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From “where I live” to “my slave songs”: Integrity and Extension in Wanda Coleman’s Poetry

Abstract. This article discusses Wanda Coleman’s poetry in terms of two interconnected categories which launched the studies of black literature by Craig Werner: “integrity” and “extension”. These categories are assumed to correspond to the standard critical perception of Coleman’s *oeuvre* as content- and form-oriented, respectively, where the former pre-conditions the latter. However, the implemented concepts not only demonstrate how well-acquainted the poet was with the everyday ghetto lives of poor black women and with multiple forms of discrimination against them (“integrity”), but also reveal her experimental attitude to language and to formal dimensions of poetry (“extension”). Also, a close reading of Coleman’s protracted series of American jazz sonnets and her “Retro Rogue Anthology” poems reveals that this formal strategy extended her attention to a new subject matter (i.e., history, culture, and black identity), perceived and presented from a collective black perspective. Eventually, Coleman’s re-writing of white classic poems bears the marks of the strategy of Signifyin(g) combined with the iconoclastic tradition pioneered by Friedrich Nietzsche.

Keywords: Wanda Coleman, black poetry, integrity, extension, American (jazz) sonnets, Retro Rogue Anthology, iconoclastic Signifyin(g)

In an interview with Malin Pereira, Wanda Coleman claims that she has taken her inspiration not only from the deep-imagist poet Diane Wakoski, whose poetic workshop she attended, but also from Charles Olson. Yet, despite the fact that the “[f]ocus in [her] work had been as much on form ... as on content”, her “content received the most of any outside attention” (Pereira 2010: 15). That lack of recognition of her attention to form by critics, who concentrated almost solely on Wakoski-like “anger, repetition, and feelings of loss and betrayal” (Pereira 2010: 10) and disregarded the jazz-inspired open-form lineage of *The Maximus Poems* that pulsates in her poems, provoked in Coleman a desire to

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“show off [her] intellect” (Pereira 2010: 15), and disentangle herself from being narrowly pigeonholed and dismissed by critics as a late voice of the Black Arts Movement. Still, the content and form dualism may be perceived as corresponding to “integrity” and “extension”, respectively, the terms applied by Craig Werner to reading literature of the muted groups who must live in the wild zone within a hegemonic society.

In this article, firstly I look at the content-oriented poems from the first two volumes: *Mad Dog Black Lady* (1979) and *Imagoes* (1983), in which Coleman concentrates on the lives of poor black women. This allows us to see how integrity helps the poet express the truth of black women’s marginalized existence, and speak about such things as the widespread racism they experience on a daily basis, which manifests itself in various forms of discrimination as well as sexual exploitation (in personal love relationships included), and their economic survival and lack of prospects, to mention but a few topic areas she persistently explores from the black woman’s standpoint. Secondly, I move on to discuss her later poems from the collections entitled *American Sonnets* (1994)², *Bathwater Wine* (1998) and *Mercurochrome* (2001), which include both her protracted sonnet series of one hundred American sonnets and the *Retro Rogue Anthology* poems. I demonstrate how her turn to extension, which often takes the form of iconoclasm rooted in the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols*, not only eventually brought a new, less immediate subject matter pertaining to larger, more general and reflective themes approached from a black perspective, such as history, culture, and black identity, but also generated an original poetics that demonstrates her attention to Modernism’s formal experimentation and challenges the racism of the white poetic tradition.

Nonetheless, the uniting factor between integrity and extension is Coleman’s use of form and language, which draws on black speech and on her black jazz sensitivity and the attitude inherited/borrowed from Projectivist conceptualizations of language and composition, which suggest that the form of a poem should emerge spontaneously in the process of writing, and emphasizes that a poem’s final formal shape should result from the development of its subject matter. As summed up by Joanna Durczak (2003: 167–168), the purpose is not a linear development of the theme in a way determined by logic or the rules governing language, but a constant movement, a faithful registering of one perception after another, thought after thought, impulse after impulse, against the tyranny of linguistic rules and habits. As a result, not only in the case of Coleman but also Robert Creeley and Olson, writing poetry is an improvisatory activity, and in this respect is reminiscent of free jazz, which in the late 1950s was launched by such black musicians as Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor, whose intuitive approach to the

2 The first part of Coleman’s American sonnets series was published as a chapbook entitled *American Sonnets* in 1994. Her complete American Sonnets were published in 2022 under the title *Heart First into this Ruin. The Complete American Sonnets*.

sound matter may be perceived as closely analogous to the composition by field, and an inspiration to Projectivist poetics.

Keeping the above remarks in mind, as already mentioned, my proposition is to read Coleman's poetry by drawing on two interconnected concepts introduced into the study of black literature by Craig Werner in his 1986 essay entitled "New Democratic Vistas", identified by the critic as integrity and extension. As Werner says, "[i]ntegrity involves recognition of the full experience of all individuals and groups, including those experiences usually consigned to the wild zone", by which he means the experiences of the members of a muted group, which are crude or "relatively unmediated". As such, these experiences are not permitted to be expressed publicly, and are relegated to the twilight zone of enforced silence. Since they are expressed in the dialect of the muted group(s), dialects based on individual vocabularies that are unrecognized by the dominant culture, which maintains institutional control over proper forms of literary discourse, these experiences themselves are perceived as trivial and unimportant. As the critic argues further on, "this recognition is a necessary precondition for extension, which involves the desire to draw on and contribute to the experience of other groups and individuals" (Werner 1986: 54), which suggests a mutual curiosity, equality and freedom in terms of cultural exchange, and also equal access to a language perceived as "Universal". Nonetheless, such an exchange never happens in the real world, as it may take place only in a pluralistic model of culture. In fact, as Werner argues, we live in a world where a solipsistic model predominates entirely, a model that eliminates dialog as a means of establishing how individual and individual groups' experiences are communicated. Historically, for the black writers in America—i.e., who operate within the boundaries of the hegemonic cultural solipsism—it meant that, metaphorically speaking, they had to knock on heaven's door only to be let in on the condition that they employed the dominant language and ascended to the standards of the hegemonic culture. Those poets were frequently classified as the integrationists, since in their poetry they employed the dominant forms of expression; as a result, they were usually regarded as merely imitators of the white norms. Paradoxically, as Werner emphasizes, the Black Arts Movement and its "representatives" such as Amiri Baraka, managed to establish an "inflexible dialect" (rooted in the "individual vocabulary") and attacked the "source of the cultural solipsism by forcibly demanding entrance into [institutional] discourse" (1970: 74). But demanding does not automatically mean being granted entrance—such a complete immersion in black culture as practiced by the BAM poets and critics, although apparently necessary at that point, had to create a closed system of reference, and all closed systems, by definition, inevitably lose energy and fall apart due to entropy. When Coleman had her debut volume published in 1979, the BAM had already been fading out. Yet, her "incorporat[ing] some of the familiar stylistic tropes of Black Arts poetry" (Ryan 2015: 416), together with her immersion in black culture and poetry, and profound understanding of lives of poor

black women, prove that in her case integrity reached a very high level of saturation with blackness.

Coleman's natural poetic habitat is Watts, the black neighborhood of Los Angeles, the black ghetto her personae—black women all of them—dwell in, and where they spend their purposeless existence with no future before them. In “Where I Live”, a poem from *Mad Dog Black Lady*, the poet sketches a picture of the city and its inhabitants, focusing on street life rituals, whose rules are dictated by poverty, sex and violence, mostly pertaining to black women and their survival in this hostile environment. The persona characterizes the place “where [she] live[s]” by making references to noisy soul music from the radio, strong smells and tastes of “hamburgerfishchilli” that draw “hungry niggahs off the street” to the “juke on the corner”, being observed by the police helicopter constantly present “like god’s eye” in the sky, and being felt by perfect strangers—“niggahs pinching my meat”, the “dudes [who] hate my / ways and call me a dyke cause i wouldn’t sell pussy” (13). Such use of synesthesia, together with mentioning some individual inhabitants of the black space (e.g., an old black woman who “collects / the neighborhood trash” or an “insane old bitch next door beating on the wall”) and all-pervasive street violence (“bullets and blood”) de-romanticize the black ghetto—strongly romanticized during the Black Arts Movement period—and turn it into an infernal space of loneliness and alienation. Moreover, the line which opens the poem and is repeated close to its end (“at the lip of a big black vagina / birthing nappy headed pickaninnies every hour on the hour”), suggests that the ghetto functions like a self-regenerating organism that produces at speed only meaningless lives and human suffering. It is not surprising then that the female persona is “looking forward to the / day [she] leave[s] this hell”.

Decoding the Los Angeles ghetto where she lives as “this hell”, and an open expression of a desire to escape the unbearable reality of the black existence, whose beauty is praised by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) as “our terribleness”, point to the fact that the speaking persona does not feel that she might ever belong in that place. The poem may be juxtaposed with Sonia Sanchez’s “Homecoming”, in which we read about the persona’s conscious decision to finally return to the black ghetto as a mature person/poet who wants to serve her community. The excerpt from Sanchez’s poem, which reads “this is for real / black / niggers / my beauty”, demonstrates her complete identification with the black inhabitants of the ghetto, and the return is a condition to discover the beauty in blackness. In this respect Sanchez’s poem remains influenced by Jones/Baraka, who formulated the ideological blueprint for the representation of the beauty of the black community in his essay entitled “City of Harlem”, where he states that

[t]he legitimate cultural tradition of the Negro in Harlem [or, arguably, of any other black ghetto] is one of wild happiness, usually at some black man’s own invention—of speech, of dress, of gait, the sudden twist of a musical phrase, the warmth or hurt of someone’s

voice... Harlem ... is a community of nonconformists, since any black American, simply by virtue of his blackness, is weird, a nonconformist in this society. (1966: 92–93)

In Coleman’s poem, written almost a decade later than “Homecoming”, the “Black is beautiful” stance seems to be merely an illusion invented and maintained by the black activist poets, who turn a blind eye to the truth and replace it with the perceptions dictated by the black revolutionary ideology. In Coleman’s early volumes there is no fascination with, let alone delight at the black existence or lifestyle. Instead, her persona seems to be sinking into depression when she realizes that “the county is her pimp”, so she cannot expect any institutional support, but at the same time saves herself from falling apart under the weight of harassment, violence and ugliness by turning “a trick / swifter than any bitch ever graced this earth / she’s the baddest piece of ass on the west coast”. Krista Comer reads this statement in positive terms as the final victory, as she claims that “the lingering aftereffect is less one of racial or female suffering than of adaptation, survival, and a sly, confident, and defiant victory” (1999: 366). Nonetheless, defiant as it is, we should be cautious in reading it as a victory since the new identity of the black female persona in “Where I Live” results from embracing a stereotype of a black woman, and reducing her to a sexual object. The fact that she refuses to accept this stereotype from the outside world, but takes it on by her own decision, suggests a strategy of mimicry which, as argued by Luce Irigaray in the context of feminism, is an ironic adaptation to the existing conditions in the cul-de-sac situation.

A similar mixture of bitterness and ironic tone can be found throughout the whole debut volume. For example, the poem “Waiting for Paul” (*Mad Dog...: 59*) expresses a longing for an ideal world that is very far from the reality of the here and now or, simply put, is its opposite:

in the bar
 they play songs about outer space
 where people love each other truly
 where whores are goddesses
 pin ball machines pay jackpots
 of ten grand and
 presidents suck dicks for quarters...
 ...
 songs about outer space
 here drugs are legal
 but no one has the need...
 ...
 the problems of humanity
 solved on the unprinted side of a paper napkin

red light and juke flashing
 come in captain zero

Simple as it is in terms of its structure based on striking contrasts, the poem does not require an extensive critical commentary, as the juxtaposition of the drab ghetto reality and the fantasy world of “outer space” clearly suggests the utopian character of the imaginary place. In “outer space” there is a world where justice has become a fact and is guaranteed, so there is no longer a need for heroes like Captain Zero—the last of the pulp magazines’ crime-fighting figures modelled on such characters as the Shadow and Batman. As there is no crime, Captain Zero, who, as a result of an accident connected with high radiation becomes invisible at night and thus arguably may be black, can relax in the bar in the “red light” and become immersed in sounds of “mellow ballad / sipped from purple glass”. The ballad about outer space as “the problems of humanity” had been solved apparently forever. Nevertheless, it is interesting to read the figure of Captain Zero as Jones/Baraka, since this connection is clearly suggested through allusion to Ellison’s figure of the Invisible Man as well as the fact that Jones/Baraka used such pop culture characters as the Shadow, Green Lantern, and the Lone Ranger in his first collection. In this light the fact that the place where the utopian world is taken for reality is a bar might suggest that access to this fantasy is induced by the music from a juke-box that intoxicates the patrons. As a matter of fact, there is no escape from that place, even though black poets such as Jones/Baraka claim that “this hell” is in fact a black paradise.

In many poems in *Mad Dog Black Lady* and *Imagoes* Coleman uses various black female personae—be it a medical billing clerk, a prostitute, a woman raped by two burglar/rapists or a young mother—who speak from their specific underdog position about their own experiences and problems of the poor living in the ghetto community. The poems abound in no-choice situations, exploitation of the poor, and crimes that involve black women as victims of economic discrimination and oppression.

For instance, a poem from *Mad Dog Black Lady* entitled “Drone” is a monologue of a medical billing clerk who speaks in a monotonous and automatic voice about the patients of the clinic where she works, typing “the same type of things all day long”, filling in “insurance claim forms / for people who suffer chronic renal failure”. These people are “poor, black or latin”, whereas the doctors are apparently white, although it is not stated directly in the poem. On the one hand, it seems that the clerk is aware of the injustice of the system, which exploits these people for its own benefit since “the cash flows and flows and flows / so that the doctors can feed their race horses / an play tennis and pay the captains of their yachts / and keep up their children’s college tuition and / trusts an maintain their luxury cars” (91–92). On the other hand, the robot-like way of her speaking protects the persona as it cuts her off from emotional involvement with the poor. Even though she herself is “paid a subsistence salary” (92), which situates

her on their side, the fact that she has a permanent job at all, and does not want to lose it, separates her from them.

A poem entitled “Today I Am a Homicide in the North of the City” (*Mad Dog...: 25*) is an interior monologue of a black woman riding a bus:

on this bus to oblivion i bleed in the seat
 numb silent rider
 bent to poverty/my blackness covers me like the
 american flag over the coffin of some hero killed in action
 unlike him i have remained unrecognized, unrewarded

The persona reflects on her own invisibility related to her race and poverty (the slash used in the phrase suggests their inseparability), which is linked to her being defined as a “silent rider”, and thus a member of the muted group. In the poem her invisibility is not an asset as it is for Captain Zero, but a result of American racism and gender discrimination. She is well-aware that if she gets killed, no-one will know about it as she is on the ride where the last stop is oblivion, a “dark corner” where she gets off the bus and walks away in her “too tight slacks...into the slow graceful mood of shadow”. Dressed to kill, the persona half-consciously attracts the attention of black men who might rape or even murder her. The final line of the poem reads: “i know my killer is out here”—making the destination become the black woman’s destiny.

The danger of walking alone through the dark streets of the ghetto in such an outfit exposes the persona to a high risk of being hurt, no matter that she does not provoke the criminal. Yet, there is no security for a black woman anywhere, even at home, which is the subject of a poem entitled “Rape” from *Imagoes*. Here, the victim of rape is giving testimony to two policemen (in the opening stanza), one of whom declares that they are “here to help [her]”, and to a doctor (in the second stanza) who wants to know “every detail” (122), forcing her to go through the horror of that experience once again. Yet immediately the falsity of the policemen’s help is revealed to her as after hearing her testimony “he laughed and his partner laughed”.

The policemen’s spontaneous reaction after the official declaration of help results from the common disbelief that a black woman could be the victim of a sexual crime, which was encoded by American history of slavery and inscribed deeply in the popular attitude to black women, who were perceived as sexually active to the point of not only attracting rape, but liking it. According to Patricia Hill Collins, who classified and described four “controlling images” of black women, the most widespread of which is thinking of black women as jezebels (1991: 77), i.e., hypersexual or whores, the image makes oppression and prejudice against black women seem natural and excused. Thus, the doctor’s enquiry reveals his curiosity masked as impatience, since everything he

says to the victim comprises brief phrases such as: “tell me every detail”, “next detail” and, impatiently, “detail, detail”. At the end, however, he asks the victim three questions pertaining to whether she had an orgasm while being raped: “did it feel / good?” “did you cum?” “both times?”. The implication of the positive answers and details she is forced to tell sends the reader back to the above-mentioned stereotype of black woman as jezebel, especially because the victim, in an attempt to answer the doctor’s second question, says that the rapists “were gentle lovers” (*Imagoes*: 122).

The third stanza refers to her boyfriend’s immediate reaction after he came back home and learned from her what had happened. His anger manifests itself in his grievances that are directed at her, as if he thought her guilty of co-operating with the rapists and, as a result, cheated him of his ownership of her body. Tony Magistrale observes that the boyfriend’s “contribution to this woman’s defilement can be read as a desperate attempt to reclaim his threatened masculinity by re-establishing his dominance in the relationship” (1989: 546), which leads to his “furtive, particularly masculine identification with the earlier burglar/rapists, who also viewed her body merely as chattel” and abuses her body himself:

... he asked her where
it happened. She showed him the spot. he
pulled down his pants, forced her back onto the sheets
i haven’t cleaned up, she whined. but he was
full saddle hard dicking and cumming torrents (*Imagoes*: 122–123)

The rest of this long poem contains many more vivid details since it consists of flashes of memory as the victim recalls what has really happened and how. Arguably, the most shocking thing is that the rapists appear in her memory to be not worse than the policemen, the doctor and her boyfriend, as they try to maintain some sort of human relationship with her (e.g., one of them tells her his name; the other gives her his phone number and kisses her good-bye). They even seem to be better in a way since, in order to protect herself and the kids from being killed, she calls them “gentle lovers” (122) and “such / *polite* rapists” (123), and also recalls that “the dark one .../... laid her *gently* on / the bed” (123) [*italics mine*]. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the rapists also play the same patriarchal game of ownership as one of them says: “where is your old man? he’s / a fool not to be here with you” (123), apparently getting satisfaction also from the fact that her boyfriend (read: ‘owner/protector’) is absent, which implies that she must be in need of sex. After they left, “she waited / until she was sure they wouldn’t / come back and kill”—the real reason for being co-operative with the burglar/rapists, and “she picked up the phone / and made the mistake of thinking the world / would understand” (124). “The world” clearly refers to the institutions (masculinist at that time) and persons that would be responsible for tracking down the burglar/rapists (i.e., the policemen), taking

care of her physical and psychological help (i.e., the doctor), and assumingly offering her support and kindness (i.e., the boyfriend). As all these men perceive the victim in terms of a jezebel, the hoped-for understanding does not take place whatsoever; on the contrary, seeing the black woman through this stereotype distorts the perception and makes her as if responsible for the sexual assault. In the end there is a role-reversal, explained by Coleman herself in the *Magistrale* interview when asked about the function of the word “polite” in the poem and about her intention behind using it. The question reads: “Did you mean to be taken ironically?”, to which the poet answers: “The physical rapists were polite. But when you talk about the psychological and emotional rape that took place through the system, those people were pretty rude ... You are constantly treated that way by men—to a lesser extent by your own black men” (*Magistrale & Ferreira* 1990: 507).

Still, discrimination against black women as blacks and as women by white and black men, respectively, is the subject of the poem entitled “Women of My Color”, where, as *Magistrale* puts it, “[t]he isolation and persecution of black women victimized as a consequence of both their sex and race is underscored ... accentuating that black woman’s exploitation is not merely racial, but also gender-specific” (*Magistrale* 1989: 547). Indeed, an act of fellatio which the persona is forced to perform in the poem signifies the domination and oppression of black women by males, and “following the curve of his penis” brings her “down” to the observation that “there is a peculiar light in which women / of my color are regarded by men”, the phrase repeated twice more in the poem, although with a slight modification, i.e. the word “color” is later replaced by the word “race”, which connects with and evokes “racism” as a constant practice in American society. In the course of the poem Coleman points out somewhat didactically that the only difference in the perception and treatment of black women by black and white men, respectively, is that the former regard them “as saints / as mothers / as sisters / as whores / but mostly as the enemy”, whereas the latter perceive them “as exotic / as enemy / but mostly as whores” (24). Arguably, this difference in stereotyping black women does not seem to be qualitative, and changes nothing from the point of view of black females, since, to quote *Magistrale* again, “[b]oth white and black male worlds want her ‘down’, conforming to an emotional and economic ‘curve’ where men are able to assert their power and pleasure at the expense of her identity” (*Magistrale* 1989: 548). Thus, the conclusion illustrated by these divagations reads:

being on the bottom where pressures
are greatest is least desirable

Poems whose subject matter is the discrimination and degradation of black women in their relationships with black men are aplenty in Coleman’s oeuvre. However, a quite original take on the topic appears in the poem “Indian summer” (*Mad Dog...*: 129), in which, as

a result of a shortage of financial means, the female persona cannot escape from the place she stays in with her lover, although, as she says, “we’d rather be elsewhere”, and remains stuck forever in the room where “we suffer heat”, and where there is “no ventilation”, only “the fan hums / unkept promise”. However, in spite of the fact that the black lovers are equally affected by the hot weather, there is no equality between them due to the gender difference. That is why the subject “we” suddenly splits in the poem into its two components, as “he finds his way out”, whereas “I’m stuck here / with the children”. The traditional gender role of a mother makes it impossible for the black woman to escape the unbearable and oppressive conditions. Through the metaphor of the heat (i.e. oppression), Coleman demonstrates how economic discrimination works, turning black women into real scapegoats and putting them at the very bottom of the social ladder.

A matter-of-fact report from “the bottom where pressures / are greatest”, which touches upon the horrors of black women’s everyday experience, appears in “Sweet Mama Wanda Tells Fortunes for a Price” (*Mad Dog...: 79*). In the poem a black prostitute with “cocoa thighs” relates in spare words an encounter with a client. The whole atmosphere in the poem—the “dark stairs”, the coldness of the room, the anonymity of the encounter, and the obvious lack of the prostitute’s emotional involvement—is far from erotic. The persona says in a cold, informative tone:

i am here to fuck
then go back
to the streets

The encounter is as quick as it can be, and it takes only six brief lines to report before “he comes off calling mama” and the prostitute-persona may leave the room with the money she has just earned:

outside
i count my cash
it’s been a good night
the street is cold
i head east
i am hungry
i smile

The persona experiences a deep relief which results from her returning to feel the external stimuli (the coldness of the street and hunger) that are contrasted with the complete lack of reference to her senses when the client was touching her (“he sighs / touches / my lips / my cocoa thighs”). Also, the phrase “i head east” may be understood as a sign

of a regained freedom to move in whatever direction she wants. All these bring a smile to her face and, together with satisfaction from the money she has just made, allow her to think that “it’s been a good night”. However, the two lines which close the poem (“i know what tomorrow / is all about”) sound dubious and ironic as the chances that the prostitute-persona will change anything in her life are close to none, and she must be counting on her physical attractiveness as well as on the generosity of her clients.

Literally the same phrase (i.e., “i know what tomorrow / is all about”) also ends the poem “Sweet Mama Wanda Tells Fortunes for a Price (2)” from Coleman’s second volume *Imagoes*. Here, the persona—a mother healing just after giving birth to a child in a maternity ward—thinks/talks about the pain that she shares with “other mothers” moaning in “other rooms” (I, 111). Like in the prostitute poem, in the mother poem the persona also smiles, this time as a result of physical contact with her baby:

little thing is brought in
 nourishes from my breasts
 i smile
 i hold him

Compared to the brutality of a black woman’s experience in the ‘prostitute poem’, the smile in its sequel from *Imagoes* might have positive connotations as it expresses the mother love and satisfaction that the boy-child is healthy. However, after this four-line stanza there comes the closing phrase pertaining to the boy’s and the persona’s own future, which seems to be as grim as ever for the blacks. As a result, it might be interpreted as a smile of illusion that quite soon will be corrected by the street reality of ghetto life.

As we have seen, Coleman’s poems represent black women as alienated individuals, separate from any sense of a group identity based on solidarity which might result from their shared experiences: being discriminated against, and frequently living below the breadline in “this hell”. In some of her poems, the poet directly explores the phenomenon of poor black women’s alienation and lack of collaboration with others in order to protect themselves against their male oppressors. They do their “battle[s] with the wolf” (“Doing Battle with the Wolf”, *Mad Dog...: 17–19*) or turn against a “legislature of pricks” (“No Woman’s Land”, *Mad Dog...: 26*) in their lonely acts of resistance. As many of Coleman’s poems testify, there is no feminist alternative to their oppression, no sisterhood they could engage with and rely on. As the poet states in “The Women in My Life”, (*Mad Dog...: 40*):

my sisters do not visit. unrequited footfalls
 a path crisp and new with anxious welcome
 a silent door

The bitter conclusion on women's relationships comes in the same poem when the persona states matter-of-factly:

my comrades are men
 hard with the wisdom of the street, prison, university
 sex attraction harnessed by circumstance

Not only is such crude sincerity and honesty a characteristic feature of Coleman's poems, but it seems to represent a full expression of transgression, as she tells the truth from the uncompromised standpoint of the wild zone poet.

Nevertheless, as Coleman in her early poems exhausted the limits of integrity, the time was ripe for extension which, let me repeat after Werner, "involves the desire to draw on and contribute to the experience of other groups and individuals" (1986: 54), and not only black women living in the LA ghetto. In spite of the fact that Coleman's strategy verges on complicity as she seems to have moved in the same direction that American poetry went at that time, her turning towards formal poetry, which in practice apparently meant for her engaging with the contemporary poetic trends and white (post)-Modernist tradition, to my way of thinking was yet another manifestation of Coleman's inherent iconoclastic leanings. In the process of drawing on the experience of another group (i.e., white Americans as the representatives of the dominant culture), her poems challenged and, arguably, modified-without-destroying the entity of the hegemonic tradition's borders, breaking into the discourse through the back door and letting the black voice enforce a dialogic relation with it. Coleman's attitude to white canonical poetry may be reduced (in the Husserlian sense) to a strategy of "exorcising Modernism" in the practice that makes her "exercise" it. I borrow these ambiguous terms as useful to my discussion of Coleman's formal turn from Mikołaj Wiśniewski (2014: 7), who explains/explores their meaning in this manner:

"Exorcising Modernism," or ... "Exercising Modernism"? In a sense, it is both, for it is intended to reflect the ambivalent attitude of the poets discussed here to the tradition of High Modernism which they challenged, but which also—undoubtedly—determined their attitudes and stylistic pursuits. In other words, the process of "exorcising modernism" cannot be regarded without taking into consideration the ways in which modernism was, and perhaps still is, "exercised" by post-war American poets.

The book edited by Wiśniewski does not contain any essay on a black poet's work, yet we can detect in Coleman's attitude to that tradition a similar ambivalence he talks about. Still, in this respect, the difference is that she is fully aware of High Modernism's hegemonic influence on American poets, and she herself uses it absolutely consciously and

deliberately in her own poems, which draw on the existing texts that appear in anthologies of American verse, and which were written by (mainly) white authors. In this way, Coleman, by modelling her poems (i.e., exercising) on the white poets' texts, practices simultaneously "a thorough critique of [the] ideological assumptions" of the "modernist avant-garde" (Wiśniewski 2014: 7) poetics, and demands extension, introducing a black perspective that results from the African American collective experience, correcting (i.e., exorcising) the dominant tradition that, according to George Kent, only (re)presents itself as "Universal"³. A conspicuous example of her strategy of "giving voice" (Wiśniewski 2014: 7)—as put by Grzegorz Czemieli, who comments on Mina Loy, a consistent critic of Modernist aesthetics—to the "human refuse generated by great modernist designers" (2014: 21) and of "reclaiming social territory abandoned by the moderns" (15) is found for instance in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Bluesbird", Coleman's virtuoso rendition of Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", a perfect Modernist poem, as well as in "Keeping Things Honest", written after Mark Strand, a High Modernism disciple, thriving in the long shadow cast by that colossus of a movement.

In both poems Coleman makes a successful attempt to rewrite—rather than adore—their authors (i.e., Stevens and Strand, respectively) by drawing on and challenging their concrete and extremely popular and widely discussed texts. Her re-writing of the poems becomes a consistently exercised anti-idolatry move as it is done together with unmasking both the white Modernism that the poems exemplify and the racial stereotypes that they sustain. As a result, the extension which Coleman practices in her retro rogue poems takes a form of Signifyin(g) "with a hammer", where "Signifyin(g)" refers to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s codifications in his milestone book *The Signifying Monkey*, which presents Signifyin(g) as a quintessentially black strategy of writing that is linguistically, formally and conceptually subversive in a trickster-ish manner. The hammer component is taken from Nietzsche's (2003: 32) concept of "philosophiz[ing] with a hammer", a critical strategy of "sounding-out of idols" by "touch[ing] [them] with a hammer as with a tuning fork" in order to hear the "hollow" sound that they make.

In Coleman's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Bluesbird" Stevens's blackbird is replaced by the bluesbird, which immediately creates an association with the black vernacular culture of the blues, an association that becomes even stronger since, unlike the blackbird, the bluesbird is only a metaphor as such a bird does not exist in nature. Perhaps that is the reason why the name of the bird is not mentioned even once by Coleman in her poem, whereas in Stevens's text it appears thirteen times, i.e., in every part of the text. Another apparent similarity between the poems is that in terms of form Coleman painstakingly follows Stevens's original. Like his poem, hers is also divided into thirteen parts, and the number of lines in each part also emulates the springboard poem

3 See: George Kent. 1972. *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*. 112. Chicago: Third World Press.

by a great Modernist, yet the bluesbird poem systematically questions and challenges Stevens's elusive meanings by alluding to black experience and its truths, which result from "twenty centuries of witnessing" and being defined as a member of a muted group. Nonetheless, here Coleman breaks the spell of the enforced silence, and regains the black voice—and hence the black perspective—by making specific allusions to black culture as well as using black speech as a means to understanding the white world. The example of the former strategy appears in parts ii and xii of the bluesbird poem, when Coleman alludes to the anti-slavery activity of a black visionary, Sojourner Truth ("i saw further winds / like sojourner / in which there winged truth's saviors") and when she mentions a mourning flood that took place after the brutal murder of a black fourteen-year old boy ("the foundation is flooded / emmett must be crossing over"), whereas the latter emerges in part vii when the poet demonstrates her virtuosity in implementing black vernacular in a poem that consistently implements the High Modernist poetics:

o gat-totin' gangstah-gunnin'
 innocents, can y'all imagine dat
 zoostriped loveride hebbenward
 where jazz singers mop
 da floors under God's spats 'n taps?

In this way Coleman transforms Stevens's philosophical poem on the power of perception of a shifting reality into a collective black poem where perceptions are decoded as they appear, becoming concrete observations that pertain to the exploitation of blacks and their will to survive.

Later in her poetic career Coleman prepared a whole series of poems written after white poets, whose texts she took from a random anthology of American poetry that was sitting on a shelf at her home, and gave that series the title *Retro Rogue Anthology*. In the interview with Pereira, the poet talks about her method of "jazzing it up", i.e., "superimpose[ing] her 'very black' perceptions over the culturally 'neutral' event ..., expanding, turning and/or reversing it". This observation demonstrates the mutual dependence of extension and integrity, as "very black" perceptions are always a pre-condition to such poetic reversals. In the case of Strand's "Keeping Things Whole", the author maintains that "poems must exist not only in the language but beyond it", meaning that they exist in the physical world. Coleman challenges that claim by addressing that issue, as she puts it, "directly and definitively" (24) in her answer poem entitled "Keeping Things Honest" (*Mercurochrome*). Here again, the neutrality of the poem by Strand is replaced by black perceptions of a world that reacts to the black presence in an instinctively racist manner: "In this country / I am the absence / of country"; "Whenever I am / I am what is seen but ignored"; "When I walk / I part the eyes"; "the heads whirl / to fill the gap /

where my history's inscribed" (223). And racism, as W. J. T. Mitchell acutely observes, is "a brute fact, the bodily reality", whereas race is "the derivative term, devised either as an imaginary cause for the effects of racism or as an attempt to provide a rational explanation, a 'realistic picture' and diagnosis of this mysterious syndrome known as racism". Thus, to boil down the term to its rudiments, "[r]ace is not the cause of racism but its excuse, alibi, explanation, or reaction formation" (Mitchell 2012: 19).

Driven by the imperative of honesty, Coleman's poem addresses the fragmentation of the American culture, a fragmentation generated by racism in its concrete and palpable manifestations (hence the title "Keeping Things Honest"), whereas Strand's poem avoids that issue completely, being perfectly satisfied with his believing in opposing a fragmentation, which is the essential part of physical reality, and "keeping things whole" by making statements such as: "[i]n a field / I am the absence / of field"; "when I walk / I part the air"; "the air moves in / to fill the spaces / where my body's been". In the conclusion of the poem, Strand's persona says: "We all have reasons / for moving. / I move / to keep things whole", as if promoting an all-inclusive, holistic concept of a friendly relationship between the persona and the world. In Coleman's answer poem, in the conclusion, there is only anger left as a natural reaction to the institutional, socio-cultural and historical discrimination of the blacks in America, since the persona says: "I have hoarded all the reasons / for a crackling / wall of flame" (223).

American Sonnets, Coleman's parallel poetic project, which consists of one hundred individual texts placed in three separate volumes, shares with the retro rogue poems similar attitudes to the work of white poets and to the white tradition in general, as it also challenges them as an established norm by whose standards the black truth cannot be expressed. Some of the sonnets from Coleman's protracted series could find their place in *Retro Rogue Anthology* as they are also answer poems addressing concrete, and mostly white texts—for instance, sonnet 10 (written "after Lowell"), sonnet 12 ("after Robert Duncan") or sonnet 38, after William Blake (here Coleman draws on two Blake's poems: "The Tyger" and "Little Black Boy"). Still, the difference between Coleman's *American Sonnets* and her *Retro Rogue* poems lies in the fact that the former series takes to task a well-established traditional form (i.e., the sonnet), whereas the latter represents the individual challenges—through emulation rooted in the strategy of Signifyin(g)—to particular poems, most of which are written in free verse. These issues demand careful analysis and methodical presentation, and here they are only cursorily signaled. Nonetheless, even such a surface signaling is necessary to briefly demonstrate how extension operates in Coleman's sonnets, and how the sonnets themselves are made blacker than ever by being classified by their author as "jazz sonnets".

In her 1988 essay "On Theloniousism", Coleman explains the idea of a "jazz sonnet" by drawing an analogy with architecture. As she acutely states, compared to "traditional writing" represented by a "furnished room" metaphor, "[a] jazz apartment" is

characterized by “modular/movable walls”, and develops that idea/metaphor further, as she clarifies that

this is an environment allowing the predictable to coexist with the unpredictable, as the Classical [i.e., the traditional] then suddenly break loose into variation to the point of unrecognizability; i.e., new, alien, and always as renewable as the occupant (artist/creator) desires—limited only by the occupant’s ... imagination. (Coleman 1988: 106)

The most striking example of the “jazzing it up” technique is sonnet 100. The connection with traditional sonnets is not mentioned directly, yet the use of archaic vocabulary, its style based on striking ornamentation, the structure determined by enjambment, the use of rhymes, and the allusions and phrases which evoke Shakespeare’s sonnets, leave no doubt that the poem praises as well as challenges the Bard’s tradition.

The sonnet begins with an address to the reader, who assumingly is not satisfied anymore with the tradition of the early sonnets:

when thou dost find no joy in all famed Erato’s
honeyed breast, wordsport a gangster poet’s jest

The message is communicated to the reader through the complex syntax and words, which strike us as archaic, and through the reference to Erato, the muse of love poetry, and we have to remember that originally the sonnet is a love lyric. The first line, which is broken up by enjambment, and in fact ends with the word “breast”, must strike the modern reader as too wordy and too long, as the word “honeyed” seems to be redundant, whereas the second line is disciplined and economic in the modern sense, as it contains only the words necessary for communicating the message. As a result, the opening distich illustrates a clash between the flowery style of the Renaissance period (i.e., when the sonnet reached its formal perfection as the English sonnet) and the Imagist requirement for using only words necessary for the presentation. Obviously, words such as “wordsport” and “gangster poet” have an ironic undertaste and belong to the contemporary world, whereas “thou”, “dost”, Erato” and “honeyed breast” come from the early days of the sonnet in the English language.

The rest of the poem draws on the contrast established at the very beginning. There is no doubt that due to the internal tensions we have here a text that evokes a “jazz apartment”:

how black and luscious comes each double-barreled
phrase, like poisoned roses or a maddened potter’s
glaze. words abundant dance their meanings on

the thrilling floor, the stolen song of ravens and
 purloined harps galore. this is the gentle game of
 maniacs & queens, translations of the highly-souled
 into a dreamer's sputterings where dark gives voice
 to gazer's light and writerly praise is blessed
 incontinence, the spillage of delight.

The placement of the periods and commas demonstrates an almost traditional attitude to the use of sentences that the poem consists of, as if Coleman respected the convention, but at the same time they make the reader realize that the sentences' structure, due to the use of enjambment, remains all the way through at odds with breaking up lines. However, if we read the poem out loud, we can hear the rhymes, which are placed at the sentences'—but not the lines'—ends.

Also, it must be noted that the poem draws on Shakespeare's sonnets for one more reason: in both cases the subject matter is concealed behind linguistic and stylistic virtuosity, and the tension created between surface and depth. Coleman's poem alludes to the presence of a hidden subject as it points to the ambiguity of some "double-barreled" phrases, strategically dispersed in the sonnet, which introduce the subject of race and racism in the context of slavery. If the literary genres represent a hierarchy of power, it is worth reminding the reader that the first edition of *Sonnets* by William Shakespeare was published in 1609, precisely a decade before the first African slaves were brought into the English colony of Jamestown, Virginia.

Moreover, the sonnet is unique in Coleman's series as it contains an easily identifiable volta that is signaled by the use of imperatives directed at the reader at the very end of the poem, which closes with a note of affirmation:

sing to me
 the anthem of untasted fruit. slay in me the
 wretchedness that names me brute. liberate my
 half-dead kill. come. glory in my rebirth.
 come. glory in my wonder's will

The poet/persona, herself a descendant of slaves, emphasizes the fact that "the wretchedness" of the past, which defines them as "brute" (i.e., a black and a slave), has been exorcised in her collection of sonnets ("the anthem of untasted fruit"). As a result, the persona, together with other American blacks, is free at last and, having cast off that burden, born anew. Such a metamorphosis may surprise the reader, as Coleman characterized the poems in her protracted series as often "surreal and ironic". Perhaps the affirmative tone cancels irony after all. Furthermore, the unspecified gender identity of the

persona in sonnet 100 is at odds not only with the female personas in the content-oriented early poems by Coleman, in contrast to poems from *Mad Dog Black Lady* and *Imagoes*, but also with her jazz sonnets in the protracted series as well, which might suggest that race awareness dominates over gender identification of the poet/persona. Yet, it seems to be one more feature of sonnet 100 that alludes to Shakespeare's poems since in the Bard's collection we encounter many sonnets that explore and play with gender instability.

The evidence that in Coleman's sonnet series race and gender are closely interconnected and work together against the solipsism of American culture by practicing extension can be found in the majority of her poems. Nonetheless, nowhere is it so clearly articulated than in sonnet 61, in which the persona sets on the "voyage beyond that / point where self disappears", the word "voyage" evoking the trauma of the Middle Passage. From the very beginning of the sonnet Coleman speaks openly as a black woman who says:

reaching down into my griot bag
of womanish wisdom and wily
social commentary, i come up with bricks
with which to either reconstruct
the past or deconstruct a head.

The "griot bag / of womanish wisdom" equips her with the specific and almost preternatural power of the spoken word, as in West Africa a griot is responsible for preserving the past in the form of oral history, and passing it on to the next generation, Nonetheless, it must be noted that as the bag contains specifically "womanish wisdom", in this case we get a reconstructed past in the form of oral *herstory*. This gender modification also makes it possible for the persona to say in the last line of the sonnet that "these are my slave songs", and since the sonnet means literally a "little song", the comment strikes us as self-reflexive. Thus, Coleman's extensions embrace not only a completion of American history with black experience expressed in the black dialect, to refer back to Werner's nomenclature, but also her "slave songs"—worded (as the self has already disappeared) in the individual women's vocabularies until recently regarded by the white hegemonic culture as not concerning us, hence quite unimportant.

In this way, Wanda Coleman's poetry can be perceived as a model example of writing saturated with blackness (both thematically and formally), in which integrity is a foundation that draws on an uncompromising attitude to communicating the everyday existence and experiences of random black women. Nonetheless, similarly uncompromising is Coleman's practice of extension. As demonstrated by even a brief and cursory analysis of her series of poems such as *Retro Rogue Anthology* and *American Sonnets*, the poet's intimate knowledge of white-in-origin forms (i.e., the sonnet) and her potent skills in emulating-with-a-difference, which is arguably a form of iconoclastic Signfyin' done on

the white poets and their texts, serve the purpose of confronting and challenging, by drawing on its poetic production, the widespread racism of American culture. As demonstrated in this article, the hegemonic culture's solipsism is revealed in Coleman's later poetry in two ways: by extension of its subject matter beyond the life of black women to historical and cultural issues, and by the implementation of intricate formal experiments, in which the inherited forms are struck by the poet with a hammer in the Nietzschean fashion, so that we can clearly hear the hollow and false sounds that they make.

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