Imagining the Unimagined Reader: Writing to the Unborn and Including the Excluded

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mother, mad father, clown, and jealous lover; of Emily Dickinson, who through her poetry engaged in a dialogue with an entire theology. Whether one attains the aesthetic heights of these writers does not matter as much as the activity itself, the attempt through language to *turn the mind into the world*. Whether I write a poem or publish a book, I am creating something which helps to give the world a reality. This has little to do with self-expression. Since it entails language, which all humans share, and since it is through language that we comprehend experience, poetry is an activity always about the world at large. Emanating from the self, its focus is inevitably upon all that is outside the self, the mind, and the imagination, even as it expresses them.

It is no surprise, accordingly, that my publishing activities have come to embrace international writing, that increasingly over the past several years Sun & Moon Press has become a home for writers from many countries. As I found a home in my youth in Europe, a place where I could read and make meaning, so has the press attempted to serve as a home for writers from other lands. As I expressed it in my recent introduction to *Mr. Knife, Miss Fork*, our new journal of international poetry, "the poet's job is to explore possibilities of meaning, which is to say possibilities of thought." How can a poet do that in a closed room, in a closed society? For good writing and publishing to occur, the doors must be opened and the full context of human experience embraced. Only then can the miracle happen, can the poet and reader get carried away.

Harryette Mullen

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Writing to the Unborn and Including the Excluded

The context for my work is not so much geographic as it is linguistic and cultural. I write beyond the range of my voice and the social boundaries of identity, yet within the limits imposed on my work and my imagination by language and its cultural significance. The idea of identity informs my poetry, insofar as identity acts upon language, and language acts upon identity. It would be accurate to say that my poetry explores the reciprocity of language and culture. My work is informed by my interactions with readers, writers, scholars, and critics, as well as my interest in the various possibilities for poetry in written and spoken American English.

I write for myself and others. An other is anyone who is not me. Anyone who is not me is like me in some ways and unlike me in other ways. I write, optimistically, for an imagined audience of known and unknown readers. Many of my imagined readers have yet to encounter my work. Most of them are not even born yet. About one-third of my pleasure as a writer comes from the work itself, the process of writing, a third from the response of my contemporaries, and another third in contemplating unknown readers who inhabit a future I will not live to see. When I read the words of African Americans who were slaves, I feel at once my similarity and difference. I experience simultaneously a continuity and a discontinuity with the past, which I imagine is similar to that of the unborn reader who might encounter my work in some possible future. There is another kind of experience I sometimes have when reading the words of authors who never imagined that someone like me might be included in the potential audience for their work, as when I read in Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols* that a "Negro" symbolizes the beast in the human. When I read words never meant for me, or anyone like me—words that exclude me, or anyone like me, as a possible reader—then I feel simultaneously my exclusion and my inclusion as a literate black woman, the unimagined reader of the text.

A future reader I imagine for my work is the offspring of an illiterate woman. A significant percentage of the world population remains illiterate, the majority of them girls and women. An even greater number of people have minimal access to books or the leisure to read them. In addition to people who simply have no opportunity to be empowered by education, the problem of illiteracy has expanded, as the late Paulo Freire pointed out, to include nominally educated people who are unable to function as critical readers. The disputes among what Hank Lazer calls "opposing poetries" provide examples of the proliferation of competing poetics representing competing and alternative literacies, of which the proliferation of illiteracies is a side effect. E. D. Hirsch's "cultural literacy" franchise offered a panacea for the anxieties of the educated and elite classes contemplating an increasingly diverse and multicultural population, as well as for the anxieties of minorities resisting total assimilation of the dominant culture.

What constitutes literacy has always been determined by the powerful, while illiteracy persists as an attribute of the disempowered. Economic and social policies in the U.S. that widen the gap between the haves and have-nots inevitably deepen the divide between the literate and the illiterate, with the illiterate increasingly consigned to the criminal justice

system. The July 27, 1997, issue of the *Women's Review of Books* gathered a collection of articles on U.S. prisons and activists working with incarcerated women and their children, observing that, "As we approach the millennium, prisons are among the country's biggest post–cold war growth industries. Within the prison boom, women are the fastest-growing population, a trend due primarily to the so-called war on drugs." One article, "Literacy for Life," reports on the work of MOTHEREAD, a North Carolina organization that helps women in prison improve their own and their children's literacy skills. In addition to the division of the literate and the illiterate, there is further division between the literate and the hyperliterate. The illiteracy that MOTHEREAD targets is of a more abject variety than that claimed by poet Sharon Doubiago, a college-educated white woman with working-class roots, in an interview in *Contemporary Literature*: "I read *Helen in Egypt* at eighteen. I've always said, self-deprecatingly, that I didn't understand a word of it. I didn't know any mythology. I was illiterate, although I was a Bible scholar."

I think I have a fairly accurate sense of the people who are reading my poetry now, because I am already acquainted with many of them. They are poets, critics, teachers, and students of literature. Some are readers interested in the poetry of writers of color, or black writers more specifically, or women writers. Some are readers who simply enjoy poetry. These known readers are the people I see at poetry readings and literature conferences, at art centers, colleges, and (more rarely) at bookstores. A few others are people who only began to read my work because they are my friends or members of my family. If they had not already known me, they probably would never have encountered my books in their normal everyday lives.

Aside from illiteracy, and the poverty that perpetuates it, which get my vote as urgent yet insufficiently recognized issues for writers and teachers of poetry, the major barriers to potential readers of my poetry are availability and language. All four of my poetry books, so far, have been published in relatively small editions by small presses and have been distributed mainly by mail order through the individual publishers and by Small Press Distribution in Berkeley. My books are very rarely found on bookstore shelves. When they are, it is usually a campus bookstore that orders books because I am scheduled to read at a particular college. These readings often occur in the context of a brief "residency" of up to a week, which might also include a public lecture on poetics; visits to writing, literature, and other classes; individual critiques of student writing; inter-

views for print or broadcast media; book signings; and various receptions and meals with interested faculty and students. Sometimes off-campus readings at community venues are also included in the residency. The variety of events, sponsored by different entities, allows more potential readers to be introduced to the work, and pragmatically combines funds from various departments and organizations to pay the expenses of travel, accommodations, and honorarium. A few of my poems have appeared, with or without my permission, on the Worldwide Web, which virtually expands the potential audience beyond those who see my work in books or periodicals.

For some potential readers, language is an even greater barrier than availability. It is possible that my poetry might become more available, but it is unlikely that my poems will become any more translatable. As long as my poems remain untranslated, they are accessible only to those who can read English, including those who speak/read/write one or more other languages. It is not that I am a linguistic chauvinist, by any means, but simply that, as a more or less monolingual speaker of American English, I am working within the language that is mine. With the exception of a handful of prose poems recently translated by Mexican poet Pedro Serrano and a few poems from my first book that were translated into Spanish for a bilingual anthology, my work exists only in English. I have sprinkled Spanish words into my poems, but never enough to make the work bilingual. My poetic idiom is a product of American English and its vernaculars, including those associated with black speakers of American English.

As I continue to work conceptually with specific cultural and linguistic materials, rather than logical statement, linear narrative, or transparent lyrical expression, my work gets closer to what makes poetry unparaphrasable, and thus, untranslatable. While I can appreciate the narrative drive of Homer and Virgil, the lyrical transparency of Sappho, or Pablo Neruda, or Wislawa Szymborska, the democratic appeal of Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, and I certainly admire the qualities that allow these poets to come across despite what is lost in translation, the qualities that I aspire to in my work seem to be precisely those that resist translation, that have to do with living, thinking, reading, and writing inside a particular language.

My desires as a poet are contradictory. I aspire to write poetry that would leave no insurmountable obstacle to comprehension and pleasure other than the ultimate limits of the reader's interest and linguistic competence. However, I do not necessarily approach this goal by employing a

beautiful, pure, simple, or accessible literary language, or by maintaining a clear, consistent, recognizable, or authentic voice in my work. At this point in my life, I am more interested in working with language per se than in developing or maintaining my own particular voice or style of writing, although I am aware that my poems may constitute a peculiar idiolect that can be identified as mine. I think of writing as a process that is synthetic rather than organic, artificial rather than natural, human rather than divine. My inclination is to pursue what is minor, marginal, idiosyncratic, trivial, debased, or aberrant in the language that I speak and write. I desire that my work appeal to an audience that is diverse and inclusive, at the same time that I wonder if human beings will ever learn how to be inclusive without repressing human diversity through cultural and linguistic imperialism.

Of course my fond desire that my work reach every interested reader on the planet from the present to the imagined future itself represents the imperialism of the poet's ego; and surely any poet who fantasizes a globally diverse audience should write poems that can more easily be translated. Nevertheless, my work continues to explore linguistic quirks and cultural references peculiar to American English as spoken by the multiethnic peoples of the United States, although the phenomena that interest me are common to most languages. My poems often recycle familiar and humble materials, in search of the poetry found in everyday language: puns, double entendres, taboo words, Freudian slips, jokes, riddles, proverbs, folk poetry, found poetry, idiomatic expressions, slang and jargon, coinages, neologisms, nonce words, portmanteaus, pidgins and creoles, nicknames, diminutives, baby talk, tongue twisters, children's rhyming games, imitative and onomatopoeic formations, syntactical and grammatical peculiarities, true and false etymologies, clichés, jingles, and slogans.

Whether in verse or prose poetry, I enjoy playing with the sounds and rhythms of words, creating aural patterns of repeating phonemes, using the devices of assonance, consonance, alliteration, rhyme, and various echo effects. As a writer I sometimes practice a kind of linguistic archaeology of the metaphorical origins of words, a resurrection of dead metaphors that are buried in any language. I am curious about the "unconscious" of language, suggested by the various indirections of metaphor, metonymy, euphemism, periphrasis, and taboo word deformation. I am equally interested in the materiality of language itself, the physical presence of words and letters on the page, so I am fond of word games, such as acrostics, anagrams, paragrams, lipograms, univocalics, tautograms, charades, homophones, spoonerisms, and palindromes that draw atten-

tion to the manipulable properties of letters and words. I like the possibility of scrambled words and syntax, of secret or alternative meanings, of words hidden within other words, as in equivoque, cryptograms, and cryptomorphic riddles. Solving such word puzzles models the activity of different readers decoding and comprehending alternative messages from the same text.

Recently I have written a poem composed of what I call "aphasic similes," another poem that gets its syntactical structure from a line of African American folklore that I found in Vertamae Grosvenor's diaspora soul food cookbook, and also a prose poem inspired by certain stylistic tics of formula fiction writing, known as "Tom Swifties," after the hero of a series of books written for juvenile readers in the early twentieth century. An ongoing project is a poem titled "Jinglejangle," a catalog of over three hundred items created by what the dictionary calls "rhyming and jingling formation," examples of the poetic process in everyday language.

Although I happen to be working in what is currently the global language of international capitalism, or what some call "Imperial English," the quirks, contradictions, even the inanities, in the language of the declining Anglo-American empire are what interest me most. Writing in English does not assure me that my work will reach the unborn readers of the future (assuming optimistically that human beings and poetry have a future) for whom English may well be as dead as Latin, Ancient Greek, and Sumerian are for me. My poetry will not reach people who do not read English, or people who do not read poetry, whether they are literate or illiterate. Although some of my poems would not suffer if they were heard but not read, others ought to be seen as well as heard. Video and audiotapes of me reading my work are stored in various poetry archives, which would make the work available to anyone who can understand my spoken English, but these media documents are quite as perishable as books and periodicals.

Not when I am writing, but after I have written, I consider who would be left out, excluded from the poem. Although it is not necessary or possible to include everyone, I find that it is useful to me as a writer to think about the fact that language, culture, and poetry always exclude as well as they include potential audiences. One reason I have avoided a singular style or voice for my poetry is the possibility of including a diverse audience of readers attracted to different poems and different aspects of the work. I try to leave room for unknown readers I can only imagine.