

“Take Kisses Back to Africa”: Diaspora and Return to African Culture in Harryette Mullen’s Poetry

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As one of the African diasporas, Harryette Mullen arranged a spiritual return to her African origin. Through memory tracing of Africa, a connection between the poet and Africa has been established. Mullen presents ways of spiritual return for contemporary African diasporas which can be seen as the journey of self-pursuing. Facing the unhealable cracks between diasporas and their origin, Mullen tries to bridge the cracks of African literary development while embraces it by constructing her diasporic identity and obtaining ethnic writer’s authority through it.

Keywords: Harryette Mullen, poetry, diaspora, return, Africa

Diaspora and return are recurring motif in ethnic literature. Due to the special historical background of the African diaspora, their return to the original home is often full of difficulties and obstacles. Therefore, for the African diasporas, imaginary return has become the key to their searching for cultural root (Han, 2021, p. 88). This paper will analyze the writing of African traditions in Harryette Mullen’s poems from the aspect of diaspora and return. Facing the unhealable cracks between diaspora and its origin, Mullen, on the one hand, tries to bridge the cracks of African literary development, and on the other embraces it by constructing her diasporic identity and obtaining writer’s authority through it, which not only shows the African diaspora’s journey of self-pursuing, but also offers a way of interrogating with contemporary politics and western mainstream discourses.

Memories of the Diasporas

At the core concept of diaspora lies the image of a remembered home that stands at a distance both temporally and spatially. For the later generation migrants, the “new land” which they live in has never been new and their memories of the “homeland” are more fragmented (Stock, 2010, p. 24). Mullen’s poems are filled with mixed African signs, but her writing is based on her indistinct and fragmented memories, which not only shows the psychological distance between African diasporas and their imagined home, but also her strong desire to fill the gap towards their origin. Through imaginary reconstruction of the homeland, it presents the poet’s changing role from passive to active, trying to rewrite the history and memory of African colonization.

What Is Remembered

Both native African poets and diaspora poets draw their poetic feelings from the traditional culture of native Africa. Most of Mullen’s remembrance is about Africa. However, memories of Africa in Harryette

Mullen's poetry are not continuous, but vague and fragmented. Mullen collects pieced memories as mnemonic traces, which is helpful for bridging the cracks between African diaspora and its origin. Firstly, Mullen's poetry is filled by scattered and fragmented African images:

dark rain laden clouds
 fragrant womb
 from pyramid to palm
 the black tide of mud

calabash of water
 botanica Yoruba
 latecomers to a potboiler
 plot rebellion in the quarter. (Mullen, 2006, p. 124)

The above stanzas are piled up by nouns and adjectives about African tribes, signs, and cultures without any verbs or punctuation pause. It shows static, fragmented pictures, reflecting the poet's discontinuous memories of Africa. Although almost all the images have certain connections with Africa, they do not make any sense contextually. The crack between the black diaspora and their remembered home has been revealed. The first stanza lays the overall tone of "dark" and laden" memory, which may not only describe the weather, but also the poet's mood while tracing her memory. Despite the keynote, her memory starts from a "fragrant womb", which also shows her eagerness and good impression of remembrance. The latter writing is like the silhouette of movies, with long-range and close-range interlaced, connecting fragmented memories together.

In the last stanza, the poet returns to reality and tries to fix the fragmented memory:

torn veins stitched
 together with pine needles
 mended hands fix
 the memory of a people. (Mullen, 2006, p. 124)

Here the poet blends the imaginary and real world, aiming at fixing the cracks of African diasporas' memories. "Torn veins" displays the inner division of the black diaspora. The poet uses "stitches", "together with", "mend", and "fix" continually, unveiling her eagerness to fix the cracked memory of Africa. Although memory tracing is hard, Africa is still very attractive to the poet. By collecting the fragmented memories, it shows the poet's attempt at bridging the cracks and getting close to her origin.

How Is It Remembered

Although diasporic memory is vague and fragmented, Mullen leaves some mnemonic traces to arise and keep memory. Blues is one of the important elements of Mullen's poetry. Most of Mullen's early poems have no titles, just recording the spontaneous overflow of feelings and memories:

go ahead and sing the blues
 then ask for forgiveness
 you can't do everything
 and still be saved

updated old records
 tune around the verses
 fast time and swing out
 head set in a groove. (Mullen, 2006, p. 125)

In the first stanza, a way of memory—blues has been presented, which is a specific tradition of black people. After singing blues, the poet seems to get some messages and lets some of the audience “ask for forgiveness”. It is possible that the blues remind her of slavery and colonial history. She does not point out what these people have done but uses the general word “everything” to indicate some hidden and cruel memories. In the second stanza, as music flows slowly, both the poet’s and the audiences’ memories gradually emerge. “Tune around the verses” not only suggests the mixture of music and lyrics, but also blues and the former memory, past and present. With time passing by, the poet’s memories get clearer like the “groove” on the record which is concrete and traceable.

By singing blues, both the poet’s self-consciousness and desire have been aroused:

felt some good sounds
 but didn’t have the time
 sing it in my voice
 put words in like I want them. (Mullen, 2006, p. 125)

Here the poet uses “felt” instead of “remembered” or “recalled”, proving the memory is still indistinct. Blues cannot recall her vague memories directly, but can evoke feelings and inner impulses. This impulse has then turned into a desire to participate in memory writing. The poet wants to sing in her own voice and put words like she wants. Instead of tracing back memory, she wants to write the memory of herself, and further, of the overall black diaspora community.

While expressing the eagerness to write, Mullen achieved it by reconstructing the colonial memory from a different angle based on her own understanding.

sue for slender
 soften her often
 mamiwata weaves
 rolexical glitter. (Mullen, 2006, p. 106)

This poem is an example of Mullen reconstructing colonial memory. “Sue for slender” correlates with the poet’s quote of Callimachus in the preface of *Muse & Drudge*: “fatten your animal for sacrifice poet, but keep your muse slender” (qtd. Mullen, 2006, p. 97). From this perspective, “sue for slender” may refer to the slender of livestock. “Her” may indicate human beings are equal to livestock, directing to slavery. “Mamiwata” is the traditional water spirit of Africa. But according to some of the earliest travelers’ accounts, many African people associate Europeans with the water and water spirits (Drewal, 1988, p. 108). Here the lowercase mamiwata in the poem may refer to the early European colonizers coming from the glitter weaves.

get a new mouth
 don’t care what it costs
 smell that hot sauce
 shake it down south

 the purify brothers
 clamor for rhythm
 ain’t none of they business
 `till the ring is on the finger

 breaks wet thigh high stepper
 bodacious butt shakes

rebellious riddem
 older than black pepper. (Mullen, 2006, p. 106)

The second stanza still lacks subject, but "the hot sauce" correlates "black pepper" in the end. Marjorie Shaffer claims that the trading of black pepper witnesses the history of colonization, contributing to the rise of global trade and redefines the world economic force (2013). While seeking black pepper, European colonists seized many local laborers and slaves from Southeast Asia, India, and Africa. Therefore, black pepper is a mnemonic trace indicating slavery and colonial history. Facing the purify locals' clamors, colonists bribe them by "putting rings on their fingers". This part correlates with the water spirit "mamiwata", which also indicates temptation and death. In the last stanza, "Riddem" is a purposeful word play which may refer to "ridden" or "redeem", indicating the outcomes of colonization. In this poem, each stanza connects with the other, forming a tightly structured memory about slavery and colonial history.

As one of the African diaspora, Mullen's memory writing about Africa and its traditions is fragmented, vague, abstract, and mixed with complex feelings. Through vague and cracked memories, Africa keeps a mysterious attraction to the poet. Her desire to pursue the lost memory and be part of it has been demonstrated. Apart from passively recalling the past memory, Mullen also tries to rewrite the official memory from her own perspective. Different from the cracked and vague remembrance, her own memory is tightly structured with rich symbols, puns, and metaphors. The poet's initiative lays the foundation for her interaction and return to Africa in poetry.

Return to Spiritual Home

The colonization of a country or nation will cause a huge loss of many things which are hard to regain or restore. This is what happened to Africa, whose culture and tradition have been disintegrated by colonial history while the values of European civilization have forcibly replaced the traditional African culture. However, African culture and tradition can be revived, poetized, and sanctified in literary writing. Therefore, return to spiritual home is a motif of African diasporic literary writing, and is constantly reflected in Mullen's poetry. It is reflected in her poems from direct expression, writing materials and techniques.

Direct Expression of Returning Desire

First and foremost, Mullen's poems indicate her emphasis on tradition in many places. Apart from the references to African signs and traditions, the form of the collection *Muse & Drudge* (1995) also shows the poet's adherence to tradition. Mullen is a highly creative writer with varied poetic forms and multiple language experiments. As an avant-gard writer, almost each of her collection has different forms. Different from the linear poems in *Trimmings* (1991), small blocks in *S*PeRM**K*T* (1992), prose poems in *Sleeping With the Dictionary* (2002), or tanka diary in *Urban Tumbleweed* (2013), *Muse & Drudge* (1995) employed four-line quatrains, which is a traditional and limited form. Mullen's behavior of changing her creative style and applied the fixed form in writing Africa may indicate her approval towards African tradition. Standard poetic form is conducive to the overall construction of specific ethnic groups. At the same time, it is also the regulator of poetic practice, which helps to restrain abnormal behavior and maintain consistency of the national poetic value (Luo, 2021, p. 37). Therefore, it is possible that the application of sticed poetic form shows Mullen's tendency towards African tradition and her desire to return.

Additionally, except poetic form, Mullen also frequently expressed her desire to return and integrate into her native land directly. Although it is difficult for African diasporas to return physically, the poet arranged a spiritual return by “take kisses back to Africa” (Mullen, 2006, p. 132). Apart from the poet herself, she also tries to summon the black diasporic community together:

you can sing their songs
with words your way
put it over to the people
know what you doing. (Mullen, 2006, p. 115)

Three groups of people have been mentioned in this stanza. The poet is directly speaking to “you”, which refers to the African diasporas. “They” refers to the western hegemonic discourse represented by European colonists. Here the poet is trying to persuade her fellow diasporas to put their own words into the mainstream western discourses. Furthermore, she also encourages African diasporas to turn to “the people know what you doing”. “The people” represents other Africans who shared similar cultural background and traditions with them. By doing so, Mullen emphasizes the common sense and unity of all the black siblings. The desire for spiritual unity and return has been unveiled.

Moreover, while expressing the wishes of unity and taking initiatives, Mullen also presents a scene of imaginary return which carries her embracement of the cracked Africa and her attempt to seek unity and harmony through it.

the folks shuffle off
this mortal coffle and
bamboula back to
the motherland. (Mullen, 2006, p. 129)

In the above stanza, the poet made a peculiar juxtaposition: “coffle and bamboula back to the motherland”. Coffle is mortal, who also symbolizes the history of African colonization and slavery. Bamboula is, on the contrary, immortal, which symbolizes African cultural heritage. Africa has been considered as a cracked whole, whose culture and tradition has been cut by colonial history. Mullen designed a journey back to the motherland while embracing both colonial history and its own tradition. Cracks seem to be diluted through the juxtaposition. The poet does not try to emphasize one side and cover the other but combine the two cracked parts together. The panorama of Africa has been presented, while the poet’s sincere desire for return and integration is also included.

Return in Writing Techniques

Contemporary African diasporas’ forms of return are mainly fictional. Through a series of imaginary returns like myths, folktales, songs and literature, African diasporas try to find the cultural connection with their origins which helps the construction of their own identity. Except direct expression and imagination of return, it is also reflected in the writing materials and techniques of Mullen’s poetry which present the tendency of returning to Africa. Mullen’s application of vocal improvisation in poetic creation is closely connected with African folk music. Oral sound is not only an important means of self-expression and ethnic communication, but also an intuitive means for black individuals to think and perceive the world. The imagistic richness and musicality are evident throughout *Tree Tall Woman* (1981).

Yeah, gonna have words turning into dance,
 Bodymoving music,
 a get-down poem so kinetically energetic
 it sure put disco to shame.
 Make it a snazzy jazzy poem extravaganza, with pizzazz.
 Poem be going solo,
 flying high on improbable improvisational innovation.
 Poem be blowing hard!¹ (Mullen unpagged)

The above poem courts the ear through complex rhythms by importing the forms and textures of black music. Expressions of rap are adopted in it. It has many spoken words like “Yeah”, “gonna”, and unconventional grammar “poem be doing” pattern. Between the two short lines “it sure put disco to shame” and “Poem be going solo”, a long sentence with strong rhythmic words is shown. With fricatives and polysyllabic words like “snazzy”, “jazzy”, “extravaganza”, and “pizzazz” piling up, a powerful rhythm has been created. The repetition of “poem be doing” further strengthened the rhythm, exclamation at the end of the line further reinforces the tone. The poem combines elements of poetry, black music and dance together, which is a creative way of return full of rhythm and vitality.

Conclusion

Under colonial history and discourses, the Africans’ identity and connection with its origin are cracked. As one of the African diaspora, Mullen firstly depicts her vague and fragmented memories and then recreates the memory of her own. Additionally, through the direct expression of returning desire and application of vocal improvisation, Mullen presents ways of spiritual return for contemporary African diasporas. Mullen’s poetic return to Africa can be seen as the journey of self-pursuing, which presents her African concern and at the same time reflects the poet’s realistic concern by using it to interrogate with contemporary politics and western mainstream discourses.

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¹ The passage from *Tree Tall Woman* is from the author’s typescript.