

From Rupture to Remembering: Flesh Memory and the Embodied Experimentalism of Akilah Oliver

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These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually “transfers” from one generation to another. . . ?

—Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (260)

The dense, blocky prose poems of Akilah Oliver’s collection *the she said dialogues: flesh memory* (1999) are packed like the sidewalk shopping carts she describes, “with debris of lives / stacked high” (9, lines 16-17). Like those sidewalk shopping carts piled with the parings of popular culture and personal life, the contents of Oliver’s poems crowd into and trace a center space of loss. This space of loss—what Hortense J. Spillers describes as the “African-American female’s misnaming” (“Mama’s” 258)—underlies and structures each poem. Oliver locates this loss multiply, in literal violence against flesh and in representational violence. Her poems cite corrupted historical narratives, undocumented lives, and contemporary systems of identity construction that are at once too limited and too determining. All these forms of loss, Oliver suggests, are the afterlives of the logic of slavery that produce “one meaning of blackness” (27).

Like Spillers in the epigraph to this essay, Oliver implies that the markings on and sufferings of past bodies “transfer” symbolically and representationally—that past bodily experiences and inscriptions shape contemporary meanings of blackness and black female identity.¹ Spillers expands on this idea, stating, “In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness” (257). But Oliver proposes a further type of bodily transfer that has the potential to speak the “truer word” Spillers seeks, affecting and expanding future meanings.

Oliver’s concept of “flesh memory,” performed throughout the collection, augments the record of markings and loss, “attenuated meanings,” and absence with an alternative epistemology of bodily presence. “Flesh memory”—what Oliver describes as the genetic memory or knowledge

of the experiences of past bodies—engages the gaps and erasures of historical black bodies and experiences, but privileges presence over erasure or rupture. Oliver performs this pluralizing gesture in her prose poems through parataxis—juxtaposing, layering, and “stack[ing] high” the plurality of voices remembered and accessed through bodily memory.

By using parataxis, which is commonly seen as disrupting, minimizing, or decentering subjectivity,² Oliver undermines the conventional division between formally-motivated poetics (often called “innovative” or “experimental”) and identity poetics as well as the aesthetic and philosophical assumptions upon which such divisions are based. While many poets and scholars, including Juliana Spahr and Erica Hunt, point out that the familiar critical division between “experimental” and “expressive” poetry does not adequately reflect the poetry being produced now—or the poetry that has been produced for the past one hundred years—these categories powerfully persist in criticism and reception. These critical categories are particularly pernicious because much of the poetry classed as expressivist is identified by the presence of a personal, autonomous, coherent—often gendered or racialized—lyric “I.” Harryette Mullen describes “this idea that you can be black or innovative” (qtd. in Spahr 12) as “aesthetic apartheid” (Mullen 29). Houston A. Baker, Jr., Aldon Lynn Nielsen, and others have worked to problematize the critical and popular division between a formalist or innovative modernism and a formally conservative, identitarian Harlem Renaissance.³ In addition, critics have sought to centralize and complicate the profiles of well-known African American writers such as Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, and Lucille Clifton.⁴ These attempts to trouble the critical map, however, tend to involve annexing more and more writers under the banner of the experimental rather than interrogating the values and composition of this privileged critical category.

Oliver uses the technology of flesh memory to write a pluralist poetry of black queer female identity and figures this pluralism formally through parataxis. Her use of parataxis undermines the division between experimental and expressivist poetics, but it also interrogates the common, limiting equation between innovation (or experimentalism) and rupture. Oliver’s parataxis does not operate primarily on the logic of rupture—a logic often ascribed to the formally innovative poets of modernism and their inheritors.⁵ Rather, Oliver’s parataxis, as it bears out the knowledge of flesh memory, aggressively privileges a logic of relation. By using parataxis relationally—remembering the “language activated in the body’s memory” (4)—Oliver’s poetry contends with representational traditions and historical loss. This strategy highlights the inadequacy of rupture as a literary and analytical technology, given the history of physical and representational

violence against African Americans in general and African American women in particular. Through flesh memory and parataxis, Oliver's poems not only state a "truer word" for black female identity, but also pluralize its possibilities.

This essay uses four of Oliver's poems to discuss the role of rupture in recent poetry and criticism and examine Oliver's choice to privilege a different logic—a logic of relation, encapsulated in her theory of flesh memory and enacted in her use of parataxis—to write a poetry of the black female body and black female identity.

The Politics of Rupture and Black Representation

Oliver's *the she said dialogues* disrupts and interrogates representational traditions in African American literature and identity discourse more generally, but rupture is not the primary logic of her poetry. However, rupture is an important political and literary tool that feminists have used to explore the formation of gendered identity in dialogue with language and the social realm and the particular gendering of poetic language. For example, Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls for a women's poetics of rupture that makes visible the gender politics of the genre of poetry from its earliest roots; indeed, DuPlessis argues that the prevalence of rupture proves that "modernist innovation is a feminist space" (Spahr 3). For DuPlessis, rupture "depoeticizes" poetry (144) and thus interferes with the means by which poetry has traditionally "depend[ed] on positioning women" (140). Rupture, therefore, becomes a powerful feminist political aesthetic with significant consequences. As Spahr states, the feminist poetics of rupture devotes "little attention to how women, or these poets themselves, are oppressed or marginal—little attention to gender asymmetry. . . . Instead much of this work investigates representation itself" (3).⁶

Similarly, parataxis has been shown to be a strategy for a socially and critically motivated poetics that engages the terms of representation. Bob Perelman writes, "The incantatory lyricism of the [old] poetry sentence where writer finds voice and universe fitting together without struggle, is an ideal environment for aggrandized sensitivity and myopic or minimized social context" (316). Parataxis, Perelman argues, shifts attention away from the subjectivity of the writer and directs the reader toward finding connections and ultimately critically engaging with systems that organize images and information. In this way, parataxis keeps easy unities at bay.⁷ While Perelman is interested in keeping "in check" the mechanism by which parts—here, sentences—build toward "larger narrative, expository, and ideological unities" (317), he suggests that subjectivity is one of

those easy unities that must be kept at bay.

Oliver's paratactic prose poems, however, center on the idea that subjectivity is no easy unity for the African American female. Indeed, in Oliver's poems, parataxis originates from the struggle where voice and universe meet. Thus, her poetry clearly "investigates representation itself" (Spahr 3), urging the reader to investigate the systems that structure knowledge and its absence. Her poetry also urgently represents the black female body as well as gendered and racialized oppression, marginality, and asymmetry. Indeed, Oliver's images insist on the particular body and its experiences, sufferings, and desires.

Oliver's poetry, intensely concerned with sensory and sensual experience, makes the raced, gendered, and sexualized body present on nearly every page. Oliver names skin, mouth, tongue, teeth, eyes, eyelashes, ears, pubic hair, thighs, vulva, crotch, belly, butt, armpits, thumb, fingers, nipples, breasts, penis, legs, spine, scars, stretch marks, sweat, placenta, and menstrual blood. Her strategy of representing the body part by part, and my reproduction of it here, may appear to risk extending the torture and dismemberment, the rupture of the enslaved body.⁸ Her imagery, however, traces the body with the fidelity and precision of a lover's touch. At other moments, the imagery demands that the reader attend to "what the body remembers" (81, 1), from "protruding belly" (65, 9) to "erect nipple" (45, 10).

Oliver's centralization and representation of the black female body is important because of the historical tendency toward both hypercorporealization and decorporealization in representations of black women. Spillers writes that slavery made black women "the principle point of passage between the human and non-human world" ("Interstices" 199); thus the location of the black female, and particularly of black female sexuality, remains not only physically and sexually exotic, but analytically so, as well. Because historically the black woman's sexuality is nearly entirely interpolated through structures of domination and commerce, Spillers claims, her sexuality becomes an analytical impasse—a point where analysis stops. Thus, the position of the black woman often is read as an "interstice"—a chaotic, empty, or excessive location, a structural gap (199-200). Oliver, however, aggressively represents and also investigates the black female body and black female desire, using parataxis to layer together representation and its critique: "when I grow up I'm going to be an assassin daddy. / when I grow up I'm going to be a healer daddy. when I grow / up I'm going to remake a lie daddy" (58, 12-14). These pronouncements, layered one upon another, perform the work's theory of identity, which depends on an interplay between competing representations and

their critique—an interplay that, Oliver suggests, will eventually “remake [the] lie” on which the black female’s misrepresentation and “misnaming” depend (Spillers, “Mama’s” 258).

Oliver’s poetry thus suggests the inadequacy of rupture as a primary formal means, given the interstitial position of the black woman. While rupture proved productive for a feminist poetry that sought to expose the ubiquitous gendering of language and poetic tradition by disrupting representation and poetic language itself, Oliver’s poetry suggests that rupture is not a sufficient strategy for a poetry that is engaged with the “severe disjunctures” (Spillers, “Mama’s” 260) that come to be associated with the enslaved body.

“if i said / the ships”: From Rupture to Remembering

As Oliver’s poetry moves beyond rupture, it moves toward alternative epistemologies. Indeed, Oliver introduces the concept of flesh memory because of the loss of documented information about historical black experience, combined with a very present sense of knowledge or “genetic memory” of slavery (4). In “she said loss, lost,” Oliver’s speaker describes the loss of history and the consequences of this loss:

i want to know what the eyes smelled at the bottom of the ships. i’ve seen that look of terror before. any asshole on the bus pants hanging off his butt. X terrorizing a fashion statement on hats & tee shirts. any black boy beautiful or ugly could be of my blood. one meaning of blackness. this arbitrariness of circumstance. know it’s all possible & nothing’s true.

where’s the national museum with the slave ships. whips. neck silencers. irons. chains. mouth bits. if i said

the ships.

why wouldn’t we all immediately have a common reference. where is the national tongue. the informed language for this thing called slavery. i don’t know of anyone who knows the names of their great great great grandfathers. not the mythic ones or adopted ones. the exact people who birthed you. i don’t know of anyone who knows the faces of their grandmothers’ rapists. not any face. the face. i don’t know anyone who can sing an old freedom song. where are the stories of the torture. what did women do with their hair. where are the seers. what the hell does raw cotton feel like. bales & bales & generations of it. (26-27, lines 16-36)

In this poem, violence comes in two forms—presence, then absence. In the first seven lines of the excerpt, presence is the immediate, semantic violence of homogeneous readings of blackness. Here we see the transhistorical “look of terror” that the speaker recognizes on the bus and the overdetermined, over-simplified, commodified signifier “X,” which is seen as “terrorizing” in the clipped, sound-bite context of “hats & tee shirts.” These over-available images, emotions, and identities—the results of racism and a dearth of representational possibilities—produce “one meaning of blackness.” Such abbreviated, decontextualized representation—“X terrorizing a fashion statement on hats & tee shirts”—is precisely what Frederic Jameson describes when he discusses parataxis as commodification (4), and it is important that Oliver reproduces paratactically such images of commodified representation and shows them as a direct effect of “one meaning of blackness.”

The violence of what is representationally present in the first seven lines is tied to a violence of absence in the list of missing torture artifacts that follows: “*slave ships. whips. / neck silencers. irons. chains. mouth bits*” (lines 23-24). Here, the speaker points to gaps in the material historical record by naming, one by one, those implements of slavery and, implicitly, the acts of torture that are not publicly named and recognized by a “national museum.”⁹ The names of the torture devices themselves emphasize the body and the silencing—the radical destruction of voice—implicit in enslavement: “*neck silencers . . . mouth bits.*” In these lines and the lines that follow, Oliver suggests that these signifiers of slavery fail to fully signify without the physical presence of artifacts and the authorized meaning conferred by a “national museum.” The brokenness of the statement that follows, split into three lines, is demonstrative, and is one of the few instances in which line breaks are used in the collection:

. . . *if i said*
 the ships.
 why wouldn't we all immediately have a common reference. (lines 24-26)

The punctuation after “ships” suggests that this word alone should comprise an obvious cultural reference, a fully signifying, complete thought—that the speaker should be able to stop right there. Instead, the next line is required in the absence of a “national tongue,” the lack of a “common reference.”

While these are the first lines italicized in the collection, Oliver employs italicized language frequently—in more than forty passages—usually to designate language that has the status of a language object.¹⁰ Thus, the use of italics here suggests that these words—“*slave ships. whips. / neck*”

silencers. irons. chains. mouth bits”—are being put under the microscope *as words* by the poem, perhaps as words that fail to function as more than language objects because of the lack of material history, of an “informed language for / this thing called slavery.” If these words no longer convey meaning, then not only are the actual artifacts missing, but their symbolic location is emptied as well. The implication is that a national tradition of silence, misrepresentation, and the treatment of trauma as unrepresentable—as an empty, excessive location—impedes the future of meanings. Here, the national tradition of slavery and torture falls into an “interstice”—a space or gap necessary to the larger structure—in the same way that the black female body does.

Because of the problem of language illustrated by the italicized lines, the lines that follow use an anaphoric figure that emphasizes knowledge: “i don’t know of anyone who knows.” Here, the speaker mourns the absence of specific family information: the exact “names of their great great great grandfathers” and “the exact people who birthed you.” The absence of “the faces / of their grandmothers’ rapists” speaks to the loss of information about both sexual violence and heredity, emphasizing the connection between the two. The speaker also mourns the absence of the collective memory of “bales & bales & generations” of the “feel” of “raw cotton.” In her mourning of family information and collective memory, as well as a “national tongue,” or an “informed language” for speaking about slavery, the speaker suggests that these absences all reduce the meanings of blackness, leading to the kinds of representational violence rendered in the poem’s opening lines, and she suggests that having this information would pluralize the meanings of blackness. Oliver uses flesh memory to accomplish this work of pluralizing.

**“Did Harriet Tubman ever fuck anybody or was she too busy?”:
The Technology of Flesh Memory**

Oliver’s exploration of “flesh memory” begins with the assumption that to engage with the systems that organize images and information about African American identity is to engage with gaps, corruptions, simplifications, and silences. In the face of these gaps and the representational violence that is their result, Oliver describes a process for accessing a version of historical and personal knowledge. Flesh memory attempts to travel beneath existing organizing structures, including the structures of historical knowledge and personal identity. In the foreword to *the she said dialogues*, Oliver defines flesh memory, first offering a literal definition of each term. Quoting from the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, she

cites: “flesh (n): 1. the soft tissue of the body of a vertebrate, consisting mainly of skeletal muscle and fat. 2. the surface or skin of the human body” (4) and proceeds to offer a similarly standard definition for “memory.” She then offers her own metaphorical definition of flesh memory:

flesh memory 1. a text, a language, a mythology, a truth, a reality, an invented as well as literal translation of everything that we’ve ever experienced or known, whether we know it directly or through some type of genetic memory, osmosis, or environment. 2. the body’s truths and realities. 3. the multiplicity of language and realities that the flesh holds. 4. the language activated in the body’s memory. (4)

By placing the literal definitions of “flesh” and “memory” alongside her metaphorical definition of “flesh memory” in the foreword to the collection, Oliver shows that she privileges and politicizes nonliteral knowledge—a gesture that defines her approach to knowledge-construction throughout the work. Oliver’s understanding of “flesh memory” claims the body as a primary site of historical knowledge, but it also suggests that this knowledge may not derive from the body’s direct, sensory, or literal experience, but may instead come indirectly, through “genetic memory, osmosis, or environment” (4). In recognizing indirect knowledge, Oliver suggests that bodily experience and bodily memory is neither primarily literal nor entirely individual; Oliver recognizes knowledge that is “invented as well as literal,” suggesting that she counts as knowledge those memories, histories, or useful fictions that must be created or imaginatively constructed when the record is missing, erased, obstructed, or corrupted. These useful fictions, though clearly constructed, are created to resist corrupted histories and commodified images.

Oliver’s first documented explorations of the concept of flesh memory occurred through performance work with the Sacred Naked Nature Girls, a four-woman performance group based in Los Angeles with whom she performed from 1994 to 1997 (Cheng 70-71). The Sacred Naked Nature Girls performed nude and used their differing racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities to enact multiple, intersecting, and conflicting ideas about the female body and its relationship to desire and memory. In an interview with performance artist Coco Fusco, Oliver and Fusco discuss a moment in a Sacred Naked Nature Girls performance when Oliver asks, “Did Harriet Tubman ever fuck anybody or was she too busy?”

Coco Fusco: To me, that was the ultimate transgression. . . . It did stir an enormous emotional response, making me realize how I’ve been socialized to have a very limited idea of Harriet Tubman as a human being.

Akilah Oliver: Often black women are not looked at as human beings, we're mothers, martyrs, caretakers, sluts, we're Harriet Tubmans, but we're not human beings. That scene, like the rape/rape fantasy scene, crosses a lot of lines inside people's heads. (Oliver et al. n. pag.)

In this interview, Oliver articulates the truly transgressive nature of "flesh memory," as she and other performers reimagine the historical record, expanding and altering, pluralizing and dehomogenizing the meanings of historical events and figures such as Harriet Tubman, challenging violent simplifications of raced and gendered lives. Oliver claims that "flesh memory" insists on and centralizes the humanity of historical African Americans, especially African American women. Oliver explains, "This is what I call genetic memory, or cultural memory. I feel it really intensely. I feel slavery very intensely" (n. pag.).

Oliver's "flesh memory" parallels Toni Morrison's "rememory" and other theories of body memory that have been suggested by trauma studies. "Rememory" and body memory suggest that memories, particularly traumatic memories, are stored in one's mind or body and may be inaccessible, but can be recalled or activated by triggering events or experiences. Oliver's "flesh memory" emphasizes a transpersonal and transhistorical capacity in this sense of bodily memory; that is, Oliver suggests that historical violence can be felt among historically distant bodies.¹¹ By defining "flesh memory" this way, Oliver acknowledges the effects of historical trauma on future subjectivities and recognizes that trauma ricochets through time, registering effects on bodies and subjectivities separated by geography and temporality.

In addition, locating historical knowledge, especially knowledge about racial and sexual violence, in the body (rather than in national archives, interview transcripts, or legal, governmental, or medical documents) offers bodily memory as an alternative site of historical knowledge. Marianne Hirsch uses the term "postmemory" to describe a similar phenomenon of transpersonal transference. In her version, postmemory is knowledge that is neither characterizable as history or immediate, literal memory; it is the second-generation "memory" of collective traumatic events: "postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection . . . its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation." Hirsch's model, which she developed specifically in relation to the experience of children of Holocaust survivors, focuses on those who "grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated"

(22). Hirsch's "postmemory" addresses the effect of the overwhelming presence (but unavailability) of parents' traumatic experience on their children's identity narratives, while Oliver's "flesh memory" inverts and expands these relations, offering presence (bodily immediacy, "genetic memory," and "osmosis") in the face of historical loss; this loss is at once conceived of as more distant—possibly generations removed—and more intimate, figured not only as narrative, but as bodily experience.

Oliver performs the knowledge of flesh memory in an early poem, "once upon a time, she said," which I quote in full:

old folks. scotch & malt liquor in da living room. do the
mash potato child. break it up. upholstery plasticized. uncle
spooky tales sandwiched between floorboards. justify the
continuation. lives go on & on. so free of godly instincts.
open those doors & let me breathe. no sea takes me home.
i witness bones on the atlantic floor. chiseled faces. short
vowel sounds trapped under centuries of sediment. let the
cow jump over the moon. tell momma you love her. don't
think you can live no more in that room. all the exquisite
summertime. gone. mash potato. child. (13, lines 1-10)

This poem opens with images from a childhood home—"old folks," "scotch & malt liquor," and "upholstery plasticized"—but quickly moves to a more distant "once upon a time" as the speaker recalls historical bodily feelings. The demand "open those doors & let me breathe" could be spoken by a captive on a slave ship or a child in a house where "lives go on & on." Similarly, intermixed with childhood memories and voices are "chiseled faces" and "short vowel sounds trapped under centuries of sediment." The speaker uses the first person only once in the poem, in this powerful statement of flesh memory: "i witness bones on the atlantic floor." Here, the speaker claims immediate knowledge of those bodies that were abandoned at sea and lost to history.

In addition, the poem emphasizes the highly linguistic nature of flesh memory, which Oliver described as "text," "language," "translation," "the multiplicity of language . . . that the flesh holds," and "the language activated in the body's memory" in her definition of the term. This definition suggests that the flesh carries linguistic artifacts or memories of language. In the lines above, these linguistic memories invoke public language such as the nursery rhyme line "let the cow jump over the moon," familial or intimate language such as "tell momma you love her," and the more distantly remembered statement "open those doors & let me breathe." All these texts, Oliver suggests, are stored in the flesh, but unlike the "undeci-

pherable . . . hieroglyphics of the flesh" that Spillers describes, these linguistic memories result in knowledge and connection, not disjuncture or repetitions of "initiating moments" of violence (Spillers, "Mama's" 260).

Oliver's use of parataxis in this poem juxtaposes images from multiple contexts and multiple speakers, shifting from "do the mash potato child" to "open those doors & let me breathe" to "tell momma you love her." Oliver suggests, however, that such multivocality is not disjunctive—that it does not disrupt or undermine subjectivity. Rather, this multivocality or inherent pluralness, Oliver suggests, is a condition of the remembering body's subjectivity. Far from implying a removal of subjectivity, the poem performs the remembering body's knowledge, and the depth and plurality of experience accessible through the body. Thus, Oliver reconfigures the relationship parataxis describes, revising the meaning of this juxtaposition, this adjacency, and presenting it as a device that makes room for representational pluralism.

Further, the paratactic sentences enact the knowledge of flesh memory, insisting on the relation of fragments from the present, recent past, and distant past to each other through the contemporary speaker's bodily memory. Because the experiences of specific past bodies are accessible through flesh memory and, Oliver suggests, potentially constitutive of contemporary subjectivity, the paratactic sentences here become specifically related, not randomly juxtaposed. The paratactic structure binds these parts into tight relation despite their temporal distance, performing the same act of merging or overlapping that happens in the remembering body, as bodily experiences that occurred over large expanses of space and time become intimately connected and accessible through flesh memory. Oliver suggests that the speaker's witnessing of "bones on the atlantic floor," "chiseled faces," and "short vowel sounds" recovers and restores information about African American history, language, and bodily experience, making available new resources for contemporary identity formation. Exploring the body's memory becomes an act of historical witness, epistemic remedy, and self-making.

While the speaker recalls and witnesses, she is clearly doing her own work of identity production. She states, "no sea takes me home," suggesting her distance from the historical Africans in slave ships and asserting a degree of ambivalence about an Afrocentric concept of African American identity. Oliver's resistance to Afrocentrism recurs in images throughout the collection.¹² The speaker's claim that "no sea takes me home" suggests that the gesture of flesh memory does not represent or endorse a wishful blurring or desire to disregard differences in bodies or bodily experiences. That is, these poems do not represent a wish to dehistoricize or depar-

ticularize historical knowledge—to transcend specific facts of bodies and their histories. Rather, Oliver’s flesh memory always roots knowledge in the body but affirms that bodies contain a vast history of knowledge that exceeds the bounds of one body’s literal experience. Thus, “flesh memory” constructs the individual body as a site of larger and longer historical knowledge than one literal life experience affords, while parataxis binds this disparate knowledge together formally in the body of each prose poem.

Indeed, Oliver’s poetry implies that the individual is not entirely bounded and discrete, but exists in very intimate interrelation with contemporary and historical others. Sharon P. Holland describes a similar recognition of the reality of intimacy, of nonseparation, despite the fiction of separation imaged by the language of personal identity—those categories, axes, and terms we use to define ourselves as black, brown, white, self, or other. Holland asserts: “We do not create intimacy; it is there awaiting our recognition. . . . We are bound intimately to others whether we realize or acknowledge such connection” (416). For Holland, relationality—being “bound intimately”—undermines the organizing, distinguishing, and separating logics of systems of personal identity and difference, though our reticence to “realize and acknowledge” attests to the importance of those systems.

Ultimately, Oliver’s poetry expresses ambivalence about the status of personal identity in its modern, western iteration, while acknowledging the ways historical and contemporary trauma threaten identity construction. The ambivalence of this model shows Oliver is also skeptical about identity systems as effective models for organizing and mobilizing information about the relationships among individuals and knowledge/power structures. Yet her model recognizes that identity construction is necessary for individuals on personal, practical, political, and spiritual levels—particularly in light of how traumatic events and representational gaps imperil and obstruct this process.

**“give up the ghosts of easy blackness”:
From Commodification to Pluralism**

In “pick any curtis mayfield song to accompany this,” Oliver engages in an incisive meditation on the tradition of African American representation and the struggle of black female self-making. She concludes this forty-seven-line poem:

all the way to the fair the innocent child blows bubbles. little fatalities.
 pick up a doll girl. learn the necessities of survival. braid its hair
 & caress. call her yourself. evil is everywhere etched in minstrel.
 dance. it's all right now. hold that brother's hand. dance.
 it's all right now. think of ways feet crossed swamps.
 give up the ghosts of easy blackness. i know what
 the visionaries want. i was willing to buy.
 the motherland myth. i want a way out too. (39, lines 40-47)

The directness and force of the rapidly juxtaposed images crafted through imperatives—"pick up," "learn," "braid," "caress"—render these gestures, which might be strong acts of independent agency, as acts of social reproduction or "necessities of survival." Their imperative tense leaves little room for play, turning a fairly ordinary image of playing with dolls (and practicing adult social behaviors) into a coping mechanism or powerless copy of behavior in the face of the incommensurable material of memory and representation: "evil is everywhere etched in minstrel." Similarly, the image of "dance . . . dance" feels frenetic and double: at once, the elicited, parodic dance of minstrelsy and the "authentic" performance of self-expression or bodily pleasure. At the same time, the call to "dance . . . dance" bookends the imperative "hold that brother's hand," suggesting a context of compulsory heterosexuality.

The last lines of the poem highlight the doubleness of the previous sentences and emphasize the problem of black self-making and meaning-making in light of the commodified state of representations of blackness. In spite of the speaker's sympathy with the "visionaries" (she relates to what they "want"), she also portrays them as sellers—the sellers of the "motherland myth" that the speaker admits she was also "willing to buy." Oliver suggests that curtailed, commodified, mass-produced images are the "ghosts of easy blackness," which the speaker rejects. Instead, she elects to remember, to invent and pluralize African American imagery, to "think of ways feet crossed swamps."

Oliver uses parataxis to accomplish this pluralizing, critiquing, and expanding of representational possibilities. The rapid succession of sentences recreates the rapid succession of new commodities, except that the poem, and the concept of flesh memory, refuses the replacement of old with new, electing instead to keep them side by side. Rather than remaking parataxis as commodification or rupture, Oliver uses it to critique the commodification of blackness and to move beyond a literature of rupture toward expansive, critically engaged representations of black female identity production.

“she said”: Desire and Self-Making

Oliver performs this extensive critique of identity and representation in a collection of love poems. I do not introduce the genre of the love poem to bury or push aside the subject of violence and its physical, affective, and epistemic repercussions, but to emphasize the connection. These love poems grapple with questions of history, violence, and their effects on identity, even while they address a “you” who is, at least some of the time, a lover. The sentences, in side-by-side relation, form a lover’s discourse in the tradition of Roland Barthes or Monique Wittig, so that desire or what Barthes would term the “discourse of absence” becomes the occasion for all discourses to enter the poems.

This sense of the poems as an extended lover’s dialogue starts with the titles. Oliver’s collection is called *the she said dialogues* because of the “she” voice in the title of nearly every poem: “she said, loss, lost,” “once upon a time, she said,” “summon, she said, her by the name you loved.” Discussing *the she said dialogues* with Rachel Levitsky, Tisa Bryant posits that the “she” is “the self, the lover, the inspiration . . . the mirror . . . memory, time itself. The multiplicity of the self, of experience, of desire . . . [a]nd perhaps even God, or god-as-conscience” (n. pag.). The “she” voice, which offers suggestions, gives instructions, and makes inquiries, frames the questions of knowing, recovering, remembering, forgetting, and integrating that are taken up by the poems. As the “she” voice instructs the speaker to document her body, state her desires, and interrogate her losses, the poems begin to link and correlate historical desire—that is, this longing for deleted history, for not-directly-accessible memory—with sexual desire. Both kinds of desire are involved in the way the poems construct identity—that is, the desire to state the self.

For example, consider the poem “summon, she said, her by the name you loved”:

what was I supposed to say
 the possibility of your breasts more enticing more
 beautiful than a threat of rain across hard earth. the scribes
 lost their way somewhere between the native wailing ghosts
 of new mexico and south carolina cotton fields. or was there
 sugarcane there. someone who knows should tell the
 urban black kids of uzi mtv and comic strip breakfasts. hail
 the gains of integration and cross the divide of race
 mythology. something is always lost when something is
 gained. who was prepared to pay the price for memory’s
 transference from the sacred to the profane. from
 porkchops to mcdonalds. working backwards. (34-35, 9-20)

The facts of history here are irretrievable (cotton or sugarcane?), the scribes are lost, and integration is collapsed into a past-tense “gain.” Oliver suggests that separately, any of these sources is a problematic base for contemporary identity production: “something is always lost.” Yet desire, which motivates memory throughout this text, draws these disparate historical, cultural, and literary materials into relation, rendering knowledges and identities contingent. The desire for historical knowledge and for language (“what was i supposed to say”) is reflected and amplified by the “possibility of your breasts” and the “threat of rain.” Parataxis again serves as a formal correlative for this discourse of sexual and historical desire as it places cultural materials into relation with each other and refuses to present categories or discourses singly or in isolation. Parataxis and desire cause discourses to become imbricated.

For this reason, I call this form of knowledge-construction queer—because it exceeds not only the boundaries of heterosexual discourse, but also the boundaries that organize the canonical discourses of slavery, sexuality, mythology, race, history, gender, past, and present. Oliver writes, “one girl said we will tell / them when they ask for a definition of relationship that i / am your white slave bitch and the other girl she laughed / she felt it was an appropriate twist of an appropriation” (67, 2-5). Oliver’s performance of flesh memory likewise represents “a twist of an appropriation”—a taking back, a reclaiming of the black female body and its representation.

Rather than reproducing the logic of rupture, further breaking bodies, voices, or epistemologies, Oliver’s critical poetics of identity turns to bodily memory as a reparative mode of knowledge. As a metaphorical, transpersonal, and transhistorical technology, Oliver’s flesh memory resists essentializing approaches to identity, yet carefully attends to the racialized, gendered, and sexualized body, expanding its history and its representational possibilities. In the service of flesh memory, Oliver’s parataxis comes to mean the crowding out of limited definitions, reductive images, singular knowledges, and restrictive systems of identity. Through these methods, Oliver’s poetics makes room for many representations and for many meanings of blackness.

Notes

1. I follow Oliver in using *black*, rather than *African American* in this essay. While Oliver uses *African American* to refer to cultural traditions, including literature, performance, and speech traditions, she consistently uses *black* and *blackness* to discuss bodily experience. Hortense J. Spillers, Saidiya V. Hartman, and Carla L. Peterson similarly employ *black* to emphasize the body’s visual meanings.

2. See, for example, Frederic Jameson (28-29). See also Lyn Hejinian (59-82, 135-60); Bob Perelman; and Ron Silliman (63-93).
3. For more on the racialization of poetry criticism and reception, see Houston A. Baker, Jr.; Harryette Mullen, Erica Hunt, Simon Gikandi, Juliana Spahr, and the introduction to Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue.
4. See, for example, Meta DuEwa Jones's "Politics, Process, & (Jazz) Performance: Amiri Baraka's 'It's Nation Time'" and "Listening to What the Ear Demands: Langston Hughes and His Critics."
5. Spahr, for example, writes, "Innovative is a word that is as hard to define as lyric, but for the most part here it means the use of agrammatical modernist techniques such as fragmentation, parataxis, run-ons, interruption, and disjunction, and at the same time the avoidance of linear narrative development, of meditative confessionality, and of singular voice" (2).
6. In this passage, Spahr describes the work of the twenty-first-century poets in the anthology whose work "does not appear conventionally feminist" (3), but the statement applies to earlier poets as well, because the poets Spahr references are influenced by those modernist innovators that DuPlessis describes.
7. Bob Perelman's analysis here responds to discussions of parataxis by Silliman and Jameson, both of whom interpret it as a quintessential postmodern mode, much like montage, but want to rescue its critical capacities in various ways. Perelman summarizes, "Both [Jameson and Silliman] are trying to fight reified parataxis—commodification—with a more committed, critical parataxis—the finding of hidden categorical similarities" (323). Perelman makes a similar point, but wants to further retrench the discussion by showing how parataxis is emerging from more abstract techniques. He emphasizes its popularization in the 1970s as an engaged alternative to more abstract poetic methods, including linguistic fracture, field poetics, cut-ups, found poetics, and bop-derived sound poetics. Perelman explains, "For some language writers, writing in sentences was one way to bring practice, politics, and daily life closer together" (315).
8. See, for example, Hartman.
9. The US National Slavery Museum, which was to be located in Fredericksburg, Virginia, is still working to raise the \$200 million it seeks to begin construction. Founded by L. Douglas Wilder, Mayor of Richmond and former Governor of Virginia, the museum was first proposed in 1993; it launched its first traveling exhibits in 2004 and an online exhibit in 2005. See www.usnsm.com, Julia M. Klein, and Pamela Gould. A Smithsonian National Museum of African American Culture and History is being planned for the Mall in Washington, DC, and is scheduled to open in 2015. See <http://nmaahc.si.edu/>.
10. Elsewhere, she italicizes familiar lyrics—"What's love got to do, got to do with it" (79, 16), along with language that is being examined by the poem, often language about language: "*language makes things false. conditional and / subject to agreement*" (34, 2-3); "i learned to say / boombox" (79, 16-17); and "they have a banishment for *lesbian* in our language he said" (82, 14).
11. Toni Morrison's "rememory" also carries this suggestion of transpersonal, transhistorical bodily memory.

12. For example: "in front of k-mart a man collects coins for a pan-african / jesus" (17, 1-2), "somalians in bloated stomach costumes / wrecking my panafrican day" (43, 9-10), or "somalia is / closer than watts so let's send the relief mission there" (37, 17-18). Oliver often highlights commodified images of Africa and pan-Africanism, decontextualized for consumers (again, parataxis as commodification). In these lines and others, Oliver resists the construction of Africa as a utopian site, home, or source of wholeness or sacredness; she writes, "abundant melanin makes no one holy" (38, 5).

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