Incidents in the Lives of Two Postmodern Black Feminists

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Conversation
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In the introduction to Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism, Madhu Dubey writes, “Although we would expect African-American literature to form a vital resource for debates about postmodernism, it is conspicuously missing, even when these debates are launched in the name of racial difference” (2). The avant-garde writer Harriette Mullen’s poetry and essays demonstrate how black American literary works can fundamentally reshape the category of the postmodern.

ARLENE R. KEIZER:
Twenty years ago, when I was in graduate school in the San Francisco Bay Area, good friends of mine gave me a copy of the African American avant-garde poet Harriette Mullen’s book Trimmings (1991) as a birthday gift. The delight I felt upon reading those poems for the first time is still with me. Mullen’s intricate dactylic verse and her meditation on the construction of women’s bodies through arte and the social conventions pertaining to it, created rhythm and melody out of the light spaces into which women, especially women of color, have often been forced. I’ve followed Mullen’s career ever since; thus my understanding of what constitutes the black postmodern has been infused from the beginning with the variety and musicality of her singular body of work.

Finding myself on the West Coast again, I contacted Mullen, whom I’d met on several occasions, to ask if she would be willing to participate in an interview, and she generously agreed. We met in west Los Angeles to set the parameters of our conversation, discussing many of the shared concerns of black postmodernist writers and critics. The following interview was conducted via e-mail between February and May of 2012.

ARLENE R. KEIZER:
In my own research on African American literary and cultural expression, I’ve been interested in the “postmemory” of slavery. I borrow the term postmemory from Marianne Hirsch, who uses it to describe the experience of the children of Holocaust survivors; she writes,

I use the term postmemory to describe the relationships of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. The term is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its belatedness. . . . Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor re-create.

I’ve even come to believe that postmemory is a constitutive element of the black postmodern; I actually think much of your work bears out my argument. What do you think about that idea?

HARRIETTE MULLEN:
You might be thinking of moments in my poetry that evoke the legacy of African Diaspora, as in Muse & Drudge or in a poem like “Exploring the Dark Content” from Sleeping with the Dictionary. As a graduate student, I wrote a dissertation about fugitive narratives of runaway slaves.

Currendy I’m engaged in a potentially endless family history project, and of course these efforts to comprehend the past are related. I grew up with absolutely no oral history of enslaved ancestors. Living in a region that honored the “gallantry” of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, I was surely affected by white southerners’ views of slavery and the Civil War.

As a child I was aware that black people were connected to Africa and to slavery, but when it came to my own family’s connection, there was no clue. My grandmother recalled hearing nothing about it, although, as I soon discovered when I began to research our family, my grandmother’s father had been born into slavery and her grandparents had all been enslaved adults when the Civil War began.

Our family narrative resisted these basic facts that I’ve only lately incorporated into my personal story. The earliest individuals I’ve found so far in my black family lines were born, either in Virginia or the Carolinas, in the late 1700s and early 1800s. I have not yet documented any ancestors born in Africa, although I may be close to finding my family’s first-generation enslaved African immigrants.

ARK:
That’s amazing! The need to excavate personal or familial links to slavery drives so much contemporary black cultural work. Many writers seem to focus on the lack of a known connection, while others are uncovering or establishing a clear genealogy. How has this search affected your creative work?

HM:
I’ve started making collages with copies of old family photographs, letters, and other documents from my grandparents’ papers. I’ve made about fifty of these collages. Some I made as gifts to family members. Most of them are 14 x 17 inches; a few are larger, and there are several smaller ones. Many of them have titles. There’s an “Ancestor Spirit” series in memory of my grandmother, with titles like “I’ll Fly Away,” “I’ll Wear a Starry Crown,” and “My Grandmother Loved Music.” I think of them as an extension of scrapbooking that also relates to my interest in collages and quilts.

That was an unexpected turn in the family history project. It started when I began photocopying the old documents so that I wouldn’t have to keep handling fragile originals as I worked on the research project. I cherish those old letters, handwritten with
fountain pens by previous generations schooled in the Palmer method. My grandmother, in particular, had very graceful penmanship. I've copied not only the letters, but also the envelopes, with their evocative stamps and destinations. Old documents, made on letterpress printers, are visually interesting, like the World War II ration books that my grandmother saved.

I also treasure the vintage family portraits. We have photographic images of at least four family members who were former slaves. Photography was my father's hobby, back when serious photographers used a darkroom to make their own prints. When he served in the military, he had requested to join the Army Signal Corps as a photographer, but few if any African Americans would have gotten that assignment back then. After he graduated, he had a job as public relations director for his alma mater, Talladega College; several of his photographs were published in newspapers.

ARK: Do you think the black postmodern especially infused with postmemory? Or might this be true of the postmodern more generally?

HM: I would relate Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" to Toni Morrison's concept of "rememory" in Beloved, one of the texts at the center of your critical and theoretical writing on black subjectivity in contemporary narratives of slavery. Both writers are concerned with repression of individual and collective trauma and subsequent return of the repressed in psychosocial dysfunction.

I share your interest in what happens when the experience of trauma shapes narrative, and also when trauma resists the creative catharsis of narrative. At the end of Beloved, with the admonition "This is not a story to pass on," Morrison captures the double bind gripping those whose cultural identity is constituted through historical trauma and its aftermath (279).

Is the repetition of narrative itself another manifestation of trauma? Does the repeated trauma-narrative act like a pharmakon with a dual function as medicine and poison? Do we inoculate ourselves with an altered virus?

We see this ambivalence about memory and memorialization in Marilyn Nelson's A Wreath for Emmett Till, published as a book for young readers. We are aware that trauma shapes our lives, whether we choose to remember and speak of it or we resort to silence and try to forget it.

In the case of slavery, precious few stories were passed down to us from our ancestors, so we see contemporary writers and artists returning to the scene of trauma with the burden of creating narratives and images that otherwise would not exist for events that otherwise might be forgotten or might be told only from the slave shoholder's point of view.

Scarcely existent are stories of the Middle Passage that represent the experience of Africans who were killed and enslaved in uncountable numbers. Their stories can only be imagined by reading between the lines of assorted legal documents. This ambivalence about telling and not telling such stories of massive trauma is repeated in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!

From the global slave trade codifying the conversion of people into property, to the Nazis' methodical genocide of Jews and others defined as inferior to so-called Aryans, we see the shadow of postmodernity—the legal and scientific rationalization for denying humanity to particular groups of human beings.

One aspect of postmodernity is inscribed in the ongoing recurrence of massive violence and displacement affecting diverse populations, accompanied by the proliferation of documents, images, and narratives relating multiple, concurrent, and overwhelming experiences of trauma.

ARK: I've been very disturbed by what seems to me an excessive focus on the body in black memorialization of slavery and the slave trade. For some reason, the logic of re-enactment has a powerful hold on the black New World culture of memorialization. What I've long admired about your work is how it directs attention away from the body itself (black, female, or black and female) to its construction by outside forces. Trimmings is, of course, a signal example. You and I have also discussed the critics who have argued that, in Sleeping with the Dictionary, you turn away from subjectivity, challenging the idea of a unitary subject. Will you say a bit about how you think of the relationship between writing and embodiment?

HM: As some critics have noted, Trimmings plays with mutually constitutive codes of "whiteness" and "blackness" in social constructions of feminine identity, also pertinent to a poem like "Dim Lady" in Sleeping with the Dictionary. I'm interested when racial and sexual codes converge in the relations of consumers and commodities, an interest that continues in my work from Trimmings to S*PeRM**K*T.

I have tried to ask critical questions about subjectivity and embodiment, with particular interest in cultural forms and practices used to construct and represent gendered and racialized bodies. Yet, because I'm a writer accustomed to living in my head, I might tend to underestimate the body's importance. In certain art forms, such as painting, sculpture, and performance, embodiment may be central to the work itself.

So I'm wondering what kinds of images and practices you have in mind as excessive, gratuitous, stereotypical, or otherwise objectionable. I can imagine a spectrum of possibilities: some compelling and thought-provoking, others more disturbing, troubling, and perhaps ill-conceived, as you suggest.

I had a poetic understanding of the "return" of Sethe's "baby ghost" as a fully grown woman in Morrison's Beloved, but then I was far more resistant to that figure embodied by Thandie Newton when the novel was adapted to film. Yet, when I recall what is most memorable for me about that film, which I have viewed only once, it is a visually poetic image that some might call "excessive" or "over the top" due to its otherworldly strangeness: it's that scene when the figure of Beloved is "reborn" from the water. She emerges soaking wet, covered with ladybugs and butterflies.

I can think of brave and provocative works created by dancers, actors, performance and visual artists—things that I would never do. I never saw, but I've read about Robbie McCauley's creation and performance of Sally's Rape, in which she herself embodies a slave woman stripped naked on the auction block. The character she performs is based on her own ancestor. It seems to have been regarded as a thoughtful and powerful work, within a context of body-centered performances that came out of feminist and identity-based art practices. If we think of embodiment and subjectivity as complicated processes, there are multiple ways of inhabiting our bodies, just as we can imagine myriad experiences of subjectivity.

ARK: It helps to hear you situate that work in the context of feminist and identity-based art practices. When I learn about such a performance piece, it sounds fascinating in the abstract, but I can't imagine sitting through it. Some of my discomfort comes from the sense that to re-enact "scenes of subjection," to borrow Saidiya Hartman's term, with one's own body reifies the reduction of black subjects to the body. In the context of the Holocaust, for instance, such a re-enactment would be almost unthinkable. I guess I'm differentiating pretty stringently (perhaps too stringently) between forms of mediation when it comes to black creative practices; in other words, my responses to literary and two-dimensional or fine art "re-enactments" are very different from my responses to them in the flesh (akin to your unease with the depiction of Beloved in the film version of Morrison's novel).
I think this is related to another current concern of mine. I've developed a particular interest in what I'll call black irony, not as in "black humor," but instead the multiple forms of irony found in black people's humor in the US and the Caribbean. I think of New World black cultures as being fundamentally ironic, but I've been disturbed lately by the sense that, for many in white mainstream culture, black irony is often invisible and black performances, no matter how ironic, are often read as sincere and essential(ist) (e.g., responses to damali ayo's performance art and to Dave Chappelle's comedy, or the scenario Percival Everett stages in Erasure, in which a parody of Sapphire's Push is taken for the "real thing" and wins a major book award). Can you talk a bit about irony in your work and the difficulty that black irony seems to pose for some white audiences (and some black audiences, as well)?

HM: The effectiveness of irony and satire depends on some baseline of consensus about reality and shared values, just as appreciating a poet's craft requires awareness of literary conventions. Still, it seems impossible that damali ayo's pointedly ironic performances in "Rent-a-Negro" or "Panhandling for Reparations" would be read as works of straightforward sincerity—just as I would have thought it was impossible to mistake the satirical and critical intention when Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña were touring with their performance piece "Two Undiscovered Americans," also known as "The Couple in the Cage." But Fusco and Gómez-Peña reported that on several occasions some people apparently did not understand that the two artists on display in the cage were performers.

HM: As a writer I am attracted to words of different sound, shape, and texture from a variety of discourses; I have drawn from American literature.

HM: The language of poetry is a way of reaching out to others beyond the limits of my own specific background. In addition to the required reading for English majors, as a college student I was also introduced to African, Caribbean, Spanish, and Latin American literature.

HM: A broader, more inclusive cultural literacy is exactly what I hope to attain, and what I would like to encourage for other readers. The language of poetry is a way of reaching out to others beyond the limits of my own specific background. In addition to the required reading for English majors, as a college student I was also introduced to African, Caribbean, Spanish, and Latin American literature.

HM: As a writer I am attracted to words of different sound, shape, and texture from a variety of discourses; I have drawn from spoken as well as written languages in my poetry. Like most educated and literate people, my vocabulary as a writer can be more various, inclusive, and precise than the relatively smaller reservoir of words I use daily in casual speech, because my written language draws on my potentially expanding vocabulary as an active reader with access to libraries of literature and reference.

HM: My recourse to something like a diaspora lexicon was in part a response to the challenges I had encountered with my previous work. My first book, Tree Tall Woman, was in some ways an attempt to relate my poetic "voice" to what I've called the urban rhetorical vernacular of the Black Arts movement.

HM: Rather than rewriting poems that had already been written, I hoped to build on expressive traditions and innovations those poets represented. With minimal departures from Standard English, my poetry texts would be read as "black talk," instead of trying to establish myself as an authentic street talker, I was interested in the poetic possibilities of code-switching, a more
familiar form of expression for me, that I think is also characteristic of African American literature as a whole.

A few critics of the Black Arts era, such as Stephen Henderson, had noted a broadly inclusive range of linguistic registers in the diversity of "black styles" of speaking and writing, including the styles of well-educated black communiquers. I decided that my own "black expression" could include whatever I found of interest.

After Tree Tall Woman two books that followed, "Trimmings and S'PeRM**K'T", were the result of my critical encounter with Gertrude Stein's modernism, a possible influence on writers as different as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks. With Muse & Drudge I tried to use language to reach across the "Black Atlantic" while also drawing on information compiled in books such as Zora Neale Hurston's "Mules and Men," Robert Farris Thompson's "Flash of the Spirit," Clarence Major's "From Juba to Jive," and African-American Alphabet by Gerald Hausman and Kelvin Rodrigues. In "Sleeping with the Dictionary," my unwriting collaborators include William Shakespeare, the US Congress, and the creators of Roget's Thesaurus and The American Heritage Dictionary.

ARK:
What recent work in any literary or artistic genre interests you and/or inspires you in your current practice?

HM:
I'm not necessarily seeing the newest, cutting-edge art, but I enjoy artist books and books about art. Our black bookstore here in Los Angeles, EsoWon, usually has a choice selection of artbooks. Once when I was browsing books in the storefront of the Studio Museum in Harlem I saw James Fugate, a co-owner of EsoWon, buying a stack of art books there. Right now I'm reading EyeMinded, a collection of essays by art critic Kellie Jones—no relation to Amelia Jones, a critic known for writing about identity or body-centered art and a co-organizer of the Womenhouse Web project. Another influential art critic is Lucy Lippard, who also wrote a novel. I met her years ago when she was giving a talk in Rochester, and after that I read her critical books on various art movements, as well as her novel.

I also like going to galleries and museums, and I often feel inspired by the work of visual artists. I made the rounds to different art spaces that were part of a collaborative exhibit of California art, Pacific Standard Time. I went more than once to the Hammer Museum in Westwood during that regional PST exhibition, and I had the pleasure of seeing the artist Betye Saar where her work was on display. The Hammer also screened several films by African American filmmakers, including Charles Burnett and Julie Dash, who attended film school at UCLA; I went to their film screenings and panel discussions.

In the realm of poetry, my current work in progress is a tanka diary that will likely be published in fall 2013. It's inspired by translations of traditional and modern Japanese syllabic poetry as well as by contemporary tanka verses composed in English.

ARK:
In Looking Up Harryette Mullen, the recently published collection of interviews you did with fellow poet Barbara Henning, you briefly mention Tyree Guyton and David Hammons as visual artists who were doing something similar to what you are doing in poetry. Can you say more about the way you think about contemporary black artists and artistic practices, and if and how you use them as a springboard? Because of Muse and Drudge, many people are aware of your complex relationship with many black musical forms, but I think much less is known about how you engage with African American or black Diasporic visual art.

HM:
Of course the Black Arts movement included not only writers but also musicians, dancers, actors, filmmakers, and visual artists such as Raymond Saunders whose essay "Black is a Color" was of interest to writers and artists across disciplines. Some artists have been rather prolific writers, particularly Adrian Piper, who is a philosopher as well as a conceptual and performance artist. I have occasionally written about visual art and artists in essays such as "Visual Rhythm," "Chaos in the Kitchen," and "African Signs and Spirit Writing." The latter is included in a collection forthcoming from University of Alabama Press.

There are so many artists whose work I enjoy, from the iconic black figures in those large, colorful paintings by Kerry James Marshall to various combinations of photography and text in the work of artists such as Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Glenn Ligon. I admire the splendid elegance and purity of form in the work of the sculptor Martin Puryear as well as the exploded maps and abstract diagrams of Julie Mehretu. I am also attracted to the eclectic esthetic of David Hammons and Tyree Guyton. John Outterbridge and Noah Purifoy, Romare Bearden and Betye Saar. Mark Bradford and Leonardo Drew, whose art seems closer to what Toni Morrison called "eruptions of funk" as they work with collage or assemble their art from recycled objects.

They may be more or less attracted to abstraction or to figurative images. They may draw their inspiration from Pablo Picasso, Joseph Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg, Marcel Duchamp, or the movement known as Arte Povera. I've said before that in Muse & Drudge I tried to do something similar with "recycled language," "found poetry," and "altered" texts, making use of what I call, after Duchamp, "linguistic ready-mades." Like jazz musicians, these artists inspire me to try alternative ways of composing poetry.

Betye Saar and her artist daughters Alison Saar and Lesley Saar live in the greater Los Angeles area; over the years I have tried as often as possible to attend their gallery openings. I definitely feel the spirit of their creative enterprise, and one of my books, Blues Baby, has a cover with an image of Alison Saar's life-sized "Topsy" sculpture. The cover of my book Recyclopedia is designed with an image of a David Hammons sculpture made with recycled glass bottles. The cover of Sleeping with the Dictionary features an enigmatic drawing by Enrique Chagoya, from whom I also borrowed the title of a poem in that book, "Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language."

My forthcoming collection of essays has a title inspired by the poet Toi Derricotte. That book, The Cracks Between, will have one of Faith Ringgold's images on the cover. In the process of writing poetry I've been known to borrow from song lyrics as well as titles that artists and musicians give to their works. I sometimes make lists of favorite lines and titles for possible use in future poems.

In addition to Chagoya's satirical title, I can think of lines in Muse & Drudge that are borrowed from painter Rose Pepsi ("The fortune cookie lied"), visionary artist and street evangelist Gertrude Morgan ("Jesus is my airplane"), and Krazy Kat cartoonist George Herriman ("Fool weed, tumble your head off—that dern wind can move you, but it can't budge me").

I've enjoyed opportunities to meet and collaborate with artists. Three poems from Sleeping with the Dictionary, "Free Radicals," "Between," and "Music for Homemade Instruments," were influenced by my experience of working, respectively, with artist Yong Soo Min when she organized the Kimchi Xtravaganza for the Korean American Museum in Los Angeles, with Allan deSouza when he edited a special issue of the art magazine Frame-Work, and with musician Douglas Ewart in a performance at Woodland Pattern in Milwaukee. From the same poetry collection, "Quality of Life" was inspired by a visit to Manhattan where I used to attend, whenever possible, poetry readings and art exhibits organized by the Dia Foundation.

A few things I've written exist only as collaborations, such as texts I wrote to accompany images made by Yong Soo Min for Womenhouse, and Waving the Flag, a collaboration with video artist Sheila M. Sofian and musician William O. Darby. More recently I participated with other writers in an arts event at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) curated by UNFO (Unauthorized Narrative Freedom Organization).
In one of her many interviews, visual artist Kara Walker says, "In a way my work is about the sincere attempt to write Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and ending up with Mandingo instead" (107). Are there moments when your willful imagination has led you to places you didn't particularly like? What do you do at such moments?

**HM:** My imagination tends to run in different directions, as I am most interested in what makes language turn toward poetry. What I dread most is when my imagination fails to lead me to any particularly interesting place. I suppose what you are describing as willful imagination is what I would experience as writer's block, when my thoughts are unproductive. When I reach such an impasse, my inclination is to take time out: go for a walk, listen to music, or get some sleep. My usual concern is whether an idea is compelling enough to take me to the point of completing a satisfying draft. Once it's completed, my concern is whether a poem might hold the attention of other readers.

I think our understanding of a visual image is quite different from how we process language. The visual perception seems more immediate and primal, although artists may create visual images that reward sustained attentive viewing. Decoding a poem tends to be a bit more convoluted, with the brain experiencing a slight delay in comprehending the layers of significance. The resources of poetry are such that I worry less about communicating a specific message, but more about the "music" of the language. I don't fret much about whether the content of my thought is ugly or beautiful if I can get the language to do what I want.

I've said often that my work is "serious play," which could apply to most artists. Another tidy oxymoron is "ugly beauty," the title of a Thelonious Monk tune. It's a useful concept for the work of some artists, and a liberating idea for me when I'm uncertain in my own practice as a poet. I also like thinking of the creative process as "chaos in the kitchen," the title of a work by Alison Saar. So much of the artist's work involves learning, practicing, and trusting that process.

There may be a particular trap awaiting the visual artist who is African American, particularly when her work is as spectacularly and scandalously visible in the art world as Kara Walker's. This artist seems driven to confront and committed to overcome the collective shame of Americans in "the land of the free" who are descended from slaves and slaveholders—and it can't be forgotten that many of us are offspring of both.

Coincidentally, I've been reading about the enslaved South Carolina potter David Drake (sometimes referred to as "Dave the potter" or "Dave the slave") in a book by a white descendant of a slaveholding family that had counted Dave among their valuable assets. At one point the author refers to Kara Walker's work:

> An enormous panorama cut from black paper and affixed to a white wall, her composition presented a candy-box version of a Southern plantation scene. Only on carefully studying the silhouettes of the graceful mansion and dancing slave children and ladies in tilting skirts was it apparent that horrors were being perpetrated in the secret spaces between black and white. Images of shameful abuses—whippings, even murders—emerged from the details of the seemingly innocent composition.

There certainly is something willfully miscueious and trickster-like, as well as something terribly painful and angry in the work of Kara Walker, something akin to the work of the painter Robert Colescott and the writer Darius James. By the way, readers will find the psychosexual perversities of the master-slave relationship in Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical narrative as well as in Kyle Onstott's novel.

**ARK:** Oh yes, that's right! That perverse legacy is apparent in both the sublime and the ridiculous. Given your deep engagement with other artistic forms, if you weren't working with words, what medium would you choose and why?

**HM:** I guess the creative people who dazzle me most, other than writers, are visual artists, architects, composers, opera singers, jazz musicians, and my favorite classical musician, Yo-Yo Ma. Of course, dancers are amazing, but I'm far too klutzy even to imagine myself with that kind of physical grace.

At this point, I can hardly picture myself doing anything else, although when I was growing up my mother enabled my sister and me to try a variety of creative pursuits. She herself had rejected piano lessons, but played clarinet and oboe in a high school band that included Omiette Coleman and Dewey Redman; she had taken an art class with David Driskell when she was in college. In a letter to her parents back home, my mother mentioned a reading on campus by Langston Hughes. My parents were first drawn together by their mutual interest in amateur photography and theater, although my father eventually became a social-work administrator and my mother, an educator and community school director. I can recall being frightened as a young child, seeing my mother fire a prop gun on stage in a community theater production.

Somehow on her modest public school teacher's salary my mother managed to pay for our private piano lessons, our art classes at the children's museum, and our dance classes at the YMCA. As a divorced parent, she provided us with supplies for drawing, painting, and sculpting. We had a cardboard puppet theater and made our own hand puppets. She also encouraged us to learn how to sew, knit, and crochet. I never was particularly good at arts and crafts, but I do still draw a little from time to time, just for my own pleasure; lately, as I said, I've been making collages that look like poster-sized scrapbook pages.

**ARK:** I was also lucky enough to have parents who revered reading and the arts and made enormous sacrifices to enable their children to have music, art, and dance lessons. Even though I was raised in an atmosphere with very conventional gender-role expectations, through reading I found my way to feminism at a very young age. I was a teenage feminist!

For about ten years now, I've been using the term "black feminist postmodernism" to describe a set of avant-garde literary and artistic practices and a nascent phenomenology of a subset of women in the African Diaspora. I think of you as being the poster child for black feminist postmodernism, and wonder if this term resonates with you at all. Would you be willing to let me use your work on the flag for our hypothetical parade? Do you think of your work as being part of a kind of work some black women writers and artists are doing now? If so, what is the link to feminism?

**HM:** I would be honored to march in such a distinguished parade, with colors flying. I had not thought about my work in exactly those terms, although I certainly identify myself as a black woman, a feminist, and a writer influenced inevitably by postmodernity. I think of your work as performing the critical function of articulating explicit and comprehensive theoretical frameworks more than my own writing that tries fitfully to straddle creative and critical discourses.

It is worth noting that, because of the work of the generations that preceded us, we were educated to become intellectual and creative workers in a time when black and feminist writers and scholars are included among the leading thinkers whose works we study and critique. Their example surely encourages us to take our own work seriously.

**ARK:** Your writing calls for close reading. How important are techniques of close reading in your classroom practices? To what degree have criticism and theory displaced techniques of close reading in our (university English departments') pedagogy?
The greatest threat to the survival of poetry may be the rushed, distracted, overburdened reader with no time to appreciate what a poem has to offer. Generally speaking, poetry is meant to slow down the process of reading. The encounter with a poem becomes a kind of meditation as we scan the text closely and repeatedly in order to absorb the sense of it and appreciate its aesthetic effects.

In practice, what I try to teach or model for students is attentive reading: considering the context, form, and content of the text. It also helps to read the poem aloud, if possible. For better or worse, a number of anxieties surround the reading and writing of poetry. There is the fear of misreading and misinterpretation, and the related fear that poetry is becoming irrelevant, or too esoteric to attract broad audiences. Time devoted to digesting literary theories (as one theory expands upon or displaces another) may be subtracted from time available to read actual literature, placing a further burden on the reader. Literary theory creates its own set of anxieties for many readers.

Although I don't think of myself as writing "academic poetry," I'm sure my poetry is influenced by my reading, writing, and teaching in university communities. Learning a variety of critical approaches to the text has enhanced my understanding and appreciation of literature. Still, there are times in my relationship with poetry when I feel quite humble and ignorant. As far as I can tell, a state of not knowing or not understanding may be crucial for a fuller experience of writing and reading poetry.

As a teacher of literature, no matter how passionate I may feel about a book that is meaningful to me, it will not be meaningful in the same way to my students. For readers, poetry can be experienced quite differently inside or outside the academy. For students, books are required reading, usually accompanied by writing assignments, quizzes, and examinations. In the classroom, reading and writing are tightly intertwined, so that the literary text becomes a prompt for inquiry and explication. Students are expected to read canonical literature and also to write critically about literary works. Outside the classroom, readers choose the books they want to read in whatever leisure time is available. Readers may find themselves returning to favorite poems for repeated reading, but no quiz will follow.

Arlene R. Keizer
Arlene R. Keizer is Associate Professor of English and African American Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery (Cornell UP, 2004), as well as essays and articles in a range of journals including African American Review, American Literature, and PMLA. Her current work addresses black postmodernism in literature, performance, and visual art; African American literature and psychoanalytic theory and practice; and the intersections between memory and theory.

Works Cited

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