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Harryette Mullen’s 1995 collection of poems, *Muse & Drudge*, has been a longstanding source of fascination for readers and critics of contemporary poetry. The book comprises eighty, sixteen-line poems, each organized into four quatrain stanzas. Poet and critic Evie Shockley characterizes the collection as a whole by noting how, in it, “Mullen samples blues lyrics and black vernacular speech; references a range of diasporic figures, events and practices; and ultimately collages these myriad sources into an epic, collective portrait of black female subjectivity.”<sup>1</sup> Though, by now, Shockley’s view of the book as a “myriad” and “epic” exploration of black female subjectivity has become more or less standard, Shockley points to a serious flaw that continues to be found in critical assessments of the book. She argues that readings of the poems frequently show a “reliance on notions of cultural ‘hybridity’ [that] often resolves into a binary of ‘black’ (blues) *content* and ‘white’ (traditional and avant-garde) poetic *forms*.”<sup>2</sup> In contrast to this approach to reading the collection, Shockley claims that

Mullen’s intensely polyvocal, thematically wide-ranging quatrains (which reference everything from Mexican maquiladoras to Dahomey symbols of royalty) insist upon the manifold and diasporic nature of black women’s experiences. The result is a new form—an African American blues epic—that takes its language, structural cues, and expansive, non-autobiographical first-person subjects primarily from the blues and African American literary traditions, even as it foregrounds the extent to which American poetic traditions, and other aspects of

American culture, have always themselves comprised complex, polymorphous mixtures.<sup>3</sup>

Shockley's emphasis here on the radically "polyvocal" and "polymorphous" nature of Mullen's volume leads one to ask how such complexity might be fruitfully analyzed, and what insights about language and poetic form may be gained from such a study.

In her early work on Modernist poetry and avant-garde poetics, Julia Kristeva proposed a bifurcated view of the poetic text as simultaneously constituted by both a "genotext" and a "phenotext." She elaborates this distinction in the following manner:

In light of the distinction we have made between the semiotic *chora* and the symbolic, we may now examine the way texts function. What we shall call a *genotext* will include semiotic processes but also the advent of the symbolic. The former includes drives, their disposition and their division of the body, plus the ecological and social system surrounding the body, such as objects and pre-Oedipal relations with parents. The latter encompasses the emergence of object and subject, and the constitution of nuclei of meaning involving categories: semantic and categorial fields. Designating the genotext in a text requires pointing out the transfers of drive energy that can be detected in phonematic devices (such as the accumulation and repetition of phonemes or rhyme) and melodic devices (such as intonation or rhythm), in the way semantic and categorial fields are set out in syntactic and logical features, or in the economy of *mimesis* (fantasy, the deferment of denotation, narrative, etc.). The genotext is thus the only transfer of drive energies that organizes a space in which the subject is not *yet* a split unity that will become blurred, giving rise to the symbolic. Instead, the space it organizes is one in which the subject will be *generated* as such by a process of facilitations and marks within the constraints of the biological and social structure.<sup>4</sup>

Taking seriously Kristeva's suggested course of inquiry, reading the "genotext" of any given poem might start by "pointing out the transfers of drive energy that can be detected in phonematic devices (such as the accumulation and repetition of phonemes or rhyme) and melodic devices (such as intonation or rhythm)"; and, in her words, it would also need to take into consideration "the way semantic and categorial fields are set out in syntactic and logical features."

This essay seeks to demonstrate how Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge* might be analyzed at the level of its genotext, taking (arbitrarily) as its primary

example the first of the book's eighty poems to illustrate how a straightforwardly genotextual analysis might proceed. The essay contends that, by closely observing the genotext of Mullen's poetry in *Muse & Drudge*, one may eventually arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the "polyvocal" and "polymorphous" nature of the language and poetic design of the poems in this enigmatic collection.

*Muse & Drudge* begins with the following poem:

- 1 Sapphire's lyre styles
- 2 plucked eyebrows
- 3 bow lips and legs
- 4 whose lives are lonely too
  
- 5 my last nerve's lucid music
- 6 sure chewed up the juicy fruit
- 7 you must don't like my peaches
- 8 there's some left on the tree
  
- 9 you've had my thrills
- 10 a reefer a tub of gin
- 11 don't mess with me I'm evil
- 12 I'm in your sin
  
- 13 clipped bird eclipsed moon
- 14 soon no memory of you
- 15 no drive or desire survives
- 16 you flutter invisible still<sup>5</sup>

To carry out our genotextual reading of the poem, we might look first at the poem's "phonematic and melodic devices," or what Kristeva refers to as the "accumulation and repetition of phonemes or rhyme," including the intonation and rhythm of the language of the poem. Starting with the poem's intonation and rhythm, a prosodic analysis of the poem's individual lines

reveals the following pattern (where the “—” symbol indicates accentual stress):

- 1 —˘—˘—˘ (trochaic)  
 2 ——˘ (trochaic)  
 3 ——˘— (trochaic)  
 4 ˘—˘—˘— (iambic)
- 5 ˘—˘—˘—˘ (iambic or trochaic; catalectic)  
 6 ˘—˘˘—˘— (iambic)  
 7 ˘—˘—˘—˘ (iambic or trochaic; catalectic)  
 8 ˘—˘—˘— (iambic)
- 9 ˘—˘— (iambic)  
 10 ˘—˘˘—˘— (iambic)  
 11 ˘—˘—˘—˘ (iambic or trochaic; catalectic)  
 12 ˘—˘— (iambic)
- 13 ——˘— (trochaic/spondees; palindrome)  
 14 —˘—˘˘— (trochaic)  
 15 ˘—˘˘—˘˘— (iambic)  
 16 ˘—˘˘—˘˘— (iambic)

What is immediately evident about this analysis is the concentration of iambic feet—along with more ambiguously metered lines (lines 5, 7, and 11)—in the poem’s two inner quatrain stanzas, while lines made up of definitely trochaic feet are relegated to the outer quatrains almost exclusively. Also, the poem’s use of catalectic (truncated) feet is only to be found in the inner quatrains (lines 5, 7, and 11), whereas the two outer quatrains contain only full trochees and iambs.

When we add to this prosodic overview an analysis of the poem’s “phonematic and melodic devices,” a clear pattern emerges that shows clusters of phonemes in the inner two quatrains, which serve to differentiate these from the two outer quatrains. In order to discover these clusters, it is

useful to first transcribe the poem into the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA):

- 1 'sæ, faɪəz 'laɪə 'staiəlz
- 2 'plʌkt 'aɪ, bɪəʊz
- 3 'baʊ/ʊʊ 'lɪps ənd 'lɛgz
- 4 'hʊ:z 'laɪvz 'ɑr 'loʊnlɪ 'tʰu:
  
- 5 'maɪ 'læst 'nəvz 'lu:səd 'mju:zɪk
- 6 'fʊr 'tʃu:d 'ʌp ðə 'dʒu:sɪ 'fɪ:t
- 7 'ju: 'mʌst 'doʊnt 'laɪk 'maɪ 'pʰi:tʃəz
- 8 'ðɛrz 'sʌm 'lɛft 'ɔn ðə 'tɪ:
  
- 9 'ju:v 'hæd 'maɪ 'θɪtʃ
- 10 ə 'ɪ:fə ə 'tʰʌb əv 'dʒɪn
- 11 'doʊnt 'mɛs 'wɪθ 'mi: 'aɪm 'i:vəl
- 12 'aɪm 'ɪn 'jɔr 'sɪn
  
- 13 'klɪpt 'bɛd ɪ 'klɪpst 'mu:n
- 14 'su:n 'nʊʊ 'mɛmθɪ əv 'ju:
- 15 'nʊʊ 'dɪaɪv 'ɔr dɪ 'zaiə sə 'vaɪvz
- 16 'ju: 'flʌrə ɪn 'vɪzəbəl 'stɪl

Taking the poem's phonemes group by group, we may begin by noting the cluster of alveolar fricatives ([s/z], [ʃ]) in the first two quatrains, and their relative absence in the second two quatrains. Their frequency, by stanza, is as follows: 9 instances; 10; 3; 7. In other words, whereas the final two stanzas, combined, contain a total of ten instances of these sounds, the first two stanzas contain a total of nineteen instances (distributed as 9 and 10, respectively).

In contrast to this grouping, the poem's labio-dental fricatives [f/v] occur in a higher concentration in the poem's final stanza (six instances), while they are less clustered and more evenly spaced throughout the rest of the poem, revealing the following pattern: 2; 3; 3; 6.

One might proceed in a similar manner through the rest of the poem's sound-patterns, distinguishing these with their respective IPA symbols, to obtain the following distributions:

Alveolar approximants [r], [ɹ], [ʁ], [ʒ]: 4; 5; 4; 7

Low front vowel [æ]: 1; 1; 1; 0

Alveolar voiced stop [d]: 0; 3; 2; 3

Nasal stops (bilabial [m] / alveolar [n]): 1; 8; 9; 8

Palatal approximant [j]: 0; 2; 2; 2

Low central vowel [ʌ]: 1; 3; 1; 1

Affricatives [tʃ/dʒ], [θ/ð]: 0; 6; 3; 0

High front vowel [i]: 0; 2; 3; 0

Diphthong [aʊ]: 2; 0; 0; 0

Alveolar lateral [l/ɫ]: 8; 4; 2; 5

Diphthong [aɪ]: 5; 3; 3; 3

Diphthong [oʊ]: 2; 1; 1; 2

Velar stops [k/g]: 2; 1; 0; 2

Bilabial stops [p/b]: 4; 2; 1; 4

Having completed this preliminary analysis of the poem's phonetic sound clusters, we can now begin to see a correlation between the prosodic and the phonetic patterns of the poem. Recalling that the two outer quatrains are made up of predominately trochaic feet, while the two inner quatrains are made up of predominantly (either full or catalectic) iambic feet, we may note a similar grouping of sound patterns, divided more or less evenly between the poem's inner and outer quatrains.

The first stanza is notable for its concentration of laterals ([l/ɫ]) and diphthongs ([aɪ], [aʊ]), while showing a complete absence of voiced stops ([d]), nasal stops ([m/n]), and approximants ([j]). The final stanza, in parallel fashion, shows a high concentration of labio-dental fricatives ([f/v]) and alveolar approximants ([r], [ɹ], [ʁ], [ʒ]), as well as a complete absence of [æ] vowels. To emphasize further this parallel between the first and fourth stanzas, both of these outer quatrains are set apart by the prominence within them of the diphthong [oʊ] and the stops [k/g] and [p/b.]

In sharp contrast to these outer (trochaic) quatrains, the two inner (iambic) quatrains show a remarkable concentration of affricatives ([tʃ/dʒ],

[θ/ð]), along with the bulk of the poem's use of the low central vowel [ʌ] and the high front vowel [i].

To move on from this prosodic and phonematic analysis of the poem, we can now consider the poem's semantic and categorial fields, or what Kristeva refers to as its "syntactic and logical features." Because we have already observed the parallel sound patterns between the inner and outer quatrains, it is not surprising, therefore, to find a similar parallelism between these same parts of the poem at the level of the poem's syntactic form. We may begin with the second quatrain:

my last nerve's lucid music  
sure chewed up the juicy fruit  
you must don't like my peaches  
there's some left on the tree

We note that the speaker here includes both first and second-person pronouns. The phrase "you must don't like my peaches" might also be read as an illustration of a "floating lyric," or a citation from folk tradition of popular, poetic sayings.<sup>6</sup>

Consider now the second stanza (the first of the two inner stanzas) in relation to the third stanza:

you've had my thrills  
a reefer a tub of gin  
don't mess with me I'm evil  
I'm in your sin

Here, we observe the same emphasis on first and second-person pronouns. However, in this quatrain the two grammatical persons have become linked—through the rhetorical figure of chiasmus—to a state of possession, such that the first and fourth lines can be read together as saying: *You have my thrills, I'm in your sin.*

Thus, while the second and third quatrains of the poem do not demonstrate any specifically *syntactical* ambiguity, they do share in common a focus on first and second-person grammatical relations, a concern with forms of property, and a thematic centered on the "floating lyric" of the peach tree verse.

Looking now at the poem's two outer quatrains, we may begin with the first:

Sapphire's lyre styles  
 plucked eyebrows  
 bow lips and legs  
 whose lives are lonely too

The speaker here is using only third-person pronouns and references, so there is a narrower focus at the level of grammatical person. However, the quatrain's syntactic structure reveals a deeper ambiguity with respect to its nominal and verbal components, which opens up a series of questions about the nature of agency in the poem as a whole. This nominal and verbal ambiguity can be laid out in a schematic form by outlining the three structures of agency that it makes possible.

Structure 1: The subject of the stanza is Sapphire's "lyre," while its predicate verb is "styles" and its object is "plucked eyebrows [and] bow lips and legs."

Structure 2: The subject of the stanza is Sapphire's "lyre styles [and] plucked eyebrows," while its predicate verb is "bow" and its object is "lips and legs."

Structure 3: The subject of the stanza is Sapphire's "lyre styles," while its predicate verbs are "plucked ... [and] bow" and its objects are "eyebrows ... lips and legs."

When we consider this first quatrain in relation to the final, fourth quatrain, we can detect a clear parallelism in the syntactic (and, by extension, semantic) ambiguity of the language in these two outer stanzas. The final stanza reads:

clipped bird eclipsed moon  
 soon no memory of you  
 no drive or desire survives  
 you flutter invisible still

At the level of grammatical person, the speaker is now mixing second-person with third-person pronouns, which leaves us with more to question with regard to the possible addressee of the poem. However, at the level of syntax, instead of nominal and verbal ambiguity we now observe a less obvious—though equally troubling—adverbial and adjectival ambiguity. This, in turn, suggests that the final quatrain shifts or reorients our earlier questions about agency to a question of objecthood, with respect to the addressee of the stanza's action (or what, in semantic terms, is called the thematic "patient").

Taken together, the quatrain's adverbial and adjectival ambiguity produce four general patterns of semantic possibility:

1. *Clipped* and *eclipsed*: adjectives modifying *bird* (n) and *moon* (n)

- clipped bird [and] eclipsed moon

*Eclipsed*: verbal complement to subject noun phrase [*the*] *clipped bird*

- [the] clipped bird eclipsed [the] moon

2. *Soon* (adv) modifies *there is* (implied)

- [there is] soon no memory of you

*Soon* (adv) modifies *survives*

- soon no memory of you, no drive or desire survives

3. *Invisible* (adj) modifies *flutter* (v)

- you flutter invisible still

*Invisible* (adj) modifies implied *you are* (v)

- you flutter [and you are] invisible still

4. *Still* (adv) modifies *flutter* (v)

- you flutter invisible still

*Still* (adv) modifies *invisible* (adj)

- you flutter invisible still

From these various possibilities for semantic interpretation—produced by the final quatrain's adverbial and adjectival ambiguity—it is evident that the final quatrain, like the first, is constructed according to a more general principle of syntactic indeterminacy, which, for its part, plays little or no significant role in the two inner quatrains.

Recalling the patterns we have so far uncovered, then, reveals a remarkably bifurcated grouping of the poem's phonetic, prosodic, and

syntactic features into the inner and outer quatrains. In the middle two stanzas, which we noted were almost exclusively made up of iambic feet, we saw a predominance of the sounds [tʃ/dʒ], [θ/ð], [ʌ], and [i]. On the grammatical level, the two middle stanzas are restricted to either first or second-person pronominal references, or a deliberate—and telling—mixture of the two via their use of the figure of chiasmus (*You have my thrills, I'm in your sin*). In sharp contrast to these inner quatrains, the two outer quatrains, which are almost exclusively made up of trochaic feet, show a predominance of the sounds [l/ɫ], [aɪ], and [aʊ] in the first stanza, and [f/v], [r], [ɪ], [æ], and [ɜ] in the fourth stanza. Both of these stanzas, similarly, contain the only instances in the poem of the sounds [oʊ], [k/g], and [p/b], as well as a total absence of the sounds [æ], [d], [m/n], and [j]. On the grammatical level, they are restricted to either third or second-person pronominal references, or a deliberate—and similarly telling—mixture of the two via their use of adverbial and adjectival ambiguity in the final stanza. The poem's questioning of agency in the first quatrain is thus complemented, and in part completed, by its questioning of the notion of objecthood (or the semantically thematic "patient") in the final quatrain.

To situate these findings within the framework of Kristeva's theory, it is helpful to recall her observation about the nature of the genotext. As Kristeva puts it, the genotext "is thus the only transfer of drive energies that organizes a space in which the subject is not *yet* a split unity that will become blurred, giving rise to the symbolic. Instead, the space it organizes is one in which the subject will be *generated* as such by a process of facilitations and marks."<sup>7</sup> If we consider this constitution, or generation, of subjectivity in and through a text as the result of a "transfer of drive energies"—specifically a transfer of energies through the material "facilitations and marks" that appear in the poem—then we might draw some provisional conclusions about the nature of the subjectivity that Mullen's poem is designed to illustrate.

The fact that first and second-person grammatical relations in the poem (in the inner stanzas) almost always correspond to clear and determinate syntactic relations suggests that ambiguity is itself not typically a feature of some purely *subjective* condition, or in any way necessarily tied to a lived, phenomenological experience of some sort. Indeed, the poem's language suggests that intersubjective, I/you relations are often as clear and determinate as their pronominal avatars: in structural and grammatical terms, they function clearly and distinctly, but always only as empty placeholders for human subjects. That is, they function as indexes of the presence of subjectivity *as such*, without specifying anything more about the content of the subjects to which they refer. Pronouns, in other words, are, in a strict sense, non-referential (they have no referential semantic content), and are thus empty signifiers that perform the work of transferring meaning between the agents of a discourse or proposition.

In contrast to the pronominal and syntactic clarity that characterizes the two inner stanzas, the pronominal and syntactic ambiguity of the two outer stanzas suggests some sort of breakdown of the basic scaffolding of subjectivity (grammar and syntax). Where questions of agency and objecthood predominate, and are expressed through open-ended syntactic structures, it is virtually impossible to posit any stable form of subjectivity. In place of this, we encounter what Evie Shockley calls an “intensely polyvocal” range of linguistic forms; indeed, the poem begins and ends by emphatically underscoring the “complex, polymorphous mixtures” of the formal elements that constitute subjectivity; or rather, as Shockley puts it, the sounds and structures of the poem’s language show us that the particular kind of subjectivity it seeks to illustrate is based on “the manifold and diasporic nature of black women’s experiences”<sup>8</sup>—a diasporic quality that could also be read as the historically and culturally specific “transfer of drive energies” in which the black subject first comes to be.

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<sup>1</sup> Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Revolution in Poetic Language,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 120-121.

<sup>5</sup> Harryette Mullen, *Recyclopedia: Trimmings, S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T, Muse & Drudge* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2006), 99.

<sup>6</sup> Defined in the following terms: “This verse and its ubiquitous usage is an example of the tradition of ‘floating lyrics’ (also called ‘maverick stanzas’) in folk-music tradition. ‘Floating lyrics’ have been described as ‘lines that have circulated so long in folk communities that tradition-steeped singers call them instantly to mind and rearrange them constantly, and often unconsciously, to suit their personal and community aesthetics.’”  
<http://pancocojams.blogspot.com/2013/11/if-you-dont-want-my-peaches-in-irving.html>

<sup>7</sup> Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, 120-121.

<sup>8</sup> Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, 19.