



Oulipo-Adjacent: Harryette Mullen

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In my [last post](#) on Unica Zürn and the poetics of the anagram, I briefly mentioned the [Oulipo](#) writers, often the first group to come to mind when one thinks of constraint-based writing that exists outside of the parameters of traditional prosody. (“Oulipo” stands for *ouvroir de littérature potentielle*—“workshop of potential literature.” It was founded in 1960 as an offshoot of Alfred Jarry’s pseudo-scientific “pataphysics” of “imaginary solutions” and “inutilious research.” If this sounds absurd to you, it most certainly is; think of Oulipo in a Dadaist lineage.)

Like Harryette Mullen in her essay “Theme for the Oulipians” (originally presented as a lecture at the CalArts Noulipo Conference in 2006 and included in her book *The Cracks Between What We Are And What We Are Supposed To Be: Essays and Interviews*, published by The University of Alabama Press in 2012), I am quick to acknowledge that I am not an “Oulipian,” despite an enduring interest in constraint-based writing and recombinant techniques. Mullen opens with the following disclaimer: “My connection to Oulipo is tenuous at best—more like nonexistent. I’m definitely not a member of Oulipo. I have the same initials as [Harry Mathews](#); that’s about as close as I get to an Oulipo connection.”

I adore reading Mullen’s poetry, and I love reading her prose, in which I can watch her mind at work as well—already, here in the first few disclamatory sentences, we have the sly topical humor of brief alphabetic play, as she runs through potential permutations of connectivity, touching on “H.M.” before moving forward. While one might note one’s “association,” or lack thereof, when discussing any artistic movement, it seems particularly necessary when mentioning Oulipo, since this a group with an actual *membership*—a membership that is largely male, largely white, and largely European.

Here, I think of Ralph Ellison’s 1964 “The World and the Jug,” in which he writes that, “while one can do nothing about choosing one’s relatives, once can, as an artist, choose one’s ‘ancestors.’” (Ellison is writing this in response to a critic who placed his work in a lineage that included Black writers only; Ellison is, in this case, setting his own aesthetic record straight by naming Eliot, Malraux, Dostoyevsky, Hemingway, and Faulkner among his literary “ancestors—if you please or don’t please!”) I also think a bit of the Groucho Marx line about not wanting to belong to any club that would have him as one of its members. Neither of these moments is perfectly relevant as I think of my relationship with Oulipo, but I will admit that I felt a bit like an interloper as I slipped in and out of the back row of the audience at the [Translating Constrained Literature Conference](#), held shortly after I arrived at Johns Hopkins University in 2014, despite the fact that most of the presenters were scholars and translators, not card-carrying Oulipians either. I will also admit that there was, and is, a pleasure in remaining at the margins of the margins, listening in on those deeply invested in this literary subgroup.

In any event, Mullen’s comparable engagement-without-entrance in the Oulipo cadre makes me double-down on my urgency in seeking *her* work out for guidance as a chosen “ancestor,” rather than heading straight to the group itself. Her investment in the intersection of where language meets and interrogates the social and the political (race, gender, identity, power), also draws me in to seek both permission and inspiration from her thinking and poetics. (And honestly, how could I *not* follow a woman whose book titles include *S*PeRM**K*T* and *Sleeping with the Dictionary* wherever she leads me?) “I’m not an Oulipian,” writes Mullen, “but I’m proof that their ideas have far-reaching influence among poets and writers.”

Mullen connects the origins of her relationship with Oulipo with a preexisting relationship with play and games (“hopscotch was a game I played as a child”), which are so often organized by a serious adherence to structure and rules within a seemingly unserious context. She writes:

Oulipo was useful to me because its members not only invented new kinds of literary structures and devices but also had investigated all kinds of artifice in literature dating back to ancient texts. The most liberating aspect of Oulipo for me was their demystification of ‘inspiration’ in favor of ‘potential literature.’ This puts less stress on writing as a product and more emphasis on writing as a process that might result in a work of literature . . . For me, constraints, procedures, and language games are just ways to get past a block or impasse in the process of writing.

In other words, Mullen’s poetics leaves room to “break” the rules when the poem asks for it—a poetics more in line with the expressive variation and metrical substitution one finds in the traditional English prosody of, say, John Donne, than in the work of “true” Oulipians (or the world of the child’s game, for that matter). She speaks of “improvisational verve and serious play,” the “idea of a collaboration between poet and text,” and the “idea of textual transformation.” I admire what Mullen takes of the formal math of Oulipo and transforms into an “impure” poetics; I choose to use this word in celebration, while acknowledging the ugly baggage it carries. In an interview with Cal Bedient, Mullen says:

A lot has been said of how American culture is a miscegenated culture, how it is a product of a mixing and mingling of diverse races and cultures and languages, and I would agree with that. I would say that, yes, my text is deliberately a multi-voiced text, a text that tries to express the actual diversity of my own experience living here, exposed to different cultures. Mongrel comes from ‘among.’ Among others. We are among; we are not alone. We are all mongrels.

Can I say, then, that I have an “American” relationship with Oulipo, with poetic form in general? Perhaps only if, off the page and in my life, I strive in my small way to push America to live up to the best of its mongrel values and identity. Returning to Ellison’s thinking on choosing one’s ancestors, I think of Mullen writing of Gertrude Stein, “I feel free to claim Gertrude as a literary foreparent, even though I am not so sure she would want to claim me as an heir. And although I claim her as an ancestor, I cannot say that I am a devout ancestor worshipper.” It is just this informed affection and affinity coupled with informed skepticism that always returns me to Mullen’s writing as a complicated lens through which I choose to view not just Oulipo, but the world.

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