

Harryette Mullen, *Recyclopedia: Trimmings, S*PeRM**K*T, and Muse & Drudge*. Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2006. 176pp. \$15

Harryette Mullen's early work owes a good deal to Language poetry: it avoids lyrical self-reference and closure; it focuses on the material aspects of language; and it addresses social and political concerns through considerations of linguistics and the writing process. But what interests me in Mullen's work is neither her development of this tradition nor her querying of the lyric situation per se—a familiar project—but rather the culturally interventionist *content* of her investigations. For Mullen, language carries power differentials inside it like a virus. Everything it contacts is at risk of infection.

Here is the whole of one short poem from the first book, *Trimmings*:

Gaudy gawks at baubles fondle tawdry laces up in garish gear, a form of being content.

The final phrase of “Gaudy gawks” toggles disorientingly between several meanings. In one reading, the way a woman presents herself (her “gear,” garish or not) determines not only how she looks but also what she *is*. Her form is an extension of her content. Yet the woman may just look “garish” tonight; the look is only one possible manifestation of her being. The forms that manifest content are transformable. It is this revisionary possibility that Mullen's slyly activist poems exploit. Her puns make a virtue of discontentedness.

Recyclopedia reissues three books by Mullen first published in the 1990s. *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*, Mullen's first two books, share a prose-poem form derived from Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. *Trimmings* borrows from and evaluates “Objects,” *S*PeRM**K*T* riffs on “Food.” *Tender Buttons'* remaining section, “Rooms,” did not become the basis for a collection, but its first line—“Act so that there is no use in a centre”—could serve as partial gloss for all three volumes of *Recyclopedia*, where the usual centers cannot hold. Mullen's puns summon various cultural data to her poems, hinging race to the marketing of baby food, the sexualized body to military terminology. In *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*, tenors are vehicles—and as we try to clock them with our radar guns, they disappear around a corner.

Here's a poem from *Trimmings*:

Dress shields, armed guard at breastwork, a hard mail covering. Brazen privates, testing their mettle. Bolder soldiers make advances, breasting hills. Whose armor is brassier.

At least two sets of meanings are legible. One relates to sexual seduction and the defensive potential of underwire bras with their hard metal underpinnings. Another comically interrogates the military's cooptation of the body

and hints at issues of class: only “bolder soldiers” advance; and those with the most power are “brassier,” the top brass. It is impossible to say which of these readings Mullen intends as primary; the poem makes nonsense of efforts to identify a fixed tenor and vehicle.

Mullen draws attention to the feminine-sounding terms we use to describe the conquering of territory (hills are “breasted”) and hyperbolically inflates the defensive rhetoric of women’s wear: there’s an “armed guard” at the “breastwork,” a woman’s armor is “brassier[e].” “Shields” acts both as noun and verb, military tool and undergarment. Mullen’s puns, especially her double entendres, are tools for drawing out connections between tropes of power and tropes of gender and sexuality.

*S*PeRM**K*T* uses similar tactics to take on consumer culture. Here is the first poem in the sequence:

Lines assemble gutter and margin. Outside and in, they straighten a place. Organize a stand. Shelf space. Square footage. Align your list or listlessness. Pushing oddly evening aisle catches the tale of an eye. Displays the cherished share. Individually wrapped singles, frozen divorced compartments, six-pack widows all express themselves while women wait in family ways, all bulging baskets, squirming young. More on line incites the eyes. Bold names label familiar type faces. Her hand scanning throwaway lines.

The first line may refer to “lines” at a supermarket, in a soup kitchen (with customers from the “gutter” or margin), or on a page. All of these lines serve to “organize a stand”—that is, they are social structuring devices, and thus manifest particular ways of thinking. Supermarkets have as much to say about poverty as homeless shelters and poems. “Individually wrapped singles” hint at a romantic loneliness the Kraft consumer might experience: human interactions curtailed by a culture addicted to fast feeding. The maxed-out density of signification in Mullen’s work asserts a world that constantly informs us about ourselves; its various objects and structures are intimately cross-connected. A poet’s work is just as disposable as the products and people it brings up: the poem ends with a female “hand scanning throwaway lines.”

The “work” a poet does comes up again in the title of the third collection in *Recyclopedica: Muse & Drudge*, which might be glossed as “think and work,” or alternatively as “poetic inspiration and physical labor.” The title reappears, mutated, twice in the book: once as “mute and dubbed” and again as “mule and drugs.” Poetry’s inspiration, the usually feminine “muse,” is figured as both “mute” and “mule.” A mute person can be “dubbed” over, her silence overwritten, erased. A “mule” is a drug smuggler; mules, who are usually women, often use their bodies as containers to transport illegal substances, a dangerous practice. Zora Neale Hurston described women as

“de mule[s] uh de world.” As Mullen mentions in an interview, the “mule” or “drudge” has traditionally provided the “material conditions” for the creation of poetry: someone “had to be...there cleaning the house, washing the dishes, and making the food for the person who is dreaming and creating.” These layered punnings challenge the traditional image of lyric inspiration by illuminating its complicity with traditional silencings of women, laborers, people of color. The poems mock stereotypes to activate alternatives: a “drudge” may be “dubbed,” or quoted, a “mule” may be a muse.

Muse & Drudge is the least Steinian of the three books, employing a stanza reminiscent of Sapphics and the blues. It’s full of women’s voices, many quoted from other texts. Mullen has described them as “a heteroglossia or maybe a cacophony of voices.” In *Muse & Drudge*, lyric “inspiration” entails direct borrowing from other texts: the speaker of the text is multiple and communal, the lyric situation is heterogenous, inclusive. At one point, Mullen uses her rhyming quatrains to skewer the media’s marketing of lighter skin: in Spanish (which she learned as a child in Texas) she quotes packaging copy on a skin “elixir” that promises that the buyer will be “hechizando con crema dermoblanqueadora” (enchancing with skin-bleaching cream). The cream is selling “enlightenment / nothing less than beauty itself”—a brand of truth inaccessible for a “double dutch darky / they dipped...in a vat at / the wacky chocolate factory.” A cascade of ironic racist references climax in this poem’s final stanza: “color we’ve got in spades / melanin gives perpetual shade / though rhythm’s no answer to cancer.” Racist clichés are “corralled in ludic routines” and used bruisingly against themselves.

This writing, in its pronounced attention to cultural grotesqueries, is alive with didactic intention. While we usually assume didactic writing marshals evidence to support a particular agenda, Mullen’s didacticism is, instead, exploratory, fearless of what it might discover. We wince at her puns because they glow with pain.

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Zak Smith, *Gravity’s Rainbow Illustrated: One Picture for Every Page*. Portland: Tin House, 2007. 784pp. \$39.95

As a thesis-generating machine *Gravity’s Rainbow* has it all: the military-industrial complex, Rilke, mysticism; thermodynamics, sadomasochism, behavioral psychology; the forties, Teutonic myth, song. Making sense of the novel’s explosive composite of concepts, characters, styles, settings, and plots is a potential fool’s errand, an act all too often carried out in tones reminiscent of the book’s personae themselves: paranoid, conspiratorial, schizophrenic, megalomaniacal.