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# Tradition and Transformation in the Work of Erica Hunt, Harryette Mullen, and Akilah Oliver

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Tradition and Transformation in the Work of Erica Hunt, Harryette Mullen, and Akilah

Oliver

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## INTRODUCTION

As black women poets, Akilah Oliver, Harryette Mullen, and Erica Hunt are all working within a literary tradition established long before them, one that has only relatively recently allowed black women within its confines. Within this tradition, black women have been, for the most part, ghostly presences as both authors and as figures within the works, and when black women characters are present in works, they have traditionally been created solely by others. Largely excluded, and often marginalized or distorted when included, many black women writers find themselves grappling with a literary tradition never intended for them, a tradition that comes to them with many of its exclusions and assumptions still intact. Hunt, Mullen, and Oliver are not satisfied merely working with language, within the continuation of literary tradition; instead they feel the need to closely examine language and traditional constructs, and to challenge, if not overturn the still embedded restrictions they have inherited as writers. Because the tradition was ill-fitting to begin with, Hunt, Mullen, and Oliver all work in an experimental sort of poetry that, though it is inevitably connected with poetic traditions that preceded it, is decidedly innovative in its approach.

Mullen's work shows a desire to explicitly explore language as simultaneously inherited, with all of its restrictions and assumptions, and something that even as such should be deconstructed, rearranged, and reworked, partly in order to undermine and expose the authoritative notion of language. In *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, for example, in a few different poems like "O, 'Tis William", and "Zen Acorn", Mullen starts out with a set arrangement of words and phrases which she then constantly shifts throughout the poem so that any assumptions that can be made about identities, the unity of words, and the meaning expressed by the combinations of words and letters is dismantled. Each new combination, each shift, represents a

new, slightly different possibility that may be in some way connected to the others. In the same way that she works with maneuvering words that at first seem to have set meanings and associations, Mullen also takes documents and stories from the past and reworks them. In “Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language”, for example, Mullen takes portions of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and rewords some of the terms of an official document that was law for several decades. In doing so, Mullen reveals some of the coded presumptions contained in the document while also doing away with the authority with which the document was written and its edicts enforced. Mullen accomplishes the same in her allusions to fairy tales and children’s stories in “Once Ever After”, and in her version of “The Story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears”, which Mullen titles “European Folk Tale Variant”.

Mullen also has a propensity for rearranging and disassociating clichés, common sayings, marketing slogans, product names, company names, and the proper names of cultural icons as she does in several poems, a few examples of which are “Dim Lady”, “Blah-Blah”, and “Jinglejangle”. Mullen reveals the way such words are rendered a certain authority by society. Just as people are expected to be familiar with words like “ball and chain”, “Coca-Cola”, “minty-fresh”, and “liquor’s quicker”, we are also expected to know what these words refer to, what they should be associated with, and what context they fit in when used in discussion or writing. Mullen refuses the prescript with which these words were given, and instead removes the words from their context and associates such words with seemingly ill-fitting ideas. In her essay “Imagining the Unimagined Reader: Writing to the Unborn and Including the Excluded”, Mullen writes:

When I read words never meant for me, or anyone like me – words that exclude me, or anyone like me, as a possible reader – then I feel simultaneously my

exclusion and my inclusion as a literate black woman, the unimagined reader of text. (199)

Much of Mullen's poetry seems to be the very expression of inclusion and simultaneous exclusion, and Mullen's desire, specifically as a writer rather than merely a reader, to make herself a part of language which might otherwise exclude or restrict her.

Also writing about the reaction to feeling both included and excluded, familiar and unfamiliar, in "Coronary Artist (2)" from *Arcade*, Erica Hunt writes: "Who wouldn't aspire to become an alien in their own language for a moment to lose the feeling of being both separated and crowded by their experience?" (15). In the same way that Mullen alters language and creates unconventional poetry to find freedom from what is embedded in language, Hunt writes of needing to find distance within language. Hunt includes the value judgment that goes along with undermining the authority of language conventions when she chooses the word "alien", but she describes the sentiment behind her own work and that of Mullen: the desire to "wander off the path of managed impulse", and to explore the possibilities of language apart from experience, a word that represents both knowledge gained from past events and the restrictions of daily realities (15). Erica Hunt's poetry also engages with the idea of restriction and transformation, but she engages less than Mullen with inherited phrases and stories. Hunt writes more explicitly than Mullen about the action of language, the act of restricting, the act of comprehending, even while she also writes in such a way as to break free of predetermined forms and practices.

In "Starting with A", from *Arcade*, Hunt writes of a black woman's encounter with language. Her journey first involves moving through the tradition before her: "She passes through pockets of warm air in a cold season, assailed by night noises, sounds in a correspondence based more on bravura than the contents of this failing world" (19). She finds

some warmth, perhaps something that appeals to her or is familiar, but this is a “cold season” in which the “noise” of language attacks her. She is not just apart from the language of tradition, she is being assaulted by it. The noises and sounds, like the language Hunt works with, come with an already determined “correspondence”, and this meaning is based on a brazen dedication to illusions rather than what is actually happening in the world. At one point in the poem, after a “white boy” refuses to converse with her and to acknowledge her speech, Hunt writes a moment of defiance in which this “black girl” seems to disregard the words of the past: “Is it an accident? She is working without quotes, never looking down” (19). “She” may be working without quotes simply because she does not take the words of others as is. However, because Hunt is aware of the fact that all language is in some way inherited, “she” may also work without quotes because she does not believe in exclusive ownership of language, or in an authority that might otherwise preclude others from using words and ideas for their own purposes. Hunt’s protagonist does not look down because, like Hunt, she is immersed in her work, and her work examines the world around her right now. In the same way that Hunt is not bound by literary tradition or even traditional poetry, the black girl of this poem is not stuck in a restrictive past and the authoritative words that the quotes contain. Hunt’s work is about using language to reveal lives endangered by notions of order and exclusion. Like Mullen, she is heavily invested in the work of revealing what is underlying and unexamined in language, and in finding new ways to use language.

Though her work also inevitably involves the same struggle Hunt and Mullen document in using language in a way that is outside of tradition and notions of order, Oliver is more concerned, most especially in *A Toast in the House of Friends*, with moving past any potentially inherited limitations of language and narrative rather than actively and continuously revealing

these limitations. She is constantly engaged in the same process of transforming language that Mullen and Hunt are, however, so there are moments in *A Toast in the House of Friends* in which she rather explicitly addresses the limitations of language. In “kill”, for example, Oliver writes of the need to create a new language, and indicts a traitorous group who: “*defend order as if they own it, even though they’re only tenants / overwhelmed by high rents and the threat of eviction*” (91). The presence of the “escaped slave” in the line before lends these lines even more of the idea of a need for those who do not fit within an exclusionary, costly structure to find new places to be. The structure of *A Toast in the House of Friends* is itself a new place, in a sense, one which is constructed outside of conventions of poetry and texts in general. In her review of Oliver’s *A Toast in the House of Friends* titled “Disembodied Embodiment”, Anna Elena Eyre writes of Oliver’s struggle with language’s “capacity to be both a prison house of enforced servitude to social definitions as well as a house of loving relationships with embodied experiences.” However, in her author’s statement for *A Toast in the House of Friends*, Oliver writes not so much of a struggle to free herself from language’s restrictions as she does of a sense of freedom through language.

Because Oliver writes *A Toast in the House of Friends* in an effort to deal with the deaths of loved ones, she writes to experience a connection with her loved ones that is not mired by traditional concepts of death and language. Death is typically understood as an experience of absence in the same way that language is sometimes understood as a marker of absence, with its missing and constantly shifting referents. The transitory nature of bodies and lives, and the transitory nature of language make the end results, language and death, markers of absence in a world that understands presence only in terms of that which is static, observable, and easily categorized. Oliver writes to create a space, as she terms it, for her dead loved ones that



continuously recognizes death as more than absence and which uses language that continuously shifts and resists classification as absence. When she writes poetry that examines and breaks free from restrictions, Oliver creates a space for her loved ones and anyone in her audience that is willing inhabit this space of freedom, even momentarily.

Though they each have different methods and different specific aims, Mullen, Hunt, and Oliver are all dealing with the “known world” as given and previously determined, and transforming it in some way. In her essay, “Imagining the Unimagined Reader: Writing to the Unborn and Including the Excluded”, Mullen explains that she writes poetry with the aim of including future readers whom she “can only imagine”, in contrast to her own exclusion as the “unimagined reader” (199, 200). In a statement for the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Erica Hunt reveals a desire to use language as a means of transformation:

...it is in the non-instrumental language of poetry in which the lapidary, the spare, mysterious, disjunctive, molecular, muscular, anagrammatic (and so on) provide previously undetected links to thinking and acting on alternatives and to building a just society. (Swords into plowshares, plowshares into ribbons, ribbons into irons, irons into kites).

Though all three poets have a differing styles and goals, each is, like Oliver, using language for a non-traditional end and providing a means for moving past restrictive notions of language; each is, in some way, writing the transformation they seek.

In order to transform language and literature, and even to reject the structures literature and language come with, one must understand the constructs created by literary tradition. As Erica Hunt writes in her essay “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics”, the effects of inherited

languages long since established as legitimate in society are often muted or ignored, and these must effects must be examined:

The languages used to preserve domination are complex and sometimes contradictory. Much of how they operate to anesthetize desire and resistance is invisible; they are wedded to our common sense; they are formulaic without being intrusive, entirely natural – ‘no marks on the body at all’. (682)

For Hunt, using language as is, and using it without thinking about the repression it furthers is only participating in a very real violence, even if this violence doesn't seem to leave a mark. In order to avoid merely perpetuating a tradition that does not fit, all three poets must look the workings of language, and examine what is understood to be “common sense”, and natural despite its dangerous restriction. To this end, Hunt, Mullen, and Oliver are all deeply invested in understanding how the most basic constructs come to be. Each poet examines the way identity is constructed, with Hunt and Oliver looking at the distinction between self and other, subject and object. The scope then expands for Hunt and Oliver to the way women are assigned identities as objects within traditional constructs. Mullen looks at the language of traditional, dominant discourse and examines the way that texts and commonly used language shapes people. Hunt and Oliver turn to visual culture as a means for understanding how meaning is formed, each using images that might be considered incomplete or chaotic and intertwining them with words to suggest a sort of reading and writing that is open to shifting meanings and constantly changing forms. All three recognize a need to understand how people come to be categorized and thereby constricted by language, and each works towards a poetics that is continuously cognizant of language, and that strives not to allow an audience to merely lose themselves within the confines of a comfortable, pre-established, and obligatory role.

## CHAPTER 1: CONSTRUCTION OF SELVES AND OTHERS WITHIN THE GAZE

The classical notion of “I” found in traditional and conventional poetry has never really suited black women poets. The unified white, male “I” of literature that could describe his experience and ponder the world and others around him was meant to encompass a universal subject. Rather than being universal, the classic subject, the first person of literature, is instead defined by privilege, and this subject explicitly excludes those disenfranchised in society. In her essay “Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity”, Rae Armantrout asserts that because women are traditionally excluded from language, women

might, in fact, be well positioned to appreciate the constructedness of the identity that is based on identification, and therefore to challenge the contemporary poetic convention of the unified Voice. (288)

Akilah Oliver, Erica Hunt, and Harryette Mullen have an additional identification that is decidedly outside of the coherent, “unified” white male voice that dominates literature in that they are black women. Nevertheless, their position outside of the clearly defined “I” of traditional literature places them in a position in which each naturally begins to question who this “I” is, and how *he* came to be.

All three poets have long ago realized that they are not the “I” of literary tradition, a concept taken for granted in so much of the literature of the present and the past. As a result, Erica Hunt and Akilah Oliver, especially, investigate the way concepts like “I” and “you”, “self” and “other”, are constructed and maintained, and the implications of these concepts and our widespread reliance on them. Harryette Mullen looks at the “I” of literary tradition and his presumed universality in “Sleeping with the Dictionary”. For Mullen, this “I”, the traditional poet and speaker who presumes to speak for all and to provide a touchstone for all to relate to is in fact constantly closing women off from literature.

Erica Hunt and Akilah Oliver each write poems that reveal the way in which notions of “I” and “you” as separate, stable entities unravel on close examination. Erica Hunt writes to reveal the way in which an “I”, also an eye, in effect creates those that fall within its gaze. Any subject, any “I”, is effectively reading others in its gaze, attempting to understand what is before him or her as another, a complete and separate individual. In attempting to make sense of others, people interpret attributes of others according to learned and widely accepted ways of reading people; people look for indicators by which to classify others according to categorizations like class, race, gender, and sexuality. Once these classifications are made, people often use these classifications and others to make assumptions about the people they glance at. People within the gaze are assigned meaning in the same way that a text is read and understood. Hunt, specifically, is interested in the way one person’s gaze, and the resulting categorization or reading of another automatically involves the seemingly stable “I” in the creation of the person within his or her gaze. Any “you” encountered is given an identity within the gaze of an “I”. For Hunt, the very construction of these ideas of others as separate and stable involves a disregarding of the boundaries between “you” and “I”. The first person is not just reading, the first person is actively constructing the other person, participating in the creation of the other in the same way that a text is written. Reading and writing are, of course, intertwined, as people create their own meanings from text.

Hunt notes that the self and other collapse during the process of constructing an other within the gaze, and that the first person retains the power of defining the person within his or her gaze. Hunt understands that this structure of a separate “you” and “I” is maintained when people merely read and write others without understanding or thinking about the process, so Hunt is invested in revealing the way this process works, and the way in which categories

seemingly fundamental to our understanding of the world are in fact violent, fallacious reductions. Like Hunt, Oliver is also interested in the way in which there is not a necessary or certain divide between selves and others. However, because of her experience with grief for her loved ones, which is a central theme of *A Toast in the House of Friends*, Oliver often explores the way love and intimacy with others causes these already tenuous boundaries between self and other to collapse. When she addresses the gaze and the separation of subjects and objects, Oliver writes of the way in which objects within the gaze complicate attempts to understand them. Oliver writes about the creation of women in the gaze, and the way women disrupt these constructions, becoming more than objects. Oliver's analysis reveals not just the restrictions of constructing the world according to "self" and "other", but also the way women, in particular, resist and challenge these constructions.

#### ERICA HUNT'S "IN THE CORNER OF THE EYE"

In Erica Hunt's "In the Corner of the Eye", from *Local History*, the eye turns to taking in "someone's missing person, the unread portion", and though what follows may give the sense that the untold story of a forgotten woman is being told, Hunt's poem disallows any sense of this observation as a mere rescuing or remembering of a woman closed off from society. What might otherwise be an unencumbered observation instead gives the sense that the subject of the poem, the woman outside of the café or restaurant, is being constricted, detail by detail, to a narrative. Hunt begins by describing details of the woman and her surroundings that could be gathered from close observation, but, as the poem examines this woman, the facts gathered from already intense observation become riddled with supposition. The woman is not being merely observed,

she's not merely being seen though she is "missing"; she's being read because she was before an "unread portion", and she's being written, even written over when she fails to reveal herself (12).

The poem begins innocently enough with a woman catching the eye of the narrator, perhaps especially because the woman is noticeably out of place. There is a sense of reward that comes along with finding this "missing person" and with being aware of her when others are not. From the start, the narrator reads the woman who was previously "unread", and the narration moves gradually into describing what the woman does. The woman sits on the stoop tearing pages out of a magazine, eating French toast, and drinking orange juice, but the narrator adds that the pages come from "18-month-old *Penthouse* magazines that someone has stacked for recycling", and the food and drink are the woman's because the person who bought them left without paying for them (12). These are details that could be gained through close, extended observation, though the detail seems to border on supposition. Though she is "oblivious" to her surroundings, the woman is placed in the setting, sitting under an umbrella, under the gray sky (12). The narrator has begun to enclose the woman, though the woman herself is unaware of her surroundings.

In the second section of the poem, the narrator progresses from what could just be very close observation to a more explicit creative elaboration regarding the seeming stranger; the narrator crosses a boundary and begins not just to see and read the object of his or her gaze, but to write the object. The audience learns that the woman cannot eat "food she loves, raw carrots, corn, apples, raisins", and that instead "She is *forced* to order omelettes and french toast" (12). More than telling what she is forced to eat presumably because she is poor, the poem reveals what kinds of foods she "loves". These are details that could, or perhaps should only come from the woman herself, not from a limited observation done only from "the corner of the eye". The

woman volunteers to do small tasks in the café or restaurant, and seems to sustain herself through this, though her reliance, made necessary by her poverty, keeps her from the foods that she loves. While creating the woman's story may allow Hunt to present a woman who might otherwise go unseen, and to highlight the effects of poverty of this sort, Hunt wants to bring attention to the fact that the crafting of the woman's story has dangerous consequences as well.

The third portion of the poem turns from the woman's desires and her routine to what she wears, seemingly returning to merely observing the woman, though Hunt continues to very clearly involve a "reading" of the woman beyond simple details that could be gathered by looking at her. The determination of gender was made at the start of the poem; the woman is identified clearly as a "she", but because she wears both a skirt and pants, she is classified as "between sexes just now" (12). Hunt notes that her clothes cannot just be clothes, they must identify at least her gender for reading by others. Looking at this woman does not happen without some determination of what her outer details, such as her clothes, mean.

In the fourth section of the poem, the narrator defines "being a person", saying that personhood is defined as "that another person is talking to you", and that this other person speaking to you "is particular, unlike that diffuse group of people you don't spend time with who are all pronouns" (12). No one is speaking to the woman in the poem, so she may not be a person at all, she may merely be a hollow pronoun to be observed from the "corner of the eye", and to be potentially filled in by the suppositions of one who observes her. In encounters in which people speak to one another, according to the given definition, the other person "is the source of certain facts but not the facts that she ever speaks out loud" (12). Even when someone moves into personhood by entering an exchange with another, that person is still, in a sense, being read and written, mined for details that are the result of observation and supposition rather



than exchange. In fact, speech doesn't necessarily matter in determining "facts" about her. Acknowledging Judith Butler's definition of identity as a social construct in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Hunt notes that personhood is granted according to your intelligibility and coherence, the ability of another to, in effect, read you according to accepted norms that dictate the terms of the reading (17). Even in this exchange that should be, perhaps, more "meaningful" than an encounter in which no one speaks, people are being restricted by their unspoken, unexamined categorizations of one another. Hunt notes that the speech of a woman may not be enough to counter the details ascribed to her through the gaze. The poem details the disturbing categorization while also showing a danger of this presumed exchange:

This person you become accustomed to: her buckle, our buckle, her pins, our pins,  
her ankles, our ankles, her limp, our limp. Your person or her person, it doesn't  
matter in the dwindling middle ground. (12)

A closing in that begins in the first section of the poem is being completed as what belongs to "her" becomes "ours", beginning with attire, moving to body parts and physical attributes, and ending with a confusion of personhood itself. The space between the two decreases, and the negative connotation of "dwindling" adds a sinister nature to the collapse. It may be tempting to read the collapse between pronouns, subject and object, as an overcoming of the limitations of boundaries, but Hunt frames the poem with the boundaries imposed by sight and this woman's silence, and Hunt seems to be more interested in the power relations involved with people constructing others than she is in creating or idealizing a union. The woman in the corner of the eye is not one with "you", nor is she necessarily a part of "our", rather she seems to be overtaken as the distance appears to close. The possessive pronouns "her", "our", and "your", and their

separate objects remain, and no real movement beyond subject and object is attained, only the presumed tightening of the mere semblance of unity. The word “our” is understood as the union of separate entities; therefore, despite the fact that the pronoun “our” gives some sense of unity, it also contains the notion of separation. Furthermore, in the last line of the poem, Hunt allows whatever illusions exist in the use of the word “our” to unwind again into “your” and “her”, restoring the separation. In the final line, Hunt notes that unity only exists in disregard, when “it doesn’t matter” that this unity is an illusion.

In these last lines, Hunt also shows the way the gaze in effect dissects this person, understanding “this person” as a whole composed of the things that can be observed: what she wears, parts of her body, and physical characteristics. The movement from what she wears, what is surface and removable, to her limp, which is part of her physical being, would seem to indicate increased intimacy, but all of these are things that can be gathered from “the corner of the eye”, and they all rely on the semblance of unity that comes with an insistence on the concept of a “person”. The audience and the gazer never really reach beyond appearances despite the illusions that the construction of another provides.

In “Public Subjects: Race and the Critical Reception of Gwendolyn Brooks, Erica Hunt, and Harryette Mullen”, Allison Cummings argues that this poem is an instance of Hunt’s concern with revealing the marginalized, and that Hunt renders visible a “nonperson” who goes unnoticed “because she is poor and anonymous” and “because of her actions and dress”(20). Cummings writes that the “‘middle ground’ between observer and stranger begins to shrink”, in some way accomplishing a revelation, a granting of personhood to this person that would be without this status if Hunt did not direct an eye towards her (20). Cummings notes, however, that despite the fact that the poem turns to defining the woman “as a distinct character”, “The

poem does not completely cross the middle ground, though, for the woman never speaks, nor does the observer speak to her” (20-21). There is a sustained lack of contact between the narrator and the subject which would be necessary if Hunt is merely attempting to reveal what is unrevealed. Cummings argues that “Hunt’s poems trace the assumptions and social conventions that impeded human interactions, barriers that are easily questioned and analyzed but not easily crossed”, and that characters like the woman in “In the Corner of the Eye” operate from within an unconventional, private culture that bars them from literacy in the larger, conventional culture. According to Cumming’s logic, then, Hunt constructs “In the Corner of the Eye” in such a way that the observer and the woman do not connect precisely because the woman outside of the café is unconventional. Cummings does not address the fact that the woman is, in a way invaded when her psyche is penetrated and information about her that could only be revealed in conversation is revealed despite the lack of communication. The poem’s first definition of personhood, that “another person is talking to you” is in fact never met for the woman in the poem. The end of the poem at which what is “hers” becomes “ours” is a kind of consumption, a closing of distance that occurs without communication or communion of any real sort. This woman is not necessarily in the corner of society so much as she is deliberately placed and held “in the corner of the eye”.

Hunt constructs the poem in such a way that it does not reveal the “missing” woman so much as it calls attention to the fact that the narrator does not need to converse with the woman in order to tell what can easily and mistakenly be thought of as the woman’s story. There is no need to connect with one who is only “in the corner of the eye” because whoever is there can be constructed through a gaze, even easier so because of his or her enforced marginal status and imposed silence. The woman in the poem moves from being “unread” to being read by both the

narrator and the poem's audience by the poem's end; her story has been crafted in a gaze, and her identity has been created according to her appearance.

#### ERICA HUNT'S "THE ORDER OF THE STORY"

In "The Order of the Story", from *Local History*, Hunt describes a process by which one might begin a story like the one told in "In the Corner of the Eye". Each poem, "The Order of the Story" and "In the Corner of the Eye" is mindful practice in the creation of self and other. Hunt more explicitly traces the process in "The Order of the Story". Beginning in the most logical way, Hunt notes that in order to participate in the creation of another, the first person observer, the "self" must be created:

Imagine yourself walking into a room the exercise suggests, and then, describe how you fill a doorway, the direction you dress in, the way you walk out of the frame. Imagine finding stones – the inscriptions that predicted you. Invent the language now. Invent the language as if each inflection belonged to you instead of containing you, or treating you as if you were a commotion in the path of progress. (15)

Following an already created "exercise", perhaps compulsorily, the observer creates his or herself first ("imagine yourself"), and then fills the entrance to the place where an encounter with another will occur. The self dresses not in a manner, but a direction, a deliberate path. Done with defining the self and determining dress, the self moves from the door frame and finds "inscriptions" that predicted his or herself. The narrator demands "Invent the language", though "inscriptions" existed before this invented language and are so a part of this "exercise" that they predicted the person who must now "invent". Like it may be for the poet, complete invention is

perhaps impossible for this “you”, especially as this “you” is so inscribed that language would already seem to be a container or a completely foreign, obligatory system that precludes his or her involvement in its creation. Despite the fact that invention may not be possible, the poem is, from the start, consciously exposing the way this “you” can alter language in such a way as to free his or herself from prior constructions, and actually “invent” by using language for his or her purposes. In this way, a double consciousness of a sort is present from the start of this exercise, as things that might constrict might also allow freedom.

After inventing the self, and the setting, the poem shifts to the recognition of an other that appears:

Invent a language to describe the doorway in the person. Eyes growing accustomed to the dark, till the dark layers peeling off in shiny blue slices. Here and there flashes as the tongue licks over the heart. (15)

This person is not explicitly constructed, but as everything in this exercise flows from imagination, the other is part of what must be imagined in order to participate in this exercise. Hunt repeats “doorway”, only this doorway is not an entry to a room, the person is not in the doorway, the doorway is in the person. Instead of the outer being a doorway to the internal, the doorway the observer has created supports the figure, the external, the concept of stable other. The image of a doorway “into” a person respects the boundaries between inner and outer and takes for granted the “other” as one who is closed off to the self, whereas a “doorway in” begins from a point where penetration of the other has already taken place. The “doorway in” possibly endangers classifications of self and other even as it seeks to reinforce these classifications. The woman in “In the Corner of the Eye” is looked into, invented, and invaded, and Hunt is here exposing the same sort of encounter in which a person must be entered into by way of language

controlled and invented by an outsider. What follows is tinged with the macabre as the eyes adjust to the dark of the interior of the other person, “the doorway in the person”. The dark layers, perhaps being peeled off by the eyes, peel off “in shiny blue slices” that are reminiscent of a surgical entry of another’s body. Going further in the “doorway in the person”, flashes come off as the observer cuts even further into the observed’s body. There is a sensual nature to the violent penetration and dissection as the first person, the “you”, is now licking the second person’s heart, and is in deep enough to touch and expose the organ that has come to be a cliché representative of people’s innermost feelings and desires. Despite the intimacy between “you” and “the person”, this encounter is clearly controlled by the “you” who remains distinct throughout his or her quest to explore and expose “the person”. The language has been invented at this point, and a penetration has been accomplished that allows the first person, the “you”, the freedom to move back and forth between the external and the internal, defining both to suit his or her purposes, to tell the story of “the person”.

Outer details are as important as inner, as the exercise now suggests: “Describe the figure the doorway supports... all the detail her mortal frame can claim, stick and join” (15). The doorway inside of the person appears again as Hunt reasserts this reversal of internal and external in order to never lose sight of the fact that the observer has essentially turned the object of his or her gaze inside out. The paradoxical image of the “doorway in” never allows a complete assumption of a comfortable distance even when the “you” turns to the observed’s easily accessed outer details. The observer encumbers the observed, sticking things on her, joining things to her. Hunt defines the subject of the gaze as a woman, or at least according to a feminine pronoun that classifies her as feminine, but is still indefinite enough to for Hunt to address the process of constructing women in general through the gaze.

Continuing what is now an explicitly gendered consideration of the gaze, Hunt notes the way women are reduced by the gaze as the “you” moves from defining the figure back to a concern with the internal. The audience is made aware of both the construction of this woman and the limitations of the construction:

Where the mind’s orbit has faded into thoughts disguised as mere calculation, where she shows signs of adjustment: a walking chainsaw in crinoline and spandex, a smile outlined in flame. (15)

Even though the audience is aware of the fact that this woman thinks, the woman’s thoughts appear as something less complicated, a mathematical, automatic computation that does not grant the woman the ability to think. She is not just the way “your” gaze defines her, she is a dangerous “chainsaw” even in her adherence to femininity through both crinoline, a Victorian mode of dress famous for its cage-like construction and rigid enclosure of women’s waists and legs, and also through the more modern spandex, which tightens around women’s forms to reveal their bodies in an inescapably erotic manner. As “a walking chainsaw”, she is always capable of cutting through these materials, and yet these are what she wears. Her smile is forged in flame, and yet she must smile. She must also be inscribed as a member of a community of women, and her role in society must be defined: “Indicate which team she’s on, the team of Moms, for the love of them, however the bread gets sliced” (15). She is described as a mother, a member of a “team”, which is an exaggerated and comical image Hunt uses to refer to this woman’s role while she also notes the absurdity of needing this definition and necessary allegiance at all.

The woman is further traced, even in seeming retreat:

Describe the butts in the doorway, in the doorway and everywhere in between, where she trips or slides down them into some other contingency, a sentence with

a dangling clause. She is the figure in the vicinity of her experience with its distracting claims on her attention. Capital letters inflate routine, without which days curve away. (15)

Every part of her must be detailed, the “buts” that might allow her to stray from the narrative being created around her, through her, and for her must be accounted for. Every place inside of her and outside of her to which she could retreat is headed off by description so that she is never off of the page, never outside of the narrative even when she “trips and slides” into some seemingly unknown place. Confined to narrative, she is always “in the vicinity of her experience”, although Hunt leaves an ironic separation between this woman and her experience as “she” is merely a character going through the motions, doing the sorts of mundane and routine things that are supposed to define women’s experience. Her experience, her “routine”, is embodied by letters and sketched out in words.

In the last section of the poem, Hunt moves away from the exercise and looks at what writers face when following conventions. Hunt defines all of “earth” as a place where:

the characters have names, open-and-shut cases of assumed identity, and hold down their spots in a book. Where the characters read the book as they are writing it, form and informant. (16)

Hunt’s character, the “she” is gradually drawn out in the course of the poem, and though “she” is not named beyond a pronoun, she is etched into being, and attempts at defining and fixing her identity have begun. “She” is present in the story, even as she is revealed to be the product of “your” imagination, “your” construction. Writers, readers, and characters in works collapse into one, and Hunt makes it clear that this is a world in which everyone is a character of sorts, the construct of another. Each person is the body of a narrative and the “informant” of the narrative,



not the creator, but one who supplies information to another, one who aids in the investigations of others. When she writes of the “exercise” that results in the assignment of identities and the creation of a narrative, Hunt is exposing the way narratives are created, and the way identities are constructed. Hunt’s following of the exercise, though, reveals seemingly rigid constructions for what they are: frail borders that are often established through violence, especially when applied to women. The woman beneath the narrative being constructed for her is dangerous at times in her failure to correspond with the identity created for her, but she is ultimately trapped even when she strays a bit.

#### ERICA HUNT’S “CORRESPONDENCE THEORY”

In the last letter of “Correspondence Theory”, from *Local History*, Hunt writes of another encounter involving a gaze in which she disregards the idea of communion through the gaze as merely the gazer’s comforting illusion. Rather than accepting the illusions the gaze allows, Hunt notes the way that ideas formed from a gaze often threaten the person in the gaze. For Hunt, the exchange between a self and an other cannot be merely thought of as communication, as an exchange on equal footing, as there is a discrepancy in power. The letter begins by asking a question to call attention to the nature of language as a perhaps more useful means for describing and categorizing what is external rather than what is internal: “Did you know that in English there are more words referring to external objects than there are words to refer to internal states?” (53). It may be not just easier, but more possible to describe that which we see, which Hunt here describes as “objects”, instead of discussing the “internal” with one another. What is outside of and apart from ourselves, like the woman outside of the café or restaurant in “In the Corner of the Eye”, is easier to explain, describe, and define with language than what is inside of

ourselves and others. From the start, a narrator addresses a constructed “you”, partly in accordance with the epistolary form Hunt uses for this section, and partly because it speaks to the way people construct others with whom they seem to correspond or communicate with even in the absence of conversation or true exchange. A question is asked for which no answer is expected and to which no one could offer the narrator an answer to, and yet this narrator is addressing “you” with the pretense of exchange. Hunt notes that a sort of communication that does not allow the other person to speak, or to escape from or challenge the ideas that come at first glance may be the preferable means of communication in a world that seeks immediate meaning: “Faces convey meaning while words take their time to reach you” (53).

Hunt goes on to describe the way bodies create language to be understood by others, and are texts to be read:

Eighty or so muscles in our skin slack or tense in a kinetic vocabulary that could go on without a comma. In the fiction of your letters how do you punctuate your body English, how do you wear the stamp of things seen? (53)

Muscle movements correspond to a vocabulary that does not require punctuation, but which is nevertheless read by others. In the same way that Hunt’s letter is a “fiction” of sorts, the audience is asked how, in their letters, their own communication without true exchange, their bodies create meaning for others. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the term “body English” refers to movement made to influence the direction of an already propelled object, making the movement ineffective. A body language created after it is too late to change things is similar to the image of one wearing the “stamp of things seen” in that both are out of “your” hands. The “stamp of things seen” is literally being marked by the violent impressing of what is “seen”, of what others see when they look at “you”. “You” can “punctuate”, interrupt or

emphasize the effect of your body language, and you can think about how others see you, but “you”, as a text, are inscribed in the gaze of others.

Writing about a man who “has a stare that means business”, Hunt uses the next section of the letter to explicitly explore the consequences of the gaze of another. Of this specifically male gaze, Hunt writes:

He has two kinds of stares, actually, business and pleasure. Most people trapped in his gaze try to fight back; they either break its hold by laying flat and still against whatever background is handy, so that voila they are part of the picture or they try to divert his attention. But few try to return his view blow for blow. (53)

One man stands in for men in general in this examination of the male gaze and its effects. The gaze, is first off, defined not merely as looking or even looking and attempting to make sense of what is seen, instead the gaze is a “stare”, an act of observing that is continuous in nature and that is seen as a transgression partly for its assumption of intimacy where there is none. The man’s stare is threatening in that it “means business” and is defined in terms of blows; it traps people, causes people to struggle to escape it, and is powerful enough to keep people from trying to reciprocate the stare. Hunt repeats the word “business”, though now the man’s stare is “business” in that it is divided into both “business and pleasure” (53). The threatening connotation of “business” is retained with the repetition, and a saying that might otherwise be a harmless cliché remains sinister and is intertwined with notions of male workplace etiquette and sensuality. Those trapped in the man’s gaze react in the same way people and certain animals in danger of being attacked by larger or threatening animals behave – they remain still and attempt to blend in with the surroundings until they are no longer interesting to the dangerous party.

Hunt writes about the man's gaze in his "encounter", and the poem moves from how "they", an indefinite third party, react, to "you" being suddenly caught in this man's gaze:

The stare demands a story and the story demands boundaries. You stay inside the landscape of it, you a body hold up your end of the conversation. You a tree locked inside the body of a tree. Finally you stick out your neck. (53)

In the same way that the woman of "In the Corner of an Eye" is constructed through a gaze, the audience of the poem is now trapped in this man's gaze and a story is being created through the gaze. The stare does not come without a story of some sort, in fact the look "demands" the story, and the story confines with "boundaries" as it is created. This exchange is lacking verbal communication between the "you" and the man, who at this point is reduced to "The stare". Nevertheless, as in the case of the woman outside of the café, an unequal exchange of a sort occurs in which "you" are only a "body" filling in "your end" of an ironically labeled "conversation" that has ensnared a silent "you". The subject, "you a body", physically "hold up your end of the conversation", giving the man something to create a story for, to lend meaning to, but Hunt is careful to use open enough terms to where "you" can also be "holding up" this exchange, as in complicating or prohibiting the story enclosing "you". The poem moves to a complication of its own when "you" becomes a "tree", rather than the expected "body". The subject of the gaze has perhaps too successfully melded with the landscape, and though "you" disrupt this man's attempt to read and construct a story for "you", "you" are still stuck within the gaze, pretending to be a tree, stuck in the man's construction of the tree.

Hunt seems to offer some escape from the gaze in the end, and this subject, unlike the woman of "In the Corner of the Eye", manages to avoid being completely taken in by the gaze of another. Hunt writes that the subject of the gaze sticks his or her neck out, perhaps finding

freedom from the gaze. Though this freedom does not necessarily come, as, from this point, the poem moves not to “you” sticking out your neck and escaping, but to a weighing of how to create “original looks” by way of taking the “risk” of looking, while at the same time teaching “thought to think out loud” (53). Hunt suggests that merely sticking your neck out is not a means for escaping the gaze, rather freedom can come when your own gaze, an “original look”, is accompanied by making “thought to think out loud”, or deconstructing thought in order to disallow the unspoken, unexamined consequences of the gaze. If thoughts and the assumptions and constructions contained in them are “out loud”, in the open, one can, even through a “look”, maintain an awareness both of how one attempts to define with his or her glance, and also of the freedom others should be granted in one’s gaze. For Hunt, sticking out your neck and gaining your own perspective is not particularly meaningful or freeing unless you are willing to recognize and challenge the constructs that come with your gaze.

#### CONSTRUCTING WOMEN WITHIN THE GAZE: AKILAH OLIVER’S “FERAL FEMINA”

Whereas Erica Hunt examines and exposes the way the gaze constricts women especially, crafting a coherent narrative for them to exist within, Akilah Oliver writes “feral femina” in *A Toast in the House of Friends* in order to show the ways women continuously undermine the process Hunt describes. Hunt’s exposure of the construction is a means of challenging it, and she suggests ways for using the gaze in a potentially less restrictive way, but Oliver takes the process one step further when she notes the way gaze cannot contain women. Oliver traces the creation of this “feral femina” within the gaze, simultaneously noting the troubling constructions of the gaze and how the woman causes the gaze to fall apart along with all of its resulting constructs.

In the first lines of the poem, the woman is cast into the gaze, and she is disjointed, but the gaze does not control her being:

headless breasts. imaginary eye. object. objectify.

objection. abject. abrupt. disruptive image.

*she opens out to a blank space*

who you be woman                      who you be (88)

She is at first taken apart by the gaze, classified according to her erotic appeal, stripped of being as a complete person, and she specifically lacks her head, the part containing her intellect and making her more than just a body. Oliver moves next to an “imaginary eye”, which may be the eye of the woman, which is inconsequential and only imaginary with regard to the male gaze. The woman may be being granted more body parts, but the eye could also be the same one that reduces the woman to “headless breasts”, and this eye which constitutes the male gaze, may only be “imaginary”. This “imaginary eye” may retain its power despite its imaginary nature, but Oliver moves on to more definite complication of the gaze. The woman is defined as “object”, she is “objectified”, thereby introduced explicitly to the consequences of the gaze, but Oliver uses “objection” to upset the notion of the woman as purely “object”, taking advantage of the many meanings and dual nature of “object” as both a subject and a verb; the person gazing may “objectify”, but the “object” of the gaze may “object”, resisting the classification. Oliver then moves completely past the distinction of subject and object for a moment, alluding to Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection. What was once an object now faces Kristeva’s denial of the delineation between subject and object, as she defines it in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*:

The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-ject, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire... what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place\_ where meaning collapses. (1-2)

What was defined as an other, as an object, is no longer other, it intertwines self and other despite its ejection, and it is always drawing the stable subject, “me”, towards recognition of a place where the basic distinctions like subject and object, foundations of stability and meaning, do not exist. Oliver follows “abject” with “abrupt”, which reflects the nature of the poem to this point, as it constantly shifts in a manner that, if one was satisfied with the stability of the gaze and its object, would seem disorderly to the point of being offensive. Oliver acknowledges that though woman may be an “image”, she is “disruptive” and “abrupt”. Every notion of this “feral” woman as the object of a gaze is challenged by the idea of the woman as something apart from this construction. Following the woman being framed as a “disruptive image”, the woman seems to gain some freedom in italics as the woman does not come into being in the fragment of the “headless breasts”, rather, as Oliver writes: “*she opens out to a blank space*”. She does not exist in constraints in the italics, she does not come apart under scrutiny, instead she comes into unmarked space where anything is possible. Though, Oliver, like Hunt, is in fact noting an inherent violence in this woman needing to necessarily “open” to anything. The woman is not being taken apart, but there is a sense in which her opening has been accomplished by her classification as an object, in anticipation of the need of an undefined, but present observer to know who this woman is (“who you be”) rather than by her desire to “open” herself.

Later in the poem, Oliver continues her mindfulness both of the gaze and the challenges to it, tracking the creation of this woman throughout the poem. After the initial lines, the woman begins to learn her place in the scheme, and what she must do to fit in:

clean carefully between the toes. lesson number one. walk.  
 one insult after another.  
 subject.  
 subjectivity. subjective. this is 62<sup>nd</sup> street. that's frothy white milk.  
 perspective of the seeing subject. (88)

To exist in this world, this woman must be thoroughly clean, her body presentable in public space. She learns lessons, and she learns how to move in the world, to “walk”. Some degree of freedom might be granted in the “walk”, though, as this “feral” woman may now be able to wander from where she is expected to be. Oliver was before concerned with how this woman was defined as an object, and she is now allowing the woman’s point of view to enter into the poem when the audience shares, from a distance, the woman’s described experience of “one insult after another”. A woman’s presence in this ordered world seems to be precarious because it comes with a constant stream of insults. The insults, however, are not enumerated or explained, perhaps to force the audience into the experience of the insults rather than their own reactions to the insults. The woman comes into being as herself, but she again enters a world that divides experience according to subjects and objects. She is no longer merely the object of the gaze, she attains standing as a subject, an I who can now view others as objects. But Oliver once again complicates this division of subject and object, as her standing as a subject also carries the connotation of the word “subject” as one who is beholden to another or under the



influence of something external. Whether she is being forced to adapt to society's rules for her, or she is becoming her own person, so to speak, the woman is constantly being imposed upon.

From the ambivalent "subject", Oliver moves to "subjectivity", granting the woman some freedom in her own perception of the world while simultaneously further situating this woman in a classical division of the world according to subject and object, internal and external. What follows from this subjectivity is the ability to declare things "subjective". Perhaps the woman herself makes the declaration, as what follows seems to be her newly formed ability to classify things like 62<sup>nd</sup> street and frothy white milk, but even these classifications are based on a system established long before she learned the rules. The woman has her own perspective, and is able to make classifications, but this section of the poem finds the woman in a situation much like that of the liberated, independent woman of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in that her newly gained status as a subject still closes her off in the wider construct. Simone de Beauvoir writes of the dangers of equating emancipation with subjecthood: "let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him *also*: mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an *other*" (731). Of course, as de Beauvoir acknowledges throughout her work, women are very much situated as object within the existing scheme, and even a woman acting as a subject within the scheme will need to "insinuate herself into a world that has doomed her to passivity" (683). Thus, Oliver's feral woman gains a perspective, a place within an existing scheme, but the perspective she gains is still defined by her place in the scheme, as hers is the ironic "perspective of the seeing subject".

The "feral femina" does take on some freedom in having a perspective, though, and she gains the ability to use language, which brings with it the potential for this woman to disrupt or even challenge the dialectical scheme she finds herself in:

obscenity of tongue. encoded. something posed and vile. this language  
 of absence. of agency. of a woman. just an ordinary woman.  
 daring speech.  
 yellow picket fence teeth. (88)

An obscene tongue can be the tongue of a woman who has discovered the freedom to speak in a socially unacceptable way that might make it obscene. But Oliver is also in explicit dialogue with Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, in which Barthes describes a speaking self, who Barthes frames as a lover seeking to embrace an other through language, as "obscene" in his or her confrontation with an other who is rendered silent when the self speaks, obscene in his or her presumption of intimacy with a silent, distant other (178). Barthes makes what might seem to be the freedom of possessing a tongue into a monstrous situation:

(The other is disfigured by his persistent silence, as in those terrible dreams in which a loved person shows up with the lower part of his face quite erased, without any mouth at all; and I, the one who speaks, I too am disfigured: soliloquy makes me into a monster: one huge tongue. (166)

The woman has gained a tongue, but she may find, in becoming an I who can speak, that she, like any others who use language, is now capable of, as Barthes writes: "crushing everything beneath his discourse" (166). The woman again is situated within a larger, potentially dangerous scheme of (speaking) subjects and (silent) objects. Oliver does, however, intertwine the concept of the tongue as a means for resistance to social norms with Barthes' image of the overbearing tongue, and this intertwining gives Oliver the space to note the way that a once silent woman's tongue, the tongue of a silent other within Barthes' discourse, might be the truly monstrous presence because of its potential to break from the structure. Rather than finding his own tongue

to be a figure of strangeness and abhorrence, a monster, the subject, might be more inclined to find the tongue of the once silent and excluded other to be monstrous.

In the same way that there is danger in the woman's use of language, language also comes along with "encoding", meanings that are transmitted, and usages that are pre-determined by an accepted structure. Language is "posed and vile", posturing even as it purports to elucidate, and potentially vile because it constricts, or even vile when it is used without regard for the accepted usages. Language is also both "of absence", in that its meaning is never completely fixed, and "agency" in that this un-fixed nature of language that might be understood as absence can also be understood as providing a great deal of freedom in the use of language. Because this woman is bound by a language of absence, a language that cannot provide easy, set meaning, the woman gains some agency in using it, in manipulating it to perhaps produce "daring speech". Oliver moves to the image of teeth to get past the tongue Barthes writes of which, though grotesque, is in fact an often harmless and sensual organ. Oliver disrupts Barthes' metaphor with teeth in order to reveal what Barthes couches with sensuality: the violence of this system of selves and others. Oliver reveals the problematic nature of the "caress" that Barthes writes of.

The next section of the poem has this woman using her "yellow picket fence teeth" to bite, but she does not bite because she is feral, as in purely rejecting the norms of subjectivity, her status as an object of a gaze, and language; rather she bites in her attempt to enact these norms, to expose the violence inherent in these norms and the way this violence is too widespread to be easily ascribed only to a fringe, "feral" group of people. Oliver lists the reasons "she bit", and she does so first because "she loved", she experiences a feeling which, when examined closely, requires and moves towards, as Barthes notes, an overtaking of the

other. “She loved”, like most other people in society, but in the same way that her use of language is “daring”, she does not accept love as an uncomplicated notion, and she expresses a hidden violence in her expression of love. “She bit” also merely because she “desired the act of taste”, and Oliver here exposes a common everyday violence, and perhaps even a sensual violence that cannot be merely attributed to a “feral”, completely other, violent nature. The reasons she bites expand to include: “She bit to symbolize language”, and “She bit who she was not”. She makes the violent distinction between self and other with her teeth, and reestablishes and re-enacts this distinction with her bite because constantly re-establishing this separation is the only means for determining “who she was not” with certainty. Oliver notes that identities are formed and maintained with an inescapable and ongoing violent separation. She also takes on the violence of language, which cleaves ideas, people, and things according to the meaning it carries. She bites to accomplish the search of the other’s body that Barthes writes of, the desire to “see what was inside it”, only Oliver dispenses with the lie that this exposure can be accomplished by way of the tongue Barthes writes of.

The woman, as constructed, is examined for a final time in the poem though the constructions contain instances of resistance:

site of eros. of forgot. of sneer. of supplication. of form.

of oppositional imagination. of desire.

of forget. of geography. of debasement. of vilification.

of mother. of fear. of agency. of speech. of forget. (89)

She is a site because her inscribed body, like the bodies Hunt writes of, is a space marked by the dominant discourse; her body is a space for society to attach classifications and form meaning. She is defined as a “site” of erotic desire, of love, with all other classifications following, each

one punctuated with a period as if to suggest separation, though they influence and alter one another. She is a “site” not just of conventions associated with womanhood: “desire”, motherhood, “supplication”, “fear”, “eros”, the “geography” and “form” of her body, but she is also a “site” of dangerous concepts that threaten to empower her and to disrupt constructions: “sneer”, “oppositional imagination”, “forgot” and “forget”, “vilification”, “agency”, “speech”, and even “fear” if it is that of others regarding her, and “geography” if she controls her space (89). She is a “site” of the action of “forgot”, as in, perhaps, already having forgotten the conventions to which she is supposed to correspond, and of “forget”, as in still in the process of forgetting, and perhaps not willing to remember that which might only constrict. She may herself be forgotten, marginalized by her status, but, just as Oliver elsewhere intertwines marginalization with notions of freedom, there is certain amount of freedom to be had in forgetting.

The final section of the poem begins with a quote from Barthes that eroticizes language: “language is a skin”. Barthes writes of language as a means for embracing the other, for creating physical contact between the self and other: “Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of words. My language trembles with desire” (73). Barthes notes that though language reaches out to the other, it never fully achieves the embrace, it is “*coitus reservatus*” in that though language is a means for embrace and acquaintance, it is also a way of distinguishing oneself from an other, exerting oneself over an other rather than allowing oneself to flow, as it were, into the other. However, Oliver may have more in mind when referencing skin, as she writes this collection of poetry partly in order to acknowledge death, the destruction and decaying of skin. In the same way that skin is shed and replaced at a high rate, language is constantly shifting and creating new, fragile,

inconstant forms. Oliver is also aware of the negative connotations of skin as a means of false construction, a shielding of the essence of something not just for protection, but for disguise and deceit. Language is both a potential artifice that asserts the stability of meaning, that makes classifications like self and other, and also something that falls away as easily and quickly as it appears. Moving beyond Barthes, Oliver defines other things taken for granted as stable as skin, including memory, “forgetting”, “lie”, “fear”, “desire”, “doubt”, “absence”, “tongue”, and “whip”. Things that present some possibility of freedom for the “feral femina” are skins as well as the things that might oppress her, like the whip and fear, or objectify her, like the tongue, and desire. These ideas are all constructions, and their relations to anything else are not certain and are always shifting. The feral femina is ultimately unable to be assigned a stable identity as an object, and when she attains her own status as a subject, she is a constant danger to the very construct she is placed in.

#### SELF AND OTHER IN AKILAH OLIVER’S WORK

Because she is dealing with the deaths of beloved others in her life, Oliver, who is in direct dialogue with Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* throughout *A Toast in the House of Friends*, contradicts Barthes’ definition of the other as indefinitely alienated from the self and absent. Though his fragments contradict one another, overlap, and elaborate on one another, in three specific fragments of *A Lover’s Discourse*, “absence”, “unknowable”, and “compassion”, the other is defined as distinct from the self and, in the other is, in a way, unreachable because of this distinction. Barthes contemplates a relationship with an other through discourse in which the self is conscious of his construction of the other, and frustrated by finding this other unable to be inscribed or understood as familiar, uniform, and whole except

by way of fragile and failing conceits. Oliver's writing reveals that though her loved ones are in some way absent like Barthes' other, she does not now view her love for them and her experience of them while they were alive as any less relevant. Whereas Barthes sometimes denies the other its being and notes his or her absence, Oliver looks to expand the notion of an other's being by expanding the ideas of being, presence, and absence. Oliver challenges the feelings of isolation and abandonment in the face of another that Barthes notes in his work. As Oliver writes in her author's statement for *A Toast in the House of Friends*, though the collection is about absence, it is also about an expanded notion of otherness that does not necessarily hold the categorizations of I, self, and other as absolute and distinct, and which therefore is not restricted to recognizing the other in terms of absence:

Absence runs through *A Toast in the House of Friends* as both a spectral language and as a device through which I voice desire, which is ultimately, the desire for poetry to absolve the world, and ourselves, of our failure to hold the othered body as our beautiful loved own.

Oliver feels absence perhaps even more strongly than Barthes because of the deaths of her family members, but she has moved past absence to recognizing a place where selves and others cannot and should not be thought of as distinct, and therefore absent from one another. Oliver writes of the concept of other itself as an action, the other is "the othered body" because it has been made into an other, not because it is necessarily other.

In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, in his fragment titled "absence", Barthes adopts the literary formula of the pursuit of a lost or unreachable lover, and frames the other and I as distinct, and the other as absent:

The other is in a condition of perpetual departure, of journeying; the other is, by vocation, migrant, fugitive; I – I who love, by converse vocation, am sedentary, motionless...nailed to the spot... an always present *I* is constituted only by confrontation with an always absent *you*. (13)

At this moment in the discourse, Barthes has granted the self, “I”, continual, absolute presence, and the other is continually absent, escaping from the gaze and company of the self. Barthes establishes a dialectical relationship in which, though both the I and the other exist, the I is granted a presence, and thereby a certain stability, while the other is continually unstable and absent. The I is always bound to the absent other by way of his “love”, his “converse vocation”, and the other here seems not to have a discernible purpose aside from fleeing from the I. In “In Aporia”, Oliver mocks the pondering of such a distance between self and other when she writes: “I too have admired the people of this planet” (10). The speaker disregards “the people of the planet” both by separating his or herself from them, and by only admitting to a prior admiration for them, as if the end of that admiration was necessary and good. The “I” admits to a shared experience with an unidentified other, but this “I” also alienates his or herself from everyone on “this planet” in a manner so drastic that is humorous. For Oliver, while the “I” here is an entity in and of itself, in order to avoid the assumption of a foolish distance, this “I” should concede that he or she is part of the “people of this planet”, part of a collective.

For Barthes, the assumption of intimacy is the foolish one. Barthes writes, in “unknowable” that efforts to “understand and define the loved being ‘in itself’” fail because of a certain distance:

I am caught in this contradiction: on the one hand, I believe I know the other better than anyone...and on the other hand, I am often struck by the obvious fact



that the other is impenetrable, intractable, not to be found; I cannot open up the other, trace back the other's origins, solve the riddle. Where does the other come from? Who is the other? I wear myself out, I shall never know. (134)

The self only believes that he or she knows the other, and in fact believes that he or she knows this "loved being" better than anyone else, but he or she is often brought back to the realization of the other as not only apart from his or her knowledge, but unknowable in this separation. For Barthes, trying to dissolve the boundaries between the self and other, an act which Barthes writes of as potentially violent penetration and controlling, is not possible. To attempt to do the impossible is to wear oneself out, to make a futile effort. Barthes goes even further, though, defining the attempt to know the other as "pure religion", making the other into a god, an "insoluble riddle on which my life depends" (135). For Barthes, a person that cannot be penetrated is not a person, but a god and a riddle. Barthes writes that all that is left for the lover, the self, to do is to either be content in his or her ignorance: "I know what I do not know", or to "define" the other not as an impenetrable thing, but instead, solely according to "the suffering or pleasure he affords me" (135). Barthes' alternative to accepting his distance from the other is to dissolve the personhood of the other, separating himself from the notion of people in the same way that Oliver's distant speaker does.

The other may be somewhat distant even for Oliver, though, as she disrupts the idea of her loved ones as familiar when she writes: "Who is the dead person?" and later writes: "Dead person, dead person, will you partake in my persimmon feast?" (10). Even though the dead people she has dedicated this work to are her family members, those who she loves and knew, here, when confronted with the corpse of the other, Oliver asks who this unnamed and unfamiliar dead person is. When Oliver asks if the "dead person" will be part of a feast, she

acknowledges that this “dead person” is so removed from her that he or she cannot be part of the feast. The words are addressed to one who not only cannot “partake” in the feast, but who cannot necessarily hear or respond to the invitation. The invitation to the persimmon feast also reads like a taunt that simultaneously acknowledges a physical and emotional distance from this unidentifiable “dead person”, and a certain coldness, and discomfort with the distance. Like Barthes, Oliver recognizes a certain absence brought about not just by death, but by the fact that it might not be possible to ever have a clear idea of who this person she is presented with is. Unlike Barthes, however, even in her acknowledgement of this distance, Oliver hints towards a need for intimacy with the other, something closer than a distance from which one can mock and potentially deny the other. While Oliver acknowledges distance, she does not languor in the experience of distance, and she seems to view the assumption and acceptance of such a distance as problematic. In “In Aporia”, Oliver moves in a markedly non-linear, complex motion towards and then away from her dead family members and their experiences.

In moments in which she is not critiquing the sort of distance Barthes maintains, Oliver challenges Barthes’ assumption of “I” as necessarily distinct from the other. In one of her movements towards a certain intimacy with a dead other, Oliver asks, at one point, in “In Aporia”, “Am I now the dead person?”, confusing the boundaries between the dead others she speaks of in *A Toast in the House of Friends* and herself. While she retains distance in referring to the other as “the dead person”, she, unlike Barthes, is questioning the distinction between herself and the other. The most marked instance of Oliver’s complicating of I and the other as distinct is her repetition of “I his body” while describing what seems to be her son’s experience of dying slowly and alone while waiting for care (9). Oliver writes “I his body” to show the way her “I” is very much connected to “his body”. Oliver could have written “my his body”, and

removed explicit involvement of “I”, but she chooses to address the notion of this subject “I” as bound to “his body”. Conversely, Oliver does not write “I he” because, unlike Barthes, she recognizes the presence of “his body”, the body of the loved other is not an eternal migrant or an absence. Though some idea of separation remains despite the combination, which is read as an uneasy combination with regard to grammar and conventional use of language, some combination is achieved, and Oliver does away with Barthes’ inevitably distinct “I” and absent “other”.

In “compassion”, Barthes writes that the feeling of compassion is compromised, and is incomplete in that it can never really know what the always separate other suffers:

If the other suffers from hallucinations, if he fears going mad, I should myself hallucinate, myself go mad. Now, whatever the power of love, this does not occur: I am moved, anguished, for it is horrible to see those one loves suffering, but at the same time, I remain dry, watertight... I am a Mother (the other causes me concern), but an insufficient Mother... (57)

For Barthes, compassion cannot be reduced to a purely empathetic state as “I”, held as a distinct presence, am never really experiencing the suffering of others, even if the others are loved ones. Barthes’ argument follows from the widespread recognition of others as essentially separate, and experiences as necessarily subjective, but for Barthes not even love, commonly thought to overcome the boundaries between people, can make a person truly able to share in the suffering of another. For Barthes, compassion is always necessarily incomplete because love does not actually close the distance between people. Barthes defines compassion in feminine, maternal terms that may presumably already preclude men (such as himself), from experiencing compassion. Barthes may be establishing a fundamental distance from the experience of

compassion that, from the outset, already limits his “I’s” ability to appreciate compassion as true empathy. Though the “I” of Barthes’ “lover’s discourse” longs for what is, for Barthes, only the illusion of intimacy with the other, Barthes’ “I” is ultimately cut off from the other.

Oliver, however, does not feel a necessary separation from her dead loved ones despite the fact that they may actually be more distant than the living but absent other of Barthes’ discourse. Oliver dedicates a great deal of *A Toast in the House of Friends* to, in Oliver’s terms, holding the space of those that might otherwise be considered absent, using language in an unconventional way in order to document feelings, memories, and experiences that might otherwise express pure abandonment, absence, and loss if restricted to narrative and rational clarity. Oliver uses her “I his body” combination to speak of a shared suffering that overcomes boundaries:

I his body is disintegrating, I his body is ossification. Death my habit  
radius, yeah yeah.

I his body can’t refuse this summons. I can’t get out  
this fucking room. Tell me something different about torture  
dear Trickster...

I his body keeps thinking someone will come along, touch me. (9)

Oliver’s “I” intertwined with “his body” is experiencing death together. Just as her son was left alone in a hospital room waiting for treatment, so does the “I” die slowly, unable to leave the room, thinking that someone will arrive to help. The experience is shared to the point where thoughts and desires are shared, not just experiences. Elsewhere in the poem, as part of her movement in the poem, Oliver seems to recount a memory of physical intimacy and physical details: “I’m cradling you to my breast, you are looking out. A little wooden lion you & Peter

carve on Bluff Street is quieting across your cheekbone” (9). The figure of the other is always absent, always fleeting in Barthes’ discourse, but Oliver constructs a discourse in which her loved one’s bodies are often present in some way, even in their physical absence. The intimacy here seems to be a memory, but it is constructed in the present tense so that the memory is being relived, or the experience is happening while it is described.

For Barthes, because it is mistaken as pure empathy, the self can often wallow in compassion despite the fact that the other who he or she suffers for is unreachable. Barthes posits understanding compassion as a simultaneous expression of empathy and a recognition that the other is irreparably separated from the self.

I bestir myself too much, in proportion to the profound reserve in which, actually, I remain. For at the same time that I ‘sincerely’ identify myself with the other’s misery, what I read in this misery is that it occurs *without me*, and that by being miserable by himself, the other abandons me... his suffering annuls me insofar as it constitutes him outside of myself. (57)

Any “I” should understand from the suffering of others that the ability of another person to suffer apart from his or herself is a recognition of the gap between self and other. Here Oliver may find some truth in Barthes idea that the suffering of others reinforces the distance between ourselves and others. After the death of her son, and in *A Toast in the House of Friends*, Oliver speaks of a kind of helplessness specifically regarding her son, whose intestinal condition would not have been fatal had he been diagnosed and treated in a timely fashion. In “murdering”, also from *A Toast in the House of Friends*, Oliver writes, of a distance between herself and her son’s body, and a resulting inability to be the one who could save him:

i to lace his frayed gluteus when chosen...

the house that is...

this, what was ours invaded, defiled.

i to cord his frayed intestines when chosen. (29)

Despite the earlier shared suffering, here the union of “I his body” comes apart into an “i”, noticeably no longer the capital and thereby more confident “I”, and “his gluteus”, “his frayed intestines”. Even though there is a singular house, body, that is “ours” in some past moment, what was “ours” and the notion of “ours” itself has been encroached upon and ruined. An unspecified outer authority prevents Oliver from being the one “chosen” to be there to save her son, and she could only have been a surgeon, one defined by a role outside of love and other than mother, in order to save her son. Still, Oliver writes that this is “the house that *is*”, it exists, like the space Oliver creates for her loved ones, and Oliver does not share Barthes’ sense of having been abandoned, nor of being an “insufficient Mother” resigned to a separation from her son or any other person [emphasis added]. Oliver’s wording in fact leaves open the possibility of being able to repair her son’s intestines “when chosen”, not “if chosen”, or “if I had been chosen”. She will not repair his intestines with surgery, or with means within a rationalist scheme, rather she creates the space to weave together, “lace” and “cord”, her son’s damaged, “frayed”, intestines. The word “cord” even brings her role as a mother into this repair process, as a mother is connected to her child by umbilical cord until shortly after the child’s birth. Oliver’s defiant choices highlight the fact that Barthes is restricted from the other by way of the construction he chooses in his fragments, and the separation he sometimes insists on.

Considering this tendency to simplify compassion and ignore the other’s distance, Barthes asks: “since the other suffers without me, why suffer in his place?” (58) Barthes suggests that there is no need to suffer for the other: “let us become a little detached... Let the

repressed word appear which rises to the lips of every subject, once he survives another's death: *Let us live!*" (58). Oliver has survived the deaths of others, people for whom she felt the love that Barthes claims to construct his discourse with, and while Oliver traces her son's death, thereby releasing him in a way, she does not view death as the end of life, but rather a passage into another realm. In "go", from *A Toast in the House of Friends*, Oliver writes for the need for a sort of detachment that Barthes advocates, but she recognizes ends and separations as incomplete in nature: "often now when i imagine life i think of what should be finite, the guise of limitability, the desire for stop" (14). To make sense of the world as we know it and according to accepted ideas, life and death, and self and other "should be" distinct and stable in and of themselves. One invested in appearances and common understandings desires limits that enable definition, even if they are only guises. Though survival of the self when grieving is crucial, being too concerned with one's "self" would seem to hamper Oliver's process of grieving. Oliver has already written of a shared suffering with her son at his time of death that knows no certain bounds, and she is unafraid of grieving for and suffering with others without imposed limits.

Barthes concludes that there is no need to get carried away with suffering in place of another, so to prevent this from happening, he sets new limits for himself when feeling compassion:

So I shall suffer with the other, but *without pressure*, without losing myself. Such behavior, at once very affective and very controlled, very amorous and very civilized, can be given a name: *delicacy*... (58)

For Barthes, the self is at stake, and mistaking and becoming too immersed in compassion is not just foolish, but it is dangerous in that there is the possibility of losing one's "self". To avoid the

loss of self, compassion, suffering with the other, must be measured. Barthes sets the terms of his compassion at odds with one another, attempting to be careful not to lose emotion in the midst of committing to greater control. With his limits set, Barthes undertakes a delicate balance between his desire for the other, his desire to empathize with his loved other, and his recognition of the other as an irretrievable and disconnected self wholly apart from himself. In “our good day”, from *A Toast in the House of Friends*, Oliver explicitly states that she wants to grieve for the loss of her loved ones outside of Barthes’ scheme, “to not suffer the loss of the departure of the Other as a “self” outside of my desire of/for that Other” (84). This sentence is fragmented like Barthes’ discourse, but Oliver’s fragment proposes the opposite of what Barthes’ “compassion” fragment proposes.

In her author’s statement for The Tolerance Project, Oliver writes of dealing with the deaths of her loved ones with a dual sense of rapture and rupture. Oliver writes that she uses language as a means of moving past a sense of rupture and into an exploration of rapture, something “beyond the limits of language and cognition”. She uses poetry to “collapse the known world into the impossible” as part of a “difficult dance with rapture” which poets must engage in. Barthes’ discourse is one of a repeated acknowledgement of rupture, of a separation between self and other. Because Barthes focuses on rupture, an unruly other continuously resists the attempts of the self to know and define him or her, and the self repeatedly renders the other absent. Faced with such an other, the subject of Barthes’ discourse finds it necessary to take protective actions, and to continuously acknowledge this distance, refusing to lose his or her “self”, denying the possibility of anything beyond traditionally acknowledged limits. In contrast, within the whole of *A Toast in the House of Friends*, Oliver continuously works to provide spaces for rapture, for what is outside of the established structure.



HINTS OF TENSION BETWEEN THE WOMAN POET AND LANGUAGE IN MULLEN'S  
 "SLEEPING WITH THE DICTIONARY"

In "Present Tense" from *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, Mullen writes of a troublesome embrace with language that contains a seeming caress by a tongue that is reminiscent of Barthes' and Oliver's figure of the tongue: "Now that I've been licked all over by the English tongue, my common law spout is suing for divorce" (17). The English language embraces the speaker, but its embrace is through licking the speaker "all over", an image which, while sensual, is also rather disgusting, and reads as a sort of violation with which the speaker is uncomfortable with. The speaker is familiar with the English tongue, with language, but this familiarity is the result of a disturbing relationship between the speaker and language in which language has repulsively marked the speaker. A partnership of sorts is created, but the relationship is based on unequal terms and is not sustainable, as it leads to divorce. The speaker's "common law spout", spout potentially being both the speaker's mouth and the speaker's words, seeks separation from the language that has embraced him or her. In comparison with the authority of the "English tongue", the speaker's "spout" is diminished in that its relation to language is of "common law", which is not law in the sense of being widely legally binding, rather its status is informal. Mullen has this potentially unequal relationship between text and women poets in mind when she writes "Sleeping with the Dictionary" (also from *Sleeping with the Dictionary*). The poem seems to be a poet's sensual exploration of a dictionary while in bed, with the poet and the dictionary as sexual partners, but there are moments in the poem which establish a disturbing inequity between the dictionary, a representative of all of English language, and the poet. Mullen also writes this exploration in terms that potentially exclude women poets from even taking part in this exploration of language.

In her essay, “‘Sleeping With The Dictionary’ Harryette Mullen’s ‘Recyclopeda’”, Elisabeth A. Frost writes of the dictionary in “Sleeping With the Dictionary” as being “only a book of raw material – a mere compendium of words”, which Frost also, somewhat contradictorily, identifies as Mullen’s “‘partner’” and as an “instigator of [Mullen’s] own word-oriented poetics”, pointing towards a tension that Frost fails to address between the dictionary as both text and partner (420). For Frost, Mullen’s poem is a demonstration of Mullen’s insistence on the “primacy of language”, a playfully sensual example of the poet’s relationship to language. The poem is not, however, an untroubled exploration of the poet’s relationship to language, and it furthermore does not seem to ally itself easily with the sensual as the sensuality of the poem often comes with gendered restrictions.

The poem begins with a troubling division between the poet and the dictionary when Mullen writes: “I beg to dicker with my silver-tongued companion, whose lips are ready to read my shining gloss” (67). Because the dictionary presumably possesses the “shining gloss”, and the poet the “lips”, it would seem that the dictionary may actually be the speaker in the first line, preparing itself for an encounter with a poet who seems to habitually read it. Though, the lips and shining gloss are somewhat interchangeable between the poet and the dictionary, and the lack of clarity as to who the speaker is in the first line allows the dictionary and the poet to collapse a bit. Even in this intertwining between the poet and the dictionary, there are hints that the poet and the dictionary are not on equal footing, as the first line of the poem uses words that have both harmless and positive connotations, and words that are somewhat tainted by negative connotations. To “dicker”, as the I, presumably the dictionary of the first line, does is to toy with something or someone, and the word also means to argue or barter with someone or something. The “I” of the first line is already establishing an unequal and even potentially hostile sort of

relationship with the playing casually with the other, making the other party something less than what will be a “partner”. If the poet and the dictionary are bartering rather than one toying with the other, the poet and the dictionary are involved in an encounter that takes on the quality of economic exchange. The dictionary’s “companion”, the poet, is “silver-tongued”, meaning eloquent or well-spoken, but also rhetorically manipulative, and potentially deceitful. No matter whether the “I” of the first line is the poet or the dictionary, this “I” is toying with its counterpart, and its counterpart is an artful communicator.

The tongues, “lips”, and “shining gloss” also render the exchange in terms of eroticism, an eroticism which marks the poem, but which is not separate from a tension that also pervades the poem. From the first line on, the dictionary is taken to bed with the poet. The bed and the dictionary collapse to a point as well, with their mutual “covers”, “thin sheets”, with the poet immersed in both the dictionary and the bed. Before any sensual play in bed begins, the weight of the dictionary threatens to crush the poet as he or she is “taking the big dictionary to bed, clutching the unabridged bulk, heavy with the weight of all the meanings” (67). The dictionary, like language in general, comes with the weight of pre-determined meanings which threaten the poet with their size. The dictionary contains a potentially dangerous authority that compresses the poet. Once the dictionary is in bed, the poet gropes in the dark, on a “nocturnal mission”, which is reminiscent of nocturnal emission, a physical phenomenon primarily associated with men (67). Mullen elsewhere relates this encounter to that of a male sexual act when she writes of “our nightly act” as a collective “penetration”, a term usually associated with male sexuality. The act is in some way gendered as male, and this gendering potentially defines the gender of both the singular poet, and the later “we” and “our” who engage in this eroticized search for words, ironically excluding women poets such as Mullen from reading the dictionary and

writing. Frost writes of the sensuality of the poem as harkening to the “spurs of creativity championed by a range of earlier experimental poets, from the Surrealists to Oulipo” (419). If Mullen is tying her poetry to the inspirations and methods of earlier poets, then she is also noting the way preceding traditions have largely consisted of male poets, and the way even some of these more experimental preceding movements like Oulipo may have also reproduced the misogyny and gendered constructs of the very traditions they sought to distance themselves from.

These more explicit mentions of male sexuality towards the middle of the poem force reconsideration of the lines that come before. The first line is itself gendered, with what is presumably the dictionary begging to “dicker” with the lips of the other which are ready to read its “shining gloss”. Because Mullen’s work shows an obvious concern with the sounds of words, and she often makes use of double entendres and allusions to like sounding words in her poetry, the word “dicker” in the first line is very purposefully reminiscent of the word “dick”, a slang term for a penis. The male-gendered dictionary seems to be readying itself for the poet’s lips to receive its “shining gloss”, which now seems to allude to ejaculate. The dictionary and the poet collapse into one another even more, as each is in some way gendered as male.

The erotic language is also troubled in that it is often intermingled with some sense of being bound to this act where it is described as “exercises”, and “motions and procedures”. The poet’s nightly regimen with the dictionary, whatever it may bring, is sometimes strangely compulsory and mechanical in nature. If Mullen is recalling seemingly innovative poetic movements of the past, she may be making a subtle criticism about what may be the abandoning of one structure, one set of “procedures” regarding the creation of poetry, merely in order to take up another, perhaps less traditional but still regimented structure that excludes and restricts.

The speaker, seeming to speak for all poets by taking up “we” and describing “the poet’s nocturnal mission”, is moving inside the dictionary, and possibly through the body of words, in search of “Any exit from the logic of language”, which might lead towards “an entry in a symptomatic dictionary”. Despite the potentially male terms for its creation, this encounter might lead to an alternative to the dictionary that may look past logical construction and the meanings as given by the dictionary. Mullen writes that the “alphabetical order” of the dictionary, rather than restricting in any way, might give way to “a dense lexicon of lucid hallucinations” (67). However, even this image is problematic in that the more explicit mentions of male sexuality elsewhere again require close examination of this part of the poem, of the product of this act being engaged in throughout the poem. The repetition of “I” in this “lexicon of lucid hallucinations”, and the denseness of this result of penetration brings to mind a stream of liquid, specifically ejaculate, which usually marks the completion of a male sexual act.

What at first seems to be merely a playful sensual encounter with language becomes instead a subtle revelation of the ways in which women are endangered in their relationships with literary tradition and language. The poet sleeps with the dictionary, but the dictionary threatens to overtake any relationship that it is a part of, and indeed to overtake the poet his or herself. Because of the terms of the relationship between the dictionary and the poet, and between the speaker and the nightly process described in the poem, the “I” and “we” of this poem are never truly identifiable as Mullen or as any woman poet. In fact, the “I” of this poem is more of a figure of exclusion, as the dictionary, male poets, and a male literary tradition exert themselves subtly in this exchange between the speaker and the dictionary. Mullen purposefully constructs this poem so that the male “I” of literary tradition is always present, and women are subtly excluded as writers, speakers, and even readers.

## CHAPTER 2: THE CREATION OF SUBJECTS

Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, that identity is “a normative ideal” in some way regulated by practices that “govern culturally intelligible notions of identity” (16). Hunt and Oliver expose the way that identity, on a basic level, is formed around people according to common constructions. In order to examine the involvement of culture and the language of culture in constructing others, Mullen and Oliver look explicitly at society, focusing on literature of the past and cultural references. A dominant discourse, whether it is found in laws, fairy tales, or pop culture, is used to define people and to provide people with a means of defining themselves and others within a society.

Mullen often examines the way literature of the past, and spoken language that has been given a certain amount of authority by way of cultural recognition gains the appearance of cohesiveness and widely understood meaning. In “Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language”, Mullen alters a legal document meant to define and exclude “Chinese laborers”, exposing its intent to reduce the people it targeted despite the deception contained in the seemingly harmless, state-sanctioned language. Akilah Oliver does something similar in her poem “grace” from *A Toast in the House of Friends*, disrupting parts of the Psalms of the Bible, a text that, like the law Mullen chooses, comes with a certain authority and status meant to make it unquestionable. In “Once Ever After”, Mullen writes her own amalgamation of a fairy tale of sorts. Mullen’s fairy tale looks at the way femininity has been constructed according to norms present in fairy tales, though Mullen also writes her tale to invoke little examined aspects of fairy tales, which themselves already contain challenges to norms. In “Resistance is Fertile”, Mullen looks at the production of subjects, examining the way clichés and popular discourses meant to encourage people to find themselves within a dominant culture are filled with opportunities for dissent and alternatives despite the often contrary intent.

As Erica Hunt writes in her essay “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics”, the language of society is integral in producing limitations for people to exist within:

Dominant modes of discourse, the language of ordinary life or of rationality, of moral management, of the science of the state, the hectoring threats of the press and media, use convention to bind and label us. (682)

The challenge for poets such as Mullen and Oliver is to, in effect, take apart this language in order to look critically at its actions, and to expose it for the limitations it creates. In doing so, both Mullen and Oliver create new forms from old, poetry that is intimately and explicitly intertwined with past forms, but which is without the exclusionary binds of the original text.

#### MULLEN’S “ONCE EVER AFTER”

In “Once Ever After” from *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, Harryette Mullen refers to many well known fairy tales and children’s stories, the most identifiable being “Sleeping Beauty”, Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Princess and the Pea”, The Brothers Grimm’s “Snow White”, “The Frog Prince”, and “Rumpelstiltskin”, “Cinderella”, and Lewis Carroll’s Alice of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Mullen, who elsewhere in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* writes of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”, is particularly concerned with children’s stories for the way these tales pass subtle, often overlooked messages and norms to children who will grow into adult members of society. Mullen is, however, looking explicitly at the construction of the feminine in fairy tales. Mullen looks at the way fairy tales and children’s stories, widely seen as a means for introducing feminine ideals and misogyny to young girls, also contain an undercurrent of resistance to these ideals. Mullen chooses fairy tales with an awareness of how the heroines, in particular, come to be models women are meant to define their lives by. Fairy



tales become a sort of script for achieving fulfillment as a woman, giving girls and women the ideals and roles they must embrace in order to be women. Fairy tales have traditionally been filled with women who accede to the demands placed upon them by patriarchal societies, primarily through marriage, thus sacrificing themselves, for the sake of a pre-determined role. Mullen makes use of the fairy tale framework to expose the workings of this script being constructed for women and girls.

Though it references many fairy tales and traditional children's stories, it is clear even from the title that Mullen does not intend to reproduce the tales without reflection as, even though a traditional tale might end with some sentiment of "happily ever after" and begin with something to the effect of "once upon a time", Mullen instead titles her poem with a distortion and amalgamation of these phrases: "Once Ever After". "Ever after" is meant to describe all that took place in the past, after the story ended, and "Once" to preface the happening in the past, so that the title confuses beginnings with endings, and disrupts the logical orderings of a narrative.

The poem begins with a princess who, instead of being defined as beautiful, and desirable, instead wets her bed: "There was this princess who wet the bed..." (53). Mullen also does not introduce the princess as "a princess", rather Mullen writes "there was this princess...", using the word "this" both for its use in slang in declaring a closeness that is not real and its use for referring to something familiar or close by. Just as she has in the title, Mullen's first line reiterates both the awareness of this tale as part of a long line of tales about princesses passed on for generations, and also a certain irreverence for these past tales. Rather than being able to sense a "pea" under her mattresses and therefore being "attuned", like the princess of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Princess and the Pea", this princess "pees" in the bed, and Mullen draws an amusing connection between the homophones while undermining the traditional

classification of fairy tale heroines as possessing desirable, feminine, and even class-defined traits such as the sensitivity required to be bruised by a pea under mattresses. This princess, also, is not merely sensitive, she is “attuned”, meaning not just receptive to, but aware. Mullen also calls our attention to the fact that this protagonist, because she wets the bed, may be a child, like many of the heroines of fairy tales, and she is therefore perhaps not legally or otherwise suited to be a bride at this point in her presumably short life, though tales about princesses usually end in marriage.

Instead of describing the appearance of her heroine and classifying her as beautiful, delicate, and the prototypical protagonist of fairy tales, Mullen refuses description, making a point of not defining or listing her protagonist’s various features which might be used to identify her as desirable, to categorize her as an object of desire. In this refusal to list her heroine’s attributes, Mullen seems most mindful of the monstrous sort of dissection and defining of “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves” that occurs both when the mother wishes for a daughter with hair as black as ebony, cheeks red as blood, and skin as white as snow, and also in the description of the child after she is born which inscribes her the same way (D. L. Ashliman). Mullen instead writes of her heroine’s attributes in seemingly incomplete terms that she punctuates as if they are complete: “Her lips were. Her hair was. Her complexion was”, leaving the reader to think about both the process of defining these features and the effect of such definitions (53). Rather than giving sentences that sum up the appearance, and perhaps falsely unify a girl who, in fairy tales, may really only be thought of in terms of her features, Mullen writes “Her beauty or her just appearance. What she wore” (53). Mullen reveals the formula that goes into constructing fairy tales, and how things like appearance must be described and defined in order for the fairy tale to

seem right to the readers and audience. The heroine of the fairy tale, like Snow White, and like all women within the male gaze, is dissected according to her physical features.

Further attention is drawn to the formula of fairy tale creation when Mullen questions the existence of fairy tale staples in her own tale: “Was there a witch? Was she enchanted, or drugged?” (53) The existence of these conditions and of this character typically found in fairy tales is not definite. Furthermore, the question posed may indicate discomfort with the figure of the witch or evil woman, both of which are figures of frightening feminine alterity present in fairy tales and children’s stories that are still widely told and adapted for even wider distribution. Mullen’s princess denies the magical element of fairy tales and children’s stories in that she is not necessarily under a spell, nor is she necessarily magical. Mullen’s protagonist also differs from the prototype in that she sleeps by choice rather than by spell or poisoning resulting from coercion.

The protagonist dreams of “a knight in armor”, a trope that has significantly come not from texts of fairy tales, but from social constructs and ways of thinking which have resulted from fairy tales (53). Rather than merely symbolizing a princess being saved from peril, the knight in armor has come to symbolize men’s salvation of marriageable women from the socially unacceptable status of the unmarried. Mullen references the “knight in armor” to show the reach of fairy tales and children’s stories in the world, and their ability to define women’s roles in a troubling way, and to limit women. The knight in armor makes Mullen’s princess think of jousting, and a “kind attack” of sorts, both of which can imply a sensual relationship between the princess and the knight. The hints at romantic resolution and tropes, however, are tainted with the violence of jousting and the reference to attacks, thereby recalling the violent restriction of

the “romantic” resolution of many fairy tales in which the princess or heroine is united with a male suitor, thus establishing or restoring heteronormative roles.

One might expect narrative to follow and resolve the questions about the presence of a witch and whether or not this princess is enchanted, but Mullen instead gives abstract fragments from fairy tales that only serve to resist narrative even while hinting at various elements of traditional fairy tales and stories in an ominous way. Mullen writes, “A heart would cough after only one bite. Something was red”, seemingly drawing again from the tale of Snow White in which the protagonist collapses into a deep sleep after one bite of a red apple. The reference seems clear, but this action is only conditional (“would”); this is not necessarily happening to Mullen’s protagonist, and Mullen uses the idea of a heart coughing to make the reference and the action absurd. The line could also be read as the heart itself being bitten, which draws from the violence present in many fairy tales, including Snow White. The red something that follows may be a fragmented reference to the apple that poisons Snow White, but it may also be blood.

From the most abstract references in the poem, Mullen then references “Rumpelstiltskin” when she writes “She couldn’t make it gold without his name” (53). The unnamed heroine of “Rumpelstiltskin” is only able to save herself from being killed by her prisoner, the king, when Rumpelstiltskin appears and spins straw into gold for her, and she is eventually only able to save her first-born child by learning Rumpelstiltskin’s name (D.L. Ashliman). Mullen somewhat distorts the story in that she has her heroine doing the labor, making an indefinite “it” into gold rather than Rumpelstiltskin, and in that the act of creating gold, the means of the *heroine’s* salvation, depends on knowing Rumpelstiltskin’s name. The princess’ life, rather than her son’s, depends on knowing Rumpelstiltskin’s name; Mullen’s heroine’s very existence depends on “his name”. Mullen calls attention to the importance of the male character’s name

thereby referencing any number of societal and philosophical conditions that leave women compromised when they are unable to access the names of men. Mullen references Lacan's exclusion of women from the Name of the Father, which excludes women from language itself. "His name" also references Christian doctrines that require the recitation and invocation of the names of a traditionally and widely masculinized holy trinity. The most commonplace of example of the way women's lives depend on the name of a man is the patriarchal determination of names which leaves most women and girls with the surname of at least one man. Like the heroine of "Rumpelstiltskin", women would be nameless themselves, and therefore quite powerless without having, "his name".

Mullen's repositioning of her heroine within the tradition of "Rumpelstiltskin" lends itself to a consideration of the ways in which the heroine of the original tale is essentially at the mercy of all three male figures in the story, though the heroine's struggle with men's violence is not traditionally thought of as disturbing, nor is it the focus of the tale. In the original tale, the heroine's father, a miller, lies to the king, telling the king that his daughter can spin gold in order to increase his standing in the king's eyes (D.L. Ashliman). The heroine's life is at first in her father's hands, and he recklessly endangers it and causes her enslavement. Mullen forces some consideration of the subtext of the fairy tale, which contains the idea that the father's name, his standing, depends on his ability and willingness to exploit his daughter. The king then imprisons the heroine in order to reap the benefits of her unique skill and her labor, threatening to kill her if she does not spin straw into gold. Upon seeing the gold Rumpelstiltskin spins for the heroine, the king marries her seemingly only because she seems to be able to create gold from straw (D.L. Ashliman). The king makes the heroine a queen, giving her a title (an extension of his title, "his name") and the desired resolution of a marriage, but this resolution is problematic even in the

original tale in that the king is essentially a greedy, malicious character who seems to merely make the woman a different sort of prisoner when he marries the heroine only for her ability. The original tale comes along with the complication that, at some point, the king may ask his now queen for more gold, and if she cannot not produce it, the king may have few reservations about taking his queen's life, as he has once before threatened her life. The heroine has some refuge from her father, but she is now in the dangerous hands of her husband. Rumpelstiltskin might be a hero when he spins the straw into gold, thereby saving the heroine's life, but he always seeks payment; he spins only in exchange for the heroine's necklace, her ring, and then for her first-born child – this last request marks Rumpelstiltskin as a particularly dangerous and deviant figure, not merely magical. Had her need for him continued, Rumpelstiltskin's subsequent requests may have eventually included having the heroine for himself, and it is even more likely that once she could no longer pay, Rumpelstiltskin might have simply allowed the king to kill his now barren queen. Rumpelstiltskin is a magical, small-statured man, an outcast like the heroine in the sense that he does not embody typical masculinity, and he might have been an ally to his fellow outcast, but he is also ultimately a danger to the heroine. Mullen's figure of a girl dependent on men for subsistence lends itself to a consideration of the way each male figure in the tale not only lacks consideration for the heroine, but is actively threatening the heroine's life and manipulating her for his purposes.

When "Rumpelstiltskin" is closely examined women's relations to wealth, greed, currency, and labor are all important facets of the original tale, and Mullen notes the way these ideas are embedded in fairy tales but largely ignored or disregarded. The tale is framed by the miller's desire to have standing in a class that he is not a part of, the king's desire for easily obtained and magically produced wealth, and Rumpelstiltskin's comparable desire for a stranger,

socially unacceptable version of wealth in the form of the heroine's jewelry and her child. In all instances, the woman is sacrificed, her life constantly in danger, in order for the men of the tale to move between classes and gain wealth. Whereas this might just be a tale designed to distract and entertain children, Mullen undermines the fragile fictions many readers approach fairy tales with, instead exposing the underlying realities of women contained therein. Mullen makes it clear that her heroine is not just watching Rumpelstiltskin spin gold, she is in fact working "night shifts in the textile mill" (53). The heroine of "Rumpelstiltskin" watches at night while the creature comes to her room and spins straw into gold. Mullen takes the middleman and the magic out of the production, and has her heroine "making it gold" rather than Rumpelstiltskin, situating her character in a tradition of generations of women who spun fabric in their homes, and then in the textile industry. Mullen forces class and labor into a setting in which they were before only hidden considerations or magically resolved complications. Mullen denies attempts to make the heroine's difficult situation magical, as the heroine's place in the world of fairy tales is forgotten as she labors: "She forgot she was a changeling peasant girl. Spinning. she got pricked" (53).

As Mullen moves effortlessly from fairy tale to fairy tale, sometimes allowing them to blend into one another, this "peasant girl" who gets pricked is also a reference to "Sleeping Beauty", who, in the best known versions of the fairy tale, is cursed by an evil, magical woman (another deviant feminine figure) to prick her finger and die by her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. In the 1959 Disney film *Sleeping Beauty* (perhaps the most widely known version of the tale at this point), the heroine is removed from the palace in an effort to avoid the curse, and she grows up in a peasant's house in the woods. The tool of feminine labor in "Rumpelstiltskin" is the means for fulfilling a curse in "Sleeping Beauty", and Sleeping Beauty is kept away from spinning wheels

for obvious reasons, though she eventually finds her way to one. In the original version, by Charles Perrault, the girl pricks her finger upon discovering a peasant spinning and requesting that the peasant teach her how to spin. Once the curse is fulfilled, the princess will only be able to be awakened by a male suitor. In the original tale by Charles Perrault, the male must be a suitable suitor, the son of a king. In the Disney version of the tale, the suitor must be the princesses' "true love", as Disney distanced its version from explicit mentions of class and the restrictions class presents. Either way, the princess must effectively cease to live her life until her life is, like those of many other heroines, in some way resolved by marriage or the prospect of marriage. Sleeping Beauty is "pricked", and Mullen, who is fully aware of the double entendre contained in the slang use of the word "prick" reiterates the sexual element of "Sleeping Beauty" and most other fairy tales with a heroine.

Mullen is also certainly aware of the lesser known, but probably source version of "Sleeping Beauty" titled "Sun, Moon, and Talia", written by Giambattista Basile sixty years before Perrault's "The Beauty sleeping in the wood". Basile's version is filled with violence that was later removed, and Mullen's references to the tale contain the violence of Basile's version. In Basile's version of the tale, the heroine, named Talia, is raped by an already married king who finds her sleeping in the woods. The king attempts to awaken the beautiful woman that he finds sleeping in the woods, and, unable to do so, he penetrates the unconscious woman and then returns to his kingdom, forgetting the woman in the woods. By using the word "prick", Mullen forces these ideas of painful, forceful penetration back to the surface. Aware of the origins of the tale, Mullen brings attention to the fact that the heroines of fairy tales are trapped. Sleeping Beauty may not be physically imprisoned like the heroine of Rumpelstiltskin, but the two are both endangered and imprisoned in a wider sense by their roles as women subject to men.



When he describes Talia's rape, Basile writes that the king "gathered the first fruits of love". The king of Basile's tale satiates his sexual hunger for the woman, which Basile writes of using a euphemistic metaphor related to eating. Though still unconscious, as a result of having been raped, Talia gives birth to twins, producing a male and female heir for the king. In the same way that his father consumes the Talia, the male heir eventually sucks out the splinter that pricked his mother, mistaking his Talia's thumb for her nipple while feeding from his still unconscious mother. In Basile's version, after Talia awakens, she immediately cradles both of the children she finds next to her to her breasts and, curiously, she chooses to feed the children before doing anything else. After she is awakened, Basile writes that the relationship between the woman and the king developed, and the king promised to make the woman his queen. Mullen again references the violence of Basile's version of "Sleeping Beauty" at the poem's end when she writes that the heroine is to be buried alive "knowing that a kiss is smaller than a delayed hunger". The kiss that awakens the Disney versions of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, and which should awaken Mullen's heroine, were Mullen sticking with the script, are less to bear and will be less of a presence in her life than the male appetites she will face when she awakens.

Mullen is also conscious of the way traditional marriage required an absorption of the woman into the man, creating a united body in marriage. When they married, women traditionally ceded their property, bodily integrity, and, essentially, any legal authority they might have had over their own lives. In classical notions of marriage, the man became the representative of the household, in a way consuming the woman's selfhood through marriage, an arrangement often simplistically understood as a union. So while the romantic kiss might wake her, Mullen writes that she in fact wakes to a decidedly less romantic reality in which she will be

consumed, and she will more fully satisfy the hunger for her body and her selfhood that has been delayed by the her suspended state.

Mullen also ends the poem with allusions to “Sleeping Beauty” and “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves”, as her heroine is buried alive. Instead of the tale ending with her salvation or any certain action, Mullen writes “It remains that she be buried alive...” as Snow White was, calling attention again to the fact that there is a pre-existing tale, a mold into which tales such as these are supposed to fit, and that her heroine is expected to fall into peril (53). The formula and the established structure dictate what remains, what should happen to Mullen’s character in order for her to be the heroine of a fairy tale, but Mullen is distorting the formula by potentially denying her heroine the falsehood of an awakening and romantic resolution, and instead ending with her eternal imperilment. Mullen has already continuously denied her heroine the false sense of security that fairy tales insist on both before peril and after the romantic resolution. In the end, Mullen’s heroine is more explicitly endangered because Mullen refuses the notion of an enchanted sleep, instead more accurately describing the reality of the unconscious heroines as essentially having been buried in their bodies. Mullen shows the way that, when following the script, women are often violently forced into roles that present a constant danger to them.

#### MULLEN’S “XENOPHOBIC NIGHTMARE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE”

In “Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language”, Mullen takes the xenophobic and racist Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and alters it slightly to create a poem that examines the language of the original act. One of the most notable alterations is Mullen’s choice to cut the act, and use the first and second sections, which establish the purpose of the act and begin to list the consequences of its violation, and then sections 11 and 12, which further define the

consequences of violating the act. In what is her only alteration to the actual words of the act, Mullen replaces the words “Chinese laborer” and “Chinese laborers” with the words “bitter labor”, even adjusting sentences to account for the singular she puts in the place of the original, plural term (*Archives of the West from 1877-1887*). Mullen’s term is more general in that it lacks the nationality marker of “Chinese” present in the original act, and so the act, because Mullen also re-titles the work, can now apply to any population of immigrants or foreigners who came or were even brought to the United States. Mullen’s changes expand the scope of the language in the act to most people living in the United States as immigrants themselves or the descendants of people from elsewhere, including, ironically, the drafters and supporters of the original act. Mullen removes the act from its time period as well, pointing to its resonance in the current time, and the reality of xenophobic immigration legislation such as this being passed in the country today. Whereas the drafters of this act intended it to be a legal document with clear authority and authorship, Mullen disregards the idea of the document as untouchable, and she alters it in order to challenge an instance of codified discrimination.

Mullen’s alterations replace “laborers”, people, with the end they are meant to create, and the only value they may contain in American society, “labor”. Mullen removes the illusion of humanity that the original act appears to grant, instead refusing to participate in any lies that may soften the blow. Because the act uses the term “laborers”, referring to the people producing the labor rather than the valuable commodity, the writers and supporters of the Exclusion Act did not have to address labor, or the country’s use of the cheap and unprotected labor to grow its infrastructure and economy. The history of the term that Mullen insists on, labor, remains hidden in the original document, along with the economic, racist, and xenophobic concerns that existed when the act was written.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed in response to building resentment towards Chinese workers that had existed since the mass migration of Chinese people to America during the gold rush of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the building of the First Transcontinental Railroad. As the gold rush came to an end and the economy declined, Chinese immigrants, already viewed with malevolence, were easy scapegoats for financial concerns. The act was passed to ban immigration from China to the United States, to stop an influx of immigrants viewed as undesirable and as threats to economic stability (*Aspiration, Acculturation, and Impact: Immigration to the United States, 1789-1930*). Chinese immigrants provided valuable labor to the country, participating in many instances of America's growth, but when the economy faltered, they were defined not as human beings who labored alongside other Americans and who had created lives in America, but merely as the term Mullen insists on, cheap, dehumanized "labor".

Mullen also chooses to use the word "bitter" as a descriptive adjective, noting the condition and point of view of the people who were meant not to be a part of the act, but merely to have their lives determined by it. The word "bitter" may describe the fact that potential immigrants, who were being precluded from entering the country by the act, may not have been pleased to have to come the United States to work to begin with. Mullen's use of the word "bitter" also brings attention to the fact that the immigrant laborers already in the United States may be "bitter" as well. The point of the Exclusion Act was to block Chinese immigration to the United States, but Mullen's re-wording makes the drafters of the Act seem specifically concerned with avoiding allowing more "bitter laborers" into the country perhaps specifically because bitterness is dangerous and can eventually lead to something more than smoldering resentment. Mullen specifically chooses to redefine the terms that the Exclusion Act takes pains

to define for itself in the concluding section, where the Act specifies: “That the words ‘Chinese laborers’, wherever used in this act shall be construed to mean both skilled and unskilled laborers and Chinese employed in mining” (*Archives of the West from 1877-1887*). Mullen denies the drafters and supporters of the Act, and the United States government who enforced the Act for decades after its passing the ability to endlessly define their terms without question. Mullen is very much concerned with taking the language given to her as a collection of terms that seem to have been set before she arrived and which seem to have excluded her from the outset, and rearranging and closely examining it. Mullen is herself a member of minority group who was brought to the country for the purposes of providing cheap labor, and she is now redefining and exposing the language of a notoriously problematic and also commonly forgotten law.

In addition to redefining the terms, Mullen reprints the Act under the title of “Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language” partly because of the awkwardness and difficulty of the language of the Act itself. The act is written in a language that may seem foreign not just to the immigrants the Act was targeting, who might not have understood English, but also to people who speak English, even as a first language. Rather than following common grammatical and syntactical convention, the Act is written in deliberately difficult language. On the other hand, the deviance from convention appeals to Mullen, and the unconventional style makes this particular entry in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* fit with the other works in its unconventional use of language. With Mullen’s slight adaptation, the Act, rather than being an instance of coded disregard, grandiloquence, and inaccessibility, becomes poetry that disregards the presumed authority of the original document and exposes the underlying ideals.

## AKILAH OLIVER'S "GRACE"

Much in the same way that Harryette Mullen is consistently in dialogue with texts from the past, Akilah Oliver explicitly integrates past text into her poem in "grace", from *A Toast in the House of Friends*, in which she quotes from several Psalms. Akilah Oliver begins "grace" with a quote from Psalms 145 in which David tells the God "They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom and talk of your power", but she breaks up the quote and interjects potentially subversive language of her own like "is it a big thing, this glory" (16). From her disruption of the verse and her questioning, it is clear from the start of the poem that Oliver will challenge the ideas presented in the Bible, and the text itself. Oliver quotes from the Bible in order to look at the way people's concepts of certain writers and their texts as legitimate and relevant lend themselves to an uncritical acceptance of their words and the widely understood meaning thought to be contained therein. Oliver does not change the words of the Psalms she uses in the same way Mullen alters the terms of the Chinese Exclusion Act, instead she inserts her words between the Psalms, and quotes them only in part. Mullen and Oliver are doing nearly identical things in their poems, though, as they both in effect, insert themselves into texts long thought of as fixed, stable entities.

When she quotes that God counts innumerable stars and gives them names, by which people can refer to stars, Oliver uses a Psalm that gives God what seems like an obsessive need to categorize and tabulate, and then authoritatively name things. But the poet also engages in this act, in some way, declaring her brother a parachutist, her mother a "minor god", her father a salesman, herself a poet, and her son a painter. The poet also names "that bright spot there", which sounds like a star God might have already named according to the Psalms, declaring it "twin" (17). The poet's naming occurs "by" the poet's "wish" where she writes: "by wish i shall

call that bright spot over there,    lingering past the din, twin” (17). Poets engage in the act of creating by designation, creating by controlling language. The difference between the poet and God is that the poet describes “by” what she comes to designate each as what she does; the poet identifies sometimes the essence, sometimes the vocation of each individual “by” some justification, explanation, or right each time she designates. The Psalm, in fact, the Bible as a whole, grants God the ability to name without justification and explanation, whereas the poet is assumed to take liberties or to depart somewhat from reality when he or she engages in the same act of naming. The poet and God are engaged in the same activity, designating what is around for others to appreciate and for others to use as a means of understanding, of gaining information. Though God, who is noticeably identified as male in the verses Oliver quotes, has a certain amount of cultural authority that allows him to name, Oliver shows the way in which God is not some alien, powerful force that the poet cannot reach, rather the poet is in some way like God.

Oliver quotes a Psalm describing God’s destruction of the descendants of Ham who have turned their backs on Him when she quotes Psalms 78:25: “Men ate angels’ food... He sent them food to the full” (17). In the context of the Psalm, God here gives Ham’s descendants their fill of their own lust and greed, seeming to satiate them only in order to later punish them by eventually destroying them. The Psalm describes a people who have been shown God’s grace, perhaps more grace than they were entitled to. Oliver integrates the Psalm in her own examination of grace, following the mention of the angel’s food with “& it is bittersweet” (17). Oliver denies the notion of grace being presented in the Psalm, noting the way grace is intertwined with the bitterness that comes when it seems grace is not shown or ends, or perhaps, when grace becomes greater than the simple distinction of good vs. bad. Oliver considers her

son's life and presence in her life to be like the angel's food, and she notes that it is bittersweet in that it is experienced, in the same way as the Psalm, only to be taken away. But there is more to Oliver's experience than the punishment and destruction Ham's descendants experience in the Bible. In contrast, Oliver notes an experience of presence even in the taking away of this grace when she writes of the markings her son has left on a full cup which she now keeps:

& this cup  
 is full &  
 marked...  
 by tender  
 prints  
 i would  
 not offer  
 it away (17)

The verse is about people who are destroyed for failing to appreciate the blessings God has given them, Oliver's own lines, however, show that the poet had a full appreciation of her son as an instance of grace, and she still does despite his death. The descendants of Ham were not so appreciative, nor were they left to ponder the absence of their blessings, having been obliterated by God shortly thereafter. Oliver is left with the absence of her son, and rather than abandoning his things in his absence, she lingers over what he has marked. The verse is taken out of the context of the vengeful, frightening story of ungratefulness and destruction, and yet some of the context remains and hints at an underlying violent emotional experience resulting from the death of a loved one and the show of grace. The idea of the loss of grace is still present, despite the ways in which Oliver's experience and response differs from that of Ham's descendants.



As the poem progresses, Oliver quotes David describing a betrayer in Psalms 55, but she does so that it sounds as if David is merely describing someone close to him: “But it was you, a man my equal, my companion and my acquaintance” (17). Without knowledge of the context of the verse, it can seem as if this may be only the beginning of someone describing someone whom he or she is close to. If there is more to the statement, it is only slightly foreshadowed by the insistent unification of “you” with some as yet undefined action. Here Oliver again relies on the context of the Bible verse, as she follows this with a recounting of a betrayal of sorts:

lost, i lost you on the way to deliverance or  
 i bowed out,  
 my lover, my betrayer, my staff,  
 my neither, my holder of chokes (17-18)

In a way, Oliver’s lines complete the fragment of the verse she chooses to include, making her story a part of the Biblical story of David’s betrayal, but Oliver also denies the verse its completion and meaning, instead referencing its completion in her own words. Oliver’s experience with death involves the idea of betrayal, though Oliver’s words deny any clear identification of the betrayer and the betrayed.

Oliver integrates Bible verses in “grace”, but she does so in a way that they become part of a fragmented, transitory narrative. Oliver’s own words merge with, complicate, and sometimes seem to interrupt the verses she chooses so that even God as author and the Bible text, each endowed with a great deal of authority, are made part of a poetry often not granted the same authority. Oliver exposes the Bible as a text like any other, one that is available to be questioned and altered. Furthermore, Oliver notes the way in which despite the fact that writers are left out

of texts of the past and long-standing traditions, they can still engage with these traditions and texts and create their own work.

#### MULLEN'S "RESISTANCE IS FERTILE"

In "Resistance is Fertile", Mullen uses numerous references to commonly used pop culture and commercial ideas to write about a society that actively feeds on and transforms people in order to sustain and reproduce itself. Different foods, the Borg – Star Trek's villainous cybernetic culture, digestion and scatology, vampires, blood, Batman, and politics are all means for Mullen to analyze the way in which people are, in effect, co-opted and consumed by a system partly by way of a culture that they themselves consume without any recognition of the culture's link to power. Societies are sustained through the creation of members, members are successfully created when people begin to feel as if they are a part of a society, and culture is a means of creating a feeling of belonging and comfort. Mullen exposes the illusion of choice, of people choosing to consume culture and adapt to societies, in favor of revealing the ways in which people are absorbed into societies. When she uses pop culture references to discuss the dangers of consumption, Mullen makes use of the very means of disseminating ideas designed to create consumers and adherents to mainstream culture. Mullen uses the audience's ease and familiarity with the shared cultural references as both an ironic commentary of the way culture invades, to some degree, everyone's lives, and also as a way of making people aware of this invasion. This poem is another instance of Mullen using discourses meant to embed integral, irreducible, and constant exclusion and restriction as a means of resistance.

In a process that Mullen describes as the "Cuisinart" of metaphors, a reference to Star Trek's Borg is perhaps the most effective and deeply meaningful means Mullen uses to describe

the way cultures, in effect, assist in creating members of society. Star Trek's Borg is, in fact, a pop culture reference that, though it can be seen as merely entertainment, actually contains a sort of resistance to and critique of the idea of a dominant and little examined culture. Mullen references Star Trek's Borg, a cybernetic culture that "assimilates" biological life, forcefully co-opting organic, humanoid life into what is referred to as its "collective" (*Borg*). Along with other physical implants and alterations meant to make the underlying biological life form more efficient, the Borg implants biological life forms with cybernetic components that allow them to connect with the collective. Through their interlinking, the Borg share thoughts and perceptions, and are all involved in the interpretation of what is happening to each one; they possess a collective intellect (*Borg*). In what is an allegory for the ideological functions of both imperialism and the production of colonial subjects, the Borg travels to other worlds and begins the process of physically altering organic life forms in order to re-make them as members of the Borg. Every member of the Borg is dedicated to this singular task of seemingly endlessly assimilating biological life into their collective (*Borg*). Mullen explicitly engages with a cultural reference that emphasizes shared mentality in order to ironically, simultaneously address both the potentially dangerous and insidious aspects of culture, and the subversive potential of culture. The audience's familiarity with the reference to the Borg, no matter the level of familiarity, is evidence of a process much like the Borg's assimilation by which people come to share information and ways of interpreting the world. Though, on the other hand, the reference Mullen uses is itself one that can induce wariness about the nature of this shared experience and how and why it comes to be.

Mullen uses the Borg's means as a metaphor not just for the way societies are built, but for the way that culture, patterns of collective thought, is implicated in this process, for the way

the people's mentalities are altered in order to create a shared vision within a society. Beyond looking at the physical creation of subjects, Mullen looks at a shift that Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* in "the West" from a sovereign-governed "society in which power was exercised mainly as a means of deduction" (deduction being the right to take the wealth, labor, and lives of subjects), to a society in which the major form of power, rather than destroying and taking, is one that works to "incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, ordering them", creating a "social body" composed of subjects (136). Bodies become an extension of power, and individual bodies are part of a larger body that is dedicated to the expansion of power, the creation, co-opting, and organizing of more bodies. Mullen notes that rather than only subjugating members by way of more explicit force and destruction, society, like the Borg, now has access to a perhaps more sophisticated expression of power that takes subjects in, that creates subjects that are themselves a part of the expression of power.

The Borg collective only exists because it forces others to join, and it seems to exist for no other reason but to endlessly add to itself, to endlessly recreate itself in the bodies of other races. Referencing the Borg's goals, and its ability to alter its methods if its subjects resist assimilation, Mullen writes: "If your kind cannot be assimilated to make spare parts for Borg wars, your resistance challenges the ant farm to adapt" (60). The Borg is, in fact, dedicated enough to its cause that it ironically, insidiously "adapts" its approach in order to forcefully adapt others for its collective. Mullen's constant, mindful shifting of references is reminiscent of both the Borg strategy Mullen references and a strategy employed most especially by those producing cultural referents for the purpose of selling products. At times, different strategies, different presentations may be needed to specifically target a group of people that seem beyond

reach. When the people cannot be “assimilated”, despite the change in strategy, the Borg responds: “Your data resisted analysis, but if you are not consumed, your flawed construction only proves that we are perfection cubed” (60). Mullen integrates the idea of reading when she writes of the Borg’s machinated analysis of organic material as data. If the Borg cannot effectively read, make sense of the life-form before them, they simply pronounce it “flawed” in relation to its “perfection”, and move on. Mullen notes the way cultures exclude what is hopelessly alien, who and what it cannot make its own. The digestion metaphor is more threatening at this point, as it notes that consumption can occur despite an inability to understand and overtake another culture: “We call you irresponsible, say you’re indigestible, and it’s undeniably true it’s tough to swallow you” (60). Even if you cannot be digested, you are swallowed into the system. Hard to swallow is itself a cliché that references digestion but is used to describe situations and ideas that are difficult to accept. Mullen forces the cliché back to its roots in digestion and denies a simple, harmless context, making the widely known and little examined statement disturbingly violent.

Beyond the irony of the Borg as a pop culture reference, Mullen is also making use of irony within the reference itself in that assimilation is normally thought to be the action of the one assuming the culture. The lesser known definition of assimilation as the action of societies taking in new arrivals, and assimilation as physical digestion are often lost. The audience most likely thinks of the Borg’s “assimilation” of others as backwards, and may be forced to recognize that their concept of “assimilation”, what at first seems like a harmless process of a newcomer adapting to his or her new home, is in fact more complicated. Mullen takes advantage of this irony in her use of the reference in order to note the way that many people have not gradually accepted new cultures and chosen to live in new societies, instead they have

been forcibly altered to fit the needs of a wider society that is largely unconcerned with the native cultures and needs of its new members.

The title of the poem “Resistance is Fertile”, is a re-working of a well known Borg statement: “resistance is futile”, and it integrates Mullen’s digestion metaphors and scatological humor, as the word fertile is related to the use of excrement to promote crop growth. Though it may seem less harmless than the Borg’s overtaking, digestion also contains a violent undertone in that people are being eaten by society, some digested, and all transformed and compiled into loads of excrement in Mullen’s use of the metaphor. According to the metaphor, “this system”, consumes people endlessly and is preoccupied with producing excrement. All parts of the system, politicians included, are intertwined with excrement. Mullen writes that “Pundits pooh-poo”, a “Libertarian runs on avowal movement platform”, and the constitution becomes “Our constipation” which “requires frequent amendments to feed the tree of liberty” (60). Though it plays into scatological humor, this is a nightmare scenario of sorts in which not just people, but also crucial, structural parts of American society that are widely valued and culturally accepted as integral are made into a repulsive product only useful for fertilizing a dubious “tree of liberty”. The poem seems to end with a joke of dealing with all of this excrement being created: “Can you dig it? Can you dig it? Man, you’re digging it with a shovel. When you’re all pooped out, we’re just breaking a second wind” (60). The same “our” who is constipated is now digging all of the excrement created by consuming people, and as people, “you” are “pooped out”, the system goes on indefinitely, gaining its “second wind” as, perhaps, the audience only laughs and relates to the humor. Mullen ends her poem with scatological humor not to lose the danger in the preceding metaphors, but in order to more forcefully make the point of how potentially dangerous even the most seemingly harmless aspects of culture and society are.

Though the poem seems to describe a scenario in which people are doomed to be constructed by the discourses, and to avail themselves to these discourses without critical reflection or resistance, Mullen's poem and her Star Trek reference are sites of resistance. Though no one in the poem seems to escape being taken into this social body in one way or another, the title of the poem itself indicates the degree to which Mullen sees opportunities for resistance to the constrictions of dominant discourses. Resistance is not "futile", rather it is "fertile" in that it is productive, capable of producing, and present even in the end product of the society of Mullen's poem, in the fertilizer created (60). In every construction through a dominant discourse, there remains a constant opportunity for resistance. Foucault sums up the possibility for resistance in his essay "The Subject and Power", an essay Foucault writes to further his creation of "a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects":

On the other hand a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that "the other" (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up. (780)

Mullen maintains the division between a "we" who attempts to assimilate and digest, and a "you" that is continually preyed upon. According to Foucault, as long as this division persists, and there is an "other", who, despite being part of the "social body", is always having power exerted on him or her, the person can always respond in an unpredictable way or in a way that challenges power. Mullen ends her poem with an example of resistance as one who is "all

pooped out” implies both one who has been dispensed with by a society and also one who has grown tired of the system he or she is being subjected to. Subjects are created through dominant discourses, and pop culture provides Mullen with a way of understanding both how pervasive and effective such discourses are, and also how these discourses always contain moments of resistance which its very subjects embody.



## CHAPTER 3: A NEW WAY

Erica Hunt and Akilah Oliver each create works that specifically address the way people conceive of order and meaning, and in doing so, each proposes a more open-ended idea of order that includes fluidity of meaning and a constant awareness of how meaning is constructed. Both Hunt and Oliver turn to striking visual examples to illustrate the way people feel compelled to construct meaning, and each uses a visual example that forces consideration of how this meaning is constructed. For Hunt, the dissolution of Magritte's planes in his painting "Black Flag" provides a means of looking at the way we come to make identifications like "plane". To force consideration of how images are read and language is understood, Oliver includes a negative image with overlaid, fragmented text that often threatens to disappear into the background of the image. Each proposes the creation of work that is open to being continuously read and re-read, work that resists the stasis often traditionally sought after in reading.

#### ERICA HUNT'S "MAGRITTE'S BLACK FLAG"

In "Magritte's Black Flag" from *Arcade*, Erica Hunt reproduces a list of New York City subway line alerts in which no line is running as it should be, but people needing each line are diverted to alternative. Each of the first four sections is connected with the others. The poem begins with people needing the delayed 4, who are advised to take the 5 or 6, and the next alert is that the 6 is delayed and it is suggested that passengers take the N or R. The following section of the poem advises that the N and R are running on the LL tracks, to accommodate the extra 5 and 6 trains which are presumably replacing the 4. In short, people are diverted from the 4 to the 5 and 6, then to the N and R which are running on LL tracks. The next section announces that the LL trains are running on the 1 track, the 1 on the 2 track, and the 2 on the 3 track. Each delay or re-routing leads to an alternative, with the many of the trains and passengers meant to be on one

line instead ending up on another line. Though the information about the train lines is absurd and disorienting, the system still operates, but in a way that people might feel is disorderly, and in a way that is clearly not what the MTA intended. Hunt's poem is the poetic illustration of Magritte's *Black Flag* in that the disordered parts still seem to produce a unified, if odd, whole.

Magritte's painting is of objects most easily identified as planes, but the planes appear to be constructed of simple parts so that they resemble toys, and a few are constructed of things that resemble objects that have nothing to do with planes such as a clothes hanger and a window. Despite the fact that the planes are made up of odd objects, that the planes are not constructed in an orderly, coherent way, viewers are still able to identify the objects as planes. Magritte's construction of the planes questions the process of how people identify objects and assign meaning to things. Like Hunt's subway system that seems to be disintegrating, Magritte's planes do not seem to be really be planes; however, despite the fact that they are incoherent and disorderly, they can be identified as such. Each artist is forcing some consideration of how we arrive at identifying order and discriminating it from disorder.

Hunt's rearrangement of the subway system and Magritte's rearrangement of the concept of planes may seem to lead nowhere, but each has an end. The form has been rearranged in each instance, made to look as if it cannot hold, and yet Hunt's subway system works even though it seems chaotic, and Magritte's objects are planes even when they are not planes in a fixed and accepted sense. Each is providing an alternative to traditional concepts of structure rather than doing away with structure entirely.

In the final section of Hunt's poem, passengers going to Long Island City "must complete their travel by 7 P.M.", after which they will be stranded because service will be "discontinued". An alternative has been provided, a bus at the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, but, as the poem ends, the "Bus

schedules have not yet been made public” (18). This is the first mention of a detail as specific and potentially constricting as schedule in the poem, and Hunt is careful to both mention it and deny it, as the schedule is left unannounced, unlike the rest of the alerts given in the poem. In the same way that Magritte’s painting in some way resists an easy identification of the objects as planes, and inspires questions, Hunt must leave some room for uncertainty, for a lack of strict definition.

#### AKILAH OLIVER’S “AN ARRIVING GUARD OF ANGELS, THUSLY COMING TO GREET”

Akilah Oliver ends “An Arriving Guard of Angels, Thusly Coming to Greet” from *A Toast in the House of Friends* with a photo that is presumably of her son, Oluchi (though it could also be of her brother or anyone else), which transitions to the next poem in the collection. The photo, a blurred, negative image, contains black and white printed words that refer to the other poems in the book, the largest of which are the words “visible and “unseen”, which are part of the next poem, “The Visible Unseen”. “The Visible Unseen” consists of Hunt’s reflections about and exhibitions of her son’s work in graffiti. The person in the image blends in with the blackness of the background of the photo in the left, upper corner. At least two of the words printed on the image are cut off by the border of the photo, disappearing into the whiteness of the surrounding page. Some of the black words disappear themselves into the black areas of the photo. The background of the photo is so indefinite and strange in the negative that it looks like any number of things, including a forest or a wave, or a painting of some sort. It is seemingly impossible to make out many of the details of the photo, including the background and the specifics of the central image. It is, however, possible to loosely identify the image and to read

the words, but because of the difficulty the contrast of black and white presents, the blurriness of the photo, and the process of physically reading something that is difficult to see and seeing something that is difficult to distinguish, one is constantly aware of the process of identification, the creation of meaning. Oliver is aware of the way contrasts such as those between black and white render easy to understand, dialectical relationships, and she seems to construct this part of her work in order to allow the contrast between black and white to instead further blur the image and potentially lose the words.

Because the type is just barely set apart from the image, it seems possible to read the words that nearly disappear into the darkness of the underlying photo. One must manipulate the book in the light, then compensate for the glossiness of the photo in order to get a look at some of the black type on the image. Even when looking at the type under light, at the right angles, with the way the words blend into the darkness of the image, the reader cannot be sure that what he or she reads is what is there, if anything. For example, there seems to be a word nearly completely submerged in the dark left corner of the photo, apart from the “and now”, “This”, “visible”, and “unseen”, and it is a word which is just distinguishable from the darkness, but which cannot be read.

The negative is the image as it is recorded by the camera, and a “positive”, or normal, understandable image is only created through chemical processing. Just as chemical processing makes the photographic image something that people can read, in a sense, so too people are invested in processing words and images. People come to make sense of words and images through a sometimes mechanical, and seemingly automatic process that resembles chemical processing of photographs. Because it is directly opposed with the way people perceive the world, the negative is referred to as such, but it is significant because it is the starting point for

the photo, the means for creating the “positive” image. The concepts of positive and negative are intertwined, with the positive being converted by the camera to a negative image, and then by processing to a positive image again. The camera allows for the sharing of images, but its own recording is “negative”.

The poet has set her words on top of an image – a particularly elusive image, which obscures, among other things, the words in largest type, “visible” and “unseen”, which relate directly to perception and to the experience of reading this poem. The reader is forced to consider what the words “visible” and “unseen” mean, and how they relate to one another, and to perception both in general and with regards to the words and image on the page. The word “visible” is barely seen, and its placement undermines the meaning of the word, to some extent. The word “unseen” is easier to see on the page, less intertwined with the darkness of the photo, but still difficult to see. The “unseen” is present despite the restriction imposed by the word, and the “visible” is not necessarily any more visible or any more present than the unseen. Oliver prefaces the presentation of her son’s work with the idea that what is visible may be somewhat difficult to see, and may go unseen, but that what is unseen is still visible. As she will go on to write about graffiti, a visible, but largely ignored and unseen art, Oliver notes the distinction between a something being present for an observer or audience to see, and an audience or observer’s willingness to in fact see whatever is in front of them. Oliver calls attention to the fact that there are power dynamics involved with the perception, recognition, and understanding.

Oliver continuously points the reader towards his or her desire to create meaning, making it a conscious process that seems nearly automatic, and almost necessary. For example, when Oliver writes: “will it disappear if the bodies that produce i”, cutting the statement off at the photo, and then places a line underneath in the same size and color print that reads: “unseen”, the

reader feels compelled first to associate the two lines with one another, despite the fact that they appear on different lines and that even if they are meant to be read together, they are clearly interrupted (55).

The reader feels the need to see these words as a part of a whole that needs completion, and the reader feels that this completion must make sense within Oliver's scheme, despite the fact that Oliver does not "complete" the statement. It is tempting to complete and connect the lines and to read them as Oliver posing a question regarding the relationship between creator and product, author and writing: "will it disappear if the bodies that produce it are unseen", but Oliver removes the reader from any satisfaction of a "right" reading in this instance. Oliver does not write "it", and the fragment "i" might be completed any other way, as the possibilities in incompleteness are technically many, no matter how much the reader moves towards ideas of completion and logical relationships.

Nevertheless, if the lines are considered together, or even if they are not, in writing of unseen bodies that produce work, Oliver is here considering the way that readers and audiences relate to works. Oliver addresses the way that art that complicates or defies the notion of meaning and accepted means for obtaining meaning is often classified as incomplete, marginal, or even meaningless, and its producers are rendered invisible or elusive for their failure to adhere to conventions. This idea relates to the following exploration of Oliver's son Oluchi's graffiti art where Oliver writes of graffiti as marking, making visible graffiti artists who, as part of an illegal and subversive visual art, are often forced into ghost-like relations with society. Because graffiti is often illegal and regarded as abhorrent and irrelevant, the work becomes less visible and is seen as less significant, less likely to actually be signifying anything at all. Oliver writes of her first encounters with her son's graffiti art as a learning experience: "I had to ask [my son], when

he showed me his piece, how to read the letters... He told me it read 'LINKS.' This was my first lesson on how to read graffiti, that I should read graffiti" (Oliver, *The Tolerance Project*). Like many others, Oliver had to learn that graffiti is something to be read, that it is not merely indecipherable, meaningless markings. Many also see graffiti as more of a nuisance than as something invested with meaning because it is often placed on the property of others, and stands in defiance of highly valued notions of property ownership. Oliver is conscious of the way graffiti, like experimental poetry, has to be seen as meaningful in its own way, even though it often challenges readers and audiences expecting to be presented with extensions of or reproductions of traditional narratives. Oliver uses a visual art to note the way that the writing of those outside of the dominant culture, those who are present but whose presence is considered marginal, is rendered less visible, less accessible when it is in fact just unseen, left beyond what dominant culture identifies as worth seeing and legible. When traditional understanding is denied, Oliver notes that rather than accepting an expanded sense of order, or something apart from convention, many merely decide that what is before them is meaningless.



## CONCLUSION

In “Science of the Concrete” from *Arcade*, Erica Hunt writes of the way concepts and language become “concrete”, so solid in society that people no longer question their structures or their status as solid, static, and necessary. Hunt writes of reading and writing as an opportunity for exposing the construction of these structures:

people “make”  
 the people around them  
 and they write  
 to write  
 the reader  
 out of retreat,  
 out of distant austerity... (32)

Hunt, Mullen, and Oliver are part of a poetics that is invested in making a world that is always aware of its making. They write to remove the reader from a space in which the seeming comforts of easy, authoritative identifications and constructs are revealed instead as dangers, and these constructs and identifications are not just dangerous to black women poets who never fit in them to begin with, but to all. The only way to accomplish a truthful accounting of language, literature, and their effects is to be willing to understand the way they work rather than merely accepting them as is. Hunt, Mullen, and Oliver take nothing for granted, and each goes about an examination of texts, concepts, and identities long since thought to be “concrete”.

For Oliver and Hunt, selves are not necessarily distinct from others, and most attempts to render people as others result in simple and understandable, yet violent and cold reductions.

Hunt, Oliver, and Mullen all look at women in the gaze and the way women are confined therein, though Oliver sees women as possessing a powerful potential to disrupt the gaze and to complicate the distinction between subject and object. Mullen and Oliver look at texts from the past and see opportunities to challenge the notions of authority that come with tradition, while also creating poetry from text thought of as complete. Hunt and Oliver combine images with words in order to render visible art following an expanded concept of order and meaning that departs from the traditional needs for stasis and closure. Hunt, Mullen, and Oliver each create poetry that refuses to lose sight of constructs for fear of reproducing them and getting lost in them. Each poet succeeds in dealing with a literary tradition never intended for them, and transforming it into something a place where the fluid and complex nature of people and their existences are recognized. In the hands of Mullen, Hunt, and Oliver, poetry no longer excludes, denies, defines, constricts, and arrogantly assumes its own completion and necessity. Each poet marks poetry as a place where transformation is ongoing and numerous possibilities are always unfolding.

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