

# poetry project

NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1996 ISSUE #162

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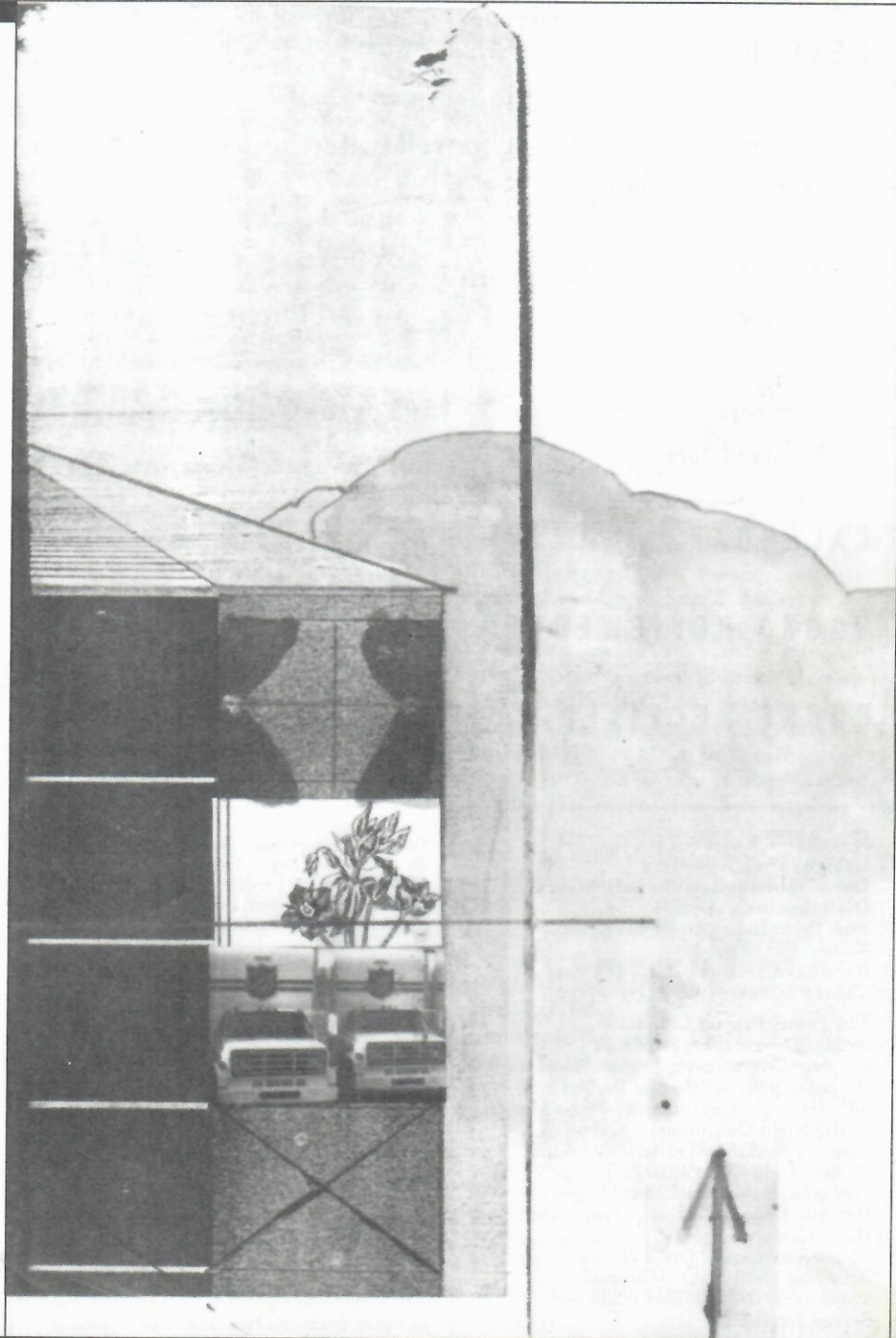
Paul Beatty

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**Newsletter Editor:** LISA JARNOT  
**Design:** DIRK ROWNTREE  
**Cover Illustration:** SOPHIA MAYER  
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# An Interview

with

## HARRYETTE MULLEN

by  
Barbara Henning



photo by Judy Natal

WHEN HARRYETTE MULLEN AND I discussed this interview in June, at first we considered a fast techno-sophisticated e-mail interview. Both of us, however, preferred the summer pace of snail mail. Our initial plan was to exchange postcards.

Postcards are great for questions, quips and slogans, but not for an in depth response. As the interview unfolded, I was sending postcard questions and Harryette was responding mostly with letters. One of the disadvantages of using the US post office is the indefinite delay for carrying. I almost always mailed a card the day before Harryette responded. The result was a rather disjointed exchange from which the following is excerpted.

6/16/96 Dear Harryette...Before we first met at the Nuyorican in 1990, Lorenzo [Thomas] had told me so many wonderful things about your writing...I was so pleased when you sent me *Trimmings*. Since then I've used it in almost all of my writing workshops. Could you begin by talking about the processes involved in writing this poem? And what in your reading-writing-speaking life brought you to consider femininity and language in this way?...I guess these are enough questions to generate a series of postcards. Love & all that. Barbara

June 17, 1996 Dear Barbara. Your idea of a postcard interview, especially in the era of fax machines and e-mail, strikes me as charming and irresistible. I'm responding to your suggestion with this letter initiating my end of the correspondence. Although I do use a computer to write, and I have access to a fax machine at work, I'm not hooked up to a modem, and I've never used e-mail. I also don't own a television,

which to Angelenos seems especially perverse. Sooner or later I might acquire the TV and VCR that are essential equipment for any contemporary cultural critic, yet I can't help thinking that to watch television while living in Los Angeles is redundant. I want to thank you for the review of *Muse & Drudge* that you wrote for the *Poetry Project Newsletter*. You generously quoted many lines from my work in the review, but I appreciated most your critical insight into the poem's appropriation of Sappho's lyric as Sapphire's blues. Not only do you alert readers to my textual appropriation and transformation of Sappho's lines and tropes, such as "a handsome man" or "I sleep alone" (using Diane Rayor's translation of Sappho's poetry into American English), but also you point toward an urgent concern that the poem works through: tradition and its rupture, the continuities and discontinuities of cultural transmission, the dissemination and preservation of language, of speech and writing, of meaning itself.

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. In one quatrain, "a strict sect's/ hystereotypist hypercorrects/the next vexed hex/erects its nopy text," I allude to the discourse of the Christian Right and right-wing populists of the Republican party, while also recalling the speech of Dixiecrat George



Wallace, who used to pronounce "detente" as the "the taunt."

The lines "hip chicks ad glib/flip the script" refer to the performance of female rappers, specifically Salt N Pepa, who used rap as AIDS education through their song, "Let's Talk About Sex." When I sought a line to complete the quatrain that fit the rhythmic and phonemic patterning of the other three lines I'd written, "tighter than Dick's hat band" popped into my head, as an automatic simile that I'd heard throughout my childhood whether my mother or grandmother referred to tight clothing, or tight situations. But it was only in the context of the lines about female rappers, whose tight distichs (couplets) inform my own improvisational approach to rhythm and rhyme in this poem, that I grasped, for the first time, the origin of this folk simile: a metaphorical description of a condom. I saw a continuum, in terms of "oral tradition" or "verbal performance style" from my own matrilineal heritage — in a religious, lower middle class family that spoke of sexuality through metaphor, circumlocution, and euphemism—to the bold public style of today's women rappers. The poem embraces all of that, while also using language as verbal scat. Print and electronic media, as well as orality, provide my materials.

It would be fair to say that lines like "divine sunrises/Osiris's irises/his splendid mistress/is his sis Isis" strike the reader as something close to pure word-and-sound-play, but this verse also alludes to the project of Afrocentrism. Even a relentlessly language-centered quatrain like "mutter patter simper blubber/.../mumbo-jumbo palaver gibber blunder" is intended to comment on the loss of indigenous languages of enslaved Africans, while its recurring sound patterns also suggest homophones of kinship terms *mother father sister brother*, thus setting up an analogy between loss of language and loss of kinship. Similarly, the admittedly nonsensical lines "marry at a hotel, annul em/nary hep male rose sullen/let alley roam, yell melon/dull normal fellow hammers omelette" play on my own name, Harryette Romell Mullen, by echoing

and scrambling the phonemes sounded in the name.

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. These effects all contribute to what Peter Hudson, a black Canadian who reviewed the book in *Afro News*, called the poem's "restless, unsettled nature" and "the overall irreverence and off-key eloquence that characterize the work."

I'm imagining that this letter and your first postcard will cross somewhere over the Midwest, and our "snail mail" interview will have begun. I'll write you again from Boulder, where I'll be spending a week at Naropa. As hectic as life gets, snail's pace seems just right to me! Best, Harryette

June 21, 1996 #1 Hi Barbara, got your card today, just as I was pushing myself out of the door to turn in my grades at UCLA. So I'm finally free to get on with summer. Time to pack whatever clean clothes I can find & get my head in gear for poets' summer camp at Naropa. Yes, that was a good night at Nuyorican. My sister & I'd planned to meet at NYC. We had no idea we'd find Lorenzo there visiting from Tx. He & I are both veterans of that state's Artists in Schools program back in the 1980s. He was active on a lot of different cultural fronts, on the local, national, and international levels, including working on poetry programs with Pacifica Radio, writing music criticism and helping to organize blues festivals, working in the schools, and attending literary and academic conferences from Austin to Amsterdam. His work's had a lasting impact on me. He had ties to Umbra, NY School & language writing & belongs to a global community of poets. He offered a different model than the homegrown Tx regionalists. Love, Harryette

June 21, 1996 #2. Dear Barbara,

that postcard you sent with Beaton's photo of Stein & Toklas, with kinky black wire dangling over Alice's head, gets to the point of *Trimmings*' origins: my reading of *Tender Buttons* and *Melanctha*. The pleasure & horror of those two works, especially stirred me up, riled me, got me thinking about the effects of race & sexuality in language. I'm starting a letter I'll try to send before I go to Boulder.

Love, Harryette

6-22-96 Dear Barbara, I remember that the first time I tried to read Stein, I really couldn't stand it. It was boring & repetitious in a way that I found obnoxious. Years later, after I'd been reading more intensively and thinking more critically about language, when I returned to Stein, especially *Tender Buttons*, I was astonished at the freshness of her language, which still seems innovative and intriguingly enigmatic. What really struck me was the complexity of meaning found in the utter simplicity of her syntax. It reminded me of sophisticated baby talk, and I am very interested in baby talk, a marginal language used mainly by women and children. *Tender Buttons* appeals to me because it so thoroughly defamiliarizes the domestic, making familiar "objects, rooms, food" seem strange and new, as does the simple, everyday language used to describe common things. As critic Elisabeth Frost has noted, my poetic language is more public and social, less private and hermetic than Stein's. Louis Cabri and Jeff Derksen also have commented that the language in *Trimmings* is less a disjunctive idiolect, more a layering and juxtaposing of *communolects*.

*Trimmings* was in part a reflection on the marginality of women and of "the feminine" in language. (As well as a reflection on the feminization and marginalization of poetry, and certainly my own marginality as a black woman in relation to the dominant cultural construction of the feminine.) It is a "minor" genre, the prose poem. It's also a list poem which I thought of as a form congenial to women, who are always making lists. Of course, the catalogues (of heroes, ships, and so



forth) in epic poems evoke a masculine tradition, not to mention David Letterman's lists. However, a whole poem composed of a list of women's garments, undergarments, & accessories certainly seems marginal & minor, perhaps even frivolous & trivial. Actually it was an inside joke for me to begin *Trimmings* with "a belt" since a convention of epic poetry is to begin "in the middle." So that joke I was having with myself was about the epic poem versus the little list poem, which has become a workshop cliché: in this case a list of feminine apparel.

Writing the poem also involved a process of making lists. First, I made a list of words referring to anything worn by women. Each word on that list became the topic of a prose poem (I started with clothing, then decided to include accessories. There were a few things I decided not to write about, such as wigs, dentures, and so forth.) Then I made more lists by free associating from words on the first list. I generated lists of words that might be synonyms (pants/jeans/slacks/ britches), homonyms (duds/duds, skirt/skirt), puns or homophones (furbe-low, suede/swayed), or that had some metaphorical, metonymical, or rhyming connection (blouse/dart/sleeve/heart, pearl/mother, flapper/shimmy/chemise), or words that were on the same page of the dictionary (chemise/chemist). I would improvise a possible sequence of words, seeing what the lists might suggest in the way of a minimal narrative, a metaphor, an association, or pun.

Each prose poem is a unit of the "long poem" that is itself a list, with each item described figuratively, as in true riddles. I also quickly understood that the structure of the poem was like a hologram. Each prose poem basically does the same thing as all the rest, since whatever the trope, it is the woman's body that appears consistently in every figure as the tenor of which clothing is the vehicle. This simply extends and elaborates a metonymical tendency already present in everyday usage: "skirt" and "petticoat" also commonly refer to women as well as to clothing worn by women. I also borrow or recycle language and/or syntactical structures from a variety of folk and mass culture genres, including: riddle, nursery rhyme, fairy tale, prayer, television commercial, cliché, tabloid headline, and weather report, as well as from specifically African-American forms including the blues and the dozens. *Love & Rockets*, *Harryette*.

6/27/96 Dear Harryette—hello from my office in Brooklyn. I loved reading your letter which did arrive before my two postcards....In *Muse & Drudge*...I always knew when I was an outsider, looking in from another cultural experience or even from my own purposeful alienation from everyday television and advertising...I'd get one line, lose the next, then a meaning would come through that had only resonated before and then....lv  
Barbara

6/29/96 Dear Harryette . . . You speak of your "layering and juxtaposing of communolects." In my own work, I think of quilting and women's work as a kind of *feminine ecriture*, a way of gaining authority and of smashing oppressive authority, in a quiet subversive way.

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## TAKING THE BLUES BACK HOME



"CORTEZ HAS BEEN AND CONTINUES TO BE AN EXPLORER, PROBING THE VALLEYS AND CHASMS OF HUMAN EXISTENCE. NO RAVINE IS TOO PERILOUS, NO ABYSS TOO THREATENING FOR JAYNE CORTEZ."

— Maya Angelou

HARMOLODIC





Your process of writing this poem by beginning with lists and generating other lists and improvising on these is quite different than composition by waiting for "inspiration" or "deep feeling." Could you speak about the effects — if any — Oulipo methods have had on your practice. again...  
Barbara

2:54 PM 7/15/96 Dear Barbara,  
Wow! Three cards and lots of questions to think about! I'll try to consolidate my responses, and address as many of your questions as I can in this letter. You asked about community. Definitely the idea of community is important to me, and specific communities of speakers, readers, writers, artists, critics, and intellectuals, have certainly influenced how I think and how I use language. Most fundamentally, some persistent aspects of my identity and my work have been determined by my community of origin. The southern black community of my childhood made both literary and oral traditions of poetry immediately available to me as a significant aspect of everyday life and of communal rit-

uals. For me, the black community was organized primarily around the institutions of school and church, particularly since my mother is a teacher and my maternal grandfather was a Baptist minister.

Our family stressed the value of education and literacy. Books and book knowledge were revered in our household. At the same time, it was apparent that the love of language prevailed also among folks in the black community who were less connected to books and literacy. One's knowledge and verbal skill were always subject to being tested in practical situations and everyday encounters, when it was important to be able to interact with people, whether or not they were highly educated or deeply literate. This community valued anyone with strong skills in oratory, storytelling, poetry, song, and verbal contests of various sorts. It was okay to be bookish, but you also had to be able to talk the talk. Playing the dozens, signifying, capping, sounding: all of these forms of verbal dueling were ways we learned to use language, wit, and humor to defend ourselves against

verbal aggression. Every child had a large repertoire of formulaic greetings, insults, taunts, and retorts, which often exploited the mnemonic force of rhyme and rhythm.

"What's cooking, good looking?"

"Ain't nothing cooking but the beans in the pot,  
and they wouldn't be, if the water wasn't hot."

As children, we memorized poetry for school and church programs, and we recited folk poetry on playgrounds and in backyards as we jumped rope and played other games. We not only repeated these conventional utterances from the folk tradition, but we also invented new rhymes and songs.

I remember my first real job, at fourteen, working for minimum wage as a waitress at a camp for rich white kids. All of the kitchen and dining staff were black, while the owners of the camp and all of the counselors and campers were white. The white folks were kept completely separate from the colored folks who were there to serve them. They slept in bright,

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ary cottages with hand painted tile in the bathrooms. (We knew this because we could earn a little extra money by cleaning their cabins between the two summer camping sessions.) We were housed in crude shacks with concrete showers that were infested with scorpions. We used to invent satirical verses about our bosses that we sang on the way to and from work each day.

"Miss Johnson's such a dried out hag, her mouth looks like a drawstring bag."

I remember also that the men who tended the grounds, and the women who laundered our uniforms, were all Mexican or Mexican-American people who spoke little or no English. While we were not permitted to speak to the white campers, some of whom were the same age I was, I always exchanged a polite greeting in Spanish with the men who did the mowing and trimming, and the women who took in our crumpled piles of food-and-sweat-stained uniforms and handed back to us neatly folded, clean, starched dresses and aprons for the next day's work.

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 southern dialect was both familiar and foreign to me, since I grew up in working class and middle class black communities in the south, and in a family divided between people from the north and people from the south, all of whom were educated speakers of standard English.

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. I have spent much of my life in transit from one community to another, and as a result I often feel marginal to them all. Yet I also feel something in common with people who are very different from one another. I try in my work to make my marginality productive. By necessity, the margin has become a positive space where I am free to do my work. This concern is at the heart of *Muse & Drudge*, a poem that deliberately addresses a diverse audience of readers, with the expectation that no single reader will comprehend every line or will catch every allusion.

My association with communities of intellectuals—a result of my experience as a student and teacher in universities, as well as my practice as a poet—has given me an aesthetic and critical language with which to examine and interrogate my other connections and experiences. I do see my work as a poet and as a critic overlapping, intersecting, and reinforcing each other in various ways. Ideas for poetry often come from the critical reading and writing that I do in other contexts. Race and gender theory clearly have influenced my work as a poet, especially in my last three books. Sociolinguistics, ethnography, and folklore have also been influential disciplines which I sought out through elective courses during my undergraduate years at the University of Texas at Austin....

Oulipo has been important to me because of this group's systematic cataloguing and exuberant invention of textual operations and literary techniques. I was interested in Oulipo's vigorous exploration of the ludic aspects of writing, as well as their theory and practice as intellectuals and artists. In Oulipo's erudite tongue-in-cheek manifestos I found a pleasurable convergence of work and play. The first time I used Oulipo constraints in a creative writing course was at Cornell, where my students initially resisted because they thought these guys were elitist, and because my students cherished the romantic idea of poetry as the inspired expression of a uniquely perceptive individual. Yet what I found useful, as a poet and

as a creative writing teacher, was Oulipo's demystification of creative process and aesthetic technique. Their idea of "potential literature" liberates the writer to concentrate on the process, rather than the product, of writing.

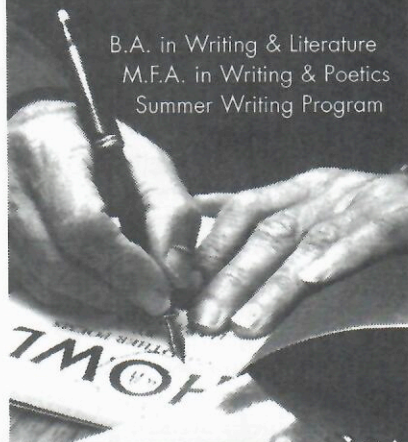
Far from being elitist, they make the creative process more accessible as they deflate the divine afflatus of artistic inspiration. A formal constraint, such as a lipogram, gives the writer a definite problem to tackle. I find it far more difficult to face a blank page, hoping for inspiration, than it is to seek solutions to a specific problem such as writing a poem about a rose without using any of the alphabets in the word R-O-S-E. This was the example I used to demonstrate to my class the pragmatic virtue of Oulipian constraints. In order to make the formal challenge more user-friendly, I encouraged my students to use and then lose the constraint at different points in the creative process. My example of such a two-step process resulted in one of the quatrains in *Muse & Drudge*. I

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began with a lipogram, which was used to generate a lexicon for the poem. Then the constraint was dropped, allowing any alphabets to enter the composition. I actually wrote two brief poems. One was a Z-shaped lipogram/calligram I called "Z-Rose." Words and phrases generated with the constraint ("pink pajama" "zig-zag" "living ink") were then cannibalized for the second, unconstrained poem, which became a stanza of *Muse & Drudge*.

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

I have found that using constraints in this way expands the possibilities for improvisation, as various textual operations may be tried at different points in the writing process. Such flexibility makes it possible to use even the most severe constraint, without fear of it being too rigid, mechanical, or stifling to the writer's individuality. Rather, it simply gives the writer a more eclectic array of aesthetic tools. This was helpful, I think, to students intimidated by Georges Perec's amazing feats of writing first a lipogrammic novel without the letter "e" and then a univocalic novel in which "e" is the only vowel.

You've asked about the poem as women's work, as piece work, like quilting. Those ideas are consonant with my own methods and metaphors of writing. The poem also comments on quilting/writing as artists' work, and as a metaphor of tradition as the interaction of continuity and discontinuity.

stop running from the gift  
slow down to catch up with it  
knots mend the string quilt  
of kente stripped when kin split

My paternal grandmother was an accomplished quilter. One of my treasures is a quilt she made, using the "cathedral window" pattern, which resembles a stained glass window. The list poems, *Trimnings* and *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*, as well as the stanza form of *Muse & Drudge*, allowed me to make a kind of long poem composed of discreet units, so that in

effect, I could write brief manageable poems that were parts of a longer work that was the book-length poem. The discreet units, stanzas or paragraphs, form various patterns like the pieces of a quilt. I could start anywhere, proceed in no particular order, writing whenever I had the chance and the energy. With my wardrobe and supermarket lists, my tidy prose paragraphs, my quatrains of blues songs and jump rope rhymes composed of recycled representations of black women, I could continually end and begin, without feeling the trauma of endings, the fear and uncertainty of beginnings. My own consolation in the face of rupture, a writing through the gaps and silences.

Love & Rockets, Harryette. P.S. I didn't know it was so long. I'm trying out a new laptop.

7/7/96 Dear Harryette, I'm on the Staten Island Ferry with a friend who is looking for an apartment in this neighborhood with a history of hotels & rooming houses, now little apartments, inexpensive and transient. The ferry ride is beautiful and calm compared to the subway. I think I've sent you a lot of questions which you'll find when you get home from New Mexico. If I didn't ask already: I find that I work with fragments in part because I'm so busy. Does the urban bustle affect your turning to fragments? Lost in thought-parts and found-in-arranging. Does this mean anything to you? Lv Barbara

7:44 PM 7/29/96 Dear Barbara, . . . Writing in fragments seems to be a very contemporary response to the postmodern distraction, the channel-surfing attention span, our fractured sense of time, on the one hand. People I know, poets and academics, are writing literally on the fly, taking their laptops aboard airplanes. That's what we share with the business passenger working on a spreadsheet or annual report. On the other hand, when I think of poetry in fragments, I also think of Sappho, whose work comes to us, like classic Greek art and architecture, as enigmatic shards and evocative ruins. Given the human capacity to destroy civilization "with the touch of a button" the same way

we microwave lean cuisine, ancient ruins stand as a figure for the obliteration of ourselves and our own culture. We imagine that some extraterrestrial archaeologists might someday examine our fragments, and wonder what manner of beings we were. In some contemporary work, including my own, the artist is engaged in a kind of archaeology of the detritus of consumer culture, the artifacts of the electronic age. That's why I immediately recognized Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Houses, in Detroit, as a visual art equivalent of what I was trying to do in *Muse & Drudge*. David Hammons has a similar approach to recycled resources. I'm also inspired by the work of Leonardo Drew, which is more abstract, but still carries the emotional charge of abandoned and reclaimed materials.

8/9/96 Dear Harryette,

Tyree Guyton's project is dear to my heart, too—coming from Detroit's devastation, an artistic reassemblage. Maybe that's one of the reasons your work means so much to me, *Muse & Drudge* is a Detroit-like project. Attached is the text from our clipped and quilted interview. If there is anything you want to add or delete, drop me a note and I'll try to make the changes. It's been a very thought provoking interview for me and I've enjoyed the whole process—it's been a thread through my whole summer. Thanks so much, Harryette. Lv Barbara

Harryette Mullen currently teaches Creative Writing and African-American Literature at UCLA. Barbara Henning's most recent books include *Love Makes Thinking Dark*, (United Artists Books) and *In Between* forthcoming from Spectacular Diseases.