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"[T]hese are my slave songs": The Poetics of Transgression and Exorcising the Demon of Racism in Wanda Coleman's Jazz Sonnets

Abstract. The article focuses on Wanda Coleman's protracted series of American Sonnets as a prime example of what I call the poetics of transgression, which the poet worked out and implemented in her "jazz sonnets." The article discusses the reasons behind Coleman's decision to turn towards formal poetry, and argues that her choice of the sonnet form is a transgressive gesture, which means a challenge to the white tradition whose limits are infringed by violating the convention, as Coleman approaches the sonnet as the entirely plastic form in the meaning that Catherine Malabou gives to the term. Through the formal transgression – i.e., breaking the rules and destruction of all the recognizable features of the sonnet, the poet demonstrates her refusal to be its slave, as she actively challenges and reshapes the old form by "jazzing it up." Simultaneously, the formal choice of the sonnet allows her to extend her earlier subject matter concerning black women's experience in the Los Angeles ghetto. Merging "integrity" with "extension" (the features of black writing identified by Craig Werner) provides Coleman with a foundation to discuss larger topics from a black perspective, such as history, identity, culture, and poetry itself. As a result, her American Sonnets series remains the poet's most consistent and subtle strategy of tracing down and exorcising the demon of racism wherever it hides – i.e. in its manifestations in the acts of violence as well as its stubborn presence in American (sub)consciousness.

Keywords: black poetry, Wanda Coleman, sonnet, plasticity, transgression, racism

In a 2006 email interview with Malin Pereira, when requested by the critic to identify in her oeuvre the poems that demonstrate a "special poetic growth in [her] development" (18), Wanda Coleman talks about three series of her poems, one of which is of particular interest to me in this article, namely American sonnets. The series consists of precisely one hundred numbered poems, published in three subsequent volumes: *American Sonnets* (1994), which contains the first 24 lyrics, followed by *Bathwater Wine* (1998), with poems 26-86, and *Mercurochrome* (2001)

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where, together with the 'missing sonnet' 25, the remaining fourteen texts (87-100) appear.[2] Moreover, the idea of launching "the sonnet project" must be strictly associated with Coleman's decision to put more emphasis on form in her poetry since, 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" (15), which provoked in the poet a desire to "show off [her] intellect" (15), and disentangle herself from being narrowly pigeonholed and dismissed by critics as a late voice of the Black Arts Movement.

This article, by setting up theoretical contexts and observations, and by the application of a close reading method of analysis of individual texts, draws on an assumption that African American literary works are, by definition, transgressive as—from Phyllis Wheatley onwards—black literature in America has been driven by a discreet and intimate relationship with the dominant white culture. It concentrates on Coleman's formal demolition-cum-re/creation work by the implementation of what I propose to call the poetics of transgression that the poet worked out and fully used in her jazz sonnets—mostly in her series of American sonnets, but also in a few occasional sonnets she wrote and placed in the above-mentioned volumes, even though she did not include them in the series. Still, Coleman's radical formal maneuvers and strategic operations on the sonnet's body are not merely examples of writerly virtuosity in demonstrating her poetic skills as she does not experiment with the sonnet form for form's sake. On the contrary, they find a parallel in the radical, uncompromising, and subversive messages that her jazz sonnets communicate, which suggests that Coleman never broke with the fundamental purpose of her writing, namely, as she put it, "to deepen the dialogue on American racism. I am never bored by the subject. I am constantly searching for new ways to illustrate the damage or to exorcise the demon" (Pereira 25). However, if in her first two collections (i.e., *Mad Dog Black Lady* and *Imagoes*) the poet directly explores that subject, concentrating on the here-and-now of black women's lives as she writes about their present-day experiences in Watts, the LA black ghetto, in her American sonnets series she maintains her concern with contemporary matters, yet also extends her interest to larger areas such as the literary roots of racism as well as the black view of American history and culture, which requires a more reflective approach.

It is quite tempting to read Coleman's jazz sonnets as a well-planned and perfectly executed formal transgression, which represents a profound challenge to the Euro-American sonnet tradition and reveals a potential to destroy the sanctified form of the sonnet. The poet's choice of the sonnet means the intentional demolition (in place of emulation) of white tradition and, by letting a black perspective in, a declaration of independence from it, as Coleman approaches

2 However, sonnets 1-24 had already appeared in print in Coleman's collections entitled *African Sleeping Sickness* (1990) and *Hand Dance* (1990). For the first time the poet's complete "American Sonnets" appeared posthumously in 2022 as a separate volume under the title *Heart First Into This Ruin: The Complete American Sonnets*, a fact which emphasizes their originality and importance not only in the poet's output, but also may be regarded as a milestone in the history of the sonnet as a genre.

the sonnet as an entirely plastic form in the sense that Catherine Malabou gives to the term. Clayton Crockett argues that in the French philosopher's concept "[t]he key is that this power to annihilate form is a power of form itself, an autoplasticity, because this is what allows for the possibility of change and transformation" (xiii). Arguably, Coleman uses (auto)plasticity as a transgressive gesture since, as stated by Chris Jenks, to "transgress is to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a … law or convention, it is to violate or infringe" (2).

The purpose of this kind of transgression in Coleman's poetry generally, and in her jazz sonnets in particular, is to express black sensitivity and a black view of the world as it is today from the standpoint of socially marginalized or culturally excluded black women, defined by the hegemonic culture as the Other(s). If we concentrate on the formal procedures employed by Coleman in her jazz sonnets, i.e., subversive reversals, specific challenges, various stylistic, semantic, and metrical irregularities as well as the consistent annihilation of the sonnet form, we come to understand that her method is not merely "a mechanical inversion of an existing order it opposes," but that these procedures are propelled by transgression which, as John Jervis observes, "involves hybridization, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories" (4). Nonetheless, Jervis points to the fact that transgression, by challenging the culture of which it is a part, simultaneously becomes discreetly involved with it. In his formulation, transgression by definition:

> is not, in itself, subversion; it is not an overt and deliberate challenge to the status quo. What it does do, though, is implicitly interrogate the law [or convention], pointing not just to the specific, and frequently arbitrary, mechanisms of power on which it rests—despite its universalizing pretensions—but also to its complicity, its involvement in what it prohibits. (4)

Thus, each and every act of transgression is profoundly entangled in an intimate relationship with the dominant culture and its manifestations. Coleman's jazz sonnets that take to task the whole sonnet tradition do not represent an exception to the rule, especially since the poet decides to turn towards form at the moment when American poetry was moving in a similar direction in the early 1980s when a new, anti-Modernist movement emerged under the banner of "expansive poetry," which included the New Formalism and the New Narrative. Moreover, at the very end of the decade, black poetry also experienced a fundamental, generational change of direction as it attempted to disentangle itself from the limiting constrictions of the Black Arts Movement and its theoretical armed wing the Black Aesthetic, one sign of which was Trey Ellis's essay entitled "The New Black Aesthetic" that promoted the idea of a black artist as a "cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures" who can "navigate easily in the white world" (235).

A work-in-progress rather than a properly finished sonnet cycle, Coleman's American sonnets can be classified as a protracted series and her approach corresponds with the work of other

black poets of her generation.[3] Such a—characteristic of postmodernism—way of presenting the poems to the reading public allows for several observations to be made. First of all, a protracted series is not a carefully composed and planned unit,[4] but appears in print in the rhythm at which the larger sections are written. In her interview with Pereira, Coleman talks in detail about how she got the idea for American sonnets and how it developed, pointing out that it was closely connected to the concept of a "jazz sonnet" that emerged as a result of her reflections on her poetry in the late 1970s when she decided to become more openly formal (15). At that time, the poet attempted to get a grant for the jazz sonnets project, but with no success. She had to wait several years to write the first of her American sonnets; it took two more years for the second and another two for the third to emerge. In the early 1990s, the sonnets, to use the poet's own words, "came unbidden with increased and demanding frequency" (18). Thus, unlike in the case of a classical sonnet cycle, the protracted series—especially if written by an African American poet—represents a poetic undertaking that does not aim for perfection in the Platonic sense of the term, demonstrating rather a "lack of concern with 'permanence' in the Western … sense of IDEAL FORM" (Henderson 61)—one of the key points of the Black Aesthetic that attempted to liberate black poetry from Euro-American norms by producing a counter poetics derived from black music, especially from improvisatory free jazz. In the quintessentially European sonnet cycle, individual poems—serving a narrative purpose as they tell a story—are placed in the narrative as if they were chapters in a novel, their position carefully planned and stable, so that to appreciate the full effect of the story told through the sonnets, we must read them in the order determined by the author. A protracted series does not make such demands. Instead, by emphasizing its performative character and openness, it refuses logical development and closure. It also draws on incompleteness and on what Stephen Henderson calls (after Larry Neal) the "destruction of the text" (61), which, in the case of Coleman's sonnets, is quite significant.

In Coleman's American sonnets series, the 'text destroyed' is the sonnet as a genre, as we know, recognize, and identify it. All its formal features are challenged and usually altered; if necessary—annihilated. Coleman breaks all the rules that past and even present-day sonneteers, including other contemporary black authors who have also been writing sonnets recently—for instance, Rita Dove, Natasha Trethewey, Tyehimba Jess, Terrance Hayes, or Jericho Brown—have unanimously respected. All these poets treat the sonnet form—to quote from Dove's introduction to her 1995 collection of experimental sonnets entitled *Mother Love*—as a sort of "talisman against disintegration," beginning her introduction by reminding readers that the sonnet "literally

3 For instance, Nathaniel Mackey, whose series of poems entitled "Songs of the Andoumboulou" was printed in several volumes over a period of more than a decade, and only one of the collections has it reflected in the title (i.e., *Song of the Andoumboulou* 18-20).

4 Even though Coleman's protracted series consists of one hundred sonnets, and the last one is a stylization which pertains to the theme of writing sonnets, the poet never said that she planned to finish the series at that point or otherwise. Her premature death at the age of sixty-seven makes it impossible to verify whether she planned to continue or regarded the series as finished.

means 'little song'," whereas metaphorically, it stands for a "*heile Welt*, an intact world where everything is in sync, from the stars down to the tiniest mite of a blade of grass," Dove points at the significance of any gesture of departure from this fragile balance and stability, claiming that "if the 'true' sonnet reflects the music of the spheres, it then follows that any variation from the strictly Petrarchan or Shakespearean forms represents a world gone awry." Classified as a new formalist, the author of *Mother Love* says further that the sonnet "defends itself against the vicissitudes of fortune by its charmed structure, its beautiful bubble," only to add immediately that "[a]ll the while, though, chaos is lurking outside the gate" (173). Coleman must have been aware of that as she decided not so much to take the sonnet form to task but change it beyond recognition or, arguably, demolish it to the point of annihilation. The lack of presence of any of the features that would allow us to classify her American sonnets as generic sonnets suggests that chaos not so much "is lurking outside the gate" but that it has sneaked inside and is operating within the premises of the "beautiful bubble" like the monstrous presence of racism in America that wreaks havoc and destruction.

Coleman's American sonnets are not sonnets at all if we apply to them even the contemporary, not-so-strict standard categories by which genres are distinguished and if we take them through a litmus paper test. As Eric A. Weil aptly observes in his review of *Mercurochrome*, "they dispense with the expected conventions of meter, rhyme, stanza, and emotional or thematic 'turn' [i.e., volta]". He calls them "nonce sonnets" (695). On the other hand, these poems must be discussed as sonnets as a result of the arbitrary decision of their author since Coleman put them in a chapbook whose title reads *American Sonnets* or included them as separate parts of other collections that followed under titles that inform the readers that they deal with a pretty traditional poetic form (or at least its variation): "More American Sonnets (26-86)" and "American Sonnets (25, 87-100)" in her later collections *Bathwater Wine* and *Mercurochrome* respectively. Be it Coleman's *licentia poetica*, which is an extension of her attitude-turned-strategy as she may be called a "devout ruler breaker", her "Black woman bravado … spilling everywhere" (Browne xviii), or simply the anger-cum-impatience-driven voice of a black poet as "[e]ach sonnet is a rock thrown … against the wall of the status quo" (Weil 696), arguably there is a method in it.

In the introduction to the first edition of Coleman's *Complete American Sonnets* Mahogany L. Browne (xviii) enquires:

> What is a sonnet besides fourteen lines written in iambic pentameter?
> What is an American Sonnet besides fourteen lines, looser in its musicality and inventive in its ability to transform the tradition into a handheld microphone, a makeshift podium, or the people's anthem?

Unfortunately, the scholar does not attempt to address her questions, clearly regarding them as rhetorical. Nonetheless, what needs to be pointed out is the shifting away of attention from the traditional sonnet as a written form to an American (and black) sonnet whose power comes

from its "looser … musicality", its oral orientation, thus redefining the position of the poet who stands as a representative/leader of the people. The very first sonnet of the series makes this clear, starting with a quotation from "the lurid confessions of an ex-cake junkie" (*HF* 3) and moving towards a general reflection on the consequences of the persistence of the color line in contemporary America:

$$\frac{\text{white greed}}{\text{socio-eco dominance}} \times \frac{\text{black anger}}{\text{socio-eco disparity}} =$$

a) increased racial tension/polarization
b) increased criminal activity
c) sporadic eruptions manifest as mass killings
d) collapses of longstanding social institutions
e) the niggerization of the middle class

(*HF* 3)

Still, despite the fact that many poems in the series overtly deal with the contemporary problems of black women who live in the ghetto and with the racism experienced by black people, there are quite good reasons that allow us to situate Coleman's American sonnets in the context of early sonnets written in the English language. The fact that Coleman had her sonnets numbered (like Shakespeare) makes it at least possible to perceive them as rooted in the Bard's 'little songs,' which were quite experimental in their time, especially since Coleman talks directly to Pereira about the importance of this influence. Nonetheless, in her sonnets, she also signals the presence and importance of the connection with English sonneteers of the Elizabethan period. For instance, in sonnet 41, she draws on the tradition of Edmund Spenser and Shakespeare to point to the defining qualities of early sonnets and her departure from that paradigm:

> it is unfashionable to rhyme, to adorn sound with
> pain, content with manner, to spitefully whisper
> in Spenserian ink or Shakespearean blush. it is
> passé to slip into paper/wear parchment's timbre
> stained saffron and rose with splendor's overflow
>
> (*BW* 106)

This excerpt touches on the role played by decorum, which guaranteed harmony between content and the appropriate form for expressing it in modeling the message that allowed poets of the past to explore and discuss the intricacy and complexity of human existence; on human experience and the expression of feelings; and on the phonetic qualities of words used by the

early English sonneteers in their elegantly and carefully crafted poems. All those conventional ways of transcribing human reality into proper correspondences between words and the world—which were essential in the past as they enabled communication through recognition—now seem invalid and "passé." Together with rhyming, which now turns out to be "unfashionable," it leaves contemporary sonneteers no choice but to "collect […] / the leavings of her pillow / and pen [...] her book of stone" (*BW*, 106). The replacement of whatever is left of past poetics (compared to the soft pillow) with the production of the "book of stone" suggests not only the need for entirely different tools the poet has to possess to carve in stone but also implies a necessity to confront a harsher reality, which demands other poetic skills.

Nonetheless, the cancellation of the classical sonnet convention, enforced by changing reality, does not necessarily mean rejection of the conscious effort of poets of the past to refashion the sonnet so that it could suit better the English language and culture. Similarly, for black sonneteers, who work hard in stone to make the old-fashioned form suitable for their own purposes, the example of the Bard experimenting with the Italian fourteen-line love lyric as an important inspiration is essential:

> now bongos play remorse (verse of course)
> …
> requiem for comrade boheme betrayed whose
> remains will never be aired—not on radio or TV.
>
> *rend open this death-row cell that I may flee*
>
> lo! the bard's winged hands transcendent
> split this earth. ancient drums new beats
> (Sonnet 31, *BW* 96)

The sonnet in Coleman's formal conceptualization has the potential to produce sounds that make it possible to express the new and ever-changing reality, as it is compared to "bongos" and to the "ancient drums" which, used by the black poet(s), make "new beats." In a sense, this quality of the "little song" arguably contains within itself what Richard Wright called "the forms of things unknown" (83), which was there within the sonnet from the very beginning or at least from Shakespeare—described half-jokingly as a "comrade boheme betrayed"—who experimented with the sonnet as a genre as well as with the sonnet cycle. Coleman talks here about the Bard's influence on her writing in terms of imprisonment from which the speaker/persona wants to escape, as remaining under such a powerful influence would mean being locked up in the "*death-row cell*" of endless emulation (read: enslavement to the rigid format), a fate that many other poets, including black sonneteers, have shared. Her consciousness of the necessity to transcend the formal constrictions of the sonnet, even if it meant contaminating or breaking

it down into pieces, resulted in launching the idea of the jazz sonnet, and again, in this context, "bongos" and "drums" make much sense as apt and pertinent metaphors.

To clarify what the jazz sonnet is, it is worth going back to and quoting Coleman's remarks from her interview with Pereira. Asked by the critic how she perceives the sonnet form, the poet responds that her approach to the sonnet involves taking a "conventional form and 'play,' 'bust,' and 'shape-shift' it according to the basic dictates of the musical concept," which should result in having her "form and explod[ing] it too." In Coleman's view, her "poetic contribution has been to refresh the sonnet, renew appreciation for it, and to assist in bringing it back to vogue" (Pereira 19). However, this general statement on her approach, which requires demolition-cum-putting the sonnet back together according to entirely new rules, entails a specific technique that rests on the Jazz Principle. The technique was presented in Coleman's theoretical 1988 essay entitled "On Theleoniousism", from which the poet quotes copiously in the interview. In the essay, Coleman lays out "the kind of poetic sensibility yet to achieve recognition, as one which does with language what Thelonious Monk did with music—as if the two were successfully divorced," and moves on to describe the technique, starting from the importance of the rhythm: "rhythm refreshed, beyond style and lyricism, ascends … to its rightful throne along with content and form and copulates with both. That which starts with homage and/or satire, takes on its own independence" (Pereira 22). Next, she asks the reader to imagine "[c]lassical/traditional writing … [as] compared to an apartment (compartmentalization)" in which "[y]ou can move things around …You can buy new furniture and lay down new floors. It is still the same apartment" (Pereira 22-23). Whereas, in contrast,

> [a] Jazz apartment has modular/movable walls, it is an environment allowing for the predictable to coexist with the unpredictable; ape the Classical then suddenly break loose into variation to the point of unrecognizability; i.e., new, alien, and always renewable as the occupant (artist/creator) desires—limited only by the occupant's pocketbook/imagination. (23)

What Coleman emphasizes here is that the jazz sonneteer draws on imitation of the formal paradigm inherited from the historical past. Yet, similarly to a jazz musician playing a standard tune (the equivalent of "conventional form"), poets may take artistic liberty and use their imagination to alter the form with a skillful application of the "rhythm refreshed," even to the point beyond any recognition whatsoever.

Thus, in Coleman's hands, the sonnet reshaped into a jazz sonnet appears to be the most "plastic" of all forms, as Catherine Malabou conceptualizes the term. In the French philosopher's nomenclature, "plasticity" maintains two apparently opposite, yet mutually complementary, meanings, as it entails the ability to receive and give form. If we apply this duality to Coleman's jazz sonnets, we can see that these poems receive their form from the long history of lyrical expression. Simultaneously, they sustain their capacity for giving form to new experiences. This ability to shape-shift draws on the sonnet's "power to annihilate form" (87), as the noun

"plastic" may also denote "plastic explosive … capable of setting off violent detonations" (87). As Malabou puts it, plasticity may refer to "the crystallization of form and the concretization of shape", but it may also describe "the destruction and the very annihilation of all form" (67).

As Coleman maintains in her essay, Theloniousism is "the Jazz Principle applied to verse" (23). And, if we apply the term to her poems and treat Theloniousism as a plastic catalyst for "the annihilation of all form," we must notice that the technique finds full expression in her sonnets. The striking feature of these poems is their irregularity, as they range in length from fourteen to sixteen lines, almost without exception have no rhymes, and their structure does not imitate, or even respect, the classical division into an octave and sestet or into three quatrains followed by a closing couplet containing a punchline, with specific functions ascribed to the poem's parts. It is also difficult or virtually impossible to find a volta/turn in Coleman's sonnets.

Taking a look at a handful of examples may give us an idea of the poet's approach to the form of the sonnet and her experiments with its structure. For example, the fourteen-line sonnet 31 consists of five stanzas of unequal length—two stanzas of a single line, one stanza of two lines (which is not a couplet, by the way), one stanza of four lines (not a quatrain), and a five-line stanza. Sonnet 41 also seems to respect the length of the generic sonnet as it consists of fourteen lines yet is organized as two five-line stanzas and one quatrain. In turn, sonnet 61 is fifteen lines divided into two parts (thirteen lines plus two), whereas sonnet 100 consists of fifteen lines not divided into stanzas. However, the last two lines are indented in Shakespearean fashion, which suggests they are the closing couplet, though that is not the case. We confront the same phenomenon if we look at those poems that have the word "sonnet" in their titles but are not included in the series. For instance, the poem entitled "Off Bonnet Sonnet" (*Mercurochrome* 32) far exceeds the limit as it consists of twenty lines, yet it has rhymes (although irregular) and ends with a rhyming couplet. The poem entitled "Put Some Sex Sonnet" (*Mercurochrome* 183), which is placed in the "Retro Rogue Anthology" section of the collection, consists of only thirteen lines, the last line apparently incomplete as it is broken in mid-sentence. Again, quite provokingly, it is thematically connected with the sonnet tradition since it may be classified as a kind of love poem.

We could go on looking for and finding more and more examples of this kind. However, those provided above exemplify that Wanda Coleman demonstrates high inventiveness in annihilating the sonnet form, suggesting that her formal experimentation should be perceived as a statement of the poet's freedom. Hollis Robbins, commenting on Susan Stewart's argumentation over the phrase "'the master' of the sonnet," which the latter critic uses in her book *The Poet's Freedom*, observes that "sonnets by African American poets make clear that 'mastery' of the sonnet form involves contending with its multiple traditions and histories, including what it means to 'master.'… The sonnet is resilient enough to be battered, knocked about, o'ertrown, broken, untied, ravished, and made new" (Robbins, 61). Apparently, it is precisely as the critic claims, especially that Coleman also unbinds the sonnet form thanks to the multiple transgressions she commits.

A very intriguing, if not the most striking, example of the Jazz Principle in action is sonnet 100—according to Pereira, a poem "particularly incredible …, perhaps the apex of [Coleman's]

sonnet achievement" (19). Here, the connection with Shakespeare's sonnets is not mentioned directly. Yet, the implementation of archaic vocabulary, a generally ornamental style based on striking embellishments, the structure of the text (determined by enjambment and consistent use of rhymes, even though randomly and irregularly placed in the text), the allusions and specific phrases which, arguably, evoke the Bard's sonnets, leave no doubt that the poem represents both praise of as well as a challenge to the Renaissance poet.

The sonnet begins with a persona of undefined gender addressing the reader who supposedly does not find satisfaction anymore in traditional sonnets as love lyrics anchored in the sixteenth-century rules of writing:

> when thou dost find no joy in all famed Erato's
> honeyed breast, wordsport a gangster poet's jest
> (*M* 105)

This message is communicated to the reader through the complex syntax and archaic words, which strike us as outdated, and by mentioning Erato, the muse of love poetry. The first line, which is broken up by enjambment and ends with the word "breast," must strike the modern reader as a bit too wordy and too long, as the word "honeyed" seems to be redundant. In contrast, the second line is disciplined and economical since it contains only the words necessary for communicating the message. In this way, the opening distich illustrates a clash between the florid style of the Renaissance, when the sonnet reached its formal maturity and climax in what is called 'the English sonnet,' and the Imagist—in its origin—demand for using only words necessary for the presentation. Words such as "wordsport" and "gangster poet" have an ironic flavor and belong to the contemporary world, whereas "thou," "dost," Erato" and "honeyed breast" come from the early days of the English language sonnet.

The rest of the poem draws on the contrast established at the very beginning, which makes it an exemplary model of transgression. There is no doubt that due to the internal tensions, we have here a text that evokes a "jazz apartment" from Coleman's description:

> 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.
> (*M* 105)

The strategically placed periods and commas demonstrate the almost traditional attitude toward using the sentences the poem consists of, as if Coleman respected the convention. At the same time, they make the reader realize that the sentences' structure, due to the use of enjambment, remains at odds all the way through with the breaking up of 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.

It must also be noted that it draws on Shakespeare's sonnets for one more reason: in both cases, the subject matter is concealed behind a linguistic and stylistic virtuosity: the dialectic of surface and depth is set into action. Coleman's poem alludes to the presence of a hidden subject as it points at the ambiguity of some "double-barreled" phrases like: "black and luscious," "poisoned roses," "the stolen song of ravens," "purloined harps galore," "dark gives voice to gazer's light," and "wretchedness that names me brute." What these phrases, strategically dispersed throughout the sonnet, have in common is that they introduce the subject of race and racism in the context of slavery. If literary genres represent the 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 in 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
> (*M* 105)

Like the vast majority of African Americans, at the end of the poem and simultaneously at the closure of the sonnet series, the poet/persona, themselves a descendant of slaves, emphasizes the fact that "the wretchedness" of a past that defines them as "brute" (i.e., black and a slave) has been exorcised through her collection of little songs ("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, is born anew. Such a metamorphosis may surprise the reader as Coleman has 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 personae in the content-oriented early poems by Coleman. In contrast to the poems from *Mad Dog Black Lady* and *Imagoes*, but along with her jazz sonnets in the protracted series, this might suggest that race awareness dominates over the gender identification of the poet/persona. This is another feature

of sonnet 100, which alludes to the "Sonnets" written by Shakespeare. After all, in the Bard's collection, we encounter many sonnets that explore and play with gender instability.

Inspired by Shakespeare's poetic work containing some general features characteristic of Elizabethan poetry, Coleman's sonnet 100 is simultaneously a tribute poem and a polemical text containing the ideology of the Renaissance sonnets and their political power. Despite this connection, though, Coleman's poem has no openly stated dedication to the Bard, unlike other sonnets in her series, which were written "after" other influential poets of the past—or, as Jennifer Ryan puts it, "poets now considered canonical in the history of world poetry… While some of [Coleman's] pieces draw on the vocabulary and rhetoric associated with a particular writer, many challenge the world-view he or she represents" (419) to "interrogate the problems inherent to … America" (422) and its racist, anti-black attitudes. Ryan's observation seems accurate, especially in the case of those sonnets concerned with history, culture, and black identity, which trace the genesis of racism down to its literary roots, hence being of particular interest to me in this article.

Nevertheless, gender might be a factor that modifies racism and even increases the discrimination against black women. Take sonnet 38, a poem written "after William Blake":

> something in here distaff flies
> bats and dives and falls and skitters
> heart? soul? mind gone foul—
> my eyes all jitters cannot see what Elohim
> imprisons me/has made condemnation of my
> sex/has made my skin my people hex
> (*BW* 103)

Ryan points out that the poem's first line refers to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and, more precisely, to the words spoken by the three witches. Yet, despite the critic's claim (422), this line in Coleman's poem is not a word-for-word quotation but a playful paraphrase.[5] Hence, if we take "distaff" as a metaphor, we can safely assume that it introduces the female component— alluding to and emphasizing the complexity of discrimination against black women regarding their race and gender. This idea finds confirmation in the phrase in the fifth line. In contrast, race as a discriminatory factor comes immediately afterward in line six. Thus, the poem offers an analysis of racism that pertains to black women in particular. Its source is apparently Elohim—the Old Testament God, whose nature, like the nature of the Maker in Blake's poem "The Tyger," seems to be beyond the grasp of the human mind. The persona in Coleman's sonnet wonders, "what Elohim / imprisons me/has made condemnation of my sex / has made my skin my people hex." Thus, Jehovah/Elohim

5 In fact, the observation is made not by the three witches, but by second witch who says: "By the pricking of my thumbs / Something wicked this way comes" (IV.1). William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 106.

must be held responsible for the enslavement of black Africans and for attempting to destroy their culture, stealing or imitating its most valuable elements by turning them into their own parody:

> he loves to strum and "steels" my blues
> cops my licks and slays my muse
> then stretches out my broken wing
> and mocks the song I'm pained to sing

Most probably, the song mocked by Elohim is a blues song, yet it could easily be a sonnet contaminated by the blues, expressing black pain and a sense of misery. In turn, the "broken wing" has devilish connotations and may be associated with the fallen angel. The perception of blacks as devils by the white majority in America was quite common as a result of, as Wheatley wrote in "On Being Brought from Africa to America," the "diabolic die" of their skin color. For this reason, Coleman points at God's cruel partiality; the speaker says, "Nepenthe offers me no drink / as potent as his hatred's stink." These two lines also offer another literary trail; in Homer's *Odyssey,* the word "nepenthe" stands for a medicine for sorrow or the magical potion/drug of forgetfulness (which brings relief from pain) given to Helen by Polydamna.

The poem ends with two questions, the answers to which are not offered by the persona, a strategy consistently implemented in "The Tyger":

> what sport will purchase liberty?
>
> doth he who caged the beast cage me?

Although separated from each other by a hiatus, these lines should be perceived as a couplet that contains a punchline—the first question pertains to the price of freedom, the second to the enslavement of Africans. In Blake's "The Tyger," it is beyond human capacity to apprehend the nature of the Maker if he could have created both the lamb (a symbol of sacrifice) and the tiger (a metaphorical embodiment of evil). In Coleman's sonnet, the disbelief concerns the question of racism. It provokes other questions to arise, among them these: are black people perceived by the Judeo-Christian God as animals? And: is it Elohim who decided to have them kept in cages (read: enslave them)?

Ryan comments on the poem in the following way: "Although Blake did not intend 'The Tyger' as a metaphor for nineteenth-century race relations, the questions he poses give Coleman a means to explore racism's persistence in her own time" (422). The critic seems to be right here, yet at the same time she happens to be completely wrong—Blake in "The Tyger" is not concerned with the demon of racism at all. Since only the closing line of Coleman's poem is a recognizable paraphrase of the Romantic poet's famous "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" we can say that Blake's epoch-determined, naïve, and instinctive racism can be found elsewhere—for

instance in the poem entitled "The Little Black Boy," in which the black boy confesses: "I am black, but O! my soul is white," and, as he is "bereav'd of light" from God, he quite willingly chooses for himself the role of a servant/slave to the white English boy. Apparently, Coleman draws on the reader's knowledge of Blake's *oeuvre*, his fascination with America, or, more precisely, a vision of America as the land of the free as presented in *America: A Prophecy* included. Furthermore, sonnet 38 also proves that although Audre Lorde's observation that "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" (112; italics in original) seems to be quite perceptive, there are exceptions to this rule. As we can see, Coleman manages to dismantle/deconstruct the haunted house of European literature with intentionally imprecise allusions to and paraphrases of great works of literature, including "The Tyger," which lead the reader astray but also discreetly point at other texts by Blake himself, texts where the demon of racism dwells.

Sonnet 10, written "after Robert Lowell," unlike sonnet 38, does not paraphrase other canonical literary texts or contain allusions to classical writers' works but draws on an imitation of Lowell's style as it emulates the characteristic syntactic and semantic features of his poems for the purpose of, as acutely observed by Ryan, "protest[ing] the long history of slavery," and taking to task the ideological background they spring from. In this sonnet, Coleman supplements or even corrects Lowell's philosophical comments on the nature of history, expressed in his sonnet entitled "History," by introducing a specifically black perspective instead of his white generalizations. Ryan points out that in her poem, Coleman "argues that his words landscapes do not capture America accurately" (419) as it entirely omits the black role in the process of building the country.

Lowell's poem begins with a general statement ("History has to live with what was here") and emphasizes the role of Protestantism in modeling the mentality of the new nation through brief references to fratricide ("Abel was finished, death is not remote") and to religious frictions ("As in our Bibles"). His poem expresses a hegemonic view of the dominant culture whose whiteness is concealed-yet-revealed in the images that come at the end of the poem, such as: "white-faced …/ … .moon" and "the silver salvage of the mornfrost." Unlike Lowell, Coleman immediately introduces a particular perspective of her and other black women's predecessors: "our mothers wrung hell and hardtack from row / and boll," and this statement makes a gesture of refusal of complicity with the dominant discourse in American white historiography. Instead, she continues her transgressive mission of correcting the public discourse and reminds the reader of injustices, cruelties, and oppressiveness against black people inscribed in the country's history. However, she does not emphasize the victimization of black women but instead their strength and perseverance in opposing the hostile world and surviving in extreme conditions against all possible odds—i.e., enslavement, enforced conversion to the Christian religion, and economic exploitation. In the poem, Coleman draws on literary allusions, although this time not to demonstrate their discriminatory character, but to pay back her debt to her literary ancestors and to nameless black women who:

… fenced others'
gardens with bones of lovers. Embarking
from Africa in chains
reluctant pilgrims stolen by Jehovah's light
planted here the bitter
seed of blight and here eternal torches mark
the shame of Moloch's mansions
built in slavery's name.

(*HF*, 12)

The above passage invokes, firstly, Alice Walker's breakthrough essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," which discusses the question of how black women's creativity manifested itself at the time of their obligatory illiteracy; and secondly, the poetry written by Wheatley, who in her semi-epistolary poem "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth" confesses that she was "snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat," and transported across the Atlantic on a slaver from her "*Pagan* land" to America where, as she says in another poem, she understood that "there is a God, that there's a *Saviour*, too." Also, the nameless black women, who "planted here the bitter seed of blight," are recalled in the poem.

In her essay "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," written in reaction to Daly's book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), a milestone work of cultural feminism, Audre Lorde says: "I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power" (67). This complaint is not repeated in Coleman's poem, in which black women's power and ability to survive is celebrated, even despite the price they have had to pay, as their marching towards equal civil rights has been marked by "the blood--soaked steps of each / historic gain," and as they are consumed by "a yearning / yearning to avenge the raping of the womb / from which we spring." Anyway, despite the "raping of the womb," Coleman's sonnet 10, in its tone and theme's resolution, reminds us of Lorde's poem "A Litany for Survival," as both inspire passionate anger and hope, and in this respect situate themselves on an opposite pole from Lowell's "History," so intensely focused on determinism and death. Coleman's poem, by mentioning the wrongs done to black women by white America during slavery, whose consequences have had a lasting effect, ends on an optimistic note since, despite all those atrocities, there have come new generations of black women, more conscious of themselves at that, women like Lorde and Coleman herself. Their self-awareness and strength come from digging not only for the historical truth about white oppression but also from discovering their power located in their "mythic background," which allows them to transgress the limits imposed by a white American culture relegating black women to the realm of non-existence. Lorde managed to break through the invisible border—which, in the sphere of access to the mainstream culture, seems to be identical with the color line—with her poems such as "Coal," "Black Unicorn," or, generally, the Orisha poems that draw on Dahomeyan mythology.

Coleman does not explore any specific myths of empowerment, but the African inspiration is strongly present in her sonnets; for instance, in the brilliant sonnet 61 where the persona 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. dolor
> robs me of art's coin
> as i push, for peanuts, to level walls and
> rebuild the ruins of my poetic promise. from
> the infinite alphabet of afroblues
> intertwinings, I cull apocalyptic visions
> (the details and lovers entirely real)
> and articulate my voyage beyond that
> point where self disappears
>
> (*BW*, 126)

Arguably, this is one of the most impressive poems in Coleman's American sonnets series. Its brilliance lies in its transgressive virtuosity, whose components are the structural clarity, wry irony, and twisted sense of humor that work together to lead to a few astonishments, and the immediately communicative quality connected with respect for meaning, which always results from attempts, as Adrienne Rich puts it, to never "abandon meaning" (7). Still, the emphasis in the poem is on the poet/persona's "womanish wisdom and wily / social commentary" understood as inheritance-cum-experience passed on to her from past generations and as the sources of knowledge about facts—facts as hard as bricks. The bricks are taken from her "griot bag," so it should not surprise the reader that they are a metaphor for the material used in the reconstruction work on the past. Such reconstruction will be necessary as the poet/persona is going to demolish the "walls" that symbolize the imprisonment or enslavement of black people to realize her poetic commitments. As the actual phrase used in the poem (i.e., "rebuild the ruins of my poetic promise") is a distant echo of T. S. Eliot's "these fragments I have shored against my ruins," the bricks may be transformed into concrete objects which are hard enough to "deconstruct a head"—due to the use the verb "deconstruct" the phrase implies not an act of physical violence, but a careful reading of the content of the head, arguably analyzing the space of American (sub)consciousness where the demon of racism has its lair. This argument finds support in the fact that the sorceress's "griot bag" contains something more than bricks—the linguistic potentiality of a universal language from whose particles ("intertwinings") the poet/persona can create meanings capable of destroying "apocalyptic visions" such as those in *The Waste Land*. At the same time, this language is plastic enough to tell what Toni Morrison calls

"a story [not] to pass on," such as being transported across the Atlantic as cargo to the auction block in the land of the free. The closing two lines of this sonnet, which read

> *mis violentas flores negras*
> these are my slave songs
>
> (*BW*, 126)

might be understood as providing a meta-commentary on the whole series of sonnets, whose undeniable beauty and black woman's wisdom are compared to "*mis violentas flores negras*" (in English translation: "*my violent black flowers*"). These words come from "Dregs," a poem by Peruvian Modernist poet César Vallejo, who, according to David P. Gallagher, was acutely aware that

> it is precisely in the discovery of a language where literature must find itself in the continent where for centuries the written word was notorious more for what it concealed than for what it revealed, where "beautiful" writing, sheer sonorous wordiness was a mere holding operation against the fact that you did not dare really say anything at all. (Gallagher, www.)

There can be no doubt that Coleman, whose sonnet 66 was written "after Vallejo,", is also aware of that fact. As her sonnet series or her poetry in general demonstrates, no matter how complex, rich in tones, and allusive the poems are, she never abandons meaning and, daring to tell the truth of the oppressed, remains loyal to "the artistic imperative to make it as clear as possible" (Paul Goodman quoted after Rich 7). Moreover, "[her] slave songs"—and let me repeat that the literal meaning of "sonnet" is a "little song"—are formally undisciplined, rebellious, and disrespectful of the white tradition, as they track down the demon of racism in order to annihilate it to the very heart of darkness, a darkness full of atrocities whose purpose was/is the dehumanization of black people for the sake of satisfying the greed of the New World and its economic needs.

In her protracted series of American sonnets, Coleman breaks away from the whole sonnet tradition, twisting her jazz sonnets formally so much that they are beyond generic recognition. Nevertheless, as Rich (5) points out in her commentary on "the poetry of emerging groups,"

> variations on form may be greater or less, but what really matters is not line lengths or the way meter is handled, but the poet's voice and concerns refusing to be circumscribed or colonized by the tradition, the tradition being just a point of takeoff. In each case the poet refuses to let form become format, pushes at it, stretches the web, rejects imposed materials, claims a personal space and time and voice. Format remains flat rigid, its concerns not language, but quantifiable organization, containment, preordained limits: control.

In the light of Rich's distinctions, Wanda Coleman's choice of form rather than format (and its methodical annihilation), and, in consequence, her practicing what I propose to call the poetics of transgression, demonstrates the poet's original and innovative approach to the sonnet form. She succeeds in making her jazz sonnets utterly non-assimilationist and difficult, if not entirely impossible, to co-opt. What is more, her mature voice gains even more power when she is singing her rebellious "slave songs"—in this way efficiently exorcising the demon of racism in America.

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