

# Barbara Henning's interview with Harryette Mullen: mnemonic power of rhyme and rh...

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Harryette Mullen Given the stress some critics have put on the way the lines “ skirt the edges of meaning,” I would assert that I intend the poem to be meaningful: to allow, or suggest, to open up, or insinuate possible meanings, even in those places where the poem drifts between intentional utterance and improvisational wordplay, between comprehensible statements and the pleasures of sound itself. . . . This poem, despite random, arbitrary, even nonsensical elements, is saturated with the intentionality of the writer. I am aware that the poem presents difficulties for any reader, because of its specific and topical references to subculture and mass culture, its shredded, embedded, and buried allusions, its drift between meaning and sound, as well as its abrupt shifts in tone or emotional affect. From Barbara Henning, “ An Interview with Harryette Mullen.”

Click here for the text of the complete interview. Kate Percy Mullen's is particularly interested in the mnemonic power of rhyme and rhythm, advertising jingles, song lyrics, poetry recitation, kid's chants, nursery rhymes etc. She thinks of her relationship to poetry as a project of recycling or salvaging standardised language; although she consciously positions her work in relation to, not against, the discursive mnemonics of contemporary technology and commodity culture. Mullen satirises the overdetermined status of cliché and stereotype through nonsensical recitation, lines like ‘ stark strangled banjo’ instead of star spangled banner, or warp made fresh’ instead of word made flesh. She juxtaposes advertising material, nursery rhymes, song lyrics, and personal expressions; and she flags the ironic effect, making the very slightest alterations to familiar words and phrases.

Mullen's work enacts the dissonances of sound and language, provoking

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investigation into poetic conventions of coherence and cultural constructions of identity.

Some of the work in *Trimnings*, *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* and *Muse & Drudge* could be considered exemplary if judged by the aesthetic program of the language school, but her work also represents a convergence of this 'language interest with an examination of the ontological authenticity of 'the black voice.' Mullen's engagement with language writing does not represent a repudiation of oppositional praxis in relation to categories of blackness, but a problematisation of the suspended materialisations of voice in cultural and poetic practices. One of the primary cultural categorisations Mullen is interested in decoding and recoding is that of race. There is a distinctly recognisable black and African diasporan word choice, with references to the West African language Fula, from which the term *mojo* is derived and the god *Osiris* from Egyptian mythology. Of course Mullen also works with a specific African American heritage variously dropping words like *cornbread*, *gumbo*, *bottle tree*, *beats and breaks*, and making reference to practices such as *double dutch*, *rag time*, *hip hop*, and *rap*. These citations, however, are satirically played out within Mullen's poetic, primarily through allusion to the emergence of black cultural practice as capital within the American market, the music and film industries receive particular attention in *Muse & Drudge* in this respect, but also more generally through the crossed circuits of economic and cultural exchange in which modes of misrecognition play a primary function for black and white consumers/readers alike.

Quatrains like ' slave made artefact, salt glazed poetry, mammy manufacture, jig-rig nitty gritty make this explicit but do, in addition, highlight a desire for her work to be circulated in relation with African American communities. Patterns of reception and participation self reflexively inform the thematic content of her poetry. For instance, a black audience is figured as producing a specific and comparative canniness: colored hearing colored, sounds darker, back vowels lower, down there deeper. From " A Poetics of Opposition: Race and the Avant-Garde." The full essay from which this excerpt has been taken can be found at <http://english.rutgers.edu/pierce.htm> Mike Jackman Mullen's prose poetry certainly does all these things. It uses an associative rather than a logical structure, fragments or syntactical aberrations that force language out of a linear interpretation, homophone puns and entendres that go beyond the double or triple level, words that work simultaneously as nouns and verbs, based around a lexicon of clothes-words that play with meaning regarding the situation of women. All this adds up to Cixous' jumbings and dislocations, Irigaray's plural meanings that go off in all directions, and represents the " detour" of analyzing woman's social situation before pleasure can be experienced.

For example, consider the many ways the following three line poem can open out, not being restricted within a linear, logical frame: Bones knit. Skins pink, flush tight. White margin, ample fleshings. Out of character, full blush. Flushed out of hid- ing, pink in the flesh. To knit, to pink, a knit, a skin, a tight, a blush and are all verbs and nouns associated with clothing and makeup. Being in the pink and being flush both refer to health and wealth. "

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Tight" can refer simultaneously to virginity, stinginess, poverty, sexual inexperience, close friends.

Ample fleshings can refer to weight, to breasts, as well as the "fleshing out" of an argument (from its bare "bones"). Flushed out of hiding can refer to being sexually aroused, hunted down, embarrassed, and hunting down the "white" aspects hiding in black identity (for which the phrase "Out of character" can function as an imperative-get out of my character-or a reflection-this is out of character for me). White, pink, blush, margin all have racial overtones. The work raises questions such as: Where is the race? Which race is hiding and which is revealed? What or who is on the margins? Is that good or bad? From Jackman, "Harryette Mullen's *écriture féminine*."