocrisies of the American

creed: the insistence that “equality and justice for all” translates as success earned through individual hard work and pluckiness, rather than being the product of the calculated exploitation of others deemed inferior.

These lines emphasize the intersection of race and gender implicit (or explicit) in drudgery. Mullen’s wordplay *transaculturates* the relationship between African Americans, women from the Global South, and immigrants in the United States, encouraging us to see continuity between America’s classic anti-black rhetoric and today’s increasing national hysteria over immigration at our southern border. “Workhorse” invokes slavery and/or the blue-collar labor performed by a so-called underemployed and unskilled black “underclass.” Mullen emphasizes the racialized *and* gendered aspect of work through her word play: “dissident pink collard criminal.” “Pink collard” combines “pink-collar,” or the term for “women’s work,” with “collard,” as in “collard greens,” a food stereotypically associated with Southern black culture(s). Indeed, “dissident” and “criminal,” along with “homeless underclass breeder” and “terminal deviant indigent slut,” are racist labels used to describe African American women in the urban ghetto. Similar to the immigrant *barrio*, the black ghetto has often been theorized in racist and classist rhetoric as a “breeding ground” for lawlessness and laziness where hypersexual and sexually deviant “welfare mothers” drain the government of precious resources while breeding future gang members, criminals, and prostitutes who will continue the vicious cycle. As Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton write in *American Apartheid*: “By the end of the 1970’s, the image of poor minority families mired in an endless cycle of unemployment, unwed childbearing, illiteracy, and

dependency had coalesced into a compelling and powerful concept: the urban underclass” (Massey and Denton 4).

“Homeless underclass breeder” also recalls rhetoric of U.S. political theorists such as Samuel P. Huntington, who warns Americans that the rising percentage of “Hispanic” persons in the United States is “driven not just by immigration but also by fertility” (Huntington 34). Huntington goes on to compare fertility rates between non-Hispanic whites, blacks, and Hispanics to argue “the single most immediate and most serious challenge to America’s traditional identity comes from the immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially from Mexico, and the fertility rates of these immigrants compared to black and white American natives” (32). Like “workhorse,” “homeless underclass breeder” alludes to the flattening and dehumanizing of non-white subjectivity by nativist rhetoric—women of color are reduced to their reproductive capacity, seen solely as vessels for breeding a growing underclass which threatens to destroy U.S. national identity. Huntington’s rhetoric exemplifies the discourse Ono and Sloop accuse of portraying “undocumented immigrants as either underpaid laborers whose work strengthens the economy or welfare recipients who drain the state’s social welfare system” (Ono and Sloop 28).

In both the case of the ghetto and the *barrio*, the social and economic conditions of these groups are generalized as products of a “culture of poverty” that reinforces laziness and lawlessness (Massey and Denton 5). At the same time, their cheap labor drives economic growth. Either way, immigrants are seen solely as “economic units.” Read comparatively as a *transborder* feminist intervention, Mullen’s word play with marginalizing dominant rhetoric reminds us of how language and power operate together

to name and silence women of color's voices. This is the "master's language" that *Muse & Drudge* will spit back in the face of domination as just one of many possible discourses. While the muse may carry a "name determined by other names," she aggressively asserts her own power to transact between language cultures, even racist ones (*Recyclopedia* 100).

The category of "women's work" offers a productive basis for cross-cultural analysis. Recent scholarship names the kind of work historically performed by African American women but now increasingly taken up by immigrant women from the Global South as "social reproductive labor."²⁷ This scholarship identifies continuities between the gendered and racialized divisions of labor in a global age and in the "pre-global" age where "whether working in domestic, cleaning, janitorial, or food service, or in nursing home or child care, or as prostitutes, sex workers, or mail- or internet-brides, Third World immigrant women are not just making a living in low-paying, low-status often demeaning niches that require little English or other skills" (Hu-DeHart 250). Now, as before, professional middle class women can leverage class privilege by transferring such "private sphere responsibilities" to "racially and socially subordinate women"—the mules of the world. Chandra Mohanty's research examines not only the tasks that women perform but also "the ideological construction of jobs and tasks in terms of notions of appropriate femininity, domesticity, (hetero)sexuality, and racial and cultural stereotypes," mapping the operations of capitalism across different divides to understand how capitalist values are naturalized through the way women's work is constituted (Mohanty 142). This methodology creates "political solidarity and common interests, defined as a community of collectivity among women workers across class, race, and

national boundaries that is based on shared material interests and identity and common ways of reading the world” (145). It is precisely this “cross-cultural comparison and analysis,” “grounded in history and social location rather than in an ahistorical notion of culture or experience” that Mullen’s poem invites (145). Women’s work becomes a *transa* through which African American women’s experiences and subjectivities are not equated with those of contemporary Latinas and women from the Global South, but rather they inform and disrupt each other, to expose sites of solidarity and also remind us of the important differences between different women’s experiences under capitalism.

Mullen’s poem travels temporally as well as spatially or geographically. The poem moves from women’s contemporary experiences of exploitation under advanced capitalism to the gendered violence of colonial conquest in the Americas. One of the most complex transactions in *Muse & Drudge* emerges between Mullen’s self-consciously hybridized language and her references to actual racial mixing. In the following quatrain, written in Spanish, Mullen references the colonial history that produced *mestizaje*:

.....
mulattos en el mole
me gusta mi posole
hijita del pueblo Moreno
.....
ya baila la conquista (*Recyclopedia* 165)

This quatrain is deceptively playful. The first two lines have a singsong rhythm and rhyme scheme, and the words seem nonsensical: mulattos in the *mole*/i like my *posole*. But everything shifts in the third line when we meet the “little daughter from a Brown town”(“hijita del pueblo Moreno”)—the result of the conquest’s “dance,” which Mullen

alludes to with the final line “ya baila la conquista” (“the conquest dances now”). Mullen plays on the double meaning of “pueblo” in Spanish—as both “town/village,” but also as “community” or “people.” She also takes advantage of the Spanish preposition “de,” which means both “from” and “of.” In the image of a little daughter from/of a brown town/people, we now have a context for and an embodiment of those “mulattos” in the first line. The *mole* and *posole* cease to be simply iconic cultural markers and become symbols of mixing, specifically racial mixing. *Mole*, a traditional Oaxacan chili and chocolate-based sauce, and *posole*, a Mexican stew made from hominy, meat, and chili peppers, are both dishes that depend on the combination of many different flavors, textures, and spices. In the discourse of mainstream multiculturalism, food and cooking metaphors are often (over)used to describe racial/ethnic heterogeneity, e.g. the tiresome “melting pot,” or even metaphors for people themselves, e.g. Latino/as as “hot” and “spicy.” At first, Mullen appears to be echoing the same kind of essentializing discourse, but the last two lines subvert this discourse, reminding us that mixing is the product of the conquest’s violent “dance.” It’s not surprising that Mullen chooses a little girl to represent colonialism’s racial legacy in Latin America—indigenous women and girls were the earliest victims of the conquest’s sexual violence. As Alicia Arrizón notes, “Massive miscegenation was facilitated not only by the social condition of the natives but also by the fact that the conquistadors’ position of power made it possible for them to exploit women at will” (Arrizón 7). To peer beneath the surface of Mullen’s seemingly playful rhymes reveals multiculturalism’s silent history—the deeply embedded histories of racial and sexual violence in the Americas.

Thus, the quatrain's second half subverts the expectations created by the first half's playfulness. In subsequent readings, Mullen's irony becomes clearer. Her use of "baila" (dance) to describe the process of conquest is perhaps the most biting irony in the entire poem. Colonialism as a dance turns subjugation into play and pleasure, and also suggests, in the "it takes two to tango" sense, that colonial subjects also participate in their own subjugation. The urgency of the Spanish word "ya" in the final line, roughly translated in English as "now," brings us back to the present moment. Mullen reminds us that colonialism's dance is not over, that the consequences of the racial and sexual violence visited upon "brown people" of all shades and combinations continue to have purchase in contemporary social injustices.

We know that the mixing of races produced complicated and important racial hierarchies where skin color and bloodline were crucial to one's status in society (as free or enslaved, citizen or non-citizen, "high class" or "low class," etc.). Particularly in the Spanish colonies of Latin America, being a *mestizo* was equated with low class status and was a source of shame and humiliation (Castillo 8). While Mullen's multiple discourses might often celebrate the complexity and interconnectedness of *transa*American cultures, the mestiza/mulatta is not part of a happy multiculturalism. Alicia Arrizón reminds us that the word "mulatto" comes from the Latin word for mule, and this etymology adds yet another valence of meaning to the poem's title. The mulatta/mestiza is a site of both history and empowerment. In her historical role, she is "the embodiment of transculturation, commodification, eroticization" (Arrizón 84), perpetually denied full inclusion in both her "native" and "dominant" cultures. Mullen's mestiza/mulatta turns this history onto itself, using the *transa* "in-betweenness of cultural hybridization" to

contest the history of racist, patriarchal power structures which have silenced her voice(s) and to aggressively make art from that *transaborder* space of marginality (101).

Muse & Drudge represents a *transaborder* feminist poetics where Mullen's multi-tongued muse transacts between "major" and "minor" discourses to challenge assumptions about borders that attempt to regulate experiences, subjectivities, and aesthetics for women of color. Her *transaborder* poetics represent a matrix of intentional and "illegitimate" transactions within transactions. Such juxtapositions compare geopolitical and gendered-racialized borders, the subjects who cross them, and the aesthetic-ideological borders that dictate what constitutes (and who creates) art and culture. *Muse & Drudge* avoids recreating or re-inscribing a stable, coherent identity *or* language through her use of *transa* techniques such as fragmentation, collage, allusion, parataxis, code switching, and signifying.

Ultimately, *Muse & Drudge* is a funky manifestation of Mullen's definition of "mongrel" as " 'among others.'" The poem rejects essentialist politics--cultural and otherwise--and instead strives to recognize and legitimate our profound interconnectedness as humans. By recognizing that we create our identities out of our relationships with others, Mullen's muse demands that we "reconfigure the hybrid" (*Recyclopedia* 158). This reconfigured hybrid (whether it be a multi-voiced text or a multi-voiced body) becomes a radical opportunity for "collaborative reading and an occasion to unite audiences often divided by racial and cultural differences" as well as a critically engaged, tongue-in-cheek and often sneaky, dismantling of the numerous social scripts that would bind us (*Recyclopedia* xi).

Notes

¹ In contesting the assumption that “cultures always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogenous nation states,” and dissatisfied with the existing terminology for cultural changes and discontinuities, Gilroy theorizes “the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering that I have heuristically called the black Atlantic world” (5; 2-3).

² In his article, “Spun Puns (And Anagrams): Exchange Economies, Subjectivity, and History in Harryette Mullen’s ‘Muse & Drudge,’” Mitchum Huehls provides an excellent theorizing of Mullen’s poem in relation to Gilroy’s “black Atlantic” diaspora, and the corresponding complex black cultural formations and subjectivities that are produced out of diaspora.

³ When asked about her references to the Yoruba orishas in the poem, Mullen has said: “They work in the poem as allusions to the African Diaspora, cultures, and spiritual traditions. They expand the idea of blackness. They suggest both continuity and discontinuity” (Hogue, “Interview,” par. 28).

⁴ Instead of viewing citizenship and social relations solely on the North-South axis of the U.S.-Mexico border, Paredes documents the “unwritten history of the south Texas borderlands” as consisting of transnational communities and “movements of people from East to West and South to North” (Saldivar 59). Greater Mexico, like Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, extends the historic-cultural boundaries of Mexico beyond the modern nation state to include a wider, transnational field.

⁵ *Maquilas*, or *maquiladoras*, are assembly plants (factories) located in Mexico close to the U.S.-Mexico border.

⁶ I also understand *transa*’s productive and destructive potential by linking it to 20th century Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz’s classic work on “transculturation” in *Cuban Counterpoint*. According to Ortiz

[...] *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word acculturation really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. (Ortiz 102-103)

⁷ See “Chapter 5: How to Tame a Wild Tongue” in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987).

⁸ Mullen says: “ [...] being in between discourses, in between cultures, in between communities, with the possibility of movement back and forth between these different arenas and discourses, so that the poetry comes out of the resistance, the conflict, the struggle, the difficulty, the discomfort or awkwardness of that position (“Untitled” 12—13).

⁹ In my use of “solidarity” as critical terminology, I am invoking Chandra Mohanty’s definition: “I define solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities” (7).

¹⁰ Much of this scholarship focuses on *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*, Mullen’s self-confessed attempts to respond to Stein’s use of “elusive poetic prose” as “meditation on the interior lives of women and the material culture of domesticity” (*Recyclopedia* ix-x).

¹¹ Frost has characterized *Trimmings* as Mullen’s attempt to merge a Black Arts tradition and a Steinian poetic tradition (*Feminist Avant-Garde*). Frost argues that Mullen signifies on Stein by extending her poetic awareness to historical, social, and political contexts and the way identities, primarily black female identities, are socially constructed.

¹² See also Paul Hoover (2004) and Calvin Bedient (1996)

¹³ Frost undertakes a comprehensive analysis of how Mullen revises and “hybridizes” the lyric tradition. Through her “mongrelization of cultural reference points” she transforms the personal lyric tradition into “an experiment in collective reading and an assertion of the complexities of community, language, and poetic voice.” (“Ruses” 466-67)

¹⁴ See Hollinger

¹⁵ See Mullen, “Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness.”

¹⁶ Mullen’s first book of poetry, *Tree Tall Woman*, placed her “rather neatly within the category of ‘representative blackness’” (“Poetry and Identity” 28), and she noticed that her audiences had “a lot of black people” as well as “white people and brown people and other people of color as well” (*Combo* 47). Her next two books, *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T* reflected new interest in innovative poetics, but she immediately saw a change in her audience. She said: “Suddenly, when I went around to do readings of *Trimmings* and ‘Spermkit,’ I would be the one black person in the room, reading my poetry, I mean, a room which typically had no other people of color in it...and I thought, ‘How am I going to get all these folks to sit down together in the same room?’”

¹⁷ In *Black Chant: African-American Postmodernisms*, Aldon Nielson echoes Mullen’s concerns: “Too much current theorizing about black poetics secures its success with a critical readership by eliminating from consideration those poetic practices that might disrupt totalizing theories of what constitutes black vernacular” (9-10).

¹⁸ As Allison Cummings has pointed out: “readers throughout the twentieth century came to associate African American identity and aesthetics in poetry with certain tropes and themes: ‘black’ dialect; folk and vernacular expressions conveying collective, regional racial identities; themes related to African American experience; line lengths and rhythms allied with jazz and blues; and allusions specific to African American history, art, music, and literature” (Cummings 13-14).

¹⁹ History, she says in an interview, “associates African-Americans with inarticulateness and illiteracy, or with an oral tradition that continually threatens to drown out any possible written tradition that we can claim as our own” (“Untitled” 11-12). Mullen argues instead: “Africans did write,” yet because “Africans may not have used writing in the same ways that Europeans did,” the history of African script has been erased. To ignore how the speakerly can also be writerly denies each generation “this history of innovation, formal experimentation, of a writerly text, that may also be speakerly at the same time, may also be musical” (*Combo* 42). See also Mullen, “African Signs & Spirit Writing.”

²⁰ As Mullen told Calvin Bedient in an interview, “I was interested in concentrating, distilling and condensing aspects of orality and literacy...I’m interested in taking a speech-based tradition and transforming it through the techniques that are available to me in writing.” (Bedient 656)

²¹ death

²² Mullen says she found the word “nubia” in a series of letters between two black women in the 19th century. Although the word technically refers to a lace collar worn by women in the Victorian period, Mullen likes its “Afrocentric” sound with its invocation of “Nubian.” (*Combo* 39-40)

²³ Mullen has said:

The separation of a border defines an order that must be defended, and also presupposes a disorder that continually threatens order...Apparently we need boundaries, even imaginary or arbitrary ones, to define social organization and artistic form. Still, it’s impossible to regulate absolutely the movement of people across borders, or even to define with certainty the difference between a work of art and a piece of garbage. (Kane 134)

²⁴ Mullen says her wordplay with “mule,” “muse,” and “drudge” is in reference to a remark made by the grandmother in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: the black woman is the mule of the world. See Bedient 666—667.

²⁵ See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010. Print.

²⁶ For further information on the creation of “undocumented” and “illegal alien” as categories of identity see Nevins (2002).

²⁷ See Grace Chang (2000); Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992); Evelyn Hu-DeHart (2007); and Pirette Hodagneu-Sotelo (2002), among others.

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