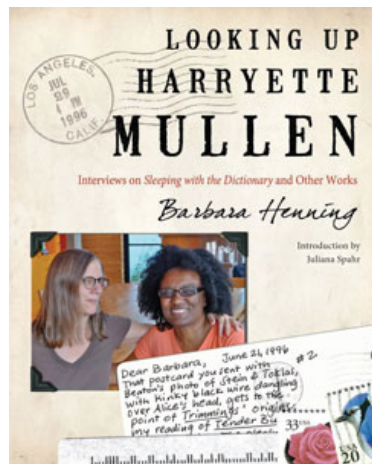


THE VOLTA: FRIDAY FEATURE

Looking Up Harryette Mullen by Barbara Henning.

Belladonna*, 2011.



Reviewed October 26, 2012 by Lauren Russell.

Any poet who has been asked how she is “inspired” to write, or any teacher whose students insist they are not so “inspired,” can recognize the persistent myth of the poet as transcendent being, one of the chosen few who in sudden fits of genius conjures poems from thin air. That misconception lends to poetry’s mystique but also adds to its aura of inapproachability. Thus, for a well-known

poet to show her cards, to reveal her methods and processes, is essentially a democratic act. “What I like about [the experimental writing group] Oulipo is its demystification of the creative process,” Harryette Mullen tells Barbara Henning in “From A to Z: Conversations on *Sleeping with the Dictionary*,” the interview that constitutes two-thirds of the book. What I like about *Looking Up Harryette Mullen* is not just that demystification but also the very un-Oulipian spirit of inclusiveness with which it occurs.

This quality comes partly from the collaborative nature of the project, what Juliana Spahr describes in her introduction as “a friendship-based explication of Mullen’s work.” In the first section, “Snail Mail,” Mullen and Henning discuss two of Mullen’s earlier books, *Trimmings* and *Muse & Drudge*, by way of the U.S. Postal Service—Henning posing questions by postcard and Mullen responding with postcards or letters. This deliberately slow form of communication results in what Henning characterizes as “lots of overlapping and dislocation,” not unlike Mullen’s work, which so often points in several directions at once.

In one of her letters to Henning, Mullen writes:

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.

Mullen’s “communities” include both the creative and academic milieus in which she currently floats and the middle- and working-class Southern black environments of her childhood. Part of Mullen’s appeal for me has been her push

against the notion of an essentialized or homogenous black female identity, perhaps most explicitly in the many representations of black women that appear in the associatively layered and densely allusive quatrains of *Muse & Drudge*. Here is a poet who starts a book by invoking the ancient Greek poet Sappho and the stereotypical character of a nagging black woman portrayed on the *Amos 'n Andy* show in a single three-word line, “Sapphire’s lyre styles.” Mullen writes that she conceived of *Muse & Drudge* as “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.” Such inclusivity is a political, as well as an aesthetic, act.

But when I try to explain this to my mother, she asks, “What’s the point of a poem that no one can understand?” A friend eyeballing my bookcase pulls out a much-thumbed copy of *Recyclopedia* and exclaims, “Harryette Mullen! Why won’t she just say what she means?” Mullen recognizes that not every reader will be open to the unconventional logic of her work. She tells Henning that the poem “X-ray Vision,” near the end of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, is asking the reader to trust her as a “human being who is not trying to trick you, and as a poet who might break the normal rules of discourse to find other ways of making sense.” The speaker of the poem declares, “You don’t need X-ray vision to see through me. / No super power’s required to penetrate my defense.” As Mullen explains, “Poetry doesn’t have to be rational. Our understanding is often intuitive.”

Yet a tension remains between the essentially democratic nature of Mullen’s project and the reality that her poems appear inaccessible to many readers—virtually anyone not trained to read them through previous exposure to avant-garde works. Similarly, while any literate person can try S+7, an Oulipian method of composition that involves replacing each noun in a source text with

the seventh entry before or after it in the dictionary (also known as N+7), not everyone can produce a poem like Mullen's "Variation on a Theme Park." By utilizing some same-letter words that do not even appear in the dictionary, Mullen delivers a witty critique of consumer culture through a variation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." Mullen's poem begins, "My Mickey Mouse ears are nothing like sonar." While on the one hand implying that virtually anyone can utilize these methods (no "inspiration" required!), *Looking Up Harryette Mullen* also reveals that Mullen is not just anyone. She is an academic steeped in critical theory and a poet influenced by diverse poetic communities and poets from Shakespeare to Césaire.

In her introduction, Juliana Spahr points out that the African-American Mullen might be "less than welcomed" by the exclusive, all male, and primarily French Oulipo, so that part of her project with *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is a "polite claiming and insistence on an inclusive tradition." There is a similar concern in *Trimmings*, the first of Mullen's socially engaged responses to Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, in which Mullen not only continues but critiques Stein's project. In a postcard, Mullen explains that *Trimmings* originated in her feelings toward Stein's *Tender Buttons* and "Melanctha," the story of a bisexual mixed-race woman that appears in *Three Lives* and perpetuates some racial stereotypes while also showcasing Stein's "continuous present" style. "The pleasure & horror of those two works, especially stirred me up, riled me, got me thinking about the effects of race & sexuality in language," Mullen writes. Part of Mullen's fascination with Stein's *Tender Buttons* was with the "complexity of meaning found in the utter simplicity of her syntax." It reminded Mullen of "sophisticated baby talk, ... a marginal language used mainly by women and children."

Mullen's interest in baby talk, which she demonstrates in poems for her nephews included in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, points again to an underlying desire

for a democracy of the page but also to the transformative power of such a democracy. Mullen explains that the alphabetical “Blah-Blah” is “like a baby learning to talk,” and “Ask Aden” originated in an alphabet stamp booklet she made for her nephew Aden when he was five. The sonically driven “Jinglejangle” also began with a stamp-pad project but draws from common expressions, pop culture references, and brand names to engage the “basic melodic impulse of chiming and rhyming” that Mullen identifies with baby talk but also with advertisements and political slogans. The poem that began as children’s entertainment ultimately becomes a cultural critique.

Mullen’s resourcefulness in finding influences and material in everything from baby talk to hip hop lyrics to critical theory to instructions on trash cans is what makes *Looking Up Harryette Mullen* so—yes—inspiring. I recommend this book to readers who have long admired Mullen’s work and eagerly found their footing in it, but I suggest it most emphatically to those who have experienced her poetry as unduly perplexing or “inaccessible.” Access is already granted, but here Mullen, with Henning, is throwing open the door.

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