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Not To Repeat History: Racialization and Combinatory Textuality
in Contemporary Asian American and African American Experimental
Writing

By

Christopher Sze-Ming Chen

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
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Committee in charge:

Professor Colleen Lye, Chair
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in Contemporary Asian American and African American Experimental
Writing

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Christopher Sze-Ming Chen

ABSTRACT

Not To Repeat History: Racialization and Combinatory Textuality in
Contemporary Asian American and African American Experimental
Writing

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Colleen Lye, Chair

This dissertation, *Not To Repeat History: Racialization and Combinatory Textuality in Contemporary Asian American and African American Experimental Writing*, examines the relationship between textual strategies and political imagination at work in Asian American and African American experimental writers Nathaniel Mackey, Myung Mi Kim, and Ed Roberson. Providing one of the first cross-cultural studies of contemporary Asian American and African American experimental writing, I contend that these writers pit two aspects of literary form against each other so as to stage a confrontation between the experience of racism and the possibility of escaping its logic. I argue that all of these writers turn to serial literary forms as a way of imitating what they take to be the power of racism to make individuals merely identical. At the same time these writers imagine the building blocks of textuality as sites of provisional abundance, either because of the traditionally combinatorial possibilities of texts, or because those possibilities are made

evident anew once texts are brought into relation with other media (for example in relation to music). I call this relation between serial literary forms and combinatory textual possibilities "racial constructivism." In other words, I argue that the poets share an understanding of racialized identities as both interchangeable and discontinuous, and so counterpose a combinatorial textuality which imagines both space and time for grief, renewal, or repair. My dissertation argues that inasmuch as these imaginings of the resources of textuality for poetry are pitted against an experience of racism as deparicularizing, the poets help us to move beyond the antinomy of a postmodern "poetics of form" and a postnationalist "politics of cultural difference."

My first chapter, entitled "An Axiomatic Chorus: Improvisation and Imagined Identities in Nathaniel Mackey's *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*," argues that Nathaniel Mackey's interest in musical improvisation pushes past texts in order to return to them with a renewed sense of combinatory possibilities. By utilizing the epistolary novel form, and refusing linear narrative development in favor of oblique chains of association, and taking jazz improvisation as a model for black experimental literary practice, Mackey not only produces a restless variety of figures for expressive force but also invents a digressive form spacious enough to hold them all in tension. In Mackey's epistolary novel series, *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, the protagonist N. writes letters to an interlocutor known only as "The Angel of Dust," whose responses are alluded to but absent from the texts. In these letters, N. chronicles the performances of an imagined group of avant-garde jazz musicians, the "Molimo m'Atet," and searches for linguistic analogues to musical improvisation. While readers are kept guessing as to whether the anonymity or pseudonymity of the "Angel of Dust" names an imagined muse, an addiction, or perhaps Mackey himself, the combination of the particulate metaphor of dust with the implicit animating power of "angel" provides a compact description of the novels' assemblage of figures out of permutable textual building blocks. I argue that the novel series both embodies and diagnoses the limits of such a constructivist impulse by revealing how such combinatory literary strategies mime racialization processes in order to overcome them. I argue that at key moments in the novel series, this racial constructivism is problematized by the protagonists' immobilizing experiences of contingency and automaticity

In my second chapter, "What is nearest is destroyed': Myung Mi Kim's 'Thirty and Five Books' and Racial Comparison," I show how Myung Mi Kim's interest in the "recombinatory power of language" functions both as a metaphor for cultural hybridization and as a set of formal strategies capable of representing interracial conflict and the dissolution of intercultural social bonds. In this chapter, I analyze an underexamined feature of the poet's works in a poem entitled "Thirty and Five Books" from a more recent volume, *Dura*—the essential political ambiguity of the poem's use of "recombinatory" or serial forms, the problem of the comparability of nonwhite communities during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and finally the significance of the systems of counting, accounting, and measurement which permeate the poem. "Thirty And Five Books" takes this interest in "accounts and recounting" and interrogates the hierarchical racial schemas which structured media representations of interracial conflict between African American and Asian American communities during the Los Angeles riots in 1992 in the wake of the acquittal of four police officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King. I contend that the systems of measurement and classification which organize so much of the poem are inseparable from the poem's vision of non-hierarchical social relations modeled after the linguistic hybridity of what the poet calls a "A banter English."

My third chapter, "Infinite Regressions: Ed Roberson, Serial Identities, and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement Lunch Counter Sit-Ins," performs an extended close reading of Roberson's poem "Sit In What City We're In," from the author's 2006 book *City Eclogue*. Roberson's poem reimagines the waves of 1960s lunch counter sit-in's as an opportunity to pose fundamental questions about the nature of racial representation in the post-civil rights era. Roberson does this by reconfiguring the sit-ins in space and in time: spatially, by tracking how mirrors behind a lunch counter create an infinite regress of reflected images of protestors and counterprotestors alike; and temporally, by reconnecting the evanescent figure of the city to the earth and enduring cyclical geological processes. Roberson's poem "Sit In What City We're In" commemorates the lunch counter sit-in movement which swept the south in the 1960s by dilating the moment and the movement in space and time and by refusing the kind of distanced, spectatorial historical framing which would safely consign the antiracist ideals of the civil right movement to the past. Instead, Roberson reimagines the scene of the sit-

ins as what I want to call a failed dialectic of racial recognition in which the promise of formal equality, desegregation, and equal protection gives way to a meditation on the homogenizing force of such ideals. I argue that Roberson stages the civil rights sit-ins as a moment of conflict between an integrationist politics in pursuit of equal citizenship rights and a later pluralist multicultural politics of recognition which emphasize cultural difference rather than similarity. As a result, the poem, and I would argue the *City Eclogue* as a whole, pioneers a novel mode of historical recollection which reveals both the appearance of the past in the present, and vice-versa. Finally I argue that Roberson's interest in the figure of the city, and the anonymity of urban life, allows the poem to represent the promise of formal equality as fundamentally compatible with racially segregated social relations.

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Introduction

This dissertation is a comparative study of contemporary African American and Asian American experimental fiction and poetry from the 1980s to the present. My dissertation examines the relationship between textual strategies and political imagination at work in Asian American and African American experimental writers Nathaniel Mackey, Myung Mi Kim, and Ed Roberson. Offering one of the first comparative studies of Asian American and African American experimental poetry and poetics, I argue that these writers pit two aspects of literary form against each other so as to stage a confrontation between the experience of racism and the possibility of escaping its logic. On the one hand, I argue, all of these writers turn to serial forms as a way of imitating what they take to be the power of racism to make individuals merely identical. On the other, these writers imagine the building blocks of textuality as sites of provisional abundance, either because of the traditionally combinatory possibilities of texts, or because those possibilities are made evident anew once texts are brought into relation with other media (for example music). I call this relation between the logic of racialization and combinatorial textuality "racialized constructivism." In other words, I argue that the poets share an understanding of racialized identities as both interchangeable and discontinuous, and so counterpose a combinatorial textuality which generates both space and time for grief, renewal, or repair. My dissertation argues that inasmuch as these imaginings of the resources of textuality for poetry are pitted against an experience of race as the creation of homogeneous serial identities, the poets help us to move beyond the reified critical categories which have typically situated these poets between a postmodern "poetics of form" and a postnationalist "poetics of identity." Ultimately I argue that these writers work out the terms of a poetic racial discourse,

echoing the critical thought of Sartre, Fanon, and others, which exceeds the terms of the debate.

Rejecting or radically revising forms of writing which privilege confessional autobiographical narratives and realist aesthetic values, a number of Asian American and African American poets from the early 1990s onward have been characterized as experimental, innovative, or avant-garde—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, John Yau, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Myung Mi Kim, Nathaniel Mackey, Erica Hunt, Harryette Mullen, Claudia Rankine, Lorenzo Thomas, Tyrone Williams, and Ed Roberson to name a few influential figures. Though some of these poets have been writing for decades, the term “experimental” has only recently been subjected to substantial critical scrutiny for its applicability to non-dominant cultural contexts. Which is to say contemporary critical accounts of postmodern American poetry have typically counterposed literary traditions which engage, explicitly or implicitly, with the subject of racial and ethnic identity formation, to a body of formal experimentation in poetry and fiction which has remained critical of the mimetic or referential “transparency” of language on which such multiethnic literary traditions are seen to depend. The terms “innovative,” “experimental,” or “avant-garde” have typically been used interchangeably to invoke a tradition of twentieth century avant-garde literary movements from Objectivism and the poets collected in Donald Allen’s influential midcentury anthology *The New American Poetry*, to contemporary Language writing by poets like Charles Bernstein, Leslie Scalapino, Lyn Hejinian, and Barrett Watten. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Nathaniel Mackey, in particular, have been central to bridging this generic divide between multiethnic postmodern poetry and fiction and more recent avant-gardes like the Language poets. In an era marked by intense, protracted debates over the inclusion of writers of color, women, and queer authors, in course syllabi, figures like Cha and Mackey have brought attention to the construction of margins and mainstreams within ethnic literary traditions themselves—between on the one hand works which stress their representative character, often written in an autobiographical or lyric mode, and on the other works which reject these conventions in favor of non-narrative, disjunctive literary forms.¹ As Mackey and others have argued, authors whose works

¹ See Bona and Maini, particularly the introduction, for a brief history of these debates over canonical inclusion in the 1980s through the early 1990s.

refuse or complicate the referential "transparency" of lyric, confessional, or autobiographical modes of writing become doubly-marginalized within ethnic literary traditions which have historically attacked or ignored modes of writing which do not seem to express legible racial and ethnic identities:

Failures or refusals to acknowledge complexity among writers from socially marginalized groups, no matter how "well-intentioned," condescend to the work and to the writers, and thus, hardly the solution they purport to be, are part of the problem. Allied with such simplistic readings is the tendency to overlook variance and divergent approaches in the writing from such groups, especially to overlook writing that defied canons of accessibility. The clear, polemical sloganeering Baraka is better known and more widely validated, despite the controversies his work has aroused, than the obscure, introspective LeRoi Jones, just as Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" is thought to be more genuine than "The Anniad." The poetry of Melvin Tolson, the poetry and plays of Jay Wright and such work as William Melvin Kelley's *Dunfords Travels Everywheres* and N.J. Loftis's *Black Anima* tend to become margins within the margins, receiving much less attention than they deserve. (Mackey, *Discrepant* 18)

Since Mackey offered this diagnosis, critics and poets like Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Lorenzo Thomas, Harryette Mullen, Fred Moten, Evie Shockley, and Keith Tuma have attempted to direct more attention toward the poets Mackey mentions and a larger tradition of "black abstraction" (Nielsen, *Ain't* 21) or a "black radicalism as experimental black performance" (Moten, *Break* 18). Here Mackey discerns in this relative critical neglect a systemic problem of literary categorization and homogenization which reads literature by authors from socially marginalized groups as the mimetic expression of normative, "representative" racial and ethnic identities. "The problem...is not peculiar to African American literature," Mackey argues, "However much the ghettoization to which black writers tend to be subjected exacerbates and gives particular pungency to the more general problematics of categorization" (*Discrepant* 4).

Similarly, at roughly the same moment in the late 1980s, Asian American scholars reclaimed Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* after nearly a decade of critical neglect in order to delimit a kind of representative Asian American identity as paradoxically founded on the impossibility of constructing such a representative subject. Echoing Mackey's anti-essentialist

critique of racial categorization and the expulsion of opaque or "difficult" texts from contemporary accounts of black literature, critics like Elaine Kim, Shelley Sunn Wong, and Laura Kang took Cha's fragmentary, non-narrative experimental novel as paradigmatic of what Kandice Chuh has called a kind of "subjectless" (9) Asian American discourse. "Neither developmental nor univocal," Lisa Lowe contends, "the subject of *Dictée* continually thwarts the reader's desire to abstract a notion of ethnic or national identity—originating either from the dominant culture's interrogation of its margins, or in emergent minority efforts to establish unitary ethnic or cultural nationalist examples" (Lowe, *Writing* 36). Subsequently, Cha's status has been split between being an experimental author, whose works circulated largely within white avant-garde audiences in New York, and an exemplary Asian American author whose works explore the extreme fragmentation of ethnic and gender identity under the impact of a genocidal colonial history, diasporic displacement, contradictory protocols for cultural assimilation, and the ultimately disciplinary character of immigrant language acquisition. Cha's writings have typically been seen as inaugurating a lineage of Asian American experimental writing which Timothy Yu has labeled "avant-garde" and which Steven G. Yao has called a poetics of "ethnic abstraction":

Starting in roughly the late 1980s or so, the...most recently emergent mode of verse production among writers of Asian descent in the United States began to take coherent shape, namely what I call "ethnic abstraction." Expressly departing from the terms underwriting both racial protest and lyric testimony, writers operating in the mode of ethnic abstraction largely reject the notion of individual subjectivity giving voice to personal experience as the conceptual ground for poetic expression. At the same time, however, neither have they abandoned the category of ethnic or minority identity as a matter for dedicated exploration through verse. Instead they have cultivated various "experimental," nonrepresentational strategies, thereby expanding both the formal and thematic reach of Asian American poetry, oftentimes in order to interrogate the very condition of ethnicity itself precisely as a social and discursive formation. (Yao 15).

For Yao, this literary strain of Asian American "abstraction" includes poets like John Yau, Mei Mei Berssenbrugge, Myung Mi Kim, and more recently, Tan Lin. I contend that the notion of

seriality, both as form and concept, marks a point of convergence between two radically dissimilar literary traditions around a critique of a pluralist multiculturalism and its demand for literary representations of legible racial and ethnic identities. Thus writers as seemingly different as Mackey and Kim, with the former's passionate engagement with avant-garde jazz and African and Egyptian mythology, and the latter's fascination with diasporic populations emerging from longer histories of colonialism and enslavement, employ serial forms to critique and offer alternatives to the "exclusionary dimensions inscribed within both the tenets of the prevailing liberal multiculturalist order and the more recent post-identitarian attacks on those very assumptions" (Yao 15-16). This study proposes that these African American and Asian American postmodern authors employ serial literary forms to counterpose the possibilities of combinatory textuality to a particular pluralist comparative framework which renders racial and ethnic identities formally equivalent and essentially modular.

These poets share an understanding of what Nicholas LoLordo has called a pluralist identity poetics and its demand for representation in a double-sense—for anthological inclusion of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups on the one hand, and on the other for realist, autobiographical modes of writing which might adequately reflect or express representative racial and ethnic identities:

...[A]ny overtly academic anthology will necessarily be governed by the representational logic of the academy. But if the dominant logic of the academy is pluralism, how do the pluralist predicates of social identity interlock with poetic values? Poets exist for the anthology as subjects marked by the predicates of identity before they exist as the embodiment of any particular poetics. ...In the realm of poetry, identity politics is...usefully conceived of as an agenda whose effects are visible at the level of canon formation. In this sense, what individual poets think about identity politics doesn't matter: the selection of contemporary poetry as a whole issues out of liberal pluralism, the scheme of representation by which our society negotiates the relations between competing identities. (LoLordo 5-11)

The fact that authors from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups exist as "subjects marked by the predicates of identity before they exist as the embodiment of any particular poetics"

(8) constructs an interpellative structure which the poets who are the subject of my study. Despite the best-intentions of editors, this representational logic constructs a kind of "taxonomic grid" (Mackey, *Paracritical* 210) of racial categorization in which poets are inevitably representative iterations of categorical or what I call serial identities. As part of ongoing debates over the canonical inclusion of authors from underrepresented groups, the use of identity categories as a principle of literary selection have provoked a range of critical responses to the use of such extra-literary criteria as a necessary corrective for previous race-based forms of literary exclusion. Such a politics of literary and political representation has been subjected to various latter day Arnoldian critiques which uphold the paired values of aesthetic universality and national culture, or perhaps what could be described as the aesthetic universality of national culture.² Despite what could obviously be read as radically divergent poetic projects—from Nathaniel Mackey's interest in avant-garde jazz improvisation and African and Egyptian mythology to Myung Mi Kim's dramatization of immigrant language acquisition and the global movements of diasporic populations—I contend that Mackey, Kim, and Roberson each attempt to diagnose, inhabit, and deform the underlying iterative, representational logic of a literary politics of identity through their use of serial literary forms.

One can perhaps not imagine a more stark exhibit of the disciplinary character of these multiculturalist representational protocols than an exchange between John Yau and Eliot Weinberger in two 1994 issues of *The American Poetry Review*.³ After a letter to the *American Poetry Review* criticizing

² See Hirsch and Bloom.

³ To give another prominent example of how formal innovation and avant-garde literary formations were often counterposed to a fundamentally mimetic poetics of identity, Marjorie Perloff's condemnation of a poetics of "ethnic amelioration," in "Postmodernism/Fin de Siecle: The Prospect For Openness In A Decade Of Closure," slides uneasily between a prescriptive critique of the "poetry of the marginalized" and a celebration of deracialized formal experiment. In a critique of a poem by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Perloff argues against the "synecdochic fallacy" of assuming that a poet like Sáenz is somehow representative of Chicano poetry and poetics more generally. And yet for Perloff the category of the "poems of the marginalized" is remobilized in order to condemn the critical latitude afforded to such poems. Perloff writes, "To encourage this kind

Weinberger's anthology, *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators And Outsiders*, for the almost total absence of poets of color in its pages, the binary of formal innovation, synonymous with aesthetic agency in general, and a "vulgar" politics of racial representation seems to structure in advance the discussion between Yao, Weinberger, and a number of subsequent APR commentators almost unanimously supportive of Weinberger's rebuttal and editorial stance. Weinberger charges Yau with creating a historically inauthentic "new persona for himself: that of the angry outsider 'person of color'":

To do so, he has had to obscure the fact that, previous to now, he has belonged almost entirely to that corner of the poetry world represented in part by my book. ...I spent years studying Chinese—which John barely speaks and cannot read—and have written extensively on Chinese poetry. ...My latest book is largely about Asia and Latin America; John's latest book is on Andy Warhol. Nearly all of his voluminous criticism is on white artists, most of them men. And yet, according to the new orthodoxy which John now fashionably subscribes, the fact of my birth makes my interests colonialist, whereas the fact of his birth makes his disinterest irrelevant (Weinberger 43).

Weinberger's judgment about the unlocatability of Yau's ethnicity assumes a model of racialized identity formation which confuses voluntary ethnic identification with racial ascription and overwrites an "indigenous" Asian American poetic tradition in favor of "Asia." Yau's cultural credentials can subsequently be revoked due to the fact that the latter "has probably never written a social protest poem in his adult life" (43) and instead has chosen to concentrate on white male artists like

of writing in the name of ethnic diversity is to assume that the 'marginalized' have the right (perhaps even the duty) to use what would otherwise be considered well-worn clichés because these groups have hitherto been denied all access to poetic speech, because their voices have been suppressed by the dominant culture. But such validation is based on the further assumption that a poem like 'The Willow' represents Chicano poetics as such, an assumption that is again an instance of what I have called the synecdochic fallacy. Indeed, the irony is that the refusal to submit the poems of the marginalized to any kind of serious critique accomplishes nothing so much as the marginalization of poetry itself."

Jasper Johns and John Ashbery. The almost parodic figure of the "angry outsider 'person of color'" (43) here functions as a category of derogation, a stereotype of a polemical cultural nationalism, and specification of the parameters of racial and ethnic intelligibility. Yau's interest in white painters and poets does not register as recognizably "ethnic" in this case and thus belongs "almost entirely to that corner of the poetry world represented in part by [Weinberger's] book" (43), which is here tacitly understood to be white. Yau, it would seem, has forfeited his status as a person of color through his immersion in a culture of white avant-gardism. The exchange is a particularly dramatic illumination of the literary borderlands between what Nathaniel Mackey will call "canons of accessibility and disclosure that are viewed as diametrically opposed to the difficulty attributed to formally innovative or experimental work" (*Paracritical* 240).

And yet in this exchange Yau's deethnicization or indeterminate ethnicity registers the historical origins of an emergent Asian American literature's attempts to emulate or mimic African American cultural nationalist literary traditions. For Daniel Y. Kim, any account of this relationship must acknowledge how "Asian Americans, unlike African Americans, have not been regarded as having developed the kind of vernacular traditions in the United States that could fortify claims to an ethnically distinct form of supraliteracy" (xxv) or "vernacular tradition exemplified by black music" (xxv). My comparative study presuppose such historical differences and instead treats the category of African American and Asian American experimental writing in the postnationalist era as responding directly to the implicit yet pervasive pluralist multiculturalist criteria used to determine the legibility and representativeness of racial and ethnic identities. Rey Chow calls these protocols examples of "coercive mimeticism" or "self-mimicry":

...coercive mimeticism [is]...a process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected, by way of what Albert Memmi calls "the mark of the plural," to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imagings of them as ethnics. (107)

In order to produce a comparative account of contemporary minority experimental writing which might find common ground, so

to speak, between such historically dissimilar literary traditions, I must turn to the centrality of literary form as a mediator between often fused literary and political discourses of representation and offer an anti-essentialist critique not of identity but of the concept of literary form itself.

The failure to register the difference between involuntary racial categorization and voluntary ethnic identification in the exchange between Yau and Weinberger is symptomatic what Susan Koshy discerns as a broader "morphing of race into ethnicity in public discourses" (*Morphing* 156). For Koshy, the "culturalist bias of institutionalized multiculturalism" (156) aggressively ignores the "dialectic between assignation and assertion that shapes the content of racial categories" (158). Thus "In this society all poets are Others," Weinberger writes, "Any poem can be about anything the writer desires; and that differences among poets must be drawn along aesthetic lines, regardless of race or sex" (43). Which is to say literary form itself, and formal innovation, becomes a kind of locus of aesthetic universality over and against the particularity of identity categories. More specifically, aesthetic form mediates the conversion of sociocultural difference into aesthetic or literary difference. What's remarkable about such a claim is that aesthetic universality, and in particular experimental poetic form, comes to be defined as a generalized alterity—which is to say predominantly in terms of the very racial and ethnic identity categories which such universality is meant to transcend. In other words, what is meant to subtend identity is here structured like an identity. Though it may sound like a counterintuitive claim, I contend that the multicultural pluralization of identity and the anti-mimetic power of experimental form are not opposed or antithetical social dynamics but, I would argue, mutually defining and equally structured by an underlying "taxonomic grid" (*Paracritical* 208) of racial categorization and racial legibility which Mackey, Kim, and Roberson both diagnose and contest through their use of serial literary forms. Such a taxonomy ultimately takes a number of different serial forms which these authors register and traverse: from modular and commensurable collective cultural identities in urban space to the serial form of the list or grid in which works by authors drawn from particular racial and ethnic communities are made representative and exchangeable. I employ the phrase "multiculturalism" advisedly, due to the term's multiple and contested meanings, to name both an overarching pluralist political meant to incorporate marginalized social groups into the sociocultural space of the nation and a specifically literary politics of curricular

revision, canon (re)formation, and anthological inclusion which attracted significant controversy and occasioned significant debate beginning in the late 1980s.⁴

In a period of protracted debates over the merits of including authors from marginalized groups in anthologies and course syllabi, both African American and Asian American poets invested in questioning the dominance of realist aesthetic values within these literary traditions, confront the same cross-cultural "problematics of categorization" (Mackey, *Discrepant* 4) and use serial literary forms to illuminate the conceptual architecture of pluralist multiculturalism and a corresponding set of cultural demands for legible literary representations of racial and ethnic identities. Describing this "problematics of categorization" in relation to Chinese racial formation in the United States, Steven G. Yao has observed that long histories of domestic racial classification has a synecdochic or metonymic character. "Indeed, to the extent that it seeks to define and situate in relation to one another whole identities precisely through the judicious selection of representative constituent parts," Yao asserts, "The very act of classification itself arguably rests upon the conceptual operation of synecdoche" (Yao 30). What Yao has labeled a synecdochic or metonymic logic of racial classification, I want to call *racial serialization*. Racial serialization describes a kind of pluralist social ontology and system of racial classification which renders racialized identities modular, homogenous, and susceptible to politically unpredictable forms

⁴ For a more detailed genealogy of the term "multiculturalism" and its various meanings—specifically its critique of curricular monoculturalism and its relationship to liberal pluralist political ideals—see Goldberg, "Introduction: Multicultural Conditions," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*. "So, where assimilation previously had dominated America's prevailing ethnic self-image and presupposing a white face to go along with white culture," Goldberg argues, "pluralism represented the ideological and rhetorical outcomes of the liberatory struggles in the 1960s. And where the monocultural commitments of a common, singular, universal, canonical, liberal education—the Great Books, Western civilization, European letters in spatial and racial senses—had dominated the academy without as much as having to register resistance.... The emergence of contemporary multiculturalisms, then, is to be understood in relation to the twentieth century domination of monoculturalism. (Goldberg, *Multiculturalism* 10-11)

of recombination and reconstitution. My study contends that contemporary African American and Asian American experimental writing is permeated by this pluralist logic of racial classification and incorporation, and employs serial literary forms to both symbolize and circumvent this social logic. Driven by what could be characterized as serial or combinatorial forms of anagrammatic and metonymic wordplay and an overarching serial epistolary narrative structure, Mackey's novel series *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* represents what I take to be one of the most extensive and playful attempts to articulate a black serial poetics which I argue can be used to articulate a postmodern and postnationalist poetics of racial and ethnic seriality more broadly.

As the Oxford English Dictionary reminds us, the term "seriality" is an attribute of "Belonging to, forming part of, or consisting of a series; taking place or occurring in a regular succession" ("Seriality"). Additionally, the term describes periodicals and television or radio shows released in installments or a form of musical composition pioneered by early twentieth century European composer Arnold Schönberg. Derived from the Latin *seriēs*, designating a row or chain, and like *serēre*, meaning to join or connect, seriality also assumes a specific definition in relation to contemporary experimental, innovative or avant-garde poetry and fiction which has come to rely heavily on the use of chance operations and other repeated procedures to generate texts. Proceduralism, Joseph M. Conte argues, "rejects the concept of a form superimposed on preexistent content; instead, it proposes a system of arbitrary constraints which functions as a generative device" (Conte 40). Serial forms, on the other hand, describe the arrangement and rearrangement of recurring, modular linguistic elements—from sounds to phrases—in order to form a set or "series" of these elements in various combinations. Examples of serial literary forms range from epistolary exchanges in fiction to poems like William Carlos Williams *Spring and All*, George Oppen's *Discrete Series*, Jack Spicer's *Jack Spicer's 1962 The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, Michael Palmer's "Sun," Alfred Arteaga's *Cantos*, or Harryette Mullen's *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*.

Akin to earlier collagistic or montagic poetic forms, serial form develops non-narratively through the shifting, sometimes aleatory relations between repeated elements. For Conte, who draws heavily upon Umberto Eco's writings on "open works" (13-14), the ubiquity of serial and procedural poetic forms in postmodern American poetry not only reveal their complementarity but also their status as non-hierarchical, exploratory modes of thought and expression:

The serial form constitutes itself on the instant from a set of mobile and discontinuous objects; and it may reconstitute itself at the next instant from a varied set of objects. Each new combination produces a new meaning, reorients itself as a new aesthetic object. ...The polyvalence of serial thought concerns itself neither with grand summation nor with the reduction of multiple alternatives to a single "truth." ...Serial thought recognizes that each conjunction of objects has a meaning; that the objects are capable of rearrangement; and that that subsequent arrangement also has a meaning which is no way "secondary" to its initial articulation. (Conte 24-25)

Conte's highly influential typology of serial and procedural forms emphasize the peculiarly postmodern virtues of their "polyvalence"—which includes the forms' non-narrative development through an emphasis on metonymic displacements of meaning rather than metaphorical depth. In contrast to poetic modes like the Romantic sequence or confessional lyric, serial and procedural forms emphasize the critical power of rearrangement to relativize mimetic or representational models of poetic expression and intention. Of course language itself, and all linguistic signs, could be said to constitute overarching serial forms or systems. Which is to say Conte is not simply arguing about a set of literary forms or formal procedures, but a particular way of thematizing these forms as an engagement with the opacity of language itself as a medium of expression. It is crucial to maintain this distinction between a metaphoricity of form and form understood as a set of literary techniques or strategies in order to account for the complex functioning of this form in the works of Mackey, Kim, and Roberson.

Existing critical attempts to theorize a postmodern serial poetics in American poetry have tended to highlight their emancipatory character, and to align the use of such non-narrative forms with what Marjorie Perloff has called a "poetry of indeterminacy" (*Poetics* 4), and typically ignore how these forms have also come to represent racial segregation, categorization, and confinement in contemporary African American and Asian American experimental writing. The poets who are the subject of my study help us to complicate this distinction between form understood as a synonym for aesthetic agency in general and racial and ethnic identities understood as fixed, preconstituted, and predictable social "content." Or as Mackey pointedly asserts, "The distinction between a formally

innovative willingness to incur difficulty, on the white hand, and a simple disclosure of innovative content, on the black, is a simple or simplistic one, but telling nonetheless" (*Paracritical* 241).

"Racialization" here names modes of racial categorization and of emphasizing how racial identity as a dynamic process of negotiating these categories and the material practices which hold them in place.⁵ My use of the term "racialization" also draws upon Michael Omi and Howard Winant's concept of a "racial formation," which characterizes the politically enforced classification of groups into races, and the formation of a racial order which links these categories to systems of political and institutional power, as well as describing ongoing histories of resistance to such projects. Of course these two aspects of serial forms are intertwined in the work of the Mackey, Kim, and Roberson. The fluctuating, unsettled space opened up between these two aspects of serial form in their writing mime racialization processes and offer a vision of combinatory textuality as a way of subverting the homogenizing logic of such processes.

What Kim calls the "fierce unsystematic recombinatory power of language," and Mackey a black experimental literary tradition of "centrifugal writing" (*Paracritical* 240), or "cross-cultural work with an emphasis on the centrifugal" (*Paracritical* 245), is presented as a space of abundance and offers time for resistance, repair, or grieving. It is this sense of serial form as generating a multiplicity of worlds and identities which is celebrated by critic Jim Keller in his account of contemporary African American and Chicano serial poetry, a form which he argues embodies pluralist ideals:

The increased popularity of the serial, pluralistic, and innovative multiethnic poem in the United States owes, in large part, to the special suitability of this form to the complex needs of marginalized social groups. The poetic series remains engagingly problematic insofar as its localist elements tend to resist broader social and cultural statements, while its recombinations of themes enable temporarily abiding cultural, social, or personal narratives. By using extended poetic forms like the series, which makes networks of texts out of their component poems, poets within the U.S. multiethnic avant-garde have proven

⁵ For a comparative analysis of the history of the term "racialization," see Murji and Solomos 1-27.

uniquely able to depict plural worlds within a single lyric space and to translate fragmented experiences into multiple livable identities. Contemporary poets rely on this plurality of worlds to provide a viable way of drawing a latticework of connections across everyday notions of agency, gender, race, and nation. Their ability to interpose multiple worldviews in their longer work enables experimental serial poets to imagine empowering concepts of identity that remain both self-consciously constructed and traditionally, ethnically rooted. (Keller 5)

And yet what Keller calls the writing of "partial, weakly interacting worlds" (5) or "plural worlds" (5) is just one way of thematizing these forms.⁶ The pluralization of worlds and identities is not, I would argue, the only way such forms signify or function semantically. My study argues that it is the very representational logic of a pluralist multicultural literary politics which is called into question by the use of serial forms in contemporary minority experimental writing. For Mackey, Kim, and Roberson, such recursive forms are used to register, at a kind of prefigurative level of abstraction, histories of racial categorization, displacement, and spatial segregation.

In a special issue on poet Ed Roberson, Brent Hayes Edwards attempts to theorize this dual or contrapuntal character of serial form in contemporary black serial poetry written by poets like Roberson, and poet-critics like Mackey, Fred Moten, and Harryette Mullen. Contemporary black serial poetics, Edwards argues, is structured by a "constitutive dialectic between the

⁶ Keller goes on to argue for the prevalence of serial form as an indication of its power to pose "a challenge to lyric poetry, which, as a genre, resists singular narrative closure. The resistance to narrative, the tensions between narrative unity and the poem's artifice—the tangents, fragments, and possible recombinations that characterize the series—all enable the poet to complicate cultural identity even while realizing multiple, deeply abiding social bonds. The series gives up the notion of one comprehensive, narrative view of cultural reality in favor of constructing coherent accounts of locality by recombining selves and worlds. Discrete poems arranged within series unexpectedly combine and tentatively resonate, related by what might best be considered "family resemblances." Local worlds, too, remain recombinatory, and the process of linguistic innovation by way of rupture and intertranslation requires a long, paratactic, and accumulative form" (Keller 20).

urge to expansion and exploration, on the one hand, and the confrontation of boundaries, gaps, limits, on the other" (Edwards, *Serial* 629). Edwards' insight here aptly summarizes the split nature of a black serial poetics, but I also want to argue the particular cross-cultural salience of a serial poetics of identity beginning in the late 1980s at the height of debates over literary canon formation. These debates, as John Guillory argues, have typically been launched by a "pluralist critique of the canon" (10) seen as the preserve of dominant cultures which is itself dependent upon the conflation of literary and political forms of representation:

The sense in which a canonical author represents a dominant social group, or a noncanonical author a socially defined minority, is continuous with the sense that in which the work is perceived to be immediately expressive of the author's experience as a representative member of some social group. The primacy of the social identity of the author in the pluralist critique of the canon means that the revaluation of works on this basis will inevitably seek its ground in the author's experience, conceived as the experience of a marginalized race, class, or gender identity. ...The typical valorization of the noncanonical author's experience as a marginalized social identity necessarily reasserts the transparency of the text to the experience it represents. ...Hence the critique of the canon remains quite vulnerable to certain elementary theoretical objections, but this fact is itself symptomatic of a political dilemma generated by the very logic of liberal pluralism. It suggests that the category of social identity is too important politically to yield any ground to theoretical arguments which might complicate the status of representation in literary texts, for the simple reason that the latter mode of representation is *standing in for* representation in the political sphere. ...Hence the *theory* of representation, and the *politics* of representation, have begun to move in quite different directions. (Guillory 10-11)

Guillory's critique of the fusing of the representational logic of liberal pluralism and epistemological critiques of the referential "transparency" of language itself echoes the binary of form and racial identity which continues to structure critical accounts contemporary minority experimental writing and postmodern American poetry and poetics more broadly. For Mackey, Kim, and Roberson, it is precisely the relationship between

these divergent or discrepant senses of representation which animate their respective poetic projects and model a cross-cultural serial poetics of identity. These experimental writers articulate a "poetics of identity," and a strategic cultural intervention into the literary politics of representation, at a level of formal abstraction which registers and ceaselessly returns to rattle the reified and commensurable categories of identity which have made such a poetics possible in the first place.

In order to navigate these competing discourses about literary form and racial and ethnic "content," we must challenge the idea that poetic techniques can possess a fixed and intrinsic political valence or thematic character. In other words we must question the assertion that such forms carry some kind of essential discursive, rhetorical "identity" so to speak. What I have been calling the thematization of literary form is for Mutlu Blasing the relationship between "a given style or set of techniques (whether experimental or traditional) and the discourses they can only represent—the moral, political, and metaphysical positions they can only signify" (12):

This essentialist, ahistorical alignment of given technical strategies with moral, metaphysical, or political values is a historically specific confusion. Before we can even begin to conceive of the history of postwar poetry, we need to identify such a conflation of different discourses as itself representing a modernist aesthetic ideology, a reification of what can only be metaphoric links... (Blasing 2)

Blasing's warning about the immediate translation of technical devices into political power clearly has profound implications for my study of the postmodern poetics of identity.

An American poetic historiography must allow for both a synchronic variety of formal options and a diachronic variety of the political purposes they may serve at different times. Neither a synchronic typology of forms nor a diachronic development alone but a grid would make for a convincing model of American poetic history, for it could register both the political pressures that modify formal typologies and the formal negotiations of political imperatives. (14)

Blasing helps to remind us that discourses which emphasize the activity of form as such often fall prey to a kind of ubiquitous aestheticist fallacy—a kind of an unavoidable essentializing of

technique when making claims about exemplary ethnic authors and works—which has structured so much critical commentary on contemporary experimental literature and the relationship between literary form, innovative or otherwise, and racial and ethnic identity. Blasing's arguments reminds us of the impossibility of somehow arriving at a pure and isolable category of literary form as such which will allow us to periodize contemporary experimental writing by poets of color. Any attempt to naturalize the linkage between the contemporary category of "identity" and specific formal devices thus inevitably posits the adequation of identity as one more "natural form," an ultimately extrinsic, contingent, and non-literary determination. The use of serial forms by Mackey, Kim, and Roberson's reveal how it is not preconstituted racial identities which are being expressed in their works, but instead a kind of non- or prefigural, imaginative force—a kind of recursive, racialized constructivism—capable of miming and deforming a social logic of racial categorization, hierarchization, and intelligibility peculiar to an emergent pluralist multiculturalism in the academy. Despite the fact that the debates over ethnic canons and curricular reform are nearly twenty years old, and their polemical intensity muted and seemingly long ago decided in favor of modest curricular revisions, I contend that the conceptual infrastructure of this racializing taxonomic grid, dependent upon the continuing salience of culture for postracial iterations of pluralist ideals, remain firmly in place.

Chapter Summaries

My first chapter, entitled "An Axiomatic Chorus: Improvisation and Imagined Identities in Nathaniel Mackey's *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*," argues that Nathaniel Mackey's interest in musical improvisation pushes past texts in order to return to them with a renewed sense of combinatory possibilities. By utilizing the epistolary novel form, and refusing linear narrative development in favor of oblique chains of association, and taking jazz improvisation as a model for black experimental literary practice, Mackey not only produces a restless variety of figures for expressive force but also invents a digressive form spacious enough to hold them all in tension. In Mackey's epistolary novel series, *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, the protagonist N. writes letters to an interlocutor known only as "The Angel of

Dust," whose responses are alluded to but absent from the texts. In these letters, N. chronicles the performances of an imagined group of avant-garde jazz musicians, the "Molimo m'Atet," and searches for linguistic analogues to musical improvisation. While readers are kept guessing as to whether the anonymity or pseudonymity of the "Angel of Dust" names an imagined muse, an addiction, or perhaps Mackey himself, the combination of the particulate metaphor of dust with the implicit animating power of "angel" provides a compact description of the novels' assemblage of figures out of permutable textual building blocks. I argue that the novel series both embodies and diagnoses the limits of such a constructivist impulse by revealing how such combinatory literary strategies mime racialization processes in order to overcome them. I argue that at key moments in the novel series, this racial constructivism is problematized by the protagonists' immobilizing experiences of contingency and automaticity

In my second chapter, "'What is nearest is destroyed': Myung Mi Kim's 'Thirty and Five Books' and Racial Comparison," I show how Myung Mi Kim's interest in the "recombinatory power of language" (Kim, *Statement* 251) functions both as a metaphor for cultural hybridization and as a set of formal strategies capable of representing interracial conflict and the dissolution of intercultural social bonds. In this chapter, I analyze an underexamined feature of the poet's works in a poem entitled "Thirty and Five Books" from a more recent volume, *Dura*—the essential political ambiguity of the poem's use of "recombinatory" or serial forms, the problem of the comparability of nonwhite communities during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and finally the significance of the systems of counting, accounting, and measurement which permeate the poem. "Thirty And Five Books" takes this interest in "accounts and recounting" and interrogates the hierarchical racial schemas which structured media representations of interracial conflict between African American and Asian American communities during the Los Angeles riots in 1992 in the wake of the acquittal of four police officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King. I contend that the systems of measurement and classification which organize so much of the poem are inseparable from the poem's vision of non-hierarchical social relations modeled after the linguistic hybridity of what the poet calls a "A banter English."

My third chapter, "Infinite Regressions: Ed Roberson, Serial Identities, and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement Lunch Counter Sit-Ins," performs an extended close reading of Roberson's poem "Sit In What City We're In," from the author's 2006 book *City Eclogue*. Roberson's poem reimagines the waves of 1960s lunch counter sit-in's as an opportunity to pose fundamental questions about the nature of racial representation in the post-civil rights era. Roberson does this by reconfiguring the sit-ins in space and in time: spatially, by tracking how mirrors behind a lunch counter create an infinite regress of reflected images of protestors and counterprotestors alike; and temporally, by reconnecting the evanescent figure of the city to the earth and enduring cyclical geological processes. Roberson's poem "Sit In What City We're In" commemorates the lunch counter sit-in movement which swept the south in the 1960s by dilating the moment and the movement in space and time and by refusing the kind of distanced, spectatorial historical framing which would safely consign the antiracist ideals of the civil right movement to the past. Instead, Roberson reimagines the scene of the sit-ins as what I want to call a failed dialectic of racial recognition in which the promise of formal equality, desegregation, and equal protection gives way to a meditation on the homogenizing force of such ideals. I argue that Roberson stages the civil rights sit-ins as a moment of conflict between an integrationist politics in pursuit of equal citizenship rights and a later pluralist multicultural politics of recognition which emphasize cultural difference rather than similarity. As a result, the poem, and I would argue the *City Eclogue* as a whole, pioneers a novel mode of historical recollection which reveals both the appearance of the past in the present, and vice-versa. Finally I argue that Roberson's interest in the figure of the city, and the anonymity of urban life, allows the poem to represent the promise of formal equality as fundamentally compatible with segregated social relations.

**An Axiomatic Chorus: Improvisation and Imagined Identities in
Nathaniel Mackey's From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still
Emanate**

Over three decades, Nathaniel Mackey's poetry, fiction, and criticism has taken jazz and world music as an opportunity for thinking through the relationship between what the author calls "the link between ethnicity and formal innovation, social and aesthetic marginality" (*Discrepant* 7), or between what the author calls "artistic othering" (*Discrepant* 265) versus "social othering" (*Discrepant* 265). For Mackey, the former, "artistic othering," refers to the power of music and writing to defamiliarize a reader's experience of genre or form for example, and to the heterogeneity of aesthetic positions taken up by authors drawn from the same racial and ethnic groups, and the latter to a variety of social constraints, from spatial segregation to social stigmas, applied to these same groups:

Artistic othering has to do with innovation, invention, and change, upon which cultural health and diversity depend and thrive. Social othering has to do with power, exclusion, and privilege, the centralizing of a norm against which otherness is measured, meted out, marginalized. My focus is the practice of the former by people subjected to the latter. (*Discrepant* 265)

Mackey's language here is characteristically alert to the nuances of the term "othering," as both a catchall designation for nonwhite communities as well as an invocation of political and phenomenological theories of identity and difference which manifest across a wide range of social phenomena—from a politics of cultural difference and cultural recognition to a Levinasian phenomenology of the role of the "other" in the constitution of the self.⁷ Mackey is interested representing the relationship

⁷ In two volumes of collected critical essays, Mackey articulates a kind of raced deconstructive poetics he dubs "discrepant engagement." Like Gates' theory of "signifyin(g)" and Baker's "blues matrix," "discrepant engagement" inhabits the intersection between discourses of cultural difference and Derridean *différance*. While Baker's call for a historicized interdisciplinary "anthropology of art" differs significantly from Gates' sweeping claims for vernacular Signifyin(g) as the

between these two types of "othering," which the author understands in strikingly homologous terms, as a space occupied by black music and performance, specifically musical improvisation. For Mackey, improvisatory music becomes a model for innovative or experimental writing precisely because of its attention to varieties of formal complexity which transcend genre:

I'd like to address the question of what characterizes innovation and the question of how the term impacts or fails to impact critical approaches to African American writing. I'd like to make the point, to begin with, that the term innovation is a relative one, that it's haunted by the question, Compared to what? ...there's a general tendency to think of innovation, especially where it's taken to be related to or synonymous with experimentation, as having to do with method, as having, more specifically, to do with the pursuit of greater complexity and sophistication in technical and formal matters, greater self-consciousness and complication with regard to questions of mediation. The pursuit of a more complex accommodation between technique and epistemological concerns, between ways of telling and ways of knowing, especially where knowing is less the claim than a nervousness about it, is what tends to be thought of as innovation, experimentation, avant-garde. (*Paracritical* 240)

If the question of innovation is at the same time a question of form, or of a "more complex accommodation between technique and epistemological concerns," then I want to argue that Mackey's own fiction and poetry attempts to find a kind of literary equivalent or homage to the nonwritten, polysemous character of music more generally, but also to the constructivist impulse of jazz improvisation in particular. Or as Michael Titlestad has argued, "Stated simply, a musical work is always in excess of any discursive translation because of the 'centrifugal flutter' of possible meanings which surround it (like an aura)" (Titlestad 31):

"black trope of tropes" (Gates 51-52), music is accorded privilege of place in each critics' account of the importance of nonwritten, vernacular forms of cultural expression for contemporary African American fiction.

The speaking subject who translates music into discourse inevitably introduces a rift between a propagated singular reading and the potential which surrounds the musical work. The process of representation is unstable in that its inevitable singularity suggests lack: representation announces its own difference from its object and, in doing so, the words `creak' under the strain of their imposed function, their asserted or assumed authority. (31)

"Writing jazz" provides some degree of continuity between Mackey's work and the work of Amiri Baraka and other notable figures in the Black Arts Movement like Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez. Yet unlike these other authors, Mackey's writing explicitly registers the profound impact of French theory, in particular Derridean deconstruction, on ethnic literary studies and an emergent politics of "cultural difference" in the late 80s and early 90s. Craig Calhoun characterizes this politics of difference, broadly speaking, as rooted in a critique of the homogenizing and politically oppressive effects of "imposed or fixed identities," including the identities asserted by earlier cultural nationalist social movements⁸:

The pursuits labeled "identity politics" are collective, not merely individual, and public, not only private. ...They involve seeking recognition, legitimacy (and sometimes power), not only expression or autonomy; other people, groups and organizations (including states) are called upon to respond. ...The issue of resistance to imposed or fixed

⁸James Smethurst defines cultural nationalism "relatively broadly as an insider ideological stance (or a grouping of related stances) that casts a specific `minority' group as a nation with a particular, if often disputed, national culture. Generally speaking, the cultural nationalist stance involves a concept of liberation and self-determination, whether in a separate republic, some sort of federated state, or some small community unit. ...In the case of African Americans, cultural nationalism also usually posited that the bedrock of black national culture was an African essence that needed to be rejoined, revitalized, or reconstructed, both in the diaspora and in an Africa deformed by colonialism" (BA 17). For a further discussion of the varieties of black nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s see James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. (Chapel Hill: The University Of North Carolina Press, 2005), 15-20.

identities has encouraged in many quarters a shift from identity politics to a politics of difference. This focus on a critique of identity—often extended in post-structuralist and Derridean circles through a critique of identity as such rather than merely specifically problematic identities—is sometimes presented as though it marks a transcendence of identity politics. (Calhoun 21-22)

I contend that Mackey's attempts to theorize a transgeneric poetics of black writing and performance he calls "discrepant engagement" could be described as a kind of deconstructive critique of identity which Calhoun finds problematic.

Since the late 1980s, Mackey has emerged as one of the most influential poets, novelists, and theorists, of this turn toward what Calhoun and others have called a politics of difference. Combining a critique of the referential "transparency" of language as well as the constructivist impulse of avant-garde jazz, Mackey's body of writings consistently challenge a residual cultural nationalist and emergent multicultural discourse which, as Aldon Lynn Nielsen and others have argued, have tended to marginalize black authors who refuse modes of writing and interpretation which overemphasize what Mackey calls the "accessibility" (*Discrepant* 18) of cultural identities.

I argue that Mackey's interest in musical improvisation provides him with a vehicle for thinking through the significance of seriality to his literary and critical practice. Jazz musicologists from Paul Berliner to Derek Bailey have made a point of emphasizing that jazz improvisation is rooted in the internalization of a combinatory repertoire of musical figures and tactics. For Mackey, the recombinatory character of improvised music becomes a way of representing recurrent racialized social constraints on the one hand, and on the other the de- and re-construction of musical figures as models for alternate social relations which are free of such constraints. Mackey's epistolary novel series, entitled *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, becomes a forum for exploring problems raised by his theoretical writings. "Musical improvisation" for Mackey comes to signify not only musical composition or performance, but also a way to think through the use of serial literary forms—from the long serial poem "Song of the Andoumboulou" to the *Broken Bottle*. I also contend that the author's attempt to elaborate an overarching postmodern poetics of "discrepant engagement" (*Discrepant* 20) which Mackey constructs to describe contemporary innovative black music and literature, is repeatedly dramatized in the novel series as a

practice which makes use of combinatory literary forms in order to overcome various forms of literal and figurative confinement and taxonomies of fixed, categorical racial identities. I argue that Mackey's use of serial forms is fundamentally ambiguous and divided. On the one hand it is a method for imagining and pluralizing possible identities as a way to escape the fixity of imposed racial identities. On the other hand, serial forms mime imprisonment in these racially ascribed identities—from the homogeneity of racial group identity to the paralyzing effects of racist objectification.

My use of the term "seriality" names both a concept and a characteristic of literary forms which feature the non-narrative arrangement and rearrangement of recurring linguistic elements—words, phrases, and even sounds. For Joseph Conte, the modularity of these repeated elements in the poetic series stand opposed to the "thematic continuity, narrative progression, or meditative insistence" (Conte 21) of the epic or what he calls the Romantic poetic sequence:

[The series] is instead a combinative form whose arrangements admit a variegated set of materials. Each element of the series is a module that asserts its position in combination with other elements; its place is not assigned by any external schema. ...The sections of a series are not hierarchical. There is no initiation, climax, or terminus precisely because there can be no development. (Conte 21-23)

After Conte, Brent Hayes Edwards' recent attempt to theorize a "black serial poetics" modeled by poet Ed Roberson is a crucial component of my reading of Mackey's novel series.⁹ I argue that *Broken Bottle* is not a narrative so much as a kind of prose poem which employs a number of serial or modular formal strategies, from the paronomastic displacements generated by puns and anagrams to the series' overarching epistolary structure, in order to model a playful, combinatory textual plenitude which the author likens to jazz improvisation. For Mackey, racialization processes and jazz improvisation both display an underlying serial structure:

A desperate accent or inflection runs through seriality's recourse to repetition, an apprehension of limits we find

⁹ See Edwards 621-37.

ourselves up against again and again, limits we'd get beyond if we could. This qualifies the promise of advance and possibility the form otherwise proffers, the feeling for search it's conducive to complicated by senses of constraint. Circularity, a figure for wholeness, also connotes boundedness. Recursiveness can mark a sense of deprivation fostered by failed advance, a sense of alarm and insufficiency pacing a dark, even desperate measure, but this dark accent or inflection issues from a large appetite, or even a utopic appetite or, better—incoking Duke Ellington's neologism—a blutopic appetite. Seriality's mix of utopic ongoingness and recursive constraint is blutopic... (*Splay* xiv)

For Mackey, serial forms are an expansive assertion of poetic and political space.¹⁰ Building upon Edwards' exploratory analysis of a contemporary black serial poetics, my reading of Mackey's *The creation of such spaces are what allow the fictional protagonists of *Broken Bottle* to cycle through a reservoir of imagined, possible selves in response to racial ascription and homogenization. *Broken Bottle* not only to produces a restless variety of figures for expressive force, but also invents a form spacious enough to hold them all in tension.*

I argue that *Broken Bottle* can be read as a kind of metafictional or metapoetic supplement to Mackey's critical writings, specifically an extended exploration of a transgeneric theory of black cultural expression the author dubs "discrepant engagement" (*Discrepant* 19). I argue that "discrepant engagement" is fundamentally premised on a deconstructive critique of racial and ethnic identity categories and of the normative cultural identities which these categories require. *Broken Bottle* is by the author's own admission a kind of fictive autobiography which combines theoretical speculation,

¹⁰ "In the words of Nathaniel Mackey, black serial poetics is crucially a claim on 'space'— taking up more room in the most basic sense—an intervention in itself in a context in which one is habitually granted only 'cramped space,'" Edwards argues, "He compares it to the 'critical furor' in jazz in the 1930s when Duke Ellington began to explore extended compositions, defying the limitations of the three-minute form imposed by the capacity of record technology at the time. For Mackey, 'seriality, which quite literally wants to expand the poetic space to practice in, resonates with that larger black quest for social space, political space'" (Edwards, *Black* 628).

musicological criticism, and reflexive commentary on the author's poetry. "The letters got started from an actual correspondence," Mackey explains in an interview, "A friend of mine to whom I'd sent a couple of poems or something wrote back with some questions" (*Interview* 328):

By way of talking about or addressing those questions I wrote it out in the form of a letter which began "Dear Angel of Dust" and made a copy and sent it to this friend. So it began in actual correspondence but it was like proposing another correspondence that I was allowing this friend to eavesdrop on, so to speak, though the thoughts were provoked by his questions. At that point I was getting interested in prose as something which could include, in a more explicit way, certain types and areas of information that I was interested in but that I couldn't work into poetry, at least not in such an explicit way as I could in prose. One can be discursive and one can use various modes of address, so I started writing a few of these letters. I didn't know how to think of them, whether they were prose poems or what. (Mackey, *Interview* 328)

In contrast to Mackey's critical writings however, the novel series functions diagnostically to reveal, intentionally or not, the limits of "discrepant engagement" as an antiracist literary agency. Far from being a celebration of a poststructuralist critique of identity and of what critic Craig Calhoun has called "a shift from identity politics to a politics of difference" (21), Mackey's novel series can instead be read as a fundamentally ambivalent allegory of how the use of postmodern serial and procedural forms reproduce aspects of racialization which the author wishes to overcome. Instead, I argue that "discrepant engagement" transforms a critique of interracial racial ascription into a reflexive interrogation of intraracially imposed forms of "axiomatic" or reified individual and group identity.

The novel series could be situated within a tradition of "jazz fiction" stretching back to James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Constructed out of an intricate weave of cross-cultural allusions and occasionally featuring libretti, lecture notes, and diagrams, Mackey's novel series consists primarily of an epistolary exchange between the multi-instrumentalist N. and a mysterious interlocutor named "Angel Of Dust," whose letters are not reproduced in text. N. uses his letters to "The Angel of Dust" chronicles the

performances of an imagined group of avant-garde jazz musicians, the "Molimo m'Atet," of which he is a founding member. While readers are kept guessing as to whether the anonymity or pseudonymity of the "Angel of Dust" names an imagined muse, an addiction, or perhaps Mackey himself, the combination of the particulate metaphor of dust with the implicit animating power of "angel" provides a compact description of the novels' assemblage of figures out of permutable textual building blocks. Formerly known as the "Deconstructive Woodwind Chorus" and "The East Bay Dread Ensemble," the Molima m'Atet play an ongoing series of elaborate performances which recall musical collectives like the Art Ensemble of Chicago and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.

The novel series progresses associatively, propelled laterally or recursively through the narrativization and allegorization of a series of what could be called combinatory or serial stylistic devices such as puns, anagrams, and rhymes. For Mackey, these devices, like the musical figures which they mimic, invite "echo, reverberation, overtone, undertone, resonance and repetition. In seriality, rasp is recursive form, a net of echoes; it catches" (Splay xii). N.'s description of the band's performances describe music as a kind of allegory for racial identity formation driven by a contrapuntal relationship between racialized constraints, the fixity of ascribed racial identities for instance, and a ceaseless construction of alternate selves or personae.¹¹ Inspired by bop and post-bop jazz

¹¹ A. Yemisi Jimoh conceives of three broad literary-musical "expressive configurations" (31), based upon spirituals/gospel, blues, and jazz. For Jimoh, each "discursive formation" is both a philosophical body of "rules" as well as an evolving sonic archive of suggestive "approaches to individual and group expression" (Jimoh 25). A. Yemisi Jimoh argues that "Jazz philosophy... posits an awareness of the instability of categories, including musical ones, and elucidates an aesthetic that results in a final product that emphasizes simultaneous expressions of multiple approaches to a single musical idea" (SBJ 28). Needless to say, the "simultaneity of expression" which characterizes jazz improvisation for Jimoh echoes Mackey's description of the "anonymous, axiomatic" seriality of imagined identities. Typically critics cite James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as the first example of the genre of jazz fiction. Mackey's work has been compared to Xam Wilson Cartiér, a contemporary of Mackey's whose fictions similarly seek literary equivalents to jazz performance. See

improvisation, Mackey represents musical improvisation as a site where social and artistic "othering" converge—a kind of composite allegorical space where musical performances and anagrammatic wordplay give birth to seemingly endless personae and where musical instruments play themselves while their owners are reduced to the status of spectators. The procedural character of Mackey's insistence upon combinatory textual strategies force the author to launch a racial critique of the automaticity of these techniques on the one hand as a potential form of racial objectification, and on the other of the pluralization of fixed identities as a simultaneously utopian and fruitless antiracist political strategy. These textual effects mark the convergence between social and artistic "othering" through the multiplication of textual possibilities around the "centralizing of a norm" (*Discrepant* 265)—whether that norm refers to construction of cultural identities or to expectations about the homogeneity of literature written by black authors. *Broken Bottle* consistently represents this "norm" as the imposition of fixed, categorical identities which musical improvisation subsequently pluralize and set in motion. Mackey's vision of "discrepant engagement" is rooted in a vision of the seriality or interchangeability of imposed racial identities on the one hand, and on the proliferation of possible imagined identities on the other. "The black speaker, writer, or musician whose practice privileges variation," Mackey argues, "subjects the fixed equations that underwrite that denial (including the idea of fixity itself) to an alternative" (*Discrepant* 267). In other words Mackey's vision of improvisation appropriates the repetitive, serial form of ascribed racial identity without reversing the value of that identity.

Mackey represents jazz improvisation as a kind of deconstructive practice *avant la lettre*, an "epistemological dilation" (Mackey, *Discrepant* 9) of the notion of fixed, essential racial and ethnic identities through a logic of

Fritz Gysin, "From "Liberating Voices" to "Metathetic Ventriloquism" Boundaries in Recent African-American Jazz Fiction". *Callaloo* 25.1 (2002): 276-287; and Robert H. Cataliotti, *The Songs Became the Stories : The Music in African American Fiction, 1970-2005*. Grand Rapids: Peter Lang, Incorporated.

supplementation and qualification—or in the author's words the "specter of ceaseless, unsettling supplementation and revision prompted by an uncontainable whole" (*Discrepant* 11). This logic of qualification, which the author has dubbed "discrepant engagement," is both characteristic of the author's slippery syntax and describes how *Broken Bottle's* protagonists create, through their improvised performances, a repository of imagined, possible selves¹²:

It is an expression coined in reference to practices that, in the interest of opening presumably closed orders of identity and signification, accent fissure, fracture, incongruity, the rickety, imperfect fit between word and world. Such practices highlight—indeed inhabit—discrepancy, engage rather than seek to ignore it. Recalling the derivation of the word *discrepant* from a root meaning "to rattle, creak," I relate *Discrepant* to the name the Dogon of West African give their weaving block, the base on which the loom they weave upon sits. They call it the "creaking of the word." It is the noise upon which the word is based, the *discrepant* foundation of all coherence and articulation, of the purchase upon the world fabrication affords. *Discrepant* engagement, rather than suppressing or seeking to silence that noise, acknowledges it. In its anti-foundational acknowledgment of founding noise, *Discrepant* sings "base," voicing reminders of the axiomatic exclusions upon which positings of identity and meaning depend. (Mackey, *Discrepant* 19)

It is important to emphasize what "discrepant engagement" isn't for Mackey, the unplanned and impulsive invention of "spontaneous bop prosody" celebrated by such Beat writers as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Instead of the "presumed immediacy, instantaneity, or emotionality that black music has in too many instances and for too long been burdened with being the embodiment of or seen as the embodiment" (Mackey, *Paracritical* 279), N.'s interest in finding a "semantic equivalent" for musical improvisation is instead a highly self-reflexive theoretical critique of identity categories.¹³ "Noise"

¹² See Mackey (PH 207-208).

¹³ "Issues of transcription, the ways the voice is 'troubled' in crossing over between media," Edwards argues, "seem to attract the most critical energy in Mackey's work. Such trouble marks

in the above-quoted passage by Mackey refers not only to language as organized sound, but to the suppression of heterogeneity which secures any pre-given or "axiomatic" racial and ethnic identity.¹⁴ A return to such "founding noise" would allow for a renewal of cultural practices and a way of querying the notion of an essential and homogenous black identity by confronting it with those exclusions which secure the relative stability of the category.

"Discrepant engagement" subjects any notion of an essential black identity—imagined in linguistic terms as an originary and "absent signified" (Derrida, *Speech* 89)—to a series of metonymic displacements or, in deconstructive terms, to a kind of Derridean logic of the "supplement" which multiplies the possible identities subsumed under the category of "blackness":

As a supplement, the signifier does not represent first and simply the absent signified. Rather, it is substituted for another signifier, for another type of signifier that maintains another relation with the deficient presence, one more highly valued by virtue of the play of difference. It is more highly valued because the play of difference is the movement of idealization and because, the more ideal the signifier is, the more it augments the power to repeat presence, the more it keeps, reserves, and capitalizes on its sense. (Derrida, *Speech* 89)

It's crucial to note that the ideality of the signifier, its claims to self-presence, functions whether or not the term in question, here racial identity, is the object of commendation or derogation. The continual qualification, revision, and deconstructive supplementation of categorical identities deeply informs Mackey's reading of black literature, art, and music as "insisting upon the partial, provisional character of any proposition or predication, by advancing a vigilant sense of any reign or regime of truth as susceptible to qualification" (*Discrepant* 43). In *Broken Bottle*, this logic of qualification is imagined as the creation of a series of possible selves or

the "limits of the sayable"; it indicates an insufficiency or dispossession native to language itself" (Edwards 573).

¹⁴ For further reading on historical definitions of "noise" in music, see Jacques Attali, *Noise*, Trans. Brian Massumi, New York: University of Minnesota, 1985.

personae which become a kind of linguistic analogue to a melodic line or jazz "run."

The improvisation of possible selves in *Bedouin Hornbook* and *Djbot Baghostus's Run* does not abolish the category of the expressive subject so much as radically pluralize it. I want to focus on three incidents in the novel series which represent musical improvisation as the relationship of individuals to collective identities. These incidents illuminate three forms of racialization which musical improvisation is meant to overcome: the departicularizing character of collective identities, racial objectification, and finally spatial confinement. While *Bedouin Hornbook* and *Djbot Bhagostus's Run* describe Molima m'Atet's heroic attempts to exceed racial categorization, the novels are also profoundly dystopian narratives about the loss of expressive capacity in which improvising subjects continually lapse back into a kind of inert, mechanical formalism. That is, Mackey's musical protagonists repeatedly encounter a kind of limit to improvisational agency in which they experience the fundamental arbitrariness or ontological insufficiency of any identity, imagined or otherwise. Aware of such dangers, Mackey nevertheless maintains the "asymptotic" promise of improvisation as the proliferation of possible selves. Thus at the conclusion of *Djbot Bhagostus's Run*, the title character who is a trickster-like personification of the Molima m'Atet's previous musical performances, in a gesture which could characterize the restless and recursive movement of the novel series as a whole, begins to run in place on a rotating stage:

No one could've convinced him he wasn't moving. Indeed, true to the universal conception he was after, his flight transcended itself. He ran with Everyman's legs, aboriginal to the future, a synoptic, transhistorical sprint. He was a caveman pursued by a mastodon, a slave with patrollers on his trail, a protestor chased by troops in Chile, an intergalactic alien dodging shots from a laser gun. Fear, he knew, had long been afoot. Every reason anyone had ever had for running now seemed to be his. Every reason anyone would ever have was also his. (*Djbot* 20)

In *Bedouin Hornbook*, the first volume of Mackey's novel series, the protagonist N.'s encounter with a musical group known as "The Crossroads Choir" becomes a complex allegory for the relationship between individual and group identity. Here Mackey represents the encounter as an act of musical exchange, a kind of contrapuntal call-and-response between N. and a literally faceless mass, in which N. goes from being an audience member to

a performer. After trying fruitlessly to make contact with The Crossroads Choir and being told that the band has "gone underground" (*Bedouin* 109), N. is finally instructed to wait "where Stocker, Overhill and La Brea come together" (*Bedouin* 109), an intersection which invokes the figure of the crossroads in Yoruba mythology and the mythical origins of the blues¹⁵:

I suppose it's a measure of the lack in my life that I went along with this arrangement. ...Shunning every eventual advance, the road ahead brought me to the realization that I had never actually seen or heard the Crossroads Choir as such. My knowledge of their music, I couldn't help seeing, had to do with its having always been, as the expression goes, "in the air." It was with a merciless missionary clarity I saw now that the Choir was an anonymous, axiomatic band whose existence had always been taken for granted. I suspected this was the only way it could be "taken" at all, even though to see it so made my pilgrimage seem absurd.¹⁶ (*Bedouin* 110)

The band's moniker suggests the syncretic origins of jazz from the blues, gospel, and other vernacular sources. Concentrated in this brief passage, N. alludes to both the history of jazz as a hybrid musical form and the blurring of musical genres and the notion of a collective black identity—both a "Choir" in the sense of a collective, anonymous body but also a "Crossroads" where an individual might make contact with supernatural musical origins. For N. this spectral collective identity is a historical inheritance, "anonymous" and "axiomatic" because departicularizing, yet N.'s "merciless missionary clarity" foreshadows a later role reversal in his performance with the group. It turns out that it is not only he who has come to listen to the group, but the group has also in a crucial sense come to listen to him.

¹⁵ For a critical account of the evolving blues mythology of the crossroads, see Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues And Evil*. (Knoxville: The University Of Tennessee Press, 1993), 26-34. "A city or urban blues singer was unable to go to the crossroads at midnight to learn his or her virtuosity from 'the devil,'" Spencer argues, "for the city had innumerable crossroads, all of which were busy with the traffic of industrial trucks that did their carrying at night" (135).

Which is to say the absurdity N. feels on pilgrimage to see a band he has either never heard or has always heard "in the air" and so taken for granted—throws the precise meaning of "underground" into question. While N. never discovers just why the band has gone into hiding, his pilgrimage can be read as a sort of "immersion" narrative which reverses the trajectory of what Robert Stepto famously identifies as the "pregeneric myth" of African American "paradigmatic narratives of ascent" (BV 67) northward from a symbolic South:

In the case of both the ascension and the immersion narratives, a fair portion of the hero-narrator's journey is through differing manifestations of social structure expressed in spatial terms. ...The grand tension is that of self-initiated mobility versus self-imposed confinement: ritual grounds such as the slave quarters, the Black Belt, recent depictions of Harlem as a symbolic space, and even Washington's Tuskegee offer the exhilarating prospect of community, protection, progress, learning, and a religious life while often birthing and even nurturing (usually unintentionally) a sense of enclosure that may reach claustrophobic proportions. (BV 68)

What Farah Jasmine Griffin calls "migration narratives" share "with the slave narrative notions of ascent from the South to a "freer" North" (3), a ritualized journey typically from a provincial to a more urban environment which may conclude with a narrator's return to an ancestral "South." N.'s journey "underground" to hear the band echoes historical "immersion narratives" in which a narrator recoils from an experience of alienation in the urban North. The unspecified "lack" which drives N.'s pilgrimage ultimately culminates in a paralyzing meditation on "wounded kinship" and the impossibility of restoring a sense of communal identity. The impossibility of reconstructing a kind of communal "ground" for racial identity becomes for N. conflict between a musical collective assembled through the suppression of individual particularity and his own playing which seeks to emphasize the "noise" or "creaking" of individual difference within a field of literally featureless, identical faces. Blindfolded and drugged, N.'s description of The Crossroads Choir and its audience underscores the frighteningly amorphous character of black communal identity:

What I can say is that I was struck by the indeterminate character of my surroundings, the variable aspects of which refused to settle into any solid, describable "take." One

moment it seemed I was in an intimate niteclub, the next a domed arena with the seating capacity of thousands. One moment I was in a cramped garage (the sort of place Ornette's band used to practice in during those early days in Watts), the next a huge, drafty warehouse in Long Beach or San Pedro or some place like that. One moment it seemed I was in a cathedral, the next a storefront church. The possibilities seemed to go on without end. I was "everywhere," which, I now knew, was nowhere in particular, a blank check drawn on a closed account.

[...]I looked around, a bit disconcerted by the blank, laconic stare I met on every rounded, "metaphysical" head. It was as though I'd stepped onto a Discrepant Chirico canvas, the crowd composed of hairless, mannikinlike men and women, each of whose faces wore itself like a tight, tautological mask. [...]The band's faces appeared to suffer from a surplus or overcharge of features—etched, it seemed, with every crow's foot or expressive crease to which flesh had ever been prone. Fold upon fold, line upon line and wrinkle upon wrinkle gathered, one moment suggesting the Assyrian god Humbaba, whose face was built of intestines, the next the Aztec raingod Tlaloc, whose face consisted of two intertwining snakes. The band, which could only have been the Crossroads Choir, partook of an elastic, variable aspect equal to if not greater than that of the audience and the structure (whatever and wherever it was) in which we were gathered. Their entrance threatened to go on forever—a slow, numberless stampede, as it were, of musician after hyperbolic musician which made me wonder whether the stage could hold them all. It seemed they were every band I'd ever heard or even ever dreamt I'd heard all rolled into one. (*Bedouin* 112-113)

Both the "tight, tautological" (113) masks worn by the audience and the band members' frightening "surplus or overcharge of features" renders each group equally nondescript. Simultaneously a band N. has "never actually seen or heard" (113) and "every band I'd heard or even ever dreamt I heard" (113), The Crossroads Choir's "elastic, variable aspect" (113) suggests an N's dread of being absorbed by this "anonymous, axiomatic" band and a logic of racial representation which tautologically defines black literature, music, and art as the mimetic expression of an essential black identity. N. recognizes the essential redundancy of a desire to immerse himself in a categorical black identity he in fact already possesses.

And yet it is precisely N.'s short-lived "missionary clarity" about the "tautological" logic of identity which is interrupted by the band's increasingly raucous and violent interaction with its audience—a series of musical exchanges which fuse audience and performers into a single, undifferentiated social mass. N. experiences the collective performance as both catastrophic and rapturous. The musically productive call-and-response exchange established between the Choir and its audience illustrates what I have been calling the seriality of collective identity. The Choir draws audience members into the collective performance and just as quickly expel them. Collective identity is here represented as an aggregative structure made and unmade by shifting ratios of similarity and difference. Reflecting upon the "slow, numberless stampede" (*Bedouin* 113) of "every band I'd ever heard or even ever dreamt I'd heard all rolled into one" (*Bedouin* 113), N.'s reaction can be read as a fundamental ambivalence about collective identity—an identity rooted in a vast vernacular musical tradition. The Choir immediately insists upon shared "kinship ties" with the spectators while at the same time acknowledging the tenuousness or emptiness of such claims of common identity:

Such a sense of myself I'd nourished only in private (or what I thought was private), unassailable, or so I thought within the vascular walls of a fool's paradise. But the band had wasted no time going for the audience's jugular, laying claim to blood and to kinship ties as though they mined us for gold. It was risky turf on which they staked their claim, veins liable to be loaded but most likely yielding only fool's gold, as they themselves must have known. "Better fool's gold than no gold at all," they seemed to insist—a conviction after my own quixotic heart. (*Bedouin* 113-114)

"Weary of a sloganizing strain" (*Bedouin* 115), N. finds the band's invocation of communal identity nevertheless compelling in its insistence on how Kimberly Benston describes call-and-response rhythms, likely inherited from slave calls, a "syntax of enactment capable of mobilizing spectatorship as a simultaneously sensate and sense-altering body" (*Performing* 21). For N. the potential emptiness of "blood and kinship ties" becomes itself a kind of ground on which these ties can be reconstructed, which is to say these ties represent a shared, though ambivalent, desire for an unattainable group identity. The pull of this desire for belonging, and an end to isolated

individuality, so strong for the audience that, at one point in the performance the audience responds to a performer's flute solo by engaging in dramatic acts of self-immolation:

"As for me," he muttered, "who am neither I nor not-I, I have strayed from myself and I find no remedy but despair." With that all hell broke loose. ...Opting for folly on the one hand and philosophy on the other, he extracted a bare-bones, hungry sound from the flute. An almost clandestine appeal, its claim was that were there no call the response would invent one. It was at this point that numerous bits of broken glass embedded themselves in my forehead, each of them the seed of a low, breathy growl which seemed to emanate from the stars. The bits of glass had all the feel of something heavensent, but an angular, trigonometric intrigue born of airtight recesses gave rise to a traumatic, anticlimactic unpacking of the fact that it was the windshield of my mother's car when I was eleven which was, after all, their source. In a flash, I heard the screeching of tires and felt myself thrown forward, the car ramming the rear of the one in front of us, not having stopped in time. (*Bedouin* 115-116)

The flutist's confession of a kind of "longing without object," in this case for an elapsed sense of racial belonging, compels one member of the audience to smash two glasses and bring his palms down on the edges in a "token...of his appreciation" (*Bedouin* 115)—a ritual demonstration of "wounded kinship" Mackey hears reverberating throughout the jazz tradition. As an allegory for finding a social structure capable of accommodating both individual particularity and group belonging, identity and difference, the call-and-response exchange between the band and its audience reaches a kind of concord with the audience in constructing the "call" of a shared cultural identity, however fictitious.

N's realization that "were there no call the response would invent one" brings on the first of his "shattered cowrie shell attacks" (*Djbot* 18), a quasi-mystical affliction which sends N. to the hospital, and which forces him to meditate on the "breakdown in the tribe" (*Bedouin* 116) of black collective identity:

The bits of glass went on to instigate a prolonged, problematic meditation on a theme which up until then had been only tangentially touched upon. Could it be, each and every laserlike sliver of light gave me reason to wonder,

that the pinpoint prevision of any breakdown of the tribe made for an obsessed, kaleidoscopic rift in sound, the audible harmolodic equivalent of a certain impingement or pungency? ...How would one then, I went on to ask, build outward from "pointillistic" so as to account for the dry waterfall effect of what was at that moment coming out of the flute? And what about rescue? What, that is, could free the future from every flat, formulaic "outcome," from its own investment in the contested shape of an otherness disfigured by its excursion thru the world? My thoughts then took a different course. The fertile bed of glittering glass had become an oasis, an agonizing mirage whose momentary splendor threw me back upon myself like a gun going off. A shadowlike report which, as it turned out, was the band coming in as the flute solo ended, inducted me into a dance whose disjointed aspects embraced an untested need I felt to investigate fear. (*Bedouin* 116)

Here N. touches upon a number of themes which Mackey has explored in his critical writings and interviews, particularly the critique of the notion that black literature and art mimetically "express" an underlying identity or set of experiences in any predictable way:

My view is that there has been far too much emphasis on accessibility when it comes to writers from socially marginalized groups," Mackey argues, "This has resulted in shallow, simplistic readings that belabor the most obvious aspects of the writer's work and situation, readings that go something like this: `So-and-so is a black writer. Black people are victims of racism. So-and-so's writing speaks out against racism.'" It has yet to be shown that such simplifications have had any positive political effect, if, indeed they have had any political effect at all."
(*Discrepant* 18)

While the band's audience registers the ecstatic character of the music, the "breakdown of the tribe" (*Bedouin* 116) represents collective identity, here the contrapuntal relationship between the Choir and its audience, as a shifting body in a constant state of molecular aggregation and disaggregation. The "pointillistic" of the flutist's solo suggests social atomization and the bits of broken glass lodged in N.'s forehead compel the need for "rescue," and a desire for collective identity. N.'s musical accompaniment to the Choir becomes an initial moment of negation, or an assertion of individuality,

which particularizes the Choir's "hairless, mannikinlike men and women, each of whose faces wore itself like a tight, tautological mask" (113).

For N. the cowrie shell attack evokes a traumatic childhood memory of a car accident. N.'s assertion of musical particularity is accompanied by a sudden, involuntary recollection of personal trauma. The scene is haunted by a sense of contingency, and of incommunicable trauma, which pervades N.'s assertion of individuality. There is little which seems to prevent N.'s sense of personal history from dissolving into a sequence of random events or accidents. The suddenly anarchic performance provides an opening for N. to sit in with the band and perform a song about a failed love affair—a performance which causes the anonymous crowd to suddenly acquire "features, welcome wrinkles and expressive lines they hadn't had before" (*Bedouin* 122). "I went on playing, amazed and encouraged by what I saw," N. observes, "even though many of the faces appeared grotesque and distorted, recalling the twisted, misplaced eyes, teeth, noses and lips of New Guinea masks" (*Bedouin* 122-123).

N.'s subsequent hospitalization, where he likens the feeling of bits of broken glass embedded in his forehead to shells designed to magnify sounds in African instruments, forces him to experience individual particularity as both contingent and incommunicable. N. literally loses his voice and experiences periodic cowrie shell attacks throughout the remainder of the novel series. In addition to being used as an ancient form of currency in Africa, cowrie shells, when affixed to the outside of hollowed out calabash gourds called "resonators," also serve to amplify the sound of African musical instruments like the Mbira. Seemingly turning his body into a life-size "resonator," N.'s attacks simultaneously hollow out his experience of interiority and displace the sound of his own heartbeat onto the "surrounding air" (*Bedouin* 126):

The attacks tend to come on as an inverse gravity in which I'm cut loose from every anchoring assumption, a giddy index if not an indictment of a tipsy world. I feel it as a weightlessness, a radical, uprooting vertigo, a rash, evaporative aspect of myself. The fear of simply floating away—as though I were empty of all solidity or substance--- overtakes me just before I either pass out or enter a kind of trance, my behavior during which I'm unable to remember once I return to normal. [...] I tend to hear my own heartbeat, amplified and coming at me from outside. It's as though the heart were a ventriloquist of sorts, throwing its voice at an ever more obtuse angle so as to exact an

acoustical shell from the surrounding air. It's an eerie feeling to be engulfed by one's own heartbeat, put upon by the heat of one's stolen pulse like a vulnerable flame palpitating in a draft. (*Bedouin* 126)

The cowrie shells make a kind of "dirty" sound or buzz which Mackey relates to "that vibration, that multiply-aspected vocality in relation to poetry...to the play of polysemous articulation" (*Paracritical* 197). And yet the buzzing N. hears, the "subcortical Muzak" of Ornette Coleman's free jazz rendition of "Embraceable You," serves as a reminder of the pervasive feeling of insufficiency or lack animating that form of linguistic play. The "play of polysemous articulation" (Mackey, *Paracritical* 197) could also characterize both the musical performance of the Crossroads Choir, to N.'s ears a kind of repository of all possible musical performances, and the "surplus or overcharge of features" (*Bedouin* 116) on the faces of its endless parade of players. N.'s refusal to cling nostalgically to a sense of collective belonging, except through a shared desire for it, seems to temporarily condemn the character to a kind of mute particularity. N.'s restless improvisatory practice, as a kind of allegory of Mackey's interest in the serial or combinatory possibilities of literary forms, constructs a range of possible personae like Jarred Bottle or Djarred Bottle and Djbot Bhagostus. Occasionally, the cowrie shell attacks remind N. that these fictional and selves, while allowing him to escape fixed categorical identities, also remain "empty of all solidity or substance" (*Bedouin* 126).

N.'s experience of mute facticity is aggravated by his inability to escape absorption by the Crossroads Choir's underground performance— a performance which crucially incorporates its audience into the proceedings only to ensnare them within an assertion of racial kinship and its loss. N. is moved by a band that "arraigned every attempt to make a virtue of sorrow" (*Bedouin* 117), are displaced onto an assertion of "wounded kinship" as a kind of primordial lack or shared forms of historical suffering—or what another character labels the "trashed intimacies of affliction" (*Bedouin* 45)—constantly in danger of becoming formulaic or sentimental.

The Molimo m'Atet's urban encounter with a crew of breakdancers in another section of *Bedouin Hornbook* provides an alternative model for a black serial poetics rooted not in the combinatory potential of group identity, but instead in the miming of immobilized or confined bodies. Breakdancing here, like the novel's vision of jazz improvisation, becomes the

production of "variations on the very condition it implicitly critiques" (Mackey, *Djbot* 111):

One sees, for example, that "break" serves notice on as it diverges from the city's valorization of hardness, unyieldingness, rigidity, the upward investment in steel and stone. That it does this while working variations on the very condition it implicitly critiques is something one might easily miss. The breakers' recourse to choreographed rigidities and robotisms arises as a caveat in the face of exactly the threat it wants to fend off, an inoculation or aestheticization, at least, of the fate to which it would seem to have acceded. ...Such athletic writhings are anything but a naively triumphal homage to resilience. The cigar boxes made that all the more clear. Breaking accents the body under siege—one notes, among other things, that the electronic drums recall machine gun fire—but also, more trenchantly yet, the susceptibility of states of siege to commoditization. (Mackey, *Djbot* 111)

For N., the history of jazz provides ample historical evidence that the "containment of black mobility" is not simply a problem of exclusion but of disciplinary regulation, ranging from mass incarceration to unremunerated labor, or "Black-historical stolen harvest, Black-historical sweat" (*Bedouin* 150).¹⁷ The ongoing "containment of black mobility" aestheticized by the breakdancers, of course echoes Mackey's own fascination with the use of procedural constraints during musical performances—for example the use of elaborate props or playing after removing the reed from a saxophone. For example, N. recalls how one of the members of Molimo m'Atet, Lambert, reminds the group, during a performance of a musical piece entitled "Prometheus" performed without drums, about how drums had historically been taken from slaves. "This theft, however, he encouraged us to recall, had given rise to a tradition of oppositional, compensatory or, if we would, makeshift practices, a making do with whatever came to hand whose inaugural "moment" was marked by more emphatic recourse to such things as footstomping, handclapping and the body-used-as-drum in general" (*Bedouin* 152-153).

A fixation on literal or imagined immobilization or arrest in the novel series underscores the fact that Mackey's use of serial forms, whether the epistolary form of the novel series or the multiple forms of recurrence which structure his long serial

poems, cannot overcome what I have been calling the seriality of racial identity but can only escape it as long as the music lasts, so to speak. N.'s experience of improvisation, in the words of Fred Moten, allow for an imagining of a kind of "anticipatory sociality and historicity" (10) in which individual and group musical performances possesses the power to dilate space and time, and to set fixed identities in motion by pluralizing them. Thus *Broken Bottle's* musical protagonists register the fact that improvisation is a simultaneously liberating and irreversible act. The trajectory of the Molimo m'Atet's musical performances become idiomatic or paradigmatic over time. Which is to say musical improvisation in the novel does not "develop" narratively, but instead seems to elaborate ever-expanding repertoire of performative possibilities. In other words, the series consistently attacks mimesis and narrative by championing a vision of improvisation as the construction of serial personae.

Ironically it is silence and not sound which helps N. to partially recover from his condition after the other members of the Molimo m'Atet come with their instruments to his hospital bedside and commence playing a silent version of "Embraceable You." The band's improvisation of and through N.'s silence suggests both the social relations which make ensemblic improvisation possible and the silence of writing itself. The Molimo m'Atet's silent performance ends up transforming privation and social atomization into an experience of plenitude. The group's silent performance suggests both combinatory possibilities, a field of potential musical performances, and the indispensability of N. to their playing. Without him, they literally cannot be heard. Thus their performance temporarily distracts N. from his private rumination on particularity and restores what he calls "ingrained immunity" (*Bedouin* 139) to the symptomatology of the cowrie shell attacks:

That the "silence" could be so compounded of implication injected a dizziness I sought to contain by sitting up straight. [...] Whatever it was, it rayed out as if to unwind or unravel—a nebulous, whirling, ever more far-reaching flare which, even as it unfolded, drew one into the recesses of built-in resistance one barely knew were there, fold upon fold of ingrained immunity long taken for granted....

It was like a spacecraft orbiting the earth gathering escape velocity. Everything went faster and faster and faster, building to an all-out, full-tilt, faster-than-ever-peak—at which point the four of them simultaneously

stopped and tucked their instruments under their arms.
(*Bedouin* 139)

The search for ever more fundamental forms of "built-in resistance" to the proliferation of combinatory possibilities and imagined identities is premised on the fact that the band's playing can come to an end, in contrast to the Crossroads Choir's interminable performance. At this moment, N.'s reentry into the Molimo m'Atet signals a shift in scale in the novel series beyond the dialectic of individual and group identity represented in these two closely related incidents.

If N.'s encounter with the Crossroads Choir dramatized jazz improvisation as the antiphonal exchange between individual and group identity, N.'s subsequent relationship with "automatic alto" (*Djbot* 52), an animate saxophone which can play itself, playfully imagines improvisation as a struggle with racial objectification, or the "rigidities and robotisms" (*Djbot* 111) of "the body under siege" (*Djbot* 111). Like Mackey, Fred Moten argues that racial objectification takes a very specific form when understood in the context of black enslavement, mass incarceration, and spatial segregation. "The history of blackness," Moten argues, "is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist" (1):

My argument starts with the historical reality of commodities who spoke-of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and "freedom." ... the emergence from political, economic, and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout their graphic (re)production. (Moten 6-7)

What Moten calls the "resistance of the object" (*Break* 1) which informs a tradition of black radical performance is represented in Mackey's *Djbot Bhagostus's Run*, the second volume of the novel series, in a humorous incident where N. is woken from sleep by his alto playing itself. N. is surprised to discover that the instrument is "possessed of a virtuosity which amounted to the ultimate in effortlessness: automatism" (*Djbot* 52).

This time the technical virtuosity of "automatic alto" (*Djbot* 52) renders its music monotonous, and so N. finds a way to tarnish its perfection by slightly altering the instrument's keys and miming corrections which accent the expressivity of the alto's performance. N.'s attempt to improvise with "automatic alto" again underscores what improvisation is not for Mackey, pure spontaneity or "automatism." Like his phantasmagoric encounter with the Choir, N.'s sense of individuality quickly becomes difficult to distinguish from the instrument and its performance. Which is to say that the instrument appears to become more self-conscious about its technical virtuosity and so begins to make deliberate errors. "Every now and then, however, automatic alto tripped itself up, critiqued its own effortlessness by deliberately having a beginner's difficulty with fourth-line D" (*Djbot* 52), N. writes. The more N. attempts to correct for this awkward "break" by miming a correction the more "inept" the alto's "non-avoidance of the 'break'" (*Djbot* 53):

I couldn't help noting that even though I was its axe awkward alto (aliquant alto) had apparently gotten me under its skin. I was a ghost, a grain of salt in the machine. Mine was the salt- or sand-anointed voice, the unavoided "break."

...Automatic alto had now come full circle, clearly come to be the host of a circuitous muse. In attempting to sidestep or critique its own technical finesse, it was now willing to admit, it had simply replaced what it took to be artificial wholeness, artificial health, with artificial breakage, artificial debris. (*Djbot* 55)

Besides representing the relationship between music and racial objectification, the "automatic alto" incident also functions as a commentary on the dangers of routinization in the use of serial forms or procedural constraints. A procedural constraint, as Joseph Conte reminds us, involves the use of arbitrary linguistic rules or conditions to generate texts—for example George Perec's novel *A Void (Verba Mundi)* which was composed entirely without the use of the letter "e." Here Conte both distinguishes between serial and procedural forms and argues for their complementarity in postmodern poetry and fiction. The "recombinatory quality" (Conte 25) of serial form can be distinguished from procedural form which "likewise rejects the concept of a form superimposed on preexistent content; instead it proposes a system of arbitrary constraints which functions as a generative device" (Conte 40). As the manic alliteration and assonance in these passages suggest, N. seems to make use of a

procedural constraint, here including but not limited to repeated "a" sounds, in order to generate an account of the instrument's performance which is also meant to mimic formal aspects of that performance. N. eventually composes a piece of music with "automatic alto" entitled "Robotic Aria For Prepared And Unprepared Alto." "In matters of artistic othering," Mackey argues, "Individual expression both reflects and redefines the collective, realigns, refracts it. Thus it is that Lester Young was in the habit of calling his saxophone's keys his people" (*Discrepant* 303). Both "automatic alto" and Lester Young's statement about "his people" figure musical instruments themselves as utopian figure for how an individual might imagine the combinatory power of collective identity through music.

In the novel series, the performances of the Molimo m'Atet ultimately give birth to quasi-mythological, trickster figures like Djarred Bottle or the titular Djbot Bhagostus. Both of these figures first appear within sections of the text entitled "The Creaking Of The Word: After-The-Fact Lecture/Libretto" (*Djbot* 188-204). These metafictional lectures/librettos describe a allegorical narrative in which both figures are, in Mackey's words, "anagrammatic myth(s)" (*Splay Anthem* xiii), whose movements dramatize elaborate puns on their own names.¹⁸ Although the figure of Djarred Bottle can be read as a kind of postmodern trickster, a sort of "deconstructive angel" (TP 40) whose allegiance, as Megan Simpson argues, "is not so much to one traditionally 'defined' culture as it is to cross-culturality itself" (TP 38), the character's liminality renders him increasingly vulnerable to immobilization, arrest, and incarceration. Djarred Bottle is, in the words of Donald Consentino, a kind of "paralytic trickster" (267).

I contend that these allegorical figures for music and musical improvisation also, like the performance of the Crossroads Choir and "automatic alto," reveal two fundamental features of Mackey's fiction and poetry. First, these figures allegorize individual and collective identity formation while functioning as reflexive commentary on Mackey's use of procedural and serial literary forms in his prose and poetry. Second, these incidents show how the use of serial or combinatory textuality mimes the racist social constraints which

¹⁸ For a more in-depth discussion of Mackey's anagrammatic wordplay, and its reference to both African myths and surrealist compositional techniques, see Paul Hoover. "Pair of Figures for Eshu: Doubling of Consciousness in the Work of Kerry James Marshall and Nathaniel Mackey." *Callaloo* 23.2 (2000) 728-748.

the forms are meant to symbolize and undo. In the case of Djarred Bottle, an incident at a stoplight dramatizes how the proliferation of improvised identities can only provide a temporary respite from a pervasive existential experience of confinement and isolation. Mesmerized by the changing of the lights, Djarred Bottle simply idles at an intersection while awaiting what he takes to be the inevitable arrival of the police. Djarred Bottle's utopian desire to see the "red, yellow, and green lights to come on at the same time" (*Djbot* 70)—functions as a kind of commentary on what I have been calling the seriality of racial identity and Djarred Bottle's consciousness of his own virtuality as one of many mythical personae. Unfortunately this moment of fascination is also quickly cut short by a description of the police, who in this fictional universe possess an almost occult, panoptic power and the authority to stop what Djarred Bottle is doing. What Djarred Bottle is doing, however, is simply waiting:

Turning his gaze to the left and looking out the windshield, he finally noticed that the light had turned green. He was surprised to find that he now felt no desire to move on. The green light wasn't enough, wasn't the go-ahead he'd been waiting for. By not moving, he seemed to be insisting that the light had no authority over him, that he'd been sitting there for reasons other than its being red, that its turning green was equally beside the point. Green would get him neither to Paris nor to China. Green was irrelevant to the out he was after.

...The cops would ask him had he been drinking, ask what was the idea of just sitting there. He'd tell them he was a Rastafarian, that he was waiting for the red, yellow and green lights to come on at the same time. (*Djbot* 70)

In this passage the police come to embody an abstract, almost mystical force of recontainment summoned by Djarred Bottle's "need for an ultimate or consummate elsewhere" (*Djbot* 67). What he hears of course, are references to place names, "Paris" and "China," emptied of any determinate reference to actual locations, and repeated in particular songs by Frank Wright, or to a blues song by Pink Anderson. Djarred Bottle's immobility could be read as a kind of allegorization of the recursive, non-developmental arrangements of serial forms themselves—a kind of movement which, after all, could be seen as static. The irony of Djarred Bottle's "insisting that the light had no authority over him" (70), illustrates the complex, contradictory status of combinatory identities in the novel series. If, on the one hand,

Djarred Bottle asserts that he recognizes the "authority" of no single identity, then this refusal will summon the police to remind him that such an identity is not voluntarily chosen but ascribed. On the other hand, Djarred Bottle sees that the light "turning green was equally beside the point" (70), an admission perhaps that the novel series' improvised personae continually come up against the material conditions which keep these imposed identities in place.

Finally, I want to tease out some of the consequences of reading the novel series as an example of what Kimberly Benston has called "contemporary black autocritography" (285)—a genre of writing which combines critical with autobiographical idioms. For Benston, "autocritography" responds to identity politics' call for more situated forms of cultural knowledge, and the empirical specificity of identity, while at the same time calling such demands for authenticity into question:

Practiced in diverse forms by writers such as Wahneema Lubiano, Hortense Spillers, Michael Awkward, bell hooks, Robert Stepto, Gayle Pemberton, Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, and Deborah McDowell... As a virtual site of insurgent speculation, where the hypothetical fusion of presence and action occurs as a provisional method of revision, "identity politics" doubles and displaces itself as an allegory of autobiography. For autobiography, too, confidence in authenticity and motivational integrity is at once founded and disappropriated through temporal acts of "self"-declaration. For autobiography, too, "identity" is a heuristic fiction that is both necessary and impossible, posited and deferred. (Benston 286)

Informed by Benston's assertion of black "autocritiography" as a kind of "reflexive and self-subverting practice" (286), I read *Broken Bottle* as a speculative, metatheoretical space in which Mackey's poetics, in particular his notion of "discrepant engagement," can be subjected to extended elaboration, qualification, and negation. What Mackey calls a language of qualification or supplementation, a language which I argue whose literary form is fundamentally serial, is shown to possess a kind of dual or contradictory character which plagues the

protagonists of the novel series. On the one hand, N.'s lush, florid wordplay and multiplying personae function as an escape from the fixity of "axiomatic" racial identity. On the other, the manic, metonymic chains of association and improvisatory pluralization of possible identities, just as quickly reproduces the homogeneity, contingency, and automaticity of those imposed racial identities which Mackey's fictional players wished to escape in the first place. As a fusion of an essentially deconstructive critique of these identity categories and of the referential transparency of language, "discrepant engagement" names a fundamentally ambivalent relationship to racialization processes which are simultaneously relieved and reproduced by the author's formal strategies.

"What is nearest is destroyed": Myung Mi Kim's "Thirty and Five Books" and Racial Comparison

Born in 1957 in Seoul, South Korea and author of seven volumes of poetry, Myung Mi Kim's poems have consistently explored what the poet calls the "Fierce unsystematic recombinatory power of language" (Kim, *Statement* 251) as a model for cultural hybridization, the movements of diasporic populations, and the historical emergence and eventual enclosure of common use resources, or "Commons," to echo the title of one of Kim's more recent books. Unsurprisingly, Kim has been claimed by multiple, overlapping poetic audiences. Though "genealogical" attempts to situate Kim's work in various literary traditions are by no means mutually exclusive, Kim has been read by Asian American scholars and as an exemplary poet of the Korean American diaspora on the one hand, or on the other by critics of experimental poetry which read the poet's use of disjunctive, non-narrative forms could also be read as a kind of ethnicized constructivist poetics deeply informed both by contemporary Language writing and earlier "Objectivist" documentary poetics of writers like Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker, George Oppen, and Charles Reznikoff.¹⁹ In order to bridge these two interpretive approaches to Kim's works, I contend that the poet models a poetics of comparative racialization rooted in the fundamental ambiguity of serial poetic forms.

Concerned with the "recombinant energy created between languages (geopolitical economies, cultural representations, concepts of community)" (Kim, *Commons* 110), Kim's poetry progresses associatively through sonic echoes generated between

¹⁹ For further analysis of the theoretical problems raised by arguing for Kim as an exemplary *Korean American* poet, see Warren Liu, "Making Common the Commons: Myung Mi Kim's Ideal Subject," *American Poets in the 21st Century: the New Poetics*, Ed. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2007, 252-66.

languages, primarily Hangul and English, and sometimes homonymically within a single language. Deeply influenced by the work of Korean American poet Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Kim's poetry often dramatizes immigrant language acquisition as a process of ideological assimilation to particular national norms and values and as the site of a potentially resistant self-fashioning for diasporic subjects. While much early criticism of Kim's works, particularly in her first volume of poems *Under Flag*, have focused primarily upon the poetics and politics of language acquisition, I want to instead turn toward a related but relatively underexamined feature of the poet's works in a poem entitled "Thirty and Five Books" from a more recent volume, *Dura*—the essential political ambiguity of the poem's use of "recombinatory" or serial forms, the problem of the comparability of nonwhite communities during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and finally the significance of the systems of counting, accounting, and measurement which permeate the poem. Rather than focus on the existential challenges facing individual speaking subjects, I want to show how the poet's interest in the "recombinatory power of language" (Kim, *Statement* 251) functions both as a metaphor for cultural hybridization and as a set of formal strategies capable of representing interracial conflict and the dissolution of intercultural social bonds. I contend that the systems of measurement and classification which organize so much of "Thirty and Five Books" are inseparable from the poem's vision of non-hierarchical social relations modeled after the expressivity of linguistic sounds.

Attempting to represent "geographical and cultural displacements, an exponentially hybrid state of nations, cultures, and voicings" (Kim, *Commons* 108), Kim's characteristic paratactic, combinatory textual strategies—her use of brief, paratactic stanzas are separated by copious amounts of white space and unfold non-narratively through sonic echoes and repeated words and phrases—bring discrete, seemingly unrelated propositions into a kind of disjunctive relation on the page. Lynn Keller describes Kim's modular arrangements of language as a generative "poetics of the aggregate" (156) in which repeated particles of language, from sounds to phrases, accumulate into larger aggregate structures. For Kim, combinatory textuality mimes the creation and destruction of social relations, often on a global scale, and connects "social space with the space of the poetic page" (157) by serving as a metaphor for the diasporic displacement of entire populations:

Both thematically and in their formal character, her poems, I will argue, encourage perception of diverse particulars in ways that do not impose artificial separations (as do the boundaries that divide nations) on the one hand but also avoid projecting visions of seamless or homogeneous wholes on the other. With a more ethical sight, singularities are recognized in their distinction and also as existing in or being able to form aggregates. The term "aggregate" I take from Kim's poetry; particularly in its zoological or geological definitions ("[c]onsisting of distinct minerals, combined into one rock" ["Aggregate"]), it perfectly conveys the balance Kim seeks between discerning and valuing difference on the one hand, and recognizing on the other hand the basis for community in the possibility of some fundamental human commonality. (Keller 156)

Keller seeks to construct an account of Kim's poetry as a fundamentally ethical project which might, through its use of combinatory or serial poetic forms, model a kind of anticipatory sociality in which identity and difference are allowed to coexist in human communities in a manner analogous to the poet's vision of the natural world as a resilient, enduring collection of hybrid structures and beings.

Because Keller does not address the question of race at length, I argue that such a poetics of the aggregate bears directly upon how Kim represents racialization processes and racial conflict, particularly in the poem "Thirty and Five Books" from the 1999 volume *Dura*—a poem which provides a fragmentary, phantasmagoric account of explosive interracial conflict in the 1992 Los Angeles riots which engulfed the city in the aftermath of the acquittal of four white Los Angeles Police Department officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King. Kim's depiction of urban violence between Korean, black, and Latino populations relies heavily upon what Keller has called a "poetics of the aggregate," or what I will refer to as Kim's use of serial or combinatory poetic forms, in order to present an account of events capable of unsettling the racial framing of unfolding events by popular media at the time. In recent years, the 1992 Los Angeles riots have produced a

substantial body of criticism from scholars of Asian American literature and history whose narratives of the conflict have recently been subjected to criticism by scholars like Jared Sexton. Sexton remains critical of the limits of multiracial coalition politics and of what Tamara Nopper has called the Asian American "abandonment narrative" forwarded by activists and scholars of Asian American history emphasizing the lack of state or federal protection during the riots for Korean American communities.²⁰

"Thirty and Five Books" is the fourth section out of seven in *Dura*, a work that the poet has characterized as "a strange autobiography" preoccupied with the "unerasable condition of interrogation that you undergo with one culture, with another culture, or the space that's created between those two places."²¹ Virtually alone among Asian American poets in the 1990s who for the most part favored first-person lyric forms, Kim's representation of the 1992 Los Angeles riots engages with the phenomenon of interracial conflict between nonwhite groups, specifically conflict between the black urban poor and Korean shop owners in South Central Los Angeles, and reaches back into early American history and American Cold War foreign policy in order to provide a broader historical context for this conflict. While an initial 1960s generation of Asian American poets often consciously modeled their politicized writing after the Black Arts Movement, "Thirty and Five Books" exposes the contours of a post-Civil Rights era in which earlier cultural nationalist affinities and alliances have all but disappeared between communities which organized under the banner of the "Third World" left in the 1960s.²² Instead, what the poet has called an

²⁰ See Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008; and Tamara K. Nopper, "The 1992 Los Angeles Riots and the Asian American Abandonment Narrative as Political Fiction." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6.2 (2006): 73-110.

²¹ See Myung Mi Kim, "Introductory Remarks and Discussion of *Dura* (4:24)." Reading. Reading at the University at Buffalo, November 14, 1998. http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Kim/UB11-14-98/Kim-Myung-Mi_02_Intro-rmrks_discussn-Dura_UB_11-14-98.mp3, Buffalo. *PennSound*. University of Pennsylvania. Web.

²² For two synoptic accounts of the Third World left in the 1960s see Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical*

"unerasable condition of interrogation" is brought to bear on the problem of comparability between continuing histories of racial terror and violence experienced by black and Korean communities. All the while, Kim's poem casts an uneasy eye on the incommensurability of radically dissimilar histories, not by ignoring "the structural violence of racial capitalism constitutes the political unconscious of the present discourse on US black-Asian relations" (Sexton, "Proprieties" 99), but by attempting to represent the structural logic of such racial capitalism at the level of standards of value, systems of measurement, and the circulation of bodies and commodities across the globe.

Reading the serial form of *Dura* in relation to the theoretical work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, critic Zhou Xiaojing has argued that "Thirty and Five Books" is exemplary of a kind of "rhizomatic" or "nomadic poetics":

The mobility of the formal elements and their protean operations through "proposition, parataxis, contingency" function in *Dura* like "rhizomes" as Deleuze and Guattari have described them in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the contact of two heterogeneous elements can form "a rhizome" that generates two veritable becomings... This formulation of the mutually generative and transformative interrelationships among multiple diverse fragments breaks away from the concept of organic form in terms of the tree or genealogy. ...Operating like a "rhizome-book," *Dura* is not so much a representation of the poet-subject's experience or observation of reality, as a "deterritorialization" of the world in the book and of the book in the world. Hence, *Dura* as "a kind of strange autobiography" also breaks away from representing the self, its life, or its [sic] identity and subjectivity. While the constant construction of what might be considered Kim's "autobiography" is deterritorialized and dispersed into the larger histories enacted in *Dura*, Kim's participation in time and history is

Activism in Los Angeles. Berkeley: University of California, 2006; and Max Elbaum. *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*. London: Verso, 2002.

actualized in her interrogation of language, discourse, history... (Zhou, *Nomadic* 69-70)

Unlike Zhou's account which focuses upon the unsettling power of juxtaposition, parataxis, and extreme fragmentation to radically disrupt or transform linear histories or notions of "the self, its life, or it['s] identity and subjectivity" (*Nomadic* 70), I want to instead turn to the question of comparability itself which emerges from the various, contradictory ways in which the poem thematizes its own use of serial or combinatory forms which multiply the potential linkages between stanzas. "The poem arrives, not established through regularizing, maintainable 'pattern' but brought into possible articulation through multiple, polyphonic tracking," Kim asserts, "The recursive and contingent carry sense" (Kim, *Anacrusis*). As an assemblage of mobile fragments of language and repeated sounds, the poem seems to emphasize the provisionality and partiality of specific readings while creating a kind of virtual poetic space capable of bridging different interpretive communities. Scholars of Asian American poetry have typically read Kim's poetry as highly critical of the nation-form, specifically progressivist national histories, fictions of national belonging, and assimilation to dominant national cultures.²³

While what Zhou calls the "nomadology" of Kim's poetics could potentially be applied to nearly all of the poet's books, the dual character of the poet's paratactic, combinatory textual strategies becomes especially charged with social contradictions in "Thirty and Five Books"—a poem which engages with one of the largest contemporary American riots since the Los Angeles Watts riots in 1965 and a wave of urban unrest which swept through northern ghettos in the 1960s. Kim's typically minimalist, elliptical approach to these long, intersecting histories

²³ See Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women*, Durham: Duke Univ., 2002., 218-45; Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, "Speaking in Tongues: Myung Mi Kim's Stylized Mouths," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37.1: 125-49; Jeannie Chiu. "Identities in Process: The Experimental Poetry of Mei-Mei Bersenbrugge and Myung Mi Kim," *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen*, Ed. Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnich. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004, 84-101.

features units of text which fragment, constellate, and seem to trace the movements of populations on a global scale. By presenting a kind of long durée of such voluntary and involuntary movements of colonized, enslaved, or diasporic human groups, the poem continually encounters and recomposes the question of the commensurability of the forms of historical suffering endured by these groups:

The dog will not eat the acorns assiduously placed in
the dented bowl. Disguised as good will.

Denomination. Promissory. Venture. Amass.

In so locating a time of geography before the compass.
Do not ask again where are we.

Ones on the other side. Shaking sticks with strips of
white rags tied at the top.

Population gathered to population. More uninhabited
space in America than elsewhere. Is that accurate.
Riders wielding tall sticks with strips of white linen
attached to them. Is that accurate. (Kim, *Dura* 63)

Zhou has already offered an insightful and expansive reading of these lines in light of numerous possible historical reference points for such deliberately spare, clipped, or "weird" fragments of language "free from syntactical closure" and subordination—from the missionary bestialization of colonized peoples to images of surrender evoking the July 27, 1953 armistice ending the Korean War.²⁴ As Zhou asserts, "The implied voyages and travels to and in Asia, Africa, and the Americas and their motivations and consequences resonate and disperse in different parts of the series through words and phrases":

Dispersed over the pages, those words and phrases enter into interplays with varied, contingent language environments to incorporate new fragments of history and to suggest new layers of allusions, as they are woven into the ensembles of movements within a complex continuum of history, evoking trade and wars between Europe and Asia; transportation of slaves from Africa and indentured laborers from Asia to Europe and the Americas; battles of colonial and imperial conquest and of national resistance on the sea and over the land; the "discovery" of America; the seizing and dividing of Native American land into private properties; and the expansion of the United States westward to the Pacific. (Zhou, *Nomadic* 72)

I want to instead focus on the complex, hybrid figure of the American nation in the poem, not as "uninhabited space" with the strong implication of the erasure of the fact of Native American genocide in constructing national narratives of inevitable and desirable westward expansion and "Manifest Destiny," but as a kind of poetic space emerging from the contradictory, antagonistic play of subject and object positions in these lines and in the poem more generally. And departing from Zhou's reading which stresses the infinite proliferation of historical contexts and possible forms of relation between linguistic units

²⁴ For further reading on what critic Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien calls the "weird english" of canonical Asian American literary texts, see Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien, *Weird English*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004.

in the text, I am more interested in how the issue of comparability and measurement emerges as a problem within a work so often celebrated for its fusion of cultural difference and linguistic indeterminacy.

"Thirty and Five Books" explores the question of racial comparison itself through repeated references to forms of measure and systems of enumerating "Number, form, proportion, situation" (Kim, *Dura* 79), or to what Arjun Appadurai has called "the idea of number as an instrument of colonial control" (*Modernity* 117).

The modern colonial state brings together the exoticizing vision of orientalism with the familiarizing discourse of statistics. In the process, the body of the colonial subject is made simultaneously strange and docile. Its strangeness lies in the fact that it comes to be seen as the site of cruel and unusual practices and bizarre subjectivities. But colonial body counts create not only types and classes (the first move toward domesticating differences) but also homogeneous bodies (within categories) because number, by its nature, flattens idiosyncrasies and creates boundaries around these homogeneous bodies as it performatively limits their extent. In this regard, statistics are to bodies and social types what maps are to territories: they flatten and enclose. The link between colonialism and orientalism, therefore, is most strongly reinforced not at the loci of classification and typification (as has often been suggested) but at the loci of enumeration, where bodies are counted, homogenized, and bounded in their extent. Thus, the unruly body of the colonial subject (fasting, feasting, hook swinging, abluting, burning, and bleeding) is recuperated through the language of numbers that allows these very bodies to be brought back, now counted and accounted, for the humdrum projects of taxation, sanitation, education, warfare, and loyalty. (*Modernity* 133)

I want to argue that these forms of colonial numerology and classificatory schemas do not simply serve a disciplinary

function but also allow for the possibility of cultural hybridity or alliance which Kim's poem will later liken to a combinatory musical "harmonics" (Kim, *Dura* 85). Which is to say the disciplinary matrices which have been applied to nonwhite populations, or the historical violence of "population gathered to population" (Kim, *Dura* 63) through genocide and the bureaucratic enumeration and calculation of colonized and enslaved populations, are in the poem the necessary, oppressive precondition for the emergence of an alternative social order in which identity and difference do not indicate relations of domination and subordination. The line "Denomination. Promissory. Venture. Amass" (Kim, *Dura* 63) reveals the poet's characteristic use of the serial form of the list, or elsewhere the form of numbered linguistic translation exercises. In describing "a time of geography before the compass" (Kim, *Dura* 63), the poem suggests, through sound, a relationship between colonial wars and the Atlantic Slave trade in which neither phenomenon is reducible to the other. What immediately strikes a reader upon encountering this four item list are the repeated vowel and consonant sounds, the short "e" in "Denomination" and "Venture" paralleling the sibilance of "ss" in "Promissory" and "Amass." The named items and processes are interconnected both through a kind of sonic patterning and the form of a list which may refer to religious groups, money, contracts, imperial trade, and the enclosure and parcelization of Native American lands. This list subsequently progresses from nouns through nouns which may also function as verbs, a movement which suggests expanding, interconnected circuits of global trade, capital accumulation, and slave trafficking. The passage, in other words, makes it difficult to tell if the lines are describing the movement of human bodies or the circulation of commodities—likely both. Historically speaking, there was sometimes little difference between slave labor and the circulation of money and commodities. As Orlando Patterson explains, slaves who were primarily defined as "socially dead" persons were also often used as money in the ancient world²⁵:

²⁵ As Patterson argues, one of the basic constituent features of the slave relation, beyond the delayed or commuted threat of death, is "natal alienation" or the isolation and redefinition of the slave as a "socially dead person" (Patterson 5). "Alienated from all "rights" or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order," Patterson asserts, "All slaves experienced, at the very least, a secular excommunication" (Patterson 5): "Not only was the slave

Money, as is well known, has several functions: it is a unit of accounting or a standard of value, a method of payment, a medium of exchange, and a means of storing wealth. ...The interesting thing about slaves is that in many primitive and archaic societies they constituted the closest approximation to modern multifunctional money. In the ancient Near East, slaves were sometimes used instead of metal as a standard of value and a medium of payment for (among other things) brides, houses, and fines. (Patterson 167-168)

Which is to say the above-quoted list moves from some of the most basic components of human market activity, from the establishment of money as a kind of universal equivalent or standard of value, to two terms, "Venture" (63) and "Amass" (63), which could also be read as commands which would remake earlier precapitalist social relations and turn slave labor, colonial trade, and colonial expropriation into the basis of European industrial development.²⁶ The poem's scattered allusions to slave labor, colonial wars, and the development of modern industrial capitalism, maintain the mutually reinforcing spatial dynamics of these historical phenomena without positing any simple causal relationship between them. As Cedric Robinson

denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors" (Patterson 5).

²⁶ For more on the definitional debates over the status of slaves as property and the integration of slavery into antebellum industrial economy of North America, see Robert Miles *Capitalism and Unfree Labour: Anomaly or Necessity?* London: Tavistock Publications, 1987; and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1983.

reminds us, "From the fifteenth century on that colonialism would encompass the lands of Asian, African, and New World peoples and engulf a substantial fraction of those peoples into the European traditions of slave labor and exploitation" (Robinson 98):

First, African workers had been transmuted by the perverted canons of mercantile capitalism into property. Then, African labor power as slave labor was integrated into the organic composition of nineteenth-century manufacturing and industrial capitalism, thus sustaining the emergence of an extra-European world market within which the accumulation of capital was garnered for the further development of industrial production. (Robinson 112-113)

And yet how are we to read the speaking position from which the imperative "Do not ask again where are we" (Kim, *Dura* 63) issues? The command closes the couplet, "In so locating a time of geography before the compass. Do not ask again where are we" (Kim, *Dura* 63), and suggest a time before early navigational instruments like the compass could radically expand and regularize global travel and trade by sea. This imperative to "not ask again where are we" (Kim, *Dura* 63) also could potentially describe the transportation of human slaves unable to locate themselves in "a time of geography before the compass" (Kim, *Dura* 63) because chained in cargo holds while struggling to survive the "Middle Passage" between Africa, the Americas, and the Carribean. It is as though the poem has begun to anticipate and preempt an imagined reader's urge toward relocalizing or "reterritorializing" the fragments of historical reportage the poem intermittently presents and to suggest that such epistemological uncertainty signifies the durability and ubiquitousness of these forms of historical violence.

Though Zhou reads the poem's epistemological opacity and pluralization of historical narratives as critical of "a national history written from the fixed point of view of the state" (Zhou, *Nomadic* 78), I argue that the voice which insistently asks "Is that accurate" (Kim, *Dura* 63) is ambivalently aligned with the threatening imperative to "not ask" (63). The interrogation of the historical claim that there

is "More uninhabited space in America than elsewhere," a claim which elides the genocide of native inhabitants of the continent, and the command to "not ask" (63) display a skeptical relation to dominant historical narratives while at the same time resignation at the power of such skepticism to fundamentally alter entrenched histories of oppression. The speaker(s) of the poem repeatedly ask "Is that accurate" in response to the previous assertion of uninhabited space and to descriptions of "Riders wielding tall sticks with strips of white linen/attached to them" (Kim, *Dura* 63)—an image which can be read as a gesture of surrender in wartime, a possible allusion to the end of the 1950-1953 Korean War, or perhaps the Ku Klux Klan on horseback. Closed by a period rather than a question mark, "Is that accurate" recurs throughout the poem and wavers between interrogative and statement. Followed immediately by the question, "Is that accurate," the image could also be read as a kind of relinquishment of mastery, an acknowledgment of epistemological opacity, over ever verifying the poem's collection of historical claims. A poetics which claims political value for disrupting the referential "transparency" of language and identity, becomes a kind of anti-documentary poetics which attempts to represent the opacity of a historical archive in which dispersed, marginalized, or murdered populations have been expunged. Uncertainty, indeterminacy, and fragmentation function not simply as ideals of epistemological critique in the poem, but as a kind of prefigural registration of ongoing historical violence. Which is to say that the "rhizomatic" form of the poem and its disruption of linear national histories in a significant sense mimics or represents the dispersion and "deterritorialization" of historically colonized and enslaved populations. In reconstructing such histories, the poem acknowledges its potential complicity in disseminating what may not be "accurate" but which nevertheless is an attempt at reconstructing testimony from profoundly damaged or distorted historical source materials.

In response to these lacunae in the national historical imaginary, or in what Homi Bhabha has called the "language of national collectivity and cohesiveness" (Bhabha 154) which constructs a mythical and culturally homogenous "people," I want to read the poem's constellation of historical fragments as a space of torsional conflict between a liberatory pluralization of historical narratives and the establishment of systems of accounting, tabulation, or enumeration which allow for the comparison and homogenization of exterminated, enslaved or colonized populations. Departing from Zhou's Deleuzian

celebration of the poem's poetics of indeterminacy, I want to argue that the forms of unknowability implied by the paired questions, "do not ask again" (63) and "Is that accurate" (63), may not be so antithetical after all. The poem's combinatory non-narrative formal strategies do not possess any intrinsic political valence but at times serve to undermine fictions of national belonging and at others to express at the level of poetic form the profound historical violence meted out to America's racial and ethnic "others." The poem thematizes these formal features unpredictably and in a manner which cannot be determined in advance of close readings of specific movements or passages. For example, approximately midway through the poem, fragments of earlier histories begin to mix with bursts of what sound like nightly news reports of the 1992 Los Angeles riots which include allusions to feudal social relations and the function of money as a vehicle for the dissemination of such authority:

Litigious grounds. News a supreme pose.

Riotous constitutes a fast designation.

Fettered intention. Penalty teeming.

Let a daughter be named perception: her name is economy.

Coins imprinted with kings' and emperors' faces.

(Kim, *Dura* 70)

The first part of this passage contains a series of mordant puns about the "Litigious grounds" (70) of urban geography and ensuing legal battles over restitution for property damaged during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the "supreme pose" or ideologically distorted media framing of the unfolding social unrest, the "Fettered intention" of mass arrests perhaps, and the pun on team/team in "Penalty teeming"—translating interracial antagonism through the idiom of competitive sports, suggesting both the unpredictable behavior of crowds and an understanding of blacks and Koreans as "Players in the field of manipulation" (Kim, *Dura* 69) by entrenched racial and class hierarchies. The line "Riotous constitutes a fast designation" puns on the parallel between the way rioting and looting crowds were described in news reports and the speed at which the riots spread through urban space. After six days, the 1992 Los Angeles riots resulted in 52 deaths, 2500 injuries, 6500 people arrested for riot-related crimes (over half of which were Latino and only about 36% black), and estimates of over half a billion dollars in property damage.²⁷ The demographics of South Central Los Angeles was rapidly remade in the 1980s and 1990s by an influx of Latino and Asian American immigrants. It is important to note that the subject of the sentence, "Riotous" (70) is an attribute of persons, or a "fast designation" which has functioned historically as a way of animalizing black urban social unrest and justifying extreme forms of state and federal intervention. In the case of the 1992 riots, 4000 National Guard soldiers were deployed to enforce an area curfew and to control crowds. Additionally, it has been reported that federal agencies used the opportunity to deport individuals they suspected to be

²⁷ As a relatively underreported fact of the riots, over half of those arrested for riot-related crimes were Latinos, a fact which Kim's poem seems to register in the line, "A third part of them are by no means/acknowledged" (*Dura* 66). For an analysis of the economic impact of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, see Victor Matheson and Robert Baade, "Race and Riots: a Note on the Economic Impact of the Rodney King Riots." *Urban Studies* 41.13 (2004): 2691-696. For a comparison of the 1992 riots with the 1965 Watts riots see David O. Sears, "Urban Rioting in Los Angeles: A Comparison of 1965 with 1992." *Multiculturalism in the United States: Current Issues, Contemporary Voices*. Ed. Peter Kivisto and Georganne Rundblad. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2000. 81-92.

undocumented immigrants. As George J. Sanchez points out, "Latinos were the single largest ethnic group arrested during the period of the riots, not only for curfew violations and undocumented status, but also as looters of their local Korean merchants" (1018):

Estimates also indicate that between 30 to 40 percent of stores that were lost were Chicano or Latino owned. Moreover, during the three days of rioting, the Immigration and Naturalization Service took advantage of those arrested for curfew violations to deport over 2,000 Latino aliens. Yet the wider media and most academic accounts of the events of 1992 in Los Angeles have largely ignored the Latino role because it disturbs strongly held beliefs in notions of community, belonging, and race in this country. (Sanchez 1018)

The poem's snippets of reportage about the riots give way to language which seems to reference a far earlier historical moment, "Let a daughter be named perception: her name is economy./Coins imprinted with kings' and emperors' faces" (Kim, *Dura* 70). The ritual invocation of a daughter named both "perception" and "economy" could be read as a slightly updated version of a conceit derived from Greek classical poetry, in which the nine classical Greek muses are invoked. This line from Kim's poem also recalls the nine sections of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*—a book and an author whom Kim has acknowledged in numerous interviews and poetics statements as a singular influence upon her own work.²⁸ In this brief couplet, the poem's concern with both epistemology and political economy indicate the poet's avowed interest in the feminisation of global poverty, or the "Feminization of poverty // Feminization of the problem of lived time" (Kim, *Commons* 108), gendered and racialized epistemologies, and of course the question of how political economy permeates not only individual perception but structures interracial conflict on a global scale. As we've seen, each of these areas of inquiry can unsettle the others,

²⁸ In particular see Myung Mi Kim, "From A Far: Dictee." *HOW(ever)* 5.1 (1988). Web.

but the daughter which is named both "perception" and "economy" underscore how gendered identity and perception are inseparable in the poem from repeated images of counting and accounting, and the circulation of money as a general standard of value.

The image of "Coins imprinted with kings' and emperors' faces" (Kim, *Dura* 70) is particularly striking for its numismatic linking of mimesis and commensurability, linguistics and the money-form. Here the coin as a container or signifier of value is guaranteed or backed by the authority of the face of the king or emperor which functions as a kind of "referent" which guarantees that value.²⁹ Additionally, these two lines acknowledge that the poem serial form—in which units of text, often one to three word phrases, repeat, recombine, and circulate—could be made to represent monetary circulation, the expansion of imperial trade networks, or a kind of prolongation of relationships of feudal authority. As a poem which shuttles back and forth between references to European and East Asian feudalism and to the Atlantic slave trade, the following stanzas highlight the continuity of hierarchical systems of value despite a shift from precapitalist to capitalist social relations³⁰:

²⁹ For more on the relationship between mimesis and the money-form, see Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: after Marx and Freud*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1990.

³⁰ On the question of the emergence of capitalist social relations through the destruction and displacement of precapitalist forms of social organization, a movement Marx famously labeled "primitive accumulation," Robinson argues, "Having secured the home market, the further expansion of capitalism required of the state that it assume new forms and additional functions. "National debts, i.e. the alienation of the state—whether despotic, constitutional or republican—marked with its stamp the capitalistic era." First in Holland, and subsequently in England (but with precedents in Genoa, Venice, Spain, and Portugal), the primitive accumulation of capital that was the basis for manufacturing had been accomplished through the agencies of a "colonial system, public debts, heavy taxes, protection, commercial wars," etc.—all the attributes of state structures" (Robinson 58).

Antipathy. Gravity of action. Record that.

Ranting rout. Evening bicycle rides display card players
in windows who appear to be passing peanuts.

Intercession of long avenues.

Express the value of A over B. Dominant relation as
that of owners of commodities.

In plural. Numerous and countable. The king is in
the counting house counting his money.

Scale decimated. Columns engineered with kindling.

(Kim, *Dura* 71)

Here the "intercession of long avenues," "the value of A over B," and "columns" are all instances of iterative spatial, alphabetic, or architectural elements which the poem indicates are "In plural" and "Numerous and countable." A quick review of the poem's reveals an array of images of symmetrically partitioned spaces, systems of measurement, and duplicable, interchangeable, or enumerable objects: "Deployments to the assigned parallel" (54); "Ascension, declination, and distance of the measured body" (54); "first arrivals in rows and columns" (54); "Moveable type" (56); "Thirty sons who will domain. House by which houses will stand" (59); "Primitive tabulation of need"

(60); "Distended beyond assembly and parts" (61); "Moving from twelve to counting on the ten fingers" (61); "Names of capitals. Names of cities," (62); "Population gathered to population" (63); "Assembly in tiers" (66); "Hordes" (67); "Players in the field of manipulation" (69); "To each note a number of officers, specially appointed, not only subscribe their names, but affix their seals" (72); "*pieces prices*" (73); "Vibrations per second" (75); "The fourth coordinate is any measure of time" (76); "Propose: sound combinations" (78); "Propose: nameless days" (78); "Time whose points are events" (79); "A million marching in the streets" (80); "Four roads meeting precisely as a grid" (80); "Effusion of ligatures" (82).

To return to the question of value in the poem, I want to argue that the lines which mention "the value of A over B. Dominant relation as/ that of owners of commodities," is a characteristically terse invocation of the language of political economy, particularly Karl Marx's investigations into the nature of commodity exchange in capitalist economies, or "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret" (*Capital* 163) to borrow the section title from the first volume of *Capital*. For Marx, the difficulty of explaining the nature and historical genesis of commodity exchange in capitalist economies is compounded by the fact that observers confront a state of affairs where social relations between private individuals are mediated entirely through the market which renders radically different objects and labor processes commensurable and calculable. The formal equality bestowed by the market upon individual subjects and their substantive inequality flatten social difference while at the same time reconstituting hierarchical social relations within the realm of economic value. Social relations mediated through the commodity-form thus for Marx become unconscious, uncontrollable, and "thinglike," and commodities appear to possess intrinsic exchange-value and relate to each other autonomously and independently of human agency. "It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things," Marx famously asserts.³¹

³¹ For Marx the commodity-form and "value relation" between commodities and owners of commodities mystify the particularity of social relationships and needs which underlie the exchange of labor and goods. "Objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other," Marx argues,

Of course Marx is careful to distinguish between the "use-value" and "exchange-value" of commodities, in which the former represents how objects might satisfy human needs when consumed, while the latter marks the capacity of objects to be exchanged with a variety of other commodities on the open market. It is the latter quantitative measure which Marx was primarily interested in analyzing, and in the thinker's work "exchange-value" bears no determinate relation to the qualitative character of "use-value." In other words, the "exchange-value" of commodity A is thus only "realized" through another commodity B, and Marx's examples here include the exchange of coats and boots for linen. Or, in the language of the poem, "Value cast. Concord whose only features are earlier and later" (Kim, *Dura* 75). "Cast" could here refer to both metalworking and the artisanal manufacturing of coins and currency, and to the dispersion or dissemination of such currency. Similarly, "Concord" (75) could refer to a type of ancient Greek coin, made in Greek towns of Asia Minor, as well as to an agreement or treaty between parties, nations. Here the word suggests a kind of imposed or enforced "agreement" internal to the category of exchange-value in which, as Marx argues, the value of a commodity, because it can only be realized through exchange, does not inhere in any object but can be imagined as what renders a series of objects at "earlier and later" (75) times equivalent.

While Kim's poem may invoke the language of Marxist political economy, the value of "A over B" redefines exchange value in order to emphasize and "express" not simply the difference in value between two commodities but the "Dominant relation" of the market itself as a form of regularized value which requires the class and racial hierarchies which the poem is so interested in exploring. Here the poem seems to gesture

"...Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange. ...To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [dinglich] relations between persons and social relations between things. (Marx 165-166)

toward the persistence of relations of domination and subordination because and not despite of the generalization of calculable units of value guaranteed by the legal armature of the state. Marx attempts to show how even hypothetical and simplified forms of commodity exchange ultimately require an entire scaffolding of laws, contracts, guarantees of ownership, and assumptions about the alienability of commodified objects and processes:

Commodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right. We must, therefore, have recourse to their guardians, who are the possessors of commodities. Commodities are things, and therefore lack the power to resist man. If they are unwilling, he can use force; in other words, he can take possession of them. In order that these objects may enter in to relation with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another as persons whose will resides in those objects, and must behave in such a way that each does not appropriate the commodity of the other, and alienate his own, except through an act to which both parties consent. The guardians must therefore recognize each other as owners of private property. This juridical relation, whose form is the contract, whether as part of a developed legal system or not, is a relation between two wills which mirrors the economic relation. (Marx 178)

Read in light of Marx's elaboration of the nature of the commodity, the "Dominant relation" between "owners of commodities" in the above-quoted passage from "Thirty and Five Books" represents another way of thinking through the problem of comparability and conflict which structures the poem. I want to argue that the above-quoted passage from the poem interrogating the construction of value are particularly significant because they demonstrate that the "idiom" in which social conflict occurs, in this case the social mediation of the market, necessarily entails a violent history of classification, calculation, and imposed commensurability between individuals, groups, objects, and processes.

After the above stanzas which invoke the seeming interchangeability and formal equivalence of "owners of commodities," the poem offers a grim judgment on those standards of measurement and value which render objects and persons "Numerous and countable" (71). The poem modulates into a mythological register in order to address the histories of colonization, genocide, and enslavement sedimented in the systems of economic value established by commodity exchange: "Scale decimated. Columns engineered with kindling." "Scale" suggests a machine used for weighing two or more items, mythological figures for justice, and what in the poem is used by a king "in the counting house counting his money" (71). As the Oxford English dictionary reminds us, "scale" could also refer to "Relative or proportionate size or extent; degree, proportion," a "standard of measurement, calculation, or estimation," or even a series of sounds or tones which make up a musical octave.³² The poem is keenly aware of the latent etymological resonances between terms, like "scale" and "decimated," in which the former suggests systems of measurement in general while the latter's origins lie in a Latin root—"decimā-re to take the tenth"—which could refer to either taxation or military execution by measured lots. Of course "decimate" functions as a more common reference to destruction or removal of a large proportion of populations.³³ Which is to say both terms, "scale" and "decimated," allude to systems of enumeration, and their ambiguous syntactical combination, "Scale decimated," implies that the very ground of comparability remains violently "engineered" and socially volatile. After what could be read as an invocation of the muses, the presence of "Columns engineered with kindling" could refer to both classical Greek and Roman architecture, as well as the scale of property destruction during the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

³² Scale could also describe a "succession or series of steps or degrees; a graduated series, succession, or progression; esp. a graduated series of beings extending from the lowest forms of existence to the highest (scale of beings, scale of creatures, scale of existence, scale of life, scale of nature, etc.)." See "scale, n.3". OED Online. June 2011. Oxford University Press. 17 June 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171737>>.

³³ "decimate, v.". OED Online. June 2011. Oxford University Press. 17 June 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/48200?rskey=JPY9ML&result=2&isAdvanced=false>>.

The poem's interest in the language of political economy and the question of value also informs its reconstruction of early colonial American history and the 1992 riots. The poem's complex, ambivalent, and potentially controversial account of the interchangeability of the nation's racial and ethnic "others" from the point of view of the state stands in stark contrast to numerous references in the poem to an entrenched American racial hierarchy which structures relationships of exploitation between groups, including nonwhite groups. In the following passage, the interchangeability of America's racial and ethnic "others" is emphasized while the profound historical differences between these groups, for example enslaved black populations and waves of voluntary migration from Asia, is suppressed by the nation-form:

Make the surface plain.

Hordes. Sides. One fish bowl and several shutting gates.

None to receive action or to specify possession.

Nations. Sty and pigpie.

Natural motion of fire to move in a straight line.

_____ arrived in America. Bare to trouble and
foresworn. Aliens aboard three ships off the coast.

_____ and _____ clash. Police move in.

What is nearest is destroyed.

(Kim, Dura 67)

For a such a remarkably dense passage, in which the possibility of cultural similarity and difference is minimized in order to highlight the ascriptive, structural positioning of racialized groups, the initial reference to a "surface" and imperative to make it "plain" seems to describe how the nation-form has forcibly pacified and homogenized these groups within its boundaries. Subsequently, these groups are organized into "hordes" or "sides" in contention—a form of racial framing which echoes popular accounts of interracial conflict in the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Of course "Hordes" (67) has historically been employed as a stereotypical designation for Asian immigrants as alternately a "yellow peril" or "model minority."³⁴ The image of "One fish bowl and several shutting gates" anticipates the penultimate stanza in this passage but also offers ways of conceiving of the spatial form of the nation as both a container and as a fortresslike enclosure with an infamous history of anti-Asian immigration laws and bans. It is perhaps in reference to how these immigrant populations have often been figured in the public imagination as bestial, morally questionable, and carriers of disease that the poem offers the line, "Nations. Sty and pigpie" (67). Here the poem highlights how the ideological space of the nation has been constructed through repeated denials of the formal protections of full citizenship to a succession of racialized populations which cannot "receive action or specify possession" (67)—a description of the poem's characteristically clipped syntax and lines which frequently provide no grammatical object to "receive action" and no grammatical subject to "specify possession." And yet I want to argue that the symmetrization of these "hordes" or "sides" describes a space of cultural contact and cultural hybridization

³⁴ For more on the history of these stereotypes, particularly in relation to Janus-faced representations of Asian Americans as both model citizens and unassimilable aliens in media, film, journalism, and literature, see Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999.

which forms the basis for the poem's later vision of alternative, non-exploitative forms of sociality which remain historically unrealized.

The conclusion of this passage engages directly with the question of commensurability of different communities brought, either forcibly or voluntarily, into the space of the nation, and its classificatory schemas or its "tables of distance and direction of the/principal portion of the inhabited world" (Kim, *Dura* 81). The poem's repeated interest in the figure of sailing ships and oceanic navigation transporting unspecified, likely human cargo situates these sections of the poem in the era of the Atlantic Slave Trade and in what Paul Gilroy has famously dubbed the "Black Atlantic." In Kim's poem, ships appear to function as a kind of figure for parataxis itself, joining otherwise discrete locations, histories, or peoples and echoing the poem's fragmentary, polyvalent formal structures. "It should be emphasised that ships were the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined," Gilroy argues, "They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected" (*Atlantic* 16):

Accordingly they need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade. They were something more—a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production. The ship provides a chance to explore the articulations between the discontinuous histories of England's ports, its interfaces with the wider world. Ships also refer us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialisation and modernisation. As it were, getting on board promises a means to reconceptualise the orthodox relationship between modernity and what passes for its prehistory. (Gilroy, *Atlantic* 16-17)

Referring perhaps to the Atlantic slave trade, Asian immigration across the pacific, or perhaps Portuguese colonialists described not as "discoverers" of America in 1492 but instead as "Aliens aboard three ships off the coast" (Kim, *Dura* 67) the underlined

slots in the second to last stanza of the above-quoted passage from "Thirty and Five Books" constitute a kind of template or formula from which only hierarchical or homogenizing historical narratives can be generated. The first slot could designate "Aliens aboard three ships off the coast," but are these "Aliens" slaves or immigrants, crew members or human cargo? Who is "Bare to trouble and foresworn"—the nakedness of transported slaves or the immigrants who must foreswear allegiance to other nations before naturalization? As a possible allusion to bloody conflict between often heavily armed Korean American shopkeepers and black and Latino looters during the Los Angeles riots, "_____ and _____ clash. Police move in" (Kim, *Dura* 67) reads as a dispassionate, almost journalistic account not of the specificity of these two groups, or the institutional power differentials which might obtain between them, but instead a demonstration of the structural overdetermination of the "poles" of interracial conflict.

I have been arguing that the voicing in this stanza is complex and ambivalent because the passage raises a number of troubling political questions about how such radically dissimilar communities and histories are rendered equivalent—especially for the purposes of constructing a progressive multiethnic coalitional subject in the aftermath of the 1992 riots. The limits of such a multiethnic coalitional politics has attracted increasing criticism for its denial of the centrality of antiblack racism in the American racial imaginary and the role of political economy in structuring conflict and contact between nonwhite racial and ethnic communities. Jared Sexton offers perhaps the most provocative and incisive formulation of this critique when he argues that these accounts of shared distress of immigrant and poor black communities in South Central Los Angeles tend "to conflate the structures of white supremacy and US imperialism (which can and do oppress Koreans and Korean Americans) with the violence or property destruction of the urban uprising of the un-propertied black poor (which cannot and do not oppress Koreans and Korean Americans)" (*Proprieties* 95):

Rather than adding texture to a 'fuller, more differentiated understanding of...the Los Angeles explosion', the postcolonial immigrant caveat appears instead as a non sequitur. The incessant displacement of race onto class and

the subsequent abdication of class analysis together represent an aversion to considerations of the material conditions of hierarchy and exploitation in theoretical work. As noted, there are references to 'capital', 'relations of production', 'the market', 'relative affluence', 'economic stagnation', etc. But none of this is elaborated as the circumstances structuring antagonism between blacks and Asians in the throes of globalization. More to the point, it is not understood as a local and immediate relation of institutionalized violence. (Sexton, "Proprieties" 95)

According to Sexton, accounts of the riots offered by scholars of Asian American history, in an effort to affirm a multiethnic coalitional politics, share a number of problematic commonalities and display a tendency to "gloss over discrepant histories, minimize inequalities born of divergent structural positions, and disavow the historical centrality and uniqueness of anti-blackness for the operations of 'global white supremacy'" ("Proprieties" 90):

When the issue of race is admitted within the critical frame, its explosive results are contained by discussion of racism *between* blacks and Korean Americans figured as an equal exchange: quid pro quo. ...Thus, blacks and Korean Americans find themselves in thrall to the respective image of the other constructed by a white racist cultural apparatus and, pitted against one another, they remain collectively divided and conquered. Yet, the quid pro quo equivalence drawn between these various forms of racism and the anti-racist prescriptions they solicit - where two subordinate groups, imagined on a horizontal plane, simply mistake one another for their true racial and class enemy - quickly discloses a pretense. Racial hierarchy, which historically positions Asians over blacks, much as class exploitation positions owners over customers and employers over workers, is strangely inverted in this instance. ...The respective racisms between blacks and Korean Americans are rendered politically *equivalent* once they are reduced to stereotype and disconnected from racial hierarchy. In a further conceptual maneuver, even this dubious equivalence

is undone by the reassertion of a new and different hierarchy representing a *reversal* of power relations that, incongruously, privileges the black poor and working class over and against Korean American entrepreneurs. (Sexton, "Proprieties" 96-97)

In this passage Sexton identifies how dominant accounts of the riots fail to adequately address "the intersection of racial hierarchy and the hierarchy of class society" ("Proprieties" 94) and instead render black-Korean antagonisms formally equivalent while mystifying the "immediate relationship of institutionalized violence" ("Proprieties" 94) between Korean entrepreneurial capital and black poverty. Sexton's thorough and scathing critique of particular accounts of the riots pinpoints almost precisely those themes—questions of cultural (in)commensurability, racial and class hierarchies, and the circulation of value through systems of counting and accounting—which we have been exploring in close readings of passages from Kim's poem. And yet as I have been arguing the poem's approach to these themes displays an ambiguous use of "proposition, parataxis, contingency" (Kim, *Commons* 107) which could be said to reproduce key aspects of the Asian American abandonment narrative "predicated on a denunciation of property destruction and shaped by a curious appeal to shared distress (Sexton, "Proprieties" 100) which Sexton wishes to critique—the naturalization of black-Korean antagonism as a conflict between two equivalent parties, a forfeiture of agency and responsibility on the part of the Korean American community for not acknowledging an American class-racial hierarchy which continues to position Asians over blacks.

In response to such criticisms of these repeated tropes of an Asian American "abandonment narrative," criticisms which could potentially be directed at portions of Kim's treatment of the 1992 riots, I contend that a fundamental thematic ambiguity pervades the poem's overarching use of serial or combinatory poetic forms which demonstrate how the poem may anticipate and complicate such charges. In particular, the poem explores a pervasive ideological tension between systems of measure allowing for the flattening or homogenization of difference between different racial and ethnic groups and their histories, and relations of domination and subordination which such imposed comparability not only allows but requires. The phrase "What is

nearest is destroyed," (Kim, *Dura* 67) perfectly illustrates this thematic ambiguity or tension between the poem's ventriloquization of the predatory and appropriative "voice" of state power and popular media, and the various strategies which the poet uses to ironize, unsettle, or undermine this voice. As a kind of refrain repeated throughout the poem often in sections directly describing the riots, "What is nearest is destroyed" (Kim, *Dura* 67) may allude to how the property damage, fires, and violence in 1992 was confined primarily to the inner city, barely affecting outer, less racially and ethnically diverse, areas of the city. As David Palumbo-Liu and other scholars of Asian American history have argued, media narratives of black and Korean conflict and violence illuminated an entrenched American racial hierarchy and consolidated popular understandings of the black urban poor as inherently criminal and Korean American shopkeepers as essentially constituting "the frontline forces of the white bourgeoisie" (Palumbo-Liu 186)³⁵:

In 1992, a little over a quarter century after Watts, in another "race riot" in the same city, Korean Americans were represented as the frontline forces of the white bourgeoisie. Not only were they successful even under the most oppressive circumstances, they were not afraid to arm themselves against blacks and Latinos to protect what is not only their territory, but also the buffer zone between the core of a multiethnic ghetto and white middle-class America. (Palumbo-Liu 186)

Despite historical patterns of white flight and financial disinvestment, Palumbo-Liu here gestures toward the media

³⁵ Such accounts recall older sociological debates over the precise status of so-called "middleman minorities." According to Edna Bonacich, after the departure of largely Jewish merchants from the inner cities after the urban riots of the 60s, Asian Americans, particularly Korean Americans, have come to occupy a similar "middleman" position in the American racial imaginary. For an early articulation of this theory see Edna Bonacich, "A Theory of Middleman Minorities," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 38, No. 5. (Oct., 1973), pp. 583-594.

framing of the riots as essentially white/black interracial antagonism displaced onto the "proxy" figures of Korean American shop owners, who have typically not resided in the communities where they do business. Perhaps acknowledging how Korean American businesses could be said to drain money out of inner city communities, the poem describes "Not the return of money but its continued removal further/and further from its starting point" (72). The racial framing of black-Korean conflict during the 1992 riots as a proxy black-white race war, and the politically ambiguous recuperation of this framing in Asian American scholarship, has attracted increasing criticism for what critics like Sexton call its "forfeiture of agency involved in this singular claim to manipulation by the powers that be" ("*Proprieties*" 103). The poem seems to register the media framing of manipulated or displaced white-black conflict through the use of overlapping rhetorics used to describe both competitive sports and the "Traverse of operations" (69) of police and military tactical operations.³⁶ It is as though the poem wishes to foreground how information or media reports of the 1992 riots were as fundamentally unreliable and ideologically distorted as historical accounts of slavery, native genocide, and colonialism.

Thus in the poem black, Korean, and Latino communities in conflict become "Players in the field of manipulation" (69), "Complete with motives" (66) of "Jobs. No Jobs," (66), whose "Bodies in propulsion" in the following set of stanzas are packed together and tightly regimented by the physical choreography of low-wage service sector labor in South Central Los Angeles³⁷:

³⁶ For further analysis of policing and the spatial dynamics of the 1992 Los Angeles riots see Paul Ong and Evelyn Blumenberg. 1996. "Income and Racial Inequality in Los Angeles." In *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the*

Twentieth Century, edited by Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja, 311-335. Berkeley: University of California Press.

³⁷ As Nancy Abelmann and John Lie point out, "New immigrants, primarily from Central America and Asia, have provided a large pool of low-wage, nonunionized labor. Low-tech industries in Los Angeles, such as the garment industry, which employed 65,000 in 1972 but over 100,000 by 1992, have been lowering wages to

Bodies in propulsion. Guatemalan, Korean, African American
sixteen year olds working check-out lanes. Hard and noisy
enunciation.

A banter English gathers carriers.

What is nearest is destroyed.

(Kim 73)

The slippery syntax in this passage renders the bodies of
"Guatemalan, Korean, African American/sixteen year olds working
check-out lanes" (73) indistinguishable from the commodities
which they tabulate, and in the language of the poem, for which
they "Torment a sum/of pieces prices" (73). On the previous
page, the poem suggests the growing sector of the South Central

compete with cheap labor overseas. ... In addition to working at
low wages, immigrant workers, unlike many "native" workers, have
not been unionized. Power considerations thus join the short-
term economic calculus in employers' systematic preference for
immigrant workers, primarily Latinos, over "native" workers,
including African Americans" (Abelmann and Lie 93). For an
historical overview of the deindustrialization and restructuring
of Los Angeles and for further analysis of job competition
between Latino immigrants, African Americans, and Asian
Americans for predominantly low-wage service sector work, see
Roger David Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, *Ethnic Los Angeles*.
New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996; and chapter 1 of João
Helion Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life
and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles*,
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006.

Los Angeles economy devoted to the garment industry and to sweatshop labor historically provided by Asian American and Latino immigrant workers, by offering the instructions, "When ready for use, cut into pieces of different sizes, /nearly square, but somewhat longer than they are wide" (72). Again, the workers and what they produce become indistinguishable, or almost interchangeable, in these lines, where both human activity and the product of human activity are permeated by a kind of overarching economic logic of serial manufacturing. Two pages later the poem describes "Repugnant items shelved and tagged" (75), and continues to imply that like commodities, entire communities have been "shelved and tagged," or geographically isolated and contained within urban ghettos in an urban center subject to a vicious cycle of white flight and financial disinvestment.

However, "Bodies in propulsion" could also describe the "Hard and noisy/enunciation" (73) of "banter English" (73) emerging from a chaotic linguistic contact zone between different non-white communities. Despite the fact that these communities have been brought into contact through the "idiom" of commodity exchange and dead end jobs, the poem nevertheless consistently maintains the possibility of non-exploitative and non-hierarchical processes of cultural hybridization manifesting in the way this panethnic "banter English" (73) *sounds*. Throughout the poem, and especially its latter half, this "banter English" (73) is imagined as an liberatory, alternative medium of interaction between communities which have been brought into contact through market exchange, and through a market logic evolved through centuries of racial terror and colonial expropriation. As the subject rather than the object of the phrase, a "banter English" (73) seemingly possesses a kind of agency beyond the control of its individual "carriers" (73)—the latter designation echoing the capacity of this "banter English" (73) to reproduce itself and expand while at the same time parroting the language of proponents of "English only" policies in classrooms and public institutions, and a rhetoric of contagion and immorality historically used to describe immigrant communities.³⁸

³⁸ For further analysis of contemporary "English-only" debates in the U.S. see T.G. Wiley and M. Lukes, "English-only and standard English ideologies in the U.S.," *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(3), 1996, 511-535.

While reminding readers of how the 1992 riots remained largely confined to poorer communities in South Central Los Angeles, "What is nearest is destroyed" (73) also could be read as a description of the poem's combinatory form, its linguistic permutations preventing discursive relations between stanzas from ever settling, and particularly its copious use of blank space (indeed Kim's use of white space has only grown more pronounced in later volumes like *Penury*). While critics have typically read these spaces in Kim's poems as either gaps or silences on the one hand, or as multiplying possible relations between otherwise discrete linguistic fragments on the other, the semantic ambiguity of this formal feature of "Thirty and Five Books" is itself one of the poem's fundamental areas of inquiry. Which is to say the poem itself figures its gaps, fissures, and white space as both evidence of damaged or "destroyed" (73) social relations, and as a space of cultural hybridity emerging between otherwise "Separate and contingent" (76) communities, languages, and historical events.

The poem thematizes this torsional relation, between its formal registration of historical damage and its modeling of non-hierarchical processes of cultural hybridization, by exploring how both phenomena are linked via systems of counting and accounting which make the question of cultural, linguistic, and economic commensurability resolvable:

Propose: constant translation. Propose: the
application of the compass to navigation. Propose: from
a settlement, a capital grows. Propose: foray, expansion.
Propose: as relates to an America. Propose: as relates
to immigrant. Propose: knowledge becomes the parlance
of the state. Propose: sound combinations. Propose:
nameless days.

(Kim, *Dura* 78)

As a potentially endless series of philosophical premises, legal specifications, or historical claims which grow progressively less purposeful and instead more anguished and uncertain, this particularly dense passage models, in miniature, what I have been calling the torsional relation between racial comparison and cultural hybridity. The identical form of each proposition encourages us to read the items on this list as settled descriptions of historical events which are revealed to be the product of human intention and planning. Or, as the poem maintains on a following page, "The subject is a proposition" (Kim, *Dura* 80). Which is to say the poem suggests that the grammatical subject of these propositions is the form of propositionality itself, a syllogistic form of reasoning and a criteria for historical intelligibility which organizes "Time whose points are events" (79). In other words, the poem wishes to highlight how these propositions are in fact manifestations of the same underlying temporal or punctual logic which structures in advance any chronicle of the colonial settlement of America, westward expansion, and subsequent waves of immigration. The "constant translation" (78) which begins the stanza could refer to linguistic and cultural hybridization, or function as a commentary upon the serial form of the poem constructed from events and assertions which must be isolated, classified, and rendered equivalent, comparable, or translatable into a common idiom. And yet the position from which such proposals are asserted alters radically over the course of the stanza, shifting from what could be read as a history textbook's narration of the colonial genesis of an American state from "a settlement" (78), to what may be a description of an immigrant speaker coping with the pressures of language acquisition, cultural assimilation, marginalization, and anonymity. By letting these lines remain historically underspecified, after all a "settlement" or "capital" could apply to any number of areas and nations across the globe, the passage emphasizes the interchangeability of these sites and the underlying expansionary aims of the nation-form.

In this passage the poem suggests that "an America" (78) is not one, but plural and, more significantly, part of a series of examples of the nation or state form. Like the seemingly transpersonal agency of a "banter English" (73), this passage provides another instance of the poem's interest in representing objects or events as formally equivalent terms in succession. For example the "application of the compass to navigation" (78)

need not specify nations or states in order to suggest the importance of this technological innovation for cartography, travel, trade, and colonial ventures. Similarly, the words "foray" (78) and "expansion" (78)—uncoupled from any reference to specific colonial nations or eras—suggests that these terms could alternately describe the figure of the "immigrant" (78) in general or any number of settler colonies or displaced indigenous human populations.

Yet at the conclusion of this stanza, the "sound combinations" (78) and "nameless days" (78) gesture toward the poem's interest in a kind of "recombinatory" linguistic musicality which functions as a potential model for intercultural social contact vitiated by long histories of exploitation, enslavement, and war. What has so far been dramatized as the "voice" of state power and its classificatory schemas, is here transposed into an aesthetic domain primarily concerned with the visceral experience and expressivity of speech and writing as recombinatory systems akin to music. In the above-quoted passage from the poem for instance, the long and short "o" sounds in "Propose" (78), "sound" (78), and "combinations" (78) begin to suggest an alternative order of sense making tied to how the sound of language might augment, undercut, or otherwise interact with the poem's discursivity. Or, as one of the author's poetics statements maintains, her poems attempt to "Counter the potential totalizing power of language that serves the prevailing systems and demands of coherence" (*Commons* 110) and "Contemplate the generative power of the designation 'illegible' coming to speech" (*Commons* 110). For example, "nameless days" (*Dura* 78), here linked sonically through the long "a" sounds in "nameless" and "days," could allude to the unrecognized histories and social marginality of Korean immigrants say, to the difficulty an English language learner has in naming the days of the week in a new language, or to inability to distinguish between a succession of perhaps equally empty or equally exhausting days for immigrant laborers.

And yet immediately preceding these lines, the poem's assertion that "knowledge becomes the parlance/of the state" (78), in a line whose linked "o" and "a" vowel sounds mirror the following two sentences, suggests that language is not simply the property of individual speaking subjects but also potentially of "the state" (78). The possibility of a recombinatory musicality and alternative forms of social mediation between nonwhite groups are inevitably shadowed by historical form of the state, which represents an entire complex

of disciplinary mechanisms, techniques, and bodies of knowledge. The poem invokes metrics of racial comparability in order to express the latent and unrealized utopian possibilities within a vision of cultural hybridity, but also to connect these logics to a totalizing, disciplinary mechanism of social classification akin to what Michel Foucault famously christened "biopolitics" or "biopower."

In a lecture series delivered at the Collège de France from 1975-1976, Foucault began to theorize "biopolitics" or "biopower" as the science race and racism inscribed in the very form of the state and its mechanisms of classification and control.³⁹ Emerging in the mid-eighteenth century out of earlier forms of sovereign power and overlapping with though distinct from what the thinker called "disciplinary power," "biopolitics" describes the management, medicalization, regularization, and demographic classification of entire racialized populations and at the level of the human species. "Biopolitics will derive its knowledge from, and define its power's field of intervention," Foucault maintains, "in terms of, the birth rate, the mortality rate, various biological disabilities, and the effects of the environment" (Foucault, *Society* 245). Nazism remained for Foucault an exemplary biopolitical regime for its peculiar coupling of racist ideology and state power:

It is at this moment that racism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States. As a result, the modern State can scarcely function without becoming involved with racism at some point, within certain and subject to certain conditions.

What in fact is racism? It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under

³⁹ For a full elaboration of disciplinary power see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage, 1995. For an examination of the intersection of "biopolitics" and race in the context of the trial of the white police officers accused of beating Rodney King, see Ellen K. Feder, "The Dangerous Individual('s) Mother: Biopower, Family, and the Production of Race," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 22.2 (2007): 60-78

power's control: the break between what must live and what must die. The appearance within the biological continuum of the human race of races, the distinction among races, the hierarchy of races, the fact that certain races are described as good and that others, in contrast, are described as inferior: all this is a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls. ...It is, in short, a way of establishing a biological type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain. This will allow power to treat that population as a mixture of races, or to be more accurate, to treat the species, to subdivide, the species it controls, into the subspecies known, precisely, as races. This is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower. (Foucault, *Society* 254-255)

In this lecture dated March 17, 1976, Foucault touched upon a theme which we have seen Kim explore at length in "Thirty and Five Books" and in nearly every other volume of her published writings. Foucault's association of biopolitical knowledge with the rhetorical figure of the caesura is a particularly apt formulation of the poem's interest in the division and divisibility of human groups. The figure of the caesura, with all of its biopolitical connotations, could also apply equally well to a poem which proceeds "by fragment, by increment. Through proposition, parataxis, contingency" (Kim, *Commons* 107). One could say that "Thirty and Five Books," and I would argue Kim's entire corpus of works, is peculiarly attuned, both formally and thematically, to the biopolitical creation, classification, and control of racialized communities, and to how such "knowledge becomes the parlance/of the state" (Kim, *Dura* 78).

"Biopolitics" remains a useful context with which to read the myriad instances of counting and accounting in "Thirty and Five Books" as a record of forms of measurement and categorization which make comparison possible between radically dissimilar objects, processes, and cultures. The poem's exploration of generalized standards of measure raise fundamental questions a kind of disciplinary homogenization of cultural difference as an object of knowledge, and more broadly about the relationship between comparability and value. By

"value" I do not only mean to suggest monetary value, though this is certainly implied through the poem's concern for the "Dominant relation as/that of owners of commodities" (71), but value as a determinant of the relative or comparative worth of the objects, cultures, and groups brought into relation by the poem's omnivorous historical reach. As Natalie Melas argues, noting the dependence of categories of cultural similarity and difference on common criteria, "a judgment of incommensurability is still one based on comparison and therefore on a criterion, only its result is the determination of contrast rather than similarity, absolute difference rather than unity" (Melas 276):

To posit discourses or cultures as radically separate entities that do not conform to the same laws does not per se protect them from a judgment of value or the deployment of a norm, since incomparability can be a mark of superior or inferior worth. ...*Incommensurability*, deriving from the Latin *incommensurabilis*, meaning "lack of a common measure" and rendered in dictionary definitions as "that which cannot be measured by comparison," foregrounds both the act of measurement and this measurement's dependence on a common denominator; incommensurability, in other words, inscribes a conjunction between similarity and value. The similarity at issue here is one that has already been instrumentalized as a norm; what two entities have in common can be used to measure them against each other or in a larger framework.

Melas can help us to read the poem's complex reconstruction and reformulation of state-based schemas of biopolitical knowledge, as an intervention into a massive body of discourse around "Black-Asian conflict during the 1992 Los Angeles riots and occurring in a deindustrialized, post-civil rights landscape of intensifying nonwhite interracial conflict and an urban center remade by waves of post-1965 immigrant groups."⁴⁰ On the other

⁴⁰ For further review of the literature surrounding Black/White paradigm of race relations and arguments about how Asian American migration after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 altered this paradigm, see Janine Young Kim, "Are Asians Black?: The Asian-American Civil Rights Agenda and the

hand, the poem's complex voicing and shifting enunciative positions make it difficult to determine if the poem's suggestion of equivalence among "Players in the field of manipulation" (69) of interracial conflict, or the seeming interchangeability of nonwhite groups within a racial hierarchy which remains fixed securely in place, is articulated from the point of view of the biopolitical state. The poem's elaboration of the relationship between comparability and value, as simultaneously disciplinary and pregnant with utopian possibilities, remains fundamentally ambivalent.

Which is to say the poem seems profoundly interested in how "knowledge becomes the parlance of the state" (78) and seems equally invested in cultivating a kind of Foucauldian epistemological critique of state power and its justificatory narratives. Informed by a poststructuralist valorization of linguistic indeterminacy, the poem's critique of epistemologies of state power tend to emphasize homologies between local and global racial conflicts, and yet I assert that such homologies manifest contradictory tendencies. The poem asserts the logic of equivalence reflected in the drive for a multiethnic coalitional identity and consistently refuses to racialize participants in the 1992 riots as a way of contesting the classification schemes of the biopolitical state. By refusing to racially categorize participants in the 1992 riots, the poem seems to underscore the role of state epistemologies in pitting contending parties against each other in such lines as "Population gathered to population" (63), "One is hurt. One is armed" (76), "_____ and _____ clash. Police move in" (67). Which is to say these lines suggest how there are, syntactically speaking, still "None to receive action or specify possession" (67)—from the point of view of a state intending "to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower (Foucault, *Society* 255)?

Contemporary Significance of the Black/White Paradigm," *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol. 108, No. 8, Symposium: Moments of Change: Transformation in American Constitutionalism (Jun., 1999), pp. 2385-2412; and Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics & Society* 27.1 (1999): 105-38. For a critique of "racial triangulation" see

In order to shift the terms of the question of whether the poem exemplifies those narratives of Asian American victimhood which Sexton finds so problematic, I contend that the poem is both symptomatic and critical of such narratives and that it attempts to think through epistemologies of the state which render interracial contact and conflict inseparable and some would argue inevitable. Kim attempts to bypass or avoid this logic of equivalence by tracking the emergence of metrics of racial comparison over several centuries and by disarticulating the question of racial value from the question of racial comparability. The poem's fascination with the "Litigious grounds" (70) of the 1992 riots, the "Assembly in tiers" (66) of an American class and racial hierarchy, and the "Dominant relation" (71) of the market exchange of labor and commodities, are all instances of structural relations of oppression and exploitation which shape nonwhite interracial antagonism. In other words, the poem's basic gambit is to suggest that the medium or ground which makes interracial antagonism and exploitation possible—class and racial hierarchies emerging over centuries from the Atlantic slave trade and what Arjun Appadurai has called a system of "colonial biopolitics" (*Modernity* 133)—is at the same time the condition of possibility for the poem's vision of an alternative social order which has uncoupled questions of cultural identity and difference from forms of value which structure racial hierarchies. The poem's vision of this alternative social order beyond the "Ascension, declination and distance of the measured body" (54) is described as a non-hierarchical and non-exploitative space of cultural and linguistic hybridity. This space of cultural or linguistic hybridity is modeled after the evolution of a "banter English" (73) or the expressivity of the poem's "sound combinations" (78).

The poem's account of the 1992 riots is bookended by extended descriptions of a pastoral landscape, seemingly set in the distant past or future, in which the poem's biopolitical schemas and bitter social divisions are displaced onto a curiously depopulated natural world through which the poem can imagine forms of symbolic resolution and restitution:

Hurried meeting.

Is it apricot or plum. Their unripe state likens them.

Semblance and question. Inference and increment.

Truth-argument. Truth-grounds. The reception of matter.

Ravine and ransom.

...Having arrived here. Trace of timber in a gravelly loam,
possibly part of a collapsed fence.

Affection to touch dirt.

All harmonics sound.

(Kim, *Dura* 84-85)

In this bare, almost dreamlike landscape situated perhaps long after or long before the historical events narrated in the body of the poem, the question of comparability returns, except this time in the far less antagonistic image of a "Hurried meeting" (84) of fruits. Due to their "unripe state" (84), the plum and apricot are difficult to tell apart and this similarity suggests a time and place before specification, individuation, or difference—before, it seems, the poem's combinatory textual strategies inevitably produce difference, division, and, for

example, the barest suggestion of human violence in the phrase "Ravine and ransom" (84). These stanzas from the conclusion of the poem echo the language of the poem's opening pages which suggest how a geological, cartographic, or mathematical language of flows, circulation, and shifting spatial relations used to describe the movements of global capital can apply just as easily to diasporic populations in transit as it does to the military operations of nations at war. The utopian pastoral landscape here stands in a temporal relation to a past history of racial domination and subordination, and in a logical relation to this history, revealing the inseparability of racial classification and cultural hybridity.

For a work so invested in exploring the epistemological problem of "Semblance" (84), "Truth-grounds" (84), and "Inference" (84), the desire to reconstruct marginal histories and to penetrate the ideological veil of popular media narratives of the 1992 riots gives way to a panorama "Without hazard" (85) where the speaker(s) can discern the remnants of a "collapsed fence" (85) and where traces of human activity have almost completely vanished. The poem holds out the promise of the racially and economically divided communities become immigrants "Having arrived here" (85) at a kind of utopian future where social relations are not mediated through the market, or through racialized relations of domination and subordination, but through two striking images of reconciliation. First, in the "Affection to touch dirt" (85) the poem describes, quite literally, an alternative "ground" of sociality. Second, a line which could be imagined as a quiet act of reflection, the gesture of touching dirt, seems to—through sudden a non-narrative, synaesthetic juxtaposition we have seen at work throughout the poem—to call attention to its own latent musicality—a non-hierarchical musical consonance which joins these two images and between which "All harmonics sound" (85).⁴¹

⁴¹ Again, Sexton is especially skeptical of narratives of black-Korean conflict, and Asian American victimhood, which naturalize the conflict and refuse to consider systemic causal explanations beyond simplistic accounts of cultural difference. In relation to Kim's poem, however, I want to argue that what Sexton calls a euphemistic rhetoric of "biological metaphors of proliferation and natural cycles" ("*Proprieties*" 92) serves a more politically complex function in the poem as a site of both imaginary symbolic resolution and as a particularly relevant language with which to describe overlapping routes of global capital and human

migration. "The `targeting' of Korean-owned businesses," Sexton asserts, "is...naturalized as a tragic and undeserved side-effect of otherwise euphemized processes of economic expansion for Korean American entrepreneurs: the penetration of `internally generated capital' and the realization of value. The authors thereby cover over the question of analysis with biological metaphors of proliferation and natural cycles. Yet, whereas black people's `resentment, hostility, bigotry, boycotts, and ... violence' are said to be the inevitable outgrowth of a natural process - `the seeds were sown' - the reader is *not* invited to make peace with the proverbial harvest. In order to avoid a causal explanation that might suggest apology for rioting and looting, the root causes of this `societal discontent and conflict' are displaced onto aggravating subsidiary factors framed as cultural difference" ("*Proprieties*" 92).

Infinite Regressions: Ed Roberson, Serial Identities, and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement Lunch Counter Sit-Ins

As Brent Hayes Edwards argues in the first collection of essays devoted to the work of poet Ed Roberson, nearly forty years after the publication of the poet's first volume *When Thy King Is a Boy*, "critical interpretation has been slow to come to terms with Roberson's accomplishment" (*Black* 621). Born in 1939 and author of eight volumes of poetry, Roberson's have long been a part of what Aldon Lynn Nielsen has called a literary tradition of "black experiment" (*Calligraphy* 165) which has remained largely absent from broader critical accounts of black postmodern literature. Including midcentury black experimental poets like Elouise Loftin, Russell Atkins, N.J. Loftis, Barbara Fields, and Norman Pritchard, Nielsen has argued that this experimental tradition has suffered from critical neglect because the writings exist outside of the boundaries of existing critical definitions of black vernacular orality.

My reading of Roberson builds upon Edwards recent description of the poet as "one of the foremost practitioners of serial poetics" (*Black* 626). By "serial poetics" Edwards suggests both the poet's use of serial poetic forms, which emphasize the non-narrative, paratactic combination of repeated particles of language, and seriality as a particular way of thematizing these forms in order to illuminate aspects of contemporary black identity formation which might elude more traditional narrative strategies of representation. I argue that Roberson's serial poetics becomes, in a recent collection entitled *City Eclogue*, a vehicle for imagining alternative forms of collective historical memory capable of both celebrating and problematizing ideals of formal equality which animated civil rights movement struggles. Roberson's poem "Sit In What City We're In" commemorates the lunch counter sit-in movement which swept the south in the 1960s by dilating the moment and the movement in space and time and by refusing the kind of distanced, spectatorial historical framing which would safely consign the antiracist ideals of the civil right movement to the past. Instead, Roberson reimagines the scene of the sit-ins as

what I want to call a failed dialectic of racial recognition in which the promise of formal equality, desegregation, and equal protection gives way to a meditation on the homogenizing force of such ideals. I argue that Roberson stages the civil rights sit-ins as a moment of conflict between an integrationist politics in pursuit of equal citizenship rights and a later pluralist multicultural politics of recognition which emphasize cultural difference rather than similarity. As a result, the poem, and I would argue the *City Eclogue* as a whole, pioneers a novel mode of historical remembrance which reveals both the appearance of the past in the present as well as the disjunctive, ruptural account of the past which might emphasize more recent discourses of cultural particularity and otherness. As an example of what Edwards calls "multiple seriality" (*Black* 634) in which various forms of repetition, from the serial organization of *City Eclogue's* five long poems, to the poet's distinctive use of lineation and overlapping syntax represent the co-constitution of racialized subjects and objects at a moment of explosive racial conflict.

As one of the only critics to engage with Roberson's poetry at length before the recent issue of *Callaloo* devoted to the poet's works, Kathleen Crown has argued that "specific histories of cultural encounter, displacement, and trauma" (190) reveal the limits of reading the disjunctive, paratactic style of African American experimental poets like Roberson strictly in terms of avant-garde aesthetic strategies. For Crown, Roberson's work challenges us to explore how such formal strategies operate within non-dominant cultural contexts—in particular how parataxis might function as a way of representing historical violence or as a kind of poetic constructivism which explores aspects of racialization processes, including racial identity formation. For Crown, early 20th century avant-garde attempts to shock bourgeois audiences might instead, in contemporary black poetry and poetics, to serve as the basis for constructing a communal "critical memory or counter-memory" (Crown 189) attuned to profoundly discontinuous cultural histories marked by racial segregation and terror:

Focusing on the avant-garde's historical revisions and allegiances raises difficult questions about the relations between experimentalism and multiculturalism, movements that have been perceived as having little to say to one

another, especially in the realm of contemporary American poetry. In the United States, avant-garde poetic practice has been identified most closely with Language poetics, which have formed themselves in opposition to the dominant, voice-based, and expressive lyric (the mode most often associated with the rubric of *multiculturalism*) by working to shatter its notions of self-presence and authentic speech in favor of a disjunctive, text-intensive poetry. Experimentalism and identity politics are not mutually exclusive, however, if we view the destabilizing and fragmentary nature of much avant-garde writing as a potentially effective means of coming to terms with history-rupturing traumatic events. In gaining access to such traumatic histories as the African diaspora, the poetic avant-garde must enter into shock and deformation in order to articulate new structures, forms, and trajectories. (Crown 189)

Crown's chiasmic pairing of "Experimentalism and identity politics" in order to describe the work of a poet like Roberson alerts us to both the necessity of placing "experiment" and "identity" in relation, and the insufficiency of continuing to insist upon the ruptural and nonrepresentational features of the former and the fundamentally descriptive and mimetic character of the latter. It is precisely these stark categorical boundaries between discourses of "identity" and "experiment," or older seemingly mutually-exclusive formulations of blackness and the avant-garde, which are breached by what I want to call a black constructivist poetics.⁴² Which is to say as a complex act

⁴² As Fred Moten has argued, "the idea of a black avant-garde exists, as it were, oxymoronically—as if black, on the one hand, and avant-garde, on the other hand, each depends for its coherence on its exclusion of the other" (32). The implicit racialized boundaries between "experiment" and "identity" can be traced back to the attempt by early twentieth century Anglo-American avant-gardes to contest linguistic standardization through the appropriation of immigrant and black vernaculars. Additionally, Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism* remains a crucial comparative study of the paradigmatic racial politics of a modernist avant-garde—primarily poets like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein—and Harlem Renaissance authors.

of historical memory and political prognostication, the poem attempts to move beyond a stalled or arrested dialectic of race and nation through the use of a combinatory aesthetic which is not simply *ruptural* but *(re)constructive* as well—a difference often elided by linguistically-derived theories of cultural difference which have informed critical accounts not only of Roberson's work but of African American poetry and poetics more generally.⁴³

⁴³ By "linguistically-derived theories of cultural difference," I mean to suggest the reformulation of racial and ethnic identity in terms of the semiotic freedom of a "floating" or "empty" linguistic signifier—in other words as a kind of linguistic object whose mimetic character can be subjected to deconstructive critique. As Ernesto Laclau observes, "The two basic principles that oversaw the constitution of the linguistic object, were the propositions that there are no positive terms in language, only differences, and that language is form not substance" (68). The deconstruction of racial categories could therefore serve to denaturalize ethnic identity by highlighting the instability and heterogeneity of those communities—situated within a matrix of overlapping forms of ethnic, though not exclusively ethnic, identifications—assumed to be the "transparent" referent or essence of ethnic identity understood as an "empty" signifier. By presupposing the absolute incommensurability of acts of cultural representation and their social contexts, the application of such linguistically-derived theories of cultural difference to ethnic experimental poetry becomes especially homogenizing and problematic. The danger here is that systems of linguistic difference presuppose a level of generality which mimic the representational systems which naturalize forms of national identity, citizenship, or belonging. What Laclau calls the "linguistic object" of identity cannot account for the particularity of *specific* acts of racial representation and for tracking Roberson's attempt to describe the emergence of a collective subject through confrontation with entrenched, segregative forms of racial "difference."

I contend that Roberson's poetry is less concerned with the binary of form and identity and instead with the relationship between formal equality and particularity, and more specifically with the conflict between a discourse of civil rights and formal equality versus a later multicultural pluralist concern, advocated by Charles Taylor and others, for cultural particularity and difference. Taylor has called the former a "politics of universal dignity" (39) and the latter a "politics of difference" (39) or "differential treatment" (39). "Where the politic of universal dignity fought for forms of nondiscrimination that were quite 'blind' to the ways in which citizens differ," Taylor argues, "the politics of difference often redefines nondiscrimination as requiring that we make these distinctions the basis of differential treatment" (39).

Scholars of African American experimental poetry like Edwards, Nathaniel Mackey, and Fred Moten have offered various readings of the significance of Roberson's use of serial forms. Serial literary forms, as described by Joseph Conte as constructed out of the combinatory arrangement of a set of repeated linguistic units—from sounds and words, to entire phrases and sentences. For Mackey and Moten, serial literary forms are likened to a variety of black expressive practices rooted in black music and performance. For Conte, serial poetic forms can be distinguished from the developmental structure of the poetic sequence:

The discontinuity of [serial] elements—or their resistance to a determinate order—distinguishes the series from the thematic continuity, narrative progression, or meditative insistence that often characterizes the sequence. At the same time, the series does not aspire to the encompassment of the epic; nor does it allow for the reduction of its materials to the isolated perfection of the single lyric. The series demands neither summation nor exclusion. It is instead a combinative form whose arrangements admit of a variegated set of materials. (21)

As permutable particles of meaning multiply possible associative links between fragments of text, the circularity or recursivity of the form provide readers with an experience of the

"constitutive dialectic between the urge to expansion and exploration, on the one hand, and the confrontation of boundaries, gaps, limits, on the other" (Edwards 629). I argue that in *City Eclogue*, the recursivity of serial poetic form becomes a vehicle for bringing a civil rights politics of racial integration and equal citizenship into conflict with a post-civil rights politics of cultural recognition and difference promulgated by thinkers like Taylor, William E. Connolly, and others. Which is to say Roberson employs the ambiguous character of serial forms in order to reimagine the scene of the sit-ins as a fragmented relational space in which ideals of formal equality and cultural particularity coexist uneasily. Juxtaposing incongruous perspectives of protestors and segregationists facing each other across the color line, the poem depicts the desegregation of social space as both the possibility of unimpeded circulation through urban space and the varieties of perceptual distortion which result from spatial exclusion. The poem's spare pronominal language of parts and wholes maintains a grammatical equivalence between subjects while delaying the quick attribution of racial identity to protestors and segregationists alike. In other words, the poem suspends the process of racialization long enough for the speaker to examine the spatial configuration of bodies and faces disordered by a breach in the era's color line. In other words, the poem's formal strategies mimic and disrupt racialization processes which construct atomized and interchangeable individuals subject to the same legal, spatial, and socioeconomic constraints.

In *City Eclogue*, the "intuited totality of serial form" (Edwards 628) becomes the gridded and racially segregated space of an unnamed city at moments of heightened racial conflict—from civil rights campaigns to desegregate Southern public businesses and facilities in the 1960s to the 1992 Los Angeles riots in the aftermath of the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department officers accused of assaulting black motorist Rodney King. In the case of the 2001 poem "Sit In What City We're In," which dramatizes the wave of civil rights sit-ins which spread rapidly across the south in the 1960s, Roberson offers a complex vision of the social ontology of desegregation.⁴⁴ The possibility of a reciprocal recognition of shared civil rights across the color

⁴⁴ Though *City Eclogue* was published in 2006, Roberson explains in an interview that he wrote the poem "around March 2001" (Crown, We 751).

line in the era of Jim Crow leads the speaker of Roberson's poem to proclaim "we are so/fused in communication we happen at once" (*Eclogue* 31) and is figured in the poem as an eruption within urban space of the reparative abundance of nature.

"Sit In What City We're In" is primarily concerned with what cultural geographer David Delaney calls the "racialization of space and the spatialization of race" (8). The poem investigates how representations of the sit-ins were structured by multiple varieties of recurrence or repetition—both in the sense of how the protest tactic spread quickly across the south and of how photographs of these protests were captured and disseminated in iconic civil rights movement photographs. The poem poses basic questions about the nature of racial representation and struggles over racialized urban space in the civil rights and post-civil rights eras. We may read Roberson's historical re- and de-construction of the sit-ins as an example of what Leigh Raiford, in a study of the significance of photography for African American social movements, calls "memory as a mode of criticism" (17)—a *critical black memory* which Raiford characterizes as "a mode of historical interpretation and political critique that has functioned as an important resource for framing African American social movement and political identities" (16). At the same time, Raiford's investigation of the "fecund irony of the 'movement photograph,'" as both tactically effective and an "aporetic strategy, rife with ambivalences" (7), raises the possibility of imagining alternative futures as well as the subsequent "transformation of history into nostalgia through the cooptation, depoliticization, and commodification of the movements themselves" (16). Roberson's poem poses fundamental questions about black self-representation and historical memory through its exploration of the seriality of the "face" in civil rights movement photography and by rereading the sit-ins' "face to face" (Roberson, *Eclogue* 27) confrontation across the color line as a metaphor for the opposition between the promise of formal equality and the recognition of cultural particularity.

The "disjunctive, text-intensive" formal techniques of the poem also make one of the most celebrated initiatives of the civil rights movement harder to contain within a narrative of inevitable political victory by refusing to racially categorize the protestors and counterprotestors present at these sit-ins. The poem, like the protests themselves, attempt to dismantle the logic of spatial segregation, or what Elizabeth Abel has called the racial sign system of the Jim Crow south, by representing

the color line as permeable, and identities in desegregated space as almost arbitrarily positional and increasingly impossible to racially categorize.⁴⁵

Roberson reconfigures the sit-ins in space and in time: spatially, by tracking how mirrors behind a lunch counter create a kind of infinite regress of reflected faces; and temporally, by reconnecting the figure of the city to images of nature and cyclical geological processes.⁴⁶ The poem's frieze-like, non-

⁴⁵ "By confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives," civil rights historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has argued, contemporary conservative narratives of civil rights struggles have isolated the "classical phase" of the movement, from approximately 1954 to 1964, and prevented "one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time" (5). Echoing recent developments in civil rights historiography which explore site-specific memorials to the movement and the movement's relatively understudied spatial politics, Roberson's poem probes a fundamental contradiction between what Nikhil Pal Singh has called the antinomy of "racial particularity" and "national universality" (15) which has informed interpretations of black struggles for equality as "the story of the nation's transcendence of the racial past" (17). The aims of iconic civil rights victories like the Greensboro sit-ins, according to such conservative counternarratives, has been progressively realized through appeals to a discourse of civic nationalism assumed to be the "antithesis of a system of ethnic and racial marks" (Singh, *Black* 18). Reflecting what Owen Dwyer calls the "high degree of indeterminacy of the movement's contemporary meaning" (668).

⁴⁶ Roberson's poetics of racialized space can also be read as a contemporary poetic attempt to combine images of nature typically associated with what has been called a southern folk aesthetic with a tradition of more explicitly politicized writing which engages the problems of urban experience. Writing about the recent southward turn in the work of contemporary black novelists like Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, Madhu Dubey characterizes the renewed interest in a southern regional aesthetic as "pitting southern localism and community values

narrative formal organization is a kind of poetic mapping of the era's five-and-dime stores and their mirrored lunch counters. Here, protestors would sit in the whites only section of these counters and remain there with their backs to frequently violent crowds of segregationists. Stylistically, Roberson's interruptive, choreographic use of spacing and lineation similarly multiplies ways of reading particular linguistic figures typically situated at the ends of lines—embedding them in larger units of meaning, transforming grammatical subjects into objects and vice-versa. These polyvalent linguistic figures begin to emphasize the fact of serial reproducibility, in the poem represented as the proliferation of images of protestors reflected in mirrors often situated behind segregated lunch counters, in such a highly mediated and widely disseminated print, photographic, television documentary record. As Elizabeth Abel argues, the sit-ins were "sites of intensive and self-conscious signifying activity" (252) which were meant to provoke a "crisis of racial legibility" (252). The poem seems to exacerbate or dilate this crisis by showing how a breach in the color line seems to fragment the scene beyond recognition.

David Delaney's writings on the spatial politics of the civil rights movement provides an important context for my

against the increasing abstraction of social relations characteristic of the postmodern era" (149). For Dubey, this "atypical black literary return to a premodern rural South signals the exhaustion of the promise of modernity that galvanized the African-American literary tradition through the twentieth century" (156) by positing the south as a kind of "imaginary elsewhere to postmodern urban existence" (144). This contemporary literary return to a southern folk aesthetic maintains the south as a site of an integral racial community bonded together against the threat of more direct, "face-to-face" varieties of racism. While for Dubey this recent southward literary turn has a symbolic resolution to the intractability of intensifying racial segregation in the urban North, Roberson's poem presents a peculiar postmodern reimagining of the legibility of southern "face-to-face" racism, in an era of direct political challenges to Jim Crow, as concealing a host of latent epistemological problems typically associated with urban alienation.

reading of Roberson's poem. Which is to say that Roberson's poem is particularly interested in representing a history of struggles over social space where segregative "spatial configurations are not incidental to power relations such as those predicated on race, but are integral to them" (14):

This means, first, that such relations are what they are because of how they are spatialized. The long struggle against racial segregation demonstrates that the spatiality of racism was a central component of the social structure of racial hierarchy, that efforts to transform or maintain these relations entailed the reconfiguration or reinforcing of these geographies, and that participants were very much aware of this. (7)

By attempting to reconfigure the "experiential meaning that law inscribes on the physical world" (Delaney 14), civil rights activists attempted to challenge claims of local and state sovereignty which were routinely used to preserve racial segregation from federal judicial intervention. Of course the movement was ultimately successful in pressuring the federal government to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, overturning the "separate but equal" doctrine enshrined in law in 1896 by *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and which ultimately expanded the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to integrate public schools and which mandated the desegregation of all public facilities and workplaces.

Elsewhere in *City Eclogue*, in a poem entitled "The Open," Roberson offers what could be read as a poetics statement which could describe author's peculiar method of historical reconstruction. By studying "the fine segregations/taken as a core from our society" (Roberson, *Eclogue* 68), the poems in *City Eclogue* can illuminate the segregated spatial form of the city pictured as the layering of geological strata:

...the fine segregations

taken as a core from our society,

reads like the streets, the history

of mine shafts, mills moments before blowing

the chamber, core layers of color line counting off

under the pressure.

(Roberson, *Eclogue* 68)

The urgency of Roberson's project of historical reimagining and investigation is here articulated in explicitly spatial terms, as the momentary opening of a space or pressurized "chamber" (68) within an oppressive history constantly threatened by a kind of reversion back into otherwise buried and ossified "core layers of color" (68). Which is to say the metaphors of drilling into and mining "the fine segregations" (68) also registers the poet's ambivalent struggle to illuminate a history of racialized spatial segregation without subsequently reifying the distinctions which make such social mandates intelligible. "Sit In What City We're In" imagines the sit-ins as a forceful and violently contested attempt to restore the fundamentally relational character of social space, represented in the poem as the accumulation of a jagged field of irreconcilable visual perspectives, and as an act of resistance which ultimately fails to yield to dominant narratives of inevitable political equality.⁴⁷ The speaker of the poem ultimately cannot construct a

⁴⁷ My use of the phrase "relational space" is broadly informed by the contemporary "relational turn" in the study of human geography. For a concise summary and critique of relational models of social space, see Martin Jones, "Phase Space: Geography, Relational Thinking, and Beyond." *Progress in Human Geography* 33.4 (2009): 487-506.

narrative progression or bridge from the space and time of the protests to the present in which the story of the protests is retold. Which is to say the speaker is unable to specify the proper name of "What City We're In" or to maintain the requisite historical distance from which to "remember" or memorialize forms of racial segregation which remain either unaccountable or ongoing, or both.⁴⁸

On Monday 1 February 1960 four students at the all-black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College entered a Woolworth's store in downtown Greensboro, touching off a subsequent wave of similar protests across the south by asking to be served at a segregated lunch counter. Situated against the backdrop of the Montgomery bus boycott and an intensification of nonviolent protest in southern cities, sit-ins differed from these other forms of civil disobedience by emphasizing the presence of protestors rather than their absence in social space.⁴⁹ The initial Greensboro protestors pre-scripted verbal exchanges with wait staff and scrupulously attempted to project middle class respectability, through dress and demeanor, to a national audience. Roberson's poem emphasizes the essential

⁴⁸ For recent scholarship which explores the impact of desegregation on African American politics in the urban north, specifically the subsequent disinvestment from American cities and the rise of white suburbanization, see "The Power of Place: Race, Political Economy, and Identity in the Postwar Metropolis," in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, eds. Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (Malden: Blackwell, 2002). For an extended study of the persistence and deepening of urban racial segregation in the post-civil rights era, see Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993.

⁴⁹ "While boycotters or strikers made their point through concerted absences," Rebekah Kowel argues, "sit-inners exerted pressure by insistent presence, occupying spaces from which they were usually prohibited. Sit-inners put themselves center stage instead of removing themselves from the scene" (136).

arbitrariness of performing and enforcing the era's racial codes and conventions. Which is to say that the speaker of the poem endeavors to trace how these codes have penetrated into the very material forms of urban space, reconstructing the protests from such a seemingly great historical distance that nearly every aspect of the scene is in need of explanation, from "how many steps we took/to cross one of our streets" (26) to the existence of the cities themselves "between the land's contours" (26):

Someone may want
to know one day how many steps we took
to cross one of our streets,
to know there were hundreds
in one city streets in one direction
and as many
as could fit between the land's contours
crossing those,
our hive grid as plumb
as circles flanked into the insect
hexagonal,
our stone our steel.

(Eclogue 26)

The quoted passage draws an implicit comparison between the lives of city inhabitants, who must navigate the space of the

city and the city's repetitive spatial form, as an aggregate of identical streets. Immediately, a reader is confronted with a series of line breaks and spaces which transform the grammatical objects of phrases, such as that "city" in line 5, into the grammatical subject of subsequent lines, "city streets in one direction." The sudden transformation of subjects into objects and vice-versa is echoed by the ambiguity of who or what is "crossing those"—what Roberson elsewhere dubs "the municipal legged insect/of streets" (*King* 44). Initially the multiplicity of individuals who constitute the "we" remains indistinguishable from the aggregative form of the city itself, a "we" whose internal constitution as a social collective is likened to the modular organic structure of a beehive which like the city itself organizes its inhabitants' lives identically—a double-edged formulation for a poem whose attention to what could be called a grammar of social space correlates to attempts by the speaker's frustrated attempts to imagine forms of political equality which do not imply cultural homogeneity or subsume individual particularity. The humanistic hope that the city remain "our stone our steel" seems to suggest that while resistance to Jim Crow holds out the promise of a kind of desegregated collective subject aligned with images of natural abundance, racial segregation severs or estranges the city's inhabitants from the city's material infrastructure—reproducing atomized, anonymous, and interchangeable urban subjects, or what Jean Paul Sartre calls "serial" social collectives or identities.

As a description of both modular urban space and the massification of individuals within such spaces, Sartre's particular insights into serial collective identities can help us to read Roberson's poem as an investigation into how racially segregated urban space impacts individual and group racial identity formation. In *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre distinguishes between various kinds of social collectivities and their degrees of social organization by counterposing the active, self-determining activity of the "fused group" to passive, objectified, or "practico-inert" social collectivities conceived as *series*—a formulation which suggests the recurrence, substitutability, and contiguity of individuals in social space. For Sartre a "fused group" (*Critique* 345) emerges from serial social relations by committing itself to a common project (examples of the "fused group" in the *Critique* range from organized book swaps to

contending economic classes).⁵⁰ Sartre is not so much interested in the social or political "content" of these groups but in elaborating a general structural grammar of group formation, dissolution, and bureaucratization. Additionally, it is only in this late work where the philosopher explicitly identifies racial oppression, exploitation, and segregation as essentially "serial" phenomena—a term which Sartre defines as a social relationship between individuals paradoxically predicated upon non-reciprocity and structurally equivalent forms of isolation or deprivation, or upon what the philosopher describes as mutual non-recognition.

In order to illustrate the concept of the "series," Sartre offers an example of a group of commuters who do not know each other but who are all nevertheless waiting for a bus to arrive. In the example, the commuters may be drawn from a variety of social contexts and communities, but they are bound together only through what Sartre calls a "negative principle of unity" (*Critique* 261), the principle of the *series*. For Sartre, this "common alterity" (*Critique* 260) of the series positions the commuters, both literally and figuratively, as interchangeable subjects organized by a common external object or purpose—in this case waiting for the arrival of the bus. Additionally, subjects can belong to myriad serial collectivities—Sartre provides a further example of the serial collective constituted by listeners all tuned in to the same radio broadcast. For Sartre, the collection of bus riders is a "practico-inert" (*Critique* 257) or passive gathering because its principle of organization is entirely external and because the relationship between members of the group remains contingent and anonymous. Sartre's definition of the "practico-inert" designates the objectified product of earlier human acts which resists current

⁵⁰ Fredric Jameson has called the opposition between serial social relations and the "fused group" as the "central conceptual antithesis between two fundamental forms of collective existence" in Sartre's *Critique*, "between the side-by-side indifference and anonymity of the serial agglomeration and the tightly-knit interrelationship of the group-in-fusion. This is an antithesis that is not merely a classificatory one, for as a principle of social dynamics and an empirical fact of social history, the group-in-fusion emerges from seriality as a reaction against it, its subsequent development and fate governed by the danger of its dissolution back into seriality again" (Preface xxvi).

activity. In the example of the commuters, Sartre uses the term "practico-inert" to describe both the bus as a material object and the passive "serial unity" (*Critique* 261) of the commuters which, as long as they remain an atomistically-isolated serial or "inactive human gathering" (*Critique* 264), begin to assume the structural characteristics of a thing. This gathering can only become an active "group," a recurrent term for Sartre who uses it to designate collectivities which are self-directing, if, for instance, the bus never arrives and the riders subsequently organize to petition the transportation authorities.⁵¹

Sartre's elaboration of seriality as a principle of social atomization has particular relevance to *City Eclogue* and to "Sit In What City We're In," which describes a world in which Sartre's example of urban commuters can be complicated by understanding the social logic of racial segregation as undergirded by a process of racial serialization or the creation of identical, interchangeable racialized individuals in a *racial series*. How might Sartre's insights into serial human collectives inform an analysis of racialization processes, and of the poem, if we imagine the bus as racially segregated?

⁵¹ For Sartre, the "reciprocal isolations" (*Critique* 257) which characterize the gathering of commuters also "express the degree of massification of the social ensemble" (*Critique* 257) which is ultimately the "real, social product of cities" (*Critique* 257). "For each member of the group waiting for the bus," Sartre continues, "the city is in fact present...as the practico-inert ensemble within which there is a movement towards the interchangeability of men" (*Critique* 257). The commuters are also fundamentally engaged in the passive production of the "object in which they are already inscribed" (*Critique* 265), that is anonymous isolation of the serial social relation itself, "There are serial behavior, serial feelings and serial thoughts; in other words a *series is a mode of being for individuals both in relation to one another and in relation to their common being* and this mode of being transforms all their structures. ...To the extent that *the series* represents the use of alterity as a bond between men under the passive action of an object, and as this passive action defines the general type of alterity which serves as a bond, alterity is, ultimately, the practico-inert object itself in so far as it produces itself in the milieu of multiplicity with its own particular exigencies" (*Critique* 266).

Feminist scholar Iris Marion Young has persuasively argued for how Sartre's conception of the passive, unconscious unity of serial collectivities might be fruitfully applied to contemporary identity categories such as race, gender, and sexual orientation.⁵² Young ultimately applies the Sartrean distinction between imposed serial identities and self-determining groups to gender and race as *serial categories* or "serial unities" (Sartre, *Critique* 267) which name historical patterns of oppression or shared material constraints faced by particular populations. For Young, serial categories, for example gender or class, form a "vast, multifaceted, layered, complex, and overlapping set of structures and objects" (728). Besides providing a useful critical framework for engaging with the forms of combinatory textuality which pervade contemporary African American experimental poetics, conceiving of racialization as a form of imposed serialization avoids the problem of the inevitable essentialism of identity categories which presuppose common political beliefs or uniform social and cultural responses to racial interpellation:

Race or nationality can also be fruitfully conceptualized as seriality. At the level of seriality racial position is constructed by a relation of persons to a materialized racist history that has constructed racially separated spaces, a racial division of labor, racist language and discourse, and so on. A person can and often does construct a positive racial identity along with others from out of these serialized positionings. But such racial

⁵² Young provides a useful summary of Sartre's concept of the group as "a collection of persons who recognize themselves and one another as in a unified relation with one another. Members of the group mutually acknowledge that together they undertake a common project. ...What makes the project shared, however, is the mutual acknowledgment among the members of the group that they are engaged in the project together; this acknowledgment usually becomes explicit at some point in a pledge, contract, constitution, set of by-laws, or statement of purpose. (723-725)

identification is an active taking up of a serialized situation. Which, if any, of a person's serial memberships become salient or meaningful at any time is a variable matter. (Young 731-732)

For Young, conceiving of racial and gender categories as serial collectivities, which of course constitute part of a matrix of interlocking serialized situations, need not specify in advance the kinds of identities formed in relation to a set of shared material conditions because these identities are significantly defined through varying responses to those conditions. "To be said to be part of the same series it is not necessary to identify a set of common attributes that every member has," Young asserts, "because their membership is defined not by something they are but rather by the fact that in their diverse existences and actions they are oriented around the same objects or practico-inert structures" (728).

In other words, racial segregation creates an indefinite and homogenous multiplicity of racialized subjects who may or may not combine to respond to a shared condition—with the caveat that this shared condition in fact may apply unevenly to individual subjects depending upon the claims of any number of competing interpellations. "The activity of racism is a *praxis*," Sartre asserts, "illuminated by a 'theory' ('biological,' 'social,' or empirical racism, it does not matter which) aiming to keep the masses in a state of molecular aggregation" (qtd. in Judaken 38). What I have dubbed a more general process of racial serialization is for Sartre embodied by an exemplary logic of colonial exploitation "conditioned by the atomisation of the native masses; and...based on the following duality: the disintegration of the old communities, and the constant dissolution of any new groups which attempt to form, and a rejection of integration into the colonising society" (*Critique* 722).

Returning to the poem, we could say that Roberson's civil rights protestors constitute a Sartrean "group" reacting to forms of common oppression and marginalization in racially segregated urban space—a group whose principle of solidarity is not a shared racial identity but, at least initially, a kind of negative unity imposed by segregated social relations. While of course white protestors began to participate in sit-ins as the

tactic spread, the poem's second stanza begins to suggest that at least initially the sit-in protestors must engage or take up the representational burden of typicality in order to contest Jim Crow and a host of racist social taboos, from "what steps aside the southern streets required" (*Eclogue* 26) to the taboos against black men gazing "face/to face" (26) at white women across the color line. The speaker's increasingly equivocal use of pronouns represents the protestors as an undifferentiated mass of individuals whose differences have been temporarily suppressed for purposes of collective protest:

Others may want more

to know what steps aside the southern streets required

to flow at last free to clear,

to know how those kept out

set foot inside, sat down, and how

the mirrors around the lunch counter

reflected the face

to face—the cross-mirrored depth reached

infinitely back into either—

the one pouring the bowl over the head of

the one sitting in

at that counter

(26-27)

The pronominal language of the poem tracks the molecular transformations of individual into collective identities, and vice-versa, allowing for an assertion of both commonality and casual violence in the interlinked figures of "the one pouring the bowl over the head of/the one sitting in/at that counter" (27). The poem reveals how "those kept out" become what I have been describing as a Sartrean group by defying a legal sanction which refuses the excluded a place to settle. For the remainder of the poem, the speaker struggles to read and reread the relationship between political equality and the mutual recognition of difference and particularity, from the fleeting symmetry of a moment of "face/to face" (26) encounter nevertheless skewed by racial animosity. Depending upon one's reading of the "cross-mirrored depth" of the scene, the "face/to face"—suggesting alternately identity, recognition, individuation, or confrontation—gives way to "either" racialized domination or subordination.

The Spatial Form of the City

As the title of Roberson's book suggests, nearly every poem in *City Eclogue* employs the figure of the city, which is repeatedly linked to cyclical natural processes from the earth's rotation to its water cycle. "In my own poems I try to show our social nature," Roberson explains, "in and as the growth of our cities and city culture. ...Restoring this larger earth to urban poetry, embedding city life within a living Nature focuses on an interrelation that should keep us sensitized to exploitative relationships which could cut us off, cut us out of life" (*Careful* 5). "Sit In What City We're In" registers how a breach in the color line alters the spatial form of the city and provides an opportunity to resituate civil rights historiography in relation to a hybrid urban/geophysical spatiality and not simply the space of a regional or national imaginary.

If as Nikhil Pal Singh has argued, the "distinctively dialectical discourse of race and nation" has constituted "a relentlessly 'negative dialectic,' in which black intellectuals and activists recognized that racial belonging operates at scales that are both smaller and larger than the nation-state" (44), then we could say that Roberson's poem is especially interested in forms of particularity which are elided by a macropolitical language of national universality and citizenship which permeates established civil rights narratives. In a sweeping analysis of photographs of the sit-in protests from

1960-63, Abel aligns the emergence of these forms of particularity with a developmental shift from the civil rights ideal of political equality to a later politics of cultural recognition:

That principled effacement of embodied differences from the conception of citizenship has a less attractive underside, however, in the facelessness of the abstract citizen. The principle of formal equivalence that dispels the burden of difference from the political realm also obscures the enduring burden of difference in the social realm, a burden that contradicts the abstract form of citizenship and calls out for recognition. That call and its social implications are registered through a different set of faces that reverse the path from the embodied subject's expressive registers to representational systems (linguistic, economic, political) that evacuate the body. (273)

Abel's analysis of the systems of exchange and equivalence reveals a departicularizing social logic at work in a politics of racial integration predicated upon the figure of the abstract citizen or what other critics have called the "imagined community" (Anderson 24) or "fictive ethnicity" (Balibar 102) of national belonging. Abel's attention to what is left out of various systems of political representation can help us to read a number of oppositions which structure Roberson's poem—for example between the possibility of circulation through urban space and an immobilizing color line, or between the "facelessness of the abstract citizen" and the particularity of specific faces. The poem's disjointed, heavily enjambed syntax indicates where particularity or difference might interrupt the circulation or exchange of equivalent terms. "The flesh form of the city," Roberson writes elsewhere in *City Eclogue*, "doesn't move/in the same time as the city's material/Forms move into era and monument" (42). For the speaker of "Sit In What City We're In," racial segregation seems to have seeped into the very "material/Forms" of the city. The poem instead attends to "the flesh form of the city"—a peculiar phrase which imagines the inhabitants of the city as a single organism. Or to put it differently, the first two stanzas evoke urban space and segregated social relations as equally objectlike and as sharing

the petrified, or in Sartrean terms "practico-inert," character of "material/Forms." The poem reanimates these forms, and restores the city's links to the natural world, by placing the promise of formal equality in dialogue with varieties of cultural particularity expunged from the figure of the abstract citizen.

As perhaps one of the most distinctive formal features of Roberson's poetry, the syntactical lineated "break" or intralinear spacing could be considered as instances of what poet and critic Fred Moten calls the "break" or "cut," slippery terms which refers to the use of repetition or sudden transitions in musical performances, and interracial contact or conflict more generally—what Moten calls the "encountering time of the caesura" (71). Departing from Abel's analysis of the synchronic medium of photography, I want to read the poem as not simply a snapshot of spatial relations at a single moment in time but instead as a medium, like music, which possesses a temporal dimension. In a poem so invested in exploring the social ontology of desegregation at a crucial juncture in civil rights struggles, the "cut" or "break" describes both formal features of Roberson's modular, overlapping syntax as well as the poem's reflexive thematization of these forms as "the product of a miscegenative encounter that exists as a function of the difference between the actors and the internal difference of the encounter" (Moten 71). I want to argue that "Sit In What City We're In" is exemplary of a body of poetry which could be said to stage such an encounter between a tradition of black experimental writing and postwar Euro-American poetic avant-gardes, persistently interested in what Peter Quartermain has called a "disjunctive poetics" (3) by pursuing a fundamental analogy between serial poetic forms and racial identity formation.⁵³

In "Sit In What City We're In," Roberson's distinctive use of lineation or spacing, which interrupts the syntax of specific phrases and subsequently reassembles these phrases into larger, overlapping units of meaning, links a series of visual perspectives which have seemingly fragmented under the impact of racial conflict. These syntactical "breaks" couple different forms of ideological identification operating at different

⁵³ Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: from Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.

spatial scales, from the possibility of "face/to face" (26) recognition across the color line to the ideological production of national subject-citizens. Thus in the third stanza, the "miscegenative encounter" of the sit-ins represents the proliferation of perspectives as the multiplication of potential methods of partitioning social space. As a further elaboration of "what steps aside the southern streets required," the speaker recognizes in the space of the sit-ins another form of disjunctive "break" between stillness and movement, a fantasmatic space between the bodies of protestors, determined not to move aside, and the virtual mobility of their mirror reflections:

 this regression this seen stepped

back into nothing both ways

 From which all those versions of the once felt
sovereign

 self locked together in the mirror's

march from deep caves of long alike march back

into the necessary together

 living we are

reflected in the face to face we are

a nation facing ourselves our back turned

 on ourselves how

that reflection sat in demonstration

of each faces

 mirror reflecting into mirror generates

a street cobbled of the heads of

our one

long likeness

the infinite regressions.

(27)

These "versions" of the scene's participants, through a kind of optical illusion, seem to march simultaneously into the scene and away from it and are susceptible to visual, political, and psychic "regression" back into the violence of racially-partitioned social space. And yet the poet's use of the term "regression" also describes the *mise en abyme* of "mirror reflecting into mirror" tapering off into "nothing both ways"—an emptiness or false depth which marks the non-relational limits of "the once felt sovereign/self" (*Eclogue* 27)—a formulation which reveals how such a self, conceived as the locus of an isolated particularity, becomes indistinguishable from the figure of the sovereign, abstract citizen.

The poem's treatment of the intricate racialized dialectics of the gaze, and the mapping of destabilized forms of racial representation in the space of the sit-ins, echo a tradition of black existential phenomenology which includes the writings of figures like W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and more recently, Naomi Zack and Lewis Gordon. According to Gordon, *Africana* philosophy describes a body of work which has endeavored to combine European and non-European existential philosophies "premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation" (*Africana* 3) with the "constant posing of the teleological question of black liberation and the question of black identity in the midst of an antiblack world" (*Africana* 4). The permutations of the specular "face to face" relation which structure Roberson's poem echo Fanon's meditations on the phenomenology of antiblack racism in *Black Skin, White Masks*, in particular Fanon's introduction of race into the Hegelian

dialectic of "Lord and Bondsman" and the reciprocal reification of the Sartrean gaze or "look."⁵⁴ Roberson's protestors' confrontation with the possibility or impossibility of mutual recognition between two "equal" subjects parallels Fanon's revision of Hegelian and Sartrean dialectics to account for the brutal racial Manichaeism and historical durability of the white/black divide.⁵⁵ Antiracist racism, Gordon argues, has skewed the existential structure of interpersonal recognition by representing the black body as a "body without a perspective" (*Antiracist* 102)—a body which throughout Roberson's poem is homogenized by both the Jim Crow social order and ideals of equal citizenship. "Being ultimately regarded by black and antiracist racists as a body without a perspective," Gordon goes on to argue, "the black body is invited to live in such a way that there is no distinction between a particular black body and

⁵⁴ Sartre describes the existential confrontation of two subjects, who attempt to reduce each other to the status of objects, as a relation "which is without parts, given at one stroke, inside of which there unfolds a spatiality which is not *my* spatiality" (*Being* 342). "If the Other-as-object is defined in connection with the world as the object which sees what I see," Sartre argues, "then my fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of *being seen* by the Other. It is in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject" (*Being* 344-345). As Ato Sekyi-Otu observes, "Manicheism, violence, the reduction of the human being to a thing by the look and action of another human being; or the condemnation of the Other to the status of a dreaded or spurned "surplus" entity: these and other characteristic figures in Sartre's account of being-for-others reappear in Fanon's representation of the racial drama of the "colonial context" (66).

⁵⁵ For a brief summary of Fanon's reimagining of Hegelian and Sartrean dialectics, see Nigel Gibson, "Dialectical Impasses: Turning the Table on Hegel and the Black," *Parallax* 8.2 (2002): 30-45.

black bodies. Every black person becomes a limb of an enormous black body: THE BLACK BODY" (*Antiblack* 105). I would argue that what Gordon calls "THE BLACK BODY," that is the representativeness of black corporeality depends upon what Sartre would call a constructed "series" of interchangeable bodies.

For the speaker of Roberson's poem, the segregated black body, as simultaneously a "body without perspective" and a spatially-confined body, becomes instead the site of a possible point of mediation for a multiplicity of perspectives which have been curtailed and profoundly distorted by the era's racial codes:

In the glass, the face
observed, changes the looking at that face, cancels both
their gaze to transparence, opens
around it a window containing right here
around us; and in that window these
same
-in the lapped frame of this one moment-
are the other one's
world we see into in ours:

(Roberson, *Eclogue* 29)

In the poem, a kind of transitory perspectival subject is formed, stitched together through crisscrossing lines of sight, and periodically coalescing into a "we" who marks the vanishing point of a segregated "nation facing ourselves our back

turned/on ourselves" (*Eclogue 27*). For Roberson, the racialized body is inseparable from the history of segregated urban space, a space fundamentally defined by complex relations between embodied perspectives rather than imagined as a kind of empty container in which social relations are simply superadded.⁵⁶ In other words, the poem's representation of desegregated space also marks the emergence of a collective "transparence" in which the conflict between formal equality and individual particularity is reimagined as a contiguous spatial relationship. And yet the poem's slippery, overlapping syntax continues to unsettle what remains "sovereign" and stubbornly self-identical in such a space—a single definitive perspective on or "version" of the scene of protest. What the poem represents as "sovereign," a sense of national belonging predicated upon the production of "versions" of formally-equivalent citizen-subjects sequestered in "deep caves of long alike" (*Eclogue 27*), is continually disrupted by varieties of particularity which skew the reciprocal recognition of formal equality. Such sovereign selves are incompatible with the poem's vision of "necessary together/living" (27) which can recognize and honor particularity without making of such particularity a basis for racial division.

As in previous stanzas, the "break" which transforms the grammatical objects of phrases into the subjects of new phrases, and vice-versa, also functions as a metaphor for the protestors' resistance to racial objectification. For example, the refrainlike repetition of "we are" (27) functions as both a halting attempt at collective self-description asserted in the "necessary together/living we are," (27) and as the grammatical subject of the next phrase "we are/reflected in the face to face we are" (27). By weaving together what each "sovereign self"

⁵⁶ Describing the emergence of a notion of "relational space," as opposed to the idea of Cartesian or Euclidean space, in recent theories of cultural geography, Jonathan Murdoch writes: "The relational making of space is both a consensual and contested process. 'Consensual' because relations are usually made out of agreements or alignments between two or more entities; 'contested' because the construction of one set of relations may involve both the exclusion of some entities (and their relations) as well as the forcible enrolment of others" (20).

glimpses from its fixed position within the scene, the grammatical mobility of the "we are" traces the expanding outline of an omniperspectival subject emerging from the fragmentary views which constitute the poem.

When the "we are" appears for the last time in this quoted passage as the divided subject of "a nation facing ourselves our back turned/on ourselves" (27) the poem establishes the sit-in as itself a kind of virtual space of political "reflection" upon the racial exclusivity of the space of the nation. The momentary tableau formed by the "face/to face" (26) encounter between protestors and segregationists gives way to an unsettling, asymmetrical image of a contorted national subject which marks the uneasy coexistence of multiple forms of ideological "reflection" implied by national belonging— a "demonstration" (27) of the particularity of "each face" (27) morphs into "a street cobbled of the heads of/our one/long likeness" (27). The poem here uses the figure of the city to problematize the promise of formal equality as fundamentally compatible with racially segregated social relations. The poem's ambivalent treatment of resemblance as a guarantor of liberal political equality acknowledges the possibility of "infinite regressions" (27)—a reminder that the production of identical national subjects continues to be defined by the constitutive exclusion of racial particularity. While the sit-ins momentarily allow for a "demonstration" of the particularity of "each face," the discordance between equality and particularity is represented as insoluble—as endless and abyssal as what "mirror reflecting into mirror generates" (27).

Roberson's poem could be said to model a peculiar postmodern variation of "integrationist poetics," a designation coined by Houston Baker. But unlike earlier forms of "integrationist poetics," the poem complicates the centrality of the nation-form to the civil rights movement and its attendant modes of racial representation which valorize formal equality. The poem's post-civil rights revision of an "integrationist poetics" should be contrasted to what Baker has identified as an earlier generation of integrationist critics in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a perspective which emphasized that "Afro-American writing would soon achieve expressive equality and homogeneity with a white mainstream" (68). Informed by a democratic pluralist politics and a faith in the achievement of a national ideal of formal equality, "The integrationists assumed as a first principle that art was an American area of achievement in which race and class were not significant

variables" (Baker 77). The poem charts the trajectory of a civil rights integrationist politics into a subsequent post-nationalist politics of cultural difference—and presents these political ideals as locked in a kind of looped, cyclical, or traumatically repetitive, temporality.⁵⁷

If we conceive of both racial segregation and formal equality as the serial positioning of racialized subjects, then the latter half of the poem could be read as a kind of ambivalent registration of the continuing logic of the series reflected in the modularity of urban space and its endless "versions" of mass sovereign individuality. Urban space in the poem reinforces both the Jim Crow social order and the abstract equality which succeeds it. Thus protestors' attempts to "face their actions" (29) and risk the unpredictability of white segregationist response to an interruption of the racial status quo dramatically reconfigures the "face to face" relation:

In the glass, the face

observed, changes the looking at that face, cancels both

their gaze to transparency, opens

around it a window containing right here

around us; and in that window these

⁵⁷ For Baker, the subsequent displacement of an "integrationist poetics" by the Black Arts Movement required a return to the structural peculiarity and folk vernacular of formerly marginalized black expressive forms like the blues. "Rather than seeking documentary evidence," Baker explains, "that panoply of words arguing for an ideal, *future* egalitarianism in the United States—the emerging generation set itself the task of analyzing the nature, aims, ends, and arts of hundreds of thousands of Afro-Americans who were assaulting present, racist structures of exclusion in America" (72).

same

-in the lapped frame of this one moment-

are the other one's

world we see into in ours:

(29)

As a traditional symbol of the mimetic function of art, the mirror functions throughout the poem as an at times transparent and at times opaque color line which either impedes or allows for intersubjective recognition—what Abel describes as a common feature of five-and-dime lunch counters which “reflected [white customers] membership in a virtual community of their peers” (257)—or as a mechanism of social mediation which can only reproduce homogenous national subjects.

“A mirror which does not look back becomes an opaque surface,” Abel observes in a description of segregated lunch counters which could easily describe Roberson's interest in how the absence of recognition across the color line becomes a kind of impassable, objectlike barrier. The shift from “mirror to window glass to thin air” (*Eclogue* 31) marks the increasing attenuation of what separates the protestors from their political antagonists and the weakening of uniform serial identities premised on a kind of reciprocal non-recognition. Similarly, the meaning of “transparence” (29) in the poem refers both to a literal object in the scene and indicates the possibility of recognizing “lapped” (29) or overlapping serial logic of formal equality and spatial segregation in “one frame” (29)—an “elemental moment (29) which nevertheless allows for some degree of spatial differentiation between the scene's participants. The lack of agreement in “both/their gaze” (29) suggests that the individuals in the scene potentially share a single “gaze” despite their drastically unequal positioning in segregated space. “Transparence” suggests both the possibility of reciprocal recognition across the color line and a description of protestors glimpsing their own mirrored reflections in which “the face/observed, changes the looking at that face” (29). While the speaker's invocation of the “face”

functions as a metonym for forms of particularity which resist being subsumed into social logics which establish equivalence between subjects, the speaker's recognition of particularity in this stanza also names a kind of intrasubjective, "miscegenative encounter" in which difference is spatialized. Difference here becomes "the other one's/world we see into in ours" (29)—an acknowledgement that the sit-ins have altered the self-perception of every participant in the scene:

You can't smash the mirror there but it break here.

And in it you see that you can't see

 your own back,

your angel of the unfamiliar, of that not like

your face... See.

(30)

Here the poem begins to represent relational "integration" by rereading the figure of a fractured national subject as the precondition for a mutual recognition of relational bonds which at the same time acknowledge difference within and between sovereign subjects.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ The poem invokes the figure of the "face" in terms which echo the ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, the figure of the "face" embodies a kind of prediscursive otherness which interrupts any phenomenological account of consciousness as self-sufficient: "...the abstractness of the face is a visitation and a coming which *disturbs* immanence without settling into the horizons of the World. Its abstraction is not obtained by a logical process starting from the substance of beings and going from the individual to the general. On the contrary, it goes toward those beings but does not compromise itself with them, withdraws from them, ab-solves itself. Its wonder is due to the

Though the speaker's vision of a racially integrated collective subject remains an atomized, serial subject which may only be a solipsistic reflection of a single face through a kind of fantasmatic "mirror" of representation, here recognizing that "angel of the unfamiliar, of that not like/your face" (30) transforms the momentarily blocked possibility of intersubjective recognition across the color line into an acknowledgement of an otherness within individuals:

From mirror to window glass to thin air

between and finally, us with no you nor I

but being

-with all our world- inside the other;

but there only in our each part yet having

elsewhere from which it comes and into which it already withdraws" (*Basic* 60).

As an ethical social relation founded upon the recognition of the prerational "abstractness of the face," produced by a confrontation of the "face to face" (Levinas, *Totality* 81), the otherness of the "face" is continually threatened by an appropriative gaze which violently asserts a mimetic identity between the "individual" and the "general." As Jill Robbins explains in an account of Levinasian modes of literary interpretation, the "face" can ultimately transform this objectifying gaze into "generosity and language, forms of nonadequation" (6) which describe the primary "nontotalizing modes of relating to the other" (6). "For Levinas ethics in the most general sense," Robbins argues, "is this putting into question of self-sufficiency, the interruption of self-described variously as an obligation, an imperative, an imposition, a responsibility—that arises in the encounter with the face of the other (*le visage d'Autrui*)" (23).

no displacement of the other,
just as each wishes the self not lost, shared
being in common in each other being
as different as
night and day still of one spin.

(30-31)

Thus the poem's vision of the utopian promise of desegregated spatial relations is reimagined not as a form of passive subjection to the other, or a primordial asymmetry in the structure of being, but instead as the product of a political intervention which temporarily balances difference and likeness, particularity and likeness, by imagining subjects as composite spaces inflected each "inside the other" (31). What the speaker calls "spin" (31) figured as the migratory terrestrial boundary dividing day from night, describes the scene's "miscegenative encounter" as processual and ongoing, while also indicating the repetitive violence and at times nightmarish recursive temporality resulting from that encounter. The counterposing of "spin" or circulation to stillness also characterizes the sit-in as a tactic in which what Susan Leigh Foster calls the "static, tensile posture of the protestors" stands in stark contrast to the flow of bodies through commercial space.⁵⁹ The protest introduces the possibility of a form of political "reflection" which describes not only the movement or stillness of bodies athwart a petrified racial divide, but also how the blocked or

⁵⁹ Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Protest." *Theatre Journal* 55.3 (2003): 395-412.

"deformed" dialectic of the racial gaze distorts the poem's representation of relational space.⁶⁰

While my reading has thus far emphasized Roberson's non-narrative mapping of the spatial politics of the sit-ins, the poem's final stanzas reveal how integrationist ideals erase difference and produce a peculiar repetitive or looped temporality which, like the multiplying mirror images of protestors, endlessly reproduces an unresolved tension between formal equality and cultural difference. Where the space of the sit-ins collapses into "lapped frame of this one moment" (29) in order to signal the emergence of complex forms of recognition, the contraction of time into a spatialized "elemental/moment" (29) suggests that revisiting the sit-ins awakens the speaker's sympathies while revealing the historical durability of those forms of racist violence and misrecognition which the protestors confront:

A here and not-here division of things,

where the future is in the same

place as the past, is

maybe one of the African

masquerades of time like these facing mirrors

⁶⁰ The poem's recursive temporal movement echoes Bhabha's notion of the "time-lag" (*Location* 191) or "temporal break" (*Location* 191). For Bhabha, the "time-lag" describes how ethnic literary agency dislocates totalizing categories of race and nation via a kind of performative repetition of these same categories. The recursive movement of the "temporal lag" is for Bhabha a "process by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience" (*Location* 178).

in which time is making faces
at you from the elemental
moment, the faced and yet to be
faced
in one frame where from, where to are faces of here.
Where a few in the crowd at that lunch counter
face their actions.

(29)

Roberson's protestors at the lunch counter "face their actions" by orienting themselves toward the possibility of a racially-desegregated future while preparing for the unintended consequences of immediate racial conflict. The phrase also implies that protest has opened a spatial and temporal "break" in which a kind of resistant group identity emerges from objectified typicality, that is an indefinite series of historical subjects constrained by racial segregation.

Suggesting the interchangeability of "future" and "past" in African ritual performances, Roberson likens the multiplication of protestors' faces reflected in mirrors to the use of masks in such rituals. As James Snead observes, in a study of the significance of cyclicity for black expressive forms, such forms of repetition may be rooted in "the beliefs that underlie the religious conceptions of black culture, observing periodic regeneration of biological and agricultural systems" (212):

Black culture highlights the observance of such repetition, often in homage to an original generative instance or act. Cosmogony, the origins and stability of things, hence prevails because it recurs, not because the world continues

to develop from the archetypal moment. Periodic ceremonies are ways in which black culture comes to terms with its perception of repetition, precisely by highlighting that perception. (212)

As Snead goes on to elaborate, the complex forms of repetition which permeate black expressive culture can suggest a return to mythic or historical roots, a resolution of opposed forces or ideas, and the possibility of cultural rebirth. Roberson's use of repetition as a structuring device for the poem can be likened to the musical "cut," which for Snead "insists on the repetitive nature of the music, by abruptly skipping back to another beginning which we have already heard" (216) and which also describes the "unexpectedness with which the [jazz] soloist will depart from the 'head' or theme and from its normal harmonic sequence or the drummer from the tune's accepted and familiar primary beat" (216). Roberson's use of a kind of linguistic "cut" in the poem suggests how the "infinite regressions" (27) of segregated serial identities becomes a sequence of moments subject to indefinite repetition. Which is to say, the Sartrean concept of the series begins to splinter the space and time of the sit-ins, making it increasingly difficult for the speaker to either exit the scene or consolidate a contemplative historical vantage external to the moment of the sit-ins from which to construct a narrative of inevitable emancipation. Both the speaker and the protestors confront not only the serial constraint of segregated space but also a kind of segregated historical time in which "the future is in the same/place as the past" (29). In this stanza the "face to face" comes to symbolize both the apparent permanence of racial segregation, which turns out to be fundamentally compatible with the notion of formal equality, and the perpetual renewal of political resistance against segregated social relations.

The appearance of Christian imagery in the poem's later stanzas unsettles and complicates religious allegories of a movement with deep roots in black liberation theology. The speaker's seemingly omniscient vantage is ultimately folded back into a position within the scene among the protestors, where "To know ourselves as a god would know us/would make us gods/of ourselves" (31). Already the collective pronoun implies that the speaker has become one of "us," circulating in a relational space where "we are so/fused in communication we happen at once"

(31). Which is to say, what the speaker recognizes or "knows" is the "transparence" of the color line and the possibility of fashioning a self-determining and racially-integrated collective subject. And yet the speaker's, and by extension a future audience's "godlike simply knowing" (31) remains present only as a momentary glimpse of those largely hidden, elemental forces remaking the space of the segregated city:

Here, in the glass of the city,

a godlike simply knowing doesn't determine

what built

rafts of citizen draughts where the street runs

up the walk to the door

(31)

The speaker must here acknowledge that "Simply knowing" (31) can't intervene in the construction of "rafts of citizen draughts" (31), an ambiguous phrase which gestures toward both the serial reproduction of identical "versions" of citizen-subjects from out of a fungible mass of city inhabitants, and the fluid movements of these subjects through a netlike grid of urban space. As the Oxford English Dictionary reminds us, a "draught" is "the withdrawing, detachment, or selection of certain persons, animals, or things from a larger body for some special duty or purpose; the party so drawn off or selected; spec. in military use." "Citizen draughts" (*Eclogue* 31) could potentially allude to the Vietnam war draft, white segregationist citizens' councils "welded together by common dedication to the principles of white supremacy" (McMillen 116), and the sit-in protestors themselves as an organized group attempting to realize an deracialized ideal of equal citizenship and protection.

Roberson's notion of "spin" and his attempt to restore a field of differentiated perspective(s) to the urban black body is interspersed with a language of geophysical phenomena—a pastoral, lyric vocabulary which is nevertheless suffused by a history of racist violence:

The oceans, themselves one, catch their image

hosed by riot cops down the gutter into

The sphere surface

river

looked into reflects

one face.

(27-28)

Like the possibility of mixed or composite perspectives and identities across a fixed color line, the "elemental" (29) forms which water assumes circulates throughout poem's urban spaces. Here the presence of water recalls both the decision of Birmingham police officers, under orders from notorious police official and staunch segregationist Eugene "Bull" Connor, to turn fire hoses on civil rights protestors, and the effect of such brutal tactics on galvanizing national public opinion against Jim Crow. The stanza also suggests the aggressive police response has further fused the protestors together who recognize their "one face" (28) in response to external threats of violence.

From droplets of water and the "sphere surface/of this river" (31) to the shape of the planet, the poem's attention to spherical forms present in nature begins to insist upon the

alignment of political and natural processes of circulation and "spin." While the "ocean teased apart/to its each drop" (31) can serve as a metaphor for racial division, the metaphor also allows the speaker to place "each drop" (31) back into circulation. Which is to say the poem returns to the figure of isolated individuals engaged in acts of political resistance whose outcome is unclear, and the desperation of these isolated acts before they become exemplary or are assigned historical agents:

Someone is riding a bus, too tired
for everything except what is right;
a god has his back against the wall
of a church in Birmingham;
the marchers take to the streets.
Someone may want to know
what city we're in
that curves glowing over the edge
into an earth.

(30)

The speaker's minimal description of these two anonymous figures and their gestures of refusal do not render them any less recognizable as civil rights icons Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King—the former of course refusing to comply with segregated transportation laws and subsequently triggering the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, and the latter perhaps delivering a sermon at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church which was bombed in 1963 by members of the Klu Klux Klan.

And yet the speaker's choice to refuse to name these figures dramatizes the poem's persistent concern with imagining segregation not through historical personages but in terms of racialized mobility and containment, or in other words of the opposition between stasis and "spin." The "someone" who names potential addressees of the speaker's historical reconstruction becomes the "someone" who is Parks herself, "riding a bus, too tired/for everything except what is right" (30)—a kind of moral exhaustion at having to move aside for white passengers. What I have read as the speaker's "godlike simply knowing" (31) becomes an implicit invocation of King, with "his back against the wall/of a church in Birmingham" (32). Here the resistance to these political acts is dramatized through bodies whose movements are controlled or constrained by racial codes which seem to have seeped into a world of objects—a bus, a wall, the spatial form of the city. On the one hand, the poem depicts a body which refuses to move and which can subsequently only continue to circulate endlessly through the city without ever arriving at a destination. On the other, the poem describes a moving body constrained, bumping up against the "wall" of a racially-partitioned present in which a "godlike simply knowing" (31) cannot guarantee the emergence of a desegregated future.

If as Brent Hayes Edwards argues Roberson's career is exemplary of a black serial poetics, then my reading of "Sit In What City We're In" argues that such a poetics describes the process of thematizing an array of complex formal strategies. These formal strategies include the poet's manipulation of enjambment, spacing, and multivocal syntax to depict the possibility of circulation across a petrified racial divide. The promise of spatial circulation, and the recombinatory power of mobile identities to form transitory ensembles or groups, remains the only emancipatory force in the poem capable of momentarily interrupting the seriality of both segregated urban space and the abstract figure of the citizen. Specifically, my reading of the poem in relation to Sartre's notion of collective serial identities and Fanon's writings on what Ato Sekyi-Otu calls the "deformed dialectic" (61) of racial recognition in the colonial situation, illuminates Roberson's careful poetic attention to existential aspects of racialization processes and how the poet's use of serial forms track the "mix of ongoingness and constraint" (Edwards 629) faced by civil rights protestors in a social space where dominant modes of racial representation have been destabilized. The poem's combinatory aesthetic charts the intricacy of emergent desegregated social relations which eventually succumb to what Sartre would call the "practico-

inert" character of reified serial identities and to what one could consider the contemporary museumification or political neutralization of this iconic moment of civil rights protest.

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