

THE INVISIBLE BLACKNESS OF HARRYETTE MULLEN'S POETRY: WRITING, MISCEGENATION, AND WHAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN

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- **ABSTRACT:** This essay addresses the poetics of Harryette Mullen, an awarded African-American female poet whose work questions the boundaries that shape the expectations for accessible intelligibility in African-American literature. Mullen's poems skirt the edges of intelligibility by going beyond the expectations for a visible/intelligible form of language that would embrace the experience of blackness. I argue that writing in Mullen's poetry works as process of miscegenation by playing on the illegibility of blackness, beyond a visible line of distinction between what is or should be considered part of blackness itself, which engages new forms of reflection on poetry as a politically meaningful tool for rethinking the role of the black (female) poet within the black diaspora.
- **KEYWORDS:** Harryette Mullen. Poetry. Writing. Miscegenation. (In)visibility.

Of Dictionaries and Grammar: Blackness as an Entry

Sleeping with the Dictionary

I beg to dicker with my silver-tongued companion, whose lips are ready to read my shining gloss. A versatile partner, conversant and well-versed in the verbal art, the dictionary is not averse to the solitary habits of the curiously wide-awake reader. In the dark night's insomnia, the book is a stimulating sedative, awakening my tired imagination to the hypnagogic trance of language. Retiring to the canopy of the bedroom, turning on the bedside light, taking the big dictionary to bed, clutching the unabridged bulk, heavy with the weight of all the meanings between these covers, smoothing the thin sheets, thick with accented syllables – all are exercises in the conscious regimen of dreamers, who toss words on their tongues while turning illuminated pages. To go through all

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these motions and procedures, groping in the dark of an alluring word, is the poet's nocturnal mission. Aroused by myriad possibilities, we try out the most perverse positions in the practice of our nightly act, the penetration of the denotative body of the work. Any exit from the logic of language might be an entry in a symptomatic dictionary. The alphabetical order of this amble block of knowledge might render a dense a lexicon of lucid hallucinations. Beside the bed, a pad lies open to record the meandering of migratory words. In the rapid eye movement of the poet's night vision, this dictum can be decoded, like the secret acrostic of a lover's name. (MULLEN, 2002a, p.67).

It is a truism that dictionaries are fundamental resources for anyone interested in looking up the meanings and spellings of words. What might not be that obvious, though, is that meaning is not simply explained with, but is itself a "composite" of, other words. These words, in turn, refer to different words, whose connections with the "memories" of still more words are endlessly linked. These links are firmly underscored by the authoritative role that is socially ascribed to dictionaries. Every entry in a dictionary is a confirmation of the past, tradition and heritage: even the most updated dictionary, with newly-coined words, inherits linguistic and historical conditions that enable its definitions to be "read," understood and, possibly, questioned or changed in posterior editions.

Dictionaries are generally expected to *catch up with* the changes of a particular language and society. However, they have to do so without losing sight of their authoritative condition in the ongoing production of heritage itself: in the midst of constant social and technical changes, dictionaries construct cultural representations necessarily framed in an inherited grammar that articulates not only the language in which they are written, but its values, discourses and historicity as well. Dictionaries can provide us with the pleasant sense of revamping our own daily, washed-out vocabularies with new possibilities for expression, but only within constraints that make (the feeling of) newness possible. If it is true that a dictionary brings forth "myriad possibilities" of creation and liberation in the most intimate relationship that a poet may develop with it, it is no less true that this relationship entails some form of penetration and entanglement, if not imprisonment.

The poem "Sleeping with the Dictionary," by Harryette Mullen (2002a, p.67), says "[...] aroused by myriad possibilities, we try out the most perverse positions in the practice of our nightly act, the penetration of the denotative body of the work". We could ask ourselves: Who penetrates whom? Does the dictionary penetrate the poet, or vice-versa? Or else, do they penetrate each other in the "denotative body of the work"? The body of the work is the very outcome of the most intimate relationship between the inherited knowns and unknowns of the dictionary and the poet's (unconscious) desire. When sleeping with the *dictionary*, the poet is himself/

herself penetrated by heritage as much as he/she penetrates the body of inherited meanings, values and definitions. The poet, a translator par excellence, translates herself in the body of her work. Her own body is translated by the heritage of this overwhelmingly virtual, if not spectral, paperless, past and present dictionary conceived across her work. How can we define or translate the body of the poet? Is the poet's body instrumental in translating the body of her work? In what ways are both of her "bodies" mutually translated in the ongoing movement of subjugation, surrender, appropriation and resistance within the realm of heritage?

Harryette Mullen's "Sleeping with the Dictionary" is both the title of her book and a poem within the book. She is an African-American female. Which entry would be more appropriate to translate her work or the woman herself: "African-American poetry," "American poetry" or "innovative poet from [a] minority background" (a title that has already been conferred upon her)? What are the boundaries of the blackness that both the female poet and her work share?

The relationships between heritage/tradition, entries, dictionaries, bodies, and works constitute the intricacies that shape the ongoing translation of identity. She is a black female poet, and her poetry draws on how the subjectivities of black women have been constructed in the US, particularly by the media and by popular imagination. Of what entries is "her" dictionary allowed to be composed? As a poet, she might be read as an intimate – but also public – dictionary, including countless, ever-increasing entries, from among which her poem would be one of many. At the same time, her own poetry might be a dictionary in which she herself, as a poet, is an entry. But who or what actually maintains control of the *passage* between these two bodies: from one body to the other, from the poet to the work, and the other way around?

The boundaries of blackness may be conflictingly shared by both the poet and her work. We have to consider the ways in which the boundaries between blackness and its otherness are negotiated when identifying what the poet's work is expected to display; it may unexpectedly showcase its otherness to be as much from *within* as from without. In what ways do the relationships between heritage/tradition, entries, dictionaries, bodies and works constitute the intricacies that shape the ongoing translation of identity? One possible way of addressing these issues would be to begin with an entry itself: "blackness," as it is presented in the *Handbook of African-American Literature*, edited by Hazel Ervin (2004):

blackness – The state, quality, or condition of possessing those physical and cultural aspects associated with people who have been identified and self-identified as black; also the degree to which one is identified or self-identified as having the physical and cultural particulars. In the United States, notions about physical blackness have been influenced by the concept of hypodescent or "the one-drop rule," which asserts that one drop of black blood makes one

racially black. As a result of hypodescent, those who are identified and who self-identify as black, range from Europeans – having skin complexions, eye colors, hair textures, and bone structures typically associated with Europeans – to sub-Saharan Africans – to skin, eye, hair and skeletal features that exist between these two extremes. Equally challenging to define are those cultural particulars that also attempt to define blackness, and in the realm of philosophy, the markers of blackness represent African cultural vestiges present in the black diaspora – what Toni Morrison calls “Africanisms” – that deviate from Western cultural norms and that may include but are not limited to the following: a predilection for orality and the rhythm and music of speech even in writing; an emphasis on a collective identity, on the importance of community over the individual; a seamless fusion of the rational and the irrational, of the natural and the prenatal, and prevailing view of development not as linear but as **circular** and **cyclical**. (ERVIN, 2004, p.37, author’s emphasis).

According to Ervin (2004), the “markers of blackness,” as “vestiges of [the] black diaspora,” are deviations from “Western Cultural Norms.” Although deviation is a form of difference in relation to a particular norm or standard, it does not necessarily represent a dichotomy, in which opposite poles remain seemingly irreconcilable. Deviations in relation to particular norms do not necessarily exclude commonalities between what is said to be diverting and what it is deemed to have been diverted from. From a biological standpoint, miscegenation, in principle, has the power to blur the limit between what is seen to be either exclusively black or exclusively white. One of the black cultural particulars that, according to Ervin (2004, p.37), is considered to deviate from “Western Cultural Norms,” is “the predilection for orality, the rhythm and music of speech even in writing”. The representation of Black English Vernacular (BEV) in literary writing is generally acknowledged as an important defining feature of African-American literature, both as a mode of representation inherited from the oral tradition of slave narratives and a form of depicting the daily lives of African-Americans. However, orality and BEV and even other features listed under the entry “blackness,” do not seem to suffice in defining or identifying a particular text as representative of black or African-American literature, let alone in defining “blackness” itself.

A work of fiction or a poem composed of African-American motifs – including the representation of characters overridden by the plight of slavery or discrimination, who speak BEV – may not be considered a truly African-American work of fiction or poetry if the author is not identified or self-identified as a black or African-American writer. It goes without saying that such an author may not phenotypically appear to be black, and might even “pass for” white – but her willingness to be recognized as an African-American is that which would place her work in the category of black fiction or poetry. It is a matter of consciousness, of decision-making by the author herself in

her effort to be *visibly* accepted as such. What can be said about an individual who is both identified and self-identified as an African-American writer/poet but whose mode of writing and style goes beyond or borrows from outside the defining limits of what is expected from an African-American literary work? In other words, what actually grants a literary work access into the rubric of black or African-American literature? What should prevail in the process of identification beyond the assertive act itself? The (body of the) author or the (body of the) work? If both are equally important, what remains complicated is the fact that the *body of writing* itself should be recognized, within the heritage, as conferring visible traits of belonging, but it also causes the proliferation of connections beyond the expected tradition.

Identities of blackness cannot exist prior to a “translation”; they come to be conceived only within a certain defining translation carried out by individuals and institutions, including publishing houses. The poet or writer translates blackness by producing it and making it different in every act of the translation/description/discussion/performance. If it seems more appropriate to say that there is no single black identity, but rather, black identities, then the “translator” (the reader, the writer, the poet, the critic, and the translator himself) must cope with the multiplicity, if not hybridity, that is already in translation within the proliferation of blackness across the diaspora. Does a black poem have to include any markers that point to the racial or ethnic connections between its text, its author and its tradition in order to be recognized as such? If the poem does not include such conventional signs, is it less “black” than it would be if the author in question were an African-American poet? And how should we begin to define the poet?

Harryette Mullen is an African-American female poet and scholar, born in Florence, Alabama, but raised in Fort Worth, Texas. She is currently a Professor of American and African-American Literature at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her emergence as a poet takes place in the early 80’s, with the publication of her first book of poetry, entitled *Tree Tall Woman* (Energy Earth Press, MULLEN, 1981). She would only publish her next book of poetry ten years later, with *Trimblings* (1991, republished in *Recyclopedia*, MULLEN, 2006), followed by *S*PeRM**K*T* (1992, republished in *Recyclopedia*, MULLEN, 2006), *Muse & Drudge* (1995, republished in *Recyclopedia*, MULLEN, 2006), *Blues Baby, Early Poems* (Bucknell University Press, MULLEN, 2002b), and *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (University of California Press, MULLEN, 2002a). The latter was nominated for a National Book Award, a National Book Critics Circle Award, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. She has received a Gertrude Stein Award for innovative poetry, among other awards. In October 2007, Harryette Mullen, along with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ernest Hardy and Alberto Ríos, received the 2007 PEN/Beyond Margins Award. On the PEN website it is claimed that “the works of this year’s recipients span an impressive

range, touching upon themes of deconstruction, regeneration, and the recycling of narratives and cultural detritus to create artwork of exceptional power and beauty” (PEN Beyond Margins Award, 2011). According to Elizabeth Frost (2000, p.397),

Crossing the lines between often isolated aesthetic camps, Harryette Mullen has pioneered her own form of bluesy, disjunctive lyric poetry, combining a concern for the political issues raised by identity politics with a poststructuralist emphasis on language. Mullen challenges prevailing assumptions about the canons of contemporary poetry, seeking in particular to draw attention to the neglected traditions of African-American experimentalism from which her writing emerges. Influences on her work range widely, from Gertrude Stein to the Black Arts Movement, from Sappho to Bessie Smith, from Language poetry to rap. Mullen’s allusive, playful texts have gained increasing attention in recent years, perhaps for the very reason that they are often hard to categorize. In her singular approach to poetics, Mullen raises important questions about tradition, innovation, and cultural identity.

In her interview with Cynthia Hogue, Harryette Mullen is inquired about her perspective regarding her first collection of poems, *Tree Tall Woman* (MULLEN, 1981). It is revealing to read her considerations on her earlier views about being part of a black culture and the issues surrounding the representation of orality and Black English Vernacular (BEV) in African-American literature. What is at stake in the interview, though, are the very complexities regarding the general representation of blackness in literature. At the time she wrote *Tree Tall Woman*, Mullen claims that she “was definitely influenced by the Black Arts Movement, [by] the idea that there was a black culture and that you could write from the position of being within a black culture” (HOGUE, 1999). She also emphasizes that “part of what people were doing with the Black Arts Movement was, in a sense, to construct a positive image of black culture, because blackness had signified negation, lack, deprivation, absence of culture. So people took all of the things that had been pejorative and stigmatized, and made them very positive” (HOGUE, 1999). On the other hand, in Mullen’s opinion, “[since] the project [of Black Arts Movement] had created a space for me to write [...] I didn’t have to carry out that project because it had already been done; I didn’t have to say ‘I’m black and black is beautiful.’ Actually, by the time I was writing, that was getting a little repetitive and almost boring” (HOGUE, 1999).

It is clear that Mullen was inevitably writing from a particular tradition that had been inaugurated in the 60’s and the 70’s, but she somehow feels now uncomfortable about the way so-called standard English, as opposed to BEV, has ultimately come to be identified with “white language”. Writing poetry in standard English would mean an approximation with what, in principle, is supposedly universal, not demarcated by the voices that have shaped the margins of English through the experience of

excluded, marginalized blacks and other minorities in the US. In that context, the “universality” of standard English has come to be read as an expression of whiteness or white language. Mullen does not deny the historicity and social values ascribed to BEV, or the significance of its traditional depiction in African American literature. What Mullen might be trying to say, however, is not only that standard English is not “white,” but rather, that the (linguistic) experiences of blackness in literature should not be restricted to BEV. In *Tree Tall Woman*, considered to be one of the least experimental, more traditional works by Mullen, the poet raises questions not only about the representation of blackness, but also about the conditions in which the absence of particular assertions in a poem conventionally associated with blackness should not necessarily preclude the poem itself from being engaged both with blackness and its beyond. In a text entitled “What is African about African American poetry?”, Mullen (1999, p.7) warns that

In our anxiety to embody or represent authentic black identity, we may impoverish our cultural heritage and simplify the complexity of our historical experience. As poets and as people of African descent, we are in danger of only performing blackness, rather than exploring the infinite permutations of our lived experience and creative imaginations as black people.

Mullen’s questioning of the search for an “authentic black identity” has somehow brought out puzzling, if not interesting forms of identification of her own poetry, when it comes to different perceptions of the discursive positions from which she writes and speaks. In “Poetry and Identity,” Harryette Mullen says:

Because my first book (*Tree Tall Woman*) allowed me to be placed rather neatly within the category of “representative blackness” (as well in the categories of “feminist” and “regional” poet), whereas my second and third books (*Trimnings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*) are more frequently described as “formally innovative” poetry rather than as “black poetry,” I have had sometimes the unsettling experience of seeing my work divided into distinct taxonomies. Because I no longer write poems like the ones in *Tree Tall Woman*, some readers perhaps perceived my world as “less black.” [...] Poet and critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis generously includes me in her essay on contemporary women’s poetry in the recent *Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the US*. A peculiar effect of the daunting constraints and demands of the encyclopedic essay, perhaps, is that I am not grouped with black women poets (of whom only Ntozake Shange is singled out as an exemplar of “experimental” writing). Instead, I am placed in a subcategory of formally innovative poets who are also women of color. Or rather (because “women of color” seems to occupy a separate category apart from innovative or experimental poets), I become an example of “innovative women poets of minority background,” along

with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Myung Mi Kim, as well as Erica Hunt (in fact, at different times I have read on the same program with the latter two). (MULLEN, 2002c, p.28-29).

Mullen's poetry has shown that the limits and the configurations of blackness are much more complex than they are generally expected to be. The boundaries of blackness in African-American literature are produced and displaced in view of ongoing issues regarding the formation of canon and audience, as well as the historical conflicts between what is conventionally called mainstream (white?) "American poetry," "African American or black poetry" and "avant-garde poetry," as it is aptly discussed by the poet and critic Evie Shockley (2005) in her article "All the Above: Multiple Choice and African American Poetry," from the anthology *Rainbow Darkness: an Anthology of African-American Poetry*, edited by Keith Tuma. The general assumption, according to Shockley (2005), is that black poetry, whether or not directly committed to black identity politics, is not allowed to be experimental or "avant-garde", and any possible experimental relationship with language and "form" is generally supposed to be deprived of racial, social and/or political concerns. Contemporary African-American poets, including Mullen, who have defied conventions, stereotypes and expectations from within and outside of African-American literary discourse, have posed questions regarding the network that produces identity, as well as the expectations that it be "visibly" translated and asserted in accordance with demands made by readers, publishers, scholars, poets, and writers alike.

In the above-mentioned anthology, in which Harryette Mullen also contributes her poems, Evie Shockley claims that

...

[This anthology] attests to the fact that there is now (again? more than ever?) a critical mass of African American poets who refuse to recognize a poetic form or experimental approach as "white," if "white" means "off-limits to black poets" – regardless of whether the prohibition is motivated by white racism or black-self defense. *These poets insist on their right to take up specifically racial subjects or themes that have no direct relation to race, to include or not include easily identifiable "blackness" in their poems, as they see fit.* (SHOCKLEY, 2005, p.8-9, my emphasis).

It is particularly interesting how Shockley rightly defends African-American poets who may or may not wish to directly express a relationship with issues of race or an "easily identifiable 'blackness'" in their poems. Precisely because there is a literary, cultural African-American tradition backing up such possibility, Shockley

(2005) argues that African-American poets feel free to engage in more experimental aesthetic approaches. If, on the one hand, the “dictionary” of African-American literary and cultural tradition is constitutive in allowing (supposedly) open-ended, permutable ways of producing meanings and identities, on the other, it also limits the liberating thrust or drive implicated in the search for other ways of performing/translating (one’s) black identity. The institutionalized support provided by the “dictionary,” a depository of tradition – constructed by on-going historical struggles, by the readership, the academic and publishing industries, by the inclusions and exclusions produced through readings from within and outside of African-American communities – seems to integrate, in part, the same discursive space that provides room for “liberation” and “experimentation”.

The fact that Harryette Mullen is classified among “innovative women poets of minority background,” in *The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the US* (DAVIDSON et al., 1995), rather than as a “black female poet,” shows that choosing what is more appropriate to describe the relationship between her African-American heritage, her ethnicity, and the way her texts have been read, classified and “translated” is no easy task. Mullen’s engagement with more experimental poetic forms, including the deliberate construction of an allusive, but also elusive kind of language poetry, is itself a questioning of cultural identity: why not re-think blackness as an already playful, connective, but also as an allusive form of relations with tradition and innovation that reconstructs/stretches its own limits? Yet, this question can only be raised now, in many ways, because the Black Arts Movement (but also the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s) had to come up with that which, nowadays, would be probably considered a search for a “black essence,” expected to fight the exclusion of blacks, both aesthetically and socially, from the American arena.

Her poetry books, *Trimmings*, *S*PeRM**K*T*, *Muse & Drudge* and *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (MULLEN, 2006, 2002a) are possible long-awaited answers to this type of lingering question. These works draw on issues of cultural identity formation, including blackness, gender, black body commodification, private and public spaces. However, over time, Harryette Mullen has realized that issues of readership have become crucial to understanding the ways in which her own work has been perceived in relation to both “blackness” and “innovation.” In a 1997 interview with Farah Griffin et al., Harryette Mullen states that

One reason I wrote *Muse & Drudge* [1995] is because having written *Tree Tall Woman* [1981], when I went around reading from that book there were a lot of black people in my audience. There would be white people and brown people and maybe other people of color as well. Suddenly, when I went around to do readings of *Trimmings* [1991] and *S*PeRM**K*T* [1992], I would be the one black person in the room, reading my poetry. I mean I’d find myself in a

room that typically had no other people of color in it – which, you know, I could do, and ... it was interesting. But that's not necessarily what I wanted, and I thought, "How am I going to get all these folks to sit down together in the same room?" *Muse & Drudge* was my first attempt to create that audience. I wanted the different audiences for my various works to come together. I was very happy to see those people who were interested in the formal innovation that I ... that emerged when I was writing *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*, partly because I was responding, in those books, to the work of Gertrude Stein, while dealing with my own concerns around race, gender, and culture. [...] And then I thought, okay, well, I'm going to need to do something to integrate this audience, because I felt uncomfortable to be the only black person in the room reading my work to this audience. I mean, it was something that I could do up to a certain point with pure gratitude that an audience existed for my new work. I felt, "Well, this is interesting. This tells me something about the way that I'm writing now," although I didn't think I was any less black in those two books or any more black in *Tree Tall Woman*. But I think that the way that these things get defined in the public domain is that, yeah, people saw *S*PeRM**K*T* as being not a black book but an innovative book. And this idea that you can be black or innovative, you know, is what I was really trying to struggle against. And *Muse & Drudge* was my attempt to show that I can do both at the same time (GRIFFIN et al., 1997, ellipses in original).

As expected, she does not think that *Tree Tall Woman* was necessarily "any more black" than the other two books, although she recognizes its affiliation with what is today considered to be a more "conservative" approach to blackness, represented by the Black Arts Movement. If during the Black Arts Movement, many African-American poets felt pushed towards a necessarily well-defined, clear-cut conception of blackness expressed in poetry with a straightforward, political language, in contrast, Harryette Mullen, especially from the 1990s onward, has "defined" blackness in her work, not in regard to any essentialist identity condition, but rather, in relation to what blackness has historically become, that is to say, tradition or heritage is not only implied in the process, but it is transformed by what can be referred to as the process of *becoming*.

Of Spirit Writing: Playing on the Illegibility of Blackness

Harryette Mullen could be said to engage in what is perceived to be a discourse on blackness, inherited from the "dictionary" represented by tradition (with its "naturalized sense of African American literary identity"), but she also engages in a playful, if not disturbing destabilization of the black subject. She emphasizes hybridity and non-purity as already playing a constitutive role in American culture. Identity

is an outcome of an on-going process involving decision-making, heritage, power differentials, and also exchange, “borrowings.”

If dictionaries are primarily made to be accessible, in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* Mullen (2002a) invites us to think about dictionaries as being more than simply an offering of “accessibility” – as a metaphor, they are brought to bear on how subjectivity and identity are formed/forged out of the cross-roads of public and private spaces of language, in which “what I think I am,” “what I am perceived to be,” and “what I am allowed or not to become” are socially constructed in conflicting manners. If we are defined by dictionaries, framed by an all-encompassing, structuring grammar, might there be a space we struggle to fill with our significant (alternative) stories and vocabularies. If the dictionary, structured in a grammar, is a way in which identity can be formed, we could perhaps “pronounce,” rewrite or introduce a word by displacing the symbolic, but no less realistic realm it occupies.

It might be fruitful though to rethink “grammar” beyond the expected *visibility* of its constraints and gaps that are passively “waiting” to be fulfilled by acceptable newness and foreseeable forms of resistance. If being beyond the constraints of a grammar is an impossible condition, it would be interesting to envision writing itself as an alternative mode of grammar that surpasses the classical opposition between the so-called living speech and the *techné* represented by writing in its traditionally conceived role of a faulty, material representation of speech. Mullen (2000) warns in her essay “African Signs and Spirit Writing” on the perils of excluding a history of writing within African-American heritage itself. By questioning issues of “authenticity” or “authentic blackness” as they relate to the often-expected orality in African-American arts – in detriment to forms of experimental writing (which could possibly be seen as a fake white artistry) – Mullen’s poetry has somehow underscored the *syncretic*, diasporic phenomenon of black, hybrid writing that includes, for example, the historical *Spirit Writing* or visionary arts practiced by former, *illiterate* slaves and free blacks throughout the history of African-American folk tradition. Harryette Mullen demonstrates the ways in which *Spirit Writing* or *Visionary Writing* was already at play in the construction of African-American oral traditions, as well as in the process of acquisition of literacy itself among slaves and free born blacks.

This form of writing anticipates the very experimental, disjunctive condition of Mullen’s complex poetical arrangements. Mullen’s critical praise of miscegenation in the US has an intimate relationship with her own disjunctive mode of writing, in which punning and allusion represent, among other things, the conflicts of the *in-betweenness* that bears upon miscegenation and blackness.

Mullen’s essay “African Signs and Spirit Writing” is an attempt to explore the connections between these two traditions that, according to the author, are more contextually drawn upon within visual arts and art history. Mullen’s central question in regard to Spirit Writing is the following:

How has the Western view of writing as a rational technology historically been received and transformed by African-Americans whose primary means of cultural transmission have been oral and visual rather than written, and for whom graphic systems have been associated not with instrumental human communication, but with techniques of spiritual power and spirit possession? In other words: How, historically, have African-Americans' attitude towards literacy as well as their own efforts to acquire, use, and interiorize the technologies of literacy been shaped by what art historian Robert Farris Thompson calls "the flash of the spirit of a certain people armed with improvisatory drive and brilliance"? (MULLEN, 2000, p.624-625).

Mullen points out that the printed text, in African-American folk culture, may have provided ritual protection, and writing may have been used to enclose and confine evil presences, as in the spirit-script of visionary artist J. B. Murray. Mullen claims that

[...] if such spirit-script looks like illiterate scribbling or a handwriting exercise, Murray's non-communicative spirit writing or 'textual glossolalia' is, according to Thompson, an African-American manifestation of surviving elements of Kongo prophetic practices: unique illegible scripts are produced in a trance-like state, functioning as a form of graphic representation of spirit possession, or the "visual equivalent to speaking in tongues." (MULLEN, 2000, p.625).

Mullen raises another fundamental question in that regard. "Writing in tongues" could have been a condition to comprehensibility and legibility; literacy might have been acquired through the cryptographic uniqueness of such script:

In order to construct a cultural and material history of African America's embrace and transmutation of writing technologies, one might ask how writing and text functioned in a folk milieu that valued a script for its cryptographic incomprehensibility and uniqueness, rather than its legibility or reproducibility. How was the uniformity of print received by a folk culture in which perfect symmetry and straight, unbroken lines were avoided, and aesthetic preference for irregularity and variation that folklorist Gladys-Marie Fry attributes to the "folk belief of plantation slaves that evil spirits follow straight lines" (67)? (MULLEN, 2000, p.625).

I am particularly interested in the "cryptographic incomprehensibility" of Spirit Writing that might somehow echo African diasporic forms of oral expression, "[...] from the field holler of the slave and blues wail to the gospel hum, from the bebopping scat of the jazz singer to the nonsense riffs erupting in the performance of the rap, dub, or reggae artist" (MULLEN, 2000, p.625). It is as if the voice

could be “unshackled” from meaningful words or from the pragmatic function of language. In that sense, Mullen argues that the written text, as spirit-script, was similarly “[...] unshackled from any phonetic representation of human speech or graphic representation of language” (MULLEN, 2000, p.625).

I would like to suggest that such “cryptographic incomprehensibility,” although connected with purposeful religious practices, including that of spirit possession or speaking in tongues, is in line with the very experimental, open-ended connections with which Mullen’s poetry is capable of engaging. Mullen’s poetry is a form of “writing in tongues,” even though English is still primarily the operative language of these connections. Her poetry is a synthetic assembling of allusions and punning that may sound nonsensical, despite being historically and socially grounded; as such, it may turn out to be quite meaningful or meaningless for some readers. Said condition partially explains what remains to be understood without any actual, definitive appropriation on behalf of the reader. Allusions are generally expected to be grasped between the lines, yet there is an incalculable manifestation of the unexpected readings or interpretations altering the outcome of punning and allusions in unexpected ways. While the search for intelligibility is certainly an important characteristic in the process of reading or understanding a poem, there is also a “cryptographic” condition that translates poetry into what might not be explainable or calculable, even though, paradoxically, explanations can always be provided (either by the author herself or her readers).

The fact that not everyone will read Mullen’s allusion or punning in the same way as she does is what turns the understanding of her poetry into an experience that goes beyond intelligibility itself, as the opacity of written marks constructs the experience of dealing with potentially invisible connections between words and phrases. Mullen’s experience with blackness in poetry is a play on expectations as much as on frustrations. The syncretic possibility of Spirit Writing is a combination of reading between the lines and a reading “despite the lines”: it is the experience of illiteracy in spite of the reader’s literacy.

More than simply making her poetry less accessible than expected, Mullen’s experience with such cryptographic reading/writing is an alternative way of bringing social and racial matters to light, but, more importantly, it is also a challenging questioning into the expected visibility with which readers might hope to find the very essence of blackness. Her playfulness with identity formation and miscegenation through punning, allusions and fragmentation sheds light on the fragmentary, diasporic condition upon which blackness is constructed. None of her poems is presented as a truthful, authentic version of blackness – even though they are constructed through memories and images that demand from readers interpretations of what blackness is expected to be, but vis-a-vis the “unexpected kinship” to which said blackness necessarily refers.

Mullen's poetry is constructed on fragmented narratives and displaced subjectivities, in which one stanza or line might be only partially related to another within a single four-quatrains poem. This could be exemplified in "O rosy so drowsy in," from *Muse & Drudge*:

O rosy so drowsy in
my flower bed your pink
pajamas ziz-zag into
fluent dreams of living ink

carve out your niche
reconfigure the hybrid
back in the kitchen
live alone, buy bread

your backbone slip
sliding silk hipped
to the discography
of archival sarcophagi

pregnant pause conceived
by doorknob insinuation
and onset animal
laminates no DNA (MULLEN, 1995, p.60).

The first stanza focuses on the sensuality of the awakening of a feminine body ("rosy") in "fluent dreams of living ink." The second stanza brings out a voice demanding a political repositioning ("carve out your niche") of hybrid conditions back into the traditional backstage of blackness ("back in the kitchen") and calls for isolation and simplicity ("live alone, buy bread"). The third stanza brings our attention to a disco setting where someone "slides silk hipped" to the archives of a discography now possibly "dead" or out-of-date ("of archival sarcophagi"). But it is the promise of life and meaning ("pregnant pause conceived") that is introduced to us in the third stanza. Interestingly, it is the "pause" that is pregnant and conceived by "doorknob insinuation." The pause is pregnant because it is filled with meaning that has not been expressed. And who is about to open the door? Doorknob, as a slang term, represents a person "who is sexually promiscuous and indiscriminate about whom they engage in sexual relations with" (Urban Dictionary.com). The last two lines represent a palindrome: "and onset animal" can be read backwards as

“laminates no DNA.” Life and diversity are brought to the fore as DNA represents their presence through inheritance. This passage reminds us that the diversity of blackness also begins with DNA. The poem says “and onset animal,” that is, the very first animal “laminates no DNA.” There is no given, prominent origin in the process of the DNA “script.” There is no onset animal, no “Adam” whose biological script could authoritatively laminate the first, pure DNA without some previous miscegenation. Ultimately the opposition between black and white, based on the supposed purity of whiteness, is put into question. The four stanzas communicate possibilities of understanding the opacity of words and connections used to express blackness as a game of memory, intimacy, and critique.

Blackness stretches its own possibilities through dotted lines, so to speak, which are ultimately made “invisible;” their connections are not given, even though the reader is forced to connect seemingly disconnected materials. There are always voices and echoes demanding interpretation through distorted paths that lead to more than one answer. This is partially achieved through the double, simultaneous reading made possible with punning, which reminds us again of the double consciousness to which blackness is always made to refer. Being black is predicated on knowing one is not white, and knowing oneself to be black is fraught with the burden of seeing oneself through the eyes of whiteness. But it is the framework of pure visibility or pure intelligibility – to be black in white – that is put into question when miscegenation and hybridity are brought to the fore in order to envision the less visible meanders that make the opposition between black and white possible.

In some poems from *Muse & Drudge*, miscegenation often appears in heteroglossic forms, in lines such as “ghetto-bound pretos” (the Portuguese word “pretos” means “blacks”) or the four lines of Spanish in “mulatos en el mole/me gusta mi posole/hijita del pueblo moreno/ya baila la conquista/chant frantic demands/in the language/bring generic offerings to/a virgin of origins” (MULLEN, 1995, p.67). According to Mitchum Huehls (2003, p.43), “[...] this heteroglossic display in the form of puns performs a “linguistic miscegenation” in order to reveal the often hidden or suppressed contributions of the African diaspora to the cultural mainstream”. Miscegenation is implicit in Mullen’s understanding of blackness and American culture; it is a miscegenation that, more often than not, has been concealed by a notion of America that tends to be “naturally” associated with whiteness. Mullen raises awareness about the cultural mingling that has been kept hidden so that whiteness, in its opposition to blackness, might emerge as the predominant color, or rather, as the colorless background of America. But miscegenation also grants an opportunity for some, especially those white African-Americans who seek to pass as whites by purposefully forgetting or concealing their African heritage. Despite their concealed blackness, their whiteness is predicated on its supposedly neutral

visibility. Some of Mullen's poems represent an effort to evoke, through wordplay, the very complex condition of the "double consciousness," where African-American individuals are split between being black and being self-perceived through the eyes of a colonial whiteness where being American does not naturally or normally include the possibility of being black.

On the other hand, Mullen also brings to light the white appropriation of black figures in the media, where, in different contexts, including, for example, a Pepsi advertisement, white actors are shown lip-synching songs by acclaimed African-American singers whose image is absent from the setting. In one of her poems from *Muse & Drudge*, the relationship between the one who is being represented and the stand-in is that of a "mongrel cyborg": "spin the mix fast forward/mutant taint of blood/mongrel cyborg/mute and dubbed" (MULLEN, 1995, p.42).

Mullen brings to the fore the different faces of miscegenation within American culture. Her critical praise of miscegenation recognizes its central role in the reading/writing process through which both blackness and whiteness are mutually constituted. But, more importantly, Mullen's experimentation with punning, double entendres, intertextuality and heteroglossy, or, in other words, her engagement with writing and "writerly texts" (with orality punningly transferred to the ambiguities of writing) is another way of stressing the linguistic, synthetic miscegenation from which blackness itself is an outcome.

As such, Mullen's blackness is thought to be beyond any expectation, yet underscored by the effects of expectations themselves. Mullen does not simply claim visibility for blackness in her poetry with respect to the concealed American miscegenation, but she explores the ways in which blackness goes beyond the framework of visibility itself, expanding that which makes blackness an experience of irreducible invisibility. The fragmented discourses in *Muse & Drudge*, along with the juxtaposition of different, sometimes disparate voices in a single line, combine with memories of seemingly disconnected settings – such as in "blue gum pine barrens/loose booty muddy bossom" (MULLEN, 1995, p.6) – to demand a disjointed logic in which the readers are required to make sense of the poems in unpredictable ways, within an overarching framework set by the poems' expectations of clarity and visibility. Mullen's poems are conceived through experiments with language that are brought to bear upon that which cannot be easily seen or understood in legible, visible lines. We are invited to think of blackness as a complex cultural experience that necessarily includes the visibility of peoples of African-descent, but interestingly stretches beyond that which is expected to be visible in cultural terms.

Final Considerations: Skirting the Edges of Visibility or the Invisible Blackness

Although Harryette Mullen is a black female poet, this fact per se has not been a motive sufficient for the classification of her poems as black poetry in some anthologies, possibly because of her often highly disjunctive and experimental language. Mullen's poems reveal diversity and heterogeneity as the author constructs each poem under different rules and voices. Blackness is constructed through permutations with different references and by the production of unexpected associations and forms of kinship. As such, her poems defy the usual discourse on the authenticity of black poetry, given that she experiments with language and subjects without necessarily producing "white poetry." Her experimentations with language and culture, especially in her last four books, chronicle time in the sense that they allow her to talk in ways not visibly or traditionally associated with blackness in a way that might be expected from a poet influenced by the Black Arts Movement in the 60's and the 70's. However, as a poet, she recognizes the importance of the poetic assertion of blackness in those decades and its aesthetical and political consequences, as well as the Black Arts Movement's influence on her first work, *Tree Tall Woman* (MULLEN, 1981).

Contextually, the freedom with which she explores the limits of her poetry has been somehow backed up by the past poetic achievements of the Black Arts Movement. In other words, she does not have to assert blackness *now*, although her poetry tends to be associated exclusively with "avant-garde poetry," as if black poetry itself could not be experimental. Despite of that, some of her poetry from *Muse & Drudge* is featured in the acclaimed *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, where it is argued that in her five volumes of poetry,

[Mullen] explores the meanings of race and gender identity, the pervasiveness and the politics of commodity culture, and the varied textures of American language. A lyric poet, she weaves her words from black folklore and Western poetic tradition, from pop culture and the literary avant-garde, from critical theory and colloquial speech. (GATES JR; MCKAY, 2004, p.2635).

Her poetry certainly belongs to "African American Literature," as it is formally defined by the anthology, but, at the same time, Mullen's poetry is difficult to classify because its experience with blackness goes beyond the limits of visibility itself. According to the anthology, she has been criticized because her poems are said to "skirt the edge of meaning" (GATES JR; MCKAY, 2004, p.2635). It has been my hypothesis that Mullen's poems skirt the edges of the visibility of blackness by going

beyond the expectations of visibility itself, or, in other words, beyond the visible form of language that would embrace the experience of blackness in order to make it intelligible. In spite of her critics, Mullen has pointed out that it is her intention “to allow, or suggest, or 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” (GATES Jr; McKAY, 2004, p.2635).

At the same time, the cryptographic condition of Spirit Writing has influenced Mullen’s own form of composition, in which the insinuation of meanings and the experimentation with sounds bring out the fragmentation of the subject in possibly conflicting voices. She plays on the illegibility of blackness, beyond a visible line of distinction between what is or should be considered part of blackness itself. It is another way of asserting how complex blackness is.

Her writing on miscegenation is an attempt to shed light on the racial complexities in the US beyond the simplistic “one drop rule” and the pervasive opposition between black and white. Her critical stance demonstrates that, as she says, “we are all are mongrels” (BEDIENT, 1996, p.653), but also that miscegenation remains concealed behind the opposition between “pure whites” and “pure blacks.” Her own form of poetical writing with a focus on the mixture, on the relationship between apparently disparate voices and on the patchwork construction of memory, represents a miscegenated form of writing calling attention to the racial diversity among American people, and, even more so, to how miscegenation has integrated blackness.

Mullen’s poems represent a critical repositioning of what blackness can be. In that regard, all her exploration of the meanings of race and gender identity, as well as “[...] her words from black folklore and Western poetic tradition, from pop culture and the literary avant-garde” (GATES Jr; McKAY, 2004, p.2635), stretch the possibilities of understanding blackness beyond its traditional search for visibility or accessible intelligibility. She weaves through invisible black “I”s that constitute what remains to be seen, to be read, to be legible in blackness.

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- **RESUMO:** *Este ensaio aborda a poética de Harryette Mullen, poetisa afro-americana cuja obra questiona os limites que moldam as expectativas pela inteligibilidade acessível na literatura afro-americana. Os poemas de Mullen exploram as bordas da inteligibilidade, avançando para além das expectativas por uma forma visível/*

inteligível de linguagem que abarcaria a experiência da negritude. Argumenta-se que a escrita na poesia de Mullen funciona como um processo de miscigenação ao jogar com a ilegitimidade da negritude, para além de uma linha visível de distinção entre o que é ou que deveria ser considerado como parte apropriada da negritude, o que possibilita novas formas de reflexão sobre a poesia como um instrumento politicamente significativo para se repensar o papel da poetisa e do poeta negros no espaço da diáspora negra.

- **PALAVRAS CHAVE:** Harryette Mullen. *Poesia. Escrita. Miscigenação.* (In) visibilidade.

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