

MITCHUM HUEHLS

Spun Puns (and Anagrams): Exchange Economies, Subjectivity, and History in Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge*

The worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism.

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

[N]o pure product of America, including the linguistic, cultural, and genetic heritage of its people, has emerged without being influenced by over three hundred years of multiracial collaboration and conflict.

Harryette Mullen, "Optic White"

In her book-length poem *Muse & Drudge*, Harryette Mullen presents an array of "double lives" that foreground the split consciousness W. E. B. Du Bois so famously identified in *The Souls of Black Folk*. By precluding a determinate choice between the "worlds within and without the Veil of Color," Mullen's word-playful poem creates a referential excess that challenges the constraints of each "world." This foreclosing of determinate choice, however, does not translate into an erasure of Du Bois's "Veil of Color." Mullen demands not only that we maintain

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the two worlds and the fracture between them, but also that we treat the fracture constitutively instead of schismatically—that we read as a “two-headed dreamer / of second-sighted vision” (76). Instead of choosing between the “either/or” alternatives Du Bois presents (pretense or revolt, hypocrisy or radicalism), Mullen highlights the relationality between the two terms of each choice, thereby predicating her revolt on pretense, her radicalism on hypocrisy, and vice versa. *Muse & Drudge* does not just reimagine the fracture that creates the doubleness of Du Bois’s double consciousness; rather, it treats that fracture as the un/grounding principle (that is, grounded by and in ungroundedness) of black diasporic identity. We might say, then, that Mullen redoubles Du Bois’s double consciousness by treating it not only as symptomatic of modern black subjectivity but also as affirmingly constitutive of it.

Mullen’s treatment of doubleness as constitutive instead of symptomatic acknowledges the claims to subjectivity that are at stake in these identity-based fractures. Moreover, constitutive doubleness provides a model for imagining a social climate of both/and-ness in which all difference can flourish. In her essay “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition,” Mae Henderson seems to be looking for such doubleness in the realm of interpretation. She maintains, for instance, that “blindness to what Nancy Fraser describes as ‘the gender subtext’ can be just as occluding as blindness to *the racial subtext* in the works of black women writers” (Henderson’s emphasis). Here she identifies a hermeneutic conflict that can “restrict or repress different or alternative readings”; it fails to recognize that “the ‘critical insights’ of one reading might well become the ‘blind spots’ of another reading” (117). Henderson’s insightful comments on the textual effects of a reader’s interpretive “blind spots” nevertheless fail to speak to the real cause of the blindness that she attempts to address, her own concept of “alternative readings.” The alternation implied by “*alternative readings*” treats the dividing line between two readings symptomatically, thereby demanding a choice between one reading or another. An “*alternative readings*” hermeneutic establishes a toggle switch between readings, thereby foregrounding only one reading at a time: it is not so much the reader’s “blind spots” as her alternation, her oscillation, that re-

stricts interpretation. The alternative to Henderson's alternative readings would be simultaneous or doubled readings, and *Muse & Drudge* requires just such a hermeneutic. Mullen conjures up a host of linguistic devices that enact a formal simultaneity, requiring readers to imagine that the text's multiple meanings occur simultaneously. For example, the syntactic disjunction of lines like "everlasting arms / too short for boxers / leaning meaning / signifying say what" (33) and the preponderance of puns throughout the work ("she dreads her hair," "eyes lashed half open," "highbrow pencil broke" [35], just to name those on a single page) necessitate simultaneous instead of alternative reading.¹

Although the poem's specific figures and devices will be the primary focus of my investigation, this notion of simultaneous reading also applies to the text as a whole. *Muse & Drudge* is an eighty-page poem written in quatrains, four to a page. Relying on the conventional blues form of the quatrain, Mullen loosely conceived each page of four quatrains as a unit unto itself (Mullen, "Solo" 654), with a seemingly infinite number of possible relations among them. Because the relations among each part of the text are multiple, the reader is again forced to read simultaneously, only now over longer stretches of text. Some pages might seem to cohere into a loose thematic narrative, others might relate as extended associative riffs on a specific historical figure or event, while the relation among others might be entirely opaque.² To identify as many rela-

1. When it comes to reading and interpreting, one might argue that simultaneity can only be an ideal—that because of the temporality of these acts, simultaneity must remain an epistemological impossibility. Without denying the temporal component to reading, performing an act of interpretation, or any other cognitive function, we can follow Kant's lead in *The Critique of Judgment* and conceive of the imagination "coming to the rescue" of this incomprehensibility. In other words, although we cannot think simultaneously, we can conceive of thinking simultaneously; we can imagine what that would look like and are thus able to talk, write, and theorize about it. Thus I want to emphasize that this distinction between alternative and simultaneous readings is primarily an epistemological one. I am not claiming that simultaneous reading actually looks that different in practice, simply that it requires that we *comprehend* reading and its content differently.

2. The ties that Mullen's poem has to the blues form occasionally leave the working unit even smaller than the page, often just a stanza or two. In an interview with Calvin Bedient, Mullen explains how this poetic form mirrors blues verse: "Quatrains can be free standing and shuffled in and out of the work in the way that blues verses are shuffled in and out in any particular performance" ("Solo" 654).

tions as possible, then, it is necessary to read vertically as well as horizontally. That is, Mullen's text asks us to hold each four-quatrained page of the poem in mind as we read another four-quatrained page (we need not even read the pages in numerical order, although that order is not arbitrary), much in the same way that we will see her puns asking us to keep at least two meanings in mind simultaneously.

In *Muse & Drudge*, Mullen exercises this hermeneutic of simultaneity to engage the political and ethical concerns that constitute the primary themes of the text. The numerous allusions to African cultures ("in Dahomey the royal umbrella / roof sky tree dome" [25]), diasporic cultures ("deja voodoo queens" [9]), slave cultures ("rumba with the chains removed" [9]), and commodity cultures ("a tanned Miss Ann startles / as the slaver screen's / queen of denial" [45]) serve to foreground Mullen's concern with exploitative representations of black peoples throughout the world. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, a book equally invested in foregrounding doubleness and simultaneity, particularly in its description of diasporic black cultures, provides a useful theoretical backdrop for the fractured yet simultaneously multiple portrait of black identity that Mullen presents in *Muse & Drudge*. Gilroy writes: "I have suggested . . . that this diaspora multiplicity is a chaotic, living, disorganic formation. If it can be called a tradition at all, it is a tradition in ceaseless motion—a changing same that strives continually towards a state of self-realisation that continually retreats beyond its grasp" (122). Using Gilroy's theorization as a frame, I will argue that Mullen's wordplay performs the slipperiness of representing black culture that Gilroy diagnoses.³ Mullen's language enacts Gilroy's depiction of the diaspora as a "ceaseless motion" structured as "a fractal form in which the relationship between similarity and difference becomes so complex that it may continually deceive the senses" (122). Moreover, Mullen uses puns to give substance to the indeterminacy of the diasporic political

3. Gilroy's theorization of the diaspora also demands a hermeneutic of simultaneity. For example, his allusion to Amiri Baraka's description of blues music as a "changing same" implies an accretion of theoretical concepts that can be simultaneously applied to various contents (music, population identity, protest, and so on).

field and to offer a picture of black cultures that resists identity-based modes of representation.⁴

Specifically, Mullen employs the pun's multiplication of meaning to elaborate on three important themes that recur throughout the poem: exchange economies, subjectivity, and history. The structure and content of Mullen's puns provide an epistemological model for critiquing the surplus value of the body that slave owners suppressed in order to instrumentalize humans; for deploying Du Bois's notion of double consciousness in a way that maintains the fracture as a constitutive part of black subjective consciousness; and for exposing the formative role of miscegenation (racial doubling) in the making of history, a role that history is invested in repressing.

Gilroy's articulation of the development of diasporic black cultures also offers a historical trajectory to these three thematic preoccupations of Mullen's text. Because Gilroy loosely conceives this theoretical narrative as a movement out of slavery and into freedom, his tripartite structure lends a historical chronology to a consideration of the economic, subjective, and historical discourses that permeate *Muse & Drudge*. Gilroy identifies the first stage of diasporic development as "the struggles against the institution of slavery conducted throughout the new world. . . . struggles for emancipation from coerced labour" (122). In addition, these struggles involved "the attempt to liberate the body of the slave from a rather deeper experience of reification than anything that can be mapped through the concept of the fetishism of commodities" (124). This stage corresponds to the economic content of *Muse & Drudge*, in which Mullen uses the logic of puns to foreground the uneconomizable surplus value of the material black body. The second development, which I want to associate with the pun's epistemological modeling of a doubly conscious black subjectivity, involves "the protracted struggles to win human status and the consequent bourgeois rights and liberties" (122). Finally, corre-

4. If we think of "identity" in terms of the multiplicative-identity operation in mathematics, which states that if multiplied by 1, x will continue to and always equal x , then we might say that the pun ruptures the very identificatory possibility of the word itself. The pun disallows a word's multiplication by 1, a function that would maintain its contiguous identity to itself, and instead forces a multiplication of itself beyond itself.

sponding to Mullen's focus on the repressed miscegenation of history, Gilroy's third phase is "defined by its pursuit of an independent space in which black community and autonomy can develop at their own pace and in their own direction" (122). Mullen uses the form of puns to argue that what history wants to write as a white independent space is actually always predicated on a black presence in that space.

Before moving through these three loosely defined stages, we should first delineate the position from which the investigation will begin—the confines of "coerced labour." That is, we must clarify both the constraints placed on the development of diasporic black cultures and how Mullen's linguistic play accounts for those constraints. Mullen begins *Muse & Drudge* by speaking about the constricted conditions of a woman. She is "a name determined by other names / prescribed mediation" (2). This power to determine and to prescribe could be that of a man to a woman (Lacan's *nom du père*) or of a master to a slave, but given the wordplay that saturates the poem, Mullen also might be thinking of anagrams. We can define an anagram as a word that is entirely determined and prescribed by another word, and anagrams appear all over Mullen's text: "taste" and "state" (10), "Patel hotel with swell hot plate" (10), "lemon" and "melon" (15), "cowboy" and "coy bow" (52), "and onset animal" and "laminates no DNA" (which is also a palindrome) (60), etcetera. In an essay on the determining and prescriptive power of anagrams, Samuel Kinser claims that anagrams create a "regularized relation or associative series [that] fixes words in relation to each other, though not in relation to the world, so that anagrammatical practices tend to perpetuate themselves" (1132). After studying the function of anagrams in various cultures throughout the world, Kinser concludes that the anagram frequently serves as a powerful ordering principle. He maintains that "[n]omination of these [anagrammatic] relations has operated to pull together, to center and classify the world's diversity in such a way as to achieve the kind of stasis which would solidify the status quo" (1133).

I suggest, then, that we read Mullen's anagrams as examples of a prescriptively determined language use that will serve as a point

of departure for more diverse versions of wordplay. Thematically, we might even read this anagrammatic power of determination as illustrative of the constraining conditions of slavery from which puns and their linguistic excess can be metaphorically liberating. Mullen's use of anagrams acknowledges limits but then uses those limits to move beyond them, toward the pun's multiplicative powers. In her essay on traditional African cultures, Mullen quotes Timothy Simone on how limits can help ground the content and form of political struggle: "Imprecision, fuzziness, and incomprehension were the very conditions which made it possible to develop a viable knowledge of social relations. Instead of these conditions being a problem to solve by resolute knowledge, they were viewed as the necessary limits to knowledge itself, determined by the value in which such knowledge was held" (qtd. in "African Signs" 681). Similarly, the unidentified woman in *Muse & Drudge* who is "determined by other names" and suffers "prescribed mediation" confounds those constraints by putting that "prescribed mediation / unblushingly on display / to one man or all" (2). Here, then, the rule of the man or the master is undermined by exposing it and making that exposure the foundation for its own subversion.

Mullen linguistically performs such subversion by putting the determining rule of the anagram "unblushingly on display" throughout the poem. For every anagram that follows the rule (as the examples above do), there are more that render that rule imprecise, fuzzy, and incomprehensible. "Clipped" and "eclipsed" (1), "kettle's" and "skillet" (7), and "marry at a hotel annul 'em," "nary hep male rose sullen," and "let alley roam, yell melon" (64) are all near-anagrams that resist the prescriptive, tautologous circle of the perfect anagram. The "annul 'em" and "melon" in the above example further subvert the determining rules of the anagram by being a perfect aural (phonetic) anagram but an imperfect visual one. The anagram's rules are differently flouted by "kin split" (32) and "of couth that shrub rat" (58), two anagrams (of "ink spilt" and "that touch of tar brush," respectively) whose anagrammatic mirror does not appear in the text.⁵ Finally, the lines "swing slow zydeco / so

5. This particular rupture is infinitely unbounded, as it implies that any word in the text can be read anagrammatically. Without its anagrammatic twin to cue us to its anagrammatic nature, there is no necessary reason to read "of couth that shrub rat" (58) as

those green chariots / light your eyes up" (57) perform a bilingual anagram. The "chariots" appear to complete the "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" pun begun in the previous line, but "chariots" is also an anagram of "haricots," which is French for "bean," and thus the "green chariots" are also green beans. Alluding to a Negro spiritual, cooking and the domestic sphere, and the French influence on black cultures (in Louisiana and Haiti), these lines themselves become a "zydeco" or a "stew" (another meaning of "haricot") of black culture that demonstrates Mullen proliferating meaning out of the bounds of determining, anagrammatic rules.

Signaling a resistance to being economized into the confining equivalency of perfect anagrams, these uppity anagrams can be read as important supplements to the primary device in *Muse & Drudge*, the pun. The necessary fractures among the various meanings of a pun create a referential excess that "overcomes" the determinacy of an anagram's potential signification. Although puns, like anagrams, are contingent on the phonemic construction of words, Gordon Bearn notes the pun's unique tendency to occur inadvertently; thus he highlights the pun's power to function outside the sphere of determined, prescriptive language: "Inadvertent puns draw our attention to the occasional powerlessness of either context or intention to narrow down the possible significances of our spoken or written words to one" (331). Similarly, Frederick Ahl sees puns as devices that "criticize . . . monistic thinking for generating too many artificial boundaries between things, words and ideas, for maintaining seriousness by pretending that a word or term exists in quarantined isolation and for refusing to tolerate the intrusion of levity or of rhetorical paradox" (33).

Although we should probably avoid a debate about which of Mullen's puns are intentional and which are not, she clearly uses the pun's structural doubleness to offer a linguistically based epistemological model that can overcome strict determinacy.⁶ For in-

an anagram but not read "name" as an anagram of "mean" or "amen" (2). Applied to the metaphorical analogy I want to draw between the constraints of both anagrams and enslavement, this infinite possibility for anagrams would imply that all identities (masters) are equally susceptible to slavery (to the rules of the anagram).

6. In "After Language Poetry: Innovation and Its Theoretical Discontents," Marjorie Perloff identifies Mullen's self-proclaimed intentionality (she quotes Mullen's descrip-

stance, the pun is Mullen's primary device for representing what Gilroy calls the struggle "for emancipation from coerced labour"; she uses the pun to critique an exchange dynamic dependent on the suppression of surplus value and the illusion of equivalency.⁷ Language that contains and controls its excess referential value creates the illusion of a linguistic mastery that we might see as structurally similar to the mastery of a slave owner over his slaves. As Mullen claims, the traditional connection between black culture and orality perpetuates the myth of equivalency—a myth with the capacity to instrumentalize and master black subjects. In an interview, Mullen comments on the allusiveness of her poetry by stating, "I want to push my work, and those [allusions] are ways that I have found to push it beyond transcription, beyond the mimetic reproduction of speech or the oral tradition. I'm trying to transform the materials of orality into text and into a very dense and complexly allusive writing practice" ("Solo" 656). And in "African Signs and Spirit Writing," she maintains that "any theory of African-American literature that privileges a speech-based poetics, or the trope of orality, to the exclusion of more writerly texts will cost us some impoverishment of the tradition" (670–71).⁸

"Writerly" texts like Mullen's *Muse & Drudge*, then, linguistically resist the easy commodification caused by the specious equivalency of "orality." Just as the exchange of slavery ignores the irreducible materiality of the body, to ignore text is to ignore the irreducible materiality of the word, which contributes an uneconomizable, referential excess to every act of meaning-making. Mullen writes of "scratched out hieroglyphs / the songs of allusion / and even the motion / changing of our own violins" to represent the violence ("scratching out" and "violins" [vio-

tion of *Muse & Drudge* as a poem "saturated with the intentionality of the writer" as one way in which Mullen's work is not like that of the Language poets with whom she is often associated.

7. Being founded on a principle of substitution (I will substitute x amount of money for y amount of product), economic exchange dynamics necessitate equivalency. Surplus value ruptures the illusion of equivalent exchange, the kind of exchange figuratively embodied in mimetic representation (x means y) or identity-based notions of the subject.

8. For a thorough development of the importance of writing/textuality and the possible limits of orality in African American artistic traditions, see Nielsen, *Black Chant* and "Black Margins"; Pearcy; and Mackey.

lence]) that such textual ignorance does to the African American tradition (12). The next stanza speaks of an “orange ink remover,” a phrase that demonstrates both the transportability of this erasure to other cultures (the “orange” evokes the Agent Orange used by the United States to “remove” the Vietnamese) and the connection between textuality and genealogical relations (reading “ink” as an anagram of “kin” implies that the erasure of text leads to an erasure of family history).

Throughout *Muse & Drudge*, Mullen explicitly connects these linguistic concerns to slavery. The poem moves directly from this erasure of hieroglyphic textuality into a representation of enslavement and an accompanying critique of orality. A knife precedes the scratching-out of the hieroglyphs (“butch knife / cuts cut” [12]), and it reenters the text on the next page with slave images: “chained thus together / voice held me hostage / divided our separate ways / with a knife against my throat” (13). All “ink” (and kin) being erased, the fact that the speaker’s only recourse here is to orality (“voice”) is precisely what holds her hostage and separates her from the others to whom she is chained.⁹ The specious equivalency of the oral leads to what appears two pages later: “soulless divaism / incog iconicism / a dead straight head / the spectrum wasted” (15). The powers of the diva and the icon are rendered impotent; and the linearity of the “chained thus together” and of “dead straight [a]head” wastes the hieroglyph’s spectrum of excessive meaning, violently resulting in “dead straight head[s].”

Mullen’s poem is quick to assert that the specious and enslaving equivalency of mimetic orality “ain’t cut drylongso [cut and dried + as long as] / her songs so many-hued / hum some blues in technicolor” (the “technicolor” can be read as the “spectrum” that is “wasted” on the preceding page of the poem) (14). Not only do these lines assert the desirability of “many-hued” and “technicolor” songs, but the pun on “hued” also allows Mullen to locate excess in the very devices of equivalency that are invested in denying that excess. For instance, to read “hewed” simultaneously with “hued” is to realize that the diversity of the technicolored spectrum

9. Associating this confinement with orality can also be read as a critique of the myth of the happy slave whose singing is evidence of her happiness.

is predicated on the violent cutting of the knives that appeared in the prior representation of enslavement. “[H]ued” explodes “hewed,” locating possibility in the repressive violence of cutting; or, hewing is required for hue-ing. Fracturing becomes constitutive instead of simply symptomatic, and the pun’s referential excess undoes any possible equivalency between a word and its meaning.

The pun on “muse” and “mules” that runs throughout the poem performs a similar rupture of equivalence. The pun adds an extra-textual value to each term, forcing the reader to hear echoes of one word each time the other appears. This mutual echoing allows Mullen to use the form of the pun to complement a thematic and political argument about race, gender, and aesthetic creation. The two terms appear in the stanza that precedes the “technicolor” stanza: “emblems of motion / muted amused mulish / there’s more to love / where that came from” (14). If the “emblems of motion” (perhaps the same “motion” that was “scratched out” two pages earlier) are being “muted,” then the progression out of “muted,” through “amused,” and into “mulish” seems to bring them out of their silence and into the excess of the stanza’s third line (“there’s more to love”). The muse and the mule, then, give new life to what seemed to be silenced (or maybe the muse can transform the mute into a mule). Elsewhere, this muse-mule collaboration functions more punningly, as each word tends to haunt the other throughout the text: in the line “muse of the world picks / out stark melodies” (17), the *l* sound in “world” allows us to hear retrospectively the “mule” in the “muse”; the lines “mule for hire or worse” (21) and “men harnessed mules” (25) insinuate centuries of male poets instrumentalizing women through the limiting image of the muse; finally, the two words come together again in a pun on the title of the book, “mules and drugs” (74). Even in the case of a line like “mule for hire or worse,” which gives us little reason to hear “muse” with “mule,” the “muse” is not far behind as it appears at the end of the subsequent stanza in “ruses of the lunatic muse” (21). These scattered puns on mules and muses ultimately make a political argument for the inextricable relationship between Sappho, whom Mullen identifies as the muse of the poem, and Zora Neale Hurston’s “woman” who is the “mule of the world.” If the title’s “muse” is Sappho and its “drudge” is Hurston’s woman-as-mule, then the

pun formally presents the mutual dependence between the two. This in turn allows Mullen to demonstrate how the female muse has been instrumentalized into mulishness while simultaneously identifying the muse potential in Hurston's black woman.

But why is it important that hue-ing is also hewing, that mules are not just mules and muses are not just muses in Mullen's work? Although Mullen's puns do not literally go out into the world and overturn specious exchange equivalencies, they do provide an epistemological model for identifying a nonequivalent surplus in all acts of exchange—a surplus that suggests that a given word, object, or body always exceeds itself. And in addition to representing the excess of material bodies, Mullen's puns also represent the uneconomizable excesses of the history of slavery as it exists in the form of memory. Just as words haunt each other in Mullen's puns, slavery echoingly haunts the memory of contemporary black culture like a restlessly present absence. To make slavery's violence subsumable by and equivalent to the slave's body, the slave traders and owners needed to suppress a counterexcess, the surplus, living humanity of the body. The material body, however, transforms the physical excess of violence into memory and scars, leaving uneconomizable imprints of that violence. This conflict of excesses, between the violence that exceeds the instrumentalized body and the living, material surplus of the human body resistant to instrumentalization, gives birth to the haunting traces of slavery that are figured by Mullen's puns.

These traces reveal themselves in *Muse & Drudge* as a thematic concern with memory. Because slavery's traumatic remainder is simultaneously too dangerous to forget yet too painful to remember, the pun's referential excess becomes the ideal tool for such sensitive acts of representation; or, a pun is a word that refuses to forget. Memory first enters the poem in a section about the Yoruba: their "torn veins stitched / together with pine needles / mended hands fix / the memory of a people" (26). Reading "fix[ing] / the memory of a people" as one of the desired functions of Mullen's text, the pun on "fix" reveals just how difficult that task is. The mending here seems provisional at best, as the pine needles provide only tenuous stitches and the hands that are fixing the memory had to be mended themselves at one time. The mnemonic tenta-

tiveness is further accentuated if we choose to read “fix” as a fixation or a locking into place—or even more drastically, in terms of “fixing” an animal so it cannot reproduce. The tentative nature of this memory-healing is countered two pages later, where forgetting seems to be a better alternative to memory. Here, the pun on “mnemonic” as “bubonic” allows Mullen to figure memory as a plague: “forgotten formula cures / endemic mnemonic plague” (28). The relationship between forgetting and remembering becomes even more vexed later in the poem when another “I” voice states, “yes I’ve tried in vain / never no more to call your name / and in spite of all reminders / misremembered who I am” (67). Here the speaker tries to forget the names and legacy of the past (we should read the double negative “never no more” simply as an emphasis of the negative), but that very act of trying to forget serves as a reminder of that which she wants to forget, thereby leading to a form of memory that can only happen as mismemory (memory with a constitutive aporia at its center).

Memory’s convoluted relationship to history seems directly related to the conflicted, present-absence / absent-presence nature of ghostly haunting—a haunting suggested by the “reminders” in which we might also hear a pun on “remainders” (for example, ghosts). In fact, the uprootedness of “misremember[ing] who I am” leads in the next stanza to “ghosts” that “brush past / surprise arrival at / these states of flux / that flow and flabbergast.” Simply put, this troubled relationship never gets any better. History and slavery persist in their remaindered excess, demanding acknowledgment (“feed the spirits or they’ll / chew on your soul” [69]) and invading everyday life (“when memory is unforgiving / mute eloquence / of taciturn ghosts / wreaks havoc on the living” [71]). Complementing these explicit statements of haunting, some of Mullen’s puns formally enact the present absence of ghostliness by never mentioning the word on which she is punning. In the lines “manx cat rations / pussy got your tongue” (61), for instance, there is a lurking pun on the homonyms “tail” and “tale,” words that haunt the lines yet never appear. By connecting the “manx cat” that has no tail and the tied tongue that can tell no tale, these lines begin to describe, among other things, an erasure of storytelling. Again we see the referential excess of puns providing an epistemo-

logical model of simultaneity that can respond to the inescapable excesses of slave economies and their memories.¹⁰

Mullen's instructive version of meaning-making can be identified through the triply punned line "warp maid fresh" (64). The transformation of "word made flesh" into "warp maid fresh" corrupts the act of creation originally found in the first chapter of John and comments on its mimetic logic (that is, word = flesh is tantamount to the seamless exchange equivalency of $x = y$). Mullen erases the primacy of this originary moment of articulation by warping the Word with a pun, by gendering the process so as to reveal the domestic oppression and commodification of women that such mimetic models of language facilitate, and by giving it an attitude (as in "don't get fresh with me") and a face-lift (as in "fresh new look"). The power of this particular pun's referential excess derives from its confrontation with what is taken to be an originary act of creation. Mullen here suggests that the original "word" is always already warped, thereby foregrounding language's infinite permutability rather than its original intent.

Consequently, scat, or "warped" language, created associatively and without immediately intentional meaning, functions as an important device for foregrounding the uneconomizable word. Passages like "it's rank it cranks you up / crash you're fracked you suck / shucks you're wack you be / all you cracked up to be" (24), or "Osiris's irises / his splendid mistress / is his sis Isis" (64), could be either playground gibberish or intentional puns with deeper political significance. For example, the first, with its echo

10. Another way to think of this would be to see Mullen avoiding the binds of exchange dynamics by writing in a way that privileges metonymic/associative relations to metaphoric/substitutive ones. The proliferation of the associative disrupts epistemological conventions of substitution and creates a text that is not representative of any given, single/substitutable (and therefore economizable) identity. By not standing in metaphorically for any given representation, Mullen's meaning is not for sale. Jonathan Culler makes similar claims for the power of puns' unstitutability: "Puns present us with a model of language as . . . a looseness, unpredictability, excessiveness . . . that cannot but disrupt the model of language as nomenclature" (14); puns "offer the mind a sense and an experience of an order that it does not master or comprehend" (8); puns are "illustrations of the inherent instability of language and the power of uncodified linguistic relations to produce meaning" (3).

of the Army's "be all you can be," might be a critique of the detrimental effects of combat on service personnel (it "cranks you up" and makes you "wack"). As Mullen tells us with the line "hip chicks ad glib" (66), the ad-libbing of scat is also an add-glibbing that traditional readings struggle to economize. The uppityness of scat and puns even appears in pun form elsewhere in the lines "ass can't cash / mere language / sings scat logic / talking shit up blues creek" (55). If we read "mere language" as the ostensibly empty signifiers of scat, then the fact that they cannot be cashed demonstrates their resistance to commodification.¹¹ The "scat logic" should also be read as "scatologic," a pun that accounts for the "ass" (perhaps a homophone of "I's," a slangy, southern way to pronounce "I") and the "talking shit," which would literally be scatologic scat. Mullen also accounts for the danger of scatologic scat's glibness, as the last line tells how "talking shit" can land us "up shit creek."

The tension between "talking shit" and being "up shit creek" demonstrates Mullen's awareness of the always provisional nature of the mending of memory. In using puns that contain their opposites, Mullen not only acknowledges an uneconomizable excess of reference but also argues that such excess is often both in conflict with itself and predicated on that self-conflict. For instance, on one level the line "placage conquer bind" seems to be about ameliorating and overcoming bondage, but instead of "placate" there is an inscribed "cage," and the "conquer bind" contains a different form of bondage, the "concubine." Similarly, violence can be located in various musical instruments throughout the poem, indicating that music might also be a vexed path toward freedom: "changing of our own violins" (12), "pick a violet guitar" (14), "stark strangled banjo" (18). Finally, a more elaborate example of using one reading of the pun to undo a different reading of the pun comes in Mullen's rewriting of the song "Joy to the World." Mullen's pun reveals that the declarations of joy in the traditional hymn are always both dis-

11. Here, scat's referential underdetermination (in the form of an infinite set of possible meanings) counters straight determinacy in a way obverse from the pun's referential overdetermination.

guising and predicated on pain, loss, and bondage: “dead to the world / let earth receive her piece / let every dark room repair her heart / let nature and heaven give her release” (39).

Just as the pun aptly addresses the collective memory remaindered by slavery’s violent excesses, it also provides a model for investigating the development of consciousness into self-consciousness—a phase of diasporic development that Gilroy associates with struggles for more abstract rights like justice, liberty, and citizenship. Indeed, it is difficult to read theories on the epistemology of the pun without hearing echoes of Freud’s discussions of uncanniness or of the development of self-consciousness in Lacan’s “mirror stage.” In her philological study of the pun, Catherine Bates describes the pun as “the antihero of literary history” (422) and maintains that the pun “is marked as other and derives its status as such from being measured against an everyday, sober method of expression treated as the norm” (425). Similarly, in his book-length study of puns, Walter Redfern asserts that “[t]he punner senses that words or phrases have their alter-ego or Doppelgänger, their often distorted mirror-image, their twin identical or not” (103), and that “[p]uns, like this kind of second self, can detach us from life, offer it to us as a spectacle” (104). Puns, then, formally offer the opportunity to attain a level of reflexivity that allows us to recognize that things (including ourselves) might always be other than they are.

Although we should be wary of allowing recognition to take the place of knowledge, the epistemological reflexivity that puns actuate is a prerequisite for attaining self-consciousness. In his essay on *The Souls of Black Folk*, Arnold Rampersad identifies the text’s greatest achievement as its signaling of “the obsolescence of the slave narrative as a paradigm for Afro-American experience, as well as the beginning of a *reflexive* paradigm, allied to the slave narrative, that leads the reader—and the race described in the book—into the modern Afro-American world” (106; emphasis added). Of course, this epistemology of black experience is articulated in the opening pages of Du Bois’s text in the discussion of “double-consciousness,” which Du Bois sees as a far cry from self-

consciousness. Du Bois famously writes of the “second-sighted” African American who lives in “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (8). Of vital importance is the fact that Du Bois does not argue that double consciousness necessarily precludes self-consciousness. Instead, he identifies the primary barrier to attaining self-consciousness as the discrepancy of power and privilege between each consciousness of double consciousness (not simply the fact that there are two consciousnesses or that a once whole consciousness is fractured). That doubleness per se is not problematic for Du Bois is further evident as he explains that despite “longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self,” the “American Negro” also “wishes neither of the older selves to be lost . . . [and] to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American” (9).

In *Muse & Drudge*, then, the pun provides an epistemological model for transforming double consciousness into an inclusive form of self-consciousness. The simultaneous doubleness of being “both a Negro and an American” is structurally homologous to the pun’s capacity to mean at least two things simultaneously. The pun is able to access and foreground what Mullen describes as “a darker back room” whose music and meaning are only occasionally heard (3). For instance, the lines “bigger than a big man / cirrus as a heart attracts / more power than a loco motive / think your shit don’t stink” use puns to reveal the duplicity of hypermasculinized men by exposing the weaker, conflicted consciousness behind masks of strength and virility (5). This Superman figure might initially evince a severity that is “more serious than a heart attack” and “more powerful than a locomotive.” Mullen’s puns, however, allow us to see simultaneously the suppressed, weaker consciousness of a man whose feelings are easily seduced by love (“heart attracts”) and as ephemeral as clouds (“cirrus”), and whose motives are irrational and “loco” (characteristics stereotypically reserved for the feminine). Furthermore, the pun makes these revelations of othered consciousness with a glibness (“think your

shit don't stink") that not only inscribes doubleness as the norm, but also forces that doubleness into a state of reflexive self-consciousness—a state in which each part of the double exerts itself simultaneously.

This glib call to self-reflection shows Mullen's awareness that the pun cannot simply conjure self-consciousness out of mere doubleness (or in Rampersad's terms, reflexivity does not yet guarantee self-consciousness). In addition to recognizing the presence of the double, consciousness must itself do critical work in the same way that the reader of the pun must often research and dig for secondary (although not supplementary) meanings. This might be the message of the lines "sitting here marooned / in limbo quilombo," which are followed by the advice, "use your noodle for / more than a hatrack / act like you got the sense / God gave a gopher" (70). Structurally, puns could be said to "maroon" a reader between two meanings, and therefore to require that the reader perform extra work (dig like a gopher) to reflect critically on each side of the meaning. But in these particular lines, the transformation of double consciousness into self-consciousness is contained in the very content of the puns in the first two quoted lines; and if we miss it, the next quatrain encourages us to return to them for more excavation. To be marooned is obviously to be stranded and optionless, but to be Marooned is to be a member of a fugitive black slave community in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that fought against slavery with guerrilla warfare tactics. Similarly, "quilombo" is a homophone of Christopher Columbus's Spanish name, "Colombo," thus offering a potential critique of the uprooted, limbic status of indigenous peoples once Columbus arrived. The pun can be read, therefore, as an analogue to a double consciousness positioned in a "Marooned" space of potentially radical freedom, but it also necessitates a self-conscious awareness of the simultaneous mobility and immobility ("limbo") of that "marooned" position.

In order to work self-consciousness out of double consciousness, Mullen tends to pack her text with representations of subjectivity that are usually allusive, de-essentialized, and fragmented. Mullen's work argues that a fully self-conscious black subject can be textually constituted through a rapid-fire presentation of a diverse spectrum of African American consciousnesses. Mullen explains in

one interview, for instance, that the muse and the drudge represent the extreme versions of stereotypical black women. Instead of writing a poem about “[t]he super-skinny black model versus Aunt Jemima,” Mullen “was interested in more of a continuum, filling in or troubling those kinds of oppositional constructions of black women” (“Solo” 660). One way Mullen creates a more “troubled” subjectivity is through her use of allusive personalities. The poem’s opening line, “Sapphire’s lyre styles,” punningly transforms Sappho into Sapphire, thereby combining the subjectivities of a lyric poem and a blues song. The Yoruba and Dahomey cultures make prominent appearances to inject African tradition into the more contemporary references and concerns of the poem. Bessie Smith shows up early in the poem in a stanza that also alludes to Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool”: “a reefer a tub of gin / . . . / I’m in your sin” (1); and Bo Diddley makes a disguised appearance (in the form of the homemade blues instrument called a “diddly bow” which he claims is not his namesake) in the line “jitterbug squat diddly bow” (18). In addition to these public figures, the poem silently alludes to female members of her family whom Mullen has credited with contributing to the composition of the poem. This allusive proliferation, then, becomes an epistemological model for subjective consciousness. As Mullen explains, “Any time ‘I’ is used in this poem, it’s practically always quotation: it comes from a blues song, or it comes from a line of Sappho; it comes from—wherever it comes from” (“Solo” 653).

Mullen further complicates her continuum of black subjectivity by de-essentializing identity throughout *Muse & Drudge*. For instance, a diva could be read as one extreme of the continuum that Mullen wants to populate, a reading supported by the severe claim that “the diva road kills” (7). But just a few pages later, a pun invests the diva with the prophetic powers of divination: “random diva nation of bedlam” (11).¹² Indeed, there are several diva figures (avatars of

12. Various allusions to Nat Turner’s rebellion further associate this prophetic power with political rebellion. Turner’s claim to have read “signs in the heavens” that foretold the rebellion he was to lead appears verbatim in the lines, “signs in the heavens / graphemes leave the trees” (31), and more obliquely later in the poem: “in a dream the book beckoned / opened for me to the page / where I read the words / that were to me a sign” (76).

Josephine Baker) who receive positive treatment in Mullen's text: "breaks wet thigh high stepper / bodacious butt shakes / rebellious riddem / older than black pepper" (8), and "her realness / was wild at the time / leastwise they tell me / it was legendary" (61).

The "diva road" only seems to "kill" when the woman adopts the image in an essentialized, commodifiable way. Thus Mullen multiplies what might be perceived as stereotypical African American identities by valuing the *process* of identity creation over the final product. For instance, the woman who purchases a little piece of "enlightenment / nothing less than beauty itself" to be "hechizando [enchanting] con crema dermoblanqueadora" (34) fails to demonstrate the necessary reflexivity required of a self-conscious subjectivity; she consequently sets herself up to be instrumentalized. "Enlightenment" not only washes her skin lighter/whiter with the "crema dermoblanqueadora" (literally skin ["dermo"] laundering ["blanqueadora"] cream), but it also implies the inextricable links between the Enlightenment and the instrumentalization and erasure of black bodies. It further suggests that the Enlightenment's culminating logic might lead to the kind of globalized exploitation suggested by the pun on "dermoblanqueadora" and "maquiladora," the word for the transnational factories built in NAFTA-organized zones along the border in Mexico.

Having purchased "beauty itself," the unidentified woman is described on the next page as "the essence lady" who "dreads her hair / sprung from lock down / under steel teeth press gang," and whose eyes are "lashed half open" (35). The problem here is not that she uses beauty products but that she has bought into essentialized (and white) notions of beauty that enact violence on her body. Finally, "her / highbrow pencil broke" (35), and the "self-made woman gets / the hang—it's a stretch / she's overextended weaving / many spindly strands on her hair loom" (36). Having fallen prey to the commodification of black women, she is forced to commodify herself as a prostitute.¹³ She becomes a "step off bottom

13. Significantly, economics saturates this section: the woman is not overextended only in her aesthetic self-creation ("on her hair loom"), as the material costs of the aesthetic venture are also emphasized through the common association of "overextended" with financial circumstances. Thus the move to prostitution.

woman" who is "walking through the alley / all night alone" (36) (a "step-off" is a street curb, and a "bottom woman" is a pimp's favorite prostitute [Major 109, 30]). Although these few pages follow a female figure from her purchase of "beauty itself" into prostitution, the duplicity of the puns in these descriptions ("dreads," "eyes lashed," "highbrow," "gets the hang," "hair loom," and "step off") often models a way out of the essentialized trap into which the woman is falling. The woman could both "dread" (fear) and "dread" (dreadlock) her hair; she both "gets the hang" (is executed) but also "gets the hang of it"; she both subjects her body to a machine ("hair loom") and has access to her past ("heirloom"); and she could both work on a "step off" (curb) and assertively tell someone to "step off."

The puns perform these simultaneous meanings because Mullen presents them and their surrounding contexts in fragmentary form (a form that is also responsible for the merely fragmentary reading that I am attempting to offer). As Mullen explains in an interview with Cynthia Hogue, "*Muse & Drudge* is an attempt to take those representations [of black women] and fracture them. . . . It was an attempt to use this language as representation, to use it in a self-conscious way as code, as opposed to taking the code as something that is real" (21). Several passages in the poem, in fact, are so fragmentary that her language often functions on the level of graphemes and phonemes instead of words. She writes, for instance, that "graphemes leave the trees" (31) (but does that mean they "fall from" or "populate" the trees?). And she later describes a "spokeswoman" who was "hooked on phonemes imbued with exuberance" and who "heard tokens of quotidian / corralled in ludic routines" (49).¹⁴ Indeed, we might take an ostensibly cosmological section near the end of the poem to be referring to her text and its fragmentary constitution. She writes of "a planet struck by

14. The value ascribed to this final image seems particularly vexed. The spokeswoman's language is probably too status quo for Mullen's taste and the image of corraling too circumscribed and controlled. At the same time, however, the "ludic routines" ("ludic" being an anagram of the less preferred "lucid") of quotidian speech and being "hooked on phonemes" (despite being a sardonic pun on "hooked on phonics") could very well apply to Mullen's own work (although we can imagine her resisting being dubbed anyone's "spokeswoman").

fragments / of a shattered comet" (74) and of a "dirty snowball / held together / with weak gravity" (75). If the text is merely a cluster of fragments "held together with weak gravity," bombarded by even more fragments from "a shattered comet," then the puns receive plenty of contextual freedom to jump between meanings.

Such freedom derives from the nature of the fragment, which is not beholden to any greater totality than itself or to any context larger than itself. Or as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy explain in their theorization of the fragment: "Fragmentary totality . . . cannot be situated in any single point: it is simultaneously in the whole and in each part. Each fragment stands for itself and for that from which it is detached. Totality is the fragment itself in completed individuality" (44). Thus the purchaser of "beauty itself" is only essentialized into prostitution when we try to tell a coherent, narrativized story about her, as I have done for the sake of this essay. If allowed to exist in all of their textual fragmentation, however, the puns that "articulate" her story complicate and fill in the fractured domains of subjectivity they depict while avoiding overly contextualized relationships. In other words, the fragments disrupt syntax, making it difficult to determine if the relations between words, phrases, and sections of the poem are causal, apposite, contiguous, or contingent. We find this relational slippage operating on the word level in lines like "blue gum pine barrens / loose booty muddy bosom" (6) and on the phrase level in lines like "you have the girl you paid for / now lie on her / rocky garden / I build my church" (22). And it is just this fragmentary indeterminacy of contextual and syntactic relations that allows the reflexive doubleness of the pun to manifest its simultaneous double consciousness as a useful form of self-consciousness.

Extrapolated to a larger scale, the fragmented subjectivity of double consciousness explored above (a fragmenting which, as we have seen, is often more than doubled) is structurally homologous to the fragmentation of African cultures into contemporary diasporic communities. *Muse & Drudge's* hyperfragmentation and punning assures that any attempt to represent what Gilroy calls

“an independent space in which black community and autonomy can develop at their own pace and in their own direction” will always be provisional and under erasure (122–23). The various instances of uprootedness throughout *Muse & Drudge* demand that the cultures contained therein be viewed from a continually shifting, parallax perspective. For example, Mullen figures the diaspora as seeds that are “blue” by the wind until “these seeds open wings / float down parachutes / then try one more again” (19). Not only does the uprooting and disseminating prove painful (it leaves “something [black and] blue on you”), but once the seeds have been replanted, their new positions demand “copulation from scratch” (19), eventually resulting in a downtrodden “dark-eyed flower / knuckling under / lift a finger for her / give the lady a hand” (20). Just two stanzas later, the uprootedness repeats itself as “her dance and her body / forward to a new air dress [address]” (20). A similar character appears later, only instead of a “dark-eyed flower” she is a “black-eyed pearl / around the world girl / somebody’s anybody’s / yo-yo fulani” (40). Her uprootedness, the indefinite pronouns, and the yo-yo’s inconsistency make her easily appropriable to a fragmented, diasporic world picture.

Not all of the diasporic representations in *Muse & Drudge* are quite so hopeless, however, as Mullen once again treats fracturing constitutively and considers diasporic dispersal as a positive feature of contemporary African American life. As she points out in “African Signs and Spirit Writing,” “African cultural systems were not utterly destroyed by slavery, but rather survived in fragmentary, dispersed, and marginalized forms that continue to exist alongside dominant cultural traditions that also significantly influence African-American cultural production” (677). One way this legacy comes across in *Muse & Drudge* is through Mullen’s multilingual lines, creating what she calls, in an on-line conversation, “my small gesture toward a visionary heteroglossia, which seems appropriate to the diaspora of languages and cultures that the black world encompasses” (“Conversation”). A few examples of how this politicized heteroglossia is manifest include lists of Gullah foods (“cassava yucca taro dasheen / . . . / guava salt cod catfish ackee” [29]); Spanish, which Mullen knows from growing up in Texas (“hijita del pueblo moreno / ya baila la conquista” [67]);

Portuguese (“ghetto-bound pretos” [“pretos” means “blacks”] [56]); and a Boston accent (“park your quark in a hard aardvark” [52], which Mullen describes in an interview as a close homophone of “park the car in Harvard yard” [“Solo” 662]).

This heteroglossic display in the form of puns performs a “linguistic miscegenation” in order to reveal the often hidden or suppressed contributions of the African diaspora to the cultural mainstream.¹⁵ Mullen begins to reclaim the foundational, historical acts of miscegenation by using the term to signify diversity, multiplicity, and honesty. She contends, for example, that a “miscegenated culture . . . is a product of a mixing and mingling of diverse races and cultures and languages.” In a similar reclamatory move, she explains that the term “[m]ongrel” comes from ‘among.’ Among others. . . . We are all mongrels” (“Solo” 652). This “among”-ness is portrayed linguistically in the stanza “creole cocoa loca / crayon gumbo boca / crayfish crayola / jumbo mocha-cola” (64). Mixture is signaled by “creole” (the pidginlike mixture of that language), “gumbo” (a mixed stew), “crayola” (as in a mix of sixty-four colors), and “mocha” (a term often used to refer to the mixture of black and white in people of mixed race). The mixture is further enacted in that “loca” and “cola” are anagrammatically mixed, and each word’s letters are literally mixed into the word “crayola.” Mullen’s text exposes the fact that we, like language, are always already mixed-blooded, mixed in the same way that puns mix meanings or that Du Bois envisions the fulfilled black identity. Du Bois asserts: “To be really true, all these ideals [physical freedom, political power, the training of brains and the training of hands] must be melted and welded into one. . . . Work, culture, liberty,—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but to-

15. A few words about my use of “miscegenation” here. Although the word historically connotes an undesired mixture of races, I want to emphasize its entirely inoffensive etymology from the Latin *misc-* (to mix) and *genus* (race). The Oxford English Dictionary identifies its first usage in 1864, a time when it was surely used to further racist ends. The first “miscegenation” law dates to Maryland in 1661, but before 1864, the now inoffensive word “amalgamation” was used to refer to the mixing of races. Although its negative connotation and racist history ensure that we would never refer to a person as “miscegenated,” in calling language miscegenated I want to follow Mullen’s lead in reclaiming words (like “mongrel”) in an effort to reveal the truths of the very relation those words were intended to suppress.

gether" (14). Mullen's punning treatment of miscegenation, however, claims that this melting and welding has already occurred, and that history and culture have simply been suppressing and denigrating what has been there all along. Furthermore, Mullen does not merely expose the facts of miscegenated mixture but maintains that centuries of white, Western culture have been predicated on and made possible by a miscegenated past.

The theme of miscegenation in *Muse & Drudge* demands that we return to one of Mullen's more uppity anagrams. In his essay on anagrams and puns, Frederick Ahl states that anagrams "suggest that something is concealed within something else" (31). The line "of couth that shrub rat" (58) (an anagram of "that touch of tar brush," a phrase that implies that an individual has unacknowledged African or African American ancestry) enacts this disguise and goes one step further because the anagram performs the same cover-up that it treats thematically. The line uses the anagram's camouflage against itself by performing the very concealment that the line is about, in order, ultimately, to reveal.

Mullen attacks the tendency to conceal miscegenation, here functioning as a denial of both African ancestry and the frequent white paternity of slaves, on two fronts. She shows that concealment occurs both through the bad faith of passing ("what is inward / wanting to get out / prey to the lard / trying to pass for butter" [23]) and through manipulation by a white media culture, which robs the mongrel of a voice ("spin the mix fast forward / mutant taint of blood / mongrel cyborg / mute and dubbed" [42]). Mullen suggests in her essay "Optic White" that "passing . . . [is] a model for the cultural production of whiteness" (72). Just as the secret ingredient in each can of "Liberty White" paint in *Invisible Man* is ten drops of black, the logic of passing requires that those ten drops of blackness remain concealed in order to produce whiteness. Through the pun, however, Mullen refuses to let language and the culture it describes pass. The pun allows us to see the darkness of a "stark strangled banjo" in the lightness of the "star-spangled banner," or the shadows of "concubines" in the glory of "conquer[ing] binds." She refuses to conceal the miscegenation of language and culture. Instead, she performs the African American tendency "to preserve . . . an acknowledgement that their genetic

heritage is the product of different races and that their traditions are syncretisms of interactive cultures" ("Optic White" 72). And if Mullen refuses to allow blackness to pass for whiteness, she similarly refuses to allow whiteness to pass for blackness. In "Optic White," Mullen describes this phenomenon of reversed passing as "a white body with black soul. . . . an otherwise unachieved racial integration through a synthesized synchronicity of images and voices drawn from disparate sources, the media equivalent of gene splicing" (86).¹⁶

Significantly, Mullen is not invested in erasing history's miscegenations but simply in exposing and proliferating them. Jonathan Culler observes that puns disrupt the "distinction between essence and accident, between meaningful relations and coincidence, that has seemed fundamental to our thinking" (4). Mullen would agree and add that the weaker sides of those distinctions (accident and coincidence) function as Others upon which the stronger terms (essence and meaning) must predicate themselves, thereby mitigating essence's and meaning's claims to strength and primacy. This punning and anagrammatic revelation of miscegenated mixture might look something like the line "lemon melon melange" (15). Each half of the "melange" (the "lemon" and the "melon") is exposed to sight; neither is passing or minstrelizing the other; and, as anagrams, each is mutually constitutive of and equally predicated on the other.

This very Du Boisian ideal is what a "history written with whitening" attempts to conceal (45). And it is Mullen's ability to write a history with both whiteness and blackness simultaneously that leaves us with a portrait of contemporary black culture evocative of Gilroy's (and Baraka's) "changing same." Without going so far

16. In *Music of the Common Tongue*, a lengthy study of African American music, Christopher Small describes the historical precursor of this phenomenon, the minstrel show. He explains that although "black [cultural] elements became part of the white culture, [they were] all unacknowledged or else safely distanced by the minstrelizing process" (193). What else is Hallie Eisenberg, the little girl who lip-syncs to Aretha Franklin's voice in a recent Pepsi ad campaign, but a contemporary minstrel player? More recently Pepsi has multiplied its minstrelsy as white girl Hallie Eisenberg turns into the black woman Halle Berry who then turns into the white man Barry Bostwick. Pepsi's crowning achievement? Accomplishing the age, race, and sex transformations through puns (Hallie / Halle and Berry / Barry).

as to claim an actual political effectivity to Mullen's writing, I have attempted to show that the pun does allow her to politicize language in a way that avoids both the esotericism of much contemporary "experimental" poetry and the overly simplistic politics of identity and opposition. Instead of dwelling too heavily on either term of an oppositional relation, the pun performs relationality itself, finding potential in the ostensibly empty space between the terms. The pun has the capacity to signify with simultaneity, to resist essentialized readings, to reveal suppressed facets of signification, and to demonstrate how an apparently dominant term is always inextricably bound to that which it dominates. As such, puns make Mullen's poetry theoretical without turning it into theory itself; and by modeling certain doubled epistemologies, they introduce an important dose of critical analysis to a kind of representational politics that too often naively assumes the logic of its own conclusions.

University of Wisconsin–Madison

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